

# THE MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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This article presents a review of the recent literature on change management in public organizations and sets out to explore the extent to which this literature has responded to earlier critiques regarding the lack of (public) contextual factors. The review includes 133 articles published on this topic in the period from 2000 to 2010. The articles are analysed based on the themes of the context, content, process, outcome, and leadership of change. We identified whether the articles referred to different orders of change, as well as their methods and theory employed. Our findings concentrate on the lack of detail on change processes and outcomes and the gap between the common theories used to study change. We propose an agenda for the study of change management in public organizations that focuses on its complex nature by building theoretical bridges and performing more in-depth empirical and comparative studies on change processes.

## INTRODUCTION

Both public administration literature and general management literature report a wide variety of cases of organizational as well as sectoral changes in the public sector, yet a recent literature review on organizational change within the public sector (Fernandez and Rainey 2006) referred to only a few studies that explicitly examined public sector organizations. There still appears to be a gap in the literature on change management specifically regarding the public administration perspective (Vann 2004).

Pettigrew (1985) put forward the criticism that research on change was impaired due to its *ahistorical*, *acontextual*, and *aprocessual* nature. In a later article, he reinforced this view and suggested that the failure to identify clear insights was caused by the tendency of researchers to focus too much attention on single change events in the design and execution of their research (Pettigrew 1990). In line with these critiques, several authors in the public management field addressed the changing content and context of the public sector as an important factor when considering change (e.g. Caldwell 2009, in By and Macleod 2009).

This article presents a review of the recent change management literature and sets out to explore the extent to which this literature has responded to these earlier critiques. It employs a frame that incorporates these critiques within the analyses of the articles examined. Furthermore, it explores the contextual challenges associated with the implementation of changes within the public sector given its under-representation within the overall change literature (Tsoukas and Papoulias 2005). We seek to answer the following questions:

1. How has change management in the public sector been studied over the past decade?
2. What gaps exist in this literature that could form the basis for a future research agenda?

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## STUDYING CHANGE

To study these questions, we draw on the issues identified by Pettigrew (1985) and Pettigrew *et al.* (2001), who suggested that researchers should examine context, content, process, and outcomes when studying change. These factors may help us to identify the specific characteristics related to change processes and implementation in organizations in a public context. We provide an overview of the particularities of change management and processes in public organizations by building on the theoretical issues raised by Pettigrew. We also extend one of the last general literature reviews on change management (predominantly based on the private sector), which was conducted by Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) and also distinguished between these four factors. We then include leadership as the fifth factor (see below).

### Change management factors

The *context* factor refers to the organization's external and internal environments, such as a changing political environment or the institutionalization of a public organization (e.g. Philippidou *et al.* 2008). The *content* factor focuses on the content of the change, including the organization's strategies, structures, and systems (Armenakis and Bedeian 1999). An example of a *content* issue in the public sector could be New Public Management (NPM), a world-wide reform trend in the public sector (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004).

Third, Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) mention the *process* factor, which describes the interventions and processes that are involved in the implementation of change. Generally, both the management and public administration literature distinguish between radical and emergent change processes. Fourth, Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) raise criterion variables, referring to the *outcomes* of change, including the attitudes, behaviours, and experiences of those involved with the change. An additional factor we include in our frame relates to the *leadership* of change, which has been receiving increasing attention in the change management literature (cf. Higgs and Rowland 2005).

### Orders of change

An important consideration is the nature of the change encountered by an organization (Armenakis and Bedeian 1999). Generally, within the literature, the nature of change is considered from different perspectives (Higgs and Rowland 2005) that tend to explore combinations of the scale of the change and its relative impact on core organizational paradigms (Van de Ven and Poole 1995; Burnes 2004). A commonly encountered taxonomy for examining types of change is the distinction between incremental and radical change (Burnes 2004; Carnall 2007). However, the definitions of each of these concepts tend to vary and are regarded as overly simplistic (Higgs and Rowland 2005). In reviewing this aspect of the literature, it is clear that different 'orders' of change can be identified (cf. Bartunek and Moch 1987): sub-system change (first-order), organization change (second-order), and sector change (third-order). Table 1 provides a summary of the taxonomy of 'orders' of change based on a review of this aspect of the literature.

The terms used in the table to describe various orders of change (reproduced from the references mentioned) are highly diverse. In the public administration literature, the term 'reform' is more widely used than the term change. Reform is a narrower concept than change because it is intentional and designed. In the well-known discussion of the term 'public management reform' by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004, pp. 16–17), the authors distinguish the term reform from terms such as transformation, reinvention,

TABLE 1 *Orders of change*

Order	Description	References
1st: Sub-system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adaptation of systems or structures</li> <li>• Occurs within part of an organization or sub-system</li> <li>• Is incremental</li> </ul>	Burnes 2004; Carnall 2007; Watzlawick <i>et al.</i> 1974
2nd: Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transformational change</li> <li>• Movement in core organizational paradigms</li> <li>• Organization-wide</li> <li>• Whole systems change</li> </ul>	Burnes 2004; Carnall 2007; Watzlawick <i>et al.</i> 1974; Van de Ven and Poole 1995
3rd: Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identity change</li> <li>• Cross-organizational change</li> <li>• Change spans specific organizational boundaries</li> <li>• Affects many organizations/sector-wide change</li> </ul>	Tsoukas and Papoulias 2005; Gratton 2005

modernization, and improvement. According to Pollitt and Bouckaert, reform is a more sober term that does not refer to total innovation. They define reform as deliberate, intentional change. The levels of reform they refer to (being more or less fundamental) are captured in our 'orders of change' concept (table 1).

We will use the five previously identified factors to describe change management and processes in public organizations as well as orders of change, focusing on the literature published in the past decade (2000–10). We will use this general framework to explore the literature, following the earlier work by Armenakis and Bedeian (1999). However, in analysing the literature, we will also further classify the tendencies in the literature within the scope of the framework to help us formulate an agenda for future research.

## METHOD

A first extensive literature review resulted in 160 articles focusing on change management in the public sector. Three search rounds were performed, starting with a general, broad search for literature by each of the individual team members. The findings were discussed in a session with the entire research team, after which the search process was further refined for a second round, in which the team analysed the literature according to the previously presented framework. During the writing of the first draft, each of the contributors incorporated new literature where applicable.

We used ISI Web of Knowledge, Google Scholar, and the search engine of the Erasmus University Rotterdam to identify articles. We selected peer-reviewed articles, preferably published in ISI-ranked journals. An exception was made for articles in specialized change management journals because some of these journals are not ranked in the ISI index. Monographs, unfortunately, could not be included in the search because the accessibility of many books is limited and their quality (e.g. through peer-review or publication by a scientific publisher) is less objectively evaluated.

The following keywords were used to find articles: 'change management', 'change process', 'reform', 're-organization', and 'change leadership.' These keywords were used in combination with (any of) these keywords: 'government', 'public sector', 'public organization', 'New Public Management' (or 'NPM'), and 'European Union' (or 'EU'). By using the word 'public' in the keyword combinations, we ensured that the change issues were related to the public context.

Next, the list of articles was examined and errors were corrected, such as by removing double entries and articles that, upon closer inspection, did not analyse change management in the public sector or did not meet other formal requirements (period, journal, or language). After the completion of this process, 141 articles remained and were reviewed in detail. The review consisted of a summary and classification of the data. Each article was reviewed and labelled with a dominant theme (content, context, process, outcome, or leadership) and with the order of the change examined (first, second, or third). Next, general and content-based information was retrieved from the articles to assist in the classification of the data. The general classifications included author, year of publication, and journal. The content and contextual factors included public sector, level (local, national, international, or EU), country, and type of empirics (if applicable). For each article, we also identified the dominant theory, the order of the change described and whether it referred to a specific country (e.g., the UK, the USA) or was comparative. In addition, a summary of the article was written, highlighting its insights and relevance for the review.

During this stage of the review process, additional articles were excluded from the review because they did not meet the initial requirements (year of publication, published in a peer-reviewed journal, related to public sector or research topic). Based on the inputs of reviews by other scholars (including the reviews for this journal), four initial publications were deleted and 17 publications were added that had not previously appeared in our literature search. After this procedure, the final list for more detailed review consisted of 133 articles.

## DESCRIPTIVES

The articles were published in 51 different peer-reviewed international journals. Twenty articles were published in 'public administration journals' and most of the others were in management journals, except for a few in political science and psychology publications. Most were published in *Public Administration* (23), followed by *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (12), and *Public Administration Review* (12). Of the non-public administration journals, most articles came from the *Academy of Management Journal* (6).

We found that more than 20 different theoretical frames were used in the articles (see table 2), of which institutional theory was the most frequently employed (20 of the articles very evidently employed this theoretical lens), especially in journals within the public administration discipline. However, if we regarded 'change management' (including particular planned or emergent approaches to change) as a particular theoretical frame, we could identify up to 14 articles belonging to this category. Thirteen articles used leadership theory as a dominant frame, most being published in a management journal, and ten articles used policy implementation paradigms. The psychological journals in which research on change management in public organizations was published predominantly focused on commitment and resistance to change among employees. Other theoretical lenses used specifically to examine the context of change were complexity theory

TABLE 2 *Descriptives*

Theoretical frames	Count	Percentage
Institutional theory	20	15.4
Change management	14	10.5
Leadership theory	13	9.8
Other	60	45.1
Unspecified	26	19.5
<b>Total</b>	133	100
<b>Methods</b>		
Case study	62	46.6
Quantitative study	24	18.0
Conceptual nature	21	15.8
Qualitative study	19	14.3
Mixed methods	7	5.3
<b>Total</b>	133	100
<b>Sector/organization</b>		
Government	14	10.5
Healthcare	13	9.7
Educational sector	7	5.2
Government agencies	6	4.5
European Union	5	3.8
Public service	3	2.3
Welfare	3	2.3
Other	7	5.2
Unspecified	75	54.1
<b>Total</b>	133	100
<b>Level</b>		
National level	48	36.1
Local level	25	18.8
International	13	9.8
Other	47	35.3
<b>Total</b>	133	100

(e.g. Plowman *et al.* 2007), network theory (e.g. Kim *et al.* 2006), chaos theory (Farazmand 2003), sensemaking (Baez and Abolafia 2002), and the resource-based view (Ridder *et al.* 2005).

We also analysed the research methods employed in the articles (see table 2). Some articles were conceptual, proposing theoretical frames for the study of change management. Many articles were case studies, often providing rich case descriptions about change in an organization. Other qualitative studies were predominantly based on interviews and did not focus on a single case. Almost all of the quantitative studies used questionnaires or secondary (survey) data analyses. A small group of articles was based on data that were quantitative (predominantly collected through questionnaires) and qualitative in nature (using interviews and observations). Furthermore, of all 133 articles included in the review, 58 specified the sector they were studying. An overview of the characteristics of the reviewed literature is provided in table 2.

In the literature, it is generally suggested that the US/Anglo-centric perspective is dominant (Pettigrew *et al.* 2001). By primarily examining the US/Anglo-centric perspective, a bias might be developed. Countries such as the UK and the USA have a majoritarian system, as opposed to more consensus-based systems, such as that in the

TABLE 3 *Source of studies*

Source	Count	Percentage
<b>US/Anglo-centric</b>		
US basis	28	21.0
UK basis	22	16.5
Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (combined)	12	9.0
Comparative (within US/Anglo-centric)	4	3.0
Subtotal	66	49.6
<b>Other</b>		
European countries (+ EU)	25	18.8
Asian	4	3.0
Other countries	4	3.0
Comparative (within other than US/Anglo-centric)	3	2.3
Subtotal	36	27.1
Comparative (international)	3	2.3
Unidentified	28	21.1
Total articles	133	100

Netherlands. This difference can influence the trajectories of public management reforms. More majoritarian-based systems often exhibit rapid, 'top-down' (Hill and Hupe 2009) oriented reform. However, consensus-based systems might exhibit slower, 'bottom-up' patterns of reform (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). Thus the implementation of change can vary among countries. We encountered a dominant perspective: of the 133 publications, 28 were based on the USA and 22 were based on the UK (see table 3). When including studies from Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, as well as comparative studies among those countries, we found 66 (49.6 per cent of all publications) to be US/Anglo-centric. Considering the subjects studied in the various countries, we did not encounter large differences among national- or local-level organizations or sub-sectors. The dominant theoretical frames used by scholars from different parts of the world were also comparable.

Next, we describe the review, based on the five previously identified factors: the context, content, process, leadership, and outcomes of change.

## CONTEXT

In most studies, the context was provided in terms of the background of the empirical data or as a framework for the conceptual elaboration of change management in the public sector. In general, the fundamental difference between private and public organizations is the political context of democracy (parliament, politics, and politicians) and the juridical context of 'Rechtsstaat' (legislation, rules, bureaucracy). For example, Rainey (1997) broadly defines differences between private and public organizations by their *environmental characteristics* (such as the intensity of political influence), *transactions between organization and environment* (such as the production of public goods), and the *structures and processes of organizations* (such as the clarity of organizational goals and the amount of 'red tape', i.e. bureaucracy).

Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004) further define five broad forces affecting change in public organizations: socio-economic forces, political system characteristics, elite decision-making regarding the desirability and feasibility of change, the occurrence of change events such as scandals, and administrative system characteristics. Others add the changing content and context of the public sector in terms of NPM (e.g. Caldwell



2009, in By and Macleod 2009) and complexity in the stakeholder field (e.g. Perrot 2009, in By and Macleod 2009). Each of these approaches to the context of change was found in the literature reviewed. We may classify the approaches in a number of ways.

The first distinction related to contextual characteristics as a frame of reference (e.g. change needing to be understood within a timeframe). Wollmann (2000) provides a useful example by positioning sectoral changes within a full historical analysis of local government reform in Germany, which in this case also needs to be understood from his institutionalist perspective. Others examine change in relation to the characteristics of a specific sector. We should note here that some studies address change in public organizations in general, whereas others discuss the context of specific sub-sectors, such as healthcare (e.g. Modell 2001) or education (De Boer *et al.* 2007). Hartley *et al.* (2002) make a useful distinction in this case, suggesting that change takes place at the societal, governmental, organizational, and actor levels simultaneously.

Second, the description of drivers of change as the contextual background provides insight into the demands placed on public organizations, such as changing client demands (Christiansen 2006; Askim *et al.* 2009), the availability of new technologies (Vann 2004; Dunleavy *et al.* 2006), and financial crises (Hendriks and Tops 2003). Central government decisions are also identified as a direct force for change. Policy changes, changes in financing, and new regulations implemented by central governments (often by EU regulation in European countries) are common drivers of reorganization and the implementation of change (e.g. Jespersen *et al.* 2002; Reichard 2003; De Boer *et al.* 2007). In a few instances, the role of political involvement in the change process is discussed as a typical contextual factor making demands on the public organization (e.g. Weissert and Goggin 2002).

Third, the direct interaction between the organization and its environment provides the context in which to manage change. With a focus on complex stakeholder networks and public-private partnerships (PPPs), some studies address the role of public organizations in changing or shaping their own contexts (e.g. Christiansen 2006). Environmental characteristics affect network arrangements (Kim *et al.* 2006), but participation in the network also shapes the context of the change in which the organization is an actor (Grantham 2001; Downe *et al.* 2004). In networks and alliances, particularly PPPs, public sector values become an explicit contextual factor in addressing change (Grimshaw *et al.* 2002).

Fourth, the debate or theoretical frame in which the publication is positioned guides how the context is established. The most frequently employed theoretical perspectives in our sample are change management theory and institutional theory. Institutionalists argue that organizational change is imposed by an organization's environment. Rather than intentionally implementing change to improve efficiency, organizations pursue legitimacy by conforming to environmental pressures (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Given its more deterministic explanation for change, combined with its focus on the organizational field rather than on individual organizations, the institutional perspective has traditionally contributed little to understanding the *processes* of managing change in organizations (Frumkin and Galaskiewicz 2004).

Change management theory, in contrast, belongs to the rational-adaptive perspective and highlights how organizational change is generated by the intentional actions of agents (Fernandez and Rainey 2006; Kickert 2010). Such literature is relatively limited in terms of providing detail regarding how context affects change. It focuses on the choices made by the actors involved in the change. Moreover, the empirical focus in change management theory is on the organizational or intra-organizational level (e.g. Coram and Burnes 2001; Sminia and Van Nistelrooij 2006).

We found it noteworthy to address the fact that many of the contextual factors described by the authors provide sectoral information. Many, if not all, of the external drivers for change are embedded within larger contextual developments, often affecting a number of organizations through their changes (such as the introduction of a new educational system that affects all universities). Most empirical work presented by the authors, however, focuses on one particular organization or on part of an organization when studying the management of change.

## CONTENT

When analysing content, we found distinguishing among the three orders of change to be very helpful. In each of the orders of change, different content relating to the purpose of the change became apparent and at the same time revealed the level to which attention is paid purely to the content (what the change is about) or how this content is implemented (process).

Typical *first-order* changes (limited to a sub-system or organizational process) can be found in the introduction of new processes, systems, and procedures. These changes involve the introduction of new accounting systems (e.g. Ridder *et al.* 2005) or performance measures (De Lancer Julnes and Holzer 2001). Furthermore, some articles address change management in relation to information technology (IT) or e-government (Ciborra, 2005; Heeks 2005; O'Neill 2009).

Such first-order changes do not affect the primary organizational processes, and although they may be introduced in an entire sector, they often also do not change the organization or sector as a whole. An interesting exception is the study by Plowman *et al.* (2007), which showed how first-order changes can result in a radical organizational change over time when describing a major shift in a church's traditional religious functions towards becoming a shelter and community centre for homeless people through a series of small changes over a period of several years. However, the findings in the study by Pope *et al.* (2006) provided an opposing view by demonstrating how the introduction of treatment centres in hospitals aiming to achieve a sector change in the UK National Health Service (third-order) on the micro level may be limited to some first-order adaptations of facilities in the physical environment.

*Second-order* changes impacting the organizational level are less represented in the reviewed literature but can be found in terms of reorganizations (Boyne 2006) or even 'agency turnarounds' (Borins 2002). On the second-order level, we see more keywords such as organizational culture, climate, and other behavioural factors that differ from the content of most first-order changes, which are more related to structure. For example, in their study of leadership in New Zealand's public sector, Parry and Proctor-Thomson (2003) conclude that rules and procedures play only a secondary role in improving the public sector and emphasize the attention that decision-makers need to give to the values and beliefs that drive decisions.

Many of the articles describe change in terms of a *third-order* nature, indicating that the content of change was related to public service reforms in general (e.g. Christensen and Pallesen 2001; Battaglio and Condrey 2009), the creation of various partnerships (Bovaird 2006, 2007), or sector-specific reforms such as a welfare reform (Askim *et al.* 2009). Other types of reform relate to privatization and the merging of government organizations (e.g. Grantham 2001; Erakovic and Powell 2006; Kavanagh and Ashkanasy 2006) or to EU reforms in particular (e.g. Bauer 2008; Schout 2009). In most cases, these changes are



described in terms of the content of the reform or policy change. The studies do not provide much detail on the management of change within the organizations.

An example is provided by Christensen and Pallesen (2001), who describe four reforms in Denmark that range from the delegation of financial authority to the implementation of user democracy and choice. The authors explain the meaning of these reforms within their institutional settings and consider their implementation with regard to their success and failure rates. Much about this implementation is described according to the role of political and administrative decision-makers, whereas the change management process within the organizations subject to the reforms remains unknown.

In terms of content, we observe that authors give significant attention to what the change involves, including full and sometimes technical descriptions ranging from macro-level reforms and new policies (often described as third-order changes) to micro-level changes in procedures and new structures (first-order changes). The content and context of change seem closely related; most authors provide a rich background on the 'what' of a change by describing its national, political and sectoral environment. Much less attention, however, is paid to how change is implemented within individual organizations.

## PROCESS

After reviewing how the process of change is discussed in the literature, we decided to group the literature into the three areas of focus that became apparent during the review process: planned versus emergent change processes, which are also addressed in much of the general literature (e.g. Beer and Nohria 2000); resistance to change; and factors defining the success or failure of the change implementation.

### Planned versus emergent change processes

Wollmann (2000) presents change in the public sector as an interchange between (radical) reform waves and intermittent incrementalism. His research described an emergent bottom-up NPM-like modernization process in German local governmental reform that was driven from inside the administration without any intervention by higher levels of government in the 1990s. Wollmann (2000) found a lack of intervention or interference by the higher levels of government to be a condition for successful change. Rational planning in Germany was short-lived and lasting change occurred through incremental bottom-up approaches. Reichard (2003) also studied local government reform in Germany, although focusing more on the 1990s. He concluded that the implementation of these reforms suffered from some problems: weak project management, weak participation and involvement of personnel, and weak involvement of politicians.

Reichard (2003) also compared similar reforms in the Netherlands and Switzerland, concluding that there are similarities in implementation. They are all bottom-up innovations involving informal and voluntary reform cooperation, their major driving forces are administrations, and they are characterized by passive politicians, municipal think tanks, the late involvement of academics, and the strong influence of consultants. Askim *et al.* (2009) described the decision-making and implementation processes of a joined-up government reform in Norway. This reform is the exact opposite of an NPM reform and an example of a third-order change. Askim *et al.* (2009) divided the reform process into two and distinguished between the decision-making and implementation phases. The final form of the merger and the selection of the leader of the reform process were found to be influenced by aspects of the reform process itself.

A number of authors use the distinction between incremental and planned changes as occurring in organizations to define different approaches that public organizations use in change initiatives. In a more general conceptual article distinguishing public sector change management from generic change management, Rusaw (2007) proposed four approaches to change in public organizations: (1) a means-end, rational, top-down planned change approach with examples of TQM and re-engineering; (2) an incremental, small-steps, decentralized, approach focused on visible results in the short term that is most successful if there is no need for external approval; (3) a pluralistic approach involving multiple mental models and actors that is useful to solve wicked problems (shared policy-making); and (4) an individual approach, which is basically the learning model, involving changing the organization through individuals and groups as well as formal and informal learning behaviour to improve service levels and invent new service systems.

More focused on privatization, Erakovic and Powell (2006) found three different 'pathways' to change in their study on privatized state-owned enterprises in New Zealand. The first is an incremental (step-by-step) pathway to change. According to Erakovic and Powell (2006), this pathway is used in competitive and turbulent environments. The second, radical, pathway is used in deregulated domestic markets and in the context of rapid technological developments. The third and reductive pathway (leading to dismantlement) is used by smaller companies in which buyers are interested in high-quality assets and long-term contracts with reliable clients. The final, most specific model is based on the implementation of a new accounting system in German municipalities. Ridder *et al.* (2005) distinguish among three different modes of cooperation for the implementation of the financial system: a mode based on a dominant project group, a mode that depends more on external consultants, and a mode based on close interaction between project and user groups. Schedler (2003b) also found considerable influence of consultants (and researchers) in his study of local and regional public management reforms in Switzerland.

### **Resistance to change**

The concept of (employee) resistance to change is a common subject in the change management literature. Authors such as Kotter (1996) and Ajzen (1991) have written about the pivotal roles that resistance to change and employee behaviour play in the change process. The literature review showed that resistance to change is still an important issue in the current change management and public management literatures. However, there does not appear to be a consensus on what causes resistance and how it can be overcome.

Oreg (2006) found that personality and the context of the change influence resistance to change and change processes. Employees resist changes because they anticipate them to have an unwanted outcome. Vann (2004) does not consider the expectations of employees to be influential, but rather focuses on the clash between the grammars of the public service bureaucracy and private business tools, for example, between project management process models and the classical features of the bureaucratic public service agency, such as policies, rules, and regulations. White (2000) examines the change management strategy as the key to success. A top-down change management approach would not work because it would lead to too much resistance amongst the employees.

Piderit (2000), based on Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour, did not focus on resistance to change specifically, but rather on what generally causes employees to react (positively or negatively) to organizational change. These reactions can be categorized according to three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and intentional (Piderit 2000, p. 786).

In their case study on the introduction of business process engineering in the UK National Health Service, McNulty and Ferlie (2004) showed that resistance to radical change made the change sedimentary rather than transformational.

### **Factors defining success or failure**

Many scholars wrote about the different factors that influence change implementation or processes. Thomas (2006) mentioned a number of variables that affected the success of the implementation of a patient safety policy in the Canadian healthcare sector, such as adequate resources, the existence of incentives to support or resist change, and the responses of multiple stakeholders. Lindquist (2006) investigated the role and function of implementation units that were specially created in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand to ensure better implementation of policy initiatives through the use of different roles (by scrutinizing and challenging, facilitating, advising, monitoring, and evaluating performance). Implementation units have great potential, according to Lindquist, but they sometimes overlap, and rivalry and competition between units is a potential danger.

Whether the change can be considered a success also depends on the definition of success. For example, Weissert and Goggin (2002) found that the success of the implementation strongly depended on its defined goals, such as cost reduction, and compliance with the change. They did not view the success of the change in terms of stakeholder satisfaction because if they had, the implementation would not be completely successful. We will examine this issue further in our section on change outcomes.

## **LEADERSHIP**

Certainly, political leadership in public organizations is quite distinct from leadership in private organizations. Leadership in the public sector is also discussed in terms of administrative or bureaucratic leadership (Van Wart 2003; Trottier *et al.* 2008). Administrative leadership can be contrasted with political leadership. The latter pertains to the leadership activities executed by the political supervisors of public organizations. Although most of the literature on public sector leadership does not examine organizational change (cf. Van Wart 2003), some authors focus on the role of leadership in organizational change.

The notion that leadership is a key factor in organizational change processes appears in the literature on organizational change (e.g. Kotter 1996). Leadership is also regarded as an important driver of change in the literature on change in the public sector. For example, Charlesworth *et al.* (2003, p. 15) state that 'effective leadership is the key to leading effective change'. Similarly, Christensen (2005) emphasizes the importance of political leadership and consultants in the process of organizational change. Ridder *et al.* (2005) emphasize the need for involvement from top management and politicians. Moreover, Gabris *et al.* (2001) emphasize that leadership needs to be credible and Kavanagh and Ashkanasy (2006) conclude that leaders need to be competent and trained in the process of transforming organizations. One study that provides detail about leadership behaviour in relation to the process of change is that by Denis *et al.* (2001). They describe the creation of leadership groups in different types of hospitals (suburban, community, and university).

Stewart and Kringas (2003) state that leadership is often described from a 'heroic', vertical perspective in the change management literature. The term 'heroic' implies an all-powerful, hierarchical leadership role. In the public sector context, leadership is mostly regarded as an exclusive activity of the head of the agency (Van Wart 2003; Chustz and Larson 2006). It is striking that little attention is given to different types of leadership

in public sector organizational change processes, such as distributed, shared, or team leadership (Jackson and Parry 2009). Almost all notions related to leading public sector change exemplify a traditional, vertical leadership model; for example, Fernandez (2005) and Boin and Christensen (2008).

Notable exceptions to a vertical leadership model are Borins (2002) and Rusaw (2007), who relate different types of leadership to different approaches to change. Borins (2002) differentiates between emergent bottom-up changes, politically directed responses to crises and organizational turnarounds by administrative leaders. The latter two approaches are based on traditional, hierarchical leadership models, whereas bottom-up changes require informal, decentralized leadership. Rusaw (2007) argues that incremental and pluralistic changes, in contrast to planned, rational change, require decentralized and shared leadership. This contention is similar to arguments made in the general management literature by Weick and Quinn (1999) and Higgs and Rowland (2005).

Most accounts of leadership in public sector change focus on the activities of top-level administrative or political leaders. However, some authors elaborate on the relationship between administrative and political leadership. In first- and second-order organizational changes, administrative leadership is emphasized. In sectoral, third-order changes, the role of politicians is more prominent. Askim *et al.* (2009) describe how political leadership was necessary in the decision-making phase of public sector reforms, whereas administrative leaders were able to influence the content of change during the implementation phase. Borins (2002) states that the relationship between political and administrative leaders is mediated by trust.

## OUTCOMES

Birkland (2011; see also Easton, 1965) used the input, process, output, and outcome concepts to study policy processes. Applying these concepts to organizational change, we view change outcomes as substantive results of the implementation of change that can be intended or unintended and positive or negative. These differ from outputs, which are clear decisions, such as the new governmental structure following a reform. Processes/activities are the ways in which the outputs are obtained. Outputs are often easier to measure than outcomes.

Let us consider how the two main approaches to change management, planned and emergent change, examine outcomes. In the planned change approach, change begins through the definition of the (undesirable) present situation. From this situation, an image is formed of the (desired) future situation. Hence, for planned change approaches, results are planned in advance. In contrast, in the emergent change approach, change outcomes are not previously determined. The outcomes emerge and are defined as the change itself occurs.

Hence, in planned change approaches, outcomes are defined in advance, whereas in emergent change approaches, outcomes emerge during the change process. In the emergent change approaches, this type of emergence means that it is more difficult to assess the success of change in advance. Indeed, it is more difficult to assess success in general. How can we measure achievement when we do not really know what we are aiming for? Viewed in this light, the statement that 'The brutal fact is that about 70 per cent of all change initiatives fail' (Beer and Nohria 2000, p. 15) might be viewed with some suspicion.

Having considered the difference between planned and emergent change, we can consider a number of outcome criteria. Traditional outcome criteria include an increased

chance of survival (continuity) or greater profitability. Furthermore, Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) assessed organizational change efforts using affective and behavioural criteria. In this study, we focus on values as possible criteria for outcomes, such as increased efficiency, transparency, or equity. In the public sector, the debate on values is becoming increasingly important. This phenomenon is closely related to the introduction of NPM (Hood 1991; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). NPM can be defined as a broad set of management approaches and techniques that are borrowed from the private sector and applied in the public sector (Hood 1991). As a result of NPM, business values – such as efficiency, transparency, and client choice – might take precedence over more traditional public values – such as equity and security.

Hence, a focus on values seems to be appropriate for examining the changes that are occurring in the contemporary public sector (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). In table 4, we therefore distinguish between NPM values and more traditional public administration values (see also Hood 1991; Ferlie 1996).

Considering our sample, we see that most planned change initiatives identify increased organizational efficiency as the main anticipated change outcome, which can be regarded as a prime NPM value (e.g. Coram and Burnes 2001; Weissert and Goggin 2002; Hendriks and Tops 2003; Reichard 2003; Vann 2004; Hoque and Kirkpatrick 2008). For example, Battaglio and Condrey (2009) studied employment in the public sector, which favours efficiency over job security. Next to efficiency, transparency (for example, Schedler 2003; Sminia and Van Nistelrooij 2006), effectiveness (for example, Jespersen *et al.* 2002; Lindquist, 2006), and client choice or client satisfaction (for example, Christensen and Pallesen 2001; Chen *et al.* 2006) seem to be important NPM values that are being pursued.

Fewer studies in our sample describe the pursuit of more traditional public sector values. Thomas (2006) analysed an organizational change process that aimed to increase safety and Chustz and Larson (2006) documented an attempt to increase equity and safety. However, in both cases, the changes took place in a hospital, where the value of patient safety is more likely to serve as a performance indicator than as a traditional public sector value. The study on reform in a Norwegian hospital by Christensen *et al.* (2006) reports both internal (such as efficiency measures) and external (such as service equality and user influence) measures of performance. Overall, organizational changes in the public sector seem to be focused mainly on the pursuit of NPM values.

Many studies explicitly refer to the anticipated goal of a planned change initiative, but not all authors analyse the extent to which this outcome has been realized. In other words, the actual effects of organizational change are not always reported. For example, Hoque

TABLE 4 *Distinguishing between types of outcome*

<b>NPM values: Increasing . . .</b>	<b>Traditional public sector values: Increasing . . .</b>
Efficiency	Equity
Effectiveness (as in: clear results)	Legitimacy
Client value	Equality
Transparency	Fairness
Frugality	Reliability
	Safety
	Due process



(2005), Christensen and Pallesen (2001), and Coram and Burnes (2001) analyse changes that aim to increase organizational efficiency but do not report the extent to which the change initiative has influenced this value.

Some studies evaluate the outcomes of organizational change. However, some important differences exist regarding how these outcomes are conceptualized. For instance, some authors refer to the *behaviour* of actors. Schedler (2003a) and Christensen (2005) report the outcome of change by stating that the subjects of change have indeed adopted a new practice. However, these behavioural effects do not necessarily contribute to the anticipated outcome value. For example, the adoption of a new accounting system (output) does not guarantee an actual increase in transparency (outcome) (Schedler 2003a). Other authors evaluate the effects of change by highlighting *experiences*, such as Weissert and Goggin (2002), who analyse the experiences of clients and stakeholders.

Other studies rely on the evaluation of employee *attitudes* to explain the effects of change. For example, Jespersen *et al.* (2002) acknowledge that an organizational change has had superficial effects and the attitudes of employees have remained unaltered. Hoque and Kirkpatrick (2008) evaluate an organizational change in terms of its effects on attitudes regarding organizational citizenship behaviour, work pressure, and morale. Finally, some authors refer to objective *outputs* to evaluate the outcome of a change. Chustz and Larson (2006) determine the outcome of a change by measuring the number of applicants for a new hospital policy. Sharma and Hoque (2002) measure client satisfaction and business results in the years prior to and after the implementation of a total quality management programme. Chen *et al.* (2006) use a similar systematic method by measuring performance indicators such as service delivery and customer identification before and after the implementation of the change.

Many articles include an evaluation of change outcomes using a number of different criteria. The normative issue of what precisely a success or failure constitutes is not often discussed. It seems that many studies analyse success in only one way, although multiple indicators could be relevant. Hence, future studies could more closely examine outcome criteria or standards to evaluate success. A fruitful approach would be to research effects on a variety of actors (politicians, civil servants, clients) in relation to a number of criteria.

Furthermore, authors rarely explicitly address the success of a change. Although some studies explicitly state that the change was unsuccessful (for instance, Hoque and Kirkpatrick 2008), the success of the change remains unclear or ambiguous in most studies. Battaglio and Condrey (2009) conclude that the implementation of NPM practices has simultaneously caused efficiency gains and negative attitudes. Reichard (2003) states that it is impossible to make success statements because many changes are still ongoing. Few studies explicitly refer to the organizational change as being successful (Sharma and Hoque 2002; Chen *et al.* 2006; Chustz and Larson 2006). Coincidentally, these are also the studies that rely on the most objective, output-based evaluations of the effects of change.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our research objectives for this literature review were to examine how change management in the public sector has been studied during the past decade and what it teaches us, with the goal of being able to propose a research agenda for the future. When considering how change management in the public sector is studied, we conclude that this field generally seems to be rather dispersed. The 133 articles that we identified were published in 51 different journals and used approximately 20 different theoretical angles to study change



in a wide range of sub-sectors. In studying the management of change, we found that both the institutional theory and the general change management literature are dominant.

Change management theory, as a rational-adaptive theory, places significant emphasis on both describing and prescribing the process of change implementation, although it tends to lack contextual considerations. Institutional theory, in contrast, provides scholars with frameworks that facilitate rich analysis of the context of change, as well as giving considerable attention to actors and their power. At the same time, the implementation processes within organizations subject to these institutional changes remain underemphasized. In addition, we observe reforms and sector changes being described as top-down, planned change, i.e. changes that are 'made to' organizations rather than changes made by and within organizations.

To a large extent, this approach supports the overall public sector model, enabling political and administrative decision-makers to agree on implementing actions to affect a reform or new policy. Subsequently, there is more interest in the question of whether the policy in itself is effective than in the question of how such changes are implemented in order to become effective. If change is consequently studied on the macro-level, such as in the reform literature, attention to micro-processes seems to almost automatically be absent. However, too much attention given to the micro-level often disregards the broader context.

Some other elements were dominant in the study of change. First, almost half of the publications are based on case-study material, which partly explains the high proportion of sub-system (first-order) and organizational (second-order) changes encountered in the literature. Second, the descriptions of the context and content of the change are rich and lead to relatively great focus on the characteristics of sectoral, or third-order, change (i.e. one-third of the articles addresses such characteristics). Third, we found that many of the drivers of change in the public sector fit into the NPM tendency to create more effective and efficient public organizations.

The use of the theoretical framework based on Pettigrew *et al.* (2001) and the review of Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) helped us to focus on important change-related issues in our analysis. We will provide more specific conclusions on some of the factors they defined, (i.e. context, content, process, and outcomes, to which we added the factor of leadership) because we encountered them in the study of change in public organizations.

First, relatively few details were provided with regard to change processes and their outcomes. Most of the articles addressed typical public characteristics and drivers, but we found that most authors had difficulty in specifically demonstrating if and how these factors actually affected the change processes in public organizations. For instance, the review confirms that NPM-related organizational changes are still very much 'in vogue' and that the change process is often described in terms of contextual characteristics and content. We were generally able to divide this literature into three main areas with regard to the change process. First, the literature showed that the emergent and planned change approach still seem to be widely used to describe change. Second, it showed that the employee (or civil servant) in the changing public organization is regarded not only as a subject but also as an actor in the change process, which is illustrated by the focus on resistance to change.

Third, some of the literature specifically focused on the factors that influence the change process and determine its success or failure. Nevertheless, we tended to find that this area lacked detail, for instance on the specific public characteristics related to the change process. Finally, a contextual issue is that the majority of the publications had a US/Anglo-Saxon origin, supporting our earlier observations on the risk of bias.

Addressing Pettigrew's earlier criticism on the study of change (Pettigrew 1985), we raise the issue that not only may contextual factors of change vary for public organizations around the world, but also the particular change implementation processes.

Our analysis shows that most articles do not particularly address the outcomes of organizational change or its level of success. Of course, some articles reviewed focused strictly on the antecedents or the process of change, and therefore deliberately did not address the degree of success. Another explanation is that general public sector characteristics, such as multiple and conflicting goals (Rainey 1997), would also make it difficult to measure the effects of organizational change. This seems somewhat contradictory with our finding that NPM in particular is one of the key drivers of organizational change, particularly aiming to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public organizations.

Despite the focus on leadership within public sector change processes, some gaps in the literature also exist. First, most of the current work in this field examines a public sector case without really considering the distinctive features of leadership in the public sector. Second, most authors do not seem to be concerned with questions such as 'what constitutes effective change leadership?' or 'what are the core competencies of leaders?' This is striking because these are important topics in private sector research on organizational change. Related to this is the notion that research into public sector change leadership is not very theory-driven. Some authors (e.g. Fernandez 2005) refer to transformational leadership theory, but most reports on leadership are records of leadership activities in an organizational change process.

## AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

From the above analyses, we would suggest that the areas for future research into change management within the public sector should include at least seven particular themes and angles across the context, content, process, outcomes, and leadership of sub-system, organizational and sectoral change.

We identified a gap between the theoretical perspectives employed and suggest that scholars look for opportunities to *use the strengths of different theoretical approaches* to study the field (1). The institutional theory, which is highly context-aware, in combination with the generic change management literature, with its detailed attention to process, behaviour, and leadership, may particularly help to better understand the complex multi-layered phenomena of change in the public sector. Additionally, we see a need for more *in-depth empirical studies of the change process* within various public contexts (2). In particular, such studies should provide details of change interventions and the roles and behaviours of those involved in change processes. This approach should include longitudinal studies (Pettigrew *et al.* 2001). One particular way to accomplish this goal is to *work with practitioners* to explore the realities of change implementation in a variety of contexts (3).

This approach would address critiques on the paucity of studies that include a practitioner perspective (Pettigrew 1990). There generally seems to be a gap between the world of the change practitioner and that of those studying change as outsiders. Practitioners, both managers and (internal) consultants, are greatly involved in change implementation and the decisions made in that area, and as such are a valuable resource for detailed information about the process (Higgs and Rowland 2005). Furthermore, there seems to be a high need among practitioners for general recipes for success, given the popularity of studies such as Kotter (1996), which often lack a sound empirical basis and an eye for sector-specific issues. Researchers could improve the theory building on change

management in public organizations with more and stronger empirical research that builds on a clear understanding of practice. In this way, researchers can provide practical guidelines that are rigorously grounded. However, they would also need to pay more *attention to the outcomes and successes* of change in public organizations (4), i.e. to support practitioners in their search for lessons on what makes a change successful. The important role of NPM in change initiatives underlines this issue, but also emphasizes the importance of a critical evaluation of an overly narrow focus on efficiency and effectiveness while disregarding the other (traditional) public sector values.

Furthermore, we see a need for more research that explicitly focuses on *leading change in a public sector context* (5). There appears to be little development or testing of public-sector-specific theory relating to the impact of leadership in the implementation of organizational change. In particular, we would like to address the issue of the interaction between administrative leadership and more external political leadership. Both may involve different competencies and behaviours to make change happen, and may even be approached as first- and second-order changes (e.g. when they only concern change leadership within one organization) versus third-order changes (e.g. when they concern political leadership affecting an entire sector).

The latter issue also raises the need for more studies demonstrating both the *discrepancies and interactions between micro- and sector-level changes* in general (6). In particular, the reform literature has a profound tradition of sector and even cross-national comparisons of sectoral changes (e.g. Kuhlman 2010). Unfortunately, such comparisons pay little or no attention to the management of change processes within the organizations subject to these sectoral changes. In addition to studies that particularly address the interaction between change within the organization and within the sector as a whole, we also see a need for more *comparative studies of the management of change* (7). These include comparisons between organizations, sectors (including public versus private), and national contexts, particularly including those between cases from the USA and the UK versus those in other countries. All these comparisons help to explore the extent to which differing contexts impact the implementation of change within the public sector.

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