

# IRNOP 2015: Paper Submission

## The Power of Projects

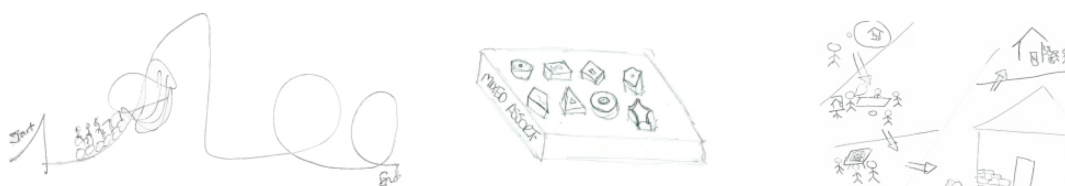
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### Paper Title

## Chocolates, cats, dips and loops: The lived experience of managing projects

### Abstract

It is project work that powers the building, maintenance, and resilience of communities and enterprise. However, there is relatively limited exploration of the ‘lived experience’ of managing projects. This study uses an arts-based research method to elicit 16 project managers’ personal experience of project managing. The findings indicate that project work is experienced as restoring messiness, confusion and disorder to certainty and order (often multiple times within the one project). The study further highlights the criticality of the professional capabilities (thrownness) of project managers to move teams from uncertainty to certainty to enable projects to deliver for community and enterprise.



### Keywords

People and professionalism | Lived experience of projects

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### Author biographical details

#### *Bronte van der Hoorn*

Bronte has worked in the private and public sector in project and change management roles and now works in a consulting capacity. In addition to her project experience, Bronte develops graphical representations of qualitative concepts to increase the accessibility of important messages. She is currently a PhD Candidate focusing on the ‘lived experience’ of projects through a continental philosophical lens.

#### *Dr Jon Whitty*

Jon enjoys looking at projects and their management through alternative lenses, such as evolutionary theory, complexity science and philosophy and enjoys ruminating on the new insights that emerge. He’s published journal articles and book chapters on these topics and delights in the opportunity to talk about them. He’s currently Senior Lecturer in Project Management at the University of Southern Queensland, and has a small but pioneering group of PhD students and industry focused research projects that are bringing new and interesting understandings to light.

## **1 Introduction**

This study is seeking to understand a project manager's 'lived experience' of managing a project. It is prompted by the call for more empirical research regarding the actual experience of projects and a shift from more classical project management (CPM) perspectives. The study adopts a subjectivist and interpretivist position and uses an arts-based research method (complemented with focus groups) to facilitate the elicitation of personal perspectives of the 'lived experience'. The focus on the 'lived experience' in project research aims to capture how projects actually unfold and are experienced (Cicmil et al., 2006). This 'lived experience' stream of inquiry proposed by Cicmil (2006) argues that project management is social conduct, and that there is benefit in understanding what project managers actually do in concrete situations.

In this study, 16 project managers were asked to draw their remembered experience of managing a project and then to discuss their drawing with a small group of peers. This was followed by a small group discussion of the individuals' drawings and the insights the group derived regarding the experience of project managing. The findings include a project manager's perception of the nature of project work, the complexity, the challenges of the activities they are required to undertake and their personal feelings regarding the nature of project work.

We firstly outline the research problem, followed by an overview of the literature informing this study, and to which it contributes. The research methodology and study method are then outlined and the findings of the study are described. A discussion regarding the findings including implications for research and practice is provided and the conclusion includes limitations of the study.

## **2 Research Problem**

Since the 2006 Rethinking Project Management Network (Winter et al. 2006) there has been growing interest in considering project management from a practice perspective. The result has included discussions of alternative foundational paradigms for the discipline and non-traditional research methods (for example: (Blomquist et al. 2010; Drouin, Muller & Sankaran 2013; Hodgson & Cicmil 2006)). However, a literature review of papers relating to the rethinking project management concept by Svejvig and Andersen (2015) found that only 7 of the 74 papers identified as belonging to this body of literature actually had a strong focus on the actuality ('lived experience') of projects. They therefore suggest there remains a need for more practice-orientated research (Svejvig & Andersen 2015). Müller and Söderlund (2015) in discussing papers submitted for the 2013 IRNOP conference also highlight the absence of variety in research design and methods to undertake studies to gain new practice-orientated perspectives in project management. This paper will respond to this call for further empirical research based on research methods that seek to understand the 'lived experience' of projects.

## **3 Literature Review**

This literature review outlines the paradigmatic shift that informs this study, an introduction to the use of new research methods in project management to support this shift, and examples of similar 'lived experience' or practice-orientated (or grounded) studies.

### **3.1 Shifting from the traditional research paradigm to practice-orientation**

The term 'classical project management' (CPM) is used by Svejvig and Andersen (2015) to describe the technocratic and rationalistic approach to project management that has dominated the discipline. CPM has received criticism for its limitations with respect to the

‘lived experience’ of projects (Bredillet 2004; Cicmil & Hodgson 2006; Koskela & Howell 2002; Williams 2005). In recent years, alternative paradigms or approaches to the CPM to underpin project management have been proposed. For example Cicmil et al. (2006) propose a research approach focused on understanding the actuality of project work and management. In their approach emphasis is given to the ‘lived experience’ of practitioners, to praxis, and context (Cicmil et al. 2006). Reflecting similar themes, a Heideggerian paradigm of project management has also been formulated (van der Hoorn & Whitty 2015). This paradigm also gives primacy to the totality of the involved ‘being-in’ experience (van der Hoorn & Whitty 2015). It is these approaches with their practice-orientation (rather than CPM) that guide this study.

There has also been discourse regarding hard versus soft paradigms in project management (Pollack 2007). The hard paradigm is generally associated with CPM, the soft paradigm with more interpretive, qualitative areas. Pollack (2007) finds that the hard paradigm is deeply rooted in the literature, but there is growing respect for the soft paradigm. In terms of practice application, Karrbom Gustavsson and Hallin (2014) highlight the distinction of hard and soft with examples of soft aspects being: negotiation, change management and facilitation; hard aspects being: contracting, technical performance and risk analysis. This distinction will become pertinent in the discussion on the findings of this study.

### **3.2 New research methods for project management**

In parallel with the proposition of alternative paradigms or approaches are suggestions of the use of new research methods in the discipline; a move beyond quantitative methods to qualitative techniques. For example, Drouin, Muller and Sankaran (2013) have published a collection of alternative research methods for the discipline including: actor-network theory,

activity theory and action research (Er, Pollack & Sankaran 2013), system dynamics (van Oorschot 2013), and simulations (Leigh 2013).

Action research was used by Takey and Carvalho (in press) to explore project management competencies. Berggren, Järkvik and Söderlund (2008) undertook a case-study style research project with a practice-orientated knowledge coproduction approach that included one practicing manager in the research team. Hällgren and Wilson (2007) utilised ethnography to understand how project managers need to adapt to deviations from plans. An ethnographic case study approach was also used by Simon (2006) to explore the activities used by project managers in the creative sector. A series of narratives were used by Marshall and Bresnen (2013) to describe a historic project with the aim of exploring the sociology of knowledge. Arts-based methods have been used by Whitty (2010) and van der Hoorn (in press) to explore project manager's experiences of project work and are further discussed in section 5.

### **3.3 Understanding the 'lived experience'**

Whilst still marginal compared to more rationalistic and technical papers, there is extant literature that captures more contextualised or 'lived experience' perspectives of projects. The following are a selection of research studies adopting a more holistic or personal perspective to explore project work and its management. Bresnen and Marshall (2000) sought to increase their understanding of the 'lived experience' of construction contracting through examining nine case studies. Also within the construction setting, Cicmil and Marshall (2005) examined a single case project to explore construction projects as social settings. Nocker (2006) used observation, interviews and analysis of project artefacts to consider projects as emergent space. Simon (2006) grounded exploration of the actual work of project managers in video gaming in four case studies. Two case studies (including

interviews) were used to consider the affect of projects on project participants through Foucault's prison metaphor (Lindgren & Packendorff 2006).

Linde and Linderoth (2006) utilised two case study projects to explore actor-network theory as an alternative perspective to traditional project paradigms. Ten case studies informed a study by Molloy and Whittington (2006) on understanding the 'lived experience' of reorganisation projects. A practitioner-as-researcher approach was adopted by Smith (2006) who adopted a reinterpretation lens in analysing a financial services IT project on which he was project manager. A case study of the construction of a major hotel complex has been utilised to explore the 'lived reality' of construction as it relates to discourse, human agency and industry structure.

An 18 month case study of a project associated with the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games was used to consider Schutz's future perfect concept (Clegg et al. 2006). Sillince, Harvey and Harindranath (2006) sought to explore inter-organisational network failures in projects and utilised a UK National Health Service project case study as data. Sense-making was explored by Ivory et al. (2006) using a transport case study, and Hällgren and Wilson (2007) used a case study to explore the learning associated with deviations from project plans.

More recently, Whitty (2010) sought project managers' perspectives on what characterised a project and their thoughts on project artefacts using an arts-based method and semi-structured interview. Hodgson, Paton and Cicmil (2011) facilitated five focus groups to explore the experience of engineering professionals' career transitions between technical and project management roles. The actuality of adoption of mentoring practice in Information Systems

projects was investigated by Leong and Tan (2013) through a series of narrative interviews. Also in IT, Sampaio, Marinho and Moura (2014) explored the actual experience of software development projects in small organisations in Brazil using ethnography and action research. An arts-based research method (musical improvisation) coupled with a semi-structured interview was used by van der Hoorn (in press) to elicit project managers experience of project work.

This literature review highlights that there is a growing body of literature focusing on a contextualised understanding of project work and project management ‘in practice’. Much of this literature is case studies to provide practice-based insights to specific aspects of projects and their management or to demonstrate the use of new conceptual lenses. There is relatively limited research specifically from the project managers’ perspectives and on the overall phenomenological experience of managing project work. Additionally, only two studies have been identified as leveraging arts-based research methods. Case studies (including observation, interviews and documentation analysis) are more prevalent. It is posited there is an opportunity to contribute to the literature through studying project managers’ ‘lived experience’ of project work utilising an arts-based method.

#### **4 Research Question**

What insights can be derived about the phenomenological and therefore ‘lived experience’ of managing project work if we ask project managers to represent how they perceive the experience of managing a project in terms of a drawing?

Furthermore, what implications do these insights have for project research and practice?

## **5 Research Methodology**

### **5.1 Methodology**

This study is focused on eliciting project managers' personal perspectives of managing project work. As such it is necessary to ground the study in an approach that aligns with this subjective investigation. We are not seeking a detached, clinical perspective (which is more aligned with traditional positivist research). Nor are we hoping to derive or prove a universal hypothesis. As such, the methodological grounding adopted for this study is the Heideggerian paradigm of projects (van der Hoorn & Whitty 2015). This paradigm enables the adoption of interpretivist perspective and subjectivism where descriptions of actors' experience or perceptions become the source of insight and knowledge.

A primary reason for the adoption of the Heideggerian paradigm as the foundation for the research is its conceptualisation of present-at-hand versus ready-to-hand. A ready-to-hand conceptualisation recognises an object or concept as part of a whole in which its being is influenced by that context and vice-a-versa (Brandom 2005). A present-at-hand conceptualisation is a more traditional, detached perspective (Brandom 2005). A hammer in a present-at-hand sense is unlikely to even be called a hammer and is simply recognised as having a set of attributes: perhaps 2kg, of having a wooden cylindrical component and a metal section of a particular shape. If we were describing a hammer in a ready-to-hand way we are likely to describe its purpose in enabling us to hammer nails into wood, as being held by a human hand and being of a weight that is not too heavy to lift but sufficient to cause a nail to pierce the surface in which it is hammered. This distinction is considered pertinent to this discussion as we are seeking to understand projects in this contextual, referential manner (a practice-orientation). We are seeking a ready-at-hand understanding where we are



interested in how concepts and behaviours link to a broader environment. We are not seeking clinical, value-less observation.

Qualitative methods such as observation (ethnography) and interviews (semi-structured and structured) are commonly utilised when seeking a contextualised understanding of a phenomena (Schensul 2008). However, there are also less frequently used methods for gathering qualitative and particularly personal (or hard to access) data (descriptions) such as that sort for this study. These include arts-based research methods (Bagnoli 2009; Barone 2008; Brearley & Darso 2008). There has been some use of arts-based research methods in project research. For example, Whitty (2010) utilised drawing (followed by an explanation) as a method to understand how project managers characterise projects. From as early as 1935, psychologists have utilised drawing (and a subsequent discussion about the illustration) to enable deep exploration on personal views and perception (Mitchell et al. 2011). Also utilising arts-based methods, van der Hoorn (in press) asked research participants to improvise on percussion instruments their experience of managing a project, and then provide an explanation. In both cases, the participants' descriptions of the experience of managing project work went beyond traditional, positivist descriptions of projects and project management. Leigh (2013) also proposes the value of simulations (which can include role-play) as a valuable method for understanding complex phenomena. These methods have informed the research method for this study, and provide grounding for the selection of a non-traditional research approach.

## **5.2 Method**

### *5.2.1 Data collection*

The research method for this study was a series of focus groups that started with an arts-based research activity and was followed by discussion. These focus groups were part of a

broader half-day workshop aiming to understand the ‘lived experience’ of project managers. Over 30 professional project managers from the researchers’ network were invited to participate in the workshop, 16 project managers attended the day. The project managers that attended the workshop worked across various sectors and disciplines and had varying degrees of project managing experience. The participants included both men (10) and women (6). Prior to the workshop the participants were required to undertake a series of tasks that prompted them to reflect on their own ‘lived experience’ of project work.

The workshop was deliberately designed to create an environment that supported the uncovering of the ‘lived experience’ of those participating. The workshop was themed as an investigative process in which the project managers were at times investigators, and at other times the subject of the investigation. Rather than sitting classroom style or at round tables, the group sat at a single long (dining-hall style) table for individual tasks and then broke into their allocated groups (4 per group), sitting away from the table in an informal arrangement for smaller activities. Around the workshop room were a series of de-identified images and narratives that had been produced by the participants as part of the pre-workshop tasks. This supported the investigative theming of the workshop. The aim was to create an atypical workshop environment in which the participants felt able to share openly with their peers their experiences of project work.

The workshop activity that informed this study is based on a question and method utilised by Whitty (2010). In his study, research participants, as part of a one-to-one semi-structured interview were asked to draw their experience of managing project and provide an explanation. In this research study, the participants were similarly asked to individually

draw their experience of managing a project, but were then asked to discuss their drawing with their group (project manager-peers). Following each group member explaining their drawing, the group was asked to collectively list (on a sheet of paper) what the drawings and subsequent explanations had told them about the various experiences of managing projects. This focus group drawing activity was the opening session for the larger workshop and was undertaken over approximately 40 minutes.

The small group discussions of the drawings were neither facilitated nor moderated by the researchers. These focus groups were set-up to be discussions between project managers (peers). However, the discussions of each group were audio recorded to enable the researchers to later listen to the explanation and discussions of each group. The drawings of each participant and their list of insights following their discussion were collected and also subject to analysis by the researchers.

### *5.2.2 Data analysis*

The audio recordings of each group's discussion regarding the drawings were loaded into Nvivo (qualitative research analysis tool). The participants' drawings and the list of insights were also loaded into Nvivo. An inductive approach to analysis was adopted with no particular hypothesis being presupposed. The researchers listened to each group's discussion, whilst also reviewing the participants' drawings and lists, and made notes of key concepts that were discussed. The themes that emerged from each group were then considered holistically.

## **6 Findings**

An overview of the project managers' individually completed drawings, their explanations of their drawings to their small groups, and the jointly compiled group lists are provided below.

### **6.1 Project managers' drawings and explanations**

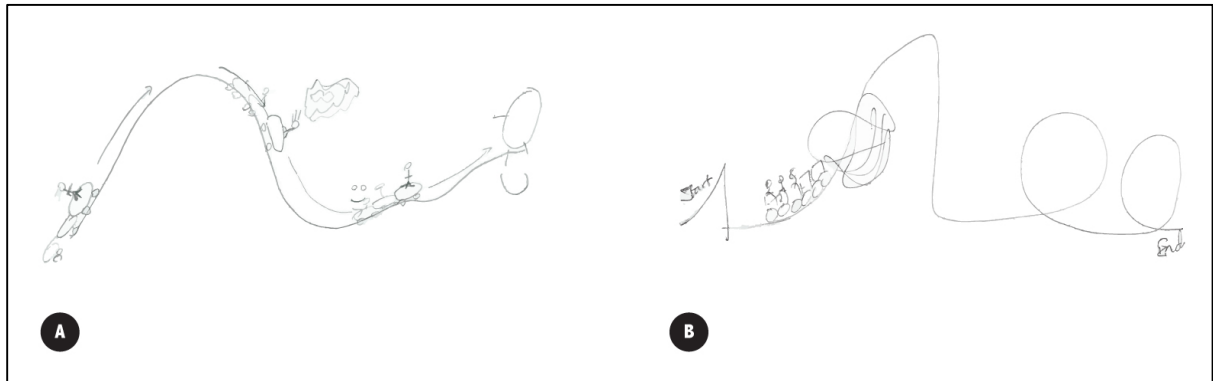
The diagrams and their accompanying explanations have been divided into three sections. It is highlighted that primacy is given to the content of the diagrams themselves and their explanations rather than the sectioning that have been used. Whilst these sections are argued as logical, they are provided for readability and understandability rather than suggesting that the diagrams and accompanying explanations can be definitively assigned any categorisation.

#### *6.1.1 Diagrams showing dynamism*

Seven of the participants drew illustrations that indicated movement or ups and downs. Three of these were strongly reflective of rollercoasters with dips and loops (for example, refer figure 1). Explanations accompanying these types of illustrations included:

“Started off with lots of good, happy smiles... quite well on an upward trajectory, then suddenly there was a change... there was a lot of confusion around this stage of the project before it started leveling out again and the confidence and happiness of the team, and myself started to improve before getting to the end.”

“You start off really excited and motivated and there's a steep learning curve but you're really quite energetic about getting going... and implementation just seems like a black hole... people scramble around separately, together, possible in a coordinated way... Then you go through a bunch of loops.”

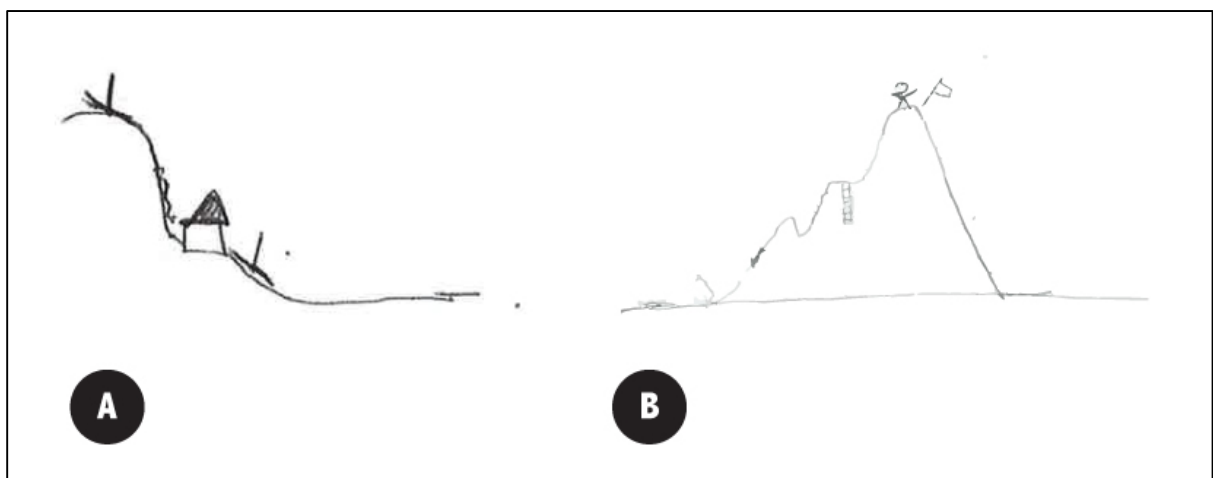


**Figure 1: Drawings indicating ups and downs**

Two were of sport related activities that occurred on mountains – skiing and mountain climbing (refer figure 2). In both cases the participants indicated that they would encounter hurdles or drops along the way. For example:

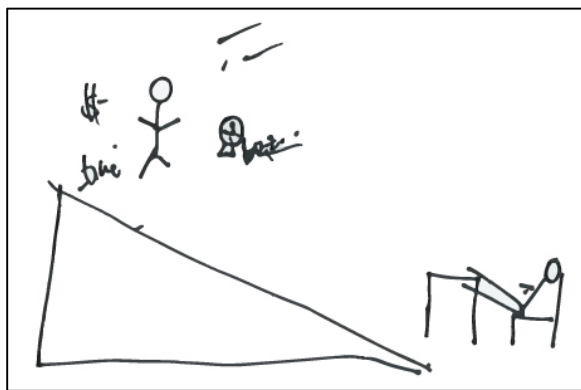
“It drops... then you go back again... very very tough... long, long battle up hill and in the end it was...”

“I kind of relate my projects to skiing and the fact that you start at the top of a hill... but along the way there’s lots of bumps and issues.”



**Figure 2: Drawings indicating sport-themes and mountains**

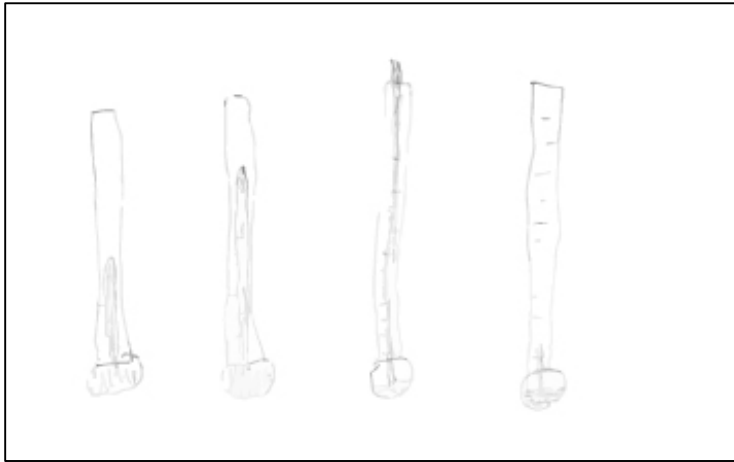
One of the diagrams (refer figure 3) was a simple triangle sloping downward with the project manager relaxing at the lower side of the triangle. The participant spoke of the experience in standard terms (such as cost, time, quality) and a decreasing amount of effort on their part. They also described the project as having received awards and having been highly successful. This illustration and explanation is noted as contrasting to the other descriptions of the experience of managing a project.



**Figure 3: Drawing indicating a slide towards relaxation**

One participant also drew a series of thermometers (refer figure 4) with the temperature rising across the thermometers and the final being a lower temperature again. The explanation included:

“Mine is a series of thermometers as the temperature rises during the project... Particularly in the early days when I was winging it a lot, it started off nice and calm... then the atmosphere got hotter and hotter and then it just blew... and we ended up comatose.”

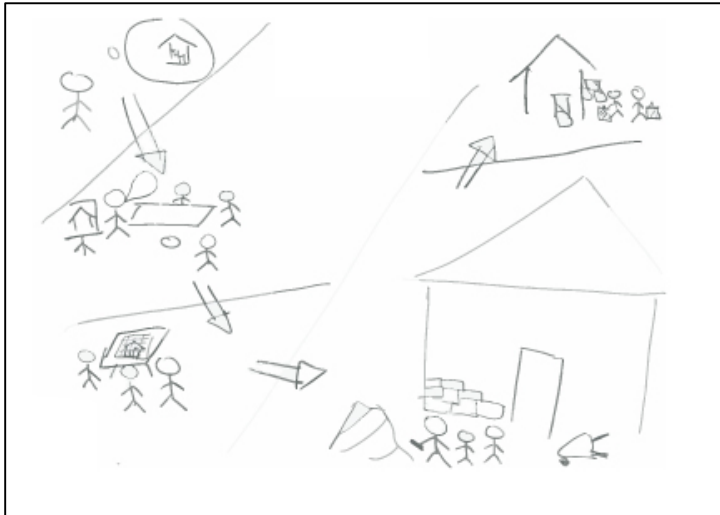


**Figure 4: Drawing indicating thermometers of increasing temperatures**

### *6.1.2 Diagrams showing phases or activities*

Four of the participants drew the activities or strategies they used to manage the project (refer figures 5 and 6). In two cases, these were shown in phases, in the later the activities were surrounding the project manager or simply drawn on the page. One project manager (refer figure 5) described the process as analogous to building a house including a visioning stage, generating buy-in, building a team, determining an approach to building and then assisting stakeholders to move into the ‘new house’. This participant added:

“At each of these steps there was a roller coaster going on... Then when you’re building the house, you find rock or mud that you’re not expecting. Or the team quits on you half way through the job.”



**Figure 5: Drawing showing processes involved in project managing**

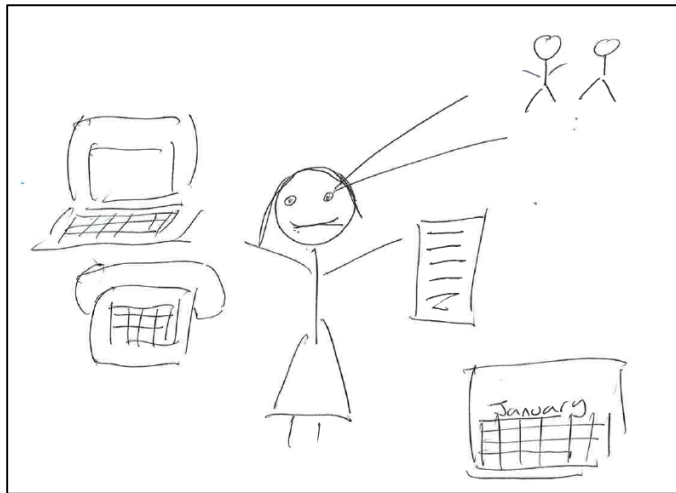
Another project manager who drew this type of illustration provided the following explanation:

“On this particular one they said ‘ok, buddy, you’re going over to help sort this one out’ and I went ‘oh, holy moly, this is a mess’. So what we did was put together a plan, so we could work out what was going on ... put all the right ‘bods’ on it. And started doing metrics so people knew where we were...”

In another illustration the project manager drew symbols of the country they were primarily working in, highlighting that “it was about culture... and spending lots of times on aeroplanes”.

The remaining project manager (refer figure 6) spoke extensively of the need to “keep people on side”. They highlighted the criticality of communication, getting regular updates, “keeping the eye on the ball” and the frustration of not being able to manage people directly.





**Figure 6: Drawing showing processes involved in project managing**

### *6.1.3 Personal affect of the project*

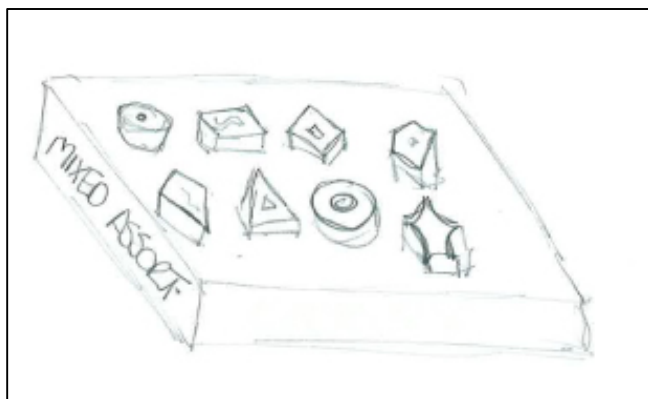
The remaining illustrations primarily focused on a feeling or affect that the experience had on the participant. One of the project managers drew a person in the middle of cats. Their explanation highlighted the varying sizes of the cats as reflecting the influence power of stakeholders and their need to manage these power struggles. Another project manager also drew cats, but in this case they reflected a personal journey from kitten to ‘fat cat’ (where they had successfully delivered the project). One project manager spoke of feeling like a celebrity; drawing a large trophy next to themselves.

Similar to the ‘herding cats’ analogy, another project manager drew a diagram of teeth being removed. Their explanation was:

“A reasonably complex project, the issue was that the steering committee and stakeholders weren’t across it, didn’t understand it, they resisted it because of the cost. So my illustration is pulling teeth... it felt like pulling teeth... So it was painful...”

Another analogy was made to the phrase a ‘life is like a box of chocolates’ from the movie *Forrest Gump*. This project manager drew a box of chocolates (refer figure 7) and described the experience as:

“Obviously there’s ones [chocolates] along the way that don’t taste so good, and aren’t the best experience. And others that are better than you assumed.”



**Figure 7: Drawing of project managing as like a 'box of chocolates'**

## 6.2 Group discussions and lists

The lists of insights that each group collaboratively derived from the drawings of their participants and their explanations are shown in Table 1.

Each group included in their list some reference to ups and downs or tension, shown in Table 1 with [U]. For example:

“Temperature goes up and down”

“Enriching outcome – stressful journey – emotional roller coaster”

All of the groups also made reference to people or leadership elements in their experience, shown with a [P]. For example:

“Leader that is glue across matrix”

“Stakeholders not always knowledgeable”

There were also a variety of items relating to how the project managers cope with the project environment [C] and activities they undertake (or approaches they employ) as part of their role [A]. For example:

“Surgeon/mechanic need to choose right tool for differing operation or repair/fix what is broken”

“Read the game (learn to)”

Overall, we would suggest that the drawings, explanations and group lists captured insights regarding the participants’ perceived nature of project work (i.e. up and down, uncertain, disorder to order), some of the emotions associated with the work (e.g. stressful, uncomfortable, enriching), and skills or capabilities required to operate in this environment (e.g. planning, pre-empting, communication, visioning).

<p><b>Group 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [C] Look forward and envisage the end of the project</li> <li>• [C] Wear many hats and switch frequently</li> <li>• Shifting focus and adapting at different levels</li> <li>• [U] Uncomfortable at points due to unknown as well as adrenalin for some reason</li> <li>• [A] Planning across multiple specialties</li> <li>• [P] Leader that is glue across matrix</li> <li>• [C] Surgeon/mechanic need to choose right tool for differing operation or repair/fix what is broken</li> <li>• [U] Clown walking tight rope, entertaining at high risk</li> </ul>	<p><b>Group 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [U] Enriching outcome – stressful journey – emotional roller coaster</li> <li>• [C] Cultural awareness – adapting to unknown</li> <li>• Forging new paths</li> <li>• [U] [C] Disorder to order – understand where we are – back to basics – shared plan, war room, honest conversations</li> <li>• [P] Building teams around ideas</li> <li>• [P] Commitment of people</li> <li>• [A] Idea- action-follow through</li> <li>• [P] Getting all on one page</li> </ul>
<p><b>Group 3</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning</li> <li>• Confidence with experience</li> <li>• More we do – less and now</li> <li>• Proud of achievement</li> <li>• [U] Temperature goes up and down</li> <li>• [U] Changes in execution- temperature goes up</li> <li>• [C] Read the game (learn to)</li> <li>• [P] Stakeholders not always knowledgeable</li> <li>• [P] Pre-empting stakeholder concerns</li> <li>• Were not trained as PMs</li> <li>• Titles don't mean what they say</li> </ul>	<p><b>Group 4</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [U] Uncertainty to certainty</li> <li>• [P] Relationships</li> <li>• [P] Stakeholder</li> <li>• Power</li> <li>• [C] Communication</li> </ul>

**Legend:**

[U]: Ups and downs/tension      [P]: People and leadership      [C]: Coping      [A]: Activities

**Table 1: Group lists of insights gained regarding projects following drawings and explanations**

## 7 Discussion on the insights from findings

Given our focus on exploring a practice-orientated ‘lived experience’ perspective, we are not seeking to derive universal generalisations from the findings. Instead we will simply derive insights from the findings, and furthermore identify possible implications for research and practice, understanding that this is based on a sample of project managers and their personal perceptions. We will focus on three insights that can be derived from viewing the drawings and examining their explanations. Firstly, that in responding to the statement ‘the experience

of managing a project was like...’, many of the study participants draw and describe situations that are initially of confusion, mess, or brokenness, and that there is a need to bring this situation to order. Secondly, we discuss the methods or capabilities used to transition the situation from the disorder to order. Thirdly, it is also apparent through their drawings and explanations that various emotions play a primary role in how the experience of managing a project presents itself to the individual.

## **7.1 The disorder to order resolution cycle**

### *7.1.1 Insights from the findings*

Several of the participants (and the groups) talked of the experience of managing a project as involving the resolving of disorder, complexity and messiness. For example, one group specifically listed “[d]isorder to order” as one of their insights, another group listed “[u]ncertainty to certainty”.

We would suggest that this broadly aligns with the Heideggerian conception of a project as the situation that arises when an attempt is being made to restore a broken situation (van der Hoorn & Whitty 2015). There is also a further insight that within the actual project there is this cycle of problem (messiness) and then its resolution. For example,

“then suddenly there was a change... there was a lot of confusion around this stage of the project before it started leveling out again...”.

For the participants who drew their experience as an ‘up and down’ experience, they often showed intermediate drops or loops. In summary, the perception of the project managers in this study (a sample of those at the centre of projects) is that there is an overall need to manage a situation from broken (messy) to restored but also that throughout this process

there will be a “bunch of loops”, “uphill battle[s]”, and ‘pulling of teeth.’; smaller examples of this disorder to order resolution cycle.

### *7.1.2 Implications for research*

Of particular interest to the research community might be the impact of the frequency and magnitude of the disorder to order restoration cycles on the completion of the work and the wellbeing of the participants. Researchers could employ arts-based research methods (e.g. drawing and musical improvisation) to elicit these cycles and prompt open discussions in the language of the practitioner about their impressions of the impact, influence, and longer-lasting footprint of these cycles.

### *7.1.3 Implications for practice*

The implication for practice is that the ‘lived experience’ of managing projects as described by these participants is far less structured and predictable than is often presented or assumed. Whilst there is an attempt to bring certainty or restoration (and this may be achieved), project work is messy, complex and uncertain in its nature. It reiterates the need for developing and promoting new tools that do not attempt to portray the process (work) of restoration itself as ordered and predictable. As highlighted by McKenna and Whitty (2012) and Söderland, Geraldi and Lechter (2012), tools such as the Gantt chart have their origins in the production environment and not in the uncertain world of project work. Tools that align with the ‘lived experience’ of project work are required.

A parallel shift would be the altering of attitudes of stakeholders regarding the nature of project work. The expectation that planning takes place and that plans (often months or years ahead) are made and baseline sets, and that work will unfold according to these plans and

baselines is illogical. These plans, as artefacts in the project environment, are potentially limiting the capability for managing project work as it truly dynamically unfolds. The rise of agile, particularly in IT projects (Wang, Conboy & Pikkarainen 2012) perhaps indicates an appetite (at least in some sectors) to this required shift in thinking. Agile planning and implementation cycles are of shorter time periods and therefore less scope than traditional management and is underpinned by the principle of responding to change rather than following a plan (Davis 2013; Wysocki 2012). This is not to suggest that agile is a universal fit for project work. Rather, that it is potentially a better fit (in some cases) for the ‘lived experience’ of project work because it acknowledges the dynamic and unpredictable disorder to order resolution cycle.

## **7.2 Managing and coping with the disorder to order cycle**

### *7.2.1 Insights from the findings*

Some of the participating project managers also drew or made reference to the activities, techniques, or approaches they employ when they are managing a project. Some participants did this in terms of drawing a sequence of activities that they undertook (for example, refer figure 5). Another did this in terms of showing icons representing skills or techniques they use (for example, refer figure 6). Some included activities or approaches in their explanation, for example: “had to find a whole bucket of cash”, setting up project frameworks, writing white papers to articulate the vision and

“[It was like] herding cats. Different sized cats. Some cats were fatter than others... some cats were very strong... it was a matter of who could win what. I was pretty much in the middle.”

Whilst there were references to activities traditionally associated with project management in formal terms (for example, planning, communication), there were also references to the activities and approaches they undertake in more colloquial terms (for example, “herding cats”, “clown walking a tight rope”, “read the game”). These more colloquial terms also disclose what it is like for the individual to live the experience of managing project work. These participants could have talked in more clinical dogma (for example stakeholder engagement and communications rather than “herding cats” or budget management rather than “find a bucket of cash”) but their use of these terms reveal the messiness and emotional tension of the environment more aligned with the actual challenges involved in engaging stakeholders or managing a budget. Whilst the dominance of these descriptions may be due to the research method, it does not negate that these are elements of the ‘lived experience’, and reinforces the criticality of soft skills in the project manager’s repertoire.

There is also a disposition or mood of shepherding or stewarding of people evident in the explanations of the drawings and group lists. For example: “pre-empting stakeholder concerns”, “building teams around ideas”, “leader that is glue across matrix”, “getting all on one page”, “commitment of people”, “forging new paths”, and “I was really conscious I wanted to keep people on side”. This again reiterates the criticality of what might be termed as soft skills.

### *7.2.2 Implications for research and practice*

The implication for research and practice is that we need to consider the skills and techniques of project managing in a contextualised manner. Additionally there is a need to bring into balance the deficit of coverage of soft elements of managing projects in the literature. Managing a budget in a harmonious, standardised environment is arguable different to



managing one in a matrix structure with disputing financiers. Therefore the skills that differentiates the project manager from another manager responsible for a budget is dealing with the project's uncertain and tension-prone environment. Similarly, developing stakeholder matrices may be useful in some contexts, but surely conflict resolution and negotiation are more important 'on the ground' skills for a project manager. A move to this focus on the contextualisation of project managing activities firstly requires recognition of the 'lived experience' of project work (as suggested in section 7.1).

### **7.3 The emotional experience of the transition process**

#### *7.3.1 Insights from the findings*

The project managers in the study also drew or explained their experience in emotional or personal terms. For example: "[e]nriching outcomes – stressful journey – emotional rollercoaster", "ended up comatose", "high pressure", "you start off really excited and motivated", "you sit there and feel a little bit sick", "I loved it... you feel like a bit of a celebrity". This variation and intensity in the emotional experience of project managers is aligned with a study by van der Hoorn (in press) in which participants were asked to play their experience of managing a project on a percussion instrument and then describe that experience.

A key finding in that article was that 93% of the study participants described their experience of project managing as including negative emotions or challenges, frustrations and difficulties. 73% of that study's participants also spoke of positive emotions associated with their experience (van der Hoorn in press). Many of the study participants' musical improvisations when analysed as a spectrogram had a dynamic, wave-like form. This wave pattern is similar to that shown in some of the participants' diagrams in this study (i.e. rollercoasters, dips and loops). We posit this starts to build an argument (now explored

through two different research methods) regarding the nature of the experience of project work. Specifically, the provision of phenomenological evidence that project managers' experience of project work can be described as emotionally dynamic.

### *7.3.2 Implications for practice*

These descriptions highlight the personal affect of project work on project managers. This can inform our understanding of the people who sustain a career in project work, and highlight the emotional skills (or coping strategies) required by project managers to undertake this work. Those working in projects need to have at least a means of dealing with (and potentially be drawn to) the ups and downs, tension, uncertainty, pressure and stress of this environment.

At this point, it would be easy to suggest that certain personality types are suited to, or drawn to project work. We suggest that this would retain a broadly positivist or universal sentiment that lacks the necessary nuance for understanding those working in projects and their strategies for dealing with project work. Instead, the Heideggerian concept of thrownness is posited as a more appropriate lens for understanding why project managers can deal with the experience of project managing.

Thrownness describes our past, the context in which all current action is grounded and which affects our future possibilities (Haugeland 2013). That is, what we have done or experienced in the past creates a tapestry from which we can take current action and which affects our current perception of an experience. We would argue that project managers must have thrownness that enables them to deal with (or perhaps even cause them to be drawn to) the emotional dynamism of project managing.

This thrownness (past events and experiences) is likely to be as varied as the number of individuals that are project managing. Potentially, the only commonality is that this thrownness enables them to survive (potentially thrive) in the project environment. For some project managers the thrownness may include formal education, for other project managers it may be particular life experiences that have cultivated an ability to deal with uncertainty and conflict. The possibilities are endless and subsequently, the methods of dealing and tools used in project managing can be equally as diverse. We would suggest that CPM applies a lens to the dealing with project work and its management that focuses only on certain tools or approaches as project managing. In reality, there is potentially a far greater range of attitudes, tools, and experiences that enable project managers to undertake their work than CPM has chosen to bring to the foreground of classical research studies. It prompts consideration to broader investigation of what project managers actually do in-practice.

In summary, this study has revealed 'lived experience' aspects of project work according to the perspectives of 16 project managers. Collectively, their drawings, descriptions and lists suggest project work as being a process (with interim processes) requiring that they transition a situation from messy, confused, disorder and uncertainty to restoration, order and certainty. It highlights a difference between the practice-orientated 'lived experience' and what is commonly propagated regarding project work (i.e. the possibility of controlled, systematised work). The nuances in capabilities and techniques required by project managers to facilitate this transition from messiness to confusion have also been revealed. It has highlighted that the capabilities and techniques need to be tailored for the context (nature) of their work. The

participants' descriptions have also increased our understanding of the emotions and affects of project work and therefore the thrownness of persons attracted to project work and the capabilities required to sustain a career in this environment.

## **8 Conclusion**

This study has contributed to the project management 'lived experience' literature (for example those studies outlined in section 3.3) through eliciting the perceptions of a sample of project managers on their experience of managing projects. The study has leveraged an arts-based method (drawing) coupled with more traditional qualitative methods (focus groups) to gain rich personal data. It therefore also contributes to our understanding of new research methods for project management. It is reiterated that this research study, by its design and philosophical underpinnings, cannot be assumed to provide universal tenants. If it is believed that a population-valid perspective should be gained (and we believe, based on our philosophical position that this is unlikely) further research would be required to increase the validity of these findings.

The findings highlight the nature of project work as being an 'up and down' process, complete with uncertainty, messiness, complexity, and disorder, and the role of the project manager being to restore this situation (which can occur repeatedly through the project) to certainty and order. These empirical accounts give support to the literature which highlights the issues with the CPM approach considering projects in more positivist, rational terms. Additionally, it gives credence to the Heideggerian conception of a project as a situation that requires restoration (and this is beyond the scope of the individual's or organisation's innate capability). It highlights the needs for project tools and techniques that fit the reality of the

‘lived experience’ and the need for an attitude adjustment regarding what we expect project work to be.

Additionally, it has been identified that there are a variety of tasks that these project managers undertake to bring the messiness to restoration. However, it is in their colloquial descriptions of these activities that we can identify insights into the nature of these activities that may differentiate these tasks from similar activities in an operational environment. It provides empirical grounding for the criticality of soft skills in project managing that has been called for within the literature. The final insight is that an ability to sustain a career in projects would appear to require a tolerance to (and ability to deal with), or desire for work that has these ups and downs, stress and uncertainty. We posit that this study has provided further empirical evidence of the need for a shift away from CPM to the generation of knowledge that is practice-orientated and based on the ‘lived experience’.

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