

The Corruption of Project Governance through Normalization of Deviance

ABSTRACT

Organizational mistakes and accidents have a long history in practice and have been studied extensively in the engineering and organizational literature. One of the primary causes of persistent organizational error is the existence of deviance; i.e., behavior violating organizational norms. We examined the behaviors and motivations of project team members in situations where deviant behaviors had been accepted and normalized as part of project operations. We used NVivo content analysis to classify the narratives of 52 project professionals as they related to Normalization of Deviance (NoD) situations, their perceived causes, and subsequent outcomes for their organizations. Our findings suggest that NoD occurs in three primary dimensions: project processes, relationships, and outcomes. We discuss the implications of these findings for project organization performance improvement and avoiding NoD situations.

MANAGERIAL RELEVANCE STATEMENT

Normalization of deviance (NoD) is defined as a state whereby people within the organization become so accustomed to deviant behavior that they no longer even view it as deviant, despite the fact that these practices exceed their own rules for the elementary safety. In practical terms, it represents behaviors that can lead to a number of significant problems with project development and delivery, as cultural failures and flawed governance permit and normalize the patterns of destructive actions by key stakeholders that are counter-productive to organizational expectations. Our goal was to offer real-world examples and highlight areas where NoD in projects occur so that organizations can recognize the underlying conditions as well the warning signs in order to avoid their negative impact. Project performance will be

improved as organizations can develop better means for identifying NoD, recognize the conditions that can encourage these behaviors, and map strategies for the best ways to address and correct NoD in project settings.

INTRODUCTION

Recently¹, an electrical worker employed by the sub-contractor of a major utility was fatally electrocuted while working on a power line project in a “hot zone,” identified as the proximity of a number of high-voltage electrical lines and adjacent towers. This environment is considered very high risk and as a result, continuous employee safety training and rigorous enforcement are mandated by state law. Following the subsequent investigation and from depositions of key members of the contractor and utility organizations, it was determined that the utility was fully aware of the dangers of working in this area, had a number of codified safety policies and best practices in place, but routinely failed to enforce them – either for their own employees or for those of contractors, in spite of legal obligations to do so. When questioned, members of the organization acknowledged the lack of enforcement efforts and painted the picture of an organizational culture that encouraged and rewarded its project managers for the quick completion of projects, even if safety steps had to be cut along the way.

In early 2018, the large UK construction firm Carillion was forced to enter liquidation proceedings, with a debt of £7.1 billion and a string of some 30,000 creditors, suppliers, employees, shareholders, and customers left with significant financial losses. In the aftermath of this financial disaster, a report by two parliamentary select committees criticized the regular actions of directors, auditors and the regulatory bodies as the main reason behind the collapse [1]. A system-wide lack of control systems led to three specific types of normalized deviance:

¹ Some key details have been deliberately obscured for legal reasons.

“late payments to suppliers, aggressive accounting and payment of high dividends to shareholders despite the troubled financial status of the firm” [2: p. 1122].

What these two stories have in common is the occurrence of mistakes – defined as “the interaction of multiple failures that are not in a direct operational sequence,” [3: p. 23] – or deviance (either individual or institutional) that can have a significant, and even deadly, effect on the firm and its stakeholders. Deviance has been defined by Robinson and Bennett [4: p. 556], as “voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in doing so threatens the well-being of the organization, its members, or both.” Deviant behavior can operate at the interpersonal level, in which individuals engage in inappropriate interactions with each other (e.g., gossip, incivility, or other mistreatment) or, more broadly, in their work-related roles, where members of the organization skirt rules, ignore restrictions, or willingly subvert expected standards of behavior [5]. The impact of deviant behavior is significant; studies reported that 95% of organizations documented some form of employee deviance, with the net effect costing billions annually [6; 7]. Thus, deviant behavior becomes a recurring and financially damaging circumstance that puts organizations in vulnerable positions both economically and socio-legally.

In addition to the occurrence of deviance is the more insidious and troublesome potential that such acts become embedded in the organization’s standard operating procedures and culture, where they are allowed (or even encouraged) to flourish. Put another way, the challenge here is not that employees are not typically ignorant of required standards of behavior or accepted practices; quite the opposite, in fact. The problem, from a cultural and governance perspective, is that unsafe or unethical practices are fully recognized, as well as potential problems resulting from their disregard, but it does not matter. Individuals and entire groups (even up to the corporate level) routinely and willingly transgress accepted standards of behavior [8]. What may

have once begun as a “this one-time only” deviation from standard operating rules become, with enough repetitions, “normalized” practice patterns. These practices form a pathology that has been entitled the “Normalization of Deviance” (NoD) and can affect organizations in industries and professional disciplines as diverse as construction [2], oil and gas processing [9], healthcare (including direct patient care, anesthesia, and nursing) [10-12], auditing and finance [13], utilities, media [14], and so forth. Instructively, the very breadth of industries affected by NoD demonstrates the wide-spread nature of the challenge and the significance of the potential dangers it contains.

In spite of the problems that organizations face through NoD practices and their prevalence in a variety of operational settings, surprisingly little is known about these behaviors within the specific context of project-based work, their most likely occurrences, employees’ motivations to engage in these activities, their impact on projects, and the larger organizations affected by them. The unique nature of project work has been characterized by a variety of challenges, in developing outputs while addressing stakeholder, safety, budgetary, schedule, and quality expectations, often while working with assembled teams and emergent leadership. Because of the wide variety of external and internal pressures on performance, project governance has been popularized in recent years as a means to control and regulate project activities, with varying degrees of success [e.g. 15]. This paper seeks to more fully explore the challenges of deviance and the conditions under which such behavior can become normalized. In addressing these behaviors, it is first necessary to examine, in more detail, some of the key elements of the challenge; specifically, the nature of work-place deviant behaviors, the conditions under which deviance and organization errors can occur, how project governance systems can curb or encourage deviance, and the circumstances under which deviant behavior

becomes normalized within the organization. Finally, as part of our analysis, we conducted a qualitative study employing narrative research and a categorization methodology, which allows us to identify the most significant conditions of NoD in project organizations.

Normalization of deviance represents behaviors that can lead to a number of significant problems with project development and delivery, as cultural failures and flawed governance permit and normalize the patterns of destructive actions by key stakeholders that are counter-productive to organizational expectations. Our goal was to offer real-world examples and highlight areas where NoD in projects occur so that organizations can recognize the underlying conditions as well the warning signs in order to avoid their negative impact. Project performance will be improved as organizations can develop better means for identifying NoD, recognize the conditions that can encourage these behaviors, and map strategies for the best ways to address and correct NoD in project settings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Recognizing the effects of various factors in the encouragement of deviance is important for identifying how deviance can occur, be encouraged and even institutionalized, and what steps might be taken to address and correct these behaviors. In this section, we will address the variety of elements in deviance, as they relate to organizational error and its aftermath consequences.

Causes of Deviant Behaviors

Deviance has been linked to a variety of organizational problems, including error [16], failure [17], mistakes [18], and accidents [3]. As we know that deviant behaviors occur at both the individual and institutional level in organizations, the causes of deviance include a variety of potential contributing factors. Illustrating this point, Reason [16] refers to “active failures” and

“latent conditions.” Active failures are the specific misguided actions taken by organizational decision-makers and latent conditions present as a set of proximal causes for such errors to occur. Permissive oversight, for example, may convince workers that they are free to cut corners, bend rules, or otherwise engage in inappropriate or deviant behaviors. Moreover, Reason [16] noted that active failures are usually immediate and have relatively short-lived effects whereas latent conditions may remain dormant for an extended period of time. Latent conditions, including top management (lack of) oversight, “if undiscovered and uncorrected – can contribute to a number of different accidents. Latent conditions can increase the likelihood of active failure through the creation of local factors promoting errors and violations. They can also aggravate the consequences of unsafe acts by their effects upon the system’s defenses, barriers, and safeguards” [16: p. 11].

A further cause of deviant behavior involves the “fallacy of centrality” [19]. Sociologist Ron Westrum coined this term through his analysis of why pediatricians failed to identify child abuse until the 1960s. He argued that because of pediatricians’ conviction that they were “central” to all issues relevant to children’s health, if something as significant as physical abuse by a parent were going on, surely pediatricians would know and report it. But they did not know about it, and therefore it must not be happening [19]. The implication across organizations suggests that the higher up in the chain of command, the more leaders can be the victim of circular reasoning: that is, if something serious is happening, they would know about it, and since they do not know about it, nothing bad can be happening. The embedded challenge is the resultant belief by organizational decision makers that “no news is good news.” In fact, “no news” most often means that workers or mid-level managers are too intimidated to either recognize or report unsafe conditions that will result in deviant behavior. Rule-breaking and

other violations occur and then are allowed to continue because no one takes responsibility for reporting such behaviors or assuming that they are tacitly encouraged at higher levels in the organization. “This fallacy is all the more damaging in that it not only discourages curiosity on the part of the person making it but also frequently creates in him/her an antagonistic stance toward the events in question” [Westrum quoted in 20: pp. 2-3].

Another important cause of deviant behavior is the organizational culture within which workers perform their duties. Organizational culture has been widely studied and offers several definitions. Early theorists described culture as: “the normative bases and the shared understandings that, through subtle and complex expression, regulate social life in organizations [21: p. 458]. Schein [22: p. 30] defined culture as: “the pattern of basic assumptions that the group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, taught to new members.” We can see from these definitions that cultures form around basic ideas of expected behavior (how we should act), ways we communicate (patterns of language and meaning), and how we should relate to each other and the external environment (how we interpret events and act accordingly). An understanding of culture is a critical clue to the pressures felt by organizational members to engage in or avoid deviant behaviors; for example, if the common understanding is that “everyone does it,” members of the workgroup or larger organization often find it easier to rationalize “going along to get along” rather than risk social or professional ostracism. As a result, a key determinant of both the frequency of deviant behavior and the degree to which it is socially normalized lies in understanding the cultural forces that can subtly, but powerfully, affect each member of the organization.

Governance as a Counter-Balance to Deviance

The concept of project governance is one that has been popularized in recent years, as organizational theorists examine the means by which project-based firms exert control over a variety of activities [23; 24]. Much of this literature focuses on the governance of organizational relationships (e.g., stakeholder networks or public/private partnerships) as they relate to projects [25; 26]. Müller [27: p. 2] referred to project governance as “the conduct of conduct;” that is, as a form of self-regulation “where the regulator is part of the system under regulation,” and writing further, he suggests, “governance provides a framework for ethical decision making and managerial action within an organization that is based on transparency, accountability and defined roles.” Employing a Delphi study methodology and using a sample of practitioners and academics, Bekker and Steyn [28: p. 4] developed a definition of governance as: “[A] set of management systems, rules, protocols, relationships and structures that provide the framework within which decisions are made for project development and implementation to achieve the intended business or strategic motivation.” Finally, the Project Management Institute’s *Body of Knowledge* [29] defines governance as, “the framework, functions, and processes that guide activities in project, program, and portfolio management. In organizational project management, governance provides guidance, decision-making, and oversight ...” Based on these definitions and following Pinto [30], for our study, we define project governance as the use of systems, structures of authority and processes to allocate resources and coordinate or control activity in a project. Governance offers the means by which project-based organizations can create and maintain the mechanisms and systems that allow for oversight and regulation of project activities.

But what happens when governance systems fail? Despite the best efforts, means, and various methods employed by organizations to support appropriate project management activities

and stakeholder relationships, there are multiple examples of failures of such governance and control systems, begging the obvious study questions: why does governance fail and what are some of the triggers that can negate or corrupt even the most carefully constructed governance systems? The causes for the failure of project governance systems can arise from a number of potential sources. Either through toxic workplace culture, misguided reward systems, failure of chain of command, a gradual weakening of formal quality control systems, or external pressures from critical stakeholders, governance systems can run the risk of being marginalized or even negated. Clearly, a variety of forces – both internal and external to the project organization – can contribute to a gradual weakening and ultimate failure of a firm’s governance systems. This latter notion of incremental shifting, or “gradualism” [31] is a key feature of governance failures and an idea that we will develop in more detail in the following section. The implications of such failures, where we most readily and visibly see the consequences, includes the process by which deviance is normalized and becomes part of the organization’s operating processes, and even its unspoken rules of behavior. Research suggests that one of the consequences of these failures of governance systems is the rise of “Normalization of Deviance” (NoD) behaviors [30].

Normalization of Deviance

Normalization of deviance in projects and project management is a concept that has become increasingly important in recent years, as we better understand the expanded nature of project managers and their teams in pursuing organizational goals through the use of project-based work. As we will demonstrate, in many ways normalization of deviance (NoD) is a natural consequence of failed governance, toxic or benign operating cultures, and skewed reward systems. Our goal is to introduce the idea of NoD and identify its causes and consequences to act as a warning to minimize their impact on the failure of projects.

It is generally recognized that the term “normalization of deviance” was first coined by Diane Vaughan, a Columbia University sociologist who studied the original Space Shuttle Challenger disaster in 1986 and found its cause resulted from a series of missteps, flawed assumptions, and a NASA culture of risk-taking. In an interview, Vaughan observed, “Social normalization of deviance means that people within the organization become so much accustomed to a deviant behavior that they do not consider it as deviant, despite the fact that they far exceed their own rules for the elementary safety” [32]. Equally importantly, Vaughan’s work has found that people grow more accustomed to the deviant behavior the more it occurs; that is, NoD is the progressive state of loss of effective control. Put simply, NoD suggests that *the unexpected becomes the expected, which becomes the accepted* [30]. If we consider this dictum, it implies that toxic or inappropriate behaviors may occur once, result in no organizational sanctions or loss of operational effectiveness, and so are continuously repeated, often without negative consequences *until the inevitable catastrophe occurs*. Thus, one phenomenon of NoD is that while a series of behaviors may appear deviant to people outside the organization, for personnel within the firm, the deviance often either goes unrecognized or is benignly acknowledged and accepted; that is, it is simply assumed to be normal occurrence. It is usually only with hindsight that people within an organization can realize that their seemingly “normal” behavior was, in fact, deviant [33-36].

Part of the challenge in recognizing and addressing NoD is the role that the “gradualism” phenomenon plays in promoting these concerns. As Starbuck and Milliken [37] have noted, acclimatization within an organization to “deviance” behavior occurs as a process of steps, often over an extended period. The unacceptable behavior does not occur all at once, but rather, may serve as the summation of multiple decisions made or avoided, with no visible or discernible

negative effects. Thus, the potential for catastrophe is never envisioned as an option until it occurs. The result of success (or an absence of failure), according to these authors [37: p. 322], results in a general attitude of “complacency versus striving, confidence versus caution, inattention versus vigilance, routinization versus exploration, habituation versus novelty. Successes foster complacency, confidence, inattention, routinization, and habituation; and so human errors grow increasingly likely as successes accumulate.” In his assessment of the causes of the Challenger disaster, for example, noted physicist Richard Feynman [33: p. I-148] observed: “.. [After] each successful flight, NASA’s managers thought ‘We can lower our standards a bit because we got away with it last time’.”

Although widely observed, normalized deviance differs from the more commonplace nature of organizational accidents due to engineering overreach [38] or other design or development failures. Errors, particularly due to unexpected risk factors (e.g., “unknown-unknowns”) will continue to remain a part of organizational life despite firms’ attempts to identify and therefore minimize their effects as much as possible, leading to the “normal accidents” which are the price paid for the failure to jointly design technology and organization [3]. Further, some risks are accepted as a process of rational cost-benefit analysis, as has been argued to have occurred with NASA’s decision to launch Challenger in the face of technical concerns. In this case, technical risk was outweighed by political risk, where NASA faced tremendous pressure to carry out missions to support the image they had created, that space flights had become both routine and a profitable enterprise through contracting for satellite launches [39]. A more recent example of a similar phenomenon occurred with Boeing’s 2018 introduction of their widely used 737, upgraded as the 737 Max. In the aftermath of two fatal accidents and the deaths of over 300 people, the company has been charged with negligence

through pushing these design and software upgrades too rapidly, even though they fundamentally changed the flight characteristics of the aircraft. In this case, commercial pressures were assumed to trump technical concerns, as the changes were rationalized as simple “upgrades” to a proven airframe. Normalization of deviance represents a cultural attitude that consciously creates conditions in which mistakes are made; in effect, it provides a perfect petri dish environment for corporate (or project) misbehavior. As Vaughan [33; 40] notes, with NoD, individuals, teams, and organizations repeatedly drift away from what are acceptable standards of practice until the drift has become the norm. Thus, one key purpose of our study was to examine the manner in which subjects identified and reflected on this cultural drift, as practices became both deviant and widely accepted within their organizations.

What Contributes to Normalization of Deviance?

The work of Ashforth and Anand [41] on workplace corruption offers useful insights into understanding the process by which otherwise “normal” firms can develop a tolerance for deviant behavior to the degree that it becomes normalized and in fact, expected as part of normal employee activities. In their analysis, they found that three organizational phenomena are present and impact on workers’ attitudes: 1) socialization, 2) institutionalization, and 3) rationalization, which enable corrupt practices to flourish in otherwise competently-led organizations [41]. We can find these same occurrences similarly at work in the evolution of deviant behavior among project organizations and members of project teams. Underlying this process is a contributing culture within the organization that is either accustomed to such practices and actively looks the other way, or may actually reward such behavior. Early research on the formation of corporate cultural mores, for example, traced the development of a firm’s values and assumptions often to a series of critical incidents, or defining behaviors, which

demonstrate – despite formal professions of corporate values – what it really takes to succeed [42; 43]. As we consider each element in turn, we can reflect on how these not only help develop a culture of NoD, but also how they contribute to a project governance system that fails to provide the necessary process control of people and organizational systems [10].

Institutionalization exposes newcomers to deviant behaviors, often performed by authority figures, and explains those behaviors as organizationally normative. When new members of project teams are first assigned, they are quickly immersed in the rules (written and unwritten) that govern project activities [44]. Because new members may be aware of the “right way” to perform tasks, institutionalization processes are intended to show them “how we do it here” in order to quickly forestall their objections should these behaviors seem unethical or unsafe.

Socialization, which is often mediated by a system of rewards and punishments, aims at determining whether the newcomer will or will not join the group by adopting the group’s deviant behaviors. This step is where governance and operating culture most directly collide, as new members are exposed, through experiencing critical incidents and subsequent rewards or sanctions, to expected behaviors and are at this point presented with the implicit choice of joining in to get along [45], or risking isolation and social ostracism by not submitting to the cultural norms of the project team.

Rationalization enables organizational members to convince themselves that their deviances are not only legitimate, but acceptable and perhaps even necessary. The gradualism at work in NoD is most often demonstrated as part of the rationalization step. Repeated missteps or deviations from accepted operating norms and principles are ignored to the point where they become institutionalized and accepted – even expected – on the part of project team members.

It is important to note that institutionalization, socialization, and rationalization work in a mutually reinforcing manner to dissolve anxiety among the uninitiated by representing deviant behaviors as thoroughly rational and not immoral responses to work performance challenges [41]. For a project team or for a project-based organization, these moves away from standard operating procedures require a series of deliberate actions taken, or not taken, which, when no harm appears to have occurred, can be safely assumed to represent the true wishes of the firm's executives. In this way, NoD is not so different from other forms of unethical behaviors, as they share the same root causes; namely, a process of inculcating less-than-satisfactory decisions and/or actions throughout the organization to the point where this behavior is simply accepted and ignored.

Normalization of Deviance Practices in Project Organizations

Research on NoD in projects has led to some useful understanding of how these behaviors can arise, as well as the way in which NoD affects project outcomes. Perhaps the best-known study of projects and NoD comes from Pinto [30], which used a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with project managers in three large project-based corporations in the US. More recent work by Pinto and Davis [46] and Hajikazemi, et al [2] examined research from scholars reporting on NoD behaviors across multiple industries and project responsibilities. Their findings suggest that there are primarily four consequences of NoD behaviors within firms that can adversely affect project activities. Specifically, the consequences identified included:

Project proposals and strategic misrepresentation - A common theme was found of strategic misrepresentation occurring as firms sought to win project business, particularly in competitive bidding processes or as part of final scope negotiations with a customer. The term, "strategic misrepresentation," comes from the work of Flyvbjerg and colleagues as they studied

the phenomenon of gaining approval for large public works projects [47-50] and refers to the deliberate use of misleading or false information for political purposes or agency issues. Thus, one avenue for NoD lies in the tactics employed by firms to win these competitive bids, often through falsifying pertinent information, minimizing risks, making unrealistic project delivery promises, and so forth. Knowing full well that in many cases, these initial promises, though perceived as crucial for winning the business, are based on well-understood falsehoods, project organizations tacitly (and sometimes overtly) encourage these behaviors. As a recent example, an investigation of wide-spread corrupt practices in the Canadian construction industry in 2011, resulted in the Charbonneau Commission identifying bid-rigging and price fixing in the awarding and management of public contracts. The commission announced that the corruption and collusion were “far more widespread than originally believed” in the construction sector [51]. According to Courtois and Gendron [13], the situation had worsened to the point where collusion had become the “usual” way of managing public contracts in the construction sector.

Client/contractor relationships - A fascinating feature of many client/contractor relationships is that they often follow a common “rival camps” dynamic. Several of the studied narratives confirmed that rather than explore opportunities to create partnerships and open communications, critical project information is often hoarded and either misused or doled out selectively. Left to their own devices, as a result, the emergent pattern (to follow Bresnen's [52] argument) among clients and contractors is often one of indirect conflict and opportunism. Put another way, many firms believe it is more advantageous in the short-term to support opportunistic behavior that trumps a more client-centered approach emphasizing partnering and relationship development.

Planning and scheduling dynamics - By scheduling dynamics, we are referring to the myriad pathologies that often occur during the project planning and scheduling cycle. To create accurate schedules, it is necessary for project managers to have full information and a constructive, trusting relationships with senior managers. When a project manager is asked to develop a schedule, there is an implicit assumption that estimates will be in good faith and the resulting project plan reflects a reasonable path to completion. However, it may not be this way at all. Problems in perception, false manipulation or hijacking the planning process outright, and pressures that senior executives often bring to bear to artificially adjust the schedules routinely pit top management against the project manager, functional department heads against each other, the project manager against the team, the project team against the customer, and so forth. A relationship between the project manager and senior executives that enforces deliberate manipulation of information, data, and project schedules encourages the maintenance of a combative culture in which normal governance cannot function.

Workplace safety - another critical example of NoD behaviors occurs when organizations gradually allow safety standards to relax while pursuing project outcomes. That is, as the original example in this chapter typifies, there are any number of projects in the construction industry, for example, that fail to enforce safety standards [cf., 2; 53; 54]. In effect, although everyone – site workers and management – is aware of unsafe practices and fully recognizes that such behaviors should be eschewed, there is often an unspoken sub-text accompanying these prohibiting rules in which it is not only possible but often expected that safety rules can be relaxed or ignored. Examples of NoD in workplace safety requirements are numerous and involve a variety of justifications for cutting corners, including pressures for on-time project delivery associated with financial penalties. Moreover, beyond the construction industry, we can

see many examples of the consequences of NoD on workplace safety in healthcare systems [55], offshore oil operations [56; 57], and even agricultural activities [58].

METHODS

Identifying some of the more common examples of the “normalization trap,” we sought to more fully explore the challenges of deviance and the conditions under which such behavior can become normalized. Through narratives provided by project managers and team members within multiple organizations, we discuss these challenges and some of the common triggers project professionals give for committing them.

Narrative Research

The challenge in our specific context lies with understanding the role that cultures can play in encouraging deviant behaviors; thus, we sought a research method that would allow us to tap into cultural patterns of expected behavior. Several organization theorists have suggested that the analysis of organizational misbehavior and toxic culture can often be more richly studied through the communication of stories and narratives [59-63]. Narratives offer an opportunity for subjects to provide their own interpretation of events, suggest cause-and-effect reasoning (why organizational actors chose to respond in the manner they did), and relate chains of events through personal experience in ways that questionnaire data may not provide. Our desire was not only to better understand the NoD activities as they relate to projects and engineering management, but also to investigate something of the interpretive lenses through which our subjects perceive and identify/label these behaviors. Therefore, it is paramount to understand actions of our participants within the framework of their social setting; that is, to avoid the

pitfalls of individualistic and societal reductionism. The individual narratives as the unit of analysis provided the means for doing this [64].

The Guiding Research Question and the Narratives

At the heart of this study are the narratives. The participants in this study were working in project-based organizations or in project management roles and data were collected over six months in 2020-21. They were given a definition of NoD, “[T]he gradual process through which unacceptable project management practices or standards have become acceptable. As this behavior is repeated without catastrophic results, it has become the social or operating norm of your project group or organization” and a simple prompt: “In your own experiences, how have you seen projects affected by this normalization of deviance behavior?” Participants were guaranteed anonymity and we solicited written descriptions (narratives) of events, including as much detail as they were willing to share about their projects, key personnel, critical events and organizational cultural attitudes, as they perceived them. Because of the necessity for anonymity and the potential sensitivity of the topic, we did not collect information that could identify the participant, their particular firm, or the specific project on which they were reporting. The research question was sent out via email and of the 64 participants, a total of 52 (26 male and 26 female) were willing to participate and were identified as having sufficient background professional experience to respond to the questions with their narratives. The even breakdown of male and female participants was simply fortuitous and not directly manipulated to create similar categories; that is, we did not set out to create equal categories of participants. The participants’ average age was 35.6 and they had an average of 12.8 years of work experience, and an average of 8.9 years in project-based work, with self-identified job titles as: project managers (15), engineers (19), project administrators (7), or support staff (13). The organizations they came

from included a wide cross-section, including construction, aerospace and automotive, computer high technology (software and IT), pharmaceutical, US government, US defense (Army, Navy, etc.), oil and gas exploration and development, health care, hospitality and entertainment, mining, and rail/transportation.

Data Analysis

Informed by Gioia, et al [65], we followed a systematic inductive approach to content analysis. In doing so, we aimed to capture concepts relevant to NoD organizational experience, in terms that are adequate at the level of meaning of people living the experience, and adequate at the level of scientifically theorizing about that experience. The motives behind this approach were to employ an inductive study with qualitative rigor, while retaining the creative, revelatory potential for generating new concepts and ideas.

The data was analyzed by following the six-phases of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke [66] which include: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing potential themes, (5) defining and naming themes and, (6) producing the report. The 52 narratives were imported into NVivo12 and the analysis returned the most frequently occurring concepts in the narratives. Two researchers independently created code manuals, following Crabtree and Miller's [67] method. This helped serve not only as a data management tool and provided an audit trail, but also organized the text to aid when comparing interpretations. After initial code manuals were created, investigator triangulation [68] took place between the two researchers and an independent specialist in the field. This tests consistency and aids in confirmation of the findings obtained through a non-biased viewpoint examining the code manuals [69].

The NVivo12 analysis grouped exact words (e.g. ‘talk’), stemmed words (e.g. ‘talking’) and synonyms (e.g. ‘speak’) together which returned the most occurring top 100 words. These were then exported into 158 initial codes and further categorization and triangulation of these produced three main themes. It was noticeable that codes clustered around the ‘processes’, ‘relationships’, and the ‘outcomes’ related to NoD.

To enhance the rigor of our approach to data analysis, we organized data into 1st- and 2nd –order categories to facilitate their later assembly into a more structured form (aggregate dimensions) [66]. Similar to open, axial, and selective coding logic, this mechanism generated the themes (aggregate dimensions) and sub-themes (2nd order themes) by collapsing or clustering codes (1st order concepts) that seemed to share some unifying features, so that they reflected and described a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data [66; 70; 71]. This method allowed us to report both informant and researcher voices, establishing a rigorous demonstration of the links between the data and the induction of this new concept and sense giving [66]. Therefore, in order to write a compelling and focused account, we drew particular attention to: (1) honoring the worldview of informants, (2) providing sufficient evidence for claims, and (3) contributing to extant theory [72]. The data structure is shown in Figure 1. We will discuss the themes and their implications in the next section.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

RESULTS

Our analysis of the narratives suggested that NoD affected project-based work through (1) its administrative *Processes* for planning and controlling for project implementation (e.g., how people behaved when approving a project and developing plans and schedules), (2) *Relationships* - how peoples' traits (such as experience and leadership style) effect NoD and what happened within the relationships occurring between the project stakeholders to affect the project, and (3) *Outcomes* – the consequences of NoD and whether these had a positive or negative effect on stakeholders and the project outcome.

Theme 1: Processes for planning and controlling project implementation

The first theme that emerged from our analysis of the narratives through NVivo related to the processes in place for planning and controlling project execution and delivery. When commencing a project, the initial approvals process and “learning to play the game” with key players were shown to be affected by pressures toward NoD. Deviant behavior would often surface to speed up deliberations and attain permissions. This attitude seeped down into a need to ensure that any façade to get approval was maintained to ensure that those responsible for oversight processes were seeing the most desirable version of the project. Unrelated projects were found to inspire fast action and less deliberation as senior management wanted to have a ‘grand finale’ in which all project teams reported their results simultaneously. This perpetuated ideas that any step of the project process was optional to meet the deadline.

On a positive note, participants described the need to identify and document project management practices or standards to produce active project guidance. The goal was to record the project requirements (such as schedule, cost, needs, risks, quality) to aim for a successful

project outcome. As one participant noted, the idea behind this was, “if we create a rock-solid proposal, nothing can go wrong,” which would be ideal, if “people did not play a role.” Senior management were seen to display a predilection to hijack the planning process to ‘enhance’ the schedule or budget to provide a more favorable outlook to the powers that be.

Senior management directed attention to purposefully side-step procedures within the legal limits, for example, by attesting that products were safe to operate until the next scheduled maintenance. This behavior seeks to create the inference that the safety checks were not missed, but were merely moved to the next stage. The resultant technical risks were then rationalized as they were outweighed by political risks to “move to the next phase.”

Some organizations had only very recently begun to place a focus on documenting processes and analysis for future state improvements. One such service-orientated participant flagged that it was not seen as a priority until receiving an influx of employees from a global manufacturing company in the same city that was downsizing. They brought with them a new procedure-focused mindset that exposed a number of gaps in the way they had been thinking about their work. Large-scale mapping sessions unearthed employees struggling to vocalize what they did – regardless of some doing it for 30+ years on a daily basis. Many of the responses were simply, “That’s the way we’ve always done it,” “It depends,” and other problematic statements. However, responses such as these were through no fault of their own – they had never been asked to make their work visible. They saw these conversations as a threat (wanting to take away their autonomy), when in reality, not having standard procedures for work left the company open to regulatory infractions, fines, potential data breaches, negative public image, and other such consequences. Many employees did not understand or care how the work they did impacted others downstream or the customer. There were never any major negative consequences to

operating the way they always have, so there was no forced reason to change. They also had historically spent time in many projects attempting to understand fragmented parts of systems, and that research was then then stored away in some folder when the project closed, never to be seen again. The cycle of wasted time and effort continued because there was not a central repository to store and view process information.

Planning for potential project changes (configuration management) would require careful management of stakeholders, as any corrective action must be within their assumed tolerances. This was a major issue in itself as individuals add their own “creative license” or implement unauthorized work arounds. Relationships create multiple complexities and NoD can foster a progressive deterioration of trust between, for example, the customer and supplier due to technical and manufacturing deviance. New employees who were unaware of the deviance may be inspired to get involved in projects, but it mainly discouraged the seasoned project team members from ever raising their hand again.

Although management of change processes were evident, changes were shown to cause rework, which could have a knock-on effect on completed tasks and negatively impact employee morale. The ultimate goal was to ensure that remedial action was minimized to avoid the need for costly rework, but this often led to a breakdown in relationships. Upon project initiation and execution, the narratives focused on involving people, but keeping control of what was shown to provide a positive picture, regardless of the real situation. This involvement was mainly to avoid complacency and aimed to ensure accountability was taken for actions. Problems cascaded through a lack of involvement and honest communication with stakeholders as they were often supplied with misleading or false information. The deviation occurred because of barriers to using the correct process of time, cost and pressure from senior management.

Another area that was affected greatly by NoD behaviors related to the lack of oversight in procedural controls in organizations. Several individual narratives noted that no one was checking up on whether milestones were met. In information technology (IT) projects, for example, when IT personnel knew that “gated review” processes should be taking place, but also knew that the likelihood of those events actually occurring was low, they tended to start skipping review steps as time went on. For example, one of the 20 IT service centers in Texas could not start their backup generator during rolling power outages because it had not been following its procedural controls. It was actually a simple fix, the plug had flipped that allows the engine to keep warm and start in cold weather. Schneier [73], also discussed cyber-focused examples of where false positives wear down diligence which brings complacency and ultimately NoD. It is when this occurs that the stage for failure has been set.

NoD led to participants coming to expect and ultimately accept these practices based on the size of the company staff and complexity of the process to get the simplest procedures changed. In some cases, there were multiple signoffs, multiple departments documents that needed to be passed through and simply “lost” paperwork that exacerbated an already difficult process. Digitizing many of the processes led to a host of different problems. Connectivity issues, software licenses, total loss of data because the handheld program module failed or was dropped, major computer breaches that shut-down entire networks. Other examples of NoD responses included stopping using computer-based backup systems and reverting to using paper documentation for backups. Some processes cannot be digitized since regulatory agencies can require hard signatures. The difficulty of these processes led to some document issues that resulted in termination of the employees involved. Sometimes complex processes and the fear of retribution made people take a chance, simply to get work done.

When issues were escalated up the chain of command they were met with concern and remedial actions. The remedial actions were complied with immediately and apologies made, but the service soon slips again, creating a vicious cycle. Even when corrections were made, another issue soon arose, and another escalation was needed. Participants noted that the response was to hire a new vendor, and the process started all over again of excellent service for the trial period and slowly as service deteriorated errors needed escalation again.

Table I presents an example of sub-themes with illustrative data extracts (direct quotes) in support of the presented findings.

INSERT TABLE I HERE

Theme 2: Relationships: how people's traits affect NoD

Participant narratives suggested that relationships and emotions were leading contributors of deviant behavior. This can, of course, be taken positively as it was noted that an inspirational leader who was reliable and instilled optimism would have positive traits mimicked. Team members were selected based on the length of service in the organization as opposed to experience with the project. This familiarity with the team member drove the emotional need for others to mimic and conduct themselves in the same way. Where the program had an established rapport with the client, team members assumed that formal processes were not needed, leading them to end-run compliance for risk management and change management processes. This “over-trust” behavior, whereby high levels of trust between organizations was established, could break down formal processes that should be followed. In the situation where key project

stakeholders were able to simply text each other to continue work, it demonstrated a high level of personal trust and yet, the implications could become risky where millions of dollars of work are at stake. Although text messages or other informal communication methods may speed decision-making, in the event of later litigated disagreements, there should still be an emphasis on processes and formal communication. Eventually, contract teams may need to get involved to decipher what the project managers had been discussing and formally put it into writing, but the longer the time lags before formal codifying agreements, the more information may be lost.

Several participants noted a feeling of being forced to complete a job, regardless of any downside risks involved in efforts to “just get the job done.” Interestingly, it was noted that a feeling of NoD often flourished as those who sought out support felt they were met with negative responses and the message that “if you cannot do your job, you are labelled as incompetent.” People would rather carry on in unproductive work patterns and hope to not get noticed rather than continually asking for help. In fact, those who did ask for support were often blamed when the project went wrong and this in turn led to frustration, disappointment, and feeling threatened.

The unwillingness to request support led to projects residing in the limbo stage of “wait and see,” which was a form of project purgatory that further inflated project costs while deteriorating stakeholder trust. The customer constantly forwarded notices of new findings, typically insignificant, to adjust perceptions of risk. If the project’s technical team ignored the customer inquiry, the customer wrongly assumed the silence was confirmation of any “real issue” that would be addressed before maintenance – i.e., they “won”. As a result, the project budget was bled dry even if there was no other costly redesign. These negative feelings and poor relational dynamics often led to a spread of destructive behavior and vicious cycle from the source and resulted in inadequate repairs or quality remediation, and further damage that

endangered others. Table II presents an example of sub-themes with illustrative data extracts (direct quotes) in support of the presented findings.

INSERT TABLE II HERE

Theme 3: Outcomes: the consequences and effects of NoD

When discussing the overall outcome from a project, we typically regarded “consequences” as the project making a positive impact and leading to transformation; i.e., successful outcomes propel positive change. For most narratives, however, the consequences discussed referred to the impact of NoD behaviors themselves and how participants saw people in their organizations being put into dangerous situations, linked not only to professional malpractice, but more worryingly, the potential for injury or death in certain projects.

To illustrate, several narratives mentioned that when senior management did not understand technical requirements, they tended to cut training/setup time from a project, and drove an attitude of “getting the mission done.” This approach led to teams feeling pressure to cut safety corners in order to just get the job done and over time, grew into an attitude of abandoning all established safety plans that were set during planning. Narratives spoke of senior management failing to assume accountability due to not understanding technical requirements and consequently, blaming those in the trenches. Senior management’s focus was seen in many cases as doing the bare minimum, with the lowest cost, to make the customer happy. The words participants used to convey this message, and the manner in which they continuously reminded people to look for ways to save money, ultimately left everyone searching for ways to legally cut

corners. While management never specifically advocated the abandonment of safety protocols, our participants suggested repeatedly that their words and actions made other people feel that it was okay to cut corners, so long as it was done in the name of saving money and/or time. The steady repeat of this message eventually led to project team members skipping quality checks because these steps took too long and therefore cost more money. Thus, if they were not engaging in deviant behavior specifically, they were certainly condoning those who did engage in it for one reason or another.

The narratives often noted that the proliferation of NoD practices at the project execution stage involved efforts to speed up a project – a result that was to be seen favorably by senior management – and meant that corners would be cut, or that red flags were ignored. Thus, the most troubling narrative descriptions of project completion often reflected a deliberate willingness by top management to ignore warning signs or quality limitations: a message that was picked up by project managers and their teams, who felt that complex processes and the fear of retribution made people take unnecessary chances to get work done. One such example in the narratives noted medical personnel routinely engaged in unsafe clinical practices to increase room turnover rate in operating and emergencies rooms. This “production pressure” placed an emphasis on pursuing output efficiency to increase monetary gain at the expense of patient safety. One participant noted that this mindset resulted in chronic non-adherence to standards, leading to anesthesia mishaps, medication errors, testing errors, dietary errors, discharge errors, and poor documentation with incorrect/inadequate information used to make clinical decisions resulting in malpractice, patient injury and death. The narratives that mentioned this phenomenon noted that solutions must come from senior management/ organizational leadership to instill a culture of safety by the policies and procedures set. These policies were to be created by

continuous assessment of an organization's current practices, governance processes and framework for ethical decision-making, organizational culture and resource allocation. Table III presents an example of sub-themes with illustrative data extracts (direct quotes) in support of the presented findings.

INSERT TABLE III HERE

Ultimately, this combination of flawed project processes, poisoned or predatory relationships with key stakeholders, and toxic consequences (outcomes) represented a cultural environment in which misbehavior was tacitly codified and self-reinforced, as employees and managers both recognized their flawed actions and either attempted to justify them or simply acknowledge their powerlessness to make positive changes, regardless of the circumstances or goals involved. Thus, our findings point to an interesting condition, in which activities at every stage in the project development cycle carries with it a potentially-damaging set of misbehaviors or self-defeating assumptions and activities. Starting with initial processes for planning and control (setting the stage), to the emergence of stakeholder relationships and their positive or negative out-turns, and finally, culminating in consequential outcomes and their implications for both individual project performance and overall (long-term) project firm viability.

In addition to positing a process for NoD behaviors through the project development, our study also offers partial confirmation for the content model of NoD first identified by Pinto [30]. We noted in the theoretical framework that in a previous study, Pinto [30] found evidence of NoD behaviors occurring in four principal manners: 1) project proposals, 2) contractor/client

relationships, 3) planning and scheduling dynamics, and 4) workplace safety. Our findings support several elements from this earlier study, specifically, 1) through initial processes (e.g., finding means to streamline approvals through skipping steps as well as unethical bidding procedures); 2) relationship development (including clients/contractor deceptive practices and deliberate withholding of information); and 3) processes to manipulate or falsify project outcomes (e.g., corner cutting in order to speed up completion of final steps even if safety protocols are sacrificed). Thus, the content model of Pinto [30] integrates well with the three-factor content model we identified. Table IV provides a summary of the results.

INSERT TABLE IV HERE

DISCUSSION

The goal of our study was to offer real-world examples and highlight areas where NoD in projects occur so that organizations can recognize the underlying conditions as well as the warning signs in order to avoid their negative impact. Using NVivo to analyze underlying patterns in the collected narratives of project management professionals, we found evidence that NoD negatively affected project-based work through the manner in which: 1) organizations developed and applied their administrative *Processes* for planning and controlling for project implementation, 2) the *Relationships* (including traits, and emotional responses) of key organizational members whose behaviors is often mimicked by other members of the project or key stakeholders, and 3) the *Outcomes* of NoD behaviors on individuals, the project team, or key stakeholders in the larger organization. Thus, respondents' recognition of NoD in projects often

highlighted a combination of cataloging various inappropriate behaviors, recognizing the social pressure to ignore or conform to these behaviors, and the acknowledgement that NoD consequences were usually visible and resulted in negative outcomes.

The project governance literature has, in recent years, focused on the manner in which project team members are expected to self-regulate by applying ethical guidelines and standards of behavior to ensure accountability and transparency [27]. Thus, it is understood that governance is not simply a system of control imposed on the project team from the “outside,” toward which they are expected to conform. Governance, at its heart, relies of multiple “touch points” to ascertain compliance, including a) top-down methods that primarily involve upper management oversight, b) market or competitive mechanisms that allow comparison across projects and project organizations, c) professional standards of best practice [74], as well as, d) a strong organizational culture enforcing expected norms of behavior. The results of our study confirm that governance plays a key role in influencing standards of behavior, both through formal processes and more information means, such as inclusive and powerful culture/social pressures. However, our findings also suggest that employees are quickly made aware of the manner in which an organization may publicly espouse ethical behaviors while within project teams, it is clear to members that other pressures are present; pressures that make it acceptable to adopt behaviors that conflict with standard operating procedures. When governance standards conflict with team relationships and anticipated consequences of NoD behaviors, it is often the governance standard that is ignored.

Social pressure to conform to relaxed standards, to “not make waves,” or go along to get along with NoD behaviors reinforces the power of organizational relationship development and the way strong cultures can enforce unwritten rules of behavior, even when they are ultimately

self-defeating or injurious to the project or parent organization. Previous research on governance and NoD within projects has suggested the critical nature of culture as a control and self-regulating mechanism. However, just as one of the issues raised was, “What happens when governance systems fail?” our findings suggest that members may understand these expected standards of behavior, but in the face of relationship concerns and social norms, they may be willing to ignore governance guidelines, even when fully aware of serious potential outcomes. This latter point is important: organizational actors working on projects are often fully aware not only of expected behaviors but the consequences of NoD and still routinely engage in deviant behaviors.

Our study also offers limited support for previous work on NoD in projects [46; 2], which offered content models of NoD by articulating its presence in four major areas: 1) project proposals and strategic misrepresentation, 2) client/contractor relationships, 3) planning and scheduling dynamics, and 4) workplace safety. This research suggests a broader attitude on the part of organizational members regarding the manner in which NoD can be identified and as well as social pressures to conform; that is, rather than articulate specific examples of NoD that conform with the categories of earlier studies, our findings supplement this earlier work by identifying a complimentary “process-like” model of critical elements in NoD. Our participants identified the latent organizational conditions [16] and impact of culture and social pressure in supporting NoD behaviors, while also identifying expected consequences of NoD. From our findings, it appears that deviant processes and relationships often define both anticipated and unanticipated outcomes. Explicitly, there are some interesting “cause-and-effect” elements, by which subverted organizational processes (such as governance mechanisms) and stakeholder relationships – either separately or combined – can influence subsequent NoD activities. These

relationships confirm earlier work on the utility of strong governance systems as a means for controlling not only project activities, but the organizational processes and key actors who can influence the project work either positively or negatively [27].

Perhaps, more interestingly for our understanding of NoD were the “second-order” findings, which offered more specific examples of NoD and showed its broader influence in organizational activities; for example, under the heading of “Processes,” our sample identified four second order themes that track well against organizational political processes, including identifying key stakeholders, controlling information flows, and understanding ways in which standards or protocols can be avoided [75]. Thus, our study broadens our current understanding of NoD by introducing organizational phenomena that had not been previously studied; i.e., the role that organizational politics and power relationships can play in both encouraging NoD and justifying (or obscuring) the impact of its negative outcomes after the fact. As a springboard to addressing a previously under-analyzed relationship between NoD and organizational political behavior, our study offers an intriguing direction for future research.

Another key aspect of NoD from the literature is the nature of “gradualism,” as these deviant behaviors occur over time, as a series of decision taken or not taken, for which no negative impact results, leading to a continued pushing out of the acceptable risk boundaries. In our study in a project setting, we saw gradualism occur in scope adjustment, inauthentic interactions with customers, or incremental changes to plans and other control documentation and subjects reported experiencing the effects that gradualism plays in ballooning project costs and schedules. Or, as our second-order theme under “Consequences” suggests, more tragically, gradualism may affect the adherence to safety standards in which lengthy or seemingly obstructive safety checks are, over time, ignored with increasing frequency until a catastrophic

event occurs. As Winch [76] noted, a constructivist perspective yields a number of causes of project escalation – many involving elements of gradualism – including strategic misrepresentation, “endgaming,” “governmentality,” culture, and escalation of commitment on major projects [25; 26].

One of the intriguing findings regarding relationships suggested the presence of an “inverted U-shaped” relationship regarding issues of inter-organizational trust and the propensity for deviant behaviors. That is, study participants noted that when high levels of trust between organizations (say, for example, between a contractor and client) exists, the implication is that formal processes of control and documentation or safety may be allowed to relax or even break down. In this way, trust can actually become the motivation to break established norms and accept NoD responses to expected established guidelines. Past research on interorganizational trust has generally posited a strong, positive relationship for project outcomes [77]. However, our findings suggest that trust can contain within it the seeds for sanctioning (tacitly or directly) misbehavior that can essentially work against achieving maximum outcomes for project stakeholders.

Ultimately, this combination of flawed project processes, poisoned or predatory relationships with key stakeholders, and toxic consequences (outcomes) represents a cultural environment in which misbehavior is tacitly codified and self-reinforcing, as employees and managers both recognize their flawed actions and either attempt to justify them or simply acknowledge their powerlessness to make positive changes, regardless of the circumstances or goals involved. Thus, our findings point to an interesting condition, in which activities at every stage in the project development cycle carries with it a potentially-damaging set of misbehaviors or self-defeating assumptions and activities. Starting with initial processes for planning and

control (setting the stage), to the emergence of stakeholder relationships and their positive or negative out-turns, and finally, culminating in consequential outcomes and their implications for both individual project performance and overall (long-term) project firm viability.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Narratives offer a useful means for understanding not just actions, but the fuller “story” behind the studied effects. However, it is also important to offer a caveat to narratives analysis within the perspective of NoD; namely, there is a potential for implicit social desirability pressures in recounting events. It has been argued, for example, that deviance that is measured using self-reports can be confounded by self-serving bias [78], so even in the case where our subjects offered their perspectives on events they observed, it is not impossible that these views were, to some degree, influenced by the desire to report these experiences in a manner that cast the reporter in the best light. Using meta-analytic techniques, Berry et al [79] found that deviance could be reliably measured by observer reports, such as supervisor or subordinate recordings of the type we employed; however, because employees may engage in deviant behaviors in hidden or cloaked ways, it may not be possible to record the full range of examples of deviance through our narrative examples. As Bauer, et al [80] noted, it is likely that lower-severity deviance behaviors, which are easier to conceal, may therefore be underreported through narrative observations.

A second potential limitation concerns the size of the research sample. For our study the findings suggested that narratives with 52 participants was sufficient to develop theoretical saturation. However, it is suggested that future studies expand the number of participants to reach a wider audience facilitating statistical analysis on comparative cases. Avenues for expansion could investigate patterns of NoD based on project characteristics such as project size,

budget, schedule, the types of external stakeholders (e.g., government versus private sector clients), and the degree of commercial or political pressure on the project organization.

An area for future research might relate to the examination of different perceptions among participants on the basis of gender, organizational position, or other contingency metrics. For example, research on ethics in business and corporate responsibility has generally suggested that female workers tend to be more ethically-minded and make different decisions than male counterparts based on viewing ethical dilemmas in the workplace [81-83]. Thus, in the specific setting of NoD, with cultural and socializing forces influencing employee attitudes, it would be interesting to determine if female workers are more resistant to NoD or feel similar pressures to conform and rationalize such behavior. Likewise, it would be interesting to examine NoD within different project settings. As we noted earlier in this paper, the existence of NoD has been documented extensively in a variety of industries; e.g., clinical medicine, finance and accounting, construction, etc. Probing at a deeper level within project-based firms (e.g., construction vs. new product development vs. IT projects) to find specific forms of NoD would offer organizational HR departments an opportunity to better target these behaviors, identifying worrying trends, and engaging in remedial steps at an earlier stage.

Our study also supports the advantages, first identified by Smircich [84] and Martin, et al [64] of applying organization story-telling, or narratives, as a means for identifying underlying cultural artefacts, unwritten rules of behavior, and pressures to conformity. Research on organizational culture going back to the 1980s wrestled with the best means for identifying and exposing underlying dimensions of culture, with useful qualitative work being done on the validity of story-telling. The narrative analysis approach in our present study benefitted from this earlier work but with the added advantage of employing modern methodological means

(NVivo) for our development of NoD behaviors and a proposed process map. Future research can apply large sample statistical analysis to confirm the process map as a description of the development of NoD behaviors in project-based organizations, while further refining the methods for collecting and analyzing organizational member narratives.

CONCLUSIONS

The project management literature is rich with research on the causes of project failure. It is helpful, therefore, to contrast the variety of pathologies that can lead to cost or schedule overruns, technical failures, rework, cancellations, and other negative results with the more insidious dynamic of NoD. Problems arise when behaviors such as those we identified relating to processes, relationships, and outcomes become culturally embedded and destructive but remain viewed as a “normal” behavior without questioning the assumptions driving them. As Reason [16] noted regarding workplace deviance, there exists the twin challenges of identifying both “active failures” and “latent conditions,” under which such deviances are permitted (and even encouraged) to flourish. In this manner, NoD is typically the result of a series of deliberative choices that have become institutionalized over time. As noted above, the nature of normalized deviance is one of gradualism and the accumulation of (and organizational acclimatization to) a series of decisions that individually may not signal disasters, but taken collectively, and applied continuously to a project setting, will eventually, lead to serious repercussions [85]. Ultimately, project performance will be improved as organizations can develop better means for identifying NoD, recognize the conditions that can encourage these behaviors, and map strategies for the best ways to address and correct NoD in project settings.

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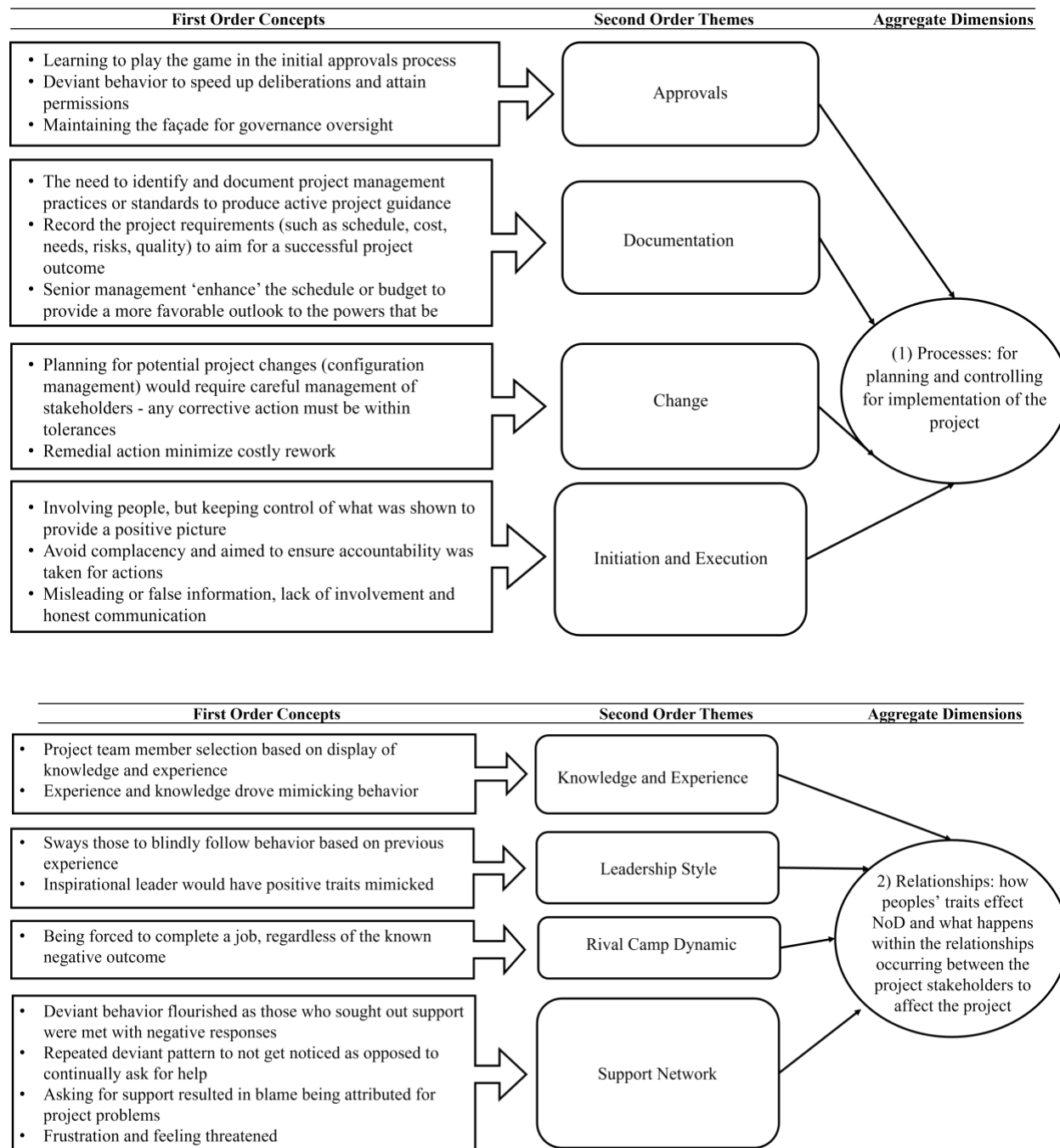
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Figure 1: Data Structure



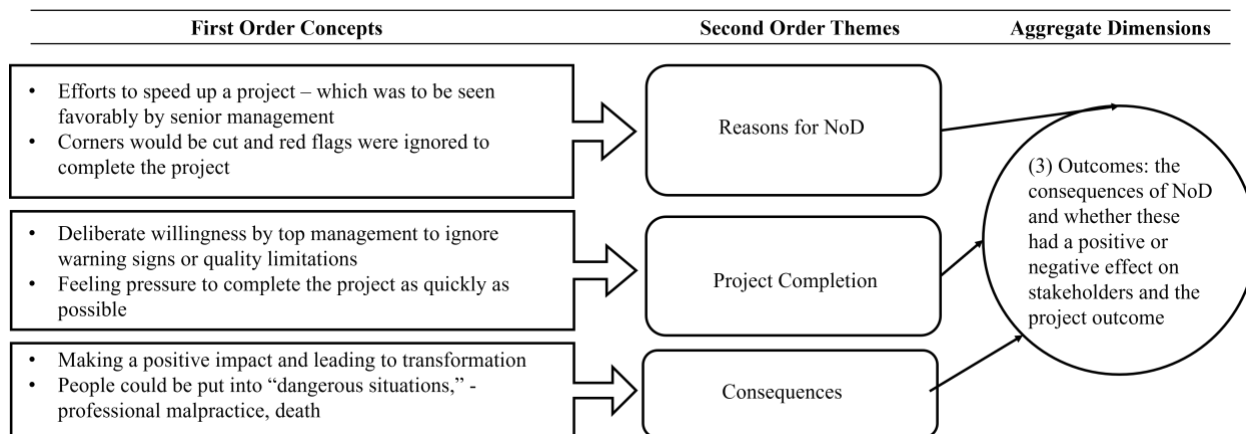


Table I: Illustrative Data Extract

Theme One: Processes
<p>Sub-Theme: Approvals</p> <p><i>Frequency: 7.64%</i></p> <p>“The more normalized deviant behavior was [found in] willful flaws when it came to the bidding process and proposal phases. Organizations are more than willing to deliberately low-ball estimates in efforts to win a contract and then make up for it later. The saying ‘it’s easier to ask forgiveness than it is to get permission’ resonated when [reflecting on] project proposals and strategic misrepresentations. Organizations know full well that once the program is approved and the contractor is married to them for some time, it becomes a lot easier to get additional funding. Funds will eventually come through a contract modification or amendment as opposed to the contractor looking elsewhere and start the process from square one.”</p>
<p>Sub-Theme: Documentation</p> <p><i>Frequency: 48.10%</i></p> <p>“Our senior managers are excellent at hiding real costs, figuring out what the board (or a client) is willing to pay, and magically arriving at that number.”</p> <p>“The leaders of an organization I worked for engaged in unethical behaviors in their efforts to secure jobs. The administrative manager lacks the needed skills to generate competitive</p>

bids for contracts, and the project manager only bore the title [due to] years of experience [with the firm]. They willfully ignored all conventional budgeting practices but engaged in deceptive work methodology, false scheduling, and riddled [their bids] with optimism bias. Hence, they end up getting jobs that were impossible to complete with the approved budget. On many occasions, we were instructed to manufacture technical reasons to request variations in order to make up for the deficit. Working under this condition was toxic and communicating with the boss was traumatic. The problem was amplified when the project team members decided to just normalize the behavior. I did not last in this organization because I couldn't make up lies to the client, and my colleagues thought I was disrespectful to the organizational leadership. I eventually resigned.”

Sub-Theme: Change

Frequency: 13.56%

“Time and time and again, I would have to email the certain person for status on work breakdown structure updates that were used for my earned value method, which were presented monthly. I felt like the change management process gradually lost its importance. This was a huge risk because we could never trust the client to do the right thing (memory and ignorance were a huge factor), which could bite us in our reports, funding, and monthly meetings”.

Sub-Theme: Initiation and Execution

Frequency: 30.69%

“[By] not adhering to certain requirements, the project team were essentially leaving out key information and not fully justifying a certain business decision which could lead to the outcome of the project seeming more attractive than it actually was. The reasoning for this is because it was a long and often cumbersome process to satisfy such requirements (but important requirements nonetheless). It likely developed by one team member telling another that they did meet such requirements in a similar previous project and cut corners by doing x, y and z. The next person would then believe it's okay to do the same and before you know, everybody is participating to the point where the deviance from the process became the norm.”

Table II: Illustrative Data Extract

Theme Two: Relationships
<p>Sub-Theme: Knowledge and Experience <i>Frequency: 35.27%</i></p> <p>“There is a rule in my company that project team must be chosen based on their experience and expertise alone.”</p>
<p>Sub-Theme: Leadership Style <i>Frequency: 15.41%</i></p> <p>“It is surprising how many times we find ourselves in a bad situation that was formed by blindly accepting previous experiences as a success.”</p>
<p>Sub-Theme: Rival Camp Dynamic <i>Frequency: 36.64%</i></p> <p>“Currently, the stakeholder relationships are so corrupt that the opposing internal and external camps are in constant conflict. Escalation of commitment is nearing its final days given the cost overruns and lack of customer trust/satisfaction. Internally, the product line has informally been declared a ‘no bid option’ on future contracts by internal stakeholders. Externally, the product line is nearly blacklisted. My confidant for the car builder stated, “The offer would have to be extremely intriguing, half price of the competition, before we would consider XYZ again”. In essence we are ‘shutting down’ this project but the damage to the culture remains.”</p>
<p>Sub-Theme: Support Network <i>Frequency: 12.67%</i></p> <p>“Many of the responses were simply, “That’s the way we’ve always done it,” “It depends,” and other problematic statements. However, this was through no fault of their own – they had never been asked to make their work visible. They saw these conversations as a threat, wanting to take away their autonomy, when in reality not having standard procedures for work to the extent possible it left the company open to regulatory infractions, fines, potential data breaches, negative public image, and other such consequences.”</p>

“When we escalate these issues up the chain of command they are met with concern and remedial actions. The partner complies with these remedial actions immediately and apologizes, but the service soon slips again creating a vicious cycle.”

Table III: Illustrative Data Extract

Theme Three: Outcomes
<p>Sub-Theme: Reasons for NoD</p> <p><i>Frequency: 68.89%</i></p> <p>“One example I have of a project affected by normalization of deviance was a project completed by my organization last year, in which a project team set out to improve technology issues that occur when onboarding our new hires. Senior leadership placed a firm deadline on the team of 90 days. This end-date driven scheduling caused the team to spend more time making project plans to ensure no schedule overruns than they spent on actually making progress against the technology issues. Senior leadership’s reason for putting such a deadline on the project was twofold: one, it was meant to inspire fast action and less deliberation and two, concurrent (but unrelated) projects were also in progress and they wanted to have a grand finale in which all project teams reported their 90-day results. They hoped that the 90-day report would inspire other employees to get involved in projects, knowing they could make a “big” impact with a short time commitment. As I’m sure you can guess, at the end of 90 days, the project ended but the work was not complete. The rest of the project work, which could have been completed by the project team, if there were not a firm 90-day deadline, was thrust onto one employee who worked within the department that supported onboarding. The employee was left with a half-completed project to finish on their own. They did not have the capacity, nor the desire, to take on this work, and the project was abandoned”.</p> <p>Sub-Theme: Project Completion</p> <p><i>Frequency: 10.77%</i></p>

“[T]he firm is in the financial sector and always looking for ways to be better/faster/cheaper. This “Race to the bottom” mentality has permeated many levels of the firm over the years and thus managers and leaders that have climbed the ladder have brought their own experiences with them yet rather than solve the problems, they continue to propagate them in order to not upset the apple cart. Looking at cheaper and cheaper contractor options does not leave the best people doing the work but rather the cheapest or most inexperienced which in turn leads to overruns in both time and budget situations.”

Sub-Theme: Consequences

Frequency: 20.33%

“The General Manager himself considered it a ‘man’s world.’ Sexual harassment of female workers was a common deviant behavior at the plant that the Human Resources department was well-aware of. I found out later that the company had been through several lawsuits for such incidents in the past, having simply paid the hefty fines and moved on; they are still in operation today. I do wonder if the company has added extensive sexual harassment training as an annual refresher.”

Table IV: Summary Results of Content Analysis

Dominant Themes	Governance Actions	
	Positive Behaviors	Negative (NoD) Behaviors
Processes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify and document performance standards 2. Identify key stakeholders and their expectations 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify key organization members and methods needed to skip steps and speed approval permissions 2. Senior managers hijacking planning processes to embellish schedule and/or budget 3. Minimize potential for problems and subsequent remedial action 4. Maintain control of all project status information
Relationships	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Senior project team members can set a positive role model for others 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Team members quickly adopted the attitudes of senior members regarding cutting safety corners or required approvals 2. Rival camps behavior between departments or with the client dictated the tone of most interactions – confrontational rather than conciliatory 3. Members felt pressure to suppress concerns or feelings to get the job done 4. Avoid asking for help or clarifications or your competence will be questioned
Outcomes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consequences can lead to positive outcomes and transformative results 2. Top management can use lessons learned as a means to train and motivate for future projects 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fear of employees being put into dangerous situations or scapegoated for bad results 2. Steps taken to speed up project completion involve cutting corners