

Taking stock of organization and performance in the public sector

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Abstract. To deepen our understanding of the publicness-performance relationship, the paper combines and integrates two conceptual models. This qualitative research seeks to cast light on two categories of organizational variables that act as performance moderators, i.e., agency-level factors and individual-level factors, by selectively reviewing academic studies on the performance of public services. It then discusses the implications of the extended model developed by the authors and suggests future research trajectories.

Keywords. Performance, public organizations, organizational variables, effectiveness

Introduction

One of the most important functions of public organizations is to provide efficient, effective, and equitable services that meet the expectations of citizens. In other words, public organizations are expected to achieve high standards in a range of performance dimensions [1][2:185].

The subject of public services performance has always interested scholars and policymakers but the idea that organizations should measure and actively manage their performance remains a highly controversial and multifaceted issue. In public services, performance applies to different levels, from the individual person to a complex system such as health or education, or to the entire public administration apparatus [3]. Moreover, subjective expectations and preferences make performance contingent by nature because it reflects the specific perspectives of the observers (internal or external stakeholders) in space and in time. Then there is the fact that performance is a moving target, which raises the hardly negligible question of the effective spaces, many beyond the control of the public managers, in which senior and middle managers can intervene with purposive action. For example, many decisions in public settings are mandatory and regulated by unavoidable norms [4][5]. Strategic management in a mandated organization setting is different from strategic management in a voluntary organization [6]. In other cases, ‘some internal characteristics, too, may be largely inherited from the past and serve as constraints on contemporary public settings. These include the age composition of the workforce and the prevailing organizational culture’ [2: ibidem].

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Fortunately, new intelligence on social phenomena and the development of appropriate analysis tools increasingly enable the conceptualization of performance and the conditions that favor or impede it. One recent analysis, for example, recognizes that ‘managerial influences on public program performance are multiple, substantively as well as statistically significant, and yet accompanied by other influences that need to be taken into consideration’ [7:10]. That research takes a formal approach and attributes approximately 20 percent of the performance variance across public organizations to top management-related effects. Nevertheless, the methods used in practice to assess and manage performances are often found to be flawed, which naturally has spurred the growth of the academic literature on opportunism, procedural compliance [8] and perverse outcomes of performance management regimes [9][1].

Still today, no overarching theory of effectiveness has been developed. The ‘performance tide’ [10] continues to produce contributions inspired by disparate theoretical traditions and disciplines, while the extant literature on the subject is highly fragmented.

The Special Issue of *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (2011) published a study [11] that sought to unravel the relationship between publicness and performance through an extensive review of the empirical evidence. Specifically, the authors developed a conceptual model based on the three performance criteria of efficiency, effectiveness and equity and the three dimensions of publicness, i.e., ownership, funding and control, that supports two key assumptions: first, that the effects of the dimensions of publicness are not separate but interactive; and, second, that publicness effects are moderated by organizational variables [11:i306]. But what does ‘organizational variables’ mean exactly? The study does not sufficiently address this umbrella term, implying that the authors consider the organizational variables a kind of ‘black box’, or an opaque space between the antecedents and the expected performances. None of which is very informative for public management research and practice. And this risks overshadowing organizational reflection [12].

The paper advances the attempt to open this ‘black box’. Drawing on both the model developed by Andrews, Boyne, & Walker (“AB&W model”) and a concept-building procedure, the paper sets out to identify a number of organizational contingencies that, according to recent literature on public services, are expected to shape public-sector performance, intended as the ‘achievements of public programs and organizations in terms of the outputs and outcomes that they produce’ [7:2]. The article therefore seeks to extend current understanding on the mediating role of organizational characteristics on public services performance by shedding light on the two types of organizational variables that act as performance moderators, i.e., agency-level factors and individual-level factors. The aim is to further clarify the conceptual underpinnings of the relationship between publicness and performance.

The paper consists of the introduction and six sections: Section 1 presents the AB&W model; Section 2 illustrates the research approach adopted; Section 3 outlines the findings of the ‘Internal Organization’ literature review; Section 4 explains why the authors decided to choose a model of factors that influence the performances of the internal organization; Section 5 proposes the AB&W model redesigned as a result of this work; and Section 6 closes the paper with a discussion of the findings and the implications for future research.

1. The AB&W model

Most recent research on publicness and performance implicitly assumes that ownership, funding and control are crucial dimensions that affect the efficiency ('the cost per unit of output or of service delivery'), effectiveness ('the extent to which policy objectives are being achieved') and equity ('how fairly outputs and outcomes are distributed among key targets or stakeholders') of public services [7:2]. The theoretical reflections, empirical evidence and common sense suggest that many factors - summed up in three words 'programs, organizations, people' [10] - are relevant to performance. Nevertheless, when it comes to assessing the impact of publicness on performance, most of the empirical studies use ownership 'as the sole publicness criterion' [11:i306]. Moreover, there are 'numerous models of performance but few come with any clear theoretical explanation or empirical validation' [10:508].

This unsatisfactory state of affairs has spurred a group of leading scholars to develop a basic yet effective general model that covers all three dimensions of publicness: ownership, funding, and control. Unlike the mainstream literature, which tends to focus on each of the three aspects separately (ownership in particular), the AB&W model argues that the three dimensions have interactive effects on performance. The broader contribution of the model is that the publicness-performance relationship is influenced by organizational and managerial variables (indicated in Fig. 1 as 'Organizational characteristics') that function as moderators.

The model was tested through a review of academic studies on publicness and organizational performance, the outcome of which indicates that publicness makes a difference to efficiency and equity and that ownership exercises less influence than commonly believed. Moreover, the magnitude and direction of these effects can change noticeably from one study to another. Indeed, the heterogeneous studies analyzed, for instance, do not place the same emphasis on the three dimensions of publicness, so the results need to be interpreted with caution. Further, few studies cover all the dimensions of publicness. In brief, the model supports the idea that 'management matters': moderators make a difference to the apparent effects of publicness, conclude the authors, therefore a further conceptualization effort is needed to prise open the black box. The study tables a far-reaching research agenda on the dimensions of publicness and organizational performance.

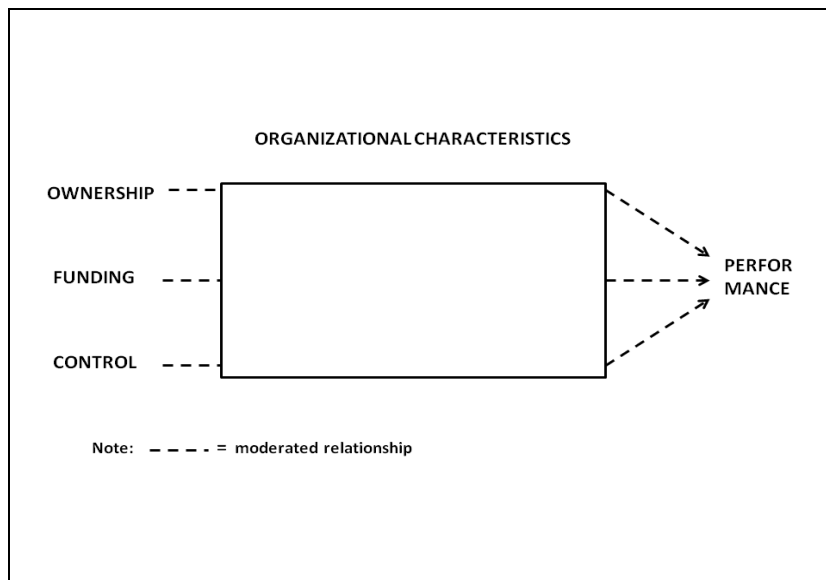


Figure 1: The AB&W Model - Dimensions of Publicness Moderated by Organizational Characteristics [1: i306]

2. Research approach

The theoretical basis of the AB&W model was the springboard for designing a four-step research path aimed at reviewing the existing literature on the ‘internal organization’ moderating variable. First, an in-depth examination of the works cited by AB&W in the performance articles published since 2000 identified 12 academic studies potentially useful to breaking down the ‘organizational characteristics’ moderating variable of the 2011 study into several sub-variables. Second, a detailed analysis of the selected articles highlighted some variables and sub-variables of potential interest to performance. In addition, a conceptual model developed by Brewer and Selden in 2000 [13] that fits with the aims of this study was retrieved. That model (“B&S model”) establishes a strong relationship between public services performance and the managerial decisions on organization (internal organization characteristics). Two later research papers, one on articles that referred to the work of B&S and the other on keywords in the title or in the text (i.e., ‘internal organization change’, ‘change management’ + ‘public’, ‘internal change’ + ‘public’, ‘organization change’ + ‘public’), identified the 11 key articles that used the B&S model published by four top public management journals: *Administration and Policy*, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *Public Administration*, and *Public Administration Review* from 2001 to 2013, which led the authors to additional studies on the topics of interest. Fourth, the findings of the literature review and the conceptualization proposed by Brewer and Selden were combined and incorporated into the original AB&W model. The reworked model replaces the ‘black box’ with a number of agency-level factors and individual-level factors that act as moderators in the ownership, funding and control of public organizations.

3. Findings of the literature review on ‘Internal Organization’

Of the works produced by the three authors in the last decade, only George Boyne takes a structured, specific and head-on approach to the performance of some organizational characteristics. In 2002, Boyne and Jay Dahya [14] co-developed a model of the impact of executive succession on organizational performance to address important variables such as structure, processes, and leadership. The model is meant to guide researchers in empirical investigations since the authors consider the effect of executive succession on performance to be significant. The key concepts are the motivations of the chief executives, the available resources, and the opportunities that exist to influence performance, which anyhow depend on a significant number of internal and external circumstances. For the purposes of this study, we are interested in the internal circumstances summarized by the authors in 13 (out of a total of 17) testable hypotheses that respond to the characteristics of the terminal position (e.g., for how long was the predecessor in office, the rate of turnover, and the number of formal roles played), those of the organization (e.g., size, organizational processes, and budgetary priorities), and those of the person (e.g., ability in transformational leadership, motives). The replacement of the chief executive officer and the ensuing shift in strategy triggers a number of internal changes to the organizational structures, the processes, the personnel and the budgetary priorities. As well as its specificities, the model is interesting because it proposes a structuring of the internal organizational characteristics where management plays an important role for performance purposes, albeit from a different perspective to that of New Public Management [15].

In other articles, Andrews, Boyne, and Walker cite the work of other authors when referring to organizational characteristics. Nevertheless, two of their considerations help to frame the question and to specify our field of investigation. First, the limited revenues and the fixed market of the public sector restrict the strategic options to improve services to the organizational aspects [16]. Second, these latter are divided into internal and external organizational components with the former referring to variables such as structure, culture, leadership and processes and the latter to the interorganizational relations with other actors, such as service outsourcers [17]. It is important to underscore this distinction because changes often take place simultaneously at both the internal organization and the external organization level. For reasons of space, this paper focuses on the internal organization characteristics deemed relevant to the core issue of performance.

As far as we can ascertain, the works of AB&W refer to 12 papers that have addressed internal organization performance in public bodies, while bemoaning the leanness of the empirical research on the subject [16].

Some of the papers address important variables such as structure, culture and leadership but applied to a specific issue or managerial tool. For example, [18] carried out a survey on the adoption of strategic planning in US federal agencies but do not examine the internal enabling organizational conditions that support this innovation. Furthermore, the authors observe that the results obtained this way are still not clear and must be further studied through additional research methods: in fact, the authors found that performance measures are only rarely included in strategic planning. Process formulation and implementation is a key issue and two authors [19] address the far-reaching consequences of comprehensive reforms in state governments in the USA, concentrating on interactions among reform components (e.g., mergers among agencies,

introduction of strategic planning), although the intra-organizational consequences of such reforms are not a primary concern of their contribution.

Other authors [20] consider the positive effects of total quality management on the financial performance of hospitals, a type of performance not quite suited to the breadth of the AB&W model. Meier and O'Toole [21] research an interesting topic of public education, exploring network management styles characterized by greater interaction with environmental actors who are not direct line subordinates or superiors. Networking has positive impacts on performance in terms of effectiveness, and the findings suggest that these results might apply also to other, more complex public organizations. Networking is thus a managerial ability, a trait of the internal organization that enables interaction with external stakeholders of relevance to performance, and therefore a bridge that links the inside to the outside organization.

The majority of works cited by AB&W highlight specific aspects that lack a frame of reference. The exception is the article by Brewer and Selden [13], which provides a framework more suited to our purposes, whose work is explored in the following paragraph.

4. The model of internal organization adopted

Three reasons make the B&S model developed by Brewer and Selden [13] chime with our purpose. First, their performance-related values are the same as those adopted by AB&W - efficiency, effectiveness, and fairness - the only difference being that the latter authors use the term 'equity' instead of 'fairness' although the meaning is the same. Second, their work is cited by AB&W as one of a "limited number of empirical studies on culture, leadership, and human resource management to support the view that performance can be improved by internal organizational change" [16:55]. Finally, the taxonomy they propose differentiates between internal and external performance and between agency-level and individual-level factors, enabling the building of a complete reference grid. In fact, the model's independent variables were identified by the authors through an in-depth literature review to ensure the reliability of the grid used to classify the 'organizational characteristics' we are looking for beyond those used by Andrews, Boyne and Walker. The key variables of the theoretical model of organizational performance built by Brewer and Selden draw primarily (as the authors indicate explicitly) from Rainey and Steinbauer [22] and both contribute in part to the public sector motivation literature inspired by the work of Perry and Wise in 1990 [23]. The B&S model is summarized below.

The key factors that the authors include at the agency-level are:

- a1. 'organizational culture', which can be thought of as shared meaning; it is manifested at different levels and it includes the basic assumptions and beliefs of members of the organization;
- a2. 'human capital and capacity' concerns human resources management from recruitment, to training, and to retaining high-performing people;
- a3. 'agency support to NPR²' relates to how agencies respond to reform related mandates (often connected with downsizing and budget cuts);

² The acronym stands for National Partnership for Reinventing Government

- a4. 'leadership and supervision' has shown a positive correlation with organizational performance especially in the public administration;
- a5. 'red tape' concerns the amount of rules and regulations that affect both the complexity of organizational design (internal red tape) and the burdensome requirements imposed on those outside the organization (external red tape).

To which must be added the four key individual-level factors:

- b1. 'structure of task/work' is considered to influence overall performance and positively so when employees are given flexibility in accomplishing their work;
- b2. 'task motivation' has been found to spur agency performance;
- b3. 'public service motivation'. This factor, when present, is reported to be positively related to performance;
- b4. 'individual performance' is considered to contribute positively to overall performance.

In describing the performance components of the 'internal organization', the variables of this model have the advantage of reincorporating those considered in the studies on specific issues cited in the preceding section. For example, two of the total quality programmed conditions of efficacy are the training of persons and the support of top management [19], which are included among the agency-level abilities, respectively in the a2 variable (*human capital and capacity*) and the a4 variable (*leadership and supervision*). A further example of individual-level key factors is the managerial ability needed to achieve good levels of networking [21], which falls under the b4 factor (*individual performance*).

The work of B&S is often cited by the successive literature (e.g., 277 hits on Google Scholar): the four top journals published eight articles, seven of which co-authored by Andrews, Boyne or Walker and four co-authored by Brewer. The only individual contribution is that of Kim, who tested the individual-level factors of the B&S model in Korea and confirmed their significance [24]. In [25], the references to B&S merely indicate that their position is deemed similar to that of other authors, according to which, unlike the proponents of the isomorphism of institutional theory, the new organizational forms produce better results. [26] refer to their work to underscore how top managers shape strategies, affect implementation, and influence performance, generally recognizing the quality of leadership in public organizations. This clearly endorses the relevance of the a4 factor. In [27], the reader sees the research shift the focus from the external environment - where the public organizations are seen as trapped by their socioeconomic contexts and the rule of administration and law - to the growing importance assigned to management in raising performance levels. A scenario in which the B&S model is considered relevant also for its empirical research contribution, its results pointing to the importance of supervisory management, performance orientation, strong cultures that emphasize work and empower employees, and workforce diversity.

Three of the four articles written by Brewer either with Walker or Boyne address the a5 'red tape' variable, which, in the empirical analysis conducted in 2000, had failed to produce statistically meaningful results in terms of its impact on performance; a later research of 2009 [28] concludes that the consequences on the internal organization's efficiency are lower than generally believed and highlights unexpected negative effects on equity: an excess of rules, norms and procedures can raise access barriers to citizens less capable of understanding and overcoming them. Generally,

“when red tape is operationalized and measured as an aggregate, multifaceted concept, it is quite harmful to performance, whether judged from inside or outside the organization” [17:439]. This signifies that the variable can generate different and even opposing results, according to whether performance is approached as a whole or as single components (such as in the case of equity). This observation confirms the crucial role of this factor and the way it is defined and measured.

The more recent works to cite Brewer and Selden confirm also the importance of the b3 individual-level factor (*public service motivation*) to performance. Further, according to the results highlighted by the empirical studies [29], this type of motivation raises the issue of the pay-for-performance systems deemed positive by conventional wisdom and management practice in the public sector: in fact, the differential pay for public managers sows discontent among the organization’s personnel and has a negative impact on performance.

As anticipated in Section 2 on the research approach, given that the B&S model is based on the pre-2001 literature and to understand to what extent the works cite, confirm or dispute its validity, we searched four leading journals for other works that address the internal organization and could provide complementary or alternative indications to those of B&S to complete the AB&W model.

The three articles found do not propose models as complete and structured as that of B&S and, while dealing with issues of indubitable interest, these are related to specific or individual cases. One article tests the links between environmental turbulence, structural stability, and performance [30]. The results (using 8 years of data on Texas school districts) show that the unpredictability of external change has a negative effect on performance and that this is compounded by internal organizational change. One of the findings is that a moderator of the negative impact of turbulence is the development of processes for dealing with turbulence (*ibid.*: 813). This confirms the importance of the a3 factor (support to reform) in the B&S model. Another article confirms the importance of both the a4 ‘leadership and supervision’ factor and the b1 ‘structure of task/work’ factor. The qualitative case study [31] investigates the effectiveness of the organizational reform of a critical health agency and, among other things, seeks to understand specifically if and how reorganization has facilitated operations (i.e., whether or not services were delivered in an efficient and effective way). The results indicate that top management did not feel it necessary to inform all personnel that the agency had to integrate with other structures and would no longer be independent. Basically, the operatives had no knowledge of the object of the change but shared and applied what derived from that change, supporting the initiatives that affected them directly. A further research based on the study of six cases highlights, among other variables, the positive role of the ‘human capital and capacity’ (a2) and ‘leadership and supervision’ (a3) factors on performance intended as efficacy, efficiency and timeliness [32].

5. Reworking the AB&W model

Examining the successive literature reconfirmed the value of the factors considered by B&S. For example, the ‘public service motivation’ factor is indeed relevant given that for 40 years “mounting survey evidence has repeatedly shown that public employees are less motivated by extrinsic rewards such as pay increases and more motivated by intrinsic rewards such as the satisfaction derived from helping others and making a

difference in society” [29:246]. This is a trait that distinguishes the public sector from the private sector and it would be useful to know whether its significance varies in other types of public settings. In addition, as underscored in the previous section, the differential pay for public managers seems to cause dissent and reverberate negatively on the performance of public organizations where public-service motivation is high.

In Fig. 2, below, the ‘agency support to NPR’ factor of the B&S model was modified not only because it refers to a specificity of the setting analyzed by that particular research, but also to give it a broader connotation: the support of a public organization in building a policy could, in fact, be interpreted as a propensity to ‘change management’. The role played by change on performance emerges from the research works that study the effects of the introduction of strategic planning techniques [18] and those that evaluate the consequences deriving from comprehensive reform policies where the interactions of different components have to be managed [19]. As some authors note [16] [17], different strategic stances lead to different approaches to change and have different consequences on performance. Therefore, managing change by anticipating, defending, or reacting to possible evolutions in regulation or in the social and economic milieu is a crucial factor for internal organizational performance.

The final observation to make is that, even though the paper focuses on the internal organization, the ‘external organization’ variable has been included in Fig. 2 to provide the reader with a synthetic yet complete representation.

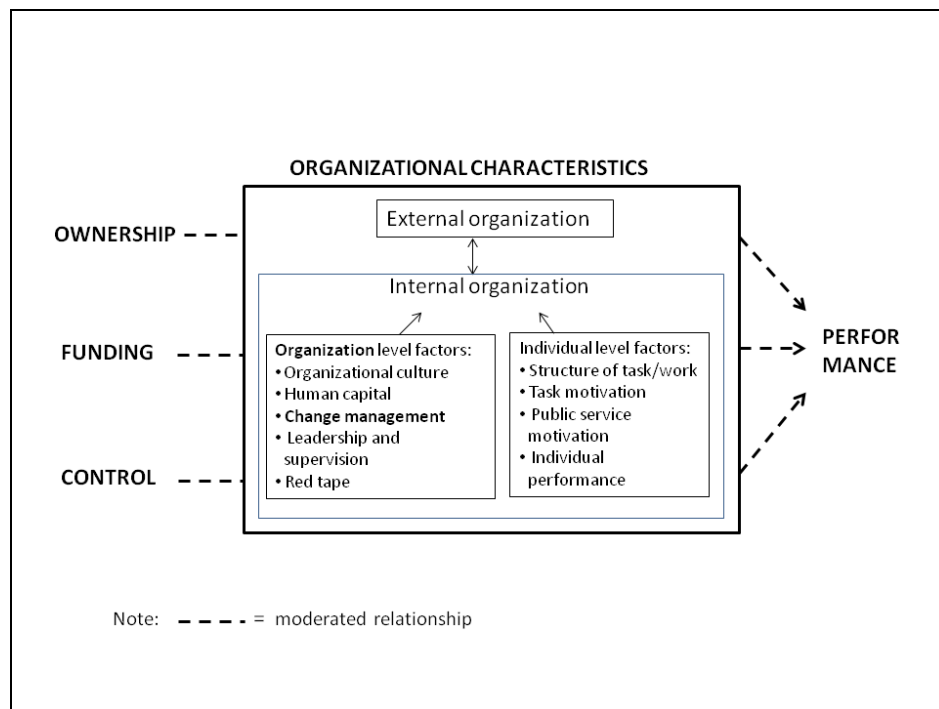


Figure 2: The Proposed and Extended AB&W Model (emphasis identifies terms of the original B&S model variables modified by the authors)

6. Discussion and limitations

The paper develops a unified model from the literature review that goes some way to opening the black box in that it unpacks the umbrella term ‘organizational characteristics’ in a series of fine-grained elements. The model identifies two main categories of moderating factors: internal and external. The internal characteristics of public organizations are then split into agency-level and individual-level factors to form the core of the unified model, while the dimensions of publicness, i.e., ownership, funding and control, set the ground rules for the development of the organizational action. It assumes an open-systems perspective [33], i.e., it recognizes the dependence of public organizations and their programs on resource flows with the environment [34] and gives management the job of orchestrating the resources and buffering the technical core from external perturbations [35:10]. When the shock penetrates the organizations, managers are able to operate internally to reduce the performance-related hit [7:272].

This highly stylized model supports the ‘management matters’ logic but avoids the trap of what is called ‘managerialism’ [36]. What is less clear, however, is ‘whether’ and ‘how’ the organization action develops in practice. Most of the studies reckon that this influence is not exercised in a linear way and that the organization variables interact according to cause-effect relations that are never fully predictable or measurable, as the authors of both the models analyzed here also underscore. The black box effect is ineludible, as is the contingent nature that informs the model proposed here. This means that not only are managerial decisions mediated by organizational conditions, but also that “discretionary choices, too, derive from specific organizational conditions that interact with performance incentives (and preferences) to create a ... calculus of choice... In this context, street-level practitioners do more than simply respond to performance incentives; they also adjust to them as they manage the imbalance between the demands of their jobs and resource constraints” [37:i272].

The recent literature on publicness and performance reveals some changes in emphasis, such as the growing focus on the ‘equity’ rather than on the ‘ownership’ aspect of performance, leading us to attempt to distil the most useful notions for the purpose of this study. For example, in terms of the role of management, we have seen how decisions about red tape can reduce equity while still raising the organization’s performance levels generally [28], just like a too rapid adaptation of the structures to the turbulence of the environment (in terms of unexpected regulatory changes or a remixing of the services to be delivered to users) depresses performance levels [30]. Or how the transfer *tout court* of private-sector practices can negatively affect the overall performance of the public-sector organization, a case in question being the systems based on management’s ‘pay for performance’ principle [29].

Compared with the original version, the informational capacity of the reworked AB&W model is higher. Each of the additional variables incorporated is sufficiently robust having been investigated and validated over the course of time by lead scholars.

The several limitations of this paper can be used to inspire future research directions, three in particular. First, our findings are largely empirically inductive, while the secondary sources on which the analysis is based are few in number and limited in variety (exclusively academic peer-reviewed articles), hence the need to successively extend the literature review to the world of practice.

Second, the paper considers solely a small part of the activities and functions of management, while the influence of the lower organizational levels, the ‘street-level

bureaucrats' in particular, has been left out. Further, the relationship between management and elected officials has been deliberately kept in the background, while both are characterized by complex relational issues that need to be investigated in future research.

Third, the model does not address the inter-organizational dimension, i.e., the fact that today the implementation of public policies and programs is the joint effort of many actors, often employed by organizations in different sectors. Investigating the effects of this inter-organizational dimension on the managerial function could be an interesting research direction to explore to understand which relations (vertical, horizontal, lateral) are crucial to performance and, on the other hand, which internal factors lead to (new) management problems in and of networks? Is it possible to extract useful elements from the extant literature to pursue this investigative path?

The above limitations notwithstanding, the authors believe that this contingency model provides a useful basis for further empirical testing and theory elaboration.

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