

## University of Groningen

### Individual accountability

Turusbekova, N.

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*

2007

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Turusbekova, N. (2007). *Individual accountability: The interplay between task, social context and personality attributes*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. s.n.

#### Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

#### Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

## Summary in English

In the introduction, chapter 1, the basic model of individual accountability is developed and presented along with two main questions to be addressed in this thesis. The model consists of task related factors (task clarity and feedback) and factors stemming from the social context (personalized responsibility and audience power). The first research question is 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. Alternatively there may be negative interactions or no interactions. If no interactions surface, accountability may still appear to be a sum of already known motivators. The second research question is about the attitudes and the kinds of behavior that the accountability factors and their interplays may be associated with. Below, the content of each chapter is summarized and the two research questions are addressed by presenting the relevant findings from each chapter and at the end by synthesizing the findings of all the chapters.

In chapter 2 we distinguish between the four accountability factors: task clarity, feedback, personalized responsibility and audience power, and investigate their relationship with task commitment. The accountability factors are hypothesized to be positively related to task commitment. Their combined effects are hypothesized to be mutually strengthening. Four pairs of interplays are investigated: Task Clarity x Personalized Responsibility, Task Clarity x Audience Power, Feedback x Personalized Responsibility and Feedback x Audience Power. A study was conducted and a web-based questionnaire was filled out by 257 respondents among which 25 were interviewed. The results reveal that all four factors are positively related to task commitment. With respect to interactions, the goal setting factors (task clarity and feedback) and the social context factors (personalized responsibility and audience power) seem to substitute rather than to reinforce one another's impact. In terms of answering the first research question, the accountability factors do not appear to form a compilation (strengthening interactions); neither an additive effect is observed. What appears instead is a sort of substitution. This chapter shows that in terms of influencing task commitment, building up social contexts may, at least partly, serve as an alternative for

(performance management) programs based on goal-setting. Interpretation of the results leads to more questions about accountability in relation to task commitment and other outcome variables. Is it a compilation, i.e. do its constituting factors together form an entity in itself, are there additive effects of the accountability factors or do they cancel each other's effect? Since the question about the nature of the accountability phenomenon is only answered tentatively by this study, more studies are conducted. Chapter 2 proves the need to study the phenomenon in relation to a range of attitudes and behaviors to see the impact of the accountability factors on outcomes other than task commitment.

Chapter 3 focuses on the application of the accountability principles to a particular area: quality management, in relation to the attitude towards and the utilization of a quality management system (QMS). The motivational outcomes studied in this chapter are akin to task performance. A new quality management system has been introduced in a company, the accountability factors are hypothesized to be related to belief in this system and use of this system. In this chapter the accountability factors appear somewhat reformulated for the context of the QMS. The factors are: system clarity, personalized responsibility (for using the system) and social support (in relation to using the system). Direct effects of the three variables are hypothesized, as well as strengthening of the 'system clarity – use of the system' and 'system clarity – belief in the system' relationships by personalized responsibility and by social support. Mixed results are obtained. The joint working of the accountability factors seems to be associated with belief in the newly introduced QMS; the factors appear to strengthen each other's impact. This is the mutual strengthening of factors that we were looking for, as support to the compilation hypotheses. In order to strengthen the belief in the system one needs a strong presence of all the accountability factors. In contrast, when it comes to using the system, the accountability factors have negative interactions with each other. Personalized responsibility weakens the relationship of system clarity with the use of the system. Likewise, social support weakens the same relationship. Thus, to increase the system's usage either one of the accountability factors within the pair (clarity - personalized responsibility; clarity - social support) needs to be manipulated. It appears that in terms of mobilizing the accountability factors, to increase the use of the system is easier than to increase belief in the system. Although the evidence of the second and third chapters is not yet conclusive, the

research still succeeds to give practical guidance about managing the accountability factors in a working place. Inferences about the accountability theory conclude chapters 2 and 3 and lead to chapters 4 and 5.

In chapter 4 we again test the relationships between the accountability factors, their interplays and task commitment, besides, a new dependent variable – task performance is introduced. Additionally, new variables – performance goal orientation and mastery goal orientation are introduced. They are integrated into the model of interacting accountability constituents, which is subsequently tested in relation to task commitment and task performance. Results show that goal orientation is indeed a valuable addition that helps understand the influence of the accountability factors. *Task performance*, unlike task commitment, seems to be associated with the interplay (positive interactions) of the accountability factors. There are strengthening relationships between the factors, but they surface only when a person's performance orientation is high. Another finding of this chapter relates to two other accountability factors: audience power and feedback. It appears that generally a strong audience that provides no feedback is associated with a decrease in task performance. As far as *task commitment* is concerned, the results of chapter 4 suggest that the relationship between the accountability variables and this outcome depends on the level of mastery orientation. If mastery orientation of individuals is low, task clarity appears to influence task commitment positively. This relationship is not strengthened, as was expected, but weakened by personalized responsibility. If, in contrast, mastery orientation is high, task clarity lowers commitment and again, personalized responsibility weakens this relationship. 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. An interesting finding of this chapter is, furthermore, that the motivational impact of the accountability constituent - task clarity (a concept, which is close to goal specificity - an important cornerstone of the goal setting) is limited. Neither a combination of feedback and audience power, nor the same factors in combination with mastery orientation play a role in strengthening task commitment.

Two main conclusions of chapter 4 that address the research questions of this thesis are as follows. In relation to *task commitment*, accountability, as operationalized by us, does not represent a phenomenon based on positive

interplays. Therefore, the first conclusion is that the accountability factors do not compile to form a potent holistic phenomenon associated with increase in task commitment. In contrast, in relation to *task performance*, task clarity and personalized responsibility appear to interact positively, given that performance orientation is high. Exactly the same is applicable to feedback and audience power. 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. Goal orientation plays an important role: performance oriented people seem to be susceptible to accountability and increase their performance, while mastery oriented people are not motivated by it.

Chapter 5 presents us with the unexpected and interesting results regarding the relationship between the accountability factors, performance orientation and yet another outcome: self-promotion, which is a kind of impression management. This outcome was added to the accountability model in order to cover both the positive type of outcomes such as task commitment and task performance and a more dubious one - self-promotion, which, according to the literature on impression management, is likely to surface in the accountability conditions. In congruence with our expectations, performance rather than mastery orientation is associated with self-promotion. Mastery oriented agents do not seem to have a tendency to self-promote, while performance oriented agents do. Several interaction effects surface. It appears that task clarity and feedback diminish the positive effect of performance orientation on self-promotion. When a powerful audience gives little feedback, there is much self-promotion among agents who are high in performance orientation. When agents are performance oriented and both accountability variables – task clarity and personalized responsibility - are absent, self-promoting behavior is the highest. Neither task clarity, nor personalized responsibility influence self-promoting behavior of the agents who are not driven by performance orientation. Increased feedback may give these agents a better appraisal of their own performance and this may explain their tendency to self-promote more when feedback is high. The purpose of this chapter, in line with the research questions of the thesis, was to investigate the interactivity between the accountability factors and to identify the role of goal orientation in the way the accountability factors influenced self-promotion. A rather unexpected finding is that highly performance

oriented agents self-promote less when they are given clear tasks and are provided a lot of feedback, while vague tasks and little feedback (that means low levels of accountability) is associated with high self-promotion of their part. Another finding is that individuals who score low in performance orientation and consequently do not tend to self-promote by themselves, appear to show increasing self-promotion in the accountability conditions. A conclusion of this chapter is that, as regards relationships with self-promotion, compilation of the accountability factors indeed makes sense, especially if one also includes performance orientation into the model.

The synthesis of the findings and conclusions of all the chapters of this thesis is presented in chapter 6. In this chapter, 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 impression management concept and the goal-setting theory of motivation. This section is followed by discussing the practical contributions of the studies. Strengths, weaknesses and directions for future research conclude this chapter. Most importantly, this chapter presents answers to the two research questions. The first question whether accountability is a compilation, based on strengthening interplays of several motivational factors is answered negatively. The interplays between the accountability variables do appear in most cases, but only in some cases they are strengthening. This means that not in all instances there is a motivational force based on the positive interplays of the accountability factors. However, positive and negative interactions between the factors prove that accountability has to be seen in its entirety. Although it is not a tool that unilaterally boosts motivation, 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 accountability conditions, since the three groups of factors – task, social and personality, appear to influence each other.

The second research question was whether, and if so, in what way, the accountability factors taken together promote certain (motivational) outcomes. To give an answer to this question, below, the impact of the accountability and goal orientation factors is summarized in relation to each outcome. To start with *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. While those who do not have a 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.

As far as *task performance* is concerned, the two pairs of the accountability factors: task clarity, coupled with personalized responsibility, and feedback, coupled with audience power, appear to form strengthening interactions. 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.

Finally, as regards self-promoting behavior, 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). Surprisingly, employees who do not have 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. The connotation is that the triangle (task - social context - personality) works again, and the exact outcome in relation to self-promotion is contingent on the levels of factors within the three groups.

Accountability works differently for people with different goal orientation: performance oriented individuals seem to profit more from it than mastery oriented individuals. An important 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. The way the accountability factors

work together implies that the phenomenon of accountability is generally a potent tool if all its elements are fine-tuned to the specific situation in which this tool is applied.