

# Bringing Context into the Study and Practice of PA: The Case for Zooming In

(Why and How Context Matters in Public Administration  
Innovation and Strategic Change)

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# A personal confession... disguised as a research problem

- RQ: how do you select a topic of a keynote speech for a major PA conference having ca. 36 hours to step in and prepare it?
- Method N.1: you aim for a topic that links with key themes researched by the original speakers (this becomes much easier when, like in this case, the original speakers are 'giants' who have covered virtually all that is knowable in our field)
- Method N.2: you aim for a topic which is an area of active and ongoing research for yourself

A (still more personal) confession... disguised as a research problem

- Refined RQ: how do you select a topic of a keynote speech to be delivered on the date of your birthday for a major PA conference with ca. 36 hours to prepare it?

# The (real) RQ and core argument

- The core argument: context matters for PA (that we already know from Geert and Guy) *and notably context matters also beyond the macro-level of (country-level) public sector reforms* (civil service reforms, performance management, ....): this is the main point of the argument here

I argue two key areas of research – located at the more micro-level of the individual public organisation-public network / the level of individual public officials - are ripe for being further progressed by more systematically examining contextual influences:

- The strategic management of public service organisations
- The relationship of PA and Innovation

RQ: How can the investigation of contextual influences contribute to understanding why/how public organisation adopt models of strategic management / why/how public administrations innovate?

A context-related approach to  
strategic management in  
public organizations

# Why bringing strategic management into public management?

There are two underlying reasons for the enhanced significance of generic strategic management models for managing public services organizations:

- One lies within the academic domain: the proliferation and broadening of schools of strategic management, in particular from social sciences other than industrial economics
- The other one lies on the public policy side: the long term effects of public sector reform trajectories (yes, including the highly contested global diffusion of NPM, which has 'left over' managerial paraphernalia and reshaped portions of the public sector)

# A variety of strategic management models now have applicability in the Public Sector

- The 'initial' schools: Strategic Design and Strategic Planning in the public sector (old and new perspectives: Bryson)
- The industrial economics-driven schools: Strategic Positioning (with public sector applications in quasi-markets....)
- Learning, Emergent Strategy and Configuration approach (Mintzberg)
- The Public Entrepreneur and the Social Entrepreneurial School
- The Strategy as Process School
- The Corporate Governance School: the role of the boards in public agencies
- The Public Value and Anglo Governmentality approach: schools first theorised within the public management scholarly community
- The Cultural School: highlighting organisational culture and public service distinctiveness
- The Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities: Putting knowledge (and professionals) at the centre

# References

- Ferlie, E. and E Ongaro (2015) *Strategic Management in Public Service Organizations: Concept, Schools and Contemporary Issues*. London: Routledge
- Ongaro, E. and E. Ferlie (2019) 'Exploring Strategy-Making in 'Non-New Public Management' Public Services Settings: The Case of European Union Agencies', *Administrative Sciences*, 9,23 - doi:10.3390/admsci9010023

# Treating Context Seriously in Strategic Management

- Managing strategically a public service organization is not an activity free-of-context, in the fundamental sense that context shapes the premises of strategic management
- The autonomy to manage strategically, the basic expectations towards a public organisation, the accountability and legitimacy bases under which a public organization operates are constituted by the context
  - The Strategic management of a university in the UK is not the same as managing a university in China
- Context is different from 'organizational environment'
  - etymology of the word context: weaving together
  - Context is a notion that refers to an 'indefinite extension'

# Contextual influences: overview

Contextual dimensions such as:

- Administrative culture/culture of governance
- The relationship of the bureaucracy to political institutions
- The nature of executive government
- The broader societal culture
- The transformative effects of administrative reforms

Have profound effects on:

- The autonomy to manage strategically
- The basic expectations and the accountability and legitimacy bases under which a public organization forms its strategy

A more formal model

*Strategy formation of PSOs = function (strategic space AND drivers of strategy formation as accounted for by combined schools of thought)*

where

*Strategic space = function of (organizational autonomy; political-societal expectations and obligations: accountability/legitimacy of the PSO)*

Which in turn are function of contextual features

# A more formal model (cont'd)

- *Organizational Autonomy* (extent to which the organisation can decide on its own goals and/or resources) = function (*multiple contextual factors, including the transformative effects of public sector reforms*)
- *Accountability/Legitimacy of the PSO* = function (*politico-administrative and cultural context; the transformative effects of public sector reforms; and economic and societal needs of the communities the public organization services*)

Autonomy + Accountability/Legitimacy *constrain / enable*  
Strategy formation

# A Research Agenda

1. Deploying theoretical sources for explaining contextual influences - including:
  - Sociological theories on the analysis of social mechanisms (see Hedstrom and Swedberg)
  - Economic mechanisms shaping convenience structure for decision-makers
  - Institutional-organisational theories accounting for logic of appropriateness and the shaping of what is 'appropriate behaviour'
2. Identifying paths to theorise typologies of contexts
  - 'typology' contradictory to the very notion of 'context'? (context as the broader space which shapes the very possibility for social action...)
  - Yet some modelling is required, to disentangle some key lines of influence

# A Research Agenda (cont'd)

3. Modelling contexts in function of how they affect the strategic space of a public organisation
  - Legalistic vs. Public Interest contexts
  - NPM vs. non-NPM contexts
  - ... and multiple combinations of these dimensions

Empirically advancing this research agenda, including through projects like the H2020 project “COGOV”

Public Administration, Context  
and Innovation:  
A Framework of Analysis

# Introduction and rationale

- Innovation: a crucial theme for Public Administration (PA) all over the world
- Studying the relations between innovation and PA (innovation *in* PA, and the role of PA *in economic and social* innovation) is a priority area for researchers, and policy-makers(?)
- However, the global significance of the topic must not lead to ‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches that overlook local differences
- PA is embedded in distinctive and diverse ‘contexts’: the cultural, political and administrative contexts shape PA, the ways in which it works and the ways in which it may be changed

# PA and Innovation: Definitions and scope

- Innovation may be defined as a form of deliberate, or at least managed, socially purposeful change aimed at attaining something that otherwise would not be achieved, by leveraging on the possibility to do new and different things or to do the same things in different ways
- In PA, innovation may be found in different domains/levels (typologies around: product (service/policy...) – process (organisation/governance) – level (micro to macro) – orientation (internal/external)]
  - e.g. product innovation such as delivering a new public services
  - e.g. process innovation, which for example can be seen in the case of public management reform to deliver ‘more [of the same] with less [resources]’
- Defining issues and scoping: innovation and transformation, digital government and innovation, innovation and risk (and broader array of enabling conditions of innovation), innovation and learning (and broader array of underpinnings of innovation), ....

# Context and PA Innovation

- (It seems to me that...) most of the extant studies on public sector innovation have paid attention primarily to factors like leadership, learning, managerial autonomy, performance systems, organisational culture, and the like on developing and sustaining innovation in public administration over time – all crucial factors, but...
- Context (political-administrative and cultural) as enabler/hinderer of innovation tends to be excluded from the picture, or at best context tends to be set in the background (as the backdrop)
- Context as the ‘missing link’ (Pollitt, 2013) to be brought into the explanatory framework
- ‘Context’ - theorised at multiple levels and along diverse dimensions, amongst other as ‘administrative paradigm/tradition’, ‘administrative and societal culture”, ‘administrative model and dominant reform narrative in the polity: Weberian bureaucracy, NPM, NPG, NWS, NPS, DGE, ...’, ‘political-administrative regime’ - may be part of the explanatory framework

# Context (cont'd)

- Context is a broad range of potential enablers/hinderers that, combined with more micro-level factors, may explain PA innovation
- (problematically) distinguishing context and organisational environment:
  - organisational environment as most immediate influencing factors (based on a model or theory)
  - context as the broader layers of factors with potential causal power
- Broadening from organisational environment to context: enlarging the range of explanatory factors/explanatory narratives
- Epistemological implications: from (deterministic/)probabilistic causation to multiple conjunctural causation (configuration of factors leading to a certain outcome – collinearity: multiple configuration leading to same outcome) and other approaches/underpinnings to causality?

Context  
(cultural-political-administrative)



Public Administration: internal and External Innovation

Internal: Public Administration Innovation

External: PA as agent/enabler of Innovation

PA  
Innovation  
Policy

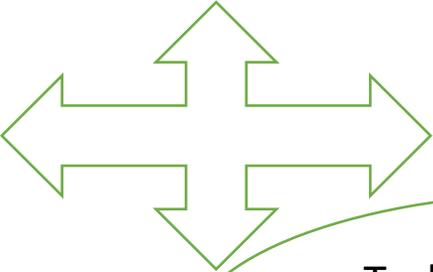


Innovation:  
Public sector level  
(reform of Public Sector/  
Administrative Reform/  
Public Management  
Reform)

Innovation:  
Strategic Renewal  
of Public  
Services Organisations  
(individual organisations  
and networks)

Economic Innovation  
("Innovation Policy")

Societal Innovation  
(State-Society relations)



Technological change,  
economic system, societal  
trends and culture

# Research Questions for a Research Agenda

- Overarching: How does context affect PA innovation? [and derived RQs]
- Underpinning defining questions: what is context? How to define context? What is innovation? How to define innovation? ... and what is PA? (borders with 'policy innovation' and 'innovation policy, with...)
- Mapping/framing questions: what are the main features of 'context' in Europe (East/West/North/South), Middle East, Eastern Asia, South-eastern Asia.... [pertinent to explaining PA innovation]
- Empirical-theoretical questions: what explains innovation in PA in [internal/External] under conditions of [context X, Y, Z]?
- Relevance-related questions: does 'bringing context into the picture' contribute to explaining innovation? (or conversely: does it blur the picture/add unnecessary layer and hence falls to Ockham's razor critique?)

Empirically advancing this research agenda including through a Europe-Eastern Asia comparative research project (Fudan and City Univ Hong Kong)

# Thank you

(P.S.: feel free to wish me a happy – and after completion of this speech  
also hugely more relieved – birthday!)