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Mapping Multi-Stakeholder Engagement: A Q Methodology in a Regional Project Management Scenario

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ABSTRACT

Research on project management describes the essence of projects involving multiple stakeholders, stressing the value derived from diverse work practices. However, this underestimates issues of counterproductive disagreements associated with diverse groups participating in a project. Thus, this study draws on Q methodology and a comprehensive stakeholder-interrelationship-project management interface to develop theoretical perspectives and explanations defining how an East Midlands, UK project team with varied expectations interrelate. Evidence from 23 interviews suggests that over expectations were not only a source of disagreements but also influenced participation. Our findings and analysis led to an overlapping conceptual interface detailing the interplay between behavior, actions, attitudes, and expectations among multiple stakeholders in a regional business development program. Accordingly, we contribute practical insights into project management with implications for engagement and communication strategies in multi-stakeholder projects.

1 | Introduction

Research on project management describes the essence of strategic alignment as a crucial factor in achieving positive outcomes (Ika 2009; Padalkar and Gopinath 2016). This body of acknowledges that more value can be achieved in a project through stakeholder engagement, communication, and collaboration (Kier et al. 2023). While this has provided valuable insights into the fundamentals of project management, it has also raised serious research questions about stakeholder heterogeneity in projects involving multiple agencies. Addressing such a research conundrum must be a priority for researchers because of the shift toward emphasizing on “managing for stakeholders” instead of focusing on “managing stakeholders” in project management (Freeman 2023; Eskerod 2020). This emphasis and shift of focus in project management practice and research underscores the essence of balancing the diverse needs of different groups in a classical project, where potential for disagreements can be unavoidable (Basten et al. 2016; Silva

et al. 2019; Haaskjold et al. 2024). Additionally, this reframing of project management as a concept introduces unresolved tensions. Indeed, tensions that arise from the different and potentially conflicting expectations on how various stakeholders see their role and contribution in a project. Another key question in all of this concerns how these varying stakeholder expectations can be harmonized in such a way that minimizes conflict but increases project success?

To this end, this study investigates stakeholders' expectations and explores the interrelationships (attitude, behavior and actions) between stakeholders and their potential disagreements in a multi-stakeholder project on business development in the East Midlands in the UK. Considering that existing project stakeholder management studies tend to focus on the traditional attributes of stakeholders, ranging from power, legitimacy and urgency to responsibility (Olander 2007; Nguyen et al. 2009), such research focus has become important. Research elsewhere has paid attention to stakeholders'

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Summary

- Stakeholder engagement and participation in a diverse regional business development project
- Alignment of stakeholder expectations and project outcomes
- Behavior, actions, attitudes, and expectations in multi-stakeholder projects
- The practical implications for engagement and communication strategies in a multi-stakeholder project

expectations at a group level (e.g., Ferrero-Ferrero et al. 2018; Haaskjold et al. 2024), underestimating the issues of conflict that often arise in multi-stakeholder projects. Indeed, while heterogeneity in such projects offers certain benefits, differences in personality types, coupled with varying perspectives and expectations, can also be a source of disagreements (Machiels et al. 2023). This discrepancy in the research has resulted in an imbalanced literature.

Against that backdrop, we draw upon the concept of stakeholder multiplicity and a systems perspective to develop a comprehensive stakeholder-interrelationship-project management interface to investigate the underlying causes of disagreements and divergent views and expectations (cf., Thelisson 2024). Consistent with our theory-phenomenon interface, we contend that our research approach provides a robust assessment of multi-layered interrelationships unfolding in multi-stakeholder projects. Thus, with this approach, we enhance new understanding concerning the success rate of projects targeting regional development programs (Davis 2014). In line with this research endeavor, the following question is used to guide the inquiry in this research.

What are the underlying causes of conflict in multi-group projects where expectations of individual project stakeholders may vary and how can their expectations be aligned?

Developing explanations at this phenomenon-theory interface is important for project management scholarship. First, the East Midlands in the UK provides a unique setting for understanding project management in the context of the UK government's pledges to resolve the North and South England divide through business regeneration and development. Moreover, its extensive rural townships offer rich settings for generating unique insights into project management challenges and implementing measures to alleviate conflict, ensuring the success of local businesses. This is essential for sustainable development and regeneration in often neglected rural neighborhoods. Such insights contribute to project management research in the following major ways.

First, the findings of this study contribute to project management research by elaborating integrated aspects of systems theory and stakeholder multiplicity. This new systems perspective and stakeholder nexus of relationships, behaviors, attitudes, and expectations including conflict contribute to the understanding

of the nature of social interactions and ties or lack of them in a unit or supposedly cohesive system in a regional project. Additionally, and as in systems theory our new theoretical explanations and perspectives elaborate on how the stakeholders we studied functioned as an interdependent unit. Thus, we contribute new understanding of how stakeholders come together as a unit or system to work together with the goal of achieving collective prosperity, and reciprocally, each stakeholder benefiting from the system in such a way that fulfills their aspirations in a regional project.

Second, the study employs Q methodology, an innovative research technique that integrates qualitative and quantitative components. This innovative method provides incisive insights into stakeholders' diversity, social connections and interrelationships in a multi-stakeholder project. Its robust design enhances understanding of a complex phenomenon within an often-overlooked research context. Third, this research has several implications for academics, policymakers, and practitioners. It encourages these different stakeholders to pay attention to stakeholder heterogeneity, and potential pressure points of conflict, re-evaluate expectations at the individual level and improve strategies for stakeholder communication and alignment (Gunn and Williams 2007).

After the introduction, the remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, the literature on project stakeholder management and relevant theories are examined to further motivate this research. Second, we present the research design and the steps we took in deploying our Q methodology. Third, we introduce the results of our study. Fourth, key findings, implications, limitations, and directions for future research are discussed. Finally, we offer concluding thoughts.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Stakeholder Groups and Individuals: Conflicts and Commonalities

In project management, involving too many stakeholders substantially increases the complexity of management (Olander 2007; Nguyen et al. 2009). This complexity arises from the necessity to alleviate project stress (Unterhitzenberger et al. 2021), address various stakeholders' needs, manage their participation, and the potential repercussions of unmet expectations (Aaltonen and Kujala 2016). Therefore, project stakeholder management often focuses on individuals, groups, or institutions with "*an interest in the project, and who can affect the outcome.*" (Boddy and Paton 2004, 226). We adopted this definition as it helps us focus on the key stakeholders in a regional development project.

Ferrero-Ferrero et al. (2018) examined internal stakeholders' expectations (students, nonacademic staff, and academic staff) with materiality in sustainability within the higher education sector. While their findings revealed overall alignment, the study also uncovered notable differences in expectations among internal stakeholders, particularly between students and academics, due to their distinct roles, responsibilities and perspectives. Building on this, Haaskjold et al. (2024) explore

the goal formulation process in sports event projects and examine how event organizers can improve the fulfillment of stakeholder expectations. The research concluded that relationship building should be utilized alongside the traditional task-oriented approach to capture stakeholders' expectations to increase their engagement. This means that greater emphasis should be placed on stakeholder interaction and cooperation (Aarseth 2014). Recently, Machiels et al. (2023) explored stakeholders' perceptions of uncertainty in a mega project and revealed that four distinct perspectives exist across and within stakeholder groups. Machiels and others found that understanding individual stakeholders' perceptions of uncertainty can help project management with stakeholder dialogue, engagement and conflict management. In this context, it shows that effective stakeholder management should move beyond predetermined assumptions about stakeholder types and prioritize an understanding of stakeholder diversity to minimize conflict. From these perspectives, it is possible to see that current stakeholder management studies primarily focus on aggregated and group levels, individual stakeholder's expectations and their relationships are often overlooked.

2.2 | The Importance of Expectation Management

A typical project comprises groups of individuals with various backgrounds and orientations (Aaltonen and Kujala 2016; Haaskjold et al. 2024). Research suggests that such diversity in human capital often brings with it varying interests that can be a source of conflict. Indeed, there is a large body of research showing divergent focus and expectations. This literature describes varying stakeholders' interests, ranging from focusing on outputs and outcomes to individual group needs (Nguyen et al. 2009; Silva et al. 2019; Byun et al. 2020). Within this research, there is also an acknowledgment of the essence of the expectations and interests of local players, including companies, communities, the government, and other external groups (Crump and Logan 2008; Olander and Landin 2005). This research describes how each group tries to promote its agenda by bringing its expectations, needs, requirements, and objectives to the project (Seippel et al. 2016; Yang et al. 2014; Eskerod and Jepsen 2013). However, studies elsewhere (e.g., Kroh and Schultz 2023; McManus 2002) recognize that not all stakeholders' needs and expectations are often fulfilled because of potential conflicts between stakeholders. As prior research has shown such conflicts are unavoidable and they can lead to project failures because of the complexity of varying stakeholders' needs and expectations (Bourne and Walker 2005; Shenhar and Dvir 2007).

Thus, one of the key challenges relates to identifying stakeholders' expectations and integrating their claims with the project aims (Grunert and König 2012). Indeed, existing studies acknowledge that developing an in-depth understanding of diverse stakeholders' expectations is essential for project managers (Donaldson and Preston 1995; Olander 2007; Crump and Logan 2008). Ignoring stakeholders' expectations is often seen as the primary cause of a project's failure (Jonker and Nijhof 2006). On the contrary, managing stakeholders' expectations effectively could maximize their positive contribution and minimize any negative impact on set goals (Bourne and Walker 2005; Hietbrink et al. 2012).

2.3 | System Theory and Stakeholder Multiplicity

Earlier studies on stakeholders have focused on the dyadic relationships between organizations and stakeholders. This body of knowledge classifies stakeholders into meaningful groups and investigates their impact on organizational operations, for example, internal and external stakeholders (Pinto 1996), and primary and secondary stakeholders (Freeman 1984). Consistent with that, systems theory positions stakeholders as elements of a cohesive and interdependent system (Ackoff 1974). With this system, the expectation is that involved individuals (stakeholders) contribute toward achieving collective prosperity, and reciprocally, each stakeholder benefits from the system in such a way that helps them to continue thriving. Under those circumstances, organizations must adopt a comprehensive and inclusive perspective to consider all stakeholders, their relationships, and mutual reliance for sustainable success (Freeman et al. 2020). Derived from system theory, the stakeholder multiplicity concept contends that stakeholders should be considered as parts of a network.

Organizations respond to the interaction of multiple influences from the whole stakeholder network, rather than individual stakeholders in practice (Rowley 1997). Different stakeholders with similar or complementary claims may either work together to strengthen their claims or hinder stakeholder management due to clashing claims (Eskerod et al. 2015). Taken together, these theories acknowledge that project management must take a systematic and holistic approach. This emphasizes the essence of understanding individual stakeholders' expectations, claims, and relationships. Stakeholders who share similar expectations may communicate with each other and even form coalitions to increase their power and influence in the project. Therefore, understanding their expectations and relationships becomes essential as it lays the foundation for project stakeholder management.

3 | Methodology

Q Methodology is adopted in this study to systematically assess and understand stakeholders' expectations in a funded enterprise coaching project in the East Midlands of the UK. Unlike traditional research approaches on stakeholders' expectations that are either purely qualitative (Haaskjold et al. 2024) or quantitative (Cosmulese et al. 2019), Q methodology combines the advantages of both. The strength of the Q methodology stems from its ability to integrate the statistical robustness of quantitative data from factor analysis with the qualitative richness gained from participant interviews during the Q-sort process (Machiels et al. 2023). It allows researchers to carry out rigorous and systematic data analysis of people's subjectivities with a small sample size (Brown 1980). Q methodology also has advantages in participants' engagement and data collection, as well as minimizing researcher interference (Watts and Stenner 2012).

Therefore, researchers increasingly recognize the methods as an effective approach to exploring people's opinions, attitudes, or positions in complex contexts. It has been evident in psychology (e.g., Stenner and Marshall 1999; Stenner et al. 2000; Jordan et al. 2005), politics (e.g., Brown 1980), nursing education (e.g., Barker 2008; Hensel et al. 2022), and project management

(Cuppen et al. 2016; Gilbert Silvius et al. 2017; Gijzel et al. 2020; Kim et al. 2021; Machiels et al. 2023). Consistent with the way it has been applied in these multidisciplinary studies, Q methodology was utilized for this study to enhance understanding of individual stakeholders' expectations in a multi-group project.

3.1 | Research Context and Design

Corby once had a prosperous ironstone and steel industry in the East Midlands of the UK. However, the town declined in the 1980s due to industrial structural transformation (Barke et al. 2023). This generated numerous economic and social problems such as inadequate business performance, elevated unemployment, low education levels, widespread mental health issues, increasing benefit claimants, and crime (Ortenberg 2008). To address these industrial transition challenges, the local government sought funding to support redevelopment and regeneration. The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) is one of the European Union's (EU) structural funds to minimize disparities and facilitate economic development across regions, with particular attention to rural areas affected by industrial transition. As one of the most deprived towns in England, Corby was allocated a budget of approximately £2.4 million between 2011 and 2015 to increase sustainable economic and enterprise activity in disadvantaged communities (Department for Communities and Local Government 2013). This funded enterprise coaching project was intended to deliver bespoke one-to-one coaching and training sessions to deprived communities, to equip residents with relevant business skills, remove barriers to enterprise, and enhance business performance.

The East Midlands is renowned for its economic vitality and has the potential to become the powerhouse of the UK's future economic development. This project provides an opportunity to delve deeply into the challenges of stakeholder engagement and alignment in the context of industry transformation. We expect the study to provide transferable and actionable insights that could be applied to other deprived areas facing similar challenges. Therefore, the research undertakes an in-depth study of a single case. Unlike quantitative studies, investigating a single case enabled us to generate rich data, providing deep and penetrating insights into stakeholder expectations, conflict-related issues, and behaviors. Such design aided our investigation of a phenomenon that was unfolding in its natural context (Yin 2009). Crucially, we were able to understand the complicated and context-specific facets of this phenomenon. Specifically, we were able to concentrate on the interplay between individual stakeholders' expectations and their interrelationships in the context of a regional development project.

3.2 | Sample Description

Q methodology does not require many participants (Donner 2001). The objective of Q methodology is not to measure demographic patterns or generalize findings across populations, but rather to uncover and understand different viewpoints on a specific topic (Brown 1993). The methodology requires only enough participants to identify the existence of factors that interplay to influence a project in order to systematically compare them (Brown 1980). The participants are purposely selected with the expectation that they will bring distinct and diverse perspectives

to the research topic (McKeown and Thomas 2013; Watts and Stenner 2012). In this study, participants were selected for three main reasons: first, they are regular participants in the project; second, they have a strong interest in the project; and third, they possess certain abilities to affect the project outcomes. While only one participant was included from the ERDF regional office, this aligns with Q methodology's emphasis on theoretical rather than statistical sampling. The participant held primary responsibility for nearly all aspects of the ERDF project in Corby and was therefore uniquely positioned to represent the funder's point of view.

As illustrated in Table 1, the sample for this research comprises 23 participants from the four main stakeholder groups, including 13 project clients, 6 project team staff, 3 Corby Town Council (CTC) members, and 1 ERDF regional officer. Two participants (Participants 13 and 14) participated in two separate interviews. The first interview took place during the concourse development phase to generate expectation statements. The second interview was conducted after the Q sorting to discuss the rationale behind their sorting decisions. Theoretically, each group has vast interests and abilities to affect the project outcomes. The ERDF regional office approves the project and expects it to meet the funding requirements. They can use their power to ensure their expectations are embedded in the project. CTC supports the project and hopes it improves enterprise activities and business performance. CTC may influence the project via development plans and regulations. The project team, which designs and delivers the training sessions, has a direct impact on the project outcomes. The project clients join the project with distinct expectations. As direct beneficiaries, their attendance and performance also shape the project delivery and results.

3.3 | Q Study Process

To achieve the goals of this study, data collection followed a Q study process. In the steps below, we provide detailed information on the Q process we adopted.

3.3.1 | Step 1—Concourse

To collect people's perspectives on a specific topic, a concourse can contain views from both primary and secondary data. Primary data may include interviews, focus groups, and observations, while secondary data can consist of literature, journals, books, reports, websites, online forums, media reports, and novels (Watts and Stenner 2012; Ellingsen et al. 2010). In this study, 185 statements representing four main stakeholder groups' expectations were collected from various sources, including stakeholder interviews, a focus group with clients, the project application form, the project delivery plan, the project leaflets, and coaching materials (see Appendix A: Concourse Statement Summary).

3.3.2 | Step 2—Q Sample

To generate a Q sample, this utilized the most representative statements from the concourse, removing redundant and overlapping

TABLE 1 | Participant information.

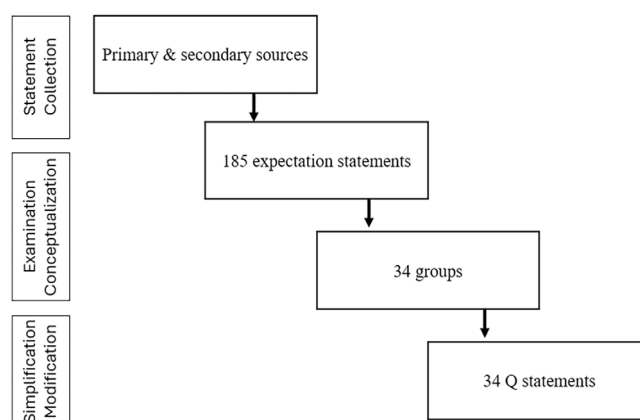
Participants number	Stakeholder group	Position and experience	Number of interviews
Participant 1	Client	Local resident	1
Participant 2	Client	Local resident	1
Participant 3	Client	Local resident	1
Participant 4	Client	Local resident	1
Participant 5	Client	Local resident	1
Participant 6	Client	Local resident	1
Participant 7	Project team	Project training coach	1
Participant 8	Project team	Project manager	1
Participant 9	Project team	Project training coach	1
Participant 10	Project team	Project training coach	1
Participant 11	Project team	Project leader	1
Participant 12	Project team	Project training coach	1
Participant 13	CTC member	Shadow board member	2
Participant 14	ERDF office	Regional officer	2
Participant 15	Client	Local resident	1
Participant 16	Client	Local resident	1
Participant 17	Client	Local resident	1
Participant 18	Client	Local resident	1
Participant 19	Client	Local resident	1
Participant 20	Client	Local resident	1
Participant 21	CTC member	Shadow board member	1
Participant 22	Client	Local resident	1
Participant 23	CTC member	Corby board member	1

Source: Authors' compilations.

statements (cf., McKeown and Thomas 2013; Barker 2008; Brown 1993). This process was informed by research suggesting that a well-organized concourse contains hundreds of statements, and administering and analyzing it directly is impractical. With that in mind, we reduced the original statements to a limited but representative number (cf., McKeown and Thomas 2013; Watts and Stenner 2012). Thus, 185 statements were examined and conceptualized into 34 groups with specific meanings. We then used a substitute statement to represent each group. After simplification and modification, 34 Q statements were identified (see Figure 1). These statements formed the Q sample to be presented to participants in the Q-sort process.

3.3.3 | Step 3—P Set

Twenty-three (23) participants completed the Q-sort process in this study. Using the guiding principles of Q methodology, 23 participants were considered sufficient because the goal of this study was not to explore phenomena or determine demographic commonness but to reveal different viewpoints among participants.

**FIGURE 1** | Q sample generation. Source: Authors' ideas.

3.3.4 | Step 4—Q-Sort and Post Sort Interview

For the Q-sort process, a sorting grid containing the same number of spaces as the Q sample statements was designed. The grid included the same number of spaces at the two extremes and

well-being, supporting them to make positive life changes (8: +3) by helping them start their businesses (10: +4). Consequently, the project was intended to enhance project clients' business skills (4: +3) and offer ongoing personalized business support (25: +3). This was expected to ensure that clients have a more supportive and successful business journey.

Factor 2 members also stated that the project stakeholders should have explicit expectations (27: -4). They were convinced that the project was designed to help residents enter entrepreneurship. They considered helping clients to go back into education (11: -3), find jobs (9: -3), tackle local social problems (7: -4) and help disadvantaged communities (16: -3) as the project's indirect impacts, side effects, or legacy in the long term. *"In terms of social problems, economic, yes, potentially, maybe very indirectly."* (P19 project client).

4.3 | Factor 3 Client Life Coaching

Factor 3 had five members, including four project clients (Participants 1, 3, 5, and 20) and one project team member (Participant 10). Factor 3 members gave particular attention to clients' personal development and self-improvement. Their main concern was to empower individuals to reach their full potential and have a meaningful life (see Appendix F: Factor 3 Interpretation Sheet). Factor 3 members believed that the fundamental issue preventing residents from moving forward was their low confidence and self-esteem (2: +4). Hence, the project needed to create opportunities for clients to communicate among themselves and training coaches (29: +3). Such a supportive environment was expected to assist clients in speaking to people in similar situations, fostering meaningful relationships with others, and recognizing their potential (30: +3). With improved confidence, boosted self-esteem, effective communication skills, and supportive environments, clients were expected to explore their passions and long-term goals and develop a suitable life plan for their future (13: +4). Eventually, they were anticipated to make positive life changes (8: +3).

Factor 3 members opposed the idea that people who joined the project lacked clear expectations (27: -4). Their primary emphasis was the project clients' life coaching and personal development, not business support (25: -3). They rejected the aims of the project related to improving business survival rates (22: -4), business resource efficiency (33: -3) and business formation rates (23: -3). *"It is good if improving business resource efficiency and increasing business survival rate come during the process, but for me, I don't strive to make these happen. Because the people we engage with are from low levels, they need confidence, realizing their potential."* (P10, project team member).

4.4 | Common Statements

While the three factors detailed above align with the following statements "support people to make positive life change" (Statement 8) and "help people realize their potential" (Statement 30), the reasons and motivations behind them significantly differ. Factor 1 perceived people's life changes and potential recognition as the project's outcomes and impacts. Factor 2

TABLE 2 | Common statements.

No.	Statement	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
8	Support people to make positive life change	+3	+3	+3
30	Help people realize their potential	+3	+4	+3
27	I have no Idea	-3	-4	-4

Source: Authors' ideas.

considered using business support as an approach to help people achieve these goals, while Factor 3 was based on the perception that people's life changes and potential recognition should be the foundation of the project. In summary, all three factors did not support the view that people joined the project with no clear expectations (Statement 27) Table 2.

5 | Discussion

The primary focus of this research study was to develop an in-depth understanding of expectations and potential areas of conflict among stakeholders involved in an enterprise coaching project in the East Midlands in the UK. Consistent with the goals of this research, the findings of this study unpacks relational complexities embedded in a classical multi-stakeholder project at regional level. By examining such complex regional systems produces knowledge that advances deep and penetrating insights into the structural and social relationships militating multi-stakeholder projects. Arguably, such insights are vital; they aid efforts to rejuvenate and revitalize neglected regions. Crucially, our focus on individual stakeholders' expectations, relationships and interactions leads to theoretical perspectives describing the dynamic relationship underlying regional multi-stakeholder projects. Figure 3 illustrates a comprehensive stakeholder-interrelationship-project management interface.

The assumption underlying Figure 3 advances understanding of how the expectations and interrelationships engendered in a multi-stakeholder project influence how stakeholders behave. The behaviors they exhibit through their interactions call for regrouping their roles to fall in line with their influence and power. From that perspective, we argue that such re-orientation in regional projects increases the chances of achieving stated objectives. Based on that, this study contributes to project management research in several ways.

First, the results contribute to project management by showcasing how different stakeholder group members can have similar expectations. For example, Factor 2 includes seven project clients and one CTC officer who expect the project to provide individual business support and assistance, although their motivations and levels of influence differ significantly. While this study examines stakeholder expectations, a different phenomenon from prior research, its findings extend Machiels et al.'s (2023) study highlighted that different opinions and perceptions between and within stakeholder groups are likely to co-exist.

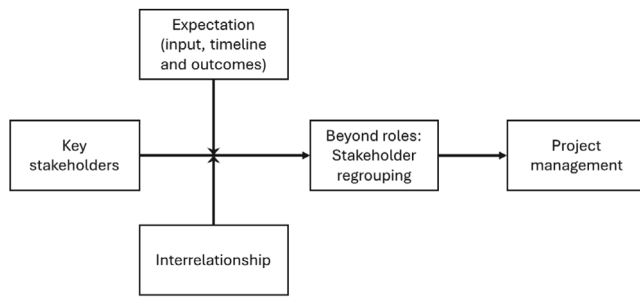


FIGURE 3 | A stakeholder–interrelationship–project management interface. *Source:* Authors' ideas.

Notwithstanding that, it is conceivable that stakeholders with insufficient power may interact, cooperate, and form alliances with more dominant stakeholders to strengthen their claims (Frooman 1999). For example, as direct beneficiaries, clients can refuse to register, join, or attend training sessions to directly influence the project outputs. Moreover, clients can coordinate with local council officers to indirectly affect the project design and delivery. This is because council officers are generally presumed to have greater influence than clients due to their authority to design and enforce local laws and regulations. Hence, we argue that project management should prioritize stakeholders' expectations alignment (Eslerod et al. 2015) and stakeholder relationship management (Volden and Welde 2022).

Second, the theoretical explanations derived from the research findings contribute to the literature by offering rich insights into project stakeholders' expectations, relationships, and behaviors that arise in projects at the regional level. These explanations advance knowledge showing that, in multi-stakeholder projects, the decisions and actions taken to achieve the target goals are often affected by what each member expects (Eslerod 2020). Their diversity and conflicting expectations often add to complications that hinder the progress toward meeting the overarching aims and goals of the project (Kroh and Schultz 2023). In this study, members of Factor 1 prioritize regional development and business generation, while members of Factor 3 concentrate on clients' personal development and life coaching. Thus, the study offers knowledge suggesting that the process of managing stakeholder expectations in diverse project groups requires some level of transparency. It should also try to temper excessively high and unrealistic expectations to a realistic level (Basten et al. 2016). Such insights build on the concept of stakeholder multiplicity, showing how stakeholders, interconnected within a project, may respond to the collective impact arising from the entire stakeholder network, rather than just to the interests of individual stakeholders (Rowley 1997).

Lastly, this study has a methodological contribution. By using Q methodology to identify unique social connections, interrelationships and potential areas of divergent views, it offers an innovative research approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative techniques for data collection. Current project stakeholder research has predominantly examined the relationships between projects and stakeholders at group levels (Ferrero-Ferrero et al. 2018; Haaskjold et al. 2024). This study's investigation of stakeholders at the individual level enabled a comprehensive analysis of their expectations in a multi-group project, resulting in robust findings (Eslerod and Jepsen 2013;

Eslerod et al. 2015). The study advanced knowledge about how four stakeholder groups had three distinct expectations. The study confirms that Q methodology is an effective and practical tool for analyzing project stakeholders, enabling individual stakeholders to express their perspectives transparently and revealing the diversity between them (Machiels et al. 2023).

5.1 | Implications

The research encourages stakeholders to re-evaluate their expectations at the individual level, which provides academics, policymakers, and practitioners with an innovative approach to understanding stakeholders' needs, exploring their interweaving relationships, and managing stakeholders. Project stakeholders may have multiple, conflicting, complementary, or cooperative expectations; stakeholders with similar or complementary expectations may ally with each other to enhance their claims. The combined strength of impact from stakeholder alliances can surpass the sum of individual impacts (Neville and Menguc 2006). Therefore, practitioners must recognize individual stakeholders' expectations and the relationships within the complex network. This information offers practitioners insights into which stakeholders back the project activities and which are against them, along with potential alliances that might emerge over various issues.

5.2 | Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

A limitation of this study was that it only investigated one regional development project in England, and only four main stakeholder groups were included. This affects the validity of the study results and makes it difficult to generalize the findings to other projects with different contexts (Saunders et al. 2019). However, single case studies can provide researchers with profound learning and understanding of a specific topic (Flyvbjerg 2006). This study's results made meaningful contributions to project stakeholder management by exploring stakeholders' expectations and their complex relationships that wide project management studies often overlooked. It would be interesting to see similar methods and approaches used in other regional development projects with different locations and contexts. Additionally, the data for this study were collected during the early phase of the project. It is worth noting that stakeholder expectation management is an ongoing process, and stakeholders' expectations and needs may change at various stages of the project (Parent 2008; Thompson and Parent 2022). The project management team must periodically assess and monitor stakeholders' expectations to improve their communication, engagement, and relationships. Therefore, an interesting topic of future research could be identifying, monitoring, and tracking stakeholders' expectation changes during the project life cycle.

6 | Conclusion

This study demonstrated that in multi-stakeholder projects, the stakeholder expectations differ and have implications for other projects. The use of Q methodology was essential in providing

a comprehensive assessment of the perspectives and behaviors of members involved in a regional development project. In that regard, the strength of the outcomes engendered in this research lies in its methodological approach. This innovative approach to research goes beyond the averages, and it helped us to unpick the underlying mechanisms that a single methodological technique may not be able to achieve. It showed the intricate relationships that are otherwise hard to decipher by either using a purely qualitative or quantitative approach.

Furthermore, this study has demonstrated that multi-stakeholder projects conflicts are unavoidable and often constrain relationships among involved parties. The study has shown that expectations, role and responsibilities are the source of such conflict. Crucially, the study concludes that in project management studies the focus must be on “managing for stakeholders” instead of focusing on “managing stakeholders” in project management. In the light of that, this study has the following recommendations.

6.1 | Recommendations

In line with the conclusion drawn on the basis of the inferences of this study, we have the following recommendations:

- A regional project with multiple stakeholders must have clearly stated terms of references. Such a document must outline the level of contribution expected from each stakeholder.
- Each stakeholder's role must be clearly defined to reduce potential issues related to responsibilities and commitment. Key to that flexibility should underpin any allocated responsibilities and declared commitment.
- Each stakeholder's expectations must be mapped out and assessment in line with the goals/objectives of the project. Above all, the interest of the beneficiaries and wider region must be respected.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Appendix A

Concourse Statement Summary

Secondary source		Collected statements no.
A	Project application form	89
B	Project delivery plan	3
C	Idea generation coaching notes	5
D	Enterprise coaching leaflet	8
E	Can do workshop leaflet	6
F	Enterprise and you leaflet	5
Primary source		
G	Clients' focus group interview (5 people)	12
H	Project client's interview (1)	5
I	Project coach interview (1)	10
J	Corby Borough Council staff interview (1)	23
K	ERDF staff interview (1)	19
Total		185

Source: Authors' ideas.

Appendix B

Unrotated Factor Matrix

Sorts	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
P1	0.6150	0.1805	−0.4556
P2	0.7129	−0.2441	−0.0826
P3	0.6414	0.2666	−0.1453
P4	0.6109	0.5705	−0.1409
P5	0.6127	0.2148	−0.2787
P6	0.4264	0.1028	−0.1708
P7	0.7537	0.4200	0.3458
P8	0.7170	0.3036	0.4672
P9	0.6033	0.1467	0.4079
P10	0.6192	0.4790	−0.3267
P11	0.7624	0.4286	−0.1362
P12	0.7714	0.4423	0.1651
P13	0.4753	−0.0139	0.1816
P14	0.6773	−0.1837	0.2276
P15	0.4365	−0.4194	0.0733
P16	0.6823	−0.5092	−0.3812
P17	0.5070	−0.7032	0.0557
P18	0.4033	−0.7188	0.1619
P19	0.6780	−0.4520	0.1256
P20	0.4210	−0.1717	−0.5032
P21	0.5749	−0.2225	0.2789
P22	0.5015	−0.3199	−0.1376
P23	0.4646	0.4030	0.2682
Eigenvalues	8.4291	3.4725	1.7214
Explained variance %	37	15	7

Source: Authors' ideas.

Appendix C

Factor Arrays—Factor Q-Sort Values for Each Statement

No.	Statement	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
1	Help businesses get financial support	−2	+2	−1
2	Buildup people's confidence and self-esteem	+2	+2	+4
3	Improve the social enterprises	−1	−2	−1
4	Improve people's business skills	0	+3	+1
5	Fill the gaps in enterprise support within Corby	+2	0	0
6	Improve social inclusion and economic inclusion	+1	−2	0
7	Solve local social problems	−1	−4	+1
8	Support people to make positive life change	+3	+3	+3
9	Help people find jobs	−1	−3	+1
10	Help people start their businesses	+2	+4	+1
11	Help people go back to education	−1	−3	+2
12	Help people get some working skills	0	−1	+2
13	Help people find the right life plan and direction	+1	+1	+4
14	Help local economic development	+1	−1	0
15	Help local business networking	−2	0	−2
16	Help disadvantaged communities	+1	−3	−1
17	Create enterprise culture	+4	−2	0
18	Promote enterprise in Corby	+3	+1	0

No.	Statement	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
19	Remove barriers to enterprise	+4	0	−1
20	Improve people's personal skills	+1	0	+2
21	Increase employment opportunities	0	−2	0
22	Increase business survival rates	−3	0	−4
23	Higher business formation rates achieved	−4	−1	−3
24	Help business growth and performance	−2	+1	−2
25	Provide business support	0	+3	−3
26	Help business marketing	−2	+2	−1
27	I have no Idea	−3	−4	−4
28	Increase business productivity	−4	−1	−2
29	Give clients a chance to talk to others	−1	+1	+3
30	Help people realize their potential	+3	+4	+3
31	Improve people's self-belief	0	+1	+1
32	Motivate people	+2	+2	+2
33	Improve business resource efficiency	−3	0	−3
34	Increase business number	0	−1	−2

Source: Authors' ideas.

Appendix D

Factor 1 Interpretation Sheet

Statements ranked at +4 and +3		
19	Remove barriers to enterprise	(+4)
17	Create enterprise culture	(+4)
18	Promote enterprise in Corby	(+3)
8	Support people to make positive life change	(+3)
30	Help people realize their potential	(+3)
Statements ranked at -4 and -3		
22	Increase business survival rates	(-3)
33	Improve business resource efficiency	(-3)
27	I have no Idea	(-3)
23	Higher business formation rates achieved	(-4)
28	Increase business productivity	(-4)
Import post Q-sort comments		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remove barriers to enterprise (19: +4): <i>"Apart from promoting enterprise, we need to understand the barriers they are facing and help them remove it"</i> (Participant 8, project team) Create enterprise culture (17: +4): <i>"Because creating enterprise culture in Corby combines everything"</i> (Participant 9, project team) Promote enterprise in Corby (18: +3): <i>"In the funding proposal, ...we were hoping the project could encourage communities to become more enterprising, to start new businesses, to increase economics activities."</i> (Participant 8, project team) Support people to make positive life change (8: +3): <i>"Remove barriers to enterprise and as a consequence, support people to make positive life change."</i> (Participant 7, project team) Help people realize their potential (30: +3): <i>"Help the local economy and get people into jobs, which will help people realize their potential."</i> (Participant 23, CTC officer) 		

Source: Authors' ideas.

Appendix E

Factor 2 Interpretation Sheet

Statement ranked at +4 and +3		
10	Help people start their businesses	(+4)
30	Help people realize their potential	(+4)
8	Support people to make positive life change	(+3)
25	Provide business support	(+3)
4	Improve people's business skills	(+3)
Statement ranked at -4 and -3		
16	Help disadvantaged communities	(-3)
9	Help people find jobs	(-3)
11	Help people go back to education	(-3)
7	Solve local social problems	(-4)
27	I have no Idea	(-4)
Import post Q-sort comments		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help people start their businesses (10: +4): <i>"I have a business idea. I want somebody to help me to start my business. (P22 project clients)"</i> Provide business support (25: +3): <i>"I expected ... I could get some business support. This is quite important for anyone starting their own business."</i> (P18 project client) Improve people's business skills (4: +3): <i>"They can lay out in black and white and see what your skills have, see what strengths are, see your weaknesses are, and work on those."</i> (P21 project clients) Help people realize their potential (30: +4): <i>"[the project] is giving them a push to help them realize their potential, start their business, do what they like instead of sitting at home."</i> (P15 project client) Support people to make positive life change (8: +3): <i>"I was out of work, and everything was kind like down in the dumps, I just thought I had enough, and things needed to be changed."</i> (P19 project client) 		

Source: Authors' ideas.

Appendix F

Factor 3 Interpretation Sheet

Statement ranked at +4 and +3		
2	Buildup people's confidence and self-esteem	(+4)
13	Help people find the right life plan and direction	(+4)
8	Support people to make positive life change	(+3)
30	Help people realize their potential	(+3)
29	Give clients a chance to talk to others	(+3)
Statement ranked at −4 and −3		
25	Provide business support	(−3)
23	Higher business formation rates achieved	(−3)
33	Improve business resource efficiency	(−3)
22	Increase business survival rates	(−4)
27	I have no Idea	(−4)
Import post Q-sort comments		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buildup people's confidence and self-esteem (2: +4): <i>"As a coach, you should motivate these people, encourage them, try to build their confidence and self-esteem and make them feel good about themselves."</i> (P10 project team) • Help people find the right life plan and direction (13: +4): <i>"People don't know where they are going and what sort of jobs they want. They need a little guidance to help them."</i> (P20 project client) • Support people to make positive life change (8: +3): <i>"This project is all about helping clients to realize their potential, make them more confident and increase their self-esteem, to find a way for their life and help them get out of the mud."</i> (P10 project team) • Help people realize their potential (30: +3): <i>"The more you learn, the more you are able to use your potential."</i> (P1 project clients) <p>Give clients a chance to talk to others (29: +3): <i>"It gives me a chance to talk to other people that are in the same situations. I can meet friends and know other people."</i> (P5 project clients)</p>		

Source: Authors' ideas.