

IMPACT OF REGULATORY FOCUS ON OPPORTUNISTIC BEHAVIOUR IN CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

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Opportunistic behaviour, an obstacle to close collaboration, is common in construction projects. But little is known about how the parties' characteristics impact their tendency to commit opportunistic acts. This study applies regulatory focus theory (RFT) to describe clients' inherent motivation orientation and examines the effects of regulatory focus on their opportunism. The questionnaire data from clients in construction projects were analysed with Partial-Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to verify the theoretical hypotheses. The results show the promotion focus of clients can increase their tendency to conduct opportunistic behaviour, but their prevention focus has no significant effect on it. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by empirically confirming that parties' inherent characteristics play a significant role in predicting their opportunistic behaviour. The findings can help parties to understand and predict other parties' decision behaviour by figuring out their motivation orientations, so as to wisely and rationally employ project management approaches under various circumstances.

Keywords: projects; transaction cost; economics; organisation; client

INTRODUCTION

Opportunistic behaviour, resulting from temporary relationships and information asymmetry, is tempting and rampant in construction projects (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Lau and Rowlinson 2009). These behaviours, like taking advantage of contractual loopholes, shirking obligations, and hold-up problems, are common on the side of contractors and clients (Lu *et al.*, 2015). Opportunism, defined as a behaviour by a party that pursues self-interests with deceit at the expense of other parties, is a significant barrier to project success. Opportunism may increase transaction costs and inhibit the development of collaborative relationships (Wang and Yan 2013). Therefore, previous research has paid some attention to the drivers and factors impacting it, which are mostly based on agency theory, transaction cost theory, resource dependence theory, and relational contract theory (Zeng *et al.*, 2015; Shi *et*

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al., 2018; Zhang and Qian 2017). But little attention is paid to the factors that stem from parties' characteristics. It is recognized that under a similar situation, parties may behave in different ways. The traits inherent to the parties, such as internal motivation, may have important implications for the emergence of opportunism in the exchange relationships (Das and Kumar 2011). Moreover, most of the previous related literature focuses on contractors' opportunistic behaviour, but some researchers have empirically proved that clients also conduct opportunistic acts in business relationships with contractors in construction projects (Lu *et al.*, 2015). This study intends to further investigate the impact of clients' internal motivation on their opportunistic behaviour, which gets little attention from researchers.

In cases where scholars have begun to examine the issue of motivation, the discussion has been confined mostly to the individual level, with very little attention to the interfirm level (Johnson *et al.*, 2015). However, understanding the genesis of construction project parties' behaviour would be helpful to manage their relationships (Das and Kumar 2011). Motivational orientation refers to the perspective that some parties are risky, open, and eager to maximize gain; other parties may be conservative and try to avoid loss (Das and Kumar 2011). For example, the state-owned construction companies in Vietnam are more likely to take conservative strategies and conform to regulations as this kind of client is more restricted by the government policies and government strategic goals. They are also less eager to explore new business and inclined to maintain the status quo (Ling *et al.*, 2009). Differences in motivational orientation may influence parties' choices between cooperative and competitive strategies (Johnson *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, it is worth raising the issue of whether a parties' motivational orientation also plays a role in determining its intention to opportunistic behaviour, which has not yet been empirically studied in the literature.

Regulatory focus is a concept of motivational orientation and refers to an organization's tendency to either pursue success (promotion focus) or avoid failure (prevention focus) (Das and Kumar 2011). A party with high promotion focus may be risk-seeking, more likely to break rules, and has a more open culture. Parties high in prevention focus will opt for maintaining the status quo and more contractual rigidity compared with the party with a promotion focus (Johnson *et al.*, 2015; Das and Kumar 2011). Parties high in different focus may be varied in the attitudes toward opportunistic behaviour (Das and Kumar 2011). Therefore, we believe that regulatory focus plays a key role in shaping the willingness to commit opportunistic acts. Overall, this study aims to examine the effects of clients' regulatory focus on their opportunistic behaviour in construction projects.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS

Opportunism

Opportunism is defined as "a lack of candour or honesty in transactions, include self-interest seeking with guile" (Williamson 1975: 9). Opportunistic behaviour of the parties in construction projects can be defined as a behaviour by a party that is motivated to pursue self-interests with deceit at the expense of another party (Luo *et al.*, 2006). Some typical manifestations of opportunism are common in practice, such as taking advantage of holes in contracts, withdrawing commitments or promises, illegal subcontracting, shirking obligations, colluding, and so on (Lau and Rowlinson 2009).

Opportunism has obtained some attention in the literature of construction project management in recent years. The principal-agency theory attributes the opportunistic behaviour of agencies to information asymmetry (Forsythe *et al.*, 2015). Lu *et al.* (2016) considered external uncertainties and complexity of construction projects as the antecedents of opportunism. Zhang and Qian (2017) explored the drivers of opportunistic behaviour of parties in construction projects from the power asymmetry perspective, which borrowed from resource dependence theory. Based on transaction cost theory, Shi *et al.* (2018) confirmed that asset specificity has positive effects on contractors' opportunistic behaviour, contract and trust can moderate the effect. While some research has examined opportunism in construction projects, less attention has been paid to the impact of the characteristics (e.g., motivation) of the parties on their opportunism.

Regulatory Focus

Regulatory focus is a psychological term primitively to describe motivation orientation of individuals, explaining the difference of individuals' tendency to either pursue success (promotion focus) or avoid failure (prevention focus) (Tuncdogan *et al.*, 2015). However, regulatory focus can also describe the macro-level motivation of organizations (Johnson *et al.*, 2015; Florack and Hartmann 2007). First, managers in construction projects as well as boundary spanners who interact with other parties on behalf of a party, have personally preferred orientations, which would influence the party's decisions. Second, the institution and culture of the party may explicitly or implicitly shape a prevailing orientation (Das and Kumar 2011). Therefore, these elements of a party (institution, culture, and managers' traits) may shape the party's distinctive strategic orientation and posture, which can be embodied as regulatory focus (Das and Kumar 2011). For example, the state-owned companies in Vietnam are more likely to take conservative strategies and conform to the regulations as this kind of client is more restricted by the government policies and government strategic goals. They are also less eager to explore new business and inclined to maintain the status quo (Ling *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, the regulatory focus is appropriate to depict the firm-level motivation of clients in construction projects.

Promotion focus is concerned with the desire to maximize success, while prevention focus describes the desire to minimize loss (Das and Kumar 2011). A party with a promotion focus may be risk-seeking, more likely to break rules, more adaptable to changing environments, and has a more open culture. On the contrary, a party with a prevention focus will have a stronger sense of duty or responsibility, chose to maintain the status quo, and more contractual rigidity. When cooperating with a partner, the prevention focus party may more care about if the behaviour is the right thing with regards to the contract and cooperative relationship (Das and Kumar 2011). While the two kinds of focus appear to be juxtaposed, (Stam *et al.*, 2010; Lanaj *et al.*, 2012), they are not two ends of a continuum but orthogonal (Higgins *et al.*, 2001). Firms can have different combinations of high or low levels of promotion and prevention focus, like individuals (Idson *et al.*, 2000). For instance, some firms might exhibit high levels of promotion and prevention focus because they have had positive experiences with both motivational orientations in the past (Lanaj *et al.*, 2012). Higgins *et al.* (2001) also revealed that there is only a low correlation between the two types of regulatory focus which indicates the independence between them.

Effects of Regulatory Focus on Opportunism

Motivational orientations of parties determine the interpretations of parties' intentions, actions, and behaviours (Das and Kumar 2011). Parties in construction projects are varied in their willingness of conducting opportunistic behaviour. One of the reasons may be that they have disparate motivation orientations. As promotion focus is associated with goal maximization (Idson *et al.*, 2000), a client with high (as compared to low) promotion focus may try numerous methods, even breaching a contractual or relational contract under the table, as long as its goals are achieved. Moreover, at the formation stage of a cooperative relationship, a party with high promotion focus may be more likely to overstate its capabilities or giving adequate or misleading information to trap the unwary party into the relationship (Das and Kumar 2011). Besides, a project manager with high promotion focus is more likely to take risks to realize its goals (Gino and Margolis 2011). Opportunistic behaviour is also a kind of risk behaviour. As Caniels and Gelderman (2010) suggested, exerting opportunism might trigger a tit-for-tat strategy from the other party; more than this, the victim of opportunism may even exit the contractual relationship or apply punishment; then, the cooperative relationship will be at the risk of cutting short. But even so, a client with high promotion focus may take the risk of committing an opportunistic act if this act can realize its aim. Therefore, this study develops the following hypothesis:

H1: The promotion focus of the client is positively associated with its opportunistic behaviour.

Prevention focus is associated with seeking to avoid failure (Idson *et al.*, 2000). A firm with high prevention focus has a strong sense of complying with the contract and fulfilling responsibility (Das and Kumar 2011). To make sure the success of projects, parties may make a rigid and complete contract to avoid conflicts in the future, meanwhile, it hopes partners' behaviours are predictable and conform to contract clauses. Opportunistic behaviour aims to seek self-interests at the cost of others' interests which may cause the failure of projects. Hence, opportunistic behaviour by other parties is a big concern for the party that particularly keeps a watchful eye on things that may bring negative outcomes. Moreover, opportunistic behaviour may breach contractual terms or relational norms (Zhang and Qian 2017), which would be against the value of a party with a prevention focus that emphasizes responsibility and rule conformation (Pennington and Roese 2003). Therefore, due to a low tolerance of risk of failure, a client with high prevention focus may also have a low threshold of tolerating partners' opportunism and less propensity to commit an opportunistic act.

H2: The prevention focus of the client is negatively associated with its opportunistic behaviour.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research question of this study is that whether the client's motivation orientations (regulatory focus) can influence their opportunism. According to post-positivism, this research can apply a deductive research strategy to explore this problem as the extant theories are substantial for hypothesis development (Grix 2010). Therefore, the quantitative survey method was employed to test the hypotheses.

Sample and Data Collection

This study chooses the practitioners of clients in construction projects as the potential respondents. The unit of analysis focuses on one party. This can control the effects of

different parties on the theoretical model. The practitioners of clients we sent the questionnaires are those who coordinate with the contractors on a daily basis and have a good understanding of the relationship between them, like project managers, department managers, project representatives.

To distribute the questionnaires, first, the authors attended three seminars in Tianjin, which aimed to improve the capabilities of practitioners in project management and EPC contract management. The attendees are from these companies that are mostly government-owned, which represent the government to be responsible for infrastructure construction such as expressway construction, urban railway construction, and so on. 93 paper questionnaires were distributed to the attendees. Second, 65 questionnaires were distributed with the help of the practitioners in the construction industry who have cooperated with or are acquainted with the authors. Third, to improve the response rate, the “snowball” method was also applied (88 surveys were distributed by this means), which is that the respondents, or practitioners from contractors available, were requested to provide the contacts (e.g. email or social software Wechat name) of other potential respondents. Through the above approaches, 246 questionnaires were sent out, 140 were received, after removing 17 invalid surveys, 123 were obtained; the response rate was 56.91%. The majority of participants are male (85.37%), which is characteristic of the industry. A total of 18.7% of participants are in the position of project manager, 36.59% are owner representatives, 27.64% are department managers, the rest are in the other positions. Most respondents are in their current position for less than 8 years (71.55%); those more than 20 years occupy 3.25%. The types of projects they were involving in while responding to the questionnaires are diverse; 25.2% of them were participating in residential projects, 21.14% were infrastructural construction projects, 18.7% were office projects, the remaining respondents were taking part in public and industry projects.

Measures

The questionnaire was developed in English. According to the standard translation-back-translation procedure (Brislin 1980), it was then translated into Chinese by three engineering construction doctoral students and then translated back into English by the other three engineering construction doctoral students to ensure uniformity with the original. A Likert scale was used with questions scored from 1 (= strongly disagree) to 7 (= strongly agree). The regulatory focus was operationalized using a ten-item scale which was developed based on the work of Das and Kumar (2011). Five items are using to measure promotion focus (For example, we make decisions based on the principle of “maximizing success”; To achieve our aims, we can break conventional rules). Another five items were for measuring prevention focus (such as, we view “avoiding loss (failure)” as our guide to action; We strictly implement our corporate internal regulations and rules). A seven-item measure was adopted for measuring opportunism (Like, on occasion we lie about certain things to protect our interests; We sometimes promise to do things without actually doing them later) Luo *et al.*, 2006). Finally, the structural model included two control variables of prior cooperation with the partner (Whether the client had an exchange relationship with the partner before), and prior cooperation satisfaction (if having prior cooperation experience, the satisfaction level of the client with the prior cooperation experience).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, PLS-SEM (Partial-Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling) is one of the main approaches to analyse data from questionnaire surveys with Likert scales, especially suitable for small sample sizes and skewed distribution (Reinartz *et al.*, 2009). As the sample size is 123, relatively small; this study applied PLS-SEM to statistically analyse the data. Following the guidelines for PLS-SEM given by Hair *et al.* (2013), the structural model representing the structural paths between the variables, and the measurement model representing the relationships between each variable and its associated indicators were evaluated with the SmartPLS, version 3.2.8.

Measurement Model

The assessment of the measurement model was based on reliability and validity (Hair *et al.*, 2013). Standardized indicator loadings for all the items were above the threshold of 0.5 recommended by Hair *et al.* (2013) (Table 1).

Table 1: Evidence of reliability and convergent validity

Constructs and Items	AVE	CR	Cronbach's α	Loadings
Promotion Focus (ProF)	0.547	0.855	0.803	
ProF 1				0.591
ProF 2				0.629
ProF 3				0.78
ProF 4				0.809
ProF 5				0.852
Prevention Focus (PreF)	0.549	0.855	0.832	
PreF1				0.783
PreF2				0.814
PreF3				0.888
PreF4				0.507
PreF5				0.651
Opportunistic behavior (OB)	0.490	0.869	0.836	
OB1				0.795
OB2				0.691
OB3				0.633
OB4				0.638
OB5				0.575
OB6				0.794
OB7				0.742

All the Cronbach's α of the constructs are above 0.7, and CR values are more than 0.8, which reveals the acceptance of the construct reliability (Table 1). Consequently, the measurement model reaches a satisfactory level of reliability. The average variable extracted (AVEs) for all the constructs is more than 0.5 (Table 1), except opportunistic behaviour, but its AVE is also closed to 0.5, indicating an accepted convergent validity. For satisfied discriminate validity, according to the Fornell-Larker criterion, it's requested that the square roots of all AVEs in diagonals are more than the off-diagonal elements in the corresponding rows and columns. Table 2 shows the satisfactory results of the measurement model. Therefore, the validity is acceptable.

Structural Model

To test the hypotheses, the full PLS-SEM structural model was performed (hypotheses H1-H2, see Fig 1). The coefficients of determination R^2 for all endogenous constructs were computed (see Fig 1). The construct cross-validated redundancy index (Q^2) for endogenous constructs that were used to assess the predictive relevance of the structural model is above 0 (Chin 2010) (see Fig 1), Therefore, the predictive relevance of the model is accepted.

Table 2: Discriminate validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

	ProF	PreF	OB
ProF	0.739		
PreF	0.267	0.741	
OB	0.238	-0.157	0.7

Note: ProF: Promotion focus; PreF: Prevention focus; OB: opportunistic behaviour

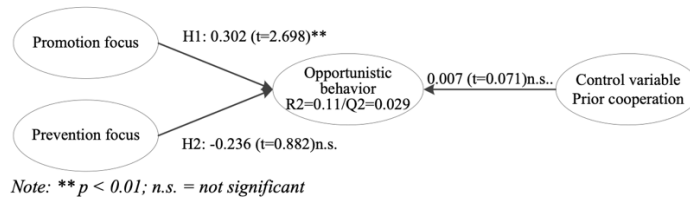


Fig 1: Results of the structural model with control variable of prior cooperation

The path coefficients between the independent variables and dependent variable in the structural model were assessed through bootstrapping with 123 cases, 5000 subsamples (Hair *et al.*, 2013). First, the authors controlled the effects of prior cooperation on the dependent variables. Fig 1 shows that the path coefficient between promotion focus and opportunistic behaviour is significant (H1: $b=0.302$, $p<0.01$), but that between prevention focus and opportunistic behaviour is insignificant (H2: $b=-0.236$, n.s.). Second, the structural model was assessed under the control of the effects of prior cooperation satisfaction on the dependent variables with the sample having prior cooperation. The results also demonstrate a positive effect of promotion focus on opportunistic behaviour (In Fig 2, H1: $b=0.392$, $p<0.05$); but the insignificant effect of prevention focuses on opportunistic behaviour (In Fig 2, H2: $b=0.199$, n.s.). Therefore, both of the two models' results show that H1 is supported, and H2 is rejected. These imply that even with the influence of control variables (prior cooperation experience and prior cooperation satisfaction), the promotion focus of clients has a positive effect on their opportunistic behaviour, but their prevention focus does not.

From the supported hypothesis 1 and the unsupported hypothesis 2, this study finds that a promotion-oriented client is more likely to take opportunistic strategies to achieve its aim, compared with a prevention-oriented client. It supports the proposition of Das and Kumar (2011) that firms with different regulatory orientations will be varied in the inclination to commit opportunistic acts.

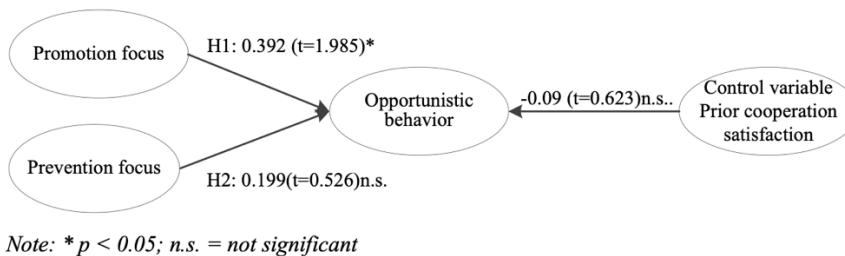


Fig 2: Results of the structural model with control variable of prior cooperation satisfaction

Hypothesis 2 is unsupported; the reason may be that opportunistic behaviour means to breach the rule of morality and a significant character of prevention focus is rule compliance. The moral code is commonly accepted and constrains the behaviour of most people in society. Thus, it is promotion focus rather than prevention focus that greatly determines the tendency of a client to conduct opportunistic behaviour.

Moreover, there are two different forms of opportunism: active form and passive form (Wathne and Heide 2000). Active opportunism involves that actors engaging in a behaviour that is expressly forbidden, whereas passive opportunism implies that actors fail to fulfil their expected obligations. The influence of prevention focus on opportunism may be varied in the two forms (Das and Kumar 2011), but this study didn't specifically distinct the two forms, which may contribute to the unsupported H2.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, with the data from clients in construction projects, this research confirms that promotion focus positively affects the inclination to conduct opportunistic behaviour, but prevention focus does not. This study has important theoretical implications for stakeholders' relationship management in project management. First, it incorporates RFT to explore the inducing mechanism of opportunism. The drivers of opportunism have received some attention in recent years, but previous literature are mostly based on agency theory, transaction cost theory, resource dependence theory, and relational contract theory (Crosno and Dahlstrom 2008; Zeng *et al.*, 2015; Shi *et al.*, 2018; Zhang and Qian 2017), the question of how the characteristics of parties influence their opportunism have been ignored, even some researchers have put forward that motivation orientations of a firm or an organization play a critical role in its decision behaviours (Das and Kumar 2011; Johnson *et al.*, 2015). This study fills this gap to extend the boundary of antecedents of opportunism for project management research by incorporating RFT.

Second, this study shed new light on parties' inherent characteristics by borrowing RFT to describe the motivation orientations of parties. Regulatory focus, which is primitively used at the individual level, was confirmed empirically that can be used at the interfirm level. It responds to the proposition of Das and Kumar (2011) and Johnson *et al.* (2015) that regulatory focus has the potentiality to shape organization characteristics. The demonstration of this theory lays a foundation for future research on the characteristics and behaviour of project parties.

This paper also provides several implications for construction project practitioners who intend to manage stakeholder relationships, by confirming that the parties indeed exhibit different kinds of regulatory focus and their promotion focus positively affects their inclination to conduct opportunistic behaviour. This is an important observation because it can partly answer the question that where the parties' motivation to opportunistic behaviour comes from. With these findings, it is easier for the parties to predict others' opportunistic behaviour, consequently choosing a more effective way for controlling this behaviour and relationship management. When cooperating with a promotion-oriented party, more rigid supervision may be needed to curtail its opportunistic behaviour. In addition, parties can figure out their types of motivation orientation as well as other parties' through RFT, which helps to understand the characteristics of other parties. With better mutual understanding, the parties can be easier to understand the motivations of others' decision-making and choose more effective project management approaches. Moreover, parties with the two different motivation orientations will behave differently and prefer different cooperating ways, therefore, sometimes, parties may need to get rid of the limits from their constant motivation orientations to coordinate with each other in various conditions.

There are some limitations in this research that open up avenues for future research. The way to do business may be varied in different sizes of the clients, private or

public owned, or culture of the country. The tendency to become opportunistic may also depend on these factors. Future research could broaden the survey by incorporating these factors into the conceptual model. Moreover, RFT was built up initiatively to describe motivation orientation at the individual level. However, this study employed it to examine the motivation of firms. Although previous research has generalized it from psychological orientation to organization motivation. More research is still needed to explore how RFT engages (or not ...) with structural explanations of behaviour (for instance, institutional theory).

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