



# Project accountability: An exploratory case study using actor–network theory

Ruben Burga<sup>\*</sup>, Davar Rezania

*University of Guelph, 50 Stone Road East, Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1, Canada*

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## Abstract

Enacting accountability in the management of a project is a dynamic process that involves social interaction. We conducted a case study of the enactment of accountability in the renovation project of a historical building at a public university. We used the concept of accountability and actor–network theory to guide data collection and analysis. Using a graphical mapping syntax of the actor–network relationships at three episodes in the life of the project, we find that artifacts are important actors in translating accountability through the disclosure of information. We also find that accountability in this project is distributed at the outset, goes through stages of enactment through ‘translating’ actors and is ultimately reconstructed through the fulfillment of the project objective. Furthermore, accountability is often being enacted spontaneously, not by design.

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## 1. Introduction

It is generally agreed that effective project management enables organizations to carry out large-scale projects on time, on budget and with minimal disruption to the rest of the business. Given the impact of effective project management on organizational performance, there is a focus on understanding factors that are necessary conditions for project success (Jugdev and Müller, 2005; Jugdev et al., 2013; Turner, 2004). Factors related to project governance, such as the effective management of stakeholders, and effective control and monitoring systems are identified as necessary ingredients for project success (Maldonado et al., 2010; Tiwana and Keil, 2009; Turner and Zolin, 2012; Rezania and Ouedraogo, 2013). Furthermore, research in the academic literature is shifting the description of projects from instrumental processes to showing projects as multi-dimensional social processes that integrate elements such

as the management of multiple project portfolios, the consideration of cultural and national diversity, and a greater concern for ethical behavior (Müller and Jugdev, 2012). Accountability is one of the social processes that relate to the effective governance and control of individual and organizational behavior (e.g. Messner, 2009).

The notion that accountability can influence the behavior of project managers and project stakeholders is intriguing because it offers much needed insight into some of the factors that are important to the governance of projects. Following Bovens (2007), we argue that accountability arrangements dictate the availability of information about project management practices and project status. They can stimulate internal reflection and a resulting learning process in project managers and organizations in which those projects are executed (Bovens, 2007). The construct of accountability entails instructions (i.e. policy), feedback pathways, rewards and punishments, monitoring, and a means for adjusting or modifying a system (Baker et al., 2012; Bovens, 1998, 2007; Laughlin, 1987). Consequently, accountability arrangements can prompt project steering committees and other administrative functions to disseminate learning from projects (Bovens, 2007).

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author.

*E-mail addresses:* [rburga@uoguelph.ca](mailto:rburga@uoguelph.ca) (R. Burga), [drezania@uoguelph.ca](mailto:drezania@uoguelph.ca) (D. Rezania).

Yet, the role of accountability in the management of projects is an under-researched area. Leong (1991) presents two accountability arrangements for project management; process accountability versus outcome accountability. He discusses their consequences on project management practice, but offers no empirical data. A review of academic and industry journals (using Web of Science, EBSCO, and ProQuest citation and bibliographic indices) resulted in 95 unique peer-reviewed articles that included both terms of ‘accountability’ and ‘project management’. None of these articles contribute to our understanding of how accountability is enacted in a project. This is especially surprising because organizations are being advised to articulate their own specific high-performance culture, inculcate accountability at all levels and create a culture of ongoing feedback and learning (e.g. Klimoski and Inks, 1990; Lunney, 2011).

In this study, we contribute to the literature on project accountability in two major ways. First, we offer an informed description of the accountability arrangements in the context of managing a single project. To our knowledge, this will be the first empirical study of the enactment of accountability in relation to managing projects. Second, we offer an informed understanding of how accountability is enacted in this project. These contributions have direct implications for improving project management practices, project governance, and increasing the success rate of projects.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Accountability as a general concept

Agency theory explains that agents will maximize their own utility to the extent permitted by the constraints imposed on them, and thus constraints are necessary to control the agents effectively (Jensen and Meckling, 1976). Accountability, as the obligation of account giving (Roberts, 1991) to a party with the power to impose rewards or sanctions, is such a constraint. While there are multiple discipline-specific uses of the notion of accountability (Dubnick and Justice, 2004), they share the generic sociological meaning that denotes the exchange of reasons for a particular conduct (Messner, 2009). Accounts are given to justify what one did or did not do (Roberts and Scapens, 1985). As a constraint on an agency relationship, accountability influences and shapes both individual and organizational behavior. To be held accountable imposes an implicit or explicit constraint on everything people do (Tetlock, 1985). Furthermore, accountability relationships not only impact behavior, but also how people interpret and think about events (Tetlock, 1983). This is because accountability produces an image of ourselves and our activity (Roberts, 1991). It is a morally significant practice, for the reason that “to demand an account from someone is to ask this person to enact discursively the responsibility for her behavior” (Messner, 2009, p. 920).

This generic sociological meaning of accountability underlies both the notion of disclosing accounts to external constituencies such as a forum (e.g. financial accounting or public accountability), and the exchange of accounts within an organization between a forum and a party (e.g. reporting and control routines in which management-related information are communicated)

(Ahrens, 1996; Messner, 2009; Roberts and Scapens, 1985; Sinclair, 1995). The generic accountability process consists of (1) an information phase in which information is provided about conduct and performance by one party, (2) a debate phase in which questions by a forum are answered by that party, and (3) a judgment phase by the forum and the possibility of the imposition of sanctions or offering of rewards (Bovens, 1998; Mulgan, 2003).

The issue of accountability during the conduct of a project is important to consider as it implies reporting and enforcement processes for individuals as they complete their tasks (Leong, 1991). Accountability, in the context of the governance of an organization, has been widely studied from multiple viewpoints (e.g. Ahrens, 1996; Bovens, 2007; Crawford et al., 2008); sometimes as a process, as an outcome or as a predictor in an organizational context (Burga and Rezania, 2015). The project management context, however, differs from an organizational one as interactions in a project occur in the context of a temporary organization (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995; Söderlund, 2012) where relationships are also expected to be temporary.

### 2.2. Accountability in project management

Leong (1991) considers the mutual benefits of considering the concepts of accountability and project management together. This is because accountability “provides a foundation from which the performances of the project participants and, more importantly, the management function can be addressed” (p. 240). Accountability provides an integrated view of project management and project outcome. In Leong’s (1991) view, the project implementation process is essentially an accountability process. The accountability framework distinguishes between performance guarantees and project-outcome guarantees. In other words, accountability for the process of project management runs in parallel with the accountability for the project outcome. Accountability for simply meeting the project outcome within the typical project constraints of time, cost, and functionality is rare. A project manager, however, runs a process that can be measured in some way, independent of the project outcome. This provides a mechanism in which a forum can hold the project manager accountable for their work.

Since Leong’s (1991) article, others are recognizing the importance of accountability for the success of projects. We searched peer-reviewed, English language, academic literature using the Boolean search expressions “‘Project manag\*’ NEAR10 accountability”. Including “‘project manag\*’” as part of the search expression returned only the articles that were related to project management. The operator “\*” was used to include variations of project management or project manager. Adding the term “accountability” limited the search to articles that were more concentrated on accountability. Using ‘NEAR/10’ for the ABI/INFORM database and ‘N10’ for the Business Source Complete database ensured that the papers were mentioning accountability within 10 words of project. After removing duplicates, there were 95 articles. The mentioning of project management and accountability, either jointly or individually, were incidental to the central theme of several

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