

Playing projects: Identifying flow in the ‘lived experience’

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the ‘lived experience’ of projects discourse. The research study uses an arts-based research method (musical improvisation on a xylophone and/or glockenspiel) to access the participant's perception of their experience of managing a project. Participants are then asked to explain their improvisation and therefore their experience. Key findings were that participants described their ‘lived experience’ of project managing as having ‘ups and downs’, including challenges and issues, and as experiencing variations in emotions over the project lifecycle. Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory is used to show that these ‘lived experience’ findings support a Heideggerian paradigm and personal perspective of what a project is. Projectness is not a characteristic of the activity itself. A project is a personal phenomenon defined in terms of the relationship between the individual or organisation and activity. It is dependent on capability versus the challenge presented by the activity.

Graphical Abstract



1. Introduction

This research study aims to contribute to the 'lived experience' of projects literature, highlighting how this perspective can bring new insights to fundamental project concepts. The motivation for the research is to contribute to the diversification of our understanding of projects beyond the knowledge captured by positivist scientific research. This impetus is driven by the suggestion that the often positivist and Cartesian foundations that underpin much existing traditional project management research and practice are not sufficient to improve project outcomes. It is posited that through enriching our understanding of the phenomena of projects, which includes an understanding of the personal 'lived experience', we will further our knowledge of projects-in-practice. It is from this understanding of the 'lived experience' that we may derive new insights that improve project outcomes.

The 'lived experience' approach to project research is focused on capturing what actually happens in projects (Cicmil et al., 2006). This 'lived experience' stream of inquiry sees project management as social conduct, and that there is a need to understand what project managers actually do in concrete situations, the social processes, thinking in action and the actual experience of practitioners in situ (Cicmil et al., 2006).

In order to capture a 'lived experience' perspective, this study leverages an arts-based inquiry research method. The selected method echoes Whitty's (2010) artefacts and emotions study that required project managers to characterise the concept of a project in the form of a line drawing and provide a subsequent explanation of their representation. This study draws on musical improvisation as a device to access the 'lived experience' rather than drawing. The improvisation is followed by a semi-structured discussion between researcher and participant regarding the meaning behind the improvised sounds played. In the analysis priority and weight are given to the discussion rather than the actual improvisation. The musical instrument is simply a methodological device for creating a musical improvisation that enables a discourse to take place that discloses a personal perspective of managing a project. It facilitates an exploration of the perceived 'lived experience' of managing a project.

The paper firstly provides an outline of the research problem. An overview of the literature is then provided from which the research question is derived and into which a contribution is made. A description and justification of the selected research approach and the findings of the study follow this. The discussion considers the implications for the findings, and particularly draws on the concept of flow theory to highlight how the personal 'lived experience' (such as that described by the participants in this study) can challenge fundamental discipline concepts such as 'what is a project?'. Limitations and constraints of the research are provided, and recommendations for further research are noted.

2. Research problem

There is ongoing discourse in the project management literature regarding the challenges of project delivery and the prevalence of project failure (Geraldi et al., 2011, McHugh and Hogan, 2011, Thomas, 2006, Winter et al., 2006 and Zwikael and Bar-Yoseph, 2004). Project management has evolved from a positivist foundation and

this foundation continues to underpin the project management tools and techniques that are in prevalent use today (Bredillet, 2004). Bredillet (2004) argues that these positivist underpinnings may be contributing to the challenges experienced in project delivery.

As such, there have been calls to adopt alternative perspectives when researching and conceptualising the phenomena of projects. This includes the call for a 'lived experience' perspective of projects (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006, Cicmil et al., 2006, Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006, Lineham and Kavanagh, 2006 and Smyth and Morris, 2007). A similar, more recent call is to utilise a Heideggerian paradigm (which has a focus of 'being-in', a contextualised, personal experience) to provide the ontological underpinning for project research and practice (van der Hoorn and Whitty, in press). Literature capturing the 'lived experience' of projects is increasing, however there is still relatively little literature that takes a particularly personal, contextualised view of project work. This research study will contribute to this area of the 'lived experience' literature.

3. Literature review

The following literature review is divided into three sections. Firstly, the extant discourse on project management delivery failure and disappointment is provided. This includes the proposition that the current dominant paradigm underpinning much project research and practice is problematic. The call to consider alternative paradigms to underpin the discipline and lenses through which to explore projects are then discussed. Finally, previous studies that have explored the particularly personal aspects of the 'lived experience' of managing a project are reviewed.

3.1. Dissatisfaction with project management

There has been significant discourse in the project literature, that despite the growth of formalised project management methodologies, projects continue to fail to meet expectations (Geraldi et al., 2011, McHugh and Hogan, 2011, Thomas, 2006, Winter et al., 2006 and Zwikael and Bar-Yoseph, 2004). For example, Geraldi et al. (2011) highlight that whilst organisations and individuals are seeking to improve project performance, such improvements are not being realised; and this is despite many organisations adopting 'best practice' project management methods. Zwikael and Bar-Yoseph (2004) posit that there is still significant disappointment regarding the realities of project delivery, suggesting this is possibly due to a strong focus on technical management components. We would suggest that this highlights the positivist foundations of much practice.

There is also a plethora of reports on projects continuing to fail to meet management expectation and/or to deliver within time and on budget. Quantitatively, it is widely accepted that 80–90% of ICT investments fail to meet their objectives (Standards Australia, 2006). PM Solutions Research (2011) found that of the 163 organisations in their sample, 37% of their projects were 'at risk' or had already failed. A McKinsey & Company Report (Bloch et al., 2012) suggests that in the current climate, for projects to deliver \$15 million in benefits, you would need to spend \$59 million. A 2013 report by KPMG (focused on New Zealand), found that failure rates of projects actually increased since their 2010 survey. Another IT-focused survey reported that only 37% of projects were completed on time, budget and scope (PlanIT, 2013).

Extant commentary suggests that much of the prevalent project research and 'best practice' methods are underpinned by positivism (Bredillet, 2004, Pollack, 2007 and Smyth and Morris, 2007). Positivism is of the natural sciences tradition. It is an ontological approach that positions the researcher external to the phenomena being researched; objectivity and detachment are valued; universals are sought; and often the phenomena being observed are divided into discrete components for examination (Saunders et al., 2009). Bredillet (2004, pp. 1–2) argues that it may be this positivist (or hard paradigm) grounding that may be leading to the problems experienced in project delivery and is a "barrier to effective understanding and communication of the true nature of project management". Cicmil and Hodgson (2006) also recognise that there may be problems with the positivist foundations of much project research.

3.2. Calls to consider projects from new perspectives

Having discussed the 'under delivery' of project management and the likelihood that this is contributed to by the positivist ontology underpinning much existing research and project management tools, it is pertinent to consider the calls to revise the lenses through which the discipline is examined.

For example, Cicmil et al. (2006) propose the need for research of the 'lived experience' of projects (as introduced in Section 1). Their proposition is based on the outcomes of the Rethinking Project Management Network which called for a stronger focus on project management practice in research. Cicmil et al. (2006) provide a discussion of the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions that would underpin such a perspective. Hodgson and Cicmil (2006) propose a danger in establishing a blind acceptance of universal techniques and therefore published a book on considering project managing through alternative perspectives, including discussions challenging the status quo (based in its positivist ontology).

A further example, is that a key theme that emerged during the UK's Association of Project Management's Courageous Conversation event in 2012: "We really need to talk about knowledge", was the necessity to consider knowledge and perspectives outside the currently accepted body of knowledge.

The commentary, *Novel approaches to organizational project management research* (Drouin et al., 2013), provides a similar perspective; challenging the bodies of knowledge and the current approaches to project research, and proposing alternative research perspectives and tools. For example, Leigh (2013) proposes the use of simulations (such as war games, role play etc.) to capture the uncertainty, complexity and turbulence of organisational life. *Novel approaches to organizational project management research* also highlights the potential benefits of considering the models and frameworks of other disciplines, such as the behavioural sciences and strategic management (Doloi, 2013 and Killen et al., 2013). This commentary highlights the acknowledgement of the value in considering diversified perspectives of the phenomena of projects.

There is also growing discussion on the importance of practice-based research for project management. For example, Blomquist et al. (2010) highlight issues with the 'traditional' and 'process' styles of project research and propose a 'practice-as-

projects' approach to research. Blomquist et al. (2010) do not dismiss the value of the more prominent research styles, but suggest that there is value in expanding research perspectives/methodologies. This concept is built upon by Hällgren and Soderholm (2011). They suggest a need to adopt approaches that consider the actual behaviours of practitioners in context (praxis), rather than focusing on the formal project management formal tools, techniques and methods (Hällgren and Soderholm, 2011). van der Hoorn and Whitty (in press) have also contributed to the discussion on calls for new perspectives in project inquiry. They posit a Heideggerian paradigm as the ontological foundation to explore the 'lived experience' of projects. Key Heideggerian concepts discussed include being-in-the-world and modes-of-being. Juxtaposed to a positivist, Cartesian perspective, Heidegger proposes the concept of being-in-the-world. This concept sees human beings (*Dasein*) as being shaped by and shaping their environment and highlights the risks associated with a reductionist approach (Heidegger, 1962). Also, the (mode-of-being) concept that no object is inherently 'fit' or 'unfit', but that it is its context that will determine its suitability, highlights the criticality of context when examining projects (van der Hoorn and Whitty, in press).

3.3. The personal 'lived experience' of projects

Empirical studies of the personal experience remain rare. An exceptions is Whitty's (2010, 2011) exploration of project managers' responses to, and relationships with project artefacts. As part of this study, participants were asked to characterise their experience of managing a project in the form of a line drawing. Following this, the participants provided the researcher with an explanation of the representation. Participant comments when explaining their drawings included:

"It's like playing the board game, snakes 'n' ladders. On good days you land on a square and shoot up a ladder. On bad days you might get bitten and slide down a snakes (Whitty, 2010, p. 28)".

Others explained wavy lines that they drew, indicating "there's an adrenaline rush when things are going right... and then there's that sick feeling knowing there's a big fall coming (Whitty, 2010, p. 28)." Another participant commented "managing a project is like playing Russian roulette with work (Whitty, 2010, p. 28)." The article highlights that it is highly plausible that "[p]roject managers obtain an emotional affect from aspects of the PM experience" (Whitty, 2010, p. 36). His research also included comments by project managers on their perspectives, feelings regarding project artefacts (such as the iron triangle and Gantt chart).

Cerny (2007) does not provide original empirical research regarding the experience of project management. However, she does highlight the criticality of including emotions in our exploration of the managing of projects. This reiterates the criticality of understanding the personal perspectives of the project phenomena. Specifically, Cerny (2007) proposes the management of emotions as a success factor in projects, and that project teams require emotional competencies. Cerny (2007) adopts a sociological perspective of managing projects. She argues that emotions are more intense in projects than in permanent organisations due to the temporary nature of projects, their complexity, risk, uniqueness and dynamics. Cerny

(2007) also states that those managing projects need to analyse expected emotions and establish strategy and action to respond accordingly.

Aitken and Crawford (2007) undertook a quantitative study to explore project managers' responses to stressful situations within their projects. In their surveying of 71 participants they found that project managers have a tendency to consider stressful situations as controllable (or as requiring more information). Furthermore, those project managers use Active and Planning coping strategies to respond to stressful situations.

Finally, Leigh (2013) recognises the value-laden, pluralistic nature of projects and that whilst technical issues dominate the current research activity, that 'non-technical' issues also require attention. In response, she proposes the use of simulation ("an abstraction of reality for a purpose" (Leigh, 2013, p. 200)) as a useful tool in project management research. She posits that such methods (including role playing, and war games) are ideal methods for supporting research in contexts that are unclear or emergent.

In summary, it has been established that there is a requirement to consider alternative perspectives when researching the phenomena of projects, and there is a sustained call for this to occur. Finally, work that has already been undertaken in the personal or 'lived experience' aspects of project managers has been briefly reviewed. No music-based elicitation has been identified as having been used in project research for this purposes and this capturing of 'lived experience' descriptions in the literature is considered to be in its infancy. As such the opportunity to add further empirical exploration to this area, and to leverage a new research method is evident.

4. Research question

The literature review has highlighted that there is an opportunity to contribute to the capturing of descriptions of the 'lived experience' of projects. Such research can build upon and provide validation to the small body of existing 'lived experience' research. It is suggested that the value of the contribution can be increased through using a new research method to validate existing findings gathered through alternative methods (the research method is described in Section 6). 'Lived experience' research is in its infancy. Subsequently, when considering the implications of the elicited descriptions it is relevant to focus on fundamental concepts such as 'what is a project?'. The research question for this study is:

What can descriptions of the 'lived experience' of project work say about 'what is a project?'

5. Methodology

This study is focused on capturing descriptions of the 'lived experience' of managing projects. With these descriptions the question 'what is a project?' can be considered. The research study is underpinned by an interpretivist philosophy. This philosophical approach to the research is deemed suitable as rather than identifying universal theorem or truths (where a positivist approach may be best), the unique experience of the participating individuals is of interest in this type of study. As such, the research methods suited to the study are qualitative. The qualitative methods traditionally used when adopting an interpretivist research paradigm include semi-structured and

structured interviews (Saunders et al., 2009). In addition to such interviewing techniques, arts-based inquiry methods are emerging as a qualitative research method or device (Bagnoli, 2009, Brearley and Darso, 2008 and Rolling, 2010). Additionally, it is highlighted that this study is positioned as exploratory research. The relative infancy of research in this area makes it unlikely that this study could provide explanatory (causal) outcomes. Only descriptions of the 'lived experience' are being sought. And these descriptions have an intrinsic value which could move the knowledge area forward.

This research project is focused on revealing project participants' 'lived experience' of managing a project. This necessitates a research method that avoids the research participants providing generic, instructed, or indoctrinated responses that are based on a theory of what projects *should be* like or taught definitions. We are looking for a more personal, concrete description of the perceived experience. Arts-based research methods (introduced above) can be used to elicit information from research participants that is beyond verbal and cliché responses (Allett, 2010, Bagnoli, 2009, Crilly et al., 2006 and Leavy, 2008). Rolling (2010, p. 110) posits that arts-based research is "[c]apable of yielding outcomes taking research in directions that sciences cannot go." Brearley and Darso (2008), p. 3 state:

"There are some experiences in organizational life that are so intense and multilayered that traditional forms of densely referenced academic text cannot adequately evoke their texture and complexity. Artful approaches complement existing qualitative research methods by inviting us to develop insights that would otherwise be inaccessible, because these approaches encourage us to see more clearly and feel more deeply as well as to express ourselves in multiple and diverse ways."

Examples of the new insights that can be derived from arts-based research methods (i.e. drawing a concept) are evident in Whitty's (2010, 2011) study, which has already been discussed. Mitchell et al. (2011), highlights that from as early as 1935, psychologists utilised drawing (and a subsequent discussion about the illustration) to facilitate rich exploration on personal views and perception.

The use of music is a relatively emerging and underexploited elicitation method in social research (Allett, 2010 and Rolling, 2010). However, the following are two examples of music being utilised as an elicitation method. The first is Clennon's (2012) experiment which involved a group of participants collectively using their voices musically to respond to a question regarding their experience of a conference. Clennon commenced the session by workshopping various methods of noise creation through the instrument of voice. Once the group was comfortable using this instrument (the voice), Clennon asked one of the participants to conduct the group (who would use the broader group's voices as instruments) to respond to the research question.

Another study utilising music for elicitation was undertaken by Daykin (2004). In this research, Daykin asked participants to bring to their interview a piece of music that was meaningful to them in the context of the research theme. This music was then used to prompt discussion between the researcher and participant.

A key benefit of music as an elicitation method is its suitability for describing themes where flow, dynamism and gestalts are relevant (Allett, 2010 and Bresler, 2008). Similarly, Clennon (2012) highlights that musical elicitation is beneficial for extracting tacit knowledge as it can be used as a metaphor for experiences that are normally intrinsic. Time, change, complexity and integration of parts to the whole are common themes in project management discourse (Project Management Institute, 2013, Shenhar and Dvir, 2007 and Skyttner, 2001). Bauer and Gaskwell (2000) would summate these benefits through indicating that the musical medium can be a reflection of our social world. Despite these benefits, Daykin (2004) cautions of the challenges in interpretation of musical output. It is problematic to assume that music has a set meaning; the meaning of a musical piece can vary from person to person. However, it is suggested that this limitation can be overcome by complementing arts-based elicitation with a discussion or explanation; i.e. use mixed methods in data collection to ensure that the actual meaning of the music for the participant is accurately understood (Mitchell et al., 2011). In this way the use of music is largely a device for accessing new information that may not be accessible through a standard interview process.

There is established commentary on how musical variables can be manipulated to express emotion (Bresin and Friberg, 2011, Gabrielsson and Lindstrom, 2011 and Mohn et al., 2011). For example, whilst there is not definitive agreement on the precise ordering of relative importance, the following musical variables are considered to be key determinants of a musician's expression of emotion: tempo, mode, articulation, pitch level, loudness, rhythm patterns, phrasing, timbre, attack level and interval content (Bresin and Friberg, 2011, Eerola et al., 2013 and Gabrielsson and Lindstrom, 2011). Fig. 1 has been adapted from Juslin (2001) and shows the characteristics of music that are associated with five key emotions. The diagram is based on the findings of several experiments exploring the means by which musicians express specific emotions and by which listeners recognise emotion. The figure is also interesting in its classification of positive and negative valence and high and low activity in relation to emotions.

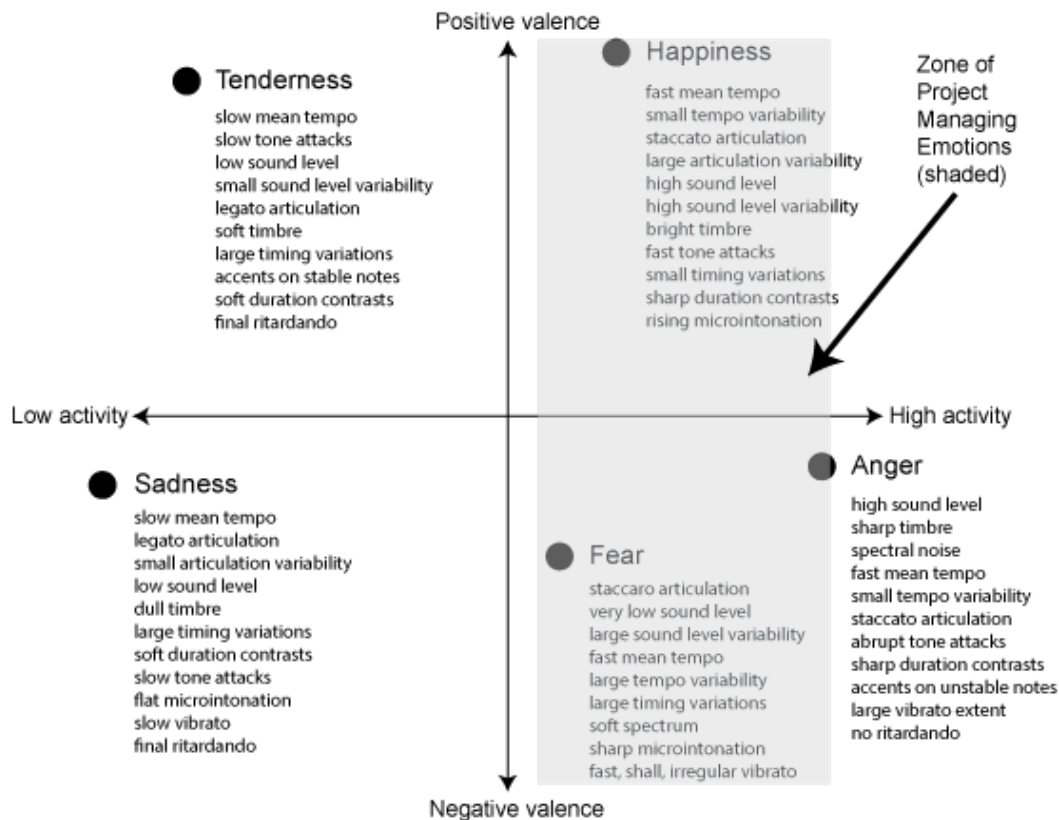


Fig. 1. Musical characteristics and their relationship to the experience of project managing.

Adapted from: Juslin (2001, p. 315).

In summary, Leavy (2008, p. 110) claims “[m]usic-based methods can help researchers access, illuminate, describe and explain that which is often rendered invisible by traditional research practices.” Given the call for new research paradigms and methods in project management research (Cicmil et al., 2006 and Drouin et al., 2013), music-based elicitation is deemed suitable as a method of enquiry for furthering the exploration of the ‘lived experience’ of projects.

6. Research method

The research method for the study can be summarised as a semi-structured interview in which an arts-based elicitation activity is used as a device to access a ‘lived experience’ description of managing a project. Specifically the participant is asked to improvise (play) the experience of managing a particular project on a xylophone and/or glockenspiel, and then to explain to the researcher the meaning of their improvisation. This is their description of their ‘lived experience’.

The semi-structured interview process (which is audio recorded) includes a small opening discussion, in which the participant is assured that the improvisation is not focused on their musical ability but rather their personal experience of the particular project. They are also asked at this point whether they have any prior musical experience. The participant is then given an opportunity to explore the possible

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sounds that could be made on the xylophone and glockenspiel. This includes 'open' experimentation, a request to play three different emotions (happiness, scariness and sadness) and to express an experience such as playing 'a day at the beach'. The participant is not asked to explain their improvisations of these 'warm-up' activities, and the only commentary by the researcher is assurance that there is no right or wrong and that their improvisations were great.

Following the 'warm-up' activities, the participant is asked to bring a particular project to mind. The only requirement is that they can clearly remember the project. The participant is then asked to play on the xylophone and/or glockenspiel their experience of managing the project. There is no direction regarding the length of the piece. A second audio recording device records the participant's improvisation of managing the project. Having played their project managing experience, the semi-structured discussion continues. Firstly, the participant has replayed (from the second audio recorder) their improvisation and is asked to explain the meaning of their piece. The researcher takes the position of an interested observer, passing no judgement on the comments made, neither challenging nor affirming their experience. In closing, the participant is asked what type of project they were playing (e.g. construction, IT etc.), how long they had been working in project management, whether their improvisation is typical of most projects they have been involved with (why/why not), and their age bracket; their gender was also noted.

In this study the research participants were drawn from a group of postgraduate project management students. Participation was voluntary. The only requirement was that they had experience in project managing. The study received ethical clearance from the sponsoring institution. The participants were made aware of the opportunity through email and an in-class announcement of the opportunity. No incentives were offered for participation.

The research study was undertaken in three different rooms, but in each setting, the xylophone and glockenspiel were set-up on tables with two different types of mallets made available for use across the instruments (refer to Fig. 2). It is noted that the glockenspiel had a chromatic scale (i.e. included sharp and flat notes); broadening the expression base for participants. The participants stood whilst playing. During the discussions prior to, and after the improvisation, the participant and researcher sat adjacent to the instruments. The discussion components of the audio recording were transcribed to enable analysis.



Fig. 2.
Set-up of xylophone and glockenspiel.

6.1. Methods of analysis

The transcripts from the audio recordings were loaded into NVivo for analysis. Common themes in the participants' explanations regarding their improvisation were tagged. An inductive approach was adopted; specifically, tagging any comments that could be related to the 'lived experience' of project management; no particular themes were pre-supposed.

The improvisations (on the instruments) of managing projects were also analysed through audio software: Sonic Visualiser and Audacity. This included digitised analysis of the wave-form (loudness/amplitude across time), mode pattern (major and minors) of each improvisation and their spectrograms. Spectrograms are based on a Fourier representation, converting an audio signal into a visualised form, with time shown along the x-axis and frequency along the y-axis. The prominence (loudness/amplitude) of any given frequencies at a given time is indicated through the intensity of colour (Costa et al., 2011). Spectrograms have been established as valuable tools in understanding and analysing music and enabling classification (Costa et al., 2011 and Thibeault, 2011).

7. Findings

The findings of this study will be discussed in three sections: participant/demographic/statistical information; findings derived from the transcripts; and findings from the improvisation analysis. This is followed by a summary of the most important findings from the analysis.

7.1. Participant demographic/statistical information

Fifteen participants were engaged in the research study. Of these participants, 12 were male and three were female. The participants' ages ranged from 18–24 through to 45–54. Of note, there was significant diversity across the type of projects managed by the participants (including IT, retail, construction, defence and policy). There was also a strong diversity in project managing experience; from 2 years to 15 + years. Four participants reported instrumental capability (although only two of these were percussionists/drummers). The length of improvisations varied from 12 to 76 s, the mean length being 39 s.

7.2. Transcripts: explanations of the improvisations by the participants

Eight of the participants indicated that they had played a full project/traditional project lifecycle in their improvisation. Ten of the participants spoke of the beginning of the project; overall participant's reported positive feelings or a 'building-up' at this stage of the project:

“Yep, that's the start of the project, generally pretty good, getting warmed up, it's a new project, you're happy...generally, good emotions”

“At the start it was great, you know, I was excited, happy to be involved and whatever, and was up really high.”

Nine of the participants spoke of the middle of the project. Their references were centred on the period being a speeding up, experiencing ups and downs, managing challenges and resolving issues:

“Once you do get started all the challenges that are put in front of you, and trying to deal with them.”

“And then you have highs and lows throughout it. You have good when you start make productivity [sic], it's pretty good and then you definitely always have some serious challenges”

Eight of the participants spoke of management influence, issues or conflict. For example:

“...he [referring to a manager] is only just concerned about the money side of things, the cost, so he wasn't really concerned about timeframes, but, he told me at the start it was more about the timeframe.”

“So when that thing happened, we wanted support, but we couldn't get it.”

The greatest consistency in commentary across the participants was in reference to the emotional experience of managing a project. For example, fourteen of the participants spoke of difficulties or challenging emotions as being part of their project managing

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experience; challenges, issues, conflicting opinions, messiness, frustration, stress and pressure.

“it was very very hectic... very intense... very manic...”

“it was so demanding, the workload... And then we hit a lot of financial challenges... so hard... so yeah, that's where it gets really hard as well...”

“everything just clashes together, starting to get eighteen things happening at once.”

“... then things just fall out of the sky, and they need to be dealt with... so while they might be a bit scary...”

Eleven of the participants commented on positive emotions as part of their experience of managing the project; happiness, good, pleased, up pretty high, satisfied, enriching, enjoyed:

“I ended on at a high note.... like a separate high note, so... so ‘bang’, I'm happy now...”

“...sometimes you feel happy, and sometimes, professionally, you feel satisfied with your job.”

“...personally, and professionally that was enriching for me.”

Interestingly, nine of the participants, commented specifically on an up and down cycle in their experience, words such as “bitter and sweet”, “mixed emotions” and “rollercoaster” were used.

“It has bitter sides as well as some sweet sides. Ups and downs.”

“So, it was a lot of ups and downs...”

“Yeah, it was a stop, start, stop, start of feeling successful and feeling unsuccessful.”

Six of the participants referred to their experience drawing on game or play-related terms, for example: “goes off track”, “running on the spot, and not getting very far”, “for a thrill” and “the goal was that it wouldn't be...”. A third of participants linked their experience with learning, for example:

“Yeah, I think as far as my professional development, I learnt a lot through it...”

“It was educative, I mean, it was challenging and you learn a lot.”

“...a lot of learning, you're still getting a lot wrong...”

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Fig. 3 provides a tree map indicating a series of themes identified in the participant's discussions of their improvisations. The number against each theme indicates the number of participants that made a comment that has been classified as relating to the theme. The size of the area allocated to the theme is relative to the number of participant's associating with the theme. An example of a participant's comment against each theme is provided to create clarity in the theme name.

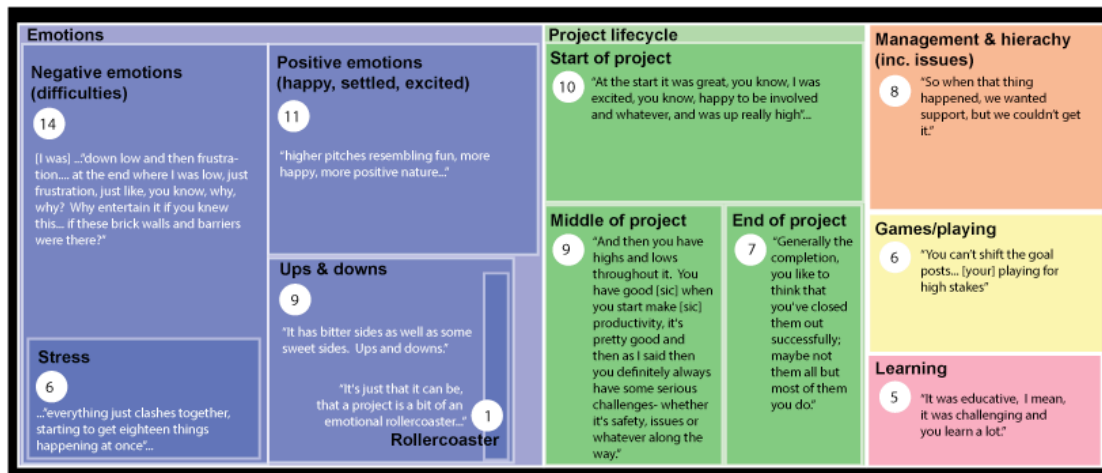


Fig. 3.

Three map showing number of participants (n = 15) who identified with a theme.

7.3. Participants' improvisations of the experience of project managing

As suggested above, the improvisations themselves cannot be weighted as heavily in their validity as the explanations provided by the participants of their xylophone/glockenspiel playing. Ultimately, the improvisations are simply a device to encourage participants to speak in a less indoctrinated or detached manner.

Additionally, primacy is given to the discussions as it is recognised that non-musicians are less likely to be able to accurately articulate emotion through an improvisation (Juslin, 2001). However, the following was found when analysing the improvisations through Sonic Visualiser and Audacity. The spectrograms of thirteen of the fifteen participant's improvisations showed changing frequency (higher and lower notes) and varying amplitude/loudness throughout the piece. When the length of the tracks was digitally standardised, there was no correlation between the nature of these ups and downs across the improvisations (refer to Fig. 4). Three of the participants did perform a glissando (a rapid progression across several keys). It is again highlighted that any analysis of the actual musical improvisations is considered secondary to the narratives. The musical improvisation is simply a device that may result in alternative/new discussion of their experience of managing projects by the participants.

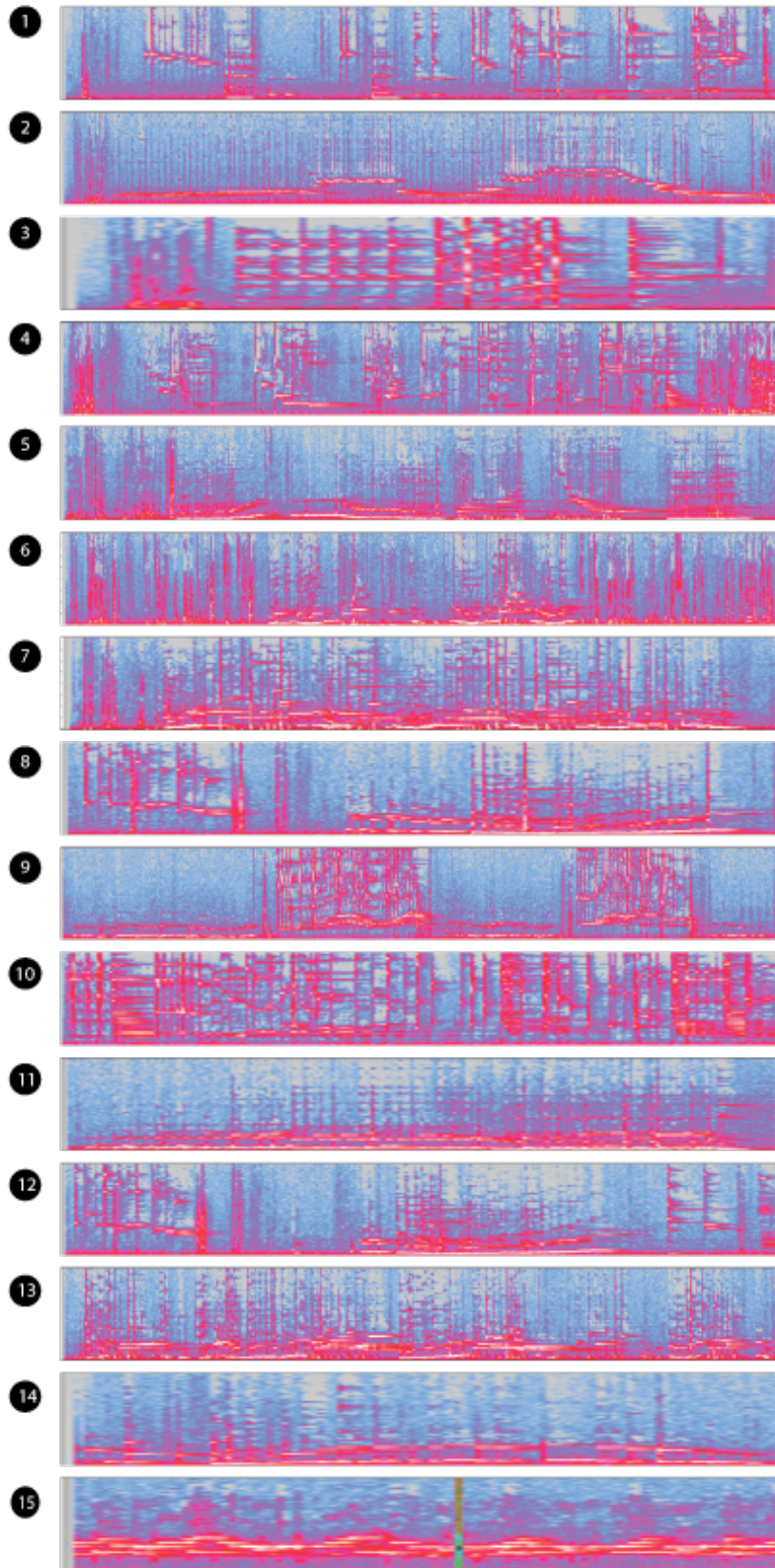


Fig. 4.
Spectrograms of participants' improvisations.

7.4. Summary of findings

The most consistent finding of the study (and it is recognised that this is a sample of fifteen participants and this limitation is discussed further in Section 8.4) is that 93% of participants included in their description of the 'lived experience' negative emotions or challenges, difficulties, frustration etcetera and 73% reported positive emotion. Additionally, 60% of participants spoke directly of ups and downs and 86% of the musical improvisations reflected this sentiment when viewed as spectrograms (i.e. they have a wave/cyclical pattern).

It is highlighted that there was minimal, and where it was present, inconsistent reference to the use of project management tools or techniques, or the day-to-day tasks associated with managing projects in the participants' explanations. Rather, participants' predominately described their experience in terms of an emotional imprint (refer to Section 7.2) that they had or were experiencing. This can possibly be attributed to the effectiveness of the musical elicitation method (as suggested by the literature) to encourage participants to consider their experience from a non-traditional, non-linguistic, personal perspective. It enabled the participants to access their 'lived experience' of managing a project.

8. Discussion

The findings are now considered with reference to the research question. Limitations of this research study are noted and the implications for further research are also provided.

8.1. The personal 'lived experience' of project managing

It is clear from Section 7.4, that this study has enabled us to access some descriptions of the 'lived experience' of managing a project. Unlike much extant project management research that focuses on more positivist, detached perspectives of the project phenomena, this study has captured more personal perceptions of the experience.

Study participants spoke of this personal perspective in terms of the challenging nature of work. They also described up and down emotional states, and periods of greater and lesser challenges. Generally, they reported a feeling of satisfaction at project completion; a sense of achievement. They spoke of project work causing stress and pressure and of the demanding, manic nature of project environments. Some participants described this type of work as having a strong learning element, which they found enjoyable and spoke of the experience using game or sport terminology. Before considering the implications of these descriptions of the 'lived experience' of project managing we will briefly contrast these findings to the discussions provided by Whitty, 2010 and Whitty, 2011 and Cerny (2007).

8.2. Comparison to the extant literature regarding projects and emotions

The outcomes of this study align with the findings of Whitty's (2010, 2011) empirical research and Cerny's (2007) commentary. For example, Whitty's (2010) work also identified the concept of project manager's experiencing a rollercoaster or up and down type occurrence when managing a project. Specifically, his participants actually

drew a rollercoaster and the board game snakes 'n' ladders when illustrating the managing of projects. Whitty (2010) also highlights that projects are reported by practitioners as having both challenges and difficulties, but there was also a positive emotion associated with the experience: "even the really bad ones. I get a buzz out of it, and I keep going back for more" (Whitty, 2010, p. 29). He terms this as a "duality" (Whitty, 2010); and this duality was certainly evident in the improvisations and explanations of the participants in this study.

In Cerny's (2007, p. 349) paper, she quotes Eskerod, Blichfeldt and Toft (2004): "...project work may be very exhausting due to high time pressures; many parallel tasks; ambiguity and uncertainty; many parties with conflicting interest [sic] to deal with; and a lot more, even though many people at the same time find project work very stimulating and exciting as it gives the person in question opportunities to put many different competencies into use and to grow personally."

In this study one participant directly quoted the enrichment and growth that can result from projects: "So, personally, and professionally that [the experience of the project] was enriching for me". Similarly, a participant commented on being "flat out" (exhausted), and another commented "I'll just feel bad or I'm a bit stressed at times". Cerny (2007) also notes the close relationship between projects and change, and this was a strong theme in one participant's improvisation and explanation; "so projects generally involve change". Cerny (2007) draws on elements of the 'accepted' project lifecycle as sources of emotion. Again, this research study found that many of the participants did reference their emotions/experience in relation to these phases (refer to Section 7.2).

In summary, there is an alignment between this previous work exploring the 'lived experience' of projects and the findings of this study. It suggests that these descriptions of the more personal experience of managing projects *may* be representative of the broader experience of project managers. Obviously, this would require far more extensive exploration before such a statement could be definitively claimed. However, for the purposes of considering the implications of these findings, we will tentatively assume that this is somewhat representative of the 'lived experience' of managing a project.

8.3. Implications for research and practice

Findings such as those in this study provide us with a richer understanding of the phenomena of projects. This enhancement of our understanding is useful in supporting a reassessment of the phenomena of projects. The potential for using these 'lived experience' descriptions to reassess facets of our understanding is many. For the purposes of this study, we will focus on the implications of this study's findings on the foundational concept of 'what is a project?'. This is simply an example of what may be identified when assessing the implications of these descriptions. It is argued that in selecting this foundational concept for examination a basis is being provided for further inquiry and discussion. Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) concept of a state of flow will be used in examining how the study's findings can inform our understanding of 'what is a project?'

8.3.1. Flow theory

Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) concept of a state of flow that can be experienced by people when certain conditions are met is useful in assisting us in understanding the implications of our findings. Whitty (2010) prompts us to consider the link between project managing and flow theory and it is suggested that this study lends support to this suggestion. The flow theory concept was founded by Csikszentmihalyi (1975, p. 36) and was defined by him as "the holistic experience that people feel when they act with total involvement." The experience of flow is associated with feelings of absorption, exhilaration and enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1992). Eight components are considered to be necessary for an individual to experience flow (Chen, 2007):

1. Challenging activity requiring skill
2. A merging of action and awareness
3. Clear goals
4. Direct, immediate feedback
5. Concentration on the task at hand
6. A sense of control
7. A loss of self-consciousness
8. Altered sense of time

In simplistic terms, persons are 'in flow' if they are challenged within their ability. If the challenge is greater than their ability, anxiety will result. If the challenge is not sufficient for their ability, boredom will eventuate (Chen, 2007, Csikszentmihalyi, 2006 and Weeson and Boniwell, 2007). Weeson and Boniwell (2007) state that flow is equally applicable to its founding area of play, as it is to work. This experience of flow in computer games, and subsequent design implications, has been discussed in the literature (Chen, 2007 and Johnson and Wiles, 2003). The challenge level of the game needs to be at the right level to sustain interest and enjoyment; neither too hard nor too easy. Fig. 5 illustrates this balance between ability and challenge for an individual to experience a state of flow with reference to the experience of project managing. Simplistically, being in flow is a function of a certain ratio of capability to the challenge of the activity being undertaken.

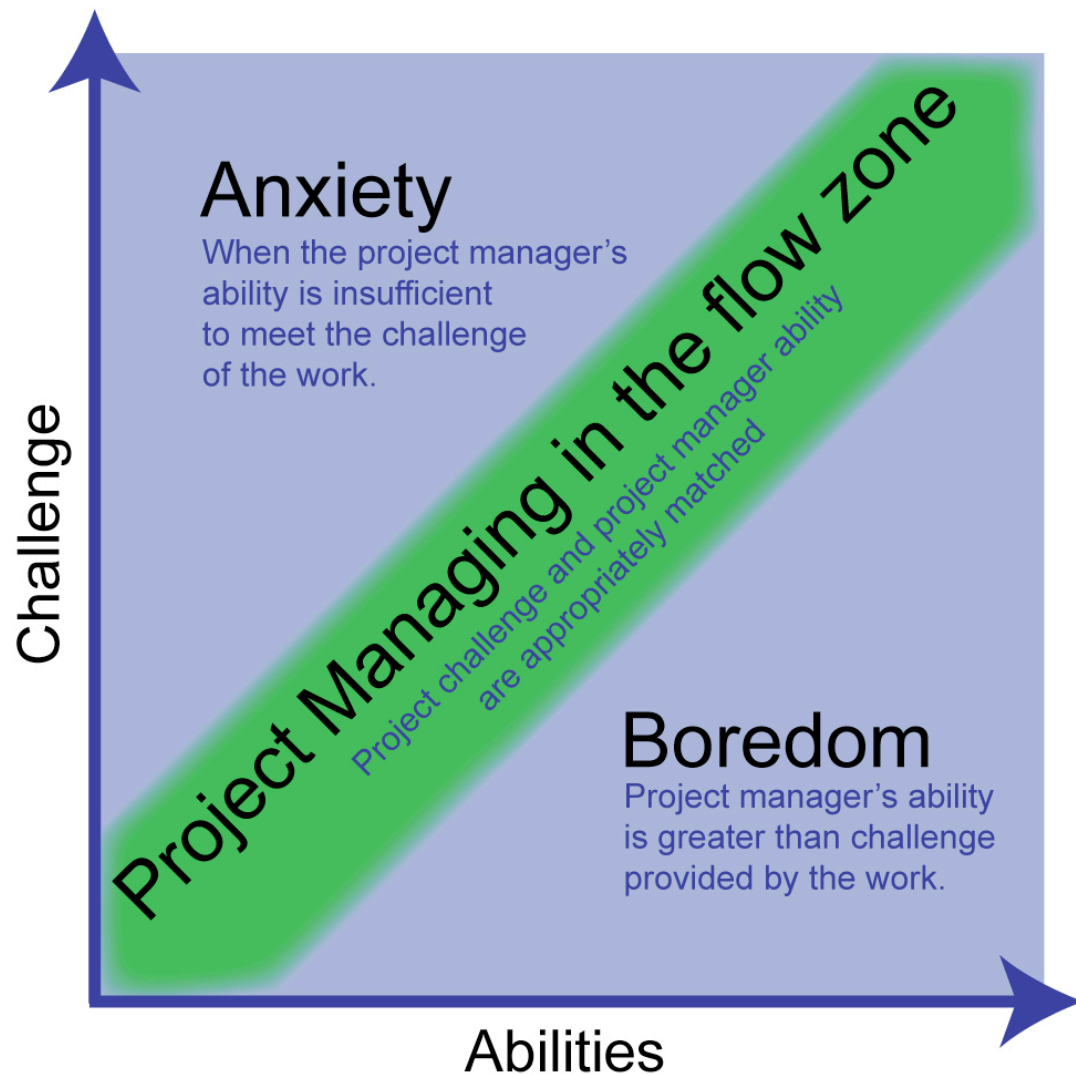


Fig. 5.
The project managing flow zone: a balance between challenge and ability.
Adapted from: Chen (2007, p. 32).

We would argue that the 'lived experience' of project managing reported by the study participants aligns with operating in the 'flow zone'. For example, aligned with component 1 of the flow experience, many of the participants reported the experience of project managing as a challenging activity requiring them to apply their skills. They balance this with a reporting of positive emotion (i.e. satisfaction, success etc.). This suggests that the emotional experience of project managers may be similar to that of game-play and experiencing flow. They are balancing on the edge of over challenged (and anxiety) and boredom; they are participating in a challenging activity requiring skill. It could perhaps be drawn that when project managers are managing their projects they are operating on the edge of their inherent capability (which includes the resources available to them) and this results in a positivity associated with operating 'in flow'.

The presence of the other components required for flow could be explored in future studies however, anecdotal evidence would suggest that many project environments could be considered as having many of the components required for flow. For

example, it is posited that a key component of most work associated with the term project has some form of goal or objective (component 3 for flow – clear goals – to be experienced). Component 4 – direct, immediate feedback – is also considered to be prevalent in many project environments. This can either be in formal processes such as tracking performance against baselines, or more informal in terms of ad hoc stakeholder feedback. Project managers are also likely to perceive that they have some sense of control, ability to influence the situation, or at least that they are expected to attempt this control. This would align with component 6 — a sense of control. In summary, whilst we have not been able to definitively defend that work that we call project work can invoke a sense of flow. We have, illustrated the likelihood that this is a plausible notion.

Also of relevance to this application of flow theory to the study is the participants' association of their experience to games or sport and learning. Interestingly, six of the participants actually used game or sport language to describe their 'lived experience' of managing a project. We would suggest that this adds credence to the concept that there is a perceived game or 'challenge to succeed' element in the experience of project managing. Additionally, a third of participants identified a learning component in their experience of project managing. Similarities again could be drawn between this experience and the experience of progressing through the levels of a computer game. The participant's capability is being progressively built so they are able to pursue greater and greater challenges (or in this case, more and more challenging projects).

It has been confirmed through this study that the project managers participating in the study experience this sense of being challenged within their ability (component 1). If we then draw on flow theory, we can infer that this sense of an 'achievable challenge' is a sign to a balanced function of 'pushing capability' versus the challenging work activity. This identification of project work as being a function of activity versus capability is a foundation for reconceptualising our understanding of 'what is a project?'.

8.3.2. Reconceptualising 'what is a project?'

In the literature review reference was made to the use of a Heideggerian paradigm (van der Hoorn and Whitty, in press) to underpin exploration of the 'lived experience' of projects. Within their discussion of the implications of the adoption of a Heideggerian paradigm they propose an alternative conceptualisation of 'what is a project?'. The proposal is that a project is the situation that arises when there is a disruption (or dissatisfaction) within a current set of conditions, and an attempt is being made to resolve this situation, but there is not an inherent capability to resolve the situation. Clearly, part of their definition is that what *is* a project is based on an individual's or an organisation's capability (or lack thereof) to undertake an activity. What is a project is not definable in terms of a specific activity, it is in the relationship that a person or group of people has (in terms of capability) to an activity. This concept of capability versus activity has similarities with the function of flow (a relationship between capability versus flow) proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1975).

We would argue that the findings of this research study validate an element of van der Hoorn and Whitty's (in press) reconceptualisation of 'what is a project?'. Specifically,

the project managers in the study (and in similar research of the ‘lived experience’ of project managing) experience certain emotions and challenges that align with operating in ‘flow’. The experience of ‘flow’ per Csikszentmihalyi (1975) is a function of capability in terms of the activity being undertaken. However, the ‘flow’ occurs because of the relationship of the person to the activity. Not just because of the activity. An activity that causes flow for one person may create boredom or angst for another. Similarly, ‘what is a project?’ is not in the activity itself. ‘What is a project’ is in the relationship between the individual or organisation and the activity. Specifically, for an activity to be perceived as a project, completion of the activity must be at the edge of one's (the individual or organisations) inherent capability. For many of the project managers in this study, operating at this edge of capability was satisfying.

8.4. Limitations and constraints

This research study is not proposed to provide a population-valid perspective of descriptions of the ‘lived experience’ of managing projects. In fact, given the nature of the question it is not expected that findings will ever be able to be deemed universally-applicable. However, a larger sample population would increase the general validity of the findings and therefore potentially support the posited implications. Further, the validity of our understanding of the ‘lived experience’ of project managing is also likely to be revealed through the ongoing use of alternative research methods (including those offered by the arts-based methods).

A further limitation can be grounded in the conception of the memory–experience gap. Kahneman (2007) and Kahneman and Riis (2005) argue that the ‘experienced’ and the ‘remembered’ are two different measures that will have different results. For this study, it highlights that the findings cannot be assumed to reflect the ‘living’ experience (i.e. the experience in the moment). However, they can be categorised as the ‘lived’ experience (i.e. a recollection of the past; a memory). This is not necessarily considered problematic, but it is raised to highlight the perspective of the explanations provided by participants of their experience, which is that they are the remembered experience not the in-the-moment experience.

8.5. Implications for future research

There is an opportunity for further exploration of the components required for the experience of flow in the project environment. Specifically, the gathering of empirical data to examine the presence of components two through eight within the project environment. Additionally, the experience of flow in understanding the people who are attracted to project work and how they can be supported and developed could be explored.

There is also opportunity to further explore the implications of the reconceptualisation of ‘what is a project?’. Specifically, what are the implications for ‘best practice’, tools and techniques if we conceptualise that ‘what is a project?’ is inextricably linked to a person or organisation's capability and it is not in the activity itself.

9. Conclusion

This paper has added to the discourse regarding the personal 'lived experience' of project managing. It has also been established that the music-based research method is effective in eliciting results that provide a 'lived experience' perspective to the phenomena of projects. It has been particularly effective in revealing the emotions experienced by those managing projects. The participants in this study described their experience of managing a project as challenging, having ups and downs, a sense of satisfaction at completion, involving learning, and having periods of stress and pressure. There is a dynamism in emotions when we are experiencing activities that we label as project work.

It has been proposed that if this described experience is considered through the lens of flow theory, then we can begin to see a conceptualisation of projects aligned with that of the Heideggerian paradigm of projects. That is, project managers report a sense of satisfying challenging that is characteristic of operating 'in flow'. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) describes flow as being a function of activity being undertaken versus the capability of the participant. This capability variable is key to van der Hoorn and Whitty's (in press) Heideggerian proposal that 'what is a project?' is dependent on an individual's or organisation's ability to undertake the activity.

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