

The management of change in public organisations:

A literature review

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a review of the recent literature on change management in public organisations and sets out to explore the extent to which this literature has responded to earlier critiques regarding the lack of (public) contextual factors. The review includes 133 articles published on this topic in the period from 2000 to 2010. The articles are analyzed based on the themes of the context, content, process, outcome and leadership of change. We identified whether the articles referred to different orders of change, as well as their employed methods and theory. Our findings concentrate on the lack of detail on change processes and outcomes and the gap between the common theories used to study change. We propose an agenda for the study of change management in public organisations that focuses on its complex nature by building theoretical bridges and performing more in-depth empirical and comparative studies on change processes.

INTRODUCTION

A recent literature review on organisational change within the public sector (Fernandez and Rainey 2006) referred to few studies that explicitly examined public sector organisations. With few exceptions (e.g. Robertson and Seneviratne 1995), the literature seems to make no distinctions between the management of change processes in private and public organisations (Stewart and Kringas 2003; Klarner, Probst and Soparnot 2008). Nevertheless, change is evidently a multi-level and multi-faceted phenomenon, which is indicative that the often-discussed differences between the two sectors could be relevant (Rusaw 2007; Karp and Helgo 2008). However, there still appears to be a gap in the literature on change management specifically regarding the public administration perspective (Vann 2004). At the same time, both the public administration and general management literature report a wide variety of cases of organisational as well as sectoral changes in the public sector. This abundance would indicate the value of exploring the literature in more detail to determine the nature and extent of evidence that relates specifically to change within the public sector.

Pettigrew (1985) offered a criticism that research on change was impaired due to its *ahistorical*, *acontextual* and *aprocessual* nature. In a later paper, he reinforced this view and suggested that the failure to identify clear insights was caused by the tendency of researchers to focus too much attention on single change events in the design and execution of their research (Pettigrew 1990). In line with these critiques, several authors in the public management field addressed the changing content and context of the public sector as an important factor when considering change (e.g. Caldwell 2009, in By and Macleod, 2009).

This article presents a review of the recent change management literature and sets out to explore the extent to which this literature has responded to these earlier critiques. It employs a frame that incorporates these critiques within the analyzes of the examined papers. Furthermore, it explores the contextual challenges associated with the implementation of changes within the public sector given its under-representation within the overall change literature (Tsoukas and Papoulias 2005).

The overall aims are to determine the following:

1. How has change management in the public sector been studied over the past decade?
2. What gaps exist in this literature that could form the basis for a future research agenda?

In the following sections, we introduce our framework for analyzing the literature and outline the methods employed in our review.

STUDYING CHANGE

To study these questions, we draw on the issues identified by Pettigrew (1985) and Pettigrew *et al.* (2001), who suggested that researchers should examine context, content, process and outcomes when studying change. These factors may help us to identify the specific characteristics related to change processes and implementation in organisations in a public context. We provide an overview of the particularities of change management and processes in public organisations by building on the theoretical factors raised by Pettigrew. We also extend one of the last general literature reviews on change management (predominantly based on the private sector), which was conducted by Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) and also distinguished among these four factors. We then include leadership as the fifth factor (see below).

Change management factors

The *context* factor refers to the organisation's external and internal environments, such as a changing political environment or the institutionalisation of a public organisation (e.g. Philippidou *et al.* 2008). The *content* factor focuses on the content of the change, including the organisation's strategies, structures and systems (Armenakis and Bedeian 1999). An example of a *content* issue in the public sector could be New Public Management (NPM), a world-wide reform trend in the public sector (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004).

Third, Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) mention the *process* factor, which describes the interventions and processes that are involved in the implementation of change. Generally, both the management and public administration literature distinguish between radical and emergent change processes. Fourth, Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) raise criterion variables, referring to the *outcomes* of change, including the attitudes, behaviours and experiences of those involved with the change. An additional factor we include in our frame relates to the *leadership* of change, which has been receiving increasing attention in the change management literature (c.f. Higgs and Rowland 2005).

Orders of change

An important consideration is the nature of the change encountered by an organisation (Armenakis and Bedeian 1999). Generally, within the literature, the nature of change is considered from different perspectives (Higgs and Rowland 2005) that tend to explore combinations of the scale of the change and its relative impact on core organisational paradigms (Burnes 2004; Van de Ven and Poole 1995). A commonly encountered taxonomy for examining types of change is the distinction between incremental and radical change (Burnes 2004; Carnall

2007). However, the definitions of each of these concepts tend to vary and are regarded as overly simplistic (Higgs and Rowland 2005). In reviewing this aspect of the literature, it is clear that different ‘orders’ of change can be identified (cf. Bartunek and Moch 1987): sub-system change (first-order), organisation change (second-order) and sector change (third-order). Table 1 provides a summary of the taxonomy of ‘orders’ of change based on a review of this aspect of the literature.

TABLE 1 *‘Orders’ of change*

Order	Description	References
1 st : Sub-system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptation of systems or structures • Occurs within part of an organisation or sub-system • Is incremental 	Burnes 2004; Carnall 2007; Watzlawicz, Weakland and Fisch 1974
2 nd : Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transformational change • Movement in core organisational paradigms • Organisation-wide • Whole systems change 	Burnes 2004; Carnall 2007; Watzlawicz, Weakland and Fisch 1974; Van de Ven and Poole 1995
3 rd : Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity change • Cross-organisational change • Change spans specific organisational boundaries • Affects many organisations/sector-wide change 	Tsoukas and Papoulias 2005; Gratton 2005

The terms used in the table to describe various orders of change (reproduced from the mentioned references) are highly diverse. In the public administration literature, the term ‘reform’ is more widely used than the term change. Reform is a narrower concept than change because it is intentional and designed. In the well-known discussion of the term ‘public management reform’ by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004: 16-17), the authors distinguish the term reform from terms such as transformation, reinvention, modernisation and improvement. According to Pollitt and Bouckaert, reform is a more sober term that does not refer to total innovation. They define reform as deliberate, intentional change. The levels of reform they refer to (being more or less fundamental) are captured in our ‘orders of change’ concept (Table 1).

We will use the five previously identified factors to describe change management and processes in public organisations as well as orders of change, focusing on the literature published in the past decade (2000-2010). We will use this general framework to explore the literature, following the earlier work by Armenakis and Bedeian (1999). However, in analyzing the literature, we will also further classify the tendencies in the literature within the scope of the framework to help us formulate an agenda for future research.

METHOD

A first extensive literature review resulted in 160 articles focusing on change management in the public sector. Three search rounds were performed, starting with a general, broad search for literature by each of the individual team members. The findings were discussed in a session with the entire research team, after which the search process was further refined for a second round, in which the team analyzed the literature according to the previously presented framework. During

the writing of the first draft, each of the contributors incorporated new literature where applicable.

We used ISI Web of Knowledge, Google Scholar and the search engine of the Erasmus University Rotterdam to identify articles. We selected peer-reviewed articles, preferably published in ISI-ranked journals. An exception was made for articles in specialized change management journals because some of these journals are not ranked in the ISI-index.

Monographs, unfortunately, could not be included in the search because the accessibility of many books is limited and their quality (e.g. through peer-review or publication by a scientific publisher) is less objectively evaluated.

The following keywords were used to find articles: ‘change management,’ ‘change process,’ ‘reform,’ ‘re-organisation’ and ‘change leadership.’ These keywords were used in combination with (any of) these keywords: ‘government,’ ‘public sector,’ ‘public organisation,’ ‘New Public Management’ (or ‘NPM’) and ‘European Union’ (or ‘EU’). By using the word ‘public’ in the keyword combinations, we ensured that the change issues were related to the public context.

Next, the list of articles was examined and errors were corrected, such as by removing double entries and articles that, upon closer inspection, did not analyze change management in the public sector or did not meet other formal requirements (period, journal or language). After the completion of this process, 141 articles remained and were reviewed in detail. The review consisted of a summary and classification of the data. Each article was reviewed and labelled with a dominant theme (content, context, process, outcome or leadership) and with the order of the examined change (first, second or third). Next, general- and content-based information was

retrieved from the articles to assist in the classification of the data. The general classifications included author, year of publication and journal. The content and contextual factors included public sector, level (local, national, international or EU), country and type of empirics (if applicable). For each article, we also identified the dominant theory, the order of the described change and whether it referred to a specific country (e.g. the UK, the US) or was comparative. In addition, a summary of the article was written, highlighting its insights and relevance for the review. During this stage of the review process, additional articles were excluded from the review because they did not meet the initial requirements (year of publishing, published in a peer-reviewed journal, related to public sector or research topic). Based on the inputs of reviews by other scholars (including the reviews for this journal), 4 initial publications were deleted and 17 publications were added that had not previously appeared in our literature search. After this procedure, the final list for more detailed review consisted of 133 articles.

DESCRIPTIVES

The articles were published in 51 different peer-reviewed international journals. Twenty articles were published in ‘public administration journals’ and most of the others were in management journals, except for a few in political science and psychology publications. Most were published in *Public Administration* (23), followed by *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (12) and *Public Administration Review* (12). Of the non-public administration journals, most articles came from the *Academy of Management Journal* (6).

We found that more than 20 different theoretical frames were used in the articles (see Table 2), of which the institutional theory was the most frequently employed (20 of the articles very evidently employed this theoretical lens), especially in journals within the public administration discipline.

However, if we regarded ‘change management’ (including particular planned or emergent approaches to change) as a particular theoretical frame, we could identify up to 14 articles belonging to this category. Thirteen articles used leadership theory as a dominant frame, most articles were published in a management journal, and ten articles used policy implementation paradigms. The psychological journals in which research on change management in public organisations was published predominantly focused on commitment and resistance to change among employees. Other theoretical lenses used specifically to examine the context of change were complexity theory (e.g. Plowman *et al.* 2007), network theory (e.g. Kim, Oh and Swaminathan 2006), chaos theory (Farazmand 2003), sensemaking (Baez and Abolafia 2002) and the resource-based view (Ridder, Bruns and Spier 2005).

We also analyzed the research methods employed in the articles (see Table 2). Some articles were conceptual, proposing theoretical frames for the study of change management. Many articles were case studies, often providing rich case descriptions about change in an organisation. Other qualitative studies were predominantly based on interviews and did not focus on a single case. Almost all of the quantitative studies used questionnaires or secondary (survey) data analyzes. A small group of articles was based on data that were quantitative (predominantly collected through questionnaires) and qualitative in nature (using interviews and observations). Furthermore, of all 133 articles included in the review, 58 specified the sector they were studying. An overview of the characteristics of the reviewed literature is provided in Table 2.

TABLE 2 *Descriptives*

Theoretical Frames	Count	Percentage
<i>Institutional theory</i>	20	15.4
<i>Change management</i>	14	10.5
<i>Leadership theory</i>	13	9.8
<i>Other</i>	60	45.1
<i>Unspecified</i>	26	19.5
Total	133	100
Methods		
<i>Case study</i>	62	46.6
<i>Quantitative study</i>	24	18.0
<i>Conceptual nature</i>	21	15.8
<i>Qualitative study</i>	19	14.3
<i>Mixed methods</i>	7	5.3
Total	133	100
Sector/organisation		
<i>Government</i>	14	10.5
<i>Healthcare</i>	13	9.7
<i>Educational sector</i>	7	5.2
<i>Government agencies</i>	6	4.5
<i>European Union</i>	5	3.8
<i>Public service</i>	3	2.3
<i>Welfare</i>	3	2.3
<i>Other</i>	7	5.2
<i>Unspecified</i>	75	54.1
Total	133	100
Level		
<i>National level</i>	48	36.1
<i>Local level</i>	25	18.8
<i>International</i>	13	9.8
<i>Other</i>	47	35.3
Total	133	100

In the literature, it is generally suggested that the US/Anglo-centric perspective is dominant (Pettigrew *et al.* 2001). By primarily examining the US/Anglo-centric perspective, a bias might be developed. Countries such as the UK and the US have a majoritarian system, as opposed to more consensus-based systems, such as that in the Netherlands. This difference can influence the trajectories of public management reforms. More majoritarian-based systems often exhibit rapid, ‘top-down-’ (Hill and Hupe 2009) oriented reform. However, consensus-based systems might exhibit slower, ‘bottom-up’ patterns of reform (Pollitt *et al.* 2010). Thus the implementation of change can vary among countries. We encountered a dominant perspective: of the 133 publications, 28 were based on the US and 22 were based on the UK (see Table 3). When including studies from Australia, New Zealand and Canada, as well as comparative studies among those countries, we found 66 (49.6% of all publications) to be US/Anglo-centric. Considering the studied subjects in the various countries, we did not encounter large differences among national- or local-level organisations or subsectors. The dominant theoretical frames used by scholars from different parts of the world were also rather comparable.

TABLE 3 *Source of studies*

Source	Count	Percentage
US/Anglo-centric		
<i>US Basis</i>	28	21.0
<i>UK Basis</i>	22	16.5
<i>Australia, New Zealand and Canada (combined)</i>	12	9.0
<i>Comparative (within US/Anglo-centric countries)</i>	4	3.0
Subtotal	66	49.6
Other		
<i>European countries (+ EU)</i>	25	18.8
<i>Asian</i>	4	3.0
<i>Other countries</i>	4	3.0
<i>Comparative (within other than US/Anglo-centric)</i>	3	2.3
Subtotal	36	27.1
Comparative (international)	3	2.3
Unidentified	28	21.1
Total articles	133	100

Next, we describe the review, based on the five previously identified factors: the context, content, process, leadership and outcomes of change.

CONTEXT

In most studies, the context was provided in terms of the background of the empirical data or as a framework for the conceptual elaboration of change management in the public sector. In general,

the fundamental difference between private and public organisations is the political context of democracy (parliament, politics and politicians) and the juridical context of ‘Rechtsstaat’ (legislation, rules, bureaucracy). For example, Rainey (1997) broadly defines differences between private and public organisations by their *environmental characteristics* (such as the intensity of political influence), *transactions between organisation and environment* (such as the production of public goods) and the *structures and processes of organisations* (such as the clarity of organisational goals and the amount of ‘red tape’, i.e. bureaucracy). Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004) further define five broad forces affecting change in public organisations: socio-economic forces, political system characteristics, elite decision-making regarding the desirability and feasibility of change, the occurrence of change events such as scandals and administrative system characteristics. Others add the changing content and context of the public sector in terms of NPM (e.g. Caldwell 2009, in By and Macleod, 2009) and complexity in the stakeholder field (e.g. Perrot 2009, in By and Macleod, 2009). Each of these approaches to the context of change was found in the reviewed literature. We may classify the approaches in a number of ways.

The first distinction related to contextual characteristics as a frame of reference (e.g. change needing to be understood within a timeframe). Wollmann (2000) provides a useful example by positioning sectoral changes within a full historical analysis of local government reform in Germany, which in this case also needs to be understood from his institutionalist perspective. Others examine change in relation to the characteristics of a specific sector. We should note here that some studies address change in public organisations in general, whereas others discuss the context of specific sub-sectors, such as healthcare (e.g. Modell 2001) or education (De Boer *et al.* 2007). Hartley *et al.* (2002) make a useful distinction in this case, suggesting that change takes place at the societal, governmental, organisational and actor levels simultaneously.

Second, the description of drivers of change as the contextual background provides insight into the demands placed on public organisations, such as changing client demands (Askim 2009; Christensen 2006), the availability of new technologies (Dunleavy *et al.* 2006; Vann 2004) and financial crises (Hendriks and Tops 2003). Central government decisions are also identified as a direct force for change. Policy changes, changes in financing and new regulations implemented by central governments (often by EU regulation in European countries) are common drivers of reorganisation and the implementation of change (e.g. Jespersen *et al.* 2002; De Boer *et al.* 2007; Reichard 2003). In a few instances, the role of political involvement in the change process is discussed as a typical contextual factor making demands on the public organisation (e.g. Weissert and Goggin 2002).

Third, the direct interaction between the organisation and its environment provides the context to manage change. With a focus on complex stakeholder networks and public private partnerships (PPPs), some studies address the role of public organisations in changing or shaping their own contexts (e.g. Christiansen 2006). Environmental characteristics affect network arrangements (Kim *et al.* 2006), but participation in the network also shapes the context of the change in which the organisation is an actor (Downe, Hartley and Rashman 2004; Grantham 2001). In networks and alliances, particularly PPPs, public sector values become an explicit contextual factor in addressing change (Grimshaw *et al.* 2002).

Fourth, the debate or theoretical frame in which the publication is positioned guides how the context is established. The most frequently employed theoretical perspectives in our sample are change management theory and institutional theory. Institutionalists argue that organisational

change is imposed by an organisation's environment. Rather than intentionally implementing change to improve efficiency, organisations pursue legitimacy by conforming to environmental pressures (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Given its more deterministic explanation for change, combined with its focus on the organisational field rather than on individual organisations, the institutional perspective has traditionally contributed little to understanding the *processes* of managing change in organisations (Frumkin and Galaskiewicz 2004). Change management theory, in contrast, belongs to the rational-adaptive perspective and highlights how organisational change is generated by the intentional actions of agents (Fernandez and Rainey 2006; Kickert 2010). Such literature is relatively limited in terms of providing detail regarding how context affects change. It focuses on the choices made by the actors involved in the change. Moreover, the empirical focus in change management theory is on the organisational or intra-organisational level (e.g. Coram and Burnes 2001; Sminia and Van Nistelrooij 2006).

We found it noteworthy to address the fact that many of the contextual factors described by the authors provide sectoral information. Many, if not all of the external drivers for change are embedded within larger contextual developments, often affecting a number of organisations through their changes (such as the introduction of a new educational system that affects all universities). Most empirical work presented by the authors, however, focuses on one particular organisation or on part of an organisation when studying the management of change.

CONTENT

When analyzing content, we found distinguishing among the three orders of change to be very helpful. In each of the orders of change, different content relating to the purpose of the change

became apparent and at the same time revealed the level to which attention is paid purely to the content (what the change is about) or how this content is implemented (process).

Typical *first-order* changes (limited to a subsystem or organisational process) can be found in the introduction of new processes, systems and procedures. These changes involve the introduction of new accounting systems (e.g. Ridder, Bruns and Spier 2005) or performance measures (De Lancer Julnes and Holzer 2001). Furthermore, some articles address change management in relation to information technology (IT) or e-government (O'Neill 2009; Ciborra, 2005; Heeks 2005).

Such first-order changes do not affect the primary organisational processes, and although they may be introduced in an entire sector, they often also do not change the organisation or sector as a whole. An interesting exception is the study by Plowman *et al.* (2007), which showed how first-order changes can result in a radical organisational change over time when describing a major shift in a church's traditional religious functions towards becoming a shelter and community centre for homeless people through a series of small changes over a period of several years. However, the findings in the study by Pope *et al.* (2006) provided an opposing view by demonstrating how the introduction of treatment centres in hospitals aiming to achieve a sector change in the UK National Health Service (third-order) on the micro level may be limited to some first-order adaptations of facilities in the physical environment.

Second-order changes impacting the organisational level are less represented in the reviewed literature but can be found in terms of reorganisations (Boyne 2006) or even 'agency turnarounds' (Borins 2002). On the second-order level, we see more keywords such as

organisational culture, climate and other behavioural factors, that differ from the content of most first-order changes, which are more related to structure. For example, in their study of leadership in New Zealand's public sector, Parry and Proctor-Thomson (2003) conclude that rules and procedures play only a secondary role in improving the public sector and emphasize the attention that decision makers need to place on the values and beliefs that drive decisions.

Many of the papers describe change in terms of a *third-order* nature, indicating that the content of change was related to public service reforms in general (e.g. Christensen and Pallesen 2001; Battaglio and Condrey 2009), the creation of various partnerships (Bovaird 2006; 2007), or sector-specific reforms such as a welfare reform (Askim *et al.* 2009). Other types of reforms relate to privatisation and the merging of government organisations (e.g. Grantham 2001; Erakovic and Powell 2006; Kavanagh and Ashkanasy 2006) or to EU reforms in particular (e.g. Bauer 2008; Schout 2009). In most cases, these changes are described in terms of the content of the reform or policy change. The studies do not provide much detail on the management of change within the organisations. An example is provided by Christensen and Pallesen (2001), who describe four reforms in Denmark that range from the delegation of financial authority to the implementation of user democracy and choice. The authors explain the meaning of these reforms within their institutional settings and consider their implementation with regard to their success and failure rates. Much about this implementation is described according to the role of political and administrative decision makers, whereas the change management process within the organisations subject to the reforms remains unknown.

In terms of content, we observe that authors place significant attention on what the change involves, including full and sometimes technical descriptions ranging from macro-level reforms

and new policies (often described as third-order changes) to micro-level changes in procedures and new structures (first-order changes). The content and context of change seem closely related; most authors provide a rich background on the 'what' of a change by describing its national, political and sectoral environment. Much less attention, however, is paid to how change is implemented within individual organisations.

PROCESS

After reviewing how the process of change is discussed in the literature, we decided to group the literature into the three areas of focus that became apparent during the review process: Planned versus emergent change processes, which are also addressed in much of the general literature (e.g. Beer and Nohria 2000), resistance to change and factors defining the success or failure of the change implementation.

Planned versus emergent change processes

Wollmann (2000) presents change in the public sector as an interchange between (radical) reform waves and intermittent incrementalism. His research described an emergent bottom-up NPM-like modernisation process in German local governmental reform that was driven from inside the administration without any intervention by higher levels of government in the 1990s. Wollmann (2000) found a lack of intervention or interference by the higher levels of government to be a condition for successful changes. Rational planning in Germany was short-lived and lasting change occurred through incremental bottom-up approaches. Reichard (2003) also studied local government reform in Germany, although focusing more on the 1990s. He concluded that the implementation of these reforms suffered from some problems: weak project management, weak participation and involvement of personnel, and weak involvement of politicians. Reichard

(2003) also compared similar reforms in the Netherlands and Switzerland, concluding that there are similarities in implementation. They are all bottom-up innovations involving informal and voluntary reform cooperation, their major driving forces are administrations, and they are characterized by passive politicians, municipal think tanks, the late involvement of academics and the strong influence of consultants. Askim *et al.* (2009) described the decision-making and implementation processes of a joined up government reform in Norway. This reform is the exact opposite of an NPM reform and an example of a third-order change. Askim *et al.* (2009) divided the reform process in half and distinguished between the decision-making and implementation phases. The final form of the merger and the selection of the leader of the reform process were found to be influenced by aspects of the reform process itself.

Various authors use the distinction between incremental and planned changes as occurring in organisations to define various approaches for public organisations to use in change initiatives. In a more general conceptual paper distinguishing public sector change management from generic change management, Rusaw (2007) proposed four approaches to change in public organisations: 1) a means-end, rational, top-down planned change approach with examples of TQM and re-engineering, 2) an incremental, small-steps, decentralized, approach focused on visible results in the short-term that is most successful if there is no need for external approval, 3) a pluralistic approach involving multiple mental models and actors that is useful to solve wicked problems (shared policy-making), and 4) an individual approach, which is basically the learning model, involving changing the organisation through individuals and groups as well as formal and informal learning behaviour to improve service levels and invent new service systems.

More focused on privatisation, Erakovic and Powell (2006) found three different 'pathways' to change in their study on privatized state-owned enterprises in New Zealand. The first is an incremental (step-by-step) pathway to change. According to Erakovic and Powell (2006), this pathway is used in competitive and turbulent environments. The second, radical, pathway is used in deregulated domestic markets and in the context of rapid technological developments. The third and reductive pathway (leading to dismantlement) is used by smaller companies in which buyers are interested in high quality assets and long-term contracts with reliable clients. The final, most specific model is based on the implementation of a new accounting system in German municipalities. Ridder, Bruns and Spier (2005) distinguish among three different modes of cooperation for the implementation of the financial system: a mode based on a dominant project group, a mode that depends more on external consultants and a mode based on close interaction between project and user groups. Schedler (2003) also found the considerable influence of consultants (and researchers) in his study of local and regional public management reforms in Switzerland.

Resistance to change

The concept of (employee) resistance to change is a common subject in the change management literature. Authors such as Kotter (1996) and Ajzen (1991) have written about the pivotal roles that resistance to change and employee behaviour play in the change process. The literature review showed that resistance to change is still an important issue in the current change management and public management literatures. However, there does not appear to be a consensus on what causes resistance and how it can be overcome.

Oreg (2006) found personality and the context of the change to influence resistance to change and change processes. Employees resist changes because they anticipate them to have an unwanted outcome. Vann (2004) does not consider the expectations of employees to be influential, but rather focuses on the clash between the grammars of the public service bureaucracy and private business tools, for example, between project management process models and the classical features of the bureaucratic public service agency, such as policies, rules and regulations. White (2000) examines the change management strategy as the key to success. A top-down change management approach would not work because it would lead to too much resistance amongst the employees. Piderit (2000), based on Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour (1991), did not focus on resistance to change specifically, but rather on what generally causes employees to react (positively or negatively) to organisational change. These reactions can be categorized according to three dimensions: cognitive, emotional and intentional (Piderit 2000; p.786). In their case study on the introduction of business process engineering in the UK National Health Service, McNulty and Ferlie (2004) showed that resistance to radical change made the change sedimentary rather than transformational.

Factors defining success or failure

Many scholars wrote about the different factors that influence change implementation or processes. Thomas (2006) mentioned a number of variables that affected the success of the implementation of a patient safety policy in the Canadian healthcare sector, such as adequate resources, the existence of incentives to support or resist change, and the responses of multiple stakeholders. Lindquist (2006) investigated the role and function of implementation units that were specially created in Britain, Australia and New Zealand to ensure better implementation of policy initiatives by use of different roles (by scrutinising and challenging, facilitating, advising,

monitoring and evaluating performance). Implementation units have great potential, according to Lindquist, but they sometimes overlap and rivalry and competition between units is a potential danger.

Whether the change can be considered a success also depends on the definition of success. For example, Weissert and Goggin (2002) found that the success of the implementation is strongly depended on its defined goals, such as cost reduction, and compliance with the change. They did not view the success of the change in terms of stakeholder satisfaction because if they had considered this aspect, the implementation would not be completely successful. We will examine this issue further in our section on change outcomes.

LEADERSHIP

Evidently, political leadership in public organisations is quite distinct from leadership in private organisations. Leadership in the public sector is also discussed in terms of administrative or bureaucratic leadership (Van Wart 2003; Trottier, Van Wart and Wang 2008). Administrative leadership can be contrasted with political leadership, which pertains to the leadership activities executed by the political supervisors of public organisations. Although most of the literature on public sector leadership does not examine organisational change (cf. Van Wart 2003), some authors focus on the role of leadership in organisational change.

The notion that leadership is a key factor in organisational change processes appears in the literature on organisational change (e.g. Kotter 1996). Leadership is also regarded as an important driver of change in the literature on change in the public sector. For example, Charlesworth *et al.* (2003; p. 15) state that ‘effective leadership is the key to leading effective change’. Similarly,

Christensen (2005) emphasizes the importance of political leadership and consultants in the process of organisational change. Ridder *et al.* (2005) emphasize the need for involvement from top management and politicians. Moreover, Gabris *et al.* (2001) emphasize that leadership needs to be credible and Kavanagh and Askkanasy (2006) conclude that leaders need to be competent and trained in the process of transforming organisations. One study that provides detail about leadership behaviour in relation to the process of change is that by Denis, Lamothe and Langley (2001). They describe the creation of leadership groups in different types of hospitals (suburban, community and university).

Stewart and Kringas (2003) state that leadership is often described from a 'heroic', vertical perspective in the change management literature. The term 'heroic' implies an all-powerful, hierarchical leadership role. In the public sector context, leadership is mostly regarded as an exclusive activity of the head of the agency (Van Wart 2003; Chustz and Larson 2006). It is striking that little attention is given to different types of leadership in public sector organisational change processes, such as distributed, shared or team leadership (Jackson and Parry 2009). Almost all notions related to leading public sector change exemplify a traditional, vertical leadership model; for example, Fernandez (2005) and Boin and Christensen (2008).

Notable exceptions to a vertical leadership model are Borins (2002) and Rusaw (2007), who relate different types of leadership to different approaches to change. Borins (2002) differentiates among emergent bottom-up changes, politically directed responses to crises and organisational turnarounds by administrative leaders. The latter two approaches are based on traditional, hierarchical leadership models, whereas bottom-up changes require informal, decentralized leadership. Rusaw (2007) argues that incremental and pluralistic changes, in contrast to planned,

rational change, require decentralized and shared leadership. This contention is similar to arguments made in the general management literature by Weick and Quinn (1999) and Higgs and Rowland (2005).

Most accounts of leadership in public sector change focus on the activities of top-level administrative or political leaders. However, some authors elaborate on the relationship between administrative and political leadership. In first- and second-order organisational changes, administrative leadership is emphasized. In sectoral, third-order changes, the role of politicians is more prominent. Askim *et al.* (2009) describe how political leadership was necessary in the decision-making phase of public sector reforms, whereas administrative leaders were able to influence the content of change during the implementation phase. Borins (2002) states that the relationship between political and administrative leaders is mediated by trust.

OUTCOMES

Birkland (2011, see also Easton, 1965) used the input, process, output and outcome concepts to study policy processes. Applying these concepts to organisational change, we view change outcomes as substantive results of the implementation of change that can be intended or unintended and positive or negative. These differ from outputs, which are clear decisions, such as the new governmental structure following a reform. Processes/activities are the ways in which the outputs are obtained. Outputs are often easier to measure than outcomes.

Let us consider how the two main approaches to change management, planned and emergent change, examine outcomes. In the planned change approach, change begins through the definition of the (undesirable) present situation. From this situation, an image is formed of the (desired)

future situation. Hence, for planned change approaches, results are planned in advance. In contrast, in the emergent change approach, change outcomes are not previously determined. The outcomes emerge and are defined as the change itself occurs.

Hence, in planned change approaches, outcomes are defined in advance, whereas in emergent change approaches, outcomes emerge during the change process. In the emergent change approaches, this type of emergence means that it is more difficult to assess the success of change in advance. Indeed, it is more difficult to assess success in general. How can we measure achievement when we do not really know what we are aiming for? Viewed in this light, the statement that ‘The brutal fact is that about 70% of all change initiatives fail’ (Beer and Nohria 2000; p.15) might be viewed with some suspicion.

Having considered the difference between planned and emergent change, we can consider a number of outcome criteria. Traditional outcome criteria include an increased chance of survival (continuity) or greater profitability. Furthermore, Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) assessed organisational change efforts using affective and behavioural criteria. In this study, we focus on values as possible criteria for outcomes, such as increased efficiency, transparency or equity. In the public sector, the debate on values is becoming increasingly important. This phenomenon is highly related to the introduction of NPM (Hood 1991; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). NPM can be defined as a broad set of management approaches and techniques that are borrowed from the private sector and applied in the public sector (Hood, 1991). As a result of NPM, business values – such as efficiency, transparency and client choice – might take precedence over more traditional public values – such as equity and security. Hence, a focus on values seems to be appropriate for examining the changes that are occurring in the contemporary public sector

(Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). In Table 4, we therefore distinguish between NPM values and more traditional public administration values (see also Ferlie 1996; Hood 1991).

TABLE 4 *Distinguishing between types of outcome*

NPM values:	Traditional public sector values:
Increasing...	Increasing...
Efficiency	Equity
Effectiveness (as in: clear results)	Legitimacy
Client value	Equality
Transparency	Fairness
Frugality	Reliability
	Safety
	Due process

Considering our sample, we see that most planned change initiatives identify increased organisational efficiency as the main anticipated change outcome, which can be regarded as a prime NPM value (such as Hendriks and Tops 2003; Reichard 2003; Vann 2004; Weissert and Goggin 2002; Hoque and Kirkpatrick 2008; Coram and Burnes 2001). For example, Battaglio and Condrey (2009) studied employment in the public sector, which favours efficiency over job security. Next to efficiency, transparency (for example Schedler 2003, Sminia and Van Nistelrooij 2006), effectiveness (for example Jespersen *et al.* 2002; Lindquist, 2006) and client choice or client satisfaction (for example Christensen and Pallesen 2001; Chen *et al.* 2006) seem to be important NPM values that are being pursued.

Fewer studies in our sample describe the pursuit of more traditional public sector values. Thomas (2006) analyzed an organisational change process that aimed to increase safety and Chustz and Larson (2006) documented an attempt to increase equity and safety. However, in both cases, the changes took place in a hospital, where the value of patient safety is more likely to serve as a performance indicator than as a traditional public sector value. The study on reform in a Norwegian hospital by Christensen, Laegreid and Stigen (2006) reports both internal (such as efficiency measures) and external (such as service equality and user influence) measures of performance. Overall, organisational changes in the public sector seem to be focused mainly on the pursuit of NPM values.

Many studies explicitly refer to the anticipated goal of a planned change initiative, but not all authors analyze the extent to which this outcome has been realized. In other words, the actual effects of organisational change are not always reported. For example, Hoque (2005), Christensen and Pallesen (2001) and Coram and Burnes (2001) analyze changes that aim to increase organisational efficiency but do not report the extent to which the change initiative has influenced this value.

Some studies evaluate the outcomes of organisational change. However, some important differences exist regarding how these outcomes are conceptualized. For instance, some authors refer to the *behaviour* of actors. Schedler (2003) and Christensen (2005) report the outcome of change by stating that the subjects of change have indeed adopted a new practice. However, these behavioural effects do not necessarily contribute to the anticipated outcome value. For example, the adoption of a new accounting system (output) does not guarantee an actual increase in transparency (outcome) (Schedler 2003). Other authors evaluate the effects of change by

highlighting *experiences*, such as Weissert and Goggin (2002), who analyze the experiences of clients and stakeholders.

Other studies rely on the evaluation of employee *attitudes* to explain the effects of change. For example, Jespersen *et al.* (2002) acknowledge that an organisational change has had superficial effects and the attitudes of employees have remained unaltered. Hoque and Kirkpatrick (2008) evaluate an organisational change in terms of its effects on attitudes regarding organisational citizenship behaviour, work pressure and morale. Finally, some authors refer to objective *outputs* to evaluate the outcome of a change. Chustz and Larson (2006) determine the outcome of a change by measuring the number of applicants for a new hospital policy. Sharma and Hoque (2002) measure client satisfaction and business results in the years prior to and after the implementation of a total quality management programme. Chen *et al.* (2006) use a similar systematic method by measuring performance indicators such as service delivery and customer identification before and after the implementation of the change.

Many articles include an evaluation of change outcomes using a number of different criteria. The normative issue of what precisely a success or failure constitutes is not discussed often. It seems that many studies only analyze success in one way, although multiple indicators could be relevant. Hence, future studies could more closely examine outcome criteria or standards to evaluate success. A fruitful approach would be to research effects on a variety of actors (politicians, civil servants, clients) in relation to a number of criteria.

Furthermore, authors rarely explicitly address the success of a change. Although some studies explicitly state that the change was unsuccessful (for instance, Hoque and Kirkpatrick 2008), the

success of the change remains unclear or ambiguous in most studies. Battaglio and Condrey (2009) conclude that the implementation of NPM practices has simultaneously caused efficiency gains and negative attitudes. Reichard (2003) states that it is impossible to make success statements because many changes are still ongoing. Few studies explicitly refer to the organisational change as being successful (Sharma and Hoque 2002; Chustz and Larson 2006 Chen *et al.* 2006). Coincidentally, these are also the studies that rely on the most objective, output-based evaluations of the effects of change.

CONCLUSIONS

Our research objectives for this literature review were to examine how change management in the public sector has been studied during the past decade and what it teaches us, with the goal of being able to propose a research agenda for the future. When considering how change management in the public sector is studied, we conclude that this field generally seems to be rather dispersed. The 133 articles we could identify were published in 51 different journals and used approximately 20 different theoretical angles to study change in a wide range of sub-sectors. In studying the management of change, we found that both the institutional theory and the general change management literature are dominant. Change management theory, as a rational-adaptive theory, places significant emphasis on both describing and prescribing the process of change implementation, although, it tends to lack contextual considerations. Institutional theory, in contrast, provides scholars with frameworks that facilitate rich analysis of the context of change, as well as actors and their power, receive considerable attention. At the same time, the implementation processes within organisations subject to these institutional changes remain underemphasized. In addition, we observe reforms and sector changes being described as top-down, planned change, i.e. changes that are “made to” organisations rather than changes made by

and within organisations. To a large extent, this approach supports the overall public sector model, enabling political and administrative decision makers to agree on implementing actions to affect a reform or new policy. Subsequently, there is more interest in the question of whether the policy in itself is effective than in the question of how such changes are implemented in order to become effective. If change is consequently studied on the macro-level, such as in the reform literature, the attention on micro-processes seems to almost automatically be absent. However, too much attention on the micro level often disregards the broader context.

Some other elements were dominant in the study of change. First, almost half of the publications are based on case-study material, which partly explains the high proportion of sub-system (first-order) and organisational (second-order) changes encountered in the literature. Second, the descriptions of the context and content of the change are rich and lead to a relatively high focus on the characteristics of sectoral, or third-order, change (i.e. one-third of the articles addresses such characteristics). Third, we found that many of the drivers of change in the public sector fit into the NPM tendency to create more effective and efficient public organisations.

The use of the theoretical framework based on Pettigrew *et al.* (2001) and the review of Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) helped us to focus on important change-related issues in our analysis. We will provide more specific conclusions on some of the factors they defined, (i.e., context, content, process and outcomes, to which we added the factor of leadership) because we encountered them in the study of change in public organisations.

First, relatively few details were provided with regard to change processes and their outcomes. Most of the articles addressed typical public characteristics and drivers, but we found that most

authors had difficulty in specifically demonstrating if and how these factors actually affected the change processes in public organisations. For instance, the review confirms that NPM-related organisational changes are still very much ‘in vogue’ and that the change process is often described in terms of contextual characteristics and content. We were generally able to divide this literature into three main areas with regard to the change process. First, the literature showed that the emergent and planned change approach still seem to be widely used to describe change. Second, it showed that the employee (or civil servant) in the changing public organisation is regarded not only as a subject but also as an actor in the change process, which is illustrated by the focus on resistance to change. Third, some of the literature specifically focused on the factors that influence the change process and determine its success or failure. Nevertheless, we tended to find that this area lacked detail, for instance about the specific public characteristics related to the change process. Finally, a contextual issue is that the majority of the publications had a US/Anglo-Saxon origin, supporting our earlier observations on the risk of a bias. Addressing Pettigrew’s earlier criticism on the study of change (Pettigrew 1985), we raise the issue that not only may contextual factors of change vary for public organisations around the world, but also the particular change implementation processes.

Our analysis shows that most articles do not particularly address the outcomes of organisational change or its level of success. Of course, some reviewed articles focused strictly on the antecedents or the process of change, and therefore deliberately did not address the degree of success. Another explanation is that general public sector characteristics, such as multiple and conflicting goals (Rainey 1997), would also make it difficult to measure the effects of organisational change. This seems somewhat contradictory with our finding that NPM in

particular is one of the key drivers of organisational change, particularly aiming to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public organisations.

Despite the focus on leadership within public sector change processes, some gaps in the literature also exist. First, most of the current work in this field examines a public sector case without really considering the distinctive features of leadership in the public sector. Second, most authors do not seem to be concerned with questions such as ‘what constitutes effective change leadership?’ or ‘what are the core competencies of leaders?’. This is striking because these are important topics in private sector research on organisational change. Related to this is the notion that research into public sector change leadership is not very theory-driven. Some authors (e.g. Fernandez 2005) refer to transformational leadership theory, but most reports on leadership are records of leadership activities in an organisational change process.

AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

From the above analyses, we would suggest that the areas for future research into change management within the public sector should include at least seven particular themes and angles across the context, content, process, outcomes and leadership of sub-system, organisational and sectoral change.

We identified a gap between the employed theoretical perspectives and suggest that scholars look for opportunities to *use the strengths of different theoretical approaches* to study the field (1). The institutional theory, which is highly context-aware, in combination with the generic change management literature, with its detailed attention to process, behaviour and leadership, may particularly help to better understand the complex multi-layered phenomena of change in the

public sector. Additionally, we see a need for more *in-depth empirical studies of the change process* within various public contexts (2). In particular, such studies should provide details of change interventions and the roles and behaviours of those involved in change processes. This approach should include longitudinal studies (Pettigrew *et al.* 2001). One particular way to accomplish this goal is to *work with practitioners* to explore the realities of change implementation in a variety of contexts (3). This approach would address critiques on the paucity of studies that include a practitioner perspective (Pettigrew 1990). There generally seems to be a gap between the world of the change practitioner and that of those studying change as outsiders. Practitioners, both managers and (internal) consultants, are highly involved in change implementation and the decisions made in that area, and as such are a valuable resource of detailed information about the process (Higgs and Rowland 2005). Furthermore, there seems to be a high need among practitioners for general recipes for success, given the popularity of studies such as Kotter (1996), which often lack a sound empirical basis and an eye for sector-specific issues. Researchers could improve the theory building on change management in public organisations with more and stronger empirical research that builds on a clear understanding of practice. In this way, researchers can provide practical guidelines that are rigorously grounded. However, they would also need to pay more *attention to the outcomes and successes* of change in public organisations (4), i.e. to support practitioners in their search for lessons on what makes a change successful. The important role of NPM in change initiatives underlines this issue, but also emphasizes the importance of a critical evaluation of an overly narrow focus on efficiency and effectiveness while disregarding the other (traditional) public sector values.

Furthermore, we see a need for more research that explicitly focuses on *leading change in a public sector context* (5). There appears to be little development or testing of public-sector-

specific theory relating to the impact of leadership in the implementation of organisational change. In particular, we would like to address the issue of the interaction between administrative leadership and more external political leadership. Both may involve different competencies and behaviours to make change happen, and may even be approached as first- and second-order changes (e.g. when they only concern change leadership within one organisation) versus third-order changes (e.g. when they concern political leadership affecting an entire sector).

The latter issue also raises the need for more studies demonstrating both the *discrepancies and interactions between micro- and sector-level changes* in general (6). In particular, the reform literature has a profound tradition of sector and even cross-national comparisons of sectoral changes (e.g. Kuhlman 2010). Unfortunately, such comparisons pay little or no attention to the management of change processes within the organisations subject to these sectoral changes. In addition to studies that particularly address the interaction between change within the organisation and within the sector as a whole, we also see a need for more *comparative studies of the management of change* (7). These include comparisons between organisations, sectors (including public versus private) and national contexts, particularly including those between cases from the US and the UK versus those in other countries. All these comparisons help to explore the extent to which differing contexts impact the implementation of change within the public sector.

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