Drivers for stewardship-oriented behaviour in client-consultant relationships: A Dutch engineering consultancy perspective

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Abstract

Consultants operating in the architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry are performing complex, intellectual activities, procured by clients. Typically resulting in inter-organizational, trust- and communication-lacking client-consultant relationships, facing information and knowledge asymmetries. This study uses stewardship theory as theoretical lens to investigate interaction in client-consultant relationships from the consultant's perspective. Data in the form of interviews and project documentation was collected from four case studies at an engineering firm and (cross-case) analysed to find patterns and draw conclusions. The research identified four drivers for stewardship-oriented behaviour, which was found being a more realistic approach within this AEC-context than pure stewardship, comprising to mutual trust, open communication, output verification, and transcendental motivation. The research discusses the drivers and argues, contrary to Davis et al., (1997), the possibility of transforming agent-steward relationships into either mutual agent or steward relationships. This research can benefit consultants in practice, by providing a perspective for viewing client-consultant relationships and the development stewardship theory among consultants in the AEC-industry.

Keywords: Stewardship theory; Trust; Communication; Client-consultant relationships; Engineering consultancy; AEC-industry

1. Introduction

Engineering services can be regarded as complex, non-standardised processes, heavily relying on experts to perform these intellectual activities (Granheimer et al., 2021; Steinmann et al., 2014). The process is typically iterative, containing a lot of interaction and communication between client and consultant, making trust an important factor for the quality (Granheimer et al., 2021). This makes procurement of the right service provider an important task for clients since they are often less knowledgeable than the consultant, therefore facing risk of adverse selection and moral hazard (Snippert et al., 2015; Sporrong, 2011). However, successful relationships between client and consultant are seldom based on the consultant's competence alone, the result is often a co-production in collaboration between the two parties (Sporrong, 2011). Both agency and its counterweight stewardship theory provide a perspective for understanding these interpersonal or interorganizational relationships between principal and manager, or in this case between client and consultant. Agency theory is based on the assumption that principal and manager are self-interested, resulting in goal conflict and

moral hazard (Eisenhardt, 1989). Whereas, stewardship theory is based on the assumption of collectivist behaviour and goal congruence among principal and manager (Davis et al., 1997). Some scholars argue the importance of stewardship approaches in the context of successful projects (Joslin & Müller, 2016), such that public clients are argued to be slowly changing towards a stewardship role (Scharpff et al., 2021).

The article investigates client-consultant relationships within the AEC-industry from the perspective of the consultant using stewardship theory as theoretical lens. The research uses a unique approach by considering the relationships solely from the consultant's perspective, focusing on internal evaluation and reflection by excluding counterparties' views. With the main goal being to identify drivers for stewardship-oriented behaviour among engineering consultants, as well as providing insights into how consultants themselves can stimulate clients in mutually adopting stewardship-oriented behaviour. Leading to the following research question: *How can stewardship theory be used as a perspective for improving relationships between consultant and client, and what are its drivers?* Furthermore, stewardship theory has already been used as a theoretical perspective by several scholars (Nwajei et al., 2022; Potemans et al., 2018; Snippert et al., 2015), however none have studied its drivers within the AEC-industry context. Therefore, stewardship theory will be used as theoretical lens to distinguish a set of drivers for developing stewardship-oriented behaviour among consultants and clients. Data, in the form of project documentation and interviews, was collected from four case studies within a specific department at an engineering firm.

The outline of this article is as follows. First, a literature review is presented which identifies the main perspective for interpreting stewardship theory in an AEC-industry context. Second, the methods for collecting and analysing data from the case studies, as well as the case descriptions are presented. Third, the case study findings are presented in the form of drivers for stewardship-oriented behaviour. Fourth, the findings of the case studies are discussed. Finally, based on the findings and discussion, conclusions will be drawn.

2.   Literature review

2.1.   Stewardship theory

Stewardship theory is often considered a counterweight to agency theory, which is based on three central problems; 1) information asymmetry, 2) adverse selection or pre-contractual opportunism, and 3) moral hazard or contractual opportunism (Snippert et al., 2015). Stewardship theory, on the other hand, argues there is no inherent, general problem of executive motivation, managers are intrinsically motivated to achieve good results (Donaldson & Davis, 1991), by aligning their own objectives with those of the company (Neubaum et al., 2011).

In stewardship theory clear and consistent role expectation and authorisation of stewards is essential to be facilitated by principals, since this results in mutual trust (Donaldson & Davis, 1991). Managers prefer personal power over institutional-based forms of power, because it stems from interpersonal relationships built on mutual trust, norms of reciprocity, and information exchange rather than arm's length, formal, authoritarian relationships (Neubaum et al., 2011). Trust is, therefore, a fundamental element of stewardship theory, despite it typically not being present upon start of the contract/relationship, it is built through interaction and involvement during the project lifecycle. Together with active information

exchange these are fundamental in achieving common goals and mutual trust through stewardship (Snippert et al., 2015). Stewardship theory uses responsibility, autonomy, shared culture and norms, and personal power and trust as main means of creating goal alignment, reduce opportunistic behaviour and threat of information asymmetry, see Figure 1 (van Slyke, 2006).
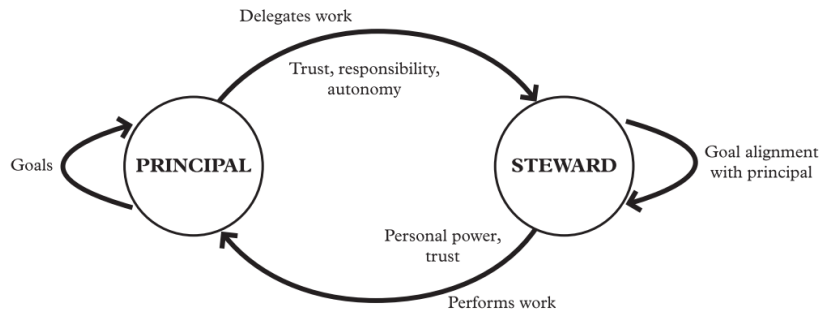

Figure 1, Stewardship theory between principal and manager adopted from (Snippert et al., 2015)

2.2. Stewardship in the AEC-industry

Within AEC literature, stewardship theory has been discussed by several scholars (Nwajei et al., 2022; Potemans et al., 2018; Snippert et al., 2015), however interaction in client-consultant relationships using stewardship theory remains under-studied. Whereas, literature focusing on stewardship's individual concepts, such as trust, goal alignment, communication and motivation is amply present in the context of client-contractor/consultant interaction (Buvik & Rolfsen, 2015; Eriksson & Laan, 2007; Khoury, 2019; Mitkus & Mitkus, 2014). Trust, communication and collaboration will be used as concepts to address the relationship between stewardship theory and the literature on client-consultant interaction. They are regarded as the main challenges to interaction in inter-organizational relationships within the AEC-industry, and will therefore be argued as relevant pillars to client-consultant interaction (Galaz-Delgado et al., 2021).

Trust can be defined as: "The expectation that the counterparty will perform in a mutually acceptable manner and act equitably when opportunism exists." (Guo, et al., 2021). Especially in a project-based industry, such as construction, where relationships are established for a limited period of time, building interorganizational trust is difficult (Laan et al., 2012). Companies often enter into (initially) arm's length, principal-agent, relationships in order to protect them from the risk of being exploited by the other. The development of trust seems crucial within projects because of its critical role in the development of effective work processes and the successful performance relationships. Prior ties are found to have substantial impact on the development of trust at the beginning of the project, resulting in development of a common philosophy, open communication and clear role expectations (Buvik & Rolfsen, 2015). This aligns with the essential role of trust in principal-steward relationships, actors should aim at building mutual trust in long-term relationships, resulting in collaborative relationships where parties act in collective-interest (Neubaum et al., 2011; Schillemans, 2013). However, excess trust can lead to actors losing objectivity or overcommitting to the relationship, leaving room for opportunistic behaviour to gain a competitive advantage (Entwistle & Martin, 2005; Villena et al., 2019). Indicating mutual stewardship relations can deteriorate into principal-agent relationships when actors lose their collectivist mindset.

Communication is defined by den Otter & Emmitt, (2008) as; "a system of interaction between sender and receiver" and has been argued that unsuccessful communication is the main cause of conflicts between client and contractor in the construction industry (Mitkus & Mitkus, 2014). It is essential in creating effective information exchange between parties, since it increases understanding among project participants, and reduces ambiguity (Lin & Lee, 2018; Norouzi et al., 2015). Trust and commitment are major mechanisms of communication, which can also be found in stewardship theory (Davis et al., 1997; Khoury, 2019). Furthermore, communication has also been advocated as means of dealing with clients' concerns relating principal-agent relations, by creating aligned interests (Turner & Müller, 2004). Within a construction or engineering context effective and adequate communication can be achieved by creating a mix of informal and formal interactions and by scheduling regular meetings (Turner & Müller, 2004). Stewardship theory uses these informal mechanisms to govern relationships, also aiming at informal communication (van Slyke, 2006).

Collaboration between principal and manager stresses the tendency of managers being collectively oriented and intrinsically motivated, reducing the need for control mechanisms because of confidence in the steward representing their views (Crombie, 2007; Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003). Collaboration is caused by trust, and an important factor in achieving project performance (Turner & Müller, 2004; Vluggen et al., 2020). The collaborative nature of projects is negatively affected by changes, assumptins, and uncertainty in requirements, whereas early involvement, relationship building, common goals and open communication show a positive effect (Aßländer et al., 2016; Sujan et al., 2020). This aligns with the notion of stewardship theory fostering long-term relationships, intrinsic motivation and goal congruence (Schillemans, 2013).

2.3. *Agents becoming stewards*

Stewardship and agency theory are common frameworks used for investigating interorganizational relationships, however its traditional approach suffers from being static, disregarding potential evolvement of relationships as it considers relationships only at a single point in time (Pastoriza et al., 2008). Others suggest the use of a combination of agency and stewardship theory, by finding a balance between control and trust-orientation (Schillemans & Bjurstrøm, 2020), or by moving away from pure stewardship (Crombie, 2007).

Pastoriza et al., (2008) challenge the Principal-Manager Choice Model by Davis et al., (1997), see Figure 2, which states that agent-steward relationships inevitably evolve into agent-agent relations due to the steward feeling betrayed by the agent. By including time and dynamism, they argue that agent-steward relationships can evolve into either agent-agent or steward-steward relations, based on their incentives to invest in long-term relationships characterized by trust and reciprocity. Pastoriza et al., (2008) distinguishes three types of motivations (*extrinsic*, e.g. financial compensation; *intrinsic*, e.g. reputation; *transcendental*, e.g. helping the client), and states that agents predominantly show extrinsic and stewards show transcendental and intrinsic motivation. It could therefore be argued that when agents evolve towards focusing on transcendental rather than extrinsic results and incentives, they could move towards becoming stewards. Moreover, from an engineering consultancy perspective, the prior suggests, that even though the client behaves according to agency theory, the consultant can initiate stewardship behaviour by, besides extrinsic, aiming for transcendental

results and motivation. With the main goal being to achieve a mutual stewardship relation. However, the nature of the construction industry might not be suitable for pure stewardship relations, mainly because foundations for relationships in the construction industry are often laid in procurement procedures, where clients have an important role in instating the governance structure (Potemans et al., 2018). It could therefore be argued that contractors, or in this case consultants, should be integrated in the process of developing the procurement strategy, to improve the chance of implementation of successful stewardship-oriented behaviour.
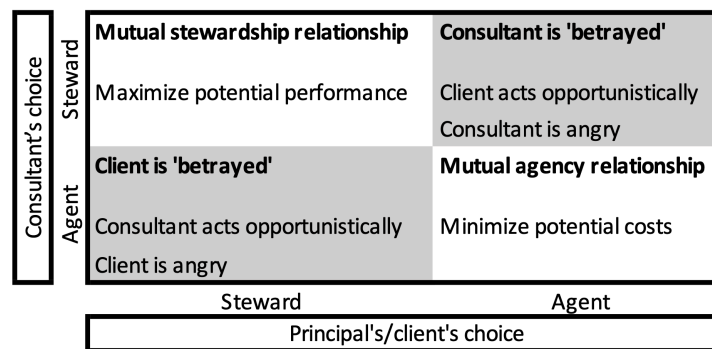
		Steward	Agent
Consultant's choice	Steward	**Mutual stewardship relationship** Maximize potential performance	**Consultant is 'betrayed'** Client acts opportunistically Consultant is angry
	Agent	**Client is 'betrayed'** Consultant acts opportunistically Client is angry	**Mutual agency relationship** Minimize potential costs
		Steward	Agent
		Principal's/client's choice	

Figure 2, Principal Manager Choice model (Davis et al., 1997)

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

Case study research is a common method for qualitative research and is best suited in case of in-depth research of contemporary events on which the researcher has no control (Yin, 2018). Since this research investigates client-consultant relationships in current or recent projects on which the researcher has no control a case study is best suited. Furthermore, the main research question is a 'how' question, which according to Yin (2018) is well suited by qualitative case study research. On top of that, the research's aim of only investigating one single department within a specific organisation connects with the notion of case studies only being used in case of data of several objects or processes in a confined time and space (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2010).

In this research a multiple case study is conducted, where four different consultant-client relationships are investigated from the perspective of the consultant. A multiple case study design was chosen because it allows for cross-case comparison making the findings more generalizable (Yin, 2018). Cross-case analysis allows for patterns being recognized across the organisation (or department), that otherwise, in case of a single case study, possibly would not have been found. Furthermore, a replication design is followed across the different cases, mainly to be able to find similar and make the data comparable. This means that the same protocol is followed for all the cases. Moreover, two types of data are used for this research in order to increase the validity (Yin, 2018), being project documentation and interviews. Furthermore, the analytical framework forms the basis for developing the protocol and allows the researcher to collect, process and analyse the data acquired throughout the research using a structured approach. The analytical model, see Appendix A, was inspired by the Sourcing Business Model (Keith et al., 2015), and adapted to an agency/stewardship theory context (Granheimer et al., 2022; Potemans et al., 2018). This resulted in a 4x4 matrix where different

levels of agency and stewardship were analysed over four dimensions; selection, specification, performance evaluation & monitoring, and reward systems & incentives.

3.2. Case descriptions

The case studies were conducted at a specific department of a consultancy company operating in the Dutch AEC-industry (Architecture, Engineering, and Construction), aiming at investigating the relationship between client and consultant. All case projects involve public clients where the contracts were awarded following a (semi)-public tender procedure.

Case A considers a relationship with a public client following from an open procurement procedure within a framework agreement. The contract was awarded based on EMAT (Economic Most Advantageous Tender) criteria, where the quality criterion was monetarily quantified and subtracted from the tender price. *Case B* considers a relationship with a public client following from an open bid procedure. The contract contained a prespecified price by the client and was awarded solely on quality-based criteria. It asked the consultant to deliver a preliminary and definitive design for a mix of existing and new buildings. *Case C* considers a relationship with a public client following from an open procurement procedure within a framework agreement. The contract was awarded based on EMAT criteria for designing and developing a preliminary design and support and supervise the contractor during the definition and construction of an E&C contract. *Case D* considers a relationship with a public client following from an open procurement procedure within a framework agreement. The contract was awarded based on best-price, excluding any kind of quality-based criteria. It asked the consultant to deliver definitive and technical design.

3.3. Data collection

The two main methods of data collection for this research are interviews and project documentation. Together this creates a mixture between two different data types. Project documentation is unobtrusive and specific regarding the cases, however the researcher can face issues regarding accessibility, retrievability, or biased selectivity (Yin, 2018). Whereas the interviews are targeted towards the specific topic and are insightful, meaning they provide explanations as well as personal views. On the other hand, interviews are prone to biases or inaccuracies, mainly because of the interviewer's incapability or the interviewee's reflexivity (Yin, 2018). Moreover, for each individual case the same data was collected. A specific set of project documentation was retrieved before the interview, this was done either by the researcher himself or by the project manager. The retrieved documentation included all the tender documents, from incoming documents from the client to outgoing documents by the consultant. The project documentation was analysed in preparation of the interview to improve the follow-up questions. For each case or project one interview was conducted with the leading project manager. A semi-structured approach was chosen for the interviews, since it allowed for case-specific follow-up questions to achieve more in-depth answers. The interviews stretched between an hour and hour and a half, and can therefore be regarded as shorter case study interview (Yin, 2018).

3.4. *Data analysis*

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed in full, and sent to the interviewees for verification to eliminate inaccuracies. Together with the project documentation the data was analysed using the software program ATLAS.ti. The top-down approach of deductive coding was used as strategy to structure the data, the codes were defined using the variables following from the analytical model. This resulted in a prespecified set of codes which were grouped according to the different dimensions in the conceptual model. After coding the interview transcriptions and project documentation, and performing a within case analysis, the findings were compared in a cross-case analysis.

4. Results

Analysis of the different case studies indicates an orientation towards stewardship behaviour among the project managers from the consultant. More specifically, it was found that across the four cases the consultant entered into the project trusting the client, their intentions and the provided information. The consultant also pursued successful collaboration with the client by aiming for goal alignment, open communication and effective information exchange. Across the four case studies the consultant's behaviour was therefore found to be stewardship-oriented, incorporating several aspects, but not fully living up to the notions of pure stewardship theory. Stewardship theory, for example, states that managers are intrinsically motivated, following from the case studies this was found being a second-tier motivation, extrinsic motivation in the form of financial compensation remains the most important type of motivation, since generating revenue and being profitable is inherent to a company's existence. Moreover, interorganizational relationships are an interplay of two, or more, parties, resulting in interdependencies between the different actors. A result of this is the fact that consultants cannot determine the client's strategy or behaviour. In the case studies it was observed that some clients chose a stewardship-oriented approach by trusting the consultant, whereas others turned towards control mechanisms using an agency approach. Resulting in a mutual stewardship relation or agent-steward bond between client and consultant. In two out of four case studies an initial mutual stewardship relationship was found, indicated by the presence of mutual trust, open communication, and transcendental motivation from the beginning of the relationship. Another case project was characterized by an agent-steward relation upon start of the project, however was turned into mutual stewardship during the project. The project manager, who was the initial steward, focused on building trust and open communication among parties along the project. The final project considered an initial agent-steward relation between client and consultant, which has deteriorated into mutual agency during the project. Despite the consultant's efforts on building trust, the client did not change their orientation towards stewardship, causing discussion and eventually resulting into conflict.

The cross-case analysis led to the identification of mutual trust, open communication, output verification, and transcendental motivation as four drivers for stewardship-oriented behaviour in interorganizational relationships within an engineering consultancy context. They are observed in every case study as being important factors in the relation between client and consultant. It should be noted that trust is regarded as a separate driver as well as a

subcomponent of the other drivers. The following sections will discuss the relevance of the different drivers and their connection with stewardship-oriented behaviour.

4.1. Mutual trust

Mutual trust is identified as one of the drivers for stewardship in client-consultant relations. The importance of mutual trust is mentioned by every interviewee and is perceived as being essential in achieving successful information exchange and interaction between actors. For example, it was found that among the project managers all aimed for achieving mutual trust along the project. All project managers stated they entered into the case projects trusting the client and their intentions, in order to achieve relationships with successful interaction. Indicating the presence of a stewardship orientation among the consultant, given the focus on building trust. However, according to the project managers this was not always reciprocal. Two out of four cases started with the client focusing on control instead trust, resulting in an agent-steward relationship. Along the process both projects took a different trajectory where one project manager managed to build trust, eventually resulting in a successful relationship.

> *"In the beginning mutual trust was insufficiently present. Currently, I have achieved mutual trust with all operational managers, they also explicitly mention it."*

Regarding the other case project, limited trust was built in the client-consultant relationship over time, eventually deteriorating into mutual agency, resulting in discussion and finally conflict. The project manager mentioned insufficient open communication and information asymmetry, resulting in divergence of expectations, as main causes for the trust-lacking relationship.

> *"That trust declines the moment you notice that the project is coming to a standstill, things are not going well, things are not clear."*

The question is whether the consultant was being naïve by trusting the client, or that the client was behaving opportunistically, basically misusing the consultant. However, in the case studies no evidence was found from the experience of the consultant that indicated deliberate opportunistic behaviour by the client.

4.2. Open communication

Open communication between client and consultant was proven being essential for performance of the project and the relationship. Several project managers experienced problems with received tender documents, the documents are considered inaccurate and incompletely explaining the requirements set by the client, directly leading to an information asymmetry. On top of that, the instruments available to clarify the documents are experienced as too limited and hampering information symmetry. The questions asked in the Note of Information were not answered satisfactorily, therefore some project managers suggest implementing a meeting or dialogue during the tender procedure with all participants and the client, where questions can be asked and discussed in order to reduce the risk of misinterpretation. The lack of information exchange is a typical example of agency behaviour, where both parties are protecting themselves from being exploited instating an information asymmetry.

> *"There were many questions, one or two rounds of questions, and the client just didn't answer them. That's difficult, should you withdraw then?"*

> *"Sometimes you read the tender documents and then you really wonder what they mean by this, what do they actually want. (...) you won't always get the answer you're looking for. I find that difficult that you can only communicate via the NoI, sometimes you just want a little more background information."*

Moreover, due to legal requirements the client was forced to (semi-)publicly procure the project in all four cases, inherently causing principal-agent behaviour between client and consultant. However, upon project start the information asymmetry could have been resolved through open communication and information exchange according to the project managers. Typically, a Project Start-Up or PSU is organized to formally start the project and theoretically eliminate any information asymmetries, this is a meeting where all executives of both client and consultant come together to discuss the project. All project managers perceive the PSU as an important step in the process, where open communication between both parties is crucial to instate goal and expectation alignment. However, some explain the PSU in their case project as lacking open communication, resulting in misalignment of goals and expectations, whereas this moment should specifically be used to further explain definitions in the assignment to reduce the risk of misinterpretation. One project manager mentioned a dialogue about the interpretation of 'recalibrating the Program of Requirements (PoR)' which should have taken place during the PSU, however this was not discussed until a year into the project, it had resulted into two different interpretations and diverging expectations between client and consultant and turning eventually into conflict.

> *"At the PSU it was not explained in more detail that the PoR should be extensively looked at again, and not in the form of a review as the request suggested textually. I see reassessment as making a number of changes to the PoR in the preliminary design, building on the existing work. The client saw it as a total redevelopment of the PoR."*

Effective open communication was found being essential in managing the expectations of both parties, when misalignment in expectations occurs this eventually caused discussion or even conflict. The PSU has a significant role in the development of open communication and managing the expectations, as well as reducing the information asymmetry caused by the tender procedure.

4.3. Output verification

The level of agency or stewardship among the client can partially be derived from the type of control mechanism applied by the client. The literature on organizational control distinguishes three types; process, output, and social control (Granheimer et al., 2021), which were used to characterize the relationship between client and consultant. In two projects the client used output control in the form of quick verification of the product, they trusted the consultant but are obligated to themselves to check the output and by their superiors.

> *"Then you are talking about one hour a week, the client does it because they are obligated to themselves, they can't just take it over."*

Other cases experienced a stricter form of output or process control, in two cases the project manager chose to make a verification document. However, the strategy of control differed at both projects, for one case the verification document was used to check the delivered products and manage revisions. In the other case the client was not interested in the product, only in

'checking the boxes', if the client could argument their choice it was fine regardless of the output. This disengagement of the client on the content side was new and hard for the consultant to work with.

> *"The client basically said: Don't explain to me why it's good, validate why it's good and show me that the checkmarks at all topics are green" (...). That belongs to the type of client who leaves the choice to his advisor. That was not the case, he had a substantive opinion. Then you need cooperation with a client who is involved in content and with whom I can discuss, this was not possible from the client."*

It was found that a form of output verification is the most realistic and suitable form of control in stewardship-oriented relationships, it is based on a mixture of trust and control where the client verifies output. Eliminating the need for extensive, detailed output control since the client trusts the consultant. Pure social control was found to be infeasible, because it incorporates no form of output control or verification, and public clients cannot afford to accept products without actively verifying them, since they are working with government money.

4.4. Transcendental motivation

The project managers demonstrate a mix of extrinsic, intrinsic and transcendental motivation. They all state that some financial profitability is a precondition for entering into a project, since they are not willing to bring money to the client. However, some project managers state they are more motivated by generating a financial profit for the company, or by creating good results to improve the company's reputation, whereas others are motivated by delivering a high-quality product. Indicating the existence of different types of motivation among the consultant. Project managers perceive the internal culture at the consultant as often more oriented towards delivering the best product possible, than focusing on generating revenue or even a financial profit. Reasons are both for helping the client as well as satisfaction among the consultant's employees, indicating transcendental and intrinsic motivation.

> *"I sometimes have the feeling the other way around, that we do way too much for what our assignment requires, and that in turn affects our direct profit."*

Furthermore, when the project managers were asked about their personal motives and incentives for participating in projects, they explained the financial aspect as a prerequisite. Whereas, working in integral social team environments while contributing to clients and society through sustainable and high-quality design were found being the main motivations for participating in projects.

> *"Is it integral, architects want starchitecture, structural engineers a challenging construction, construction managers want an important role in project management, and MEP wants a challenging installation. A trend that you see is that the focus is on sustainability, ecology, biodiversity."*

It was found that the consultant adopts and expresses a form of transcendental motivation in the form balancing their interest between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. They are serving a collective interest by helping the client while sufficing their financial needs. This balance between transcendental, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation indicates an orientation towards stewardship theory among the consultant.

5. Discussion

The main objective of this study was to investigate the relationship between stewardship theory and interorganizational interaction among clients and engineering consultants. The research focused on identifying the drivers for adoption of stewardship theory among consultants. The term stewardship-oriented behaviour was derived from (Martynov, 2009), to characterize the observed behaviour among client and consultant. This term was chosen because most stewards will likely be somewhere on the spectrum oriented towards stewardship, instead of being pure-stewards (Crombie, 2007). Stewardship-oriented behaviour incorporates a mixture of trust and control-based governance mechanisms (Schillemans & Bjurstrøm, 2020), and is argued to serve collective interests by aiming for relationships governed by trust and reciprocity, while still incorporating some form of self-serving behaviour. The main findings of this research provide insights into the adoption of stewardship-oriented behaviour by identifying a set of drivers. Furthermore, it was found that, contrary to Davis et al., (1997), steward-agent relationships can evolve into either mutual agent or steward relations (Pastoriza et al., 2008). Together the results indicate the potential for implementation of stewardship-oriented behaviour among client and consultant.

5.1. Drivers for stewardship-oriented behaviour

Four drivers for stewardship-oriented behaviour were identified and balanced between a pure and loose interpretation of stewardship theory. *Mutual trust* and *open communication* are identified as the first two drivers for stewardship-oriented behaviour, they serve as means for reducing and mitigating conflicts, creating open and transparent information exchange, minimizing information asymmetries (Guo, et al., 2021; Uusitalo et al., 2021), as well as supporting goal alignment and building collective interests (Turner & Müller, 2004). *Output verification* is based on loose stewardship, arguing a balance of trust and control-based governance mechanisms is optimal (Schillemans & Bjurstrøm, 2020), resulting in a mixture of social and output control typed as output verification (Eriksson & Laan, 2007). *Transcendental motivation* is the fourth driver and also considers a loose form of stewardship, it addresses the need for a mix of transcendental, extrinsic, and intrinsic motivation, and underlines the importance of development of transcendental motivation in order to achieve stewardship-oriented behaviour (Pastoriza et al., 2008; Sujan et al., 2020). It is contrary to theoretical stewardship, where stewards are intrinsically motivated, (Davis et al., 1997), by considering the importance of the fact that companies cannot exist without financial compensation or extrinsic rewards. Challenging the classic dichotomy of agency and stewardship theory being driven by ex- and intrinsic motivation respectively, by including transcendental motivation (Pastoriza et al., 2008), mixed motives (altruism & self-interest) (Sharma, 1997), and mentioning the positive relationship between extrinsic monetary rewards and motivation, being critical in ensuring collective ownership of goals, or goal alignment (Sujan et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the drivers show a significant overlap with the literature on stewardship in the AEC-industry, focusing on trust, communication and collaboration. Two aspects are directly translated into drivers for stewardship-oriented behaviour in client-consultant relations. Trust and communication were found to both resemble stewardship theory in AEC literature as well as in the practical context of this research. Indicating the relevance of the

first two drivers. Collaboration, on the other hand, was less prevalent among the case studies, despite its important role in the connection between AEC literature and stewardship theory. Among consultants, collaboration was sometimes perceived as superficial, since due to the large knowledge asymmetry between parties the client is unable to understand the complex processes. Leaving a question about the relevance of collaboration in this specific context, since there are no reciprocal actions from the client side, only providing information, what is therefore the added value of collaboration. Although, collaboration was sometimes perceived as positively affecting the relationship beyond reducing the information asymmetry. For example, in the case of a client with sufficient knowledge to technically understand the project. On top of that it was also found that in the case of positive prior collaboration the consultant is more likely to experience stewardship behaviour from the client, since positive prior ties positively affect building trust and open communication, especially in the beginning of the project (Buvik & Rolfsen, 2015; Guo, et al., 2021). Indicating the relevance of collaboration in successful client-consultant interaction.

5.2. Developing mutual stewardship

Findings of this research align with the notion of Pastoriza et al., (2008) stating that the Principal-Manager Choice model (Davis et al., 1997), is too static. The model views relationships at a single point in time and disregards its potential development during the process. It was found that agent-steward relationships can evolve into either mutual agent or mutual steward relations. Several scholars, including Davis et al., (1997), have already typed the model as being too simplistic (Crombie, 2007; Pastoriza et al., 2008), this research aligns with this notion. By including dynamism, it will be argued that agent-steward relationships are instable and are likely to converge into either agency or stewardship-oriented behaviour. The case studies indicated all consultants aimed for adopting stewardship-oriented behaviour, whereas the clients altered between agency and stewardship. It was found that in order to achieve mutual stewardship, the steward (the consultant in this case) should stimulate the agent (client) in adopting stewardship-oriented behaviour, by convincing the agent of the positive effects of mutual trust and open communication, as well as by critically questioning their behaviour. Parties with high levels of moral development are more likely move towards stewardship, indicating the relevance of transcendental motivation, given their tendency to develop collectivist behaviour (Martynov, 2009).

Moreover, it was found that stewardship-oriented behaviour in an engineering consultancy context aligns with pure stewardship on several points, such as achieving mutual trust and open communication, whereas regarding motivation and the type of control there is a significant difference. Stewardship-oriented behaviour distances from the notion of stewards only being intrinsically motivated and governed through social control, (Davis et al., 1997; Pieper et al., 2008), by arguing stewardship-oriented consultants can be motivated through a mixture of motivations (i.e. extrinsic, intrinsic, and transcendental) and need to be governed by a mix of control mechanisms (i.e. output, and social control) (Eriksson, 2006; Pastoriza et al., 2008). Regarding motivation it is argued that developing stewardship-oriented relationships between client and consultant requires a shift from extrinsic to transcendental motivation (Pastoriza et al., 2008). And that for governance mechanisms a mixture of output and social control, combining the necessary aspects of the client verifying the deliverables while still building on trust and self-control, is best suited (Crombie, 2007; Eriksson, 2006;

Granheimer et al., 2022). Despite, this research only investigated steward-agent relations with consultant-initiated stewardship, a different dynamic could be observed in case of the client initiating stewardship.

Furthermore, contrary to information, the engineering consultant was found having a knowledge advantage over the client given its capability to perform these intellectual activities (Granheimer et al., 2021; Steinmann et al., 2014), the question is therefore whether the consultant is using his task-specific knowledge to exploit (agency) or help (stewardship) the client (Sharma, 1997). Creating a power distance between principal and manager where the client is dependent on the consultant. The knowledge asymmetry could be a cause of the difference in trust, given the tendency of the client to protect itself from being exploited. Disregarding the information asymmetry, the consultant is, arguably, less prone to exploitation from the counterparty than the client, due to this knowledge asymmetry. Raising the question whether the client is in the position of initiating stewardship in the relation with the consultant. Moreover, regarding the information asymmetry, it will be argued that when tender documents are inducing an information asymmetry due to being incomplete and not accurately explaining the client's goals and requirements, as well as parties not utilizing the potential of the PSU to refine or clarify their assignment, deterioration of the relationship towards mutual agency-oriented behaviour seems inevitable.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Theoretical contributions

By using stewardship theory this research contributes to the literature on client-consultant interaction focusing on developing stewardship-oriented behaviour between client and consultant in an engineering consultancy context. The article identified the term stewardship-oriented behaviour, which deviates from pure stewardship by incorporating several concepts from agency theory. Stewardship-oriented behaviour builds on the premise of extrinsic rewards being inherent to a company's existence, as well as the need for output control among clients, since clients cannot blindly accept the provided product. Furthermore, a set of drivers for development of stewardship-oriented behaviour among clients and consultants are presented and discussed, aiming at building mutual trust and open communication, and realising transcendental motivation. Moreover, the research argues the limited applicability of pure stewardship in an engineering consultancy context, the choice is not dichotomous, meaning there are more possibilities on the agency-stewardship spectrum than pure-agent or pure-steward. The research aligns with the notion of Pastoriza et al., (2008) of the Principal Manager Choice model, (Davis et al., 1997), being too static, thereby underlining the argued simplicity of the model, which states that agent-steward relationships inevitably evolve into mutual agent relationships due the steward feeling betrayed. It was, however, found that agent-steward relations can evolve into either mutual agent or mutual steward relationships.

6.2. Practical contributions

The research addresses interaction in client-consultant relationships from the consultant's perspective and focused on developing drivers for stewardship-oriented behaviour within the engineering consultancy industry. Trust and communication are among the main challenges

to client-consultant interaction and were also found to be important factors for interaction in the case studies (Galaz-Delgado et al., 2021). Together with motivation and control this study identifies them as the main drivers for stewardship-oriented behaviour in client-consultant relations. Moreover, the research stresses the importance of the client's behaviour in the process of achieving mutual stewardship-oriented behaviour. Consultants can influence this choice to a certain extent by propagating their own behaviour, however an intrinsic positive orientation towards stewardship remains necessary for clients in order to transform their behaviour.

Analysis of the case studies led to two practical problems, being the lack of open communication and information exchange during the tender procedure as well as during the PSU. Both problems are a cause of the general information asymmetry between client and consultant, and could therefore be addressed by stewardship-oriented behaviour. Several project managers stated the lack of communication and information provided in the Note of Information, and suggest a dialogue with the client and all contenders as means of resolving the issue. Despite, direct communication between client and participant (consultant) during the tender procedure is prohibited by law. Furthermore, the PSU is regarded as an important instrument for instating a successful relationship, it is the first moment of communication after the tender procedure and should therefore be used to overcome the information asymmetry induced by the previous phase. However, it was found generally not being used to its full potential, the meeting lacked open communication and information exchange, which are important steps for overcoming the information asymmetry as well as building trust.

6.3. *Limitations and future research*

This article investigates interaction in client-consultant relationships, using stewardship theory, solely from the consultant's perspective. Immediately leading to the first limitation of this research, being the fact that only the perspective of one actor is used for investigating client-consultant interaction. The research focuses on the consultant, therefore excluding the views of the client, this was deliberately decided due to commercial and reputational interest. On top of that, in terms of external validity, only four case studies were investigated all within a specific department at a single engineering consultancy firm. When performing the research at another company or even department different results could be found. Therefore, one should be cautious with generalizing the findings across the AEC-industry. Furthermore, the second limitation considers the assumption of more interaction always leading to better project performance, indicating the need for stewardship theory. Within the AEC-industry this assumption should be nuanced, because relationships can be successful with both agency and stewardship approaches. This also raises the question whether the consultant should aim for mutual steward relations in the first sense. Providing a direction for future research on investigating which strategy regarding agency and stewardship theory consultants should incorporate to achieve best results. Besides investigating the consultant's strategy, another direction for future research could be to integrate the client's perspective into the development of stewardship-oriented behaviour. By investigating the effects of mutual trust, open communication, output verification, and transcendental motivation on the development of stewardship-oriented behaviour among the client.

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Appendix A: Analytical model

The analytical model was developed for structuring and analysing the interviews and project documentation. The model distinguishes four levels of client-consultant relations from pure agency to pure stewardship, with stewardship-oriented behaviour in the middle. By structuring the interviews according to the four vertical dimensions its level of agency/stewardship can be determined for each individual row.

The model argues that agents will behave following a transactional approach based on output or process control, whereas stewards are best suited with behaving according to Relational Contracting (RC) principles based on social control. However, this only explains the two outer most columns, given the engineering consultancy context the two in-between levels contain a transactional and relational orientation of behaviour following theory on professional agents. Literature on professional agents argues that these parties/actors have a mixed motive, behaving not solely out of self-interest, but also incorporate altruistic behaviour. On top of that, engineering consultants have task-specific knowledge the client is unable to understand, resulting in a knowledge (instead of information) asymmetry. Given the engineering consultancy context, it can therefore be argued that the professional agent covers the in-between spectrum on the agency-stewardship scale. Therefore, the professional agent will form the middle part of this conceptual model and will be explained from a transactional as well as relational perspective, mainly because of the ability to choose their motive (towards self- or collective-interest) and whether they want to behave and engage in a transactional or relational contract. The four orientations of the model were analysed using four dimensions; selection, specification, performance evaluation & monitoring, and incentives & reward systems. These arose from the literature as being best suited for investigating client-consultant interaction in these interorganizational relationships.

	Agent	Professional agent		Steward
	Transactional *Authority focus*	**Transactional** *Price focus*	**Relational** *Price/trust focus*	**Relational** *Trust focus*
Selection	Price; open bid procedure	Price > quality; open/limited bid procedure	Quality > price; limited bid procedure	Value; limited bid procedure
Specification	Process oriented; functions and activities by client	Output oriented; functions by client, activities by contractor	Output/value-oriented; functions conjointly, activities by contractor	Value-oriented; functions and activities conjointly
Performance evaluation & monitoring	Process control by client; detailed monitoring of process	Output control by client; detailed monitoring of output	Output & social control by client; verifying final outcomes	Social control; self-control and verification of collaboration
Incentives & reward system	Reimbursements	Fixed price	Cost-plus compensation with incentives	Value-based compensation with incentives