UNRAVELLING THE ROLE OF SOCIO-PROFESSIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS IN SHAPING IDENTIFICATION WITH THE FRENCH CIVIL SERVICE

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Abstract

For several decades, public sector employees in France have faced profound reforms driven by the emergence of New Public Management (i.e., NPM), in the 1980s across Western countries, and the paradigms it introduced (Bezes & Musselin, 2015; Pollitt et al., 2007; Reiter & Klenk, 2019). The implementation of these managerial doctrines and practices has been linked in the literature to various negative effects on employees' health, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., Abord de Chatillon & Desmarais, 2012; Rivière et al., 2019) and raises questions about a loss of bearings and meaning at work (Dussuet et al., 2017; Emery & Giauque, 2012). Specifically, according to some authors, the dichotomy between these market-inspired practices and values and the traditional ethos of public servants has led to a hybridization of institutional culture (Emery & Giauque, 2014). This transformation raises questions about the identity positioning of public sector employees. While identification has already been studied in the public sector, particularly through the lens of identification with work groups or organizations, no research has to date specifically examined identification with the public service as an institution. Yet, its broader scope, compared to organizational focus, calls for an additional specific quantification of this form of identification in a context as vast and complex as the French civil service. Moreover, the French civil service presents a distinct work context, shaped by a unique system of representations and values (Hondeghem & Vandenabeele, 2005; Rouban, 2009). Despite this distinctiveness, the relationship that public servants maintain with the institution (i.e., French public service) remains largely underexplored. Therefore, this study aims to explore this relationship between public servants and the French public service by examining the socio-professional and organizational characteristics likely to influence these connections in differentiated ways. Data were collected from a sample of 676 public servants from various French public contexts. Descriptive, correlational, and mean comparison analyses were conducted. The results demonstrate that several of these determinants are significantly associated with the level of identification with the public service, suggesting differentiated levels of identification based on employee typologies. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationships that French public servants maintain with their institution, while also highlighting differences that may exist between various categories of employees and public organizations.

Keywords: French public service, identification, socio-professional determinants, organizational characteristics, public servants.

1. Introduction

In the field of organizational studies, interest in identity-related concepts is particularly pronounced (Alvesson et al., 2008; Miscenko & Day, 2016). Research on identity has indeed led to significant theoretical and practical advancements in understanding organizational phenomena (Haslam & Reicher, 2007). The professional environment plays a crucial role in individuals' lives, as they often construct and express their identities through the organizations to which they belong (Elsbach, 1999; Lee et al., 2015).

The organizational identification's construct has emerged from these studies to describe the tendency of individuals to internalize the characteristics of their organization and embody them as part of their own identity (Albert et al., 2000). Organizational identification refers to an individual's sense of unity with their organization and their tendency to define themselves based on its perceived attributes (Ashforth, 2016; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This construct is foundational as it serves as a basis for shaping individual attitudes and behaviors (Albert et al., 2000; Lee et al., 2015).

Despite the significance of this construct, the scientific literature highlights a lack of studies on identification in the public sector (Rho et al., 2015). Yet, this professional context represents a promising area of research, particularly in the French public sector. First, because the French civil service is characterized by a distinctive system of values and representations, which shapes its unique work context (Hondeghem & Vandenabeele, 2005; Rouban, 2009). Second, while several studies on identification have been conducted in public organizations, few have accounted for the specificities of this professional sector in their analyses. Identification has primarily been studied through the lens of individual organizations, and, to date, no research has specifically examined identification with the civil service as an institution. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the public sector has been subjected to continuous transformations that are likely to have profoundly influenced the identity structure of public servants (Buffat, 2014; Emery & Martin, 2008).

Over the past few decades, in most Western systems, various major public management paradigms have progressively replaced the traditional Weberian model (Klenk & Reiter, 2019). Among these paradigms, NMP, a doctrine inspired by neoliberal ideology, emerged in the 1980s, promoting the adoption of private-sector management practices within public administrations (Bezes & Musselin, 2015; Karataş, 2019). Subsequently, counter-programs grouped under the umbrella term "post-NPM" arose to mitigate the negative effects of NPM (Karataş, 2019). According to many scholars, the implementation of these new models has profoundly transformed public administrations by challenging foundational principles of traditional organizational culture and the ethos of public servants (Diefenbach, 2009). In particular, these reforms, often implemented in fragmented and heterogeneous ways, have fostered the hybridization of public organizations, combining managerial logics and values that are sometimes incompatible or discordant (Klenk & Reiter, 2019).

This process of hybridization has given rise to organizational tensions, where conflicting and sometimes antagonistic demands and normative frameworks coexist (Pupion, 2021). These paradoxes can undermine ethical frameworks, generate value conflicts, and call into question the relationship between public servants and their institution (Emery & Martin, 2008). Some scholars even argue that organizational hybridity has contributed to a hybridization of public servants' identities, marked by the proliferation of diverse identity profiles, the blurring of normative frameworks, and a sense of identity ambiguity experienced by the agents (Buffat, 2014).

In this context, the present study aims to explore variations in the level of identification of public servants with the civil service. It seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the identity profiles emerging within this hybrid institutional landscape. More specifically, the study seeks to examine the extent to which the socio-professional characteristics of public servants, along with the specificities of the organizations that employ them, influence their identification with the institution.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample was drawn from several public organizations, allowing for a broad diversity of organizational and socio-professional characteristics (e.g., workforce size, job roles). The study sample comprised 676 French public servants, including 458 females (67.75%), 215 males (31.80%), and 3 non-binary individuals (<0.01%). The average age of the participants was 46.09 years (SD = 9.60), and their average tenure in the public service was 18.63 years (SD = 10.60). Among the participants, 274 (40.53%) worked in the territorial civil service, 183 (27.07%) in the state civil service, 219 (32.40%) in the hospital civil service, representing the three branches of the French civil service. Additionally, 235 (34.76%) held managerial positions, while 441 (65.24%) were non-managerial employees.

2.2. Measures

The *civil service identification* was assessed using an adaptation of the Organizational Identification Graphic Scale (Shamir & Kark, 2004). Seven figures were composed of two circles, one white and the other black, representing the participant and the civil service, respectively, with varying degrees of overlap. The individual was asked to indicate the option that best represented how they identified with the civil service.

The socio-professional characteristics, included gender, age, educational level, tenure in the civil service, employment status (i.e., permanent civil servant, contract with indefinite duration, or other), category of the employee (i.e., category A, B, or C; specific to the French population), hierarchical role (i.e., manager or non-manager), working hours (i.e., full-time or part-time), percentage of working hours of part-time employees, number of teleworking days and functional area (6 domains). The organizational characteristics included branches of the French civil service and workforce size (e.g., 11 to 24, 25 to 49).

2.3. Procedure

The questionnaire was administered online via self-completion over a period of approximately two months. Several organizations from the three branches of the civil service were contacted to distribute the questionnaire to their employees. Additionally, a panel was utilized to provide supplementary responses. These two channels yielded 469 (69.38%) responses from the civil service organizations and 207 (30.62%) responses from the panel. Participants were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary, and that their responses would remain anonymous.

3. Analysis and results

To examine differences in levels of identification with the civil service based on socio-professional and organizational characteristics, several analyses were conducted using SPSS software (version 30). Skewness and kurtosis coefficients indicated that the distributions approximated normality.

Pearson correlation analyses revealed significant positive relationships between identification with the civil service and age ($r = .142$; $p < .001$) as well as civil service tenure ($r = .163$; $p < .001$). In contrast, there were no significant relationships with the number of teleworking days ($r = .000$; $p = .993$) or the percentage of working hours for part-time employees ($r = -.035$; $p = .369$). A regression analysis showed that seniority explained a small but significant additional proportion of variance in identification beyond that explained by age (ΔR^2 *adjusted* $= .008$; $p = .021$).

Mean comparison analyses revealed several significant differences based on the branch of the civil service (i.e., $F(2, 673) = 10,055$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .029$), employment status ($F(2, 673) = 4,382$; $p = .013$; $\eta^2 = .013$), hierarchical position (i.e., $t(674) = 3,264$; $p = .001$; Cohen's d = .029) and functional aera ($F(5, 459) = 4,163$; $p = .001$; $\eta^2 = .043$). However, no significant differences were found based on gender (i.e., $t(671) = -.123$; $p = .902$), level of education ($F(4, 671) = .365$; $p = .834$), employment category (i.e., $F(2, 673) = 1,043$; $p = .353$), working hours (i.e., $t(674) = .927$; $p = .354$) or workforce size (i.e., $F(8, 667) = .868$; $p = .543$). To assess the explanatory power of categorial variables significantly associated with identification, chi-square tests were performed. Results showed that the branch of the civil service was weakly but significantly associated with hierarchical position ($\chi^2(2) = 13,153$, $p < .001$, *Kramer's* $V = .139$), moderately associated with employment status ($\chi^2(4) = 83,162$, $p < .001$, $V = .248$) and strongly associated with functional aera ($\chi^2(10) = 535,870$, $p < .001$, $V = .759$). Employment status had a weak but significant association with functional aera ($\chi^2(10) = 36,578$, $p < .001$, $V = .198$) and no significant relationship with hierarchical position ($\chi^2(2) = .683$, $p = .711$, $V = .032$). Finally, hierarchical position was moderately and significantly related to functional aera ($\chi^2(5) = 24,062$, $p < .001$, $V = .227$). More precisely, several factors were associated with stronger identification with the civil service. These included being older, having longer tenure, belonging to the hospital branch of the civil service, holding permanent status, occupying a managerial role, or working in the medical or paramedical fields.

4. Discussion, limitations and future research directions

This study addresses two critical gaps in the existing literature. First, it offers a new perspective on identification by assessing it it within the broader framework of the French civil service, rather than at the organizational level. This systemic approach provides a more holistic understanding of the public servant's relationships with their professional environment. Second, it examines a diverse range of socio-professional and organizational characteristics to identify factors that influence -or not- identification with the civil service. These findings enhance our understanding of employee identification dynamics in modern, hybridized and complex public administration contexts.

Moreover, these results suggest that some mechanisms underpinning identification with the civil service may overlap with those driving organizational identification. Indeed, both significant and non-significant relationships between these characteristics and civil service identification echo patterns previously observed in studies of organizational identification (e.g., age, job tenure, gender, workforce size, education, and hierarchical function; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Riketta, 2005). Nevertheless, while employment category does not appear to significantly impact civil service identification, other civil service-specific characteristics (e.g., employment status, branch of the civil service) seem to play a meaningful role in variations in identification levels. These findings are consistent with research highlighting that characteristics specific to local organizations foster identification at the local level, whereas global characteristics are more strongly associated with global identification (Greco et al., 2021; Reade, 2001). Overall, these results underscore the importance of considering socio-professional and organizational dynamics when developing policies aimed at strengthening identification among civil servants.

Organizational identity research suggests that central, distinctive, and enduring attributes differentiate organizations and shape individual identification. These attributes foster a cognitive connection, supporting self-enhancement, differentiation, and value expression (Weisman et al., 2023). Regarding socio-professional characteristics, few studies have examined their role in shaping identification. However, self-coherence and self-continuity motives may explain why employees perceived as more representative of the civil service (e.g., senior staff, managers) reinforce their identification to maintain internal consistency (Ashforth, 2001).

However, this study has several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences and cannot capture the evolving identity dynamics in the public organizations. Second, although the sample is diverse, its size and the number of variables may not fully represent all civil service populations. Third, this study used an adapted version of Shamir & Kark's (2004) graphic scale, as no validated tool for civil service identification currently exists. Finally, as an exploratory study, its preliminary findings need to be validated through future research. Nonetheless, this study raises heuristic questions for future research. The exploratory statistical approach adopted here could be enhanced with advanced models such as latent profile analysis, to better understand individual variations in identification, as recommended by Ashforth et al. (2008). Then, in line with recommendations by Weisman et al. (2023), longitudinal and qualitative methods may track in identification over time and provide deeper insights into the underlying processes of identification. Lastly, the development of a validated tool for civil service identification would equip both researchers and practitioners with a reliable instrument to enhance understanding of this phenomenon.

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