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Book Chapter

# **FOUCAULT'S GOVERNMENTALITY AND THE ISSUE OF PROJECT COLLABORATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The concept of governmentality has proven useful to analyse how the reflexive management of people within and without the project is conducted. In this chapter we explore the organizational theory of governmentality and its importance in project settings. First, we identify the specificity of project governance and relate it to the definition and discussion of governmentality by Michel Foucault. Following this, the use of governmentality within projects through project culture is discussed. Subsequently, the use of governmentality outside projects through social media is discussed. Finally, the chapter concludes by highlighting new directions for research with governmentality as the focal point, discussing the types of research questions that a concern with projects and governmentality raises and how addressing these might further develop project management as a field of enquiry.

**Keywords:** Governmentality, Project governance, Juukan Gorge, Project collaboration, Project culture, Social Media

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Project governance involves the process of achieving project objectives by managing different stakeholders involved and implicated in project settings. The distinction between involved and implicated is significant. Those stakeholders involved are formally recognized as such by being associated with the project's governance, participating in its delivery. Those stakeholders implicated in project governance are not necessarily formally and legitimately involved; they may be asserting a stake that is not formally recognized. Significant consequences can flow from not managing project relations with not only formal stakeholder such as investors but also those whose stakeholding may not be formally acknowledge but is, by any ethical metric, implicated.

Governance takes care of some of the formal aspects of project management. Carlsson et al. (1995) defines governance as the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs. Governance is important in projects because there may be no necessary alignment between the many corporate governance doctrines that might be involved on the part of multiple partners. An overall code of governance separate from those of the firms involved may be necessary, for four primary reasons. First, complex, uncertain and creative challenges are taken up through projects (Hartman 1998), hence projects require formal governance through measures such as project charters to achieve objectives. Second, there is a need to resolve conflict between the short-term interests of the contractor and the long-term interests of the client and end users. Third, there is a need to have in place strategies for ensuring responsible, reflexive and self-organizing project management in situ (Müller et al., 2014). Fourth, project management is a social activity with people at the centre of all interactions (Packendorff, 1995). People working for the project, such as managers and engineers, or people being affected

by the project, such as communities and project affected persons (Tutt and Pink, 2019) may need to be managed in accordance with project objectives.

The concept of governmentality has proven useful to analyse how the reflexive management of people within and without the project is conducted. In this chapter we explore the organizational theory of governmentality and its importance in project settings. First, we identify the specificity of project governance and relate it to the definition and discussion of governmentality by Michel Foucault. Following this, the use of governmentality within projects through project culture is discussed. Subsequently, the use of governmentality outside projects through social media is discussed. Finally, the chapter concludes by highlighting new directions for research with governmentality as the focal point.

## **2. FOUCAULT'S GOVERNMENTALITY**

In a recent article in *Organization Studies*, Raffnsøe et al. (2019) describes the *Foucault effect* and identifies four waves which are in some ways overlapping. The first wave focused on disciplinary power and the impact of discipline, and techniques of surveillance and subjugation. The second wave focused on the linguistic turn and how discourses act as intermediaries that condition the ways of viewing and acting. The third wave focused on governmentality and involves an investigation of governmental technologies that operates on subjects as free persons. The fourth wave focused on subjectivity and the techniques of the self. Multiple scholars suggest governmentality has proved to be perhaps Foucault's most productive concept as it concerns managing the population as a collective mass (McKinlay & Taylor, 2014; Miller & Rose, 2008).

Foucault defines governmentality as an "ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics, that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit

complex form of power” (Foucault, 1991: 20). The term governmentality was coined by Roland Barthes in 1957, to study the ways in which governing organizations present themselves to the public (Dean, 2010). Twenty years later, the concept gained popularity when French philosopher Michel Foucault used the concept in a narrower sense in his studies on power. Foucault introduced the term in his collection of lectures at the College de France on the *Birth of Biopolitics* in 1979 (Marks, 2000, p. 128). For Foucault, governmentality meant combined strategies of organizational governance in a broad sense, as well as self-governance by those made subjects of organizational governance.

Foucault used the notion of ‘governmentality’ to connect the idea of ‘government’, a term he uses in a broad sense, one not restricted to formal political institutions, with that of ‘mentality’, as a neologism based on a semantic merger. Foucault defines government as a specific combination of governing techniques and rationalities, typical of the modern, neoliberal period. He was pointing to a fusion of new technologies of government with a new political rationality. ‘Governmentality’ refers not only to new institutions of governance but also their effects. Governmentality thus refers to normatively institutionalized ways governed increasingly by standards, charters, and other codes. *The Project Management Body of Knowledge* (2021), for instance, formulates such norms, defining the practices of a successful project manager through which project managers can become “entrepreneurs of their selves” (Cooper, 2015), by achieving project milestones. As du Gay (du Gay, 2000, p. 168) suggests, governmentality “create[s] a distance between the decisions of formal political institutions and other social actors, conceive[s] of these actors as subjects of responsibility, autonomy and choice, and seek[s] to act upon them through shaping and utilising their freedom.” Such shaping of freedoms has a functional purpose; for Foucault, the concept of governmentality is premised on the active choice of subjects, rather than their domination or

external control (Clegg et al., 2002). After all, from a governmentality perspective, organizations can be seen as spaces where phenomena, encompassing hidden objectives, are created (Miller & O’Leary, 1994; McKinlay & Taylor, 2014). Functionally, the need for an architectonic of external control is greatly reduced if choices can be relied upon in their premises if not their specifics.

Deploying the concept of governmentality in *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault (2002) studied the ways in which a normative universe was formed by how the ‘truths’ of practices, such as medicine, were constructed and taken-for granted. Rather than seeing power relations as a matter of different forces’ positions and resources, Foucault saw it in terms of strategies, discourses and processes (Clegg, 1989). The focus was on 'the totality of practices, by which one can constitute, define, organize, instrumentalize the strategies which individuals in their liberty can have in regard to each other' (Foucault, 1988: 20). Subsequently, many scholars (Fleming and Spicer, 2014; Haugaard, 2012) list Foucault’s governmentality as the fourth dimension of power as an extension of Lukes’ (1974) three dimensions of power. People voluntarily delegate their autonomy and willingly position their subjectivity in relation to a normative force that is external to themselves (Jackson & Carter, 1998).

Foucault (2007, p. 108) describes how taken-for-granted practices, that are not idiosyncratically invented by individuals but derive from the deeply shared norms, often professionally institutionalized, create subjectification to norms and self-surveillance (Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Sewell, 1998) as these norms are situationally reproduced. The practice of governmentality *aspires* to create a common sensemaking frame (Colville, Waterman, & Weick, 1999; Weick, 1995) whereby project participants will voluntarily and willingly agree to be normatively governed in choices forming the subjectivity of their project selves (Barnett, Clarke,

Cloke, & Malpass, 2014). The aspiration is that the personal ambitions of those governed will become enmeshed with those of the overall project management team through their subjectification to these norms.

Achieving a degree of collective consciousness is valuable for all forms of organizations; it is critical for project settings where there is no unitary centre of control and many stakeholders that may be implicated, although not formally recognised as such. Control of stakeholders is difficult to achieve in project settings through traditional forms of governance focused on contractual tightness and strict surveillance (Stinchcombe, 1985). Despite this, governmentality is a relatively under-explored concept in project management. We now turn to discuss separately how governmentality was used within projects and outside projects.

### **3. GOVERNMENTALITY WITHIN PROJECTS THROUGH PROJECT CULTURE**

In the past, Pitsis et al. (2003) and Clegg et al. (2002) studied governmentality creating a strong project culture in alliance contracting between a public-sector body and three private-sector contractors for the construction of a large infrastructure project in Sydney, Australia. The project was designed to prevent storm water detritus and sewage ending up in the harbour. All parties to the alliance contract were partners in a risk/reward scheme which was based on successful achievement of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of Schedule, Budget, Occupational Health and Safety, Community, and Ecology. Normativity was instituted both through training and through the visual cues of the space in which project staff worked. A visible commitment to the KPIs was evident from observation of the head office where all the alliance partners were collocated. There were banners declaring the rhetoric of ‘no-blame’ culture and ‘whatever is best for the project’ along with glossy photography and clearly visible mission and vision statements. The walls of the



staff kitchen were decorated with stories about the project that had been cut out of the local and metropolitan press. The progress of the project was displayed in charts throughout the office space. Notices were posted about forthcoming social and training events.

What characterized the projects relations with its partners, both those that were formal and (most of those) that were informal was the attention paid to governmentality in the project. The attention was authentic, premised not upon relations of *power over* but about creating a culture of trust in which the *power to* achieve the objectives of the project were widely shared both internally between project teams and externally between stakeholders formally and informally implicated in the project. Power over and trust in are mutually opposed variables: where trust is low, projects will strive to maximize power over stakeholders by various means; where trust is high, relations of power over stakeholders can be relaxed. In relationships between project and stakeholders, trust can shift attention from self-interest to ‘common interest’ and help the parties share more knowledge and other resources (see, among others, Smyth, Gustafsson, & Ganskau, 2010; Eskerod & Vaagaasar, 2014). Trust reduces transaction costs in terms of control and increases the opportunity for positive interaction. Trust between the project and various stakeholders grew through repeated assessments of whether the other acted in accordance with what was agreed.

What was crucial was creating relations characterised by mutual trust that the parties in the project would perform what they were committed to doing. The risk and reward profit sharing agreement in the project was central to this being achieved internally. Formal stakeholders included actors such as alliance partners, subcontractors, the building workers union, the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) and clients; informal stakeholders were the citizens in areas in which the project was being undertaken. All parties stood

to benefit from cooperation and completion of the KPIs on the positive side of the risk/reward ledger, including sub-contractors and employees. The communities in the areas in which the work was preceding also stood to benefit from cleaner water in the harbour. Community liaison officers were deployed in the communities effected, holding strategic conversations with residents, winning their trust and accepting ideas for project implementation that arose from their concerns.

In the wake of Pitsis et al's (2003) and Clegg et al's (2002) research other project management scholars considered governmentality. Renou (2015) emphasized the importance of governmentality for performance measurement and regulation in the case of water utilities in France. Müller et al. (2016) show a significant correlation between governmentality as an enabler for project governance and organizational success. Ninan et al., (2019) studied a metro rail project in which the role of governmentality for branding the project and managing the project community was vital. As we shall see in the next section, drawing on the work of Ninan and his associates, the projection of governmentality can occur not only through face-to-face contacts but also through use of social media, affordances barely visible at the time of the project in question.

#### **4. GOVERNMENTALITY OUTSIDE PROJECTS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA**

Outside projects, there are external stakeholders such as existing landholders, utilities, and the community surrounding the project site, all of whom have significant impact on the delivery of the project. These external stakeholders are difficult to govern as they interact with the project across permeable boundaries, are unaccountable to the requirements of the project and cannot be governed with contractual instruments or conformance to standards, as is the case with internal stakeholders (Ninan et al., 2020). These sources of difference are exacerbated in megaprojects

because of their increased scale, duration, complexity and the wide range of external stakeholders implicated.

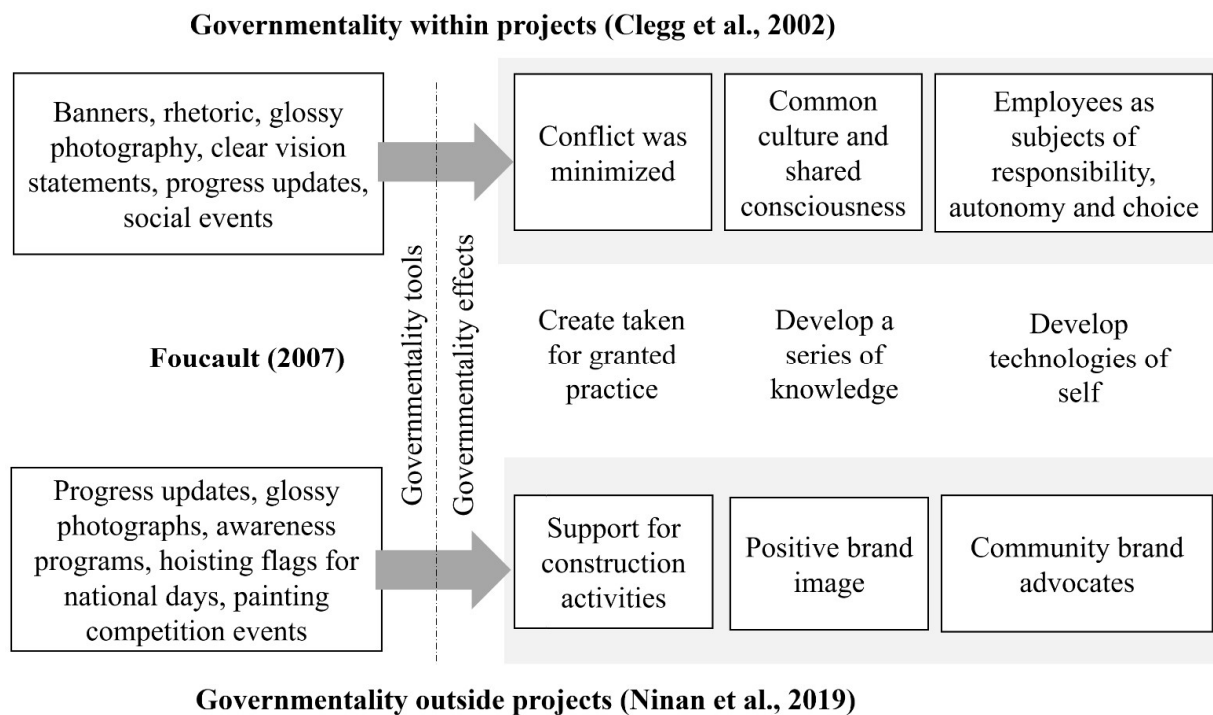
Ninan et al. (2019) studied the practice of governmentality in an infrastructure project in India using social media. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and observations in social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) and grounded theory methods (Glaser and Strauss, 2017) were employed to open code the social media data and interview data respectively. Each of the incidents reported in social media were assigned to a category that emerged from our data. Multiple cycles of coding, crosschecking and theoretical review was followed to derive theory from data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The project had a social media strategy for communicating effectively with the stakeholders outside the project. The objective of this strategy was to build alliances with key constituencies of interest, forged through building a common sense of pride and purpose that incorporated those outside of the project upon whom its work had effects. Progress updates of the project such as work completed, progress photos, and service information were regularly shared in the official social media platform of the project. The photos uploaded were glossy images depicting the inside of trains and outside of stations and did not cover any negative events such as accidents, safety issues, or delays. There was an explicit focus on promoting the project using rhetoric, such as of the project 'transforming the city' and how the awards bestowed on the project were a source of pride for the city. Promotional events and awareness programs to educate the community of the benefits of the project were conducted in parks, malls and colleges. Reports of other events such as hoisting flags for national days and celebration of regional festivals were shared on the social media platforms. Painting competitions on the theme 'go green metro' were conducted for school children.

The use of these strategies resulted in some visible changes in the behavior of the project community. Traffic diversions to enable the construction of the project usually cause a lot of inconvenience to the community and result in agitation from the public. However, the project in consideration did not experience any such problems as it enjoyed special preference and support from the community during construction. Akin to customer insensitivity to prices seen in branded consumer goods (Dawes, 2009), the project community was not affected by traffic diversions and hassles during the construction of the project. There was also a positive brand image for the project with community members claiming that they were proud of the project. The community members tied the project's celebration of the regional festivals to the organization becoming an icon of the identity of the city, complementing similar discourses found in the social media interactions of the organization. In addition, there were community brand advocates for the project as community members supported and defended the decisions of the project in social media. This transformation of identity occurred because the project targeted sections of the population, such as school children, specifically to enroll and translate into loyal supporters of the project.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE AVENUES OF RESEARCH**

The use of governmentality within projects (Clegg et al., 2002) and outside projects (Ninan et al., 2019) has some similarities, which affords some interesting avenues for future research in the area. Governmentality tools such as banners, rhetoric, clear vision statements, glossy photography, progress updates, and social events have been employed for creating governmentality within the projects. Similarly, governmentality tools such as progress updates, photos, strategic rhetoric, awareness programs, hoisting flags for national days, celebration of regional festivals, and painting competition events were employed for creating governmentality outside the projects.

The effect of governmentality can be seen in taken-for-granted practices. In the case of governmentality within projects reduced conflicts are the aim, while in the case of governmentality outside projects, support for project activities in both specific and general publics is the aim. The second process involves deploying knowledge via a power-knowledge nexus. In the case of governmentality within projects an appreciation of common project culture and shared consciousness is deployed, while in the case of governmentality outside projects, the key actions are building the trust and support of critical stakeholders implicated in the project's success. Developing technologies of the self, positioning personal identities of those governed, creates reflexive self-monitoring agencies in terms of the formally inculcated nexus of power-knowledge. In the case of governmentality within projects employees became subjects of responsibility, autonomy and choice, while in the case of governmentality outside projects, the project community become recruited not as opponents but as advocates of the project. The governmentality tools and effects from governmentality within and outside projects are depicted by drawing on two research projects in which we have been involved in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Governmentality within and outside projects**

The work on governmentality within projects can be extended by studying how alternate forms of governance other than contracts can be used to govern internal stakeholders. The effect of governmentality on long-term and short-term relationships amongst explicit and implicated stakeholders can be explored. With advances in technology and increases in scale of projects, many interactions relating to projects will occur via digital platforms. Ninan et al. (2019) observed social media platforms, however there are many other platforms where interactions outside the project are evident. Along with an exploration of other social media platforms such as YouTube, interactions outside the project are evident in news articles (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021), which can also be explored for studying governmentality. In the modern era, along with observations of office spaces and meetings, digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Skype and Teams offer many insights into interactions within the project.

Projects world-wide, such as the High Speed Two project in the United Kingdom, the WestConnex project in Australia and the Statue of Unity project in India are experiencing resistance from the project community. There is a need to explore how governmentality can be a tool for mitigating community resistance. The interaction between governmentality within projects and outside projects needs further investigation. The project team and the way their normative universe is shaped as they deploy strategies to manage external stakeholders in the project community is vital (Ninan et al., 2021). The key is transparency about the project aims and progress and clear articulation of the benefits through KPIs.

Sometimes, in corporate circles, it takes a public relations disaster to make clear the importance of governmentality in terms of corporate actors' responsibility, autonomy and choice. A case in point occurred in the corporate behemoth, Rio Tinto, the minerals and resources project company. In May 2020 Rio Tinto blasted a cliff face near its Brockman iron ore mine in the Pilbara, Western Australia to access iron ore. The blasting destroyed a site of spiritual significance to the traditional owners of the land. After the event, the following appeared on the Rio Tinto web site:

“This was a breach of the trust placed in us by the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura people and other Traditional Owners of the lands on which our business operates. We apologise unreservedly to the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura (PKKP) people, and to people across Australia and beyond, for the destruction of Juukan Gorge... In allowing the destruction of Juukan Gorge to occur, we fell far short of our values as a company and breached the trust placed in us by the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we operate. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that the destruction of a site of such exceptional cultural significance never happens again, to earn back the trust that has been lost and to re-establish our leadership in communities and social performance” (<https://www.riotinto.com/en/news/inquiry-into-juukan-gorge>).

Under West Australian law it had the legal right to mine the area. Rio has a segmented organisational structure with product divisions, such as iron ore, operating as autonomous strategic business units, in which responsibility, autonomy and choice to make decisions resides. Choice in

this case led to decision-making with disastrous environmental and stakeholder consequences that threatened the legitimacy of the entire corporation, as Rio Tinto recognised in its changes to Governance published on its website. For the future, the strategic business units such as the iron division have been assigned responsibility for Communities and Social Performance (CSP), partnerships and engagement. A central Communities & Social Performance area of expertise has been established to build line management capability and provide support as well as deliver assurance. An Integrated Heritage Management Process has been established that reviews all sites and ranks each for cultural significance, informed through consultation with the Traditional Owners of the land and confirms that these Traditional Owners have been consulted prior to any material impact of Rio Tinto activity, the nature of which will be explicitly advised. In addition, a new approvals process for projects of ‘high’ or ‘very high’ significance under the new Integrated Heritage Management Process must be approved by the heritage sub-committee of the Executive Committee or the Board and provide commitments to greater transparency and material benefit to Traditional Owners. On Rio Tinto’s website, an interview with indigenous man Brad Welsh, Chief Advisor to the CEO on indigenous affairs, is given prominence on the website (<https://www.riotinto.com/news/stories/how-we-are-listening>), stressing ‘truth telling’ and treating Traditional Owners as partners.

What these reforms signal is a realization in Rio Tinto that governance must be more than a formal instrument; it must extend to governmentality shaping the choices and dispositions of its executives in areas much broader than their technical and managerial expertise. The active choice of these subjects must now extend to an appreciation of anthropology and a respect for cultural traditions among those who are residents and traditional custodians of the lands on which it operates; moreover, the voice of these custodians will be heard in agreements that have to be



negotiated in advance of any project work. Rio Tinto learnt through a failure of governmentality how significant and costly such shortcomings can be, both internally and externally (Verrender, 2020). Destroying trust can occur rapidly (Kramer, 2009), as Juukan Gorge demonstrates.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The objective of this chapter has been to introduce the concept of governmentality and its applications in the domain of project management. We have discussed the use of governmentality within projects in Australia and in a project in India. In the case of governmentality within projects, conflict appears to be minimized when a common culture and shared consciousness is created and employees are transformed into subjects of responsibility, autonomy and choice. In the case of governmentality outside projects, where there is support from a community for project activities, a positive brand image needs creating and the community is transformed to becoming brand advocates.

Foucault's (2007) processes of governmentality capture the practices of these new approaches to governance well. While stakeholders within projects develop new identities and consciousness, take part in new disciplines and institutions, stakeholders outside the project are invited into the fold of the organization; in some contexts, this might be done digitally; in other cases through negotiation. With the advance in technology and increase in scale of projects, many interactions relating to projects occurs in the digital platforms. In other cases, governmentality will be done more directly by representation and consultation. In the modern era, along with observations of meetings and training programs, digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Skype and Teams offer many insights on interactions within the project, while platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and

YouTube offer insights on interactions outside the project. Governmentality significantly affects all aspects of performance in project settings.

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