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6. Conclusions and discussion

In this thesis we tried to address two research questions about the nature of accountability and its outcomes. In this chapter, first, we answer the two research questions by presenting the main conclusions about the accountability phenomenon and about the influence of the accountability factors and goal setting on a number of (motivational) outcomes. A few tables are developed and presented in order to better understand the intricate working of various factors. Then the scientific contribution of the present research is discussed in terms of findings that enrich the goal-setting theory of motivation and the impression management concept. This section is followed by discussing the practical contributions of the studies. Strengths, weaknesses and directions for future research conclude this chapter.

6.1 Nature of the accountability phenomenon

The first research question was whether accountability should be viewed as a compilation of several motivational factors, which positively interact with each other and create a synergy in terms of motivational effect. Our model is based on positive interactions since the literature refers to accountability as one force, either consisting of multiple facets or treated as a one-dimensional phenomenon. We started our investigation by proposing that accountability is multi-dimensional and the separate accountability factors do not only act as individual motivators, but also form a compilation, that is, strengthen each other's motivational impact. Alternatives to positive interactions are negative or no interactions. If negative interactions arise, factors cancel or weaken each other's impact. If no interactions, but additive effects between the factors surface, accountability would appear to be a sum of well-known motivators.

The two groups of factors considered initially are task-related (task clarity and feedback) and social context-related (personalized responsibility and audience power). As the chapters progress, the two groups are augmented by a third group: personality factors (mastery orientation and performance orientation). A triangle (task-social context-individual) model emerges, where the three groups of factors together appear to affect individual attitudes and behaviors in a comprehensive way. The interplays between the accountability factors and the sign of the

interactions prove to depend on personal goal orientation and on the kind of outcome in question. All the findings give evidence that interactions surface in relation to all outcomes, some of the interactions are strengthening and others are attenuating, but they all play an important composite role. Therefore, our conclusion is that accountability is indeed more than a number of isolated factors. Thus, an answer to the first research question is that accountability is a holistic phenomenon based on interactions, even though strengthening interactions between its factors only surface under specific conditions. Where such strengthening interactions arise, the integrity of the phenomenon is manifested by the individual factors that reinforce each other's impact. This means that the outcome variable is maximized when both accountability factors that form a pair (task clarity – personalized responsibility and feedback – audience power) are strongly present. More often instead of the strengthening interactions, weakening interactions are observed, where the factors attenuate each other's influence on the outcome variables. In any case, the factors should be seen in combination with each other, because changing the level of one has consequences for the way the other factor influences the outcome.

6.2 Accountability outcomes

The second research question addressed by the studies is about the joint influence of accountability factors on certain (motivational) outcomes. They include behaviors: task performance, use of system and self-promotion and attitudes: task commitment and belief in system. It appears that the kind of joint effects that the accountability factors have on the outcomes is outcome-specific and also depends on the individual motivational orientation. In other words, they depend on the kind of behavior/attitude in question and the combination of the task, social context and personality factors. The main results based on the chapters 2 - 5 in relation to the three main outcomes: task commitment, task performance and self-promotion, are presented in the text below. Tables 6.1 – 6.4 are based on chapters 4 and 5 only, since the preceding chapters (2 and 3) do not have the goal orientation component. Where the tables cannot reflect all the relevant information, such information is presented in the accompanying text with a reference to the respective chapter.

Table 6.1 reflects the relationship between task clarity and task performance (see chapter 4) and between task clarity and self-promotion (see chapter 5). The

relationships are put in the condition of (low or high) level of personalized responsibility and (low or high) level of performance orientation. It appears that there is a positive relationship between task clarity and task performance if at least one of the factors (performance orientation or personalized responsibility) is high. When both the social context variable and the personality variable are low, in study 1 of chapter 4, clear tasks may be associated with a decrease in task performance. In addition to what is reported in Table 6.1, chapter 4 reveals that when performance orientation is high and personalized responsibility is low the above mentioned relationship is stronger than when performance orientation is high and personalized responsibility is also high. This can be ascribed to a sort of substitution between task clarity and personalized responsibility. Strong presence of either one of these two factors already appears motivating and attenuates the other factor's motivational power. **It can be concluded that for performance oriented agents either one of the two factors (task clarity or personalized responsibility) is sufficient for an improvement in task performance.**

Table 6.1. The relationship between task clarity and the two outcomes for low and high personalized responsibility and low and high performance orientation.

Performance orientation	Low		High	
Personalized responsibility	Low	High	Low	High
Task clarity	TP - + SP 0 0	TP ++ SP 0 0	TP ++ SP --	TP ++ SP --

Note: The outcome variables TP = task performance, SP = self-promotion. A plus represents a positive relationship, a minus – a negative relationship and zero stands for no relationship. Results are based on two studies, the first symbol indicates the result of the first study, the second symbol indicates the result of the second study.

As far as self-promotion is concerned, results of chapter 5 show that persons who are low in performance orientation do not tend to self promote, while high performance orientation is associated with high self-promotion. From table 6.1 we infer that when performance orientation is low there is no relationship between task clarity and self-promotion. The same table indicates that clear tasks are associated with a decrease in self-promotion if performance orientation is high. When tasks are clear, the chances of failure are decreased and there is less threat for the image of performance oriented people, thus, less need for self-promoting behavior. **A**

conclusion is that when performance oriented agents, who usually tend to self-promote, are given clear tasks, their self-promoting behavior reduces.

Inferences about the relationships between the accountability outcomes and feedback, audience power and performance orientation are summarized in Table 6.2. **In relation to task performance, based on both studies, it can be concluded that agents who are highly performance oriented and receive a lot of feedback from an audience with strong power perform at a high level.** Performance oriented individuals may react negatively to feedback (VandeWalle, Cron & Slocum, 2001). Our finding shows that feedback from a powerful audience does not evoke a (negative) reaction that would result in worsening of task performance. It is possible that feedback from a powerful audience lets the agents focus on the task and perceive it as an opportunity to improve performance, rather than become self-focused, *i.e.* perceive feedback negatively as a judgment of oneself. Other results appear to be mixed and somewhat contradictory, which calls for more research.

Table 6.2. The relationship between feedback and the two outcomes for low and high audience power and low and high performance orientation

Performance orientation	Low		High	
Audience power	Low	High	Low	High
Feedback	TP - + SP ++	TP +- SP ++	TP - + SP +-	TP ++ SP --

Note: The outcome variables are TP = task performance, SP = self-promotion. A plus represents a positive relationship, a minus – a negative relationship and zero stands for no relationship. Results are based on two studies, the first symbol indicates the result of the first study, the second symbol indicates the result of the second study.

Individuals low in performance orientation, which usually are not inclined to self-promote, increase their self-promotion upon receiving feedback. This effect may be attributed to being better informed about the actual performance due to receiving feedback. Agents low in performance orientation may interpret feedback positively and therefore become more enthusiastic about their actual performance. As a result, they may self-promote somewhat more. From chapter 5 we infer that this is especially true if an audience is highly powerful. From the same chapter we learn that being performance oriented is associated with self-

promotion. As can be seen in Table 6.2, **performance oriented agents show less self-promotion when they receive feedback from a powerful audience.** By receiving feedback performance oriented agents learn that the audience is already informed about their performance, so their usual level of self-promotion can be decreased. It is also known that performance oriented individuals interpret feedback as evaluative and judgmental. So they may have some apprehension of feedback and it may have at least a short-term hampering effect on their self-promoting behavior.

Taking into account mastery orientation of agents gives insights into the relationship between the accountability variables and task commitment, and new and additional information about the relationship between the accountability variables and self-promotion. Table 6.3, based on the results of chapters 4 and 5, shows the relationships between task clarity and the two outcomes for low and high levels of personalized responsibility and low and high levels of mastery orientation.

Table 6.3. The relationship between task clarity and the two outcomes for low and high personalized responsibility and low and high mastery orientation.

Mastery orientation	Low		High	
	Low	High	Low	High
Personalized responsibility				
Task clarity	TC ++ SP - 0	TC ++ SP - 0	TC 0 - SP - 0	TC 0 - SP - 0

Note: The outcome variables are TC = task commitment, SP = self-promotion. A plus represents a positive relationship, a minus – a negative relationship and zero stands for no relationship. Results are based on two studies, the first symbol indicates the result of the first study, the second symbol indicates the result of the second study.

In relation to the first attitudinal outcome (i.e., task commitment) table 6.3 reports that **individuals who do not have a mastery orientation appear to be motivated by clear tasks.** However, from chapter 4 we infer that if non-mastery oriented agents are made personally responsible, clear tasks still let them feel committed, but to a lower degree. We can conclude therefore that when agents are not mastery oriented, there appears to be a substitution between the motivational impact of task clarity and personalized responsibility in relation to task commitment. When

mastery orientation is high, study 1 of chapter 4 shows no relationship between task clarity and task commitment, while a negative relationship is observed in study 2. Mastery oriented individuals tend to elaborate task strategies by themselves (Davis, Carson, Ammeter & Treadway, 2005). The above mentioned negative relationship may arise because of the tension between the task clarity that is handed down to mastery oriented agents and their preference to clarify the tasks themselves and learn from doing so. In study 2 of chapter 4, personalized responsibility seems to attenuate the negative relationship between task clarity and task commitment, this must be due to the extra possibilities to learn that personalized responsibility presents to the mastery oriented agents. **A conclusion is that highly mastery oriented individuals do not find task clarity motivating.**

From the same Table (6.3) we infer that according to study 1 (chapter 5), task clarity is negatively associated with self-promotion regardless of the level of mastery orientation or personalized responsibility. The other study shows no significant main or interactive effects. Therefore, clarifying the exact relationships between task clarity, mastery orientation and personalized responsibility, and their impact on self-promotion are a good subject for follow-up research.

Table 6.4. The relationship between feedback and the two outcomes for low and high audience power and low and high mastery orientation.

Mastery orientation	Low		High	
Audience power	Low	High	Low	High
Feedback	TC ++ SP 0 0	TC ++ SP 0 0	TC ++ SP 0 0	TC ++ SP 0 0

Note: The outcome variables are TC = task commitment, SP = self-promotion. A plus represents a positive relationship, a minus – a negative relationship and zero stands for no relationship. Results are based on two studies, the first symbol indicates the result of the first study, the second symbol indicates the result of the second study.

Finally, Table 6.4 reflects the relationships between feedback and the outcomes, for low and high levels of audience power and low and high levels of mastery orientation. In relation to the first outcome, task commitment, there appear to be positive main effects of feedback, visible in the table, and of mastery orientation, which we infer from the text of chapter 4. No interactive effects

between the variables surfaced. **It can be concluded that feedback is always positively associated with task commitment. The same applies to the effect of mastery orientation on task commitment.**

Table 6.4 shows no interactions between mastery orientation, audience power and feedback in relation to self-promotion. It appears, therefore, that mastery orientation does not play a role in the way the accountability factors influence self-promotion.

To conclude this summary, the answer to the second research question about the outcomes of accountability is contingent on the outcome in question and the exact combination of the accountability and the goal orientation factors. It is clear though, that in relation to task commitment, task performance and self-promotion the accountability factors can work in strengthening or (when weakening interactions are observed) competing ways.

6.3 Scientific contribution

6.3.1 Contribution to the goal-setting theory

The motivational impact of task clarity, a concept, which is close to goal specificity - an important cornerstone of the goal setting, is limited. While many studies investigate the motivational properties of goal specificity, there are not as many studies (Shapiro & Doyle, 1983; Joshi & Randall, 2001) that confirm that clear tasks are, indeed, motivating. The impact of task clarity on task performance throughout the studies presented in this thesis is positive. An exception appears to be constituted by the agents who are both not performance oriented and are not made personally responsible for the tasks. Task clarity is not associated with task commitment when mastery orientation of individuals is high. On the contrary, the level of task commitment among mastery oriented agents is low when their tasks are clear. **Therefore, the motivational impact of task clarity is subject to a few conditions: it is associated with task performance when people have either high performance orientation or personalized responsibility for the task or both; task clarity is associated with task commitment when people have low mastery orientation.**

Feedback – another cornerstone of goal-setting appears to be positively associated with task commitment but not with task performance. Only in case of

highly performance oriented employees, feedback which comes from a powerful audience, appears to be positively associated with task performance. The same type of employees show a decrease in task performance when their audience is powerful, but does not provide them with enough feedback. **The role of feedback in relation to task performance, thus, seems to depend on the power of the audience and on goal orientation. A general implication for the goal-setting theory is that when goal setting elements – task clarity and feedback - are taken in the context of accountability, their motivational properties become contingent on the social context variables and personal goal orientation.**

6.3.2 Contribution to impression management literature

Goal orientation helps to understand the influence of the accountability factors on self-promotion. Mastery orientation appears to be negatively related to self-promotion, according to the results of study 1 in chapter 5. Mastery oriented people are interested in their own performance and their own learning, rather than necessarily doing things equally well or better than others (Button et al, 1996; Brett & VandeWalle, 1999; VandeWalle, 2001; Kozlowski & Bell, 2006). Consequently self-promoting behavior is not one of their priorities. These results were neither corroborated nor refuted by the results of study 2, chapter 5. The connotation is that mastery orientation may well be negatively related to self-promotion, but to come to a definite conclusion in this respect, further investigation is necessary.

Performance oriented individuals, who generally tend to self-promote, show a reduced self-promoting behavior in the accountability conditions (feedback from a powerful audience or clear tasks). In fact, primarily the goal-setting task-related component plays a role in reducing self-promotion. Accountability appears to be a tool for a reduction of self-promotion especially among performance oriented employees. Surprisingly, **employees who do not have a performance orientation and usually do not self-promote, show more of self-promoting behavior when they are put in accountability conditions: facing feedback of powerful audiences.** To both categories of employees (high and low in performance orientation) accountability, thus, serves as a trigger to show unusual degrees of self-promoting behavior. If those high in performance orientation are inclined to overestimate their performance and those low in performance orientation to underestimate their performance, creating the

accountability conditions seems to help both types to get and present a more realistic picture of their own performance.

6.4 Practical contribution

Based on the findings which appear in more than one study, we highlight a few recommendations to management practitioners. The recommendations are grouped by the outcome. The first outcome is task commitment. If employees are made highly personally responsible, the relationship between having clear tasks and their task commitment may be weakened, since there is a kind of substitution effect between personalized responsibility and task clarity. In contrast, if tasks are vague, making employees highly personally responsible is associated with an improvement in task commitment. The choice may depend on whichever factor is easier to manipulate, or which factor is more appealing to a certain group of employees. While those who do not have mastery orientation find clarity motivating, highly mastery oriented employees do not, they prefer vague tasks. If their tasks are clear, making them personally responsible can somewhat compensate for the negative effect of task clarity on their task commitment. **In contrast, feedback always seems to be good for task commitment; therefore, efforts to improve task commitment can primarily rely on providing more feedback about the task.**

High personalized responsibility for very clear tasks seems to be beneficial to task performance irrespective of goal orientation of the employees. The other pair of accountability factors - feedback from a powerful audience, seems to help only performance oriented agents to work better. **Thus, strong accountability seems to be an effective tool to influence the performance of performance oriented agents who compare and evaluate themselves in relation to the performance of others in similar positions.**

Accountability, especially feedback, may be associated with self-promotion. Individuals who are performance oriented and usually tend to self-promote, reduce their self-promotion in accountability conditions (feedback from a powerful audience and task clarity). Self-promotion is unusual to individuals low in performance orientation. But when the amount of feedback from powerful audiences increases, it can be associated with an increase in self-promotion among

individuals who do not have performance orientation. This may be beneficial to their self-esteem. However, while some self-promotion may be good, e.g. for career advancement, excessive self-promotion is usually disliked by others in an organization. **Thus, it is important to remember that accountability triggers self-promotion in one group of employees (low in performance orientation) and hampers self-promotion of the other group (high in performance orientation).** In addition to the performance management highlights above, each chapter presents more detailed advice to management practitioners.

6.5 Strengths and weaknesses of the studies

The strongest contribution made by this thesis is that some effects of goal setting and social context seem to be rather universal, while others depend on the characteristics of an agent. These characteristics should be taken into consideration by the accountability researchers. Besides, this research has yielded findings valuable to the field of impression management and goal orientation. Important questions about the nature of the accountability phenomenon are answered and conclusions are drawn about the theoretical and practical implications of the phenomenon. Integration of the three contexts (task, social and personality) proved to be a useful approach to studying accountability. In addition, a few methodological strengths should be mentioned.

A methodologically strong point of this research is in conducting three studies that yielded four distinct data sets. They were carried out in different field settings, which contributed to the external validity of the studies. The companies where the data were collected included a subsidiary of a listed multinational, a semi-governmental organization and a private company. The other methodological strength was the use of two data collection methods (questionnaires and interviews) in the studies discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

Shortcomings of the studies presented in this thesis are primarily of a methodological nature. The first is the issue of causality. The accountability outcomes are presented as effects of the accountability factors, the goal orientation factors and their interactions. Strictly speaking, the results allow interpretations in terms of the outcomes (task commitment, task performance, and self-promotion) causing goal orientation, task clarity, feedback, personalized responsibility and

audience power. On the basis of statistical analysis this possibility cannot be excluded. On logical grounds, however, the causality claim can at least partially be addressed: goal orientation is a stable personality trait and, therefore, it is not likely to have been influenced by the outcome variables.

The second issue is the use of self-report questionnaires. The fact that task commitment as well as task performance received high scores can be attributed to social desirability, which can take place in self-rating. Social desirability is presenting one self in a more favorable light and hiding the true feelings about the subject. However, it was not feasible to obtain information about an attitude such as task commitment, unless it was reported by the respondents themselves. Obtaining the measurement of task performance from supervisors, could have reduced the willingness of the respondents to participate, data could have been lost if either a respondent or a matching supervisor did not fill out and return the questionnaire, and the matching of the data from both sources would have been lengthier. For these reasons it was decided to use the self-report questionnaires.

The last point that can be improved is also related to methodology: while in studies presented in chapters 2 and 3 questionnaires were supplemented by interviews, in studies reflected in chapters 4 and 5 only questionnaires were used. The weaknesses of this research present opportunities for the future research. They are in employing a stronger methodological approach: using multi-method and obtaining objective performance information without compromising the anonymity.

6.6 Future Research

This research poses a few questions to be taken up by those who are interested in advancing the accountability theory. Accountability factors in our model stem from the three domains: task properties, social context and personal characteristics. While goal orientation is considered a rather stable personality characteristic, the other two domains change continuously with the fluid working environment. As labor intensive tasks shift elsewhere, the Westerns countries, where the average level of education is increasing, try to capitalize on developing knowledge and technology. These domains are rich in non-routine tasks and appeal to mastery oriented people. It might, therefore, be necessary to adapt accountability to the new monitoring and leadership styles such as coaching and transformational leadership.

Each position within an organization becomes unique because of the loosely defined task requirements (Motowidlo & Schmit, 1999). Other current trends are characterized by vaguer tasks, less programmed jobs and self-management, which make the role of task clarity less prominent and the role of personalized responsibility more prominent. Personalized responsibility calls for investigating the role of authority for tasks and decisions, since it is necessary to have a balance between responsibility and authority. Also given the importance of team work and the proliferation of dispersed or virtual teams, future research will benefit from concentrating on the influence of such task characteristics as task interdependence and task autonomy on accountability and accountability outcomes.

Society becomes more complex, more networks spring up, more audiences gain power, so the social side of accountability becomes more important. One of the trends, for instance, is the increasing customers' influence on the evaluation standards. It is interesting to investigate the actual role of customers as one of the accountability audiences and determine what gives or can give them power to influence the agents. Enriching to the model would be the inclusion of more social context characteristics such as multiple powerful audiences (multiple stakeholders), which may have different or conflicting interests. It may also be useful to differentiate between the legitimacy of audience power and the types of audience power. This can be addressed by future research with the purpose of developing an integrated and up-to-date accountability model.

6.7 Concluding Remarks

Using our own approach to operationalizing and measuring accountability, we have established that individual accountability is a phenomenon based on interplays and has to be viewed in its entirety. The three groups (task, social and personality) of accountability factors appear to influence each other. Not in all instances there is a motivational force based on the positive interplays between the factors. The fact that the accountability constituents may strengthen or weaken each other's relationships with the dependent variables, calls for extra thought and attention in creating the accountability conditions. Accountability is not a solution to all problems and is not a tool that unilaterally boosts motivation. It works differently for people with different goal orientation: performance oriented individuals seem to profit more from it than mastery oriented individuals. The way the

accountability factors work together shows that the phenomenon of accountability has far-reaching important implications to such domains as goal-setting and impression management and in relation to at least a few important work behaviors and attitudes. Follow up research can help create an optimal combination of the three contexts: task, social and personality to make accountability a fulfilling experience for the individuals and bring the intended benefits of accountability to the institutions.