

**Your Job, My Responsibility: Psychological Ownership and Uneven Participation in Teams**

Alexandria Yoon Jee Han

Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California

## PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

### **Your Job, My Responsibility: Psychological Ownership and Uneven Participation in Teams**

Team-based work is often structured with clearly defined roles and responsibilities to promote efficiency, accountability, and collaboration (Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). In theory, this structure should enable individuals to contribute meaningfully toward a shared objective. However, in practice, the presence of structure does not always result in active participation as many teams experience uneven contribution, where some members take on a disproportionate share of the workload while others remain passive, despite having assigned roles and expectations (Latané et al., 1979). This imbalance can negatively impact both team performance and individual learning outcomes, raising important questions about what drives engagement within collaborative environments (Karau & Williams, 1993).

Existing research on team dynamics has identified several factors that influence participation, including social loafing, role clarity, and leadership structure (Cobb & Hackman, 2003). While clearly defined roles are often viewed as a critical component of effective teamwork, they do not necessarily ensure that individuals will take ownership of their responsibilities. Psychological ownership, or the extent to which individuals feel personally responsible for and invested in their work, may play a more significant role in shaping behavior than formal structure alone (Pierce et al., 2001).

This tension highlights a critical gap between structure and behavior in team environments. While roles and responsibilities can be clearly assigned, they do not guarantee that individuals will actively engage with them. In many cases, teams may appear organized on the surface while still experiencing uneven participation and limited collaboration. Understanding this gap provides a more nuanced view of why some teams struggle to distribute work effectively, even when expectations are clearly defined. This raises an important question: why

## PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

do clearly structured teams still experience uneven participation, and what factors influence whether individuals take ownership of their roles?

### **Literature Review**

Uneven participation is a persistent challenge in team-based work, even in environments where roles and expectations are clearly defined (Karau & Williams, 1993). While collaborative structures are designed to distribute responsibility across members, they often produce the opposite effect, where a small number of individuals assume a disproportionate share of the workload while others contribute minimally. This imbalance is not always the result of capability or intent, but rather a function of how responsibility is perceived and enacted within the group. In many cases, the presence of shared goals and collective accountability can reduce individual motivation, creating conditions in which participation becomes inconsistent despite the appearance of organization (Latané et al., 1979).

One of the most widely studied explanations for this phenomenon is the tendency for individuals to reduce effort when working in groups. As responsibility becomes shared across multiple members, individual contributions can feel less visible and less essential to the overall outcome. This diffusion of responsibility can lead individuals to disengage, particularly when they believe their effort will not significantly impact the group's success (Karau & Williams, 1993). However, while this framework helps explain reduced participation, it does not fully account for the variation in individual behavior within teams. In many cases, some members respond to reduced participation by increasing their own effort, compensating for perceived gaps in contribution, while others remain passive (Williams & Karau, 1991).

To better understand this divergence, the concept of psychological ownership provides a more nuanced explanation. Psychological ownership refers to the extent to which individuals feel

## PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

a sense of responsibility, attachment, and personal investment in a task or outcome, so when individuals experience a strong sense of ownership, they are more likely to take initiative, invest effort, and remain engaged throughout the process (Pierce et al., 2001). In contrast, when ownership is weak or absent, individuals may comply with assigned roles without fully committing to the work.

The development of psychological ownership is influenced by several factors, including autonomy, involvement in decision-making, and perceived control over the work. When individuals feel that they have agency in shaping the direction of a project, they are more likely to develop a sense of responsibility for its success. Conversely, when tasks are assigned without meaningful involvement or when responsibilities are perceived as interchangeable, individuals may struggle to feel connected to the work (Pierce et al., 2001). In these cases, participation may become uneven not because expectations are unclear, but because they are not meaningfully internalized.

Closely related to psychological ownership is the concept of role clarity, which is often viewed as a foundational component of effective teamwork (Kahn et al., 1964; Mathieu et al., 2008). Role clarity refers to the extent to which individuals understand their responsibilities and how their work contributes to the broader objective. High levels of role clarity can reduce confusion and improve coordination, allowing teams to operate more efficiently. However, while clarity can reduce ambiguity, it does not necessarily increase motivation or engagement. Individuals may understand what is expected of them without feeling compelled to exceed minimal requirements (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). This suggests that role clarity alone is insufficient to ensure active participation, particularly in environments where intrinsic motivation or ownership is lacking.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

Leadership structure further shapes how responsibility is distributed within teams. Traditional models emphasize clearly defined leadership roles to guide decision-making and maintain accountability, while more contemporary perspectives highlight the benefits of distributed or shared leadership (Carson et al., 2007). In theory, these approaches should encourage broader participation and collective responsibility. However, the presence of defined leadership roles does not guarantee that team members will actively engage with their responsibilities (Cobb & Hackman, 2003). In some cases, clearly designated leadership can reinforce passivity among other members, who may defer responsibility to those perceived as more accountable or capable. (Deter & Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2011).

Taken together, existing research suggests that while structure, role clarity, and leadership design are important components of team effectiveness, they do not fully explain patterns of uneven participation (Mathieu et al., 2008). Teams can appear well-organized in terms of roles and responsibilities while still experiencing imbalances in effort and engagement. This indicates that factors beyond formal structure, particularly the degree to which individuals feel a sense of ownership over their work, play a central role in shaping behavior (Pierce et al., 2001). However, much of this research has been conducted in controlled or simplified settings, which may not fully capture the complexity of real-world team environments. In applied settings, teams operate under time constraints, varying levels of motivation, and uneven distributions of effort, creating dynamics that are more difficult to predict. This gap highlights the importance of examining how these concepts manifest in structured yet imperfect environments, where expectations are clear, but participation remains inconsistent (Ilgen et al., 2005).

### **Method**

An exercise was conducted that simulated a professional agency environment and required the development of a comprehensive marketing campaign. The project was completed

## PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

over several weeks as part of a graduate-level communication management course at the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism (USC Annenberg). The goal of the exercise was for each team to create and present a fully developed campaign for a designated client, incorporating research, strategy, creative execution, and a final presentation of findings.

### **Participants**

There were six participants involved in the exercise, all second-semester graduate students in the Communication Management program at USC Annenberg. Each participant was assigned a specific role within the team to reflect a traditional agency structure, including Agency Lead, Creative Director, Media Planner, Social Manager, Data Insight Manager, and Strategist.

### **Procedure**

The participants were assigned to a single team and given the task of developing a marketing campaign for a selected artist. Responsibilities were distributed across team members based on assigned roles, which included areas such as strategy development, content creation, and presentation design. The scope of work included areas such as strategy development, content creation, and presentation design. The team worked collaboratively through a combination of in-class sessions and independent meetings, utilizing shared digital platforms to organize materials and track progress. Throughout the project, participants were expected to contribute to both the development of ideas and the execution of deliverables. This included participating in group discussions, completing assigned tasks, and collaborating on shared documents and presentation materials. The final deliverable consisted of a group presentation supported by a visual slide deck, which was presented to the class.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

### **Discussion**

The Agency Project revealed how uneven participation can persist even within a clearly structured team environment. Although roles and expectations were defined from the outset, contribution across team members varied significantly. Some individuals assumed responsibility for large portions of the project, while others contributed more reactively or required direction to complete assigned tasks. As responsibility became distributed across the group, some team members appeared to perceive their contributions as less essential, resulting in lower initiative and more passive engagement. However, while some individuals disengaged, others increased their level of involvement to compensate for gaps in participation. Rather than a collective decrease in effort, the team exhibited a divergence in behavior, where responsibility became unevenly absorbed by a subset of members.

Psychological ownership provides a more precise explanation for this divergence. Although all members were assigned roles, not all appeared to internalize their responsibilities. Some contributed at a surface level, completing tasks when prompted but not taking initiative beyond their assigned scope. In contrast, others assumed responsibility for the broader success of the project, extending their contributions into areas such as strategic direction, written content, and refinement of deliverables. This difference in ownership directly contributed to the unequal distribution of work and effort within the team. The lack of ownership among some members was also reflected in the collaborative process. While ideas were discussed as a group, there was limited evidence of iterative development or collective refinement. Suggestions were often acknowledged but not actively built upon, resulting in a process that resembled sequential contribution rather than true collaboration. As a result, responsibility became increasingly concentrated among those who demonstrated higher levels of ownership. This led to a pattern of

## PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

centralized execution, where key elements of the project, including the development of the campaign narrative, written script, and presentation materials, were completed by a small subset of the team. While this ensured that deadlines were met and deliverables were completed, it also introduced several limitations. The concentration of responsibility reduced opportunities for diverse input and created bottlenecks in both decision-making and execution, particularly as the project progressed. In this way, the team was able to function, but not at its full potential. These findings also highlight a limitation of role clarity as a mechanism for driving participation. Although each team member had a defined role, this did not translate into consistent engagement. Without a sense of personal investment, roles remained passive rather than becoming active drivers of contribution.

From a practical standpoint, these observations suggest that effective teamwork requires more than clearly defined structure. Teams must also create conditions that promote ownership and accountability. This may involve establishing clearer expectations for independent contribution, increasing visibility of individual work, and creating systems that encourage active participation rather than reactive completion of tasks. Without these elements, teams risk defaulting to patterns of uneven participation that limit both performance and collaboration.

This experience highlights a tension between individual accountability and collective participation. Taking initiative allowed the project to move forward efficiently, particularly as deadlines approached and key deliverables remained incomplete, but it also limited opportunities for broader engagement within the group. A more effective approach in future team settings may involve establishing stronger expectations for ownership early on and allowing space for others to step into their roles, even if this introduces short-term inefficiencies.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The observations are based on a single team within a specific academic context, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other settings. Team dynamics can vary significantly based on factors such as group composition, individual motivation, and external constraints, all of which may influence participation in ways not fully captured here. Additionally, the analysis is based on participant observation, which introduces the potential for bias in interpreting team behavior. While efforts were made to reflect critically on these dynamics, the perspective remains influenced by my role within the group. While existing frameworks explain patterns of participation and ownership, further exploration is needed to understand how these dynamics evolve in applied settings where time constraints and performance pressures are present. Future research could examine how different approaches to accountability, ownership, and team structure influence participation over time.

Overall, the findings reinforce a central conclusion: structure alone is not sufficient to ensure effective collaboration. While roles and expectations may be clearly defined, participation ultimately depends on the extent to which individuals internalize a sense of ownership over their work. Without this internalization, teams may appear organized while still experiencing significant imbalances in contribution. More importantly, this experience suggests that effective teamwork is not simply a matter of assigning responsibilities, but of designing systems that actively encourage engagement, accountability, and shared investment. In both academic and professional settings, the ability to translate structure into meaningful participation may ultimately determine whether teams function as collections of individuals or as truly collaborative systems. Structure can assign responsibility, but it cannot ensure that responsibility is taken.

**References**

- Carson, J. B., Tesluk, P. E., & Marrone, J. A. (2007). Shared leadership in teams: An investigation of antecedent conditions and performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(5), 1217 - 1234. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20159921>
- Cobb, A., & Hackman, J. (2003). Leading teams: Setting the stage for great performances. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 48(4). <https://doi.org/10.2307/3556648>
- Detert, J. R., & Burris, E. R. (2007). Leadership behavior and employee voice: Is the door really open? *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(4), 869 - 884.  
<https://doi.org/10.5465/AMJ.2007.26279183>
- Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R. (1976). Motivation through the design of work: Test of a theory. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 16(2), 250 - 279.  
[https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073\(76\)90016-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(76)90016-7)
- Ilggen, D. R., Hollenbeck, J. R., Johnson, M., & Jundt, D. (2005). Teams in organizations: From input-process-output models to IMO models. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 56, 517 - 543. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.56.091103.070250>
- Karau, S. J., & Williams, K. D. (1993). Social loafing: A meta-analytic review and theoretical integration. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65(4), 681 - 706.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.65.4.681>
- Kahn, R. L., Wolfe, D. M., Quinn, R. P., Snoek, J. D., & Rosenthal, R. A. (1964). *Organizational stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity*. John Wiley.
- Latané, B., Williams, K., & Harkins, S. (1979). Many hands make light the work: The causes and consequences of social loafing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37(6), 822-832. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.37.6.822>

## PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

- Mathieu, J., Maynard, M. T., Rapp, T., & Gilson, L. (2008). Team effectiveness 1997-2007: A review of recent advancements and a glimpse into the future. *Journal of Management*, 34(3), 410 - 476. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206308316061>
- Morrison, E. W. (2011). Employee voice behavior: Integration and directions for future research. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 5(1), 373 - 412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520.2011.574506>
- Pierce, J. L., Kostova, T., & Dirks, K. T. (2001). Toward a theory of psychological ownership in organizations. *The Academy of Management Review*, 26(2), 298 - 310. <https://doi.org/10.2307/259124>
- Salas, E., & Cannon-Bowers, J. A. (2001). Teamwork and team training. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 15487 - 15492. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-043076-7/01436-4>
- Williams, K. D., & Karau, S. J. (1991). Social loafing and social compensation: The effects of expectations of co-worker performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61(4), 570 - 581. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.61.4.570>

## PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

### **AI Disclosure Statement**

Tool Used: ChatGPT Edu

I selectively accepted wording suggestions and structural edits, and rejected others. All revisions were reviewed, modified, and integrated by me to preserve my original voice, arguments, and academic integrity. Specifically, AI tools were used to review my draft against the assignment requirements to ensure all criteria were addressed, and to help identify areas where my writing could be more concise in order to meet page limit requirements. All analysis, interpretation, and conclusions presented in this assignment are my own. All text was written on Google Documents before being transferred to Microsoft Word for submission. All edits and version histories can be provided upon request.

Examples of prompts used include:

- “Did what I write match up to the assignment requirements?”
  - “Did I miss anything?”
- “I want to delete 2-3 sentences. Do not rewrite or paraphrase. Give me the specific sentences or words that are redundant and unnecessary.”
- “How would I score based on the grading rubric?”