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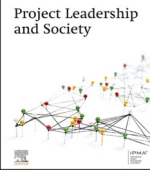
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Editorial

Novel research methods in project studies

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1. Introduction

Studies of projects, project-based organisations and project organising have reached a pivotal juncture, marked by an increasing need to innovate methodologically. Project research has traditionally been dominated by survey-based quantitative approaches aimed at measuring variables and identifying statistical patterns across large samples. While these methods have advanced the foundational body of knowledge in project management, they are increasingly critiqued for their limitations in accessing the depth and complexity of lived project experiences (Green and Sergeeva, 2019). Early survey instruments often relied on close-ended, pre-categorised items, factor-based approaches, offering minimal scope for respondents to elaborate on meanings or experiences (Lupton, 1993). As project contexts become more complex, dynamic, and socially embedded, this limitation has stimulated a methodological turn in project studies towards more qualitative, interpretive, and context-sensitive research approaches. There is a need for more and novel methods which could capture the diversity in projects and the different platforms that project stakeholders are active in. This Special Issue of Project Leadership and Society brings to the forefront the importance of novel research methodologies, methods, and data that can advance our understanding of projects and project organising in contemporary society. The objective is not merely to diversify the tools available to researchers but to reimagine how knowledge is produced in a field that is inherently interdisciplinary, practice-oriented, and deeply embedded in real-world challenges (Pink et al., 2010). The special collection of papers responds to long-standing calls for more reflexive, engaged, and multi-modal research practices in the social sciences (Pierce, 2008; Arino et al., 2016).

The project studies field has already witnessed a significant shift towards qualitative research methods, particularly interviews, as a default alternative to surveys. These methods have been critical in surfacing practitioners' perceptions, organisational narratives, subjective opinions and reflections on experiences. However, even interviews are constrained in their ability to uncover the full complexity of project work. Emerson et al. (2011) note that interviews often struggle to elicit insights into the deeper meanings actors ascribe to their experiences, particularly when reliant on standardised questions such as 'what does this mean to you?' or 'why is this significant?'. To overcome such

limitations, mixed methods research has gained momentum. By combining the breadth of quantitative data with the depth of qualitative insights, mixed method designs offer a more holistic and triangulated understanding of project phenomena (Jiang et al., 2022; Locatelli et al., 2017). Yet, integrating different methodological paradigms poses its own challenges, particularly around epistemological coherence and language consistency. Thus, the call for methodological innovation is not simply a call for more tools, but for better integration, reflexivity, and fit-for-purpose research design.

In addition, the rise of digital platforms and online interactions presents a transformative opportunity for project research. As more work and communication migrate to digital spaces, these platforms generate vast datasets that are naturalistic in origin, i.e., they are produced without direct intervention from researchers (Silverman, 2024). Such data, ranging from social media posts to digital news archives, enable researchers to observe how projects and stakeholders are discussed, represented, and contested in real time (Ninan, 2020; Ninan and Sergeeva, 2022a, 2022b; Sergeeva and Ninan, 2023). Unlike interviews or surveys, which rely on participant recall or are shaped by interviewer prompts, digital data sources reflect spontaneous discourse, making them especially valuable for capturing public narratives and sentiment (Potter, 2002). These data can also be reanalysed, enabling longitudinal or comparative studies across time and context. For example, media discourses can be used to analyse how different stakeholders frame megaprojects, how public sentiment shifts over time, or how crises are constructed and contested (Morehouse and Sonnett, 2010; Oswald et al., 2018). Furthermore, digital data platforms can serve as 'laboratories for the social sciences', enabling researchers to observe emergent phenomena such as stakeholder coalitions, digital protest strategies, or branding and narrative formation in real time (Bansal et al., 2018). While such approaches provide new avenues for empirical exploration, they also demand new methodological considerations, such as with data ethics, representativeness, and analytic techniques (Hallett and Barber, 2014).

In tandem with digital innovations, narrative inquiry has emerged as a powerful methodological framework in project studies. Grounded in interpretivism, narrative inquiry privileges the lived experiences of individuals and the meanings they attach to events, relationships, and decisions (Clandinin, 2022; Czarniawska, 2007). It does so through the

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analysis of ‘field texts’ such as life stories, narrative interviews, documents, images, and symbols. In the context of projects that are often temporary, high-stakes, and socially charged undertakings, narrative methods are particularly effective at illuminating how actors make sense of ambiguity, uncertainty, and identity. A key method within this tradition is the narrative interview, which is an open-ended, unstructured type of interview that encourages participants to construct and share stories in their own terms (Mishler, 1991; Sergeeva and Green, 2019; Sergeeva and Winch, 2020). Unlike structured interviews, narrative interviews do not impose predefined categories or assumptions but enable interviewees to surface what they themselves perceive as meaningful. This research method is especially suitable for understanding career trajectories, leadership development, and stakeholder engagement in complex projects (Sankaran, 2018; Sergeeva and Kortantamer, 2021). Despite its promise, narrative inquiry remains underutilised in project studies (Sergeeva and Duryan, 2021). There is still limited agreement on how best to analyse narrative data, with scholars drawing on diverse approaches such as thematic analysis and structural analysis (Riessman, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1995). This methodological diversity represents both a challenge and an opportunity for the development of more systematic and theoretically grounded practices of narrative analysis in project contexts.

As a complement to narrative methods, ethnography provides yet another avenue for immersive, contextual understanding of projects. Ethnographic research allows scholars to witness the everyday practices of project teams, the tacit norms shaping decision-making, and the micro-politics of organising (Dainty, 2008; Stablein, 2006). Variants such as autoethnography and ethnographic-action research further enable insider perspectives and collaborative knowledge creation. Autoethnography as a method where the researcher is also a participant, it allows for intimate, reflexive engagement with the setting, capturing phenomena often hidden from external observation (Adams and Manning, 2015). Maintaining reflexive diaries and conducting real-time documentation can provide deep insights into project dynamics (Koch and Harrington, 1998). Similarly, action research which is a participatory method where researchers and practitioners collaborate to solve real-world problems, represents a form of engaged scholarship (Kemmis, 2006; van Marrewijk and Dessing, 2019). In projects that affect diverse communities and societal infrastructures, engaged approaches ensure that research is not only about practice but with and for practitioners and stakeholders (Barbour et al., 2017). Whether through digital ethnography, visual methods, diary studies (Unterhitzberger and Lawrence, 2022), or advanced case design (Martinsuo and Huemann, 2021), the goal is to deepen our understanding of how projects operate and impact the world.

Through this special issue, we had three objectives – first, to make sense of leading organisation and management methods and explore how they inform project studies. For this, we facilitated a joint session with four senior method experts. Second, to gather examples of successful application of methods beyond traditionally used methods in project studies, for which, we edited eight papers in this special issue. Finally, to inform future direction on research methods in project studies, for which we combined insights from interviews with organisation studies methodologists and insights from eight papers in this special issue.

2. A conversation with organisation studies experts

We talked to the world-recognised experts in organisation and management studies and asked them about research methods in the new age. We spoke with Prof Ann Langley, Prof Eero Vaara, Prof Stephanie Dailey, and Prof Ann Cunliffe. We asked them questions on their perspective on the evolution of research methodologies and methods in organisation and management studies. In particular, what are some methods which would help researchers understand society and leadership better, and what is their vision for the future work into research

methodologies and methods? Following the conversation, they sent back notes and references to papers which helped us further distil the area.

2.1. Ann Langley: moving from retrospection to prospection

Ann Langley emphasises that research must do more than interpret the past. Research must anticipate and stay alive to the unfolding present as time does not stop at the end of research rather something unexpected happens after it. This insight led her to advocate for a shift toward ‘researching forward’, particularly through research methods like longitudinal ethnography, action research, and process studies that can track ongoing change. This future-facing mindset demands methodological flexibility. Prof Langley recounted publishing a paper that explicitly stated – “*This is how I understand it now. But I don’t know what’s going to happen next.*” She welcomed the idea that academic journals could accommodate updates or revision cycles that incorporate what happens after publication. She calls this an example of researching forward where authors have an opportunity to engage in multiple cycles.

Prof Langley also emphasised the new methodological challenges and opportunities brought on by digitalisation. While the world is awash with ‘big data’ she highlighted the richness of ‘small data’ — a term picked up later by other panellists. She noted that “*technology creates big data ... but at the same time technology creates small things.*” Small data includes micro-interactions captured in emails, text messages, or online chats and such information offers intimate insights, however demands meticulous and creative methods to analyse them. Visual data, too, is underutilised in organisational research. We as a society are taking photos like crazy, however researchers lack robust tools for visual analysis. She called on journals to support ‘new methodological contributions’ that focus not only on analysing images but developing clear guidance for doing so.

Prof Langley’s view is unapologetically pragmatic when it comes to training and mentoring. She urged early-career scholars to collect rich data and not to cut corners. Drawing on the resource-based view of scholarship, she encouraged researchers to build on who you are and what you already know, rather than chasing novelty for its own sake. Every individual has their own personal history which could be the flavour needed for this new world. Her reflections on the pandemic revealed another layer of methodological transformation. Online meetings, now often recorded by default, have become valuable sources of data. “*We are going to be using more online interviews and meetings, which were never recorded before, but now they are*” she observed. This shift opens up new possibilities for capturing and analysing digital trace data. When confronted with questions about researching large-scale societal problems, Langley pointed to the necessity of team-based, multi-sited ethnography. She cited the example of climate change research involving insurers, governments, and NGOs, resulting in a project requiring not only longitudinal depth but networked collaborations.

Her closing advice resonates as a guiding principle for the special issue: do not let methodological fads dictate your path. Instead, Langley advised to extend your resource base from what you have and find the distinctive area of expertise that grows from your lived experience and contribute from there.

2.2. Eero Vaara: pluralism, history and future fictions

Eero Vaara calls for methodological pluralism, framing it as a historical shift as well as a strategic imperative. He says pluralism is not simply about more methods, rather it is about ensuring methodological intentionality. He remarked that one cannot just call research as qualitative, rather they have to be clear what kind of qualitative research they are doing. This is not merely semantic. Prof Vaara explained that without such methodological clarity, authors risk their research success as reviewers misunderstand submissions. For example, a historical paper might be judged by ethnographic standards, i.e., a kind of disciplinary misalignment that derails publication. To move beyond that, researchers

must define their ‘methodological genre’, whether it is micro-history, rhetorical analysis, or visual ethnography.

Prof Vaara also addressed the growing interest in studies that not only interpret the past but engage in shaping possible futures. Drawing on his own work and emerging trends in the field, he described how many grand societal challenges such as climate change or inequality inherently involve future narratives. “*These are alternative utopias or dystopias. So we also need methodological tools to explore them*”, he remarked. To that end, Prof Vaara pointed to scenario analysis, storytelling, and speculative methods borrowed from science fiction and design. These tools are increasingly necessary for addressing future-oriented organising, where decisions are being made today based on imagined tomorrows. He argued that scholars have not studied this topic enough, however it is crucial now as people imagine the future and then organise around those imaginations. Still, Prof Vaara was careful not to overstate the novelty of these approaches as he cautioned against reinventing the wheel. Techniques like topic modelling or digital discourse analysis are often touted as revolutionary within organisation studies, but they have been used for years in computational social sciences and humanities. “*We have to be humble enough to learn from other disciplines*” he said, advocating for cross-disciplinary literacy rather than methodological faddism.

In the digital realm, Prof Vaara highlighted the challenges and opportunities posed by visual and multimodal data. While he acknowledged Prof Langley’s point about the abundance of images, he extended a need to focus on theoretical frameworks for interpreting them. He believes this is where methodological innovation must be paired with conceptual rigor. On the topic of societal-scale research, Prof Vaara highlighted that traditional qualitative methods can seem insufficient in the face of vast, systemic issues. He calls for embracing hybridity and collaborative designs by combining methods. Maybe start with big data, then move to small data. Maybe scenario writing combined with ethnographic material. His call was not for a single master method but for intelligent juxtaposition, thereby letting each method do what it does best.

Prof Vaara ended with a challenge to the academic publishing system itself and pointed out that authors attempting multimethod studies often find their work does not fit standard journal templates. Journals must evolve to support multiplicity not just in theory, but in form enabling papers that include multiple methods, multimedia components, and dynamic updates. Ultimately, Prof Vaara’s vision is a field of research that is reflexive, interdisciplinary, and forward-looking.

2.3. Stephanie Dailey: following the work as it happens

Stephanie Dailey highlighted that researcher’s deep attentiveness is required to make sense of how meaning is constructed, enacted, and made visible. She remarked that we are evolving in what our goals are as researchers charting a progression from prediction, to interpretation, to action-based observation. One of the clearest ways she framed this shift was through a powerful three-part typology: “*We have gone from what researchers think practitioners do, to what practitioners think they do, and now to what practitioners actually do*”. This is more than a rhetorical flourish as it signals a pivot from assumptions and self-reports to empirical observation, enabled in large part by digital technologies and ethnographic access.

Prof Dailey’s core methodological argument was for triangulation which is not simply as a safeguard for validity, but as a strategy to uncover tacit and embodied knowledge. She explained that the strongest papers that she reviewed had multiple sources of data, describing how combining interviews, observations, visual data, and artefacts allowed her to reach deeper layers of organizational practice. In particular, Prof Dailey highlighted the power of arts-based methods and photo elicitation, which are techniques that ask participants to create or select images as a way of communicating what words often cannot. This attention to the visual and affective resonated with Prof Langley’s comments, but

Prof Dailey emphasised its methodological novelty and leading to stiff resistance in traditional publication outlets as there is such a long lag time between what we are doing and what gets published. She also remarked that journals tend to favour conventional textual methods over more interpretive, emergent, or visual approaches. This resistance, she believes, stifles innovation and discourages researchers from exploring unfamiliar terrain.

Prof Dailey also shared a vulnerability that many interdisciplinary scholars will recognise being caught between fields. This is a familiar cost of working at disciplinary intersections; one she feels journals and reviewers must become more sensitive to. Her call to action was clear: journals should create space for unconventional submissions that are not just in special issues, but as a long-term editorial stance. This includes accepting visual content, multimethod designs, and experimental formats that foreground the richness of data.

Prof Dailey also reflected on the role of technology in shaping method. The availability of video recordings, wearable devices, and other digital sensors has allowed researchers to capture real-time practices that were previously invisible. While supportive of novel tools, she warned against letting method drive research questions as there is a danger when method becomes the most exciting thing. Instead, she urged researchers to keep problems and people at the centre and let the research question guide the research method. Let your participants guide your insights. She emphasised the importance of reflexivity, by being transparent about your positionality, your challenges, and even your failures. Sometimes we want to present our work as more linear than it was. But the messiness is part of the truth.

2.4. Ann Cunliffe: ontology, imagination and the ethics of theory

While others focused on methodological variety or digital innovation, Ann Cunliffe insisted that our research practices cannot be divorced from the ontological commitments we carry. For Prof Cunliffe, research is not simply a matter of gathering data or applying methods, but of how we are in the world as researchers. She emphasised that every method, be it ethnography, discourse analysis, or participatory action research, carries assumptions about what counts as reality, knowledge, and meaningful interaction. She drew from her own background in philosophy and critical studies to argue for research that is situated, embodied, and ethical. That means paying attention not just to abstract theory but to the relational and emotional dynamics of organisational life. She stressed that we are not just producing knowledge to be read by other academics, rather we are producing knowledge that should make a difference - for people, for organisations, for society.

She calls for researchers to be “*experimental, adventurous, imaginative, and try different methods*”. Her examples of such experimentation ranged from using plays and dramatic reenactments to co-produced narratives with community organisations. These aren’t just aesthetic choices; they are epistemological and ethical strategies that respect participants as co-creators of knowledge, not just sources of data. In this way, Prof Cunliffe’s work bridges a critical gap in organisational research between theory and practice, academia and lived experience.

Digital methods, she noted, offer new ways to capture relational dynamics, however cautioned that just because we can record everything doesn’t mean we understand it better. In a field increasingly focused on technical sophistication, her call to re-centre ethics, ontology, and human connection is both a grounding force and a radical provocation.

3. Summary of papers in the special collection

This Special Issue brought together a collection of eight papers that critically respond to this need (please see [Table 1](#) below). Each article exemplifies the diversity, depth, and promise of novel methodologies and methods in project studies. From analytic autoethnography to serious games, digital netnography to biographical narratives, these

Table 1

A collection of eight papers in Special Issue “Novel research methods in project studies”.

Author and paper title	Details of the paper
Simon Addyman, “Taking a selfie: Researcher-practitioner positionality and reflexivity in project scholarship”	Explores researcher-practitioner positionality and reflexive engagement through autoethnography which inherently engages in reflexive research practices.
Maria Freese and Geertje Bekebrede, “Game research by design in project management and beyond”	Introduces the game research by design as a gaming research set-up by illustrating examples and showing the potential of this methodological approach.
Jingbo Zhang and Kenneth Chung, “Online naturalistic inquiry for stakeholder issue analysis: Design and implementation”	Demonstrates how social media data can map stakeholder concerns in real time combining netnography, thematic, emotion work, and sentiment analysis.
Fran Ackermann and Eunice Maytorena-Sanchez, “Overlooked and underused? The benefits and challenges of using causal mapping for project studies”	Highlights causal mapping as a powerful, underutilised method for unpacking project complexity. It reflects on how it has been used and unpacks its potential to be used in project studies.
Alfons van Marrewijk, Shankar Sankaran, Nathalie Drouin and Ralf Müller, “Climbing to the top: Personal life stories on becoming megaproject leaders”	Uses biographical narratives and life stories to trace the life journeys of megaproject leaders and their evolving identities.
Magnus Yngvi Josefsson, “Structures of persuasion: Analysing the discourse surrounding a failed public project”	Applies discourse analysis to uncover how narratives shaped the failure of a high-profile public project.
Lama Arda, Giovanni Esposito and Rens Wilderom, “Sense and sensibility: Narrative strategies shaping megaproject delivery”	Combines topic modelling with narrative inquiry to examine public sentiment toward megaprojects. It highlights significance of employing different narrative strategies and their different effect in institutional contexts.
Carl Marnewick, Alejandro Romero-Torres and Julie Delisle, “Rich pictures as a research method in project management – A way to engage practitioners”	Promotes visual methods for engaging practitioners and unpacking complex project tensions. It shows that rich pictures elucidate concepts for better understanding and clarification.

papers collectively demonstrate how alternative modes of inquiry can unearth what practitioners actually do, not merely what they say they do—or what researchers assume they do. The shift towards methodological pluralism acknowledges that understanding project-based work, organisations, and leadership requires more than capturing behaviours or outcomes. It demands immersion into context, reflexivity, creativity, and an embrace of complexity as the adoption of methods that are empathetic and context-sensitive enables deeper engagement with lived experience, is vital for developing robust and relevant theory (Pink et al., 2010).

In ‘Taking a Selfie,’ Addyman (2025) leverages analytic autoethnography to explore the researcher-practitioner positionality in project scholarship. Autoethnographic approaches challenge conventional boundaries between the researcher and the researched. By reflecting on their own engagement with participants during interviews, Addyman identifies four reflexive dimensions - role of the self, relationality, chance and circumstance, and the bridging of research and practice - that shape knowledge co-creation. These insights resonate with calls for reflexivity as a core component of methodological rigour (Koch and Harrington, 1998; Adams and Manning, 2015), especially in settings where project research and practice coalesce.

The contribution by Freese and Bekebrede (2025) advances ‘Game Research by Design’, a methodological framework that uses serious games to simulate and study project dynamics. In treating games as socio-technical laboratories, the authors offer a compelling rationale for using experimental design in complex project settings. Serious games, in this context, provide immersive, safe environments for observing decision-making, interaction, and systemic responses. This research

reflects the growing interest in multi-method, design-based approaches and adds an engaging, participatory layer to traditional empirical inquiry.

Zhang and Chung (2024) propose a pragmatic framework for conducting online naturalistic inquiry via social media. Digital platforms such as social media are becoming increasingly relevant in project environments not only for stakeholder engagement but also for methodological innovation. Combining netnography, thematic and sentiment analyses, they show how digital discourse can be harnessed to map and prioritise stakeholder issues in infrastructure projects. Their approach responds to the growing scholarly recognition of digital data as ‘naturalistic’ which exists independently of the researcher’s intervention (Ninan, 2020) and capable of offering rich, real-time insights into the project ecosystem (Bansal et al., 2018).

In ‘Overlooked and Underused?’ Ackermann and Maytorena-Sanchez (2024) make a strong case for causal mapping in project research. Their paper synthesises how this technique has been employed to unpack the multi-causal, interacting dynamics of project complexity. By facilitating structured visualisations of issues, decisions, and value judgments, causal mapping enables rich, multi-actor analysis that complements interviews, surveys, and case studies. This method, they argue, holds particular value in capturing the contextual, relational, and emergent aspects of project work, areas often underrepresented in conventional data collection approaches.

van Marrewijk et al. (2023) use biographical narratives to uncover how individuals become megaproject leaders. Their research offers a deeply humanised understanding of leadership formation, tracing the evolution of identity, values, and career trajectories through life stories. This aligns with the narrative turn in project studies (Clandinin, 2022; Czarniawska, 2007), which views stories not only as data but as meaning-making tools. Biographical inquiry, in this case, is deployed to bridge the personal and professional, revealing leadership as a lifelong developmental process shaped by context and agency.

Josefsson (2024) presents a compelling integration of discourse analysis with legal argumentation structures to analyse a failed public project. By exposing how narratives and counternarratives interact and how power is exercised through discourse, the study responds directly to calls for examining the many and varied limitations of project management and covert causes of failure (Ninan et al., 2021). This paper represents a novel blend of rhetorical and project studies methodologies, offering a powerful lens for understanding stakeholder conflict, legitimacy, and resistance.

Arda et al. (2024) expand the narrative approach further by exploring how public narratives shape citizen responses to megaprojects. Using both qualitative data and topic modelling (Latent Dirichlet Allocation), they identify instrumental and hedonic narrative strategies and assess their impact on public sentiment. The mixed methodological design exemplifies the value of combining computational tools with traditional qualitative inquiry. It also reflects the growing trend in project research to investigate the discursive construction of project legitimacy (Dalpiaz and Di Stefano, 2018; Sergeeva and Green, 2019).

Marnewick et al. (2024) propose rich pictures, a visual tool from Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), as an underutilised yet powerful technique for project research. Their paper demonstrates how visual artefacts can clarify complex issues - such as the tension between product and project management - and foster greater practitioner engagement. The method emphasises participatory learning, sense-making, and feedback, aligning with action research and co-generative forms of inquiry (Kemmis, 2006; van Marrewijk and Dessing, 2019).

4. Future direction on novel research methods in project studies

Project scholarship now stands on the threshold of its next methodological turn. Insights from the four method experts (Section 2) and the eight empirical contributions in this Special Issue (Section 3), when read against the limitations sketched in the introduction, point to five

intertwined trajectories that can guide future research design. Each trajectory answers a specific gap, but together they sketch a plural, reflexive and forward-looking research agenda.

1. **Researching Forward: From Retrospection to Propection:** Ann Langley's call to 'stay alive to the unfolding present' reframes time in project studies. Rather than freezing action at data-collection cut-off points, scholars are urged to follow projects as they emerge and morph, combining longitudinal ethnography, process tracing and action research with mechanisms that allow post-publication updates. Several papers in this issue already prototype such designs: Freese and Bekebrede (2025) serious-game laboratories create repeated cycles of experimentation, while Zhang and Chung (2024) mine social-media traces that refresh daily. Future work could build prospective cases by securing digital repositories where researchers, practitioners and even reviewers can add observations as a project unfolds. Further publications can be treated as living documents that accommodate second or third chapters reporting what happened next. There should also be an opportunity to integrate scenario analysis or speculative fiction, as noted by Eero Vaara, to test how today's decisions might reverberate through imagined tomorrows.
2. **Hybrid Configurations of big, small and thick data:** All four panellists celebrated methodological pluralism, yet warned that hybrids fail when researchers bolt methods together without epistemic coherence. The successful studies in this issue imply a rule-of-thumb: let each method do what it does best and make the joints visible. Going forward we envisage configurations, for example, such as digital trace analytics followed by ethnographic deep-dives, followed by visual elicitation in the process topic modelling of around a million tweets about a megaproject (Williams et al., 2024), zoom into a critical hashtag community through netnography, and finally conduct rich-picture workshops with those actors. Other combinations include causal mapping, serious gaming, and reflective autoethnography, allowing researchers first to visualise complexity, then stress-test it in a simulated environment, and finally document their own positionality in action. Such designs demand transparent 'methodological genre statements' with a short, front-of-paper section specifying the knowledge claims each component supports and how they interlock.
3. **Sensory, Visual and Arts-Based Inquiry:** Stephanie Dailey's insistence on the work of practitioners foregrounds the body, the senses and the non-verbal. Addyman's autoethnography, Marnewick et al.'s rich pictures and Dailey's own photo-elicitation exemplify a wider sensory turn. Future projects could exploit ubiquitous video-conferencing archives and wearable-camera feeds to perform micro-interaction analysis of distributed teams. They could weave arts-based artefacts such as drawings, collages, soundscapes, into data collection and dissemination, not as decoration but as alternative epistemic lenses. Future research methods could also couple visual material with rigorous analytic protocols (e.g., iconographic coding, multimodal discourse analysis) to avoid what Prof Vaara called use of images without theoretical grounding. Journals can also accelerate uptake by allowing embedded video clips, high-resolution images and hyperlink appendices in standard articles.
4. **Participatory and Ethical Co-Production:** Ann Cunliffe reminds us that methods carry moral weight. Serious games, rich pictures and action research already relocate participants from subjects to co-investigators; yet future studies can go further by adopting "design justice" principles, ensuring that research questions and the choice of method itself emerge from stakeholder dialogue rather than academic convenience. Researchers could also report reflexive diaries or role-switching commentaries similar to Addyman (2025) alongside findings, making power dynamics and researcher affect explicit. Researchers could also evaluate resonance, not replication, as the primary legitimacy test: does the knowledge generated matter to those who live the project, and can they use it? Ethics committees

will need updated guidelines for participatory video, real-time data scraping and cross-platform traceability.

5. **Methodological Infrastructure and Capability Building:** Finally, novel methods will stall without supportive ecosystems. Three system-level actions emerge such as 1) editorial innovation – gatekeepers should encourage multi-method manuscripts, accept mixed-media files and pilot 'update rounds' where authors post follow-up data two or three years after initial publication. 2) Open, annotated method repositories – akin to software "package managers", curating step-by-step protocols (scripts for LDA, templates for causal maps, ethical checklists for autoethnography) that early-career scholars can remix. 3) Interdisciplinary training studios – short, intensive workshops where project researchers practise stitching together computational text analysis, visual elicitation and participatory design under one roof, echoing Prof Vaara's plea for humility and learning from adjacent fields.

Taken together, the future of methods in project studies is plural, anticipatory and dialogical. It blends computational reach with ethnographic depth; privileges sensory and narrative ways of knowing; and treats participants as co-authors of both projects and scholarship. Most importantly, it commits to "researching forward": not merely explaining yesterday's projects but equipping society to imagine and enact better ones tomorrow. By pursuing these directions, the field can keep pace with the distributed, digital and value-contested realities of 21st-century projects while remembering that every method is, at heart, a choice about how we wish to be in the world.

5. Conclusion

Project studies have always been propelled forward by methodological innovation. From the early dominance of survey-based designs to today's sophisticated, mixed and multi-sourced approaches, each methodological turn has opened new windows on the lived realities of projects, project-based organisations and the societies they serve (Sergeeva et al., 2022). Yet the research problems that confront us in 2025 are digital workspaces, distributed teams, urgent societal challenges and fast-moving technological change, etc., demanding still bolder lenses and richer forms of evidence. Ultimately, this special issue sets out to cultivate a more inclusive methodological landscape for project studies, one that mirrors the complexity, fluidity and diversity of contemporary project work. By fostering methodological innovation, we aim not only to enhance rigour and relevance, but also to deepen the field's contribution to theory, policy and practice.

The conversations and empirical papers collected here converge on four interlocking insights. First, scaling without dilution is possible when richly contextual 'small data' from multiple qualitative studies are intentionally assembled into broader mosaics. Such collaborative, multi-sited designs let researchers tackle societal-scale questions such as climate risk, infrastructure justice, digital inequality, while preserving the nuance that makes qualitative inquiry so powerful. Second, the digital turn is expanding what can count as data and how it can travel: screenshots, video clips, colour imagery and real-time trace data invite readers to see phenomena rather than merely read coded excerpts. Journals, in turn, must embrace friction-free annexes, multimedia supplements and update cycles that allow findings to evolve alongside the projects they document. Third, methodological choices gain power when they are transparently aligned with theoretical puzzles and practical contexts. Across the issue, successful studies weave multiple sources such as interviews, observations, visual artefacts, discourse traces, etc., into coherent narratives that make their epistemic 'joints' visible. This alignment ethic helps reviewers evaluate hybrids on their own terms and guides early-career scholars past the anxiety of adequacy that often accompanies ambitious, mixed-method designs. Finally, a generational shift is pushing the field toward open, participatory and ethically reflexive scholarship. Emerging researchers call for modular, media-rich

studies that acknowledge positionality, share data for reuse and design research that ‘plugs in’ to wider conversations long after initial publication.

Taken together, these insights chart a forward-looking agenda for project studies. Future research will be digitally fluent yet critically grounded, collaborative yet reflexively aware of power, and adventurous in method while disciplined in articulation. By continuing to stretch our methodological repertoire and by embedding transparency, multimodality and ethical care at its core, the field can generate the deeper, more actionable knowledge that today’s complex, high-stakes projects demand. In doing so, project scholarship will not only interpret the projects of yesterday, but actively help shape the more sustainable, inclusive and imaginative projects of tomorrow.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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