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## The effect of rater accountability on performance ratings: A meta-analytic review<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Although rater accountability is recognized as a potentially important characteristic of performance rating contexts, due to discrepant findings in the literature, its effect on performance ratings is unclear. This issue was addressed in the present study using meta-analytic methods to synthesize findings across 35 samples. Consistent with expectations, the effect of rater accountability on performance ratings varied as a function of accountability source, such that ratings were substantively influenced by accountability only when raters were held accountable by the ratee versus a superior. This effect was consistent whether accountability was introduced through identification or justification manipulations. Further, we did not detect any evidence suggesting that findings varied as a function of rating direction or study setting. Implications for performance appraisal research and practice are discussed.

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Rater accountability occurs when another individual holds raters responsible for their performance ratings. Raters experience accountability when they believe that their performance ratings have implications for their social image within their organization (Tetlock, 1985). As such, accountability could occur when, for example, others are made aware of a rater's performance ratings or the rater must explain their ratings to another individual in the organization, such as the ratee or a supervisor (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Roch, 2005). In a performance appraisal context, raters can (and often do) face such accountability pressures (Levy & Williams, 2004). Raters are often expected to communicate performance deficiencies to their ratees for developmental purposes (Ghorpade & Chen, 1995). Many performance appraisal systems allow ratees to review the results of their performance appraisal and request an explanation if they believe that ratings are inaccurate (Bernardin, Hagan, Kane, & Villanova, 1998). Some performance appraisal systems require raters to convene in groups to discuss their ratings and arrive at a consensus (Roch, 2007), while others formally evaluate raters based on their performance ratings (Bretz, Milkovich, & Read, 1992; Ferris, Munyon, Basik, & Buckley, 2008). Indeed, various features of the rating context possess potential to confront raters with such accountability pressures.

Note also that, although accountability appears to be the norm in many performance appraisal systems, it is not a universal phenomenon. Organizations may collect performance ratings that are not shared with ratees, for example, for the purposes of assessing performance potential or promotability (Cederblom, 1991) or for research purposes (e.g., as criterion measures in validation studies; see Cleveland, Murphy, & Williams, 1989). Similarly, some performance appraisal systems pool ratings across anonymous raters (Ghorpade, 2000); a circumstance where rater accountability would be low, as raters are not personally

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connected to their ratings. Furthermore, although often treated as a dichotomy in the literature (i.e., accountable vs. unaccountable), based on our review of existing evidence, we describe different characteristics of accountability manipulations that could impact the effect on ratings. That is, although accountability characteristics are thought to impact performance ratings, could different types of accountability characteristics have different effects?

The effect of accountability on performance ratings has been the subject of Human Resource Management (HRM) and Industrial-Organizational (I-O) Psychology research for some time (e.g., Hauenstein, 1992; Sharon & Bartlett, 1969). Performance evaluation models highlight accountability as a contextual characteristic that is theorized to impact performance rating scores (e.g., Levy & Williams, 2004). At present, a large body of research exists examining the effect of rater accountability on performance ratings. However, findings from existing research vary greatly. For example, studies have reported effects of accountability on performance ratings that are both positive (e.g., Antonioni, 1994; Roch & McNall, 2007) and negative (e.g., Guruswamy, 2001; Smith, 2012). In addition to differences in directionality, the magnitudes of effect sizes have also varied greatly between studies. Beyond these concerns, such studies also vary with respect to the characteristics of rater accountability mechanisms (such as accountability source, discussed later) and study characteristics, both of which might interact with rater accountability to influence performance ratings. Therefore, despite the existing volume of research, the effect of rater accountability on performance ratings remains unclear. This represents a substantial gap in our knowledge of the contextual determinants of performance ratings in organizations. This issue is particularly important to consider, because as mentioned, some degree of rater accountability is often a component of performance appraisal systems.

The purpose of the present study is to address this deficit by means of a quantitative literature review. Indeed, results from a number of well-crafted field and laboratory studies concerning the effect of accountability on performance ratings have been published, though given the size of the literature and diversity of findings, it is not possible to cohesively interpret these findings without meta-analytic synthesis. This point was highlighted in Glass (1976) who noted that results from a large number of studies “can no more be grasped in our traditional narrative discursive review than one can grasp the sense of 500 test scores without the aid of techniques for organizing, depicting and interpreting data” (p. 4). By applying meta-analytic methods to account for the effect of statistical artifacts and substantive moderators on variation among effect sizes reported across studies, we will help to glean generalizable conclusions from this relatively large and disparate literature. Note that these particular issues cannot be overcome by further primary investigations, as their findings would likewise be impacted by statistical artifacts (Schmidt & Hunter, 2014) and must still be jointly interpreted along with the rest of the literature – an initiative that cannot be adequately carried out without the application of meta-analytic methods (Glass, 1976; Valentine, Pigott, & Rothstein, 2010). Considering these points, we argue that meta-analysis is an appropriate analytic framework for addressing the issues faced in the existing rater accountability literature.

In the following sections, we discuss performance appraisal in greater depth. We then discuss theories of accountability and form hypotheses concerning the effect of accountability on performance ratings. Finally, we discuss the potential role of study and appraisal system characteristics as moderators.

## 1. Performance appraisal in organizations

Performance evaluation is a central task in organizations, as performance ratings are used for a number of important purposes (e.g., administrative decision-making, employee development, documentation; Aguinis, 2013; Cleveland et al., 1989). Performance ratings can be understood from an in situ perspective (Ferris et al., 2008; Fletcher, 2001) whereby the organizational context influences performance ratings through its effect on rater goals and motivations (Murphy, 2008). In other words, when rating performance, rater motivations and ultimately performance ratings are influenced by the organizational context in which the rater is embedded (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995; Tziner, Murphy, & Cleveland, 2005). Such a perspective recognizes that raters may pursue goals other than accuracy, such as preserving interpersonal relationships or fostering favorable outcomes for oneself and ratees (Harris, 1994), often by assigning performance ratings that are too high (Bretz et al., 1992; Spence & Keeping, 2011).

Murphy and Cleveland (1995) note that performance ratings can be influenced by contextual variables that can be classified as either distal or proximal. *Distal* variables are those that influence performance ratings indirectly, such as the organizational climate or culture, while *proximal* variables are those that influence performance ratings directly, such as rater-ratee interpersonal relationships or consequences of performance ratings. In a literature review, Levy and Williams (2004) qualitatively synthesized a large body of evidence suggesting that proximal contextual characteristics influenced performance ratings. This review distinguished between proximal variables that influence how performance ratings are carried out (*process proximal variables*) and those that deal with the configuration of the appraisal system itself (*structural proximal variables*). In a subsequent review of the performance rating context, Ferris et al. (2008) noted that “cognitive, social and relationship, affective and emotional, and political and relationship-based components of the work context reflect an intricately intertwined and integrative contextual background against which performance evaluation needs to be perceived and interpreted” (p. 150).

In addition to these qualitative reviews, some research has meta-analytically summarized the effects of organizational context variables on performance ratings. For example, Jawahar and Williams (1997) used meta-analysis to clarify the effect of performance appraisal purpose on performance ratings. Prior to the Jawahar and Williams review, there was great disparity in this literature, and the effect of performance appraisal purpose on performance ratings was unclear. Results of this meta-analysis provided robust evidence suggesting that performance ratings are higher when collected for administrative purposes as compared to research/developmental purposes. As noted earlier, a similar state of affairs is currently present in the rater accountability literature, which we aim to address in our meta-analysis.

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