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Individual accountability

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2. Decomposing and compiling the phenomenon of individual accountability: the four factors in relation to task commitment²

2.1 Introduction

Organizations exert accountability pressures in order to influence their members' attitudes and behaviors (Schlenker, Weigold & Doherty, 1991; Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin & Dardis, 2002). Frink and Klimoski (1998, p. 9) define accountability as a: "... perceived need to justify or defend a decision or action to some audience which has potential reward and sanction power". Individual accountability is a fundamental principle of organization theory (Frink & Ferris, 1998); it has been a part of many frameworks in management and social psychology literature because of its impact on interactions between the members of an organization. Interpersonal expectations are at the core of accountability as the link between the individual and the institutional level (Frink & Klimoski, 2004).

According to some authors accountability should not be viewed as a unitary construct (Frink & Ferris, 1998; DeZoort, Harrison & Taylor, 2006; O'Connell, 2005). The phenomenon is likely to consist of a number of interacting factors which cannot be captured by a one-dimensional scale or just one manipulation (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). The studies that do measure accountability as a multi-dimensional construct (Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin & Dardis, 2002; DeZoort, Harrison & Taylor, Barreto & Ellemers, 2000) do not share quite the same opinion about what exactly the dimensions should be. Sedikides et al. manipulate account-

² Partly based on Emans, B., Turusbekova, N., Broekhuis, M., Molleman, E. (2004). Psychologische aansprakelijkheid en werkmotivatie: goal setting in een sociale context/Psychological responsibility and work motivation: goal-setting in the social context. *Gedrag en Organisatie*. 17(6), 448-459

giving, audience status, identifiability and evaluation expectancy. DeZoort et al. distinguish between three levels of accountability: review, justification and feedback. Barreto & Ellemers measure identifiability and account-giving. More often accountability is measured in a singular way, such as in a study of the impact of accountability on in-role performance and organizational citizenship behavior by Ricketta and Landerer (2002) and on organizational learning by Popper and Lipshitz (2000). In a few experiments, where accountability was manipulated by means of one manipulation, it appeared to influence pro-social behavior (Barreto & Ellemers, 2000) conformity (Quinn & Schlenker, 2002) and risk-taking (Weigold & Schlenker, 1991). Quinn and Schlenker point out that accountability does not universally boost motivation and performance, for instance it does not always have a positive impact on decision-making. Thus, many studies have shown that accountability appears to influence various aspects of an individual's behavior in the work context. However, there is no unequivocal agreement about what the accountability factors are and how they may influence each other, therefore their motivational contribution remains unclear.

Operationalization of accountability as a complex phenomenon that consists of a number of motivating factors seems to be a viable approach for reevaluating its effect on vital organizational outcomes, such as task commitment. Commitment, a willingness to persist in a particular course of action (Cooper-Hakim & Viswesvaran, 2005), is considered to be a positive factor from the perspective of both the employee and the organization (Romzek, 1989). It is known to increase effort (McCaul, Hinsz & McCaul, 1987) and is related to a decrease in employee turn over (Porter, Steers, Mowday & Boulian, 1974). Therefore, an investigation of the relationship between the accountability factors and task commitment is a useful addition to the accountability literature.

The objective pursued in this chapter is two-fold. The first is to examine accountability as a phenomenon consisting of a number of individual motivational factors that interact and strengthen each other's impact. Here and elsewhere we shall use the term *compilation* of constituents to indicate strengthening interactions. A compilation means that the combinations of accountability factors are stronger motivators than each factor on its own or a sum of those factors. Thus, there will be

grounds to proclaim that accountability is a multi-dimensional entity rather than a number of constituents with additive motivational impacts. If zero or negative interaction effects rather than positive ones surface, the results would point to a lack of a compilation. If zero interactions are found, the constituting factors evidently play a motivational role independently of each other. That means that each of them adds to an employee's motivation in their own singular way and the contributions of the different constituents are simply 'piled up' on each other. In case negative interactions are found, one constituent weakens the contribution of the other constituent, leaving it no room to do its motivational job.

The second objective of this study is to deepen the understanding of the motivational properties of accountability in relation to task commitment. To crystallize the dimensions of accountability, we examine the definitions and operationalization from existing accountability literature and look into the exact motivational mechanisms. Then the phenomenon is compiled back into a model, which reflects interactivity between the accountability factors, in relation to task commitment.

2.2 Accountability factors

Accountability implies some sort of 'agency' on the part of the accountable individual, which is based on the relations of this individual with some audience. For this reason the term *agent* will be used here to denote the individual whose behavior is being observed (Frink & Klimoski, 1998; Cummings & Anton, 1990; Adelberg & Batson, 1978). The evaluators comprise a social context of the agent, a so-called *audience* that has particular expectations, observes the agent and evaluates his or her behavior. Below are the motivational components, they are embedded in the definitions of accountability and/or are devised from various conceptualizations of the phenomenon.

First of all, the object of accountability has to be clear. The type of accountability that is the subject of our studies is accountability for tasks that have to be carried out according to prescribed standards. Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy and Doherty (1994) and Quinn & Schlenker (2002) point out the necessity to have concrete standards or salient prescriptions for performance. The standards reflect the preferences and performance expectations, and as the accountability literature asserts, in order to motivate an agent, it is important to make

unambiguous what is expected (Frink & Klimoski, 1998; Frink & Ferris, 1998; Cummings & Anton, 1990; Klimoski & Inks, 1990). This is also in line with the goal setting theory of motivation (Locke & Latham, 1990). Thus, *task clarity* appears to be a key constituent of accountability. Task clarity reduces ambiguity by making explicit what exactly needs to be accomplished.

The next important accountability component is *feedback*. An agent can infer feedback from carrying out the task and evaluating the results of his/her own activity. Although some feedback may be extracted from performing and evaluating the task itself (Locke & Latham, 1990), considerable feedback tends to be received from external audiences (Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Feedback “represents the strongest level of accountability pressure because it specifies an acute, consequential event where explicit direct reaction is forthcoming from an authoritative audience” (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999, p. 378). Feedback in the conditions of accountability is a manifestation of the importance of the task at hand, and therefore a source of motivation to try to perform the task well. It informs the agent about the outcome of the evaluation and the monitoring and it lets him or her take corrective steps if these are necessary. Feedback and task clarity are related to the goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990). Since accountability is also a social influence variable (Frink & Ferris, 1998), we distinguish two other accountability factors, which spring out of the social context.

According to Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy and Doherty (1994) the individual’s responsibility for tasks or actions is an adhesive that binds together the components of accountability. This responsibility does not automatically arise from the task itself. Instead, as a social context factor, it is defined by the broader organizational needs and assigned to the agent. Accountability implies that the agent’s responsibilities should be distinguishable from those of others. This variable, *personalized responsibility*, implies that responsibility for a task is unique and belongs exclusively to the agent, rather than being dispersed, shared or undefined. It underlines the role expectations linked to the agent and delineates the agent’s responsibilities. Being an outline of where one’s responsibility begins and where it ends, personalized responsibility makes an individual more identifiable. Identifiability means expecting to be assessed and to have to justify a decision or action (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Barreto & Ellemers, 2000; Sedikides et al. 2002; DeZoort, Harrison & Taylor, 2006). For instance, in the experiments of Sedikides

et al. (2002) subjects who felt identifiable reported the highest subjective perception of accountability, therefore it was recognized that accountability and identifiability are linked. How personalized responsibility is experienced depends, at least partly, on the accountable agent him or herself, while the other social context factor is more closely related to the others in an organization, and the power they have to influence the agent.

The social context side of accountability implies having to justify one's actions to others (Brtek & Motowidlo, 2002; Klimoski & Inks, 1990; Tetlock, 1983). An indispensable part of this context is created by parties or audiences that monitor and evaluate the agent and have the power to sanction or reward the agent, based on the evaluation (Cummings & Anton, 1990; Mitchell, 1993; Frink & Klimoski, 1998). We term this accountability component *audience power*. The audience can be comprised of colleagues, supervisors, clients, suppliers, and others that may be endowed with the power to influence the agent. The combination of the expectations together with the power of the audience makes the evaluation meaningful to the agent. Due to this combination, the positive or negative consequences for the agent are contingent upon this evaluation. Audience power is the fourth and last component of accountability that we distinguish based on the existing literature. In our conceptualization, accountability consists, thus, of four factors: task clarity, feedback, personalized responsibility and audience power. However, it remains to be answered, if accountability should really be considered as a self-standing concept, based on joint effects of its factors, or a bundle of performance management concepts, which are unrelated to each other in their impacts on employees' motivation.

If in practice the phenomenon of accountability works, as its definitions suggest it should, then in addition to the role played separately by the constituents of accountability, we must be able to observe the joined effects of these constituents. We expect the two factors that originate from the social context: personalized responsibility and audience power, to moderate the relationships between task commitment and the two task-related accountability factors: task clarity and feedback. Audience power represents a strong social context and implies existence of social norms, accepted by the agent. Personalized responsibility represents internalized social norms. In this sense, personalized responsibility is comparable to having oneself as a powerful audience. Both audience power and personalized

responsibility are normative and are the products of a social context. They are expected to act as strengthening moderators to task clarity and feedback, which are the more conventional motivators, rooted in goal-setting. The value of the accountability phenomenon is in emphasizing the social context of work, where prominent social context factors positively influence the relationships between the two task-related factors and task commitment. The detailed interactions are discussed in the model below.

2.3 Model and hypotheses

The model (Figure 2.1) starts with a series of hypotheses that assume a direct positive motivational impact of the accountability factors on task commitment. Audience power and personalized responsibility in our model are assumed to be equally motivating as task clarity and feedback. The novelty of the model is in the series of interactions hypotheses. Particularly we expect that audience power and personalized responsibility will act as moderators, strengthening the relationships between task clarity and task commitment and between feedback and task commitment. Below, first the direct motivational effects are presented (hypotheses 1-4), thereafter, the mechanisms leading to interactions are detailed (hypotheses 5a to 5d).

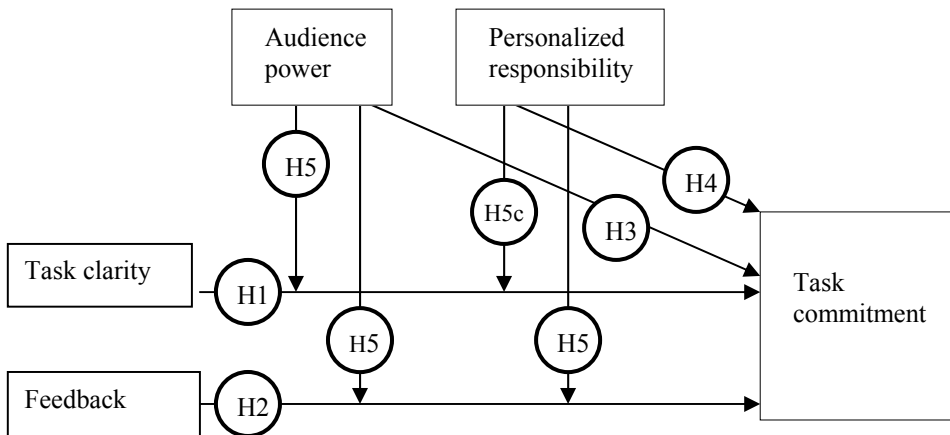


Figure 2.1: Research model (1)

Allen, Freeman, Russell, Reizenstein and Rentz (2001) in a study of organizational downsizing and work attitudes found that clarity promotes

organizational commitment by means of reducing uncertainty and anxiety. By means of clarity an agent is made aware of what is expected to be accomplished. This reduces ambiguity and facilitates identification with the task. Based on these motivational properties of clarity in general, we expect that task clarity will be positively related to task commitment. Hypothesis 1: *task clarity is positively related to task commitment.*

Feedback is an important motivator since communicating and behaving supportively improves the employees' commitment (Locke & Latham, 2002). Feedback lets them know whether their performance has either met or failed to meet the expectations. Feedback allows the agents to position themselves in relation to whether they perform well and in accordance with expectations or not, and if necessary take corrective steps. It allows the agents to be more knowledgeable about the results of their task activities. Besides, it reveals the interest of others in the tasks performed by the agents and gives an opportunity to learn from the reaction of others. Feedback leads to various manifestations of commitment as described in the performance cycle of Locke and Latham (1990), in the study of organizational commitment by Ivancevich and McMahon (1982) and in a study of team goal commitment by Hoegl and Parboteeah (2006). Knowledge and encouragement received by the agents through feedback are expected to positively influence their task commitment. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is: *feedback is positively related to task commitment.*

The next factor, audience power, is strongly rooted in the social context. The role of the audience is to evaluate the agent's performance and determine rewards or punishment, depending on the evaluation. The evaluation can be made by an officially authorized audience (e.g. superiors) as well as by any unofficial one (e.g. peers), provided that the opinion of this audience is important to the agent. The audience's authority and the "importance of the outcomes that [the employees] expect as a result of working" (Locke & Latham, 2002, p. 707) are the factors that facilitate the employees' commitment. Besides, being subject to the evaluation of an audience must prompt the agent to be more emotionally involved in the task, or to attribute more importance to it. These feelings of involvement and importance make sure the agent becomes committed to the task. On the basis of these arguments we have derived hypothesis 3: *audience power is positively related to task commitment.*

Personalized responsibility, i.e. an exclusive duty to deal with or take care of a task, is the next factor implied in the definition of individual accountability. In a study of decision making by Kiesler, Kiesler and Pallak (as cited in Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1982) personal responsibility proved to raise commitment. Personalized responsibility is expected to have a positive effect on task commitment, as the agents will feel empowered by the responsibility that is delegated and the tasks that are entrusted to them. Simultaneously, personalized responsibility reduces the chances that someone will free-ride and take credit for achievements of the other responsible agents. Hence, hypothesis 4 is: *personalized responsibility is positively related to task commitment.*

The interaction hypotheses, presented below, are based on an idea that since accountability as a holistic phenomenon is expected to be associated positively with commitment (Erdogan *et al.*, 2004), its composite factors should reinforce each other's impact on commitment. A powerful audience will increase the link between task clarity and task commitment. The task implementation is made easier and more straightforward for the agent by means of clarity. Observation and evaluation by a powerful audience gives the task salience and will be perceived as more justified and fair when the agent is presented with a clear task, since rewards or punishment depends on the outcome of this evaluation. Stated negatively, a powerful audience that rewards or punishes an agent, while the agent does not have a clear picture of the task, may decrease task commitment or even cause resentment. Hypothesis 5a: *audience power strengthens the effect of task clarity on task commitment.*

The next pair of factors which is expected to interact is comprised of feedback and audience power. Feedback and audience power together form a strong alliance. Feedback coming from a powerful audience is more salient than feedback from an audience without any or with little power. When feedback comes from a powerful audience it is taken more seriously. It makes the task stand out and gives it importance and significance. Therefore commitment to such a task is expected to be stronger than commitment to task with feedback from a less powerful and significant audience. Hypotheses 5b: *audience power strengthens the effect of feedback on task commitment.*

The effect of task clarity on task commitment is expected to be stronger if an agent is personally responsible for the task. Once an agent becomes committed to

the task due to its clarity, personalized responsibility would ensure that the task receives necessary attention and is not given up easily. A clear task provides a straightforward cue about where to apply effort, while personalized responsibility for the task motivates the agent to persist and stay focused on the task. Implementation of such a task is more promising to be successful. A reward in this case will belong to the responsible agent, which is another motivator to be loyal and committed to the task. Hypothesis 5c: *personalized responsibility strengthens the effect of task clarity on task commitment.*

The last pair of accountability factors that are expected to strengthen each other's impact on task commitment are feedback and personalized responsibility. Feedback is expected to be more effective when an agent is the owner of the responsibility for the task rather than when he or she is not personally responsible. Feedback about the task for which the person is personally responsible is more likely to be received with attention and interest by the agent. This kind of involvement in the task is akin to task commitment. The opposite is also true, when feedback is given about a task, but the task is not the sole responsibility of the agent, the agent is less likely to pay attention to feedback or appreciate it in the same way. Hypothesis 5d: *personalized responsibility strengthens the effect of feedback on task commitment.*

2.4 Method

2.4.1 Participants

This study was carried out within an international company, established in 1947, operating in the energy field, with headquarters in the Netherlands. The company had undergone some structural changes as a result of which it became more centralized. At the time of the study the company had 2125 employees. To participate in the study, each 3rd employee was chosen from an alphabetic list until 590 persons were selected. The response rate was 43.5% (257 respondents). 10.1% of them were women. The average age of the participants was 44 years. In terms of these parameters, the sample was representative of the company. The average tenure among the participants was 19 years, and the average number of years working in the current position was 6 years.

2.4.2 Procedures

The selected employees were invited by email to fill out a web-based questionnaire. After two weeks a reminder was sent. The questionnaire was available in two languages: in English and in Dutch. In addition to the questionnaire, 25 employees selected at random were interviewed in order to be able to illustrate any distinct patterns that might appear and to supplement the questionnaire data with more profound qualitative information. Prior to being administered, both instruments were piloted with persons in and outside the company. A steering committee was formed consisting of several staff members who belonged to different departments of the company. The committee assisted in the fine-tuning of the questions and concepts used in the study.

2.4.3 Measures

First, the respondents were asked to identify and shortly describe one particular important task. The rest of the questions that followed were about this task. All items of the questionnaire were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale from “1 - strongly disagree” to “7 - strongly agree”. Whenever possible, existing scales were used. The list of scale items in English can be found in Appendix A and in Dutch in Appendix B. Task clarity was measured by means of four items of Locke and Latham (1990) *e.g.* “The task is clear to me” ($\alpha = 0.89$). Feedback from supervisors and colleagues was measured, again by using five items based on Locke and Latham, *e.g.* “I get enough feedback indicating how I am performing this task” ($\alpha = 0.82$). Audience power was measured by six items, *e.g.* “I really care about what my co-workers think about my performance of this task” ($\alpha = 0.74$). Personalized responsibility was measured by six items, *e.g.* “For this task I am the one and only responsible” ($\alpha = 0.59$). Task commitment was measured by means of five items based on Hollenbeck, Klein and O’Leary (1989) and Hackman and Oldham (1975), including a reverse item “Quite frankly, I don’t care about this tasks” (Hollenbeck *et al.*) ($\alpha = 0.75$). The topics of the interview guide were similar to those of the web-based questionnaire.

2.5 Results

The reliability coefficients, the means, the standard deviations and the inter-correlations of all variables are presented in Table 2.1.

Table2.1 Descriptive Statistics, Intercorrelation Matrix

Variable	α	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Task clarity	0.89	6.28	0.72					
2. Feedback	0.82	4.90	1.13	.18**				
3. Audience power	0.74	5.08	0.92	.00	.37**			
4. Personalized responsibility	0.59	4.64	1.36	.22**	.10	.02		
5. Task commitment	0.75	6.30	0.65	.36**	.34**	.37**	.26**	

Note: N=256; ** p < 0.01 (2-tailed).

To test the main and interaction effects we followed the procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1991): (1) we centered the predictors around their overall mean to reduce multicollinearity between these variables and their interaction term, (2) we multiplied both variables to calculate their interaction term, (3) we included the ‘main’ effects in a regression model to prevent a biased estimate of the interaction, and (4) in order to depict a significant interaction effect, we computed two regression equations by inserting the values of both predictors that lay plus and minus 1 SD from their means. Results of the multiple regression analysis are shown in Table 2.2.

Table2.2: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Task Commitment

Hypothesis	Independent variables	β
5a	Clarity (A)	0,35***
	Audience power (B)	0,26***
	A x B	-0,26***
5b	Feedback (A)	0,23***
	Audience power (B)	0,24***
	A x B	-0,14**
5c	Clarity (A)	0,26***
	Personalized responsibility (B)	0,10***
	A x B	-0,09**
5d	Feedback (A)	0.31***
	Personalized responsibility (B)	0.22***
	A x B	-0.10*

Note: N=257; * p \leq .10. ** p \leq .05. *** p \leq .01 (2-tailed).

There is a significant positive correlation between task clarity and task commitment (Table 2.1) as well as a main positive effect of task clarity on task commitment, which is presented in Table 2.2. As one of the interviewees indicated “*Clear tasks and targets give me an objective, something that I have to achieve at the end of the year, I like this kind of feeling, it’s pushing me to do those things*”. This supports hypothesis 1.

In hypothesis 2 we predicted a positive relationship between feedback and task commitment. There is indeed a significant positive correlation between these two variables (Table 2.1) and a significant positive main effect of feedback on task commitment (Table 2.2). This relationship is illustrated by the following quotes: “*...if I don’t receive proper feedback, I feel lost*” and “*... constructive feedback motivates me, even if it’s negative feedback it can be passed across as constructive*”. Thus, hypothesis 2 is confirmed.

Table 2.1 shows that audience power is positively related to task commitment: “*Although most of the time my supervisor is in the office while I’m in the field, I take his opinion seriously and feel committed*”, - said one of the employees. This illustrates the positive relationship between audience power and task commitment obtained from the multiple regression analysis (Table 2.2), which supports hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 4: ‘personalized responsibility is positively related to task commitment’, has been supported by responses such as: “*when responsibility is shared, it’s likely that people will start thinking: “oh well, somebody else will do that”, and as a result nobody feels responsible anymore*” and “*...getting the exclusive responsibility for a job makes me feel that they trust me and that I should strive to do the job as good as I can*”. Table 2.2 shows a significant positive main effect of personalized responsibility on task commitment. These results support hypothesis 4.

The results of the regression analyses (Table 2.2) show that all four interaction terms are significant, however instead of the hypothesized positive interactions, negative interactions surface. These results are contrary to hypotheses 5a, 5b, 5c and 5d. In all four analyses we see a more or less similar pattern of results: two main effects, both with a positive weight and an interaction effect with a negative sign. To avoid redundancy we will only display the results of one regression analysis graphically (Figure 2.2).

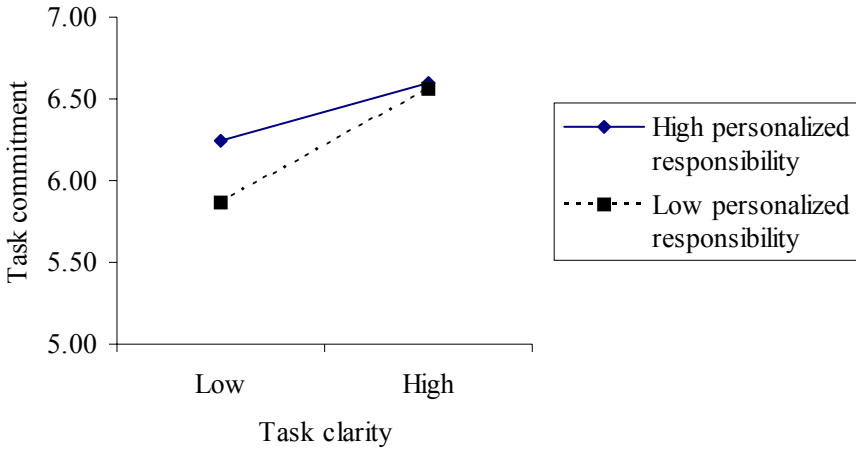


Figure 2.2: Task commitment regressed on low and high task clarity for high and low audience power.

Both lines in Figure 2.2 go up, which shows the positive main effect of task clarity. The clearer the task the more the employee feels committed to it. The line indicating ‘high personalized responsibility’ lies above that of ‘low personalized responsibility’, which demonstrates the positive main effect of personalized responsibility. Higher personalized responsibility is associated with stronger task commitment of the employees. The line indicating low personalized responsibility, however, is steeper than that of high personalized responsibility exposing the significant interaction effect with a negative weight; the higher the degree of personalized responsibility, the weaker the relationship between task clarity and task commitment. If there is a high level of task clarity, personalized responsibility contributes very little to task commitment. Likewise, if there is a high degree of personalized responsibility, task clarity only marginally contributes to task commitment. Overall it seems that whenever task clarity is low, personalized responsibility can substitute it, or compensate for the lack of it, and whenever personalized responsibility is low, task clarity can substitute or compensate for the lack of personalized responsibility. Similar conclusions can be derived as regards the other three significant interaction terms.

Below are some quotes to illustrate the possible weakening effect of social

context factors on the relationship between task clarity with task commitment and feedback with task commitment. A weakening effect of audience power on the relationship between task clarity and task commitment (hypothesis 5a) can be illustrated by the following quote: *“I am committed to this task... the task is very clear, but I don’t feel the repercussions will be severe if I don’t do it”*. The next quote illustrates the interactions between audience power and feedback, referred to in hypothesis 5b: *“I get formal feedback from my boss at least four times a year, and often in between. Besides, I have a lot of contacts with my clients and of course in the team, where things are discussed in an informal way, merely to give each other advice. I do not depend on my clients, while I depend to some extent on my boss... I feel very committed”*. This quote is from a respondent who receives a great deal of feedback, but does not experience pressure of the high audience power, and still feels strongly committed. Results depicting the interaction between personalized responsibility and feedback, related to hypothesis 5c, can be illustrated by: *“My department has made me exclusively responsible for this job. My supervisors don’t have to specify this job in further detail because while doing my work I will make sure that I obtain sufficient insight to fulfill my tasks properly”*. An indication of the impact of personalized responsibility on the relationship between feedback and task commitment (hypothesis 5d) surfaces in the following quote: *“I am the only one who is responsible for this job, and because it is a rather specialized job, there are no colleagues who are able to provide specific feedback...but if I do not deliver the right output it will have huge consequences for many parties involved, and therefore I am highly committed to do my job well”*. The quotes as well as the outcomes of the regression analyses indicate a weakening or a possible substitution of the effects of social context variables on task commitment by the variables originating from goal setting.

2.6 Discussion

This research simultaneously addressed two related objectives: (1) investigating the nature of the main and (2) the interactive effects of the accountability factors in relation to task commitment. The four accountability elements in our model are positively associated with task commitment, which leads to the first conclusion that all four elements represent motivational factors. Although our conceptualization and measurement of accountability are somewhat different from what already

exists in the accountability literature, our findings are in congruence with the literature that refers to motivational properties of accountability (Frink & Klimoski, 1998; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Next, it appeared that there are significant negative interactions between social context factors (audience power and personalized responsibility) and factors related to goal-setting (task clarity and feedback). Thus, contrary to our interaction hypotheses the two categories of motivational factors do not reinforce each other's impact on task commitment. Instead, it appears that when clarity and feedback are hardly present, audience power and personalized responsibility play a motivational role, and vice versa. The relationships between task clarity and task commitment and between feedback and task commitment are weakened by strong personalized responsibility and by strong audience power. Therefore, audience power and personalized responsibility can be seen as a compensation for a lack of task clarity and feedback. It is possible that in certain conditions audience power and personalized responsibility substitute task clarity and feedback or cancel out the impact of these factors. An example of such a canceling effect is when a powerful audience gives feedback and it causes an outcome, contrary to the desired increase in commitment, such as irritation or an action in direct contradiction to the prescriptions. This is known as reactance - a motivational arousal caused by a threat to or elimination of particular behavioral freedom (Brehm, 1989; Brehm & Brehm, 1981, Brehm 1966). Certain freedom may be constricted by the presence of the powerful audience with sanction power. In this case, task clarity and feedback would only be beneficial under low audience power and low personalized responsibility and vice versa.

The substitution effect findings seem to be consistent with some of the recent developments in the accountability studies. For instance, Frink and Klimoski (2004) show that accountable agents can be proactive in shaping their duties and can function as catalysts rather than merely accepting a premeditated set of expectations. A possible explanation is that whenever clarity is low, employees who feel personally responsible or experience a high level of audience pressure, are as a consequence stimulated to "create their own clarity" by developing their own personal benchmarks in an effort to show behavior for which they know they can be held accountable.

Some limitations of this study should be mentioned, such as self-report measurement, a cross-sectional design and a possibility of a ceiling effect. The

latter is a methodological artifact meaning that the variable scores have reached a limit or a “ceiling” and therefore could not take on higher values. This could be another possible explanation of the negative interaction effects between the variables. Since task commitment scores are very high, the ceiling effect may have reduced the steepness of the slopes depicting the interactions, leaving room for substitution patterns only.

Whether the negative interactions are, or are not the product of the ceiling effect only, in our study the two categories of motivational factors in fact do not reinforce each other’s impact on task commitment. This means that strengthening all of the accountability factors simultaneously may not be associated with higher motivation. In other words, in relation to task commitment, accountability could be considered as simply a number of factors, each of them doing its motivational job. As a consequence, if combined, they weaken each other’s motivational impact. If the substitution between the factors does not apply only to the sample we studied, but appears to be a general pattern, this will have implications for the accountability theory at large. If there is no reinforcement among its separate elements, discourse on individual accountability might need to reconsider its prime object of discussion, as accountability may appear to be simply a combination of well established motivating factors, rather than an emergent motivating factor in its entirety. Follow-up research is thus necessary to answer with certainty whether individual accountability is a new emerging concept or just a conglomerate of old notions. To that end, an investigation of the effects of the accountability variables on task commitment in a different task environment is deemed useful. In this regard, chapter 4 presents studies conducted in two different organizations, one private active in water management and the other one semi-governmental working in the field of justice.

The study reflected in this chapter has a definite practical value. The implications of the positive direct effects of all accountability variables are straightforward: they all contribute to task commitment. This can and should be exploited by the organizational behavior practitioners in an attempt to achieve improvements of task commitment. The substitution effect between goal-setting related and the social context related factors indicates that manipulating just one of the substituting pair of factors could already strengthen task commitment. Hence, in an organizational context, either the predictor that is easier to manage, or the one

to which the employees are more susceptible can be altered in order to improve task commitment. Building social contexts may therefore, at least partly, serve as an alternative for performance management programs based on goal-setting.

In terms of further research, a more comprehensive approach to the study of accountability may be taken by including new moderators. According to Lerner and Tetlock (1999) and Dubnick (2005), the motivational properties of accountability are inherently contingent on characteristics of the agents. In other words, what accountability factors are more appealing to an individual depends on his or her motivational orientation, which is a personality trait. The interactions between the social context and the goal-setting factors of accountability may be better understood by means of adding an extra dimension of personality-related differences in motivation. This may complement the model, which is now based on the social context and goal-setting related factors and give the model a 'personality-based' dimension. A more comprehensive approach to the study of accountability may furthermore be taken not only by including new moderators, but also by including new dependent variables.

As appeared in our study, while the direct positive effects of the accountability factors on task commitment surfaced, as was expected, the signs of the interactions pointed to a weakening rather than strengthening effects. The question springs up about the possible interaction effects of the accountability factors on other motivational outcomes. Studying accountability in relation to more outcomes may give new insights into the mechanisms behind the phenomenon and how it can be managed. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 present additional possible accountability outcomes: the relationship between the accountability factors and successful introduction of a quality management system (chapter 3), task performance (chapter 4) and self-promoting behavior (chapter 5).