

# Project risk as identity threat: explaining the development and consequences of risk discourse in an infrastructure project



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## Abstract

This paper explores the role of social identity threat in risk discourse in an infrastructure project, and the consequences risk discourse has for cooperation between stakeholders. We show that risks posed a threat to the identity of the project team, resulting in a discourse focused on attributing responsibility for risks to outsiders and that polarized their relations with stakeholders. Consequently, the project team tried to eliminate risk by withholding information from the stakeholders they regarded responsible for inflicting risks on the project. This exacerbated intergroup relations and led to conflict. Given that social identity processes affect the way stakeholders discuss and handle risks, these findings are relevant for the design of risk management systems in projects.

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## 1. Introduction

Cost escalation happens in roughly nine out of ten transport infrastructure projects and actual project costs are on average 28% higher than estimated (e.g., Flyvbjerg et al., 2003, p. 640). Delays in schedule are also frequent, resulting in a negative evaluation of project delivery (Kaliba et al., 2009). In this context, risk management is often seen as crucial for project success, because it fosters control over events or situations that may threaten a project (De Bakker et al., 2011). However, most literature on risk management views project risk as a given and pays no attention to how actors subjectively and interactively construct what risk means in a specific social context (Clarke and Short, 1993; Gephart et al., 2009; Stallings, 1990). By

understanding risk construction in complex real-life projects we can assess how the actors themselves partly shape the concept of risk, and how this might lead to problems in project execution.

This paper examines the role social identity plays in the emergence of risk discourse in a complex infrastructure project and what consequences that discourse has on stakeholder cooperation. Two characteristics of this case make it suitable for examination. First, members identified strongly with their project team and resisted interference from other stakeholders. When a new member joined the team at an advanced stage of the project, this became especially tangible. Second, risks were a ‘hot topic’ in this project; there was an ongoing risk discourse. The term discourse refers to the way people talk about a phenomenon (e.g., risk) in actual conversations (Whittle and Mueller, 2011). Our focus is on risk discourse inside a project team and in contrast with other stakeholders in the project.

To understand why groups talk about risks in a certain way, we use Social Identity Theory (e.g., Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1979), which provides a fundamental insight into the way social context affects human cognition, emotion, and behavior. Specifically, we incorporate the notion that when a source of

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identity is threatened, people can actively resist the threat (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2007; Blanz et al., 1998; Petriglieri, 2011). For instance, when groups feel their identity is threatened they may close ranks, become defensive and even hostile toward other groups (Branscombe et al., 2001) to the detriment of intergroup cooperation. Because project success depends largely on the quality of cooperation between groups (Klijn and Teisman, 2003), the concept of identity threat is highly relevant to project management.

Research on the social construction of risk in project management (Zhang, 2011) showed that views on – and descriptions of – risk differ among stakeholders. Variations are based on differences in knowledge, expertise, roles and responsibilities, and interests (Keil et al., 2002; Lim et al., 2011). Whereas these studies merely described the social processes involved in the construction of risk, our study aims to provide thorough insight into the reasons why risks in particular contexts are so sensitive and dealing with them can become such a problem. We expect that when a complex project entails severe political risks (identified as secondary risks), project risks not only threaten the goals of a project, but also present a threat to the social identity of the project team. This in turn influences the way risks are discussed and treated in a project, and the way stakeholders cooperate with one another. For instance, although risk-avoiding behavior among (public and private) project partners has been described earlier (Koppenjan, 2005), this paper amends the prevailing view of risk in the project management literature (Lehtiranta, 2014) by showing more clearly that risk-avoiding behavior may result from the relationship between identity threat and risk discourse.

## 2. Risk and identity threat

In the project management literature, risks are predominantly perceived as threats to project goals (e.g., Hartono et al., 2014). As such, project organizations strive to manage, mitigate, and preferably eliminate risks (Lehtiranta, 2014). Difficulties in attaining project goals are easily associated with poor risk management, which can threaten the confidence and self-esteem of project team members. Because people do not want to be associated with things they consider negative, they will strive to ward off the association between a group they identify with (e.g., the project team) and the negative characteristic (e.g., project risk). To clarify this argument we use the concept of social identity threat.

A central principle of Social Identity Theory (SIT) is that when people identify with a group (their ingroup), they are motivated to uphold a positive view of that group (Tajfel, 1982). When membership of a group is meaningful to a person, this shapes his or her social identity, which can be threatened in various ways, such as intergroup conflict (Branscombe et al., 2001) or negative stereotypes others have of the ingroup (Petriglieri, 2011). We define social identity threat as possible damage to the value, meaning, and/or enactment of group identity (cf. Petriglieri, 2011). This paper focuses on threat to the value of a group's identity, which constitutes the possibility that a source of identity will be less valuable in the future.

Group members are not passive receivers of threat; they are motivated to mitigate or eliminate identity threat, and employ several strategies to do so. If it is impossible to change the actual position of the ingroup, people can resort to a cognitive coping strategy, for instance by emphasizing some more flattering characteristic of their group or by comparing the group with another one lower in status (Blanz et al., 1998). When it is possible to change the position, ingroups can become hostile or directly retaliate against outgroups (Blanz et al., 1998; Fischer et al., 2010).

Our first research question pertains to these possible responses to identity threat. Specifically, we are interested in how the project team responds to the identity threat associated with risks by talking about these risks in a certain way. To answer this question, a useful point of departure is the notion that people and groups can have different views on what constitutes an important project risk (Keil et al., 2002; Lim et al., 2011). For instance, a study on an IT project showed that a strict division of roles and responsibilities between groups resulted in irreconcilable interests and a fragmented view of risks (Lim et al., 2011). This group-specific risk perception led to severe crises in the project. One of the reasons for this was the fact that certain risks were not part of the shared view of risks as they had not been recognized in time. Furthermore, when project managers and users had to categorize risks in an IT project, they identified the risk that the other party was responsible for as the most important (Keil et al., 2002).

Interestingly, this second study not only considered that groups have differing views on risks, but also that they attribute responsibility for risks to different actors and groups. Responsibility attribution is well-known in social psychological research (Fincham and Jaspars, 1980) and social role is an important factor in the process. Individuals base their attribution of responsibility not only on what a person has actually done, but also on their expectations derived from the social role of that person (Hamilton, 1978). The organizational setting also needs consideration to understand how responsibility is attributed (Gailey and Lee, 2005). For instance, members in leadership roles are given more responsibility (Gibson and Schroeder, 2003). Responsibility attribution can also take place when individuals or groups want to divert attention away from their own actions; in this sense, it can be opportunistic or strategic.

Responsibility for risks in the context of project management has been studied extensively (for a review, see Lehtiranta, 2014). It has been established that parties in (infrastructure) projects have different perceptions of the importance of risks and who is – or should be – responsible (Andi, 2006; Rahman and Kumaraswamy, 2002). However, these studies focus on the result of discursive processes: the official, contractual allocation of responsibilities for risks. Exploring the process of responsibility attribution in action, during actual conversations, promises insights into the complex process. Language can subtly (Wigboldus et al., 1999) or blatantly (Ladegaard, 2011) express the relative positions, relationships between, and feelings toward other groups. Moreover, people use language to position their group more positively, which can help them ward off identity threat.

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