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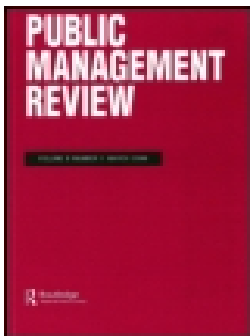
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Conceptual foundations of workforce homogeneity in the public sector. Insights from a systematic review on causes, consequences, and blind spots

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ABSTRACT

Workforce diversity is a key objective of public personnel policies worldwide. We augment this discourse by exploring the complementary and multifaceted concept of workforce *homogeneity*. This systematic literature review clarifies an elusive concept and reveals dominant causes and consequences of public sector workforce homogeneity, synthesizing how self-selection, personnel policies, and socialization create often implicit yet persistent practices that lead to workforce homogeneity. By linking these causes with their (un-)intended consequences, this study on workforce homogeneity sheds light on an important theoretical concept for public management and identifies broad avenues for future research.


KEYWORDS Workforce homogeneity; diversity; self-selection; public personnel management; systematic literature review

Introduction

During the last two decades, workforce diversity has gained increasing attention in public management (PM) research (Dudau and McAllister 2010; Lee and Zhang 2020; Moon and Christensen 2020; Vangen and Winchester 2014), pointing towards a looming ‘diversity crisis’ in public workforces across the globe (Linos 2018, 67). Fuelled by a shortage of talent in many areas of public service provision, public personnel managers are struggling to attract skilled staff into their relatively overaged workforce in all OECD countries (Colley 2014).¹ Yet, the expected retirement waves of senior public sector workers present a ‘unique opportunity to diversify the public sector by increasing the share of underrepresented groups’ (Wolf and Amirkhanyan 2010, 19), but why does public personnel composition matter?

Classic Weberian bureaucracy assumes that public personnel management systems transform recruited talent into rule-abiding bureaucrats who will fulfil their duty neutrally and efficiently (Weißmüller, De Waele, and van Witteloostuijn 2022). However, PM scholarship recognizes that modern societies are increasingly diverse and that the representation of as many groups of society – both by tangible and intangible characteristics – is essential for sustaining institutional legitimacy, inclusive

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procedural justice, and citizen trust (Ricucci and Saidel 1997; Hong 2021; Dudau and McAllister 2010). The concept of diversity holds a prominent role in PM scholarship on this objective of bureaucratic representation (Meier 2019; Clark, Ochs, and Frazier 2013) as well as in the general management literature on the relationship between equal opportunities in HR and organizational performance (Kochan et al. 2003; Wright et al. 1995; Li et al. 2018). However, the particularities of the public sector often impede direct transfer of scholarly insights from the general management literature into PM because public sector organizations operate in political environments that constrain employment regulations, they pursue dissimilar goals, and operate by dissimilar value frames compared with private sector organizations (Oberfield 2016; Nabatchi 2018). Consequently, the topic of what actually constitutes ‘workforce diversity’ (or lack thereof) is still lacking conceptual clarity in PM research despite the growing societal and scholarly interest (Pitts and Wise 2010).

Cox (1995) defines ‘diversity’ as a multidimensional composite of human differences but studies on diversity are inconclusive and frequently non-transparent as to which dimensions to include conceptually (Kennedy 2014). For instance, Wise and Tschirhart (2000) point out that diversity management mainly focused on the dimensions of age and gender while neglecting racial and ethnic diversity issues habitually. Whereas dimensions such as age, gender, or ethnicity are tangible, scholars stress that diversity also incorporates intangible dimensions, such as ‘differences in worldviews or subjective culture’ (Larkey 1996, 465). Combining these perspectives, Inegbedion et al. (2020, 2) define workforce diversity as ‘the differences in employees because of the coming together of people from various backgrounds’, whereby diverse backgrounds stem from ‘the heterogeneous nature of people due to certain dimensions, especially gender, race, ethnicity, personality, and culture’. In this sense, both tangible and intangible attributes, abilities, and characteristics constitute *diversity* (Jackson, May, and Whitney 1995). Besides lacking clarity concerning the scope of the concept of diversity, empirical studies struggle to provide a tangible, (quasi-)causal link between diversity and measurable outcomes. Many studies rely on singular, predominantly tangible dimensions and conclude with partially contradicting findings and multi-directional relationships between causes and consequences of workforce composition (Selden and Selden 2001; Pitts 2005; Linos 2018). Addressing this ambiguity, Apfelbaum, Phillips, and Richeson (2014) conclude that it is hardly possible to make any final scientific statements concerning the value of workforce diversity yet, clearly calling the current concept into question. This line of contradictory empirical results as well as the prevalence of research focusing on tangible diversity dimensions points towards a gap in our theoretical understanding of diversity and calls for a more critical perspective. Following Alvesson and Sandberg (2011), who stress that developing relevant theoretical insights requires engaging with alternative perspectives, we problematize the limitations and unquestioned normativity that underlies the diversity discourse by focusing on its (presumed) mirror concept *homogeneity* instead. This study’s goal is not to propose its own definition of homogeneity but to reveal how the concept is being used and conceptualized in the discourse and, subsequently, to synthesize the empirical evidence accrued on the causes and consequences of workforce homogeneity in the public sector. This is why we opted for a qualitative meta-synthetic approach that does not aim to empirically measure the level of homogeneity in the public sector (e.g. by quantitative means of meta-analysis) but to make a conceptual contribution that highlights a blind spot in the discourse on workforce

composition. Applying these insights can help develop a deeper understanding of public sector workforce homogeneity and its relation to diversity as well as enhance the implementation of representation in practice. This study contributes to the public management discourse by revealing that homogeneity is often taken for granted as a theoretical concept although it is hardly defined. Reviewing the discourse on homogeneity promotes us to argue that homogeneity regarding tangible *and* intangible dimensions has independent causes and effects, which cannot be explained from a theoretical stance based on a (lack of) diversity conceptualization but deserves further scholarly attention.

The relationship between homogeneity and diversity

Workforce homogeneity is a surprisingly under-explored concept. To date, neither the growing number of studies on public sector diversity nor the empirically inconclusive findings have drawn larger scholarly interest to the concept of homogeneity, its origin and consequences (Apfelbaum, Phillips, and Richeson 2014). In the scholarly discourse, diversity is most often conceptualized normatively and in relation with tangible employee characteristics such as race, gender, and age, whereas the intangible dimensions are not a main interest. Studies following this narrower perspective logically equate lower degrees of diversity with lacking representation, hence interpreting workforce homogeneity as a defective state which diversity may cure (Fernandez 2007). Tackling underrepresentation by offering better access and opportunities for members of visible minorities is a key objective of diversity management in the public sector, consequentially linking diversity with ideas of inclusion and equality (Oberfield 2016) and homogeneity with a lack of both.

However, diversity also incorporates *intangible* factors such as beliefs, values, culture, attitudes, and motivations, all of which are crucial for team efficiency, employee wellbeing, and productivity (Kirkman and Shapiro 2001; Santos, Hayward, and Ramos 2012; Veage et al. 2014). Classic Weberian bureaucracies are designed as cloning machines, which are supposed to attract and retain employees that share these same motivations to warrant a smooth execution of formalized bureaucratic rules and procedures (Weber 1922). Latent behavioural dynamics related with homophily, but also explicit policies and routines result in processes of attraction, selection, and attrition leading to a workforce that is highly likely to being homogenous regarding their motivational, psychological, and physical attributes (Jackson, May, and Whitney 1995; Schott and Ritz 2018). Apfelbaum, Phillips, and Richeson (2014) point out that a high degree of employee homogeneity regarding values and motivation such as equity or civil duty is the explicit norm or implicit aspiration in most public organizations, particularly civil services, and links strongly with the prolific discourse on public service motivation (PSM). Accordingly, it is assumed that homogeneity levels regarding intangible dimensions are higher in the public vis-à-vis the private sector. This can be explained with the *attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) model*. The ASA model explains how certain forces within organizations ‘operate to attract, select, and retain an increasingly homogenous group of employees’ (Leisink and Steijn 2008, 120). It describes how individuals are first, *attracted* to organizations that they perceive as similar regarding their own values, motives, and personality traits (e.g. PSM), second, how organizations *select* new members by their congruence to existing skills and abilities within the organization, and third, how members that do not fit to the

organization leave over time due to the process of *attrition*. Therefore, the ASA model constitutes a theoretical foundation of workforce composition and homogeneity. PSM is often argued to play an important role in accelerating the processes described in the ASA model through person-organization fit – i.e. the compatibility between employees and the entire organization – particularly regarding the desired value congruence (Sekiguchi 2007; Ritz, Weißmüller, and Meynhardt 2022).

Curiously, the mainstream diversity discourse seems to neglect that value-based (intangible) homogeneity is argued to be normatively desirable (see, e.g. the PSM and public value discourse), exposing a paradoxical hole in the theory on public workforce composition: Can homogeneity be the – often presumed undesired – opposite of diversity if (intangible) homogeneity is argued to be a desirable outcome of public personnel management and recruitment policy? The scholarly discourse already provides several empirical findings that support the conceptualization of homogeneity as more than ‘the lack of diversity’. For instance, (Öberg, Oskarsson, and Svensson 2011, 365) show that homogeneity in the form of ‘egalitarian and ethnically homogenous’ workplaces may help build trust levels in groups. Particularly, group coordination and cohesion are affected by homogeneity. For instance, Brewer (1999) finds that most discriminatory behaviours are not motivated by an aversion towards out-groups but by individuals’ wish to maintain and promote positive relations within their in-group. Similarly, Halevy, Bornstein, and Sagiv (2008) and Apfelbaum, Phillips, and Richeson (2014) illustrate that the motive to cooperate within homogenous in-groups is distinct from and even stronger than conflict behaviours towards out-group members. These findings strongly point towards two distinct psychological phenomena (homogeneity *and* diversity) and not simply two ends of the same continuum (homogeneity *versus* diversity). We argue that these independent effects of workforce homogeneity on individual and group outcomes are largely overlooked in the diversity discourse. Hence, this study explores the concept of homogeneity in the PM literature more thoroughly, taking first steps towards a more nuanced understanding of the nature of workforce homogeneity as a theoretical concept beyond diversity.

Systematic literature review

Following the principles of problematization (Alvesson and Sandberg 2011), we illuminate the conceptual independence of homogeneity and provide an overview of the scientific discourse on potential causes and consequences in the public sector. We opted for a systematic literature review which relies on a rigorous, transparent, and theory-informed search strategy to identify and synthesize the complete body of relevant studies (Moher et al. 2009). This review’s strongest contribution lies in the systematic condensation of a previously dispersed and understudied research topic in the PM discourse. By developing theoretical building blocks, we constitute homogeneity as an independent concept and explore its causes and potential consequences. Specifically, this review addresses the following research questions.

- (1) How is the concept of public sector workforce homogeneity conceptualized in the scholarly discourse?
- (2) What are the *causes* of public sector workforce homogeneity?
- (3) What are the *consequences* of public sector workforce homogeneity?

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: the next section describes the empirical strategy, the research procedure, and the coding method. We use Moher et al. (2009) 'Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses' (PRISMA) approach to structure and report our search strategy and subsequent steps of analysis. The systematic search and coding procedure reveal a clearer conceptualization of the concept of homogeneity and clusters of causes and consequences. After presenting a synthesizing summary of the findings, limitations and implications for future research are discussed.

Materials and methods

We conducted this systematic literature review for four reasons. First, since research on the efficiency of diversity measures frequently lead to ambiguous results, analysing public workforce homogeneity may function as a remedy for an entangled body of empirical evidence and inform public personnel management (Schneider 1987; Apfelbaum, Phillips, and Richeson 2014; Prebble 2016; Schott and Ritz 2018). HR departments need to better understand the relationship between diversity and homogeneity as well as homogeneity's independent causes and consequences to implement diversity policies effectively and to avoid unintended outcomes. Second, a systematic literature review allows for the inductive identification of arguments, concepts, and theory lenses used to capture the phenomenon, hence revealing latent clusters beyond the research mainstream. Third, the topic of workforce homogeneity has created sufficient interest in the field of public personnel management (see, e.g. Schaveling, Blaauw, and van Montfort 2017; or Richards and Duxbury 2015) and general management research (e.g. Xu, Ling, and Park 2021; Grotto and Andreassi 2020; or Steffens, Terjesen, and Davidsson 2012) to allow for conducting a systematic literature review. However, the current discourse in management studies focuses on workforce homogeneity as a contextual factor (Xu, Ling, and Park 2021) or as an independent or moderating variable calling for more in-depth exploration (Zhang 2019; Li et al. 2018). Fourth, while there are literature reviews on *diversity* in public (Wise and Tschirhart 2000) and general management research (Jonsen, Maznevski, and Schneider 2011), to the best of our knowledge, there is yet no meta-level study investigating public workforce homogeneity specifically. Systematic literature reviews are meta-studies that follow a rigorous methodological procedure to identify relevant literature comprehensively through an explicit a-priori search and inclusion strategy (Cooper, Hedges, and Valentine 2009). Scientific progress relies on the iterative accumulation of knowledge derived from the empirical evidence of many studies (Glass 1977). To date, only a limited number of systematic reviews relate to workforce homogeneity as an outcome but with purposefully limited scope, e.g. by focusing on the particular role of PSM in employee self-selection into public service (see Perry and Wise 1990; or Schott and Ritz 2018).

Search strategy

The studies included in the review were identified as follows. First, we performed a search on the topic of homogeneity in all leading² PM journals. Second, we conducted a systematic search in the major online database ISI Web of Science Core Collection with open start date but restricted to publications by end of 2020, by

searching for keywords in title, abstract, and keywords of scientific peer-reviewed journal articles to maximize the search query output. We generated search terms by combining terms that exclusively refer to this sector – [*‘public sector’ OR ‘public service’ OR ‘public authority’ OR ‘public governance’ OR ‘public administrat*’ OR ‘public organization’ OR ‘public management’ OR ‘civil servant*’ OR ‘public employee*’ OR ‘civil employee*’*]³ – with the target terms referring to workforce homogeneity and non-diversity used in the scholarly discourse, i.e. [*‘homogen*’ OR ‘cohesive’ OR ‘uniformity’ OR ‘conformity’ OR ‘selection bias’ OR ‘heuristic’ OR ‘team structure’ OR ‘workforce’ OR ‘group mentality’ OR ‘group dynamics’*]. Moreover, we explicitly included the well-established concepts of (*dark sides of*) *public service motivation* (PSM) (Perry and Wise 1990; Schott and Ritz 2018) as well as the *ASA model* (Schneider 1987) in our search strategy by extending the key words by [*‘homophily’ OR ‘groupthink’ OR ‘groupthink’ OR ‘self-selection’ OR ‘ASA’ OR ‘attraction-selection-attrition’*] to capture paradigms implicitly linked with workforce homogeneity (Schott and Ritz 2018). We retrieved $N = 1,063$ studies through this search procedure.

Inclusion criteria and final set selection

Following the PRISMA approach (Moher et al. 2009), we applied six criteria to distil all relevant studies from the initial set of $N = 1,063$ hits for the systematic review. First, we only included studies focusing on the workforce in the *public sector*. Second, studies needed to contain either *causes* or *consequences* of workforce homogeneity (or both), which implies an explicit or implicit definition of homogeneity as well. Considering that homogeneity is often conceived as a baseline against which effects of workforce diversity are interpreted (Apfelbaum, Phillips, and Richeson 2014), we also included research focusing on *diversity* if these studies presented, for example, unsuccessful diversity management strategies that resulted in the persistence or increase of homogeneity. Third, regarding the perspective of consequences, any articles that mentioned general impacts related to workforce composition on the organization or its members were included. Studies that did not focus on homogeneity in the *workforce* but concentrated on macro-level effects – e.g. related with organizational power structures or hierarchies – were excluded for lack of precision in topical fit. Fourth, we set no restriction on the publication date of articles to obtain the maximal number of relevant sources in this dispersed research field. Fifth, since the most influential journals targeted at an international scholarly audience publish in English, only these articles were included. Sixth, only published, peer-reviewed work was considered, excluding all grey literature for quality control and rigour (Rothstein and Hopewell 2009).

Applying the aforementioned selection criteria lead to a final sample of $n = 31$ articles from the initial set of $N = 1,093$ articles. Appendix A reports this iterative selection process with a PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al. 2009) in more detail, and Appendix B summarizes this final set of studies, providing details on author(s), year of publication, country focus, title, journal, methods, and key findings. Subsequently, each study’s content was analysed inductively using an iterative recursive qualitative coding procedure to reveal *causes* and *consequences* of workforce homogeneity, paying close attention to the *conceptualization* of homogeneity at the same time. This coding procedure was conducted independently by two researchers to increase reliability (Mayring 2015). The revealed causes were aggregated abductively by inference to the best explanation into three clusters, further subdivided by these clusters’ focus on

individual microlevel or organizational mesolevel effects. We categorized consequences of workforce homogeneity by their valence (i.e. desired vs. undesired outcomes) as identified by the respective author(s) of the studies from the perspective of PM, resulting in four categories of consequences.

Results

Descriptive results

The articles retrieved for systematic analysis were published between 1990 and 2020. Seven articles date back to the period prior to 2010 and the remaining 24 (77.4%) articles were published after 2012. Two-thirds ($n = 19$; 61.3%) were published recently, within the last five years of the search query, which underlines the nascency of the topic in the PM discourse (see Figure 1). The $n = 31$ studies of the final set were published in 22 different journals pointing towards a rather dispersed discourse. Increasing publication numbers also reflect the growing interest in public workforce composition research following the growing diversification of Western societies and institutions (McGrandle 2017) and a more prominent integration of diversity principles as part of bureaucratic reforms (OECD 2010).

Most studies ($n = 10$; 32.3%) research public workforce homogeneity in the U.S., $n = 9$ (29.0%) research European countries, $n = 7$ (22.6%) Australia, Canada, or New Zealand, one study researches South Korea, one study compares two developing African countries, and one article presented comparative cross-country research. Comparative research into the relationship between workforce homogeneity and specific administrative traditions and country cultures is particularly scarce which is surprising given that institutional and structural differences are sensitive to

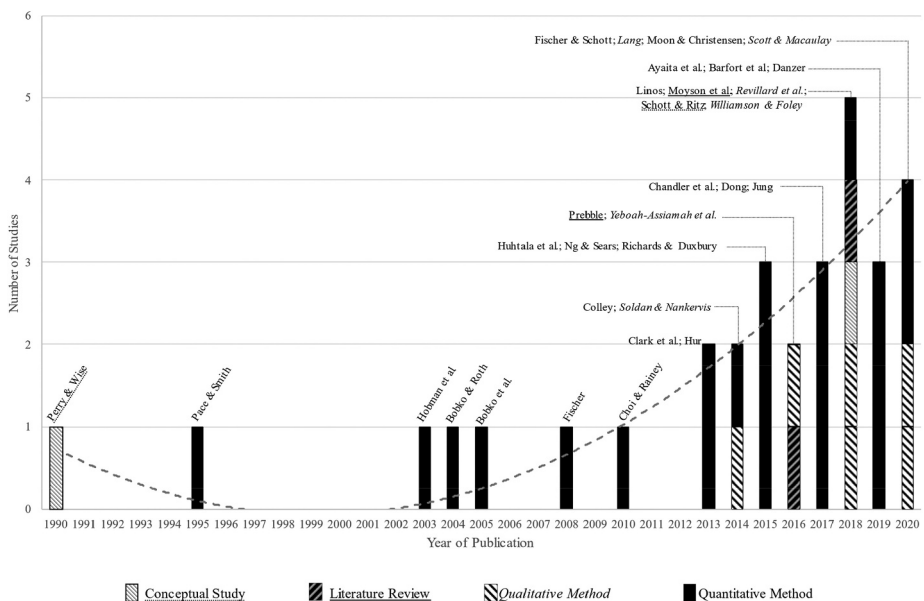


Figure 1. Summary of studies reviewed by method and year of publication.

country-specific and historical developments (Ayaita, Yang, and Güla 2019, 24). Only six studies explicitly mention that country-specific factors may influence the understanding and normative evaluation of homogeneity. Barfort et al. (2019) and Yeboah-Assiamah et al. (2016) refer to cultural homogeneity as a potential factor influencing unethical behaviour and groupthink. Danzer (2019) and Chandler, Heidrich, and Kasa (2017) conducted research in former Soviet Union-countries and address the role of historic developments in workforce composition due to privatization efforts and cultural characteristics. Scott and Macaulay (2020) point out that New Zealand's goal of creating a unified public service identity may influence the level of homogeneity observed. Yet, country effects do not constitute the general perspectives of homogeneity in the studies.

Regarding research methods, most studies retrieved ($n = 21$, 67.7%) rely on quantitative methods, among which only three studies' empiricism is based on a (quasi-)experimental design; $n = 3$ articles present literature reviews, only one of which is a systematic review. These three literature reviews focus on PSM (Prebble 2016; Schott and Ritz 2018) and socialization (Moyson et al. 2018), and while they do reveal specific causes and/or consequences of workforce homogeneity, they do not focus on the concept of workforce homogeneity itself. Furthermore, $n = 6$ articles use qualitative methods and one article – Perry and Wise (1990) – is purely conceptual (see Figure 1 and Appendix B).

Main analysis

Concepts and definitions

Addressing this study's first research question regarding the conceptualization of homogeneity, we find that most studies ($n = 23$) do not provide any explicit definition or conceptual specification of the terms 'homogeneity', 'heterogeneity', or 'diversity'; several authors even explicate the lack of conceptual clarity. For instance, Schott and Ritz (2018, 40) recommend more accurate 'reflecting on the composition of the work teams and organizations', Choi and Rainey (2010, 116) stress the 'need for a more nuanced interpretation of diversity'. The studies that do discuss and define (any of) these concepts, do so rather imprecisely. Four articles use the terms 'heterogeneity' and 'diversity' synonymously, positioning homogeneity as their counter concept and often in a normatively negative way. For instance, Hobman, Bordia, and Gallois (2003, 302) explain that the term 'group diversity is used to refer to the amount of heterogeneity within a group or unit on certain characteristics' while Moon and Christensen (2020, 158) state that 'practices [...] and leadership committed to workforce heterogeneity create a positive work atmosphere for diversity'. Other studies use ambiguous or implicit definitions derived from their own research questions. One example is Clark, Ochs, and Frazier (2013, 86) who research representative bureaucracy and describe a lack of diversity as 'patterned disparities in the representation'. Linos (2018, 68) explains the increasing diversity in police departments as the result of attracting 'new and different candidates' but remaining imprecise in whether this relates to tangible or intangible characteristics.

Considering the related scholarly debates on inclusion, equality, and discrimination draws an even more heterogeneous picture. Almost one-third of the articles reviewed ($n = 10$) refers to the topics of equality, inclusion, and representation, but the conceptual links with diversity or homogeneity are loose and often multidirectional. For

instance, Clark, Ochs, and Frazier (2013, 76) state that diversity ‘is salient because it connotes democracy, citizenship, inclusion, parity, and equal opportunity’, while Bobko and Roth (2004) argue that installing the objective of workforce diversity represents a value-based decision or may be driven by legal considerations not necessarily resembling fairness. The entanglement of these dissimilar conceptualizations and perspectives as well as the lacking degree of problematization and reflection regarding the use of these terms calls for a (re)conceptualization of diversity and homogeneity.

Furthermore, the partial absence and vagueness of definitions as well as the high variety of interpretations used is an important initial finding. It explains why the discourse on workforce homogeneity is dispersed since a lack of a common core conceptual foundation decreases the comparability of empirical results and hinders the detection of research gaps. As an interim answer to our first research question, we find that homogeneity is defined vaguely in most of the scholarship, predominantly as the opposite of heterogeneity which is equated with diversity. Since diversity is used normatively – i.e. as a desired outcome of public personnel policy – workforce homogeneity is mostly conceptualized as a negative outcome of HR practices which may relate both to tangible and intangible workforce characteristics.

Causes of workforce homogeneity in the public sector

Our second research question asked what empirical evidence exists regarding the causes of public workforce homogeneity to explore the emergence of this phenomenon. The coding procedure disclosed three clusters of causes, which lead to, or foster, homogenous workforce in the public sector: *self-selection*, *personnel policies*, and *socialization and cultural persistence*. The following section summarizes the three clusters with direct references to the studies reviewed, linking these causes with the respective process stages of the ASA model (Schneider 1987).

Self-selection (attraction)

The first argumentative cluster used to explain workforce homogeneity in the public sector is self-selection. This micro-level perspective describes the measurable outcome of an individual’s implicit or explicit preference to associate themselves with a group or sector based on tangible as well as non-tangible characteristics such as affect, perceived similarity (Ng and Sears 2015; Danzer 2019), ethical preferences (Ayaita, Yang, and Güral 2019; Barfort et al. 2019) but also parental socialization that prime homophily in job choice (Fischer and Schott 2020). As a result, individuals make employment choices that will eventually lead to their professional association with a public organization – as opposed to a private sector firm. As one of the key propositions for the relevance of PSM, Perry and Wise (1990) argue that individuals with high PSM levels are especially likely to self-select into public sector employment because pursuing a career in a public agency, whose goals are directed towards fostering public welfare, entails the opportunity to help others and society, which is assumed to be a central motive for high-PSM individuals. This process of PSM-based self-selection presents a reason for homogeneity in the public sector, especially regarding intangible dimensions (Jackson, May, and Whitney 1995). Quantitative research by Ayaita, Yang, and Güral (2019), using a large sample of German individuals, affirms Perry and Wise

(1990) conceptual study by revealing that individuals with strong convictions regarding civic virtue are particularly likely to actively self-select into public sector employment.

Linós (2018) extends this perspective by incorporating the concepts of ‘stereotype threat’ and ‘belonging uncertainty’ into the homogeneity discourse. The author points out that especially visible minorities and groups – such as women and people of colour – hesitate to apply for positions in public sector employment because these groups often fear being subjugated to negative stereotypical behaviour. Ng and Sears (2015) present further empirical evidence from Canada showing that visible minorities often prefer private sector employment, implicitly assuming that the private workforce is less homogenous so they would be less likely to stand out. The authors argue that especially immigrants of visible ethnicity seek for the opportunity of rapid socio-economic mobility, which they tend to associate with the private rather than the public sector. Ng and Sears (2015) further explain that visible minorities’ preference for the private sector is compounded by the fact that especially recent immigrants may have a negative image of governments since they may have suffered from political prosecution. Nonetheless, these observations and explanations for self-selection into the private sector are context-specific and may be generalized across national contexts only to a limited extent.

Other authors relate the phenomenon of sectoral self-selection to latent character traits such as risk-aversion. Dong (2017) and Jung (2017) find that risk-averse individuals are more likely to self-select into the public sector because in many countries public sector employment offers comparatively higher job-security and wage stability. Jung (2017) also shows that women tend to be more risk-averse compared to men and, hence, are supposedly more likely to self-select into the public sector. In sum, studies on self-selection as a main cause of public sector workforce homogeneity often heavily rely on the idea that individual preferences and not necessarily sectoral differences in personnel sourcing and retention drive professional sector choice, stressing that individual micro-level characteristics reinforce self-selection and, hence, perpetuate workforce homogeneity.

Personnel policies (selection)

Workforce homogeneity is not only a result of individuals’ sector choice but also of the organization’s personnel policies, including strategies of recruitment, procedures for promotion and dismissal, as well as possibilities of personnel development (Lang 2020). The reviewed literature differentiates between two perspectives on the effects of personnel policies: policies that directly foster homogeneity and policies that target towards increasing diversity but fail their purpose or entail counter-productive side effects (Moon and Christensen 2020). Research on personnel policies fostering homogeneity focuses mainly on organizational recruitment and promotion strategies. Since the inception of this concept, the scientific discourse on PSM has stressed that PSM can be a powerful tool for attracting employees by strategically promoting public agencies’ explicit connection to PSM’s underlying dimensions (Perry and Wise 1990). Linós (2018) shows that PSM-related signalling in job advertising is still a common strategy in civil services, attracting applicants that fit this pattern of motives and motivations. Intangible, motivational homogeneity regarding political partisanship and administrative ideology also highly influences the promotion and appointments for civil servants. Clark, Ochs, and Frazier (2013) use the appointment history of the Federal

Executive Service in the U.S. to illustrate that shared ideological views determine personnel decisions, creating a 'glass ceiling' for political minorities and non-mainstream ideas.

Another focus lies on the effects of promotion procedures specific to the public sector. Focusing on the tangible diversity dimension of age, Colley (2014) study presents an explanation for the continuing trend of ageing in Australia's civil service. She describes how changing the civil service recruitment strategy from a career-based to a position-based system dramatically increased the age profile of their public sector workforce. While this reform had the desired outcome of reducing employee turnover, it increased homogeneity regarding age groups – especially in later cohorts – over time. Colley (2014) illustrates how recruitment processes function as gatekeepers, dramatically affecting the later stages of employees' career paths. Fischer (2008) further shows that promotion based on seniority is a more widespread practice in the public sector compared with the private sector, particularly in HR-decisions on reward allocation, promotions, salary raises, and layoffs. These findings are supported by recent research investigating political careers and nominations in the public sector (Cirone, Cox, and Fiva 2021). Rewarding seniority fosters homogeneity through stabilizing tacit structures and impedes the chances of entry and development for new members of the organization.

Whereas these personnel policies reinforce homogenous workforce composition in civil services, other policies intended to diversify teams fail or even result in unintended side effects. A popular strategy aimed at increasing workforce diversity relies on increasing transparency and recruitment tool accessibility for underrepresented groups. For instance, Bobko, Roth, and Buster (2005) examine the effect of 'work sample tests' in public sector recruitment. Work sample tests are assessment measures that confront applicants with relevant tasks or problems that are representative of the position they applied for. For years, these tests have enjoyed great popularity with HR departments because they are assumed to be objectively fair and minority friendly, avoiding the biases inherent in e.g. cognitive ability tests (Bobko, Roth, and Buster 2005). However, Bobko, Roth, and Buster (2005) show that work sample tests contain the same potential of discriminatory bias against visible minorities and do in fact not level the playing field. Bardach, Rushby, and Klassen (2021) report comparable results in situational judgement tests (SJTs). Furthermore, a study by Bobko and Roth (2004) illustrates the common deficits of diversity-related recruitment strategies in practice when relying on top score-referenced banding. Bobko and Roth (2004) show that due to algorithmic fallacies these bandwidths are often incorrect and label too many applicants falsely as 'equal', which interferes with the strategy's original goal. The authors hence stress the danger of overestimating the relevance of algorithm-based selection tools when implementing affirmative action. Studies by Pace and Smith (1995) and Soldan and Nankervis (2014) show that diversity-related concepts, such as affirmative action, can be easily misunderstood by practitioners, resulting in confusion and ambiguity instead of encouraging diversity-conscious hiring practices. Soldan and Nankervis (2014) detect a 'commitment-implementation gap' in Australia's public sector regarding the difference between the formulation of diversity management goals and their actual implementation. The authors show that targeted recruitment, employee development, and employee retention rhetoric and practice often greatly diverge, which results in distrust between employees and their organizations, consequently rendering diversity-directed personnel policies inefficient.

Besides recruitment policies, trainings for personnel managers aiming at creating awareness of unconscious biases in recruitment have become an increasingly popular practice. Yet, Williamson and Foley (2018) question the effectiveness of such trainings, because they aim towards changing individuals' behaviour but often neglect structural causes. Moreover, trainings focusing on the involuntary nature of biases tend to normalize and trivialize them. In extreme cases, the attempt to convince people to reflect and overcome their biases can paradoxically reinforce stereotyping (Williamson and Foley 2018), which calls for profound evaluations of trainings to avoid unintended effects.

Socialization and cultural persistence (attrition)

The third cluster of causes is *socialization* and the *cultural persistence* of practices and behaviours that reinforce homogeneity on the organizational (macro) level. Several studies focus on those processes in public organizations that function latently and result in workforce homogenization over time by creating a new shared social identity (Scott and Macaulay 2020). In their systematic literature review, Moyson et al. (2018) synthesize diverse streams of research on socialization processes in public personnel management research. Although the authors stress that implicit processes of socialization are less powerful in reinforcing homogeneity compared with explicit processes of personnel selection, organizational socialization is essential in determining person-organization fit and moderates the transformation of new employees to full organizational members. Schott and Ritz (2018) use Schneider, Goldstein, and Smith (1995) ASA model to explain how PSM relates to socialization and homogenization in the public sector workforce. Organizations that are explicitly pledged to PSM will attract individuals that hold similarly high levels of PSM, and these individuals will – due to their high person-organization fit – be more likely to be successful in the recruitment process. Reversely, people with low levels of PSM – and, consequently, low person-organization fit – will either be less likely to be hired or will eventually leave the organization. Socialization processes are strongly linked with organizational culture. In a replicated cross-sectoral study, Chandler, Heidrich, and Kasa (2017) show that particularly dominant types of organizational culture can be extremely persistent in a public sector context and are often hardly affected by external or internal incentives to change. These findings resonate with Revillard et al. (2018) study using bibliographic interviews to demonstrate persistent inequality in the French public sector regarding both gender and minorities based on a 'glass-ceiling' effect related to organizational culture.

Consequences of workforce homogeneity in the public sector

Our third research question asked for the consequences – i.e. the effects and outcomes – of tangible as well as intangible homogeneity in the public sector workforce. The reviewed articles contain four clusters of consequences of homogeneity: *employee wellbeing and performance*, *rigidity*, *groupthink*, and *lack of neutrality*. The valence of effects (intended or unintended) differs, and several articles imply both desired and undesired effects. Furthermore, consequences' level (individual, organization, or macrosocial) of effects is often neither explicitly defined nor discussed. However,

identifying these consequences produces conceptual clarity and elevates homogeneity from a too simplistic notion as a mere 'lack of diversity' to a phenomenon that actually leads to independent outcomes.

Employee wellbeing and performance

The first category of consequences of a homogenous workforce highlights the positive effects on employees' wellbeing and organizational performance. However, the relation of these effects (cause and effect) is partially disputed. *Employee wellbeing* is related to several concepts, such as motivation, satisfaction, or team harmony, and often linked with *performance* at the organizational level (Choi and Rainey 2010; Hur 2013). One perspective focuses on the link between occurring conflicts and the tangible dimension of ethnical diversity. Hur (2013) examines this relationship using the case of U.S. police departments and shows that increasing ethnical diversity leads to more conflicts, which decreases performance. Choi and Rainey (2010) present related results, stating that racial diversity in U.S. federal agencies decreases organizational performance concluding that a more homogenous workforce might experience less internal conflict and, hence, perform better. Huhtala et al. (2015) show that homogenous work units sharing similar experiences create a stronger and more cohesive ethical culture, which, in turn, increases employee engagement, lowers individuals' likelihood to suffer from burnout, and increases job satisfaction (Danzer 2019). Hobman, Bordia, and Gallois (2003) support this relation by explaining how the intangible dimension of value congruence in teams of civil servants reduces task and relationship conflicts and increases team motivation and involvement. This performance link is supported by Richards and Duxbury (2015), who show that workforce homogeneity correlates with more effective knowledge sharing, group-based learning, and a higher degree of knowledge dissemination, because acquiring and sharing knowledge is easier in homogenous groups.

Rigidity

The second category of consequences of workforce homogeneity is procedural and organizational *rigidity* often related to conservatism in decision-making processes. 'Conservatism' in this sense does not refer to any political orientation and is not used normatively but characterizes individuals as conservative if they feel highly committed to rather traditional value paradigms, which might manifest in a certain reluctance to innovation and change. As causes of a homogenous workforce, self-selection, recruitment practices, and socialization processes are strongly related to uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 2003), consequently reinforcing the status-quo in both organizational procedures and best practices in strategic and operative decision-making (Clark, Ochs, and Frazier 2013; Dong 2017; Moyson et al. 2018; Linos 2018). Fischer (2008) discusses the dual effect of rigidity. On the one hand, procedural rigidity creates trust and reduces turn-over intentions because it signals long-term stability and, hence, reduces recruitment costs. Stability guarantees performance predictability and may be particularly crucial in the public sector, in which the careful balancing of public interest and public resources is expected (Dong 2017). On the other hand, Fischer (2008) stresses the negative consequence of rigidity in an organizational context. While fast-changing, dynamic environments demand flexibility and adapting to the new status-quo, public sector organizations that rely on a particularly

homogenous workforce may eventually be unable to cope with these dynamics. A similar argument focuses on innovation capacities. Through the proxy of risk-aversion, rigidity is linked with lacking innovativeness and entrepreneurship (Dong 2017).

Groupthink

A mainly unintended consequence of workforce homogeneity, especially regarding intangible dimensions, is *groupthink*. Groupthink describes the phenomenon that homogenous groups with strong ties tend to seek congruence to a degree that it results in misjudgement and even objectively bad decision making (Janis 1972). Schott and Ritz (2018) interpret the concept within the frame of the ‘dark side’ of PSM, as workforce homogeneity related with individuals’ core values and motives creates highly cohesive groups that are more prone to misjudgement due to peer pressure. Furthermore, the authors derive inflexibility and non-responsiveness of workforce engaged in groupthink since homogenous groups are less able to successfully adapt in dynamic organizational environments.

Yeboah-Assiamah et al. (2016) present similar findings when examining unethical behaviour in public sector organizations in Ghana and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The authors use the ASA model and social-cognitive-theory to explain how leading executives affect and prime their subordinates’ behaviour by creating benchmarks and (a)moral groupthink, which eventually creates a norm of organizational behaviour and decision-making. Whereas these effects of workforce homogeneity stress the threat of unintended consequences on the organizational level, Schott and Ritz (2018) also raise awareness that a homogenous high-PSM workforce may cause undesirable micro-level behaviours, such as blind rule-following and unethical behaviour since homogeneity and person-environment fit reduces individuals’ incentive to question the status quo of conduct.

Lack of neutrality

In addition to groupthink, a *lack of neutrality* presents another unintended consequence of workforce homogeneity. Prebble (2016) stresses that the concept of PSM relates to prosocial motives, such as ‘the plight of the underprivileged’ or a ‘better life for the poor’ (Kim et al. 2013, 92). While these prosocial motives are laudable causes, they cannot claim universal legitimacy in the context of Weberian administrative traditions, in which bureaucracy is installed to explicitly guarantee neutrality and equality for all clients – irrespective of their sociodemographic characteristics (Weber 1922). By actively pursuing recruitment strategies that create and reinforce a strong orientation towards PSM within the workforce, public agencies risk lacking neutrality, which eventually results in unintended politicization of bureaucratic processes and discrimination of certain types of clients that are perceived as relatively more – or less – deserving than others (Jilke and Tummers 2018; Weißmüller, De Waele, and van Witteloostuijn 2022). Clark, Ochs, and Frazier (2013) show that these biases are especially related to promotion and personnel reward strategies that are particularly informed by ideological partisanship. Moreover, research provides evidence that misapplication and lacking understanding of certain diversity measures may result in the explicit support of specific minorities while neglecting others. For instance, several authors raise concerns about interpreting diversity management solely as promoting white women at the expense of reinforcing the discrimination of

women of colour (Clark, Ochs, and Frazier 2013). These biases manifest in an unbalanced representation of the general public among the workforce of public agencies resulting in institutional delegitimation and losses in workforce performance (Wise and Tschirhart 2000).

Discussion

The purpose of this systematic literature review was to explore homogeneity as a theoretical concept beyond ‘non-diversity’ by synthesizing how homogeneity is conceptualized in the literature and to synthesize the current discourse on causes and consequences of workforce homogeneity in the public sector. As illustrated in Figure 2, our first contribution is to reveal that, so far, the scientific discourse revolves around three clusters of causes that explain the emergence and stickiness of workforce homogeneity: self-selection, personnel policies, and socialization processes. Whereas the concepts of self-selection and socialization are widely accepted and explored, the implications of personnel policies, such as recruitment and diversity strategies, constitute a relatively new research area and offer many opportunities for future research. The fact that strategies and measures explicitly targeted at increasing workforce diversity often fail to meet their goal and sometimes even result in counter effects is an especially interesting finding because it indicates that diversity strategies can paradoxically foster homogenization (Bobko and Roth 2004; Soldan and Nankervis 2014; Williamson and Foley 2018). Another interesting finding is that the review only revealed three major causes of homogeneity, which presents a limited range of factors and calls for future exploration. For instance, the analysed literature does not consider systemic factors linked with the specific nature of professions more often nested within the public sector that

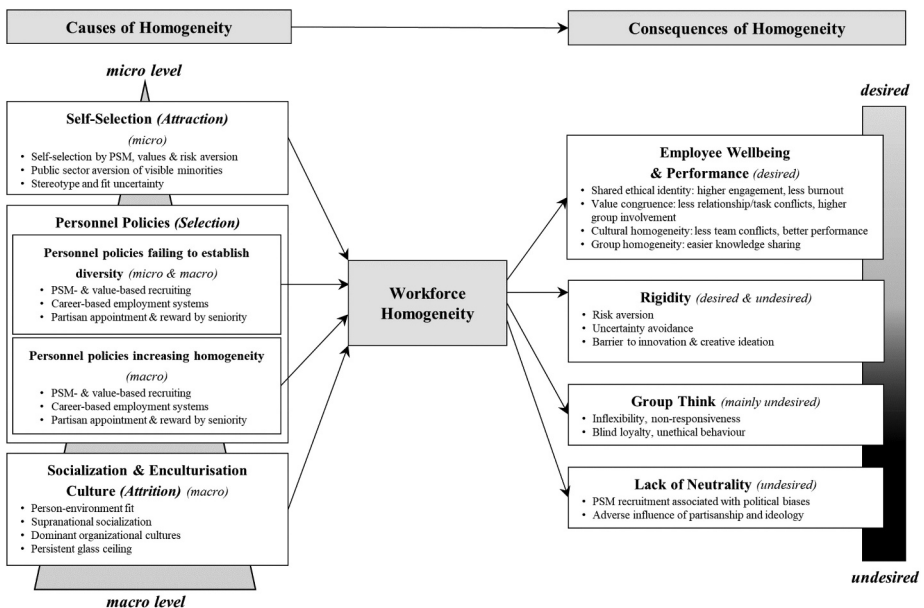


Figure 2. Synthesis of causes & consequences of workforce homogeneity in the discourse.

tend to attract women more strongly than men, such as occupations in the fields of care work and health provision (OECD 2019). However, this finding might result from our search strategy, which did not specifically target the care or educational sector. Future studies can build on our findings and examine specialist disciplines more closely.

Moreover, the current review stresses the significance of the interplay between the level of the individual and the organization when examining causes of workforce homogeneity in the public sector. The effects of self-selection and recruitment processes are intricately connected and may lead to micro-level biases in personnel choices irrespective of organizational goals and policies. Socialization processes, however, occur beyond the micro-level and understanding them in more depth may help explain, e.g. how organizational culture persistently influences value conformity over years (Chandler, Heidrich, and Kasa 2017). Bearing in mind the duality of structure and agency (Giddens 1984), the three categories of causes emphasize the interconnectedness of the factors that influence homogeneity, ranging from individual attitudes, the design of recruitment processes, trainings, and colleague interactions to complex long-term socialization mechanisms. Considering that individual- and organization-level effects may even work in opposing directions, these findings strongly suggest embracing an integrative perspective to fully understand these relationships. We, therefore, encourage future research to overcome the limitations from focusing on isolated levels by, for instance, conducting cross-hierarchical research to trace how policies transform and cascade into processes and agency over time.

The second key contribution of this study relates to the *consequences* of a homogenous workforce in the public sector. Although the discourse treats them as outliers or quasi-irrelevant side effects, we distilled four clusters of consequences encompassing both desired and undesired effects: *groupthink*, *lack of neutrality and representation*, *employee wellbeing and performance*, and *rigidity*. We show that personnel policies, such as PSM-informed targeted recruiting or seniority reward schemes, may direct workforce composition towards homogeneity of tangible and non-tangible dimensions in several ways and to both desired and undesired outcomes. Currently, the concept of groupthink is used to explain mainly negative effects of a homogenous workforce, linking them with unethical behaviour, un-responsiveness, and blind loyalty (Schott and Ritz 2018). Lacking neutrality and representation describe an effect of political biases, arising from selection, attraction, and rewarding processes, which, in turn, lead to decreasing institutional legitimacy and organizational performance (Wise and Tschirhart 2000). Investigating the performance effect of a homogenous workforce in the public sector offers plenty of opportunity for future research, whereas moderating variables such as conflict, knowledge acquisition, or employee satisfaction need theoretical linkage with workforce composition. Besides, this connection needs more critical examination because the causality and the direction of this effect are still unclear (Ely 2004). The fourth category, rigidity, describes the balancing act between lower flexibility, deficits in innovation, and performance predictability as well as organizational stability and trustful long-term relationships between employees and their employers (Fischer 2008; Dong 2017). In summary, these numerous examples of consequences of homogeneity raise reasonable doubts about the one-sided portrayal of diversity as a monolithic theoretical concept (Kochan et al. 2003).

Building on these findings, this study starts a discourse on the reconceptualization of the entangled concepts of homogeneity, heterogeneity, and diversity. We suggest that research into the effects of workforce composition will benefit from integrating the perspective of homogeneity not merely as the flipside of diversity but as an interlinked yet non-congruent concept. An organization's workforce can be described as more or less homogenous on a wide spectrum between the two abstract poles of high to low homogeneity. However, the degree to which we assign the relative label of high vis-à-vis low homogeneity to one workforce compared to another is contingent upon the normative criteria we use for comparison. There are many tangible as well as intangible criteria commonly used to characterize workforces (e.g. age, gender, value orientation, political opinion, cultures, and many more), each of which may serve as a different *dimension of diversity* – e.g. diversity regarding age, gender, or values – each of which set a different marker onto the high vis-à-vis low homogeneity spectrum, allowing to characterize a workforce as homogenous or heterogeneous regarding specific diversity dimensions. This perspective may help explain why increasing workforce diversity does not always result in higher productivity (Selden and Selden 2001; Pitts 2005), a puzzle that problematizes diversity as a panacea (Fernandez 2007). The essential debate about inclusion, equality, and representation touches upon societal, political, and legal arguments, which relate in many ways to the diversity discourse. Each of the potential dimensions of diversity will be informed by cultural and institutional norms and individually or shared societal values. These norms and values shape the degree to which high or low homogeneity regarding a specific diversity dimension will be considered as desirable suggesting that diversity dimensions present inherently normative concepts. However, to examine causes, consequences, moderators, and directions of effects, we need ways to separate these concepts analytically. This is where homogeneity as a descriptive spectrum in contrast to – normative – dimensions of diversity may suit. Reconceptualizing homogeneity and repositioning diversity does not aim at undermining the significance of the diversity discourse but sheds light on unanswered questions and contradictions that need to be addressed conceptually and empirically. Since more and more public sector organizations worldwide promote diversity and inclusion policies (OECD 2021), it is essential to critically reflect on the mere positive interpretation of this diversity agenda to prevent inefficiency or unintended effects.

Limitations and future research

Problematizing and challenging the understanding of homogeneity as a mere mirror concept of diversity, this systematic literature review advances our understanding of the causes and consequences of workforce homogeneity by revealing that workforce homogeneity is more than a defective state or a baseline for comparison. Yet, we recognize that this review is subject to several limitations. We found that the current discourse on homogeneity is a dispersed research field often lacking precise definitions. This constitutes an obstacle for conducting a systematic literature review because it lacks a 'natural' starting point. We tried to mitigate this challenge by using a range of key words to capture both tangible and intangible forms of homogeneity. These key words were further informed by the ongoing theoretical debate on the link between workforce composition, PSM, which is grounded theoretically in the ASA model. Particularly, this study is the first step in addressing the paradoxical findings in the diversity discourse by highlighting and challenging an often taken-for-granted entanglement of theoretical

concepts and terminology. Consequently, we encourage future research on workforce composition to considering explicitly and precisely the (implicit) normativity inherent in the concept of diversity and further unravel the relationship between (dimensions of) homogeneity and diversity agendas and policies in the public sector workforce. Furthermore, the contradictions and blind spots regarding the consequences of workforce composition call for more empirical and conceptual research on the outcome level, for instance, by focusing on the relationship between homogeneity, team performance, and motivation. Moreover, it is important to note that our study relies on qualitative coding and, effectively, meta-level research on evidence that largely follows a quantitative research epistemology. Many of the quantitative studies reviewed derive correlation-based results and are unable to clearly identify causal mechanisms. Consequently, the causes and consequences of homogeneity on both the individual and the team/organization level are not necessarily distinctive but may interact in the course of time. Reliable empirical evidence is lacking on how individual choices and preferences preserve workforce homogeneity, for instance, through *unconscious* biases in (self-)selection and the perception of person-organization and person-team fit. Future quantitative and comparative research across various administrative traditions may help reveal both the latent micro-behavioural and implicit organizational logics associated with the causes and consequences of workforce homogeneity in the public sector.

Notes

1. By public sector, we refer to the broad sectoral domain occupied by governmental and federal institutions, public institutional systems, and public enterprises (Fletcher et al. 2020).
2. This initial search was conducted in the 20 most prestigious journals ranked by *h5-index* in the field of Public Policy and Administration.
3. We use the broader definition of the ‘public sector’ rather than the narrower ‘administrative core’ to maximize review coverage. Yet, we purposefully exclude the education and healthcare sector in the current study since in many countries, educational and medical services are not exclusively delivered by public institutions but often co-created in a mixed-sector or hybrid environment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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