

## University of Groningen

### Individual accountability

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## 4. Accountability and goal orientation in relation to task commitment and task performance

### 4.1 Introduction

According to Dubnick (2005) it is ‘notoriously imprecise’ what accountability exactly is and its exact meaning is obfuscated. The two previous chapters about the motivational outcomes of accountability give rise to an interesting question regarding the nature of accountability. In short, the issue is whether an employee’s accountability represents more than just the sum of its constituting factors. The concept as a whole refers to, on the one hand, a well delineated task that one is personally held responsible for and, on the other hand, the condition that the fulfillment of the task is monitored by someone else in the organization. On theoretical grounds it is assumed that accountability results from the interplay of these factors rather than being just a summation thereof. The outcomes of the studies presented in chapter 2 and 3, however, were equivocal, and we cannot say with the full conviction if accountability is the interplay of its constituents or if the individual factors just add up to each other’s motivational influence, without forming any positive interactions with each other. As far as the research results presented in the previous chapters tell, the answer seems to lie somewhere in between.

The research presented in this chapter aims at further articulating this answer by broadening its scope. The measurements used in the study presented in chapter 2 are repeated in two new organizational settings, and an additional set of predictors is introduced that is related to the employees’ motivational orientation. As will be elaborated later in this chapter, the presence of the interplay between accountability factors is hypothesized to depend on that motivational orientation.

Below, first, the accountability concept is shortly defined again in addition to what has already been outlined in the preceding chapters. Thereafter, there is a section devoted to the discussion of the multi-dimensionality of accountability: its

components and their interactions. Then follow the sections on the outcomes of accountability and the mixed findings which were obtained previously. Next, the theory on motivational orientation is unfolded and later elaborated into a number of hypotheses relating motivational orientation to the accountability dynamics. Finally the hypotheses are empirically tested in two different companies.

## **4.2 Definitions of individual accountability**

Individual accountability is a fundamental principle of organization theory (Frink & Ferris, 1998); it influences the individual's attitudes and behaviors in various ways (Schlenker, Weigold & Doherty, 1991; Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin & Dardis, 2002). It provides a mechanism for the social control of behavior (Frink & Klimoski, 1998; Quinn & Schlenker, 2002; Schlenker et al., 1991; Tetlock, 1985) and therefore has been a subject for a number of investigations in the field of organization studies. The definition of accountability which is primarily used here and elsewhere in the thesis is a "...need to justify or defend a decision or action to some audience which has potential reward and sanction power" (Frink & Klimoski, 1998, p. 9). Here the accountable individual is referred to as an *agent*, following the terminology used by Adelberg and Batson (1978), Cummings and Anton (1990) and Frink and Klimoski (1998). An *audience* is comprised of e.g. colleagues, superiors and/or clients that observe, monitor and/or evaluate the agent. Rewards and sanctions determined by this audience are perceived as contingent on accountability conditions.

## **4.3 The components and multi-dimensionality of individual accountability**

Accountability should not be viewed as a unitary construct according to some authors (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Frink & Ferris, 1998; Emans, Turusbekova, Broekhuis & Molleman, 2004; DeZoort, Harrison & Taylor, 2006). In order to produce the necessary effect on the agent, as the definition used throughout the chapters implies, accountability is comprised of a few factors. First of all it should encompass *task clarity*, which reduces the ambiguity about the object of accountability of the agent. Second, responsibility for the task should be made personal or uniquely pertaining to the agent; we refer to it as *personalized*

*responsibility*. Personalized responsibility is defined in relation to the social context of the agent and to other agents' responsibility. Next, to create effective accountability conditions, there should be a particular audience to observe and evaluate the agent's behavior. The potential evaluation is made salient by the *audience power* to reward or punish the agent, contingent on the outcomes of the agent's behavior. The last component is *feedback* that the audience provides to the agent regarding his or her performance of the task. For more elaborated information about the accountability components, the reader is referred to earlier chapters.

Accountability has many facets, but the question if it really should be considered as a self-standing concept rather than a bundle of well known performance management concepts remains to be answered. If the phenomenon of accountability in practice works as its definitions suggest it should, than in addition to the role played separately by the constituents of accountability we must be able to observe their joined effects. Audience power represents a strong social context and implies the existence of social norms, abided by the agent. Personalized responsibility is comparable to having oneself as a powerful audience. It implies that social norms are internalized. Although personalized responsibility is assigned and is in fact an outline of where one's responsibility begins and where it ends, eventually it is felt by the agent and is, therefore, subjective. Both audience power and personalized responsibility are normative and are products of the social context. Therefore they are expected to act as moderators to task clarity and feedback, which are the more conventional motivators rooted in goal-setting.

In comparison to chapter 2, the number of hypothesized interactions is reduced. In chapter 2, we stipulated two-way interactive effects between task clarity and feedback on the one hand and personalized responsibility and audience power on the other hand. Based on the results obtained from chapter 2, in the present study we remove the less significant interactions in order to reduce the number of interactions and focus the model. Interactions that may be particularly expected, for reasons to be unfolded below, are narrowed down to the following: task clarity by personalized responsibility and feedback by audience power.

Task clarity is expected to interact with personalized responsibility because both revolve around the task and are in a way internal (i.e., related to the agent and his/her own task) with task clarity being a task characteristic that originates in the

task and personalized responsibility having the agent as its focal point. Being personally responsible for something clear can in principle strengthen the impact of clarity. Likewise, task clarity can increase the impact of personalized responsibility because if a task is clear, it is easier to feel more responsible for it. Therefore we believe there is a common basis for this pair of variables to form an interaction. That is, we expect these two factors to strengthen each other's motivational impact.

Feedback and audience power are expected to interact with each other because both are primarily external to the task and the agent. They are related to outside opinions and outside parties respectively. In organizations the judgment of the observing audience is transferred via feedback to make the agent knowledgeable of the results of his or her activities. Significance of the audience to the agent is likely to strengthen the importance of feedback, given by this audience. This qualifies feedback and audience power for possible interactions.

If the above stipulated interaction effects are found in this study, we will be in the position to conclude that the combinations of accountability factors are stronger motivators than each factor on its own. Then we will have more grounds to proclaim that accountability as it is operationalized here may be considered as an entity based on interactions instead of being a sum of well known motivators. It would be a *compilation* of constituents instead of encompassing a number of additive constituents. If zero or negative effects rather than positive ones will surface, the results would, in contrast, point to a lack of interplay. If zero interactions are found, the constituting factors evidently play a motivational role independently of each other. That is, each of them adds to an employee's performance and commitment 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 apparently weakens the contribution of the other one, leaving no room for the other one to do its motivational job. Now that we have dealt with the four components of individual accountability and their possible interactive effects, we shall relate them to the work outcomes. Alongside we also present the mixed findings from the previous chapters.

#### **4.4 Accountability outcomes and mixed findings**

A number of accountability outcomes have been previously studied, mainly by means of laboratory experiments. Among the demonstrated outcomes of

accountability are effortful information processing and search effort (Lee, Herr & Kardes, 1999), performance (Erdogan, Sparrowe, Liden, & Kenneth, 2004), in-role performance (Riketta & Landerer, 2002), organizational learning (Popper & Lipshitz, 2000) conformity (Quinn & Schlenker, 2002) and pro-social behavior (Barreto & Ellemers, 2000). A study of in-role performance (Riketta & Landerer) where accountability was measured as a one-dimensional construct, showed that employees with low accountability had the lowest performance scores. Frink and Ferris (1998) investigated the influence of felt accountability on the relationship between goal-setting and performance. In the highly accountable condition there was a negative correlation between goals and performance whereas there was a positive one in the no accountability condition. In their study, felt accountability was measured as a one-dimensional variable. Dubnick's (2005) 'accountability paradox' runs: accountability has a negative effect on performance because account-giving consumes the agent's time and effort, which would otherwise be spent on improving performance. We can see that the points of view regarding task performance as a viable outcome of accountability are not aligned.

Understanding how accountability factors influence task performance is important, taking into account the contradictions regarding this subject in the accountability literature. Accountability is assigned in order to achieve compliance with certain activities, in other words, agents are presented with the accountability factors in order to induce them to reach acceptable levels of performance. According to Dubnick (2005) there is no evidence of the relationship between accountability and performance, or at least it is "unarticulated and untested". Therefore there is a pressing need to examine how exactly accountability factors can motivate agents to perform.

Another important question is whether accountability factors motivate agents to be loyal and to show behavior that is demanded from them and to accept the task that is assigned to them. Stated otherwise, the question is whether accountability impacts task performance and task commitment. Accountability as a whole should not be perceived as a coercive force, as it presumably motivates with rewards to the same extent as it employs punishment. Therefore it is vital to know if indeed accountability factors evoke such positive attitude towards tasks as task commitment. Except for our studies (see chapter 2), to our knowledge there are no other studies investigating the relationship between accountability and task

commitment. Based on the above, we are convinced that studying task performance and task commitment, as possible outcomes of accountability, makes valuable addition to the development of the accountability theory.

Our previous studies where the interactions of the accountability variables were investigated in relation to task commitment and task performance have yielded equivocal results. In chapter 2 we predicted that there would be positive ‘task clarity – personalized responsibility’ and ‘feedback – audience power’ interactions in relation to task commitment. In chapter 3, clarity, personalized responsibility and audience power were studied in relation to a quality management system. As was the case in chapter 2, in chapter 3 we focused on investigating the existence of positive interactions. One of the dependent variables in chapter 3 was *use of the system*, which is comparable to task performance. Compared to chapter 3, where use of a quality system was a specific kind of task performance, in this chapter task performance is formulated in more generic and encompassing terms.

In chapter 2 and 3 moderated regressions that were performed to look for evidence of the supposed interplay between the accountability constituents gave expected as well as unexpected results. As expected, we found positive main effects, but the signs of the interaction effects were mostly not in accordance with our expectations. In chapter 2, the interactions showed that personalized responsibility and audience power weakened rather than strengthened the influence of task clarity and feedback. Regarding the relationship between task clarity, personalized responsibility and task performance, a somewhat weakening relationship surfaced in chapter 3. A weakening two-way interaction effect means that an increase in the level of one of the factors is associated with a decrease in the relationship of the other factor with the dependent variable. According to the negative interaction effects which surfaced in chapter 3, task clarity and personalized responsibility appeared to weaken each other’s effect on task performance. When personalized responsibility was high, the relationship between task clarity and task performance was somewhat weaker than when personalized responsibility was low.

There is a possible explanation of the weakening interactions: a methodological issue - a ceiling effect could have been a problem. In the case of the chapter 2 findings, it is possible that because the values of task commitment were high (6.3), there was no space left for variance. However, the same is not likely to have

happened in chapter 3, where the values of task performance were not very high (4.8 within the value range 1-7). If there is no ceiling effect, then the negative interactions between the accountability variables might mean that accountability is not a compilation, or a synergetic phenomenon where components strengthen each other's motivational impact. We than may agree with Lerner and Tetlock (1999, p. 259) who "reject the idea that a generic motivational construct underlies all accountability effects". We will be able to state that accountability is simply a number of factors, each of them doing the same motivational job, and that, as a consequence, if combined, they weaken each other's motivational impact. Stated otherwise, having similar motivational consequences, the accountability constituents may substitute each other, reducing each other's roles whenever they act in concert. Then the phenomenon of accountability should be treated with caution. Another possibility or an additional possible explanation is that the weakening effect is due to the influence of some other variable, which was not accounted for in chapters 2 and 3, such as characteristics of agents (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). The relationship between accountability and performance is inherently contingent on characteristics of the agents and properties of the task environment (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Dubnick, 2005). Therefore a viable way of articulating and testing the exact nature of the relationship between the interplay of the accountability factors and task performance is by taking into account the individual motivational orientation. Following this line of reasoning, we turn to personality variables. As already pointed out, accountability depends on the context of the agent, which is created by various external and internal factors. Interactions of the accountability factors create certain cues in the agent's environment. The agent's personal drive and motivational orientation may determine to what kind of cues he or she is sensitive. We therefore would like to include personality traits, in particular an individual's goal orientation in an explanatory model of accountability effects.

## **4.5 Goal orientation**

To capture the motivational orientation of the agent we make use of the goal orientation concept. Goal orientation is a personality trait that affects work behavior and performance (VandeWalle, Brown, Cron & Slocum, 1999). Goal orientation influences the way the agents perceive their task and social context.



Depending on their goal orientation people react differently to cues in their environment. Two goal orientation variables are distinguished: performance goal orientation, also known as ego orientation, and mastery goal orientation, also known as learning orientation. Below is an elaboration of these two types of goal orientation.

Performance orientation is defined as the extent to which an individual seeks to *demonstrate task competence* for the purpose of gaining favorable judgment and avoiding negative judgment from others (Button, Mathieu & Zajac, 1996; Brett & VandeWalle, 1999; VandeWalle, 2001). Performance oriented individuals usually believe that their abilities or intelligence are fixed. In the studies of Dweck (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988), performance oriented persons appeared to have apprehension of failure and tried to avoid disapproval of others. According to Brett & VandeWalle performance oriented individuals “focus on comparing favorably to others and avoiding demonstration of incompetence”.

Mastery orientation, the other type of goal orientation, is the extent to which an individual seeks to *learn new competencies* by acquiring new skills and managing new situations (Button et al., 1996; Brett & VandeWalle, 1999; VandeWalle, 2001). To improve their performance mastery oriented agents tend to seek feedback (VandeWalle, Ganesan, Challagalla & Brown, 2000). They are open to challenges, intrinsically motivated and persistent (Kozlowski & Bell, 2006).

Accountability factors and their interactions give certain cues and goal orientation may influence how these cues are perceived and reacted to. What we expect of goal orientation in particular are the moderating effects on the relationship between the accountability factors and the two motivational outcomes: task performance and task commitment. Performance orientation, in contrast to mastery orientation, is expected to play an important role in moderating the relationships between the accountability variables and task performance. Performance oriented agents react to and rely on the cues to help them fulfill existing role expectations and may interpret the cues as extra stimulation to show good performance. According to Dweck and colleagues (Dweck, 1996; Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Dweck & Leggett, 1988) performance oriented agents focus on manifesting their abilities and on the end results. They are guided by an underlying motivation to live up to the expectations of others and are prone to exhibit performance that is commensurate with or is better than the performance of others.

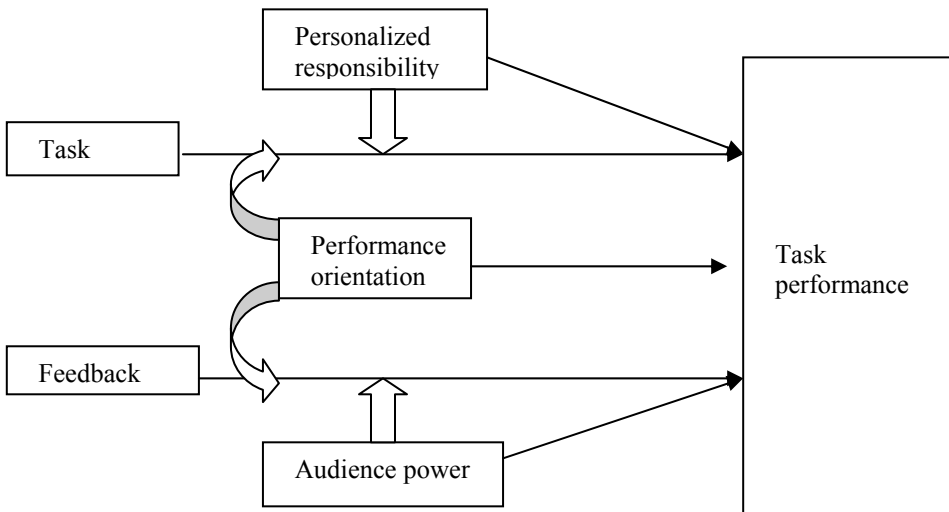
Additional support is found in a study of type A individuals by Yarnold, Mueser and Lyons (1988). Wellbeing of type A individuals depends on favorable evaluation by others and socially recognized achievements. In this they are similar to performance oriented persons. In Yarnold, Mueser and Lyons's study type A subjects enhanced their performance in accountability conditions. Similar behavior is expected of performance oriented agents. Unlike performance oriented agents, mastery oriented individuals do not view task performance as an end in itself. To mastery oriented agents, even if the result of performance is not up to some predefined standard, it is already an achievement if the process of performing the task has resulted in learning. In contrast, performance oriented agents, if put in the spotlight of accountability, would not want to look negatively and therefore will feel forced by the accountability factors to improve their performance. Therefore we expect performance orientation rather than mastery orientation to play a prominent role in the relationship between the accountability factors and task performance.

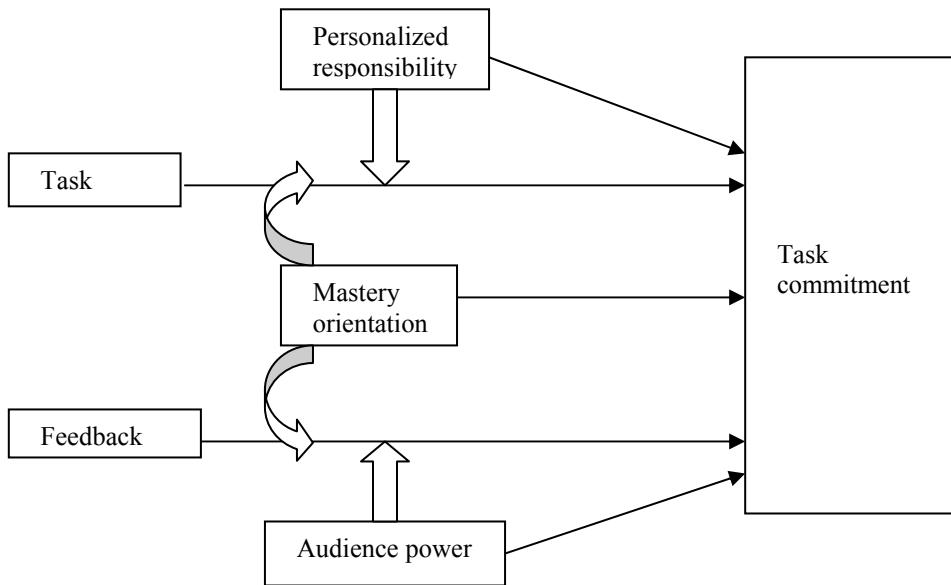
Mastery oriented agents are primarily motivated by learning and it is likely that they will experience accountability differently than performance oriented individuals. Mastery oriented agents may consider the accountability cues as presenting an opportunity to learn. They will react and consequently rely on these cues to enable themselves to learn. Therefore the presence of the accountability cues or factors will primarily increase their task commitment. Thus, there is a positive influence of mastery orientation on task commitment (Porter, 2005) and therefore mastery orientation may also moderate the relationship between accountability and task commitment. Mastery oriented agents may be assumed, therefore, to be sensitive to the positive interplay of task clarity and personalized responsibility and their commitment promoting effects. Performance oriented individuals may try to avoid clear instructions as well as being identified as the only responsible person, since it may increase their chance of public failure. On the contrary, mastery oriented persons are expected to be more motivated by clarity and personalized responsibility since task clarity gives them the focus. At the same time, personalized responsibility means that in relation to this task they should predominantly count on themselves and be resourceful, which can only be appealing to mastery oriented agents. As far as feedback is concerned, performance oriented agents may have a certain dislike of it, especially in case of process

feedback and negative performance feedback. Thus, while stimulating them to perform, feedback will not make them more committed to tasks. In contrast, mastery oriented agents would seek feedback, especially process feedback, and especially from powerful audiences, which could enable them to improve their skills. Therefore in the case of mastery oriented employees we expect a strengthening of the feedback – commitment relationship by audience power. Stated otherwise interaction is supposed to be dependent on the level of mastery orientation. We therefore believe that introducing goal orientation will help explain the working of the accountability variables. In the following section this view will be elaborated in detail.

## 4.6 Model and hypotheses

Below we remind the reader about the initial hypotheses regarding the direct effects and the two-way interactions between the accountability variables, which have already been presented in previous chapters (see chapters 2 & 3). We do not formulate separate hypotheses about the main effects and two-way interactions again in this chapter since they have been discussed in previous chapters and therefore at this point do not advance our knowledge. They lead us to the new hypotheses, which essentially are the initial hypotheses, enriched by an extra dimension of either performance or mastery orientation. Our model as a whole is presented in Figure 4.1.





**Figure 4.1: Research model (3).**

#### **4.6.1 Task performance related to task clarity, personalized responsibility and goal orientation.**

We build up the first hypothesis, which relates task performance to task clarity and personalized responsibility, starting with the corresponding main effects that surfaced in previous research. Task clarity is positively related to task performance. This appeared in our previous study (see chapter 3) and has surfaced in studies where clarity, clear expectations and distinct tasks were positively associated with performance (Schaefer & Moos, 1993; Shapiro & Doyle, 1983; Joshi & Randall, 2001). Many studies replicate the findings of the goal setting theory where goal specificity, which is comparable to task clarity, is related to a number of motivational outcomes, including task performance. Task clarity reduces ambiguity of the task to be performed and increases the actual task performance. In this study we also expect task clarity to be positively associated with task performance.

The same positive main effect is expected of personalized responsibility. Shared responsibility that originates in the interdependent nature of tasks inside groups may result in a reduction in performance (Harkins, 2006; Karau & Williams, 1993;

Kidwell & Bennett, 1993; Harkins, Latané & Williams, 1980). In such cases it is difficult to discern who should be rewarded or punished. People often expect others to expend less effort on collective tasks, and, therefore, withhold their own effort in order not to be the victims of others' free-riding. It is also possible that they see their own contribution to performance as unnecessary or dispensable and are, therefore, not very motivated to perform. Personalized responsibility diminishes the agent's opportunities to free ride, and as a result he/she may exert extra effort, which is translated into a boost in the agent's performance. Personalized responsibility embodies identifiability and responsibility. It is the opposite of shared responsibility and therefore it is expected to be positively associated with task performance.

In addition to the above mentioned direct effects of task clarity and personalized responsibility we expect interactivity between these two factors in their relation to task performance. In other words, we expect that an agent who has clear tasks while being made personally responsible for this task will perform better compared to a similar agent who is not made personally responsible. On the one hand, 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. In the study of Hinkin and Jackson (1985) social loafing was reduced when output was identifiable and participants believed that they were evaluated through comparison between their own performance and that of co-workers. On the other hand, being personally responsible for a clear task gives grounds for a more objective and straightforward performance evaluation. Task clarity makes possible to judge about the extent to which the individual's task is accomplished, while personalized responsibility makes sure that the performance outcomes are attributed to the right person. Thus, the combination of task clarity and personalized responsibility focuses the agent on performance and motivates him or her by providing grounds for more objective evaluation. Therefore the combination of these two factors is more potent in its relationship with task performance than each of these factors individually. In other words, we expect personalized responsibility to strengthen the relationship between task clarity and task performance. Especially, a positive interaction between these variables is expected when a certain motivational orientation is present. To reflect this extra dimension, performance orientation is introduced into the model.

Task clarity and personalized responsibility constitute the first pair of accountability variables that may interact with performance orientation. We expect positive direct effects of the three variables on task performance and a positive two-way interaction between task clarity and personalized responsibility. We suppose, furthermore, that this two-way interaction is especially strong in the case of employees who are high, rather than low, in performance orientation. We thus stick to the rationale underlying the two-way interaction hypothesis, but stipulate that it applies primarily to performance oriented employees, since performance oriented employees are already keen on performing. Besides, the drive of highly performance oriented agents to perform the task well will be strengthened by the cues given by the two accountability components. Performance oriented agents will not want to fail while carrying out a clear task for which they are personally responsible because they are focused on output and being better than others. Therefore hypothesis 1 is: personalized responsibility will strengthen the relationship between task clarity and task performance if performance orientation is high rather than low.

#### **4.6.2 Task performance related to feedback, audience power and goal orientation.**

Feedback and audience power are also expected to be associated with task performance. Both variables are united in representing the side of accountability which communicates the results of evaluation and reminds the agent of the consequences thereof. First, we present a few words about the direct effects, which are at the basis of our second hypothesis. Many studies about feedback (Raj, Nelson & Rao, 2006; Bandura, 1991; Locke & Bryan, 1969; Shapiro & Doyle, 1983), feedback environment (Rosen, Levy & Hall, 2006), self-referenced feedback (Brunstein & Maier, 2005), feedback specificity (Davis, Carson, Ammeter & Treadway, 2005), feedback intervention (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) and feedback derived from the task (Locke & Latham, 1990) have shown that feedback appeared to stimulate task performance. Also Locke & Latham (2002) argue that feedback could have an independent motivational effect on performance, since the knowledge of results allows the employees to make adjustments to their performance. Therefore in this study we expect a positive main effect of task related feedback on task performance to surface. However, the novelty of our

hypotheses is not in the direct effects, but in the interactive effect between the two accountability factors.

There is certain evidence that audience power is related to task performance. Frink and Ferris (1998) have suggested that the agent's perception of the audience and of the related rewards and sanctions influence how hard the agent tries in performing the task. In the study of Harkins (2006) participants subject to evaluation put out more effort compared to the unevaluated participants. Locke and Latham (2002) contend that anticipating rewards or punishment can affect performance. Strong audience power is an additional stimulus that can result in the improvement in task performance, because the fact that the powerful audience is there makes the relationship between good performance and rewards and that between poor performance and punishment more tangible. Therefore, in this study audience power by itself is expected to be positively associated with task performance.

In addition to the above, feedback is hypothesized to constitute a stronger motivator if it is backed up by a powerful audience. Feedback from a powerful audience, rather than feedback coming from an audience with no or low influence power, prompts the agents to perform. By receiving feedback from a powerful audience the agents are reminded of the social expectancies and of the proximity of rewards or punishment. Here again goal orientation can help to elaborate on the relationship between feedback and audience power on the one hand and task performance on the other hand.

The effect of feedback and audience power on task performance may be influenced by performance orientation. The interplay between feedback and audience power makes up an accountability component. This component embodies normative cues from the social environment. Performance oriented people in their pursuit of performance are especially sensitive to normative cues they get from their environment. As already was articulated, performance oriented individuals are performance-prone. Especially because feedback originates from the audience that eventually may evaluate their performance, highly performance oriented agents are expected to be susceptible to this accountability component. Thus, it is high rather than low performance orientation that makes sure that feedback from a powerful audience is associated with task performance. Therefore we hypothesize that audience power will strengthen the relationship between feedback and task

performance if performance orientation is high rather than low (hypothesis 2).

#### **4.6.3 Task commitment related to task clarity, personalized responsibility and goal orientation**

From task performance as the dependent variable and the effects of performance orientation we go on to hypothesizing about relationships that involve task commitment as the dependent variable and the moderating effects of mastery orientation. In chapter 2 not only a positive motivational effect of task clarity on task commitment was expected, but also a strengthening of the ‘task clarity – task commitment’ relationship by personalized responsibility. Our previous study has shown that task clarity by itself is indeed an important factor that is associated with task commitment. 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. Thus task clarity is associated with task commitment.

A positive direct relationship with task commitment also holds true for the second variable, personalized responsibility. In a study of decision making by Kiesler, Kiesler and Pallak (as cited in Caldwell & O’Reilly, 1982) personal responsibility proved to raise commitment. In chapter 2 personalized responsibility also appeared to be positively related to task commitment. Therefore, in this study we again expect personalized responsibility to be positively associated with task commitment.

Previously we expected that personalized responsibility would strengthen the ‘task clarity – task commitment’ relationship. When agents are personally responsible for a clear task, they could be expected to be more committed, since once agents become committed to the task due to its clarity, personalized responsibility would ensure that the task receives necessary attention and is not given up easily. The relationship between task clarity and task commitment therefore was expected to be strengthened by personalized responsibility. In chapter 2, however, a negative interaction term was found. We now qualify the two-way interaction by adding a dimension of mastery orientation to the relationship between the two accountability variables and task commitment.

Mastery orientation could play an important role in influencing the relationship between task clarity, personalized responsibility and task commitment. We suppose that personalized responsibility strengthens the relationship between task clarity



and task commitment only if mastery orientation is high. Thus, we again follow the earlier reasoning about the two-way interaction, but limit it to the situation of higher rather than lower mastery oriented employees. We suppose so, because mastery oriented employees are, by themselves, open to commitment enhancing stimuli. To state it negatively: in the absence of mastery orientation, the accountability mechanism inherent in the combination of task clarity and personalized responsibility might not improve task commitment, because employees who score low in mastery orientation are not commitment-prone by themselves, whereas the enhancement of commitment presupposes a certain commitment-proneness. Therefore hypothesis 3 runs: *personalized responsibility will strengthen the relationship between task clarity and task commitment if mastery orientation is high rather than low.*

#### **4.6.4 Task commitment related to feedback, audience power and goal orientation.**

Our next pair of factors that influence task commitment is comprised of feedback and audience power. We start with a few words about the relationship between feedback and task commitment. Feedback by itself is motivating because it helps the agent to accomplish the following two things. First, to position him/herself in relation to whether he/she performs well and in accordance with expectations. Second, feedback gives an opportunity to adjust and to learn from the reaction of others. Feedback leads to 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 of Hoegl and Parboteeah (2006). We too have observed a positive relationship between feedback and task commitment in the research reported in chapter 2. Therefore in this study we expect a direct positive effect of feedback on task commitment.

The same is expected of a counterpart of feedback - audience power. Chapter 2 showed a direct positive effect of audience power on task commitment. 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. Therefore, audience power is expected to be associated with task

commitment. However, our interest goes beyond the direct relationships.

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. Commitment to such a task, therefore, is expected to be stronger. We now formulate our concluding hypothesis by adding the effect of mastery orientation on the relationship between feedback, audience power and task commitment.

Since mastery oriented agents are commitment prone, the combination of the ‘feedback – audience power’ and high mastery orientation is expected to be associated with task commitment. Feedback from experts is valuable to mastery oriented agents. As VandeWalle and Cummings (1997) found out, agents who are mastery oriented tend to seek and make use of feedback in order to learn and improve their skills. In organizations, an audience is authorized to oversee the agent based on its capacity to do so. Supervisors often have the necessary expertise, peers may point out the agent’s blind spots, and clients know best what keeps them satisfied. Thus, feedback from a powerful audience could be perceived by mastery oriented agents as extra valuable in terms of learning. Hypothesis 4 reads therefore: *audience power will strengthen the relationship between feedback and task commitment if mastery orientation is high rather than low.*

In order to test the hypotheses two studies were carried out at two different institutions: a semi-commercial company and a public organization. The studies are presented separately, *i.e.* not as one research population, because the two institutions are of different type and one exists relatively longer than the other. These and other differences, pointed out below, may have influenced their social and task environments. Keeping the two samples separate will help us to find out if our hypotheses hold in different contexts and in that sense supports the external validity of our reasoning. It also was used for the reason of internal validity, and for the purpose of giving feedback to the respective companies.

## **4.7 Study 1**

### **4.8 Method**

The first study was carried out at a semi- commercial company, which had gone through a highly dynamic episode. Three years prior to the study, the company was transformed as a result of a fusion of parts of two water management institutions. It is active in the field of water management in the South of the Netherlands. The main service of the company is water purification. Recent changes in their tasks were reported by 95% of the respondents.

#### **4.8.1 Participants**

All 306 employees of the company in study 1 were sent a questionnaire (see below). 186 respondents returned the questionnaires, which constituted a 61% rate of response. The type of tasks of the employees ranged from laboratory work, and issuing permits to optimizing project management, from IT to installing water purification systems and from managerial tasks to audit and administrative tasks.

In terms of education, the sample employees generally had vocational training. 12% of the respondents had managerial functions. There were 71% male and 29% female respondents. Average tenure with the company was 12.6 years, and the average age was 44 years. These averages were similar to the average in the company as a whole.

#### **4.8.2 Procedures**

The information about the coming up study was first posted on the company's intranet. Then every company employee received an e-mail, with the invitation to fill out a web-based questionnaire. Additionally, hard copies of the questionnaire were sent to their homes. Three weeks later a reminder was sent by email. The web answers amounted to 64%, accordingly, returned paper questionnaires amounted to 36%.

Self-reported questionnaires were used, measuring each of the variables, inherent in the hypotheses. Self-reporting was important since we needed to measure the perceptions of the agents themselves, and such information could not have been obtained from another source. Self-reporting was also vital for reasons

of confidentiality. If *e.g.* task performance scores had to be obtained from elsewhere, we would have to match the performance scores with the rest of the item scores. This would have to be done in breach of confidentiality and have resulted in a lower response rate.

### 4.8.3 Measures

7-point Likert-type items were used, anchored by *strongly disagree* (score 1) and *strongly agree* (score 7). The respondents were asked to pick out a particular task and the subsequent questions were referring to this task. It had to be a task on which the respondents spent considerable time. The task preferably had to have undergone some recent changes. It had to be a task in which the routines were not well established, so that task clarity would not be unanimously high; that is why we opted for a novel or recently adapted task. This kind of task was also used in order to try to reach the necessary levels of variance and avoid too high values of task commitment and task performance. Such high values had to be avoided in order to prevent a ceiling effect, which could have been a methodological problem in the previous studies.

The five independent variables were measured on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree) in the same way measurements were done in the research, reported in chapter 2. Task clarity ( $\alpha = .92$ ) was measured by means of five items (*e.g.* “The task is clear to me”), based on Emans et al. (2004), Locke and Latham (1990) and Breugh & Colihan (1994). The items that we borrowed from English publications had to be translated into Dutch. Feedback ( $\alpha = .91$ ) was measured with eight items like “My supervisor provides me with a lot of feedback about how well I am doing this task”. Some of these items came from the Job Diagnostic Survey (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), some came from Emans et al. (2004). Personalized responsibility ( $\alpha = .62$ ) was measured with three items such as “I do not share responsibility for carrying out this task with others” from Emans et al. Audience power ( $\alpha = .80$ ) consisted of four items based on Emans *et al.* and Hinkin & Schriesheim (1989) *e.g.* “Evaluation by my supervisor regarding this task may influence whether or not I get a pay raise”. Performance orientation ( $\alpha = .82$ ) was measured by three items based on Janssen (2002), *e.g.* “In managing this task it is important to me that I perform better than others in my working environment”. Mastery orientation ( $\alpha = .78$ ) was measured by three items also

based on Janssen (2002); an example of an item from this scale is “I need to master everything that is necessary to perform this task as well as possible”.

The two dependent variables were measured with the use of the following scales. The five items of the task commitment scale ( $\alpha = .69$ ) *e.g.* “Quite frankly, I don’t care if I accomplish this task or not”, were based on Klein, Wesson, Hollenbeck & DeShon (2001). Task performance ( $\alpha = .79$ ) consisted of three items, *e.g.* “Regarding this task I think I deserve a very good evaluation” based on the Expanded Delft Measurement Kit (Roe, Ten Horn, Zinovieva & Dienes, 1997). The complete list of items in English is presented in Appendix C and in Dutch in Appendix D.

#### **4.8.4 Preliminary analysis study 1**

Since only self-report questionnaires were used, a confirmatory factor analysis was carried out in order to estimate the likelihood of a common method variance. Parameter estimates were computed using the maximum likelihood method included in the LISREL 8.51 computer package. Since we intended to measure eight constructs (*i.e.*, task clarity, personalized responsibility, feedback, audience power, performance orientation, mastery orientation, task performance and task commitment) we selected a model containing eight first-order latent constructs. To check for mono-method bias, we tested a model with only one latent variable. Comparing one factor model with the eight factors model showed that the solution with eight factors is substantially better than a single factor solution ( $\Delta\chi^2 [28] = 3015.02, p < .001$ ). This confirmed that more than one factor underlies the data, which implies that common method variance is not likely to be a significant problem.

### **4.9 Results study 1**

Moderated regression analyses were carried out to test for direct effects and moderated relationships in order to test the hypotheses. Means, standard deviations, Cronbach’s alphas and correlations are presented in Table 4.1. The following paragraph is to give an idea about the means of the variables, all measured on a seven point scale, and to highlight some of the correlations.

The means indicate that on average the employees indicate that they are highly committed to their task (6.1) and perform it well (5.7). The tasks are generally very

clear to the company's employees, with a mean of 5.8. The mean of feedback lays around 4, which indicates moderate levels of feedback. When it comes to the personalized responsibility for the tasks, it is probably not always possible in this company to attribute the responsibility for a particular task to a particular person since the mean score for personalized responsibility is 4.06. The employees did not seem to be very much influenced by the opinion of their colleagues about their performance, as the mean score of the audience power is only 2.9. The means of mastery and performance orientation are 6.06 and 3.8 respectively, so, on average, the employees have a much stronger mastery orientation than a performance orientation. Personalized responsibility and mastery orientation are significantly related to task commitment, while task clarity, mastery orientation and performance orientation are significantly related to task performance. A more thorough analysis is presented in the paragraphs that follow.

**Table 4.1. Study 1. Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha's and**

Variable	M	SD	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Task clarity	5.84	0.84	.92	-							
2 Feedback	4.01	1.18	.89	.07	-						
3 Personalized responsibility	4.06	1.38	.62	-.08	-.02	-					
4 Audience power	2.90	1.41	.93	-.12	.31**	-.04	-				
5 Performance orientation	3.80	1.21	.82	.08	.11	.04	.16*	-			
6 Mastery orientation	6.06	0.56	.78	.09	.03	-.02	.12	.26**	-		
7 Task commitment	6.12	0.73	.69	.13	.13	.20**	.04	.07	.28**	-	
8 Task performance	5.73	0.73	.79	.19**	-.04	.106	-.118	.25**	.20**	.28**	-

**intercorrelations.**

Note: N=186 \*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed), \*\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed). Variables values ranges from 1 (low) to 7 (high)

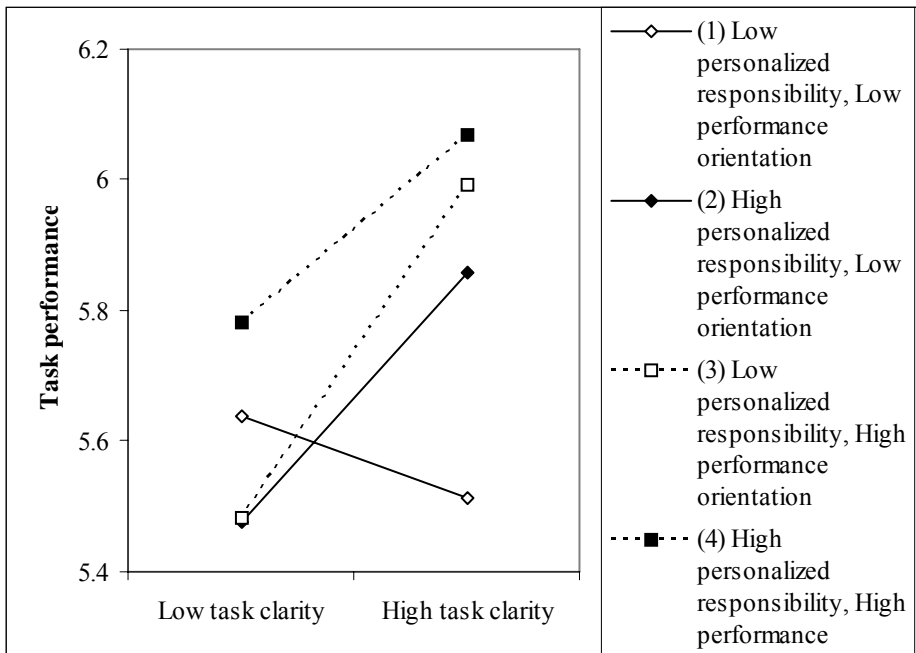
To test the three-way interaction effects we used the procedure for moderated linear regression analysis recommended by Aiken and West (1991) and slope

**Table 4.2. Study 1. Task performance regressed on the accountability factors and performance orientation**Note PO=performance orientation. N=186. Using a two-tailed test: \* $p \leq .10$ , \*\* $p \leq .05$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ 

Variables	Hypothesis 1 Task performance			Hypothesis 2 Task performance			
	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$	
<u>Main effects</u>							
Task clarity	.13	.07	.15*				
Personalized responsibility	.07	.04	.13*				
Performance orientation	.11	.05	.18**	.03	.05	.25***	
Feedback				-.08	.04	.05	
Audience power				.15	.05	-.15**	
R <sup>2</sup>						.10***	.09***
<u>Two-way interaction effects</u>							
Task clarity x personalized responsibility	.04	.05	.06				
Task clarity x PO	.07	.06	.11				
Personalized responsibility x PO	.02	.04	.06				
Feedback x audience power				.09	.03	.21**	
Feedback x PO				-.07	.04	-.15*	
Audience power x PO				-.01	.03	-.02	
R <sup>2</sup>						.11***	.13***
$\Delta R^2$						.001	.04**
<u>Three-way interaction effects</u>							
Task clarity x personalized responsibility x PO	-.09	.04	-.22**				
Feedback x audience power x PO				-.02	.03	-.06	
R <sup>2</sup>						.13***	.13***
$\Delta R^2$						.02**	.002

difference tests recommended by Dawson and Richter (2006). A number of significant main effects, two and three-way interaction effects have surfaced. All main and interaction effects are presented in Tables 4.2 and 4.3.

Our first two hypotheses are about the influence of performance orientation on the relationship between the accountability variables and task performance. The first hypothesis is that the relationship between task clarity and task performance is strengthened by personalized responsibility if performance orientation is high rather than low. The main effects of task clarity and personalized responsibility on task performance are positive and approach significance ( $p < .10$ ). Furthermore, there is a significant positive main effect of performance orientation on task performance. This means that task clarity and personalized responsibility as well as performance orientation are associated with higher task performance.



**Figure 4.2: Study 1. Task performance regressed on task clarity for low and high personalized responsibility and low and high performance orientation.**

Note: Low score = 1SD below the mean, high score = 1SD above the mean.

The three-way interaction effect, graphically represented in Figure 4.2, is significant and negative. According to the slope difference test the slope for 'low



personalized responsibility - low performance orientation' differs significantly ( $t = 1.907$ ;  $p < .10$ ) from the slope for 'high personalized responsibility - low performance orientation'. From the downwards going slope for 'low personalized responsibility - low performance orientation' we infer that this combination is associated with a negative relationship between task clarity and task performance or reverses the otherwise positive relationship. All other slopes point upwards, which represents the main positive effects of task clarity on task performance.

The reverse relationship between clarity and task performance reflects that when performance orientation is low, the level of personalized responsibility moderates the relationship between task clarity and task performance. When performance orientation is low and personalized responsibility is low, clear tasks are associated with a decrease in task performance compared to vague tasks. However, when performance orientation is low and personalized responsibility is high, clear tasks are associated with an increase in task performance.

The difference between the 'low personalized responsibility - low performance orientation' and the 'low personalized responsibility - high performance orientation' slopes approaches significance ( $t = 1.643$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ). This means that in the conditions of low personalized responsibility and high task clarity, agents who score high in performance orientation perform better compared to agents who score low in performance orientation. The difference between the 'low personalized responsibility - low performance orientation' slope and the 'high personalized responsibility - high low performance orientation' slope also reaches significance ( $t = 1.907$   $p < 0.10$ ). This implies that when tasks are clear making agents who are low in performance orientation personally responsible is associated with higher task performance. In short, task clarity turns out to be positively related to performance if at least one of the other two factors (personalized responsibility or performance orientation) is high.

The difference between the upwards going slopes of 'low personalized responsibility - high performance orientation' and 'high personalized responsibility - high performance orientation' is not significant. The lack of the difference indicates that if performance orientation is high, the relationship between task clarity and task performance is positive regardless of the level of personalized responsibility.

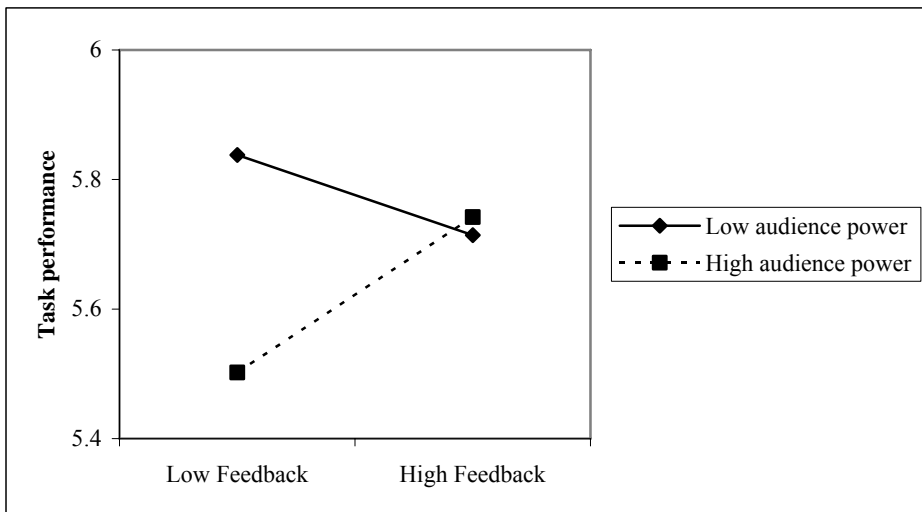
The slopes 'high personalized responsibility - low performance orientation' and

‘high personalized responsibility - high performance orientation’ do not differ significantly from each other. This is an important pair of slopes because it relates to our hypothesis. Hypothesis 1 stated that personalized responsibility would strengthen the relationship between task clarity and task performance if performance orientation was high, rather than low. However, graphically both slopes seem to have the same steepness. Besides this, the lack of a significant difference between the slopes indicates that the level of performance orientation does not make any difference for the relationship between high personalized responsibility, task clarity and task performance. This means that regardless of whether or not an agent is performance oriented, if personalized responsibility is high, then task clarity is positively associated with task performance. Therefore hypothesis 1 is not confirmed. Quite contrary to our hypothesis, if performance orientation is low, there is a strengthening of task clarity – task performance relationship by personalized responsibility. Rather than a strengthening effect (between performance orientation and personalized responsibility), there is just an additive effect. It is reflected by the fact that the dotted line representing ‘high personalized responsibility – high performance orientation’ lies above the other lines, representing all other combinations of performance orientation and personalized responsibility.

The second hypothesis implied a strengthening effect of audience power on the relationship between feedback and task performance if performance orientation is high. Furthermore, feedback, audience power and performance orientation were expected to have positive direct effects. The outcomes of the regression analyses (see Table 4.2) show that of all main effects only the main effect of performance orientation on task performance is significant and positive. The main effect of feedback is far from significant, whereas the effect of audience power is significant, but negative. This means that contrary to what was expected, weaker audiences are associated with better task performance than stronger audiences.

From the significant positive two-way interaction, depicted in Figure 4.3, we infer that when there is little feedback, task performance is better when audience power is low rather than when it is high. From the same graph (Figure 4.3) we conclude that audience power strengthens the relationship between feedback and task performance. It strengthens this relationship, irrespective of the level of performance orientation, and consequently also ‘if performance orientation is

high'. The three-way interaction term indeed is not significant, which means that there is no moderating effect of performance orientation on the relationship between feedback and audience power on the one hand and task performance on the other hand. Performance orientation turns out to play no role, as far as the impact of the accountability mechanism of feedback and audience power is concerned. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is not confirmed.



**Figure 4.3: Study 1 Task performance regressed on feedback for low and high audience power**

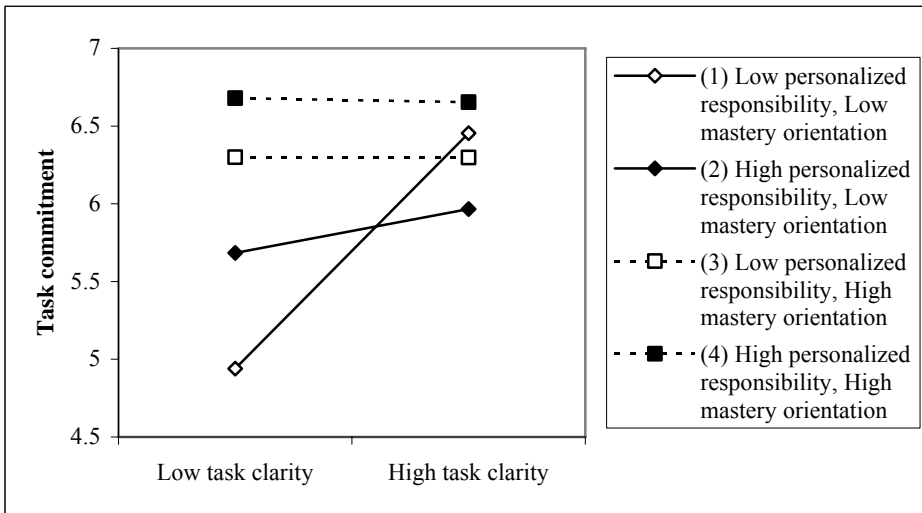
Note: Low score = 1SD below the mean, high score = 1SD above the mean.

The third hypothesis was about the joined effect of task clarity, personalized responsibility and mastery orientation on task commitment. Table 4.3 shows significant main effects of task clarity, personalized responsibility and mastery orientation. Besides it shows a significant negative two-way interaction for Task clarity X Personalized responsibility and for Personalized responsibility X Mastery orientation. Also the three-way interaction is significant, which relates to hypothesis 3. This interaction is depicted in Figure 4.4. The slope difference test shows significant differences between the slope for 'low personalized responsibility – low mastery orientation' and the other three slopes ('high personalized responsibility - low mastery orientation' ( $t = -3.137, p < .005$ ), 'low personalized responsibility - high mastery orientation' ( $t = -2.663, p < .01$ ) and

**Table 4.3. Study 1. Task commitment regressed on the accountability factors and mastery orientation**Note MO=mastery orientation. N=186. Using a two-tailed test: \* $p \leq .10$ , \*\* $p \leq .05$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ 

Variables	Hypothesis 3 Task commitment			Hypothesis 4 Task commitment			
	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$	
<u>Main effects</u>							
Task clarity	.22	.07	.25*				
Personalized responsibility	.12	.04	.23*				
Mastery orientation	.36	.09	.28*	.10	.05	.28**	
Feedback				-.02	.05	.16**	
Audience power				.36	.12	-.03	
R <sup>2</sup>						.13***	.09***
<u>Two-way interaction effects</u>							
Task clarity x personalized responsibility	-.16	.05	-.26**				
Task clarity x MO	-.23	.10	-.18**				
Personalized responsibility x MO	.06	.06	.07				
Feedback x audience power				.01	.03	.03	
Feedback x MO				-.07	.10	-.08	
Audience power x MO				-.01	.08	-.01	
R <sup>2</sup>						.19***	.10**
$\Delta R^2$						.06**	.002
<u>Three-way interaction effects</u>							
Task clarity x personalized responsibility x MO	.15	.07	.18**				
Feedback x audience power x MO				-.03	.06	-.05	
R <sup>2</sup>						.21***	.10***
$\Delta R^2$						.02**	.001

‘high personalized responsibility - high mastery orientation’ ( $t = -3.542, p < .001$ )). As already is inferred from the negative two-way interaction of task clarity and personalized responsibility, task clarity may have a bigger impact on task commitment when personalized responsibility is low. The three-way interaction shows that this is only the case if mastery orientation is low. If mastery orientation is low, task clarity is positively related to commitment, especially if personalized responsibility is low. If mastery orientation is high, task clarity does not contribute to commitment, while personalized responsibility contributes to it in an additive way. Therefore the three-way interaction is a further specification of the significant two-way interaction, i.e. it is only there if mastery orientation is low.



**Figure 4.4: Study 1. Task commitment regressed on task clarity for low and high personalized responsibility and low and high mastery orientation**

Note: Low score = 1SD below the mean, high score = 1SD above the mean.

Based on the results of the three-way interactions, the main effect of mastery orientation should be reconsidered. Being high in mastery orientation is always good for high task commitment. Task clarity does not add much to this, but high personalized responsibility does. Being low in mastery orientation seems to attenuate task commitment, but this can be compensated by task clarity, especially if personalized responsibility is low. The main effect of task clarity should be re-evaluated as: high task clarity only becomes important for task commitment if

mastery orientation is low, and especially if personalized responsibility is also low. The main effect of personalized responsibility now indicates that personalized responsibility serves as a commitment promoting factor in itself. If mastery orientation is high then personalized responsibility also promotes task commitment. If mastery orientation is low and task clarity is low, personalized responsibility can partly compensate the negative impact of these low values on task commitment. Hypothesis 3 ran: personalized responsibility will reinforce the relationship between task clarity and task commitment if mastery orientation is high, rather than low. This hypothesis is not confirmed.

Hypothesis 4 states that if mastery orientation is high then audience power strengthens the relationship between feedback and task commitment. In Table 4.3 there are positive main effects of feedback ( $p < .10$ ) and mastery orientation ( $p < .05$ ) on task commitment, which mean that more feedback and higher mastery orientation are both associated with higher task commitment. There are no significant two- or three-way interaction effects present; therefore hypothesis 4 is not confirmed.

## **4.10 Discussion study 1**

The main message of this study comes down to the following. First, goal orientation further explains the direct influence of the accountability elements on task commitment and task performance. Second, it explains some interactions between the accountability elements and their relationship with task commitment and task performance. The accountability factors not only interact with each other, they also intertwine with performance orientation and mastery orientation, and these more complex interplays shape the final attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Disentangling of this interplay was one of the two objectives of our study, and the results are discussed in the paragraphs that follow, but to begin with, a few words about our first objective.

The first objective was to examine if any of the results of this study concerning accountability phenomenon coincide with the results from the previous study presented in Chapters 2 & 3. Here is a brief account of the findings that were in concordance with the results of our previous study. Firstly, these are the findings regarding the main effects: the main positive effect of task clarity, feedback and personalized responsibility on task commitment and the main positive effect of task

clarity on task performance.

Secondly, there is one interaction effect that appears to work in the same way throughout the studies. To remind, chapter 2 showed that personalized responsibility weakened the relationship between task clarity and task commitment. Here, in congruence with chapter 2, a weakening of the relationship between task clarity and task commitment by personalized responsibility was found, which leads to an important conclusion. It seems to corroborate the notion that clarity and personalized responsibility, both forming part of the accountability conglomerate, may serve as substitutes to each other, rather than as reinforcers of each other's motivational impact, as was hypothesized.

Let us now discuss in more detail the goal orientation and the related direct and interactive effects of accountability variables on task performance (hypotheses 1 & 2), and later do the same for the goal orientation and the direct and interactive effects of accountability variables on task commitment (hypotheses 3 & 4).

Hypothesis 1 addressed the relationship between task clarity and personalized responsibility, on the one hand, task performance, on the other hand, and the influence of performance orientation on this relationship. In this study performance oriented agents appear to perform well, unless both task clarity and responsibility are low. Persons high in performance orientation apparently are very keen to do well, but if tasks are vague, doing well may be very uncertain. Highly performance oriented individuals may not like a vague situation and they will show a lower performance or would leave the scene if they could. Furthermore this will especially be so if they do not feel personally responsible for good performance. If performance orientation is high, task clarity as well as personalized responsibility add to task performance, manifesting an additive relationship between the two accountability factors.

Figure 4.2 also shows that the two highest task performance levels are found in the conditions when there is high clarity and high performance orientation, irrespective of personalized responsibility. This also makes clear that those high in performance orientation especially become motivated to perform well if tasks are clear. If tasks are clear the situation is unambiguous and for the performance oriented actor there is not much risk to fail. A vague task is something much more suitable for mastery oriented persons, because it contains more opportunities to learn. When task clarity and personalized responsibility are both high, the latter

contributes only a little further to task performance. When task clarity is low, however, personalized responsibility evidently is related to a larger improvement in task performance. In other words, if performance orientation is high, the effects of personalized responsibility and task clarity seem to substitute each other. In short, task clarity and personalized responsibility again surface as substitutes of each other, now in their role as catalyst of the impact of performance orientation on task performance.

From the three-way interaction it follows that two of the three factors should be high to produce a good performance. If agents score low in performance orientation but have clear tasks and are made personally responsible, their task performance improves. When it comes to the interplay of the three variables - highly performance oriented agents who have clear tasks and are made personally responsible perform the best.

Theoretically this means that in organizational settings performance orientation appears to be a positive factor for the actual task performance, given that the tasks are clear and/or employees feel personally responsible. Performance orientation might not be related to task performance in specific laboratory settings (Block, Roney, Geeter, Lopez & Yang, 1995), in specific groups, such as children (Dweck, 1986) or students (Button et al., 1996), or with predetermined specific conditions such as a challenging task (Kozlowski & Bell, 2006) or a failure situation (Dweck & Elliott, 1988). However, in organizations, it is quite possible that performance oriented agents perform successfully on clear tasks for which they are personally responsible.

There is a strengthening of task clarity – task performance relationship by personalized responsibility if performance orientation is low. This result is the opposite of what was hypothesized, but nonetheless interesting from a theoretical point of view. It points to one more substitutability relation between factors, now between performance orientation and personalized responsibility: as soon as one of them is present, clarity works as a promoter of task performance. But if both are missing, clarity does not promote task performance anymore. On the contrary, it is then associated with a reduction in task performance. In other words, if there is a drive to perform well, due to either performance orientation or personalized responsibility, a clear task seems to have motivating potential. If no drive like this exists, than motivating potential reduces to zero. This finding is a valuable addition



to the goal setting theory. Its contribution is in suggesting that it is good to have clear goals, except for situations where people do not feel motivated to achieve a high level of performance and are not made personally responsible for their tasks.

Interactivity between feedback, audience power and performance orientation was expected to influence task performance according to hypothesis 2. Although, contrary to our expectations, the accountability factors feedback and audience power do not interact with performance goal orientation, they still have a number of direct and interactive effects on task performance. Audience power by itself is negatively associated with task performance, which means that strong audience power seems to attenuate task performance. This is congruent with Harkins (2006) who found that on a specific task (solving complex Remote Associate Test items) evaluated subjects put more effort than the unevaluated subjects. However, the evaluated subjects did not outperform the unevaluated subjects because while on simple tasks putting more effort in the prepotent response was the right strategy, on the complex tasks, it did not result in performance improvement. As appears in our study, audience power either does not motivate agents at all, or as in Harkins's experiments, it may actually stimulate them, but not result in higher performance. Stimulation by the audience is in accordance with the social facilitation theory of Zajonc (1965) which says that presence of an audience creates uncertainty and as a result the subject's drive is reinforced. On a familiar task that individuals are good at, their performance improves, while on a task that is not mastered by the people, the presence of an audience worsens their performance. Our results show that the combination of a powerful audience with no feedback is associated with the worst performance. Assuming the tasks were rather new, an audience that monitors without providing feedback may make one nervous and likely to fail.

Examining hypothesis 2, we did not straightforwardly find an association between feedback and task performance. However, given the positive two-way interaction effect that was found between feedback and audience power, such an association may exist, depending on audience power conditions. Feedback, in case it is provided by a powerful audience, with its corrective and informative properties feedback appears to outweigh the negative effect of audience power on task performance. When audience power is high, the relationship between feedback and task performance is stronger than when audience power is low. This means that in order to be optimally motivating, feedback has to come from a powerful source.

This finding is important for management practitioners. If task performance is to be improved, it is not enough to provide more feedback, since feedback alone does not promote task performance. It would also not be useful, or even negative for performance, to install a controlling powerful audience to monitor the employee's performance, since audience power by itself is negatively associated with task performance. If task performance is to be improved, it can be achieved by using both of these accountability factors at the same time. In performance management, it is necessary to make sure that the parties in the organization who give feedback to each other also have the power to influence each other. This can be particularly applicable to novel and complex tasks, which is in line with the social facilitation theory. These findings provide an underpinning of the basic idea underlying the accountability concept, which says that it is the compilation of factors that serves as a performance management tool, rather than those factors in isolation.

Surprisingly, Figure 4.3 shows that little feedback and low audience power are associated with even better task performance than what is generated by high feedback and strong audience power. This suggests that on clear tasks it makes sense to just let the agents be. This could be a good idea as far as the short-term individual task performance is concerned. However, in organizations besides being used for the improvement of individual task performance, feedback serves some other purposes, such as facilitating coordination between various agents and allowing agents to establish social contacts with each other and develop shared views. Similarly, powerful audiences serve more functions besides determining rewards for good performance or sanctions for poor performance. Nonetheless, in other settings, for instance Delphi groups, little feedback between the groups members and little audience power may be important success factors, at least in the short-term. This concludes the findings related to task performance, the following sections address task commitment as an accountability outcome.

Hypothesis 3 dealt with the interrelationships of task clarity, personalized responsibility and mastery orientation with task commitment. Each of the two accountability variables, task clarity and personalized responsibility, on its own appeared to be positively related to commitment. In addition, the two variables negatively interacted with each other. While personalized responsibility by itself is associated with task commitment, it has a weakening impact on the relationship between task clarity and task commitment. We can conclude that generally in order

to promote task commitment only one of the factors needs to be used: either task clarity or personalized responsibility.

Mastery orientation, however, adds another dimension to the above mentioned two-way interaction and suggests that this negative interaction is only there if mastery orientation is low. When mastery orientation of the agents is low and especially if their personalized responsibility is low as well, task clarity is important for task commitment. In contrast, if mastery orientation is high, the effect of task clarity on task commitment is not present. However, since the 'high personalized responsibility – high mastery orientation' line lies above the 'low personalized responsibility – high mastery orientation' line (Figure 4.4), there is, apparently, an additive effect of personalized responsibility when mastery orientation is high. In other words, personalized responsibility on top of mastery orientation is associated with higher task commitment. Since the effect of task clarity did not surface, the basic idea of interactivity between personalized responsibility and task clarity, inherent in the notion of accountability, does not appear to work at all for mastery oriented employees. There is a possible explanation of this phenomenon: clear tasks may be unattractive to highly mastery oriented agents. Vague tasks, on the contrary, may be perceived as a challenge for they may present extra opportunities to learn. In other words, even if they are personally responsible, in the organizational context, highly mastery oriented agents do not seem to associate task clarity with task commitment.

Mastery oriented individuals are just as strongly motivated by personalized responsibility as individuals who are not mastery oriented. This is inferred from the absence of the two-way interaction between personalized responsibility and mastery orientation. There seems to be a difference in the motivating effect of personalized responsibility and that of mastery orientation. Personalized responsibility is something assigned to an employee, while mastery orientation is an innate personality feature. It seems that assigned responsibility does not have any extra influence on mastery orientated agents. Nonetheless, there is an additive effect of personalized responsibility and mastery orientation; their sum results in increased task commitment. Therefore, the presence of both of them is beneficial for task commitment.

For managers the foregoing implies that to obtain a committed workforce one should primarily select employees with a mastery orientation. Additionally, one

should make the highly mastery oriented workers personally responsible. If workers score low in mastery orientation, however, their task commitment can still be influenced. What the managers should do depends on the type of tasks that the low mastery oriented workers have to perform. If workers have to perform vague tasks, giving them responsibilities, empowering them, will be beneficial for task commitment. If, in contrast, the tasks of the workers who are low in mastery orientation are clear, task commitment will not benefit from making them personally responsible.

The nature of the interactions between mastery orientation, task clarity and personalized responsibility and their relationship with task commitment, as it surfaced in the results, is of theoretical significance. While personalized responsibility is positively associated with task commitment of mastery oriented agents, task clarity is not. Instead, task clarity induces task commitment of agents who are not mastery oriented, while making them personally responsible seems to be ineffective from the point of view of task commitment. Therefore, which accountability component, task clarity or personalized responsibility acts as the motivator depends on the level of mastery orientation of the agents. If mastery orientation is high, personalized responsibility adds to commitment, if mastery orientation is low, task clarity is much more important.

Hypothesis 4, which did not receive support, stated that if mastery orientation would be high, audience power would strengthen the relationship between feedback and task commitment. We found that feedback and mastery orientation on their own were associated with task commitment, however, no interactivity between any of the elements was found. This means that neither a combination of feedback and audience power, nor the same factors in combination with mastery orientation seem to play a role in strengthening task commitment.

The shortcomings of this study are primarily of a methodological nature, i.e. the study used only self-report questionnaires and was cross-sectional, which impairs the internal validity of the study (i.e., the presumed causality between concepts [Figure 4.1]). As a recommendation for further research these methodological issues may be dealt with by means of using different methods to prevent possible bias and studying the phenomenon from a longitudinal perspective.

To conclude, we summarize the theoretically relevant findings that ensue from this study. The first finding pertains to the relationship between clarity and

personalized responsibility and task performance, moderated by performance orientation. People perform better if at least two of these conditions are present. Especially those high in performance orientation seem to perform better if goals are clear. If neither the intrinsic (i.e. high performance orientation) nor the extrinsic (i.e. made personally responsible) drives are there, task clarity may even lower task performance. In other words, there is substitutability of performance orientation and personalized responsibility: as soon as one of them is present, clarity works as a promoter of task performance. Based on this study we can conclude that if performance orientation of agents is low, accountability seems to act as a compilation of factors in the way it is associated with task performance.

The second finding concerns the relationship between feedback and audience power and task performance. Irrespective of the level of performance orientation, audience power strengthens the relationship between feedback and task performance. Actually, we found the lowest performance in the conditions when the audience power was high and the level of feedback was low. Because most of the respondents had to fulfill rather novel tasks, we tentatively conclude that if one is rather inexperienced, a powerful audience that is merely present and that provides no feedback might be experienced as stressful, which will have a counterproductive effect (see, for example, Zajonc, 1965).

The third finding: having clear tasks is very important for those low in mastery orientation, while they add nothing to the commitment of those who are high in mastery orientation. Our findings assist in answering the question about the nature of the accountability phenomenon, if it is a compilation or a sum of motivational factors. Further findings pertaining to this subject are presented in the next study.

## **4.11 Study 2**

Study 2 is a replication of study 1, which is covered in the first part of this chapter. Study 2 was carried out at a different institution – a public organization active in the field of justice, founded in 1990 which has a staff of 900 persons. The main function of this organization is collection of (mainly traffic) fines. In contrast to the company of study 1, which had undergone an organizational change shortly before the study, the organization of study 2 has not recently passed through major changes. The educational background of the workers in study 2 was mainly a technical one, as was the case in study 1. The average level of education, however,

was higher in study 2. Below is an account of the method used in this study, followed by the results section and the discussion of the results.

## **4.12 Method study 2**

### **4.12.1 Measures study 2**

Measures in study 2 were identical to study 1. The reliabilities of the scales are presented in Table 4.

### **4.12.2 Participants study 2**

200 employees were approached and 95 of them returned the questionnaire, thus the response rate of 47.5 percent was reached. The kinds of tasks that the respondents performed included managing contacts with bailiffs, various IT tasks, handling appeals and court orders, commenting on the enforcement orders and alike.

10.5% of the respondents had a managerial function. 55% of the respondents were male and 45% female, the average age of the respondents was 37.5 years. For the organization as a whole the male/female ratio is 46/54; these characteristics of the sample, except for the latter one, are similar to those in the overall population of the organization.

### **4.12.3 Procedures study 2**

Respondents received questionnaires with enclosed return envelopes from their supervisors and were once reminded to fill them in. The questionnaires were returned directly to the researchers.

## **4.13 Results study 2**

Statistical analyses were carried out in the same way as in study 1. First we present the outcomes of the correlation table (Table 4.4) to give an idea about the relationships among the study variables. Then, results corresponding to the hypotheses are presented.

The correlation table shows a number of significant correlations. Task clarity has a high mean (6.0), which means that tasks are very clear to the respondents. Task clarity correlates negatively with personalized responsibility and is positively

related to task performance. The mean of feedback is 4.3, which indicates relatively moderate levels of feedback.

**Table 4.4. Study 2. Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha's and intercorrelations**

Variable	M	SD	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Task clarity	6.0	0.56	.86	-							
2 Feedback	4.3	1.09	.89	-.05	-						
3 Personalized responsibility	3.5	1.61	.50	-.21*	-.05	-					
4 Audience power	4.0	1.03	.87	-.15	.52**	.16	-				
5 Performance orientation	3.6	1.31	.84	-.14	-.03	.21*	.31**	-			
6 Mastery orientation	5.7	0.92	.66	.05	.12	-.20	-.08	.14	-		
7 Task commitment	5.9	0.69	.61	-.04	.24*	.00	.02	-.08	.35**	-	
8 Task performance	5.0	0.71	.63	.27**	.03	-.14	-.09	.03	.09	.16	-

Note: N=92 \*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed), \*\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed). Variables values ranges from 1 (low) to 7 (high).

Feedback correlates strongly with audience power, and with task commitment. Personalized responsibility is around 3.5 out of possible 7.0, which means that often teams, rather than individual employees are responsible for tasks or that responsibility is not clearly assigned to agents individually. Similarly, audience power with the mean of 4.0 is also not too strongly present at the organization. Personalized responsibility and performance orientation are correlated. There are no correlations of personalized responsibility with any of the dependent variables. Audience power correlates with performance orientation, but with none of the dependent variables. The mean of performance orientation is about 3.6. Performance orientation has no correlations with any of the dependent variables. Mastery orientation is high (5.7), it correlates highly and significantly with task commitment. The means of task commitment (5.9) and task performance (5.0) are high. The dependent variables do not correlate with each other.

In terms of the mean values this study is similar to the study presented in the first part of this chapter, except that in this study personalized responsibility, mastery orientation and task performance appear to be somewhat lower, while audience power appears higher than in the study above. Some correlations of the independent variables and moderators with the dependent variables in this study are similar to study 1. These include a positive correlation between mastery orientation and task commitment, and a positive correlation between task clarity and task performance. However in this study, unlike in study 1, there are no correlations between personalized responsibility and task commitment, between audience power and task performance and between performance orientation and task performance. Further analysis helps explain the lack of association between these variables. Now that a brief account of the means and correlations has been given, in the paragraphs below we present results corresponding to the hypotheses.

The first hypothesis states that personalized responsibility will strengthen the relationship between task clarity and task performance if performance orientation is high, rather than if it is low. This hypothesis first deals with the direct main effect of task clarity on task performance, which is significant and positive (see Table 4.5). Within this hypothesis we also analyze the influence of two moderators: personalized responsibility and performance orientation on the relationship between task clarity and task performance. Results show that neither the main effects of these moderators nor their interactions with task clarity reach significance. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is not confirmed. This means that personalized responsibility does not appear to strengthen the relationship between task clarity and task performance and introducing performance orientation to the model does not result in any additional effects. Thus, in this study task performance is not associated with and does not depend on either of the moderators mentioned in this hypothesis.

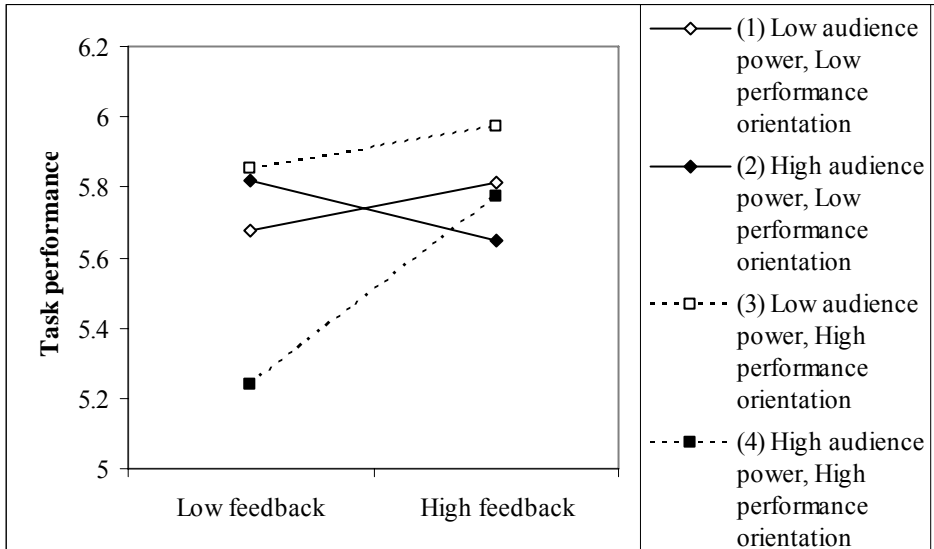
Hypothesis 2 stated that audience power will strengthen the relationship between feedback and task performance if performance orientation is high, rather than low. First we investigated the direct effects of feedback, audience power and performance orientation on task performance. Such direct effects were not present (see Table 4.5). Furthermore, audience power by itself did not surface as a moderator in the relationship between feedback and task performance. Finally performance orientation was studied as a moderator to the relationship between the



**Table 4.5. Study 2. Task performance regressed on the accountability factors and performance orientation**Note PO=performance orientation. N=92. Using a two-tailed test: \* $p \leq .10$ , \*\* $p \leq .05$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ 

Variables	Hypothesis 1 Task performance			Hypothesis 2 Task performance		
	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$
<u>Main effects</u>						
Task clarity	.31	.14	.25**			
Personalized responsibility	-.07	.06	-.13			
Performance orientation	.23	.16	.42	-.02	.07	-.03
Feedback				.08	.09	.12
Audience power				-.11	.07	-.20
R <sup>2</sup>						.09**
						.02
<u>Two-way interaction effects</u>						
Task clarity x personalized responsibility	.01	.09	.02			
Task clarity x PO	-.12	.26	-.13			
Personalized responsibility x PO	-.06	.05	-.35			
Feedback x audience power				.01	.05	.03
Feedback x PO				.09	.07	.18
Audience power x PO				-.10	.05	-.24*
R <sup>2</sup>						.12*
$\Delta R^2$						.03
<u>Three-way interaction effects</u>						
Task clarity x personalized responsibility x PO	.01	.07	.02			
Feedback x audience power x PO				.09	.04	.32**
R <sup>2</sup>						.12
$\Delta R^2$						.00
						.10
						.06**

two accountability variables - feedback and audience power on the one hand and task performance on the other hand. A positive three-way interaction was found, which is depicted in Figure 4.8.



**Figure 4.5. Study 2. Task performance regressed on feedback for low and high audience power and low and high performance orientation**

Note: Low score = 1SD below the mean, high score = 1SD above the mean.

The dotted lines in Figure 4.8 reveal that the ‘feedback – task performance’ relationship is stronger if performance orientation is high and the more so if audience power is high as well. The steeper slope ‘high audience power -high performance orientation’ differs significantly from ‘low audience power -high performance orientation’ ( $t=1.680, p<.10$ ). The difference in steepness means that for performance oriented agents, high audience power results in a stronger association between feedback and task performance. In short, the expected interaction of audience power and feedback appears to hold (only) in case of high performance orientation. From the same pair of slopes we infer that low feedback in the conditions of high performance orientation - high audience power is associated with lower task performance than low feedback in low performance orientation - low audience power conditions. For performance oriented agents the presence of a powerful audience that does not provide feedback seems to be related

to a reduced performance.

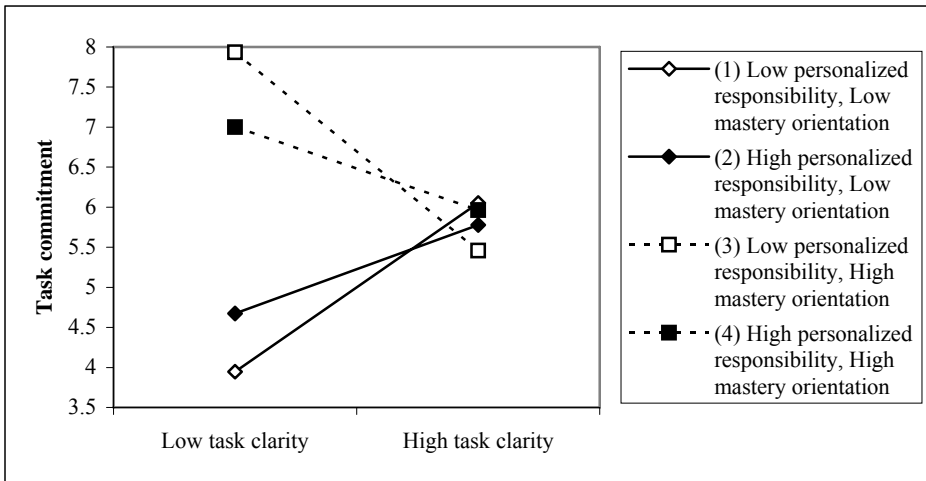
All lines on the graph of the three-way interaction go upwards except for the one representing 'high audience power - low performance orientation'. The latter line goes down which means that when performance orientation is low and audience power is strong, the relationship between feedback and task performance becomes negative, i.e. more feedback is associated with poorer task performance. By comparing the downward slope with other slopes we can infer one more important result. The significant difference between the slopes 'high audience power - low performance orientation' and 'high audience power - high performance orientation' ( $t=2.002$ ,  $p<.05$ ) means that when audience power is high, performance orientation is responsible for the positive or negative relationship between feedback and task performance. That is, given the high audience power, when performance orientation is low the above mentioned relationship is negative, as if the feedback backfires, whereas when this orientation is high the relationship between feedback and task performance is positive, and the feedback appears to work. This confirms that if performance orientation is high, high audience power strengthens the relationship between feedback and task performance. This fits in with hypothesis 2. The other slopes do not appear to differ significantly from each other. This concludes the hypotheses about the moderating effect of performance orientation. The next paragraphs present results for hypotheses 3 and 4 that involve the moderating effects of mastery orientation

According to hypothesis 3, personalized responsibility was expected to strengthen the relationship between task clarity and task commitment if mastery orientation is high, rather than when it is low. The main effects of task clarity and personalized responsibility do not reach significance, while the main effect of mastery orientation on task commitment is significant and positive (Table 4.6). In Figure 4.9 the dotted lines are consequently 'on average' above the solid lines. The first significant two-way interaction is between task clarity and mastery orientation. The sign of this interaction is negative, which indicates a weakening of the relationship between task clarity and task commitment by mastery orientation. This two-way interaction is also visible in Figure 4.6: the two dotted lines go down and the two solid lines go up. This means that when mastery oriented individuals are given clear tasks, their task commitment decreases. Those individuals, who are intrinsically motivated to learn, are apparently especially committed to tasks that

**Table 4.6. Study 2. Task commitment regressed on the accountability factors and mastery orientation**Note MO=mastery orientation. N=92. Using a two-tailed test: \* $p \leq .10$ , \*\* $p \leq .05$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ 

Variables	Hypothesis 3 Task commitment			Hypothesis 4 Task commitment		
	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$
<u>Main effects</u>						
Task clarity	-.04	.12	-.03			
Personalized responsibility	.01	.06	.01			
Mastery orientation	.74	.30	.99**	.19	.08	.22*
Feedback				-.07	.06	.30**
Audience power				.17	.09	-.13
R <sup>2</sup>						.13**
						.16***
<u>Two-way interaction effects</u>						
Task clarity x personalized responsibility	.06	.08	.07			
Task clarity x MO	-.84	.41	-.66**			
Personalized responsibility x MO	-.11	.07	-.57*			
Feedback x audience power				.05	.04	.11
Feedback x MO				-.06	.10	-.11
Audience power x MO				.06	.09	.10
R <sup>2</sup>						.14**
$\Delta R^2$						.02
						.20**
						.04
<u>Three-way interaction effects</u>						
Task clarity x personalized responsibility x MO	.31	.12	.63**			
Feedback x audience power x PO MO				.05	.05	.15
R <sup>2</sup>						.21**
$\Delta R^2$						.07**
						.20**
						.01

offer the opportunity to learn (*i.e.*, are low in clarity). In other words, the main effect of mastery orientation should be attributed to the situation in which goals are vague. Conversely, and only when mastery orientation is low, clarity is positively associated with commitment. Another significant interaction term is between personalized responsibility and mastery orientation. Personalized responsibility is positively related to commitment if mastery orientation is low and negatively related to commitment if mastery orientation is high.



**Figure 4.6 Study 2. Task commitment regressed on task clarity for low and high personalized responsibility and low and high mastery orientation.**

Low score = 1SD below the mean, high score = 1SD above the mean.

The three way interaction offers further explanation to the Task Clarity x Mastery Orientation interaction. Clear tasks are associated with a decrease in commitment of mastery oriented agents especially when their personalized responsibility is low. At the same time their task commitment is the highest when their tasks are vague and personalized responsibility low. On the contrary, agents who are not mastery oriented show the lowest level of task commitment when their tasks are vague and personalized responsibility is low. Their highest task commitment is associated with high task clarity and low personalized responsibility. The slope significance tests showed that two pairs of slopes in Figure 6 significantly differ from one another. The slope ‘high personalized responsibility - high mastery orientation’ significantly differs from ‘high

personalized responsibility – low mastery orientation’ ( $t = -1.765, p < .10$ ) and ‘low personalized responsibility - high mastery orientation’ significantly differs from ‘low personalized responsibility – low mastery orientation’ ( $t = -2.246, p < .05$ ). Personalized responsibility attenuates the relationship between task clarity and task commitment. Unlike hypothesized, high personalized responsibility does not strengthen the relationship between task clarity and task commitment of mastery oriented agents. The patterns found in the results clearly do not fit in with the content of hypothesis 3.

The last hypothesis (hypothesis 4) posits that audience power strengthens the relationship between feedback and task commitment if mastery orientation is high. The results (Table 4.6) show two positive main effects on task commitment: the significant effect of feedback and of mastery orientation. Interaction effects pertaining to this hypothesis did not reach significance; therefore hypothesis 4 is not supported.

## **4.14 Discussion study 2**

The purpose of this study was two-fold: to investigate the additional moderating effects of goal orientation and to corroborate the outcomes of the studies presented in chapter 2 and 3. Below we will address these two issues as well as the initial question, posited in the first chapters - if accountability should be considered as a self-standing concept or a bundle of well known concepts. This discussion section is dedicated to study 2. A comparison of this study with study 1, presented in the beginning of this chapter will be made later in the ‘general conclusions’ section.

To address the second objective, the results that repeated those of chapter 2 and 3 include: a positive relationship between task clarity and task performance and between feedback and task commitment. In contrast to the findings of study 1, no two-way interactions between the accountability variables surfaced in this study.

Discussion of the influence of performance orientation and mastery orientation on the relationship between accountability variables and task performance and task commitment is presented below in the order of the hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 stated that if performance orientation is high, rather than low, then personalized responsibility strengthens the relationship between task clarity and task performance. Since no significant main or interaction effects were found, except for the main positive effect of task clarity, this indicates that clear tasks are

associated with task performance regardless of the level of personalized responsibility and performance orientation.

According to hypothesis 2 high performance orientation and high audience power were expected to strengthen the relationship between feedback and task performance. We found out that performance orientation is indeed a factor that together with audience power plays a role in the relationship between feedback and task performance. Several other conclusions follow from the results corresponding to this hypothesis.

Within the condition of high audience power we see a clear interaction between feedback and performance orientation. This suggests that someone who is high in performance orientation and has a powerful audience, has the drive to perform well, reinforced by the external pressure. However, what can be inferred from the graph (Figure 4.8) is that the lack of feedback makes it unclear for the agents who are highly performance oriented how to attain such a good performance. The agents may feel lost and helpless or frustrated. This comes close to the social facilitation theory explanation, which states that the presence of an audience, which does not provide feedback, may be associated with a decrease in performance. In this study it appears that highly performance oriented agents presumably become excessively nervous or stressed if they are confronted with a powerful audience that does not provide feedback. Such a condition is a good antecedent for a poor performance. In such a situation giving feedback has the biggest positive impact; it is the steepest line in Figure 4.8.

The only downward line, depicting the negative relationship between feedback and task performance when audience power is high and performance orientation is low, can be explained in the following way. Persons who are low in performance orientation have a smaller inner drive to perform well compared to persons who are high in performance orientation. More feedback helps the former type of individuals to perform. However, if there is a powerful audience, but there is no inner drive to perform well (performance orientation is low), adding feedback worsens task performance. If the audience is powerful, its feedback may cause a motivational state that leads to an action in direct contradiction to the rules. This would be a case when social influence backfires (Paul, 2005). In other words, a case of reactance - a motivational arousal caused by a threat to or elimination of particular behavioral freedom (Brehm, 1989; Brehm & Brehm, 1981, Brehm 1966).

One's freedom may feel to be constricted by the presence of the powerful audience. The contradictory action triggered by reactance in this case is a decrease in task performance.

When audience power is high and performance orientation is high the relationship between feedback and task performance is the strongest. However, the line of 'high audience power – high performance orientation' lies below 'low audience power – high performance orientation'. Therefore although high performance orientation and high audience power is associated with a stronger 'feedback – performance' relationship, the best combination as far as the actual level of task performance is concerned is made up by the combination of low audience power and high performance orientation. An advice to management practitioners who have to deal with a performance oriented workforce and powerful audiences surrounding that workforce, would be to promote feedback-giving by the audiences. If, however, the workers are low in performance orientation and the audience that observes their performance is powerful, the advice would be otherwise, as feedback from this audience is associated with a weakening of task performance, possibly because of reactance. In that case, discouraging feedback would be a wiser course of action.

Hypothesis 3 stipulated that mastery orientation should be high, in order for high personalized responsibility to strengthen the relationship between task clarity and task commitment. Generally, mastery orientation itself appears to be associated with task commitment, but mastery oriented agents do not seem to be especially committed to clear tasks. Specifying the tasks for such people probably makes the tasks less challenging for them. High personalized responsibility attenuates the negative relationship between task clarity and task commitment among mastery oriented agents. Not being personally responsible, while having very clear tasks is associated with the lowest level of task commitment among mastery oriented agents. They feel neither motivated by responsibility delegated to them, nor by the task, since they seem to prefer vague tasks to clear tasks. Similarly, when mastery oriented agents are made personally responsible for vague tasks their commitment is somewhat lower than in the non-responsible condition. They may already be motivated enough by vagueness of the task, and making them personally responsible on top of that may be a little counterproductive. Feeling highly personally responsible may restrict their freedom to experiment with the task and



thus reduce learning opportunities.

Those low in mastery orientation do not feel comfortable if tasks are vague and they do not feel committed to such tasks, instead they feel really helped if tasks are made clear. They are not eager to learn from unstructured tasks, but if they are offered structure or ‘standardization’ of the task, they feel more committed. High personalized responsibility attenuates this positive relationship between task clarity and task commitment. When workers who are not mastery oriented do not feel personally responsible, they show the most commitment to clear tasks and the least commitment to vague tasks. The latter situation is explained by their dislike of vagueness which is strengthened by being made responsible for a vague task. Not being responsible seems to unleash their intrinsic motivation and increase their commitment to the tasks of their liking – clear tasks.

Our conclusion that clear or specific tasks are not attractive to mastery oriented individuals is in a way contradictory to the goal setting theory, which asserts that specificity is one of the important motivators. Our two-way negative interaction between mastery orientation and clarity is in congruence with the study of Seijts, Latham and Tasa (2004). The outcomes of this study were consistent with those in a few other studies (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989; Mone & Shalley, 1995) suggesting that on novel and/or complex tasks, challenging specific performance goals may not have the desired motivational effect on task performance. In the study of Seijts et al. there were two types of goals. The first type was a performance goal that focused on the end result which had to be a good performance. Attaining these goals required motivation, primarily effort and persistence. The second type was a learning goal which focused on knowledge and skill acquisition. The authors found that lower performance was associated with setting a specific high performance goal in a situation primarily requiring an acquisition of ability rather than an increase in motivation i.e. good task performance. Subjects in the do-your-best condition (no goal specificity) had performance results similar to the ones who had specific high performance goals. In the same situation setting a specific learning goal was associated with higher performance. The conclusion of Seijts et al. was that in a situation where learning was required, setting a high specific performance goal was not prudent.

Our finding may be used to further the idea of Seijts and colleagues. Novel tasks in organizations require learning and are likely to attract mastery oriented

individuals. Setting specific high performance goals in these conditions is not likely to be beneficial in terms of performance improvement compared to do-your-best goals. In the same study of Seijts et al. commitment to performance goals was found to be lower than commitment to learning goals. According to our study, mastery oriented agents do not increase their commitment to goals if tasks are clear or specific. Thus, clarity or specificity of tasks and goals is not a motivator for mastery oriented agents. Our conclusion therefore is that the motivational impact of goal setting may not only be limited in the conditions of complex novel tasks, its utility is also contingent on the type of individual goal orientation. As a consequence, accountability seems to be not fully applicable to the motivation of mastery oriented people. Most clearly the results pertaining to hypothesis 3 show that while task clarity is a burden for those who want to learn, it is a blessing for those low in mastery orientation.

Test of the last hypothesis, which stated that audience power strengthens the relationship between feedback and task commitment if mastery orientation is high, we can only infer that feedback is beneficial for task commitment. Since no interactions reach significance, we conclude that in the situation under study no relationship between task commitment and (the interplay of) these particular accountability factors could be discerned.

One of the drawbacks of this study is that some regression results yielded low  $R^2$  values and therefore the corresponding findings should be considered with some reservation. Because of the low proportion of explained variance strong predictors in terms of explained variance of task performance and task commitment were not identified.

## **4.15 General conclusions**

There are several conclusions which can be made based on both studies. First we review the conclusion, inferred from the main effects of feedback and mastery orientation on task commitment. Then we consolidate the conclusions that pertain to the interactive effects in order to answer the question stated in the beginning of this chapter: whether or not individual accountability should be treated as a compilation, a holistic phenomenon based on interplays of its components, rather than just a collection of those components.

Feedback is positively associated with task commitment, as follows from both

studies in this chapter and from chapter 2. Another finding based on the direct effects is that mastery orientation is positively associated with task commitment; it surfaces in both studies presented in this chapter. More articulated insights about the actual impact of these variables is inferred from the way the accountability and the goal orientation variables interact with each other to produce effects on the motivational outcomes.

Before addressing the conclusions based on the two-way and three-way interactions, it is noteworthy to mention that the outcomes of one study, which did not reach significance, cannot be said to refute the outcomes of the other study as long as they do not contradict them in terms of the signs (which was quite often the case). Most likely the small sample size in study 2 accounts for the failures to fully replicate some of the findings of study 1. In case of a failure like that, the study 2 outcomes may still be concordant with those of study 1, that is, not contradictory to them. This type of concordance, admittedly a weak form of corroboration, will be taken into account in the discussions, in addition to stronger forms of corroboration.

#### **4.15.1 Mastery orientation, accountability and task commitment.**

Regarding interactivity, our first core conclusion, based on both studies, is about the impact of high mastery orientation on the relationship between task clarity and task commitment. In study 1 high mastery orientation appeared to neutralize or bring to zero the relationship between task clarity and task commitment. In study 2 high mastery orientation had a negative effect on the relationship between task clarity and task commitment. Thus, high mastery orientation seems to either weaken or annul the relationship between task clarity and task commitment. Clear tasks are apparently only committing if people are low in mastery orientation. For those high in mastery orientation clear tasks are unattractive, since they offer fewer opportunities to learn. Our conclusion is that the impact of task specificity, which is an important cornerstone of the goal setting, is beneficial to those who are not mastery oriented only. These results really contribute to goal setting and goal orientation literature by unraveling that the motivational impact of goal setting is not only limited in the conditions of complex novel tasks, but may furthermore also depend on the individual's goal orientation.

If mastery orientation of individuals is low, task clarity appears to influence

task commitment positively. This relationship is not strengthened, but weakened by personalized responsibility. If, in contrast, mastery orientation is high, task clarity lowers commitment and again, personalized responsibility weakens this relationship. Similarly, neither a combination of feedback and audience power, nor the same factors in combination with mastery orientation play a role in strengthening task commitment. Feedback by itself is likely to be a promoter of task commitment; this finding confirms the goal-setting theory. As far as the accountability theory is concerned, feedback from a powerful audience does not appear to be related to higher task commitment. Separate accountability factors directly influence task commitment or have additive effects, but there are no strengthening interactions between them. Therefore, since in relation to task commitment, accountability, as operationalized by us, does not represent a phenomenon based on positive interplays, it may not be a potent holistic tool to influence task commitment.

#### **4.15.2 Performance orientation, accountability and task performance.**

In study 1 task clarity and personalized responsibility appear to interact and positively influence task performance if performance orientation is high. Before performance orientation was introduced into the model we found no significant two-way interactions. However when performance orientation is high, the positive interplay of the accountability factors surfaces. We can say that in relation to task performance, there is a strengthening interplay of the accountability factors task clarity and personalized responsibility, dependent on whether or not high performance orientation is present. Therefore, performance orientation is at least partially responsible for creating the conditions for the strengthening interplay between accountability factors. This finding was neither replicated nor refuted by study 2 and therefore should be used cautiously.

A positive ‘feedback - audience power’ interaction that surfaced in the results of study 1 in relation to task performance is confirmed by the results of study 2. We find that in both studies audience power has an influence on the relationship between feedback and task performance. From study 1 we have learnt that audience power strengthens this relationship regardless of performance orientation. In addition to that from study 2 we learn that as far as feedback - task performance

relationship is concerned, the positive effect of high audience power is only applicable when agents are highly performance oriented. Thus, based on both studies there is clear evidence that the positive effect of audience power on the 'feedback – task performance' relationship appears as long as performance orientation is not low. The findings of the first study suggested that a strong audience that provides no feedback is associated with a reduction in task performance. The second study showed that that this is only the case for individuals high in performance orientation. In the conditions when a powerful audience that does not provide information about the current performance or how to improve future performance, performance oriented individuals may experience extra stress. Such a condition is a good antecedent for poor performance, as has been manifested by the social facilitation theory.

The studies have shown that the answer to the question about the nature of the accountability phenomenon in relation to task performance is the following. Task clarity and personalized responsibility appear to interact and positively influence task performance if performance orientation is high. Also feedback and audience power appear to interact and positively influence task performance if performance orientation is high. Therefore our second core conclusion is that regarding task performance, accountability indeed works as one whole, made up of constituents that strengthen each other, but this seems only to apply to individuals who are highly performance oriented.

This chapter shows that accountability is more than a number of isolated factors. Whether or not interplays are observed depends on the kind of motivational outcome: task performance seems to be associated with accountability as (strengthening) interplay, while task commitment does not. The novelty of this study is in discovering that the way the accountability components interact appears to be dependent on the type and the level of goal orientation.