

Publicness and organizational theory building: opening the black box

Abstract. The paper investigates the publicness-performance relationship, combining and integrating two conceptual models offered by recent mainstream literature. Results suggest the need to set the performance management debate in a broader context, one open to the contribution of organization studies. Embracing a fresh perspective not only enables us to advance our understanding of the relevant phenomena, but also to build a more convincing and informed knowledge base on public service performance.

Keywords. Performance, public organizations, organizational variables and theory, effectiveness

Introduction

There is something obvious, almost taken for granted, in the nexus between performance and organizing. The subject of public services performance is constantly under scrutiny by a variety of stakeholders, including politicians, citizens, service users and government inspectors, (G. A. Boyne, Meier, O'Toole, & Walker, 2006, p. 1) and, over time, has had many ups and downs (Bouckaert & Van Dooren 2009). More recently, the ongoing crisis and dwindling public budgets has heightened the interest in these themes, even though, generally speaking, their relevance is indubitable. At least two major reasons make the apparent obviousness somewhat misleading.

First, the complexity of the performance-organizing relationship translates into significant conceptual complexity. While the organizational discipline acknowledges, and not only in terms of publicness, how hard it is to understand the evolution of the organizations that in times of turbulence and transformation grow in complexity (Czarniawska 2003; March 1996; Scott 2001), the blurred boundaries of the public administration research domain means it can be investigated from several different angles. For instance, Raadschelders (1999, p. 298) underscores that in this field the disciplinary identity is provided by the object (vast) of the research rather than by a unified body of theory “prohibited for Public Administration [because of] its multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary nature and the continuous changing nature of government and government-society relations.” A view supported by Riccucci (2010), who sees the heterogeneity of literature’s epistemic traditions not as a weakness in terms of analytical rigor but as enabling, giving the scholar a choice of the epistemological approach best suited to their research question. The fertility of

pluralism is the response of this not-yet established author to some of the polemic statements, such as the reference to “postmodernist morass of extreme relativism”, that help to limit the significance of the multiple constituency model (George A Boyne, 2003, p. 222).

On the other hand, the notion of performance itself has failed to garner consensus and the highly diverse definitions and ensuing research methods often make it very difficult and unsatisfactory to compare the various proposals. The idea that organizations should measure and actively manage their performance remains a highly controversial and multifaceted issue. In public services, performance applies to different levels, from the individual person to a complex system, such as health or education, or to the entire public administration apparatus, hence “the evaluation of public organizations is a complex process, not just a consensual technical and apolitical job” (Arellano-Gault, Demortain, Rouillard, & Thoenig, 2013, p. 152). In fact, subjective expectations and preferences make performance contingent by nature because it reflects the specific perspectives in space and in time of the observers (internal or external stakeholders), as well raising the problem of which evaluation criteria to use according to whether the organizations are single or networks (Kenis & Provan 2009; Grandori 1999; Mercurio 2007). Then there is the fact that performance is a moving target, which raises the hardly negligible question of the effective spaces, many of which are outside the control of the public managers, that allow the senior and middle managers to take purposive action. For example, many decisions in public settings are mandatory and regulated by unavoidable norms (Grafton et al. 2011; Sorrentino & Simonetta 2011). Strategic management in a mandated organization setting is different from strategic management in a voluntary organization (Kenis & Provan 2009). In other cases, ‘some internal characteristics, too, may be largely inherited from the past and serve as constraints on contemporary public settings. These include the age composition of the workforce and the prevailing organizational culture’ (Boyne & Walker 2010).

The second reason is that performance and organization are treated as separate elements by the mainstream literature. For example, the relationship between publicness and performance was explored in a recent study (Andrews, Boyne, & Walker, 2011) published in a Special Issue of *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*. Specifically, the authors developed a conceptual model based on the three performance criteria of efficiency, effectiveness and equity and the three dimensions of publicness, i.e., ownership, funding and control. Among other things, the model supports a key assumption: that publicness effects are moderated by organizational characteristics (ibidem, p. i306). But what does the term ‘organizational characteristics’ mean exactly? That the study glosses over this umbrella term implies that the authors see the organizational variables as a kind of ‘black box’, i.e., an opaque space between the antecedents and the expected performances. The model correctly identifies performance as the dependent variable but fails to define the role attributed to the ‘organizational choices’. Like a background element, these skirt the edges given that the authors refer only generally to ‘organizational characteristics’.

Basically, the mainstream literature overlooks what is an ineluctable aspect of organizational reflection: that performance is an intentional consequence of organizing. In other words, performance is the fruit of multiple decisional processes diverse in both form and level (Grandori 1999). The significance of the organizational dimension in the development of public sector studies has been declining since the late 1990s, as attested by the recent studies published in three major journals with a research focus on

social science-based approaches of organizations: *Organization Studies*, *Organization Science*, and *Administrative Science Quarterly* (Arellano-Gault et al. 2013; Bozeman 2013). Conversely, the mainstream focus of other academic branches is on the rise. Naturally, that researchers of different fields delve into public services is fully legitimate but does risk overshadowing organizational reflection (Martinez & Mercurio 2004).

The aim of this paper is to highlight some recent developments in the international debate on public sector performance and the implications of adopting an approach that encompasses organizational analysis to identify the content of the ‘black box’. Drawing on both the model developed by Andrews, Boyne, & Walker (“AB&W model”) and a concept-building procedure, the paper sets out to identify a number of organizational contingencies that, according to recent literature on public services, are expected to shape public-sector performance, intended as the ‘achievements of public programs and organizations in terms of the outputs and outcomes that they produce’ (O’Toole & Meier 2011). The aim is to empower our current understanding of the mediating role of organizational characteristics on public services performance by shedding light on two types of organizational variables that act as performance moderators, i.e., single-entity-level factors and individual-level factors, to further clarify the conceptual underpinnings of the publicness-performance relationship.

This objective chimes with the track’s aims because the sustainability of the performances of the entire public administration system is essential to an understanding of the organizing of a single entity. Given the need to tackle the problem of parsimony in the number of variables to use when developing a model in this field (Rainey & Steinbauer 1999) already at this level, it was decided not to broaden the discourse to the interorganizational dimension but to leave this to successive research work aimed at defining the role played by organizing in reform processes to satisfy the need “to treat autonomy and integration and specialization and coordination as mutually dependent”, according to what has emerged in some of the latest research contributions (Bezes, Fimreite, Lidec, & Laegreid, 2013, p. 170).

The paper consists of the introduction and six sections: Section 1 illustrates the research approach adopted; Section 2 presents the ABW model; Section 3 outlines the findings of the ‘Internal Organization’ literature review; Section 4 explains why the authors decided to choose a model of factors that influence the performances of the internal organization; Section 5 redesigns the ABW model based on the results of this endeavor; and Section 6 closes the paper with a discussion of the findings and the implications for future research.

1. The research approach and identifying the exemplary case

While discussing what form to give the paper for the 2013 AIDEA Conference, the idea of sustainability in relation to organization and performance spurred us to examine issues such as interorganizational coordination, where both the specialization versus coordination dilemma (Verhoest et al. 2007) and the methods used to evaluate the effectiveness of networks (Kenis & Provan 2009) raised the question of organizing as a relevant factor of coordination; in particular, the question of organizing change. To quote Denhardt: “Public administration is concerned with managing change processes

in pursuit of publicly defined societal values” (2008, p. 16). As indicated in the introduction, practical reasons have led us to limit the paper’s field of investigation to the level of the single organization. The literature research started with the authors’ knowledge base, which led to the 2011 special issue of the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* on ‘Publicness and Organizational Performance’ and the model proposed by Andrews, Boyne, and Walker (the “AB&W model”) in which performance is affected by an “umbrella” moderator variable defined as ‘organizational characteristics’. The academic standing of the authors and the fact that the article refers to the ‘dimensional publicness theory’ of Bozeman (1987), well-recognized by the literature, compelled us to try our hand at “unpacking” the moderating variable using the process described below.

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

Epistemologically, the method adopted can be defined as interpretive (Myers 2009) as *i*) it uses the subjective professional expertise of the authors to frame the research question and identify the basic reference literature; and *ii*) develops the response to the question through an interpretation of the key text (the ABW model) and then by conducting the successive research suggested by reading the text and the related literature.

2. The AB&W model and the ‘black box’

The latest research on publicness and performance implicitly assumes that ownership, funding and control are crucial dimensions that affect the efficiency (‘the cost per unit of output or of service delivery’), effectiveness (‘the extent to which policy objectives are being achieved’) and equity (‘how fairly outputs and outcomes are distributed among key targets or stakeholders’) of public services (O’Toole & Meier, 2011, p. 2).

The theoretical reflections, empirical evidence and common sense suggest that many factors - summed up in three words 'programs, organizations, people' (Talbot 2005) - are relevant to performance. Nevertheless, when it comes to assessing the impact of publicness on performance, most of the empirical studies use ownership 'as the sole publicness criterion' (R. Andrews et al., 2011, p. i306). Moreover, there are 'numerous models of performance but few come with any clear theoretical explanation or empirical validation' (Talbot, 2005, p. 508).

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

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

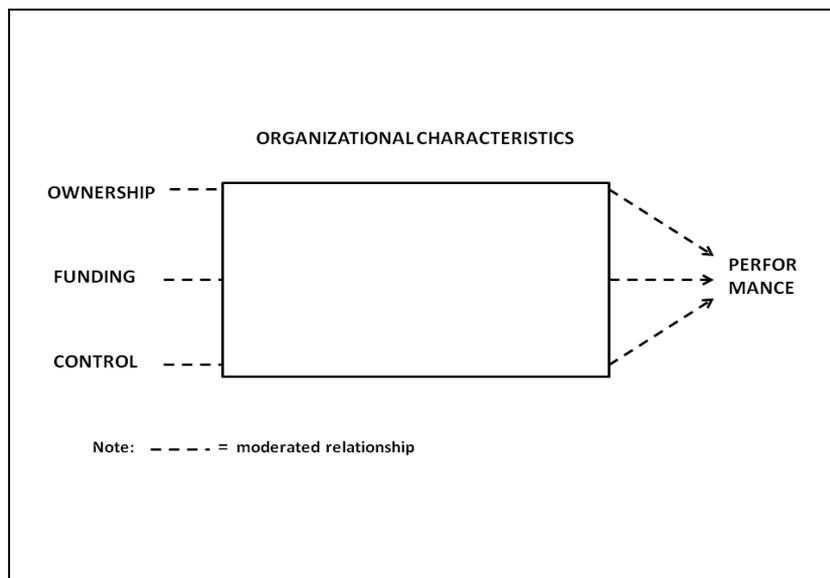


Figure 1: The AB&W Model - Dimensions of Publicness Moderated by Organizational Characteristics (R. Andrews et al., 2011, p. i306)

3. Unpacking the black box: findings of the literature review and the focus on ‘internal organization’

Of the works produced by the three authors in the last decade, only George Boyne takes a structured, specific and head-on approach to the performance of some organizational characteristics. In 2002, Boyne and Dahya (2002) co-developed a model of the impact of executive succession on organizational performance in which the authors address important variables such as structure, processes, and leadership. The model is meant to guide researchers in empirical investigations since the authors consider the effect of executive succession on performance to be significant. The key concepts are the motivations of the chief executives, the available resources, and the opportunities that exist to influence performance, which anyhow depend on a significant number of internal and external circumstances. For the purposes of our study, we are interested in the internal circumstances summarized by the authors in 13 (out of a total of 17) testable hypotheses that respond to the characteristics of the terminal position (e.g., for how long was the predecessor in office, the rate of turnover, and the number of formal roles played), those of the organization (e.g., size, organizational processes, and budgetary priorities), and those of the person (e.g., ability in transformational leadership, motives). The replacement of the chief executive officer and the ensuing change in the strategies adopted triggers a number of internal changes that concern the organizational structures, the processes, the personnel and the budgetary priorities. Aside from its specificities, the interesting thing about this model is that it proposes a structuring of the internal organizational characteristics in which, for performance purposes, management plays an important role, albeit from a different perspective than that of New Public Management (Hood 1991).

In other articles, Andrews, Boyne, and Walker cite the work of other authors when referring to organizational characteristics. Nevertheless, two of their considerations help to frame the question and to specify our field of investigation. First, the limited revenues and the fixed market of the public sector restrict the strategic options to improve services to the organizational aspects (Andrews et al. 2006). Second, these latter are divided into internal and external organizational components with the former referring to variables such as structure, culture, leadership and processes and the latter to the interorganizational relations with other actors, for example, those to which some services have been outsourced (Boyne & Walker 2004). Making this distinction is essential precisely because changes often take place simultaneously at both the internal organization and the external organization level. To reiterate what we said earlier, this paper focuses on the internal organization characteristics deemed relevant to the core issue of performance.

As far as we can ascertain, the works of AB&W refer to 12 papers that have addressed internal organization performance in public bodies, albeit bemoaning the leanness of the empirical research on the subject (Andrews et al. 2006).

Although some of the papers address important variables such as structure, culture and leadership, these are applied to a specific issue or managerial tool: for example, (Berry & Wechsler 1995) survey the adoption of strategic planning in US federal agencies but do not examine the internal enabling organizational conditions that support this innovation. Furthermore, the authors observe that the results obtained this way are still not clear and must be further studied through additional research methods. In fact, the authors found that only rarely are performance measures included in strategic planning. Process formulation and implementation is a key issue that has led

two authors (Chackerian & Mavima 2000) to address the far-reaching consequences of comprehensive reforms in US state governments, in particular, interactions among reform components (e.g., mergers among agencies, introduction of strategic planning), although the intra-organizational consequences of such reforms are not a primary concern of their contribution.

Other authors (Douglas & Judge Jr. 2001) consider the positive effects of total quality management on the financial performance of hospitals, a type of performance not quite suited to the breadth of the AB&W model. Meier and O'Toole (Meier & O'Toole Jr. 2001) research an interesting topic of public education, exploring network management styles characterized by greater interaction with environmental actors who are not direct line subordinates or superiors. The case of school superintendents studied selects five sets of actors from the organization's environment: school board members, local business leaders, other school superintendents, state legislators, and agencies. Networking has positive effects on performance in terms of effectiveness, and the findings suggest that these results might apply also to other, more complicated public organizations. Networking is thus a managerial ability, a trait of the internal organization that enables interaction with external stakeholders relevant to performance, and therefore a bridge linking it to the external organization.

The majority of works cited by ABW highlight specific aspects that lack a frame of reference. The exception is the article by Brewer and Selden (Brewer & Selden 2000), which provides a framework more suited to our purposes, whose work is explored in the following paragraph.

4. The internal organization model adopted

Three reasons make the B&S model developed by Brewer and Selden (Brewer & Selden 2000) chime with our purpose. First, their performance-related values are the same as those adopted by AB&W - efficiency, effectiveness, and fairness - the only difference being, although the meaning is the same, that the latter authors use the term 'equity' instead of 'fairness'. Second, their work is cited by AB&W as one of a "limited number of empirical studies on culture, leadership, and human resource management to support the view that performance can be improved by internal organizational change" (Rhys Andrews et al., 2006b, p. 55). Finally, the taxonomy they propose differentiates between internal and external performance and between agency-level and individual-level factors, enabling the building of a complete reference grid. In fact, the model's independent variables were identified by the authors through an in-depth literature review to ensure the reliability of the grid used to classify the 'organizational characteristics' we are looking for beyond those used by Andrews, Boyne and Walker. The key variables of the theoretical model of organizational performance built by Brewer and Selden draw primarily (as the authors indicate explicitly) from Rainey and Steinbauer (1999). The model is summarized below.

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

- a.1. 'organizational culture', which can be thought of as shared meaning; it is manifested at different levels and it includes the basic assumptions and beliefs of members of the organization;
- a.2. 'human capital and capacity' concerns human resources management from recruitment, to training, and to retaining high-performing people;

- a3. 'agency support to NPR'¹ relates to how agencies respond to reform related mandates (often connected with downsizing and budget cuts);
- a4. 'leadership and supervision' has shown a positive correlation with organizational performance especially in the public administration;
- a5. 'red tape' concerns the amount of rules and regulations that affect both the complexity of organizational design (internal red tape) and the burdensome requirements imposed on those outside the organization (external red tape).

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

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

In describing the performance components of the 'internal organization', the variables of this model have the advantage of reincorporating those considered in the studies on specific issues cited in the preceding section. For example, two of the total quality program conditions of efficacy are the training of persons and the support of top management (Chackerian & Mavima 2000), which are included among the agency-level abilities, respectively in the a2 variable (*human capital and capacity*) and the a4 variable (*leadership and supervision*). A further example of individual-level key factors is the managerial ability needed to achieve good levels of networking (Meier & O'Toole Jr. 2001), which falls under the b4 factor (*individual performance*).

The work of B&S is often cited by the successive literature (e.g., 277 hits on Google Scholar): the four top journals published eight articles, seven of which co-authored by Andrews, Boyne or Walker and four co-authored by Brewer. The only individual contribution is that of Kim, who tested the individual-level factors part of the B&S model in Korea and confirmed their significance (Kim 2004). In (Ashworth et al. 2007), the references to B&S indicate solely that their position is deemed similar to that of other authors, according to which, unlike the proponents of the isomorphism of institutional theory, the new organizational forms produce better results. (Boyne et al. 2011) refer to their work to underscore how top managers shape strategies, affect implementation, and influence performance, generally recognizing the quality of leadership in public organizations. This clearly endorses the relevance of the a4 factor. In (Boyne & Walker 2005), the reader sees the research shift the emphasis placed on the external environment - where the public organizations are seen as trapped by their socioeconomic contexts and the rule of administration and law - towards the growing importance assigned to management in raising performance levels. A scenario in which the B&S model is considered relevant also for its empirical research contribution, its results pointing to the importance of supervisory management, performance orientation, strong cultures that emphasize work and empower employees, and workforce diversity.

Of the four articles written by Brewer either with Walker or Boyne, three address the a5 'red tape' variable, which in the empirical analysis conducted in 2000 failed to produce statistically meaningful results in relation to its impact on performance; a later

¹ The acronym stands for National Partnership for Reinventing Government

research of 2009 (Brewer & Walker 2009) concludes that the consequences on the internal organization's efficiency are lower than generally believed and highlights unexpected negative effects on equity: excess of rules, norms and procedures can raise access barriers to citizens less capable of understanding and overcoming them. Generally, "when red tape is operationalized and measured as an aggregate, multifaceted concept, it is quite harmful to performance, whether judged from inside or outside the organization" [15:439]. This signifies that that variable can generate different and even opposing results, according to whether performance is approached as a whole or as single components (such as in the case of equity). This observation confirms the crucial role of this factor and the way it is defined and measured.

The more recent works to cite Brewer and Selden confirm also the importance of the b3 individual-level factor (*public service motivation*) to performance. Further, according to the results highlighted by the empirical studies (Walker & Brewer 2009), this type of motivation raises the issue of the pay-for-performance systems rated positive by conventional wisdom and management practice in the public sector: the differential pay for public managers sows discontent among the organization's personnel and has a negative impact on performance.

As anticipated in Section 1 on the research approach, given that the B&S model is based on the pre-2001 literature and to understand to what extent the works cite, confirm or dispute its validity, we searched four leading journals for other works that address the internal organization to glean complementary or alternative indications to those of B&S to complete the AB&W model.

The three articles found do not propose models as complete and structured as that of B&S and, while dealing with issues of indubitable interest, these are related to specific or individual cases. One article tests the links between environmental turbulence, structural stability, and performance (Boyne & Meier 2009). The results (using 8 years of data on Texas school districts) show that the unpredictability of external change has a negative effect on performance and that this is compounded by internal organizational change. One of the findings is that a moderator of the negative impact of turbulence is the development of processes for dealing with turbulence (*ibid.*: 813). This confirms the importance of the a3 factor (support to reform) in the B&S model. Another article confirms the importance of both the a4 'leadership and supervision' factor and the b1 'structure of task/work' factor. The qualitative case study (Isett et al. 2011) investigates the effectiveness of the organizational reform of a critical health agency and, among other things, seeks to understand specifically if and how reorganization has facilitated operations (i.e., whether or not services were delivered in an efficient and effective way). The results indicate that top management did not feel it necessary to inform all personnel that the agency would no longer be independent but had to integrate with other structures. Basically, the operatives had no knowledge of the object of the change but shared and applied what derived from that change, supporting the initiatives that affected them directly. A further work of research based on the study of six cases highlights, among other variables, the positive role of the 'human capital and capacity' (a2) and 'leadership and supervision' (a3) factors on performance intended as efficacy, efficiency and timeliness (Stewart & Kringas 2003).

5. Reworking the ABW model

Examining the successive literature confirmed the value of the factors considered by B&S. For example, the ‘public service motivation’ factor is indeed relevant given that for 40 years “mounting survey evidence has repeatedly shown that public employees are less motivated by extrinsic rewards such as pay increases and more motivated by intrinsic rewards such as the satisfaction derived from helping others and making a difference in society” (Walker & Brewer 2009). This is a trait that distinguishes the public sector from the private sector and it would be interesting to know whether its significance varies in other types of public settings. In addition, as underscored in the previous section, the differential pay for public managers seems to create dissent and reverberate negatively on the performance of public organizations where public-service motivation is high.

In Fig. 2, below, the ‘agency support to NPR’ factor of the B&S model was modified not only because it refers to a specificity of the setting analyzed by that particular research, but also to give it a broader connotation: the support of a public organization² in implementing a policy could, in fact, be interpreted as a propensity to ‘change management’. The role played by change on performance emerges from the research works that study the effects of the introduction of strategic planning techniques (Berry & Wechsler 1995) and those that evaluate the consequences deriving from comprehensive reform policies where the interactions of different components have to be managed (Chackerian & Mavima 2000). As some authors note (Andrews et al. 2006; Boyne & Walker 2004) different strategic stances lead to different approaches to change and have different consequences on performance. Therefore, managing change by anticipating, defending, or reacting to possible evolutions in regulation or in the social and economic milieu is a crucial factor (indeed, a strategic factor) for internal organizational performance and as such can be considered a key characteristic of an organization of sustainable performance. It is a well-known fact that change management is connected to the management of innovation (Walker et al. 2010) and that in the presence of slack resources the objectives of innovation can conflict in the shorter term with objectives of efficiency (George A Boyne, 2003, p. 223). Hence, according to the proposal of James March (1991, p. 71), organizational learning in “maintaining an appropriate balance between exploration and exploitation is a primary factor in system survival and prosperity”. Therefore, change management that encompasses organizational learning can help to improve the public service, as Boyne’s definition suggests, “as a closer correspondence between perceptions of actual and desired standards of public services”(George A Boyne, 2003, p. 223, emphasis in the original)

Lastly, even though the paper focuses on the internal organization, the ability of the public organizations to relate to each other and to a network of actors through which the overall performance of the public system can be deemed sustainable depends on the extent to which each public organization is geared to achieve this specific goal, i.e., how much the internal organization is coherent with it. In essence, the internal organization is a precondition of the sustainability of system performances. Fig. 2, below, illustrates the reciprocal interaction between the internal organization variable and the external organization variable.

² In Fig. 2, the authors substituted the original term (agency) with ‘organization’

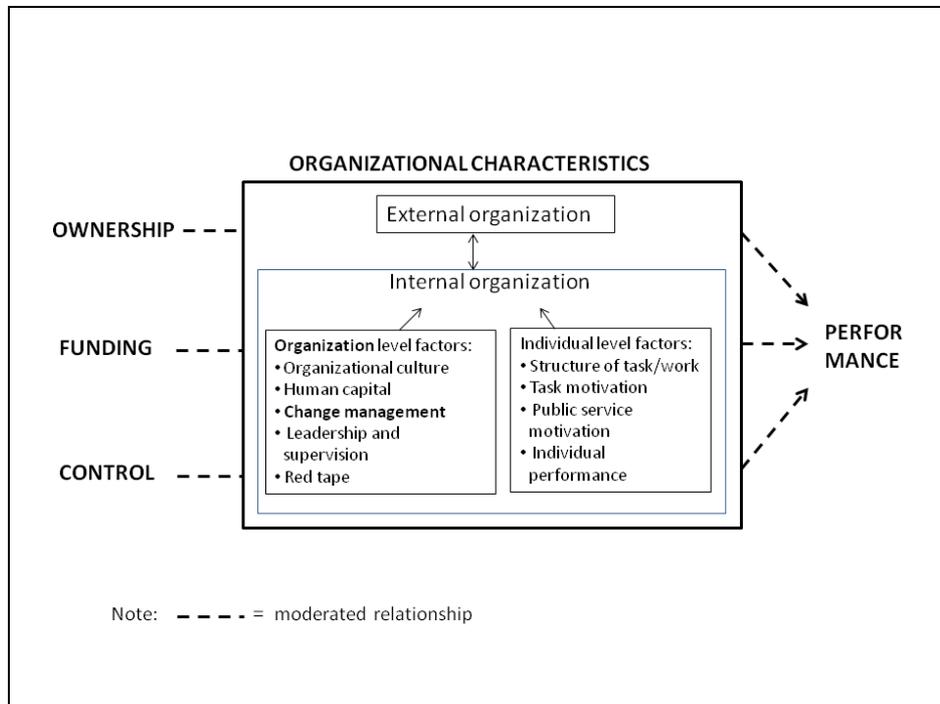


Figure 2: The Proposed and Extended AB&W Model (emphasis identifies terms of the original B&S model variables modified by the authors)

6. Discussion, limitations and future research paths

The building of the exemplary case illustrated in the paper, which can be defined also as an ‘exercise’ to improve our understanding of the theoretical profile developed by the recent mainstream literature of the organization-performance relationship, highlights two distinct aspects: the first is the significance of the model; the second is the use that the vast Public Administration research domain seems to make of the organizational discipline (at least when dealing with performance).

6.1. Significance and limitations of the model.

The unified model developed from the literature review goes some way to opening the black box of the AB&W model (or the AB&W-B&S model) in that it unpacks the umbrella term ‘organizational characteristics’ in a series of fine-grained elements. The model identifies two main categories of moderating factors: internal and external. The internal characteristics of public organizations are then split into organization-level and individual-level factors to form the core of the unified model, while the dimensions of publicness, i.e., ownership, funding and control, set the ground rules for the development of the organizational action. The model favors an open-systems perspective, in that it recognizes the dependence of public organizations and their programs on resource flows with the environment and gives management the job of orchestrating the resources and buffering the technical core from external perturbations

(Scott, 2004, p. 10). When the shock penetrates the organizations, managers are able to operate internally to reduce the performance-related hit (O'Toole & Meier 2011).

This highly stylized model supports the 'management matters' logic but sidesteps the trap of what is called 'managerialism' (Pollitt 2003; Reborá 2012). What is less clear, however, is 'whether' and 'how' the organization action develops in practice. Most of the studies reckon that this influence is not exercised in a linear way and that – as also underscored by the authors of both the models analyzed here – the organization variables interact according to cause-effect relations that are never fully predictable or measurable (De Marco & Sorrentino 2007). The black box effect is ineludible, as is the contingent nature that informs the model proposed here. This means that not only are managerial decisions mediated by organizational conditions, but also that “discretionary choices also derive from specific organizational conditions that interact with performance incentives (and preferences) to create a ... calculus of choice... In this context, street-level practitioners do more than simply respond to performance incentives; they also adjust to them as they manage the imbalance between the demands of their jobs and resource constraints” (Brodkin, 2011, p. i272).

The recent literature on publicness and performance reveals some shifts in emphasis, such as the growing attention placed on the 'equity' rather than on the 'ownership' aspect of performance, prompting our endeavor to distil the most useful notions for the purpose of this study. For example, in terms of the role of management, we have seen how decisions on red tape can reduce equity while still raising the organization's performance levels generally (Brewer & Walker 2009), just like a too rapid adaptation of the structures to the turbulence of the environment (in terms of unexpected regulatory changes or a remixing of the services to be delivered to users) depresses performance levels (Boyne & Meier 2009). Or how the transfer *tout court* of private-sector practices can negatively affect the overall performance of the public-sector organization, a case in question being the systems based on management's 'pay for performance' principle (Walker & Brewer 2009; Reborá 2012).

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

The several limitations of the exercise conducted in this paper can be used to inspire future research directions, three in particular. First, our findings are largely empirically inductive, while the secondary sources on which the analysis is based are few in terms of both the quantity and variety of the studies collected (exclusively academic peer-reviewed articles).

Second, the paper considers solely a small part of the activities and functions of management, leaving out the influence of the lower organizational levels, in particular, that of the 'street-level bureaucrats'. Further, the relationship between management and elected officials has been deliberately left in the background.

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

6.2. The contribution of the organizational discipline to the research field of publicness and performance.

Despite the above limitations, the authors believe that this contingency model provides a useful basis for further empirical testing and theory elaboration. Three further considerations support the use of organizational theory building in the field of publicness.

The first is that the model developed here consists of a spectrum of variables that could be broadened to encompass the results of the research fields indicated earlier or even to include others, such as that of technology for its intertwining with the organization and relative consequences on performance (Depaoli 2012). Nevertheless, the problem is not so much that of preparing the most exhaustive list of variables possible but of deciding which theoretical-organizational perspective to use to identify the variables of significance and to design the research. The literature review shows how this aspect has been somewhat neglected. For example, the B&S model adopted for this paper validates – and rightly so based on the methodological considerations as in (Raadschelders & Lee 2011) – the use of a ‘taxonomy’ because it identifies the variables “empirically” based on the contributions found in the literature and believed significant in the frame of reference proposed by (Rainey & Steinbauer 1999). What seems to be missing is the definition of a ‘typology’ based on an organizational theory perspective.

The second consideration is that the realm of organization studies is just as vast that of public administration studies and, likewise, is populated by different methodologies and epistemologies (Grandori & Soda 2006; Martinez & Mercurio 2004). In summing up 40 years of organizational research, March indicates the research currents, the established domains, with the words: “A variety of approaches that emphasize humanistic, interpretive, and ethnographic visions of organizational research have become common. Studies of organizational change and learning have been extended into studies of the evolution of populations of organizations, organizational forms, and organizational rules, and into the dynamics of ecologies of mutual learning. The simple observation that organizations involve conflicts of interest has become the basis for extensive applications of game theory and related concepts to questions of information exchange, bargaining, contracts, and problems of agency. Issues of gender, ethnicity, and culture have attracted students of organizations with a wide variety of methodological styles, as they have scholars throughout the social sciences.” Like public administration studies, the organizational discipline is made up of different epistemological positions but here, too, the idea that such a variety is an advantage has gained wider currency: “We prefer the paradigm-crossing position because we find it impossible to ignore the multiplicity of perspectives that make up our field of study and wish to take advantage of the diversity organization theory offers” (Schultz and Hatch 1996, p. 530). So the publicness theorists are spoilt for (and rich in) choice when it comes to the different approaches developed by the different theoretical currents, as suggested by the work of Riccucci (2010).

Our final consideration concerns the analysis and the observations recently underscored by Bozeman (2013), who points out the many opportunities missed due to the lack of cross-fertilization between public policy studies and organization studies. On the one side, the policy scholars ignore organizations and organization theory resulting in “limited insight into the impacts of organizations on policy success or failure” (p. 173), on the other, organization studies scholars might find, for example,

that “[i]n context-oriented organization theory a grounding in public policy institutions can be edifying and can even be a useful entry point for developing general theory” (p. 175).

In brief, the paper has shed light on how the predominant approaches isolate performance from core organizational thinking and suggests the need to study performance in conjunction with the insights of organizational theory contributions. The paper is a first attempt to stimulate the debate and to orient research in a direction other than the mainstream.

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