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Developing a Conceptual Framework for Evaluating Public Sector Transformation in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

When evaluating Public Sector transformation efforts in the UK during the past three decades, three waves can be identified. The first wave in the mid 1960s to the late 1970s is regarded as Traditional public administration and the second wave in the late 1970's to 1990's is labelled as New Public Management (NPM). The third wave began in the late 1990s and can be characterised as the post NPM or Digital Governance Era. This study aims to examine the concepts and associated factors that influence post NPM public sector transformation in the UK. Initial literature analysis found that while the post NPM era has no dominant model, a number of key concepts have emerged in the literature and policy statements that characterise the key attributes of post NPM public sector transformation in the UK. This paper attempts to conceptualise these concepts by formulating a conceptual framework for public sector transformation in the digital era.

Keywords

Public Sector Transformation, E-government, New Public Management.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades there were several major efforts to transform the organisations and management of central government in the UK (Metcalf and Richards, 1992). The management of public sector has been the centre of reforming attention at all times, however the pace accelerated when Conservative party took office in 1979 (Greer, 1994). Their manifesto promised a reduction of waste, bureaucracy and over government (Theakston, 1995). In addition, Conservatives favoured a more 'business like' approach and emphasised on these reforms to underpin the three principles of efficiency, effectiveness and economy (Thomson, 1992). In early 1990s, a number of influential commentators started believing that these reforms were heading toward one clear direction (Hood, 1991). This general direction was soon referred to New Public Management (NPM) (Hood, 1991, 1995; Pollitt, 1993).

NPM became a global phenomenon (Bevir et al, 2003) and was set as a policy ambition for international organisations like the OECD and the World Bank (OECD, 1995; World Bank, 1992). NPM practices were extensively institutionalised in many influential advanced countries (Dunleavy et al, 2005) and it modernised and transformed the delivery of public services (Lapsley, 2009). However, Lynn (2008) stated that NPM is still far from universal and that there is only a partial convergence. Even during the early days many authors started disputing that NPM was a two decade old set of public management ideas and are no longer new (Kickert, 1997). More recently many of the critiques claimed that reforms based on NPM has peaked and illustrated a variety of initiatives (Goldfinch and Wallis, 2010). These initiatives has been identified as Digital-Era Governance (Dunleavy et al, 2005), Ne-Weberian State (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004;Dunn & Miller, 2007), Public Value Management (Stoker, 2006) and New Public Governance (Osborne, 2006).

This study will explore the evidence for a shift from an era of NPM to Post NPM in the case of United Kingdom (UK). The aim of this study is to propose a conceptual framework to evaluate post NPM public sector transformation in the UK. In order to explore the above-mentioned issues, this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 offers a contextual background of Public Sector Transformation in the Digital Era; this is followed by the Evolution of PS transformation in the UK; thereafter Towards a Conceptual Framework for Public Sector Transformation in the Digital Era and finally the paper will provide a conclusion and discussion.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND: PUBLIC SECTOR TRANSFORMATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Traditional public administration practiced in government agencies dates back many decades. The public services offered were highly bureaucratic and siloed where the public had no choice of a service provider. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) were overlaid onto existing organizational structures and processes without any consideration to how they can be improved. In this context, changing the behaviour of government organisations and establishing co-operation between government agencies is fraught with difficulty. Usually, it is easier for governments to create (national) web portals to assert their e-Government presence, but this has merely amounted to information being reorganised without any fundamental change to existing back office processes or information systems and technology (IS/IT). Given these issues, like many other Western European nations, the UK government is striving towards a vision for government-wide transformation. While the early stages of e-Government focused on e-enabling customer-facing services in the UK, the latter stages of e-Government are focused towards more transformational change in public sector agencies. Such transformational change is focused very much on radically changing the way public services are delivered to stakeholders. The changes are driven by ICT and organization-led transformation to government operations, internal and external processes and structures. The focus is often on enabling the realisation of services that meet public-sector objectives such as efficiency, transparency, accountability and citizen centricity (Weerakkody et al, 2011).

THE EVOLUTION OF PS TRANSFORMATION IN THE UK

The major post war change to the civil service was the appointment of Fulton Committee (Theakston, 1995). It transformed the structure, recruitment and management, including training of the Home Civil Services (Barberis, 1995). The Fulton report in 1968 was a notable landmark in the historical development of the British civil service and its main aim was to managerialise Whitehall (Greer, 1994). In 1970's, UK government launched an efficiency strategy programme that improved management and efficiency within civil services (Metcalfé and Richards, 1992). The major contribution of this unit was the introduction of Management Information Systems for Ministers (MINIS) in the Department of Environment (DoE) and Financial Management Initiative (FMI) (Flynn, 2007). MINIS made new sub units within the Departments and each were then set tasks and objectives and the cost associated with them (Greer, 1994). The objective of FMI was comprised of setting targets, measuring outputs and performance against those targets, specifying resources and identifying the individuals responsible for those resources (Cabinet Office, 1983). FMI did further develop MINIS theory and paved the way for Next Steps in 1988 (Flynn, 2007). The Next Steps claimed that the government were too big to be efficient with too many job duplications (Barberis, 1995). It created new independent executive agencies employing a large number of officials involved in the service delivery and operational level (Greer, 1994).

In 1991, the government further launched citizen's charter and market testing Initiatives (Theakston, 1995). Citizen Charter was 'the most comprehensive programme ever to raise quality, increase choice, secure better value and extend accountability' (Cabinet Office 1991, p.4). While Market Testing initiative was 'competing for quality' and mostly focused on outcomes and outputs rather than inputs (Oughton, 1994). After the Next Steps Initiatives the other major reform was the launch of 'Modernising Government Initiative' by the Labour Party in 1999 (Flynn, 2007). This reform intended to be a key element in the UK public sector and meant to bring a 'step change' in the functioning of civil service rather than a continuous improvement (Bovaird and Russell, 2007). Hood (1991) did a summation of all the reforms in the 1980's and believed that these reforms were heading towards one clear direction. He labelled it as New Public Management (NPM) in his paper 'A Public Management for all Seasons'.

New Public Management (NPM)

NPM is explained as a way of reorganising public sector bodies to bring their management, reporting, and accounting approaches closer to business methods (Pollitt 1993, Greer 1994, Dunleavy and Hood, 1994). It is an influential set of management techniques drawing on private sector performance criteria and practices (Lapsley, 2009). Hood (1991) stated that NPM was born due to four other administrative megatrends. First trend was the government's attempt to slow down or reverse growth in terms of over public spending and staffing. Second trend was the shift toward privatisation, and quasi-privatisation and away from core government institutions. Third trend was the development of information technology in the

production and distribution of public service. Fourth trend was the development of more international agendas. Furthermore, Hood (1991) argued that NPM doctrines were a mixture of two different streams of ideas. One was the new institutional economics (Niskanen's, 1971), which generated a set of administrative reform doctrines built on the ideas of contestability, user choice, transparency and close concentration on incentive structures. The other was the movement of business type managerialism (Pollitt, 1993) in the public sector, which helped to generate set of administrative reforms based on the idea of professional management. Hood (1991, 1995) identified seven doctrines of NPM focused on: i) visible hands on top-management in the public sector; ii) explicit standards and measures of performance; iii) greater emphasis on output control; iv) disaggregation of units in the public sector; v) more competition in public sector; vi) stress on private sector style of management practice; and vii) stress on greater discipline and frugality in resource use. These principles emulate private sector practices and were often criticised by scholars (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004; Stoker, 2005; Osborne, 2006)

The concept of NPM was widely adopted in the UK and internationally since its emergence (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). It has been widely deployed by Governments seeking to modernise and transform their public sector organisations (Bovaird and Löffler, 2003). Recently, it became evident in the Public Management literature that NPM was a failure as it did not achieve its promised results of efficiency, accountability and equity (Stoker 2006). However, Lapsley (2009) stated in his paper that NPM is not a failure and it is still working in some European and developing countries. Due to the disappointing results of the government reforms based on the principles of NPM, many studies presented post NPM paradigms. The paradigms are Digital-Era Governance (Dunleavy et al 2005), Public Value Management (Stoker, 2006), Ne-Weberian State (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004; Dunn & Miller 2007) and New Public Governance (Osborne, 2006). These concepts have been introduced by various scholars because of the complexity of PS transformation in the digital era. In particular, NPM has limitations in conceptualising digital era transformation due to the complexity of the service landscape that is hugely influenced by the Internet and associated array of innovative ICTs as well as the pressure to deliver value and new networked governance mechanisms that can facilitate the needs of a variety of stakeholders with different needs.

Digital-Era Governance (DEG)

After two decades of dominance by NPM, it became evident that there was increasing dissatisfaction with its limited focus on outdated private sector business models (Lapsley, 2009). A study by Dunleavy et al (2005) argued that the torch of leading edge change has passed from NPM and will not return. The study looked at NPM from three different themes, Disaggregation, competition and incentivisation (Pollitt, 2003). Furthermore, the study declared the NPM themes have been reversed and it led to policy disaster in many countries. Therefore, an alternative to NPM was posed under the banner of Digital-Era Governance (DEG) by Dunleavy et al (2005). The label highlighted that the central role of ICT played a major role in changing the way public services run their business processes and the way of delivering it to citizens and customers (Margett, 1998). DEG is not solely about digital changes; however, it also focuses on governance (Ferlie and Andresani, 2006). Dunleavy et al (2005) argued that DEG will impact governance under three main themes Reintegration, Need-based Holism and Digitization changes. Joined up governance (JUG) is the main component of reintegration in the UK (Pollitt, 2003), for example the integration of the Inland Revenue and HM customs and Excise into single UK national tax agency (Dunleavy et al 2005). Need-Based Holism is considered to steer more towards a citizen, service and needs based public organisations (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Digitization changes is linked with the impact of internet, social media, e-mail and other online services on public agencies and it is often known as e-government in the literature (West, 2005). Since the mid-1990s ICT has played an important role in incrementally changing and shifting traditional and bureaucratic government models into the current digital era model, which is referred to commonly as e-government. E-government is defined as the transformation of internal and external processes of government using ICTs to provide efficient and user-focused services to citizens, businesses and other stakeholders (Burn and Robins, 2003; Evans, 2005). There are a number of motivations behind e-Government; among these the most prominent are, efficiency and cost reduction (Gupta et al. 2008; Gil-García and Pardo 2005; Jaeger 2003); assurance of providing better services to customers (Davison et al. 2005; Navarra and Cornford 2005; Wong and Welch 2004; Silcock 2001); centralisation of government agencies (Al-Khouri and Bal 2007; Ndou 2004; Seifert and Petersen 2002; Layne and Lee 2001); economic development (Gil-García and Pardo 2005; Jaeger 2003); reducing corruption (Kim et al. 2009; Al-Khouri and Bal 2007); improving transparency of public services (Irani et al. 2007; 2008); and creating a more participative form of government by encouraging online debating, voting and exchange of information (Davison et al. 2005; Carter and Belanger 2005; InfoDev 2002; Reynolds and Regio-Micro 2001; Bonham et al. 2003). Yet, realising these motivations require fundamental changes to existing established practices. Indeed, the literature indicates that implementing transformational change in the public sector through e-government involves a radical paradigm shift in comparison to previous efforts of organisational change seen in the public sector (Weerakkody et al., 2011). Moreover, the evaluation of the potential benefits requires that the added value generated from such transformations is clearly visible to stakeholders. In this respect, more recently some have used the effects of public value management on transformation.

Public Value Management (PVM)

Stoker (2006) argued that NPM seek to confine politics to the role of initial input into the system of management and final judge, while politics should be seen as the process that breathes life into the whole process (Moore, 1995; Smith, 2003). Furthermore, politics can play a major role through encouraging participation of citizens in meeting of all these three challenges of efficiency, accountability and equity (Bovaird and Loffler, 2003). Furthermore, the paradigms of Traditional Public Administration (TPA) and New Public Management (NPM) do not support the idea of networked governance. Stoker (2005) believes that governments started steering in new ways through the development of complex networks and the rise of more bottom-up approaches to decision making. As a result of this transformation, the politicians as well as public sector managers should imply different ways of working in order to add public value in the services delivered. Therefore, they need a vision for a new paradigm in which to put their new practices. Stoker (2006) came up with a solution by creating a new paradigm labelled as Public Value Management (PVM). PVM is a framework based on the practices of networked governance and its core objective is to achieve public value (Moore, 2005). In contrast to NPM, it does not confine politics but rather see it as central to the management challenge (Smith 2003). PVM declares the service delivery can create public value if there is an engagement and an exchange between the stakeholders and government officials (Stoker, 2006). It relies on legitimacy of a wide range of stakeholders and the main challenge for politicians are to find ways of engaging people on their own terms, for example ICT can play a major role by making citizens participation more flexible and easy (Dunleavy et al, 2005). PVM also focuses on a good long run relationship between clients and contractors rather than focusing on any contract narrowly (Aldridge and Stoker, 2002). Furthermore, Politicians should imply an adoptable and learning based approach to the service delivery (Moore, 2005). In addition to PVM, Pollitt & Bouckaert (2004) argued that NPM has enormously contrasted with the Continental European Public Administration and came with a new perspective of European critique of NPM called Neo-Weberian State.

Neo-Weberian state (NWS)

NPM transformed public organisations through improving management functions by introducing new form of Managerialism (Dunn and Miller 2007), however it neglected wider governmental, political, and socio-cultural contexts (Osborne and Plastrik, 2000). NPM did completely banish bureaucracy in public organisations (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992), while it did ask for maintaining the bureaucratic model in some organisations and its reduction in others (Dunn and Miller, 2007). Based on these arguments, Pollitt & Bouckaert (2004) came up with a neo-weberian state model drawn from Max Webers bureaucracy theory. A study by Dunn and Miller (2007) declared that NWS has weberian and neo-weberian elements. The study indicated that weberian perception is based on four principles. First is centrality of state, which would ensure that a weak state has the political, organisational and managerial capacity to deal with domestic and international problems (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Second principle is reform and enforcement of administration law, which would protect individuals from unpredictable actions by state agencies (Drechsler, 2005). The third principle is preservation of public services, which would ensure fairness in the society (Lynn, 2008). The fourth and final principle is representative Democracy; which would maintain the stability and competence of the public bureaucracy (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Additionally, Dunn and Miller (2007) pointed out four neo-weberian principles; External orientation toward citizens, public consultation and direct citizen involvement, result orientation, and management professionalism. In contrast to NWS, Osborne (2006) claimed that there is a need for a more holistic theory and a more comprehensive and integrated approach to public service delivery and proposed the concept of New Public Governance.

New Public Governance (NPG)

Osborne (2006) criticised NPM for its intra-governmental focus in an increasingly plural and pluralist world and for its dependability to the application of outdated private sector techniques to public sector. Moreover, NPM emphasised more on service inputs and outputs rather than the service processes and outcomes (Thatcher, 1995). Osborne (2006) argued that there is a need to move towards a more holistic theory of public administration management. He believed that NPM was a transitory stage in the evolution from traditional public administration to a new paradigm called New Public Governance (NPG). He claimed that the nature of state is plural (multiple inter-dependent actors contribute to the delivery of public service) and pluralist (multiple processes inform the policy making system). As a result of plural and pluralist nature of state public organisation should stress more on inter-organisational relationship. In addition, public organisation should focus more on service processes and outcomes rather than the service inputs and outputs (Osborne, 2006). Finally, NPG emphasised more on the design and evaluation of a stable inter-organisational relationships, where trust or relational contracts act as a core governance mechanisms (Bovaird, 2006).

TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR PUBLIC SECTOR TRANSFORMATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Digital-era Governance (DEG) highlights the central importance of information and communication technology (ICT) in the public sector management systems and in the methods of interacting with citizens. DEG paradigm argues that the current development of public sector organisational and managerial changes revolve around IT changes and alterations in information systems. Furthermore it sees information systems is linked to wide range of cognitive , behavioural, organisational, political and culture changes. DEG promises a potential transition to more genuinely, integrated, agile, and holistic government, where organisational operations are visible in detail both to the personnel operating in public agencies and to citizens and civil society organisations.

While, PVM focuses on the practices of network governance and hugely encourages citizen's involvement. Stoker (2006) stated that PVM uses politics as a mechanism for social coordination and ultimately achieving public value. He further highlighted that politics can be used to create public value by encouraging public intervention, providing new ways of engaging citizens, creating an environment in which partnership is possible and adjusting the system on continuous bases. Similarly, Dunleavy et al (2005) mentioned that politicians as public managers can only achieve the public value by introducing new ICT. In comparison to PVM, the DEG paradigm clearly illustrates that ICT can create an interactive mechanism (i-e call centres, e services) that automatically facilitate agency staff and system's taking a more holistic view of citizen's needs and preferences. In DEG, ICT can also encourage citizen's participations in ways that are flexible, attractive to them and not too time consuming. Furthermore, ICT will play a major role in creating partnership through the rollback of agencification (merger) and joined up government. ICT can also introduce agile government processes that achieve speed, flexibility and responsiveness in the decisions making process. In a nut shell all the PVM themes encounter ICT elements of DEG.

In contrast to PVM, the NWS paradigm's focal point is top-down governance through neo-weberian principles. Dun and Miller (2007) outlined that these principles would enhance the external orientation toward the needs, values, and perceived opportunities of citizens. These neo-weberian principles would also encourage citizen involvement in the public sector management. Similarly, DEG uses ICT instruments to overcome the needs and values and direct involvement of citizens. DEG claims that through the use of ICT, governments can create one stop shops where services are provided by the same co located staff and one stop window where only the customer interface is integrated. Moreover DEG focus on co-production by involving citizens in producing outputs with government, for example, citizens can pre separate the recycling materials, as a result it will leave a much simpler and cheaper collection and transport task for governments to accomplish (Dunleavy et al, 2005). NWS is also focusing on result orientation theme, where neo-weberian principles emphasis more on achieving the results rather than following a formal procedure. Similarly, DEG focuses on the result orientation through use of ICT by creating an end to end service reengineering where it enables project teams to go outside agency boundaries to achieve a good result.

In addition to PVM and NWS, the NPG model emphasises on networked governance through inter-organisational principles. Its core claim is to make government more effective and legitimate by including a wider range of social actor in both policymaking and implementation (Osborne, 2006). NPG's mechanism rests on the idea of network approach, where it encourages partnership between stakeholders, and stresses more on service outcomes. In the same manner, DEG as well supports the idea of network governance under the themes of reintegration; need based holism and digitization (Dunleavy et al, 2005). Furthermore DEG exploits the digital-era technology opportunities to put back together many of the elements that NPM separated out into discrete corporate hierarchies. One of the components of reintegration in the DEG is network simplification, for example, the multiple fragmentation of the UK rail industry was a drawback of NPM where three separate regulators covered rail infrastructure investment, rail safety, and licensing of train companies. While simplifying underlying networks can stop the creation of multiple management teams and creates less work for each other to handle. As, illustrated in figure 1, DEG is focusing on governance through the use of ICT. NPG is based on networked governance through internal-organisational principles, while PVM is based on networked governance through politics and NWS is based on top-down governance through the use of neo-weberian principles. Eventually, all four paradigms are leading to one common goal citizen involvement and interaction. As discussed above, the components for all four paradigms of public sector transformation as shown in figure 1 can only be obtained with the use of ICT in the digital era.

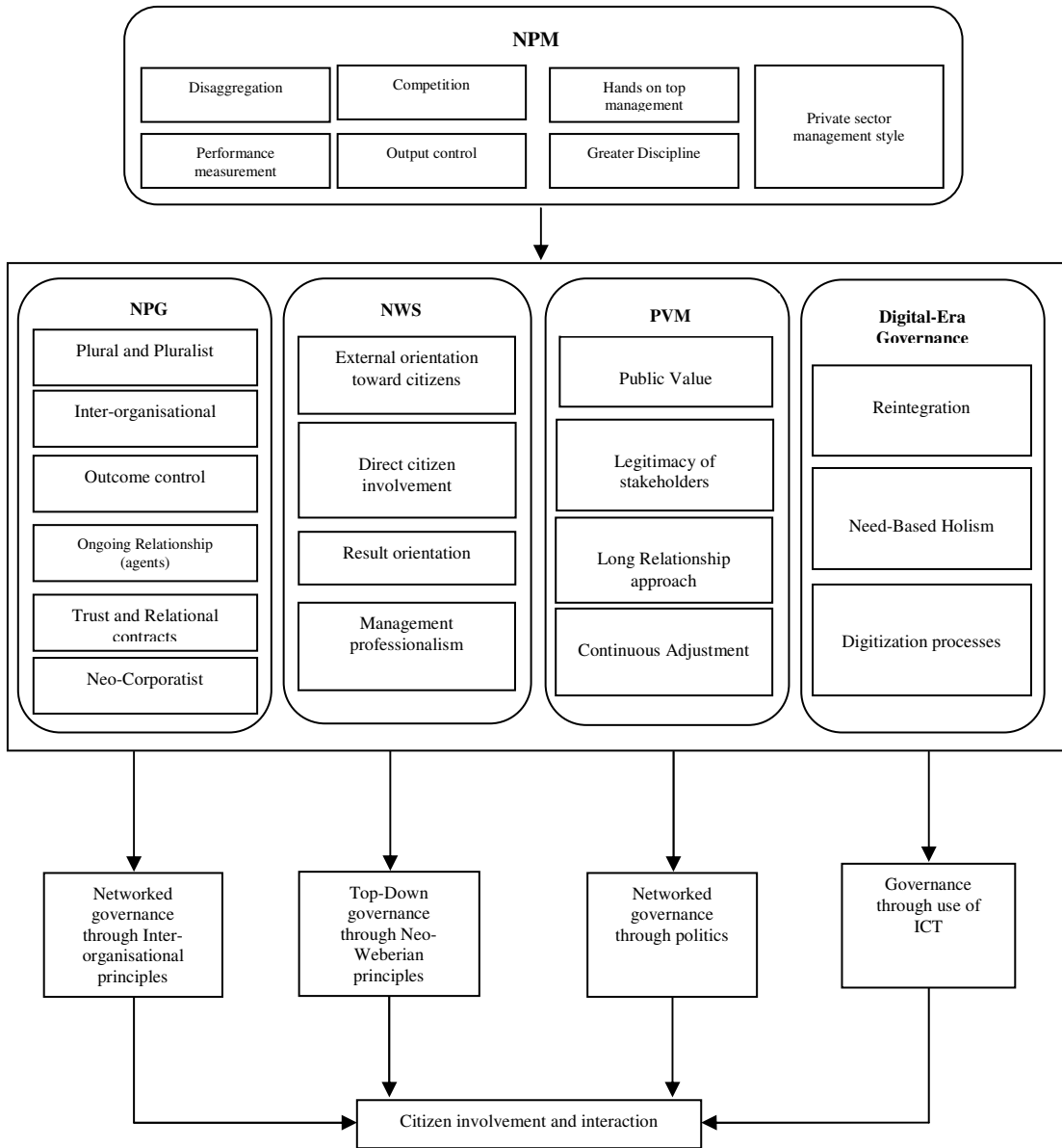


Figure 1 Conceptual framework for Public Sector Transformation in the Digital Era

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

This paper has examined the literature on public sector transformation; it found a shift from NPM to a number of different paradigms known as Digital-Era Governance, Public Value Management, Neo-Weberian State and New public Governance. It has highlighted the significance of each of these concepts in adding value to understanding the impact of transformation of PS organisations. The paper has also shown that each of these on their own have limitations and do not capture the complex and wider landscape of public sector transformation. Theoretically, this paper has contributed to the field by developing a conceptual Frame Work for analysing public sector transformation in the digital era. Moreover, it has discussed the components of each paradigm in the context of digital-era and how ICT would enable them to achieve the proposed outcomes. From a practical perspective, the paper offers policy makers a high level frame of reference to understand the different attributes of PS transformation. This research is a work in progress and requires further theoretical and empirical research to develop and explore the conceptual framework proposed.

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