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The Stakeholder Challenge: Dealing with Challenging Situations Involving Stakeholders

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Manuscripts

The Stakeholder Challenge: Dealing with Challenging Situations Involving Stakeholders

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The Stakeholder Challenge: Dealing with Challenging Situations Involving Stakeholders

Abstract

Project managers are an occupational group who is exposed to high levels of stress caused by various aspects such as resources and communication or working relationships. One particularly challenging area is the interaction with stakeholders, who are often perceived to “be difficult”. With this study, we investigate how project managers cope with challenging situations involving stakeholders in projects. We do this through a qualitative study involving interviews and focus groups to explore the lived experiences of the project managers in specific situations. Our findings suggest that a project manager perspective on stakeholder management is particularly valuable to account for contextual factors such as sources of challenging situations. We propose a project coping model which transfers Lazarus and Folkman’s stress and coping model into the project context and adds the layer of project coping to emphasise the project managers’ perception of accountability and commitment to the project.

Keywords: project management, stakeholder, coping, project coping model

Introduction

Project managers have been found to be less resilient than the average working population with a particularly high stress level in regards to their working relationships (Cheung et al. 2020). The overall perception of stress in the working environment, i.e. occupational or workplace stress, has been described as having “reached epidemic proportions in recent years” (Kinman and Jones 2005, p. 109), which is also reflected in the increase in research on this topic and the refinement of how stress is approached theoretically (Bliese, Edwards, and Sonnentag 2017). A vast amount of studies has investigated how different occupations deal with stress ranging from university employees (Mark and Smith 2012) to nurses (McVicar 2003) to veterinaries (Hatch et al. 2011) to project managers (Aitken and Crawford 2007; Richmond and Skitmore 2006). However, the very limited number of studies investigating project managers leaves a big gap which needs to be addressed based on the very recent findings on the concerning state of the wellbeing of project professionals by Cheung et al. (2020). Hence, we do not aim to investigate workplace stress in general across various occupations but will focus specifically on the project profession as there is a theoretical, methodological and practical need which will be explicated in more detail in the following sections.

“Workplace stress can be defined as the change in one’s physical or mental state in response to workplaces that pose an appraised challenge or threat to the employee” (Colligan and Higgins 2006, p. 89). For project managers there are various challenges or threats present in the workplace which can lead to stress like resources, technology, work overload, conflicts or communication (Richmond and Skitmore 2006). Many of these aspects can be linked to the engagement with stakeholders as stakeholder voices might materialize tensions in projects (Boonstra, van Offenbeek, and Vos 2017) and stakeholder management in general is regarded to be “at the very heart of project management” (Aaltonen and Kujala 2016, p. 1538). Currently, we do not know how project managers deal with the challenges or threats posed by stakeholders.

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3 Considering the above mentioned research on the wellbeing of project managers and the fact
4 that in areas such as resources and communication, work relationships and strain on
5 psychological health project managers are categorised as high risk compared to the average
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10 working population (Cheung et al. 2020) we need to fill that gap and gain a better understanding
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12 of how project managers cope with stressful situations involving stakeholders. This is
13 particularly prevalent, as most studies on occupational stress are quantitative in nature
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15 (Mazzola, Schonfeld, and Spector 2011) – in general and in the field of project management
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17 (Aitken and Crawford 2007), whereas we use a qualitative approach based on interviews and
18
19 focus groups to gain rich insights.
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25 The literature on coping strategies emerged in the 1960's and matured as a distinct area of
26 inquiry about 30 years ago. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) developed the widely accepted
27 definition of coping as “the thoughts and behaviours used to manage the internal and external
28 demands of situations that are appraised to be stressful” (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004, p.
29 746). Dewe, Cox, and Ferguson (1993) note that this definition is brought about due to the
30 response to works that burden abilities and resources. We will use the coping strategies
31 literature as our theoretical lens to analyse how project managers cope with stressful situations
32 involving stakeholders and hence, developed the following research question: **What is the**
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34 **project managers' experience of dealing with challenging situations in projects involving**
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36 **stakeholders?**
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49 We will answer the research question through a qualitative study utilising interviews and
50 focus groups with experienced project managers. We found that project managers are not only
51 concerned about how they themselves deal with a challenging situation, but they also feel a
52 strong sense of accountability towards the project and hence, we differentiate between personal
53 and project coping. The paper is organized as follows: First we review the literature on project
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3 stakeholders, coping in general and more specifically in projects and provide the theoretical
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5 background to our search for answers to the research question. We then describe and justify our
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7 methods for data collection and analysis. In the findings section we present the results from the
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9 interviews and in the discussion section we answer the research question and develop a model
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11 for the use of coping strategies in projects.
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15 **Theoretical Background**

16 ***Project Stakeholders***

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19 Stakeholders are individuals or groups who “have a stake in the success or failure of a
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21 business” (Freeman et al. 2010, p. XV), whereas project stakeholders are typically defined as
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23 affecting or being affected by the project (Eskerod, Huemann, and Savage 2015). These can be
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25 groups and individuals such as investors, suppliers, customers, users, authorities, neighbours,
26
27 media and so forth, who play a crucial role in regards to project success (Eskerod, Huemann,
28
29 and Savage 2015; PMI 2017). Research on project stakeholders has been dominated for many
30
31 years by an instrumental approach, which is mainly prescriptive and focuses on developing
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33 tools and techniques to manage individual stakeholders, such as the power/interest matrix
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35 (Olander and Landin 2005) or stakeholder mapping (Bourne and Walker 2005). A shift to a
36
37 more relational approach to stakeholders has developed more recently with some initial work
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39 on investigating stakeholder behaviours (Beringer, Jonas, and Kock 2013), network and
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41 systems perspectives (Missonier and Loufrani-Fedida 2014; Sperry and Jetter 2019) or a more
42
43 holistic perspective of stakeholder landscapes (Aaltonen and Kujala 2016). This is also
44
45 underpinned by a systematic literature review on stakeholder management in megaprojects by
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47 Mok, Shen, and Yang (2015) who has identified that the majority of work has been done in the
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49 areas of stakeholder management processes and analysis methods, with work associated with
50
51 the relational approach in areas such as stakeholder interest and influence as well as engagement
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53 gaining traction. Our work is situated in the relational approach to stakeholder management
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3 (Oliveira and Rabechini Jr 2019) as it is interested in the relationship between the individual
4 stakeholders and the project manager. It adds a unique perspective as it does not put the
5 stakeholder in the centre of the investigation, but the project manager and more specifically
6 how the project manager copes with challenges created by or through project stakeholders.
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14 Flyvbjerg (2014) and Mok, Shen, and Yang (2015) suggest that particularly in largescale
15 projects the social complexity associated with the project's stakeholders is a key managerial
16 challenge. This is the case in regards to the stakeholders' quantity, their variety and the
17 relationships amongst them. Aaltonen and Kujala (2016, p. 1537) also highlight the "rugged
18 and foggy stakeholder contexts" of new product development projects as challenges for
19 stakeholder management. Such challenges can occur in multiple shapes or forms. Projects often
20 involve a very heterogeneous set of stakeholders concerning age, gender and project role, which
21 can have an impact on how events, phenomena or outputs are perceived (Chipulu et al. 2019;
22 Ojiako et al. 2015). Subsequently, perception incongruence amongst stakeholders or between
23 stakeholder and project manager can lead to challenging situations, which the project managers
24 need to resolve. Furthermore, some of the common reasons for unsuccessful projects are
25 stakeholder disappointment (e.g. Dalcher 2009) or lack of stakeholder alignment (Ollus et al.
26 2011), which can be potential factors causing tensions between the project manager and
27 stakeholders on a project. The high number of stakeholders involved in projects, each with
28 individual potentially diametrically opposed and competing values, requirements, expectations
29 and concerns, can also be the reason for challenging situations between the project and
30 individual stakeholders (Walton and Dawson 2001; Eskerod, Huemann, and Savage 2015). In
31 addition, stakeholders often have different objectives, cultures, knowledge, expertise and roles,
32 which can create further complications to project managers (Baiden, Price, and Dainty 2006).
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3 Classically, there are different types of stakeholder depending upon such variables as their
4 power, legitimacy and urgency (Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997), with those having high
5 power, legitimacy and urgency having high salience. Some stakeholders are internal to an
6 organisation and some reside outside (Ritter 1999). Hence, they might decide to act in a
7 supportive or non-supportive way when engaging with the project. Often these stakeholders are
8 actors that are outside the authority of the project manager (Karlsen 2002). Therefore, if
9 perceiving their interests adversely affected, project stakeholders with high salience, such as
10 clients, suppliers, senior managers and team members, can be highly disruptive in their
11 behaviours, in terms of working for the achievement of the project objectives like time, quality
12 and cost. They can also develop a high level of frustration, which creates emotions like anger,
13 helplessness or powerlessness (Invernizzi, Locatelli, and Brookes 2018). It lies within the
14 responsibility of the project manager to ensure that the various demands of stakeholders as well
15 as the objectives are met, which can create challenges or even perceived threats for the project
16 manager. Hence, the project manager needs to develop adequate strategies to cope with such
17 situations.

38 ***Coping***

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40 Coping is a highly complex multidimensional construct, including both cognitive and
41 behavioural processes to manage challenging situations (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004). As
42 defined by Dewe, Cox, and Ferguson (1993, p. 7) coping is “the cognitions and behaviours,
43 adopted by the individual following the recognition of a stressful encounter, that are in some
44 way designed to deal with that encounter or its consequences”. Coping processes are initiated
45 as a response to the appraised demands of a given situation (Folkman 2008). Therefore, it is a
46 response that helps individuals manage situations that are different from the ‘norm’ and
47 situations that potentially create stress. Psychological stress identifies that it is the individual’s
48 perceptions of the environmental demands that exceeds the individual’s perceived ability to
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3 cope, it is therefore not the ability but the perception of the demand (Lazarus 1966). Theories
4 of stress that are valued within workplace research argue that there is a transaction between
5 individuals and the environment/situation (Lazarus and Folkman 1987) and hence, this
6 interplay requires the employment of coping strategies (Dewe, Cox, and Ferguson 1993).
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13 As previously mentioned, much of the coping literature appears in the field of physical
14 (Keefe et al. 1989) and mental health and psychological wellbeing (Doron et al. 2013),
15 identifying the ways in which people cope with stress. However, a body of literature is emerging
16 that does review coping strategies of those dealing with challenges within workplaces (Ito and
17 Brotheridge 2003). Recently a number of studies have been published which focuses on how
18 coping can help employees to deal with stress (Casper, Sonnentag, and Tremmel 2017;
19 Monteiro, Marques Pinto, and Roberto 2016) and to avoid burnout (Ângelo and Chambel 2014;
20 Ben-Zur and Yagil 2005). Interestingly, these studies mainly focus on employees in non-
21 managerial positions and do not provide us with much insight into how individuals with
22 management responsibilities towards internal and external stakeholders cope. However, it is
23 important to understand how managers – and in our case specifically project managers – cope
24 as deficiencies in coping skills lead to adverse outcomes, such as increased vulnerability or
25 depression (Haaga et al. 2004), negative effects on individuals job satisfaction (Welbourne et
26 al. 2007) and work performance (Brown, Westbrook, and Challagalla 2005), whereas coping
27 skills are positively related to vigour and task performance (Casper, Sonnentag, and Tremmel
28 2017).
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51 Coping is often viewed as a process rather than a trait as it “is concerned with what the
52 person actually thinks or does in a specific context, and with the changes in these thoughts and
53 actions across encounters or as an encounter unfolds” (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, p. 178).
54 Coping arises from an event or situation which is perceived to deviate from the norm and to
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3 create stress (Parker and DeCotiis 1983). This is followed by an appraisal of the threat, harm or
4 challenge which this event or situation represents (Folkman et al. 1986). The appraisal occurs
5 when an individual gives meaning to a particular event or situation and based on this appraisal
6 coping processes are employed (Folkman 2008). In summary, coping itself can be viewed as a
7 process which is initiated by a stressor, i.e. an event or situation, and then the stressor is
8 appraised which in consequence leads to different coping strategies (Thoits 1995). This is also
9 depicted in the original stress and coping model (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, as cited in
10 Folkman 2008), which is the key summary of the coping process and explains how the different
11 actions and behaviours are related to each other.
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25 Coping literature has identified two major approaches to coping: emotion-focused coping
26 and problem-focused coping. Emotion-focused coping strategies are cognitive and behavioural
27 endeavours that are aimed at reducing the emotional distress, and perhaps maintaining a positive
28 psychological state (Folkman 1997), associated with the situation, such as expressing emotions
29 (Pearlin and Schooler 1978). Problem-focused coping strategies are aimed at modifying the
30 stressor, involving both cognitive problem-solving strategies engaging in activities such as
31 planning and behavioral strategies for managing the source of the problem (Folkman and
32 Lazarus 1980). Mann et al. (1997) identified five basic patterns of coping with dilemmas and
33 challenging situations which are all focused on the avoidance of conflict: adoption, ignorance,
34 delegation vigilance as well as hypervigilance. Hence, there are many different coping
35 strategies and mechanisms that are adopted based on the challenging or threatening situation.
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51 Coping is said to occur in two forms, maladaptive coping, where the coping fails to manage
52 the problem and adaptive coping, where there is a fit between the challenging situation and the
53 approach used to cope (Parasuraman and Cleek 1984). Generally, research has concluded that
54 those who employ problem-focused strategies are found to be adaptive, however those that
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3 employ emotion-focused coping or avoidance strategies are maladaptive in their coping
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5 (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004). Employing different coping strategies has different effects on
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7 the outcome for the individual. Active behaviours and problem-focused coping are moderators
8
9 of stress symptoms, therefore reduce symptoms of stress, whereas emotion-focused coping and
10
11 avoidance are likely to enhance stress (Nakano 1991). Hence, the implementation of different
12
13 coping strategies can significantly impact on the wellbeing of the individual and the outcome
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15 of a situation.
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21 The way individuals respond to a stressful situation may be due to the interpretation and
22
23 understanding of the experience (Welbourne et al. 2007), or the impact it may have. This coping
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25 response has been found to mediate the effect on ones emotions with some coping strategies
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27 increasing positive emotions and some increasing negative emotions (Folkman and Lazarus
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29 1988). Coping strategies therefore help individuals manage the stressor and to avoid burnout.
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31 Emotion-focused coping is negatively correlated with the burnout dimension depersonalization
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33 and problem-focused is positively related with the burnout dimension personal
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35 accomplishment, which means problem-focused coping helps employees to realize the sense of
36
37 their work (Ben-Zur and Yagil 2005). In the next section we will discuss how the concept of
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39 coping can be useful for project managers to address challenges they are facing in their working
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41 relationships (Cheung et al. 2020).
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46 47 ***Coping in projects***

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49 We outlined earlier potential challenges or threats by or through stakeholders project
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51 managers might experience in their everyday working environment, like perception
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53 incongruence (Chipulu et al. 2019), competing values or requirements (Eskerod, Huemann, and
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55 Savage 2015), disruptive behaviour due to high salience (Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997) or
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57 frustration (Invernizzi, Locatelli, and Brookes 2018) to name just a few. Project managers need
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3 to develop strategies on how to cope with these challenges or threats which are perceived to be
4 outside the norm and hence, create stress in order to improve the atypical and high-risk
5 psychological health of project managers (Cheung et al. 2020). Richmond and Skitmore (2006)
6 suggest that project managers in general use problem-focused as well as emotion-focused
7 coping strategies and that their effectiveness is highly dependent on the situation and context
8 in which they are applied (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Social support was the most effective
9 coping mechanism for project managers in this study, followed by communication, adding
10 resources, avoidance of stress, problem-solving and various others. They also found that project
11 managers with a university degree use problem-focused coping strategies and planning more
12 often than non-university educated ones. The use of more planning and active strategies to cope
13 with stressful situations was also identified by Aitken and Crawford (2007). They determined
14 that coping strategies become more structured with an increased level of project management
15 experience and maturity. This is probably also due to the fact that the project environment in
16 general is more based on facts and problems than emotions.
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36 However, coping in projects so far has been exclusively investigated based on dispositional
37 coping strategies, that means strategies which are applied across multiple situations and where
38 the question is asked what project managers normally do to cope with certain situations (Aitken
39 and Crawford 2007). We are not interested in this generalised approach, as it has been
40 highlighted by Carver and Scheier (1994) that it is of particular importance to focus on the
41 specific situation for which coping is required as different stressful situations lead to different
42 coping strategies. Hence, we utilise situational coping and look at what a project manager has
43 done in a real and specific situation. Our situation will focus on a challenge or threat by or
44 through a stakeholder and this will provide us with unique insights into coping in this specific
45 context.
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3 Against this theoretical background we will endeavour to answer our research question on
4 how project managers deal with challenging situations involving stakeholders. We conceived
5 this in a conceptual framework to situate it in the wider context of research undertaken in the
6 field (Figure 1). From a practical perspective this is highly relevant as project managers are
7 facing higher levels of wellbeing issues and stress due to their work relationships than the
8 average working population (Cheung et al. 2020). There is currently only a very limited body
9 of literature which addresses these issues (Aitken and Crawford 2007; Richmond and Skitmore
10 2006) and more clarification is required. We will gain a better understanding of coping in
11 projects by adopting a situational approach in collecting rich data through qualitative
12 interviews.
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Insert Figure 1 about here

36 **Method**

37 In this study, we focus on the phenomenon of coping and more specifically, on how project
38 managers deal with challenging situations involving stakeholders. To explore this phenomenon,
39 we adopt phenomenology as the mode of philosophical enquiry (Bowman 1998) and a
40 qualitative research method (Creswell and Poth 2018) with a group of individuals who have
41 practical knowledge of the phenomenon and experienced it themselves (Moustakas 1994; Van
42 Manen 2016). A multi method qualitative approach was taken, consisting of interviews
43 followed by two focus groups.
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54 The study takes a phenomenological approach to interpretation with its main objective “to
55 reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence”
56 (Creswell 2013, p. 76). The aim of phenomenology is to tell a story about participants lived
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3 experience, therefore asking participants to describe their experience is crucial (Starks and
4 Brown Trinidad 2007). Not only is it focused on deep description of the phenomena, but also
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6 how it occurs, attending to the specific nature of the phenomenon (Freeman 2020).
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11 Therefore, phenomenology allows for the examination of the specific approach to coping
12 project manager's use in situations where challenges are created by stakeholders. Consequently,
13 this method enabled us to find behavioural aspects (McClelland 1998; Spencer and Spencer
14 2008) of coping and thus helped us to understand the concept of coping for the project manager
15 in more detail. To enable this, participants were asked to identify a critical incident (Flanagan
16 1954) which they had to deal with around a challenging situation involving stakeholders which
17 contributed to the success or failure of a project. In particular, the following areas were
18 explored: a) the identity and characteristics of stakeholders that create challenges for project
19 managers b) the nature of the challenge and the actions/behaviours of the stakeholders c) the
20 impacts on the project managers and d) the strategies used by the project managers to cope with
21 the challenging situations.
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38 ***Data Collection***

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40 There has been a lot of discussion on how to measure coping appropriately and it is described
41 as "as much art as it is science" (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004, p. 751), particularly in
42 reference to the high number of quantitative instruments which are available in the literature
43 (e.g. Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub 1989; Endler and Parker 1990). Guided by the work of
44 Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), we adopted a qualitative approach, which is regarded to be
45 useful in understanding the coping need and strategy, especially if people provide a narrative.
46 Our unit of analysis is the phenomena of project managers' coping in challenging situations
47 caused by stakeholders and the unit of observation is project managers (Kosaroglu and Hunt
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3 2009; Sedgwick 2014). Since the focus of the research is on the way this process manifests
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5 (Freeman 2020), this unit of analysis provides insight into the experience of coping.
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8 9 *Stage 1: Interviews*

10 Interviews were chosen in the first stage of the study as it allowed us to build a relationship
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12 with the interviewees, to talk about sensitive topics and to enquire in-depth about their
13
14 behaviours while providing the narrative. The interviews were facilitated in an informal and
15
16 interactive process which mainly utilised open ended questions (Moustakas 1994). The
17
18 interview protocol was developed to explore the project manager's experience of coping within
19
20 the specific situations that occur when challenges or threats are encountered through
21
22 relationships with stakeholders. A set of questions for each of the areas was prepared and pilot
23
24 tested to capture the relationships and interactions with stakeholders, the challenges faced and
25
26 how these were dealt with, however their use adapted from interview to interview (Saunders,
27
28 Lewis, and Thornhill 2019). During the interviews, each participant was asked to describe two
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30 challenging situations, so that in total 24 situations, were explored to discern participants
31
32 experience of coping. Probing questions were asked to gain more detail, either to elaborate or
33
34 clarify (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). This allowed us to explore the experiences of the dealing
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36 with difficult stakeholders ("what have they experienced?") specifically in regards to the Project
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38 Managers perspective ("how have they experienced it?").
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46 Phenomenology is concerned with common features of the lived experience, consequently
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48 data from a homogenous sample, who have knowledge and can provide an in-depth account of
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50 experience are preferred over large sample sizes, with phenomenological studies having around
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52 6-12 participants (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006). In total 12 interviews were conducted,
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54 with an average duration between 45 and 60 minutes and interviewing was stopped when
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56 repetition occurred due to data saturation. Project managers with at least five years professional
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58 experience participated in the interviews. They were responsible for organisational and cross-
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3 organisational projects in different industries and worked in small to medium sized companies
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5 in the UK, like construction, infrastructure, IT or pharma (Table 1). These industries were
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7 chosen due to their relative maturity in project management.
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18 19 *Stage 2: Focus Groups*

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21 Two focus groups were conducted to validate the findings from the interviews. A member
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23 checking focus group [FG1] with four of the original interviewees was conducted to examine
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25 the credibility of the interpretation (Guba 1981) and allow the researchers to check their
26
27 understanding of participants' experiences and check for areas that were missing (Madill and
28
29 Sullivan 2018). This focus group lasted 1 hour 40 minutes. Member checking reflects the co-
30
31 constructed generation of knowledge through allowing participants to engage with interpreted
32
33 data (Madill and Sullivan 2018). A validation focus group [FG2] was also conducted with
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35 seven, highly experienced project managers (Fern 2001) and lasted 1 hour 38 minutes. The
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37 focus groups consisted of experienced project managers (Table 1) and took place within a UK
38
39 university. The focus groups were presented with the framework and findings, with the purpose
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41 of producing fully articulated accounts of experience and to gain a consensus on the frameworks
42
43 (Smithson 2008). Participants were asked if the frameworks included key factors, if they felt
44
45 anything was missing and if there anything confusing or ambiguous and probing questions were
46
47 used to ask for examples or to check for understanding. For quality purposes, the focus groups
48
49 had both a facilitator and an observer who took notes of big issues or pertinent points, who also
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51 undertook a briefing at the end of the session to evaluate initial thoughts on the discussion
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57 (Krueger and Casey 2015).
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Data Analysis

Phenomenological analysis was undertaken following a six-step approach, developed by Creswell and Poth (2018), which starts before the actual data are analysed. Firstly, bracketing is an important concept in phenomenological analysis, which requires the researchers to put aside, but not abandon their own views (Starks and Brown Trinidad 2007). This is done by focusing on the sense making of participants to understand their experience, rather than the researchers presuppositions (Hycner 1985). This was continued throughout the research process, with the research team meeting to discuss thoughts and interpretations of the data.

To prepare the data the audio recordings were transcribed into textual data. Reliability and validity takes on different meanings in qualitative research, with measures of trustworthiness more appropriate as criteria of quality (Braun et al. 2019). To ensure the validity of interpretation, for triangulation of multiple perspectives, the first three authors in the research team were involved in the analysis of the data (Braun et al. 2019). Throughout the data analysis, the research team also met regularly to discuss the coding process to gain a consensus (Saldaña 2013). Initially, to familiarise ourselves with the data, the transcripts were read through carefully by three of the authors in order to gain an understanding about the general sense and overall importance (Creswell 2009). A list of significant statements of how the participants experience the phenomenon was generated (Creswell and Poth 2018), after which, the ‘meaning units’ (Moustakas 1994) were identified and clustered into themes. The meaning units were then grouped into medium-level themes. After the identification of the medium-level themes the three researchers again got together to discuss their findings and to develop the high-level themes which are represented in this study (Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

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3 The composite description consists of two parts: the textual (“what”) and the structural
4 (“how”) description (Creswell and Poth 2018). The textual description is mainly represented in
5 the findings sections and which provides a thick description of participants experiences (Guba
6 1981). The discussion section embodies the structural description and tries to explain and
7 understand why and how individuals deal with challenging situations involving stakeholders.
8 Based on this composite description in the discussion a project coping model is proposed at the
9 end.
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20 **Findings**

21 Here we present the amalgamated results from the interviews and the two focus groups.
22 The analysis revealed four high level themes, which provide deeper understanding into how
23 project managers deal with challenging situations involving stakeholders. These are 1) the
24 types of challenging situations, 2) their sources, 3) their impact and 4) the coping strategies to
25 deal with them. We provide details of each high-level themes below.
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34 ***Challenging situations involving stakeholders***

35 We identified a range of challenging situations from hard issues to do with project
36 governance, through to softer issues related to the attitudes and expectations of a stakeholder.
37 Below we present these different challenging situations.
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45 ***Governance***

46 Governance-related challenges ascertain to the rules, responsibilities and regulations in a
47 project. Such challenges focused on a lack of responsiveness and of documentation, (“Some
48 people are notoriously bad at responding to emails and only ever want phone calls. But then
49 you have to back everything up with an email so that you’ve got your project documentation.”
50 [PM12]); the non-fulfilment of responsibilities (“We were getting frustrated; they didn’t do
51 what they were supposed to have done.” [PM10]); or the absence of agreed working
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3 relationships (“They spoke about doing things collaboratively, but the system within [their
4 organization] is very much a case of ‘you’ve got to be allocated 65 percent of your time to
5 this set of projects’.” [PM10]) In some cases, working with mechanisms in place to ensure
6 effective governance can be a challenge “committees can sometimes ruin a project” [FG1].
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10 11 12 13 14 15 *Technical expertise*

16 A perceived or real lack of technical expertise of individuals involved in the project can
17 create challenges as it can lead to a lack of contribution or respect (“If they are highly
18 experienced practitioners but they haven’t necessarily come from a traditional clinical
19 background, sometimes it’s been difficult for them to get their voice heard. So that I do find
20 quite tricky” [PM12]).
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30 31 *Attitude*

32 Another area of challenge is the stakeholders’ attitude towards the project. (“You’ve
33 probably got some other people involved depending on the structure of the organization who
34 may or may not want to see the project succeed” [PM9]) and, or, towards each other (“There
35 was a tension between those two parties of which I felt I was in the middle, which was
36 incredibly difficult as a project manager.” [PM1]).
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46 47 *Expectations and Understanding*

48 A challenging situation was meeting of expectations i.e. whether stakeholders articulate
49 their requirements and whether other stakeholders strive to meet them. (“I think they were
50 difficult in a sense, because you were never sure if you were getting a true reflection of their
51 stake, or what they wanted as an outcome.” [PM1]). The same applies to the understanding of
52 project goals and deliverables. This encapsulates the stakeholders’ appreciation of what the
53 project aims to achieve (“The supplier very quickly got on board, the [client organisation]
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3 were harder to deal with, mainly because the main person at the [client organization] was
4 probably not on top of the detail, and didn't really understand what we were doing." [PM9]).

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7 A related type of challenge was when there is a lack of understanding of project work ("He
8 was under pressure to deliver within a specified time because he told his boss (...) that he was
9 going to deliver within a specified time, and because we weren't going to meet that time it
10 became a problem." [PM6]).

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 *Working Environment*

20
21 Challenging situations existed in relation to the working environment in the project, which
22 is the way of communicating and treating each other within the project team. ("I don't think
23 he was particularly competent, so it doesn't send a positive message to those working for him.
24 As a result I don't think they had a great working environment because he wasn't a great
25 manager." [PM9]). A lack of effective channels of communication, coupled with poor
26 communication skills by the project manager, typically results in a working environment
27 characterised by breakaway meetings and informal communications taking place between
28 stakeholders outside the main forum and often hidden from the project manager, which is a
29 very challenging situation to deal with [FG2].

30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 *Sources of challenging situations*

45
46 We identified three broad sources of the challenging situations: the structural and social
47 environments and stakeholder characteristics. These sources include elements internal and
48 external to the project. Whilst we discuss each source separately below, the findings showed
49 that there is often some inter-linking. An example is a stakeholder's involvement in a past
50 project, which is an aspect of the social environment, having a negative influence on their
51 temporary way of being, which is part of stakeholder characteristic. ("They become closed
52 because they have had a bad experience."). Another example is a project undertaken in a

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3 structural environment suffering from change fatigue, which has an adverse effect on the
4
5 inter-personal relationships amongst stakeholders in the social environment [FG2].
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8 9 *Structural Environment*

10 The structural environment refers to the project organisation, the project participants, the
11 project objectives, as well as the project governance. In general, inefficient structures or the
12 lack of mechanisms to deal with issue creates challenging situations. As do bottlenecks and
13 blockers, such as procurement, legal and finance and procurement routes that do not promote
14 partnership working or the building of swift trust between stakeholders [FG2].
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23 A challenging situation exists when a stakeholder is unknown. (“Then, of course, there are
24 the stakeholders (...) that appear in the process at certain stages.” [PM8]) Or due to their
25 position within the project structure (power/influence). The project objectives i.e. time
26 (schedule) and cost (budget), can create challenges (“There was stress between the teams
27 because there was an accelerated timeline.” [PM10]). Further challenges exists if the goals of
28 the project participants are divergent (“As it developed, you began to realise where these
29 different agendas were” [PM8]). Stakeholders also often experience pressure regarding their
30 role performance, which can be misaligned to the project performance, again creating
31 challenging situations.
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45 External constraints or drivers also create challenging situations (“We’re getting to a
46 different sphere of an environment because that is a more commercial, external process as
47 opposed to [the internal business].” [PM3]) As can the shared history between stakeholders to
48 the project (“I think he’d had a bad experience with [us] and he never got the outcome he
49 expected to get.” [PM11]). Culture, which includes the different organisational cultures,
50 national or regional cultures, as well as the project culture, is another aspect of the structural
51 environment leading to challenging situations (“Sadly, in the culture that we’re in, it always
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3 comes down to some finger pointing later on.” [PM3]). Within organisations, different sub-
4 cultures can exist, for example, those stakeholders from operations who work in a “keep
5 things the same” [FG1] culture, which can be challenging if they are required to participate in
6 a project. Not seeing the bigger picture, or the existence of “satellite cultures” [FG2] creates
7 challenges. External factors can vary between the public and private sector; for example, in
8 the public sector, dealing with national politics can create difficulties and in the private sector,
9 it can be dealing with regulation [FG2].

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11
12 Challenging situations created through the structural environment are also due to a lack of
13 representation of stakeholders (“It was surprising the amount of influence that they had
14 indirectly, because there were no [stakeholder category] represented in the project team;
15 however, it was their influence that was surprising throughout the whole project.” [PM1]).
16 The following were also sources of challenging situations in the structural environment: a lack
17 of training or knowledge (“His technical knowledge was second to none, he was excellent, but
18 it was the way he managed people and needed managing, that was very challenging” [PM5]);
19 a lack of resources (“Things that are not working well, not resourced well.” [PM4]); a lack of
20 interest in the project leading to low motivation to engage or contribute [FG1], and lacking
21 the requisite time to focus on the project if they are involved in multiple projects [FG2].

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 *Social Environment*

46 The social environment refers to the networks and interactions in terms of how project
47 actors deal with each other. Challenging situations occur due to difficulties in building and
48 maintaining inter-personal relationships, including between stakeholders internal and external
49 to the project (“You could argue that a lot (...) is around managing relationships, (...) you
50 need everyone to be pulling in the same direction. That’s absolutely fundamental.” [PM2]).
51 There is mitigation of such difficulties where there is a degree of familiarity (“It’s worked
52 with subsequent projects with them” [PM9]).

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3 Problems with communications between stakeholders, both outside and within the project
4 team, is a source challenging situations (“It was almost like an initial miscommunication at
5 the beginning, which set the tone for a lot of the stuff which happened during the subsequent
6 couple of months.” [PM10]). In worse case situations, where there is no communication,
7
8 “things like trust and everything else tend to fall away” [FG1].
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16 Stakeholder treatment in terms of equity and equality, if not managed in a consistent way
17 can present challenges (“Sometimes people need to hear and see information in different
18 ways.” [PM12]). The same applies to the presence or absence of trust, i.e. whether the
19 stakeholders trust each other and the project manager, or not (“If you’re the project manager
20 and you’ve got other people underneath you that are not doing what you think they’re doing,
21 then that creates a level of mistrust, so that’s difficult to manage.” [PM12]). Lack of empathy
22 is another negative aspect of the social environment. The project manager needs to be aware
23 of the needs of a stakeholder and demonstrate the ability to empathise (“I’d like to do
24 something about the lack of empathy with the stakeholder. It’s one thing identifying a
25 stakeholder and it’s another thing meeting their needs.” [PM11]).
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40 *Stakeholder characteristic*

41 One source of challenge is stakeholders perceived to be difficult based on individual
42 personality traits, which is not unique or specific to project environments (“When you have a
43 personality clash with somebody it can be quite difficult to move things forward.” [PM12]).
44 This also includes traits like honesty and arrogance. An additional challenge is not only
45 dealing with certain personalities but also aligning personalities with their position or their
46 importance as a stakeholder [FG1].
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56 What is unique though to the project environment, and is a source of challenge, is an
57 individual’s temporary way of being at a particular point in time, i.e. their personality state.
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3 This can be influenced by either an individual's role within the project ("Maybe it's the nature
4 of the role within a joint venture, maybe she's got lots of pressures from other members of the
5 management committee" [PM5]); or by their expectations of the project, which might be
6
7 unrealistic ("It's really difficult, her expectations are through the roof." [PM5]). A stakeholder
8
9 might have good knowledge of their role and their required contribution – the "intelligent" or
10
11 informed client for example [FG2]. Though conversely, they might act as though they
12
13 understand, without the knowledge, training or expertise in projects or project management
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15 and this can create challenging situations. For example, it might lead a stakeholder to act in a
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17 very bullish manner. Other stakeholder characteristics that lead to challenging situations are
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19 anxiety, being too laid-back and lacking the ability to adapt to changing circumstances.
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27 Hence, a distinction is made between personality trait and state, with the latter being a
28
29 temporary way of being, resulting from some aspect of the stakeholder's engagement with the
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31 project.
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34 ***Impact***

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36 Impact refers to the repercussions from a challenging situation, which is distinct from the
37
38 situation itself as it may occur within or beyond the project environment. Moreover, it does
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40 not necessarily occur concurrent with the situation. There might be a delayed impact with the
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42 effects only becoming apparent later. Challenging situations potentially have an impact on the
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44 project as well as on the project manager him-/herself.
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50 ***Project impact***

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52 Challenging situations can have an impact on meeting time (schedule), cost (budget) and
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54 quality (specification) success criteria; projects take longer, cost more money or have quality-
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56 levels compromised. They can also have an impact on achieving the goals and delivering the
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58 scope of the project ("Swaying the direction of a decision based on their own personal or
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3 organisational needs rather than the project as a whole” [PM12] and “There are personalities
4 which are large and bombastic and will steer projects in a different direction.” [PM3]).

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7 Ultimately, this can lead to benefits not being realised. There are also negative impacts in
8 terms of satisfaction of the key stakeholders (“That we could do all this and still not satisfy
9 the [stakeholder category] as a difficult stakeholder” [PM1]).

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16 Project impact, though, does not necessarily need to be negative. For example, confronting
17 a challenging situation can enhance organisational learning, if harnessed as an opportunity for
18 the project manager and for the organisation to learn from the situation. Drawing conclusions
19 and having new project coping strategies to deal with similar situations in the future are
20 examples of positive impact (“As unpleasant as it was at the time it was quite a valuable
21 learning experience.” [PM9]).

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31 Project impact is not limited to the project environment as it often goes beyond the
32 individual project, affecting other organisations, programmes, portfolios, etc. For example,
33 not losing the lessons from a challenging situation on one project “might take you in a
34 different direction for a different project because you’re trying to learn from experience”
35 [FG1].

36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 *Personal impact*

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45 A challenging situation in a project can have an impact on the project manager him-
46 /herself, i.e. a personal impact. There is a distinction as to whether the challenge has an
47 impact on the role of the project manager or on his/her well-being. In relation to the project
48 manager’s role, a challenging situation may have an impact on the individual’s professional
49 learning (“However, there were definitely lessons I could learn and things I could have done
50 better” [PM9]). Even on their weltanschauung, which is the social context of the individual’s
51 perspective or view of life (“I would have had a view of project management with a narrower
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3 scope and wouldn't have necessarily at that time thought about providers and the people who
4 are actually ultimately paying for the drugs. That's a factor of my developing experience in
5 that I was learning that." [PM4]). Challenging situations also have an impact on a project
6 manager's reputation and their role in the project or organisation ("Then it got a bit personal,
7 thinking the impact of that could cause me issues going forward with my career." [PM11] and
8 "I thought I might get sacked." [PM9]). This personal impact on the project manager's role
9 usually takes place within the project environment, as it directly links to his/her
10 responsibilities to deliver the project.
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23 Regarding the project manager's personal well-being, a challenging situation caused by a
24 stakeholder can create manifold reactions and have varied impacts. It can create frustration
25 ("We were getting frustrated. They didn't do what they were supposed to have done."
26 [PM10]), unease ("It was just like 'Oh my God', and it almost makes you feel 'what have I
27 done'?" [PM10]), resistance ("No one wanted to work on it, including me, but I was the
28 project manager" [PM9]), anger ("It made me feel quite, well, almost angry." [PM5]),
29 isolation, helplessness ("It's very unusual that I was in a position where I could not give a
30 level of certainty, that didn't have a series of caveats and further unknowns." [PM8]),
31 defensiveness, threat ("It was often that there was a perception about lack of ability to do a
32 job" [PM4]), embarrassment ("I felt a little bit upset at the beginning." [PM6]), and stress ("It
33 was pretty stressful to be honest" [PM9]). It can have an impact on the project manager's
34 home life ("You go for a fag, then you go for a pint down the pub, and then potentially go
35 (...) take it out on your wife. It affects you personally." [PM10]). This personal impact on the
36 project manager's well-being usually occurs beyond the project environment, as it is often
37 something they deal with outside official working hours. The personal impact can also last a
38 long time ("You are only good as your last project aren't you really? If one project doesn't go
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3 as well as it should, for various reasons, that can affect you and it can stay with you for many
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5 years.” [FG1])
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9 As with the project impact, the personal impact of a challenging situation can be positive
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11 or negative on the individual. Positive impacts, as described above, encompass personal
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13 growth, career development, enhanced creativity and a sense of accomplishment. Negative
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15 ones include both physical and mental health, such as stress, anxiety and high blood pressure.
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17 The need to highlight positive impacts when coping with a challenging situation “rather than
18
19 just the negatives” [FG2] was made, though the findings suggest negative impacts are
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21 typically more prevalent.
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27 Whether the personal impact on the project manager is positive or negative influences the
28
29 effectiveness of coping strategies used to deal with future challenges. Project managers
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31 described a virtuous cycle whereby a positive experience of coping with a challenging
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33 situation feeds into the project manager’s own personality state –see earlier discussion – and
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35 enhances their capability to cope effectively in the future.
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39 ***Coping Strategies***

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41 As a challenging situation has an impact on the project manager as well as on the project,
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43 so a project manager develops different approaches to cope with this impact. Our study
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45 identified two types of coping strategies: personal coping strategies and project coping
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47 strategies.
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50 51 *Personal coping strategies*

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53 The study revealed certain personal coping strategies being adopted by project managers
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55 i.e. communication, relationship building, identification of common ground and consideration
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57 of different approaches. These are strategies used by the project manager to cope with the
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59 challenging situation i.e. minimizing stress. We distinguished two types of personal coping
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3 strategies: problem-focused and emotion-focused. Problem-focused strategies are efforts to do
4 something active to alleviate stressful circumstances, whereas emotion-focused coping
5 strategies involve efforts to regulate the emotional consequences of stressful or potentially
6 stressful events.
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14 Communication with the stakeholders involved in the challenging situation was identified
15 as one of the key problem-focused coping strategies used by project managers (“I’d have to
16 spend quite a lot of time calming other people down.” [PM12] and “It was all about open
17 communication.” [PM4]). Communication helps to identify and understand the source of the
18 challenging situation, which subsequently enables the project manager to determine solutions
19 and hence, contributes to solving the problem. The project managers spoke about how it
20 involved a change of mode of communication, such as more face-to-face and one-to-one’s
21 and less emails, a strategy that was often linked to experience. Linked to this was the notion
22 of “stroking” [FG2] and using humour to help diffuse a situation that the project managers is
23 personally struggling to cope with.
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38 Besides communication, we identified a range of other problem-focused coping strategies.
39 Building relationships between the stakeholders causing stress and the project manager also
40 contributes to addressing the problems created by the stressor (“We had to try and explore the
41 understanding of each other” [PM12]). The identification of common ground between
42 stakeholders and the project manager (“I always try to put myself in their shoes” [PM4]) was
43 adopted by some, though less commonly across the board. This was also the case for project
44 managers’ consideration of different approaches to dealing with the stakeholders (“That’s the
45 point you need to obviously back-up by re-evaluating and try and think of a different
46 strategy.” [PM3]). Linked to this was standing back and not rushing (“Press the pause button”
47 [FG2]). Though letting this pause go on too long i.e. “just sit and wait” and “see how it goes”
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3 could be “a high-risk strategy” [FG1]. After an appropriate period of pause, then it typically
4 involves a carefully planned critical intervention, such as bringing a new person into the
5 project arena, who, through a perceived neutrality, can help the team to rise to a challenge.
6
7 Project managers spoke about such interventions taking the pressure off them and reducing
8 their stress. Challenging and questioning aspects of the project, such as the assumptions made
9 by a key stakeholder creating difficulties, such as the client or senior management, could be
10 difficult to do in some organisational cultures or in dealing with certain personality traits,
11 though it was seen as a useful problem-focused coping strategy [FG2].
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23 Problem-focused coping strategies take place mainly within the project environment, i.e.
24 the strategies are addressing a problem the project manager is facing within the project by
25 involving the project team members and stakeholders, as opposed to the personal life of the
26 project manager.
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33 Project managers employed emotion-focused coping strategies to deal with the effect of the
34 challenge on their personal life and their emotional well-being. The two most common
35 emotion-focused coping strategies amongst project managers were sharing and reflecting,
36 followed by self-validation (“Convincing one’s self about your approach being right” [FG2]),
37 venting, confrontation, patience and demonstration/validation of personal values. Project
38 managers frequently use their personal and professional network to share experiences of
39 situations they perceive to be stressful in order to cope with the resulting emotions (“My
40 strategy I think in coping with that is talking about it with other colleagues.” [PM7] and
41 “There’s probably quite a lot of informal moaning between our projects.” [PM12]). Having a
42 mentor to talk to was very useful in this respect.
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57 Regular reflecting in a systematic way also enabled project managers to better deal with
58 the emotions caused by challenging situations involving stakeholders (“I’d come home, feel
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3 very frustrated and do a lot of reflection.” [PM7] and “You'll come back, out of the
4 conversation and you reflect, and you take ten minutes away from a situation.” [PM3]).
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6 Another very popular strategy was self-validation, i.e. finding confirmation from others that
7 the actions were correct or that it is not the project manager’s own fault (“Having chatted to a
8 lot of other consultants some of them have got three or four stories like that.” [PM9] and “It’s
9 almost like I’m seeking affirmation from them that it was okay.” [PM7]). Less widely used
10 though effective strategies were venting, (“Walk away from my computer.” [PM4]),
11 confrontation (“There would be a stand-up row in an office” [PM3]) and patience (“Mull over
12 it a lot and take advice a lot more.” [PM4]), as well as the demonstration and validation of the
13 project manager’s own personal values (“The way I got round that was that I fell back on
14 values, rather than compromising my own values.” [PM1] and (Being honest and having a
15 clear conscience with yourself.” [FG2]. Project manager’s employ emotion-focused coping
16 strategies both within and beyond the project environment. Many of these strategies are about
17 building up the project manager’s own sense of worth, (“Makes you feel on a personal level
18 you are coping.” [FG2].

39 *Project coping strategies*

40 We identified coping strategies that were not oriented towards the project manager’s
41 reduction of personal stress, but, rather, towards the reduction of stress in the project, which
42 we class as project coping strategies. Here project managers focused on how the project can
43 best cope with the challenging situation. The project manager does not try to improve the
44 situation for him-/herself or solve the problem from a self-oriented motivation. Instead, they
45 concentrate on the problem from a project perspective, which does not necessarily help them
46 as individuals to cope better. Strategies under the heading of project coping were framed in
47 terms of the project organization are e.g. re-structure of the project or project team (“I’ve
48 certainly used breaking down a project to solve interpersonal problems in a project” [PM11],
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3 in terms of the project team referred to as “reconfigure with the people” [FG2]). Such
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5 reconfiguration, subject to resource availability, can have the added benefit of bringing in new
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7 people to “... where they should have been in the first place” [FG2].
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11 Other strategies are passing on a role on the project (“I tend to take that person off, or take
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13 a step back, go on holiday for instance for a couple of weeks or whatever, and get someone
14
15 else to deal with the situation.” [PM6]); or seeking external support (“We took legal advice on
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17 it.” [PM11]). In these examples, the project itself is adapted to overcome the repercussions of
18
19 the challenging situation. The project managers described additional useful strategies within
20
21 project coping around the topic of uncertainty management. Having a strong structure,
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23 through utilisation of a formal project management methodology, such as PRINCE2, provides
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25 “an anchor” [FG1] for control to be exerted and a challenge met. (“We can change control out
26
27 of that [challenging situation]. We have this mechanism.” [PM3]). The importance of
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29 stakeholder engagement was highlighted (“How they went about it was a bit dynamic, sort of
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31 extreme but they made their point, forcibly” [PM3]), and developing a Plan B (“They had a
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33 backup in case, so like a Plan A and a Plan B” [PM1]). These are proactive measures to
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35 reduce uncertainty in respect of the potential future impact of a challenging situation on the
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37 project. Finally, the ultimate project coping strategy highlighted was “stop the project” [FG2].
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44 **Discussion**

45
46 Based on these findings outlined above we need to revise our conceptual framework (Figure
47
48 1). It became clear that project managers do not only develop coping strategies for themselves,
49
50 but also for the project (Figure 2). In many cases, project managers are held accountable to
51
52 stakeholders for the outcome of a project and they use resources and personal competencies to
53
54 meet this accountability (Mac Donald, Rezania, and Baker 2020). A challenging situation
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56 involving stakeholders can be a threat to successful achievement of the outcomes. Hence,
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58 project managers are not only interested in how they themselves can best deal with it, but due
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3 to their accountability they feel a sense of responsibility to put measures in place for the project
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5 to cope with this challenging situation as well.
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11 Insert Figure 2 about here
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15 We found that the coping strategies applied for personal as well as project coping are
16 partially informed by established stakeholder management methods/tools/techniques which are
17 grounded in the relational and instrumental approaches to stakeholder management (Oliveira
18 and Rabechini Jr 2019; Missonier and Loufrani-Fedida 2014). Hence, project managers try to
19 utilise their explicit and tacit knowledge about stakeholder management to make sense of
20 challenging situations involving stakeholders and to identify the most suitable way to cope with
21 each specific situation. This indicates that project managers with a more formal project
22 management education and/or more experience are more likely to be able to determine
23 mechanisms for coping due to access to a broader range of methods/tools/techniques, whereas
24 a lower degree of project management maturity will make this more difficult and hence, less
25 structured (Aitken and Crawford 2007).
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41 Our findings furthermore show, that the process of coping is specific for the occupation
42 project manager. To visualise this, we transfer Lazarus and Folkman (1984, as cited in Folkman
43 2008) stress and coping model into the project context, evaluate it for the occupation of project
44 managers and answer our research question “What is the project managers’ experience of
45 dealing with challenging situations in projects involving stakeholders?” (Figure 3). Since
46 temporary organizing structures such as projects are becoming more and more important for
47 work in and across organizations (Bakker et al. 2016), this transfer seems to be important to
48 understand how employees and managers which are involved in these structures can cope with
49 challenging situations. Cheung et al. (2020) have emphasized the importance of the occupation
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3 project manager for stress research by showing that the high level of communication and
4 interaction in projects represents an above-average risk to the wellbeing of project managers
5 compared to other professions – and stakeholder interaction seems to be a significant factor
6 contributing to this particular mental stress situation (Aaltonen and Kujala 2016; Cheung et al.
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12 2020).

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15 Unlike the original stress and coping model, the project coping model does not start with the
16 event, i.e. the challenging situation, but a step earlier with potential sources of the challenging
17 situation, i.e. the stressor. Following a primary appraisal of the situation, the impact can occur
18 on the personal and/or project level and through the secondary appraisal the coping strategies
19 are determined. These detailed insights into the coping process including nuances on where the
20 impact and the coping takes place (inside/outside of the project) were only possible through the
21 adoption of a situational approach to coping (Carver and Scheier 1994). By understanding what
22 project managers do in real and specific situations we were able to develop a comprehensive
23 and detailed model, which would not have been possible with a dispositional approach.
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41 Insert Figure 3 about here
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44 This project coping model – and the findings of this study more generally – do not only
45 enable us to understand how project managers deal with challenging situations involving
46 stakeholders, they also propose some important implications for project stakeholder
47 management. Firstly, it is important to consider that there can be considerable tensions between
48 stakeholders and project managers (Boonstra, van Offenbeek, and Vos 2017), but stakeholders
49 are not simply “difficult” or create challenging situations for the purpose of doing so. We found
50 that for every situation we investigated, there was one or multiple reasons which for why
51 situations arose which the project manager perceived to be challenging or even threatening. By
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3 understanding the reason – or source in the terminology of our model – project managers will
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5 be more likely to develop effective strategies to deal with the situation on a personal and project
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7 level. Secondly, even if a challenging situation does not have a direct impact on the project
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9 manager’s role or wellbeing, but only on the project, they still employ personal coping strategies
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11 and vice versa. This means that if a challenging situation involving a stakeholder negatively
12
13 impacts the project, the project manager feels affected by it and perceives the need to deal with
14
15 that situation on a personal level as well. This suggests that stakeholder management is a
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17 challenging activity for project managers and that appropriate support framework should be
18
19 established to enable the project manager to fully exploit the stakeholder management tools and
20
21 techniques. As discussed earlier, stakeholder management research has traditionally put the
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23 stakeholder, i.e. the one who needs to be managed, in the centre of the investigation (Eskerod,
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25 Huemann, and Savage 2015; Mok, Shen, and Yang 2015). But without understanding why
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27 certain threats or challenges arise when dealing with stakeholders and how they affect the
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29 individual who needs to manage, i.e. the project manager, important contextual factors of
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31 stakeholder management have been neglected.
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39 **Conclusion**

40 Our study helps us to understand how project managers cope with challenging situations
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42 involving stakeholders. Project managers adopt the traditional approach of emotion- and
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44 problem-focused coping. However, the situational coping approach revealed, that project
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46 managers do not only employ coping strategies for themselves (personal coping), but that due
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48 to their accountability for outcomes they also develop coping strategies for the project (project
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50 coping). In this context they utilise relational and instrumental stakeholder management
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52 methods which they are more likely to have if they are experienced and/or have a more formal
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54 project management education. The project coping model visualises and integrates the process
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56 of project managers’ coping with challenging situations involving stakeholders.
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Theoretical and practical implications

Our study contributes to stakeholder literature in project management by adding the project managers perspective. Using the relational approach to stakeholder management (Oliveira & Rabechini Jr, 2019) this study does, contrary to previous studies, not put the stakeholder in the centre of the investigation, but the project manager and more specifically how the project manager copes with challenges created by or through project stakeholders. Additionally, we add knowledge to stress and coping in project management through the application of a situational coping approach in the project environment (Aitken and Crawford 2007). By doing this we evaluate and further develop the stress and coping model by Lazarus and Folkman (1984, as cited in Folkman 2008) for the occupation group of project managers. This occupation group has a high risk in regard to strain on psychological health and is thus interesting for stress research. Our project coping model expands the knowledge in terms of proposing a coping process for project managers which acknowledges traditional elements of stressor and appraisal (Welbourne et al. 2007; Folkman 2008) but adds different sources of stressors and also differentiates the impact into personal and project impact. Additional to the original model it extends the theory in terms of adding the additional layer of project coping.

From a practical point of view our study enables project managers to obtain a better understanding of why stakeholders may appear difficult, which subsequently allows them to analyse in depth the impact of these difficulties on the project as well as themselves. Based on this evaluation they can then identify appropriate coping strategies.

Limitations and areas for further research

Our study has a limitation, which we would like to acknowledge. The study was only conducted in the UK and – as we know – cultural aspects can play an important role in different

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3 approaches to coping. Hence, we propose that the study should be replicated in different cultural
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5 settings like South America, Asia or Africa.
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9 We also identified a number of areas for further research: Firstly, a more detailed
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11 classification of the challenging situations is necessary in order to be able to link different
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13 coping strategies to challenging situations and hence, improve the effectiveness of coping.
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15 Secondly, different coping strategies are adopted based on the personality traits of individuals.
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17 Therefore, it would be interesting to explore which coping strategies work best for which
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19 personality types of project managers. And thirdly, the effectiveness of the coping strategies
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21 adopted by project managers to deal with challenging situations involving stakeholders requires
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23 further exploration, i.e. do the coping strategies they adopt actually work?
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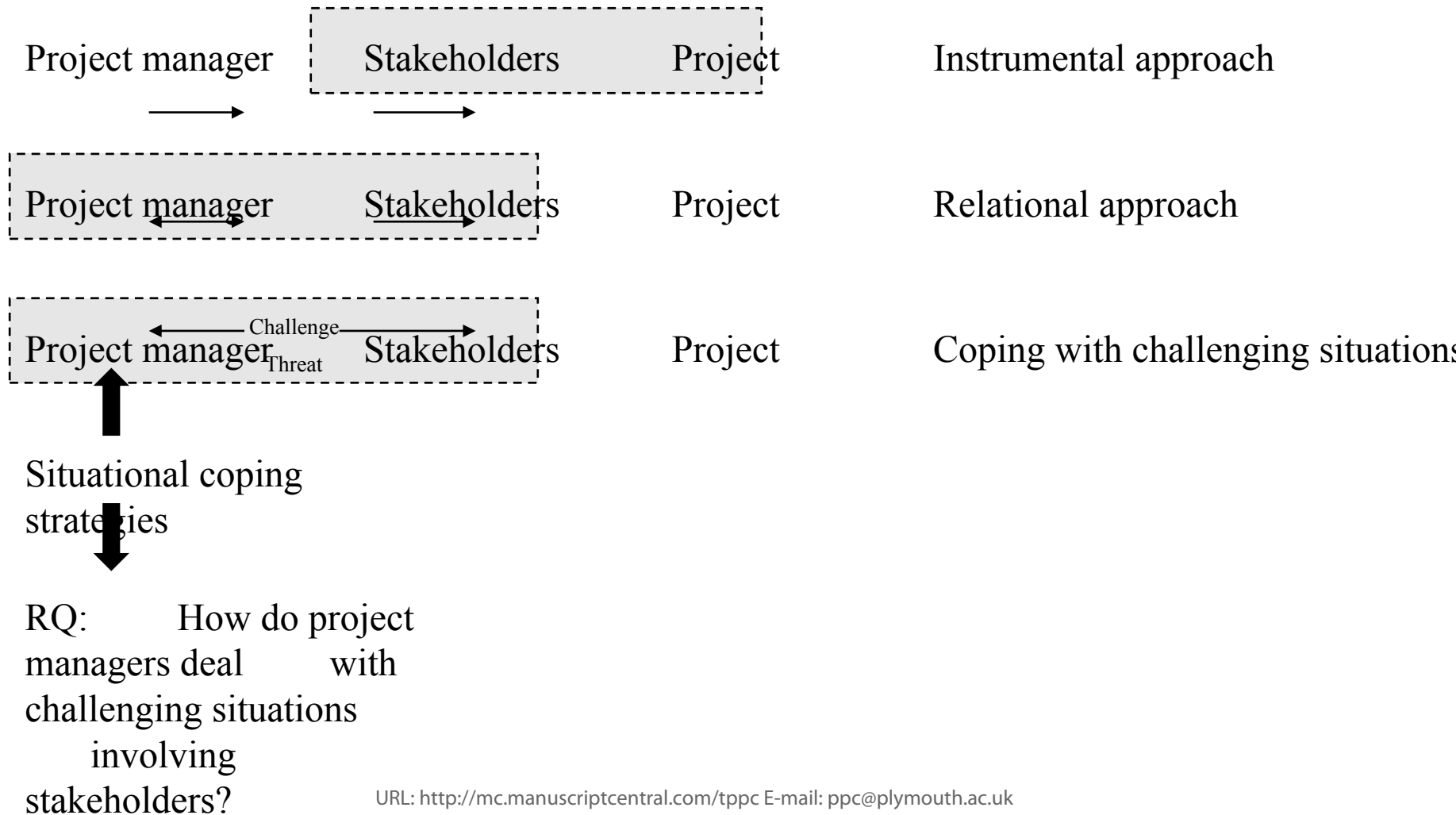
Table 1 – Interviewee and focus group participant characteristics

IDENT	Project type	Work experience	Company size	Interview	FG1	FG2
PM1	Organisational change	15 – 20 years	1,000 – 5,000	x	x	
PM2	Construction	> 20 years	10,000 – 20,000	x		
PM3	Construction	1 – 5 years	1,000 – 5,000	x		
PM4	Pharma	> 20 years	> 20,000	x		
PM5	IT	5 – 10 years	1 – 50	x		
PM6	Nuclear	5 – 10 years	5,000 – 10,000	x		
PM7	Construction	> 20 years	> 20,000	x		
PM8	Construction	> 20 years	1 – 50	x		
PM9	IT	15 – 20 years	100 – 500	x		
PM10	IT	1 – 5 years	100 – 500	x		
PM11	Construction	> 20 years	5,000 – 10,000	x	x	
PM12	Research	15 – 20 years	1,000 – 5,000	x	x	
PM 13	Pharma	> 20 years	1 – 50		x	
PM 14	Organisational change	> 30 years	100 – 500			x
PM 15	Construction	> 20 years	1,000 – 5,000			x
PM 16	Organisational change	> 20 years	1,000 – 5,000			x
PM 17	Organisational change	10 – 15 years	5,000 – 10,000			x
PM 18	Organisational change	> 20 years	1,000 – 5,000			x
PM 19	Construction	1 – 5 years	10,000 – 20,000			x
PM 20	Construction	> 20 years	1 – 50			x

Table 2 – Creation of themes and meaning units

	Meaning unit (no of codes)	Medium-level theme I (no of codes)		Medium-level theme II	High-level theme
Three researchers independently	154	11	Three researchers together	Structural environment	Source
		5		Social environment	
		4		Stakeholder characteristic	
	85	7			Difficult situation
	189	4		Project impact	Impact
		12		Personal impact	
	112	6		Project coping	Coping
		10		Personal coping	

Figure 1 – conceptual framework



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Figure 2 – revised conceptual framework

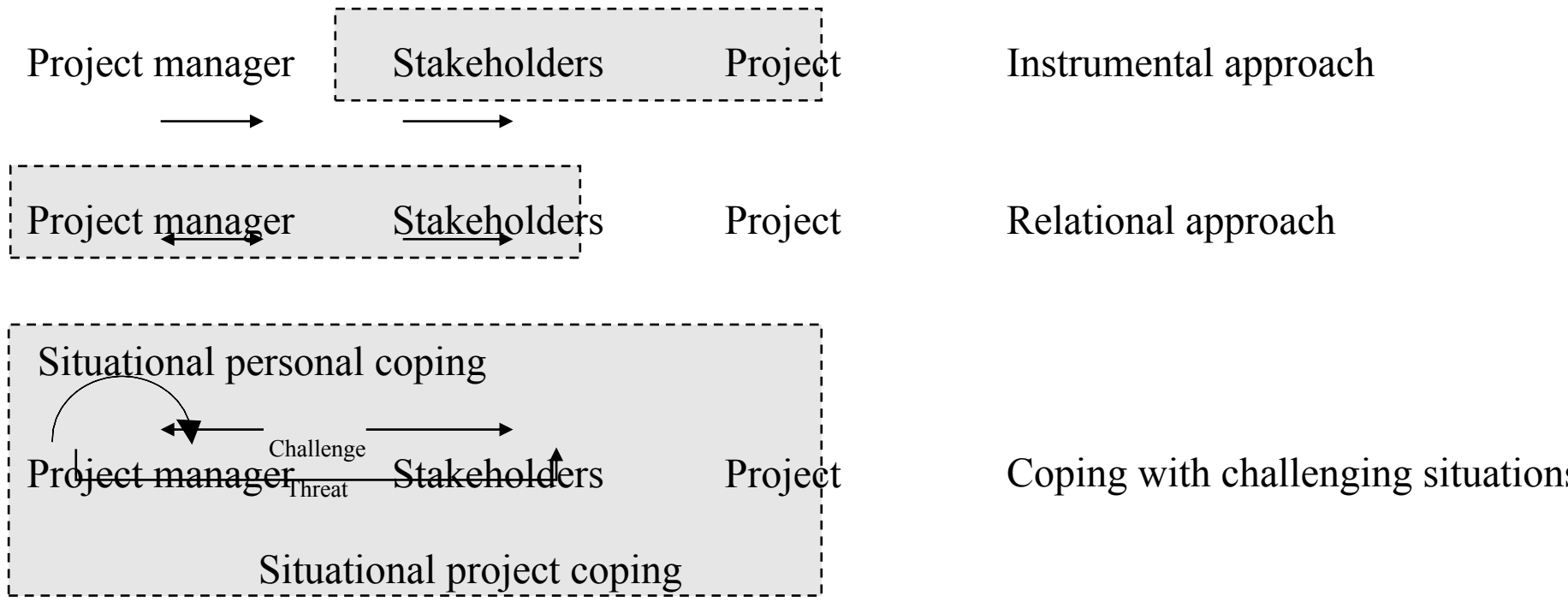


Figure 3 – Project coping model

