

Tom S. Karlsson
School of Public
Administration,
University of Gothenburg
tom.karlsson@spa.gu.se

Jan Olsson
School of Humanities,
Education and Social
Sciences, Örebro University
jan.olsson@oru.se

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A special call

Public organizations in the 21st century, are increasingly complex in terms of multiple institutional rules, norms, and practices. This complexity constitutes a difficult challenge for civil servants to find and determine appropriate identities, roles and relationships in their everyday work. For this special issue we made a call for scholars to contribute with new and novel understandings, addressing the roles of civil servants within increasingly complex public sector organizations, focusing on a couple of interrelated research questions:

- What is the nature of public administration taking into consideration increasing institutional complexity in terms of persistent bureaucratic traditions, new public management solutions, participatory ideals, activist sentiments among officials and so forth?
- What are the consequences of this institutional complexity for the possibility of preserving a coherent, rule-governed public administration and what does public mean today in public administration?
- What types of roles are civil servants playing in relation to different institutional rules and norms and various categories of actor (politicians, citizens, organizations) and how do they handle frictions and conflicts?
- What type of conceptions of civil servants' roles are developing, including public service ethics? What alternative and contesting role-conceptions and ethics are prevalent and supported?

This introduction should be understood as being both a summary of the current state of research in relation to civil service – its predicaments and challenges – as well as being a suggestion for future attention among scholars and practitioners. We have thus written this introduction not only with the purpose of summarizing the main components inherent in the six articles that are included in this special issue but with the hope of also spurring discussions concerning what civil service has been, currently seems to be and might become in the future.

* **Tom S. Karlsson** is assistant professor at the School of Public Administration, University of Gothenburg. His research interest concerns managerial and market reforms over time, with specific interest in how central government agencies – and the actors within – adopt and adapt to new practices. He has recently published in *Public Management Review* and at *Routledge* and *Studentlitteratur*.

Jan Olsson is professor of political science at Örebro University. He is specialized in public policy, public administration and planning. Recent research considers the political importance of civil servants and their roles in processes of policy and institutional change. Empirical focus has mainly been on environmental policy, regional development, and organizational renewal. Olsson has published articles in journals like *Planning Theory and Practice*, *Environmental Politics*, and *Journal of European Public Policy*. Recent books are: (2016) *Subversion in Institutional Change and Stability – A Neglected Mechanism* and (2017) *Green Inside Activism for Sustainable Development. Political Agency and Institutional Change* (together with Erik Hysing), published by Palgrave Macmillan.

Institutional complexity and multiple roles

During the early 1940's and 1950's, bureaucracy as the organizational model for the public sector came under considerable academic fire. Merton (1940) argued that it had become perverse in its attempts of trying to regulate every inch of public life, whereas Kaufman (1956) exclaimed that bureaucracies had gained 'self-directing properties'. In the 1960's and 1970's criticism of bureaucracy developed into a questioning of the efficiency of 'big government' and its large welfare programmes. Implementation problems were 'discovered' to be obstacles to welfare programmes making a real difference in the life of many citizens (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Bureaucracies and the civil service, were increasingly perceived as difficult to govern, manage, and control. Furthermore, much of the service production was characterized by low levels of service quality, flexibility, trust and management (Diefenbach, 2009; Dunn & Miller, 2007; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The era of New Public Management (NPM, Hood, 1991, 1995), which emerged during the 1970's and 1980's (Hood & Dixon, 2015; Pollitt, 2000; Yliaska, 2015), can be understood as a reaction to such perceived bureaucratic flaws (Karlsson, 2017a, 2017b). An important theme on the NPM reform agenda that is of particular interest for this special issue was how to increase the discretion of civil servants when administrating and executing welfare services.

Within public administration, discretion became especially salient as addressed in Michael Lipsky's seminal work on street-level-bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010 [1980]). According to Lipsky, civil servants require a certain degree of discretion in order to transform or adjust actions so that they fit with the situations in which they find themselves in. From this perspective, discretion becomes the difference between 'policy as written' and 'policy as performed' (Lipsky, 2010 [1980], p. xvii). From the background of this, we would expect civil servants to be somewhat skeptical about managerial control and governance since it jeopardizes their potential power of discretion (Crossland & Hambrick, 2011; Finkelstein & Peteraf, 2007; Karlsson, in press).

Considering the increasing use of framework laws and trends towards new reforms during the last decades, Lipsky's insights on the discretion of street level actors are relevant today for civil servants in a more general sense. Civil servants act in institutionally complex contexts in which they need to handle multiple rules, norms, and practices not necessarily compatible with one another. There are thus different expectations and pressures on civil servants and they have to handle contested issues – a highly interesting theme largely neglected both within public organizations and among public administration scholars. In increasingly fragmented organizations there are a number of expectations and demands on civil servants such as Weberian ideals; responsiveness to politicians; service-mindedness in relation to users and new consumer ideals; governing and management inspired by NPM ideas; professional values and ethics largely formed by professions; participatory innovations in relation to citizens and user groups; as well as activist values and commitments in relation to social movements

(Hysing & Olsson, 2012). This fundamental institutional complexity makes it increasingly difficult to determine the nature of appropriate action (March and Olsen 1989; 2006) in different situations, both for rank and file and for managements who want to uphold and reproduce organizational identities and cultures (Hysing & Olsson, 2017; Olsson, 2016).

In order to manage this institutional complexity, a number of different strategies and actions are used by civil servants, such as remaining loyal in relation to superiors, acting in line with particular ethical principles or seeking to develop a strict expert role, to mention just a few. Civil servants sometimes feel that they need to think and act in controversial ways in situations when contradictory values are at stake. They may, for instance, show dissent to and resist superiors, which may lead to problems and challenges in decision-making, planning and implementation processes. Rosemary O'Leary provides an interesting argument regarding this, supported by a number of examples (O'Leary, 2010, 2014). Jan Olsson further argues that subversive action is a neglected mechanism that can help us better understand the 'political role' of civil servants. For example, staff that dislike a new management initiative can tacitly coordinate a slowdown in their professional activities; and a top manager seeking to influence an important decision can sow dissent between political parties in order to 'divide and rule' (Olsson, 2016). Some civil servants – such as so-called inside activists – may have their own agendas that they promote with the help of like-minded people both within public organizations and in social movements. The inside activism phenomenon has been reported in policy areas such as environmental policy (Hysing & Olsson, 2017; O'Leary, 2014; Olsson & Hysing, 2012); gender equality (Banaszak, 2010; Yeatman, 1990); equity planning (Krumholz and Forester, 1990); and water policy (Abers & Keck, 2009).

It is quite obvious that these controversial examples of action among civil servants are quite radical in comparison with Weberian ideals but so are also the institutional complexity that civil servants have to handle on a daily basis. We should not expect these types of controversial behaviors to be very common; civil servants likely play different roles in different contexts and situations. They may most of the time act in line with bureaucratic rules and norms but can switch to a more radical type of action in critical, conflictual situations when important values are at stake (Hysing & Olsson, 2017).

Whistleblowing is another type of radical action which has received increasing attention in the last decade, and has become somewhat more accepted than before (Brown, Lewis, Moberly, & Vandekerckhove, 2014). Whistleblowing comes in different clothing, depending very much on the issue and the context. Whether a civil servant is doing the 'right thing' by leaking or going public with government secrets or 'organizational wrongdoings' (Skivenes & Trygstad, 2014) is often a difficult question in specific cases, largely due to the complexity of rules and norms. Despite that, the right to blow the whistle seems to have become an increasingly important instrument to ensure transparency in public organizations. This can hopefully strengthen fundamental values like political accountability, rule of law and efficient administration (Brown et al., 2014).

The growing interest in public ethics and public service ethos (Lawton, Rayner, & Lasthuizen, 2013; Svava, 2013) can be seen as an important way of interpreting and handling institutional complexity in public life. Civil servants are not expected just to follow the law in the narrow sense or to be sensitive to specific wishes of politicians and citizens but also to be guardians of more general public values and norms (Lundquist, 1998). This complexity means that an official may feel pressure to take action to try to address things that are deemed problematic in relation to public ethics. This can be a fine balancing act between staying loyal and acting according to some ethical ideas and norms. This can be played out and handled in many ways and is further addressed by some of the contributing scholars in this special issue.

Public ethics and platform of values

Nyström Höög and Björkqvall (2018) present an interesting study that touches upon public ethics in terms of so called 'platforms of values'. These are informal policy documents that public organizations increasingly initiate and produce. In a critical analysis of these 'PV-texts' as a genre, Nyström Höög & Björkqvall show how the practice of engaging PV-texts has come to gain an almost hegemonic status, in which control over civil service can be exercised almost undetected. They convincingly argue that the production of these texts, are initiating a closer control towards goal congruence, which can be understood as a 'softer' managerial control than what we normally see. The study thereby contradicts previous understandings of such texts, claiming that rather than initiating and producing text for an external recipient, they should be understood in terms of efforts to increase goal congruence within the organization.

If platforms of values actually lead to increasing managerial control it will inevitably reduce the latitude of actions for subordinate civil servants. The increasing use of 'softer' managerial techniques for governing or controlling civil servants can be associated with growing 'managerialism' (Clarke, Gewirtz, & McLaughlin, 2000; Deem, 1998; Karlsson, in press; Pollitt, 1993, 2016) or a 'management culture' (Arnaboldi, Lapsley, & Steccolini, 2015; Lapsley & Skærbæk, 2012) within the public sector. Another situation which can affect civil servants' and street-level bureaucrats' discretions, and indeed pivot existing roles, concerns the interference of elected officials. Previous research on this topic has e.g. discussed the blurring of roles between elected politicians and administration (Mouritsen & Svava, 2002; James H. Svava, 2006a, 2006b) in a changing political and administrative context (Frederickson, 1999b; Frederickson, Smith, Larimer, & Licari, 2012; Kettl, 2002).

This VP-strategy of coordinating and consolidating organizations through the use of values can also be seen as a new expression of normative institutionalism (March & Olsen, 1989; March & Olsen, 1995; Peters, 2011). However, we can expect an organizational culture – in line with normative institutionalism – to be mainly developed and reproduced through the large number of daily activities within the organization rather than through top-down policies of manage-

ments. Even if a management succeeds in creating a specific organizational culture through a value platform, it may be difficult for the staff to interpret what it actually means in specific situations, in particular when administrators face complex ethical dilemmas (Van der Wal, 2011). A recent example of this type of challenge was reported in an evaluation of a Swedish national project on the code of ethics of government employees, which concluded that many participants felt that the common code had an abstract, judicial character that did not guide them in their daily work. The code was of limited help in balancing and prioritizing between values. Another difficulty was to get time for reflection and discussion on ethical dilemmas (Statskontoret, 2014, pp. 8-9; Svensson, 2013). Considering these problems, well-established value platforms may not really consolidate how organizations work on a more daily basis among rank and file. More empirical work may help us on the way.

Politicized civil servants

Poulsen and Boye Koch (2018) make a case of discussing this in this issue in terms of functional politicization, which means an adoption of a political role amongst civil servants. Their study is based on open ended responses from 554 civil servants regarding potential dilemmas arising within their organizational and occupational function. Arguing from a theoretical background of merit-based bureaucracies, they find that politicization permeates all levels of public organizations and is perceived – by the civil servants themselves – as inevitable. Having said this, they furthermore find certain instances where politicization is frowned upon, especially in the handling of specific beneficiary cases. In order to resist politicization in these situations civil servants make use of the organizational hierarchy or expresses implicit or explicit voice – to borrow from Hirschman (1970).

In a similar fashion, Bischoff (2018) contributes to this issue through a study of civil servants response to dilemmas that occur when elected officials govern in a way that is directly contradictory to constitutional requirements. This is an issue that has become most relevant – in Denmark and many other states in Europe – due to the increasing number of refugees and the rise of right-wing nationalist parties. More specifically, what happens if (or when) elected officials act as if the constitution is contradicting an efficient implementation of a perceived public will? Investigating this through reinterpreting a vignette study, Bischoff finds that as many as one quarter presented answers that neglected a judicial requirement. One of the reasons for this is the presence of political pressure upon the administration.

The changing context of public organization and content of what it is that civil servants do, have been a topic that has interested a number of scholars. In relation to civil servants, Johansson, Lindgren, and Montin (2018) e.g. discuss how civil servants on a municipal level in Sweden have become affected by the changing organizational and governance contexts within the public sector. They conclude by arguing that the role of civil servants has been greatly affected by

the fact that elected politicians in a higher respect act as goal- or target creators. NPM is argued to have a substantial effect on the emerging or changing roles within the municipal sector. Similar findings have been found amongst civil servants on central governmental level in Sweden (cf. Karlsson, 2014). This means that although the Wilsonian separation of politics and administration, which is increasingly highlighted within the NPM-paradigm, is present, contemporary civil servants respond to political steering through the manner in which goals are constituted or through civil servants' perceptions, perhaps sometimes imagined such, of political intentions.

Street-level generalists and experts

The changing role of civil servants is highlighted and analyzed by Agger and Damgaard (2018) in this issue. In a longitudinal case-study of urban planners in a Danish setting, they found that Lipsky's (2010 [1980]) classical divide between management and street-level bureaucrats was somewhat insufficient for complex and contemporary roles. From this perspective, they open up for a re-interpretation of theories of street-level bureaucrats, introducing ideas about 'academic generalists' and 'academic experts'. These (new) roles have different task in contemporary organizations. Generalists are primarily working the space for different types of knowledge, whereas specialists should focus on the ability to collaborate with citizens. An important implication for these roles concerns the need for interaction and coordination between them.

This contribution of civil servants engaging in emergent interactive process roles resonates against the growing literature on 'collaboration' and 'coproduction' of welfare services (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Lægreid & Rykkja, 2015; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011) within what is commonly known as the 'New Public Governance' (Osborne, 2006, 2010; Wiesel & Modell, 2014) or 'New Public Service' (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000, 2001) era. For civil service, this means an opportunity for coping with or handling the increasingly complex institutional and judicial contexts (Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004; March & Olsen, 1989) that makes up the public sector. For individual civil servants working in these contexts, the emerging and new roles offer forms for making sense of the public sector as an idea as well as providing some efforts of tackling so called 'wicked issues' (Camillus, 2008; Lundquist, 1991; Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Controlling or advocating citizens?

The fifth contribution of this issue is by Mosegaard Søberg (2018), who presents a study of civil servants' handling of 'benefit fraud'. More specifically, the article engages in a study of how civil servants act when demanded to denunciate citizens that are suspected of committing fraud? It is argued that civil servants who are being forced into such roles risk facing loss of trust from citizens. More specifically, it is argued that this emerging role is complex due to the fact that it needs to balance between working with or against citizens. The article further-

more sheds light on the topic of successful policy implementation processes. It is argued that in order to raise civil servants' perceptions of policy meaningfulness (Tummers, 2012; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014; Tummers, Bekkers, & Steijn, 2009), management plays a decisive role. Civil servants' willingness and attitude towards (new) policies and its implementation are heavily influenced by the attitude progressed by existing management. Dedicated managers can shape the actual policy implementation so that it becomes a success. However, in less favorable situations when there are tensions between the management and the civil servants on how to act in relation to citizens and users, the organization may face a dilemma between systematic control and a more trust-based service delivery. The solution to this dilemma may even turn out in dual norms and an increasingly disharmonic organization.

Public and private service delivery

The sixth, and final, contribution to this issue is by Madestam, Sundström, and Bergström (2018). Their study approaches civil servants from a slightly different perspective and investigates school leader's perceived roles and core values. More specifically, they ask whether there are any differences in the way that school leaders embrace public core values between school leaders in public versus private organizations. Through an extensive quantitative study of 975 Swedish school leaders – responding to 15 postulations about their organization – they find that there are small variations in which core values are highlighted in the different organizational setting. Two values, however, are distinctly different. Firstly, school leaders in public schools is found to be closer to politicians as compared to private schools. Secondly, school leaders in private schools are found to donate user's influences in a higher degree. Having stated this, they also argue that there are indications that public schools are engaging more in entrepreneurial values whereas private schools are more commonly being politicized. From the backdrop of this contribution, it is reasonable to make some conjectures about the nature of contemporary public administration. In line with the reasoning presented by Madestam et al. (2018), we expect that an increased level of marketization of public services will inevitably affect the nature of how those actors reason and rationalize their place within the service production. As welfare producers embrace the emergent logic of welfare production, we expect an increasing level of market homogenization implying that potential discrepancies between public and private principal will converge over time. For contemporary civil service this would imply that the very core of such public values – whatever these may be – inherently undergoes change and on-going deliberation. This also evokes the fundamental empirical and normative question of what is and will be the nature of public interest and public values in service delivery exposed to competition. Another major issue is how newly introduced ideas about 'trust-based public administration' (Bringselius, 2017) will actually work in public organizations in which NPM values have been institutionalized during more than three decades. Is there any room for trust-based relationships in service delivery

systems where competition is a key instrument of governance or is this reform idea just adding to the institutional complexity?

From current to future contributions

This special issue contributes to the literature in a number of different ways. One contribution is to the existing literature on roles that emerges within the managerialized state (Brodkin, 2011; Karlsson, in press; Kirkpatrick & Ackroyd, 2003; Pollitt, 2016). Actors engaged in the realization of policy encounter different challenges and opportunities, which can be handled in different ways. Findings presented by e.g. Poulsen and Boye Koch (2018) and Bischoff (2018) directs attention to emerging coping strategies that could be studied in other national contexts and welfare levels. Such studies could e.g. focus on how civil servants conceptualize their situation ‘between two masters’ as Bischoff (2018) so accurately puts it.

This special issue furthermore raises important issues concerning the available discretion that civil servants have in different contexts. Although many NPM-reforms have been aimed at increasing discretion at the level of actors (Kaboolian, 1998; Karlsson, in press; Lipsky, 2010 [1980]; Sandfort, 2000; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014; Wangrow, Schepker, & Barker III, 2015), the emergence of complex contexts where elected officials are held politically accountable increase the risk – or chance, depending on your take on the subject – that individual latitude of actions within administrative parts will decrease. The contributions put forth by Agger and Damgaard (2018) and Mosegaard Søberg (2018) partly point in that direction. More studies should be undertaken in this matter. There is need for more in-depth understanding about how these complex situations affect actors as well as organizations within contemporary welfare states.

Another important matter that this special issue engages is the matter of managerial controls exerted on civil servants within public organizations. The contributions from Nyström Höög and Björkvall (2018) concerning ‘softer’ managerial control and from Mosegaard Søberg (2018) about the relevance of ‘managerial dedication’, indicates the importance of scrutinizing these roles within the public sector. Such roles play a decisive part in the realization of policy within public organizations, and we need to understand more about the dynamic relationships that emerge through and from such powers. The contributions by Madestam et al. (2018) furthermore shed light on the values as incorporated by actors within the public welfare production. Although contrasting some previous assumptions concerning dominating public values, their results indicate an on-going homogenization of public service providers. Future studies could focus on how managerial roles interact with the political agenda set within public organizations as well as how they interact with actors in more traditional civil servant roles. Important public values are at stake in these processes and how those contested issues will be handled is open to debate on the level of party politics and election campaigns.

On a final note, we argue that there is dire need to incorporate and inform current educational curriculum engaged at higher education institutions about the changing and emerging roles of civil service. Theories on street-level bureaucracy (Evans & Harris, 2004; Lipsky, 2010 [1980]; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014) has served us well for a long time, but the ongoing adoption and adaptation to managerial techniques (Karlsson, 2017b) and cultures (Arnaboldi et al., 2015; Lapsley & Skærbæk, 2012) within the public sector together with increased marketization (Johansson et al., 2018; Karlsson, 2017a; Modell & Wiesel, 2008) and growing managerialism (Deem, 1998; Frederickson, 1999a; Pollitt, 1993, 2016) bring role and context complexity to the foreground. In order to prepare the next generation of civil servants for the complex institutional and judicial forms of organizing the public sector, we need to equip them with knowledge of what it means to serve the people, that is: public ethics.

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