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## Understanding Sustainable Public Administration through Knowledge Formation

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Anna-Aurora Kork \*

Faculty of Social Sciences  
Tampere University  
33014 Tampere University, Finland  
E-mail: [anna.kork@tuni.fi](mailto:anna.kork@tuni.fi)

Lotta-Maria Sinervo

Tampere University  
[lotta-maria.sivervo@tuni.fi](mailto:lotta-maria.sivervo@tuni.fi)

Harri Laihonen

University of Eastern Finland  
[harri.laihonen@uef.fi](mailto:harri.laihonen@uef.fi)

Nina Lunkka

University of Eastern Finland  
[nina.lunkka@uef.fi](mailto:nina.lunkka@uef.fi)

*\* Corresponding author*

### Abstract

The article focuses on collective knowledge formation processes in which an understanding of sustainable public administration (PA) is constituted. We turn the perspective from the production of sustainability data to the epistemic aspects of sustainability: to justifications, rationalities, and knowing in the specific context of sustainability management in public organizations. We approach sustainable policymaking as an ambiguous and complex process that requires collective sense-making of what public organization is and desires to be. This process may lead to a reconsideration of organizational identity, especially concerning core values, purpose and expectations of PA. Through a scoping review of the organizational identity literature, we explore what is known about identity construction and identity work in the PA context. The results of this review will provide insights to further analyze what sustainable PA means through the lens of organizational identity. We suggest that, as an ambiguous policy aim, sustainability will describe the new mission of PA and set strategic ambitions for transformation. In public organizations, identity construction can be used as a tool for collective sense-making and knowledge formation that responds to the critical strategic questions of why PA exists, what it should achieve in the future, and how its tasks are prioritized. The article contributes to

sustainability management discussions by linking public and knowledge management studies and extending the understanding of sustainability as a strategic aim in both fields of research.

**Keywords** – knowledge formation; sustainability information; organizational identity, public administration, policymaking. (*max 5 words*)

**Paper type** – Academic Research Paper

## 1 Introduction

Although the objectives of economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable activities have been the subject of societal and scientific debates for decades, it remains unclear how to operationalize these goals in practice. Therefore, researchers, as well as policy practitioners, are struggling with the different political rationales — how to simultaneously pursue ecological, economic, and social goals, and how to make sense and thus ensure sustainable development both at the institutional macro-level policy and at the administrative and organizational levels in public service management. This kind of institutional complexity, with multiple competing rationalities and operational logics (cf. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Greenwood et al., 2011; Raynard 2016) related to the sustainability information and knowledge utilization in public administration (PA), and public sector knowledge management more in general, have received relatively little attention in the knowledge management (KM) literature (cf. Currie & Suhomlinova, 2006; Laihonen & Kokko, 2020).

Besides, sustainability has only recently become a conceptual focus of PA (e.g., Fiorino, 2010; Krause et al., 2016; Figueira et al., 2018; Trondal, 2021). Discussions on sustainability in PA have focused on the issues of sustainable development, especially from the perspectives of the environment, development goals, or accounting and reporting for sustainability (e.g., Greco et al., 2015; Hossain, 2018). Prior literature has not widely studied sustainability as an organizational issue. For example, Ball et al. (2009) and Zeemering (2018) stressed the need to understand the sustainability implementation process and its relationship with different aspects of sustainability in management activities and practices. Still, the foundation of sustainability information as a socially constructed knowledge and existential part of PA, has not been studied so far.

Knowledge formation in sustainable policymaking is a complex process. We argue that the conception of sustainable PA is continuously reinterpreted and redefined through social interaction among multiple stakeholders and in various cycles of policymaking. This knowledge formation process in society is thus fundamentally dialogic and sociopolitical in nature (cf. Whitworth 2014). In this study, we approach public sector KM from the perspective of knowledge formation, where the foundation of sustainable PA is constituted. We explore what sustainable PA means through the lens of organizational identity with the aim to understand how organizational identity work and knowledge formation process

reconcile different desires and expectations of PA. As a strategical ambition, sustainability describes the mission of PA: why it exists and what it should achieve in the future.

Our study contributes to public sector KM literature by emphasizing the social process of knowledge formation in sustainable policymaking. First, we turn the focus from sustainability data production to the ontological and epistemic aspects of sustainability in PA: justifications and rationalities that inform planning and implementing sustainable public policies. Second, we argue that as a result of this negotiation process, a conception and the intentions of sustainable PA will emerge and be constantly shaped. Consequently, sustainability reflects the many values, purposes, and identities of PA (Wæraas, 2010; Zalmanovitch, 2014). Different dimensions of sustainability, such as ecological responsibility, social equity, and economic performance, reflect the essence of PA.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, we provide a brief overview of the premises related to knowledge formation in PA and continue by reflecting on this in the context of sustainable policy making. To understand what sustainable PA is and what it aspires to be, we introduce and analyze the literature on organizational identity. The results of this scoping review are then briefly described in section 4. Finally, we will discuss the potential of utilizing the concept of organizational identity as part of framing knowledge formation and its relationship with sustainability policy goals in PA.

## **2 Knowledge formation of sustainability in policymaking**

Sustainable policymaking is a strategic challenge to public management despite technological advances (Milano et al., 2014). Construction and utilization of knowledge for sustainable policy development is a complex process involving politics and multilevel decision-making with collaborative governance efforts. Surprisingly, literature on public sector KM has left the social processes of knowledge formation with little attention. This has led to the dominance of a rationalist-optimist view advocating technical and evidence-based knowledge in policymaking (Laihonen et al., 2023).

Despite the wide acceptance of knowledge as socially constructed, rationalistic approaches such as evidence-based policy and KM tend to dominate the discussion of public sector KM both in theory and in practice. The prevailing KM approaches prioritize data over meaning (Dumay, 2020; Spender, 2014) and fail to address wicked social problems, such as sustainability (Hess & Adams, 2002; Kay, 2011). Traditional knowledge-based problem-solving approaches still focus on the production of more information and

sustainability data rather than the actual dynamics of decision-making and politics (Pollitt, 2006; Laihonen & Mäntylä, 2017; 2018). Critics argue that culturally and historically contingent aspects of evidence-informed policymaking and pluralistic views of truth are left uncovered (Sanderson, 2002; Dillard & Yuthas, 2013), with KM literature focused extensively on producing more information to manage ‘tame organizational problems’ (Dumay, 2020).

While a long history (e.g., Henry, 1974; Wiig, 2002) and an increasing body of recent literature promoting KM in the public sector exist (e.g., Agrifoglio et al., 2021; Dumay et al., 2015; Massaro et al., 2015), not enough attention is paid to the ways public actors constitute their understanding of sustainable PA, and what kind of policy programs, management strategies or practices they expect to lead to a sustainable future. Therefore, we turn the focus of KM to those social processes in which knowledge and understanding of sustainable PA are constituted.

Knowledge formation in PA highlights 1) the interactive and social processes by which the evidence base of sustainable PA is constructed, 2) the relevance of institutional complexity and organizational responses to sustainable development policies, and 3) the meanings that public actors attach to data and information on sustainability. From this, a threefold framework for analyzing knowledge formation in PA has been suggested (Laihonen et al., 2023). This framework considers knowledge formation as a continuous interplay of institutional complexity, organizational responses, and individual sensemaking and argues that as a result of the process, the mission, goals, and values of PA take shape.

From the knowledge formation viewpoint, the perception of sustainable PA is continuously (re)created through collective sense-making processes bounded by the institutional demands and organizational responses contingent to the prevailing societal circumstances. Sustainable PA is thus enacted by individuals, the members of PA, based on their interpretations and understandings (Weick et al., 2005). Indeed, knowledge formation is an ongoing process (Lunkka et al. 2022), that represents the evidence, values, and objectives of society. More specifically, we assert that in the policymaking context, available sustainability data and information are enriched with the collective expertise and experiences of multiple stakeholders such as policymakers, policy advisors, managers, civil servants, and citizens.

For us, sustainability provides a timely and highly relevant phenomenon to contextualize the analysis of knowledge formation in PA. Sustainability is variously

interpreted and valued in different organizational contexts making it challenging to operationalize. Such pluralism is typical for sustainability discourse, but management is often streamlined. This leads us to study the foundation of PA, its role, and the logics of identity, that is, what ultimately defines PA.

### **3 Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Research task***

We challenge the rationalistic approaches of KM by taking an interpretivist position (Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1989) on how knowledge of sustainable PA is constructed in a politico-administrative context and in organizational processes. We do this by reviewing the literature on organizational identity in PA. As this is a conceptually oriented article, our aim is to analyze how identity building of PA could inform knowledge formation, which defines the priorities that public organizations attach to the policies and strategies dealing with the different societal phenomena..

Instead of a static description of what sustainability is or could be in PA, we strive to understand the elements of the knowledge formation process in which conception of sustainable PA is constituted. We see sustainability as a profound strategic ambition, that concerns not only the sustainability data processing functions in public management but also transforming PA identity, its values and intentions to respond future policies. Knowledge of sustainability is constructed on many levels of PA, and organizational responses vary in producing the idea of a sustainable PA.

#### ***3.2 Data and methods***

As far as we know, no previous research has investigated how knowledge formation and identity of PA are connected, and therefore, we started our research journey by carrying out a scoping review (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005; Munn et al., 2018) which aims to uncover how organizational identity in PA context has been studied. The scoping review is useful for identifying gaps, general topics, and concepts used in the research field (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

Instead of systematic approach, our preliminary search was conducted in November 2020 from Scopus and Google Scholar with the search string "organizational identity\*" AND "public administration" OR "public services" OR "public sector". The initial search

was intentionally as wide as possible, as our aim here was to gain the general scope of the research field, which could be at later phases then refined and specified more in detail for systematic review purposes (Arksey and O'Malley 2005; Munn et al., 2018). The Scopus search produced 34 articles and Google Scholar 2810 articles. We screened 604 research articles based on titles and language (English), their relevance, and online availability. After reaching saturation and removing duplicates, we obtained 27 articles that were fully read. During this phase, ten articles were excluded because they did not respond to the research task. Thus, our data consisted of 17 articles on organizational identity in the context of PA (Table 1).

#### 4 Identity of Public Administration

The results of the literature review reveal that many studies covered change aspects, which stimulate the identity formulation process as a response either to organizational change or public management reform. Studies on organizational identity in the public sector context show that constructed identities may be both defensive and proactive responses to managerial reforms. Most of the studies were qualitative case studies or conceptual. For instance, higher education contexts seem to be highly relevant to study how organizational identities are constructed during managerial reforms (e.g., Garcia & Hardy, 2019; Fumasoli et al., 2015; de Boer et al., 2007). The theoretical background of organizational identity lies mainly in organization studies deriving from the fields of management sciences, social sciences and psychology. The topic has only recently become a subject of public management and public administration studies in the 2010s.

Three main approaches to studying organizational identity can be identified according to Rondeaux (2006). **Interpretative** (representations of who we are as organization, multiple contradictory identities involving sensemaking and incremental evolution), **interactionist** (emphasis on membership and collective creation of organization, co-constructed and negotiated identity, acknowledging inter-related groups, interactions and discourses) and **functionalist** (managerial action in building organizational identity, organizing and promotion of “shared” identity, symbolic management). (Rondeaux 2006).

Table 1 Scoping review of organizational identity in public administration context

Authors	Approach	Organizational identity	Context
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Bankins & Waterhouse 2019	functionalist	identity construed of external image, management style and individual public service motivation	public sector identity in the labor market (conceptual)
Beech et al. 2008	interactionist, interpretative	identity as dynamic and changeable, inherently complex and constructed through interaction	public sector change (conceptual)
Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson 2000	interpretative, interactionist	identity as an idea of being special and different from other organizations	public sector reforms (conceptual)
Czarniawska-Joerges 1994	interactionist, narrative	identity construction as a continuous process of narration	public sector organizations, state agencies
de Boer et al. 2007	Interpretative	identity as socially constructed, symbolic and cognitive side of organizations stimulating new ideas, changing attitudes and frames for action.	higher education, reform, university
Fumasoli et al. 2015	functionalist	identity as a flexible risk reducing device in strategic planning multiplicity functions	higher education, university
Garcia & Hardy 2007	Interactionist, interpretative	identities constructed by narratives	higher education, university
Mönkkönen & Puusa 2015	interactionist, narrative	identity as multiple interpretations of organization core characteristics	governmental offices, organization merger,
Palma et al. 2010	functionalist	system of meaning that guide organizational actors' behaviour, providing cohesion and security	public organization of port industry
Reissner 2019	interpretative (interactionist)	identity as members' shared understanding of who they are as an organization, the outcome of collective sensemaking.	public-private partnership
Rondeaux 2006	interpretative, interactionist	identity as a complex, hybrid and constantly evolving perceptions of reality, multiple identities	administration reform, federal public organization
Rondeaux 2014	interpretative interactionist, integrative approach	identity as hybridization, coexistence of different identity rationales and diverse perceptions. Dynamics of identification work	regional administration



Simpson & Hibbert 2008	interpretative	identity construction as a multi-dynamic process in which multiple temporalities	public sector science organizations
Skálén 2004	interactionist	identity as sensemaking that produces identity	reform program of public healthcare authority
Wæraas 2008	functionalist	identity as multiplicity and inconsistent values	public organizations in Norway (conceptual)
Wæraas 2010	functionalist	identity as the ways public organizations represent their value statement	regulative organizations
Zalmanovitch 2014	interpretative (interactionist)	identity as a socially constructed concept of what the organization is or would like to be.	public administration (conceptual)

#### ***4.1 Perceptions on organizational identity***

The concept of organizational identity has its roots in the work of Albert and Whetten (1985). They defined organizational identity as a construct that members use to describe what is central, enduring, and unique to their organization. Organizational values are also an essential part of organizational identity (Wæraas, 2010). More recently, studies on organizational identity have suggested that identity is not necessarily coherent and stable, but constantly changing, and that organizations can have multiple identities with different values (Wæraas, 2010). Instead of being explicitly established, organizational identity can be understood as a collective understanding shared by organizational actors that have different perceptions of organizational identity, reflecting what the organization is, what it is becoming, and what it wants to be (see Rondeaux, 2014).

According to de Boer et al. (2007), organizational identity emphasizes the symbolic and cognitive side of organizations and their role in stimulating new ideas, changing attitudes, and new frames for action. Thus, identity is understood as a socially constructed concept of what an organization is or would like to be. The questions that an organization may ask itself include who we are, what kind of organization is this, and what makes us different. Constructing such an identity may include strengthening organizational autonomy, controlling collective resources, constructing boundaries, and defining ‘being special’ as an organization. According to Zalmanovitch (2014), the socially constructed identity of PA

is grounded in the existence of and interaction among three pillars: political interests (what can be achieved), legal (under what structures, limitations, rules), and managerial tools (how it may be attained).

Mönkkönen and Puusa (2015) refer to ambiguity in organizational identity, which implies multiple possible interpretations of organizational core characteristics. Through dialogue, organizational actors can move from groups and practices toward joint action and into a more collective interpretation of their organizational identity. These narratives can act as stories of identity. Czarniawska-Joerges (1994) employed a framework that combines institutional theory with a narrative approach to study organizational identity. Organizational identity is based on the elements of temporality, locality, metaphors, interaction and narratives.. “The central questions are as follows: Who are we? What do we do? Who are we like? The labels from the private sector became metaphors in this specific context” (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994, 207).

The new public management doctrine has influenced identities of PA. Skålén (2004) concludes that NPM reform initiatives create fluid, heterogeneous, and even conflicting organizational identities rather than a uniform and stable business identity for public organizations. Two types of identities can be discerned: one related to the ways in which organizational actors perceive the organization and other related to the perceptions that the organization is ascribed to others. For him, organizational identity is a metaphor for discussing and analyzing the organization.

Public organizations are characterized by contradictory and inconsistent values and identities. According to Palma et al. (2010), organizational identity refers to the system of meaning that guides organizational actors’ behavior, providing cohesion and security. In public sector organizations, unique characteristics and public identity imply bureaucracy, such as strong hierarchy, rule orientation, and policy dependency (e.g., Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Palma et al., 2010). Wæraas (2008) discusses the challenges of introducing corporate branding in part of public sector organizational identity and argues that public organizations could benefit more from branding due to inconsistent values and multiple identities, rather than trying to promote one set of values and one identity at the expense of others.

Rondeaux (2014) suggests that the integration of different perspectives on organizational identities can complement each other. Reissner (2019) theorized that organizational identity is the outcome of collective sensemaking processes that connects

the organization and its members recursively and ensures that their understanding of the organization matches its purpose and external expectations.

Organizational identity can be a management instrument with multiple functions that responds to changes in the organizational field. Organizational identity acts as a strategic tool for risk management to guide the desired future state of public organizations (Fumasoli et al., 2015). The management is responsible for the communication of the desired identity of the organization, and this vision reflects the way the organization is perceived by others. (Fumasoli et al., 2015.) This may also produce multiple identities with implications for human resource management. Bankins and Waterhouse (2019) characterize organizational identity as consisting of external, intra-organizational, and intra-individual factors, such as organizational external image and reputation, human resources management practices, and public service motivation of employees. Rondeaux (2006) shows that the universal values, mission, and purpose of public organizations are linked to the two identity logics of public service and public managerialism that define the identity of PA.

#### ***4.2 Identity construction process***

Organizational identity construction can be used to examine how public organizations respond strategically to internal and external expectations, demands, and environmental changes (Fumasoli et al., 2015). Change seems to be a natural condition rather than an extraordinary event in the construction of organizational identity.

Simpson and Hibbert (2008) assert that organizational identity in PA is socially constructed through continuous interaction, traditions, social habits, and performative actions. They argue that identity construction is an emergent and dynamic interplay between the embodied interpretations of traditions and the spontaneous performative actions of organizational actors. Mönkkönen and Puusa (2015) highlighted interactive processes and stressed the meaning of conscious identity work. For them, dialogue and discourse are essential in examining organizational identity construction.

Public management reforms are ways to construct public organizations. Rondeaux (2014) considers organizational identity a prominent issue in public sector reforms and studies how organizational actors experience identity when modernizing PA. Therefore, understanding the environment and multiple perceptions is essential for organizational identification. There is not necessarily an agreement on institutionalized organizational identity, and different alternative organizational identities may coexist within the same

organization. Similarly, Garcia and Hardy (2007) concluded that organizational identities are constructed by the narratives of organizational actors. For instance, how individuals talk about themselves, the group they belong to, other groups, their organizations, and other organizations. Through this process, specific individual and organizational identities are formed and different outcomes are achieved.

Reissner (2019) identifies two mechanisms that can help in the organizational identity construction process: 1) relational positioning that draws on possible configurations of institutional logics and associated identity resources, and 2) discursive framing that captures members' hopes and expectations. In addition, de Boer et al. (2007) highlight 1) constructing organizational boundaries such as defining own activities, environments, relations with other organizations, and government; 2) controlling collective resources such as commanding entry and exit and finances; and 3) being special as an organization, such as having a special task or way of working. Features of organizational identity in PA emphasize at the same time the idea of being special and part of general category of public sector organizations (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). Public organizations have common features, such as autonomy, collective resources, and constructing boundaries. However, they also have characteristics that make them different from others, such as special purpose, competence, resources, or structures as well as culture and history (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson 2000).

Palma et al. (2010) see that following the NPM, a split between operational and strategic control has taken place. and as a result organizational mission is transformed into a more business-oriented mission. This has a significant impact on operations, employee profile, and organizational identity as identity provides meaning and security. Public organizations may identify with values that imply a more lenient identity, distancing themselves from "traditional" authoritative and bureaucratic identity. This kind of value statements can be considered symbols for constructing an organizational identity where (Wæraas 2010).

In public organizations, modern identity construction is a continuous process of narration in which the elements of narratives, "autobiographical acts", are constantly formulated and edited. Identity formulation is an interactive and collective process that can be managed as an organizational process. (Czarniawska-Joerges 1994). Thus, sustainability can act as a powerful idea that requires translation for formatting organizational identity and making sense of what sustainability means in public organizations.

## 5 Conclusions

This study examined the identity of PA in the context of sustainable policymaking. Our premise in this study was that the social processes of knowledge formation would ultimately define the essence of PA, representing its basic values, objectives, and tasks. This led us to investigate the organizational identity of PA. From our preliminary literature review, the key elements of knowledge formation in PA identity are:

- Public management reforms act as a catalyst for transformation and considering who we are as organization
- Identification process and identity work is a social process
- Organizational members sensemaking, activity of individuals in identity construction process
- Tradition is a resource for knowledge needed in identity work
- Communication and dialogue are prerequisites for collectively interpreted identity construction, managers create forums for social interaction that promote cooperation and collaboration
- Context matters, institutional power play: instead of institutionalized identity, multiple and dynamic identities, hybridization.

Although sustainability was not discussed in any of the reviewed studies, the review provided many insights into the role of knowledge formation processes in identity work. First, studies focusing on public sector reforms (e.g. Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson 2000; de Boer et al. 2007; Rondeaux 2006) and new public management in particular (Skålén, 2004; Palma et al. 2010) stress that a change in organization or strategy necessitates dialogue and collective sense-making of the transformed situation. It was highlighted that the identity of PA is socially constructed (e.g., Beech et al., 2008; Garcia & Hardy, 2007; de Boer et al., 2007; Zalmanovitch, 2014) and due to long-standing traditions of the bureaucracy in public organizations, more attention must be paid to the contextual determinants of change (external, inter-organizational, and individual factors, see Bankins and Waterhouse 2019) It is a task of management to promote collaboration, dialogue, and social interaction to construct knowledge for organizational identity (Mönkkönen & Puusa, 2015).

Second, the literature shows that multiple identities of PA may exist at the same time due to inconsistent values, and PA modernization efforts may spur identity hybridization (Rondeaux, 2006; Wæraas, 2010). Thus, the critical question for identity dynamics in public organizations is, who are we? This is an important issue when considering sustainability and its implications in public management. Management doctrines, such as NPM, have transformed public organizations' traditional universal values (Palma et al.

2010; Rondeaux, 2014). In the context of sustainability, public organizations may favor a softer organizational identity instead of their bureaucratic public sector identity (Wæraas, 2010). Thus, identity can be used as a strategic tool for promoting sustainability and organizational change or defending stability and continuity in organizations representing their future state (Fumasoli et al., 2015).

Finally, the literature brought out the issues of communication processes, brand, and image in public organizations that are used to demonstrate the specific mission and organizational identity of public organizations (Bankins & Waterhouse 2019). From the perspective of knowledge formation, the results demonstrate that, in each organization and decision-making situation, an understanding of the many purposes and values of PA is constructed. Therefore the role of individuals, narratives and values of organizational members cannot be ignored (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Garcia & Hardy 2007; Wæraas, 2010). Simultaneously, in this knowledge formation process, the PA reinvents itself and its identity is thus constantly evolving and reformed. As a result, in PA, there may be heterogeneous and conflicting organizational identities (Skålén, 2004).

For us, the review evidenced the importance of identity construction and identity work when public organizations confront such a wicked problem of sustainability. According to Zalmanovitch (2014), in principle, the political pillar of identity determines what needs to be achieved whereas the managerial pillar decides how it is to be achieved. Sustainability is illustrative example of a strategic ambition or a policy goal. However, in concert, it represents the core values of PA: efficiency, effectiveness, and equity (Bartle & Leunenberger, 2014) and these key tenets are related to sustainability in various dimensions. Thus, PA is characterized by profound sustainability in its processes and practices (Trondal, 2021).

These observations encourage to continue studying more systematically 1) sustainability as an ambiguous policy goal and as a strategic objective of public sector organizations, and 2) collective sense-making and knowledge formation processes where understanding of societal and organizational values are constructed. Through the interaction and dialogue, an idea of the sustainable PA emerges, describing what it is like and what it should achieve. Although national governance systems vary in their historical-cultural contexts, the problem of knowledge formation to ensure sustainable PA and its implications for research or policymaking is indeed a global one.

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