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Differences between public administrators' and elected officials' perspectives on the role of the citizen in service quality improvement processes

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Abstract

Purpose

According to the “New Public Management” paradigm, citizens are viewed as active participants through all the different steps of service planning and provision. Nonetheless, citizens’ involvement is still far from being systematically applied within local governments. The purpose of this paper is to give a contribution to this stream of research by investigating whether a part of this resistance could be explained by the differences between public administrators and elected officials’ perspectives on the role of the citizens in service quality improvement processes.

Methodology/Approach

A mail survey was conducted among a sample of Italian town municipalities in May and June of 2010. 102 questionnaires were returned (59 from politicians and 43 from public managers), and these questionnaires were then analysed through t-tests and regressions.

Findings

Findings support the existence of a statistically significant difference between public administrators’ and elected officials’ attitudes. Differences exist in three main issues: the relative importance of citizens as sources of inputs to improve public service quality, the objectives of citizens’ involvement and the structure of citizens’ preferences.

Research limitations

Results could have been influenced by the degree of New Public Management development within the specific research setting (Italian local governments).

Practical implications

Formalising the role, the timing and the contribution of citizens’ involvement to the municipal decision-making process could help to mitigate the mentioned dualism. Creating a favourable cultural background and sharing a citizen-oriented vision within the whole organisation, from top levels to front-line employees, is fundamental.

Originality/value

This paper is the first to suggest that these resistances toward involving citizens in quality improvement processes could be due to the differences between administrators’ and elected officials’ perspectives.

Keywords: public services quality; co-production; citizen orientation; citizen involvement.

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction

The evolution of the role of citizens from passive recipients to active participants in service planning and provision processes is one of the main implications of the introduction of the “New Public Management” paradigm in the 1980s (Kelly, 2005). However, this evolution is still in progress, as many municipalities are reluctant to involve citizens in measuring public services’ performance and in setting priorities and programs for service quality improvements (Dalehite, 2008).

Conceptual criticisms of the new model of public management, as well as the lack of resources, have been suggested as reasons for the non-adoption of participation policies (Cassia and Magno, 2009a; 2009b).

The purpose of this paper is to provide a further contribution to the current research by investigating whether or not a part of the resistance towards the new practices can be explained by the differences between public administrators and elected officials’ perspectives about the role and the involvement of citizens (Scott and Vitartas, 2008). Therefore, with the support of an empirical analysis, this paper intends to fill a significant gap in the available literature (Dalehite, 2008) by analysing the role of internal divergences in attitudes.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: literature about the role of citizens, according to the new model of public management, is reviewed. The empirical setting, data collection procedures and results are then presented. Finally, findings are discussed, and managerial implications are drawn.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

The new market-based model of public management brought about by the “New Public Management” paradigm and its developments since the 1980s has significantly influenced managerial thought and practices within the public sector (Kelly, 2005). Local governments have been deeply affected by these new principles, given their proximity to citizenry, and most of the available studies adopt their point of view (Van Ryzin et al., 2008). This approach is based on two main principles: a commitment to performance measurement and citizen-customer orientation (Politt, 1988). A broad evolution of the role of citizens is one of the major consequences of this perspective (Skelcher, 1992). Citizens are no longer viewed as passive recipients; they are now seen as active participants through all the different steps of service planning and provision: they contribute not only with an active participation during the various stages of the production process (Testa and Ugolini, 2001), but they also provide inputs for co-production processes (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Cassia and Magno, 2009c). Regarding the last issue, an extensive debate has arisen about the advantages and disadvantages of involving citizens in measuring public services’ performance and in setting priorities and programs for service quality improvement. In particular, the following disadvantages have been identified:

- Citizens’ involvement is useless because too often citizens tell administrators what they already know, so that they do not enhance public managers’ understanding of their organisation’s performance (Poister and Thomas, 2007). Moreover, some scholars argue that data cannot be clearly translated into meaningful information (Van Ryzin and Immerwahr, 2007) and that the appropriate interpretation of even reliable and valid opinion data may be quite obscure (Stipak, 1980). As a consequence, it is sometimes not clear what public

managers can learn from the analysis of citizens' judgements and how actions could benefit from these insights (Kouzmin et al., 1999).

- Citizens' involvement will provide the municipality with unreliable information. Many studies have demonstrated the absence of a clear statistical correlation between service outputs and citizen evaluations of service outcome (Stipak, 1980; Swindell and Kelly, 2005; Swiss, 1992; Van Ryzin and Immerwahr, 2007), generating a tension between customer feedback and objective measures of performance (Kelly, 2005). As a result, some administrators argue that objective indicators reflect reality, whereas external indicators are wrong and should be ignored (Stipak, 1980).

- Citizens do not have enough knowledge about local government to correctly evaluate municipal services (Stipak, 1980). Van Ryzin and Immerwahr (2007) argue that officials often think that customers are sometimes unaware of, or unwilling to, confess their true motivations and preferences.

These conceptual criticisms may partially explain the non-adoption (or the incomplete adoption) of the "New Public Management" service improvement practices within several municipalities. Moreover, resistance to implementing a fully citizen-oriented approach is sometimes at least partially explained by organisational and resource constraints (Cassia and Magno, 2009a).

Given these premises, the purpose of this paper is to give a further contribution to this stream of research by investigating whether or not some of these resistances are due to the differences and the dualism between administrators' and elected officials' perspectives.

On this point, it should be remarked that the new paradigm is "distinguished by the concept of a relationship between administrators and the citizens and customers they serve, unmediated by elected officials." (Kelly, 2005, p. 76) On the contrary, traditional public administration has often suggested that public administrators owe accountability to elected officials as representatives of the citizens whom they are elected to serve (Kelly, 2005). A certain level of confusion about the (frequently overlapping) roles of public managers and public administrators is, therefore, not surprising: for example, there is no agreement concerning who (the managerial component, the political component or both) should evaluate the outcomes of citizens' involvement processes and make the necessary decisions to improve service quality (Cassia and Magno, 2009b).

To grasp the existence (or absence) of the mentioned dualism between public administrators' and elected officials' perspectives, we suggest three hypotheses.

Administrators (managers) and elected officials can rely on different sources of information from municipal stakeholders to set local agendas: the local population, representatives of local associations, municipal managers, employees in general, front-line employees, media and local companies. Askim and Hansenn (2008) define citizens' inputs as information that administrators (managers) and elected officials obtain through direct contact with citizens. Administrators (managers) and elected officials may attribute different levels of importance to each of the available sources of inputs; therefore, we test the following hypothesis:

Hp1: Administrators (managers) and elected officials (politicians) attribute different levels of importance to citizens (as compared to the other municipality's stakeholders) in setting priorities for services quality improvement.

According to Ebdon and Franklin (2006), citizens' involvement may be motivated by four motives: creating support for decisions adopted by the municipality, increasing trust, making citizens aware of the decision processes and outcomes of the municipality, and collecting

information and suggestions for better decision making. According to Dalehite (2008), the first two objectives indicate a symbolic use of involvement, which means that citizens' participation is useful; it shows care for the citizens, regardless of the practical implications for service quality improvements. On the other hand, the remaining two reasons express a rational use of involvement. These objectives may be perceived in a different way by administrators and elected officials. As a consequence, we test the following hypothesis:

Hp2: Administrators (managers) and elected officials (politicians) have different views about citizens' participation objectives.

To evaluate service quality performance, many authors (Brown, 2007; Shingler et al., 2008) emphasise the importance of subjective indicators; for example, employees' politeness, their responsiveness in fulfilling requests, the clarity of procedures to the citizens, the clarity of information provided to the citizen and the ability to meet citizens' needs. Moreover, each of these attributes could have a different relative importance, which means that only some of them may drive the overall satisfaction with municipal services. Therefore, importance-performance analysis (Van Ryzin and Immerwahr, 2004; 2007) can be conducted to understand priorities, but the perceptions of administrators and elected officials may differ both in regards to the importance and the performance dimensions:

Hp3: Administrators (managers) and elected officials (politicians) have different perceptions of the current service quality performance of their municipality and different views of the structure of citizens' preferences (the attributes' importance).

3. The empirical analysis: methodology and results

Methodology

To test the hypotheses, we sent surveys to a sample of 900 Italian municipalities in May and June of 2010. 102 questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 11.33%. The questionnaire was mailed to the general address of each municipality, with the indication that it could be filled out by either the mayor, other political members or by managers who have frequent contact with citizens. To avoid influencing expressed opinions, the purpose of the research (to compare public administrators' and elected officials' perspectives) was omitted from the survey. Of the 102 questionnaires, 59 were completed by politicians, and 43 were completed by public managers. The average population of the involved municipalities was 8,258, with no statistical difference for the two sub-samples (administrators' and officials' municipalities).

Results

The first hypothesis states that administrators (managers) and elected officials (politicians) attribute different levels of importance to citizens (as compared to the other municipalities' stakeholders) in setting priorities for service quality improvement.

Drawing on the procedure followed by Askim (2007), we identified the most important sources of inputs and information (in terms of stakeholders) for a municipality, and we asked respondents to indicate their perceived importance for each of them (on five-point Likert scales).

Ranking based on perceived importance of information sources	
Administrators	Politicians
1. Front-line employees	1. Citizens
2. Citizens	2. Front-line employees
3. Local associations	3. Local associations
4. High-level managers	4. High-level managers
5. All of the municipality's employees	5. All of the municipality's employees
6. Local companies	6. Local companies
7. Media	7. Media

Table 1 - Ranking based on perceived importance of information sources.

Results (Tables 1 and 2) show that the politicians perceive citizens as more important sources of information, as compared to administrators, when defining policies for quality improvements. Regarding all the other sources of information, no other statistically significant difference was found (Table 2).

	Administrators (1-5 scale) mean	Politicians (1-5 scale) mean	T-test for statistical difference
1. Citizens	4.29	4.53	Significant p=0.04
2. Front-line employees	4.35	4.36	Not significant p=0.91
3. Local associations	4.23	4.22	Not significant p=0.93
4. High-level managers	4.23	4.21	Not significant p=0.87
5. All of the municipality's employees	3.86	4.05	Not significant p=0.27
6. Local companies	3.81	3.82	Not significant p=0.81
7. Media	3.67	3.57	Not significant p=0.59

Table 2 – T-test for statistical differences in the importance of information sources: administrators vs. politicians.

The second hypothesis investigates more detailed perceptions behind citizens' involvement by suggesting that administrators (managers) and elected officials (politicians) could have different views on citizens' participation objectives. According to Ebdon and Franklin (2006), citizens' involvement may be motivated by four motives: creating support for decisions adopted by the municipality, increasing trust, making citizens aware of the decisions processes and outcomes of the municipality, and collecting information and suggestions for better decision making.

	Administrators	Politicians
	1-7 scale (mean)	
1) Citizen participation in the activities of the local community is useful (<i>synthetic indicator</i>)	5.49**	5.97**
2) Citizens' involvement is useful:		
a) to create support for decisions adopted by the municipality	5.58	5.83
b) to increase citizens' trust in their municipality	6.03	5.74
c) to make citizens aware of the decision processes and outcomes of the municipality	5.72**	6.24**
d) to collect information and suggestions for better decision making	5.91*	6.20*

Table 3 – Comparison of administrators' (managers) and elected officials' (politicians) perceptions of citizens' participation objectives.

Level of statistical significance of the difference between administrators' and politicians' ratings: * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$.

We tested the importance of these objectives both separately and together with a synthetic indicator (Scott and Vitartas, 2008), using five seven-point Likert scales (completely disagree – completely agree).

Findings demonstrate (see Table 3) significant differences between administrators' and politicians' perspectives for both the synthetic indicator and two of the four specific objectives. In all of these cases, the evaluations provided by elected officials are higher than those expressed by administrators.

The third hypothesis states that administrators (managers) and elected officials (politicians) have different perceptions of the current service quality performance of their municipality, and have different views of the structure of citizens' preferences.

To test the first part of the hypothesis, we asked respondents to rate how they perceived the performance of the services provided by their municipality. Following Brown (2007) and Shingler et al. (2008) we identified six attributes for measuring performance to be evaluated on seven-point Likert scales (1=very bad; 7=very good). The results (see Table 4) demonstrate that there are no statistically significant differences in the perceptions of the municipality performance.

	Administrators	Politicians	Difference
	1-7 scale (mean)		
Employees' politeness	5.51	5.41	0.1 (n.s.)
Responsiveness in fulfilling requests	4.84	4.76	0.08 (n.s.)
Clarity of procedures to the citizens	4.81	4.72	0.09 (n.s.)
Clarity of information provided to the citizen	5.05	5.05	---
Ability to meet citizens' needs	4.86	4.97	0.11 (n.s.)
Overall municipal services' quality	5.02	4.91	0.11 (n.s.)

Table 4 – Comparison of administrators' (managers) and elected officials' (politicians) perceptions of their municipal services' performance.

N.s.: The level of statistical significance of the difference between administrators' and politicians' ratings is not significant ($p > 0.10$).

To test the second part of the hypothesis, we avoided asking respondents to rate the importance of each of the mentioned attributes, as this could have presented biases (Van Ryzin and Immerwahr, 2004; 2007). Following Van Ryzin and Immerwahr (2004; 2007), we decided to apply the importance-performance method to derive the perceived importance of each attribute, thus identifying respondents' views about the structure of citizens' preferences. We therefore ran two separate regressions, one for politicians and one for administrators, setting the "overall municipal services' quality" as the dependent variable and the other five attributes as independent variables. Findings highlight significant differences in the structures of citizens' preferences in the perspectives of administrators (Table 5) and of elected officials (Table 6). We also tested for the presence of multicollinearity by evaluating the variance inflation factors, and we obtained satisfactory results (Menard, 2002): all the VIFs were well below 10 (maximum value=3.20).

Significant differences emerge from the analysis of the findings. Public administrators think that the level of overall municipal services' quality depends, first of all, on the clarity of information provided to the citizen ($\beta=0.50$), followed by the responsiveness in fulfilling requests ($\beta=0.37$) and by the ability to meet citizens' needs ($\beta=0.35$). On the contrary, politicians' view of the structure of citizens' preferences is that the ability to meet citizens' needs is the only significant determinant of the overall quality of municipal services ($\beta=0.70$). In sum, administrators and politicians show differences relating to the importance but not to the performance dimension (Van Ryzin and Immerwahr, 2004; 2007).

Public administrators				
	Std Beta	T	Sig.	VIF
Employees' politeness	-0.04	-0.32	0.75	2.04
Responsiveness in fulfilling requests	0.37	2.31	0.02	3.20
Clarity of procedures to the citizens	-0.25	-1.58	0.12	3.07
Clarity of information provided to the citizen	0.50	3.63	0.00	2.35
Ability to meet citizens' needs	0.35	2.766	0.00	2.00

Table 5 - Linear regression analysis – dependent variable: overall municipal services' quality; Adj. R squared: 0.656.

Elected officials				
	Std Beta	T	Sig.	VIF
Employees' politeness	0.07	0.74	0.46	1.86
Responsiveness in fulfilling requests	-0.01	-0.153	0.87	1.65
Clarity of procedures to the citizens	-0.05	-0.40	0.68	2.24
Clarity of information provided to the citizen	0.13	1.01	0.31	2.19
Ability to meet citizens' needs	0.70	5.539	0.00	2.18

Table 6 - Linear regression analysis – dependent variable: overall municipal services' quality; Adj. R squared: 0.589.

4. Discussion and implications

The findings support the hypothesis that a dualism between public administrators' and elected officials' perspectives about the role and the involvement of citizens exists within municipalities. In particular, the research demonstrates the existence of a difference on three main issues:

- 1) the relative importance of citizens as a source of input to set priorities to improve the quality of public services;
- 2) the objectives of citizens' involvement;
- 3) the structure of citizens' preferences.

The results show that, in general, the managerial component of the municipality is less oriented to citizens' involvement than to elected members. At least two suitable explanations of this finding can be provided. First of all, public administrators could think that an increase in citizens' participations implies a higher workload for the employees of the municipality (e.g., more time and effort to collect data from citizens). Given current municipal resource constraints (Cassia and Magno, 2009a), administrators could be reluctant to enhance the level of citizen involvement. A second reason could be linked to the threat of losing a part of their decisional role and power within the municipality. This reasoning is supported by the fact that administrators and politicians rate similarly on symbolic objectives of citizens' involvement, but not on rational objectives (hypothesis 2). In other words, administrators agree that involving citizens could be a fruitful way to increase citizens' trust in the municipality, but they also think that information and suggestions collected from citizens could reduce their decision-making power.

The differences in perceived structures of citizens' preferences represent another major concern. To improve the quality of municipal services, it is necessary to know what issues to make a priority. In general, administrators would give priority to the clarity of information provided to the citizen, and to the responsiveness in fulfilling requests. These factors are not urgent, in the perspective of elected officials, who will improve the municipal ability to meet citizens' needs. Moreover, citizens may even have another structure of preferences, which differs from both the administrators' and the politicians' preferences.

Given this divergence between public administrators' and elected officials' perspectives about the role and usefulness of citizens' involvement, it is not surprising that modern public co-production practices have been adopted by a small number of municipalities. There could be also no agreement on more specific issues, e.g., defining who (the managerial component, the political component, or both) should evaluate the outcomes of citizens' involvement processes and make the necessary decisions to improve services quality.

Reducing the differences between public administrators' and elected officials' perspectives and sharing a common view about the role of citizens and the objectives of their involvement is, therefore, a prerequisite to successfully introducing new managerial practices within local government. Formalising the role, the timing and the contribution of citizens' involvement to the municipal decision-making process, as well as identifying the performance aspects to be measured, could help to mitigate the mentioned dualism.

More importantly, creating a favourable cultural background is a priority. Sharing a citizen-oriented vision within the whole organisation, from the top levels to the front-line employees, is fundamental. In other words, all the local government's members should be aware of the reasons behind involving citizens in measuring municipal performance and improving services quality. The cultural change from a bureaucratic to a post-bureaucratic attitude may be extremely difficult. Nonetheless, this effort is necessary to make public management practices work more effectively.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to give a contribution to the stream of research analysing the non-adoption of new public management co-production practices by investigating whether or not a part of the resistance could be connected to the differences and the dualism between public administrators' and elected officials' perspectives about the role and the involvement of citizens. The results of the analysis of a survey among Italian municipalities strongly corroborate this reasoning. Reducing the gap between administrators and elected officials therefore is essential for a wide and substantial (and not only symbolic) adoption of the new practices.

Several limitations of this study should be underlined. First of all, results could have been influenced by the "New Public Management" degree of development within the specific research setting. Therefore, care should be taken when generalising the results in contexts characterised by more advanced practices. Moreover, the choice to rely on a quantitative study and to not collect data from both the administrators and the elected officials within the same municipality presents not only advantages but also limitations. In addition, the possibility of respondents' self-selection should be mentioned, e.g., mayors who completed the questionnaire could have been more oriented toward "New Public Management" than the whole population.

Future studies could provide further insights on this topic by adopting a longitudinal approach and studying in-depth perspectives on the managerial component and the political component of citizens' roles in quality improvement processes in the same municipality.

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