



EMERALD POINTS

IDENTITY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

A Complex Journey Between Identity
Features, Struggles and Dimensions

ANDREA TOMO



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BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	vii
<i>About the Author</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1. Challenging Identity Issues in the Public Sector: Opportunity or Threat?	7
2. A Mapping of 'Identity in the Public Sector': Dealing With Context, Organizational and Individual Dimensions	51
3. Public Employees and Remote Working: Making Sense of Identity and the (New) Workplace	73
Conclusions	123
<i>Index</i>	135

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LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Chapter 1

Figure 1.1.	Most Recurring Patterns and Interactions Between Identity Features.	34
Figure 1.2.	The Iterative Process of Identity Formation.	35

Chapter 2

Figure 2.1.	The Science Mapping of 'Identity in the Public Sector'.	56
Figure 2.2.	Dimensions and Positioning of Clusters.	61
Figure 2.3.	The Extended Framework to Understand Identity in the Public Sector.	64

Chapter 3

Figure 3.1.	Participants #1 and #13's (Home) Workplace.	86
Figure 3.2.	Participant #6 (Home) Workplace.	88
Figure 3.3.	Participant #16 (Home) Workplace.	88
Figure 3.4.	Participant #25 (Home) Workplace.	90
Figure 3.5.	Participant #32 (Home) (Itinerant) Workplace.	91
Figure 3.6.	Participant #24 (Home) (Itinerant) Workplace.	92
Figure 3.7.	Participant #8 Sign on the Door.	95
Figure 3.8.	Participant #23 (Home) Workplace.	97
Figure 3.9.	The 3PW Model.	107

Chapter 1

Table 1.1.	Identity Features in the Public Sector: An Overview of Threats, Struggles and Coping Behaviours.	17
Table 1.2.	Overview of the Studies.	18
Table 1.3.	Cases of Public Administrations.	28
Table 1.4.	Geographical Areas.	28
Table 1.5.	Research Methods Used by Authors.	29

Chapter 2

Table 2.1.	The Clusters Emerging From the Analysis.	55
Table 2.2.	Clusters and Associated Dimensions.	59

Table 2.3.	Processes of Interpretation and Translation.	63
Chapter 3		
Table 3.1.	Details of Participants Interviewed.	83
Table 3.2.	A Summary of Practices Connected to the Type of Identity Work and Their Descriptions.	101
Table 3.3.	Positive and Negative Aspects of Smart Working Emerging From the Interviews.	106

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INTRODUCTION

Identity is a crucial, complex and multifaceted concept that has important implications for organisations, groups and individuals. Indeed, identity refers to the sense of self and the ways in which individuals define themselves in relation to others (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and it is influenced by a range of factors, including social norms, cultural values, personal experiences and organisational contexts (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Stets & Burke, 2000). In this regard, identity may influence organisational performance, employee motivation and job satisfaction (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010).

Indeed, external factors may bring threats and challenges to identity creating individual reactions and resistance to organisational change projects that, in turn, are likely to fail (Tomo, 2019).

Public sector is not new to failures because of too many change projects imposed without any learning action from previous failures (Tomo, 2018). Indeed, too often top-down initiatives demonstrated a lack of consistency, coherence and acceptance at the individual (micro) level (Meyer, Egger-Peitler, Höllerer, & Hammerschmid, 2014; Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006; Spanò, Tomo, & Parker, 2022; Thomas & Davies, 2005). This is not only with reference to old bureaucratic models but also to more recent New Public Management (NPM) and post NPM-inspired reforms.

In a context where many issues remained unsolved, COVID-19 brought a new challenge related to a sudden acceleration of the digital transformation of public administrations, which are now facing a complete reorganisation of working practices, structures as well as human resource management policies (Todisco, Tomo, Canonico, & Mangia, 2023). The spread of Smart Working (SW) and other agile forms of work is probably creating a new wave of reforms for the public sector imprinted by many NPM-derived concepts in combination with, or reframed within, a context characterised by the pervasive use of technology. In this sense, if we consider NPM as a regime (Spanò et al., 2022), then we might also start considering SW as a new regime regulated by its rules, with its ‘language’ and ‘vocabulary’, as well as with its supporters and detractors.

Since identity is complex and threats may come from different levels (context, organisational, individual) (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), there would be a benefit from an in-depth understanding of this complexity, the underlying relations between identity features and the intertwined and integrated processes taking place behind the 'curtains' of identification processes.

On these grounds, the purpose of this book is to offer insights on the interplay between public sector reforms and organisational changes at the macro (context) and meso (organisational) levels and their impact on the micro level (individuals). In more detail, this book will guide the reader through the complex journey between identity features, struggles and dimensions as an in-depth analysis of the micro level affected by macro and meso changes in the public sector. This book is grounded in the awareness that the public sector inefficiencies (from manifold perspectives such as the economic, social, organisational and institutional ones), despite the expensive reforms and measures taken, remained unsolved because of the lack of attention to how the changes introduced were grounded, translated and experienced at the micro level. In this regard, the micro level analysis requires further attention towards issues such as behaviours, relations and individual identity. By doing so, this book aims at unveiling the 'black box' of identity in the public sector, offering a support for public management into a complex and quite blurred research area, providing a new theoretical and practical approach to the analysis and interpretation of the issues examined.

On these premises, the first chapter will frame the issue of identity and its importance within organisation and management studies, and more specifically within the public sector domain. This chapter will discuss the main aspects that previous approaches to the public administration left unsolved, with specific reference to behavioural, relational and identity issues. By means of a literature review using Web of Science, this chapter will reconstruct previous literature on 'identity in the public sector' and deeply analyse identity struggles, their antecedents (i.e. the threats and challenges that engender an identity struggle) and consequences (i.e. coping behaviours or strategies adopted to deal with identity struggles) to expose the reasons why often public employees resist to projects of organisational change.

Results from the review are then problematised focusing on how the literature addressed these issues and how these have been tackled in practice. The last section will then suggest an iterative process to understand the interaction between the identity features (threats, struggles, and coping behaviours). Some suggestions are finally provided to improve the analysis as well as to draw more in-depth insights from the study of identity in the public sector.

The first chapter will also form the basis of the analysis carried out in the second chapter to tighten the disparate literature by unveiling the key macro-areas/dimensions concerning identity in the public sector.

Indeed, the second chapter will provide a closer look to the different macro-areas/dimensions exploring identity in the public sector by means of bibliometric and co-words analyses using VOSviewer and relying upon the database of the literature review from the first chapter. The co-words analysis will furnish a mapping of the most recurring keywords and links within the identity literature in the public sector domain. The clusters emerging from the analysis will also allow the identification of both more and less investigated areas/dimensions to provide suggestions for future research direction but also to shed lights on latent dimensions supporting a theorisation on the issue of identity in the public sector. In more detail, six clusters emerged from the analysis: Cluster 1 – External drivers of change; Cluster 2 – Roles and rules imposition; Cluster 3 – Organisational Citizenship; Cluster 4 – Regimes and organisational control; Cluster 5 – Relations and interactions; Cluster 6 – Impression management.

These clusters supported a process of abstraction and theorisation to suggest an extended framework to understand the complexity of identity in the public context because of the interaction of many underlying (strictly connected) processes of interpretation and translations of reforms from the macro level (context) and procedures and structures at the meso level (organisation) to the micro level (individual).

Finally, the dimensions/clusters emerging from the second chapter will represent the conceptual basis for the empirical analysis in Chapter 3. Indeed, by recovering the discussion about SW as a new regime, the concepts behind the two clusters 4 (Regimes) and 5 (Relations and interactions) (*Foucault, control, subjectivity and workplace*) will be further analysed to answer to some questions solicited by the ‘new normal’ characterised by the ‘working from distance’ (Välikangas & Lewin, 2020; Yang, 2020): *How public employees interpreted the revolutionary change introduced by the spread of SW? What type of identity did they develop? How did employees make sense of their new ‘workplaces’? What kind of struggles did they experience? How employees working from distance can be motivated by managers without exceeding in new (pervasive) forms of control?*

On these grounds, Chapter 3 will rely upon an ethnographic analysis using photo-elicitation and interviews with public employees to explore their feelings, emotions and development of identities during the lockdown period (2020) and how these have been influenced by their new workplaces (their houses). Interviews will also consider the more recent period where SW is no

longer an imposition (as it was during 2020 to avoid the spread of the pandemic) but a choice for employees who ask for it to catch how their point of view on SW (positive and negative aspects) changed before and after the pandemic.

This book attempts to present a more holistic approach to the comprehension and analysis of individual identity in the public sector. It reviews previous literature on the issue but also challenges it and provides further insights that might be of interest for academics, public decision-makers and managers for a better understanding and management of complex organisational change projects in the public sector. Indeed, this book contributes both to theory and practice by unveiling and exposing the reasons behind public employees' resistance, the identity struggles they experience and their coping behaviours (i.e., strategies/identity work to deal with changes and identity struggles).

The findings offer key implications for theory, practice and policymaking, contending the importance of holistic approaches to the debate and abandoning pre-constituted schemes to put forth the relevance of behavioural, relational and identity issues. It offers a key message: contextual-specific and cultural factors influencing individual behaviours and identities are important and should better influence policymaking processes, in terms of a more informed look at how changes at macro and meso levels could affect the micro/individual level, thus reducing the occurrence of resistance to projects of organisational change and therefore improve the quality of public administrations' action.

In more detail, considering the above-mentioned intertwined and combined action of different processes at multiple levels, this book supports the analysis of these levels and the reflection on how these may be improved to create value not only *for the public* but also for those *working in the public*. More specifically:

- (1) at the macro/context level: the way public reforms are shaped, considering their effects not only on public administrations but also on their employees and related reactions and behaviours.
- (2) at the intersection between macro (context) and meso (universities and public administrations): the way training courses and other training initiatives for public employees are designed.
- (3) at the meso (organisational) level: the way public administrations design organisational procedures, structures and policies (especially HRM policies) and consider their employees' aspirations, experiences and identities.

- (4) at the intersection between meso (public administrations/organisations) and micro (individuals): the way public employees frame, and react to, contextual and organisational changes, reconsidering and readdressing their behavioural responses towards being active agents of change rather than being resistant or passive.
- (5) through a bottom-up process (following the top-down initiatives): individual responses may drive the improvement of both reforms at the macro (context) and policies at the meso (organisational) level.

On these grounds, the text proposes an analysis of a key contemporary issue related to the re-centring of the individual within the public administration. The consideration of the individual level in the analysis of identity makes this text of particular interest for researchers/academics interested in the field of public sector, but also for public employees and practitioners working within (or close to) the public sector (experts, consultants, professionals) to understand what are the main factors and challenges affecting identity and what are the possible strategies and behaviours used by public employees to cope with threats to their identity and expectations. This analysis represents a critical starting point to further comprehend from a theoretical, practical and policymaking point of view, what kind of interventions might reduce resistance, or other forms of passive behaviours, to changes at macro and meso levels in the public context. This might be the basis for creating or adding value in the whole administrative action of the public sector.

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CHALLENGING IDENTITY ISSUES IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: OPPORTUNITY OR THREAT?

1. Identity and Its Importance for Studying Organisations – 2. Public Sector Reforms and the Cage to Employees' Identity – 3. Framing of Identity Issues in the Public Sector: A Literature Review – 4. A Complex Approach to Identity: Discovering Threats, Struggles and Coping Behaviours – 5. The Contribution of Visual Methods for Enhancing Studies on Identity – 6. Final Remarks – 7. References

1. IDENTITY AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR STUDYING ORGANISATIONS

Understanding identity is crucial for a deep understanding of organisational life (Kenny, Whittle, & Willmott, 2011) because it relates to many key questions (e.g. Who am I? Who am I within my group of colleagues? Who am I in my organisation? How do I appear to other people and issues (gender, race, profession, religion, etc.)? (Kenny et al., 2011; Muir & Wetherell, 2010).

While 'personality' focuses on a person's inner aspects and refers to cognitive processes that influence how people behave, identity is something that can be both attributed to individuals and groups and that provides the frames through which a person makes sense of themselves in relation to others and within specific contexts (Kenny et al., 2011; Tomo, 2022). Therefore, identity also (and mainly) refers to socially available categories and can be contingent according to context, culture and history.

The literature on identity comprises multiple streams that often interconnect and sometimes overlap (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Brown, 2019; Corlett, McInnes, Coupland, & Sheep, 2017). There are studies focusing on identity conceptualisation (Brown, 2006; Slay & Smith, 2011; Zanoni, Thoelen, & Ybema, 2017), and how identities shape organisational outcomes (Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Wright, Nyberg, & Grant, 2012). There are also studies on the politics of corporate (Rodrigues & Child, 2008) and professional identity construction (Goretzki, Strauss, & Weber, 2013; Tomo, 2019, 2022; Tomo & Spanò, 2020). Other studies consider dis-identification and self-alienation (Costas & Fleming, 2009), or the relationship between a personal identity that is relatively stable over time (Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane, & Greig, 2012; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), and a work identity that is less fluid and affected by groups and contexts (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Empson, 2013; Tomo, 2022). Finally, there are studies of the micro-politics of identity construction (Allain, Lemaire, & Lux, 2021; Brown, 2015) and how they may have meso- and macro-level consequences (Tomo, 2019).

Brown (2017) argued that *Recognition of multiple approaches to identity work and processes of organizational identification both brings clarity to a confused and confusing literature, and highlights issues for research that may prove generative* (p. 297). This entails that the literature on identity not necessarily has specific gaps but that the lack of systematisation may lead to contrasting evidence and partly overlook the relationship possibly existing between identity features (Tomo, 2019).

Indeed, as Alvesson et al. (2008, p. 9) have remarked, the literature is 'largely disconnected', and there is a requirement for 'a more engaged conversation across metatheoretical lenses'.

On these grounds, the literature would benefit from studies using mixed theoretical-practical oriented approaches and also from a multi-level approach to identity, to better tap into the dynamics occurring across levels (individual, organisational and contextual) (Ashforth, Rogers, & Corley, 2011; Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007; Empson, 2004). This means acknowledging the multifaceted and complex nature of identity and understanding the need of deep-diving into the dynamic relationship between identity features (Tomo, 2019). Many authors, when looking at these dynamics, refer to identity work (Ahuja, Heizmann, & Clegg, 2019; Brown, 2017; Lepisto, Crosina, & Pratt, 2015) as the effort that people put to maintain, repair and revise their personal and role identities. In this regard, the concept of identity work emerges as a key explanatory concept of individual as well as collective phenomena in which people build and rebuild their identities in the face of contingencies (Alvesson