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Exploring Project Teams' Collaborative Behaviours in Hong Kong's Relational Contracting Projects

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Abstract

Relational Contracting in Hong Kong is used as a key approach for delivering successful outcomes. However, the reality of the practice differs significantly. Projects still face significant delays and cost overruns. In this, researchers suggest focussing on attitudes and behaviours of project teams, which would deliver better results.

This study aims to explore project teams' attitudes and collaborative behaviour in Hong Kong's relational contracting projects. A qualitative approach was employed to explore attitudes and behaviour using interviews guided by the theory of planned behaviour. Interview participants included ten mid-senior-level professionals with active involvement in Hong Kong relational contracting projects. Later, interview data was analysed using thematic analysis procedures.

Results suggest that to enable collaboration among project teams in Hong Kong relational contracting, project teams may develop relational attitudes by ensuring senior management commitment to the project and relational norms. Exhibit collaborative intentions for integrating project team, and promote collaborative behaviour through teamwork, affective trust and extra-role behaviour. Collaborative behaviour developed through the proposed framework in the study would smoothen relationships and improve the chances of project success.

Keywords: Collaboration; Relational Contracting; Relational attitudes; Relational behaviour.

Introduction

Complexity of construction projects is a major source of changes in the construction business process. This leads business to adopt more collaborative approaches in project governance.

Relational contracting (RC) as a collaborative approach in project governance is widely used in Hong Kong's construction industry. RC in Hong Kong was introduced by foreign contractors when they entered the market by setting up joint ventures with local counterparts. This approach was popular because of the expertise of foreign contractors, and market awareness of local contractors played a crucial role in achieving a positive outcome. This paved strong footing for RC in Hong Kong construction industry. However, a positive outlook was short lived for the industry because many projects suffered delays and cost overruns. Researchers in this suggested focussing on a comprehensive approach to deal with issues. In this studies in Hong Kong and the UK argued for cultural change, teamwork and collaboration from project teams (McKinsey & Company, 2016; Latham, 1994).

RC literature emphasises on two main directions for improving collaboration among project teams. First focuses on "hard elements" for improving collaboration and later on "soft elements". Both these directions contribute to successful RC (Bygballe et al., 2015). "Soft elements" however, are considered more beneficial because these provide a rational purpose to "formal elements" (e.g. Pinto et al., 2009, Kadefors, 2004). With this, scholars such as Bresnen and Marshall (2000) have suggested that research should focus on a theoretical perspective of social processes (exploring soft elements for collaboration) for understanding RC as a concept and how it may enable a collaborative project environment.

In a similar effort researchers in construction management highlight teamwork, trust, attitudes, team integration as most important features for developing a collaborative environment (e.g. Ling et al., 2013, Rahman and Kumaraswamy, 2012, Ng et al., 2002, Chan et al., 2003, Eriksson et al., 2009, Gadde and Dubois, 2010, Bresnen and Marshall, 2000, Eriksson et al., 2008). Thus, this study aims to explore project teams' attitudes and behaviour for collaboration in Hong Kong's relational contracting projects.

Theory of Reasoned Action/ Theory of Planned Behaviour

Theory of Reasoned Action/Theory of Planned Behaviour (TRA/TPB) suggests attitude help explain behaviour through the mediation of intentions (Ajzen, 1991). The theory suggests attitude is a 'mental process assisting decision-making for potential or actual response'(Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The relationship of constructs, in theory, was initially proposed in TRA. However, various changes in the framework are considered in TPB framework (Ajzen, 1991).

TPB explains behaviour through its three antecedents attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behaviour control, and mediation of intentions (Ajzen, 1991). The framework is widely accepted in the quantitative exploration of health-related behaviours (e.g. Booth et al., 2015, Rich et al., 2015), and relational behaviours and partnering intentions (e.g. Cheng, 2016). This study adapted TPB for explaining the relationship between attitude and behaviour through the mediating role of intentions. In this, two of the constructs of the theory were not considered in this study. Authors anticipated the role of delivery modalities to act in motivating and constraining behaviours. Delivery modalities such as new engineering contract, guaranteed maximum price, act as motivators of

behaviours. Whereas, low bid contracts and lump sum tendering, as constraining factors. Thus, the spirit of discarded constructs is partly achievable through delivery modalities.

Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the RC concepts borrowing constructs from TPB. A pool of ten project managerial staff were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Interview questions were guided by TPB to allow interviewees to share knowledge, experience, and opinions about the concepts. Table 1 presents profile of professionals interviewed for this study.

Company	Code for interview participant	Position	Experience in the industry (in Years)	Experience in RC (in Years)
Contractor	PSI01	QA/QC manager	33	10
	PSI02	Project director	39	25+
	PSI06	Operations manager	25	7
	PSI07	Project manager	16	4
	PSI08	Project manager	17	8
	PSI09	Project manager	15	5
	PSI10	QA/QC manager	16	3
Sub-contractor	PSI04	Project control manager	17	6
Consultant	PSI03	Consultant advisor for relational contracting projects	40	20
	PSI05	Director- Team alignment and collaborative culture among teams	25	15

Table 1 Profile of interviewees

Data Analysis

This study adopted a thematic analysis for analysing data. Thematic analysis provides a rigorous approach for qualitative data analysis. It provides a fifteen step checklist to ensure reliable and trustworthy results of the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

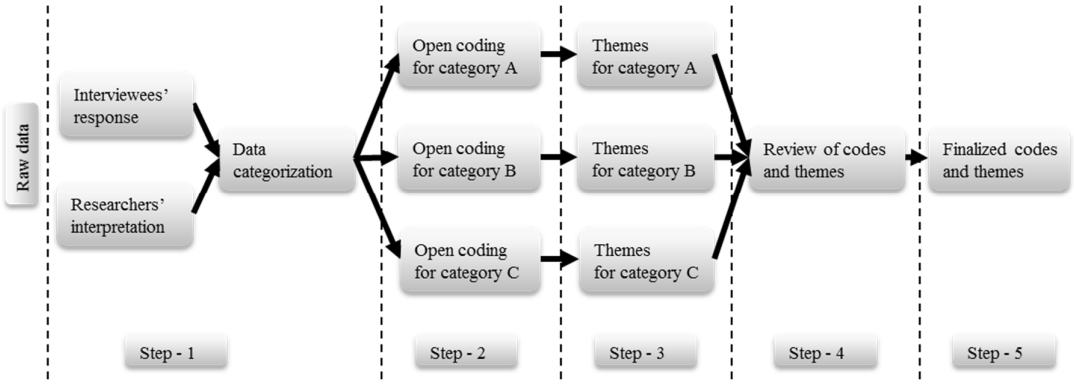

Figure 1 Research process adopted from Braun & Clark (2006)

First step of data analysis was to transcribe the data obtained through interviews. Initially transcribed data was highlighted based on initial thoughts, keywords, literature related terms, and essential aspects mentioned by interviewees.

The data was then organised based on theoretical categories suggested by TRA/TPB. In the next step of open coding, a nominated word/words assigned to the highlighted information. For ensuring correct coding (avoiding repetition or duplication across categories), a review was helpful. Open coding reflected a total of 138 codes representative of the recorded transcripts. In the next step of the analysis, three aspects were important. 1. "Internal consistency", 2. "Coherence", and 3. "Literature-suggested grouping" (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A total of 24 themes representing 138 codes were extracted by the end of the mentally challenging exercise. Themes and codes were further reviewed to have a manageable number of themes and codes for explaining a purposeful story. In this, five Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) students and three professionals were invited, as independent reviewers. Aim of involving independent reviewers was to ensure the reliability of results (Alhojailan, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the final step of the analysis, all finalised themes and codes were considered for presenting analysis results.

Findings

Relational attitudes (RA)

Attitudes have been imperative to change work practices in construction projects. It has been argued that RC projects require an attitudinal change from project teams. According to Bresnen and Marshall (2000), embedded practices in projects are challenging to reverse. Changing those practices require involvement from all project partners. Thus, collaborative behaviours may have a profound impact once project teams have assumed new attitudes (Bresnen & Marshall, 2000). Results in this study suggest senior management commitment (SMC) and support as a critical attitudinal trait for shaping project direction. Besides SMC, a collective effort is argued for formations of normative practices. This collective effort is considered as relational norms of the team developed and shared within project teams (Suprapto, 2016).

Senior management commitment

Senior management commitment (SMC) drives collaborative mission and vision in a project (Cheng, 2016; Rahman & Kumaraswamy, 2012; Rowlinson et al., 2006; Rowlinson & Cheung, 2005; Suprapto et al., 2015b). Commitment and support from project seniors drive the collaboration and ensure effective implementation of RC (Rowlinson et al., 2006; Rowlinson & Cheung, 2005). Results in this study suggest SMC is essential for driving collaborative philosophy, providing resources and delegating authority [PSI02a-01]. Thus, it acts as an essential tool for achieving successful project outcomes. Rowlinson et al. (2006); Rowlinson and Cheung (2005) pointed out the role of senior management as a leader in sharing "project beneficial opinions, plans and behaviour". It applies to leadership roles in mentoring and being open to engage in discussions with the team members [PSI04a-08]. Senior management needs to value relationships over commercial gains. One of the respondents mentioned:

"I have seen excellent managers; they open up and say this is our fault and may cost your team. … Due to the partnership, they value the relationship more than monetary gain." [PSI03a-08]

This culture is not common in the construction industry. However, if senior management changes attitudes from self-centric to project-centric, it may help to develop a flexible environment in the project.

Relational norms

Mutually developed and shared norms of the team (Poppo & Zenger, 2002; Suprapto et al., 2015a). These norms include 'no-blame', 'fair treatment', 'best for the project'. Relational norms establish a foundation for future behaviours of project teams in a relationship.

In this, no-blame culture is considered as a driver of collaboration in projects, which is the willingness of teams to accept/welcome responsibility for problems as they occur (Lloyd-walker et al., 2014). No-blame culture enables project teams to discuss problems openly and strive for solutions without fear (Rowlinson et al., 2006). The no-blame culture encourages early problem identification and reporting [PSI02a-09a], what Lloyd-walker et al. (2014) termed as facilitating mechanisms for a no-blame culture [PSI04a-02]. No blame culture will also encourage project teams to act by fair rules of the game.

Fair treatment is identified as a relational norm in this study. Moorman (1991) reported that people with fair treatment contribute more towards their teams and improve resolution for their teamwork. People treated with prejudice show a lack of trust, loyalty and motivation (Kadefors, 2005). One of the interviewees mentioned that the whole point of RC is to collaborate. 'If you do not treat partner fairly, how can you expect others to be fair and collaborate? Thus, fair treatment would initiate constructive interactions among teams and eventually allow the trust to evolve and emerge — fair treatment within a project setting shapes the assessment of fairness in a project [PSI03a-09, PSI08a-03]. It has been argued that RC projects require best for the project approach. It is witnessed that projects employing best for project approach in RC are more successful [PSI03a-03], due to the linkages between commercial interests and project outcomes (Sakal, 2005).

Collaborative Intentions (I)

Collaborative intentions are the decisions a team endures with the partner team. Team integration reflects these decisions of the project team. Active involvement in team integration activities informs positive intentions. If the project team seek to collaborate, it encompasses team integration activities (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Ronken & Lawrence, 1952). Team integration provides practices and methods that promote a flexible environment for collaboration, where information and knowledge are exchanged freely among the members of teams (Baiden & Price, 2011; Baiden et al., 2006). It is achievable by developing an integrated project team, goal setting and alignment, and regular team building activities (Bosch-Rekveldt et al., 2011).

A delay in team integration is often due to the emphasis on completing the project. Partners realise the effectiveness of team integration once problems are escalated. This is why team integration workshops and exercises (e.g. partnering workshops) are recommended at the start of the project [PSI05I-11, PSI04I-08, and PSI05I-05]. Team-building activities enable trust among the individual members and trust in the project (Kadefors, 2004). This is done through informal gatherings to enable members to feel they are a part of the team (Lahdenperä, 2012), encouraging communication and coaching them to avoid bad behaviours and how to develop an integrated project team [PSI04I-07]. Bosch-Rekveldt et al. (2011) suggested that integrated project teams result in the constant flow of information regarding "design adjustments", "scope changes" and,

eventually, improved efficiency. An integrated project team refers to a team whose members are organised based on the objectives of the project; they work beyond the boundaries and identities of their parent organisation (Baiden & Price, 2011; Izam Ibrahim et al., 2013; Mollaoglu-Korkmaz et al., 2011; Moore & Dainty, 1999). Bosch-Rekveldt et al. (2011), reporting the results of their study, pointed out that a project suffers interface problems resulting in difficulties with aligning goals, but an integrated project team could have managed issues of objective alignment among the teams effectively. Thus, it is necessary for the teams to sit down together, finalise objectives and align their objectives with the project objectives (Bromley et al., 2003; Forgues & Koskela, 2009). Results in this study suggest that teams with aligned objectives can focus on a single direction [PSI07I-02] and thus ensures better teamwork (Love et al., 1998), and sustainable relationships [PSI05I-03].

Collaborative behaviour (RB)

Collaborative behaviour is the most commonly used term in RC literature. However, there are alternative explanations of collaborative behaviour. This study defines collaborative behaviour into three dimensions: (1) Teamwork, (2) Trust, and (3) Extra-role behaviour. A team is said to be espousing collaborative behaviour, when it exercises teamwork behaviours, have emotional attachments to one another, and members of each team voluntarily strive for excellence of the team.

Teamwork (RB1)

Teamwork is an essential contributor to enhanced performance in an inter-organisational setting (Baker et al., 2006; Salas et al., 1992). Because it is dependent on the intensity of the interactions among partners (Hoegl & Gemuenden, 2001). Teamwork is defined as shared knowledge and skills to facilitate collaboration (Baker et al., 2006; Cannon-Bowers et al., 1995; Salas et al., 1995). It has been argued that chaotic situations can be well managed using better teamwork and task work due to high uncertainty and equivocality (Morgan et al., 1986). Similarly, teamwork is essential for construction projects due to the high uncertainty and equivocality (Rowlinson & Cheung, 2004; Walker & Lloyd-Walker, 2015) to reflect 'beliefs' and 'intentions' for the shared goals (Cohen & Levesque, 1991). In these situations, open communication paves a way forward to reduce uncertainty and equivocality by accurate information sharing [PSI02b-06, PSI07b-03-a, PSI04b-02].

Besides communication between project partners, it is necessary that the capabilities of the partners match needs. This situation is particularly common in construction projects, where people with varied background, experience and personalities undertake a responsibility. Thus, project leadership has the responsibility to appoint the best-suited person for the job [PSI03b-02] or re-assign/remove non-aligned members [PSI03b-04]. Because non-aligned/misaligned members would not extend support to others, which is essential in cross-functional teams [PSI07b-01]. As mentioned 'mutual support' and 'encouragement' are essential characteristics of cooperation (Phua, 2004; Phua & Rowlinson, 2004), on the contrary, a low focus on "capabilities-task matching" would result in the selection of unwarranted employees [PSI09b-02].

Affective trust (RB2)

Trust improves project team's ability to collaborate (Zineldin & Jonsson, 2000). Trust has been viewed as social interactions among project teams (Dyer & Singh, 1998; Larson, 1992; Ring & Van de Ven, 1992; Uzzi, 1997). It is developed through "successful repeated interactions" among partners for promoting good relationships. Trust plays an essential role in the multidisciplinary and inter-

organisational teams (Zolin et al., 2002). A higher level of trust encourages partners to assume more risk, thereby reducing the relationship between 'assets- specificity' and 'contractual complexity' (Mellewigt et al., 2007). Trust in integrated project delivery (a form of RC) is considered a determining factor for successful outcomes (Pishdad-Bozorgi 2012). Results in this study suggest trust as the most central feature in collaborative relationships [see PSI05b-04, PSI09b-02, and PSI04b-03]. It has been argued that affective trust is central in determining a "team's satisfaction with relationships and project success (Pinto et al. 2009). Affective trust, which is considered as "shared beliefs of teams to willingly accept vulnerability based on the positive prospects of each other" (Rousseau et al., 1998). It enhances participants capability work collaboratively (Costa et al., 2018).

Extra-role behaviour (RB3)

Extra-role behaviour is defined as the "behaviour which benefits the organisation, which is discretionary, and goes beyond existing role expectations" (Vandyne et al., 1995). It validates individuals' resolve for partnership (Tyler & Blader, 2000). Two of four dimensions of extra-role behaviour are empirically tested to improve team performance (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Helping as the first dimension of extra role behaviour is a cooperative behaviour of the individual in sustaining lasting relationships. Interviewees in this study reported without helping each other, the essence of collaboration will be lost [PSI07b-01]. Whereas, voice as the second dimension of extra role behaviour is a constructive challenge for improving the general environment (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). In alignment with this explanation, this study pointed action learning [PSI02b-04]. Action learning, as the third dimension is about challenging routines and practices for improving processes. Action learning is not about drastic changes in the processes but minor and straightforward adjustments to produce better results.

Proposed Framework

Figure 2 presents a framework for explaining the collaborative behaviour of project teams in Hong Kong relational contracting projects. The framework presents three constructs and six dimensions to achieve collaborative behaviour. Project teams may develop relational attitudes for collaboration with: (1) SMC and (2) relational norms. Relational attitudes would provide a suitable foundation for the development of a trusting relationship among project teams. By playing a leadership role, senior management may delegate authority and mentor junior team members (Rowlinson et al., 2006; Rowlinson & Cheung, 2005). Whereas relational norms would enable project teams to adopt normative practices. Successful development of relational attitudes would strengthen the belief of the partner team to "act collaboratively", " to integrate", to be involved in "joint exercises", and "focus on relationships". Once teams have reflected collaborative intentions through the team integration process, project teams would be able to reflect it in teamwork behaviours such as "open and honest communication", "mutual support", and "development of team cohesion". Franz et al. (2016), argued that "team integration" plays a vital role in improving "group cohesion" and "performance". It has been reported that collaborative intentions have a positive impact on teamwork (Baker et al., 2006) and trust (Rousseau et al., 1998; Suprapto et al., 2015a). Collaborative intentions developed will strengthens team members' willingness to involve in volunteer activities as they see other team members as self and act more collaboratively (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Anvuur (2008) suggest attitudes and intentions facilitate extra-role behaviours for promoting cooperation. Whereas Thompson and Sanders (1998) maintained a collaboration stage as moving a step ahead of

cooperation, which focuses on long-term sustainability. In this extra-role-behaviour of members plays a significant role. Team members adopt duties, which are not conventionally part of their job requirement.

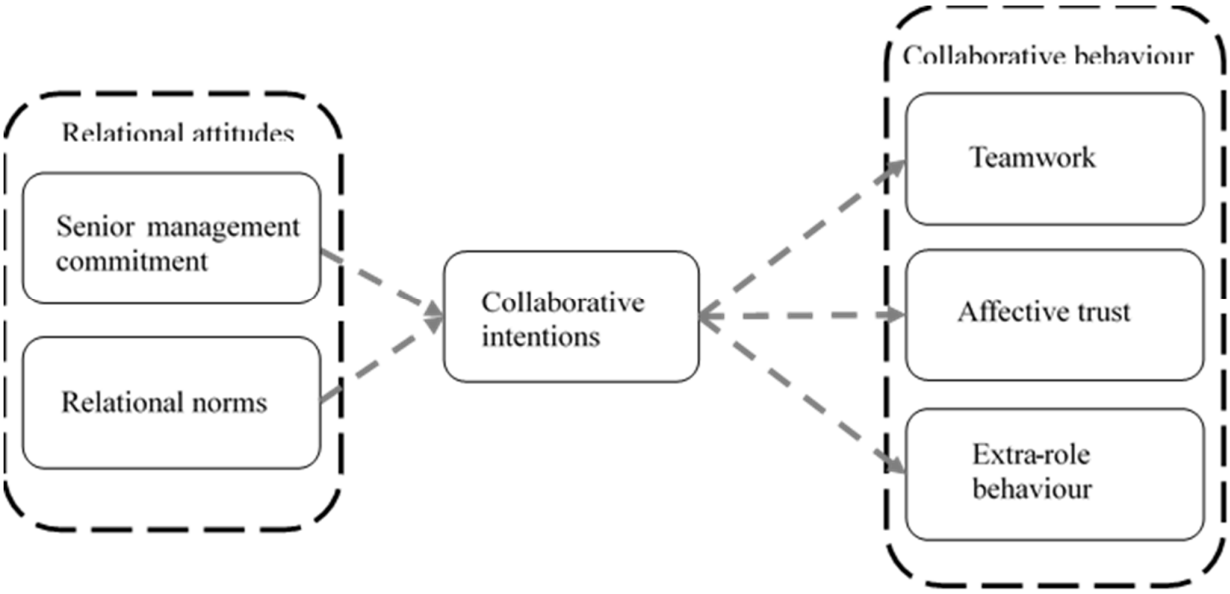

Figure 2 Framework for explaining the collaborative behaviour of project teams in RC (Memon, 2017)

Conclusion

The proposed framework helps to explain project teams' collaborative behaviour in relational contracting. Collaborative behaviour of project team developed through the proposed framework would enable them to espouse project focused behaviours. Project teams should cultivate relational behaviour to develop and sustain collaboration across the project lifecycle. By developing relational attitudes in terms of (1) commitment from senior management and (2) relational norms, i.e. co-developed by interacting teams in a relation, teams can show their intention to collaborate by integrating their team with the project team in terms of aligning objectives, initiating team-building exercises. Flexible environment will enable them to engage in teamwork. Continuous working interaction during the team integration process will allow trust in other teams and members of project teams will participate in voluntary exercises to support the system.

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