The ‘organizing’ paradigm in public administration: learning by focusing on customer orientation

Abstract

- Purpose
Public Administration complexity derives from the dual character of the public sector, that is to be a means of delivery and an element of societal self-governance. The bureaucratic framework is a way to address this tension, while simultaneously public administration needs to focus on a more processual view of the organization to improve service quality. Training could be a key point to sustain such a transition, by focusing on Customer Orientation. The aim of the study is to explore whether a training device focused on Customer Orientation could develop employees’ theory on organization as being process-oriented, i.e. ‘organizing’.

- Design
The longitudinal study is on a training case study in Italy. Participating in the training course were 34 employees belonging to 16 Public Administrations. Data on participants’ organization representations were collected at the beginning and at the end of the course through the SWOT matrix. Data analysis used a quali-quantitative approach.

- Findings
Findings show a shift to viewing the service organization as a process implicated in uncertainties and unpredictable events rather than the realization of an ideal model.

- Originality
The study contributes to highlight the need for a practical focus on the conceptualization of organization in training, since the term ‘organization’ is often underdescribed or treated as an end in itself.

Introduction

Public administration is a critical context due to demanding clients, barriers to equity and intrinsic organizational complexity. This complexity derives from the dual character of the public sector, that is to be both a means of delivery and also an element of societal self-governance. In this way, public administration has to contain the unresolved value conflicts and moral ambivalence of society, at the intersection of conflicting needs and alternative definitions of the common good (Hoggett, 2006). A specific element of the conflictual nature of public purpose is represented by the tension between an ethic of care (as a compassionate concern for the individual) and an ethic of equity (as a responsibility towards all cases equally), and by the tension between universalism and particularism (for instance, the impartial treatment of individuals may produce discriminations towards groups). Furthermore, public administration routinely faces the paradox of dealing with increasing demand amid decreased resources. This, in turn, creates a range of management challenges (Pokharel and Hult, 2010).

The bureaucratic framework is a way to address such tensions: the standardization of procedures is the answer to the complexity of organizational processes as well as to the need for transparency in public administration. Following Du Gay (2000, 2005), the original Weberian meaning of bureaucracy, as a particular kind of moral institution, in which principles of impartiality and fairness are paramount, need to be rediscovered. “Public bureaucracies are a vital resource, the epitome of what Weber called substantive rationality rather than instrumental rationality. As such it
is perhaps the one place where questions of technique and questions of value stand a chance of being integrated” (Hoggett, 2006, p. 177).

Conversely, in public bureaucracies, there are risks of ambivalence due to the partially suppressed value conflicts, the absence of transparency, moral corruption and the predominance of an organizational model based on rigid prescriptions and routinizations. Therefore, in contrast to the ideal of impartiality, there is often uncertainty about what public officers should primarily do, feeling frustrated by the constraints of procedures, which if on one hand want to protect transparency, on the other may make their activities rigid, inefficient and unresponsive. “A typical mechanism for legislative conflict resolution is to pass on intractable conflicts for resolution (or continued irresolution) at the administrative level” (Lipsky, 1980, p. 41).

The result is a further dilemma between public administration bureaucratization - as an answer to its unresolved conflicts – and the need to focus on a more processual view of the organization, as a way to improve service quality. Reforms of public administration have been high on the agenda of OECD countries for the past 35 years in order to face this dilemma. An essential component of ‘New Public Management’ principles is the idea that citizens are viewed as customers of the administration (Korunka et al., 2007). The increased focus on the concrete and existing needs of customers brought profound shifts in public administration (Schedler, 1995, Martin and Fraser, 2002). One key issue is the shift in the perspective of service organizations to viewing customers as active co-producers rather than as passive users. Following Toffler (1980), consumers may be better named as ‘prosumers’, i.e. the crasis between ‘producers’ and ‘consumers’, since production and consumption are not separable phases in service delivery.

Recognizing the crucial role that frontline employees play in service delivery and building relationships with customers (Rod and Ashill, 2010), a way to sustain civil servants to address the structural tension of public administration is represented by the construct of Customer Orientation. The term Customer Orientation derives from service management literature. It means the focus on meeting customers’ interests, needs and expectations, and on delivering appropriate and personalized services (Schneider et al., 1998). Customer orientation is linked to customer-perceived service quality (Susskind et al., 2003). Moreover, by considering customers as the first priority, client and staff satisfaction significantly increases, following the double empowerment effect between customers and workers that has been highlighted in previous studies (Converso et al., 2015). An internal focus on customer orientation is important to promote the organization internally to its employees and, at the same time, a better responsiveness of the employees to organizational service quality (Rodrigues and Pinho, 2012). It appears, therefore, that the successful public service provider lies both in governing and responding to the service expectations of consumers and in training and motivating the organization to interact positively with the consumer (Osborne, 2010).

Although approaches to organizational consultation may have not adequately understood the contested nature of public organizations (Hoggett, 2006), one important and essential factor that contributes to employee service quality is training (Sun et al., 2012; Zumrah, 2015; Cortini et al., 2016). According to Claver and colleagues (1999), “replacing the training programmes” is a key point of the methodology that must be used to sustain “a transition from a subservice culture to a culture of responsibility, from a continuity culture to a culture of innovation, […] from an administrative culture of conformity with procedures to a culture of performance […] which is not afraid of making decisions that imply a certain degree of improvisation and risk” (pp. 460-462).
While it has been generally accepted that training may lead to higher levels of service quality, the literature does not lend its full support to this relationship (Elkjaer and Nickelsen, 2016; Moraes and Borges-Andrade, 2015).

In training, the focus on Customer Orientation allows participants to connect the service quality to the congruence or vice-versa to the conflict among the different dimensions of the service organization, according to Normann’s grid (1984). For instance, the training device highlights that it is not possible to deliver high-quality services without a high-quality relationship within the organization. This approach permits to recognize the impact on the service quality of the quality of the relationship between customer and provider as well as between provider and his/her work group (including the formal leader). Indeed, the two different relationships are strictly interrelated: the quality of the relationship is like a cascade flow from the back-office to the front-line of the service process (Bruno et al., 2017).

Our hypothesis is that referring to ‘customer orientation’ throughout a training experience may allow participants to focus more easily on the theory of organization as ‘organizing’ (Weick, 1995), by “shifting the emphasis from process accountability towards a greater element of accountability in terms of results” (Hood, 1995, p. 94). On the contrary, a more traditional emphasis on bureaucracy, intended as a sequence of procedures, favours a theory of the organization as a res which is predefined, hence increasing routine crystallization and resistance to recognizing the importance of the evaluation of service quality in public administration.

The aim of the longitudinal study is to analyze through a case study the evolution of participants’ organization perspectives in a training device focused on the idea of public administration as customer oriented. More specifically, the research question is whether the training experience could activate new epistemological conceptions on organization at the end of the course by comparison with the beginning, and whether they may be related to the ‘organizing’ paradigm.

The study: Context, Sample and Procedures

The context of the case study is a training device for public administration in the North of Italy. Public bodies chose to attend the course with one or two representatives to develop their competencies in conflict management at work.

The program lasted for four months in 2017 and was composed of 8 training units of 5 hours each, each unit every two weeks. The aim of the course was to develop organizational competencies in managing work conflicts. More specifically, the focus on customer orientation was presented as a means to manage organizational conflicts. An added value of the program was to meet colleagues of several public organizations, to discover shared common criticalities even if arising from different contexts and to explore from different points of view the professional practices that help to remove barriers to the improvement of service quality and organizational health outcomes (Dell’Aversana and Bruno, 2017). The author coordinated the course.

The methodology used in the training case study referred to the approach of work-integrated learning (Orrell, 2011). Participants evaluated their competencies in conflict management, management of service organizations and group work at the beginning and at the end of the program. The self-report measures revealed an increase in all the dimensions evaluated. Moreover, each meeting, participants’ satisfaction was measured in relation to the following dimensions: usefulness of the training unit with respect to one’s role and professional context; clarity of the
issues addressed; depth of the topics; training unit management; quality of teachers’ feedback; integration of the single training unit with the previous ones; achievement of learning outcomes. The measure of overall satisfaction showed a high score (max 4.81; min 4.21; mean 4.51, on a 5-point Likert scale). Both kinds of evaluations were supported by questionnaires.

Participating in the training course were 34 employees belonging to 16 public bodies, representing different service organizations: social services, the emergency sector, education organizations, administrative departments of the health sector, the local government sector, work inspection and fiscal services. As data were collected through an assignment that was not mandatory, the sample was composed of 30 subjects, 25 women and 5 men. Age ranged from 33 years to 64 years, with an average of 51.72 years.

The study was longitudinal: the SWOT matrix (an acronym for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) was used to collect participants’ representations on the organization. At the beginning and at the end of the program they were asked to fill in a SWOT matrix. Each participant wrote within each area of the matrix about his/her own organization. Each SWOT matrix was labelled with a subject code and a time code (T1; T2).

The entries collected at time 1 (T1) were 25 (21 women and 4 men). The entries collected at time 2 (T2) were 20 (15 women and 5 men). This resulted in a whole corpus of 45 entries. The corpus T1 was composed of 2043 words; the corpus T2 of 2764 words.

A subsample of 15 participants filled in the SWOT matrix either at time 1 and time 2 (11 women and 4 men). This resulted in a sub-corpus of 30 entries (15 at T1 and 15 at T2) used for the qualitative analysis (see next section). All subjects gave written informed consent and authorized and approved the use of anonymous data for publications.

Data analysis

The study employed a mixed method design (Cortini, 2014; Davidson et al., 2016). Data analysis used quantitative analysis for the larger sample of 45 entries, while qualitative analysis was used on the smaller sample of 30 entries. While the quantitative analysis provided a broader view of the data to explore the presence of new emerging organizational dimensions at T2, the qualitative one offered a look at a specific portion of the data, to deepen and precise the kind of evolution from T1 to T2. Indeed, the qualitative analysis allowed researchers to evaluate the specific organizational dimensions involved in this evolution, by comparing each participant’s representation of the organization at T2 with his/her “starting point” at T1.

The phases were:

- Quantitative analysis of the frequency and word density (i.e. the frequency of each word divided by the number of the total words of each corpus) of the terms, both in corpus T1 and in corpus T2, by using R software environment (R Development Core Team, 2007). In this step, data were aggregated. The analysis unit was the single word to detect characteristics and changes of the lexicon from T1 to T2. Firstly, relevant words were selected by excluding articles, prepositions, and conjunctions. Words with the same lemmas were grouped (e.g. ‘organization’ and ‘organizational’).

- Thematic analysis of the entries labelled with the same subject code either at T1 and at T2. In this step, the analysis unit was the subject’s entry, by comparison of each subject’s entry at T1 with the same subject’s entry at T2, to explore new issues emerging at time 2 for each
subject. Using a data-led approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the relevant material was inductively selected for each entry and was subsequently encoded according to themes emerging from the data-set. Themes captured important aspects of the data in relation to the research questions and were identified developing tables and matrices, creating categories, sorting the material into categories, noting the variables and relationships between categories (Bruno and Dell’Aversana, 2017, 2018; Ripamonti et al., 2018). The credibility of analysis, a criterion for the qualitative research, was assessed through supervision sessions to check the coding strategies and to review the interpretation of the data, by discussing any reason of variation (Barbour, 2001). Consensual validation was achieved, after coding independently the data, by discussing the differences and reaching a joint conclusion. Rival configurations of themes were ultimately modified (Patton, 2002).

Findings

Quantitative analysis

Findings show an increase in word numbers from T1 to T2. Considering the different corpus length and the different sample size, each participant wrote on average an entry composed of 82 words at T1 and of 138 words at T2.

The relevant words which had a word intensity percentage higher than 0.2 were considered for the analysis. Table 1 presents the frequency and the word intensity of each word both in corpus T1 and in corpus T2. Data show an increase of word variety from T1 (N= 27) to T2 (N= 50).

The words that are distinctive of each corpus are highlighted in bold in Table 1. These words compare only in one corpus: 5 at T1 and 28 at T2.

The words which appear either in corpus T1 and in corpus T2 refer primarily to the experience of scarcity (‘few’ and ‘lack’) and to the social system of the organization (‘personnel’ and ‘colleagues’). The focus on service appears in both data subsets.

The distinctive elements of T1 are ‘autonomy’, ‘assignment’ and ‘demotivation’ and refer once again to the internal social system, which is mainly represented as addressing task instructions, with more or less job discretionality, or with absence of motivation.

Conversely, the distinctive terms of T2 refer to several new emerging organizational dimensions: the normative and the politic dimension (‘law’, ‘politic’); the environment (‘context’, ‘social’); economic resources (‘financial’); the organizational image (‘image’). There is a reference to a new paradigm of organization, which is not conceptualized as a closed system focused on ‘assignments’, but as a system (‘system’, ‘structure’) differentiated between internal (‘internal’) and external (‘extern’) dimensions and focused on more sophisticated work constructs, i.e. ‘activity’, ‘task’, ‘role’. Moreover, at T2 the emphasis on ‘lack’ is mitigated by the emergence of new terms, e.g. ‘presence’, ‘development’, ‘lot’, ‘motivation’, ‘new’, ‘satisfaction’, ‘better’, ‘improvement’. In addition, the ambivalence of the organizational life seems to be recognized: terms like ‘diverse’ and ‘difficult’ are indicators of the intrinsic complexity of the organizational process.

Table 1 – Word Frequency and Density at T1 and T2
Qualitative analysis

The qualitative analysis allowed us to deepen the specific organizational dimensions involved in the evolution of the organizational representation throughout the training process. Findings show a more sophisticated conceptualization of the following themes at T2.

The Client-System

The primary new emerging area at T2 is about the client-system. At T1 customers are represented only by singular individuals, whereas at T2 also by institutions such as charitable and volunteers’ associations, or organizations operating in the same intervention field. Therefore, the representation of the client-system becomes larger at T2, by including institutional demands in addition to the singular ones.

At T1 participants refer to users’ satisfaction as an indicator of organizational efficacy. At T2 there is a further focus on the specific different consumers’ targets and hence on the necessity to take into account also new emerging needs. Moreover, the conflict between the demands of the traditional clients versus the new social needs is recognized as an issue to be addressed by the public administration. Indeed, some participants underline their role as being ‘social sensor’ of the difficulties of the context in which they operate.

A distinctive focus of T2 is on the Environment, i.e. the external dimension of the public administration. This area emphasizes the strict connection between the organization and its territory, its social context, its constraints and resources. There is a specific attention to the need for organizational network and communication with the extern.

A participant refers to the concept of client in this way, at T1:

ICT procedures and participation in collective commitments sacrifice the relationship with the user (PF1, f, T1),

and at T2:

the Social Worker is like a social sensor and therefore a spokesperson for the needs of the local population and a promoter of projects that satisfy them (PF1, f, T2)

The Service: Purposes, Activities, Quality and Evaluation

This theme refers both to the service concept and to the activity system implemented to deliver it. There is a stronger focus at T2 than T1 on service outcomes. Participants note that public administration needs, first of all, to increase its capacity to evaluate and monitor service quality. In fact, at T2 there is a higher attention on definition clarity and sharing on goals, tasks, roles, procedures in order to protect service quality. Most of all, not identifying with organizational objectives is described as a critical issue in public administration. Moreover, quality innovation is called as an opportunity to be addressed.

A participant perceives as a primary threat at T1:

too much bureaucracy or slowness that does not allow us to change the working methodology (PC1, f, T1)

while at T2:

little staff involvement towards achieving the objectives (PC1, f, T2).
Conflict

From T1 to T2 findings show a new emerging image of organizational conflicts, even if some ambiguities are remaining. In fact, on one hand, conflicts are still depicted like at T1 as affecting just the relational dimension. On the other hand, at T2 conflicts are also explained by involving the relationship dimension - both internally and externally – but relating to task performance. Indeed, participants complain the difficulty of managing the conflict to improve service quality and not just in a self-referential way. Conflicts which are not able to include the task dimension are drawn as not being generative and conversely producing individualism, fragmentation, resistance towards change, frustration and distress.

A participant describes internal conflict in this way; at T1:

*Jealousies that may arise among colleagues* (DA, f, T1),

while at T2, she deepens this issue:

*Competitiveness among employees, that is not aimed at improving the services offered, is a threat* (DA, f, T2).

Team as a work-instrument

At T1 when present the team is described as a form of mutual protection. At T2 it emerges in a new way. Its novelty is connected to the representation of the group as a work-instrument more than a social space. At T2 the team is represented as multi-professional, specialized and problem-focused. It appears most of all as a tool to protect the product. In this way, the work group allows participants to manage problems by using their power of influencing situations; to address complexity, emergencies and unpredictable situations; to share knowledge. It is described as an instrument to support a sense of belonging and organizational identification. A particular emphasis is placed on leadership, as the function that may or may not protect the team efficacy. Indeed, the team mismanagement is repeatedly evoked as a threat to public administration service quality, customers' satisfaction and organizational outcomes.

A participant depicts her organization at T1:

*It is a large work environment and people have professional skills* (PF, f, T1),

while at T2:

*Personnel is divided into specialist units that manage complex situations* (PF, f, T2).

Image

This area emerges at T2. Participants refer either to the internal organizational image and to the external one. The organizational image is considered as a crucial dimension, i.e. the most effective means to make the service value visible to several stakeholders. At the same time, it is represented as one of the most important criticalities in public administration, that often may elicit a feeling of distrust. This criticality seems to be active both at the internal level (within the organization, between leader and followers, and among workers) and at the external one. In the latter case, the distrust of consumers is recognized as having a strong impact on the relationship with the service employees.
While there is no reference to this issue at T1, at T2 a participant insists on the need to promote within the organization:

greater visibility, social reporting to stakeholders, and cultivating greater consistency (MS1, f, T2).

Organizational theories

At T2 new emerging organizational perspectives seem to appear. Proactivity is proposed as an alternative to reactive and routinized logics and to procedure bureaucratization. The paradigm of organization as a rigid system is revised by participants to describe the organization as composed of multiple dimensions. These factors are for instance: the culture, the physic system, the technology, the politic influence. All of them, in addition to the ones which have been already discussed in the previous areas (the client-system, the service concept, the service delivery process, and the organizational image), complete the service organizational grid, according to Normann (1984).

A participant describes her work in this way at T1:

Administration asks to work but often it lacks the tools to perform at best the functions it requires us to do in our work (BZ, f, T1),

and in a much richer version at T2:

In my work context I have to try to study who is facing me, trying to understand what is required of me, what exactly is the case I’m dealing with, to respond in the best way, according to what the law requires. To do this, I start from the tools I have (computers, programs, government sites, databases) and combine them with my personal knowledge and that of my colleagues, whenever possible, always to reach the ultimate goal of satisfying the user in the best possible way (BZ, f, T2).

Discussion

In the first meeting, participants pay attention most of all to the criticalities of the organization, by focusing on the constraints that do not permit to deliver a high-quality service. These criticalities relate to a general inattention of the organization to several issues, from individual motivation to leadership. The main actors of this organizational theory are on one hand the macrosocial dimension and on the other hand the individuals, in a sort of conflictual polarization. The common feeling is ‘absence’: the macrosocial dimension seems to be distant both from a temporal and a spatial point of view; it is placed before the concrete process and far away from the concrete persons who live in the organization. Therefore, this model seems to be not related to the concrete and situated organizational life.

At the end of training, a new organizational theory is emerging. Participants refer to a more processual paradigm. First of all, a new social subject emerges more clearly in their narratives, i.e. the work-group. Indeed, the macrosocial dimension which was the first actor at T1 leaves part of the scene to an emerging actor, that is the microsocial dimension. The polarization between social and individual dimension is de-emphasized thanks to the appearance of the group dimension, which allows participants to recognize more easily their influence on the organizational process of actions and decisions. The microsocial level, by playing at the intersection between individuals and organization, is represented as a tool to protect work meaning. Indeed, it is the work-group that embodies employees’ sense of authorship and responsibility.
This evolution seems to be facilitated by using Normann’s grid (1984), which allows participants to recognize and reconstruct the several dimensions that constitute the service delivery process. First of all, the focus on customers requires participants to consider also their responsibility in orienting the organizational process. By considering their role as ‘social sensor’, the function of social regulation played by the public administration seems to be recognized in its complexity, according to Hoggett (2006).

Moreover, participants seem to connect the quality of relationship at the front-line level to the quality of relationship inside the organization. The latter has a strong impact on the quality of the service delivered, as service management literature has severally discussed. Therefore, the quality of the relationship at the back-office level seems to be recognized as a strategy to improve service quality by supporting employees’ identification with a sufficiently shared meaning of organizational activities and purposes.

This evolution is visible in relation to leadership, considered at T2 as a function of the work-group more than an individual role or a personal attitude. Indeed, this function facilitates the group in producing its outcomes in an effective, efficient and meaningful way.

At the same time, the organizational image makes the interplay between the back-office and the front-line visible. Since the image is either internal and external, it represents the connection between the personnel idea and the clients’ expectations. In this direction, the reference to the organization image is an important determinant of the service outcome. Specifically, the image appears at T2 as an issue to be protected in order to enhance the quality of the service provided.

Through the dynamic interrelation among these different dimensions, the organization seems to be described by participants as a process implicated in uncertainties and unpredictable events more than the realization of an ideal model. The shift from the first to the last meeting follows the paradigm shift from the organization conceptualized as a predefined entity, to viewing the organization as ‘organizing’ (Weick, 1995). Indeed, at T1 the representation of the organization used by participants is almost reified, as an ‘object’ which limits the individual possibilities of action and influence on the quality of the service provided. The organization refers to an ideal model in relation to which gaps are highlighted. At T2 there is a new emerging organizational paradigm, ‘problem-focused’ or ‘by process’. The connection between the personal contribution and the organizational outcomes is no more represented as a need of adherence to a predefined model, with its inevitable failures and errors. Such connection relies on the organization process, i.e. what happens in terms of actions and decisions in the organization life. Following Thompson’s definition (1967), the relationship between the individual and the social system could be represented as a process of actions and decisions, that is sustained by goals and values. These actions and decisions are related to human beings’ values and aims, not to a reified model which is not changeable due to its distance and predetermination.

**Conclusion, practical implications and limitations**

The study contributes to highlight the need for a practical focus on the conceptualizations of organizations in training. Within organization studies, the term ‘organization’ is often underdescribed or treated as an end in itself rather than a ‘dispensable means’ (Du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2014, p. 749). Representing the organization as a process of organizing allows participants to distinguish between the prescribed and discretionary parts of task performance.
In this direction, our proposal is to use the construct of customer orientation as an artefact that supports the pragmatic call to experience proposed by an approach to organization studies as a practical science of organizing (O’Connor, 2012). The reference to this construct appears as a tool which favours a conceptualization of the organization as a process of actions and decisions. Following Du Gay and Vikkelsø’s call to a practical science of organizing, in our proposal this tool shares with other conceptual devices the need to be used as “heuristic concepts that exactly because of their ‘empirical character’, i.e. their immediate recognizability by the participants of the field which they seek to describe, have the potential to instigate an investigation of or conversation about the situation as a whole” (2014, p. 750).

Several are the practical implications of the study, in relation to training and public policy. First, if public administration wants to increase service quality by focusing on a more processual view of the organization, training could be a key point. Second, a specific training tool may favour such transition, i.e. the concept of Customer Orientation and the use of Norman’s grid (1984). Focusing on client-centeredness means developing participants’ organizational competencies, enhancing both employees’ sense of authorship and responsibility, and service production in an effective, efficient and meaningful way.

Especially in public administration, there is no ideal solution to the dilemma posed by the conflictual nature of public purpose, and workers are caught between conflicting patterns of duty in relation to task performance. In relation to public policy, a further implication of the study is that focusing on the organizational process may support service operators to rely on the necessity of a principle of situation-specific evaluation rather than on a predefined model that inhibits their capacity to respond to clients’ demands and specificities. Therefore, in order to sustain service quality, organizations need to provide devices to use and develop employees’ organizational competencies more than their fit to an ideal model.

Since the results are derived from the study of one case study, research limitations are that they may not be fully applicable to other contexts. The study needs to be further developed in other contexts.

References


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Table 1 – Word Frequency and Density at T1 and T2