TOWARDS AN INTERATIVE AND LONGITUDINAL
methodology for

ANALYSING STAKEHOLDERS
within a project context

Julien Bousquet, Ph.D.
Director of the Master
of Project Management
University of Quebec at Chicoutimi

julien_Bousquet@uqac.ca

Christophe Leyrie, Ph.D.
Professor of project management at
the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi

christophe_leyrie@uqac.ca

Dr. Thierno Diallo
Professor of Economics
at University of Quebec (UQAC)

thierno_Diallo@uqac.ca

ABSTRACT

The concept of stakeholders has evolved since its popularization by Freeman in the mid 1980s. Since then, interest in stakeholders has grown within the field of project management and it has become an important research topic. Many researchers have focused on identifying and analyzing stakeholders with the aim of developing tools to facilitate their strategic management. However, some researchers have highlighted limitations of the key processes of identification and analysis proposed, due in part to the growing number and type of project participants. Moreover, few studies take time into account when identifying the many various stakeholders involved over a project's lifetime. In light of this, this article proposes an iterative and longitudinal approach based on an innovative index - media prominence score - which can be used to define key moments of the cycle of analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of stakeholders seems to have its origins in the work of researchers from the Tavistock Institute, London, looking at the application of systems theory to organizations at the end of the 1960s *(Mason and Mitroff, 1981)*. For Freeman *(1984, p.48)*, the concept can be applied to any group or individual who may affect or be affected by the achievement of an organization's objectives. Several different, albeit connected, theories were developed from this definition, including a three-level approach proposed by Donaldson and Preston *(1995)*. The descriptive level of stakeholder theory allows an organization to be approached as a constellation of cooperative and competitive interests. The instrumental level allows the focus to fall on possible connections between stakeholder management and performance. The normative level concentrates on the legitimacy of stakeholders and particularly on the intrinsic value of their interests. The development of these views has allowed stakeholder theory to be implemented in various fields such as politics, public administration or management, while also creating numerous debates, including the one surrounding the relevance of integrating these theories into a unified body of work *(Gond and Mercier 2005)*.

The idea of stakeholders appeared within the specific context of project management at the end of the 1970s *(King and Cleland, 1978)*. Since then, interest in stakeholders has become increasingly pronounced, in practice as well as research, so that today it is one of the key aspects of the subject *(Littau, Jujagiri et al., 2010)*. The concept has been used in relation to the definition of project aims and objectives *(Achterkamp and Vos 2008)*, thereby becoming part of the success criteria, and has also been used in relation to the achievement of these aims and objectives *(Kolltveit, Karlsen et*

al. 2007), thereby becoming part of project success factors. Several studies looking at managers have confirmed that stakeholders play a leading role in the execution of a project, particularly in relation to the definition of project aims and scope *(Bourne and Walker, 2005)*, budgets and timetables *(Jergeas, Williamson et al., 2000)*, and even to the very existence of the project *(Olander and Landin, 2008)*.

According to Elias, Cavana et al. *(2002)*, the importance given to stakeholders in relation to project success clearly requires their systematic management. It seems that the way in which the various participants involved are managed will determine the impact their actions could have on project performance *(Sutterfield, Friday-Stroud et al. 2006; Achterkamp and Vos 2008)*. In this context, and using normative and/or descriptive measures, several authors have defined more or less structured processes and tools designed to manage stakeholders. Generally, the various process phases as well as the accompanying techniques and tools aim to allow managers to improve their understanding of the potential impact of stakeholders and to develop strategies accord-

ingly, based on responses adapted to the various project contexts *(Bourne and Walker 2006)*. Good practices in this field encourage a formal and systematic approach based on clearly defined phases, aims and strategies. These include an initiation and planning phase, a stakeholder identification phase, a stakeholder analysis phase, a stakeholder management strategy implementation phase and finally, a monitoring phase for actions undertaken *(Karlsen, 2002)*.

However, in addition to measures derived from normative approaches, Bourne and Walker *(2006)* highlight that managing stakeholder relations is an extremely difficult process for project managers who must create relationships with a series of diverse and changing individuals, both internal and external to the organization. According to the authors, developing and maintaining these relationships requires a specific set of skills that must enable managers to work within the environment of an organization, thus creating a real challenge as well as a key leadership problem. In fact, as project complexity grows in parallel to an increase in stakeholder numbers, diversity and power *(Karlsen, 2002; Winch, 2004)* and as multiple interests

are expressed, strong project leadership has proved to be indispensable *(Sutterfield, Friday-Stroud et al. 2007)*. Based on the same principle, Nwankwo and Richardson *(1996)* nevertheless find it regrettable that few formal approaches have been used to understand and improve the leadership skills of project managers within this context and that little support exists in the field. At the end of their content analysis of the main relevant publications over the last ten years, Kolltveit, Karlsen et al. *(2007)* are disappointed by the fact that authors show relatively little interest in this particular problem despite the fact that stakeholder influence on project success is largely accepted as fact. They have therefore called on researchers to undertake more studies to improve understanding of this important aspect of project management. Conversely, Jergeas, Williamson et al. *(2000)* insist that there needs to be greater clarification of the complexity of relationships and interactions linked to stakeholders, particularly through qualitative research. We therefore propose to use this article to present a method that allows stakeholders to be understood within a project context using an iterative and longitudinal approach.

1. Stakeholder Research: Choosing a Method

There are several reasons that could explain the lack of research available to produce more comprehensive theories on stakeholder management in a project context. Firstly, whether the outlook is descriptive, instrumental or normative, any fixed choice is liable to influence the construction of research questions and therefore the type of expected results. Gond and Mercier *(2005)* clearly highlight both the need to negotiate the inherent risks in descriptive or instrumental approaches as well as in normative approaches and the difficulty involved in doing so. According to these authors, empirical methods, with instrumental aims re-

sulting in management tools, run the risk of only responding to trivial concerns while a certain naiveté is linked to the rationale of incantations and exhortations to improve the consideration of stakeholders. Aware of the need to acknowledge the complexity of the phenomena being studied while taking care to avoid sacrificing logic to ideology or politics, we have chosen to base our research on a qualitative method initially inspired by Grounded Theory *(Glaser and Strauss, 1967)*. A qualitative approach is completely justified for the study of complex phenomena *(Pires, 1997)* and allows significant interpretation adapted to the analysis of reasons behind actions and social practices *(Mucchielli, 2009)* which seems consistent with the study of relationships between and with stakeholders as well as with our own epistemological position. Moreover, qualitative research encourages an inductive approach *(Patton, 2002)* and is largely based on emerging and flexible estimates, which allow unexpected phenomena to be differentiated and investigated, something that is often required in a phase of exploratory research such as ours *(Maxwell, 2005)*.

Furthermore, to reinforce our desire to remain neutral and balanced in relation to the different stakeholder theories – neutrality which excludes the use of strictly defined hypotheses to guide our research – we were initially inspired by some of the principles of Grounded Theory. Very similar to the Grounded Theory of Glaser and Strass *(1967)* yet more focused on theorization rather than theory itself, this inductive method aims to move towards understanding, contextualization and placement, rather than only producing a theory *(Mucchielli, 2009, p. 207)*. We were obviously not going to disregard previous knowledge completely; however, we have used stakeholder theories with the aim of creating suggestions relative to our research intentions

Step 1: Identifying events (trigger & significant)

Step 2: Defining stakeholders

Step 3: Quantifying stakeholders

Step 4: Interpreting & summarizing results

FIGURE 1. *Iterative Method of Analyzing Stakeholders.*

and therefore, to return to the imagery used by Deslauriers & Kérisit *(1997, p.95)*, as more of a "nautical chart" than a "railway network". We have used an inductive framework with the aim of extracting elements of a theory moving from specific to general, based on questions emerging from the field, rather than using a generally applicable theory to produce and verify hypotheses for a specific situation.

We have therefore chosen a method favoring a flexible and emerging process based on a relatively neutral theoretical position. It nevertheless remains that the social and scientific respectability of interpretative results relies on a thorough definition and presentation of research procedures *(Mucchielli 2009)*. As the questioning on which our method is based leads to a desire to delve into the ecosystem created by a project and its stakeholders, we naturally chose to use a case study. Furthermore, as our research is focused on a dynamic phenomenon that is strongly linked to one context and that evolves in tandem with the effects and results it creates, we chose to approach the study using a procedural and longitudinal outlook. We aim to understand how things evolve over time. This idea of time, an intrinsic part of longitudinal studies, is taken into account through chronology rather than duration and requires that data be collected over several periods and that the analysis take these different periods into account *(Forgues and Vandangeon-Derumez 2003)*. This integrates a dynamic aspect that is currently missing from stakeholder theories. Gond and Mercier *(2005)* have expressed regret over the largely static nature of these theories, from both descriptive and normative outlooks.

However, choosing a longitudinal case study does not mean that operational research details are completely defined. Implementing this type of study does, in fact, need to take into account the principle of reality: it is impossible to constantly observe and analyze all dimensions of the project-stakeholder ecosystem. In addition to the extreme difficulty of implementing such an operation, which would not be achievable even through more or less participative observation, the resulting data overload would be difficult to access and use. The questions therefore remain – Which stakeholders should be observed? When? How often? With the aim of providing a specific answer, we have defined a method that uses several existing tools, adapted to our aims.

2. Proposal for an Iterative and Longitudinal Method Based on the Idea of Centrality

With the aim of implementing the first exploratory phase of our approach to project stakeholders, we have devised a method based on four clearly defined key steps that comprise an iterative cycle. The steps are set out below *(see **Figure 1**)*.

2.1 Step 1: Identifying Events Based on Media Prominence Score

As we mentioned above, the first challenge that needs to be met when studying the relationship between project stakeholders relates to time. If real-time data collection is excluded then the next step is to determine the most appropriate times at which the situation should be analyzed and to understand the dynamics that characterize the situation. We have used the concept of "media prominence score" to remain as objective as possible during the selection process.

Developed by Influence Communication[1], a media monitoring and information broker company from Quebec, media prominence score is a communication indicator that aims to define significant events. According to the company, this indicator represents the proportion of space occupied by key news items in comparison to all news items reported in newspapers, on radio and on television in Quebec, during a one-week period. The value of each news item is calculated in terms of readership, print runs and audience ratings for each media outlet distributing it. The item is then weighted according to size, location in each type of media and finally, format. This raw data is the result of a statistical analysis of key news items and does not take into account any qualitative elements such as tone or arguments used in the press coverage.

Media prominence score demonstrates the benefit of measuring the "media waves" concept popularized by Brosius and Eps *(1995)* while also isolating "key events" at the heart of the media process. These events typically attract the attention of readers and audiences instantly *(Kepplinger and Habermeier, 1995)* and, therefore

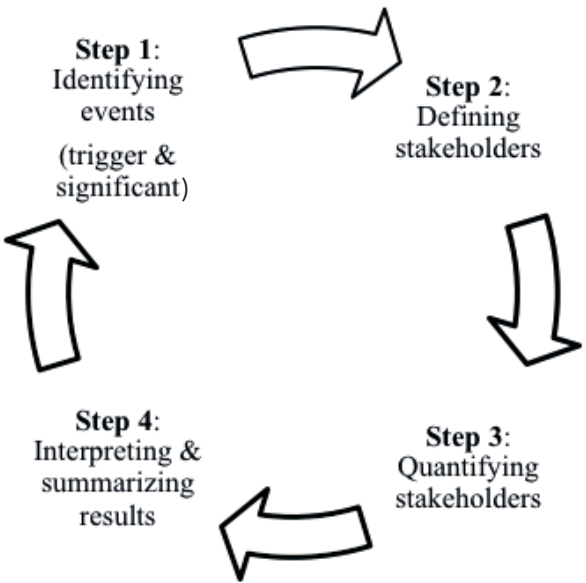[1] www.influencecommunication.com

Top 5 news accross Québec	
Events	**Media prominence score**
Political crisis in Egypt	5,07 %
New amphitheater in Quebec and a return for the NHL?	4,18 %
Political crisis in Tunisia	1,01 %
Canadians defeated by Boston Bruins	0,77 %
Grammy Awards – Arcade Fire wins album of the year	0,75 %

3 major events (>1%) [annotation grouping first three rows]

FIGURE 2. *Example of the top 5 news items in Quebec on February 11, 2011.*
Source: Influence communication

No.	Stakeholders
1	Stakeholder a
2	Stakeholder b
3	Stakeholder c
4	Stakeholder d
5	Stakeholder e
6	Stakeholder f
…	…

TABLE 1. *Sample List of Stakeholders*

Interest	Positive or negative actual or perceived issues that the project represents for stakeholders
	Very weak (1); Weak (2); Average (3); Strong (4); Very strong (5)
Power	Project stakeholders' capacity for action or positive or negative influence
	Very weak (1); Weak (2); Average (3); Strong (4); Very strong (5)
Position	Stakeholders' position or situation in relation to the project and its completion
	Strong opposition (-2); Opposition (-1); Neutral (0); Support (1); Strong support (2)
Involvement	Intensity of actions implemented by stakeholders in relation to the project and its execution
	Very weak (1); Weak (2); Average (3); Strong (4); Very strong (5)
Centrality	Stakeholder's central or inevitable nature: total score allocated for interest, power, position (absolute value) and involvement levels
	**Interest + Power +	Position	+ Involvement**

TABLE 2. *Summary of the Composite Indicator of Centrality.*

No.	Stakeholders	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3
1	Stakeholder a	12	14	15
2	Stakeholder b	17	6	14
3	Stakeholder c	14	11	11
4	Stakeholder d	12		12
5	Stakeholder e	7	4	
6	Stakeholder f	5	5	6
7	Stakeholder g	5	5	6
Average		8.00	5.63	10.67

KEY:

	Stakeholders taken into account (above average centrality)
	Stakeholders not taken into account (lower than average centrality)
	Stakeholders not taken into account (missing from the media environment)

TABLE 3. *Sample Integration Table for Stakeholder Centrality.*

exert influence over the general public, journalists, lobby groups and decision-makers; in other words, stakeholders. The concept of media waves, which until recently was mainly defined and used in the field of political science *(Chaffee and Schleuder, 1986; Ajavon, 2006)*, can be perfectly transposed to other contexts such as project management and specifically, stakeholder management.

The idea is therefore to check the weekly classification of the most significant media events in Quebec[2] regularly *(see* **Figure 2***)*. The process starts as soon as a major news item linked to the study project reaches a significant media prominence score, also known as a media alert[3] *(>1%)*, and will be repeated iteratively each time a news item relating to the project reaches this weigh.

2.2 Step 2: Defining Stakeholders

Once the process is initiated by a media alert *(media prominence score of >1% for an event relating to the study project),* any stakeholders visibly implicated in the project must be catalogued. This involves comprehensive and exhaustive research

[2] Each week the media prominence score of the 5 most dominating news items in the province of Quebec is offered for free. It should be noted that it is possible to buy services for particular regions or specific countries (agreements with foreign companies).

[3] A news item achieving a general media prominence score that is greater than or equal to 1% is considered to be a key news item. It will probably have been the headline item in one of the main media outlets in Quebec for one day or more. If the item reaches 5%, it can be considered a "media tsunami" (Giasson, Brin and Sauvageau, 2010).

during the first cycle of the process, followed by a complete update during subsequent periods. Identifying stakeholders is a long and tedious task that should be completed by several researchers in order to limit the impact of any bias or any potential oversights. From this step onwards, the involvement of more than one researcher allows a certain amount of triangulation to be implemented in defining a participant as a project stakeholder, thereby increasing the level of confidence in or the validity of results obtained *(deMarrais and Lapan, 2004)*. In addition to participants who are directly involved in or affected by the project, it can be difficult to assess the stakeholder status of participants such as, for example, second-level stakeholders *(a stakeholder of a stakeholder)*.

Specifically, researchers will initially carry out an individual press review based on newspaper articles *(e.g., Le Devoir, La Presse, Le Soleil, Le Progrès-Dimanche, etc.)* written about the study project and published in the weeks preceding the media alert. Based on an external view of the phenomenon being studied, these articles will be discussed and analyzed to identify any stakeholders. Once cataloguing is complete, researchers will compare their results with the aim of filtering and selecting stakeholders. It should be noted that an odd number of researchers helps facilitate mediation. The results of this step are set out as a list *(see* **Table 1***)* to facilitate the subsequent quantitative analysis of stakeholders.

2.3 Step 3: Quantifying Stakeholders using Centrality

Once stakeholders have been identified, it is important, during this step, to develop an analysis resulting in a reasonably detailed understanding of the relationship that exists between each of the listed participants and the project. Once again, depending on what is found during the initial period and during any subsequent periods, this should either be an initial exhaustive analysis or an in-depth update. As before, it is important to use a method designed to limit researcher subjectivity and bias. To this end, we have applied the idea of centrality as a composite indicator, allowing the position taken by each stakeholder in relation to the project to be described at any given moment.

Borrowed from sociometry, this measurement tool defines the position of participants in a network and more specifically, identifies the most important ones *(Hussler and Hamza-Sfaxi, 2012)*.

Various types of centrality are seen throughout the literature, such as degree centrality *(number of direct links)* or intermediate centrality *(number of intermediary positions in the links between network members)* for Freeman *(1979)*, or local centrality *(proximity to other network members)* and global centrality *(centrality across the whole network)* for Huault and Leca *(2009)*. All these types of centrality underline the relative importance of some participants in relation to others in terms of effectiveness *(Baret, Huault et al., 2006)*, authority *(Hussler and Hamza-Sfaxi, 2012)* and especially power *(Huault and Leca, 2009)*, turning the latter into participants that are difficult to ignore *(Burt 1995)*.

The centrality used in this instance is defined by its composite nature, a result of the different criteria taken from those most commonly mentioned in the literature analyzing project stakeholders. We have therefore defined the idea of centrality as a result of the interest, power, position and involvement of each of the stake-
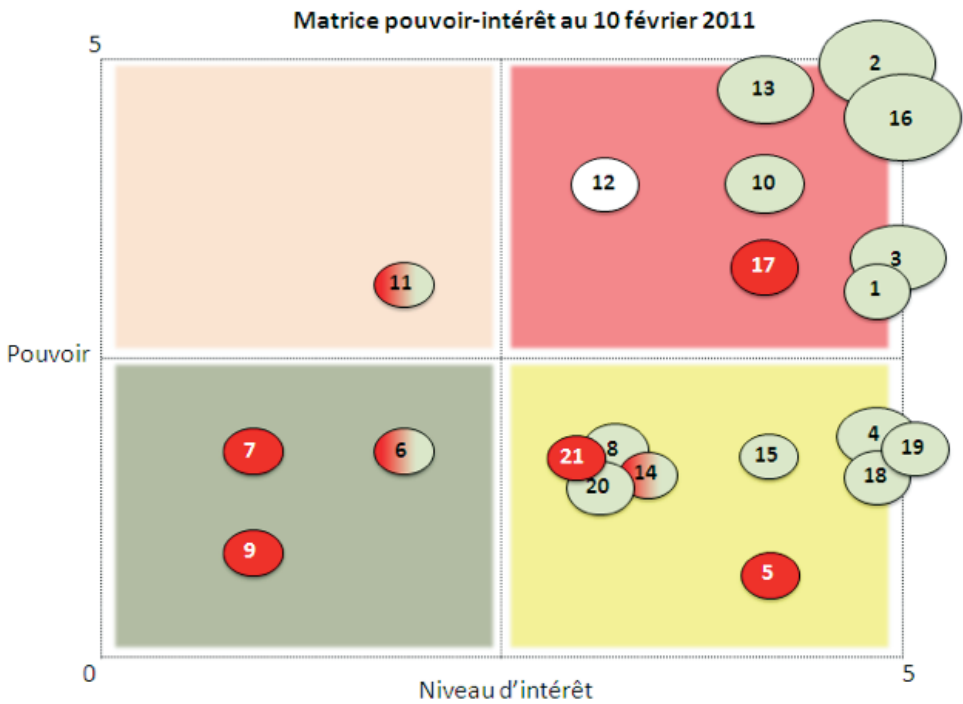
FIGURE 2. *Sample Power/Interest Matrix.*

holders considered. Interest relates to the positive or negative actual or perceived challenges that the project represents for stakeholders. The existence of these challenges for a participant is exactly what makes that participant a stakeholder. Power represents a stakeholder's ability to act or their capacity for positive or negative influence on the project. These two initial criteria constitute two areas traditionally used to build matrices that allow project stakeholders to be positioned graphically *(Newcombe, 2003; Olander and Landin, 2005).* The distribution of stakeholders in relation to the project is described by the concept of positioning regardless of actions taken or not. These actions are assessed as part of the involvement criteria. At any point in time, each stakeholder can be more or less in a position of opposition, support or neutrality in relation to the project while still being more or less significantly involved in implementing actions linked to that position and, therefore, more or less active or passive in relation to the project. The ideas of positioning and involvement are used in some processes proposed within a framework of public policy development *(Varvasovszky and Brugha, 2000)* and in the construction of stakeholder-commitment matrices as suggested in project management literature *(Jepsen and Eskerod, 2009).* Finally, we

believe that stakeholder centrality, a composite criteria built around these four ideas, describes the central or inevitable nature of a stakeholder at any specific moment of a project life cycle. The table set out below *(see* **Table 2***)* summarizes the different dimensions and clarifies the evaluation scale.

Specifically, and as with the preceding step, each researcher starts by weighting each dimension of centrality in accordance with their media review analysis. Once the weightings and centrality scores have been calculated individually, researchers once again compare their results in order to achieve consensus. Researchers and their opinions are once again triangulated to reduce subjectivity bias as much as possible. The remaining step is to clearly identify the most important stakeholders of the period by checking those that achieved an above average score. This third step is set out as an integration table for centrality *(see* **Table 3***)* bringing together the retained stakeholders, their centrality score for each period and an indication of whether they have been taken into account or not during the various periods in accordance with their position in relation to the average. Thus the table is used to gradually build a longitudinal and dynamic view of the stakeholders.

2.4 Step 4: Analysis and Interpretation of the Project Environment

The final step in our approach aims to build a more dynamic view of the stakeholder situation and of their relationships in order to provide researchers with an original insight into the strategies they implement in relation to each other, as well as to allow improved interpretation of data extracted from the field. To achieve this, two tools already known to practitioners and researchers have been used, as part of our own framework of centrality: the power/interest matrix and the sociogram.

As previously mentioned, the power-interest matrix is a common tool available to managers dealing with project stakeholders *(Olinder and Landlin, 2005).* The technique allows stakeholders to be mapped onto a matrix built around the power and interest dimensions. Depending on the position of participants on the matrix, managers can categorize them according to the threat or potential support they represent and thus decide on which actions to implement to defend or promote the project and its progress. However, we would suggest that an additional level of information should be added to this representation by integrating the scores linked to stakeholder position and centrality using appropriate codes.

We believe the image obtained would be more meaningful with regard to the position of the project within its environment.

A sociogram is a tool that psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists and education specialists have used for a long time when analyzing social networks *(Saint-Charles and Mongeau, 2005).* The tool is now used in management research and practice, particularly to study and understand the emergence of informal networks in organizations and projects as well as governance *(Cross, Borgatt et al., 2002; Pryke, 2005).* Essentially, sociograms allow the social structure of a group to be represented by criteria such as attraction, repulsion, dependence or influence, using a diagram made of nodes and the links between these nodes. Once again, we believe the tool can be enriched by adding scores linked to stakeholder positioning and centrality to the diagram using appropriate symbols. This allows the social structure created by stakeholders to be represented and will help clarify any implementation strategies they have used.

From an operational perspective, the power-interest matrix *(see* **Figure 2***)* is constructed using data already produced during the third step of the process. As illustrated in **Figure 2**, stakeholders only need to be positioned in the
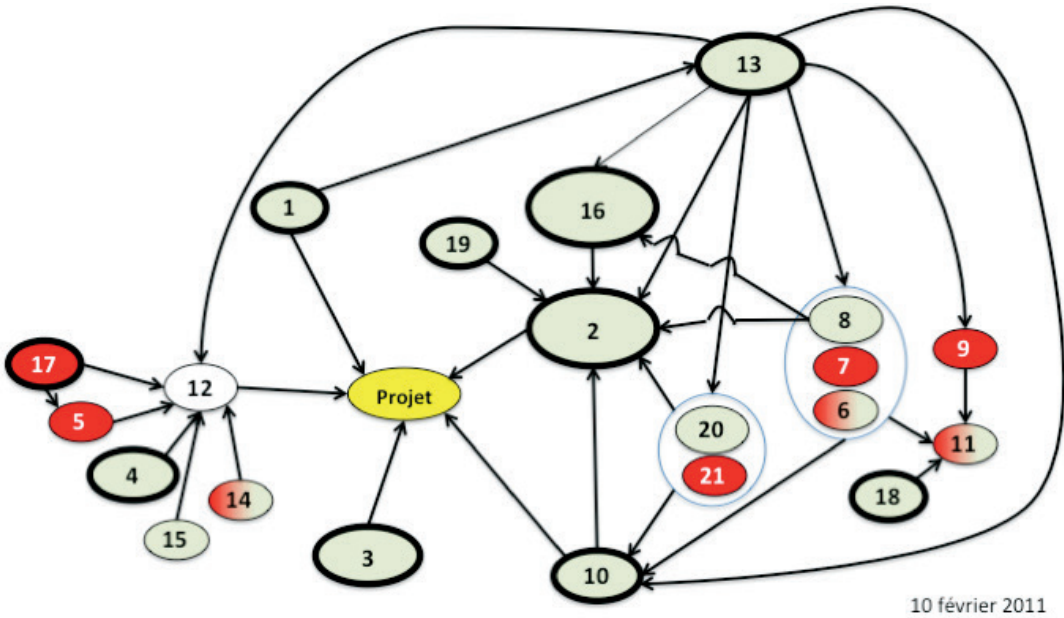

FIGURE 3. *Sample Sociogram.*

correct place by using smaller or larger bubbles in accordance with their centrality, and a more or less dark color to represent their position. As part of the analysis and interpretation, it should be noted that stakeholders located in the upper right quarter seem to be the most unavoidable as they have been allocated the highest level of power and interest. However, to clarify potential strategies more effectively, whether these have actually been or should be implemented, we believe the matrix should be refined to take into account levels of stakeholder centrality as well as their position in relation to the study project.

In turn, creating the sociogram *(see **Figure 3**)* requires a return to secondary data relating to the project and its environment in order to identify existing influential relationships, and their direction, between stakeholders at a specific moment in time. This analysis is carried out using the same operational method as in the previous steps. Individually, each researcher will start by analyzing the relationship dynamics between various participants in accordance with the project and with its general environment. Results are then pooled to cross-reference analyses and results before arriving at a common understanding of the situation. Once again, triangulation ensures a certain amount of objectivity, limiting any potential bias. As illustrated in **Figure 3**, influential relationships identified in this manner are geographically represented using nodes and arrows. As with the power/interest matrix, participant centrality and position are also indicated by the size of the nodes and their color, creating a richer view of stakeholder contexts.

3. Conclusion

This article aimed to present an iterative and longitudinal method within a research framework aiming to locate and explore new avenues of research within the field of project stakeholder analysis. To identify the permanently dynamic dimension of stakeholder analysis, we deliberately sought to avoid the status quo that dominates project management research, which is based on normative and instrumental processes that lead to a simplification or marginalization of complex social and political processes *(Cicmil 2006)*.

The iterative and longitudinal method proposed in this article illustrates the situation of project stakeholders and the influential relationships that exist between them at various key periods within the project life cycle. By combining an interpretative analysis of the power-interest matrix and the sociogram with a more systematic approach based on media prominence score and calculations of centrality, we propose an interesting approach to longitudinal intra-case or inter-case analysis.

We believe this combination can avoid information overload while basing itself on a certain type of codification to bring the level of structure needed for more or less systematic comparisons in time and space. In return, these comparisons could provide any resulting analysis and theory with a dynamic dimension that is currently missing for stakeholders. Moreover, the inspirational "grounded" approach will provide ongoing analyses and results, as well as new research approaches.

authors

Julien Bousquet Ph.D. is a marketing professor at the University of Québec at Chicoutimi (UQAC) since 2003. He earned a Ph.D. in administration at the University of Quebec at Montréal (UQAM). He is actually director of the project management master's degree and director of the Multidisciplinary studies in project management (www.uqa.ca/lemgp) His main areas of research focus principally on relationship project (marketing and communication theories applied to project management) and stakeholders management.

Dr. Christophe Leyrie has been a professor of project management at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi since 2000. He obtained a Master of Science in project management from Université du Québec à Montréal in Québec, Canada, and a Doctorate of Science in business from Université Jean Moulin-Lyon3 in France. He is a member of Multidisciplinary studies laboratory in project management (http://www.uqac.ca/lemgp) where his research interests center on project stakeholder management, organizational politics in projects and project leadership.

Thierno Diallo Ph.D is Professor of Economics at University of Quebec (UQAC) where he has been since 2005. He received a B.A and M.A. from Toulouse School of Economics (TSE) in France and his Ph.D. in economics from the University of Montréal, Canada in 2006. He worked at National Economics Research Associates (NERA, Inc) in Boston (USA) as a Senior Economist. He is currently a member of Multidisciplinary studies laboratory in project management (http://www.uqac.ca/lemgp) where his research interests center on project stakeholder analysis and project financial and economic analysis and impact assessment.

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