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Governance, governmentality and project performance: the role of sovereignty

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Viewpoint

Abstract:
Considerable confusion prevails in the mutual positioning and relationship of concepts like management, leadership, governance and governmentality in projects. This article first develops a framework to distinguish these terms conceptually by use of Archer's structure and human agency philosophy. This provides for clearer conceptualization and lesser redundancy in the use of terms. Then the interaction between governance and governmentality in the context of projects is assessed, using a contingency theory perspective. This addresses long-standing questions about the nature of the impact of governance and governmentality on each other and on project and organizational performance. The results show that higher levels of project sovereignty (as a measure of governance), are associated with lower levels of authoritarian, but higher levels of neo-liberal governmentality, as well as higher levels of project and organizational performance. The article continues with a discussion of the theoretical implications from different perspectives of causality, which provides for different approaches to improve project performance through deliberate fine-tuning of governance and governmentality.

Keywords:
project governance; governmentality; project performance; organizational performance; sovereignty.

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1. Introduction

The academic discourse in the field of project management research continues to expand. The most obvious developments are from structural, or *hard management* approaches, to merely human, or *soft management* approaches. This development started in the 1950s with the so-called modern project management, where the focus was primarily on the managerial aspects, with planning and control techniques, such as PERT (Program Evaluation and Review Technique) [1]. Several decades later, about the turn of the millennium, this was complemented by the human side of management with a growing awareness of the important role of leadership in projects [2]. Around the same time, another stream of literature started to emerge, which addressed the theme of project governance as a structural way to steer projects and their managers for better project results [3]. This stream was subsequently complemented by publications on the human side of governance, that is, the subject of governmentality [4]. This development is indicative of a diversification in the understanding of projects and their management, done by adding new and widening existing perspectives, as well as increasing the granularity of each perspective with the ultimate aim to improve project and with that organizational results.

This growing granularity in understanding of these terms pervades the practitioner and academic community in project management in an unequal manner. Examples include the interchangeable use of the terms management and leadership in organizations [5][6], whereas publications that aim for a deliberate distinction between management and leadership define the former as a task related activity [7] and leadership as an interpersonal, person-oriented, social influence [8]. Similarly blurred is the use of the terms governance and management, whereby recent developments indicate a tendency to use the term governance for describing parts of traditional management tasks instead of the particularities of the structural framework thereof. These exemplary cases indicate the growing need for a clearer positioning of the terms (and their underlying concepts) against each other. Moreover, a clarification of the distinct nature of each of these terms should be empirically supported in order to give examples on how to apply them more deliberately and appropriately.

To that end, we pose two research questions:

R1: What is the difference of the terms/concepts of management, leadership, governance and governmentality in the realm of projects?

R1.1: What is the relationship between governance and governmentality and their combined relationship with project performance?

We do not empirically investigate the relationship between management and leadership and their combined relationship with project performance, as this was already done in earlier studies [9][10][11].

The first part of the present article develops a conceptual framework to distinguish between the four terms mentioned above using Archer's [12] Realist Social Theory and its distinction between structure and human agency. The second part of the article applies two of the lesser researched concepts, namely governance and governmentality in projects, to empirically investigate their combination with different levels of project and organizational performance. This provides for a better understanding of the particular roles of these somewhat new elements of investigation in the realm of projects. The empirical study uses the concepts of project sovereignty as a proxy measure for governance and as unit of analysis. The investigation takes a critical realism stance in the sense of Bhaskar and colleagues [13], which is also the underlying philosophy of Archer's Realist Social Theory.

Practitioners benefit from the article by gaining a better understanding about the different nature of the four concepts and the nature of the governance and governmentality interaction for project and organizational performance. Academic readers benefit from a clearer structure to distinguish the terms/concepts and the theoretical implications derived from the investigation into the roles and relationships of the concepts.

The article continues by building a conceptual framework by positioning the concepts of management, leadership, governance and governmentality against each other. Subsequently the methodology of the empirical investigation is described and the particular profiles of governmentality and performance at different levels of governance are described. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical implications from different causality perspectives. The article finishes with the conclusions of the study.

2. Building the conceptual framework

One way of positioning the concepts of management, leadership, governance and governmentality is by looking at them from a sociological perspective (Figure 1). Many sociologists agree that two basic concepts prevail in all forms of societies, including organizations or projects. These are structures and human agency. Structures are known for example, in form of job role descriptions, policies, processes, etc. in organizations. Structures are intended to be objective and rational by nature. Human agency describes the behavior of people within these structures. It represents the human subjectivity in response to structures [14][15]. Sociologists discuss the relationship between structure and human agency, which originally assumed a dominance of one over the other in various ways. Among them, Archer suggested that the two concepts are inseparable and mutually constitutive, hence each of them can only be understood in light of the other [12][14]. Their relationship is grounded in an ontological difference, whereby human agency possesses the self-reflective capabilities that structure lacks. Hence the implementation of the structural demands is mediated by human agency [15], which gives raise to a contingency theory perspective. Applying this distinction between structure and agency as a philosophical lens to the four terms of management, leadership, governance and governmentality, classifies:

- *Management* with its traditional understanding as a *task-oriented* activity in order to accomplish planned results (e.g. plan, implement and control). It is a *structural* means for *execution* of ‘getting things done by others’. Management is often referred to as being rational, numbers driven, as well as associated with objectivity in planning and control in pursuance of efficiency in execution of an endeavor [16].
- *Leadership* as an interpersonal, and person-oriented process [8], hence a *people-oriented* activity to accomplish planned results at the same *execution* level as management, but in form of *human agency*. Leadership describes what goes on between people, including human action and subjectivity. In his studies on the physiological base of emotional intelligence in the human brain, Goleman [17], showed that the difference between leadership and management is even physiological. The rational management tasks mainly stimulate the prefrontal area of the human brain, which is the youngest part of the brain, whereas the interpersonal leadership tasks stimulate the emotional center of the brain, named the amygdala, one of the oldest parts of the human brain. Therefore, management and leadership complement each other in our efforts to accomplish objectives.
- *Governance* as a *framework for managers* to perform their task and hold them accountable for their work, thus a *structural* means to *steer* managers [18]. Governance relates to management as an objective and rational structural means to organizing in societies, such as firms or projects. Hence, it is at another level than the execution-oriented management tasks, as it frames the does and don’ts of it.
- *Governmentality* as the ways in which those in governance roles (i.e. governors) interact with those they govern. Hence, a *human agency*, reflecting the governors’ mentalities and rationalities towards those they govern during the implementation, maintenance and change of governance structures. Similar to governance, it is an activity to steer managers, hence at the steering level.

Figure 1 shows the relative positioning of terms, within the framework of structure and agency, as well as steering and execution. This answers research question 1.

	Structure	*Human Agency*
Steering	**Governance** The framework for managers to do their tasks, and held accountable for it	**Governmentality** Governors' chosen ways of interaction, with those they govern
Execution	**Management** Goal oriented activity to accomplish (project) objectives	**Leadership** People oriented activity to accomplish (project) objectives

Fig. 1. Mutual positioning of management, leadership, governance and governmentality

3. Governance, governmentality and performance

3.1 Governance

The framework in Figure 1 identifies governance as a structure to steer management. Similarly, OECD defines governance as the means by which organizations are directed and their managers held accountable for conduct and performance [19]. For that, governance provides the structure to define the objectives of an organization, it provides the means to achieve those objectives, and it controls progress [20]. Within the realm of projects, governance exists at several levels: a) at the top of the organization as that part of corporate governance that decides on the particular part of the business that is done by projects; b) within middle management as *governance of projects*, where the entirety of projects, or subsets thereof, are governed and decisions are made on the commonalities of approaches across projects, such as methodologies, reporting practices, training, etc.; and c) at the individual project level in form of *project governance*, where decisions are made on particularities of the individual project [21][22]. These differences are crucial as they strike the balance between standardized practices required for efficiency in managing the organization, and idiosyncratic practices required to enable successful management of unique undertakings.

Governance measures are manifold, and vary widely [23]. One of the basic principles of governance, which is not very often used in project related studies, is that of *sovereignty*. It denotes the supreme power and rights for autonomy required for mutual recognition and control of governed entities. The concept is traced back to the "Peace of Westphalia" in 1648, where it described the member states' rights for autonomy, mutual recognition, and control [24]. Today it is typically defined in terms of internal control, external autonomy, and authority, such as "the right to rule over a delimited territory and the population residing within it" [25].

In project-based organizations it addresses projects' right for autonomy, as standalone, mutually recognized and respected entities, which reciprocally control each other, for example, by sharing resources [26][27]. Here sovereignty overlaps partly with the concept of project autonomy [28], but through its inclusion of mutual recognition and external control it becomes wider in scope. Moreover, autonomy is typically granted by an institution of higher level authority, while sovereignty is typically claimed by the institution in question [29]. To that end, sovereignty measures the extent the project managers claim power and autonomy among peer projects, which is a more realistic measure than the formally granted autonomy, which may not be followed in project reality.

Earlier studies using sovereignty as a measure of governance did not investigate the particular patterns of governmentality and performance emerging at different levels of sovereignty. This is done in the present article.

3.2 Governmentality

Just as all management needs some level of leadership, so does sovereignty needs to be accompanied by a human agency dimension to ensure people's 'buy-in' to the chosen governance approach. This human dimension is governmentality.

The word governmentality is a combination of the words *governance* and *mentality*. It was coined by the French semiologist Roland Barthes [30] in 1957 to describe the different ways in which those in governance positions present themselves to those they govern. This way of presentation reveals the attitude and mentality they have towards the governed people. Dean [31] defines three governmentality approaches:

- *Authoritarian governmentality*: Governors (such as members or chairpersons of project steering committees) clearly articulate to the project manager their expectations in terms of the means and ends in the management of projects. This is often found in organizations with well developed project management methods, but also in those with a preference for centralized decision making, clearness in directions and significant power distance, such as in major pubic investment projects [32].
- *Liberal governmentality*: Governors draw on the rationality and economic thinking of the managers they govern, for example, by use of incentives. This is exemplary for governance institutions that build on heterogeneity of governance approaches, for example, by using economic principles and market awareness to drive rational decision making by managers. This is often found in customer-delivery projects [33].
- *Neo-liberal governmentality*: Those in governing positions build on the self-governance of managers by setting the values of the organization in a way that makes managers steer themselves in directions that are desired by those who govern. This approach to governmentality builds on the managers' collective interests and willingness to consent. By the setting of the contextual frameworks, managers' behavior is shaped, but not determined [34]. Examples include community governed open-source development projects, where managers subscribe to an ideology and steer themselves in line with the value system of the organization [35].

Authoritarian and liberal approaches are direct approaches, based in interaction between governors and managers, whereas neo-liberal governmentality is an indirect approach which works through the environment of each manager [36]. Hence, neo-liberal governmentality becomes effective through cultural design [37]. Prior studies showed variances in expressions of authoritarian and neo-liberal governmentality at different levels of project and organizational success. However, the interaction of these concepts with sovereignty for project and organizational performance has not been assessed so far.

3.3 Project and organizational performance

The influence of governance on performance is intuitively valid, as the steering of project managers in desired directions of project performance links logically with better organizational results. However, there is little empirical evidence for it. Studies in general management [e.g. 37], as well as studies in project management [e.g. 38] repeatedly showed a lack of empirical evidence for this. One of the rare studies on the relationship between governance, governmentality and project success identified governmentality as an independent variable that has direct impact on project success, with governance being a moderator variable that represents the structural context and impacts the governmentality – success relationship [27]. This moderation takes place through a stronger governmentality – success relationship in the context of trust as governance mechanism (representing a stakeholder theory approach to governance), as opposed to a weaker relationship in the context of control as governance mechanism (representing agency theory approaches to governance).

Organizational performance relates relatively weakly to project performance. Only 28% of organizational performance can be traced back to project performance [27]. Hence, it is worthwhile identifying to what extent the "fit" between governmentality and governance impacts the wider organizational results.

Contingency theory suggests that the maximization of the value of a dependent variable (such as project performance) is influenced by the ‘fit’ between the state of the independent variable (such as governmentality) with the context variable (such as governance) [40]. Hence, governance is the ultimate independent variable, because it controls to what extent governmentality is allowed to influence project performance. Hence, the interaction of governance and governmentality is decisive for the impact of the steering level on project performance. Thus, neither governance nor governmentality alone are most decisive for performance, it is their interaction and particular combination that impacts project performance. To that end, we pose the following hypothesis:

H1: Different levels of sovereignty relate to different patterns in the combinations of authoritarian and neo-liberal governmentality, as well as project and organizational performance.

Project performance is one of the classic themes in project management research. Most often used synonymous to project success. However, success is typically measured at the end of the project, whereas performance can also be measured over the project-life cycle. Metrics used for both are often the same, but grew in variety over time [41]. Generic measures were developed staring from a focus on hard measures, such as time, cost and scope accomplishments in the 1980s [42][43] to more balanced measures, which added softer dimensions, such as team-satisfaction and end-user satisfaction [44].

The exiting literature shows insufficient evidence to answer research question 2 in light of the role of sovereignty as governance measures.

4. Methodology

An exploratory deductive study was done as part of longer-term mixed methods investigation. This wider investigation started with a conceptual and qualitative study to define the measurements for governance, governmentality, as well as project and organizational performance [26]. This was followed by a quantitative study to identify the relationship between governance, governmentality and their combined impact on project and organizational performance [27].

The present study investigates the role of project sovereignty as a proxy for governance in the combination and expression of authoritarian and neo-liberal governmentality in projects and their performance. The studies are executed taking a critical realism perspective which assumes a mind-independent reality where underlying mechanisms are assumed to give rise to particular events, which then give rise to human experiences [45]. This combination of views from underlying objectivism to experienced subjectivism provides for the identification of possible trends, but not necessarily generalizations of results or a singular explanations of a phenomenon [46].

A worldwide-questionnaire in the quantitative study described above yielded 125 responses, which are analyzed in the present article. The details of the measurement constructs can be found in [27] along with the approach to data collection, the demographics and descriptive statistics of the sample. Hence validity and reliability are achieved through use of tested constructs and Common Method Bias issues [47] were addressed following the approaches listed in [27].

The variables were measured on five-point Likert scales, using the following:

Authoritarian governmentality was assessed through questions on the steering committees’ level of enforcing their decisions and being authoritative in style. Neo-liberalism by the extent the steering committees communicate values, fosters self-control, and empowers project managers. Both measures were on 5 point Likert scales, individually factor analyzed and the respective factors used herein with both having a mean of zero and a standard deviation of 1, together with a skewness and kurtosis below 0.8. Authoritarian governmentality showed a minimum of -2.842 and a maximum of 2.302, neo-liberal governmentality a minimum of -2.490 and a maximum of 2.321.

Sovereignty was measured as the role that the project manager assumes. Three roles were distinguished (from low to high sovereignty): a) *employee*, the project manager aims to fulfill tasks in a merely prescribed manner (e.g. process compliance); b) *manager*, the project manager claims a proportionate decision-making authority, expressed in a merely risk averse behavior [48] using professional and predictable decisions making heuristics [49]; and c) *entrepreneur* the project manager assumes a wide range of behaviors, such as risk taking and being a rugged individual [50], being responsible for the project in its entirety as a business, free to decide on behalf of the project, only constrained by the limitations set by the governing institution. The measures were factor analyzed into a single, with a minimum of -2.846 and a maximum of 1.758, as well as a skewness and kurtosis below 0.7.

Performance at the project level was measured using ten items which balanced soft factors, such as customer satisfaction, and hard factors, such achievement of time, cost, scope objectives. The mean value was 4.124, with a minimum of 1.667 and a maximum of 5.0000; skewness of -0.972 and kurtosis of 0.198. Organizational performance was measured by ten items, of which three items measured performance at each of the levels of project, program, and portfolio, plus one overarching question on organizational performance. A mean value was 3.662, with a minimum of 1.000 and a maximum of 5.000, skewness of -0.657 and kurtosis of -0.120. Further details of the sample, its demographics and descriptive statistics can be found in [27].

The factors described above were used in the present analysis, together with normalized measures for the performance variables.

5. Analysis

5.1. The interaction of governance and governmentality

Earlier studies showed that governance and governmentality interact for performance [27]. To understand the nature of this interaction the variables for authoritarian and neo-liberal governmentality, as well as project and organizational performance were measured at two levels of governance, that is, at low and high levels of sovereignty. Figure 1 shows the results, with low sovereignty on the left and high sovereignty on the right. The measures for project and organizational performance were both higher in cases of high sovereignty, with project performance increasing significantly (at p≤0.05) when moving from low to high sovereignty.

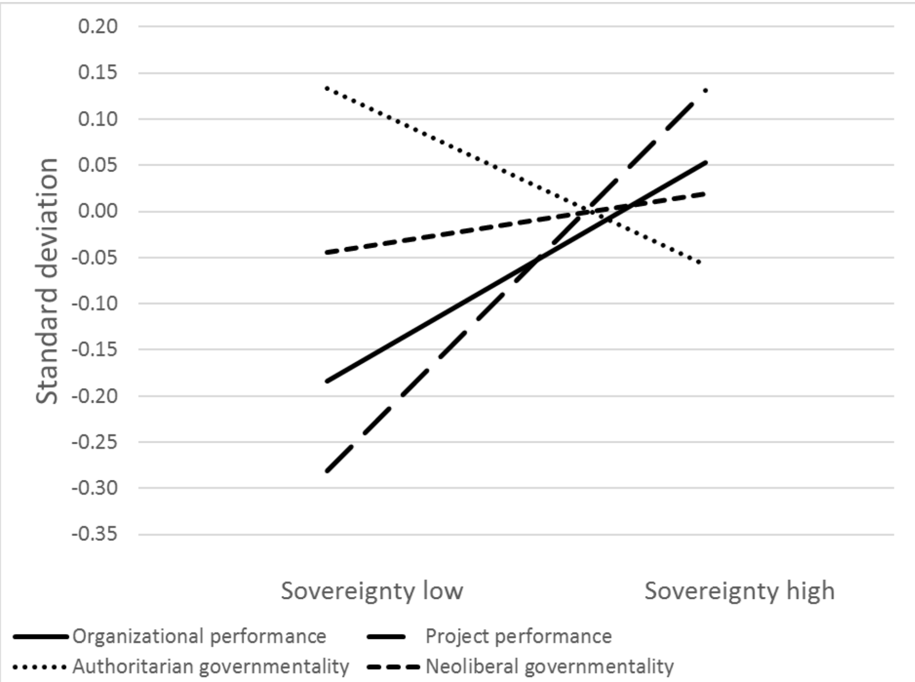

Fig. 2. Interaction of governance, governmentality and performance

5.2 Higher sovereignty – higher performance

Figure 2 shows the differences in patterns at different levels of sovereignty. High sovereignty in governance is associated with higher than average levels of neo-liberal governmentality and higher than average levels of project and organizational performance, paired with a lower than average level of authoritarian governmentality. The average is indicated by the 0.00 line on the y-axis.

Contrarily, in the context of low sovereignty, authoritarian governmentality is higher than average, and associated with lower than average levels of neo-liberal governmentality, as well as project and organizational performance.

The interaction of governance and governmentality become visible through comparison of low and high sovereignty practices. Low sovereignty implies that the project manager (and with it the project) is governed as a process, which necessarily needs to be followed, with little authority and freedom in decision making by those involved. The project manager claims a role as an employee, or at best as a manager, who has to act within the limits of the job description and with strongly limited decision authority. In this context, the steering of project managers develops from the authoritarian governmentality by the governance institution (typically the project steering committee). Little is there in terms of a neo-liberal value system that orients project managers in their decisions and allows for self-control. Project managers follow the orders from their steering committees.

The particular combination of low sovereignty, low neo-liberalism and high levels of authoritarian governmentality appears to be detrimental to the maximization of project and organizational performance measures. Hence, low sovereignty is not a context within which governmentality flourishes for better performance. It inhibits a project-level culture of self-thinking individuals and degrades professionals into receivers of orders.

High sovereignty appears to be supportive of maximizing project and organizational performance through governmentality. Here authoritarian approaches are reduced and neo-liberal governmentality takes over the steering of the project managers, who claim decision-making authority while simultaneously being accountable for the business approaches and results of their project. The project and its manager becomes an entrepreneurial entity, loaded with high risk, but also the autonomy and authority to deal with these risks and control them itself. These results support hypothesis H1.

6. Discussion

Interpretations of these results depend on the assumed direction of causality. Does governance/governmentality cause the level of performance, or does performance cause the particular combination of governance and governmentality? The following addresses both.

6.1 If the interaction of governance and governmentality impacts performance

Assuming that the particular combination of governance and governmentality impacts project and organizational performance, then projects should be governed as sovereign entities. Here projects are expected to act entrepreneurial and have the autonomy and authority to apply a wide variety of behaviors to handle the many different risks they are exposed to - all for the benefit of the project. This governance approach ’fits’ best with a predominantly neo-liberal governmentality, where the governance institutions a) refrain from acting authoritative, b) set a democratic culture by communicating values and fostering self-control, and c) expect the project manager and team to decide for themselves, taking into account the collective interest of the project’s stakeholders. The combination of high sovereignty and high neo-liberalism leads to high performance at both the project and the organizational level. This boils down to trust-based governance approaches, where governance institutions trust the project manager and team to act in the best interest of the project, hence the governance institution takes a stewardship perspective towards the project [51]. Stewardship theory proposes that (project) managers’ motives are aligned with the objectives of their governing institutions. Moreover, managers are motivated by higher order needs and work intrinsic factors. Thereby identifying themselves with and are committed to the organization. Managers are assumed to prioritize the accomplishment of the organization’s objectives over their own objectives, thus they are trusted to act pro-organizational and collectivistic

[52]. Therefore, they assume, and their governance institution grants them, widest possible freedom in the execution of their task.

6.2 If performance impacts the interaction of governance and governmentality

Assuming the contrary, that is, that performance is decisive for the choice of governance/governmentality combination, then two scenarios emerge. The first scenario is similar to the above. The good performance leads the governance institution to relax on giving orders and instead establish a set of organizational values that allow project managers to control themselves. A stewardship theory perspective from the governance institution prevails [51].

The second scenario is one of poor performance, where the governance intuition's trust in the project manager's success in accomplishing expected performance measures diminishes. Here the governance institution increases control and gives clear (authoritative) orders to the project manager in an attempt to ensure the 'right' things are done to manage the project. Such a context inhibits possible neo-liberal self-control values in the organization's culture and demands authority obedience. This boils down to control-based governance approaches, which are expressed as agency theory perspective by the governance institution. Agency theory assumes that managers are not trustworthy and/or susceptible to possible short-term gains for themselves at the expense of the project. Project managers are therefore not trusted by their governors and need strict control. Non-trust approaches to governance require the establishment of sophisticated control structures and their enforcement, which is expensive and adds to the costs of the project [53]. Moreover, these agency costs are typically not accounted for in project financing and add unexpected expenses to an already strained budget. Hence, the governance institutions and the project manager enter into a vicious downward spiral with little chance to recover from the situation. Examples for this are manifold, and frequently found in largely overspent public investment projects [51].

In organizations that impose their governance structure at the outset of a project without changing it over the project life cycle, it is reasonable to assume that governance/governmentality impacts (i.e. causes) performance as described above. This view is supported by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [54], or the investigation on governance impact on project results by Bekker and Steyn [55]. However, the relationship between governance/governmentality and performance can also be more reflexive and mutually adjusted over time. Here a change in performance can lead to an adjustment in governance/governmentality in the way described above, which gives rise to the possibility that the new governance/governmentality approach influence performance as described. A continuous change. This is desirable as long as the mutual influences reinforce positive developments for the project and its performance. In case of negative developments, the nature of the governance perspective (agency or stewardship) shall be assessed and a more trustful and stewardship based approach implemented, if possible. That may include an assessment of the resources engaged in the project in order to instill high levels of trust, mutual respect and motivation to carry the project forward in the desired direction.

7. Conclusion

This paper addressed the yet under-developed perspective of governmentality as the human counterpart to the more structural governance approaches in project-based organizations. For that, management and leadership were positioned as execution level counterparts to governance and governmentality at the steering level. This answered research question 1.

Then a prior study was extended which empirically identified governance as a context (moderating) variable and governmentality as directly influencing variable on project and organizational performance. The present study assessed the combination of governmentality measures, project and organizational performance at different levels of sovereignty. Low levels of sovereignty were indicative of low performance measures, low neo-liberal and high authoritarian governmentality. High levels of sovereignty were indicative of high levels of performance and neo-liberalism, and low level of authoritarian governmentality. This supports hypothesis H1 and answers research question 2.

Theoretical implications are elaborated in the discussion section, by linking the findings to underlying agency and stewardship perspectives, whereby the former is associated with lower levels of sovereignty and the latter with higher levels thereof. Furthermore, the results were discussed from different directions of assumed causality, up the point of reflexivity and the suggested actions in these cases. Academics will find building blocks for governance theories and relationships in the discussion section.

The discussion section also addressed practical implications for the practicing managers and governors. Other practical implications include the need to make governmentality a subject of project management training, as it has been shown to have a stronger impact on project results than governance. To that end, the recommendations for governance and governmentality provided above will allow practitioners to apply governance and governmentality more deliberately and thus benefit from the findings for their own organizations.

The strengths of the study lies in the use of tested and published measures, which supports validity and reliability of the data and the findings thereof. Weaknesses are in the relatively small sample size, and the exploratory nature of study. More investigations are needed to validate and stabilize the findings, and address related research questions, like the impact of project sizes, sectors, or national cultures on the relationship of governance and governmentality for good performance. Moreover, future studies should address further measures of governance and governmentality and their interaction in order to build a comprehensive theory that allows for a more deliberate construction and use of governance structures and governmentality in human agency.

The article contributed to the discussion about the importance of governmentality as such, and the nature of the interaction of governance and governmentality for sustained performance in projects and organizations.

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Before joining academia, he spent 30 years in the industry consulting with large enterprises and governments in more than 50 different countries for better project management and governance. Projects he worked on span from small up to USD 5 billion in value. In these projects, he worked closely with AT&T and Bell Laboratories, USA. He also held related line management positions, such as the Worldwide Director of Project Management at NCR Corporation.

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