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Social cohesion and interpersonal conflicts in projects

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| Manuscript Number: | MPL-D-14-00038 |
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| Abstract: | One particular area of project management literature that has continued to gain momentum in literature is its social dimension; with a number of scholars emphasising the fact that there is a considerable social dimension to every project activity. Within this context, the authors examine parameters that drive social facets of projects with a particular focus on social cohesion, interpersonal conflicts and national culture. Data from 167 project managers working in Kuwait were collected utilising a web-based questionnaire. Bivariate statistics was employed in the analysis of data, the objective being to draw out various correlations. No evidence was found in the study to support the notion that social cohesion or interpersonal conflicts were impacted by project management experiences, or that national culture portrayed stronger attitudes to measures of social relations. In effect, findings suggest that, social imperatives may transcend national culture. Results from the study also showed that managerial  experience could not predict attitude towards social cohesion or interpersonal conflicts. |
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**Social cohesion and interpersonal conflicts in projects**

**Abstract**

One particular area of project management literature that has continued to gain momentum in literature is its social dimension; with a number of scholars emphasising the fact that there is a considerable social dimension to every project activity. Within this context, the authors examine parameters that drive social facets of projects with a particular focus on social cohesion, interpersonal conflicts and national culture. Data from 167 project managers working in Kuwait were collected utilising a web-based questionnaire. Bivariate statistical techniques were employed in the analysis of data, but revealed no evidence to support the notion that social cohesion or interpersonal conflicts were impacted by project management experiences. In effect, findings from this research suggest that, social cohesion and interpersonal conflict transcend the effects of national culture.

**Keywords**-Culture, Social cohesion, Conflict, Projects

**Introduction**

The ‘projectification’ of work tasks has been a trend adopted by many organizations to control their business processes (Hobday, 2000). Projects have long been viewed as control mechanisms that enable the delivery of business operational requirements. Yet despite the popularity of project, overruns are frequent (Flyvbjerg, 2009, 2014) resulting in questions being raised about the control philosophy that has long dominated project management (Lenfle and Loch, 2010).

Over recent decades, scholars have focused on finding the ‘secret recipe’ that will lead project success and the result has been the generation of a plethora of criteria and factors that help explain why some projects succeed and why others fail (Chipulu et al., 2014; Ojiako et al., 2014). Despite substantial research, the impact of multiple participants with multiple perceptions and assessment criteria continues to be a challenge for project management systems (Flyvbjerg, 2009, 2014). Nevertheless, in pursuit of a greater understanding of project attributes, particularly those focusing on project success and failure concepts; there has been an emerging theme that emphasizes the significance of a socially-constructed management approach (Muethel and Hoegl, 2012; Vincenzo and Mascia, 2012). This interest would come as no surprise to Belout and Gauvreau (2004) who have long advocated that social factors are the most critical determinants of success for business projects. Delving back even further into the academic archives, Baker et al. (1983) suggested that 77% of the variance between a successful and failure within such projects will be determined by social factors, whereas Bikson and Gutek (1984) suggest that the figure could be as high as 90%.

Within socially-constructed management approaches, one critical dimension is *culture,* which is a complex phenomenon that can be employed to articulate how our society may be understood (Trompenaars, 1993). There is a growing acknowledgement that project success and failure may be substantially dependent on project stakeholder perceptions, which are influenced by cultural dispositions and a few scholars (see Henrie and Sousa-Poza, 2005; Chipulu *et al*., 2014; Ojiako *et al*., 2014) have suggested that, as such, culture lies at the core of project management research primarily because people deliver projects. This research will further deepen understanding of the social facets of projects with a particular focus on social cohesion, interpersonal conflicts and national culture.

**Rationale for study**

Within the project management discipline scholars have continued to develop conceptual models based on theoretical assumptions that the authors of this paper would contest, exhibit little or no relationship with the social reality of the project environment. The situation is exemplified by research within the process control domain of project management, such as Lenfle and Loch (2010), which has observed that project practitioners are generally unable to sustain rational management control systems, such as those proposed in various ‘bodies of knowledge’. The implication, according to Singh and Singh (2002), is that there is a need to move away from a rationalist topology of project management to a topology better able to deal with complexity and extreme uncertainty.

The argument put forward in this paper is grounded on theoretical developments in the field of project management that have brought to the forefront of academic thinking six new areas of research, including ‘social processes’ (see Winter *et al*. 2006). The authors’ opinion is that the existing research agenda appears *not* to have been able to drive through a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the social tensions, ambiguities, uncertainty, risk and contradictions which faces today’s project management practitioners.

In line with earlier propositions put forward by both Williams (2005) and Ojiako *et al*. (2014), the authors of this paper argue that the conceptualisation of project management as a social process appears to have developed as a result of the identified limitations in a rationalist approach to the delivery of business objectives project delivery. In its clearest manifestations, the notion of social facets (imperatives) within the delivery of business projects indicates a comprehensive rejection of the control philosophy which has been long associated with project management. Hence, in contrast to what can only be referred to as a *deterministic* bias, the notion of social facets (within project management), it will appear, seeks to be able to support a constant alignment of interactions within projects and decision making.

As expected, there has been some element of empirical research in this area. Studies, like Bresnen et al. (2003), have pointed out how processes relating to knowledge capture, transfer and learning in the business environment depend heavily on social relationships. In addition, adopting a group-wide/community-based approach to managing knowledge (and by implications, projects) is an essential element of a successful project (ibid). In the same light, Miller et al. (2000), noted the strong influence of cultural values on management practice and suggested that project management application was unlikely to be of relevance to businesses if applied in a way tat ran counter to pre-existing work and cultural values within the organisation. It is therefore of no surprise that Engwall (2003), suggested the ‘importance of analysing the interior processes of a project in relation to its historical and organizational context’ (p. 790). Furthermore, Cicmil *et al*. (2006) suggested that ‘*Researching the actuality of projects means focusing on social process and how practitioners think in action, in the local situation of a living present’* (p. 676).

A review of literature that focusses on social imperatives in project management, indicates the existence of four moderating factors; project complexity (Williams, 2005); experience (Cheng et al., 2005); industry sector (Lenfle and Loch, 2010;), and national culture (Henrie and Sousa- Poza, 2005; Chipulu et al., 2014; Ojiako et al., 2014). Although all four parameters are seen to have considerable moderating influence on the social facets of project management, in this study, we focus on national culture. National culture acts is a moderating factor that continues to attract considerable managerial and scholarly interest not only among organisations, but specifically within the project management discipline. Hence, this study focuses on gaining an understanding of the nature of relationships that exist between these social imperatives and factors that influence the success of projects. Empirical data is obtained from the State of Kuwait, a country which has not traditionally attracted the attention of project management scholars, thus leading to the following research question is posed; “How prevalent is the measurement of social relations on projects implemented in Kuwait?”

**Methodology**

Guidance for the framing of the research question and choice of research method that was deemed appropriate for the study was drawn from earlier research methodology studies (see Flynn et al., 1990; Bertrand and Fransoo, 2002; Forza, 2002), thus leading to this study being categorised as survey research aimed at ‘understanding the relevance of a certain phenomenon and describing the distribution of the phenomenon in a population’ (Forza, 2002, p. 155). In this case, the phenomenon is social cohesion and interpersonal conflicts in project management.

Being that the study is predominantly exploratory in nature, the adopted research approach/philosophy (see Figure 1), drawn from Sekaran (1983) and Cavusgil and Das (1997) which provides an analytical framework for cultural studies.

**Figure 1**: Research Philosophy

The framework for the questionnaire employed in this study was drawn largely from earlier work by Belassi and Tukel (1996), focusing on drivers for project failure. The questionnaire was divided into four sequentially arranged sections to ensure a logical flow of questions from factual information to opinions. The first section contained independent parameters to measure against opinions about social relations, and two ranking questions that focused on factors impacting project outcome and overruns. Each included three social factors and three technical factors. The intention here was to measure the frequency of each for comparison; whether social factors prevailed over technical. For the two sections that followed, a seven-point Likert-type scale that ranged from ‘*Strongly Agree’* to ‘*Strongly Disagree’* and a ‘*Not Applicable’* option were used to assess social relations on two dimensions: social cohesion (‘*SC*’) and interpersonal conflicts (‘*IC*’). Such a “correlational design” enabled statistical analysis to be conducted in order to assess associations between attitudes on social relations and mediators acknowledged in the hypotheses (Ruane, 2008: p. 87). The questionnaires were disseminated to project managers working in Kuwait. Respondents were members of the Project Management Institute - Arabian Gulf Chapter – Kuwait (http://www.pmiagckw.org) and had been contacted directly via email through the professional social network, *LinkedIn.* A total of 167 responses were collected of which 107 were useable. *SPSS* 18.0 was used to analyse the raw data for correlations between the independent parameters and attitudes towards levels of social cohesion (‘*SC’*) and interpersonal conflicts (‘*IC’*). Conforming to testing assumptions, three tests were performed to validate hypotheses: one-way *ANOVA*, *t-tests* and logistic regression.

**Findings**

To measure reliability, a test for internal consistency on the two pre-determined measures, ‘SC’ and ‘IC’, was undertaken. Reliability testing was undertaken using Cronbach’s Coefficient Alpha (α). The reliability statistics for both are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1**: Reliability statistics for measures of ‘*SC’* and ‘*IC’.*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Measure** | **Cronbach's Alpha** | **No. of items** | **No. of cases** |
| ***‘SC’*** | 0.69 | 10 | 107 |
| ***‘IC’*** | 0.74 | 9 | 107 |

Reliability testing in this case was focused on measuring the degree to which the statements used are consistent with the social relations construct intended (Pallant, 2010). The reliability of ‘*SC’* measure was slightly less than the minimum expected - 0.7 (Schervish, 1987). As suggested by Pallant (2010), due to the sensitivity of the test to a small number of items, mean inter-item correlation was analysed to verify reliability. In this case, the mean was 0.18 which still indicated a slightly suboptimal value (optima range: 0.2-0.4) (Pallant, 2010). Analysis of “*if item deleted*” did not yield any improvements.

For the measure of ‘IC’, Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was 0.74, suggesting acceptable internal consistency, although it had fewer items than the previous construct. ‘SC’. In addition, when moderated for ‘Interpersonal problems are common in my division’, reliability value improved to 0.77.

Respondents were presented with seven different sources of conflict within projects while being requested to rank them in order of what most affected the performance of their projects. The results indicate that ‘*IC’* was reported as the primary source of conflict by the majority of respondents. Conflicts over project priorities were prevalent, achieving second and third rankings, respectively; however, there was a recurrence in ‘*IC’* which was reported as the leading least likely source of conflict. It could not be inferred from these results that ‘*IC’* represents the leading cause of conflicts in projects since responses were similarly dispersed. However, the prevalence of ‘*IC’* over technical factors suggests the need for additional studies investigating the extent to which project difficulties may be underpinned by social conflicts in larger samples. Nevertheless, due to the sample size, generalization of this finding is not viable.

However, national culture was found to be marginally predictive of ‘*SC’* (*p*=.06). Although the sample distribution would not justify the comparison, nevertheless, one would predict that in the population there may be a significant association; therefore future research should look at similar categories of larger size to explore the importance of ‘*SC’* across various national cultures. As for the ‘*IC’* construct (see Table 3), results again indicated that there were no differences between the observed and predicted outcomes; and so there were no differences between predicted and observed number of cases in predictions of ‘*IC’* given national culture (χ2 (1, *n* = 107) = 1.82, *p* = .18).

**Discussion and managerial implications**

The focus of this study has been to explore parameters that drive social facets of projects with a particular focus on social cohesion, interpersonal conflicts and national culture. As a base for the study, Kuwaiti project managers were sampled. The study focuses on two major areas of interest in social imperatives within project management; *social cohesion* and *interpersonal conflict*s. A research question ‘*how prevalent are measures of social relations in projects?’,* was presented. Within this question, two dimensions were examined; the first dealing with the occurrence of social and technical moderators of project outcomes and the second dealing with variations in the levels of *social cohesion* and *interpersonal conflicts* measures as effects of four identified antecedents.

As earlier highlighted, two aspects of social relations were to be examined for their impact on projects: *social cohesion and interpersonal conflicts*. In an attempt to determine the perceptions of these measures in managerial context, four moderators (‘*Perceived project complexity’*; ‘*Project management experience’*; ‘*Industry sector’* and ‘*National culture’*) were employed to evaluate respondent’s attitudes towards these dimensions. Correlations were examined to determine which, if any, moderate the perceptions of social relations. In terms of the occurrence of social and technical moderators of project outcomes, there was no evidence to support that social cohesion or interpersonal conflicts were impacted by either industry type or managerial experiences, or that national culture (in this case, Arab), portrayed stronger attitudes to measures of social relations than other national cultures. Hence, our findings conflict with those of earlier studies such as that of Muller and Turner (2007) who found that employees with greater experience emphasized social cohesion and team satisfaction. The results of the regression test showed that managerial experience could not predict attitude towards social cohesion or interpersonal conflicts. Nonetheless, results showed a marginal significance in predicting social cohesion score for national culture. As stated above, although there was an uneven balance in ethnic groups which may have influenced the scores, the authors suggest that such findings should not be dismissed but rather that future research should investigate such cultural effects on perceptions of social relations.

In terms of variations in the levels of ‘SC’ and ‘IC’ measures, the result of the data analysis (one-way ANOVA) suggest that project stakeholders who categorized their projects as being of medium complexity significantly differed in perception from those of low complexity on measures of interpersonal conflicts ‘*IC’* but not social cohesion ‘*SC’*. This lack of consistency across both dimensions of social relations could be partly due to the reliability of the constructs. Here, ‘*SC’* scores, although proximate, were not as entirely reliable as ‘*IC’* scores. Such finding can be acknowledged as significant especially given that 65% of respondents agreed that politics decreased deficiency. This finding is in line with earlier studies by Flyvbjerg (2009, 2014), which suggest that politics in projects lies at the root of personal conflicts that arise in project environments.

In terms of the overall question of the prevalence of social relations in business environments, the main point to note is that project practitioners are extremely sensitive to the social (including political) context of the business environment within which they operate. This should not be seen as surprising when it is noted that social realities are creatively constructed, therefore implying that the social nature of projects presents perhaps two streams of complementary perspectives. The first, which is ‘*pluralistic’*, suggests that the reality of projects may be represented using a selection of language systems and symbols which, as such, are representative manifestations of culture (Henrie and Sousa-Poza, 2005; Chipulu *et al*., 2014; Ojiako *et al*., 2014). The second stream, popularly referred to as the ‘*plastic stream’*, suggests that the constructed reality of projects can be shaped and fitted to align with how project practitioners may intend to conceptualise the business environment within which the project is being delivered. In summary, it is important to acknowledge that due to the uniqueness of individual projects, it is difficult to identify how specific project stakeholders would perceive a project. For example, we recognize that specific parameters which influence perceptions of project success and failure in one project may not necessarily be regarded as relevant in another project.

It therefore remains a topic of great interest to generate an understanding of whether social imperative transcends that of national culture. A recent empirical investigation of over 700 relationships in UK engineering projects shows how social processes have a significant effect on managerial processes. Relationships within the project are particularly important, with respect, trust, and the length of the relationship having a particular resonance with successful interactions. Culture can also have an effect on areas that might appear extraneous, both which are both important and topical in relation to project management. As earlier mentioned, for a substantial period of time, various scholars appear to indicate recognition of how important social and cultural imperatives have been within the domain of project management (Abd El-Razek *et al*., 2008; Naoum *et al*., 2013; Ruqaishi and Bashir, 2013). The emergent global nature of projects has a substantial impact on how project management adjusts its outlook and underlying theories in order to deal with social challenges. These challenges are becoming more pronounced, particularly as ever-more international projects are being initiated, primarily due to advantages that are seen to accrue from wider talent pools and possible cheaper labour. Although these advantages may be abounding, the reality is that projects also abound with problems that may be directly linked to culture. Such problems may, for example, be linked to communication, misunderstanding of intentions and priorities, and the existence (or perception) of differences in terms of quality expectations and standards. Some projects also constitute teams that are geographically or functionally broadly dispersed. Such teams have to face their own challenges, such as the question of control.

The challenge for “projects” and the organization is to know how to ensure that a unified set of business goals can be maintained in such a scenario. These challenges are known to substantially impact project management approaches in that they can lead to increased confusion in business processes, such as decision making, thus negatively impacting team effectiveness. Witt *et al*. (2001), for example found project matrix teams to be highly politicised while Chen and Partington (2004) found differences between Eastern and Western managers’ conceptualization of construction project management. Such challenges have led scholars to put forward various proposals, which include the adoption of cultural synergy leadership approaches and increased use of feedback mechanisms. However, it has to be accepted that not all proposals are applicable in all cultural contexts. For example, although the use of feedback fits a Western management context, it does not fit Eastern culture, which is highly oriented towards implicit communication.

**Conclusions**

Based on our observations, many scholars have agreed that project success is a highly idiosyncratic concept defined by criteria and factors specific to the given business context and conditions. Our intent in this paper was to add to the body of related literature, by showing how one example from Arab culture relates to previous ‘Western’ studies that emphasize the need to integrate social dimensions in the assessment and evaluation of project outcomes.

A socially-constructed project management continues to draw the attention of many scholars, particularly in light of exploring the causes of project failures and its impact on organisational effectiveness. Considering the web of complexity and uncertainty that underlies projects and the cultural mix of different entities that converge in spatially-separated project forms, understanding the social underpinnings of emergent projects is crucial for predicting project outcomes, and may in fact salvage them from potential failure. To this end, exploring the social dependence of project success within a new context (Kuwait) can arguably add evidence of influence of social (cultural) imperatives on project success. Further research may enable an understanding of whether or not social factors supersede technical factors and what shapes the prevalence of such phenomena. Knowledge emanating from such future research may help clarify some of the ambiguities surrounding the causes of an augmenting trend of project failures. It was therefore the purpose of this research to explore these issues and provide information of their relevance.

There are two major limitations to the study that warrants to be mentioned. In the first place, both culture and its social configuration are particularly challenging to articulate due to the complexity involved in articulating specific cultural and social parameters. To this extent, there may be questions on the appropriateness in using as a survey instrument in this study, of a questionnaire. Secondly, although to avoid contextual bias from translation, the questionnaire had been produced in English. Candell and Hulin (1986), suggest that equivalence issues will exist where units of data gathering have not been developed in the predominant language of the culture under investigation.

**References**

[add as appropriate]