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Citizen feedback as a tool for continuous improvement in local bodies

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the feedback discourse by exploring how public managers and politicians use complaints from citizens to improve the overall and specific performance of public services. The main research questions are: Can citizen complaints analysis be a useful planning tool in the public sector? What can public managers learn from citizen feedback?

Design/methodology/approach – Applying an empirical approach (Yin, 2005), the multiple case studies treated in the paper aim to clarify a series of decisions (particularly, why feedback is not used to its maximum potential). The overall design includes a defined set of questions, and the research protocol includes data retrieval, collection and analysis. A new cataloging model is proposed to homogenize the spectrum of analysis. This model is intended to create a parallel between two local bodies different in size, mission, and complexity, but which have front office facilities and are in the same territory and have the same potential target population.

Findings – In total, 698 complaints and 183 corrective or preventive actions were analyzed. Public managers' attention seems to focus on technical or normative issues rather than on aspects of public services. This may be explained by the lack of funds for training, the scarce use of relational and human capital development leverage, and the concomitant necessity to guarantee at least the same level of services as provided in previous years, confirming the "Blame the rich and credit the poor" mantra.

Originality/value – This paper offers a strategic approach to learning from citizen's feedback that other scholars or practitioners have not yet provided. There are many academic studies on customer feedback as a continuous improvement tool for the private sector, but few for public administration.

Keywords Continuous improvement, Policy making, Accountability, Citizen complaints handling, Citizen feedback

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Legitimizing choices in public administration (PA) assume complex contours in concomitance with an ongoing financial crisis, forcing public institutions to maintain current service levels while facing reduced economic and human resources. Acting consistently with respect to users' expectations and needs can promote the development of an image of PA as a transparent actor and careful listener to citizens' desires and needs, particularly those conveyed as of complaints derived from personal or collective inconvenience or harmed interests.

In considering the passage of the public sector in the last 30 years, from New Public Administration to New Public Management (NPM) one has to recognize management attempts to move onto private enterprise models, while still involved in producing or contracting public services. This has resulted in changes of perspective in the way scholars deal with the topic of Public Management, and consequently it is not easy to summarize the pros and cons of each approach on the specific theme of "learning from complaints and from

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listening to citizens (e.g. conflict intensification, increased indirect costs, non-professional influence connected to uninformed or not qualified individuals)."

This paper proposes an approach to the issue of citizens' complaints not related to co-production. The approach intends to harness the ability of several distinct groups of actors to produce together something that equally guarantees specific interests. It is a citizen-oriented, listening-amplification approach, in which the acquired feedback is used to improve services, thus, reducing discomfort, diseconomies of scale and integrating more functions in fewer operations. Its implementation with more effective policies in terms of human and financial resources management would also ensure a safe and pleasant working atmosphere in front offices. This approach is reflected in the proposed "complaints cataloging model," where five sub-areas are evaluated in order to produce inputs for planning from citizens' feedback.

The multifaceted image of the citizen (as voter, taxpayer and user) should be kept in mind to establish which component is preponderant while the listening strategy is implemented. This can lead to a classification of active citizens, including bad citizens, professional citizens, silent citizens and citizens aware of sphere of interests, both their own and that of other individuals or groups. Therefore, the public manager acts in the context of a "blame the rich and credit the poor" regime in which, to overcome this potential trust gap, one risks to allow an "excess of democracy" (Crozier *et al.*, 1975).

Varying the perspective of observation from bureaucrats listening to citizens (Lukensmeyer, 2013) to politicians listening to citizens (Chen, 2016) can help distinguish administrators who are already part of the majority (frontbenchers) and do not use the feedback input well, and administrators who have recently entered politics or are not part of the majority (backbenchers) and have a high need of information from citizens. Therefore, relevant input is the interpretative capacity of politicians (Askim and Hanseen, 2008).

Complaints are a non-conveyed or stimulated signal to be used by administrators and public managers. Koontz (1999) poses questions on how to measure the input of the impact of citizens on public policies through interviews with public officials. He distinguishes between those who consider it a training opportunity, and those who instead believe it is an opportunity to promote the local body's policies and then protect it from possible future reductions in size. A third typology includes those guided by moral obligation, but disconnected from instrumental benefits unlike the first two kinds.

Last, but not least, customer orientation (Bini, 2008) in quality management, even in PA, is now a basis for ISO 9001, ISO 9004 and Common Assessment Framework (CAF) 2013. The new ISO 9001: 2015 foresees continuous improvement bound to customers' expectations as a fundamental planning element.

This paper aims to contributing to this discourse, offering an explorative look at the way in which public managers and politicians use complaints to improve the overall and specific performance of public services. The main research question is:

RQ1. Can citizen complaints analysis be a useful planning tool in the public sector?

The focus of the study is on how PA treats complaints, including corrective and preventive actions (PA) deriving directly from complaining and anticipating criticalities. Empirical results of this study suggest that public administrators and managers are reluctant to use feedback from citizens. A cataloging model is proposed in order to understand and explain planning inputs derived from citizens' feedback. The model is applied in the homogeneous analysis of two new case studies. Evidence from the case studies confirmed the original idea that analyzing complaints can lead to a more valuable planning activity. However, several corrective actions (CA) should be applied in order to supplant resistance both from citizens and civil servants in engaging in dialogs, which are the basic input for services continuous improvement (Hobbs, 2014).

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first section briefly reviews literature concerning citizens' complaining vs PA. The second section discusses the research methods used (research design, data collection and analysis). The methodological approach is a qualitative (Miles and Huberman, 1984) analysis of case studies (Yin, 2005). The third section presents case studies found via the internet and the analysis conducted on two North Western Italian cases, where theoretical insights are derived from fresh data and discussed. The paper concludes by discussing the contribution and development of the present study, together with directions for further research: "Why are complaints not yet a consistent and efficient planning tool?", "How can public actors use this NPM tool in a more specifically calibrated way?", "How can public managers or politicians improve the management of complaints in its positive input valence or use them as a part of a larger concept of transparency, included in strategies to create 'informed citizens' (Ruffini, 2013)?"

The results of these case studies will help to provide new evidence of best practices for improvement, according to citizens' feedback (e.g. human resources management), in a panorama of research that normally limits itself to the logical schemes of cataloging complaints and making them easily available instead of showing evidence of learning derived from citizen feedback.

Literature review
The public sector is far from considered infallible. Its intrinsic nature is human as it is ruled, managed and represented by human beings, not inclined to perfection. This implies mistakes in the day-by-day activity, misinterpretations of laws and norms by both civil servants and citizens, and the incorrect expectation that every request should receive a satisfactory reply. This confusing reality of liabilities and discomforts leads to the hard work of efficient complaint handling as a consequence of service failure. It should lead to CA, to anticipating potential criticalities and, thus, reducing malcontent.

The following literature review has been developed with a focus on consequent concepts such as service failure, feedback, complaints and citizens/administrators/civil servants. Starting from the PA performance, and its positive or negative reaction based on citizens expectations, this paper considers the counter reaction from administrators and civil servants including their ability to learn from professional activity mistakes.

Service failure, feedback and complaints
Service failures happen when there is no concurrence among a legitimated expectation to receive an acceptable service and the real service provided, mostly due to "performance gaps" (Ma, 2016). With this in mind, the Obama Administration realized several projects, including Feedback USA and the Core Federal Services Council (NextGov, 2016).

Some examples of service failures are: wrong medical diagnosis; corporal punishment in jails and schools; police use of excessive force; divulgation of information protected by privacy laws; corruption or discrimination in accessing public services; and, at a micro-level, failure to cut green areas or fix potholes; mistakes in taxation.

When service failures occur dissatisfied citizens can express their resentment by casting blame (James *et al.*, 2016), potentially activating negative word-of-mouth, citizen defection or exit strategies (Table I).

Citizen feedback –complaints in particular – thus has psychological, managerial and political connotations. As feedback generally implies an interaction between citizen/customer and the public sector, including appreciation, complaint, various requests, etc., here complaint is defined as a communication from the citizen, dealing with an unfairly suffered discomfort, sometimes as a consequence of a service not or only partly provided. This damaged (or limited access to) a right or a legitimate interest and the citizen needs redress (Bhattacharjee and Mysoor, 2016; Gauri, 2011). Accordingly, there are three essential elements of a complaint: communication, discomfort and damage.

According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback may concern a task, how it is performed, the self-regulation and the person who performs the task. It may be immediate or delayed, positive or negative. A citizen may react while (not) receiving the services or after their provision.

Feedback may be a sudden reaction to an action that is seen as the violation of a social pact. The results of feedback may also concern: how one is behaving, where one is going and what are one's future perspectives. It may or may not be routine (Kroll, 2013), direct (complaint, appreciation, remark), indirect (not proposed by the original provider but reproposed by the press), anonymous (if providers assume that identifying themselves could be risky) or mediated (through an interview, e.g., with agreed questions), positive (in the sense of proactive) and sustainable (grounded, applicable, long-term oriented).

Feedback is normally considered as originating from outside of the institution it is directed to. This happens most of the time, but valuable feedback can also derive from internal resources (Rich and Oh, 2000) by means of audits, performance assessments, interviews, specific online forums or newsgroups, or whistle blowing policies. Feedback can also be repetitive (several persons providing the same input or the same person repeatedly providing the same input), or not formalized (as is the case of medical doctors and nurses who are very close to their client, and who fear future retaliation for negative feedback).

Citizens and administrators

Feedback from citizens and services users in the public sector is relevant because the citizens' own skills, resources and capacities can be used to create value (Moore, 2014). Citizens work on the basis of "active citizenship" and participatory democracy (Hendriks, 2010), actively confronting the public body when providing feedback. This civic activism need derives from the assumption that value performance in the public sector is always multi-dimensional (Moore, 1995) as it is not a variable of quality and objective costs alone, or of the provided service, but also involves perceived equity and consensus as a direct effect of the services offered (Houston *et al.*, 2016). New media help improve the potential power of complaints (Andreassen and Streukens, 2013; Einwiller and Steilen, 2015).

As stated in the introduction, various levels of citizens' involvement, voice and defection (Arnstein, 1969; Hirschmann, 1970; Simmons and Brennan, 2017; Boswell *et al.*, 2015; James and Moseley, 2014; Simmons *et al.*, 2012) should be taken into consideration. Ruffini (1999) distinguishes several profiles of the citizen: a beneficiary, a person in need, whose rights are based on a legal framework; a consumer, with a choice of public and private service providers; a producer/consumer who receives a service and at the same time collaborates with peers (e.g. parents performing external control roles in a nursery organization); a user with no alternatives (the utilization of the service is limited and not customized, e.g. public gardens); a customer who must pay a direct or indirect fee for a service when the provider operates in a monopolistic regime; a taxpayer who assumes compensation between taxes paid and services

The ambivalent nature of citizen feedback	
Immediate	Delayed
Direct	Indirect
Positive	Negative
Anonymous/mediated	Personal
Grounded	Groundless
Repetitive	Unique
Formalized	Non-formalized
External	Internal
Propositive	Destructive

received; a passive or "silent" (Berry and Junn, 2015; Gest and Gray, 2015; Gray, 2015; Turner, 2015) citizen, whose capacity to act is limited and where citizen's trust is a lever of goal achievement (Bouckaert, 2012).

Two more variables can be added to this taxonomy: professional citizens who due to their competence or preservation of specific/community interests can produce complex and proactive feedback to particular challenges, to be handled in a governmental framework "in which crucial elements of public authority are shared with a host of non-governmental or other-governmental actors, frequently in complex collaborative systems that sometimes defy comprehension, let alone effective management and control" (p. 9); and difficult citizens (Kouzmin *et al.*, 1999) who often take good government for granted and pay more attention to insufficient performance (Yang and Holzer, 2006).

Thomas (2012) states that administrators should consider themselves "professional citizens," working on managing their power with and not on citizens. They should be able to identify potential pitfalls on sampling expectations, or understand how much citizens aid is needed. They should be able to manage the risk to users discussing qualitative standards without a scientific or normative basis allowing a confrontation. Citizens should be driven in clarifying their needs (Salomon, 2005) before trying to realize them. Paradoxically, listening to the citizens' voice (Lukensmeyer, 2013) can lead to "trust gaps" (Dalton, 2004) or to "excess of democracy" (Crozier *et al.*, 1975). In general, this definition from 1975 is still valid in the current context, where normative ignorance of the framework is not a deterrent to criticism that sometimes can be not grounded.

Learning from feedback

Complaints can be considered part of the concept of performance (Moynihan, 2008; Bouckaert and Halligan, 2007; Boyne *et al.*, 2009; Ruffini *et al.*, 2011; Behn, 2003; Rebora *et al.*, 2016), mostly while talking about service quality (Suarez-Barraza *et al.*, 2009; Nalbandian, 2013; Elg *et al.*, 2015), or provision with a focus on topics such as red tape and corruption. This is made possible by evaluating and assessing services on the basis of expectations and perceptions. Issues such as learning and planning (Kinder, 2012) are treated separately, respecting their logical order even if managerial and political behavior in response to feedback can be a unitary process. Yang and Holzer (2006) note that measuring and improving citizens' satisfaction (Fitzgerald and Durant, 1980; Dehoog *et al.*, 1990; Olsen, 2015) and perceptions of service provision through citizens' participation in the evaluation of public sector activity is a relevant issue for new performance measurement perspectives. Citizens' expectations can vary on the same service and most of the time performance is not the key to evaluation. Instead, it is the gap between expectation and performance that forms the perception. As with each subjective measure, perception is a blend of expectations and the preservation of interests. Discrepancy between subjective and objective ratios shows that citizens have little perception of the real level of services they receive (Parks, 1984).

Particularly useful results come from the work of So (2012) concerning the Taipei Municipality and its citizens. So expresses doubts on the coexistence of accountability and learning in a cultural performance management process. The points to a second level of accountability, a horizontal, a kind of "benchmarking learning" opposed to political accountability. The works previously described focus on public sector learning in which the main actors are public managers.

Once there are sufficient elements for change, public managers and politicians can start planning accordingly (CFPS and LGO, 2011). Relevant works on organizational change focus on listening to the "discontented" inside and outside the public organization as an initial "sparkle" of improvement, where positive feedback leads to sustainable success (Kelman, 2005). Brewer (2007) distinguishes clearly between self-interest and community interest, emphasizing that consumerist approaches promoted from the NPM are not robust

enough to supplant traditional citizen-oriented approaches: "A citizenship perspective has a greater potential to develop problem-solving strategies, based on systemic pattern theory, which emphasizes paying attention to organizational policies, processes and outcomes, rather than, as with organizational aberration theory, regarding complaints as the product of specific problems to be addressed without systemic modifications" (p. 554).

Complaints are also useful for their capacity to raise consciousness in terms of service failure and help to illustrate areas for improvement by showing good innovation potential (Simmons and Brennan, 2013): answering the what, why and how of issues such as values, organizational practices and systems changes. Simmons & Brennan propose, and the following case studies confirm, that converting knowledge derived from complaints into energy is a requisite to support innovation processes such as invention, exploitation and diffusion.

Methodology

The research design rests on empirical case studies located in the same geographical area (Yin, 2005). The approach poses "why" or "how" questions by the authors who had no control over the events treated but wanted to consider the operative links in a medium-term period (How do public managers and politicians treat complaints? Why should public managers and politicians pay more attention to feedback? Why are complaints not yet an adequate tool for planning in the public sector?). The initial questions were based on the literature review presented above, with attention for a contemporary phenomenon in a real life context. The case studies are aimed at clarifying a series of decisions (why feedback is not used to its full potential). A description of the background clarifies how the feedback is treated and explored.

The overall design included the definition of a set of questions, the project and research protocol, data retrieval, collection and analysis leading to findings and conclusions. The research protocol began with screening relevant literature related to service quality improvement, particularly Parasuraman (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1991) and Kano (Kano *et al.*, 1984), as sources of elements for evaluating two international case studies and then adapting an existing cataloging model to the findings and applying it to two new case studies. Semi-structured interviews with public managers were conducted on relevant topics including the management of complaints, continuous improvement and citizens' feedback.

More analytical than statistical generalization was provided in order to propose future research streams and theoretical suggestions. Validation tools were used to test causal connections: i.e. internal validity (no sampling, as the total population was taken into consideration) external validity (logical repetition of events); and reliability (a simple case study protocol) (Figure 1).

The research was longitudinal (Pettigrew, 1979), as this provided a transparent look at the formation and development of complaints management over a three-year span. The study relied on extensive, qualitative research into the Citizen Relationship Management phenomenon. Retrospective data collection (from 2011 to 2014) was mainly based on documentary sources, including previous studies, local databases (accessed directly from local bodies and institutions), press archives, online archives of local and national newspapers, and PA databases. A series of potential prejudices were identified as documentation pitfalls and, therefore, avoided in database queries or the definition of interviews questions. A simple attempt to triangulate data was operated and produced in-depth analysis results in the Findings section. Primary data also originated from in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews with quality management experts. Each interview ranged from one to three hours in duration.

The aim of data processing was twofold: defining a minimal data set, made homogeneous through a new cataloging model, and verifying the areas of improvement more likely to be activated and the areas that are underestimated. The main results from the study are
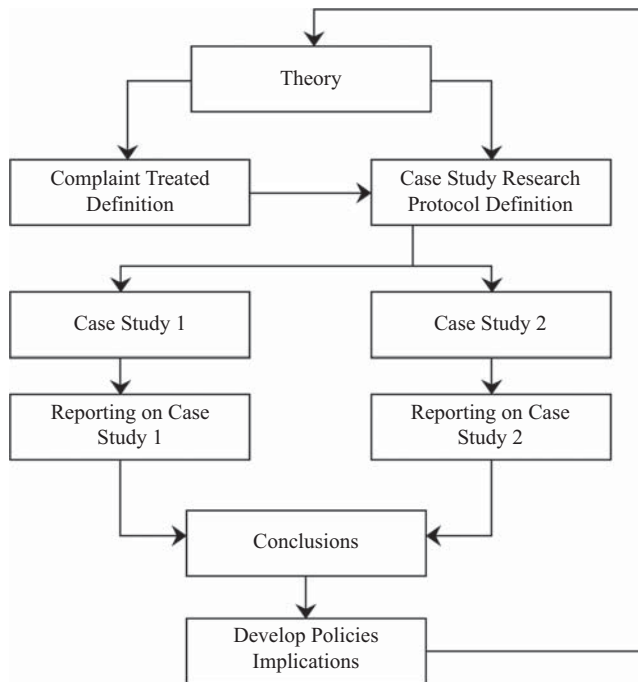
theoretical insights into whether citizens' complaining feedback is an appropriate tool for the PA. The findings originate from confirmation of the original theory, and are presented in the conclusions. Subsequently, some political implications are developed in order to propose patterns and paths for future research, and change and improvement in feedback and planning management.

Case studies

An online search uncovered several best practices relating to the issues treated in this paper, such as practiced by Milan Municipality (Comune di Milano, 2013), Amsterdam City Council (Hassan, 2010) and Finland with its creative response to the problem. It has set up a Complaints Choir that literally translates a chorus of simultaneous complaints from many people in music (www.complaintschoir.org/news.html). Research studies came from institutions such as DESA (2013), NAO (2008), OECD (2001), GAO (2000), TARP (2007), Health Committee of the House of Commons (2015), and Ombudsman reports (European Ombudsman, 2017; Queensland Ombudsman, 2010).

Software available online for citizen relationship management includes Neighborland (https://neighborland.com/), Citizen Connect (http://citizenconnectcentre.sg/) and OTRS (https://www.otrs.com/).

Three relevant case studies were selected from the online search: Toronto Municipality, the Hong Kong Government and the Scottish Community Services Agency (SCSA). The information came from direct interviews and the available documentation. The Toronto Municipality, and the Hong Kong and Scotland Governments are considered to be among the most innovative and customer-oriented PAs. In addition, two Italian case studies were analyzed based on a cataloging model, which permitted the homogenization of results and facilitated data interpretation.

Toronto municipality
Toronto Municipality shows interest in complaints and feedback management, and in continuous improvement. It has established a quality procedure for handling complaints, a database to manage and store complaints and feedback, and a shared protocol for complaints, all of which are available in all divisions. The protocol is also available to citizens, even on the web, as well as contact details for each divisional complaints management officer.

Complaints are intended as useful tools to identify patterns and trends of services provision improvement. Higher management is encouraged to get input from these elements, to update processes, focusing attention on "escalating complaints" (i.e. follow-up complaints by citizens who are dissatisfied by the way their initial complaint was handled). Further, the internal auditing tests each division's complaints management system.

Citizens can track their complaints online while they are being handled and can make "escalated complaints" which are treated by the deputy general manager and by city manager's staff. Citizens are invited to contribute to a customer satisfaction survey on the way in which their complaints were handled. Reports are available in English and French on the Ombudsman's website. Last, but not least, through the "You Make the Difference" program, staff have an opportunity to nominate colleagues who have demonstrated their overall commitment to excellence. Staff can be commended for excellence in five categories; service excellence, innovation, community engagement, leadership excellence and commitment. Complaints management is part of the initiative.

The efficiency unit of the government of the Hong Kong special administrative region
As recently as 2008, using complaints to improve service delivery was not a common activity. Few departments analyzed their complaints in order to identify areas for improvement or to prevent/minimize similar complaints in future. However, in 2009 guidelines were proposed (the Efficiency Unit of Hong Kong Government, 2011, 2009) to help staff use complaints data to highlight areas where service delivery improvement could be necessary. They also advised staff on the importance of robustly monitoring their department's own internal systems to identify potential improvements. And, finally, they underlined the importance of transparency and communicating the lessons learned from complaints handling to other departments and the public. The Efficiency Unit idea is that complaints provide important intelligence to departments on potential areas for improvement and systemic weaknesses.

Departments should make the best use of this free information to identify any underlying problems and improve their services as a perfect complaints handling system is useless if the PA keeps on repeating the same mistakes. A system should in fact also provide powerful analytic and reporting capability to help the department do trend analysis and identify recurring problems for further analysis. Using complaints to identify areas where service improvements are needed should be a key responsibility for both middle and senior management.

Departments should be encouraged to be open and transparent in communicating both their performance in handling complaints and the service delivery improvements implemented as a result of complaints made, and senior management should be advised to consider and learn from best practices identified in other departments.

This effort produced interesting results. Over half of the departments captured and shared the experience/lessons learned in complaints handling (61 percent), even though only 1 percent of departments declared publicly that there were policy changes/service delivery improvements implemented as a result of complaints made. In general, as many as 71 percent of the departments did not make public their complaints handling information; be it complaints statistics, complaints handling performance, or policy changes/service delivery improvements implemented as a result of complaints made.

The SCSA
The Scottish public sector complaints handling landscape has been subject to significant review in recent years. The Crerar Review (a report of the independent review of regulation, audit, inspection and complaints handling of public services in Scotland) published in 2007 and the subsequent Sinclair Report published in 2008 provide much of the background and context for the SCSA work. The Crerar Review found that public sector complaints handling processes in Scotland were not "fit-for-purpose." They were not always accessible or easy to use, they were inconsistent (across and sometimes within sectors) and were often complicated for organizations and for individuals to use.

Following the Crerar Review, the Scottish Government established a fit-for-purpose Complaints System Action Group, led by Douglas Sinclair, then Chair of the Scottish Consumer Council. Sinclair's group was asked to develop proposals for simplifying public service complaint handling processes and streamlining the handling landscape. Sinclair's report made several recommendations, including new roles or responsibilities for the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO), including to simplify and improve handling by working with public bodies to develop standard procedures. Sinclair also recommended that the SPSO co-ordinate a range of activities to help public bodies adopt best practices in complaint handling by supporting training for handlers, assisting to develop a complaints handling network and issuing guidance.

The Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 ("the PSR Act") gave the SPSO new powers in relation to complaints handling, specifically a new role to oversee the development of standardized model handling procedures (CHPs) for each sector (local authority, housing, National Health Service, Further and Higher Education, the Scottish Government, Scottish Parliament and Associated Public Authorities in Scotland) and to promote and monitor best practice in complaints handling. These new duties were undertaken by the Complaints Standards Authority, which was established by the SPSO in October 2010. The CHPs models were developed in line with the Sinclair Report recommendations and the framework of the SPSO Statement of Complaints Handling Principles (approved by the Scottish Parliament) and the Guidance on a Model Complaints Handling Procedure. The emphasis in the CHPs is on faster, simpler complaints handling with local, early resolution by empowered well-trained staff. While each sector has a different model, they are in fact the same: essentially a two-stage procedure within clear, transparent timescales. There is also an emphasis on valuing complaints by recording all complaints, reporting key information and using the lessons learned to improve service delivery.

To support the introduction of the CHPs model developed for each sector, including a suite of sector-specific e-learning training courses to support staff awareness of the Front-line Resolution stage of the CHPs model and good practice in complaint handling in general. This training is freely available to all public sector organizations in Scotland.

The SCSA is now moving toward the next stage of work which will focus on identifying, developing evaluating and sharing best practice, developing key performance indicators and supporting complaints handling practitioners across the public sector in Scotland. One way of doing this is through Complaints Handler Network groups. Each organization is required to publish its complaints performance on a quarterly basis and publicize its performance annually. Organizations are also required to use complaints data to learn from complaints and drive up standards of service delivery.

A new cataloging model
As the preceding case studies show, there is still no "planning from feedback" culture even in the more civilized and innovative PAs. Sensibility to citizens' input as added value in planning looks like "utopia" and efforts to counter this inertia are evident. The following case studies from administration institutions in the North Western Italian public sector

identify a necessity to homogenize the spectrum of analysis and propose a new cataloging model. This model was intended to create a parallel between two local bodies which are different in size, mission and complexity, but which are in the same territory, share several front office facilities and have the same potential target population.

The model was partly influenced by Parasuraman's SERVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988, 1991), the ISO 9001:2008 and the 9001: 2015 first drafts, and the CAF 2013, which emphasize technical compliance and customer orientation as the most relevant goals of public sector activity. Issues such as safety and performance are also part of the approaches, but were considered separately. Longbottom and Hilton's (2011) work on hard vs soft dimensions of service quality also influenced the model.

The cataloging model contains five sub-areas that each consider services and providers from various perspectives and relate to a specific issue.

Sub-area A, "Technical content," includes legislative and technical compliance, promptness of services and its homogeneity in time and space. It is intended to verify potential pitfalls and gaps in the planning and first steps of the provision of a single service. In this sense, middle managers and officers are considered as a potential target for complainers, and top management should consider this sub-area as a potential tool for human resources, and more generally, in performance evaluation.

Sub-area B deals with "Accountability and performance accessibility," with the intent to facilitate comprehension of the service provided by means of all active media available. This sub-area also takes into consideration "performance results publicity," aka accountability. Sub-area B has much to do with the way in which first administrators and then civil servants communicate with citizens. Many complaints can be avoided with clear information activity that uses new media as well as traditional tools. Anticipating citizens' needs, demands and doubts with proper and simple language is a powerful tool, one which shows a more friendly bureaucratic local body and increases trust in public sector activity (Houston *et al.*, 2016). In this sense, feedback from this sub-area should be included as input in future policy development, to track and stress the citizens' contribution to improving public policies.

Sub-area C looks at performance width, efficacy and completeness in "Service availability." Competition is not a real issue in PA, but sub-area C is partly devoted to preparing for it. Ratios should be identified, also considering results deriving from this sub-area. Feedback comes mostly from mistakes in human resources, and from usage of financial resources. If both of these are not optimized, in this crisis scenario some (geographic or service) areas may not be covered appropriately, causing inconvenience and discomfort to citizens. Future policies should seriously consider feedback on the way in which resources are and should be used.

Sub-area D, "Customer orientation," is linked both to listening to citizens and to managing and developing human resources. It verifies whether citizens receive personal solutions to problems, if empathy is employed and if civil servants act at their best. Complainers often stress an incapacity to deal with easy or complicated problems or misbehavior, or even (un)intentional attempts by public officers to damage users. Training based on sub-area D feedback is fundamental to reduce customer dissatisfaction and increase the perception of being cared for and listened to.

Finally, sub-area E, "Infrastructures," includes concepts as broad as hygiene, safety and environment. Allowing a citizen to find a safe, friendly environment when dealing with local bodies' front offices is a guarantee for success for both parties. Disorder, dirtiness and sensing an unsafe environment can produce negative feelings toward the service provided. Further, normative constraints should be always respected for the sake of both workers and users.

This model can be applied to both complaints handling and cataloging continuous improvement. It applies performance management techniques derived from total quality

management orientation points. The second case study is currently using this cataloging model as a direct consequence of this research.

Sub-areas A, B and C relate to service performance evaluation and improvement. While technical compliance and service amplitude derive from normative issues, as well as from internal and external standards and comparisons, a newer challenge for public managers is accountability, which has accrued from the ongoing financial crisis worldwide. It entails all the citizen typologies proposed in the definitions and is linked to the capacity of public managers to listen to their customers/clients. This is the focus of sub-area D, as it treats customer orientation as a local body and not just as front office clerk characteristics. As Deming, Juran and Crosby state, "Quality is defined by customers' requirements, and is a top management responsibility to guarantee continuous improvement (Imai, 1997; Suarez-Barraza *et al.*, 2009; Fryer *et al.*, 2007) conducted throughout the organization." Sub-area E is devoted to safety in working and public areas of a local body. Noncompliance with the content of sub-area E can imply risks for employees and citizens and demands particular attention as public managers are responsible for negligence in safety issues.

Two Italian case studies
Case study 1: Italian NW Public Agency (CS1). CS1 has no refined systems for complaints management because of the low number of reports, and the small scale of the local body. According to the quality officer, many complaints start from incorrect assumptions (poor knowledge of procedures or equipment needed to operate or the normative framework is not evident or known). Complaints may then be considered unfounded. Other complaints relate to a subjective (negative) evaluation of a service received. For example, the waiting time for some services may be perceived as excessive, but the complaint is of timeliness that is "in line" with sector standards, and the feedback gets returned to users.

Some complaints may report offensive behavior by staff or some service inefficiency. In these cases, if the complaint appears founded, an inquiry follows and reports are sent to the officers responsible for identifying appropriate corrective/disciplinary actions. Planning CA is mostly linked to complaints about infrastructure malfunction. In some cases, the reported problem is not yet known and the solution demands an intervention (e.g. a malfunctioning lift or a broken information sign). The analysis of received complaints in the period 2011-2013 revealed two aspects in particular that led to CA/PA. Complaints are different and may derive from dissatisfaction with a service received or because a certain service is missing. At the same time the complaint might suggest improvements to existing services. In many cases, complaints are unfounded or require shared liability with external actors and, therefore, do not involve only the will of the local agency (Figure 2).

Case study 2: Italian NW local body (CS2). CS2 developed a quality management system that started in 2007, with ISO 9001 certification for 14 directional areas. The project is now widespread in large parts of front-line services and since November 2011 an online "Complaints reception system" has been active, aiming to foster an organic method of receiving and managing feedback and offering an alternative to traditional complaining habits. According to data from the past three years, CS2's trend in complaints management shows an increase (2013) resulting from augmented attention to technical compliance as well as the introduction of several new services that are replicated in other regions in the local body (Figure 3).
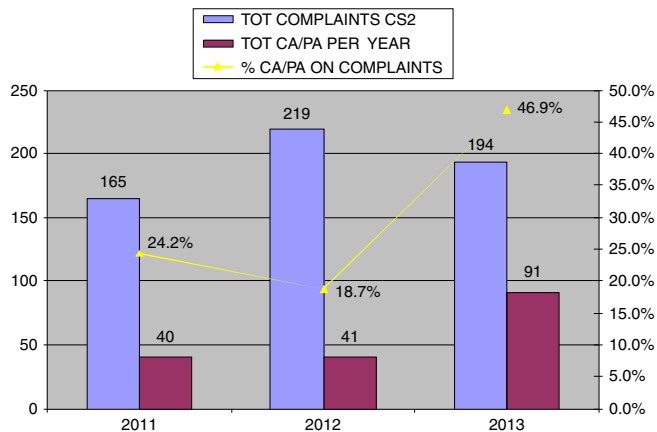
Findings
In the period 2011-2013, CS1 received 120 complaints in total and took 11 CA. In the same period CS2 received 578 complaints and implemented 172 corrective or PA.

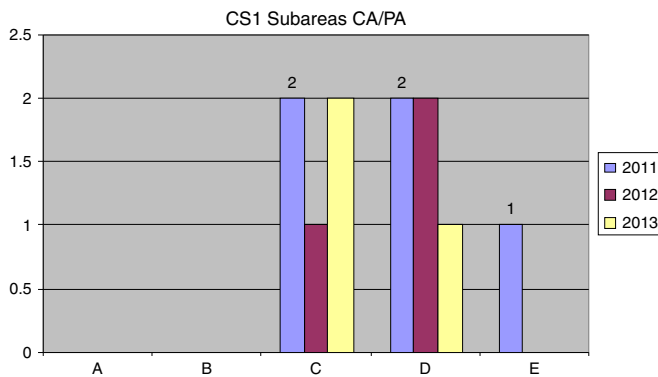**Figure 2.**
CA/PA and
complaints in CS1
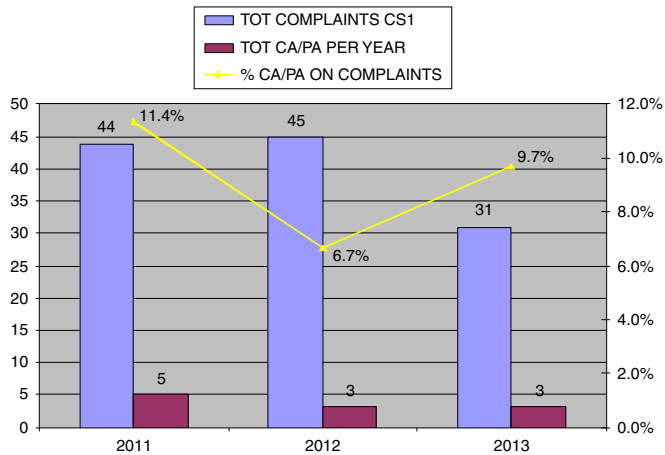
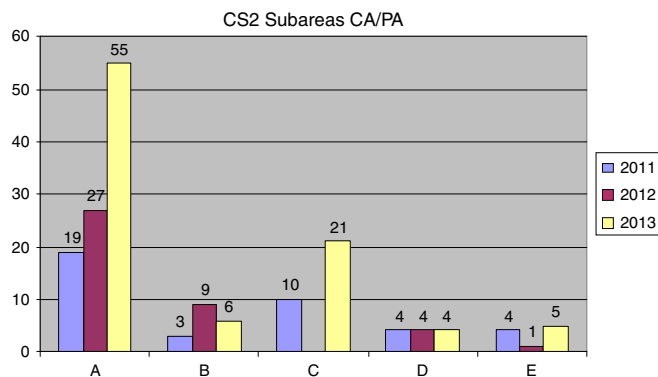**Figure 3.**
CA/PA and
complaints in CS2

In both CS1 and CS2, CA/PA are concentrated in waiting times, hygiene and technical-legislation compliance of provided services. Sub-area A (55.19 percent of total CA/PA in both case studies in the 2011-2013 period) and sub-area C (19.67 percent) are preponderant and relate to technical content and service amplitude. Results from sub-area D (9.29 percent) suggest little interest in interaction with citizens, human resources development and, in general, in human resources management. This led to identifying "gaps" that are dealt with in the conclusions. Sub-area B has a mere 9.84 percent CA/PA and almost one in five is related to dialog with citizens improvement, or to make public works accountable, or the civil servant-user relationship, or to information to facilitate access to the complex administrative system of a public body.

If one bears in mind that three out of four CA/PA are linked to performance and one out of five to the human factor, it may be said that the relational aspects have less need of development compared to performance, which is not always aligned to expectations (Figures 4 and 5).

Public managers' attention seems focused on technical components rather than human services. This may be explained by a lack of funds for training, scarce use of relational and human capital development leverage, and a concomitant necessity to guarantee (at least the

Figure 4.
CS1 Distribution of
CA/PA for Sub area

Figure 5.
CS2 Distribution of
CA/PA for Sub area

same level of) the services provided in previous years, thus confirming the "Blame the rich and credit the poor" mantra. Despite repeated emphasis, in both training moments and high-level official communications the guarantee that CA will follow every founded complaint is counter to the common managerial culture of CS2, but clearly evident in CS1.

A public agency relies on citizens who are "100 percent customers/clients," which explains why sub-area D is always present in the total PA/CA. In contrast, it seems that safety and hygiene are not a priority (sub-area E CA/PA = 6.01 percent) in either institution. Greater focus on listening to citizen feedback could lead to clearer objectives and performance rewards for PA. With this lack of input, leadership is hesitant and lazy in dealing with citizen feedback, adhering to the "here and now" logic and neglecting to propose at least medium-term outlooks. While public agency leaders have clear ideas on feedback potential, the level of action required and political impact that complaints imply are not immediately intelligible to them. Furthermore, the percentage of PA/CA on complaints in CS2 increased from 24.24 to 46.91 percent (see Figure 3) and cannot be motivated only by the spread of an ongoing improvement culture as it included several technical services in the quality management system in 2013, and technical compliance is relevant to their provision.

CS2 responds to citizen feedback in 30 percent of cases (CS1 in 10 percent), and in general CS1 and CS2 learn from feedback in one in four cases. The data are satisfactory if one considers that it is quite common for local bodies to receive identical feedback several times (e.g. ten mothers complaining about food quality in the same kindergarten).

Conclusions

Researching complaints management is demanding because complaints are but one technical "tool" in a panorama of customer relationship methodologies developed in fields other than the public sector. It does not have a rich academic literature and is usually investigated in connection with general organizational or political studies. A practical approach to the subject would seek more complexity than found in the theoretical framework mentioned above. Few local bodies have dedicated structured complaints management systems; many have non-homogeneous systems and data are generally unavailable.

This paper constitutes a first attempt to analyze citizen feedback in the public sector, trying to answer the question:

RQ1. Can citizen complaints analysis be a useful planning tool in the public sector?

The case study findings clarify what a public body can learn and how management learning systems based on quality management may (not) adequately improve the public sector. Findings show that CS1 and CS2 learned from citizen feedback in 25 percent of the cases.

Complaining is a powerful tool, but not yet perfectly calibrated to a PA reality. It is not that simple to obtain an automatic mechanism to translate feedback into planning input. Media, irrationality, partisanship, collective and more often individual interests have always affected citizen's expectations and the evaluation of the public sector activity. Besides that, citizens tend to mistrust the whole organization while addressing a part of it.

Although "the integration of participation and performance measurement can greatly improve citizens' trust" (Yang and Holzer, 2006; James and Van Ryzin, 2017), one must not underestimate the fact that complaints management has a distinct lack of interest in exploiting it (see sub-areas B and D, which show little interest in interaction or learning by citizens). Above all, the top management organizational mandate is missing. Little interest is shown in policy making as a direct effect of citizens' feedback in both Italian case studies and, there is little will to communicate it, if it does happen). In the other three web-based case studies, Toronto Municipality represents a difference. Its top management is committed to analyzing feedback and improving processes.

In the two Italian case studies, top managers generally accept "laziness," to avoid activating contagiously perilous issues such as political responsiveness (Soss and Moynihan, 2014) or social equity and their pandemic public opinion effects, thus leading to low results or negative attitudes to using feedback in sub-area B i. As a transparency issue, complaints management can work only if a transparency offer from the public sector and a transparency demand from citizens are equal (Ruffini, 2013).

This trend can lead to behaviors other than learning, particularly in developing administrative burdens that "can be implemented via less visible administrative processes, requiring lower political consultation and less need to acknowledge their purpose" (Moynihan *et al.*, 2014), undermining trust, transparency, citizen participation and exacerbating inequality. Then burdens may become a tool for refining ("creaming") the feedback provider, not for obtaining quick tips for planning.

Practical implications deriving from the case study findings of this paper relating to sub-area B i confirm what scholars have tested in other circumstances; i.e. that civil servants generally take a negative approach to transparency motivation (Ruffini, 2013) and feedback reuse, while being solicited to innovate during a crisis period and become increasingly the "unit of analysis" (Kelman, 2006) where innovation is not the fruit of necessity, but an individual and institutional growth path deriving from a transparent approach to service planning and provision. These two tensions (change vs private sector) may be managed in a unique, productive and enriching way, where solving problems together is a win-win strategy.

Potential research paths include three assertions/criticalities: first, feedback from complaints may provide better results if service users are empowered and services produce

standard results (input). For example, feedback is more effective for transportation services with users paying for a "ticket" rather than for social care services. In CS1 where every service has a fee and user feedback is solicited, sub-area D emerges as a basic planning tool, while in CS2, with fewer standard services, it is harder to set fees (or costs) for a specific service.

Second, feedback on citizen's complaints is ambiguous or generic and hardly exploitable for continuous improvement planning as it is based on social values and/or political ideas. Learning is subject to "normalization" where administrator political values are matched with citizens' feedback/values (see sub-area D, potential input).

Third, feedback works less effectively when public managers (as in Italy) do not have a continuous improvement culture, but a management culture based on formalisms and aversion to risk, inducing more attention for sub-areas A and E, which involve compliance to the normative and reducing awareness of citizens' needs.

Future developments of this paper should include concerns on the statistical value of data from "multiple" complaints (the same complaint proposed by a large number of different citizens) and information deriving from "serial" complainers which cannot be considered traditionally. There should also be an assessment of citizens' skills in input production. At the same time, advocacy/orientation can help prevent complaints and help find pitfalls in public services.

Last, but not least, financial as well as political issues could be essential to foresee negative choices. These should, therefore, be tested to reduce their impact and to favor trend analysis as underlined in the Hong Kong Efficiency Unit case study.

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