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PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIONS BETWEEN BUREAUCRACY AND POST-BUREAUCRACY: A PARADOXICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving social, economic, and technological challenges, enhancing the quality and efficiency of public services has become vital for Public Administrations (henceforth, PAs) to effectively address emerging challenges (Brogaard, 2021; De Vries et al., 2016). Although advancements have been made, such as the implementation of e-government systems (Kawabata & Camargo, 2023; Klievink et al., 2016), or the integration of green public procurement practices (Liu et al., 2021) - these often represents incremental improvements (Brogaard, 2021) rather than the transformative innovations needed. A deeper level of organizational learning essential for fostering radical innovation remains elusive (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

Despite expectations that PA organizations could harness bottom-up citizens' demands and top-down political directives to drive innovation, inertia and short-term focus seem to dominate (Boukamel & Emery, 2017; Sheep et al., 2017; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011).

1. CONTRADICTORY LOGICS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

A plausible explanation of this innovation gap lies in the presence of contradictory logics that influence PA. Similar to other complex organizations, PAs operate under multiple institutional logics, each driven by different "*rationality* [that is, set of] rule-bound choices among alternatives of action" (Berti, 2021). These rationalities are informed by two dominant models: the bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic frameworks.

1.1. From bureaucracy to post-bureaucracy

Traditionally, public organizations adhered to Weberian bureaucratic principles, that emphasized standardization, strict rule enforcement, and technical expertise (Monteiro and Adler 2022; Weber 1958). Bureaucracies were praised for their precision, impartiality, and meritocratic structure, establishing a model of efficiency for complex organizations.

However, critiques emerged by the mid-20th century, highlighting the rigidity and centralized decision-making as sources of inefficiencies and dysfunctions (Crozier 1964; Masuch 1985; Bozeman 2000; Merton 1940).

Responding to these criticisms and changing political and economic conditions, scholars and policymakers globally introduced new administrative paradigms – i.e., coherent and comprehensive norms and ideas about how to govern, organize and lead PAs, see Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg (2014). These include 'New Public Management' (NPM) (Hood 1991), 'Neo-Weberian State' (NWS) (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2009), 'Public Value Management' (PVM) (Moore 1997) and 'New Public Governance' (NPG) (Osborne 2006).

While characterized by varying managerial and organizational solutions and values, all these paradigms sought to supplant bureaucratic models with new post-bureaucratic ones (Torfing et al. 2020), emphasizing flexibility, performance and responsiveness.

1.2. The layering of bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic models

Interestingly, the literature has demonstrated that new models rarely fully displace their predecessors (Christensen and Lægreid 2022; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). In contrast, administrative paradigms tend to compete and coexist (Olsen 2006; Bel & Casula 2024), resembling 'layers in a cake' - where the most recently added top layer is visible, but the older paradigms in the lower layers provide a solid foundation (Torfing et al. 2020).

Thus, these models create 'layering' mechanisms (Ongaro et al. 2023), allowing the traditional bureaucratic model to persist alongside the new post-bureaucratic model, albeit in unstable and shifting dominance relationships (Torfing et al. 2020; Nielsen and Andersen 2024). Consequently, contemporary PAs emerge as multilayered entities incorporating aspects of both paradigms (Hammerschmid et al. 2016; George et al. 2021).

1.3. Tensions and paradoxes in Public Administration

The coexistence of competing bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic features generates enduring tensions in public operations and management. Scholars often described these tensions as 'paradoxical' (Moynihan 2011; Vigoda-Gadot and Mizrahi 2014; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017; Hood and Jackson 1991). For example, the 'production paradox' highlights the challenge of evaluating public sector outputs using quantitative indicators, which can obscure rather than clarify management responsibility in areas where outcomes are difficult to measure (Hood and Peters 2004).

The concept of paradox is not novel in PA literature, notable scholars have previously linked PAs to paradoxical phenomena (Vigoda-Gadot and Mizrahi 2014; Moynihan 2011). Simon (1946) noted that PA principles often resemble proverbs presented in conflicting pairs. Building on these insights, Hood & Jackson (1991) focused on administrative arguments frequently appearing in matching pairs with advantages and disadvantages. More recently, Pollitt & Bouckaert (2004; 2017) scrutinized contradictions within PAs, aiming to unravel their nature, whether as trade-offs, dilemmas, or paradoxes.

An analytical framework for understanding and addressing these enduring tensions is provided by paradox theory.

2. Paradox theory

Developed primarily since the 1980s with foundational works by Quinn and Cameron (1988), Poole and Van de Ven (1989), Smith and Berg (1987), paradox theory has recently emerged as an established framework for research in organizational settings (Smith and Lewis 2011; Lewis 2000). This is evidenced by a surge in academic literature, including special issues (e.g., Hahn et al. 2018; Jules and Good 2014; Smith et al. 2017; Waldman et al. 2019), comprehensive reviews (Putnam, Fairhurst, and Banghart 2016; Schad et al. 2016), robust handbooks (e.g., Berti et al. 2021), a double volume of Research in the Sociology of Organizations, engaging in interdisciplinary theorizing (Bednarek et al. 2021b; 2021a), and dedicated streams and sub-sessions in conferences like EGOS and AOM.

The potential of paradox is fast explained: organizations and their members are full of paradoxes. Leaders face ongoing tug-of-wars between today and tomorrow, emergence and planning, social mission and financial demands. People in their ordinary life experiences paradoxical tensions, for example navigating pressures between career and family. These binary oppositions demanding choice are – through paradox lens – dualities that necessarily coexist.

Paradoxes are defined as 'contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time' (Smith and Lewis 2011, 386). They may appear 'logical in isolation, but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously' (Lewis 2000, 760). Paradoxes often manifest as interlocking interdependent oppositions that cannot be easily resolved. For example, the relationship between changes and stability is a paradox: one element defines the absence of the other; change is the opposite of stability, yet neither can be understood without the other.

Paradox theory is frequently depicted as a meta-theory, providing an overarching theoretical framework that allows the application of key-constructs and principles across various phenomena and contexts (Schad et al., 2016). This perspective can enhance also different theoretical streams capable of integrating diverse phenomena and interpretations.

A central debate within paradox theory focuses on the ontological and epistemological dimensions of paradox. On the one hand, materialist perspectives treat paradox as inherent realities that exist independently of actors' cognitions. Here, contradictions materialize and become expressive; while they may not be ultimately resolved, it is possible to 'tap their energy' (Andriopoulos and Lewis 2009, 106). Conversely, constructivist perspectives posit that actors construct their realities based on psychological frameworks, rendering paradox an 'in the eye of the beholder' phenomenon. In this view, paradoxes are intersubjective accomplishments that come into being through discourse, even if their real-world implications remain unacknowledged.

Beyond these ontological and epistemological premises, scholars also focus on developing models to describe the recursive nature of paradoxes. Smith and Lewis, in their 'dynamic equilibrium model' (2011), propose that paradoxes are inherent to organizational processes and often remain latent, unnoticed and unperceived tensions. They can become salient due to external pressures (change or resource scarcity) and/or because of the measurement apparatuses (e.g., management control system, policies, reward systems, management practices) adopted by organizations or individual sensemaking.

Once these tensions are salient, they prompted various responses, including separation (i.e., choosing to recognize one tension while ignoring the other), denial (i.e., refusing to see the tension at all), and acceptance (i.e., harmonizing tensions; Smith and Lewis 2011) or splitting, confrontations, transcendence, suppressing, or adjusting (see Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017). These responses fall into two major categories identified by Smith and Lewis (2011): 'either-or' or 'both-and' strategies.

The either-or strategy involves denying the existence of contradictions, treating them as mistakes to be fixed. This approach often leads to increased tensions as one contradiction is prioritized over another. In contrast, both-and strategy embraces the inseparability and interdependence of opposing demands, seeking synergies and balancing contrasting needs.

The capacity to accept paradox requires an appropriate mindset that allows actors to recognize, value, and feel comfortable with the tension (Miron-Spektor et al. 2018). These approaches can lead to either vicious or virtuous cycles. Vicious cycles occur when organizations focusing solely on one pole of the paradox, exacerbating tensions in the long run and resulting in organizational inertia (Smith et al. 2017). In contrast, virtuous cycles arise when organizations acknowledge all the poles of paradoxes, enhancing long-term sustainability and fostering radical and incremental innovation.

3. RESEARCH OBJECT

Despite the potential that a paradoxical lens holds, the existing literature on paradoxes in public administration is fragmented and often focused on isolated paradoxes within specific contexts, such as government transparency (Qi and Ran 2023) and collaborative governance (Adeoye and Ran 2023).

This PhD dissertation seeks to explore the application of paradox theory within the realm of public administration, contributing to the advancement of knowledge in this field.

The dissertation comprises a collection of papers that have facilitated my entry into ongoing debates within both the public management community and the field of paradox theory. Over the past three years, I developed three papers, all of which have been presented in international conferences and workshops. Notably, one paper has been accepted for publication in *Public Management Review,* while a second is currently undergoing major revision for *Public Administration.* I plan to submit the third paper to an international peer-reviewed journal (*Academy of Management Journal)*. The most recent versions of these papers form the core of this dissertation.

The structure of the dissertation is cumulative, reflecting the research trajectory undertaken throughout this journey. Each paper is presented as a standalone chapter, addressing specific research questions, theoretical frameworks, methodological concerns, and contributions. Yet, they are unified by a shared focus on examining public administration as a paradoxical entity, highlighting the inherent contradictions and the coping strategies employed to navigate its complexities.

The contributions of this dissertation are twofold. Firstly, it aims to enrich the emerging discourse within public management studies regarding the application of a paradoxical lens to the study of public administration. This work advances the understanding of how this perspective is beneficial and timely in public management literature.

Secondly, it seeks to enhance the ongoing debate surrounding bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy. Utilizing qualitative research tools, I aim to inductively contribute to this expanding body of literature, offering new concepts and opportunities for further theorization.

4. RESEARCH PATH AND DISSERTATION STRUCTURE

Beyond this introduction, the thesis is organized into four distinct chapters.

The first chapter delves into the paradoxes inherent in public organizations. This chapter offers a foundational conceptualization of the paradoxes that emerge in public contexts. It traces the roots of these paradoxes within existing scholarship and provides insights into the reimagination of the ongoing debate between bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy. To achieve this, I conducted a systematic literature review closely adhering to the 'Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses' (PRISMA) approach, ensuring a rigorous, transparent and replicable methodology (Shamseer et al. 2015). This review analyzed 73 articles, setting the stage for further exploration.

The second chapter of the thesis employs a historical approach to investigate how PAs navigate the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox both (i) over time and (ii) across different yet intertwined organizational domains. This perspective transcends the simplistic notion that bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy merely replace one another. Instead, it facilitates an exploration of how these models—exhibiting distinct strengths and overlaps—either balance both poles or emphasize one as dominant.

The chapter also seeks to determine how the varying strengths of the bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy poles influence the nature of the paradox and affect coping strategies. Specifically, it examines whether the strength attributed to these poles manifests similarly or differently across interrelated organizational domains, consequently shaping distinct coping strategies. To address these questions, I analyzed a national case of a public competition for hiring public managers organized by the National School of Administration, focusing on the intertwined domains of selection and training over a span of nearly 30 years (1995-2023). The dataset comprised over 3,200 pages of documentary materials, including job advertisements, pre-selective and written tests, training programs, guidelines, internal regulations, and annual reports from the National School of Administration.

Finally, the third chapter represents the most recent study, advancing our understanding of public administration by introducing a multi-polar view of administrative landscapes. This chapter posits that public administrations are multilayered entities characterized by multiple rationalities. Beyond a legal logic rooted in compliance with formal norms (reflecting bureaucratic structures) and a performance logic focused on efficient and effective service delivery (emerging from post-bureaucratic values), a third logic - democratic responsiveness - requires alignment with political mandates to ensure consensus. These three logics coexist, creating what I metaphorically refer to as a 'three-body problem,' akin to the challenge of predicting the motion of three celestial bodies interacting through gravity, which defies a general analytical solution due to its complex dynamics (Barrow-Green 1997). Managing these logics is often constrained to optimization strategies or failed innovations, leaving little room for deeper and radical change (Criado, Alcaide-Muñoz, and Liarte 2023).

This chapter posits that learning and innovation processes within public administration are influenced by these distinct yet interconnected logics, constituting a three-polar paradox. While these logics are interdependent, their simultaneous pursuit with equal intensity can generate tensions that impede progress. The chapter aims to uncover how public administrations can effectively navigate this 'three-body problem' to enhance organizational learning and innovation.

This chapter advances the complexity of paradox theory by adopting a 'trialectic' lens, thereby enhancing the understanding of paradoxes as composed of multiple simultaneous poles. No existing studies have addressed this theoretical framework, making this research both innovative and timely. To conduct this analysis, an ethnographic study over four years (2019-2023) on a project aimed at innovating hiring processes in public administration has been observed. Data collection involved extensive empirical materials gathered between 2020 and 2024, following ethnographic traditions (Moeran 2007) through participation in multiple meetings and events designed to develop and implement the project.

In the conclusion, I summarize the three primary findings and contributions of this dissertation and explore how they collectively enhance our understanding of paradoxes in public organizations. These reflections will pave the way for discussing potential avenues for further research that can extend the lines of inquiry initiated herein.

5. References

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Chapter I

Reimagining the Bureaucracy and Post-bureaucracy Debate: A Systematic Literature Review on Paradoxes in Public Administration

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Reimagining the Bureaucracy and Post-bureaucracy Debate: A Systematic Literature Review on Paradoxes in Public Administration

ABSTRACT

The relation between bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy sparks debate within public administration (PA), typically conceptualized as a 'simplistic' replacement of alternative paradigms. However, scholars argued for the coexistence of bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic features in PAs, which may foster paradoxical tensions. This article contributes to this debate adopting a paradox lens, and by employing the PRISMA methodology to systematize literature on PA-paradoxes, and their relation to bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy. The findings reveal the pervasiveness of PA paradoxes and their relation to bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy contraposition. Therefore, this paper enriches the traditional conceptualization of bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy with a more reconciliatory approach through paradoxical lens.

KEY WORDS
paradox; systematic review; competing demands; bureaucracy

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the transition from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic organizational forms has ignited intense debates in the management literature (Grey and Garsten 2001; Hensby, Sibthorpe, and Driver 2012). These discussions have been particularly significant within public administration (PA), which, for many decades, closely adhered to Weber's bureaucratic model (Weber 1958). Since the 1940s, scholars have started highlighting dysfunctions (Merton 1940) and vicious cycles (Crozier 1964) stemming from the actual operation of the ideal bureaucratic model (Hughes 2017; Weber 2002). This process has led to an enduring trajectory of reforms, which is still at the core of the current PA literature (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017).

These reform efforts have been informed by different administrative paradigms over the last several decades, i.e., a coherent and comprehensive set of norms and ideas about how to govern, organize and lead the PA (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014), as 'New Public Management' (NPM) (Hood 1991), 'Neo-Weberian State' (NWS) (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2009), 'Public Value Management' (PVM) (Moore 1997) and 'New Public Governance' (NPG) (Osborne 2006). Despite being characterized by a different mix of management/organizational solutions and values, all these paradigms sought to find a balance between bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic models (Torfing et al. 2020) and to overcome the main limits emerging from previous attempts (e.g., NPG and PVM are often described as attempts to address the weaknesses of NPM; O'Flynn [2007]).

Although the public debate on the trajectory of PA reform has been characterized by the assumption that bureaucracy could have been simply replaced with the introduction of new administrative models (Pollitt 2016), the literature has strongly argued and demonstrated that when a new paradigm of reform is adopted, it is unlikely that this would wholly and mechanically replace previous ideas and practices (Christensen and Lægreid 2022; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). In contrast, administrative paradigms tend to compete and coexist (Olsen 2006; Bel & Casula 2024), akin to 'layers in a cake', where the most recently added top layer is visible, but the older paradigms in the lower layers provide a solid foundation (Torfing et al. 2020). For instance, in discussing the NPG paradigm, Koppenjan (2012, 32) claims that this perspective is 'contradictory to, as well as an alternative for, the Weberian and NPM paradigms. On the other hand, it is built upon them. Network governance does not function independently of hierarchical and NPM-like arrangements'.

Consequently, contemporary PAs should be treated as multilayered entities incorporating aspects from both bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic paradigms (Hammerschmid et al. 2016; George et al. 2021). While some paradigms exhibit more post-bureaucratic features, others preserve or try to resonate with specific bureaucratic characteristics. For example, NPM emerged as a strong reaction against traditional bureaucracy (with its emphasis on decentralization and performance), while NWS aimed to modernize it by fostering professionalism, efficiency, and citizen friendliness (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). Conversely, PVM and NPG aim to reappraise and reinforce some original safeguards of the bureaucratic model (e.g., equity, fairness) while fostering stakeholders' engagement and networking governance arrangements (O'Flynn, 2007).

While the literature has widely shown that the coexistence of competing paradigms creates tensions and contradictions, only a few pioneering scholars have proposed hypotheses on the paradoxical nature of these tensions (Hood and Jackson 1991; Hood and Peters 2004; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). This article aims to contribute to this debate and advance our understanding of PAs as multilayered entities by adopting a theory-informed paradox lens.

The paradox lens is a theoretical approach that acknowledges that paradoxes– competing yet interdependent elements– are inherent in every organization (Lewis 2000). The paradoxical lens aims to explain how organizations can effectively and simultaneously address competing demands, thereby fostering long-term organizational sustainability (Smith and Lewis 2011).

Recognizing the multilayered nature of PAs - i.e., the competing coexistence and overlapping of bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic features resulting from different administrative reforms trajectories (Torfing et al. 2020), which engender tensions exhibiting a paradoxical nature (Hood and Peters 2004) - makes the adoption of a paradox approach particularly significant. Considering the relationship between bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy through a paradox perspective enables us to address this recurrent debate through a theoretical context that encourages the simultaneous management and integration of both bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic paradigms into PA operations and management. Notably, adopting such an approach could be beneficial for PA scholarship and practice for recognizing the interrelatedness of the tensions emerging in different PA areas, as it highlights their relations with the overarching bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy paradox.

Despite the potential of this perspective, the literature investigating paradoxes in the PA context is fragmented and typically focused on single paradoxes emerging in specific arenas, such as government transparency (Qi and Ran 2023) and collaborative governance (Adeoye and Ran 2023). Thus, we aim to first investigate the paradoxes that the extant literature has explored in PA settings and their characteristics and then to explore how those paradoxes are related to the bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy debate. To achieve this goal, we will conduct a systematic literature review closely adhering to the 'Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses' (PRISMA) approach (Shamseer et al. 2015).

This review contributes to literature in different ways. First, while reviews on paradoxes in the PA context have been carried out on specific aspects, to the best of our knowledge, no study has comprehensively systematized paradoxes in PAs. In this way, we aim to further enrich the paradoxical analysis of PAs, a context inherently rife with paradoxical tensions in their operation and management (Fossestøl et al. 2015).

Second, our analysis goes beyond the mere identification of paradoxes in the literature by discerning how these relate to distinctive features of either bureaucracy or post-bureaucracy. The coexistence of both paradigms enables us to claim the existence of an overarching bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy paradox shaping PA operations and management. Therefore, the second contribution of this article is to highlight that the bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy debate is not just a transition (what we will describe as a 'dilemma' in the theoretical background) but a complex interplay of distinctive features that display paradoxical nature, thus offering new and enriching perspectives in managing the tensions spurring from it.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. The paradox perspective

As previously introduced, the paradox perspective offers a compelling approach to addressing long-term organizational sustainability by concurrently tackling multiple, divergent elements, such as competing goals or environmental demands, which create persistent tensions and contradictions within and across organizations.

The paradox perspective is frequently depicted as a meta-theory, offering an overarching theoretical framework that enables the application of a set of key-constructs and principles across phenomena, contexts, and theories (Schad et al., 2016). Acknowledging the multiple conceptualizations of paradoxes (Putnam, Fairhurst, and Banghart 2016), we deliberately refrain from adhering to any specific theoretical approach and, instead, embrace the inherent plurality within the concept. Consequently, our adoption of a broad and holistic perspective on paradox allows for inclusivity across various theoretical approaches (Qi and Ran 2023; Adeoye and Ran 2023). This section specifically focuses on key-elements commonly shared across different conceptualizations (Schad et al. 2016).

The paradox perspective views multiple competing demands as paradoxes, consisting of two or more contradictory and interrelated poles (Poole and Van de Ven 1989), creating enduring and incompatible tensions within organizations. Paradoxes can be defined as 'contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time: elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when juxtaposed' (Lewis 2000).

The literature employs various terms to characterize the nature of tensions, e.g., dilemma, duality, contradiction, or dialectics. For our paper, it is important to clearly define the concept of dilemma, as conceptualizing tensions as dilemmas rather than paradoxes entails different coping strategies. A dilemma is 'a tension such that each competing alternative poses clear advantages and disadvantages' (Smith and Lewis 2011), forcing a choice between two mutually exclusive options (Lewis 2000). Conversely, the importance of framing tensions as paradoxes lies in the enduring coexistence of opposites. This perspective recognizes that choosing between opposing yet interconnected elements is impossible because selecting one option intensifies the need for its opposite (Putnam, Fairhurst, and Banghart 2016). Hence, while paradoxes allow for a combination of both opposites through a 'both-and' approach, embracing contradictory elements, the concept of dilemmas denotes an 'either-or' relation between alternatives (Qi and Ran 2023).

The symbol that best represents paradoxes is the Taoist Yin-and-Yang because elements appear distinct and opposite but define each other within a net of reciprocal mutuality (Schad et al. 2016). This symbol signifies (i) oppositional yet synergistic and interrelated elements, (ii) boundaries highlighting their distinctions while integrating them into the overall system, fostering potential synergies, and (iii) an external boundary that juxtaposes opposing elements, amplifying their paradoxical nature, and ensuring their persistence over time. Paradoxical tensions exemplify this interplay between opposition and synergy (Quinn and Cameron 1988). For instance, change and stability are opposing concepts, yet their coexistence is necessary, representing the struggle between the comfort of the familiar and the uncertainty of the future (Lewis 2000).

Paradoxical tensions are inherent in the organizing process and can be latent and salient (Figure 1): they exist as unnoticed and unperceived tensions (latent tensions) in organizations until certain factors, such as environmental conditions (plurality, change, and scarcity) or cognitive effort, accentuate their contradictory nature, leading to increased perception among organizational actors. Once latent tensions become salient, they elicit responses that, depending on the coping strategies employed by actors, can result in vicious or virtuous cycles. Vicious cycles occur when organizations adopt an 'either-or' approach, focusing solely on one pole of the paradox while attempting to eliminate the others. However, suppressing one pole intensifies the need for suppressed elements, exacerbating tensions in the long run and resulting in organizational inertia (Smith et al. 2017). For instance, Sundaramurthy and Lewis (2003) demonstrated how an excessive emphasis on control over collaboration led to short-term success but fostered opportunistic behaviours, including defensiveness, distrust, and detrimental performances. In contrast, virtuous cycles occur when organizations are aware of and acknowledge all the poles of paradoxes. This approach, grounded in a 'both-and' perspective, urges actors to embrace paradoxes as enduring puzzles, enhancing long-term sustainability and fostering radical and incremental innovation. As demonstrated by Lüscher and Lewis (2008), helping actors' acceptance of paradoxical tensions facilitates sensemaking and opens possibilities that encompass both perspectives. This enables them to find 'workable certainty,' a strategy for moving forwards rather than becoming immobilized by the presence of paradoxical tensions.

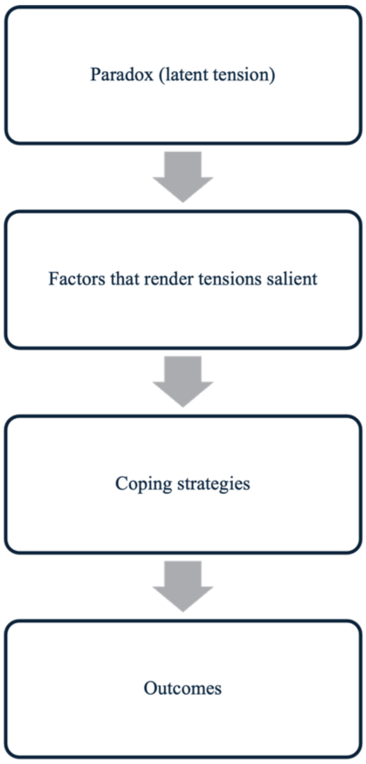

Figure 1. Dynamic representation of the key-elements of paradox perspective

2.2. Bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy in PAs: towards a paradoxical framework?

The paradox perspective provides an analytical framework for effectively addressing multiple and polarized demands in PAs. While all organizations grapple with competing and heterogeneous interests (Smith and Lewis 2011), this challenge is the institutional mission of the PA (Pandey 2010). PAs are tasked with pursuing heterogeneous goals, often contradictory and conflicting (Yang 2020), such as upholding high ideals such as the 'defence of the common good,' while providing public services within normative and operational constraints. Moreover, PAs interact with many stakeholders, each with partially diverging expectations (Aleksovska, Schillemans, and Grimmelikhuijsen 2022).

PAs have historically navigated these challenges through bureaucratic forms of organizing (Hughes 2017), which emphasize standardization, strict rule enforcement, and specialized technical knowledge among their members (Weber 1958). According to Weber, when fully realized, his ideal-type bureaucracy would be the most efficient form of organization for complex entities such as PAs (Monteiro and Adler 2022), relying on precision, goal attainment, and impartiality. The traditional PA model also involved formal control by political leaders as well as hierarchical and centralized organizational structures. The public workforce consisted of permanent and apolitical officials who theoretically served any governing political party equally and were involved only in administering and delivering the policies, focusing on 'doing the thing right' (Norman and Gregory 2003, 44).

However, beginning in the 1940s, scholars highlighted the emergence of different dysfunctions (Bozeman 2000; Merton 1940) and vicious cycles (Crozier 1964) stemming from the concrete application of the bureaucratic model.

In response to these criticisms, scholars and policymakers began rethinking how PAs should be organized and managed to address the inefficiency and rigidity associated with their bureaucratic nature (Hughes 2017). The growing critique of public bureaucracy has given rise to other administrative paradigms, i.e., coherent and comprehensive norms and ideas about how to govern and organize PAs. For instance, NPM emerged as a catalyst for administrative reforms advocating for marketization, a management-by-results and decentralization. However, NPM-informed reforms often led to detrimental consequences, leading to organizational fragmentation and undermining core values such as fairness and equity. In response to the shortcomings of NPM, alternative paradigms such as the NWS, PVM and NPG have gained prominence (Torfing et al. 2020). The NWS emerged as a 'bureaucratic corrective' to NPM, aiming to uphold classical Weberian values while enhancing PA efficiency (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2009); the PVM shares some similarities with the NWS but places greater emphasis on stakeholders involved in public governance (Torfing et al. 2020, 14–15). Moreover, NPG advocates for governance grounded in network partnerships and horizontal forms of governance, departing from traditional top-down government structures, and fostering collaboration over competition (Osborne 2006).

All these paradigms seek to overcome the bureaucratic model of PA towards a post-bureaucratic form (Torfing et al. 2020), enhancing its effectiveness, efficiency, and capacity to address stakeholders and societal needs. These paradigms, each with its specific mix of mechanisms and values, embody several post-bureaucratic elements, including a focus on deregulation and decentralization of authority and a reduction in management layers, which clearly diverge from the characteristics associated with bureaucracy (Figure 2). Similarly, reforms inspired by post-bureaucratic paradigms underscore the importance of outcomes achievement quality improvement and flexibility (Hood 1991) as opposed to the bureaucratic emphasis on procedural compliance (Du Gay 2000). This often involved the removal of those rules ('cutting the red tape' [Bozeman, 2000]) that hampered PAs from effectively fulfilling their role.

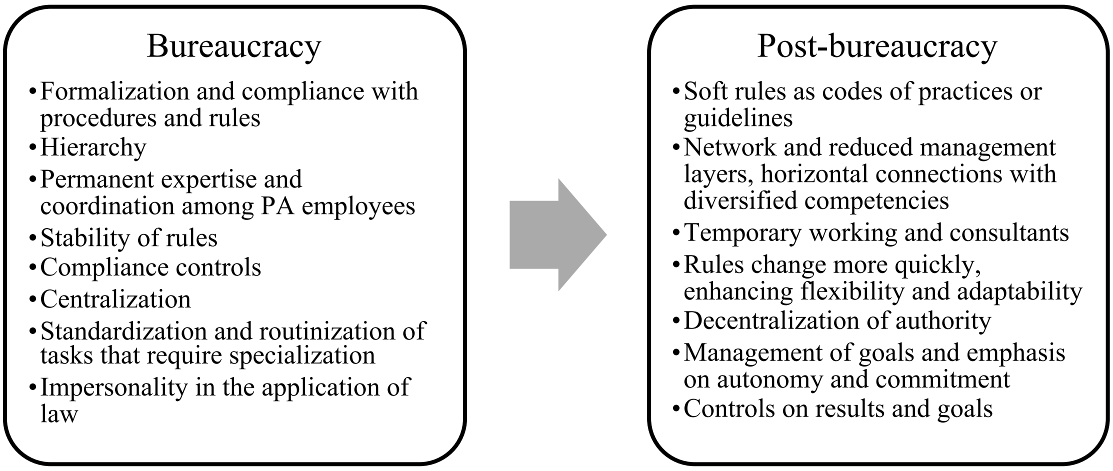

Figure 2. Bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy key-features

Each administrative paradigm entered the public discourse with the goal of influencing the structuring and operation of PA, to replace the previous paradigm. Therefore, the transition from bureaucracy to more post-bureaucratic forms is often approached as a dilemma, aiming for a replacement of the traditional bureaucratic paradigm with specific post-bureaucratic values and instruments. However, this replacement often results in unintended and negative consequences (Diefenbach 2009). For instance, the NPM's emphasis on performance measurement and planning frequently led to the proliferation of performance plans and indicators, resulting in increased bureaucracy rather than its reduction (Hood 1991).

Certain scholars have begun to question the 'sequential' and simplistic transition from traditional bureaucracy to post-bureaucratic models. Indeed, the introduction of new administrative paradigms through PA reforms does not mean that existing paradigms are simply replaced with new ones (Christensen and Lægreid 2022). The post-bureaucratic paradigms compete and coexist with old embedded bureaucratic paradigms, that continue to influence daily operations (Hyndman et al. 2014; Goldfinch & Halligan 2024), accumulating upon each other and resulting in a layering mechanism (Koppenjan 2012). For example, Hyndman et al. (2014)

empirically illustrate that bureaucracy (traditional PA model), NPM and NPG discourses coexist over time rather than supplanting one another in the implementation of accounting and budgeting reforms. In this regard, George et al. (2021) argue that contemporary PAs should be viewed as multilayered entities incorporating elements from both models.

The coexistence of competing paradigms creates tensions (Torfing et al. 2020) that exhibit a paradoxical nature. For instance, Hood and Peters (2004) identified paradoxes that emerged from the application of NPM to traditional bureaucratic PAs, such as the 'production paradox'. Introducing performance measurement systems was initially intended to enhance freedom and autonomy but paradoxically led to increased coordination, control, and formalization (Torsteinsen 2012) due to the unique characteristics of PAs (e.g., low measurability and unclear cause–effect relationships).

The concept of paradox is not novel in the PA literature, as some notable scholarly works have previously linked PAs to paradoxical phenomena (Vigoda-Gadot and Mizrahi 2014; Moynihan 2011). For example, Simon (1946) observed that PA principles resembled proverbs presented in conflicting pairs. Building on these insights, Hood & Jackson (1991) focused on administrative arguments often coming in matching pairs with advantages and disadvantages. More recently, Pollitt & Bouckaert (2004; 2017) scrutinized contradictions within PAs, aiming to unravel their nature (e.g., trade-offs, dilemmas, or paradoxes).

This article aims to advance this discourse by delving deeper into the analysis of paradoxes, adopting a theory-informed view. Through a comprehensive review of theoretically-driven literature, we refine the understanding of paradoxes, elucidating their nature and management in PAs.

PAs emerge as fertile ground for paradox lens application as they inherently grapple with competing demands and goals that cannot all be simultaneously met without trade-offs (Fossestøl et al. 2015; Backhaus et al. 2022), and they have limited scope for goal setting and the imperative of maintaining impartiality to confront complex and contradictory problems, which demand flexible and innovative solutions (Chow 1992; Franken, Plimmer, and Malinen 2020).

To the best of our knowledge, no comprehensive systematic review has been conducted on the paradoxes inherent in PAs, and there is a gap in the literature addressing the bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy debate using paradox perspective. Therefore, building on these gaps, our goal is to address the following complementary and interrelated research questions:

RQ1: What paradoxes have been studied in PA settings in literature theoretically based on the paradox approach?

RQ2: What are the key-features (factors rendering paradoxical tensions salient, coping strategies, outcomes achieved) of those paradoxes?

RQ3: How can the current literature exploring PA paradoxes help to reimagine the debate on bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy in PAs?

3. SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW METHODOLOGY: THE PRISMA APPROACH

To answer the three research questions, we conducted a systematic review of the literature examining paradoxes in the PA context following the PRISMA method to ensure a rigorous, transparent and replicable approach (the checklist is available in Appendix C) (Shamseer et al. 2015).

We first established the research protocol and the search term keywords; then, in January 2024, we implemented two main search strategies to identify relevant articles (Figure 3).

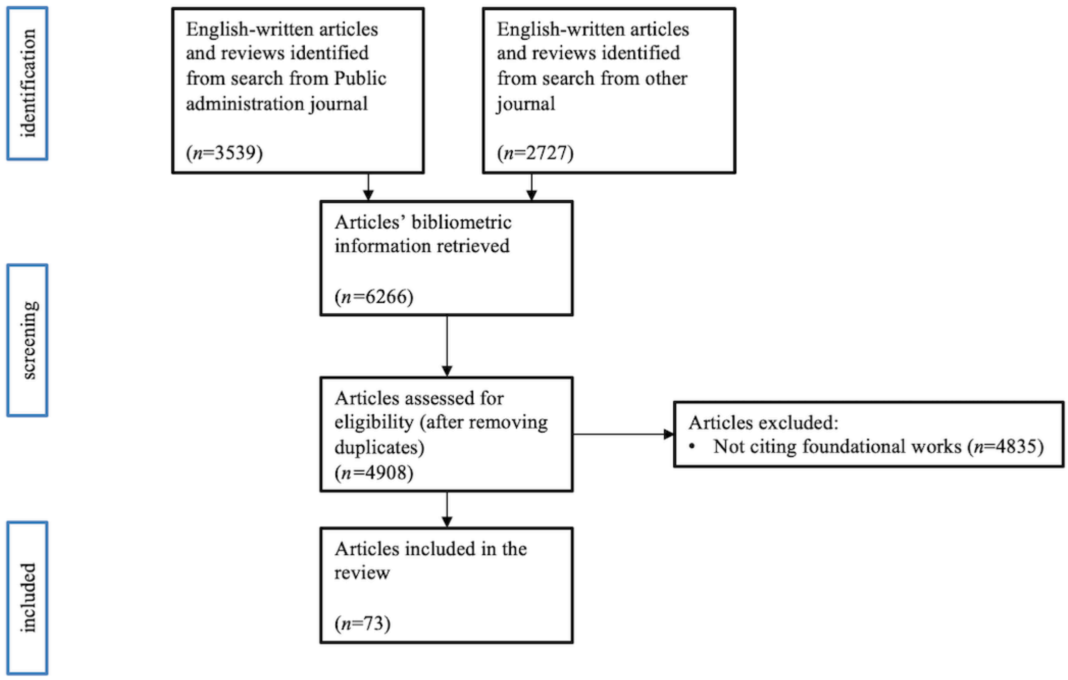

Figure 3. Search strategy flowchart

The first search strategy involved searching for the keywords 'paradox' and the most frequently used similar terms, such as 'dilemma,' 'duality,' 'dialectic,' 'ambidexterity', 'tensions' and 'contradictions' in the title, keywords and/or abstract. We incorporated the common synonyms for paradoxes, as Putnam et al. (2016) suggested, to encompass a broad range of articles. The keyword search was conducted in the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases. Our inclusion criterion included searching only English-language articles and reviews while excluding books, book chapters and other grey literature (e.g., working papers, conference proceedings, etc.) (Cooper, Hedges, and Valentine 2009). We decided to focus on articles that underwent a peer-review process and excluded grey literature due to challenges in assessing relevance caused by the lack of abstracts, requiring a comprehensive review of the entire document (Adams, Smart, and Huff 2017).

Furthermore, another inclusion criterion was to search for articles and reviews published in 39 PA journals (Appendix A), included in the Academic Journal Guide of the Chartered

Association of Business Schools. We excluded 16 journals focusing on policy subfields, such as health and education. As a result, our initial search yielded 3539 articles.

The second search strategy involved identifying articles that included the terms ‘paradox’ (or its synonyms) along with ‘public administration’, ‘public organization,’ and ‘public sector.’ We conducted title, abstract, and keyword searches across publications from all fields of study utilizing phrase and Boolean searches in WoS and Scopus. After eliminating duplicate articles, this second search yielded a total of 2727 publications.

After combining the results from both search strategies, we identified 6266 articles. Following duplicate removal, 4908 articles remained for further examination, for which we retrieved key bibliometric information (journal, article title, publication year, keywords, abstract, and reference list).

The two strategies allowed us to retrieve many articles that indirectly or incidentally address paradoxes in PAs rather than having paradoxes as their primary focus. For example, many of these articles mention the word ‘paradox’ in the abstract but do not extensively discuss the concept. These articles are not useful for addressing our research questions and were consequently not included.

Therefore, we introduced an additional eligibility criterion to ensure comparability among the selected papers regarding their key assumptions. Despite their varied conceptualizations of paradoxes, we sought articles that shared certain common analytical elements. Drawing from the approach outlined by Schad et al. (2016), we identified several ‘key-publications’ (listed in Figure 4). These foundational paradox texts in management studies have been carefully selected for their seminal contributions to advancing and extending the paradox perspective making it appealing for a broad audience. Indeed, these texts offer core elements for understanding and analysing paradoxes, providing a theoretical framing of the definition of ‘paradox’, factors rendering tensions salient, and the notion of coping strategies.

Author/s	Title	Year	Source
Smith & Berg	*Paradoxes of group life: Understanding conflict, paralysis, and movement in group dynamics*	1987	[book]
Quinn & Cameron	*Paradox and transformation: Toward a theory of change in organization and management*	1988	[book]
Poole & Van de Ven	Using Paradox to Build Management and Organization Theories	1989	*Academy of Management Review*
Lewis	Exploring paradox: Toward a more comprehensive guide	2000	//
Smith & Lewis	Toward a Theory of Paradox: A Dynamic equilibrium Model of Organizing	2011	//
Putnam, Fairhurst, Banghart	Contradictions, Dialectics, and Paradoxes in Organizations: A Constitutive Approach	2016	*Academy of Management Annals*
Schad, Lewis, Raisch, Smith	Paradox Research in Management Science: Looking Back to Move Forward	2016	//
Smith, Jarzabkowski, Lewis, & Langley.	*The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Paradox*	2017	[book]
Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, Lewis	Microfoundations of Organizational Paradox: The Problem Is How We Think about the Problem	2018	*Academy of Management Journal*

Figure 4. Key-publications on paradox perspective

Since various conceptualizations of paradoxes in empirical research share these core elements, using the inclusion criterion of key-publications enables a broad yet theoretically-focused search. To ensure that we included studies consistently applying a paradox lens, we conducted an automated analysis of the references cited in the 4908 selected papers. We verified that these papers referred to at least one of the identified 'key-publications', thereby ensuring *'that we drew from studies that consistently applied a paradox lens by building on each other'* (Schad et al. 2016, 17).

Following this process, we identified 73 articles (the complete list is provided in Appendix E) that met the inclusion criteria and obtained full-text copies for further analysis. However, although the PRISMA approach ensures the accuracy, transparency, and replicability of the findings (Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart 2003), a potential drawback of this approach is the possibility of missing relevant articles depending on how the article is structured. For instance, we may overlook articles that discuss the paradox perspective within the body of the text but do not explicitly utilize the specific concept in search fields (e.g., title, abstract, keywords).

To further analyse the 73 identified articles, we implemented a qualitative content analysis. The coding process (Appendix D) involved identifying the key-elements of the paradoxical lens (Figure 1) of each article, namely, the paradox poles, the factors rendering tensions salient, the coping strategies employed and their outcomes.

We adopted an inductive approach for identifying paradox poles and an abductive approach for identifying the factors rendering tensions salient, the coping strategies and outcomes. We employed an abductive approach to address the third research question. In this regard, the paradox poles were interpreted separately considering the characteristics of both bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy (Figure 2), aiming to identify convergences or differences. Throughout the coding process, we moved between the empirical data and existing categorizations of these concepts (Putnam et al. 2016; Schad et al. 2016; Smith & Lewis 2011).

4. FINDINGS

In this section, we present our findings, mirroring the sequence of the aforementioned research questions.

4.1. What paradoxes have been studied in PA settings in literature theoretically based on the paradox approach?

This section introduces the identified paradox poles, specifying the levels at which they occurred and were analysed. In this regard, we identified six levels, namely, the individual, team, leadership, organization, PA system, and PA ecosystem (columns of Table 1). The individual, team, and leadership levels pertain to intraorganizational dynamics, while the PA system and ecosystem levels encompass interorganizational spaces. The PA system level refers to the network of public organizations operating at various governmental levels, presenting inherent complexity and associated challenges (Pandey 2010). In contrast, the PA ecosystem level denotes the relationships and work arrangements among the PA, profit and nonprofit partners, as well as users and citizens (Vangen 2017). It is important to recognize that the same paradox can be investigated at multiple levels (Lüscher and Lewis 2008).

As a result of the coding process, we identified seven main paradoxes (rows of Table 1), which pertain to different topics of PA management, organization and operations (cells of Table 1). The paradox of *coordination vs. competition* was retrieved across multiple levels. This means that individuals (Majgaard 2015), organizational units (Parikh and Bhatnagar 2018), and ecosystem partners (Bate and Robert 2006) struggle to balance working towards larger collaborative goals while safeguarding their respective interests (e.g., competing for promotions and exhibiting individualistic behaviour) (Sedgwick 2016).

The team composition is influenced by the paradox of *homogenization vs. diversity*, which highlights the necessity of having diverse skills and backgrounds to foster innovative solutions, despite acknowledging that more homogeneous teams are easier to manage and coordinate (Amyar et al. 2019).

Another recurring paradox is the *control vs. commitment* paradox, which pertains to vertical coordination among leaders and followers (Kelman and Hong 2016), organizations and employees (Bennani, Hassine, and Mazouz 2022), and PA partners (Saz-Carranza and Ospina 2011). This paradox underscores the tension between imposing rigid control to establish boundaries and preserving inclusive decision-making and operational autonomy to accommodate organizational needs and enhance collaborative performance (Hermanson et al. 2020).

At the organizational level, the paradoxes called *stability and standardization vs. flexibility and adaptation* illustrate the challenge of balancing investment in innovation while preserving traditional and path-dependent routines/processes (Bate and Robert 2006).

Two paradoxes refer specifically to the PA system level, focusing on the degree of specialization in tasks and decisions within PA organizations, vertically (*centralization vs. decentralization*) and horizontally (*specialization vs. versatility*). First, the *centralization vs. decentralization* paradox captures the tensions arising from the interaction between central (national) and top-down decisions versus local, bottom-up needs and specificities (Yang 2020). Second, the *specialization vs. versatility* paradox reflects the trade-off between being highly specialized within the functional and institutional context, such as emphasizing the increased productivity of large-scale organizations, versus promoting the diversification of identity, which encompasses the subjective 'lived experience' and the diversity of human social experience (Jun and Rivera 1997).

Another key paradox, *accountability for compliance vs. accountability for results*, addresses the distinct characteristics of PA operations, encompassing governance arrangements, styles, and individual contributions/identities. This paradox manifests at the individual, organizational, and ecosystem levels. At the individual level, it delves into actors' professional identities and the nature of their contributions. While individuals are expected to adhere strictly to established procedures, rules, and institutional targets to '*do things right*' and act fairly, they are also concurrently called to ensure social outcomes of public services, such as meeting client needs and pursuing the common good by '*doing the right thing*' (Arshed et al. 2021). For instance, Talbot (2011) highlights the tensions between procedural interests, which emphasize administrative procedures that respect equity, fairness, and due processes, and public interests, which provide legitimacy for activities serving the common good. Regarding the nature of their contributions, actors within the organization desire to be proactive and possess organizational capacity; however, they must also be accountable and act on behalf of their organizations, which are often constrained by traditional postulates and procedures, limiting voluntary initiatives (Bennani, Hassine and Mazouz, 2021).

At the organizational level, the *accountability for compliance vs. accountability for results* paradox pertains to the pursuit of organizational objectives and underlying governance. Concerning organizational objectives, the paradox highlights the need for PAs to adhere strictly to rules while simultaneously achieving the expected goals (Brorström 2015). In terms of organizational governance, public actions must demonstrate effectiveness in proving their value for money; however, measuring and reporting these actions can be challenging (e.g., reporting timelines may be too soon to capture all effects, and effects may evolve over time) (Brorström, 2015).

Finally, at the PA ecosystem level, Brorström (2015) emphasizes how PAs strive to balance competing interests. For example, terminating certain bus services that serve only a few travellers may be financially justifiable (*accountability for compliance*), while maintaining them may lead to improved living conditions and create better urban spaces for users (*accountability for results*).

In conclusion, approximately half of the studies examined paradoxes at the organizational level (43%), while only a minority explored paradoxical tensions at other levels. A considerable number of articles investigated paradoxes arising at PA-specific levels, such as the PA system (11%), and slightly more studies focused on the ecosystem level (21%). Additionally, the most widely studied paradoxes were *accountability for compliance vs. accountability for results* (35%), *stability and standardization vs. flexibility and adaptation* (21%) and *control vs. commitment* (17%).

Table 1. Paradox poles identified according to the level where occur

	Individual	Team	Leadership	Organization	PA system	PA ecosystem	Total
COORDINATION VS. COMPETITION	*Horizontal collaboration among individuals (3, 2%)*			*Horizontal collaboration among organizational units (5, 4%)*		*Horizontal collaboration among partners of the ecosystem (7, 5%)*	15, 11%
HOMOGENEIZATION VS. DIVERSITY		*Team composition (6, 4%)*					6, 4%
CONTROL VS. COMMITMENT			*Leader-follower vertical coordination (9, 7%)*	*Organization-employees vertical coordination (11, 8%)*		*PA-partners vertical coordination (4, 3%)*	24, 17%
STABILITY AND STANDARDIZATION VS. FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTATION				*Organizational change and stability (22, 16%)*		*Ecosystem change and stability (7, 5%)*	29, 21%
SPECIALIZATION VS. VERSATILITY					*Level of specialization (horizontal) (7, 5%)*		7, 5%
CENTRALIZATION VS. DECENTRALIZATION					*Level of specialization (vertical) (8, 6%)*		8, 6%
ACCOUNTABILITY FOR COMPLIANCE VS. ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RESULTS	*Nature of contributions and professional identity (16, 12%)*			*Organizational objectives and governance (21, 15%)*		*PA ecosystem governance (11, 8%)*	48, 35%
Total	19, 14%	6, 4%	9, 7%	59, 43%	15, 11%	29, 21%	

4.2. What are the key-features of those paradoxes?

This section describes the key-features of the previously identified paradoxes, including the factors rendering tensions salient (Table 2), the coping strategies and their outcomes (Table 3).

Starting with the factors rendering tensions salient, we categorized them into three main groups, *plurality* (31%), *change* (50%), and *scarcity* (19%), by referring to Smith & Lewis (2011) and then contextualizing them into the PA context.

Plurality encompasses various aspects, including the multiplication of differentiated and potentially conflicting demands (Pandey, 2010); the simultaneous response to multiple complex social problems (Jun and Rivera, 1997); and the presence of different yet equally important goals, practices, and values from multiple layers and stakeholders (Lee 2022). Xiao (2018) also highlighted the coexistence of different organizational forms within the same PA and the collaboration and partnership among multiple PA and non-PA actors, further intensifying tensions (Vangen 2017).

The *change* factor includes new opportunities or threats arising from within and outside PAs. Internally, the implementation of new reforms (Kuitert, Volker, and Grandia 2023) or pioneering practices, such as the adoption of innovative management tools and training programs (van der Kolk, van Veen-Dirks, and ter Bogt 2020) or the integration of novel technologies (Qiu and Chreim 2022), can trigger paradoxical tensions. Externally, environmental turbulence (Hermanson et al. 2020), with the emergence of challenges such as pandemics (Yang 2020), financial crises (Murphy et al. 2017), or the management of migration flows (Schmidt 2019), plays a critical role.

Finally, *scarcity* represents subfactors such as different types of resource limitations (temporal, financial, human) (Hermanson et al. 2020). For instance, public budget reductions (Caidor 2023), the implementation of austerity policies (Majgaard 2015), and inadequate strategic planning management (Kuoppakangas et al. 2020) all contribute to the challenges related to scarcity.

Table 2. Factors rendering paradoxical tensions salient

Type of factors	Factors	Description	n, %	n, %
Environmental factors	Plurality	Differentiated and potentially conflicting demands to PA	4, 5%	24, 31%
		Differentiated and potentially conflicting objectives for PA	3, 4%	
		Differentiated and potentially conflicting PA organizational units	1, 1%	
		Differentiated and potentially conflicting (PA and non-PA) actors in delivering public services	16, 21%	
	Change	From within PA	30, 38%	39, 50%
		From outside PA	9, 12%	
	Scarcity	Economic resources	7, 9%	15, 19%
		Internal managerial resources	6, 8%	
		Political/strategic resources	2, 3%	

Concerning the coping strategies for managing paradoxical tensions, these have been abductively classified into three categories, following Putnam et al. (2016): *either-or*, *both-and*, *more-than* (Table 3). These strategies can yield either positive or negative outcomes, as illustrated below.

The least commonly employed coping strategy described in the literature is the '*either-or*' approach (27%). This approach involves preserving only one pole of the paradox by either (i) denying the existence of paradoxes, (ii) selecting among competing interests and emphasizing differences instead of accommodating them (Schmidt 2019), or (iii) confining the poles to separate contexts. For instance, Amyar et al. (2019) demonstrated that team leaders may ignore the existence of paradoxes, downplay their responsibilities, and simultaneously provide discretionary space for team members to downscale processes by avoiding legitimate tasks. Similarly, Kuitert, Volker, and Grandia (2023) illustrate how the initiatives to shape the integration of new NPG-related themes have been separated into higher levels of governance, selecting a top-down approach over the bottom-up approach. This resulted in misalignment and maintenance of the hierarchical mode of governance, ultimately limiting the implementation of NPG values. Robbins et al. (2021) illustrate how actors can separate the poles and allocate tasks across different times and places, such as restricting access to information based on employees' job profiles or creating working groups based on the division of labour. The literature suggests that these strategies lead to *negative outcomes*, including negative attitudes from PA employees (8%) and reduced organizational effectiveness (12%). If paradoxes are not effectively addressed, they contribute to a hostile environment that induces anxiety, threats, and defensive behaviour among PA employees, potentially leading to burnout or a decline in their commitment (Chow, 1992). Dysfunctional coping strategies, such as a hospital's failure to translate efficiency gains into improved patient outcomes, can exacerbate the contradictory nature of organizational objectives (e.g., striving for lower costs while maintaining high quality). This further reinforces organizational paradoxes and reveals underlying problems stemming from inadequate planning (Amyar et al. 2019).

In contrast, *both-and* and *more-than* strategies can lead to positive outcomes, such as fostering creativity, innovation, and learning practices, thereby enhancing organizational effectiveness, and generating positive attitudes.

Both-and strategies were identified in 31% of the articles. These strategies aim to embrace and accommodate the opposing demands arising from paradoxes and can be characterized as either (i) recognizing the paradox poles and embracing their inherent contradictions or (ii) seeking compromises between the poles. The former involves actions such as updating skills to become more flexible and creative or encouraging followers to accept paradoxes as an inevitable part of the organizational context, demonstrating how to manage them effectively. Paradoxical leadership (Backhaus et al. 2022), i.e., refers to the ability to balance competing structural and relational demands over time through creative practices and solutions, enabling agile and adaptive decision-making (Franken, Plimmer, and Malinen 2020). This, in turn, leads to positive employee attitudes, including job satisfaction and work engagement. The latter approach focuses on negotiating a compromise by selectively combining the best aspects of each pole, employing a 'pick-and-mix' approach (Bate and Robert 2006). For example, Ospina and Saz-Carranza (2010) identified collaborative practices employed by leaders to address paradoxes, such as facilitating interaction through activities such as identifying and proposing common work issues or establishing the necessary structure and processes for effective collaboration.

These approaches contribute to increased organizational effectiveness by improving performance and fostering an environment where individuals are willing to accept pressure.

Finally, the most examined strategies in current PA literature are the *more-than* (42%). These strategies aim to synthesize contradictions at higher levels of abstraction, situating them within new relationships. The more-than approaches encompass three subcategories: (i) reframing the contradictions between paradoxical poles as opportunities for learning, (ii) fostering dialogue by establishing spaces where the poles dynamically interact, and (iii) reflecting on current practices. The first subcategory occurs, e.g., when individuals actively reframe the paradoxes, participating in creating a new understanding of the contradictions and contributing to organizational ambidexterity (Parikh and Bhatnagar 2018). Leaders who develop a collective comprehension of organizational public values and goals can better engage with other employees, pursue collective outcomes, and enhance organizational effectiveness (Zeier, Plimmer, and Franken 2021).

Regarding the second subcategory, Hernandez (2018) illustrates the importance of communicative practices, e.g., open discussions about the problem and continual feedback. These practices facilitate the dissemination of new management arrangements, fostering '*a cumulative learning process, through which the organization gradually integrates the contrary dimensions of the paradox*' (Hernandez 2018, 553). Members can enhance organizational effectiveness by adopting a paradoxical governance approach characterized by increased collaboration and participation.

Third, according to Vangen (2017), adopting transparent reflective and reflexive practices aids practitioners in accepting the strengths and weaknesses of contradictory yet equally valid solutions for governing collaborations. This coping strategy entails cultivating a paradoxical mindset, perceiving tensions as paradoxes rather than mere either-or dilemmas. By doing so, individuals gain a deeper understanding of the opposing elements and actively seek more integrative solutions (Miron-Spektor et al. 2018). Embracing a paradoxical mindset yields a positive outcome through a cascading learning effect. Managers who navigate tensions with this mindset also help employees acknowledge the constructive potential of tensions in their work, enhancing organizational effectiveness. Consequently, practitioners' doubts and anxieties are alleviated by emphasizing that there is not just one optimal solution (Vangen, 2017).

Table 3. Coping strategies and their outcomes

Categories of coping strategies		**n, %**	**n, %**	**Negative outcomes**			**Positive outcomes**				
				Negative attitudes from PA employees	Reduced effectiveness	**n, %**	Innovation	Increased effectiveness	Learning	Positive attitudes from PA employees	**n, %**
either-or	Denying: one pole exists	6, 8%	19, 27%	2, 8%	3, 12%	5, 20%					
	Selecting: choosing one pole	6, 8%									
	Splitting: confining poles in separate settings	7, 10%									
both-and	Recognizing: ability to recognize poles and live with their contradictions	6, 8%	22, 31%				1, 4%	5, 20%	3, 12%	3, 10%	12, 48%
	Compromising: developing a middle ground between poles	16, 23%									
more-than	Reframing: reformulating contradictions between poles as learning opportunities	8, 11%	30, 42%					5, 20%	1, 5%	2, 8%	8, 32%
	Dialoguing: third spaces where poles dynamically interplay	11, 15%									
	Reflecting on current practices: contradictions between poles as opportunity for new ones	11, 15%									

4.3. How can the current literature exploring PA paradoxes help to reimagine the debate on bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy in PAs?

As previously described, policymakers primarily view the shift of PAs towards post-bureaucracy as a sequential and mechanic movement. However, several studies have suggested that the transition did not occur straightforwardly. Instead, the key-features of both models coexist and complement each other within PA organizations and operations (Torfing et al. 2020; Olsen 2006). In this section, we will show how the paradox poles (reported in Table 1 and highlighted in *italics* here) identified in the literature by answering the first research question reflect distinct key-features of either bureaucracy or post-bureaucracy.

Certain paradox poles reflect specific features of the bureaucracy model. Various papers emphasize that PAs are typically governed in a centralized and hierarchical manner (*centralization*), imposing top-down and formalized rules (Kuitert, Volker, and Grandia 2023). At both the organizational and individual levels, it often becomes apparent that public servants' agency is restricted by formal procedures and rules. This leads to detailed and regulated reporting of their tasks (*accountability for compliance*) (Hernandez 2018), significantly limiting individuals' autonomy (Bennani, Hassine and Mazouz, 2021). Furthermore, to ensure adherence to rules and institutional goals, scholars have highlighted how PA employees (and internal units) are still subject to 'bureaucracy-based' controls (*control*) (Lee 2018; Xiao 2018). Given this context, employees have limited opportunities to foster innovation (Qiu & Chreim, 2021), as they must adhere to established procedures and routines (*stability and standardization*) to gain legitimacy within the political hierarchy (Bjerge and Bjerregaard 2017). Finally, PA employees are expected to possess specialized expertise (*specialization*) to ensure continuity in decision-making (Jun and Rivera, 1997). This implies that working teams often exhibit uniform and congruent competencies (*homogenization*) to foster shared understanding within the team (Vangen and Winchester 2014) and to achieve collaborative goals (*coordination*) (Parikh and Bhatnagar, 2018).

In contrast, the opposing poles identify distinct elements of the post-bureaucratic paradigm. For instance, Van der Kolk et al. (2020) show how implementing management-by-objectives prioritizes the quantitative measurement and reporting of goal achievement (*accountability for results*) rather than focusing on how they are attained. An emphasis on performance is also expected to foster *commitment* among members of the organization, as they are granted operational autonomy and the freedom to choose how to accomplish the goals set by the organization (Lee, 2018). As highlighted by Hernandez (2018) and Vangen and Winchester (2014), PA actors can be proactive, acting on behalf of the organization while preserving their autonomy and reporting the results achieved (Norman & Gregory, 2003). NPM-inspired reforms should function to emphasize the *flexibility and adaptability* of PAs in finding innovative solutions to meet pluralistic demands (Bjerge & Bjerregaard, 2017) while serving the public interest (Talbot 2011). Thus, PAs should strive to achieve substantively rational ends by doing '*the right thing*' for the surrounding community and pursuing service-oriented goals that reconcile competing interests (Norman and Gregory, 2003). Other key-features of post-bureaucracy include the role played by competitive mechanisms (*competition*), such as salary and promotion structures (Majgaard, 2015), and the advocacy for *decentralization*, promoting local autonomy and bottom-up initiatives (Bate & Robert, 2006). In this regard, the post-bureaucratic paradigm encourages networks that incorporate diverse competencies and expertise (*diversity*) (Vangen, 2017) and values the proliferation of identities (*versatility*).

Therefore, a deep analysis of the reviewed articles reveals how these paradox poles, which reflect distinctive features of either bureaucracy or post-bureaucracy (Figure 5), can coexist within PAs and endure over time. These elements may appear logical in isolation but become absurd when integrated (Smith and Lewis, 2011), ultimately creating paradoxical tensions.

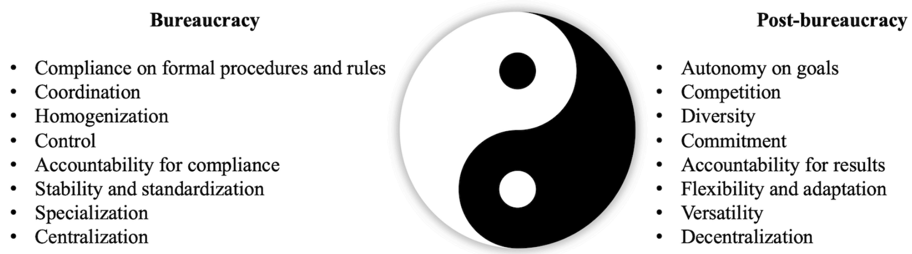

Figure 5. The bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy debate through paradoxical lens

The features of the identified paradoxes (the factors rendering those tensions salient and the coping strategies) seem to further support the paradoxical nature of the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy debate. When certain environmental factors accentuate their opposing nature, latent tensions become salient (Schad et al., 2016). For example, the introduction of new technologies or private-sector values/mechanisms (Kuna 2017), the implementation of new collaborative value systems inspired by NPG values (Kuitert, Volker, and Grandia 2023), or the pursuit of austerity programs all tend to exacerbate elements characteristic of both the bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy paradigms. These factors often prioritize specific organizational goals, values, and practices over others (Majgaard 2015), thereby making tensions more relevant.

A paradoxical approach also helps explore how organizations and their members can effectively manage the complex relationship between bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy. In this regard, adopting *either-or* strategies may initially yield positive effects, but in the long run, suppressing one pole leads to organizational inertia (Lewis, 2000). For instance, an excessive focus on diversifying competencies, which is a distinct post-bureaucratic feature, may cause PA managers to maintain excessive independence and a lack of collaboration. This, in turn, can undermine their responsibility to overcome tensions and create an excessive discretionary space for team members, diminishing the efficiency of processes (Amyar et al., 2019).

In contrast, the *both-and* and *more-than* strategies effectively address the contradictory elements of both bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy by adopting a managerial approach that simultaneously balances all the poles of the paradox. For instance, PA actors can establish relational interaction spaces where boundaries blur, allowing contradictory features such as competition and cooperation to coexist by introducing innovative organizational forms (Lange et al. 2008). Similarly, to reconcile homogenization and diversity within the same team, employees can actively cultivate a shared understanding of appropriate behaviour and foster a strong organizational culture that gives meaning to team structures and procedural agreements (Saz-Carranza & Ospina, 2011).

5. DISCUSSION

This paper reimages the debate between bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy through a paradoxical perspective by systematically reviewing the current literature on paradoxes in PAs. The present findings first acknowledge that multiple paradoxical tensions significantly influence the operation and management of PAs. Second, they emphasize that these tensions are connected to the ongoing debate between bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy, which can be interpreted from a paradoxical perspective. This section presents those two contributions and discusses the limitations of the study as well as the avenues for future research that it opens.

Contribution #1: The pervasiveness of paradoxes in today's PA settings

Notwithstanding previous studies of paradoxical tensions in PAs (Simon 1946; Hood and Jackson 1991; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004; Hood and Peters 2004), this article contributes to the scholarly discourse by further advancing the literature through a theory-informed lens. By delving into the paradoxical framework as applied to PAs, this study emphasizes the pervasive and timely nature of paradoxes within PAs. In response to the first research question, we identified seven paradoxes that manifest at different levels of PA (individual, team, leadership, organization, PA system and ecosystem). These paradoxes capture various crucial elements of management, such as task prioritization, accountability, contributions and competences of actors, and collaboration within and outside PAs. The pervasiveness of these paradoxes, which are situated at different levels and related to heterogeneous topics, confirms and reinforces the inherent paradoxical nature of PAs.

Furthermore, the findings related to the second research question highlight how the paradoxical nature of PAs has become even more prominent in today's context. Environmental factors, such as increasing globalization and the complexity of society and organizations, have made latent tensions more urgent. Similarly, the plurality of demands, the need to keep pace with a rapidly changing environment, and the emphasis on resource scarcity are diffuse and present today, leading to contradictory yet persistent demands (Lewis, 2000). How PAs respond to these tensions becomes a fundamental determinant of their fate, and the reviewed articles suggest that PA actors are adept at managing these paradoxical tensions. Most of them have implemented strategies that embrace competing elements simultaneously, adopting *both-and* or *more-than* approaches. These approaches create virtuous cycles as PA actors become aware of tensions, accept them, and consider them sources of learning and creativity.

Contribution #2: How reviewed literature helps to reimage the bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy paradox

The results highlight that all the paradoxes identified by scholars can be connected to the ongoing bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy debate and that their conflicting features can coexist within PAs. It can be argued that this complex relationship constitutes an 'overarching paradox' that relevantly shapes the operation and management of current PAs. While scholars and policy-makers have theorized primarily about the transition from bureaucracy to post-bureaucracy as a dilemma, the findings of this review reaffirm the juxtaposition of multiple and distinct elements of both paradigms within PAs (Hood and Peters, 2004). The values, mechanisms, and instruments associated with the post-bureaucracy paradigm do not simply replace the traditional features of bureaucracy but rather build upon them (George et al., 2021). Furthermore, these contradictory features are so intertwined that none can be reduced, rendering the conceptualization of this debate as a dilemma as inadequate and outdated. As contemporary PAs become more global and dynamic, the contradictory and distinct features of both bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy intensify, necessitating their simultaneous reconciliation.

Thus, a paradoxical perspective provides an approach that embraces complexity and accommodates contradictions, offering a framework for understanding the coexistence of conflicting features within bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy. By adopting this paradoxical lens, we can challenge traditional narratives and explore new avenues for reimagining and managing the coexistence of these paradigms without succumbing to the temptation of favouring one over the other. Negative outcomes tend to arise when one paradigm is prioritized over the other (either-or coping strategy) (Norman and Gregory 2003). For instance, while NPM reforms were expected to address the shortcomings of bureaucratic rules and procedures positively (Hughes, 2017), they also eroded certain bureaucratic safeguards, such as equity, professionalism, and the pursuit of public interest (Monteiro and Adler 2021). While the dilemma conceptualization of bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy implies exclusive choices between alternatives, this review goes a step further, suggesting that we can learn from the failures of NPM reforms by finding a new balance between opposing features and emphasizing their coexistence. Adopting a paradoxical theoretical lens allows for beneficial reinterpretation and reimagining of the interplay between bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy, creating a dynamic and holistic relationship where contradictory features are effectively managed. This is the true essence of the paradoxical lens: one pole cannot be simply disregarded or mechanically replaced; instead, both poles must be equally and jointly considered to generate positive outcomes.

Limitations and future research

First, we acknowledge the potential bias in our selection criteria stemming from PRISMA approach. While this methodology ensures the replicability of the findings, a notable limitation arises in the possibility of overlooking relevant texts depending on the structure of our search strategy, e.g., what keywords or inclusion/exclusion criteria are employed. For example, we opted to exclude grey literature from our search strategies. Although Adams et al. (2017) found that the inclusion of grey literature does not significantly alter the outcomes of a systematic review, we invite future research to delve into whether the outcomes of our study could be enriched by incorporating it.

However, it is worth noting that each review type has inherent strengths and weaknesses. Opting for alternative review approaches might introduce different challenges, e.g., an excessive reliance on the coders' and researchers' subjectivities. Consequently, we encourage further investigations employing other review approaches (e.g., scoping reviews, meta-syntheses, or bibliometric analyses) to enrich this debate from different perspectives.

Second, our review focused primarily on paradoxes identified in those publications that adopted a theory-informed perspective on the inquiry of paradoxes. This approach may result in the omission of texts that discuss paradoxes without a theoretically-informed framework. Further research might adopt a broader perspective to explore all the ways in which the idea of 'paradox' is examined in PA context to deepen our understanding of PAs as multilayered and intrinsically complex entities.

Finally, our sample selection, guided by the criterion of key-publications, exclusively included articles incorporating a paradoxical framework. While our key-publications are influential in establishing the roots of the paradoxical framework, our text selection methodology may be questioned. Future studies could consider incorporating a diverse set of influential texts or employ alternative selection criteria. Additionally, future research may focus on studies adopting a paradoxical view in PA without necessarily relying on a theory-informed framework (e.g., Bjerke-Busch & Thorp 2023). These approaches could offer valuable insights, broadening the exploration of paradoxes from various perspective and enriching the ongoing debate on the pervasive and timely nature of paradoxes within PA.

6. Implications and conclusion

This study has relevant implications for PA researchers as well as for PA practitioners, i.e. PA managers and employees, policy-makers, and educators.

Implications for PA research

First, this study sheds light on new research opportunities. Despite adopting a comprehensive approach, we acknowledge that the discussed paradoxes should not be considered exhaustive. Researchers can explore paradoxes at different levels, including intra- or interorganizational levels, using alternative conceptualizations/definitions of paradoxes (such as the constitutive approach and metatheoretical traditions [Putnam, Fairhurst, and Banghart, 2016]) or integrating the paradoxical lens with other frameworks (e.g., institutional logics; see Brandl, Keegan, and Kozica [2022]; McCarthy et al. [2022]). Additionally, our results highlight three coping strategies, but the literature recognizes other responses to paradoxical tensions (e.g., acceptance, resolution, or synthesis), which could be explored. Finally, adopting different definitions of PA related to specific policy subsectors (education, health, social policy) or entities can offer valuable insights. Scholars could analyse how paradoxical tensions, and coping strategies differ and are implemented by utilizing tailored search strategies and sources. Applying a paradoxical lens in these expanded ways can offer deeper insights into the bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy debate.

Additionally, the study identifies paradoxes (e.g., stability-vs-flexibility; coordination-vs-competition) present in other organizational contexts (private, nonprofit) (Schad et al., 2016). Therefore, the study of PAs can inform management scholars, fostering new opportunities for mutual learning and collaboration.

Implications for PA practice, policymakers and PA education

Practitioners, namely, managers and employees, need to recognize that embracing conflicting demands, such as the coexisting features of both bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy, rather than ignoring them, can help reduce the stress and anxiety related to paradoxical tensions (Kuna, 2017). Daily and strategic management should be seen as a series of balancing acts involving the reconciliation of opposing ideas (Norman and Gregory, 2003) through dialogue and creative solutions, equally considering competing demands and contributions. In this context, HR managers should adapt recruitment policies to select and socialize individuals who can recognize and effectively cope with increasingly prominent paradoxical tensions (Backhaus et al. 2022).

Policymakers need to recognize that prescribing a mere shift from bureaucracy to post-bureaucracy is naïve and misleading, as PAs exhibit key-features of both paradigms simultaneously. Therefore, since coping with paradoxes requires flexibility and room for manoeuvring to identify innovative and creative solutions, policies addressing PA issues should not be narrowly operationalized as standardized and regulatory instruments.

Finally, PA education should prepare current and future employees to navigate the evolving nature of PA and its emerging demands. Training programs should develop paradoxical skills, including recognizing the cyclical nature of paradoxical tensions and practising reflection and relationship-building to effectively cope with them (Kuna, 2017). Thus, it is crucial to show that neglecting one side of a paradoxical tension leads to negative consequences such as increased frustration and reduced job effectiveness (Backhaus et al. 2022).

In conclusion, this systematic literature review aims to reimage the bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy debate through a paradoxical perspective. In this regard, we first identify multiple paradoxes that significantly influence the operation and management of PAs. Second, we emphasize the interconnectedness of these tensions with the relationship and coexistence of bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy within PAs, which can be reinterpreted through a paradox lens. We contribute to the literature in two ways. First, this study highlights the pervasive and timely nature of paradoxes within PAs. Second, the results highlight that all the identified paradoxes can be tethered to the ongoing bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy debate, revealing that conflicting features can coexist within PAs. Consequently, this complex relationship constitutes an 'overarching paradox' that significantly shapes PA operation and management. While scholars and policymakers have traditionally conceptualized the transition from bureaucracy to post-bureaucracy as a dilemma, the findings of this review reaffirm the juxtaposition of multiple and distinct elements of both paradigms within PAs.

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8. APPENDICES

8.1. Appendix A: Search Terms and Selection Rules for Articles Included in the Database

1. Search Terms for Public Administration journals

paradox terms:	"paradox" OR "dilemma*" OR "dualit*" OR "dialectic*" OR "ambidexterit*" OR "tension*" OR "contradiction*"

Public Administration journals (from Academic journal guide of the Chartered Association of Business Schools, excluding journals that refer to specific policy sub-fields):

- Administration and Society
- Administrative Theory and Praxis
- American Review of Public Administration
- Australian Journal of Public Administration
- Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy
- Evidence and Policy
- Governance
- International Journal of Public Administration
- International Journal of Public Sector Management
- International Public Management Journal
- International Review of Administrative Sciences
- International Review of Public Administration
- Journal of European Public Policy
- Journal of Policy Analysis and Management
- Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory
- Journal of Public Affairs
- Journal of Public Affairs Education
- Local Government Studies
- Milbank Quarterly
- Perspectives on Public Management & Governance
- Policing
- Policy and Politics
- Policy Studies
- Public Administration
- Public Administration and Development
- Public Administration Quarterly
- Public Administration Review
- Public Integrity
- Public Management Review

- Public Money and Management
- Public Organization Review
- Public Performance & Management Review
- Public Personnel Management
- Public Policy and Administration
- Regulation and Governance
- Review of Public Personnel Administration
- Social Policy and Administration
- Teaching Public Administration
- Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy

2. Search Terms for not PA journals

paradox terms:	"paradox" OR "dilemma*" OR “dualit*” OR “dialectic*” OR “ambidexterit*”
AND	
Public administration terms:	“public administration” OR “public sector*” OR “public organization*” OR “public organisation*”

3. Inclusion and Exclusion Rules as Applied to the Corpus of Articles Generated by search of Scopus and Web of science

To make inclusion decisions about the 4908 articles identified by the two literature searches, the authors relied on the following inclusion and exclusion guidelines. These were discussed among the authors through two meetings to reach an agreement and to start selecting articles to include in our final literature review database.

- **Guideline #1a: Include** only English-written articles and reviews.
- **Guideline #1b: Exclude** books and grey literature.

- **Guideline #2a: Include** only paradox perspective-driven articles, i.e., they cited at least one of the “key publications” of the paradox perspective (Fig. 4 in the text).
- **Guideline #2b: Exclude** articles not citing “key publications” of the paradox perspective.

All the inclusion/exclusion guidelines were fulfilled by using bibliometric data retrieved from both Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) and exported into a CSV file.

First, by using the filter in Scopus and WoS, we exclude publications that were not English-written articles or review.

Second, drawing from the approach outlined by Schad et al. (2016), we identified several "key publications" (listed in Figure 4) that offered core elements for understanding paradoxes. These elements encompassed aspects such as the definition of a paradox, factors rendering salient the tensions, and the notion of coping strategies. Various conceptualizations of paradoxes in empirical research share these core elements. To ensure alignment with these core elements, we conducted an automated analysis of the references cited in the 4908 selected papers. Therefore, two of the authors automatically verified, using the bibliometric information provided by Scopus or WoS, whether at least one of the "key publications" of the paradox perspective appeared in the references list of each article. By contrast, when this reference was absent, we expected that the authors used the term "paradox" (and its synonyms) to broadly describe a paradoxical event, activity, or phenomenon without actually adopting the analytical lens of paradox theory. As a result of this process, we randomly selected around 20 articles and briefly verified the adoption of the paradox perspective in their conceptual/theoretical section. Furthermore, to test the robustness of the process mentioned above, the other two authors randomly selected 15 of each of the excluded articles to verify if these papers had been reasonably excluded. The analysis of randomly excluded articles ultimately corroborated the appropriateness of our initial screening and we then confirmed the inclusion of the 65 publications in our final literature review database.

8.2. Appendix B: Coding Process and Guidelines

To establish our coding protocol, all authors started by independently analyzing the full text of three randomly selected articles by considering each of the analytical dimensions reported in the table below. Once the four authors had independently coded the 12 selected articles, we met to discuss the coding strategies we pursued, solving disagreements. The process was repeated once more, coding a total of 24 randomly selected articles. As a result of this iterative process, we reached code saturation. The remaining 33 articles were equally split between two authors and coded independently. At the end all four authors met twice more and discussed the final codes, in particular those about the key elements of the paradox perspective, to ensure consistency of the coding activity and solve any disagreements. The table below provides specific details on the coding process for each variable of the literature review database.

Domain	**Variable**
Disciplinary field and research setting	We identified five characteristics that allowed us to provide a general description of the corpus of the selected articles: (i) the journal's field of study; (ii) the article's nature of the academic research (conceptual vs empirical); (iii) the type of methodology; (iv) the national context of the empirical setting; (v) the type of public administration where paradoxical tensions occurred and were investigated. (i) To identify the **journal's field of study** for each article we initially used the Academic Journal Guide (AJG) of the Chartered Association of Business Schools. However, as there were eight journals that were not classified by the AJG in our database, we then decided to rely only on the Scimago classification, which ensures that each journal is classified into consistent subject area and categories. As a result of this process, we identified the following subject areas: 'business, management and accounting' and 'social science'. Within the former, we identified the following categories: 'accounting', 'strategy and management', 'business and international management', 'organizational behavior and Human Resource Management', 'marketing', and 'Management of Technology and Innovation'. Within the 'social science' category, we identified 'public administration', 'sociology and political science', 'education' and 'development'. (ii) To understand the article's **nature of academic research** we reviewed the full text of each article by first considering the nature of the research goals of the paper and then searching for the presence of a methodology section ("data and methods", "research design", "methodology") within the same. Based on this screening we then classified each article as either *conceptual*, *empirical* or *mixed*. (iii) The **type of methodology** used in the empirical analysis was retrieved from the methodology section of each article and each article was classified according to the

	dichotomy between *qualitative* vs *quantitative* methods. We find just an article with a mixed methods approach. (iv) We identified the **country or countries** where data collection took place by first reviewing the abstract, and, occasionally, the methodology section of the article if this information was absent from the abstract. (v) We also identified both the **level and the type of administration** where data collection was based. Concerning the study level, we reviewed each article's methodology section and classified articles as either *local, regional, national* or *multiple*, following the classification system used by De Geus et al. (2020). Then, concerning the type of administration, we inductively classified it based on the setting reported by articles. We identified 8 types: *municipalities, government departments, public organization in general, administration related to education, administration related to health, inter-organizational networks, public companies* and a residual category, defined '*not classifiable*, where we included all the conceptual papers that did not clarify a specific type of administration. A data extraction form was used to report the information extracted from the articles and to report the final code for each variable.
Common elements of paradox perspective	The core elements of the paradox perspective (fig. 1) correspond to five key variables of the literature review database. These are: (i) the paradox poles; (ii) the type of factors rendering tensions salient; (iii) the type of coping strategies adopted; and (iv) the type of outcomes resulting from the coping strategies. To properly code each of these elements, we firstly comprehensively and qualitatively reviewed the content of the 57 articles. In most articles, the authors explicitly used the same exact denomination and attributes used by paradox scholars. For example, Vangen and Winchester (2014) (e.g., "The quantity tension is defined by the poles of complexity and simplification") and Qiu & Chreim (2022) (e.g., "While a barrier lens often produces a check-list type, one-of coping strategies, a tension lens embraces a more dynamic and complex perspective"). However, since there are different conceptualizations of paradox perspective, other authors either used different denominations to identify the aforementioned elements of the paradox framework or did not explicitly identify some of them. In these cases, we used the conceptualization provided - in particular by Smith & Lewis (2011), Putnam et al. (2016) and Schad et al. (2016) - to detect them or highlight their absence from a paper. Moreover, some articles contained more than one of the above-mentioned key elements permitting more than one code for each element. For example, Yang

(2020) speaks about multiples paradoxes in relation to 'centralization vs decentralization' and 'non-governmental entities vs governmental entities', whereas Schmidt (2019) discusses two coping strategies.

Secondly, after having qualitatively identified an element of the paradox perspective, we reported one or more explanatory sentences from the article about that element within a data extraction form.

Thirdly, we operationally coded the above-mentioned elements of paradox perspective by adopting two different strategies. An abductive approach was used for identifying significant categories of factors that render tensions salient, coping strategies, and their outcomes. Hence, based on existing classifications of these elements (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Schad et al. 2016; Putnam et al. 2016), we have exhaustively identified multiple categories (as underlined by Schad et al. 2016) and verified how these fitted with those retrieved from the reviewed articles. We created new categories when some variables highlighted by the authors were barely attributed to an existing one and generally reformulated all the existing categories to take into account the specificities of the PA context.

In contrast, an inductive approach was employed for coding paradox poles. Some authors provided a description of some paradox poles, but existing categories were not functional in catching the specificities of PA. It is often claimed that paradoxical tensions arise and are the result of specific and context-based dynamics and processes (Smith & Lewis 2011). Consequently, to adequately consider the specificities of PA paradoxes, an inductive and open coding approach was adopted to identify paradox poles.

(i) The first element we identified were the **paradox poles**. These were identified starting from the statements reported by authors of the reviewed articles where explicitly present.

By contrast, where the paradox poles were not defined in a statement, we identified the words scholars used to describe the concept. In both cases we transcribed the statements within the data extraction form.

As a first step of coding, we identified the ***unit of observation***, namely the level of analysis where the paradoxical tensions occurred and were observed. We recognized six different units of observations: *Individual* (e.g., single employees, managers); *Team* (e.g., working groups within a specific PA department); *Leadership* (relationship between PA managers and employees); *Organisation* (the entire public sector organization); *PA system* (e.g., different PA organizations and levels); and the *PA ecosystem* (more or less informal networks among PA, non-profit and profit actors). As a result of this process, we were able to assign each paradox to a unit of observation. For example, "cohesion vs diversity" was assigned to team level because it was discussed in relation to competing interests in team composition (Amyar et al. 2019), whereas the poles "competition vs cooperation" (Bate & Robert 2006) were assigned to PA ecosystem level, because they relate to an example of horizontal coordination among partners of the ecosystem (specifically, private sector, public sector and citizens).

The next step of coding consisted in specifically categorizing the ***poles of the paradox***. In this regard, we started by gathering together the most similar paradoxes by looking at common terms and meanings. It is relevant to underline that around the half of the papers already defined the two poles of the paradox. Consequently, we mainly simply aggregated paradoxes that were close in terms of their content by creating an overarching explicative category.

Concurrently to the identification of paradox poles we clarified the ***topic of each paradox***, in other words, the process or dynamics they referred to. For example, the paradox "control vs commitment" at organization level refers to an organization's employees' vertical coordination because, on the one side, it refers to the oversight (Hermanson et al. 2020; Norman and Gregory 2003) and hierarchy of the organization (Majgaard, 2015) and, on the other side, to managerial freedom (Norman and Gregory 2003) and ideals of innovative problem solving (Majgaard, 2015). As a result of the coding procedure, we identified seven main paradoxes and seven topics, as represented in Table 1.

(ii) The second element coded were the **factors that render latent tensions salient**. Following the categorization of factors drawn up by Smith and Lewis (2011, 389), we classified the factors into two groups: the "actors' paradoxical cognition" and the "environmental factors", with the latter ultimately subdivided into "plurality", "change" and "scarcity". Therefore, firstly we grouped the most similar factors as highlighted by the authors of the reviewed articles and then we verified if these could have been assigned to one of Smith and Lewis' (2011) typologies.

We then created specific sub-categories of factors that reflected the specificities of the PA context and a related description. For example, the "cut in budget due to financial crisis" (van der Kolk et al. 2020) was a factor that we categorized into environmental factors, related to scarcity. Within the category "scarcity", we clustered this and other similar factors such as (e.g., "climate of austerity" (Majgaard, 2015), "insufficient resources" (Parikh and Bhatnagar, 2018; Amyar *et al.*, 2019; Qiu and Chreim, 2021) into the "*economic resource*" sub-category. Regarding the factor "Change", we underlined if this was coming from "*outside the PA*" or "*within the PA*". Finally, concerning the "Plurality" factor we identified four specific sub-categories by highlighting a multitude and heterogeneity of demands, objectives, organizational units, and actors delivering public services. We named these factors as follows: "*Differentiated and potentially conflicting demands to PA*"; "*Differentiated and potentially*

	conflicting objectives for PA"; "*Differentiated and potentially conflicting PA organizational units*"; "*Differentiated and potentially conflicting (PA and non-PA) actors in delivering public services*". (iii) Thirdly, we coded the **coping strategies** following the aforementioned process for the factors. Scholars adopting a paradox perspective, in particular Putnam et al. (2016), often highlighted three main categories of coping strategies: "either-or", "both-and", "more-than". We thus started by distinguishing whether the coping strategy highlighted by the authors of the reviewed articles was "either-or", namely focusing on just on one pole of the paradox, or "both-and"/ "more-than", which instead focused on trying to accept and balance both poles. We distinguished between "both-and" and "more-than" on the basis that the former accents individual choices, whereas the latter centers on individual-organization interface in responding to contradictions (Putnam et al. 2016). Finally, we then refined and identified sub-groups by grouping the most similar strategies. For example, Amyar et al. (2019), highlighted "engaging in practices that downplay responsibility to manage tensions and enhancing discretional space for members to downscale the process", as a coping strategy in their article. We classified this as an "either-or" strategy, clustered into the sub-group "*Denying: only one pole exists*", because it assumed the choice of one pole over the other. On the contrary, Kuna (2017) underlined "management consultant help public managers in grappling with the paradoxical processes which emerge during implementation of NPM by encouraging their clients to identify and acknowledge the existence and consequences of paradox in reform change processes". We classified this strategy as both-and, clustered into "Recognizing: ability to recognize poles and live with their contradictions" because it assumed that actors could recognize paradoxical tensions and live with them during innovation processes. We ultimately identified eight sub-categories of coping strategies (tab. 3): three "either-or"; two "both-and" and three "more-than". (iv) Fourth, the **outcome of the coping strategies** was coded starting at the distinction between "positive" and "negative" provided by Schad et al. (2016). We assigned each outcome reported by the authors of the reviewed articles to either the "positive" or "negative" category and further distinguished them into sub-groups based on the goal they accomplished. For both positive and negative outcomes, we made explicit either "*positive*" or "*negative attitudes from PA employees*". For example, "strong and positive relationships between paradoxical leadership and both job satisfaction and work engagement of public employees" (Backhaus *et al.*, 2022) were coded as a positive outcome, clustered into "positive attitudes from PA employees" sub-group. On the contrary, "paradoxes emerge and reinforce organizational contradictions and reveal organizational problems as staff shortages and inadequate planning" (Amyar *et al.*, 2019) were coded as a negative outcome,

	clustered into the "reduced effectiveness" sub-group. As a result of this process, we identified four positive outcomes and two negative ones, as reported in tab. 4.
Bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy	We employed an abductive approach to interpret the paradox poles through the bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy debate. First, the key features of bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy were identified and synthetized from the literature (Hood, 1991; Weber, 2002; Pollitt, 2009; George *et al.*, 2021) (see figure 2). Second, the paradox poles identified were abductively interpreted separately in light of the characteristics of both bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy, aiming to identify convergences or differences. For example, the *centralization* pole of the paradox "*centralization-vs-decentralization*" is a clear distinctive feature of bureaucracy. This is a key characteristic of bureaucratic public organizations. On the contrary, the decentralization pole has been a clear goal and instrument of post-bureaucratic reforms. For this reason, it has been interpreted as a feature of the post-bureaucracy paradigm.

8.3. Appendix C: Prisma checklist

Section/Topic	#	Checklist Item	Reported on Page #
Title			
Title	1	Identify the report as a systematic review, meta-analysis, or both.	24
Abstract			
Structured summary	2	Provide a structured summary including, as applicable: background; objectives; data sources; study eligibility criteria; methods; results; limitations; conclusions and implications of key findings.	24
Introduction			
Rationale	3	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of existing knowledge	24-28
Objectives	4	Provide an explicit statement of questions and objectives being addressed with reference to outcomes, and study design.	26-28
Methods			
Protocol and registration	5	Indicate if a review protocol exists, if and where it can be accessed (e.g., Web address), and, if available, provide registration information including registration number.	NA
Eligibility criteria	6	Specify study characteristics (e.g., presence of theoretical framework) and report characteristics (e.g., years considered, language, publication status) used as criteria for eligibility, giving rationale.	Appendix A
Information sources	7	Describe all information sources (e.g., databases with dates of coverage,) in the search and date last searched.	35-37
Search strategy	8	Present full electronic search strategy for at least one database, including any limits used, such that it could be repeated.	Appendix D
Study selection	9	State the process for selecting studies (i.e., screening, eligibility, included in systematic review).	35-37; Appendix A, B
Data collection process	10	Describe method of data extraction from reports (e.g., piloted forms, independently, in duplicate) and	35-37; Appendix B

		any processes for obtaining and confirming data from investigators.	
Data items	11	List and define all variables for which data were sought and any assumptions and simplifications made.	Appendix B
Risk of bias in individual studies	12	Describe methods used for assessing risk of bias of individual studies	NA
Summary measures	13	State the principal summary measures (e.g., risk ratio, difference in means).	NA
Synthesis of results	14	Describe the methods of handling data and combining results of studies	NA
Results			
Study selection	15	Describe the results of the search and selection process, from the numbers of records identified in the search to the number of studies included	39-53
Study characteristics	16	Present the characteristics of studies included	NA
Discussion			
Discussion	17	Provide a general interpretation of the results	53-57
Implications	18	Discuss implications of the results for practice, policy and future research	57-59
Other information			
Protocol	19	Indicate where the review protocol can be accessed	35

8.4. Appendix D: Search strategies

An example of a search command for paradox studies in (39) Public Administration journals – according to AJG (Academic Journal Guide) - in Scopus is the following:

(TITLE-ABS-KEY (paradox*) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (dilemma*) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (dualit*) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (dialectic) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (ambidexterity) AND (LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Administration Society") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Administrative Theory And Praxis") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"American Review of Public Administration") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Australian Journal of Public Administration") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Evidence and Policy") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Governance") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"International Journal of Public Administration") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"International Journal of Public Sector Management") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"International Public Management Journal") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"International Review of Administrative Sciences") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"International Review of Public Administration") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Journal of European Public Policy") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Journal of Policy Analysis and Management") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Journal of Public Affairs") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Journal of Public Affairs Education") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Local Government Studies") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Milbank Quarterly") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Perspectives on Public Management & Governance") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Policing") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Policy and Politics") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Policy Studies") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Public Administration") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Public Administration and Development") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Public Administration Quarterly") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Public Administration Review") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Public Integrity") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Public Management Review") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Public Money and Management") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Public Organization Review") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Public Performance & Management Review") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Public Personnel Management") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Public Policy and Administration") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Regulation and Governance") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Review of Public Personnel Administration") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Teaching Public Administration") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE,"Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy")).

8.5. Appendix E: list of eligible studies

The provided list comprises the sample of articles retrieved through our search strategies (n=73). Due to constraints on word count, not all of these articles have been cited in the manuscript.

Adeoye, O. & Ran, B. (2023). Government transparency: paradoxes and dilemmas. *Public Management Review*. DOI: 10.1080/14719037.2023.2181981

Amyar, F., Hidayah, N. N., Lowe, A., & Woods, M. (2019). Investigating the backstage of audit engagements: The paradox of team diversity. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, *32*(2), 378–400. https://doi.org/10.1108/AAAJ-08-2016-2666

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Auschra, C., & Sydow, J. (2023). Resourcing goal-directed networks: toward a practice-based perspective. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 33*(2), 232-245. https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muac023

Backhaus, L., Reuber, A., Vogel, D., & Vogel, R. (2022). Giving sense about paradoxes: Paradoxical leadership in the public sector. *Public Management Review*, *24*(9), 1478–1498. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.1906935

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Cornford, J. (2019). Competing institutional logics of information sharing in public services: Why we often seem to be talking at cross-purposes when we talk about information sharing. *Public Money & Management*, *39*(5), 336-345. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2019.1611236

Di Domenico, M. (2015). Evolving Museum Identities and Paradoxical Response Strategies to Identity Challenges and Ambiguities: Changing Ethical Understandings in the Handling of Human Remains. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *24*(3), 300–317. https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492615569885

El Ammar, C. (2021). Talent Management Philosophy in Public Sector: A Key for Managing Conflicts and Contradictions. *Икономически изследвания, (8)*, 69-92.

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Chapter II

The Bureaucracy vs. Post-bureaucracy Paradox in Public Administration:

An Historical Perspective on The Selection and Training of Public Managers

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The current version of this manuscript has been presented at the 24th Annual Conference of the European Academy of Management hosted by the University of Bath (26/06/2024).

The current version of this manuscript has been presented at the PhD Management & Organization Brownbag Seminar during the visiting period at Nova School of Business & Economics (29/05/2024).

CHAPTER II

The Bureaucracy vs. Post-bureaucracy Paradox in Public Administration: An Historical Perspective on The Selection and Training of Public Managers

ABSTRACT

In the historical trajectory of public administration (PA), bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic models competed and coexisted in unstable relations of dominance, leading to an overarching bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox. However, despite a growing interest in paradox perspective in PA literature, extant studies have not extensively explored paradoxes across time and multiple organizational domains. To address these gaps, this article investigates how PAs navigated the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox over 30-years historical analysis in two interrelated organizational domains: selection and training of managers. Our study reveals that the relative strength of bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy paradox' poles changed over time, rendering the paradox either generative or pathological. Moreover, the poles' strength varies across the two organizational domains, influencing different coping strategies. We contribute twofold to theoretical development by unraveling the: (i) time-specificity and (ii) domain-specificity of the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox. Finally, we draw implications for practitioners, emphasizing the importance of (i) historically and processual-embedded and (ii) context-sensitive ambidexterity.

KEY WORDS
bureaucracy; post-bureaucracy; hiring; public managers; historical case-study

CHAPTER II

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, Public Administration (PA) has been dominated by the bureaucratic organizational model ideally representing efficiency, rationality, and continuity (Weber, 1958). However, its implementation has often resulted in an overemphasis on standardization, formalization, and centralized decision-making, leading to various vicious cycles (Masuch, 1985). In response, efforts to enhance PA efficiency and effectiveness have prompted enduring reform trajectories informed by different administrative paradigms (sets of norms and ideas about how to govern, organize and lead PAs: see Bryson et al., 2014), including New Public Management (NPM) (Hood, 1991), New Public Governance (NPG) (Osborne, 2006), and the Neo-Weberian State (NWS) (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2009). While emphasizing different mixes of governance mechanisms and organizing principles, all these paradigms have sought to replace the old bureaucratic model with (post-bureaucratic) values, governance arrangements and managerial practices that address problems and dysfunctions stemming from its operation (Torfing et al., 2020).

However, rather than replacing bureaucracy, these reforms have generated 'layering' mechanisms (Ongaro et al., 2023) whereby the traditional bureaucratic model persists alongside the new post-bureaucratic model (NPM and post-NPM paradigms), albeit in unstable and shifting dominance relationships (Nielsen & Andersen, 2024; Torfing et al., 2020). At times, either bureaucracy or post-bureaucracy may dominate the overall perception of how to structure PAs, relegating the other to a marginal position, or they may compete to shape PAs' daily operations (Hyndman et al., 2014). Consequently, modern PAs become multilayered entities where bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic models dynamically compete and coexist (George et al., 2021). Some scholars have suggested that, over time, this juxtaposition, characterized by the simultaneous persistence of conflicting features (Christensen & Lægreid, 2022; Fossestøl et al., 2015), tends to generate enduring tension (Denis et al., 2015; Hood & Peters, 2004). This tension, characterized by "persistent contradictions between interdependent elements" (Schad et al., 2016, p. 10), has been studied as a paradox inherent to modern PAs which influences their operations and management over time (Kuitert et al., 2023; Norman & Gregory, 2003). Thus, this article adopts a paradoxical perspective as a theoretical lens through which to examine the overarching bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox (Smith and Lewis 2011).

There is a growing trend in the PA literature to investigate governance, operations, and management by adopting the paradox perspective (Adeoye & Ran, 2023; Qi & Ran, 2023). This approach has the potential to explain how organizations can manage conflicting features simultaneously while promoting long-term sustainability (Lewis, 2000). However, despite its increasing adoption, its full potential remains unexploited. On the one hand, extant studies often focus on a single moment, without considering historical contexts or dynamic shifts over time. For example, they overlook how shifting dominance relations may differently configure the paradox over time. On the other hand, studies often concentrate on one specific domain, without examining whether the same paradox simultaneously impacts on other inevitably intertwined domains (e.g., compensation-incentives, selection-training, or planning-budgeting) within the same organization.

To bridge these gaps, our study adopted a historical approach to investigate how PAs navigate the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox (i) over time and (ii) across different yet intertwined organizational domains (the specific research questions will be presented in section 2.3). To achieve our research goal, we empirically explored the Italian centralized public competition for the selection and training of public managers (PCSTM), which intertwines two organizational domains (selection and training), over almost 30 years (1995-2023).

The article contributes to the literature in two ways. First, by analyzing PAs as multilayered entities, it explores how the evolution of conflicting models has shaped the manifestation of the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox and influenced organizational solutions to handle it. Consequently, we recognize the paradox's *time-specific* nature as it varies over time. Our findings evidence the historical embeddedness of paradoxical tensions, echoing the call for a 'historical' and 'longitudinal' turn in management and PA studies (Murdoch et al., 2023; Rowlinson et al., 2014).

Second, our analysis explores how the paradox's nature is influenced by contextual dynamics and exhibits variations even within the same organization. The paradox studied proved to be *domain-specific*, exhibiting different forms across various organizational domains and prompted different solutions to deal with it. This analysis can shed light on all contexts in which multiple organizational domains are inevitably intertwined.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Theorizing bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy as a paradox

The contrast between bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic models is a long-standing matter of debate in management scholarship.

Historically, PAs embraced classic bureaucratic logics, characterized by hierarchical structures, rule-based organization, and standardized tasks (Monteiro & Adler, 2022). Weberian bureaucracies represented the most efficient organizational model. They featured specialized roles, written rules and procedures, and hiring based on technical competence. Although bureaucracy ideally prompts meritocracy, universalism, and neutrality, scholars identified multiple vicious cycles arising from its functioning (Gouldener, 1954; Crozier, 1964; Masuch 1985).

In response to criticisms and changing political and economic conditions, governments worldwide attempted to reform PA by advocating the adoption of new administrative paradigms given various labels, including New Public Management (NPM), New Public Governance (NPG), and the Neo-Weberian State (NWS) (Bryson et al. 2014).

NPM, the most widespread alternative paradigm, aimed to introduce business-like values, mechanisms, and practices into PA to improve its efficiency and effectiveness (Hood, 1991). It emphasized decentralization, autonomy, privatization, performance improvement and competitive mechanisms (Pollitt, 2016). However, scholars widely criticized NPM as a panacea for all bureaucratic issues (Hood, 1991), arguing that it often paradoxically exacerbated typical bureaucratic dysfunctionalities like increasing centralization and red tape (Diefenbach, 2009). For example, its focus on rational planning and performance measurement resulted in the proliferation of plans and indicators (George et al., 2021). Consequently, 'post-NPM paradigms' (Christensen and Lægreid 2022), like NPG and NWS, emerged. NPG advocated greater state-civil society integration, power decentralization, and promoted new horizontal channels for civil participation in decision-making processes (Osborne, 2006). Prioritizing alliance building and partnerships over hierarchy, NPG promoted flexible approaches (e.g., reducing directive instruments and minimizing competition) over bureaucratic rigidity and standardization. NWS, a 'bureaucratic corrective' to NPM (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2009), blended traditional bureaucratic continuity and predictability features with enhanced efficiency (Byrkjeflot et al., 2017), reaffirming the role of laws, procedural equality, and hierarchical relations, while advocating flexibility and responsiveness to citizens' needs.

The shift from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic models, often depicted as sequential and mechanical in public debate, has revealed a more complex reality. Within PAs, the bureaucratic model persists alongside the post-bureaucratic one (Nielsen & Andersen, 2024), resulting in layering mechanisms whereby new post-bureaucratic organizational and managerial models are added without eliminating the older bureaucratic ones (Martin, 2010; Pollitt, 2016).

Consequently, bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic models co-exist in unstable and shifting dominance relations (Torfing et al., 2020). The literature has extensively demonstrated how these models exert strength in binding and influencing individual and collective agency towards specific options and solutions. Despite advances towards post-bureaucratic features, bureaucracy often maintains a dominant position in some PAs, strongly shaping individual behaviors and organizational actions (Monteiro and Adler 2022). Bureaucracy, imbued with power relations, perpetuates these dynamics (Weber 1958), enforcing binding rules and influencing organizational and social hierarchies. This phenomenon is apparent in various national contexts (particularly Italy, Greece, and Spain), where recent reforms have introduced NPM features (e.g., a strong focus on performance, monetary incentives) but retained a bureaucratic structure (e.g., adherence to rules, standardized tasks) (Ongaro 2009). Similar analyses have explored budgetary and accounting reforms, performance regimes and governance arrangements worldwide (Hyndman et al., 2014; Koppenjan, 2012; Virani & Van Der Wal, 2023), underscoring the multilayered nature of PAs, where bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic features compete and coexist (George et al., 2021).

Against this background, some scholars have claimed that the coexistence of competing features leads to enduring tensions, exhibiting a paradoxical nature (Moynihan, 2011; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Vigoda-Gadot & Mizrahi, 2014). For instance, Hood and Peters (2004) identified several paradoxes associated with this enduring path of reforms, such as the 'production paradox', where the evaluation of results involves specifying outputs using quantitative indicators in domains where results are not readily observable. This blurs management responsibility rather than clarifying it.

2.2. Navigating the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox: a theory-informed perspective

The concept of paradox is not new in the PA literature. For example, Simon (1946) noted similarities between PA principles and proverbs presented in conflicting pairs, while Hood & Jackson (1991) explored administrative arguments often expressed in matching pairs with advantages and disadvantages. More recently, Pollitt & Bouckaert (2017) examined contradictions within PAs to unravel their nature (e.g., trade-offs, dilemmas, or paradoxes).

However, a theory-informed view on paradoxes has not yet been fully adopted in the PA literature.

The paradox perspective offers a fruitful theoretical lens for addressing long-term organizational sustainability by simultaneously navigating divergent elements, like competing goals or demands, which create persistent tensions and contradictions within and across organizations.

Scholars increasingly recognize that PAs are dynamic and complex entities fraught with tensions, where inherent paradoxes, defined as "persistent contradictions between interdependent elements/poles" (Schad et al., 2016, p. 10), are manifest (Backhaus et al., 2022; Lewis, 2000).

Since paradoxes stem from the accumulation of historical layers (Pierides et al., 2021), over time the coexistence of bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic models displaying contradictory features about PA design (Denis et al., 2015, p. 273) has given rise to an overarching bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox (Jun & Rivera, 1997; Norman & Gregory, 2003).

The paradox exhibits a dynamic pattern (Smith and Lewis 2011), remaining latent until environmental conditions render it salient. Such conditions include plurality (conflicting demands and goals, Backhaus et al., 2022), scarcity (resource limitations, Amyar et al., 2019) or change (business-like values introduction, Kuitert et al., 2023). Once salient, the paradox spurs responses– described as 'either-or', 'both-and', and 'more-than' coping strategies– potentially generating vicious or virtuous cycles (Lewis, 2000). Vicious cycles emerge when PAs excessively focus on one pole, e.g., on post-bureaucratic features, suppressing the bureaucratic ones, through an either-or approach. Denying the poles' coexistence leads to organizational inertia and diminished processes efficiency (Amyar et al., 2019).

Conversely, virtuous cycles emerge when PAs recognize paradoxical tensions, following both-and or more-than approaches to simultaneously balance bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic features. Both-and approaches acknowledge opposites as interdependent. They seek synergies or accommodate conflicting demands. More-than approaches entail the embracing of paradoxical tensions through flexible practices. In some cases, contradictions can be transcended by reframing situations at higher levels of abstraction, rearranging organizational practices (Schneider et al., 2021) or allowing contradictory features such as competition and cooperation to coexist by introducing innovative organizational forms (Qi & Ran, 2023). Proactively embracing contradictions fosters sustainability, promotes organizational learning and transformation, and drives positive change and innovation (Smith and Lewis 2011).

Against this background, the strength dynamics of dominance and competition between bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy may restrict the coping strategies available to reconcile divergent logics. Systemic power wielded by the two models- "institutionalized power that operates automatically through rules and routines" (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2017, p. 329)- influences paradoxes by allocating strength to poles, ultimately (i) rendering latent tensions salient; (ii) enabling or hampering responses to paradox; (iii) shaping the preferred coping strategy.

The management literature on organizational paradoxes has shown that systemic power distribution can manifest itself in stable and symmetrical or unstable and asymmetrical forms (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2017).

Under stable and symmetrical power relations, strength is equally distributed between bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy. PAs may accept the persistent coexistence of these opposite elements, turning paradox into generative nature (unavoidable situations potentially leading to positive outcomes). This occurs when power relations enable iterative responses to tensions that have both bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic features and act as catalysts for innovation and dynamic adaptation (Berti & Cunha, 2023). Therefore, actors may be encouraged to adopt both-and and more-than coping strategies.

Conversely, when systemic power between bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy is unstable and asymmetrical, strength is predominantly allocated to one pole (e.g., when the bureaucratic paradigm occupies a dominant position). A paradoxical virtuous cycle of acceptance is not feasible. Paradox becomes pathological (dysfunctional situations cause oppression and deplete organizational capabilities) (Berti & Cunha, 2023), constraining organizations' capacity to handle contradictory bureaucratic and post-bureaucracy features, resulting in 'either-or' strategies which lead to vicious cycles eroding organizational capabilities. PAs constrained by their inability to formulate alternative responses may resort to ritualistic obedience (Berti and Simpson 2021).

2.3. Specific research questions

Our theoretical framework leverages the paradox perspective to deepen understanding of the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy debate. The layering of distinct models over time results in an overarching bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox. The interplay of strength dynamics between the poles of this paradox influences its nature, rendering it generative or pathological, and ultimately shaping different coping strategies. Our perspective focuses on two noteworthy aspects.

First, viewing multilayered PAs through paradoxical lens transcends the idea that bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy merely replace one another. This lens allows exploration of how the two models, displaying distinct strength and overlapping over time, either balance both poles through generative coping strategies or emphasize one as dominant.

Second, the paradox perspective makes it possible to study how, at specific historical moments with overlapping models, the strength of bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy varies across organizational domains (in our case, selection and training), each of which exhibits specific coping strategies.

Based on this theoretical framework, our research addressed the following questions:

- How did changes in the strength of the bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy poles influence the coping strategies adopted in the time considered?
- How did the changing strength of the bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy poles manifest itself in two distinct yet intertwined organizational domains (selection and training), thereby influencing the coping strategies adopted?

Our first research question concerned how the varying strengths of the bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy poles influence the paradox's nature (generative or pathological) and affect coping strategies. Hence, we sought to determine whether equality of strength between the poles fosters the adoption of generative coping strategies, or if the dominance of one pole over the other leads to conservative ones.

Our second research question was whether, at a given time, the strength attributed to the two poles of the paradox manifests itself equally in two interrelated organizational domains or differently, consequently shaping distinct coping strategies. Therefore, we sought to determine whether the strength of poles is similar across organizational domains or different.

To answer these questions, we analyzed a national case of a public competition for the hiring of public managers (PCSTM), where selection and training were the two intertwined organizational domains.

3. EMPIRICAL CONTEXT AND RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 The case of centralized hiring processes in PA

The Italian PA, particularly the public competition for the selection and training of public managers (PCSTM), provided an ideal setting to address our research questions, for four reasons.

First, the PCSTM operates within a context characterized by conflicting needs and logics. The bureaucratic model prioritizes specialized technical and legal expertise, standardized methods of assessment and training, and it focuses predominantly on candidates' knowledge (Weber, 1958). Conversely, the post-bureaucratic model claims that professional managers should assess attitudes and behaviors, empowering candidates with networking and collaboration skills. Therefore, the PCSTM offers an opportunity to empirically investigate the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox within a PA context crucial for answering our research questions.

Second, the Italian PCSTM system has a longstanding history spanning over 28 years (1995-2023), with nine editions organized, and maintaining consistent organizational solutions for selection and training. The PCSTM begins with selection. This involves a pre-selective test followed by two/three written tests and an interview. Successful candidates enter a training phase comprising *general-training* with technical courses, roundtables and workshops, and *specialist-training* through apprenticeship. Assessments are conducted throughout the *general-training* phase, and successful candidates advance to *specialist-training*. The last step is a final examination, leading to formal hiring by the PA. This consistency renders the PCSTM an ideal case-study for exploring changes in selection and training over time. Moreover, extensive information is available for each edition, which facilitates a historical approach to understanding how administrative paradigms distribute strength differently between the bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy poles, influencing coping strategies (RQ1).

Third, the dual composition of PCSTM in selection and training domains provides a fruitful basis on which to discern evolving strength dynamics in the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox over time. This suggests that selection and training may experience distinct strength dynamics, often favoring the bureaucratic pole or its opposite. Consequently, it furnishes the opportunity to investigate how strength is distributed differently in these two domains simultaneously and shapes different coping strategies (RQ2).

Lastly, the PCSTM exemplifies a scenario common to various organizational contexts, where two or more organizational domains are interconnected to achieve long-term goals. For example, the interconnectedness of compensation and incentives or training and selection, can be retrievable in every organization. Moreover, the Italian PCSTM is comparable with other systems for the selection and training of public managers (Spain, Portugal); and the public organization that oversees the PCSTM operations, the 'Italian National School of Administration' (NSA), is part of the OECD's "Schools of Government" network, in which more than 70 national schools of administration worldwide exchange best practices on public management.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The empirical data were collected and analyzed using an historical approach (Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014). The dataset spanned from 1995 to 2023 and comprised over 3200 pages of documentary materials (listed in Appendix A), including job advertisements, pre-selective and written tests, training programs, PCSTM guidelines, internal regulations, annual reports of NSA. We qualitatively analyzed these materials, identifying types of assessment in each PCSTM, course contents and methods, other training tools employed, number and qualifications of NSA teachers, and experts. Furthermore, we analyzed national laws enacted since 1990s, highlighting significant changes in public personnel hiring and noteworthy reforms in civil service and NSA organizational structures. Complementing our textual analysis, we conducted 12 interviews with influential actors involved in the NSA's management and hiring activities. Beginning with interviews with a former NSA president and manager, we employed a snowball technique to include managers and teachers from NSA or engaged in PCSTM as selectors and trainers. The interviews, conducted between April and November 2023, averaged 80 minutes each. All materials were categorized according to the release year, document type (laws, job advertisements, tests, training programs), and the corresponding main event (reforms, pandemic, financial crises), followed by the hand-coding of all materials. Adopting a historical process perspective (Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014), our research focused on analyzing organizational meso-level events, actions, and strategies to reconstruct the key-dynamics of public manager hiring over nearly three decades. Using an abductive analysis approach, our methodology proceeded through five iterative steps between our data and established theoretical constructs.

Step 1: Historical reconstruction of key-events. We compiled a 10-page chronology detailing key historical events, enacted legislation, and changes within NSA and PCSTM editions. Historical events encompassed societal occurrences (inflation, economic crises, pandemic) and legislative developments within the PA, including laws or decrees reshaping the NSA's structure and functions. We analyzed how reforms introduced post-bureaucratic principles, layering upon each other, adding innovations compared to previous. Drawing on the PA-reform literature, we categorized each reform as either 'bureaucratic' or 'post-bureaucratic' according to the principles introduced. 'Bureaucratic' reforms sought to restrict actors' autonomy, aligning with non-discretionary logics, e.g., by testing knowledge of legal procedures that constrain autonomy. Conversely, 'post-bureaucratic' reforms granted autonomy and discretion to actors, e.g., giving them freedom to determine how to achieve predefined objectives.

Step 2: A preliminary PCSTM analysis. We line-by-line analyzed each PCSTM edition dataset, including job advertisements, training programs, tests, to thoroughly understand the organizational solutions for selection and training. Our focus was on organizational aspects, i.e., assessment types, selection commissioners, course contents and methods, teachers. Following our theoretical framework, we distinguished between bureaucratic or post-bureaucratic features within each PCSTM dimension. We defined 'bureaucratic' PCSTM features as ones that limit actors' discretion and adhere strictly to 'non-discretionary' protocols. For example, bureaucratic solutions emphasize legal knowledge to ensure compliance with imposed norms (Christensen, 2024). Conversely, post-bureaucratic features empower actors' autonomy, e.g., courses targeting networks and partnerships. Accordingly, we compiled a list of dimensions, systematically coding the organizational solutions. These descriptive codes constituted our first-order evidence of the organizational solutions adopted in each PCSTM. We arranged these codes chronologically, providing systematic evidence of the PCSTM's evolution.

Step 3: Organizational solutions for managing the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox. We analysed how each PCSTM navigated the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox in selection and training. Using first-order codes, we applied a paradoxical lens. Employing either-or, both-and, and more-than coping strategies (Putnam et al., 2016), we unravelled the selection and training solutions. For example, in the first edition, we coded only bureaucratic solutions in selection, identifying an 'either-or' strategy because the post-bureaucracy pole was denied. Conversely, in the training domain of the latest PCSTM edition, we identified both bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic models, although they were intricately bound up with each other so that it was difficult to discern them. This represented a 'more-than' strategy because bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy models were reframed in a novel relationship. We iterative applied this analytical process across all editions.

Step 4. Contextualizing organizational solutions in the evolution of strength dynamics between bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox. We explored the model's strength within each PCSTM edition, analysing broader contexts surrounding PA and PCSTM, including examination of national laws and academic literature. Given the coexistence of bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic models from 1990 onwards, we sought to untangle how their interplay had influenced the organizational solutions implemented in each PCSTM edition and organizational domain. We hypothesized that each model displays its strength distribution, influencing the PCSTM's implementation. For example, in 2022, a legislative measure mandated the assessment of managerial skills in selection, resulting in the assessment of such skills from the eighth edition onwards. We interpreted this legislative shift as a strength transfer from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic organizational solutions. To conduct this analysis, we interviewed individuals familiar with the PCSTM to validate our understanding of the organizational solutions adopted and the strength dynamics surrounding PCSTM. Additionally, these interviewees provided contextual insights into developments since 1990s, contributing to a more informed analysis of the layered models and their strength distributions.

Step 5: Temporal bracketing. We organized our observations chronologically to identify patterns of bureaucratic or post-bureaucratic features in both selection and training. For this purpose, we established specific periodizations by grouping PCSTM editions that shared homogeneous coping strategies and strength. For instance, the first four PCSTM editions predominantly exhibited bureaucratic strength in selection and training. We consequently aggregated them into distinct periods. This categorization process yielded three distinct PCSTM periodizations, each marked by a rupture point compared to the previous period (e.g., the transition from the first to the second period was characterized by a reconciliation of bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic elements during training). Consequently, coping strategies and strength were conceptualized as triggers of shifts between these periodizations, and we incorporated them in the Figure presented in the Findings section.

4. FINDINGS

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the key-events shaping Italian PA over the past three decades. We explore pivotal PA reforms and events and the evolving dynamics within the NSA (section 4.1). Then we analyze the evolution of public competition for the selection (4.2) and training (4.3) of managers within the PCSTM case (Appendix B provides an overview of the main events and organizational solutions). Finally, we illustrate how the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox has been manifest in PCSTM across three periodizations, highlighting continuities and changes over time.

4.1 The layering of bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic paradigms in the Italian PA from 1990 onwards

Historically, the Italian PA has been characterized by bureaucratic models emphasizing formalism, personnel with a legalistic background, and limited professionalism (Kickert, 2007). Entry into public service relied on universalistic criteria, with public employees holding public-law employment status and subject to the centralized governance of their employment relations through legislation and administrative acts.

In 1957, the establishment of the "High School of Public Administration" (HSPA) marked a significant development, as it was responsible for the training of executive personnel across administrative sectors. By 1972, the HSPA's mandate had expanded to include the training of public managers, consolidating its position as the central coordinating body for training activities within state administrations.

Starting in 1992, Italy faced an economic and political crisis which triggered reforms aimed at modernizing the PA by replacing bureaucratic traditions with NPM post-bureaucratic principles (Ongaro, 2009).

The 'Bassanini reforms' (named after the PA-Minister) unfolded from 1992 to 2001. Their purpose was to transform the PA into a sector that "serves the citizen-user", emphasizing performance controls beyond mere legal conformity (Capano, 2003). Key-aspects included re-organizing central government by fostering flexible structures, simplifying administrative procedures, introducing performance measurement, and reforming the Civil Service.

The Civil Service reform (Legislative Decrees 29/1993 and 80/1998) aimed to managerialize labor relations with post-bureaucratic 'privatization' and 'contractualization' features (Ongaro, 2011). This aligned public employment rules with private employment via labor contracts, confining legislative provisions to the background. Simultaneously, the HSPA was reorganized, and a selective PCSTM was introduced. This innovation was intended to integrate selection and training to recruit prospective managers by welcoming individuals without prior administrative experience and starting to select also not law-graduates (Ongaro et al., 2023). In 2001, Legislative Decree 165/2001 stipulated that appointment to managerial positions must occur through public competitions announced by individual PAs or through PCSTM organized by the HSPA.

The modernization of the Italian administrative system continued in 2009 with the 'Brunetta Reform' (Legislative Decree 150/2009), which introduced performance evaluation and management systems that linked individual results to economic incentives. HRM practices underwent a partial re-juridification process that limited managerial discretionality. However, the 2008 financial crisis induced policymakers to curtail the reform's implementation, prompting a pay and hiring freeze until 2018.

The subsequent reform (Law 124/2015) was intended to progressively relax turnover cuts to enhance personnel mobility. It introduced changes in public employment, including a system for the appointment of senior public managers through competitive exams overseen by independent commissions. Renewal of the appointment depended on a positive evaluation within a new performance management system designed to engage stakeholders in result assessment. However, a legal setback occurred when the Constitutional Court ruled against the reform.

Finally, thanks to the NextGenerationEU recovery plan issued by the EU Commission, the Italian government developed a National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) prioritizing PA modernization and strengthening administrative capacity. The NRRP emphasizes collaborative projects and public-private partnerships, underscoring the importance of enhancing public employee competence, including managerial skills. In 2022, the NSA adopted guidelines for public management assessment, "Skills model for managers of the Italian PA", which specified the skills required of public managers (problem-solving, process management, collaborators development, etc.). These guidelines now steer the selection of public managers.

Overall, despite numerous reform attempts to replace the legal model with a 'new' post-bureaucratic model, the lack of institutional and organizational safeguards led to the persistence of both, emphasizing a continuity between the 'old' and 'new' models (Ongaro et al., 2023).

4.2 Selection in the PCSTM: the evolution of organizational solutions for navigating the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox

The 1995 inaugural PCSTM edition aimed to depart from traditional hiring practices by embracing innovative post-bureaucratic principles in the hiring of public managers. However, changes proceeded more slowly than expected.

The selection process predominantly adhered to the bureaucratic model. It prioritized candidates' knowledge of jurisprudence (e.g., constitutional, administrative, and labor-laws), over other skills and competencies. The pre-selection (the first step of the selection) focused on assessing candidates' legal and economic knowledge, with minimal consideration of general culture, logical and analytical abilities. Written tests involved the writing of two essays, one juridical and one socio-political. The final selection phase consisted of an interview assessing the candidate's knowledge of subjects like administrative, labor, penal-law, economics, history, and sociology.

Aligned with the bureaucratic model (Capano, 2003), legal skills predominated over technical ones (Ongaro et al., 2023). Furthermore, the commissioners evaluating candidates were drawn from the legal system, comprising magistrates and lawyers, highlighting the legal-centric approach of early PCSTMs.

In the fourth edition (2005) three challenges emerged. First, public management, although limited to 'planning and programming', 'accounting' and 'control', became a subject of assessment, while history or sociology was removed. Secondly, along with two written tests on law and economics/public management, a third written test on a foreign language was added. Third, pre-selection focused solely on law, economics, political and administrative science, contemporary history, and public management, excluding assessment of logical or analytical abilities. This framework persisted in the fifth edition (2011), with the addition of a practical test on IT tools during the interview. The subsequent sixth edition in 2012 was marked by two notable changes: the exclusion of public management from assessment subjects, and the reintroduction of logical skills verification in pre-selection alongside legal and economic knowledge.

Until the sixth PCSTM, there had been an evident emphasis on verifying legal and economic knowledge, with minimal (if any) attention paid to evaluating managerial roles or knowledge extending beyond technical aspects. Therefore, the organizational solutions adopted exhibited typical bureaucratic features.

The seventh (2018) and eighth (2020) editions introduced significant innovations in candidate selection, embracing elements proper to post-bureaucratic approaches. The list of assessment subjects included public management and public policy analysis alongside law and economics. The pre-selection test comprised questions assessing both of these subjects and logical reasoning. Two written tests consisted of essays based on case-studies. They evaluated candidates' knowledge, reasoning aptitude, the ability to critically use and analyze disciplinary tools. The interview assessed candidates on their possession of organizational and managerial skills relevant to specific managerial situations. These editions witnessed a combination of bureaucratic features (e.g., legal skills assessment) and post-bureaucratic ones (e.g., managerial skills assessment).

In the recent 2022 edition, greater emphasis was given to managerial skills in response to the NSA's enforcement of the "Skills model for managers of the Italian PA", which delineate the skills and required of public managers. Pre-selection evaluated situational and reasoning (verbal, abstract, numerical) abilities alongside knowledge about 'digital innovation' and other subjects. The first written test evaluated candidates from a multidisciplinary perspective encompassing legal, economic, public management, and public policy analysis. The focus shifted to the candidate's ability to use tools and methodologies from these disciplines to formulate diagnoses and propose reasoned solutions to PA issues. The second, 'in-tray', test simulated work situations to assess candidates' managerial abilities. The interview aligned with NSA guidelines by focusing on both skills and knowledge. Therefore, from the seventh edition onwards, post-bureaucratic approaches emerged as organizational solutions within the PCSTM, replacing the exclusive dominance of bureaucracy.

4.3 Training in the PCSTM: evolution of the organizational solutions for navigating the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox

In the first four PCSTM editions, both the training domain and selection's organizational solutions reflect bureaucratic traits. For example, in the fourth edition (2005), courses predominantly employed traditional frontal teaching methods and scholastic learning approaches. The syllabuses covered codified scientific disciplines (e.g., economics, history, management) especially related to the legal realm (e.g., regulations, contracts, and normative techniques). Similarly, the 'public management' course was primarily focused on teaching norms about controls and planning. Only limited hours were allocated to courses enhancing other managerial skills, like communication or decision-making. This legalistic orientation was reinforced by the predominantly legal or economic background of the teachers (lawyers or magistrates), with a minimal number of cognitive-communicative or economic-political science experts. Despite efforts to incorporate post-bureaucratic elements, like courses on communication and decision-making skills, the prevailing approach in these editions remained bureaucratic.

The fifth edition (2011) departed from the traditional training program to align with the 2009 'Brunetta Reform'. It introduced post-bureaucratic features aimed at equipping public managers with the skills necessary for efficient decision-making and the translation of rules into tangible elements verifiable by citizens. Consequently, the training program changed radically since it now concentrated on the functional and operational roles of public managers. Unlike previous editions, courses were no longer codified into distinct subjects but were organized into teaching modules. Alongside persisting bureaucratic and legalistic modules, like quantitative methods or administrative law, post-bureaucratic features were introduced to elucidate the managerial function within PA. Prospective managers engaged in the development of managerial skills through case-studies. They analyzed complex situations and translated appropriate responses into organizational and managerial terms. While typical bureaucratic and legalistic courses persisted, they were taught innovatively through case-studies, conferences, and group-work, which were interwoven with in-depth study of managerial practices. Significant emphasis was placed on attitudinal skills, including public speaking, negotiation, and leadership. Moreover, the teaching faculty composition outsourced activities to business administration lecturers, reflecting also different disciplinary backgrounds, with lawyers and magistrates less present. In summary, the fifth edition exhibited the coexistence of bureaucratic features, such as the retention of legal courses, with post-bureaucratic elements emphasizing other skills and abilities and partnerships with other (private) stakeholders.

In the sixth edition (2012), the instructional framework retained its modular structure with content adjustments that signaled a subtle transformation. This edition showcased a dynamic interplay between bureaucratic elements, such as legal subjects, and post-bureaucratic features emphasizing practical and managerial skills. The curriculum seamlessly integrated these distinct features into a cohesive educational experience. Rather than existing as separate entities, bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic aspects became intricately interwoven to form a cohesive and unified whole.

The seventh edition (2018) brought discontinuities compared to previous editions, structuring training into three phases. The first phase, through 'development center' and mentoring and coaching activities, focused on aligning content and knowledge among prospective managers with heterogeneous backgrounds. It involved activities for assessing behavioral and managerial competencies, strengthening existing skills and addressing weaknesses. The second phase featured keynote-speeches and conferences on topics relevant to PA by influential actors. The final phase explored specialized topics through workshops which guided prospective managers in competency development rather than mere knowledge accumulation. Analyzing the content of each workshop presented a challenge in distinguishing between bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic features because they were intertwined, forming a novel relationship where legal courses and attitudinal development were no longer perceived as opposites. This integration extended to the teaching staff, which had more heterogeneous disciplinary backgrounds (e.g. socio-political subjects, management and engineering besides law and economics). Alongside lawyers and magistrates, psychologists or media professionals were also present.

The structure of the eighth edition (2020) was identical with that of the seventh, with a noticeable emphasis on the 'development center' indicative of a closer focus on nurturing managerial skills rather than solely imparting knowledge.

In summary, since the seventh edition, distinguishing between bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic features has become increasingly difficult. While legal knowledge or technical skills persist, they are intricately interwoven with a post-bureaucratic emphasis on other technical, social, and managerial skills. This integration has given rise to a novel relationship among features that were originally perceived as opposites.

4.4 An integrated view: how the distribution of strength between bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy shaped coping strategies in selection and training

The preceding sections explored the organizational solutions governing public competition for the selection and training of managers (PCSTM) over nearly 30 years (1995-2023). Categorizing these organizational solutions revealed three distinct periodizations (Table 1). Drawing on the paradox literature, we observed that the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox is shaped by diverse strength dynamics and coping strategies pivotal in determining whether the paradox manifests itself as pathological or generative.

Table 4. Periodizations of public competition for the selection and training of managers (1995-2022)

	Selection	**Training**
I (I, II, III, IV)	Either-or: only bureaucracy	Either-or: only bureaucracy
		• Psycho-attitudinal activities (skills basket) • Reformulation of teaching: some courses are predominantly "technical", while others integrate scientific disciplines with operational practices
II (V, VI)	Either-or: only bureaucracy	Both-and: bureaucracy and postbureaucracy
	• Evaluations aimed at verifying organizational and managerial skills • In-tray assessment	•Development center and mentoring & coaching activities •Integration of attitudinal skills, technical knowledge and managerial practices within the courses
III (VII, VIII, IX)	Both-and: bureaucracy and postbureaucracy	More-than: bureaucracy integrated with postbureaucracy

4.4.1 Period 1 (1995-2005): the paradox is pathological

The PCSTM emerged during a comprehensive PA reform which introduced NPM privatization and managerialization principles. It sought to hire public managers equipped with skills beyond traditional legalistic ones, departing from the practice of the past. However, the first three editions exhibited mainly bureaucratic features. Selection predominantly adhered to bureaucratic principles, with commissioners (magistrates or lawyers) having legalistic backgrounds. Candidate assessment prioritized legalistic knowledge, with limited concern for other competencies. Despite some efforts in the fourth edition to include public management knowledge, it remained confined to legal and principled aspects. From a paradoxical perspective, the bureaucratic pole maintained its predominance, hindering the emergence of post-bureaucratic alternatives. Strength dynamics favored bureaucratic solutions and inhibited the integration of the post-bureaucratic model. Consequently, the coping strategies employed followed an 'either-or' approach.

Moreover, the organization of training courses mirrored bureaucratic dominance, emphasizing traditional teaching methods and legal courses while neglecting managerial skills enhancement. Teachers mostly had legal backgrounds, which further reinforced the bureaucratic persistence. The bureaucratic pole prevailed, leading to an 'either-or' strategy.

Coping strategies for managing the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox in both selection and training followed an 'either-or' pattern, with strength dynamics favoring bureaucratic dominance. This resulted in a pathological manifestation of the paradox which limited the organizational ability to adopt post-bureaucratic solutions.

4.4.2 Period 2 (2011-2012): a coexistence begins

The second period, influenced by the 2009 'Brunetta Reform', aimed to fortify the NPM culture. Notwithstanding selection's organizational solutions remained unchanged from previous editions, the fifth edition introduced public management courses, albeit confined to specific topics like planning and programming, accounting, and control, later removed in the sixth edition. However, as in the previous periodization, the bureaucratic pole's persistence in selection hindered the emergence of the post-bureaucratic model. Strength was concentrated within the bureaucratic pole, thus denying the post-bureaucratic pole, leading to 'either-or' strategies.

The 'Brunetta Reform' distinctively reshaped training by emphasizing the practical role of public managers, leading to a radical transformation. The traditional bureaucratic focus on legal knowledge now coexisted with post-bureaucratic principles of managerial professionalization. Post-bureaucratic principles extended into networking, with teaching partially outsourced to business schools, fostering broader disciplinary backgrounds. This coexistence gained further ground in the sixth edition, especially in the training phase, for a cohesive and integrated educational experience. Consequently, organizational solutions for managing training integrated opposing forces, thereby fostering 'both-and' strategies. Strength dynamics in training diverged from selection because the post-bureaucratic pole had sufficient influence to emerge. Consequently, both the bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic models were stable and symmetrical, exerting equal force in shaping training.

In summary, within this periodization, the paradox exhibited distinct configurations in selection and training. In selection, strength dynamics favored the bureaucratic pole, inhibiting the emergence of post-bureaucratic solutions through 'either-or' strategies. Conversely, in training, both poles wielded the same strength, resulting in the adoption of 'both-and' solutions.

4.4.3 Period 3 (2018-2022): the paradox became generative

The latest periodization witnessed a change in the NSA presidency and important novelties for the PA (NRRP introduction). This transition positively influenced both selection and training because the focus gradually shifted towards evaluating skills rather than just knowledge. Official regulations implementing the NRRP further solidified this change by mandatorily assessing future managers' skills.

Organizational solutions for selection introduced radical innovations embracing post-bureaucratic principles. For instance, the interview expanded its evaluation criteria to include technical knowledge (e.g. public management and public policy analysis) and competencies beyond legal bureaucratic knowledge. Candidates were assessed on organizational and managerial skills relevant to specific situations. These skills were made mandatory in the latest edition by the "Skills model for managers of the Italian PA" which specified the necessary skills and attitudes. The written test took the form of an 'in-tray' simulating work situations to assess candidates' abilities related to managerial roles. This integration of post-bureaucratic principles with bureaucratic features marked a shift towards 'both-and' strategies. The NSA's enforcement provided equitable strength to the post-bureaucratic model, creating conditions where both poles were stable and symmetrical. This equilibrium facilitated the emergence of generative 'both-and' strategies.

This positive influence extended to training, where it prompted a comprehensive restructuring that comprised various phases to develop abilities, skills, and technical knowledge. A pivotal addition was the establishment of the 'development center', which provided mentoring and coaching for prospective managers to enhance their skills and remedy their weaknesses. Courses transformed into workshops merging legal and technical elements with practical and behavioral contents. This fusion redefined their relationship, with legal courses and attitudinal development no longer being perceived as conflicting forces but instead as complementary components. This integrated approach broadened the composition of the teaching staff to encompass legal, economic, socio-political backgrounds. Hence, traditional opposites were redefined into a novel relationship, suggesting that the coping strategies adopted a 'more-than' approach.

In this periodization, bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic models exhibited equitable strength, enabling the emergence and seamless integration of both approaches. The paradox assumed a generative configuration where the opposing poles acted as forces for positive change.

5. Discussion

This paper enriches the debate on the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox in PA by showing how the layering of organizational models (bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy) distributed strength between the paradox poles over time and across two intertwined organizational domains (selection and training). This equally influenced the coping strategies used to handle the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox. Specifically, our empirical analysis yielded two main findings.

Firstly, PAs undergo layering mechanisms as bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic models accumulate and coexist over time, each characterized by distinct features and varying strengths. By empirically showing this, we contribute to the theory emphasizing the *time-specific* nature of this paradox in PA, which manifests differently over time, and recognizing that the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox emerges from the accumulation of historical layers (Pierides et al., 2021). Additionally, we contribute to literature in methodological terms by showing the fruitfulness of the historical approach, reaffirming the need for a 'longitudinal' and 'historical' turn in PA literature (Murdoch et al., 2023). In terms of implications, this first result is particularly fertile. The time-specific nature of the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox (Pierides et al., 2021) underscores the need for practitioners to cultivate *historically-embedded ambidexterity* so that they can handle the paradox effectively. Ambidexterity, understood as the ability to simultaneously pursue apparently conflicting objectives like organizing according to bureaucratic or post-bureaucratic organizational models (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004), should be complemented by an historical sensitivity. This entails framing and assessing the strength distribution between the paradox poles over a broader timeframe and avoiding a myopic fixation on the present. Embracing a historical perspective proves useful for organizational learning because it provides a longer-term outlook, disrupts repetitive patterns, and improves innovation (Smith & Umans, 2015). Our analysis reveals that an unequal strength distribution between the bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy poles generates a pathological manifestation of the paradox, prompting either-or strategies. Conversely, symmetrical strength between the poles configures the paradox as generative, allowing for both-and or more-than strategies. In this regard, decision-makers (policymakers), play a crucial role in intervening to rebalance the strength distribution between the paradox poles, thereby facilitating the transformation of a pathological paradox into a generative one. This empowerment enables actors to choose the most effective coping strategy. Conversely, in the case of a generative paradox, practitioners should possess sufficient autonomy to develop tailored solutions for each domain, avoiding the presumption of universal applicability that usually characterizes centralized solutions.

Secondly, our analysis extended to two intertwined organizational domains, selection and training, where outcomes vary according to the underlying bureaucratic or post-bureaucratic model. Coping strategies within these domains differ depending on the prevailing strength dynamics. For example, during the second periodization, the bureaucratic pole had dominant strength in selection, resulting in a pathological paradox and prompting either-or strategies. Conversely, in training, the paradox exhibited generative qualities, because strength was balanced between the poles, thus allowing both-and strategies. This second result contributes to the theory by unraveling the *domain-specific* nature of the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox. Our study highlights that the paradox takes different forms in different organizational domains. Specifically, in domains where strength is equally distributed between the poles, it is generative; in domains where strength is unequally distributed, it is pathological. Therefore, within PA, different strength distributions between the bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic poles may differently shape the paradox nature. This variation leads to different organizational solutions in the two interconnected organizational domains (selection and training). For instance, during the same periodization, generative coping strategies were employed when strength distribution between poles was symmetrical. Conversely, when greater strength tilted towards the bureaucratic pole, coping strategies led to the denial of the other one. This second result suggests that practitioners should gain a nuanced understanding of strength distribution within each domain. The choice between generative or pathological paradoxes should depend upon contextual factors that influence these dynamics. For example, regulatory measures redefining the strength distribution between the poles facilitated a shift towards openness to the generative paradox during the third periodization. Consequently, practitioners should possess sufficient ambidexterity to manage paradoxes varying over time and across different contexts. In sum, by adeptly navigating the dynamics between poles, they are recommended to cultivate a *context-sensitive ambidexterity*.

6. Conclusions

This study innovatively contributes to the PA literature by highlighting the time- and domain-specific nature of the bureaucracy vs. post-bureaucracy paradox, advancing knowledge on how organizations navigate paradoxes over time and across multiple domains simultaneously. However, our study has two limitations which could be the triggers of future studies.

First, we provided a historical case-study, uncovering strengths dynamics and organizational solutions adopted over 30-years, through extensive documents analysis and interviews. Despite claims of a longitudinal turn in PA scholarship (Murdoch et al., 2023), still few contributions develop a temporal understanding of administrative systems. We recommend further studies to pave the way for a historical and longitudinal turn in PA research, e.g., by focusing a temporal lens on the association between reform trajectories and PAs' development or on how tensions have been managed over time. Furthermore, a historical approach could benefit from longer-period analyses. Future studies could adopt this approach to analyze how paradox dynamics expand differently over extended periods, also by considering the outcomes of the strategies adopted, for example, by investigating the career trajectories of hired managers.

Second, we identified how the paradox assumes different forms across interconnected domains by focusing on the Italian PCSTM, which intertwines selection and training in the hiring of public managers. Although similar arrangements exist in other countries (Spain, Portugal), we argue that the presence of two organizational domains can be generalized to other contexts. Many organizational practices involve multiple organizational domains (job design, career management or incentive mechanisms and compensation policies) susceptible to prevailing logics. Organizational and individual evaluation or government arrangements may undergo significant transformations based on bureaucratic or post-bureaucratic approaches. Therefore, we encourage future studies to provide further insights into how the dynamics identified are manifest in other organizational domains, shaping the paradox's nature and the coping strategies.

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8. Appendices

8.1. Appendix A – Documentary materials listed by type

Type of document	Document	Pages number
Job advertisements (116 pages)	I public competition for selection and training of public managers (PCSTM) (3 April 1995)	5
	II PCSTM (25/02/1997)	6
	III PCSTM (6/04/98)	5
	Modification on III PCSTM (18/01/2001)	3
	IV PCSTM (12/12/2005)	9
	V PCSTM (5/1/2011)	23
	VI PCSTM (22/06/2012)	23
	VII PCSTM (1/8/2018)	14
	VIII PCSTM (30/06/2020)	14
	IX PCSTM (20/12/2022)	14
Tests (252 pages)	Test traces (V PCSTM)	1
	Test traces (VI PCSTM)	1
	Pre-selective test (VII PCSTM) Test n. 12, B version	11
	Pre-selective test (VII PCSTM) Test n. 12, A version	11
	Pre-selective test (VII PCSTM) Test n. 7, B version	11
	Pre-selective test (VII PCSTM) Test n. 7, A version	11
	Pre-selective test (VII PCSTM) Test n. 6, B version	11
	Pre-selective test (VII PCSTM) Test n. 6, A version	11
	Pre-selective test (VII PCSTM) Test n. 5, A version	11
	Pre-selective test (VII PCSTM) Test n. 5, B version	11
	Pre-selective test (VII PCSTM) Test n. 4, A version	11
	Pre-selective test (VII PCSTM) Test n. 4, B version	11
	Pre-selective test (VII PCSTM) Test n. 3, A version	11
	Pre-selective test (VII PCSTM) Test n. 3, B version	11
	Written juridical test (VII PCSTM) Version A	6
	Written juridical test (VII PCSTM) Version B	15
	Written juridical test (VII PCSTM) Version C	11
	Written economic test (VII PCSTM) Version A	4
	Written economic test (VII PCSTM) Version B	6
	Written economic test (VII PCSTM) Version C	6
	Pre-selective test (VIII PCSTM) Version 3	8
	Written juridical and english test (VIII PCSTM) Version 2	1
	Written juridical and english test (VIII PCSTM) Version 3	1
	Written juridical and english test (VIII PCSTM) Version 1	1
	Written economic test (VIII) Version 3	1
	Written economic test (VIII PCSTM) Version 1	1

	Written economic test (VIII PCSTM) Version 2	1
	Pre-selective test (IX PCSTM) Version 1	13
	Pre-selective test (IX PCSTM) Version 2	14
	Pre-selective test (IX PCSTM) Version 3	14
	First written test (IX PCSTM) Version 1	2
	First written test (IX PCSTM) Version 2	2
	First written test (IX PCSTM) Version 3	2
	In-tray test (IX PCSTM) Version 1	2
	In-tray test (IX PCSTM) Version 2	2
	In-tray test (IX PCSTM) Version 3	2
	English test (IX PCSTM) Version 1	1
	English test (IX PCSTM) Version 2	1
	English test (IX PCSTM) Version 3	1
Essays and report (630 pages)	B.G.Mattarella (2009) "State public managers and the role of the Higher School of Public Administration"	227
	"Training the PA: NSA report (2017-2022)"	339
	E. Espa (2021) "Recruitment criteria and training contents in the NSA corso-concorso experience"	8
	Bassanini, F. (2009). Twenty years of administrative reform in Italy. Review of economic conditions in Italy, (3), 369.	24
	Bassanini, F. (2000). Overview of administrative reform and implementation in Italy: organization, personnel, procedures and delivery of public services. International Journal of Public Administration, 23(2-3), 229-252.	15
	B. G. Mattarella (2012) "The fifth course-competition for access to public management" RIVISTA TRIMESTRALE DI DIRITTO PUBBLICO. - ISSN 0557-1464. - 2012:(2012), pp. 285-286.	2
	E. Espa (2021) "The recruitment of managers: the experience of NSA corso-concorso"	15
Interviews (82 pages)	#1	2
	#2	3
	#3	4
	#4	9
	#5	5
	#6	10
	#7	9
	#8	11
	#9	13
	#10	7
	#11	4
	#12	5
Training programs (394 pages)	Time management IV PCSTM	2
	Training program IV PCSTM	6
	Economics IV PCSTM	3

	Politics and institutions history IV PCSTM	3
	community and international relations IV PCSTM	2
	Regulations and contracts IV PCSTM	6
	Management and organization IV PCSTM	13
	Institutions and public policies IV PCSTM	3
	Decision making IV PCSTM	2
	Communication IV PCSTM	2
	Human capital IV PCSTM	6
	Training program V PCSTM	31
	Module 1 - the managerial function in public administration v PCSTM	4
	Modulo 2 - quantitative methods for public choices v PCSTM	3
	Module 3: administrative action in the national and European context v PCSTM	6
	Module 4 - public manager v PCSTM	10
	Module 5 - public manager's tools v PCSTM	9
	English (V PCSTM)	1
	Training program VI PCSTM	27
	Area II: acting in a multilevel context VI PCSTM	6
	Area I: the public manager faced with complexity (VI PCSTM)	2
	Area V: the director manager VI PCSTM	4
	Area IV: the manager between efficiency and effectiveness VI PCSTM	4
	Area III: the manager among objectives, rules and procedures VI PCSTM	3
	Training program VII PCSTM	27
	Macro-Module 1: The context and policies (VII PCSTM)	16
	Macro-Module 2: Organizing activities and people (VII PCSTM)	22
	Macro-module 3: Financial resources (VII PCSTM)	5
	Macro-module 4: Administrative action and relationships (VII PCSTM)	5
	Training program VIII PCSTM	57
	Macro-Module 1: The context and policies: the ecological transition of the PA VIII PCSTM	28
	Macro-Module 2: Organizing activities, resources and people VIII PCSTM	35
	Macro-Module 3: guiding the transformation process in digital PA (VIII PCSTM)	41
Laws (1777 pages)	Presidential Decree n. 3/1957	127
	Presidential Decree n. 576/1962	5
	Presidential Decree n. 472/1972	7
	Presidential Decree n. 748/1972	78
	Presidential Decree n. 701/1977	12
	Law n. 421/1992	15
	Legislative Decree n. 29/1993	144

	Legislative Decree n. 470/1993	12
	Law n. 59/1997	31
	Law n. 127/1997	22
	Law n. 396/1997	11
	Legislative Decree n. 80/1998	16
	Legislative Decree n. 112/1998	31
	Legislative Decree n. 287/1999 - reorganization NSA	3
	Legislative Decree n. 165/2001	168
	Law n. 137/2002	4
	Law 145/2002	6
	Legislative Decree n. 381/2003 - reorganization NSA	5
	Guidelines of IV PCSTM (2005)	7
	Law n. 133/2008	132
	Law Decree n. 78/2009	53
	Legislative Decree n. 150/2009	42
	Legislative Decree n. 178/2009 - reorganization NSA	10
	Law Decree n. 78/2010	105
	Guidelines of V PCSTM (2011)	4
	Law Decree n. 98/2011	88
	Guidelines of VI PCSTM (2012)	3
	Law Decree n. 95/2012	74
	Presidential Decree n. 70/2013	12
	Law Decree n. 101/2013	24
	Law Decree n. 90/2014	35
	Law n. 114/2014	37
	Law n. 124/2015	56
	Legislative Decree n. 74/2017	9
	Legislative Decree n. 75/2017	22
	Guidelines of VII PCSTM (2018)	6
	Guidelines of VIII PCSTM (2020)	4
	Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (2021)	273
	Law Decree n. 80/2021	35
	Guidelines on access to public management "Skills model for managers of the Italian PA" (NSA) (2022)	49

8.2. Appendix B – timeline

Year	Contextual factors	Implementation strategies	Organization of hiring procedures	Implications for PMs' hiring strategies	
				Selection	Training
1957	Presidential Decree n. 3/1957 (foundation of HSPA)				
1962	Presidential Decree n. 576/1962 (establishment of the HSPA and assignment of responsibility to improve staff selection and training methods)				
1972	Presidential Decree n. 748/1972 (introduction of management training in HSPA)				
1992	Globalization, Europeanization Diffusion of NPM principles Collapse of the party system Fiscal crisis <u>I° PRIVATIZATION</u> Law. n. 421/1992 (delegation to amend the rules governing public employment; strengthening the role of management: Public Managers (PM) operate with the capabilities and powers of the private employers)	Investment in the school for the selection of managers			

1993	Legislative Decree n. 29/1993 (Privatization of public employment: employment relationship determined by contract; PMs have the obligation to achieve results; separation between politics and administration; introduction of the possibility of access to management by external parties, through a selective public competition for selection and training of public managers organized by the HSPA)				
1994	Change of HSPA director	Centralization of sourcing processes			
1995	Change of HSPA director		I° public competition for selection and training of public managers	Pre-selective test on logical, analytical and general culture skills. Written and oral test on the technical and legal subjects specified in the job advertisement.	Frontal lessons covering well-codified scientific subjects, predominantly legal subjects.
1996	Change of HSPA director				
1997	<u>II° PRIVATIZATION</u> Law n. 59/1997 (simplification and reorganization of collective bargaining; creation of an employee code of conduct) Law n. 127/1997 (abolition of age limits for public competitions) Legislative Decree n. 396/1997 (new rules on trade union representation and collective bargaining)	Redefinition of training and entry pathways	II° public competition for selection and training of public managers	Pre-selective test on logical, analytical and general culture skills and technical and legal subjects indicated in the job advertisement. Written and oral test on the technical and legal subjects indicated in the job advertisement.	Frontal lessons covering well-codified scientific subjects, predominantly legal subjects.
1998	Legislative Decree n. 80/1998 (Contractualization of senior management		III° public competition for	Pre-selective test on aptitude skills (analysis,	Frontal lessons covering well-codified

	(top-level state managers, managers under the political leader) Change of HSPA director	Hiring managers with non-specialized skills	selection and training of public managers	synthesis, logical reasoning and problem solving) and technical and legal subjects included in the job advertisement. Written and oral test on the technical and legal subjects indicated in the job advertisement.	scientific subjects, predominantly legal subjects.
1999	Legislative Decree n. 287/1999 (organizational and accounting autonomy of HSPA) HSPA reorganization				
2000					
2001	Legislative Decree n. 165/2001 (access to the qualification of manager occurs through a competition announced by the individual administrations or through a selective public competition for selection and training of public managers announced by the HSPA) Change of HSPA director				
2002	Law n. 145/2002				
2003	Legislative Decree n. 381/2003 (reorganization of HSPA)				
2004					

2005			IV° public competition for selection and training of public managers	Pre-selective test on subjects specified in the job advertisement. Written and oral test on the technical and legal subjects indicated in the job advertisement.	Frontal lessons covering well-codified scientific subjects, predominantly legal subjects. Introduction of time-management courses.
2006	Change of HSPA director				
2007					
2008	Fiscal crisis and austerity policies (reduction in the cost of public employment to be achieved with hiring freezes) <u>BRUNETTA REFORM</u> Law Decree n. 112/2008 (converted into Law n. 133/2008, "anti-slacker" rules)	Cost control and reduction mechanisms			
2009	Law Decree n. 78/2009 (hiring freeze) Legislative Decree n. 150/2009 (Reduction of collective autonomy; introduction of performance management and variable pay system) Legislative Decree n. 178/2009 (HSPA reorganization)	Introduction of private-business logics			

2010	Law Decree n. 78/2010 (Freezing of collective bargaining for the three-year period 2011-2013 and hiring freeze) Change of HSPA director				
2011	Law Decree n. 98/2011 (extension of the block until December 31, 2014)		V° public competition for selection and training of public managers	Pre-selective test on subjects specified in the job advertisement. Written and oral test on the technical and legal subjects indicated in the job advertisement.	Reduction of teaching modules and reformulation with more interdisciplinary and management contents (frontal lessons) Introduction of skills basket
2012	Law Decree n. 95/2012 (reduction of public expenditure)		VI° public competition for selection and training of public managers	Pre-selective test on subjects specified in the job advertisement. Written and oral test on the technical and legal subjects indicated in the job advertisement.	Reduction of teaching modules and reformulation with more interdisciplinary and management contents (frontal lessons) Introduction of skills courses
2013	Law Decree n. 101/2013 (reduction of public expenditure) Presidential Decree n. 70/2013 (change of name: from HSPA to NSA)				

2014	Measures to relax the turnover block Law Decree n. 90/2014 (central training institutes merged into NSA)	Revival of the NSA's planning capacity			
2015	<u>MADIA REFORM</u> Law n. 124/2015 (delegation Law on management and reorganization of current legislation)				
2016	Extraordinary commissioners at NSA				
2017	Legislative Decree n. 74 & 75/2017 (reduction of the weight of supplementary bargaining and trade union relations and greater autonomy and responsibility for managers) Change of NSA director				
2018			VII° public competition for selection and training of public managers	Pre-selective test on subjects indicated in the job advertisement. Written and test on the technical and legal subjects indicated in the job advertisement. Oral test on the technical and legal subjects indicated in the job advertisement and assessment of organizational and managerial skills in relation	Teaching and laboratories with more interdisciplinary and management contents (fewer frontal lessons and more laboratories). Introduction of development centre activities and mentoring and coaching activities.

			to specific situations specific to the managerial role.	
2019				
2020	Pandemic	VIII° public competition for selection and training of public managers	Pre-selective test on logic, situational questions and subjects indicated in the job advertisement. Written test on the technical and legal subjects indicated in the job advertisement. Oral test on technical and legal subjects indicated in the job advertisement and assessment of organizational and managerial skills in relation to situations specific to the managerial role.	Lectio magistralis on thematic and didactic areas and workshops with more interdisciplinary and management contents Increase in hours dedicated to development center activities
2021	<u>NRRP</u> Law Decree n. 80/2021 (reorganization of the NSA and new recruitment measures to implement the NRRP) Change of NSA director			
2022	Skills model for managers of the Italian PA	IX° public competition for selection and	Pre-selective test on subjects indicated in the job	

training of public managers	advertisement and situational questions. Written test on the technical and legal subjects indicated in the job advertisement and in-tray to ascertain skills and aptitudes. Oral test on knowledge relating to the technical and legal subjects indicated in the job advertisement and assessment of skills to fill the managerial role.

Chapter III

The 'Three-Body Problem' in Public Administration

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CHAPTER III

Three-Body Problem in Public Administration

ABSTRACT

Public Administration (PA) often faces a 'three-body problem,' wherein three conflicting logics—legal, performance, and democratic responsiveness—shapes simultaneously its operations and management. Managing this complexity increasingly challenges innovation and organizational learning in PA. Drawing on paradox theory, this paper explores how these logics manifest within organizations, and how actors navigate the challenges arising from these logics, achieving different levels of innovation. Through a longitudinal ethnographic study of the Italian public sector, we observe that these logics may manifest individually, in pairs or all three at once. Depending on the nature of their manifestation, actors adopt various coping strategies, ranging from denial and defensive mechanisms to more adaptive synergies-finding strategies. However, a trialectical approach, which is crucial for addressing the 'three-body problem', remains underutilized, thereby limiting the potential for radical innovation in PA. Our findings contribute to paradox theory by introducing grater complexity to the current conceptualization of paradoxes, moving beyond the ideas of nested or knotted to include a multipolar perspective. Additionally, we contribute also to public management literature by showing that radical innovation is often hindered by the inability of actors to manage all three logics simultaneously, as this requires a higher level of organizational learning, known as triple-loop learning.

KEY WORDS
multiple logics; trialectics; public administration; paradox theory; ethnography

1. INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality and efficiency of public services and enhancing Public Administration's (PA) problem-solving capacity is crucial to meet contemporary social, economic, and technological challenges (Brogaard, 2021; De Vries et al., 2016). Even if some advancements have been made, such as the adoption of e-government systems (Kawabata & Camargo, 2023; Klievink et al., 2016), or the incorporation of green public procurement practices (Liu et al., 2021), many of these represent incremental innovations (Brogaard, 2021), and the PA seems to struggle with the deeper organizational learning processes required to foster more radical innovations (Argyris & Schön, 1978). One would expect that some of the many PA organizations operating at the national, regional, or local level, stimulated both by bottom-up citizens' demands and driven by the directives of political administrators of different ideological orientations could express more innovative potential, but inertia and short-term focus seems to prevail everywhere (Boukamel & Emery, 2017; Sheep et al., 2017; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011).

One plausible explanation of this phenomenon is the fact that – as in other organizations – PAs are affected by contradictory logic and demands, and that organizational learning is hindered by their inability to manage paradoxes, defined as competing elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time (Smith and Lewis 2011). A central tenet of organizational paradox literature (see Berti et al. 2021; Pradies et al. 2023 for recent reviews), is indeed the idea that effective management of strategic contradictions and ambivalence spurs organizational learning (Miron-Spektor, Gino, and Argote 2011; Andriopoulos and Lewis 2009; Smith and Tushman 2005). While paradox theory has been already applied to the public sector (e.g., Bednarek, Paroutis, and Sillince 2017; Cannaerts, Segers, and Warsen 2020; Favoreu, Maurel, and Queyroi 2024), little attention has been devoted to how the management of paradoxes enables or hinders organizational learning in the PA.

Moving from the observation that PAs incorporate multiple institutional logics, each of those presupposes a different "*rationality* [that is, set of] rule-bound choices among alternatives of action" (Berti, 2021), and informed by ethnographic data collected observing a longitudinal 4-year project (2019-2023) attempting to introduce innovations in the recruitment practice in the Italian local government, we propose that the cause of this organizational learning block is decision makers' tendency to oversimply tensions, presenting competing elements in dyads. The three logics that characterize our object of study (*legal*, a requirement of compliance with formal norms; *performance*, the requirement to deliver services efficiently; and *democratic responsiveness*, being aligned with a political mandate ensuring consensus) are instead co-occurring, creating what we metaphorically define a 'three-body problem', the challenge of predicting the motion of three celestial bodies interacting through gravity, which lacks a general analytical solution due to its complex, chaotic dynamics (Barrow-Green, 1997). In other words, even if decision makers appear endowed with a paradox mindset which make them seek both/and solutions (Lewis & Smith, 2022; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), their incapacity to consider at the same time *three* co-occurring (or salient) paradoxes hinders the development of sustainable radical innovation.

Our research started with a more general applied research question *(what limits innovation in the context of PA?*) but evolved to consider the more focused research objective of this paper, i.e., asking *how organizational actors can effectively navigate a three-pole paradox, fostering organizational learning?*). Our findings allow us to develop a model that: 1) articulates the possible response modalities in the presence of multipolar paradoxes; and 2) identifies factors helping and hindering paradox navigation in these contexts. As such, it offers a dual contribution. First, we add to paradox theory by showing that managing multiple poles requires adopting a trialectical approach (Ford & Ford, 1994; Janssens & Steyaert, 1999), which implies embracing a strong process perspective, one that sees change as constantly unfolding, determining "how reality is brought into being in every instant" (Langley et al. 2013, 5). Such approach enriches the simpler Smith & Lewis's (2011) dynamic equilibrium model, which is instead based on a weak process logic, viewing change as move from one state to another (Cunha & Putnam, 2019). This goes beyond the notion of knotted (Sheep, Fairhurst, and Khazanchi 2017; Jarzabkowski et al. 2022) or nested paradoxes (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Patrick, 2018), which are based on the idea of paradoxes making other paradoxes salient, rather than on that of a more complex, multipolar, attractors field. We argue that it is important to complexify paradox theory incorporating trialectics, considering that many contemporary organizations (even outside the public sector), increasingly must balance tensions inherent to organizing processes (e.g., exploration versus exploitation or integration versus differentiation) while at the same time meeting additional requirements imposed by societal responsibilities (Rangan 2015).

From a PA literature perspective, we offer a new explanation, building on paradox theory, of the factors limiting radical innovation, which does not recur to stereotypical causes (such as cultural rigidity, change aversion, excessive formalism) but that rather shows that sincere efforts to push innovation are often thwarted by the complexity of the challenge, which cannot be tackled with a sequence of incremental innovations, and not even a simple shift in logic (Argyris and Schön, 1978), but requires a 'triple-loop', radical approach to learning (Tosey et al., 2012).

The paper begins with an overview of the literature on organizational innovation processes in PA, and an identification of the different logics that characterize it (legal, performance, and democratic), before considering the opportunity that paradox theory offers to reframe the problem. The second section details the methodology used in our empirical case-study, while the third presents the findings of our longitudinal study. In the fourth section, we discuss and generalize our findings, emphasizing their theoretical, managerial, and public policy implications, and suggesting directions for future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Innovation in Public Administration: navigating multiple logics

Public Administration is under global pressure to innovate, driven by the need to modernize public services (Currie et al., 2024; Demircioglu et al., 2024) and address complex, emergent challenges that societies face nowadays. These challenges, often described as 'grand challenges' (large-scale, complex, uncertain, and evaluative problems that are culturally, politically, and economically embedded, see Howard-Grenville and Spengler 2022) and 'wicked problems' (complex, intractable, open-ended, and unpredictable issues, see Head 2019), include phenomena like global warming, gender inequalities and refugee crisis (Couture et al., 2023; George et al., 2016).

There is a growing demand for public innovations to contribute to solving these wicked and unruly problems (Criado et al., 2023). While PAs have traditionally been efficient and effective at managing straightforward, routine processes and recurrent situations (e.g., public order and tax collection) through bureaucratic mechanisms such as means-end rationality, the application of legal rules and processes, and the exploitation scale economies (Ansell et al., 2021; Mueller, 1979), these methods falter in the face of today's emergent and multifaceted 'grand challenges' and 'wicked problems' (Alford & Head, 2017; Denford et al., 2024).

To meet these challenges *effectively,* PAs requires leveraging a broad knowledge base and developing and integrating new knowledge to address these complexities (Weber and Khademian 2008), thereby nurturing public innovation processes (Ansell et al., 2021). Public innovation refers to the process by which PAs develop new knowledge to address societal challenges and implement these solutions (De Vries et al., 2016), by, e.g., learning new methodological approaches through collaborations with different private actors or non-profit organizations (Arslan et al., 2024; Brogaard, 2021; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011). Learning and innovation processes are vital for improving the quality, efficiency and problem-solving capacity of public services (De Vries et al., 2016; Osborne & Brown, 2011).

However, PAs continue to struggle with innovation, due to barriers that go beyond simple bureaucratic inertia. Typical explanations, such as political pressure, the lack of competition, or the red tape (i.e., rules, regulations, and procedures that remain in force and entail a compliance burden for the organization but have no efficacy for the rules' functional object, see Bozeman 1993), offer only partial insights.

One key challenge is the misalignment between the fast-paced demands for innovation and the slower, deliberative processes of politics and administration (Sørensen & Torfing, 2011). Successful public innovation relies on building governmental legitimacy and fostering citizen trust in governmental capabilities to address pressing concerns (De Vries et al., 2016). Yet, political legitimacy concerns often delay innovation, as constitutional routines and electoral processes create a disconnect between political ambitions and policy implementation, contrasting with the urgent demand for innovation (Currie et al., 2008).

PAs also operate within rigid, outdated frameworks that stifle innovation (Bozeman, 2000; Bruce et al., 2019). The bureaucratic legalistic structure of many PAs, though designed to legitimize and reinforce the system, can also inhibit the flexibility required for innovation. Consequently, PA constantly must find a balance between the rigidity of bureaucracy with the need to remain responsive to political and democratic pressures (Sweeting & Haupt, 2024).

Additionally, the lack of competitive pressure is another major source of inefficiency in PA. While efforts like New Public Management have introduced market mechanisms (e.g., privatization, contracting out, or performance-based pay) to spur competition, PAs remain less sensitive to competitive pressures than private organizations (Choi & Chandler, 2015). Instead, PAs often focus on meeting performance indicators set by the government, rather than achieving meaningful, systemic innovation.

The literature identified several key barriers to PA innovation: political influence, multiplicity of stakeholder interests, and lack of competition (Choi & Chandler, 2015). Barriers may relate to the need to ensure normative conformity to management practices, demonstrate effectiveness and efficiency through outputs and outcomes, and respect political mandates simultaneously. While these factors are typically studied in isolation, they do not account for the broader complexity of why PAs struggle to innovative comprehensively. Many innovations worldwide, across different sectors, despite initial promise, fail to scale or sustain impact (see Currie et al. 2024; Demircioglu, Audretsch, and Link 2024; Favoreu, Maurel, and Queyroi 2024). It seems unlikely that all PAs around the world face the same barriers. Rather, we propose that PA's inability to innovate stems from the challenge of managing multiple, conflicting demands or 'logics' simultaneously. The barriers faced by PAs relate to three primary logics (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999):

1. Legal logic ensures compliance and conformity toward rules and regulations (laws, decrees, internal regulations) (Weber 1958).
2. Performance logic, emphasizes clear and pre-established results, fosters effectiveness and efficiency, and being accountable for transparent and measurable outputs (Hood, 1991; Newman et al., 2001).
3. Democratic responsiveness logic, stresses "representativeness, political responsiveness, and accountability" (Rosenbloom, 1983, p. 221), positioning public innovations as a means for politics to meet citizens' needs and expectations, thereby influencing administrative practices (Christensen, 2024; Funck & Karlsson, 2023) and obtaining consensus. Therefore, PAs strive to be consistent with the political mandate of elected representatives and democratic principles.

Managing these logics is often limited to optimization strategies or failed innovation, leaving little room for deeper and radical innovation (Criado et al., 2023). Therefore, a more holistic approach is needed to understand how PA can manage these three logics simultaneously to overcome barriers that hinder innovation and effectively address wicked problems.

2.2. Reframing the problem of innovation through paradox theory

Leading and managing in organizations involves navigating environments with competing goals, contradictory interpretations, and ambiguous causalities. Paradox theory recognizes that organizations are not orderly, logical, and predictable entities, suggesting that inherent and pervasive paradoxes, such as exploration vs. exploitation, tradition vs. innovation, or planning vs. emergence, mutually enable and constitute each other (Farjoun, 2010).

Paradoxes are persistent oppositions between interdependent elements (Berti et al. 2021; Schad et al. 2016; Smith and Lewis 2011), appearing 'logical in isolation, but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously' (Lewis, 2000, p. 760). Smith and Lewis (2011) propose a 'dynamic equilibrium' model describing their cyclical and processual oscillation over time. In their model, tensions are often latent to organizing processes and become salient due to external pressures (changes or resource scarcity) and/or because of the measurement apparatus (e.g., management control system, policies, reward systems, management practices) adopted by organizations or individual sensemaking. Once salient, actors attempt to navigate them using various strategies. These may include separation (i.e., choosing to recognize one tension while ignoring the other), denial (i.e., refusing to see the tension at all), and acceptance (i.e., harmonizing tensions; Smith and Lewis 2011) or splitting, confrontations, transcendence, suppressing, or adjusting (see Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017). These responses fall into two major categories identified by Smith and Lewis (2011): 'either-or' or 'both-and' strategies. 'Either-or' strategies provide only short-term relief (Jarzabkowski, Lê, and Van de Ven 2013) and are considered defensive and detrimental (Smith and Lewis 2011; Lewis 2000). They occur when actors focus on just one pole, subordinating or choosing one pole to the other. In contrast, 'both-and' solutions embrace paradox by integrating and harmonizing tensions, viewing the tension as necessary, and seeing the contradictions as complementary (Lewis, 2000; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989), thereby fostering long-term sustainability. This approach can include moving back and forth between differentiating and integrating, oscillating between dilemmatic requirements, or achieving a synergistic balance (Smith 2014; Lüscher and Lewis 2008; Andriopoulos and Lewis 2009). The capacity to accept paradox requires an appropriate mindset that allows actors to recognize, value, and feel comfortable with the tension (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). These approaches can fuel either vicious or virtuous cycles. Vicious cycles occur when organizations suppress one pole, intensifying the need for the other (Lewis, 2000), while virtuous cycles emerge when organizations develop constructive strategies, enabling actors to manage paradoxes as a potential source of innovation and learning.

Over the years, significant progress has been made in paradox theory, yet the foundational premise remains centered on the tension between two opposing poles, requiring 'holding two opposing forces at the same time' (Smith and Lewis 2022, 84–85). Despite paradox scholars' explicitly 'focus on underlying tensions as dualities between two elements' (Smith and Lewis 2011, 382), strategies for managing tensions, such as oscillation, balancing, and splitting, inherently assume considering both polarities simultaneously.

Yet, paradox theory also acknowledges the possibility of multiple polarities in two main ways. First, it assumes that multiple tensions are likely to affect any organization (Smith & Lewis, 2011), and can be co-occurring (Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013). Second, it acknowledges that multiple paradoxes may inform one another (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, Chalkias, & Cacciatori, 2022; Sheep, Fairhurst, & Khazanchi, 2017). This "interference" is typically conceptualized in two ways: nestedness and knottedness. Nested paradoxes are 'similar paradoxes that show up across different levels' (Lewis & Smith, 2022, p. 533), where 'the experience at one level creates new challenges at another' (Smith and Lewis 2011, 384). Since tensions are generated by multiple poles evolving over time, paradoxes can co-occur at different levels of analysis (micro, meso, and macro) and/or at different organizational levels (e.g., executive/operational). For example, Andriopoulos & Lewis (2009) showed how innovation paradoxes are nested at different organizational levels, as the same paradox becomes differently salient. Paradoxes imply each other and navigating the paradoxes may create other paradoxes, thereby creating interwoven or knotted paradoxes. Knotted and interwoven paradoxes amplify each other, 'transforming positive features into negative ones, for example, how the most innovative talented people become the least innovative employees' (Cunha & Putnam, 2019, p. 103). Knotted paradoxes are 'multiple paradoxes intertwined with one another' (Lewis & Smith, 2022, p. 533), with amplifying (exacerbating) or attenuating (improving) effects on each other, fostering 'very different consequences to innovative action' (Sheep et al., 2017, p. 463)

However, the concept of a paradox comprised of multiple poles, such as a 'three-polar paradox' - a situation in which three mutually opposite and interdependent poles are constantly present so that even attempts at 'splitting them', i.e., navigating them two at the time, are destined to fail - has not been thoroughly theorized. The idea of a three-polar paradox has surfaced in the literature with the notion of trialectics (Ford & Ford, 1994; Janssens & Steyaert, 1999) or 'third space', which considers the developing dialogic relationships 'to enable higher-order thinking around the introduction of a third element that dereifies oppositions in a balanced relationship, opening a space for change based in attraction, not conflict' (Fairhurst, 2019, p. 8). The idea of trialectics involves the absence of a real opposition between the poles of a duality; instead, there are 'only apparent ones, that is, the opposition is a socially constructed reality. Instead of viewing the poles as opposing forces pulling in different directions, trialectics argues for the complementary relationship of dualities, much like the polar opposites of an electrical circuit. In this case, paradox is resolved through the "jump" to a higher or lower level of equilibrium caused by a reframing or reconstruction of the distinctions that create the apparent opposites' (Papachroni et al., 2015, p. 11).

Yet the original contributions defining trialectic processes pre-date the formulation of contemporary paradox theory, and it is difficult to reconcile them with the standard 'dynamic equilibrium model'. Considering three-polar paradoxes also complicates the idea that successful management (navigation) of paradoxes will produce 'innovation' (Jay 2013; Miron-Spektor et al. 2018; Smith 2014). Dynamic equilibrium of paradoxes fosters sustainability by 'enabling learning and creativity' (Smith and Lewis 2011, 393), and effective management of paradoxes fosters organizational learning (Berti & Cunha, 2023; Bloodgood & Chae, 2010; Cunha et al., 2021), defined as generating new knowledge, enhancing organizational competence and adapting to changes in external environment (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

Thus, we consider learning and innovation processes within PA as affected by distinct yet intertwined legal, performance, and democratic responsiveness logics, thereby constituting a three-polar paradox. While these logics are interdependent, their simultaneous pursuit with equal intensity can generate tensions that impede progress, and we aim to uncover how PA can effectively manage this 'three-body problem' to enhance organizational learning and innovation. This study contributes to complexify paradox theory adopting a 'trialectic' lens, advancing the understanding of paradox as composed of multiple simultaneous poles. To our knowledge, no existing studies have addressed this theoretical framework, making our inquiry innovative and timely.

3. METHODS

Our ethnographic study of a 4-years project (2019-2023) aims to develop an understanding of how actors operating in Public Administration effectively navigate a three-polar paradox – composed of legal, performance, and democratic responsiveness logics – to foster learning innovation. Analyzing in-depth data over years allowed us to generate novel insights about the presence of three logics. In addition, this surfaced differential patterns of coping strategies and outcomes.

3.1. Research context

Our research focuses on the Italian Public Administration, which navigates the tension between a complex regulatory framework and ongoing modernization efforts. Historically, the Italian PA has been bureaucratic and legalistic (Capano, 2003), rooted in the Napoleonic tradition of standardization and formalism, with public service entry based on universalistic and merit-based criteria. This dynamic is particularly significant in the recruitment and selection of public personnel, a process enshrined in the Italian Constitution, which mandates that hiring public employees must be conducted through competitions adhering to impartiality and fairness.

Consequently, Italian public service recruitment processes must adhere to a myriad of laws and administrative regulations. Non-compliance can result in legal consequences for those overseeing the selection process.

Since 1992, Italian PA has undergone numerous reforms influenced by New Public Management (NPM) principles that introduced managerial themes and contents (Torfing et al., 2020). In the last three decades reforms numerous reforms were introduced fostering flexible structures, simplifying administrative procedures, enhancing PA procedural transparency and 'privatizing' the civil service through private labor contracts. However, these reforms have been stymied by Italy's byzantine administrative law apparatus, requiring numerous decrees and secondary legislation for implementation - often delayed by government turnovers. Moreover, the complex interplay between various government levels (central, regional, provincial and local), each with different degrees of autonomy and responsibility (Ongaro, 2011), exacerbates challenges, making democratic responsiveness a significant concern. This has led to a layering of reforms, where new initiatives accumulate on top of existing ones rather than replacing them, further entrenching the institutional-administrative system (Mele & Ongaro, 2014).

In recent years, the focus on recruitment has shifted toward improving the quality of hires, with an emphasis on evaluating both technical expertise and attitudinal fitness. In the late 2010s, after years of hiring freeze, the need for qualified employees grew, prompting the introduction of innovative hiring methods. These were driven by a national modernization plan, influenced by EU governance, aimed at strengthening the Italian PA.

For these reasons, the study of recruitment processes in Italian public administration represents a fertile context to examine the evolution of complex paradoxes deriving from the coexistence of multiple logics that confront decision-makers with a variety of trade-offs and dilemmas, but also situations made *undecidable* by the compresence of need to demonstrate adaptability (to combine different requirements) with rationality requirement that restrict the possibility to be flexible (Berti & Cunha, 2023). Scholars have frequently highlighted the paradoxes associated with the multilayered nature of PA (see Jun and Rivera 1997; Norman and Gregory 2003; Ingaggiati et al. 2024; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004).

3.2. Case selection

In 2019, an Italian region, in partnership with Italmunicipia (a pseudonym) - the national association representing over 8000 municipalities – launched an EU-funded project aimed to enhance efficiency, quality and innovation in public recruitment processes. The project's objective was to experiment with new selection methods that assessed both psycho-attitudinal and technical skills, while aggregating recruitment processes across multiple municipalities. Success indicators included redefining job profiles, streamlining recruitment processes, and strengthening staff competencies in hiring. For these reasons three logics were at play in the project: a legal logic (expressed by the strict requirements to comply with the regulatory framework for public sector recruitment), a performance logic (manifest in the pursuit of effectiveness and efficiency in the selection process), and a democratic responsiveness logic (incapsulated by the need to harmonize the diverse requirements and political priorities of different local governments).

The initiative featured two experimental selections rounds, with the participation of 16 municipalities, resulting in 63 positions filled. Alongside the project managers from Italmunicipia and the regional HRM staff, various stakeholders were involved in the implementation. A consulting firm was brought in to support project design and reporting, and experts with extensive public HRM experience- including a university professor and researchers (two members of the authorial team) specializing in HRM and public management, an occupational psychologist, and two public employment experts - were involved in the process.

The first experimental selection, held in July 2022, involved 13 PAs and aimed to streamline recruitment using ICT tools, update job profiles and set a best-practice example for future selections. Italmunicipia and the region released a call for interested PAs, which expressed their workforce planning concerning the number of vacancies they had. Then, they participated in workshops to co-design the innovative profiles to be hired. Once a position profile was developed, a job advertisement was published. A external provider set up the ICT platform, and, complying with law, a commission composed of a region' public manager and two other PA's managers was appointed to assess candidates, starting with two written tests. The second phase, interviews, was organized with external public HRM experts, and commissioners attended workshops to learn new interviews techniques. Finally, 30 candidates were hired. The second experimental selection, conducted in May 2023, was led by the municipality of M., under a new law permitting aggregated selections across PAs for specific profiles. This selection, which involved 3 PAs, focused on behavioral and attitudinal skills. Shortlisted candidates were compiled into a list, municipalities within the aggregation could invite them for technical skills interviews. To organize this selection, Italmunicipia and the region requested the workforce planning of the leading municipality and decided on the profile for selection. The job advertisement was published, and the same ICT provider of the previous selection was used. An occupational psychologist co-designed the written test, based on situational judgement test, with the appointed independent commissions. 217 were included in the list available to the participating municipalities and from which 33 candidates were hired.

3.3. The presence of legal, performance and democratic responsiveness logics in the 'Civic Synergy' project

The 'Civic Synergy' project was selected as a case-study because it exemplifies the coexistence of multiple logics, each presenting decision-makers with distinct and often incompatible rationality rules. From our observations, these rationalities guide actions as the project's objectives were to '*simplify the administrative/bureaucratic burdens on PAs in selecting candidates and enabling participation in experiments with innovative competition procedures, aligned with the latest recruitment and HRM guidelines. The project established common conditions for selections with timelines and methods that create value, thereby intercepting the needs of administrators concerning staff recruitment*' (T.INT). This highlights the influence of three different logics - 'legal', 'performance' and 'democratic responsiveness' – which we explore below through specific examples. Quotations are referenced with their source, corresponding number and year of origin, whether from archival documents (DOC.), minutes (MIN.), ethnographies (ETN.), or interviews (INT.).

Legal logic. Throughout the project, a strong legal logic was evident as a complex framework of laws, decrees, internal regulations heavily influenced public selections. The Italian Constitution mandates '*competitive examinations*' (art. 97 Cost.) shaped by a robust regulatory framework for selecting employees. The Civic Synergy project aimed to address these legal constraints by '*innovating public selection systems, by addressing legal aspects such as regulatory modifications'* (DOC22) while *'fulfilling technical-regulatory obligations'* (DOC58). This effort to comply with legal requirements while reducing administrative burdens and '*bureaucratization which causes delays in hirings*' (DOC20) underscores the pervasive role of legal logic in shaping the project.

Performance logic. A performance logic also surfaced, prioritizing effectiveness, efficiency, and the achievement of clear, pre-established results. The 'Civic Synergy' project put strong emphasis on the need for '*effective, quick and economical hirings in municipalities'* (DOC26). Italmunicipia was driven to '*innovate hiring methods'* (DOC60), by '*standardizing competitions, particularly benefiting small municipalities facing economic and organizational challenges'* (MIN.2/2021). Leveraging the European Social Fund, the Region and Italmunicipia sought to *'shortening timelines compared to traditional competitions'* (DOC60) and reducing costs compared to traditional methods. These efforts for *'ensuring the efficient and effective completion of competitive procedures'* (DOC2) reflect a commitment to the performance logic.

Democratic responsiveness logic. The democratic responsiveness logics emerged through the project's political dimension, emphasizing the need for securing public consensus. The '*cooperation project'* (MIN.1/2020) was initiated by a regional political act and aimed at '*realizing a public interest, common to the participants'* (DOC2). The success of the project relied also on the involvement of local mayors, who were instrumental in signing formal agreements to participate. Therefore, mayors played a crucial role because '*the activation of institutional and organizational innovation is strongly influenced by the availability of structured knowledge that support the expansion of the consensus area and the involvement of political decision-makers'* (DOC.1). The project's political foundation, underscored by elected officials' roles, illustrates the democratic responsiveness logic, where public innovations are linked to political accountability and responsiveness to citizens' needs.

The compresence of the three logics. In the 'Civic Synergy' project, we observed the simultaneous presence of three logics: Italmunicipia and Region was driven by the need *to ensure the efficient, effective, and economical fulfillment of current legal framework regarding competitions'* (DOC2), to make the *'Public Administration more efficient and effective and more attentive to societal needs'* (DOC51). Additionally, *'Italmunicipia intends to create a network of municipalities to initiate a process that can lead to the dissemination and adoption of good practices and innovative selection models, complying with current law'* (DOC10). Therefore, public organizing in this context was shaped by the intertwining of legal requirements (legal logic), efficiency and effectiveness goals (performance logic), and adherence to political mandates (democratic responsiveness).

3.4. Data collection

Our data collection comprises an extensive range of empirical materials gathered between 2020 to 2024 by two of the authors operating as Italmunicipia consultants of the 'Civic Synergy'. Following the ethnographic tradition (Moeran, 2007), field data was collected through multiple meetings and events attendance, aiming at developing and implementing the project. Fieldwork was real-time over the course of the project, generating data in the form of minutes, notes, interviews and from archival material. To improve the accuracy and validity of our findings (Eisenhardt, 1989), we triangulated qualitative data across various actors and sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), as summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Data collection

Name	Source	Pages
	INTERVIEWS	
A. interview	Municipal employee and participant of the first experimental selection	7
B. interview	M. Municipality general director	7
Br. interview	M. Municipality manager	9
C. interview	Two interviews in 2023 and 2024	22
F. interview	Regional manager	6
G. interview	Interviews in 2023 and 2024	16
Gir. interview	Regional manager	3
S. interview	Municipal manager and selective commissioner of the first experimental selection	8
T. interview	Italmunicipia manager	6
Z. interview	Former municipal manager and selective commissioner of the first experimental selection	10
		94
	PARTICIPANT OBSERVATIONS	

- 24 days participating with Italmunicipia board and commissioners' meetings for developing the Vademecum on how to perform interviews (August 2022 to March 2023)
- 3 days assisting with webinars for spreading news about the second experimental selection in 2023
- 1 year actively supporting the work of M. municipality for the second experimental selection (2023-2024)
- 31 meetings attended from 2020 to 2023
- 3 days of workshops for defining the job profile of the first experimental selection in 2021
- 5 events attended for promoting the Civic Synergy project from 2021 to 2023

	From these participant observations, we collected the following fieldnotes and minutes:	
1/2020	Italmunicipia board and experts, regional staff	2
2/2020	Italmunicipia board and experts, regional staff	2
3/2020	Italmunicipia board and experts, regional staff	12
2/2021	Italmunicipia board and consulting firm	2
3/2021	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm	2
4/2021	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm, regional staff	2
5/2021	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm	2
6/2021	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm	1
7/2021	Italmunicipia board, consulting firm, communication experts	2
8/2021	Italmunicipia board, consulting firm, communication experts	1
9/2021	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm	1
10/2021	Italmunicipia board and consulting firm	2

11/2021	Italmunicipia board and consulting firm	1
12/2021	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm	4
13/2021	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm, regional staff	9
0/2022	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm, regional staff	2
1/2022	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm, regional staff	1
2/2022	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm, regional staff	4
3/2022	Documents to send to the mayor for participation in the project	13
4/2022	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm, regional staff, firm for outsourcing ITC tools	4
5/2022	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm	1
6/2022	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm	2
7/2022	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm, firm for outsourcing ITC tools	1
8/2022	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm, regional staff	3
9/2022	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm	3
10/2022	Italmunicipia board and regional staff	1
11/2022	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm, firm for outsourcing ITC tools, selective commissioners for the first experimental selection	3
12/2022	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm	3
13/2022	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm	1
14/2022	Italmunicipia board, consulting firm, communication experts	3
15/2022	Italmunicipia board, consulting firm, regional staff and M. municipality staff	4
16/2022	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm	2
17/2022	Italmunicipia board	2
18/2022	Fieldnotes: Italmunicipia board and experts (including two members of the authorial team), and commissioners for the first experimental selection	6
19/2022	Fieldnotes: Italmunicipia board and experts (including two members of the authorial team), and commissioners for the first experimental selection	5
20/2022	Fieldnotes: Italmunicipia board and experts (including two members of the authorial team), and commissioners for the first experimental selection	5
21/2022	Fieldnotes: interviews of the first experimental selection	5
22/2022	Fieldnotes: Italmunicipia board and experts (including two members of the authorial team), and commissioners for the first experimental selection	2
1/2023	Italmunicipia board	1
2/2023	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team)	1
3/2023	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm	2
4/2023	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm, M. municipality staff	3
5/2023	Italmunicipia board, consulting firm, firm for outsourcing ITC tools	2

6/2023	Italmunicipia board, communication expert	2
7/2023	Italmunicipia board, consulting firm, M. municipality staff, ICT outsourcer	3
8/2023	Italmunicipia board, consulting firm, M. municipality staff	3
9/2023	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm, regional and M. municipality staff	3
10/2023	Italmunicipia board, consulting firm, M. municipality staff, ICT outsourcer	2
11/2023	Italmunicipia board, consulting firm, regional staff	3
12/2023	Italmunicipia board, communication expert	2
13/2023	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team)	2
14/2023	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), M. municipality staff	3
15/2023	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm	2
16/2023	Italmunicipia board, M. municipality staff	2
17/2023	Italmunicipia board and experts (including a member of the authorial team), consulting firm, regional and M. municipality staff	3
18/2023	Italmunicipia board, consulting firm	1
19/2023	Italmunicipia board and experts (including two members of the authorial team), selective commissioners of the first experimental selection	1
20/2023	Italmunicipia board, consulting firm	1
21/2023	Italmunicipia board and experts (including two members of the authorial team), consulting firm, M. municipality staff	4
22/2023	Italmunicipia board, consulting firm	2
23/2023	Italmunicipia board and experts (including two members of the authorial team), M. municipality staff	8
24/2023	Italmunicipia board	1
25/2023	Italmunicipia board	4
27/2023	Fieldnotes: Webinar for promoting the second experimental selection	3
28/2023	Fieldnotes: Webinar for promoting the second experimental selection	2
29/2023	Fieldnotes: Webinar for promoting the second experimental selection	2
26/2023	Italmunicipia board and experts (including two members of the authorial team)	3
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	ARCHIVAL INFORMATION	
DOC1	Project's implementation document: Description of the project with the main aim of strengthening skills to make recruitment more efficient and improve the quality of social services in municipalities, objectives, interventions, expected results, and a timeline.	36
DOC2	Political act (regional council resolution) for the constitution of the project.	27
DOC5	Circular #845.	1
DOC6	Circular #864.	1
DOC7	Circular #248.	1
DOC8	Circular #490.	1
DOC9	Circular #497.	2
DOC10	Circular reserved for mayors of PAs participating in the project.	3
DOC11	Circular #461.	2
DOC12	Project intervention plan: Description of interventions, actors, deliverables, and timing.	31

DOC13	1st workshop: Kick-off meeting presentation.	20
DOC14	Circular #613.	4
DOC15	Circular #657.	1
DOC16	2nd workshop for defining professional profiles: Presentation of the results of the questionnaire on needs and skills assessment.	37
DOC17	Descriptive sheets of competence profiles.	11
DOC19	Descriptive sheets of competence profiles – Project financial manager.	3
DOC20	Assessment aimed at identifying current practices and processes used by the participating administrations concerning the definition of needs and the acquisition of personnel, as well as highlighting the main technological solutions for managing the current selection processes.	11
DOC21	Change management plan.	4
DOC22	Training plan.	10
DOC23	Overview of the latest regulatory developments regarding the recruitment and hiring of public employees.	86
DOC24	Press release for the dissemination of the first selection.	3
DOC25	Job advertisement for 30 vacancies of project financial managers.	21
DOC26	Training content plan.	10
DOC27	Decree of appointment for the selection committee.	7
DOC28	Press release for the dissemination of the first aggregated competition RL.	2
DOC29	Decree containing the evaluation criteria for the written test.	1
DOC30	Press release from the Italmunicipia Secretary regarding the first ANCI competition.	2
DOC31	Written test A of the first competition.	5
DOC32	Written test B of the first competition.	5
DOC33	Written test C of the first competition.	5
DOC34	Decree of admission to the oral exam.	2
DOC35	Structure of the oral exam questions.	2
DOC36	Motivational interview outline.	7
DOC37	Report by the occupational psychologist on the structuring of interviews for transversal skills.	11
DOC38	Press release about the meeting of the selection committee commissioners for the development of selection interviews.	2
DOC39	Press release about the third meeting of the selection committee commissioners for the development of selection interviews.	2
DOC40	Press release about the conclusion of the selection interviews.	2
DOC41	Questionnaire aimed at obtaining an overview of the current organizational structure, the most requested professional profiles by local entities, as well as the current and expected skills.	76
DOC42	Press release on feedback from the selection commissioners.	1
DOC43	Press release on free training activities for municipalities.	2
DOC44	Press release about the publication of the final regional competition ranking.	2
DOC45	Press release about the calendar of training activities.	3
DOC47	Showcase of advertisements and rankings: Implementation on the project platform to facilitate citizens in scouting and evaluating competitions of interest to apply for.	9
DOC48	Press release about the third meeting of the selective commissioners for the development of selection interviews.	2
DOC49	Job advertisement for local police officers.	23

DOC50	Vademecum on how to perform interviews.	62
DOC51	Project dissemination and communication plan.	8
DOC52	Press release for the dissemination of the local police officers' competition.	2
DOC53	Press release for the dissemination of the local police officers' competition.	2
DOC54	Decree containing the evaluation criteria for the written test of the second competition.	1
DOC55	Mock-up survey to be submitted to entities indicating the professional profile required.	6
DOC56	Written test 1 for local police officers.	7
DOC57	Press release for the final project webinar.	2
DOC58	Presentation of the final event: Overview of the project, objectives, and outcomes.	15
DOC59	Press release for the dissemination of the EU project’s final event.	3
DOC60	Final project report for activity accounting.	27
DOC62	Competency catalog: About knowing, knowing how to do, and knowing how to be.	4
DOC63	New guidelines on workforce planning.	37
DOC64	Link to press releases produced throughout the entire project.	2
DOC65	Mapping of outputs and targets.	8
DOC66	Workshop for designing a skills matrix necessary for each profile.	3
DOC67	Notes about the new law (art.3-bis).	5
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Participant observation and interviews. Overall, two members of the authorial teams spent three years in fieldwork observations, in-depth interviews, collecting first-hand data on the interactions among actors in taking decisions and analyzing the consequences (Locke, 2012). The activity of consultants for Italmunicipia allows to get insights in practices of informants, acting both as an insider and an outsider (Atkinson & Hammersly, 1998; Moeran, 2007) .We accessed seminars and workshops, formal and informal meetings throughout the project, including kickoff meetings, strategic board meetings, and joint sessions with the region and municipality. Most of the meetings were organized online, allowing the taking of extensive notes about their content, processes and decisions achieved, including verbatim quotes. Minutes and fieldnotes (67 minutes, for a total of 192 pages) provided further insights, enabling us to construct detailed project timelines and capture key-decisions. 14 semi-structured interviews with 11 distinct informants, representing all organizations involved in the Civic Synergy project were conducted from 2023 to 2024. Participants included the general director and three managers from the Municipality, two regional managers, the project manager from Italmunicipia, two selection commissioners, and two civil servants from the PAs participating to the project. All participants were involved in the Civic Synergy project and were knowledgeable about its evolution. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and were conducted in Italian, recorded and transcribed verbatim and later translated into English. Guided by extant research, we used a semi-structured interview guide. First, we asked our informants about their involvement in the project context, and which challenges they confronted with in navigating multiple logics and demands simultaneously, and how they responded to these challenges. Second, we invited them to detail the major source of organizational learning (if any) they encountered participating at the project or if they would expect to learn something, asking them for some examples of practices learnt during the implementation of the project or practices learnt and implemented in their organization after the project. Third, we asked them to describe what they expected in terms of innovation and the actual innovation implemented in the project; we also asked for examples of innovation implemented in the project or in their organization after the project. Finally, we asked them what they would change anything in their participation at the project. We adopted a 'courtroom' interviewing style to prompt detailed illustrations, enhancing the reliability and trustworthiness of our data (Smith 2014; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). These interviews facilitated further in-depth insights, complementing the iterative and cumulative nature of the fieldwork.

Informal conversations and observations during the fieldwork proved to be another rich data source. Informal conversations or emails and mobile messaging with secretaries or executives helped deepen our understanding of contextual decisions and consequences, and cross-check inferences.

Archival information. In addition to fieldwork, we gathered an extensive archive of documents, including 693 pages of project documents, progress reports, meeting agendas and press releases. These materials helped us to create a detailed project history, check and confirm facts, support observations and validate the retrospective aspects of our interview data. The archival material mostly allowed us to observe and validate some of the paradoxical tensions and coping strategies mentioned by participants, and the arguments provided to justify them.

3.5. Data analysis

Our analysis evolved through a variety of analytical techniques aimed at generating insights across the project, including memos, team discussions, detailed chronologies (Langley, 1999), thick descriptions and in-depth coding to reveal emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We organized this process into four stages, moving from raw data to theoretical interpretations. Although these stages are outlined sequentially, the process was iterative, refining insights and enhancing generalizability (Locke et al., 2008). Table 6 provides a summary of the analytical process.

Table 6. Data analysis

Step	Analytical Activities	Output
1. Develop thick descriptions to generate initial insights	• Creating chronology of the project • Developing thick descriptions	Identification of the phases of the two experimental selections
2. Contextual analysis	• Cluster of emerging issues into three different logics • Returns to raw data to confirm all instances of issues	Presence of the three logics within the project
3. Unveiling the salience of the three logics.	• Code data to identify the challenges confronted by actors • Code as salient tensions when (i) the problems were both salient and challenging and (i) actors involved were responsible for addressing the problem. • Cluster tensions into 3 groups	Identification of how the logics become salient to actors
4. Coping strategies and their outcomes	• Identify decisions in response to challenges • Classify decisions as (i) denial, (ii) defensive, (iii) both/and, (iv) trialectics • Identify outcomes	Identification of coping strategies and outcomes

Step 1: detailed chronologies and thick descriptions. We first created an extensive chronology of the Civic Synergy project. We mapped critical elements, including relevant meetings, key participants, major decisions affecting the project. We segmented the data chronologically into different phases as project evolved over time. We distinguished between two macro-periods: the first and second experimental selections. Within each experimental selection, we identified similar phases typical of public employment recruitment, such as job analysis, job profile identification, recruitment planning, and candidate selection. This mapping established a factual foundation, serving as the basis for writing detailed chronological descriptions. We frequently returned to thick descriptions and maps as we conducted subsequent analyses.

Step 2: contextual analysis. We were alerted to the presence of the three different logics within our data based on the analytic memos that the two members of the authorial team made through fieldwork, which we shared and discussed. This inductive foundation for positioning our work was further consolidated during the analysis, as the thick descriptions we generated also reflected the presence of the three logics. Using open coding, we categorized emerging issues under each logic as follows:

- legal logic, issues relating to (a) strict adherence to laws and regulations, (b) conformity normative principles, (c) the organization' rigid bureaucratic structure, and (d) the involvement of legal experts, such as lawyer, to validate decisions against existing jurisprudence;

- performance logic, issues involving (e) the introduction of innovative practices that depart from traditional methods, aiming to improve (f) efficiency, effectiveness, and economy (g) flexibility, and (h) accountability in achieving predefined objectives;

- democratic responsiveness logic, issues concerning (i) the respect for the political mandate, (j) adherence to the mayors' directives, and (k) the need to publicly showcase achievement to garner political support.

This list of issues became a central reference throughout the project and across all collected materials. We relate the presence of the three logics in our case-study in the previous section.

Step 3: unveiling the salience of the three logics. To address the research questions about 'how can PA actors effectively navigate a three-pole paradox - balancing legal, performance, and democratic responsiveness rationalities - to foster innovation in their organizations?', we draw upon dynamic equilibrium framework (Smith and Lewis 2011). We began by identifying how the three logics became salient to actors. Tensions were deemed 'salient' when actors faced competing demands, opposing alternatives and contradictory goals and requirements (Putnam et al., 2016). We identified 'salient tensions' if two conditions were met:

- the problems were both salient and challenging, e.g., evidenced by its recurrent mention across multiple discussions and meetings, or when actors referred to the issue as 'challenging', 'unclear' or 'uncertain'. We frequently relied on our fieldnotes and memos, as well as on minutes of meetings.

- The actors involved were responsible for addressing the problem, with the continuation of the project hinging on the resolution of the issue.

In these situations, we developed additional thick descriptions. This provided a corpus of detailed accounts of the salience of each logic. For example, during the first experimental selection, discussions frequently focused on how to assess candidates' competencies. The challenge lay in balancing the need for 'economy on timing to simplify assessment methods', while ensuring 'standardized assessment compliant with internal and national regulations' and establishing these as 'best-practices'. The project's progress was contingent upon the resolution of this problem.

Then, we analyzed these thick descriptions, which gave us key insights into how logics ensues during the project. In some cases, a single logic became salient to actors, while in others, two logics became simultaneously salient and strongly intertwined to create a paradoxical situation. In other instances, all three logics were perceived simultaneously by actors, leading to the emergence of what we termed 'trialectics'.

Step 4: coping strategies and their outcomes. Once tensions became salient, actors were prompted to manage them. Drawing on Smith & Lewis' dynamic equilibrium model (2011), we identified the coping strategies used by actors to navigate paradoxical logics. Aligning with paradox literature, we focused on two approaches: 'either-or' and 'both-and'. The 'either-or' approach treats paradoxical tensions as trade-off dilemmas, where actors make decisions favoring one logic over the other, often leaving the paradox unresolved (Smith 2014). Alternatively, the 'both-and' approach involves questioning these trade-offs and seeking ways to balance or integrate competing demands, exploring contradictions and their interdependence (Schad et al., 2016).

However, applying these categories proved challenging when only one logic became salient to actors, or when all three logics manifested simultaneously. In situations where only one logic dominated, actors had little room for alternative strategies and were constrained to either comply with or reject the logic. When three logics appeared at once, classifying the coping strategy strictly as 'either-or' or 'both-and' became problematic. Thus, to avoid oversimplification, we chose not to strictly rely on these terms and instead identified four distinct coping strategies, still informed by paradox literature:

- Denial strategies: actors apply the same routine repeatedly, ignoring or downplaying paradoxes.

- Defensive strategies: minor corrections were made, often involving separation and typically addressing one logic at time while sidelining others.

- Synergies-finding strategies: actors attempt to negotiate tensions between two logics by oscillating between them or adopting tightrope-walking approach, trying to balance competing demands.

- Trialectics: actors flexibly navigate multiple logics simultaneously, seeking balance and equilibrium through flexible management.

After identifying these coping strategies, we shifted our focus to their outcomes. Specifically, we sought the consequences of these strategies in terms of innovation and organizational learning. Our goal was to uncover whether the strategies led to meaningful innovation or reinforced existing practices. To do this, we compared the initial objectives of the decisions made with the actual outcomes achieved. For example, we analyzed how PAs traditionally conducted job analyses and compared that with the methods used in the project. We corroborated our findings by interviewing participants and cross-referencing them with archival materials. This allowed us to assess whether the coping strategies fostered innovation or simply perpetuated routine practices.

Analytical quality. We ensured the rigor of this analysis in several ways. First, we engaged closely with participants, incorporating their feedback throughout the process. Second, we maintained constant team discussions and regularly shared memos to refine our insights. Third, we employed triangulation by using multiple data sources and performed several iterative analytical steps, even during data collection. Lastly, we returned to the field after the initial analysis, to 'test' the emerging patterns, assessing whether they were consistent across our dataset or if alternative patterns or explanations surfaced. This ongoing data collection not only deepened our insights, but also confirmed our findings.

4. FINDINGS

Our findings are in two parts. First, we explore how the three logics – legal, performance and democratic responsiveness - clash during specific decision-making processes. This involves analyzing how these logics become salient at different moments, for different actors, and in varying ways. Second, we discuss the attempts to manage these challenges and their outcomes. In some instances, the strategies used result in innovation and organizational learning; in others, they fail to produce the intended results. Interestingly, even when these efforts align with the principles of paradox theory, they sometimes fall short. To ground our analysis in context, we incorporate quotations referenced by their source, number and year of origin, whether from archival documents (DOC.), minutes (MIN.), ethnographies (ETN.), or interviews (INT.), as well as vignettes that illustrate key moments.

4.1. When logics become salient: how actors confronted with challenges informed by legal, performance, and democratic responsiveness logic

Throughout the project, external pressures (i.e., changes in context, organizational plurality, resource scarcity), or the individual sensemaking or the measurement apparatus adopted by organizations (i.e., management control system, policies, reward systems and management practices), frequently brought challenges to the forefront for actors. We observed that these challenges often involved aspects of the legal, performance and democratic responsiveness logics. While these logics coexist and often contradict each other, they do not always manifest simultaneously. Actors may experience these logics individually – perceiving one logic at time – or in pairs, which creates an 'ordinary' paradoxical situation. However, in more complex scenarios, all three logics intersects, fostering challenges where actors confront with multiple, interdependent tensions. We term this challenge a 'three-body problem', describing the experience of perceiving multiple, mutually constitutive and co-evolving paradoxical tensions among the three poles.

In this section, we show of each of this situation became salient to actors.

Case 1: Challenges informed by a single pole of the paradox. Throughout the project, actors experienced challenges which presented features belonging to just one single logic. We identified these challenges as the ones where a single logic manifested and they are exemplified by three scenarios: (i) when actors confronted with the need to reaching consensus with internal and external partners to advance the project *(democratic responsiveness)*, (ii) when they must plan recruitment *(performance),* and (iii) when actors should draft job advertisements *(legal).*

We observed a recurrent challenge during meetings between the region, Italmunicipia, and experts, emerged from the need from the region to gain union approval for the project. Unions, which oversee HR decisions, needed to be 'provided updates on project progress' (MIN.8/2022). However, Italmunicipia and the experts expressed concerns about the unions' involvement, particularly since unions were to be 'informed about and validate the job profiles' under selection (MIN.6/2022). Italmunicipia raised concerns that gaining union approval could slow down the project's advancement. This challenge was rooted in the region's need to align with political mandates and secure internal and external legitimacy. This was reflected also in their proposal that 'the candidate assessment commission be chaired by a woman to align with the Three-Year Positive Action Plan' (MIN.8/2022), issued by the regional government. Here, the challenge was largely shaped by political pressures and the need to maintain external and internal legitimacy.

Planning the recruitment posed another significant challenge for the project. The recruitment strategy was complex due to the conflicting goals of innovation and practicality. The primary goal of the recruitment was breaking with the past, aligning with '*the innovative nature of the project'* (MIN.4/2023). During an interview, a manager from M. municipality emphasized that the recruitment strategy should be shaped by '*marketing strategy, aligning to the trends of more progressive institutions, and by attractiveness reasons, as there's a significant drop-out between those who apply and those who attend the tests'* (INT.C/2023). However, an overly innovative recruitment process risked attracting too many applicants, making it difficult to manage the selection process. While some criteria needed to be established, the main priority was to *'avoid overly stringent candidate requirements, which could severely limit the applicant pool'* (MIN.2/2022). The challenge, therefore, was to balance innovation with feasibility while maintaining cost-effectiveness and ensuring the recruitment aligned with the project's overarching objectives

The process of drafting the job advertisement revealed another significant challenge throughout the project. While the project's goals were innovative, the need to comply with the complex legal framework remained a central concern for the actors involved. Legal regulations and internal policies strictly dictated the content of job advertisements, creating a constraint for experts from Italmunicipia, the region, and M. municipality. They were compelled to '*undertook a detailed analysis and composition of how job advertisement must be drafted according to laws'* (MIN.4/2022). This compliance was mandatory to '*avoid potential legal appeals'* (MIN.2/2022), limiting the flexibility that the project's innovation might have otherwise encouraged.

Case 2: challenges informed by two poles of the paradox. In certain phase of the project, actors faced challenges informed by features of two competing logic co-occurring in contradictory pairs. We identified two scenarios where these logics became particularly salient: (i) the challenge between crafting an innovative job description (*performance)* and ensuring broad appeal to a wide audience *(democratic responsiveness)*; and (ii) the challenge between performing comprehensive interviews (assessing both technical and attitudinal skills) within resource constraints *(performance)* and complying with laws' requirements *(legal)*.

During the project planning phase, we observed that one of the initial challenges was determining the competencies that the job profiles identified for the selection should include. This task quickly revealed a paradox: on one side, actors would develop innovative job descriptions emphasizing psycho-attitudinal skills (performance); while on the other, a wide range of municipalities joined the project, therefore the profile's competencies should be broad and transversal enough to satisfy heterogenous needs and to be attractive to a multiplicity of candidates (democratic responsiveness). The core challenge lay in merging these criteria while staying true to the project's goals describing the job profile *'innovatively, coherently with the highly innovative* *experimentation'* (MIN.16/2022). Simultaneously, national priorities – shaped by a government plan influenced by EU-governance – emphasized ecological and digital transitions and PA modernization and simplification. This prompt the job description to focus competencies beyond technical skills, including managerial and project management skills (e.g., euro-project planning skills) (MIN.13/2021). These evolving demands placed increasing pressure on actors to create job profiles that would not only meet these innovative and forward-looking standards but also appeal to a wide array of PAs, particularly smaller municipalities (MIN.2/2022). This strategy aimed to maximize the involvement of PAs in the experimental phase, fostering broad consensus on the profiles to be filled.

We observed a second challenge informed by two competing logics during the interview phases, as Italmunicipia and its consultants sought to balance comprehensive candidate evaluation – specifically, assessing both technical and attitudinal components during the interviews – with the constraints of time, resources *(performance)* and legal compliance *(legal)*. The new interview approach should break from the usual practices, where questions are typically random and focus predominantly on technical competencies. This conventional method is often preferred because it easily demonstrate objectivity and analytical rigor of the evaluation. Yet, the project's goal was to conduct interviews that effectively assessed both technical and attitudinal skills, ensuring an in-depth assessment '*without allowing one aspect to overshadow the other*' (ETN.1). Furthermore, the interviews '*should fit within a strict 10-minute timeframe per candidate, enabling the evaluation of all candidates despite limited resources'* (ETN.2). Compounding the challenge, the commissioners responsible for the interviews '*lacked the specialized skills necessary to assess attitudinal competencies accurately. Consequently, the interview structure had to be simple yet standardized, ensuring consistency across all evaluations'* (ETN.2). Alongside these practical concerns, the interviews needed also to fully comply with legal requirements. Italmunicipia emphasized the importance of an '*analytical and objective assessment of attitudinal skills, aiming to prevent any legal challenges that could arise from perceived biases or inconsistencies in the evaluation process'* (ETN.3). Moreover, the interviews must guarantee fairness and equal opportunity for all candidates, with a particular focus on preventing *'any bias toward candidates without prior experience in PA'* (ETN.2).

Case 3: challenges informed by the three poles of the paradox. Finally, throughout our fieldwork, we observed also moments where actors confront with features of legal, performance and democratic responsiveness logics simultaneously. This 'three-body problem' manifested in two challenges: (i) during the decision of which profiles would be subject to selection and (ii) in designing the candidates' selection.

The first challenge arose during the first step of selection when Italmunicipia, its experts, the consulting firm and the region convened in several meetings to determine the type of profile to be selected. Italmunicipia – aligning with the project's innovative objectives– aimed to use the experimental selection process as a model for best-practices. To achieve this, the job profile had to appeal to a wide range of municipalities, aligning with their political mandates and addressing diverse needs. Additionally, the profile needed to encourage participation by reducing costs for municipalities compared to conducting individual selections. Yet, the profile also had to comply with legal requirements, particularly with each municipality's three-year workforce planning, which dictates the number and type of positions they can hire. If the profile did not meet these workforce planning criteria, municipalities would be unable to participate. At the same time, the profile had to remain innovative and distinct from traditional roles while being flexible enough for broad adoption across various municipalities. This delicate balance between innovation, legal compliance, and broad appeal was the core of the challenge.

The second challenge arose in the context of candidate selection, where actors were required to reconcile the legal mandate for a selection process compliant with regulations, with the need to optimize time and financial resources, while also establishing the selection process as a best-practice to enhance the legitimacy and the attractiveness of Italmunicipia and the participating PAs. A critical point of contention was the choice between remote proctoring or in-person assessments. Remote proctoring was favored for *'its cost-saving benefits'* (MIN.4/2021), as evidenced by previous regional experiences (MIN.13/2021), but it also raised '*significant concerns regarding privacy and data protection'* (MIN.2/2022). The legitimacy of proctoring was further questioned considering '*recent legal appeals faced by other PAs using this system'* (MIN.4/2021). Conversely, '*in-person assessments were perceived as a means to increase the project's visibility to central authorities'* (MIN.2/2022), aligning with the project's broader goals of *'becoming a best practice'* (MIN.2/2022). To ensure the *'project's success and sustainability'* (MIN.2/2022), Italmunicipia need to carefully navigate all these concerns, recognizing that *'a successful participatory approach would be crucial for the project's continuity and sustainability'* (MIN.2/2022). Furthermore, Italmunicipia's consultants '*recommended adopting practical yet rigorous testing methods to ensure high candidate competency, proposing a standardized model'* (MIN.2/2022), while the region emphasize the cost-saving need of streamline the selection process *'to mitigate the substantial time investment required'* (MIN.2/2022).

4.2. Navigating challenges: the impact of the coping strategies on innovation and organizational learning

When these logics emerge—whether individually, in pairs, or in trios—they create real challenges that require actors to manage them effectively. We identified four distinct coping strategies: denial and defensive strategies, synergies-finding, and a trialectics approach. The first two occur when actors focus on only one logic. While these strategies may provide short-term relief, they are often considered detrimental in the long run. In contrast, the synergies-finding approach involves balancing two logics, whereas the trialectics approach allows for the simultaneous management of three logics.

Below, we present examples illustrating how actors navigate these tensions using different coping strategies, influenced by their perception of the logics at play. We also examine the outcomes achieved through these approaches.

Case 1: Strategies for coping with challenges featuring a single pole of the paradox. In addressing challenges driven by a single logic, actors employed two main coping strategies: denial and defensive responses. These strategies emerged when actors encountered a paradox but opted for simpler, short-term solutions.

In the case of denial strategies, actors avoided addressing the underlying tension, choosing instead to follow traditional routines. A clear example of this emerged during the drafting of job advertisements for the first experimental selection. Italmunicipia, alongside experts and regional staff, held several meetings to discuss how to draft it. The region expresses the need that ensure strict compliance with its internal regulation (MIN.12/2021), in order to '*to avoid potential legal challenges'* (MIN.2/2022). As a result, the advertisements adhered to legal requirements, including mandatory subjects as defined by internal guidelines (MIN.5/2022). Despite the project's innovative goals, the actors defaulted to standard procedures, producing conventional job advertisements with little innovation.

This routine approach persisted even in the second experimental selection, where compliance with new laws remained the priority. As one manager put it, *'innovating the text of the job advertisement, unfortunately, is limited by regulatory constraints, and the internal regulations require including a series of mandatory information. We will end up creating job advertisement complying with laws and then issuing press releases to explain to people what we are looking for'* (C.INT).

This approach minimized legal risk but ignored the original goal of creating a more innovative profile, leading to predictable, traditional job postings that ultimately failed to align with the project's ambitions. Yet, the strategy of repeating routine processes in addressing the challenge, lead to '*classic job advertisement, in fact it could be done much better than this'* (SCH.INT), even if *'the risk is that the job advertisements result as not compliant to laws and then we risk criminal liability'* (A.INT).

In contrast, defensive strategies involved minor adjustments to address the logic driving the challenge. For instance, during the recruitment phase, the challenge was to expand the applicant pool and appeal to a broader audience. Italmunicipia and the municipality responded by modernizing their communication efforts, using *'flyers and videos. We spread the information across all our social media channels. We are promoting the job advertisement through press releases to major newspapers'* (MIN.16/2023) or promoting it '*in schools during orientation or through youth center*' (MIN.20/2023). This strategy, although aligned with emerging practices in PA, was an attempt to make the recruitment process even more appealing.

> *'Since we began organizing competitions with the new regulations, which has been for about two years now, we have started going to universities to hold career days dedicated to the public administration. We do this to encourage people to work with us'* (B.INT).

However, despite these efforts, the recruitment campaign fell short of expectations. M. municipality expected its collaboration with Italmunicipia to enhance its '*market visibility and penetration, but this did not meet expectations due to a partial disinvestment and strategic changes by Italmunicipia'* (B.INT). Yet, recruitment was deemed '*ineffective, as the number of candidates and PAs involved fell short of expectations'* (MIN.21/2023), and there were concerns about '*misleading information that could deter municipalities'* (MIN.16/2023). After this selection, once proved the ineffectiveness of this strategy, the municipality took corrective actions, such as '*investing more in marketing and creating targeted communication with candidates'* (BR.INT) and creating more targeted communication with candidates, '*not just sending them an email but calling them one by one'* (B.INT).

Case 2: Strategies for coping with tensions emerging from two poles of the paradox. When confronted with challenges driven by two conflicting logics, actors adopted different strategies to navigate tensions. These coping mechanisms very depending on whether actors prioritize one logic over the other – through defensive strategies – or attempt to balance both through synergies-finding strategies.

During the second phase of the 'Civic Synergy' project, a defensive strategy was employed. Italmunicipia, the region and M. municipality, faced the task of creating a more innovative job profile for the selection process. The goal was to align with the project's innovative objectives by describing and *'rebranding a profile'* (MIN.16/2022) integrating both technical and attitudinal competencies. The profile also needed to address a high-demand area subject to frequent turnover. Several meetings to discuss about the profile were organized and an analysis by the consulting firm was conducted. Then, the profile chosen was that of *'local police officers'* (DOC16), deemed a *'safe and traditional choice'*.

'It is well known that security is a priority for the mayors, so we decided to organize a selection process for local police officers because this is a professional profile that any mayor consistently needs. The mayors want to ensure that they can promptly respond to citizens' needs in this area' (C.INT).

While this decision aligned with the political mandate and the need for a profile 'broad enough to address the needs of both PAs and potential candidates interested in this profile' (T.INT), it led to incremental adjustments rather than the radical innovation initially intended. The final job description largely adhered to a standard format, with stronger emphasis on technical skills rather than attitudinal ones. According to an Italmunicipia manager, 'the political mandate likely had a significant influence. A more conservative approach prevailed, emphasizing the necessity of maintaining the project's timeline rather than exploring a more innovative direction for the profile. To minimize the risks associated with the project's potential failure, we chose to proceed with a safe and traditional profile' (T.INT).

As a result, the need to satisfy transversal interests outweighed the drive to develop a truly innovative profile, leading to defensive strategy. Although some minor shifts were made, the logic of democratic responsiveness—ensuring the project's timeline and minimizing risks—prevailed. This constrained the ability to create a transformative job profile, limiting innovation to superficial changes.

In contrast, a synergies-finding strategy was successfully employed during the interview process for the first competition. Italmunicipia, in collaboration with experts in HRM, public management, and occupational psychology, developed a new interview methodology that balanced both technical and transversal skill assessments. The challenge was to meet legal compliance while assessing both technical knowledge and transversal competencies, in a limited time and teaching commissioners this new approach, as they are not experienced in conducting interviews. 'Several workshops were organized to design this methodology' (MIN.11/2022), involving not only interview commissioners but also 'HRM officials and regional and municipal managers, pushed by the willingness to innovate the interview process beyond the conventional methods typically used' (G.INT).

Experts were briefed on the expectations and requirements for the interviews, emphasizing the need to 'act innovatively, integrating diverse knowledge, yet remain pragmatic since the competition requires standard characteristics' (ETN.2). Legal constraints required the 'random selection of questions, prompting the need to blend technical and attitudinal assessments through carefully articulated questions that support both analytical and shared evaluations' (ENT.1). The interviews process was designed to be concise, given the high number of candidates and the limited time resources, but also 'replicable for all candidates in the selection and, in general, for all municipalities that will evaluate candidates on both technical and attitudinal skills' (MIN.9/2022).

The experts co-designed a structured interview process with a technical question, followed by subsequent questions aimed at evaluating transversal competencies. This standardized structure allows for consistent replication and was thoroughly tested by the commissioners to ensure functionality. At the same time, it facilitated an analytical and objective assessment within a 15-minutes timeframe. This innovative approach effectively embraced the need for both technical rigor with the assessment of soft skills.

'During the interviews, practical case questions were introduced, allowing candidates to demonstrate their conceptual knowledge while also conveying their transversal skills' (SCH.INT)

The innovation's impact was significant enough that Italmunicipia dedicated a publication and organized a seminar to 'teach other municipalities how to conduct interviews in this new manner' (MIN.19/2023). Furthermore, commissioners expressed 'satisfaction with this method, which simultaneously evaluates both hard and soft skills' (ETN.5).

As a result, the new interview technique represented a transformative change that has been assimilated by both the region and the involved municipalities. As one commissioner remarked, 'For two years now, our municipality has formalized this innovation in various selection we have performed' (S.INT).

'This approach led to more comprehensive evaluations than would have been achieved using traditional techniques. For example, candidates who excelled in the written exam often failed to express themselves adequately in the interview phase, leading to a reassessment of their overall evaluation. This has been an effective learning experience, and I have personally worked to disseminate it in my municipality' (Z.INT).

Case 3: Strategies for coping with tensions emerging from all the three poles of the paradox. When challenges present as a 'three-body problem', navigating them proves increasingly demanding. Throughout the project, we have observed scenarios where synergies are found just between two logics, leaving the third isolated and under-addressed, thereby inhibiting trialectic processes. This was exemplified in the development of the profile for the first experimental selection in the Civic Synergy project.

Italmunicipia, its consultants, and the regional staff organized workshops where the PAs involved in the project were invited 'to express the technical and attitudinal competencies needed to fill their vacancies' (MIN.2/2022). These workshops were crucial for building 'consensus among the population of administrators and municipalities we engaged. The primary goal of the project was to create a selection process with timelines and methods that would add value, allowing us to effectively address the staffing needs of the administrations' (T.INT).

During these workshops, three profiles were proposed 'with notable names and competencies: Project Financial Managers, Digital Managers, and Green & Sustainability Experts' (SCH.INT). Despite the diverse suggestions, only one profile could be selected, and the Project Financial Manager was ultimately chosen due to its widespread demand and relevance across various municipalities. This decision was a compromise, due to 'its strong demand among pilot

PAs, its relevance across various themes, and its adaptability for smaller municipalities compared to the other two profiles' (MIN.2/2022).

'Given the diverse needs of the participating PAs, the Financial Manager profile was seen as suitable for organizations with advanced administrative structures, typically medium-large PAs. Smaller entities, where financial management might be handled by just one or two individuals responsible for a wide range of tasks, necessitated a less specific, more standardized profile. As a result, the profile chosen for the selection remained within standard parameters' (Z.INT).

However, this approach sacrificed the third logic—performance—in favor of maintaining standardization and regulatory alignment. Although the Project Financial Manager profile had an innovative name, it ultimately adhered to conventional administrative functions, limiting the project's potential for transformation.

'The selected profile is essentially a standard administrative accounting role, ensuring compatibility with existing profiles within PAs' internal regulations' (MIN.2/2022).

'We confronted with reality: the proposals are attractive, but when applied to real-world situations, they need to be scaled back. Each PA has pre-approved profiles within their regulations, and we cannot arbitrarily modify them due to internal procedures. None of us had the financial manager profile within our entities, so we had to find a compromise that would work for everyone' (G.INT).

Despite this, the workshops and the collaborative decision-making process had some positive outcomes. The experience of working together to analyze and describe the competencies needed for new profiles had a lasting impact on some of the participating PAs. One participant remarked that the process provided valuable insights, particularly for municipalities that later needed to rewrite job profiles in line with national laws

'In our organization, thanks to our mayor's commitment to organizational well-being, when national laws required us to rewrite job profiles, we applied what we learned from this experience—analyzing and correctly describing the competencies required for the profile we were seeking and identifying the aspects to investigate during the selection process' (A.INT).

As a result, some PAs were 'able to develop more interesting, transversal profiles that are better suited to the new functioning of PA and to selection processes that consider these competencies' (SCH.INT).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Public administration often grapples with a 'three-body' problem, where three contradictory yet co-occurring logics - legal, performance and democratic responsiveness – interact simultaneously. Paradox theory, which offers a theoretical framework for managing organizational complexities, has not yet fully addressed how to manage multiple three poles at once. This paper seeks to fill this gap by addressing the research question: *how organizational actors can effectively navigate a three-pole paradox, fostering organizational learning?*.

By identifying the three-polar paradox as a theoretical construct and presenting empirical findings on how these 'three-body problems' emerge and are navigated by actors, we contribute significantly to both paradox theory and public management research. This section first outlines the study's two principal findings, followed by a discussion of the key theoretical and practical contributions.

First, we uncover a multipolar paradox system, where interactions among the three logics become salient to different actors at different times and in varying ways. Environmental factors - such as scarcity, plurality and change – along with the organizational measurement apparatus and individual sensemaking - can render one, two, or all the three logics salient to actors. Some may perceive only one logic, others two, and in some cases, all three logics may become salient simultaneously, creating what we term the 'three-body problem'.

Second, we show that actors navigate these logics differently based on how they perceive them. When confronted with a single logic, actors often resort to denial or defensive strategies. Denial strategies involve avoiding the underlying tension by adhering to traditional routines. In contrast, defensive strategies involved making small adjustments to resolve the challenge posed by the logic, providing a short-term solution. When confronted with two logics simultaneously, actors may either prioritize one logic - through defensive strategies - or attempt to balance both logics, seeking synergies-finding strategies. While defensive strategies lead to superficial changes that limit innovation, the latter approach fosters incremental transformative change by reconciling co-occurring logics. In cases where all three logics are simultaneously salient - constituting the ‘three-body problem’– actors typically focus on finding synergies between two logics while sidelining the third. While a trialectic approach that integrates all three logics would be ideal, managing them simultaneously is highly challenging, resulting in actors prioritizing two logics and achieving only incremental innovation.

5.1. Advancing paradox theory: expanding the complexity

Our findings contribute to the advancement of paradox theory, by challenging and expanding the traditional orthodoxy and broadening Smith & Lewis’s (2011) dynamic equilibrium model. Unlike other approaches that suggest paradoxes as nested (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Patrick, 2018) or knotted (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Sheep et al., 2017), we argue that the three-pole paradox we observed does not emerge from other paradoxes. Instead, it is a unique multipolar paradox where all three logics are equally present and influence public administration’s operation and management. Our introduction of the 'three-body problem' aligns with Eastern philosophies of managing tensions, particularly those grounded in cyclical change (Li et al., 2018). By incorporating a ‘three-body problem’ approach, we offer a more nuanced understanding of how organizations navigate multipolar paradoxes, thus advancing paradox theory in a way that can be applied across different organizational contexts.

This insight has broader implications beyond public administration. Many contemporary organizations, even outside the public section, face similar multipolar paradoxes, where tensions such as exploration versus exploitation or integration versus differentiation intersect with additional societal responsibilities (Rangan, 2015). Therefore, we argue for the need to 'complexify' paradox theory by calling for a 'strong process perspective' (Ford & Ford, 1994) that incorporates a trialectical approach (Janssens & Steyaert, 1999). This approach would enable a more comprehensive study of paradoxical tensions and their interactions, moving beyond the weaker process logic that views change as a shift from one state to another (Cunha & Putnam, 2019) and instead emphasizes the continuous unfolding of tensions and how they shape organizational realities. This perspective avoids reifying paradoxes and encourages scholars to adopt a more dynamic, processual understanding of how paradoxes unfold in complex organizational environments.

5.2. Learning how to innovate public administration

The 'three-body problem' has important implications for the management and innovation of public administration. Beyond the usual factors often attributed to resistance to innovation, such as cultural rigidity, change aversion, and excessive formalism, innovation in PA is often stifled by the sheer complexity of the challenges it faces. As observed in our study, the way actors perceive and engage with the competing logics determines the strategies they use to cope with these tensions, leading to different levels of innovation—from routine repetition to incremental change.

To better understand these varying outcomes, we apply Argyris and Schön (1996; 1978) organizational learning framework to differentiate between the levels of learning achieved, which correspond to different types of innovation:

- 'Zero-level learning'. In this scenario, no learning occurs. Organizational actors simply repeat routine approaches without addressing the underlying tensions. This is most common when actors adopt denial strategies, ignoring the paradoxical logics and adhering to traditional methods. As a result, innovation is entirely absent.
- 'Single-loop learning', which occurs 'whenever an error is detected and corrected without questioning or altering the underlying values of the system' (Argyris, 1999, p. 68). Here,

actors make minor adjustments to their actions while keeping the underlying assumptions or governing values intact (Romme & Van Witteloostuijn, 1999). This type of learning is observed when actors use defensive strategies. They prioritize one logic over another, making adaptive changes without fundamentally questioning their approach. Innovation here is limited to small-scale or incremental improvements, reflecting a repeated effort to solve problems within predefined goals and methods.

- Double-loop learning, a transformative process. It occurs when actors question and alter the governing values or assumptions that underpin their actions (Romme & Van Witteloostuijn, 1999), through 'modification of an organization's underlying norms, policies and objectives' (Argyris & Schön, 1978, p. 3). This is observed when actors adopt synergies-finding strategies, attempting to reconcile two contradictory logics simultaneously. By addressing and modifying underlying norms, policies, or objectives, double-loop learning fosters more substantial, albeit still incremental, innovation.

Following Bateson (1973), scholars such as Hawkins (1991), Swieringa & Wierdsma (1992), and Nielsen (1993) started to identify shortcomings in thinking about learning organizations, addressing them by going beyond a 'double-loop' outlook and then introducing another dimension, triple-loop action learning.

- The 'triple-loop learning' (or deutero-learning) (Tosey et al., 2012; Visser, 2007), involves a higher order of 'meta-learnig', understood as the capacity to reflect and inquire into the context in which lower orders of learning take place, thus fostering a more effective capacity to learn. This deeper form of learning enables actors to navigate multiple logics simultaneously by adopting what we refer to as a trialectic approach, which dynamically manages the interactions between all three competing logics. Here, the learning process is not only about solving the immediate tension but also about redesigning the organization's capacity to handle complex, multipolar challenges. This approach enables radical innovation.

This plurality of learning levels—ranging from zero-level to triple-loop learning—demonstrates that different coping strategies lead to different levels of innovation. A more complex level of learning is associated with a deeper engagement with paradoxical tensions. For example:

- Single-loop learning is often associated with framing tensions as trade-offs that can be managed with an optimal balancing choice (or even as a clear-cut dilemma that can be resolved with a drastic choice). Adjustments are made, albeit within a set model of preference that defines what is "optimal", resulting in limited, incremental innovation.
- Double-loop learning occurs when actors successfully navigate a two-pole paradox. This allows for more innovative practices, as actors remove constraints creating undecidability (Berti & Cunha, 2023), leading to changes in organizational practices.
- Triple-loop learning is required for managing the 'three-body problem,' where actors must balance the gravitational pull of three competing logics. This level of learning both demands and stimulates radical innovation by reshaping the organization's underlying processes.

Our findings suggest that PA often struggles to manage more than two logics simultaneously, resulting in second-level learning and incremental innovation. If the goal is to achieve radical innovation, PA must learn to handle multiple logics simultaneously through trialectics.

These findings have important implications for practitioners. First, PA managers need to be aware of which logic a given problem relates to, how that logic interacts with other competing logics, and the potential repercussions of focusing on one logic at the expense of others. This requires a deep understanding of the interdependencies between legal, performance, and democratic responsiveness logics. Second, managers and policymakers should focus on fostering a flexible system that can dynamically navigate the tensions between multiple logics. Rather than convincing decision-makers to prioritize one logic over another, success in PA innovation hinges on the ability to embrace complexity and adjust continuously. The awareness that innovation requires ongoing adjustments—rather than one-time solutions—is critical for overcoming the innovation challenge. Finally, by embracing this complexity and adopting a trialectical approach, PA can move beyond incremental innovation and create the capacity for radical change, ensuring that all three logics are managed in a balanced and flexible manner.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has explored the complexity of innovation in PA through the lens of paradox theory, identifying the co-occurrence of three contradictory logics: legal, performance, and democratic responsiveness logics. The *legal* logic demands compliance with formal norms, the *performance* emphasizes services efficiency, and, finally, the *democratic responsiveness* logic requires alignment with political mandate and public consensus. Together, these create a 'three-body problem', where the simultaneous presence of these logics hinders the deeper organizational learning necessary for radical innovation. Our research demonstrates that the oversimplification of tensions—managing competing elements in dyads—impedes organizational learning and innovation.

Our insights regarding the management of these logics through paradox theory provides fertile grounds for research in other organizational setting, where three or more co-occurring logics require careful navigation. We studied the 'three-body problem' in the public context, where the oversimplification of tensions, manage competing elements in dyads, block organizational learning. As fostering innovation in public administration is increasingly important in the pursuit of wicked problems or grand societal challenges, we hope that our framework will provide useful grounds for research into how innovation evolve. We expect that our findings can help also other context, beyond public administration, to further advance innovation and organizational learning through paradox theory. In particular, future research might examine multiple logics manifesting within other organizational contexts. Additionally, research can also focus on the efforts of organizational actors to navigate the multipolar systems and how these efforts foster innovation or inertia.

At the same time, our work has specific boundary conditions. First, we have provided a detailed longitudinal study based on intensive personal engagement with the project, and this has allowed us to uncover interactions and dynamics that would have been otherwise difficult to access. Yet, this also means that we have been able to document the dynamics of 'three-body problem' only over the relatively short period of our engagement and exclusively within the 'Civic Synergy' project. Further research might explore the multipolar systems and how actors cope with them historically, over long time periods. This could include insight into how different organizations seeking to provide different solutions or adapt solutions to different local contexts inform one another; zooming out to look at the navigation of multiple poles in addressing grand challenges. Furthermore, longer-term historical studies could provide further insight into how multipolar system we identify expand, shift, and even reverse (Cunha & Putnam, 2019), and when and how its navigation might become dysfunctional to the longer-term purpose.

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Conclusion

Conclusions

1. SUMMARY AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE RESEARCH PATH

This section provides a brief synthesis of the research journey and discusses its broader contributions to the literature on paradoxes in public administration. Each chapter presents distinct analyses and data sources, yet the dissertation as a whole offers a qualitative exploration of paradoxes within public organizations, incorporating various managerial actors as research participants. The empirical studies in this dissertation draw from 26 individual interviews, participant observations over a four-year project, and extensive document analysis. This diverse range of sources forms the empirical foundation of the research papers, underpinning the theoretical contributions presented in each chapter.

The first chapter provides a systematic literature review aimed at reimagining the bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy debate through a paradoxical lens. The study identifies multiple paradoxical tensions that significantly shape the functioning and management of public administrations. These tensions are intricately linked to the ongoing debate between bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy, which can be understood paradoxically. The analysis reveals seven paradoxes that operate at various levels within PAs (individual, team, leadership, organization, system, and ecosystem), encompassing key managerial elements such as task prioritization, accountability, and collaboration. The persistence of these paradoxes at different levels reinforces the inherently paradoxical nature of PAs, which has become even more evident in today's globalized, complex environment. Factors like increasing societal complexity, resource scarcity, and shifting demands intensify these tensions. The research highlights that PA actors adeptly navigate these paradoxes by embracing competing elements and adopting both-and approaches, which promote learning and innovation.

Moreover, the paradoxes identified are closely tied to the coexistence of bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy within PAs. Contrary to the notion that post-bureaucratic features replace bureaucratic ones, the study shows that these features coexist and interact in a paradoxical relationship. As contemporary

PAs grow more dynamic and globalized, the contradictory elements of bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy necessitate simultaneous reconciliation rather than an either-or approach.

This first chapter contributes to literature in different ways. First, while reviews on paradoxes in the PA context have been carried out on specific aspects, to the best of our knowledge, no study has comprehensively systematized paradoxes in PAs. In this way, we aim to enrich the paradoxical analysis of PAs, a context inherently rife with paradoxical tensions in their operation and management (Fossestøl et al. 2015), by showing the pervasive and timely nature of paradoxes within PAs.

Second, our analysis goes beyond the mere identification of paradoxes in the literature by discerning how these relate to distinctive features of either bureaucracy or post-bureaucracy. By adopting this paradoxical lens, we can challenge traditional narratives and explore new avenues for reimagining and managing the coexistence of these paradigms without succumbing to the temptation of favouring one over the other. The coexistence of both paradigms enables us to claim the existence of an overarching bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy paradox shaping PA operations and management. Therefore, the second contribution of this article is to highlight that the bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy debate is not just a transition (what we will describe as a 'dilemma' in the theoretical background) but a complex interplay of distinctive features that display paradoxical nature, thus offering new and enriching perspectives in managing the tensions spurring from it.

The second chapter presents a historical analysis aimed at enriching the understanding of the evolving bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy paradox within public administration. By demonstrating how bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic models accumulate and coexist over time, particularly in two intertwined organizational domains—selection and training—the chapter reveals how the relative strength of each model influences the paradoxical tensions, and the strategies used to manage them. The empirical analysis yields two key findings.

First, PAs undergo a layering process, in which bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic models accumulate over time, each defined by distinct characteristics and varying degrees of influence. The study empirically demonstrates that this layering contributes to a time-specific understanding of the paradox, which manifests differently across periods as historical layers build up (Pierides, Clegg, and e Cunha 2021). In this regard, the research contributes to the theoretical discourse by emphasizing the historical nature of the bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy paradox, and it also provides a methodological contribution by illustrating the value of historical analysis. This underscores the call for a longitudinal and historical approach to PA research (Murdoch, MacCarthaigh, and Geys 2023).

Second, the analysis extends to two key organizational domains—selection and training—where coping strategies differ depending on the prevailing balance between bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic forces. This finding contributes to the literature by revealing the domain-specific nature of the bureaucracy-post-bureaucracy paradox. Specifically, the paradox behaves differently depending on the strength distribution within each domain: generative when strength is balanced, and pathological when it is skewed. This variation in strength dynamics drives different organizational responses and coping strategies across the two domains.

The third chapter advances paradox theory by introducing the concept of a three-polar paradox, where three mutually opposing and interdependent logics coexist and interact. While paradoxes involving two poles have been extensively theorized, the idea of a three-polar paradox has received limited attention in the literature. The notion of trialectics (Ford and Ford 1994; Janssens and Steyaert 1999) provides a foundation for this concept, emphasizing the possibility of resolving oppositions through the introduction of a third element, creating a balanced, dynamic relationship that fosters change.

By identifying the three-polar paradox as a theoretical construct and presenting empirical findings on how these 'three-body problems' emerge and are navigated by public sector actors, the study first reveals that different actors perceive and prioritize these logics in varied ways. Some actors may focus on a single logic, others on two, and in some cases, all three logics become simultaneously salient, creating what is referred to as the three-body problem. The research highlights that actors respond to these logics based on how many they perceive at any given time. When confronted with a single logic, actors often resort to denial or defensive strategies. Denial strategies involve avoiding the underlying tension by adhering to traditional routines. In contrast, defensive strategies involved making small adjustments to resolve the challenge posed by the logic, providing a short-term solution. When confronted with two logics simultaneously, actors may either prioritize one logic - through defensive strategies - or attempt to balance both logics, seeking synergies-finding strategies. While defensive strategies lead to superficial changes that limit innovation, the latter approach fosters incremental transformative change by reconciling co-occurring logics. In cases where all three logics are simultaneously salient - constituting the 'three-body problem'– actors typically focus on finding synergies between two logics while sidelining the third. While a trialectic approach that integrates all three logics would be ideal, managing them simultaneously is highly challenging, resulting in actors prioritizing two logics and achieving only incremental innovation.

The findings contribute to paradox theory by challenging and expanding traditional models, such as Smith & Lewis's (2011) dynamic equilibrium model. The introduction of the three-body problem offers a more nuanced understanding of how organizations navigate multipolar paradoxes. The study calls for a "strong process perspective" (Ford & Ford 1994) that embraces trialectics (Janssens & Steyaert 1999), enabling a more comprehensive exploration of paradoxical tensions and their continuous unfolding in organizational contexts. This approach moves beyond the weaker process logic that views change as a transition from one state to another (Cunha & Putnam, 2019), emphasizing instead the ongoing evolution of tensions and their role in shaping organizational realities.

The concept of the three-body problem contributes to literature dedicated to management and innovation of public administration. PAs often struggle to manage more than two logics simultaneously, leading to only incremental innovation. However, if the goal is to achieve radical innovation, PAs must learn to navigate multiple logics at once through a trialectic approach. This involves cultivating a higher level of meta-learning, or the ability to reflect on and inquire into the contexts in which lower-order learning takes place. By fostering this deeper form of learning, organizations can more effectively navigate competing logics, dynamically manage their interactions, and redesign their capacity to handle complex, multipolar challenges.

2. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS

While the methodological and theoretical limitations of the different specific studies of this dissertation are addressed in dedicated sections in the previous chapters, several general avenues for further research have emerged. Here I want to report some general avenues for further research that accompanied the research work and can help to further advance the potential of the theoretical framework proposed in this dissertation.

Notwithstanding the pervasive challenges faced by PA through the lens of paradox, significant resistance in the scholarship remains. For that reason, we encourage further investigations employing review approaches (e.g., scoping reviews, meta-syntheses, or bibliometric analyses) to assess how the conceptualization of paradox in PA is going or adopting broader perspective to explore all the ways in which the idea of 'paradox' is examined in PA context to deepen our understanding of PAs as multilayered and intrinsically complex entities.

Additionally, future research may focus on studies adopting a paradoxical view in PA without necessarily relying on a theory-informed framework (e.g., Bjerke-Busch & Thorp 2023). These approaches could offer valuable insights, broadening the exploration of paradoxes from various perspective and enriching the ongoing debate on the pervasive and timely nature of paradoxes within PA.

Researchers can explore paradoxes at different levels, including intra- or interorganizational levels, using alternative conceptualizations/definitions of paradoxes (such as the constitutive approach and metatheoretical traditions [Putnam, Fairhurst, and Banghart, 2016]) or integrating the paradoxical lens with other frameworks (e.g., institutional logics; see Brandl, Keegan, and Kozica [2022]; McCarthy et al. [2022]).

Despite claims of a longitudinal turn in PA scholarship (Murdoch, MacCarthaigh, and Geys 2023), still few contributions develop a temporal understanding of administrative systems. We recommend further studies to pave the way for a historical and longitudinal turn in PA research, e.g., by focusing a temporal lens on the association between reform trajectories and PAs' development or on how tensions have been managed over time. Furthermore, a historical approach could benefit from longer-period analyses. Future studies could adopt this approach to analyze how paradox dynamics expand differently over extended periods, also by considering the outcomes of the strategies adopted, for example, by investigating the career trajectories of hired managers.

2.1. Implications for practice

This dissertation equally presents some implications that can be useful for a broad range of practitioners, such as managers, employees, policymakers and educators.

The studies presented in the dissertation suggest that both managers and employees should recognize that engaging with conflicting demands— such as the coexisting features of bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy - can alleviate the stress and anxiety associated with paradoxical tensions (Kuna, 2017). Daily and strategic management should be viewed as a series of balancing acts that reconcile opposing ideas (Norman and Gregory, 2003) through open dialogue and creative problem-solving.

Managers can cultivate constructive responses to paradoxical tensions by viewing paradoxical tensions as opportunities rather than incompatible alternatives. Adopting *both-and* or *more-than* approaches, managers can find compromise solutions through promoting partnerships and collaboration among the various stakeholders involved in PA operations and management (Hernandez 2018; van der Kolk et al. 2020). This entails creating environments conducive to dialogue and creative solutions, ensuring that competing demands, interests, and contributions are considered equitably and concurrently.

Managers who embrace a paradoxical mindset (Miron-Spektor et al. 2018) can instigate cascading learning among employees. By encouraging acceptance of tensions in their work, managers can facilitate both clear expectations – providing explicit guidance through one-on-one meetings or informal interactions, such as discussions during coffee breaks – and horizontal feedback - promoting feedback among colleagues engaged in similar tasks rather than relying solely on vertical feedback from supervisors.

For these reasons, Human Resources (HR) managers must adapt recruitment policies to select and socialize individuals capable of recognizing and effectively coping with increasingly prominent paradoxical tensions (Backhaus et al. 2022).

Policymakers must acknowledge that merely prescribing a shift from one organizational model to another is naïve, as PAs are inherently contradictory. Coping with paradoxes necessitates flexibility and the ability to identify innovative solutions, meaning policies should not be narrowly operationalized as standardized regulatory instruments.

Therefore, policymakers should focus on creating flexible systems that can dynamically navigate tensions among competing logics. Success in PA innovation hinges on the ability to embrace complexity and make continuous adjustments rather than relying on one-time solutions.

Finally, PA education should equip current and future employees to navigate the evolving demands of public administration. Training programs must focus on developing paradoxical skills, including recognizing the cyclical nature of paradoxical tensions and practicing reflection and relationship-building to cope effectively with these challenges (Backhaus et al. 2022).

To activate both-and strategies, it is essential to foster a paradoxical mindset and skillset, enabling employees to recognize and address paradoxical tensions. Educators should emphasize that neglecting one side of a paradox leads to negative outcomes, such as increased frustration and reduced job effectiveness. Training should also highlight the importance of collaboration and network engagement with diverse actors, enhancing reflective and relational practices as well as communication skills. Furthermore, managers should be trained to be receptive to proposals from all actors within the PA ecosystem, facilitating two-way interactions and combining top-down and bottom-up approaches.

Beside these general considerations, this dissertation highlights that the paradoxes inherent in public context presents some specific features. They are *time-specific, domain-specific* and constitute a multipolar system. Hence, some detailed implications for practitioners are presented:

Historical dimensions of paradoxes. The time-specific nature of paradoxes (Pierides, Clegg, and e Cunha 2021) highlights the need for practitioners to cultivate *historically-embedded ambidexterity*. This involves:

- understanding ambidexterity: recognizing the need to pursue seemingly conflicting objectives (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004).

- Developing historical sensitivity: Framing and assessing the strength distribution between paradox poles over time to avoid a myopic focus on present dynamics. This perspective fosters organizational learning by providing a longer-term view, disrupting repetitive patterns, and enhancing innovation (Smith & Umans, 2015).

Nuanced understanding of domain-specific paradoxes. The domain-specific nature of the paradox encourages practitioners to develop a nuanced understanding of the strength distribution within each domain, recognizing that the choice between generative and pathological paradoxes is influenced by contextual factors. For instance, regulatory measures that redefine strength distributions can facilitate a shift toward generative paradoxes. Therefore, practitioners must possess sufficient ambidexterity to manage these evolving paradoxes across different contexts, cultivating *context-sensitive* strategies.

Multipolar context. Acknowledging that PAs comprises multiple logics, entail practices to the need to understand which logic pertains to specific problems, how that logic interacts with others, and the repercussions of prioritizing one at the expense of others. This requires a comprehensive understanding of the interdependencies among logics.

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