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# **The Stakeholder Challenge: Dealing with Challenging Situations Involving Stakeholders**

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## **Author Biographies**

**Christine Unterhitzenberger** is a Senior Teaching Fellow in Project Management at Lancaster University Management School. Her research interest is in the area of psychosocial and relational aspects of project management, in particular she is interested in understanding how individuals and groups in projects behave and the impact of that behaviour. She is a Department Editor for the Project Management Journal and Chair of the Association for Project Management Research Advisory Group and an expert evaluator for the European Commission Horizon 2020 work programme. Her research has been published in journals such as Production Planning and Control, International Journal of Project Management and Project Management Journal.

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**Martin Rost** is a Research Assistant at the Chair of Management and Organisation at the University of Stuttgart, Germany. He studied business administration and did his PhD in the field of organisational psychology at the Ludwigs-Maximilians-University Munich, Germany. His research focuses on the behaviour, roles and networks of individuals in the emergence of organisational capabilities, competency management, and project management.

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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.

Considering the above mentioned research on the wellbeing of project managers and the fact that in areas such as resources and communication, work relationships and strain on psychological health project managers are categorised as high risk compared to the average working population (Cheung et al. 2020) we need to fill that gap and gain a better understanding of how project managers cope with stressful situations involving stakeholders. This is particularly prevalent, as most studies on occupational stress are quantitative in nature (Mazzola, Schonfeld, and Spector 2011) – in general and in the field of project management (Aitken and Crawford 2007), whereas we use a qualitative approach based on interviews and focus groups to gain rich insights.

The literature on coping strategies emerged in the 1960's and matured as a distinct area of inquiry about 30 years ago. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) developed the widely accepted definition of coping as “the thoughts and behaviours used to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised to be stressful” (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004, p. 746). Dewe, Cox, and Ferguson (1993) note that this definition is brought about due to the response to works that burden abilities and resources. We will use the coping strategies literature as our theoretical lens to analyse how project managers cope with stressful situations involving stakeholders and hence, developed the following research question: **What is the project managers' experience of dealing with challenging situations in projects involving stakeholders?**

We will answer the research question through a qualitative study utilising interviews and focus groups with experienced project managers. We found that project managers are not only concerned about how they themselves deal with a challenging situation, but they also feel a strong sense of accountability towards the project and hence, we differentiate between personal and project coping. The paper is organized as follows: First we review the literature on project

stakeholders, coping in general and more specifically in projects and provide the theoretical background to our search for answers to the research question. We then describe and justify our methods for data collection and analysis. In the findings section we present the results from the interviews and in the discussion section we answer the research question and develop a model for the use of coping strategies in projects.

## **Theoretical Background**

### *Project Stakeholders*

Stakeholders are individuals or groups who “have a stake in the success or failure of a business” (Freeman et al. 2010, p. XV), whereas project stakeholders are typically defined as affecting or being affected by the project (Eskerod, Huemann, and Savage 2015). These can be groups and individuals such as investors, suppliers, customers, users, authorities, neighbours, media and so forth, who play a crucial role in regards to project success (Eskerod, Huemann, and Savage 2015; PMI 2017). Research on project stakeholders has been dominated for many years by an instrumental approach, which is mainly prescriptive and focuses on developing tools and techniques to manage individual stakeholders, such as the power/interest matrix (Olander and Landin 2005) or stakeholder mapping (Bourne and Walker 2005). A shift to a more relational approach to stakeholders has developed more recently with some initial work on investigating stakeholder behaviours (Beringer, Jonas, and Kock 2013), network and systems perspectives (Missonier and Loufrani-Fedida 2014; Sperry and Jetter 2019) or a more holistic perspective of stakeholder landscapes (Aaltonen and Kujala 2016). This is also underpinned by a systematic literature review on stakeholder management in megaprojects by Mok, Shen, and Yang (2015) who has identified that the majority of work has been done in the areas of stakeholder management processes and analysis methods, with work associated with the relational approach in areas such as stakeholder interest and influence as well as engagement gaining traction. Our work is situated in the relational approach to stakeholder management

(Oliveira and Rabechini Jr 2019) as it is interested in the relationship between the individual stakeholders and the project manager. It adds a unique perspective as it does 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.

Flyvbjerg (2014) and Mok, Shen, and Yang (2015) suggest that particularly in largescale projects the social complexity associated with the project's stakeholders is a key managerial challenge. This is the case in regards to the stakeholders' quantity, their variety and the relationships amongst them. Aaltonen and Kujala (2016, p. 1537) also highlight the “rugged and foggy stakeholder contexts” of new product development projects as challenges for stakeholder management. Such challenges can occur in multiple shapes or forms. Projects often involve a very heterogeneous set of stakeholders concerning age, gender and project role, which can have an impact on how events, phenomena or outputs are perceived (Chipulu et al. 2019; Ojiako et al. 2015). Subsequently, perception incongruence amongst stakeholders or between stakeholder and project manager can lead to challenging situations, which the project managers need to resolve. Furthermore, some of the common reasons for unsuccessful projects are stakeholder disappointment (e.g. Dalcher 2009) or lack of stakeholder alignment (Ollus et al. 2011), which can be potential factors causing tensions between the project manager and stakeholders on a project. The high number of stakeholders involved in projects, each with individual potentially diametrically opposed and competing values, requirements, expectations and concerns, can also be the reason for challenging situations between the project and individual stakeholders (Walton and Dawson 2001; Eskerod, Huemann, and Savage 2015). In addition, stakeholders often have different objectives, cultures, knowledge, expertise and roles, which can create further complications to project managers (Baiden, Price, and Dainty 2006).

Classically, there are different types of stakeholder depending upon such variables as their power, legitimacy and urgency (Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997), with those having high power, legitimacy and urgency having high salience. Some stakeholders are internal to an organisation and some reside outside (Ritter 1999). Hence, they might decide to act in a supportive or non-supportive way when engaging with the project. Often these stakeholders are actors that are outside the authority of the project manager (Karlsen 2002). Therefore, if perceiving their interests adversely affected, project stakeholders with high salience, such as clients, suppliers, senior managers and team members, can be highly disruptive in their behaviours, in terms of working for the achievement of the project objectives like time, quality and cost. They can also develop a high level of frustration, which creates emotions like anger, helplessness or powerlessness (Invernizzi, Locatelli, and Brookes 2018). It lies within the responsibility of the project manager to ensure that the various demands of stakeholders as well as the objectives are met, which can create challenges or even perceived threats for the project manager. Hence, the project manager needs to develop adequate strategies to cope with such situations.

### ***Coping***

Coping is a highly complex multidimensional construct, including both cognitive and behavioural processes to manage challenging situations (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004). As defined by Dewe, Cox, and Ferguson (1993, p. 7) coping is “the cognitions and behaviours, adopted by the individual following the recognition of a stressful encounter, that are in some way designed to deal with that encounter or its consequences”. Coping processes are initiated as a response to the appraised demands of a given situation (Folkman 2008). Therefore, it is a response that helps individuals manage situations that are different from the ‘norm’ and situations that potentially create stress. Psychological stress identifies that it is the individual’s perceptions of the environmental demands that exceeds the individual’s perceived ability to

cope, it is therefore not the ability but the perception of the demand (Lazarus 1966). Theories of stress that are valued within workplace research argue that there is a transaction between individuals and the environment/situation (Lazarus and Folkman 1987) and hence, this interplay requires the employment of coping strategies (Dewe, Cox, and Ferguson 1993).

As previously mentioned, much of the coping literature appears in the field of physical (Keefe et al. 1989) and mental health and psychological wellbeing (Doron et al. 2013), identifying the ways in which people cope with stress. However, a body of literature is emerging that does review coping strategies of those dealing with challenges within workplaces (Ito and Brotheridge 2003). Recently a number of studies have been published which focuses on how coping can help employees to deal with stress (Casper, Sonnentag, and Tremmel 2017; Monteiro, Marques Pinto, and Roberto 2016) and to avoid burnout (Ângelo and Chambel 2014; Ben-Zur and Yagil 2005). Interestingly, these studies mainly focus on employees in non-managerial positions and do not provide us with much insight into how individuals with management responsibilities towards internal and external stakeholders cope. However, it is important to understand how managers – and in our case specifically project managers – cope as deficiencies in coping skills lead to adverse outcomes, such as increased vulnerability or depression (Haaga et al. 2004), negative effects on individuals job satisfaction (Welbourne et al. 2007) and work performance (Brown, Westbrook, and Challagalla 2005), whereas coping skills are positively related to vigour and task performance (Casper, Sonnentag, and Tremmel 2017).

Coping is often viewed as a process rather than a trait as it “is concerned with what the person actually thinks or does in a specific context, and with the changes in these thoughts and actions across encounters or as an encounter unfolds” (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, p. 178). Coping arises from an event or situation which is perceived to deviate from the norm and to

create stress (Parker and DeCotiis 1983). This is followed by an appraisal of the threat, harm or challenge which this event or situation represents (Folkman et al. 1986). The appraisal occurs when an individual gives meaning to a particular event or situation and based on this appraisal coping processes are employed (Folkman 2008). In summary, coping itself can be viewed as a process which is initiated by a stressor, i.e. an event or situation, and then the stressor is appraised which in consequence leads to different coping strategies (Thoits 1995). This is also depicted in the original stress and coping model (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, as cited in Folkman 2008), which is the key summary of the coping process and explains how the different actions and behaviours are related to each other.

Coping literature has identified two major approaches to coping: emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping. Emotion-focused coping strategies are cognitive and behavioural endeavours that are aimed at reducing the emotional distress, and perhaps maintaining a positive psychological state (Folkman 1997), associated with the situation, such as expressing emotions (Pearlin and Schooler 1978). Problem-focused coping strategies are aimed at modifying the stressor, involving both cognitive problem-solving strategies engaging in activities such as planning and behavioral strategies for managing the source of the problem (Folkman and Lazarus 1980). Mann et al. (1997) identified five basic patterns of coping with dilemmas and challenging situations which are all focused on the avoidance of conflict: adoption, ignorance, delegation vigilance as well as hypervigilance. Hence, there are many different coping strategies and mechanisms that are adopted based on the challenging or threatening situation.

Coping is said to occur in two forms, maladaptive coping, where the coping fails to manage the problem and adaptive coping, where there is a fit between the challenging situation and the approach used to cope (Parasuraman and Cleek 1984). Generally, research has concluded that those who employ problem-focused strategies are found to be adaptive, however those that

employ emotion-focused coping or avoidance strategies are maladaptive in their coping (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004). Employing different coping strategies has different effects on the outcome for the individual. Active behaviours and problem-focused coping are moderators of stress symptoms, therefore reduce symptoms of stress, whereas emotion-focused coping and avoidance are likely to enhance stress (Nakano 1991). Hence, the implementation of different coping strategies can significantly impact on the wellbeing of the individual and the outcome of a situation.

The way individuals respond to a stressful situation may be due to the interpretation and understanding of the experience (Welbourne et al. 2007), or the impact it may have. This coping response has been found to mediate the effect on ones emotions with some coping strategies increasing positive emotions and some increasing negative emotions (Folkman and Lazarus 1988). Coping strategies therefore help individuals manage the stressor and to avoid burnout. Emotion-focused coping is negatively correlated with the burnout dimension depersonalization and problem-focused is positively related with the burnout dimension personal accomplishment, which means problem-focused coping helps employees to realize the sense of their work (Ben-Zur and Yagil 2005). In the next section we will discuss how the concept of coping can be useful for project managers to address challenges they are facing in their working relationships (Cheung et al. 2020).

### ***Coping in projects***

We outlined earlier potential challenges or threats by or through stakeholders project managers might experience in their everyday working environment, like perception incongruence (Chipulu et al. 2019), competing values or requirements (Eskerod, Huemann, and Savage 2015), disruptive behaviour due to high salience (Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997) or frustration (Invernizzi, Locatelli, and Brookes 2018) to name just a few. Project managers need

to develop strategies on how to cope with these challenges or threats which are perceived to be outside the norm and hence, create stress in order to improve the atypical and high-risk psychological health of project managers (Cheung et al. 2020). Richmond and Skitmore (2006) suggest that project managers in general use problem-focused as well as emotion-focused coping strategies and that their effectiveness is highly dependent on the situation and context in which they are applied (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Social support was the most effective coping mechanism for project managers in this study, followed by communication, adding resources, avoidance of stress, problem-solving and various others. They also found that project managers with a university degree use problem-focused coping strategies and planning more often than non-university educated ones. The use of more planning and active strategies to cope with stressful situations was also identified by Aitken and Crawford (2007). They determined that coping strategies become more structured with an increased level of project management experience and maturity. This is probably also due to the fact that the project environment in general is more based on facts and problems than emotions.

However, coping in projects so far has been exclusively investigated based on dispositional coping strategies, that means strategies which are applied across multiple situations and where the question is asked what project managers normally do to cope with certain situations (Aitken and Crawford 2007). We are not interested in this generalised approach, as it has been highlighted by Carver and Scheier (1994) that it is of particular importance to focus on the specific situation for which coping is required as different stressful situations lead to different coping strategies. Hence, we utilise situational coping and look at what a project manager has done in a real and specific situation. Our situation will focus on a challenge or threat by or through a stakeholder and this will provide us with unique insights into coping in this specific context.

Against this theoretical background we will endeavour to answer our research question on how project managers deal with challenging situations involving stakeholders. We conceived this in a conceptual framework to situate it in the wider context of research undertaken in the field (Figure 1). From a practical perspective this is highly relevant as project managers are facing higher levels of wellbeing issues and stress due to their work relationships than the average working population (Cheung et al. 2020). There is currently only a very limited body of literature which addresses these issues (Aitken and Crawford 2007; Richmond and Skitmore 2006) and more clarification is required. We will gain a better understanding of coping in projects by adopting a situational approach in collecting rich data through qualitative interviews.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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## **Method**

In this study, we focus on the phenomenon of coping and more specifically, on how project managers deal with challenging situations involving stakeholders. To explore this phenomenon, we adopt phenomenology as the mode of philosophical enquiry (Bowman 1998) and a qualitative research method (Creswell and Poth 2018) with a group of individuals who have practical knowledge of the phenomenon and experienced it themselves (Moustakas 1994; Van Manen 2016). A multi method qualitative approach was taken, consisting of interviews followed by two focus groups.

The study takes a phenomenological approach to interpretation with its main objective “to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell 2013, p. 76). The aim of phenomenology is to tell a story about participants lived

experience, therefore asking participants to describe their experience is crucial (Starks and Brown Trinidad 2007). Not only is it focused on deep description of the phenomena, but also how it occurs, attending to the specific nature of the phenomenon (Freeman 2020).

Therefore, phenomenology allows for the examination of the specific approach to coping project manager's use in situations where challenges are created by stakeholders. Consequently, this method enabled us to find behavioural aspects (McClelland 1998; Spencer and Spencer 2008) of coping and thus helped us to understand the concept of coping for the project manager in more detail. To enable this, participants were asked to identify a critical incident (Flanagan 1954) which they had to deal with around a challenging situation involving stakeholders which contributed to the success or failure of a project. In particular, the following areas were explored: a) the identity and characteristics of stakeholders that create challenges for project managers b) the nature of the challenge and the actions/behaviours of the stakeholders c) the impacts on the project managers and d) the strategies used by the project managers to cope with the challenging situations.

### ***Data Collection***

There has been a lot of discussion on how to measure coping appropriately and it is described as “as much art as it is science” (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004, p. 751), particularly in reference to the high number of quantitative instruments which are available in the literature (e.g. Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub 1989; Endler and Parker 1990). Guided by the work of Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), we adopted a qualitative approach, which is regarded to be useful in understanding the coping need and strategy, especially if people provide a narrative. Our unit of analysis is the phenomena of project managers' coping in challenging situations caused by stakeholders and the unit of observation is project managers (Kosaroglu and Hunt

2009; Sedgwick 2014). Since the focus of the research is on the way this process manifests (Freeman 2020), this unit of analysis provides insight into the experience of coping.

### *Stage 1: Interviews*

Interviews were chosen in the first stage of the study as it allowed us to build a relationship with the interviewees, to talk about sensitive topics and to enquire in-depth about their behaviours while providing the narrative. The interviews were facilitated in an informal and interactive process which mainly utilised open ended questions (Moustakas 1994). The interview protocol was developed to explore the project manager's experience of coping within the specific situations that occur when challenges or threats are encountered through relationships with stakeholders. A set of questions for each of the areas was prepared and pilot tested to capture the relationships and interactions with stakeholders, the challenges faced and how these were dealt with, however their use adapted from interview to interview (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2019). During the interviews, each participant was asked to describe two challenging situations, so that in total 24 situations, were explored to discern participants experience of coping. Probing questions were asked to gain more detail, either to elaborate or clarify (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). This allowed us to explore the experiences of the dealing with difficult stakeholders ("what have they experienced?") specifically in regards to the Project Managers perspective ("how have they experienced it?") .

Phenomenology is concerned with common features of the lived experience, consequently data from a homogenous sample, who have knowledge and can provide an in-depth account of experience are preferred over large sample sizes, with phenomenological studies having around 6-12 participants (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006). In total 12 interviews were conducted, with an average duration between 45 and 60 minutes and interviewing was stopped when repetition occurred due to data saturation. Project managers with at least five years professional experience participated in the interviews. They were responsible for organisational and cross-

organisational projects in different industries and worked in small to medium sized companies in the UK, like construction, infrastructure, IT or pharma (Table 1). These industries were chosen due to their relative maturity in project management.

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### *Stage 2: Focus Groups*

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

## ***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).

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Insert Table 2 about here

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

## **Findings**

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

### ***Challenging situations involving stakeholders***

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

#### *Governance*

Governance-related challenges ascertain to the rules, responsibilities and regulations in a project. Such challenges focused on a lack of responsiveness and of documentation, (“Some people are notoriously bad at responding to emails and only ever want phone calls. But then you have to back everything up with an email so that you’ve got your project documentation.” [PM12]); the non-fulfilment of responsibilities (“We were getting frustrated; they didn’t do what they were supposed to have done.” [PM10]); or the absence of agreed working

relationships (“They spoke about doing things collaboratively, but the system within [their organization] is very much a case of ‘you’ve got to be allocated 65 percent of your time to this set of projects.’” [PM10]) In some cases, working with mechanisms in place to ensure effective governance can be a challenge “committees can sometimes ruin a project” [FG1].

#### *Technical expertise*

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

#### *Attitude*

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

#### *Expectations and Understanding*

A challenging situation was meeting of expectations i.e. whether stakeholders articulate their requirements and whether other stakeholders strive to meet them. (“I think they were difficult in a sense, because you were never sure if you were getting a true reflection of their stake, or what they wanted as an outcome.” [PM1]). The same applies to the understanding of project goals and deliverables. This encapsulates the stakeholders’ appreciation of what the project aims to achieve (“The supplier very quickly got on board, the [client organisation]

were harder to deal with, mainly because the main person at the [client organization] was probably not on top of the detail, and didn't really understand what we were doing.” [PM9]). A related type of challenge was when there is a lack of understanding of project work (“He was under pressure to deliver within a specified time because he told his boss (...) that he was going to deliver within a specified time, and because we weren't going to meet that time it became a problem.” [PM6]).

### *Working Environment*

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

### *Sources of challenging situations*

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

structural environment suffering from change fatigue, which has an adverse effect on the inter-personal relationships amongst stakeholders in the social environment [FG2].

### *Structural Environment*

The structural environment refers to the project organisation, the project participants, the project objectives, as well as the project governance. In general, inefficient structures or the lack of mechanisms to deal with issue creates challenging situations. As do bottlenecks and blockers, such as procurement, legal and finance and procurement routes that do not promote partnership working or the building of swift trust between stakeholders [FG2].

A challenging situation exists when a stakeholder is unknown. (“Then, of course, there are the stakeholders (...) that appear in the process at certain stages.” [PM8]) Or due to their position within the project structure (power/influence). The project objectives i.e. time (schedule) and cost (budget), can create challenges (“There was stress between the teams because there was an accelerated timeline.” [PM10]). Further challenges exists if the goals of the project participants are divergent (“As it developed, you began to realise where these different agendas were” [PM8]). Stakeholders also often experience pressure regarding their role performance, which can be misaligned to the project performance, again creating challenging situations.

External constraints or drivers also create challenging situations (“We're getting to a different sphere of an environment because that is a more commercial, external process as opposed to [the internal business].” [PM3]) As can the shared history between stakeholders to the project (“I think he'd had a bad experience with [us] and he never got the outcome he expected to get.” [PM11]). Culture, which includes the different organisational cultures, national or regional cultures, as well as the project culture, is another aspect of the structural environment leading to challenging situations (“Sadly, in the culture that we're in, it always

comes down to some finger pointing later on.” [PM3]). Within organisations, different subcultures can exist, for example, those stakeholders from operations who work in a “keep things the same” [FG1] culture, which can be challenging if they are required to participate in a project. Not seeing the bigger picture, or the existence of “satellite cultures” [FG2] creates challenges. External factors can vary between the public and private sector; for example, in the public sector, dealing with national politics can create difficulties and in the private sector, it can be dealing with regulation [FG2].

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

### *Social Environment*

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

Problems with communications between stakeholders, both outside and within the project team, is a source challenging situations (“It was almost like an initial miscommunication at the beginning, which set the tone for a lot of the stuff which happened during the subsequent couple of months.” [PM10]). In worse case situations, where there is no communication, “things like trust and everything else tend to fall away” [FG1].

Stakeholder treatment in terms of equity and equality, if not managed in a consistent way can present challenges (“Sometimes people need to hear and see information in different ways.” [PM12]). The same applies to the presence or absence of trust, i.e. whether the stakeholders trust each other and the project manager, or not (“If you’re the project manager and you’ve got other people underneath you that are not doing what you think they’re doing, then that creates a level of mistrust, so that’s difficult to manage.” [PM12]). Lack of empathy is another negative aspect of the social environment. The project manager needs to be aware of the needs of a stakeholder and demonstrate the ability to empathise (“I’d like to do something about the lack of empathy with the stakeholder. It’s one thing identifying a stakeholder and it’s another thing meeting their needs.” [PM11]).

#### *Stakeholder characteristic*

One source of challenge is stakeholders perceived to be difficult based on individual personality traits, which is not unique or specific to project environments (“When you have a personality clash with somebody it can be quite difficult to move things forward.” [PM12]). This also includes traits like honesty and arrogance. An additional challenge is not only dealing with certain personalities but also aligning personalities with their position or their importance as a stakeholder [FG1].

What is unique though to the project environment, and is a source of challenge, is an individual’s temporary way of being at a particular point in time, i.e. their personality state.

This can be influenced by either an individual's role within the project ("Maybe it's the nature of the role within a joint venture, maybe she's got lots of pressures from other members of the management committee" [PM5]); or by their expectations of the project, which might be unrealistic ("It's really difficult, her expectations are through the roof." [PM5]). A stakeholder might have good knowledge of their role and their required contribution – the "intelligent" or informed client for example [FG2]. Though conversely, they might act as though they understand, without the knowledge, training or expertise in projects or project management and this can create challenging situations. For example, it might lead a stakeholder to act in a very bullish manner. Other stakeholder characteristics that lead to challenging situations are anxiety, being too laid-back and lacking the ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

Hence, a distinction is made between personality trait and state, with the latter being a temporary way of being, resulting from some aspect of the stakeholder's engagement with the project.

### ***Impact***

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

#### *Project impact*

Challenging situations can have an impact on meeting time (schedule), cost (budget) and quality (specification) success criteria; projects take longer, cost more money or have quality-levels compromised. They can also have an impact on achieving the goals and delivering the scope of the project ("Swaying the direction of a decision based on their own personal or

organisational needs rather than the project as a whole” [PM12] and “There are personalities which are large and bombastic and will steer projects in a different direction.” [PM3]).

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

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

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

#### *Personal impact*

A challenging situation in a project can have an impact on the project manager himself/herself, i.e. a personal impact. There is a distinction as to whether the challenge has an impact on the role of the project manager or on his/her well-being. In relation to the project manager’s role, a challenging situation may have an impact on the individual’s professional learning (“However, there were definitely lessons I could learn and things I could have done better” [PM9]). Even on their weltanschauung, which is the social context of the individual’s perspective or view of life (“I would have had a view of project management with a narrower

scope and wouldn't have necessarily at that time thought about providers and the people who are actually ultimately paying for the drugs. That's a factor of my developing experience in that I was learning that." [PM4]). Challenging situations also have an impact on a project manager's reputation and their role in the project or organisation ("Then it got a bit personal, thinking the impact of that could cause me issues going forward with my career." [PM11] and "I thought I might get sacked." [PM9]). This personal impact on the project manager's role usually takes place within the project environment, as it directly links to his/her responsibilities to deliver the project.

Regarding the project manager's personal well-being, a challenging situation caused by a stakeholder can create manifold reactions and have varied impacts. It can create frustration ("We were getting frustrated. They didn't do what they were supposed to have done." [PM10]), unease ("It was just like 'Oh my God', and it almost makes you feel 'what have I done'?" [PM10]), resistance ("No one wanted to work on it, including me, but I was the project manager" [PM9]), anger ("It made me feel quite, well, almost angry." [PM5]), isolation, helplessness ("It's very unusual that I was in a position where I could not give a level of certainty, that didn't have a series of caveats and further unknowns." [PM8]), defensiveness, threat ("It was often that there was a perception about lack of ability to do a job" [PM4]), embarrassment ("I felt a little bit upset at the beginning." [PM6]), and stress ("It was pretty stressful to be honest" [PM9]). It can have an impact on the project manager's home life ("You go for a fag, then you go for a pint down the pub, and then potentially go (...) take it out on your wife. It affects you personally." [PM10]). This personal impact on the project manager's well-being usually occurs beyond the project environment, as it is often something they deal with outside official working hours. The personal impact can also last a long time ("You are only good as your last project aren't you really? If one project doesn't go

as well as it should, for various reasons, that can affect you and it can stay with you for many years.” [FG1])

As with the project impact, the personal impact of a challenging situation can be positive or negative on the individual. Positive impacts, as described above, encompass personal growth, career development, enhanced creativity and a sense of accomplishment. Negative ones include both physical and mental health, such as stress, anxiety and high blood pressure. The need to highlight positive impacts when coping with a challenging situation “rather than just the negatives” [FG2] was made, though the findings suggest negative impacts are typically more prevalent.

Whether the personal impact on the project manager is positive or negative influences the effectiveness of coping strategies used to deal with future challenges. Project managers described a virtuous cycle whereby a positive experience of coping with a challenging situation feeds into the project manager’s own personality state –see earlier discussion – and enhances their capability to cope effectively in the future.

### ***Coping Strategies***

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

#### *Personal coping strategies*

The study revealed certain personal coping strategies being adopted by project managers i.e. communication, relationship building, identification of common ground and consideration of different approaches. These are strategies used by the project manager to cope with the challenging situation i.e. minimizing stress. We distinguished two types of personal coping

strategies: problem-focused and emotion-focused. Problem-focused strategies are efforts to do something active to alleviate stressful circumstances, whereas emotion-focused coping strategies involve efforts to regulate the emotional consequences of stressful or potentially stressful events.

Communication with the stakeholders involved in the challenging situation was identified as one of the key problem-focused coping strategies used by project managers (“I’d have to spend quite a lot of time calming other people down.” [PM12] and “It was all about open communication.” [PM4]). Communication helps to identify and understand the source of the challenging situation, which subsequently enables the project manager to determine solutions and hence, contributes to solving the problem. The project managers spoke about how it involved a change of mode of communication, such as more face-to-face and one-to-one’s and less emails, a strategy that was often linked to experience. Linked to this was the notion of “stroking” [FG2] and using humour to help diffuse a situation that the project managers is personally struggling to cope with.

Besides communication, we identified a range of other problem-focused coping strategies. Building relationships between the stakeholders causing stress and the project manager also contributes to addressing the problems created by the stressor (“We had to try and explore the understanding of each other” [PM12]). The identification of common ground between stakeholders and the project manager (“I always try to put myself in their shoes” [PM4]) was adopted by some, though less commonly across the board. This was also the case for project managers’ consideration of different approaches to dealing with the stakeholders (“That’s the point you need to obviously back-up by re-evaluating and try and think of a different strategy.” [PM3]). Linked to this was standing back and not rushing (“Press the pause button” [FG2]). Though letting this pause go on too long i.e. “just sit and wait” and “see how it goes”

could be “a high-risk strategy” [FG1]. After an appropriate period of pause, then it typically involves a carefully planned critical intervention, such as bringing a new person into the project arena, who, through a perceived neutrality, can help the team to rise to a challenge. Project managers spoke about such interventions taking the pressure off them and reducing their stress. Challenging and questioning aspects of the project, such as the assumptions made by a key stakeholder creating difficulties, such as the client or senior management, could be difficult to do in some organisational cultures or in dealing with certain personality traits, though it was seen as a useful problem-focused coping strategy [FG2].

Problem-focused coping strategies take place mainly within the project environment, i.e. the strategies are addressing a problem the project manager is facing within the project by involving the project team members and stakeholders, as opposed to the personal life of the project manager.

Project managers employed emotion-focused coping strategies to deal with the effect of the challenge on their personal life and their emotional well-being. The two most common emotion-focused coping strategies amongst project managers were sharing and reflecting, followed by self-validation (“Convincing one’s self about your approach being right” [FG2]), venting, confrontation, patience and demonstration/validation of personal values. Project managers frequently use their personal and professional network to share experiences of situations they perceive to be stressful in order to cope with the resulting emotions (“My strategy I think in coping with that is talking about it with other colleagues.” [PM7] and “There’s probably quite a lot of informal moaning between our projects.” [PM12]). Having a mentor to talk to was very useful in this respect.

Regular reflecting in a systematic way also enabled project managers to better deal with the emotions caused by challenging situations involving stakeholders (“I’d come home, feel

very frustrated and do a lot of reflection.” [PM7] and “You'll come back, out of the conversation and you reflect, and you take ten minutes away from a situation.” [PM3]). Another very popular strategy was self-validation, i.e. finding confirmation from others that the actions were correct or that it is not the project manager's own fault (“Having chatted to a lot of other consultants some of them have got three or four stories like that.” [PM9] and “It's almost like I'm seeking affirmation from them that it was okay.” [PM7]). Less widely used though effective strategies were venting, (“Walk away from my computer.” [PM4]), confrontation (“There would be a stand-up row in an office” [PM3]) and patience (“Mull over it a lot and take advice a lot more.” [PM4]), as well as the demonstration and validation of the project manager's own personal values (“The way I got round that was that I fell back on values, rather than compromising my own values.” [PM1] and (Being honest and having a clear conscience with yourself.” [FG2]. Project manager's employ emotion-focused coping strategies both within and beyond the project environment. Many of these strategies are about building up the project manager's own sense of worth, (“Makes you feel on a personal level you are coping.” [FG2].

### *Project coping strategies*

We identified coping strategies that were not oriented towards the project manager's reduction of personal stress, but, rather, towards the reduction of stress in the project, which we class as project coping strategies. Here project managers focused on how the project can best cope with the challenging situation. The project manager does not try to improve the situation for him-/herself or solve the problem from a self-oriented motivation. Instead, they concentrate on the problem from a project perspective, which does not necessarily help them as individuals to cope better. Strategies under the heading of project coping were framed in terms of the project organization are e.g. re-structure of the project or project team (“I've certainly used breaking down a project to solve interpersonal problems in a project” [PM11],

in terms of the project team referred to as “reconfigure with the people” [FG2]). Such reconfiguration, subject to resource availability, can have the added benefit of bringing in new people to “... where they should have been in the first place” [FG2].

Other strategies are passing on a role on the project (“I tend to take that person off, or take a step back, go on holiday for instance for a couple of weeks or whatever, and get someone else to deal with the situation.” [PM6]); or seeking external support (“We took legal advice on it.” [PM11]). In these examples, the project itself is adapted to overcome the repercussions of the challenging situation. The project managers described additional useful strategies within project coping around the topic of uncertainty management. Having a strong structure, through utilisation of a formal project management methodology, such as PRINCE2, provides “an anchor” [FG1] for control to be exerted and a challenge met. (“We can change control out of that [challenging situation]. We have this mechanism.” [PM3]). The importance of stakeholder engagement was highlighted (“How they went about it was a bit dynamic, sort of extreme but they made their point, forcibly” [PM3]), and developing a Plan B (“They had a backup in case, so like a Plan A and a Plan B” [PM1]). These are proactive measures to reduce uncertainty in respect of the potential future impact of a challenging situation on the project. Finally, the ultimate project coping strategy highlighted was “stop the project” [FG2].

## **Discussion**

Based on these findings outlined above we need to revise our conceptual framework (Figure 1). It became clear that project managers do not only develop coping strategies for themselves, but also for the project (Figure 2). In many cases, project managers are held accountable to stakeholders for the outcome of a project and they use resources and personal competencies to meet this accountability (Mac Donald, Rezania, and Baker 2020). A challenging situation involving stakeholders can be a threat to successful achievement of the outcomes. Hence, project managers are not only interested in how they themselves can best deal with it, but due

to their accountability they feel a sense of responsibility to put measures in place for the project to cope with this challenging situation as well.

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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We found that the coping strategies applied for personal as well as project coping are partially informed by established stakeholder management methods/tools/techniques which are grounded in the relational and instrumental approaches to stakeholder management (Oliveira and Rabechini Jr 2019; Missonier and Loufrani-Fedida 2014). Hence, project managers try to utilise their explicit and tacit knowledge about stakeholder management to make sense of challenging situations involving stakeholders and to identify the most suitable way to cope with each specific situation. This indicates that project managers with a more formal project management education and/or more experience are more likely to be able to determine mechanisms for coping due to access to a broader range of methods/tools/techniques, whereas a lower degree of project management maturity will make this more difficult and hence, less structured (Aitken and Crawford 2007).

Our findings furthermore show, that the process of coping is specific for the occupation project manager. To visualise this, we transfer Lazarus and Folkman (1984, as cited in Folkman 2008) stress and coping model into the project context, evaluate it for the occupation of project managers and answer our research question “What is the project managers’ experience of dealing with challenging situations in projects involving stakeholders?” (Figure 3). Since temporary organizing structures such as projects are becoming more and more important for work in and across organizations (Bakker et al. 2016), this transfer seems to be important to understand how employees and managers which are involved in these structures can cope with challenging situations. Cheung et al. (2020) have emphasized the importance of the occupation

project manager for stress research by showing that the high level of communication and interaction in projects represents an above-average risk to the wellbeing of project managers compared to other professions – and stakeholder interaction seems to be a significant factor contributing to this particular mental stress situation (Aaltonen and Kujala 2016; Cheung et al. 2020).

Unlike the original stress and coping model, the project coping model does not start with the event, i.e. the challenging situation, but a step earlier with potential sources of the challenging situation, i.e. the stressor. Following a primary appraisal of the situation, the impact can occur on the personal and/or project level and through the secondary appraisal the coping strategies are determined. These detailed insights into the coping process including nuances on where the impact and the coping takes place (inside/outside of the project) were only possible through the adoption of a situational approach to coping (Carver and Scheier 1994). By understanding what project managers do in real and specific situations we were able to develop a comprehensive and detailed model, which would not have been possible with a dispositional approach.

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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This project coping model – and the findings of this study more generally – do not only enable us to understand how project managers deal with challenging situations involving stakeholders, they also propose some important implications for project stakeholder management. Firstly, it is important to consider that there can be considerable tensions between stakeholders and project managers (Boonstra, van Offenbeek, and Vos 2017), but stakeholders are not simply “difficult” or create challenging situations for the purpose of doing so. We found that for every situation we investigated, there was one or multiple reasons which for why situations arose which the project manager perceived to be challenging or even threatening. By

understanding the reason – or source in the terminology of our model – project managers will be more likely to develop effective strategies to deal with the situation on a personal and project level. Secondly, even if a challenging situation does not have a direct impact on the project manager's role or wellbeing, but only on the project, they still employ personal coping strategies and vice versa. This means that if a challenging situation involving a stakeholder negatively impacts the project, the project manager feels affected by it and perceives the need to deal with that situation on a personal level as well. This suggests that stakeholder management is a challenging activity for project managers and that appropriate support framework should be established to enable the project manager to fully exploit the stakeholder management tools and techniques. As discussed earlier, stakeholder management research has traditionally put the stakeholder, i.e. the one who needs to be managed, in the centre of the investigation (Eskerod, Huemann, and Savage 2015; Mok, Shen, and Yang 2015). But without understanding why certain threats or challenges arise when dealing with stakeholders and how they affect the individual who needs to manage, i.e. the project manager, important contextual factors of stakeholder management have been neglected.

## **Conclusion**

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

### ***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

approaches to coping. Hence, we propose that the study should be replicated in different cultural settings like South America, Asia or Africa.

We also identified a number of areas for further research: Firstly, a more detailed classification of the challenging situations is necessary in order to be able to link different coping strategies to challenging situations and hence, improve the effectiveness of coping. Secondly, different coping strategies are adopted based on the personality traits of individuals. Therefore, it would be interesting to explore which coping strategies work best for which personality types of project managers. And thirdly, the effectiveness of the coping strategies adopted by project managers to deal with challenging situations involving stakeholders requires further exploration, i.e. do the coping strategies they adopt actually work?

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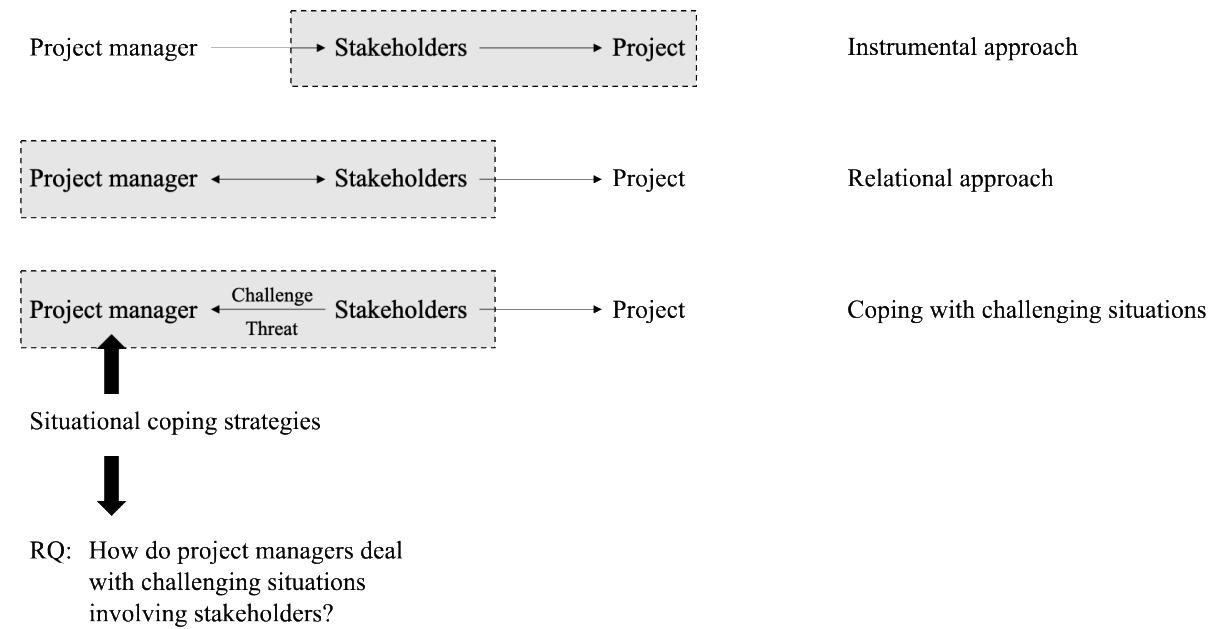
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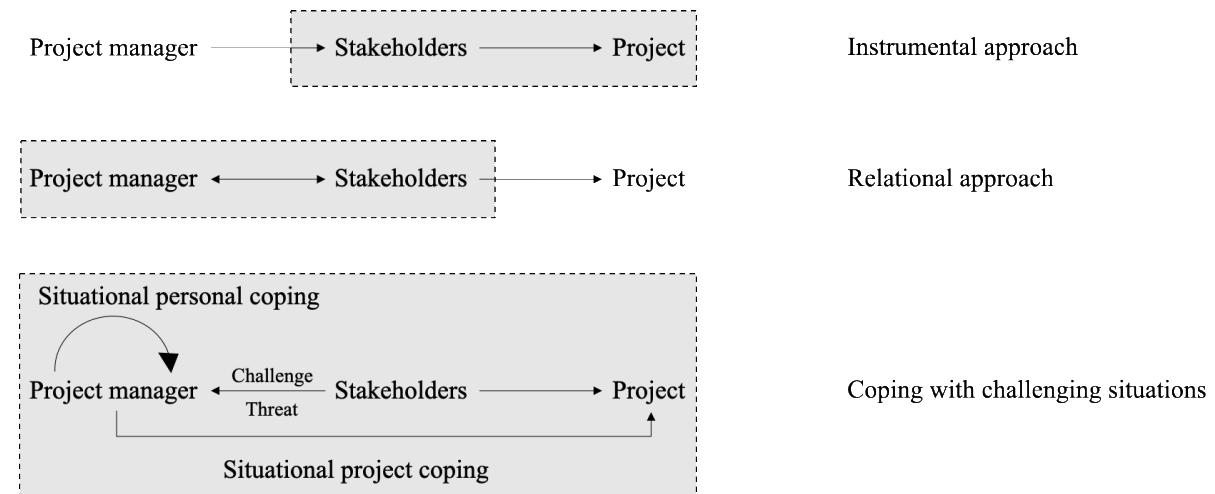
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**Figure 1 – Conceptual Framework**



**Figure 2 – Revised Conceptual Framework**



**Table 1 – Interviewee and focus group participant characteristics**

IDENT	Project type	Work experience	Company size	Interview	FG1	FG2
<b>PM1</b>	Organisational change	15 – 20 years	1,000 – 5,000	x	x	
<b>PM2</b>	Construction	> 20 years	10,000 – 20,000	x		
<b>PM3</b>	Construction	1 – 5 years	1,000 – 5,000	x		
<b>PM4</b>	Pharma	> 20 years	> 20,000	x		
<b>PM5</b>	IT	5 – 10 years	1 – 50	x		
<b>PM6</b>	Nuclear	5 – 10 years	5,000 – 10,000	x		
<b>PM7</b>	Construction	> 20 years	> 20,000	x		
<b>PM8</b>	Construction	> 20 years	1 – 50	x		
<b>PM9</b>	IT	15 – 20 years	100 – 500	x		
<b>PM10</b>	IT	1 – 5 years	100 – 500	x		
<b>PM11</b>	Construction	> 20 years	5,000 – 10,000	x	x	
<b>PM12</b>	Research	15 – 20 years	1,000 – 5,000	x	x	
<b>PM 13</b>	Pharma	> 20 years	1 – 50		x	
<b>PM 14</b>	Organisational change	> 30 years	100 – 500			x
<b>PM 15</b>	Construction	> 20 years	1,000 – 5,000			x
<b>PM 16</b>	Organisational change	> 20 years	1,000 – 5,000			x
<b>PM 17</b>	Organisational change	10 – 15 years	5,000 – 10,000			x
<b>PM 18</b>	Organisational change	> 20 years	1,000 – 5,000			x
<b>PM 19</b>	Construction	1 – 5 years	10,000 – 20,000			x
<b>PM 20</b>	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
154	11	Structural environment	
	5	Social environment	Source
	4	Stakeholder characteristic	
85	7		
189	4	Difficult situation	
	12	Project impact	Impact
	6	Personal impact	
112	10	Project coping	Coping
		Personal coping	

**Figure 3 – Project Coping Model**

