

PM WORLD BOOK REVIEW ¹



Book Title: ***Doing exemplary research projects: A guide to practice***

Author: **Stewart Clegg and Julien Pollack, Editors**

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Introduction

What makes a research project successful? Is it making the right connections to gain insight into organizational culture and learn what drives adherence to or deviance from institutional processes? And what about organizational change? Is success dependent on collaboration among project visionaries who bring together the right mix of people with the power and social capital to overcome bottlenecks? In “Doing exemplary research projects: A guide to practice” by editors Julien Pollack and Stewart Clegg (2025), we learn firsthand about problems that arise when conducting, writing, and publishing research. Whether best practices become ways of working so project teams rinse and repeat the protocols that work, or single actors take on the role of change agent to introduce new approaches that get adapted in order to get projects over the finish line, this book makes it clear that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the research and project journey. However, insights gained from actors central to the problem are key success factors.

Overview of Book’s Structure

The book presents six exemplars, guided by anecdotal accounts of the research process from the researcher's perspective. We learn directly from the authors what initiates an investigation into a problem, the often-serendipitous circumstances that bring research teams together (Lenfle and Soderlund, 2022), the thoughtful ways

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researchers center participants, and how their research projects navigated new and uncertain project-based team formations and structures to help organizations achieve project success. Then, perhaps most importantly for anyone wanting to get published, each exemplar reflects on how the author revised and rewrote the articles initially rejected for publication, and why it is important to approach research publication with an open mind and readiness for the often-daunting process of revision and responding to reviewer feedback.

As a bonus, following each exemplar, commentary from referees and field professionals who reviewed the research articles examines its strengths and weaknesses, insights gained from the research, and its relevance for the field of organizational studies and project-based organizations. Through these commentaries, we come to understand the writing and methodological qualities of each paper that justify its publication and learn where each article has room for growth and, with further development, can contribute more to its field niche. The goal of the book was to provide students and early-career researchers in management and project studies with examples of strong academic research articles to help them learn how to conduct and write research that gets published in a reputable academic journal. A second goal, if not intended, was certainly achieved: a best-practice guide to conducting project-based research.

The book offers several key takeaways that can benefit anyone developing research skills. First, to become published, research and write high-quality papers about bold topics you are passionate about; you may need the emotional connection to the work to power through the review process. Ensure the research topic falls within the journal's scope and confirm this by checking your bibliography against articles published by the journal. Journal referees often operate under various time constraints, and editors carefully filter submissions based on whether they can confirm quality and fit on first review. Second, be clear about the methodological context and structure. Reviewers praised some exemplars for having strong theoretical foundations and for structuring data so that findings were easily identifiable, not just in words but also in visuals. As Lenfle and Soderlund suggested, if you know it, show it.

Third, the research exemplars were developed over time (ranging from 4 to 10 years) within organizations that used project-based approaches to achieve their goals. Across the exemplars, researchers sought to understand the range of problems that project-based organizations face. The researchers looked at practices impacting large-scale transitions (Lenfle & Soderlund, 2022), sustainability projects (Lehtimaki & Jokinen, 2023), traditional organizations and temporary, project-based organizing (Sydwo & Windeler, 2020), tendencies to deviate from project governance guidelines (Pinto & Davis, 2022), moving data past theory toward organizational change

(Marrewijk & van den Ende, 2022), and the effect of institutional actors on public-private partnerships (Biygautane, 2019). Several of the exemplars drive home the idea that direct collaboration with participants can enrich outcomes and shed light on a project's core issues, even when the organization fails to implement lessons learned from the research project.

Highlights

The book highlights the importance of working closely with research participants and of examining historical research to understand the research questions better. Both Marrewijk and van den Ende (2022) and Lehtimaki and Jokinen (2023) had a high level of collaboration with research participants. For Marrewijk and van den Ende (2022), the collaborative insights gained through ethnoventionist methods helped participants understand why the interorganizational transition had failed, leading to the establishment of a learning community that supported project-based practice rather than data collection on the problem. For Lehtimaki and Jokinen (2019), collaboration through action research led to solving problems in real time and stronger alignment within internal stakeholders. Biygautane (2019) adopted an institutional entrepreneurship approach to develop relationships with participants over time and observed how social and political power impact project success, leading to better public-private partnership outcomes. All three are good examples of how to partner with participants rather than study them.

Highlights: What I liked!

What is especially helpful about the book is its exploration of topics important to the project management field, particularly for those working with organizations on change or sustainability projects, and in critical fields where patterns and behaviors in organizational culture limit progress. In their exemplar on deviance in projects, Pinto and Davis (2022) examined how, once normalized, bad behavior can, over time, do more than erode project governance standards; it can put people's lives in danger if the work involves high-risk industries or critical infrastructure. This exemplar was important to include in the book because, as project managers, operating in the best interests of the business can mean taking the uncomfortable step of calling out roadblocks and behaviors that stifle work or go against institutional ethos.

Who might benefit from the Book

An important part of effective project management is promptly escalating issues to the right people. Pinto and Davis (2022) remind us that not only is this the ethical thing to do, but research also suggests that deviant behaviors in projects are a natural occurrence across many industries and are often knowingly continued despite

potential dangers. By working closely with individuals on the front line of these situations, researchers and project management practitioners can better understand these hidden or misunderstood organizational realities, and the reason for doing work that matters become even clearer.

Conclusion

Clegg and Pollack (2025) have assembled a guide to publishing research, conducting fieldwork, and using projects to help organizations establish and realign their institutional efforts, all in one place. The firsthand accounts of researchers, together with the critical reflections of research professionals following each exemplar, illustrate the practice of doing exemplary research and the journey of moving an idea from concept to realization. I recommend this book to anyone getting started in academic research and project management, as well as to those working in organizations where traditional processes have stalled and new ways of working and partnering, both internally and externally, are needed to move the needle forward. If you are submitting work to be published and need a pep talk or are hoping to make meaningful connections with the right people to get the right answers to support your project, keep this book in mind.

For more about this book, go to: <https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/usd/doing-exemplary-research-projects-9781035316731.html>

About the Reviewer



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