

PROFILES OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTIFICATION IN THE FRENCH PUBLIC SERVICE SECTOR

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Abstract

The scientific literature regularly highlights the growing interest in research on identity issues in organizational studies (e.g., Brown, 2015) and more specifically for identification, presented as a key construct for understanding identity mechanisms (Ashforth, 2016). However, in 2015, Rho and colleagues emphasized the lack of studies on identification in the public sector and nonprofit organizations. Yet, identification constitutes a particularly relevant concept for this professional sector. Firstly, because this sector has a specific set of goals and values (Emery & Martin, 2008). Secondly, because the public sector has been exposed to important reforms in recent decades which may have generated identity shifts (Meyer et al., 2014). Finally, because identification, given its associations with health attributes (Lee et al., 2015) constitutes a fundamental resource for the civil servants who are particularly exposed to stress at work (Douillet, 2017). While many studies have referred to the organization as the target of identification, several scholars remind us that individuals carry multiple identities and that they can thus identify with multiple foci simultaneously (e.g., organization, work team, occupation (e.g., organization, work team, occupation; Miscenko & Day, 2016). Furthermore, considering these different targets allowed to highlight interaction effects between various identifications (e.g., Horton & Griffin, 2017). Therefore, some researchers have used person-centered analysis to establish identification profiles among workers (e.g., Lipponen, 2005). However, these works often focus more on the dimensions of identification rather than the foci (e.g., Yang et al., 2019). Moreover, until now, these studies on identification profiles have remained highly uncommon in nonprofit organizations. The aim of this research was to investigate the distinctive profiles of French public agents based on their levels of identification with many core foci of the public service, namely their respective organizations, work teams, and professions. Data for this cross-sectional study, involved 574 participants and were collected from various French public authorities (i.e., territorial civil service, state civil service and hospital civil service). Latent profile analyses were conducted to examine different agent profiles, revealing three distinct profiles characterized by varying levels and patterns of identification with the three foci as well as an overall identification. This study contributes to a deeper knowledge of French public sector employees and more globally of the mechanisms of identification in the specific public service sector.

Keywords: *Professional identification, French public service, latent profiles analysis.*

1. Introduction

For some researchers (e.g., Benallah & Domin, 2017; Rivière et al., 2019), the multiple and successive reforms in the French public sector are considered one of the main causes of discomfort and loss of meaning among employees due to the increase in new professional requirements and constraints. Precisely, this particular context, faced by public organizations since the 1980s in most Western countries (Polit et al., 2007) has corresponded to the dissemination of a new managerial doctrine: the New Public Management (NPM, (Abord de Chatillon & Desmarais, 2012). In essence, this involved aligning public sector management practices with those of the private sector, particularly through the implementation of a market-oriented framework and values inspired by the private sector (Emery & Martin, 2008). A few years later, the multifaceted nature of changes and the complexity of reforms led some authors, such as Klenk & Reiter (2019), to use the term post-NPM to characterize the period of hybridization of public organizations observed since the 2000s. According to them, it is characterized by transformations that become more contingent, and the spreading of public management objectives focusing more on efficiency, quality, and accountability.

In this context of confrontation between a traditional Weberian model of public management and that of NPM, and subsequently post-NPM, public sector employees have been faced with continuous and heterogeneous reforms. These changes in the work environment and content raise questions about relationships with the public service, the meaning of work, potential conflicts of values, and more broadly, the structuring of professional identity in this sector.

2. Background

In the professional context, identification is predominantly addressed and defined through the lens of organizational identification (Greco et al., 2021; Miscenko & Day, 2016). Most authors who have proposed definitions of the identification in a professional context have, in fact, used the organization as a social reference for individuals (e.g., Dutton et al., 1994; Edwards, 2005). and research on other foci of identification (e.g., team, profession) has commonly relied on adaptations of the conceptualization of organizational identification (Tremblay, 2017). Identification is a fundamental construct for understanding organizational phenomena, as it relates to an individual's visceral sense of unity toward a considered entity and their propensity to integrate the characteristics of this entity into the construction of their own identity (Albert et al., 2000; Ashforth, 2016). These identification processes are likely to vary based on the foci that may combine (Greco et al., 2021). Moreover, the Public Sector presents a distinctive work context concerning the system of representations and values associated with it (Emery & Martin, 2008).

Nevertheless, most of the models tested for this construct have been conducted in samples from the private sector (Rho et al., 2015). Indeed, the particularity of the Public Sector context has rarely been considered in scientific works focusing on identification (Meyer, 2021) and studies on this population have not particularly taken into account the specificities of this context or the multiple foci that may influence individual identity. Several studies, however, have emphasized the importance of simultaneously considering multiple identification foci in an organizational context (e.g., Miscenko & Day, 2016). In complex organizations, such as those rooted in the French public sector (e.g., Departmental Council), there are multiple foci to which employees can attach their identity to. They may identify with the organization as a whole and/or more specifically with certain components of it (Reade, 2001). In fact, the most obvious interest in studying these different foci lies in the analysis of their interactions. Indeed, despite the distinct characteristics of the identification's target, these identification can either combine or conflict with each other (Ashforth et al., 2008). To delve further into these considerations, some research has attempted to examine employees' profiles based on their different levels of identification. Unfortunately, despite recurrent encouragement to use this type of study (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2008, Greco 2021), they remain rare and insufficient to date, given that: (1) they are often based on identification component (e.g., affective, cognitive) rather than foci (e.g., Yang et al., 2019), (2) the number of foci studied simultaneously is very limited, or (3) the statistical methods used to determine profiles exhibited methodological and statistical biases (e.g., Lipponen et al., 2005). It is worth noting that different studies have already highlighted the relevance of establishing profiles, particularly in the context of the Public Service (e.g., Kouadio & Emery, 2017), based on organizational commitment, a conceptually close variable to identification but more comprehensive in assessing the strength of the bond between the individual and the organization than on the specificity of its impact on self-definition (Klein et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, the contribution of these studies lies in highlighting the uniqueness of the Public Service field, whether due to the specificity of possible foci, the predominance of public service values in the employees' identity, or the impact of multiple changes in public management over the past decades on their connection to their work (e.g., Kouadio & Emery, 2017).

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The study sample comprised 574 French public agents, with 392 females (68.41%) and 181 males (31.59%), originating from organizations maintaining a minimum workforce of 100 individuals. The average age of the participants was 44.92 years (SD = 10.12; range: 21 to 65 years), their average job tenure was 14.36 years (SD = 10.58) and their average career tenure in the public service was 18.00 years (SD = 10.61). Among the participants, 22.16% (127 agents) worked in the territorial civil service, 39.09% (224 agents) in the state civil service, and 38.74% (222 agents) in the hospital civil service. Regarding employment contracts, 91.62% (525 agents) held permanent positions or their equivalent, while 8.38% (48 agents) were on temporary or equivalent contracts. Lastly, 79.1% (N = 404) were non-managerial employees, while 13.5% (N = 169) held managerial positions.

3.2. Measures

The professional identification was assessed using a new questionnaire with 27 items rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). Allowing the measurement of an individual's level of identification with various foci of their professional environment as well as an overall identification score (Noble & Fouquereau., under submission). *Work team identification* (e.g., *When my work team fails, I feel like I'm failing as well*), *supervisor identification* (e.g., *I could speak about my supervisor and myself in almost the same terms*) and *organizational identification* (e.g., *I could speak about my supervisor and myself in almost the same terms*) were assessed with 9 item each.

3.3. Procedure

The questionnaire administration took place online through self-administration over a period of approximately six weeks. Participants were contacted through professional networks. They were informed that participation in this study was voluntary, and responses would remain anonymous.

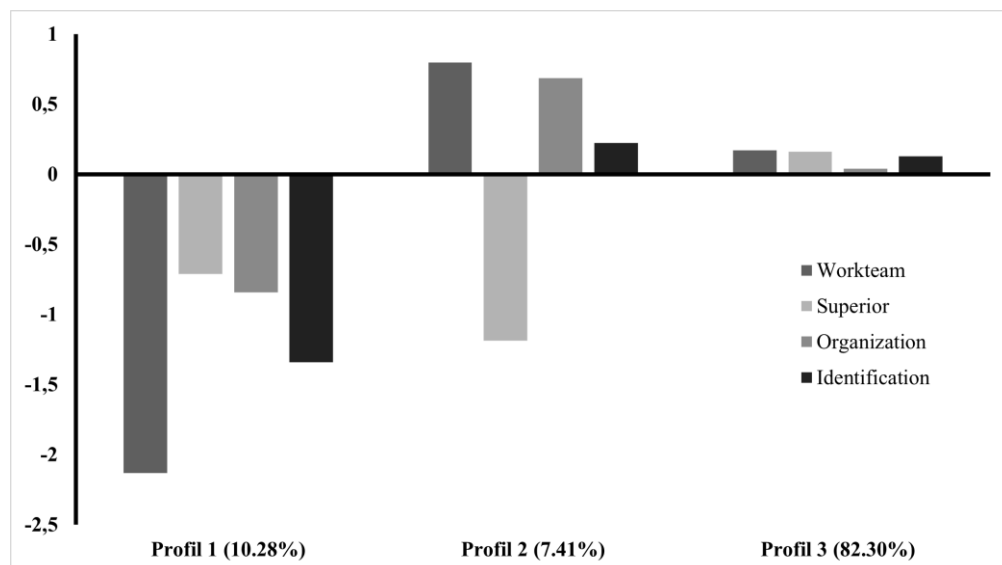
4. Analysis and results

The psychometric properties of the multi-item measure were assessed through preliminary factor analysis. The results endorse the superiority of the Bifactor-ESEM solution ($\chi^2 = 977.112$, CFI = 0.928, RMSEA = 0.071, SRMR = 0.032) based on fit indices and recommendations by Morin et al. (2020). This solution comprises a global factor and three specific factors corresponding to distinct foci.

The present study utilized the Maximum Likelihood Robust (MLR) estimator in the Mplus 8.9 statistical package (Muthén & Muthén, 2021) for all analyses. To address the sensitivity of Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) to start values, 5000 sets of random start values, each with 1000 iterations, were employed, and final optimization focused on the top 200 solutions. The decision of how many profiles to retain relies on a consideration of whether the profiles themselves are meaningful, aligned with theory, and statistically adequate (Tein et al., 2013).

The examination of solutions revealed that a three-profile solution exhibited superior statistical qualities. Each class has been designed on its unique characteristics. As depicted in Figure 1, Profile 1 (10.28%), labeled as *Low Identification* displays low to very low identification scores across various foci and the general factor compared to the standardized mean. Profile 2 (7.41%), labeled as *Ambivalent Identification* corresponds to individuals exhibiting moderately high identification with the work team and organization, moderate scores on the general factor, and very low identification with the hierarchical supervisor. Finally, Profile 3, labelled as *Normative Identification* corresponds to the largest group (82.30%) and pertains individuals with moderate scores across all foci and on the general factor.

Figure 1. Final Three-Profile Solution.



5. Discussion, limitations and future research directions

The present study addressed two identifiable needs in this research field. Firstly, it aimed to deepen the emerging reflections on the specificities of identification within the public service sector, particularly in the French context. Secondly, it responded to the necessity of developing person-centered approaches to study identification phenomena using a bifactorial model in a LPA, aiming to better understand profiles of agents representing specific subpopulations. In this regard, the study distinguished profiles based on the global and specific levels of identification among French public agents (i.e., work team, supervisor, and organization foci).

Nevertheless, the study has several limitations. Firstly, it relies on a scale designed to address the chaos in the scientific literature concerning the conceptualization and operationalization of identification, yet the examination of its psychometric qualities is still underway. Secondly, although the current sample exhibits great diversity in sociodemographic characteristics, some subpopulations are still inadequately represented to study the specificities of agent profiles. Finally, this initial approach remains exploratory, and these preliminary conclusions need confirmation in subsequent studies.

However, this study already raises fruitful heuristic questions that constitute additional avenues for research. Firstly, the question arises regarding the possible generalization of the observed profiles. The complexity of the French public service and its organization into three distinct institutions (i.e., territorial civil service, state civil service, and hospital civil service) with unique culture and context raises questions about the heterogeneity of identification structuring. Indeed, considering variables that may predict the different profiles, whether at the individual level (e.g., public service motivation, managerial status), managerial and organizational practices (e.g., supervisor support, virtuous organizational practices), or organizational characteristics (e.g., reputation, workforce), becomes crucial. Furthermore, while Profiles 1 and 3 show a form of convergence in identification with various foci and overall identification, Profile 2 stands out due to the specificity of low identification with the hierarchical superior. This peculiarity reinforces the research perspective around considering the context, particularly with the consideration of managerial practices as the potential origin of this specific profile. A longitudinal approach would allow studying the stability of profiles over time based on the evolution of managerial practices, such as the implementation of transformational leadership. Finally, determining these profiles constitutes a promising foundation in studying their explanatory power on various behavioral, attitudinal, and health-related indicators. These elements could indeed reveal specific levers of action for public service stakeholders to address identified health and performance challenges to date.

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