



# Intuition in project management and missing links: Analyzing the predicating effects of environment and the mediating role of reflexivity

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## Abstract

The role of an intuitive cognitive style in project planning may be more complex than prior studies have allowed for. Therefore, we used a model of the role of environment in intuition and the relationships between intuition, reflexivity, and project outcomes (measured as project success and speed of completion) in order to examine how environment influences intuition; and whether reflexivity mediates the link between intuition and project outcomes. Our field study incorporates responses from 450 managers representing 410 projects from firms located in the United Arab Emirates. The regression analysis suggests that competition uncertainty and environmental complexity are determinants of intuition; intuition promotes team reflexivity and this in turn enhances project outcomes. These results show that the intuitive approach in planning projects and team reflexivity are complementary foundations for improving different aspects of project performance and, therefore, that models of intuition in project management should incorporate the effects of reflexivity.

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## 1. Introduction

The past decade has seen an intense interest, conceptually and empirically, among researchers of the role of intuition in managerial practices (e.g., Elbanna et al., 2013; Hensman and Sadler-Smith, 2011). A problem over decision making and project management, which research has hitherto neglected,

however, is that the impact of intuition on organizational outcomes such as project performance may be indirect. To date, much of the discourse on intuition within the management literature has highlighted the role of intuitive processes in project/decision outcomes, without offering much enlightenment on the mechanics of the indirect effects of intuition (e.g., Khatri and Ng, 2000).

In contrast to past research, this study did not view intuition as an antecedent of project performance but as a variable of considerable impact on other determinants of project performance. A major aim of this study, therefore, was to improve our understanding of the role of intuition by developing our analysis of intuition so that we are able to identify a mediator of its influence, team reflexivity (or the extent to which project teams reflect upon and modify their functioning). In a project context, reflexivity helps to modify an agreed project plan in order to properly implement it. Hence, reflexivity can be seen as a functional project process in that it interacts with other

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decision approaches such as intuition to enhance project performance. In other words, this paper argues that project performance is affected not by intuition itself but by the way that intuition affects other project processes.

We posit that our new view of the roles of intuition and reflexivity are theoretically viable and can provide empirical evidence to support our hypotheses. However, there have been few, if any, studies that have examined the relationship between intuition and reflexivity in the context of project management. Reflexivity presents teams with clarity, agreement, and a specific challenge about the need for adaptation, making it more likely that targeted outcomes will result. Although research interest in reflexivity is increasing in such fields as health management (Schippers et al., forthcoming), information technology (Misuraca et al., 2013), human resources (Pietersea et al., 2011), other fields such as project management are still lagging behind.

This paper makes another contribution to the literature: a small but growing body of research suggests that team reflexivity may be an important process in enhancing project outcomes (Schippers et al., 2013). However, one organizational outcome dominates the writings of researchers who investigate reflexivity, namely, innovation (e.g., Schippers et al., forthcoming; West, 2002). This being the case, this limitation was remedied by focusing on other important aspects of project performance, namely, project success and speed of completion, which are less researched areas in the literature on project management.

In terms of the study setting, previous studies have found that the particular country of the research setting affects the role of environment (Elbanna et al., 2015). Similarly, Ochieng et al. (2013) argue that different cultural norms and assumptions about the project environment can affect the way project teams communicate and behave. For example, increasing numbers of empirical studies in different countries located in the troubled Middle East, such as Egypt (Elbanna and Child, 2007) and Turkey (Dayan et al., 2012), report a lack of the moderating impact of environment in the planning process–outcome linkage. Given that research on environmental variables has shown that perceived environmental uncertainty may operate as an antecedent to the strategy process rather than moderating its

influence on organizational outcomes (Boyd and Fulk, 1996), this study contributes to a different analysis of the role of environment in project management by examining environmental features as antecedents of project planning rather than moderators (e.g., Meissner and Wulf, 2014).

In conclusion, the aim of the present study was to examine the impact of environmental characteristics on the level of intuition, the role that intuition plays in reflexivity, and the ways in which these two phenomena relate to project performance. The specific research questions that we addressed were: (1) what are the relationships between environmental features and intuition; (2) what is the relationship between intuition and reflexivity; (3) what is the impact of reflexivity on project performance; (4) what is the role of reflexivity in the relationship between intuition and project performance? These questions are represented diagrammatically in Fig. 1. In view of the new relationships that are examined in this study, its exploratory nature should be taken into consideration.

Answering these questions is significant both for researchers and practitioners because it has the potential to shed light upon the ways in which project teams use intuition and reflexive behaviors. This can contribute to renew the theoretical bases of project management as per recent calls for extending project management research, such as that of Floricel et al. (2014). A contribution of this study lies in its demonstration of the importance of environment for the use of intuition. Moreover, by identifying team reflexivity as a mediator of the relationships between intuition and project outcomes, we both substantiate the theories of project management and point to a mediator variable that offers clear opportunities for project management. This also contributes more generally in explaining some of the surprising results of related research on intuition; it improves our evolving comprehension of its role in management in general and of project management in particular.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

As depicted in Fig. 1, the study model investigates the relationship between environmental characteristics (measured as competition uncertainty, macro-economic uncertainty and

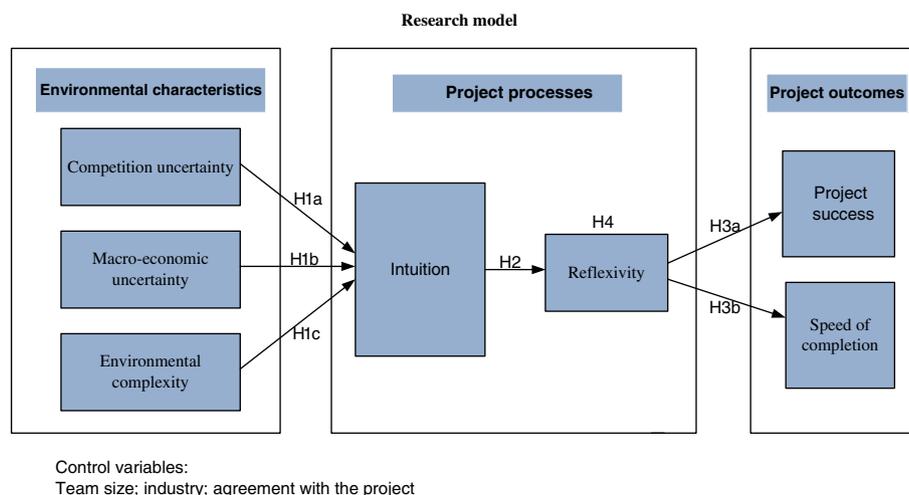


Fig. 1. Research model.

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