

## SYMPOSIUM ARTICLE

# Public sector employees in a challenging work environment

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Public sector employees are expected to perform well in a work environment that is characterized by a variety of challenges. This Symposium aims to shed light on how environmental changes impact the shared identity, attitudes and behaviour of public sector employees; how public sector employees take charge of continuous change and deal with challenges in their work environment; and how organizations can help employees to tackle such work-related challenges. We identify four specific gaps in literature—some methodological and some more substantive in nature—and explain how this Symposium helps to address these gaps.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This Symposium is devoted to public sector employees working in a demanding work environment. Public sector employees are expected to perform well in a work environment that is characterized by a variety of challenges, some already long known and some related to more recent trends. Most challenges apply to the whole public sector, but there are also challenges that are more dominant in particular areas of public sector work where the environment is changing more rapidly. For example, think of the teachers who have to teach students with different cultural and language backgrounds at a time when teacher shortage is high. A challenge traditionally identified in public administration research concerns employees in public organizations being confronted with high levels of red tape (Bozeman et al. 1992; Davis 2013). Furthermore, public sector organizations are characterized by conflicting values and goal ambiguity (Hood 1991; Rainey et al. 1995). Employees in public organizations are challenged to balance 'traditional' public values such as integrity, neutrality, and legality, on the one hand, with 'business-like' values such as efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness on the other hand. As society gets more diverse, representativeness is increasingly difficult to realize, thereby adding to the already 'complex set of objectives that public managers and organizations must pursue' (Rainey 2009, p. 108). In addition, challenges are associated with the growing expectation to serve citizens and to act in a responsive way. For example, in the field of inspection services we detect a recently intensified shift from command and control based inspection practices to responsive regulation (Rutz et al. 2017). This trend leads to changed inspector–inspectee relationships in which inspectors do not simply enforce rules and regulations, but are also expected to take into account inspectees' needs and demands (Vigoda 2002).

The observation that working in the public sphere entails challenging and complex situations is certainly not a new one. However, there are still gaps in the literature—some methodological and some more substantive in nature—that have not yet been addressed. For instance, in most studies on this subject employees are seen as having a rather ‘passive’ role: their attitudes are affected by the increasingly challenging working environment. Less attention has been paid to the question of which capacities or what (proactive) behaviour are necessary to handle this challenging work environment. In addition, research is likely to benefit from paying attention to the potential positive side of a challenging public sector work environment, and relinquishing the idea that a demanding and complex work environment is all bad. From a methodological point of view, alternatives to the frequently used cross-sectional survey designs are necessary to reduce the risk of common source bias and to enable insight into whether outcome variables maintain their meaning across different levels of analysis.

This Symposium aims to address these gaps in the literature and, through this, to contribute to our knowledge and understanding of public sector employees in a challenging work environment. In particular, we aim to shed light on how environmental challenges impact the shared identity, attitudes and behaviour of public sector employees; how public sector employees take charge of continuous change and deal with challenges in their work environment; and how organizations can help employees to deal with work-related challenges.

The remainder of this Introduction is structured as follows: first, we provide a short, non-exhaustive review of employees’ attitudes in general and employees working in a complex environment in particular. Second, we identify two methodological and two more substantive gaps in the literature on this issue, and explain how this Symposium helps to address these gaps. In doing so, we aim to provide directions for future research. We conclude this Introduction by summarizing the key findings of the articles included in this Symposium.

## 2 | PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES IN A CHALLENGING WORK ENVIRONMENT

Research on public sector employees in general and on individuals working in challenging environments, in particular, frequently focuses on employees’ attitudes, such as organizational commitment and job satisfaction. How can this interest in attitudes be explained? Attitudes have been found to be solid predictors for organizational-relevant outcomes including performance, attendance and organizational citizenship behaviour, and therefore have been studied by psychologists and organizational behaviour scholars for several decades (see the meta-analysis by Meyer et al. 2002). Also in the field of public administration, the question how attitudes can be stimulated and what their outcomes are has been the subject of extensive research. In this section we provide a short, non-exhaustive review of the literature.

For example, using a large sample of professionals working in the Egyptian health and education sector, Mostafa et al. (2015) found that affective commitment can be fostered by high-performance human resource practices and that this relationship is partially mediated by public service motivation. In line with this, research by Dick (2011) showed that organizational commitment of a county police force in the UK can be improved by managerial factors. Recent research by Jacobsen and Stanioek (2018) found a positive relationship between organizational commitment and employees’ perception of their supervisors as transformational leaders among Danish teachers. In addition, organizational socialization tactics, such as formal training and mentorships, are found to affect employees’ identities, values and motivation, especially those of newcomers in the organization (for a review, see Moyson et al. 2018). Regarding the outcomes of attitudes, Vermeeren et al. (2011) found evidence that employees’ satisfaction is positively associated with customers’ satisfaction. Next to this, a growing body of research has focused on identifying the outcomes of public service motivation (for a review, see Ritz et al. 2016). Aggregate results suggest that the concept of public service motivation is positively associated with work-related outcomes such as organizational citizenship behaviour and organizational and individual performance.

Studies also address employees' attitudes related to the specificities of the work context of public organizations. For example, goal conflicts and goal ambiguity in public sector organizations are found to have detrimental effects on work motivation and job satisfaction (Wright and Davis 2003; Wright 2004). Gould-Williams et al. (2014) showed that work overload has a negative effect on employees' attitudes. In particular, the authors found that high levels of workload are positively associated with intentions to quit the job and negatively associated with job satisfaction. Others have identified red tape as an important antecedent of public sector employees' job dissatisfaction (Strand and Dore 2009), a decline in job involvement and motivation (Pandey and Scott 2002; Welch and Pandey 2007), increased work alienation (DeHart-Davis and Pandey 2005), and feelings of normlessness (Bozeman and Scott 1996). Scholars have also taken into account that working in the specific context of public government inevitably entails a need to make decisions in the face of value dilemmas (cf. Hood 1991; De Graaf et al. 2016). The latter is particularly the case when public employees perform their tasks in interaction with others. This includes not only co-workers or public managers. Research also directs attention to coping strategies of public sector professionals in interaction with service users (e.g., Jensen and Andersen 2015) and citizen co-producers (e.g., Jaspers and Steen 2018).

### 3 | ADDRESSING SOME REMAINING QUESTIONS: FOUR CONTRIBUTIONS

While the above does not provide a full review of the literature on employees' attitudes in demanding work environments, it does show that many questions have already been tackled. A challenging work context is found to have an—often negative—impact on the attitudes of public sector employees. This observation is alarming since attitudes and motivations have been identified as important predictors of work-related outcomes. In this section we highlight some methodological and substantial questions that have not yet been fully answered. Moreover, we point out how this Symposium helps to address these questions.

First, the studies reviewed above assign a rather 'passive' role to employees. The underlying assumption is that employees' attitudes are negatively affected by the challenging work environment. Much less attention is given to the employees who can actually deal with these challenges. Which characteristics, capabilities, and motives are necessary to stay engaged and committed in such a context? This Symposium wants to draw attention to a different perspective in studying employees' attitudes in challenging work environments: one that considers employees as 'active' rather than 'passive' agents. The rationale for this perspective comes from different fields. For example, psychologists and organizational behavioural scholars have identified problem-focused coping strategies (as opposed to passive coping strategies) as a personal resource to deal with changes and complex situations (e.g., Ashford 1988; Martin et al. 2006). In his study on changing forms of professionalism, Noordegraaf (2016) stresses the need to stimulate the development of so-called 'organizing and connective capacities' and the ability to be reflective in times of organizational and societal changes. In their recent study on veterinary inspectors, Schott et al. (2018) found that having clear job expectations when entering a public sector job helps inspectors to successfully deal with daily work demands such as increasingly aggressive inspectees.

Almost two decades ago, Jackson and Stainsby (2000) already predicted that public sector managers of the 21st century would need greater tolerance for ambiguity as well as willingness to take considerable risks, in order to manage new organizational network forms effectively. In this Symposium, Homberg et al. (2019) introduce a new capability that could help individuals deal with everyday working life. Their empirical research shows that important capabilities of successful organizational change reside within employees who take charge of continuous improvements in order to deal with an increasingly complex and demanding work environment.

Second, a challenging environment is often seen as a risk for employees' well-being in the short term and for organizational performance in the long term. Dissatisfied employees who are not committed to the organization are feared to have less energy or even leave the organization, resulting in a loss of knowledge and increased costs for attracting, selecting and training newcomers. Based on change literature (Kuipers et al. 2014), we argue that it is useful to pay attention to the potential positive sides of a challenging public sector work environment. For example,

work environment challenges may force us to reconsider entrenched patterns of working, leadership behaviour, and the way we train and motivate newcomers. Direct support for the claim that an overly demanding context is not necessarily all bad is provided by Audenaert et al. (2019). The authors found evidence that employees' organizational commitment is not negatively affected by an overly demanding work environment, provided that employees experience a supportive social exchange relationship with the organization. As such their analysis fits well with Karasek's (1979) job-demands model and Bakker and Demerouti's job demands-resources model (2007), which stress the need to balance high demands with the provision of relevant resources.

A first methodological shortcoming of the literature discussed above relates to most studies being cross-sectional in nature, measuring the relationship between work context and individual attitudes by relying on employees' perceptions. Although increasingly used in public administration research (Groeneveld et al. 2015), this type of data and research design increases the risk of common source bias and does not allow claiming causal interference (Podsakoff et al. 2003). As a consequence, we cannot rule out the possibility that the relationship between dissatisfaction and conflicting goals, for instance, is the result of dissatisfied employees who experience goals to be more conflicting simply because they invest less energy to sort them out (instead of higher levels of dissatisfaction being the result of conflicting goals). The risks associated with common method bias stress the need to make use of objective data and to use different sources of data (e.g., objective and subjective data from employees, supervisors, and co-workers). If collecting data from different sources is not possible, measuring the dependent and independent variables at different moments in time could be an alternative strategy to reduce common method bias. After all, the time-lag helps to create psychological separation between independent and dependent variables (see Audenaert et al. 2019).

A second methodological limitation of current research relates to research often analysing data at the individual level only. To gain a better understanding of attitudinal phenomena in organizational settings, Demerouti and Bakker (2011) encourage researchers to integrate multiple levels in their research and to analyse whether outcome variables maintain their meaning when including different levels of analysis. On the basis of this, we encourage scholars to research attitudes and behaviours not only at the individual level, but also at the multiple levels (e.g., team level and organizational level) that structure public organizations. This stresses the need for large datasets making this type of analysis possible. In this Symposium, different contributions address this need for a multi-level approach. Audenaert et al. (2019) study the impact of a job-level characteristic—the balance between employers' expectations of employees' contributions and the rewards offered—on a variable set at the individual level, namely affective commitment. In addition, they study the role of an individual-level resource. This is the employee's individual perception of a supportive or non-supportive social exchange relationship with the organization, as a buffer to increasing job demands. Also, van Kleef et al. (2019) take into account multiple levels as they study individual inspectors' identity and commitment being influenced by job requirements, the interaction at team level, organizational-level socialization practices, and even interaction with actors (e.g., inspectees) outside the organization. Finally, Reissner (2019) focuses on the interplay between organizational and collective levels of analysis, rather than looking at individual employee outcomes. She studies how multiple institutional logics affect collective sensemaking in hybrid organizations, which in turn impacts the organizational identity of members as a collective.

## 4 | OVERVIEW

Although at first sight the five articles in this Symposium seem to address a very broad range of issues, they do have in common that they contribute to our knowledge of public sector employees working in a demanding environment by paying particular attention to the question how this work environment impacts public sector employees' attitudes and their identity, what (coping) behaviour these employees show in response, or what support the organization can offer. Below we provide a short overview of the studies included in this Symposium and explain how these studies contribute to our knowledge regarding (1) the multiple facets of the public sector work environment, (2) effective

(coping) behaviour as one way to deal with these challenges at an individual level, and (3) the potential role of organizations in supporting their employees.

The collection of articles in this Symposium shows that the challenges of working in the public sector can take different forms. Audenaert et al. (2019) based their analysis on the high expectations that public sector organizations hold of their employees. They refer to macro-level changes that help explain these increasing demands, such as the introduction of market mechanisms under New Public Management (NPM) or New Public Governance reforms. Their analysis, however, specifically focuses on jobs becoming 'unbalanced' as increasing expectations about employees' contributions are not necessarily balanced by the inducements offered, such as investment in employees' careers, employment security or other resources. The NPM downsizing adage of 'doing more with less' is a typical example. Interestingly, while their empirical analysis identifies both overdemanding and balanced approaches to the employment relationship in the public organization under study, they do not identify overinvestment where high investments in employees are not coupled with high expected contributions. Also Homberg et al. (2019) refer to macro-level changes such as a focus on e-government, quality management, and good government as causes of a challenging public work environment. They explore the question why and how organizational members take charge of these macro-level changes at the front-end of the organization. Reissner (2019) states that the increasingly demanding context for employees concerns a specific NPM trend, namely the hybridization of organizations, for example through strategic partnerships or joint ventures that are formed between public and private organizations. Boundaries between public and private logics have become less clear, resulting in confusion and ambiguity about the employees' collective organizational identity. According to Steijn and Van der Voet (2019), the challenge relates to public sector employees finding less opportunity to interact with service beneficiaries, and to the employees perceiving their work to have less impact due to increasing levels of bureaucratic procedures and administrative regulations.

The potential devastating impact of red tape on employees' jobs and attitudes, in turn, highlights the importance of the question to what extent the increased focus on performance, accountability and quality of services in public sector organizations has brought along with its (over)extended bureaucratic control procedures. The challenge of Van Kleef et al.'s (2019) study relates to inspectors having to enforce rule compliance and make decisions that are coherent with those taken by their colleagues, yet at the same time they need to be sensitive to the specific situation of the inspectee. Here, trade-offs between competing values ultimately set limits on the ability of rules and regulations, checklists and procedures, and even socialization practices such as training and mentorships to provide a clear answer to what is appropriate behaviour expected in specific situations encountered in the field. This issue has also been discussed extensively in the literature on street-level bureaucrats' discretionary power.

Furthermore, each article in the Symposium focuses on explaining (changing) attitudes and the identity of public sector employees by (1) focusing on antecedents of organizational commitment, job satisfaction, role clarity or task mastery; (2) studying the impact of individuals' prosocial or public service motivation; (3) looking into proactive and extra-role behaviour; or (4) studying organizational identity as employees' collective sense of self. In addition, the Symposium contributions teach us about the coping behaviour of public sector employees when confronted with challenges. Audenaert et al.'s (2019) analysis of demanding employment relationships is based on the hypothesis that employees weigh up job demands and the job resources offered and, consequently, cope with unbalanced conditions by reducing their affective commitment. In Reissner's (2019) analysis, employees cope with ambiguity and even incompatibility in the institutional logics of a hybrid organization through collective sensemaking. They seek to shape the organization by comparing the organization with its constituting partners and framing their expectations. The study by Homberg et al. (2019) suggests that so-called 'taking charge behaviour' could be an important ability of public employees that enables them to deal with the increasingly complex work environment. The contributions by Van Kleef et al. (2019) and Steijn and van der Voet (2019), in particular, demonstrate the vulnerability of employees in demanding contexts. Steijn and van der Voet (2019) find that rather than being a resource that helps public sector employees to cope with the burdens of red tape, prosocial motivation strengthens the negative effects of red tape on job satisfaction. Van Kleef et al. (2019) show how inspectors cope with the complexity of their work by seeking

information and feedback both inside their organization and in their contact with inspectees. The resulting processes of informal socialization, however, reveal inspectors' vulnerability to 'capture' by the organizations being inspected.

Third, although not always explicitly discussed, the contributions to this Symposium teach us about how public sector organizations can help employees to deal with work-related challenges. Audenaert et al. (2019) put the spotlight on job demands and resources and show that organizations, through structuring and managing jobs, affect individual employees' attitudes. Yet at the same time, taking into account employees' perceptions of their relationship with the organization, their analysis demonstrates that the supportive practices of an organization are ultimately filtered by the employees' interpretations. In turn, these interpretations are influenced by the long-term trust that has been built (or that, in contrast, is lacking) in the organization–employee relationship. Steijn and van der Voet's (2019) analysis can be considered a call to organizations. When designing jobs, they need to take into account job impact, job contact as well as time that employees have to spend dealing with bureaucratic procedures and regulations. A message put forward by Van Kleef et al. (2019) is that organizations' intentional practices to socialize their employees through selection procedures, providing training programmes or installing mentorships do have effects. The authors additionally show that these efforts might be supported, yet can also be counteracted by informal socialization outside of the organization's direct sphere of influence. The study by Homberg et al. (2019) suggests that not only transformational leadership, but also perceived organizational support and access to resources are important for taking charge behaviour. The ability to deal with a changing work environment can be stimulated by empowering employees and setting a clear vision.

To conclude, safeguarding the well-being of the workforce and good organizational performance in demanding work contexts is a difficult act that includes maintaining a healthy balance between demands and resources. However, as we want to close this Introduction to the Symposium 'Public Sector Employees in a Challenging Work Environment' on a positive note, we argue that challenges in the work environment may also present opportunities for changing entrenched patterns of working, leadership behaviour, and the way we train and motivate newcomers for the better. This positive approach to the challenging work environment of many public sector employees is a line of research that deserves more attention.

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