



Essay

Normative violence and its implications in project scholarship

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

 Normative violence
 Exploitation
 Inequality
 Resistance

ABSTRACT

In recent years, project scholarship has increasingly focused on the dark side of projects. However, these discussions have largely overlooked extant literature on violence that is widely referenced in broader management and organizational studies. In this essay, I argue that normative violence—violence embedded in socio-cultural and legal norms accepted and practiced in broader society—provides a valuable lens through which to analyze and discuss the inequality, harm, and exploitation present in project settings. From this perspective, I argue that future research in project scholarship should investigate how norms—borrowed from external socio-cultural and legal frameworks, as well as those developed and spread within projects—can lead to the infliction of normative violence in, around, and of projects.

Introduction

In recent years, project scholarship has increasingly focused on the ‘dark side’ of projects, highlighting issues like unethical practices, power imbalances, and negative impacts on individuals, groups and communities (e.g., Aguilar Velasco & Wald, 2022; He et al., 2022; Locatelli et al., 2022; Sarhadi & Hasanzadeh, 2022). Despite this emerging attention, these discussions have yet to fully benefit from the insights offered by violence literature (e.g., Abdelnour & Abu Moghli, 2021; Ahmed, 2024; Bloomfield et al., 2017; Varman & Al-Amoudi, 2016). This body of literature, which has long informed various social science fields, including management and organizational studies, offers rich analytical frameworks and concepts—such as *normative violence*, *insensitive violence*, *symbolic violence*, *structural violence*, and *collective and mundane resistance*—that can deepen project scholarship’s understanding of how violence is experienced, reproduced, perpetuated, normalized, and resisted within project environments. Indeed, a review of extant literature in project studies reveals that the concept of violence is often only indirectly acknowledged in discussions concerning issues such as collective actions and protests (Hanna et al., 2016; van Den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019), stakeholder management (Aaltonen & Sivoonen, 2009; Derakhshan, 2022), and project corruptions and failures (Locatelli et al., 2017, 2022a, b).

Against this background, in this essay, I argue that the concept of *normative violence*—violence that is embedded in the norms that govern our society—can be applied within project scholarship to provide a more nuanced understanding of violence in these settings. As a critical yet

under-examined element of the dark side of projects, this framework sheds light on violence *in*, *around*, and *of* projects. In doing so, I argue that normative violence in projects is not only inherited from broader societal and organizational norms but also actively developed and diffused within projects, influencing practices beyond the project’s lifecycle. I conclude by suggesting directions for implementing the concept of normative violence in project scholarship.

The nature of normative violence

The concept of normative violence was first introduced by Judith Butler, who explored how societal norms can exert harm by shaping identities and behaviors in ways that perpetuate exclusion and inequality. Butler (1990, 2004) argued that norms that govern our society are not neutral; rather, they are influential regulatory forces that categorize individuals based on characteristics such as gender, race, and ethnicity among others, determining which lives are valued and which are to be marginalized. As Butler suggests, these norms are often fully legitimized and dictate common practices in broader society; however, their implications can inflict diverse types of violence to certain individuals, groups, or communities who are excluded by these norms.

Although Butler did not extend the conceptualization of normative violence to management and organizational settings, scholars in this field have extensively drawn on Butler’s theorization to examine how exclusionary norms operate within organizations (e.g., Kenny, Fotaki & Scriver, 2019; Varman & Al-Amoudi, 2016; Varman et al., 2023). Through the lens of normative violence, scholars in management and

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2025.102679>

Received 14 January 2025; Accepted 30 January 2025

Available online 6 February 2025

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organizational studies argue individuals, organizations, and institutions may use socio-cultural and legal norms to legitimize violence against particular groups based on factors such as caste (Mendonca, D’Cruz & Noronha, 2022; Varman & Al-Amoudi, 2016; Varman et al., 2021), class (Vijay & Nair, 2022), ideology (Martí & Fernández, 2013), or gender (Ashraf, Pianezzi & Awan, 2023). In this way, violence is normalized through narratives that serve to moralize, legalize, and even popularize harm (Haleem, 2019).

Scholars studying the functions of normative violence within social and organizational contexts further propose that norms arise when they serve the interests of influential actors in a social setting (e.g., organization). In other words, norms are formed when certain behaviors support the goals of these actors, leading individuals to perform actions that reinforce the norm (Kenny, Fotaki & Scriver, 2019). Furthermore, exclusionary dynamics consolidate not through isolated actions but through repeated, collective enactment. As Butler (2013, p.313) describes, norms are “a kind of imitation for which there is no original,” a quality that makes them particularly difficult to trace or challenge. Consequently, by regularly reinforcing exclusionary norms, normative violence becomes embedded within social contexts as a seemingly natural and unavoidable approach toward others.

Norms further establish what is recognizable, understood, and validated as human within society (Varman & Al-Amoudi, 2016; Varman et al., 2021). These frameworks both enable and restrict perceptions of human worth, selectively including some individuals as ‘human’ while excluding others. This process of exclusion leads to derealization (Ahmed, 2024), a condition where certain individuals are seen as “neither alive nor dead” (Butler, 2004, p.32), essentially dehumanized. Norms thus encode the operation of power by defining who is valued as a person and who is marginalized or deemed invisible (Derakhshan & Chowdhury, 2024). Only those whose lives are regarded as ‘livable’ are mourned or grieved when they suffer or die (Ahmed, 2024; Varman & Al-Amoudi, 2016), and this derealization allows violence against dehumanized individuals to occur with little ethical concern.

Although the literature on normative violence does not portray derealized individuals as passive victims (e.g., Kenny, Fotaki & Scriver, 2019), it also suggests that the resistance to normative violence remains limited. Such resistance often involves public acts of vulnerability, where marginalized individuals assert their humanity before the broader society to affirm their needs and desires (Butler, 2016; Derakhshan & Chowdhury, 2024; Varman & Al-Amoudi, 2016). Workers categorized as unskilled, for instance, often resist their marginalization and exploitation by creatively asserting their skills in ways that challenge the categories imposed on them (Iskander, 2021). For instance, migrant workers might use their expertise, adaptability, and ingenuity in construction or other labor-intensive sectors to demonstrate their capabilities, despite being categorized as unskilled (Derakhshan et al., 2024). Derealized individuals may also resist by forming groups that foster solidarity and develop counter-narratives (Mumby, 2005), which empower them to assert their rights and challenge dehumanization. However, empirical studies in organizational contexts reveal that individuals may not always critically evaluate the violent norms they face (Varman et al., 2021), and that when they express their vulnerability, organizations may retaliate with further violence (Ahmed, 2024; Varman & Al-Amoudi, 2016).

Manifestations of normative violence in projects

Although project management scholarship has scarcely addressed normative violence explicitly, its manifestations within projects can be traced and identified through a close examination of accepted and justified practices and norms that inflict harm and diverse forms of violence within project settings. Normative violence in project context is often perpetuated through socio-culturally ingrained expectations and behaviors, both within the project environment and broader societal settings. These norms can enable harm toward specific individuals or

groups by regulating behaviors toward them based on factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, or their role within the project. I argue that the key manifestations of normative violence inflicted and experienced in project environments may be grouped to include aggressive competition and exploitation; exclusion and marginalization; and exploitation and harm inflicted on external stakeholders and communities.

Aggressive competition and exploitation in projects

Projects frequently cultivate an environment of intense competition, where the pressure to achieve objectives is so high that it fosters a victory-driven mentality. This culture can push project managers and team members to prioritize results over ethical considerations, thereby normalizing aggressive tactics that may harm individual well-being (Creasy & Carnes, 2017). For example, project environments with aggressive timelines and performance targets may impose severe workloads on team members, causing stress, burnout, and psychological harm (Turner, Huemann & Keegan, 2008). The emphasis on competition and productivity, when normalized, creates a culture where pushing individuals to their limits becomes standard practice, masking the harm caused as a necessary means to an end (Zwikael & Globerson, 2006).

In these high-pressure environments, individuals in vulnerable roles, such as lower-level team members, may be disproportionately exploited. For instance, organizations may justify the excessive hours and intense demands placed on project workers as part of the temporary sacrifice needed for project completion, neglecting long-term impacts on team members’ health and well-being (Turner, Huemann & Keegan, 2008). Research shows that project managers, as influential actors within the social dynamics of a project, can play a significant role in creating and reinforcing harmful norms (Creasy & Carnes, 2017). In addition, by rewarding only visible, high-performing individuals, they implicitly support these norms, fostering a culture where exploitation is justified, normalized and tolerated (Bredillet, Tywoniak & Tootoonchy, 2018). In highly competitive industries, such as construction and engineering, these exploitative practices become more entrenched, especially under norms that frame competition and resilience as marks of professionalism (Pinto & Winch, 2016).

Exclusion and marginalization

In project settings, certain individuals or groups might be systematically excluded from decision-making processes or relegated to peripheral roles. Studies reveal that project teams may replicate broader societal hierarchies, reinforcing gendered or racialized divisions of labor (Dunn et al., 2011; Greer & Carden, 2021). For example, as projects borrow social norms from the broader society surrounding the project, women or racial minorities may find themselves restricted to lower-status roles within the project or excluded from critical meetings, perpetuating an unequal distribution of power and influence (Bresnen et al., 2005; Pinto, Patanakul & Pinto, 2017).

Inclusion challenges in project settings are also documented in cases where individuals with non-dominant cultural backgrounds or lower social status face implicit biases that limit their participation (Ojiako et al., 2015). These exclusionary norms can cause marginalized team members to feel invisible or undervalued, which may prevent them from contributing fully to the project. Notably, studies in project management have shown that this exclusion can often be subtle, manifesting through microaggressions or tacit cultural codes that deter equal participation (Creasy & Carnes, 2017). In projects, where the structure and roles are highly stratified, these implicit forms of exclusion can lead to a hierarchy that devalues contributions from individuals based on non-performance-related factors, further reinforcing societal biases within the project environment (Winch, 2012).

Exploitation and harm inflicted on external stakeholders and communities

Normative violence in project environment also extends beyond internal dynamics of the project team and stakeholders to affect external stakeholders such as local communities, particularly when project outcomes are prioritized over ethical considerations. Project teams may exploit resources or ignore community concerns under norms that privilege profitability and efficiency above social responsibility. This is particularly evident in projects within the extractive industries, where community resources are often appropriated with limited consultation or consideration for the long-term impacts on local populations (Derakhshan, 2022; Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2017).

Similarly, worker exploitation within projects is often justified by socio-cultural and legal norms. While legal norms differ from socio-cultural ones in being explicit rather than implicit, both can serve to legitimize harmful practices toward specific labor groups. In particular, migrant workers frequently endure exploitative conditions within projects, driven by regulatory frameworks that permit or overlook these practices. One prominent example is the Kafala system (Alzoubi, Locatelli & Sainati, 2023; Iskander, 2021), prevalent in Gulf countries, where legal structures bind migrant workers to their employers, severely restricting their rights, making it difficult for them to seek fair treatment or leave exploitative situations, and simultaneously normalizing their exploitation (Fernandez, 2021; Parreñas, 2021). This should, however, be noted that the context in which normative violence is inflicted can be highly intricate and multifaceted. For example, as Iskander (2021) observed, the Kafala system in Qatar operates in tandem with socio-political norms that categorize workers based on their skillset. While nearly all migrant workers in Qatar are subject to the same legal framework and visa regulations, those labeled as skilled enjoy markedly different rights compared to those deemed unskilled. These differences extend to fundamental rights such as freedom of movement, autonomy, dignity, creativity, and self-expression. Workers categorized as unskilled are often prohibited from living in or freely accessing most areas of the city—the very city they helped construct—and are instead confined to labor camps in the surrounding desert, further entrenching systemic inequality and exclusion.

Similarly, project literature also discusses the exploitation of migrant labor in large-scale construction projects globally, where workers from economically disadvantaged regions are recruited for low-wage, high-risk positions, often without adequate health and safety protections. These exploitative practices, justified under norms that often bring such workers to dehumanized or derealized positions (Derakhshan et al., 2024).

Studies also show that when projects fail to address the concerns of these stakeholders, it can result in community pushback and resistance (Hanna et al., 2016; van Den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019; Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2016). However, even such resistance is often overlooked or delegitimized in project governance frameworks, which tend to emphasize compliance over genuine stakeholder engagement. As projects increasingly operate across borders, the ethical responsibility toward external stakeholders becomes a pressing concern, yet socio-cultural and legal norms can facilitate ongoing harm by framing stakeholder exploitation as a normative aspect of project execution.

Implications of normative violence in project scholarship

The framework of normative violence provides a valuable tool for examining how harmful norms and practices become embedded in project cultures, shaping behaviors, decision-making, and interactions. Applying this perspective allows project management research to move beyond surface-level views of conflict or dysfunction, uncovering how violence is normalized, reproduced, and legitimized within projects. Drawing on the nuanced literature of normative violence, I propose three key areas where project scholarship can adopt this lens to analyze the complex forms of violence encountered in project environments.

Normative violence in projects

Within the boundaries of a project, normative violence can serve as a critical framework for understanding how harm is inflicted upon individuals working directly on or within the project team, without much ethical concern. Project environments are often governed by norms drawn from broader organizational or socio-cultural and legal contexts, shaping the dynamics of work, power, and interpersonal relationships within these temporary organizations. These norms may be uncritically adopted from the permanent organization or broader industry expectations, reinforcing harmful behaviors that eventually become accepted as standard. In this way, projects borrow and embed external socio-cultural and legal structures that inflict harm on team members through normalization of aggressive competition, exclusionary practices, or relentless performance pressures.

Project norms may also be developed internally, amplifying the pressure placed on team members to achieve success at all costs. For instance, norms that prioritize speed, efficiency, or market competition can easily shift into violence when team members are expected to work long hours, endure high stress, or sacrifice personal well-being for the project's objectives.

Additionally, exclusion and marginalization based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic status can be perpetuated within project settings. For example, women and minorities may find themselves sidelined from key decision-making processes or confined to less visible roles, reflecting broader societal hierarchies within the temporary organizational structure. These norms can make project environments challenging and even hostile for individuals whose identities place them at odds with the exclusionary norms of the project.

Here, normative violence can offer a lens for examining questions such as: *How do project environments adopt and internalize harmful norms from broader organizational or socio-cultural contexts? What role do specific project norms play in shaping experiences of inclusion or exclusion within the project team? How does the normalization of performance pressures affect team members' physical and mental well-being? What are the long-term effects of normative violence on project professionals? In what ways can resistance to normative violence emerge within project teams, and how is such resistance received or retaliated against within the project structure? How can project leaders mitigate the influence of exclusionary or aggressive norms that contribute to normative violence?*

Normative violence around projects

Normative violence also manifests in the impact that projects have on external stakeholders, including individuals, communities, and organizations surrounding the project. External stakeholders may occupy positions of vulnerability, in particular when they are subjected to project decisions without adequate representation or voice. The concept of normative violence provides an analytical lens to understand how project practices—justified under the guise of greater good or progress, but also socio-cultural and legal norms—may harm these communities through the normalization of exploitative or exclusionary practices.

In projects involving construction, energy, or large-scale infrastructure, the negative impact on local communities may be deemed inevitable or even acceptable collateral in the quest for progress. This normalization of harm effectively derealizes those affected, positioning them outside the scope of ethical considerations and reducing their concerns to peripheral status. Such derealization occurs when external stakeholders are seen as less human—making it easier for project activities to overlook or justify harm inflicted upon them. The concept of normative violence provides a critical perspective on these exclusionary practices, enabling project management scholars to question how norms that favor project success simultaneously marginalize and harm those in surrounding communities.

To further investigate the impact of projects on external stakeholders, especially within marginalized communities and contexts like

the Global South and global supply chains, future research could address questions such as: *How does the concept of derealization help explain the normalization of harm in projects that impact Indigenous, rural, or economically disadvantaged communities? What mechanisms within large-scale infrastructure projects are linked to the derealization of affected communities, making it easier to overlook social and environmental harm they experience due to the project activities? How are socio-cultural and legal norms used to justify the exclusion of marginalized communities from decision-making processes within projects? How can project management frameworks be adapted to prevent harm to external stakeholders, particularly in areas where socio-cultural and legal norms permit exploitation? What roles do global governance structures (such as international labor laws or environmental protections) play in mitigating normative violence in projects affecting marginalized communities? How does the derealization of certain stakeholders impact the long-term sustainability and ethics of project outcomes?*

Normative violence of projects

Projects are commonly viewed as agents of change (Turner & Müller, 2003) capable of transforming both the organizations that sponsor them and the societies they operate within. However, this change is not always inherently positive; projects can also become conduits for the dissemination of harmful norms that extend beyond the project's lifecycle. I, thereby, question the hegemonic positivity that often characterizes discourses of the impact of projects and suggest that the concept of normative violence offers a framework for understanding how projects, through their embeddedness in organizational and societal contexts, may actively shape and diffuse violent norms to the permanent organization and broader society. Such norms would arguably persist long after the project has concluded.

For instance, a project may establish new norms around labor practices, environmental exploitation, or community relations that, once seen as effective or efficient, are replicated across other projects or organizational activities. These norms may then be absorbed into the permanent organization, influencing its culture and operations beyond the project setting. In this way, projects act as sites where harmful practices are not only normalized but institutionalized, becoming part of a broader organizational approach that may affect other projects, departments, and even industry standards.

Projects also have the power to shape societal attitudes and practices. For example, large-scale projects in sectors such as oil and gas, construction, or technology may legitimize the use of exploitative practices toward marginalized communities or environmental resources, framing them as necessary for achieving economic goals. Over time, such practices can become accepted standards within an industry or broader social context, contributing to a societal culture that perpetuates violence against vulnerable populations and ecological systems. Thus, projects are not only recipients of societal norms but also powerful agents that contribute to the evolution and entrenchment of new forms of normative violence across organizational and social landscapes.

The implications of these processes are profound for project management scholarship. Projects are often seen as temporary endeavors, yet they can leave lasting legacies in terms of the norms they propagate. Acknowledging that projects can be sources of normative violence challenges the field to rethink how project outcomes are evaluated and how success is defined. It also calls attention to the ethical responsibility of project practitioners and sponsors to consider the broader impacts of their work, recognizing that the norms established within a project may have enduring, potentially harmful effects on individuals and communities.

Concerning the role of projects in development and diffusion of harmful norms to the permanent organization and broader society some of the questions that future research may address are: *What mechanisms do projects employ to establish and reinforce harmful norms within the organizations they are embedded in, and how do these mechanisms evolve over*

the project lifecycle? In what ways do large-scale projects contribute to the normalization of exploitative practices towards marginalized communities, and what are the long-term implications for imposing changes on the fabric of the society? How do project management practices inadvertently legitimize harmful norms related to labor exploitation, environmental degradation, and community relations, and what factors influence their diffusion into the permanent organization and broader society? What role do stakeholders (e.g., sponsors, contractors, local communities) play in either challenging and resisting or perpetuating normative violence during and after the implementation of projects? How do projects impact the evolution of industry standards and practices regarding ethical considerations in labor, environmental sustainability, and community engagement, particularly in contexts with vulnerable populations? How can project evaluation frameworks be redefined to incorporate assessments of normative violence and its long-term effects on organizational culture and broader societal norms?

Conclusion

Projects, as temporary organizations, are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural, legal, and political structures that both shape them and are, in turn, shaped by them. Understanding the complexities of this embeddedness is crucial to gaining insight into the experiences of individuals, groups, and communities who are directly or indirectly involved in or impacted by projects—particularly when it comes to the harm and violence they may endure. However, on the path toward understanding the harm inflicted in, around, and of projects, it is essential to avoid using these categorizations as oversimplified frameworks.

Violence is an inherently complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and such categorizations should not lead us to simplify its nature. Different forms of violence often coexist and intersect, creating layered experiences of harm that are more difficult to recognize, trace back to their origins, or adequately address. These overlapping dimensions of violence further complicate efforts to mitigate harm, as they often remain invisible or normalized within project environments. That is, violence, and the resistance against it, cannot be understood or resolved through linear or one-dimensional approaches. Additionally, the fast-paced, temporary nature of projects often leads to the neglect of violence experienced within project settings, as well as the underestimation of the long-lasting negative impacts these endeavors can create.

In writing this essay, my hope is to bring attention to the need for project management scholarship to critically engage with the concept of violence, particularly through the lens of normative violence. By doing so, we can uncover the nuanced ways in which harmful norms and practices are embedded, perpetuated, and resisted within project environments. This approach calls for a rethinking of project outcomes, encouraging scholars and practitioners to move beyond simplistic metrics of success and consider the ethical, social, and human costs of projects. My aim is to inspire future research and dialogue that not only addresses these critical issues but also helps develop strategies to mitigate violence and create more equitable and just project environments.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Roya Derakhshan: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

None

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