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Needham, Catherine; Mangan, Catherine

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The 21st-century public servant: working at three boundaries of public and private

Catherine Needham and Catherine Mangan

In a project on the roles and skills of the 21st-century public servant, interviews with public service workers highlighted three boundaries of public and private: relating to ethics, careers and identities. Two contingent factors shape the capacity of staff to be able to reconcile the public and private aspects of their work: the degree of fiscal austerity and the scope for reflective practice. Strategic workforce planning needs to support staff to manage the different versions of public and private.

Keywords: Austerity; careers; ethics; identity; workforce change.

People delivering public services in the public, private and third sectors face similar challenges as they manage shrinking budgets, increased citizen demands and technological advances which undermine the viability of traditional modes of service delivery. This paper reports findings from a project on the 21st-century public servant, funded by a knowledge exchange grant from the Economic and Social Research Council. The project built on the University of Birmingham Policy Commission (2011) into the 'Future of Local Public Services', which identified the need to pay attention to the changing roles undertaken by public servants and the associated support and development needs. Public servants are here defined broadly, to incorporate people delivering public services across different sectors, reflecting the mixed market of providers of public services.

Through interviews with people involved in supporting and delivering public services in England, and a survey of new graduates in local government, the research considered how the public service workforce is changing, and what further changes are anticipated. During the research, we encountered three framings of public and private, which we discuss in this paper. Exploring public service work through counterposing the public and private is of course not a new approach, but here we consider three framings of the public and private which are particularly resonant for people working in the current context of public services, adjusting to long-term austerity and technological change. The three framings of public and private are ethics, careers and identity.

To write about public services through the metaphor of the public-private boundary is to

tread very familiar ground, and we approach this border with some trepidation. As Williams and Powell (2015, p. 1) put it in relation to publicness:

Attempts to understand the changing nature of 'the public' in developed nations are hamstrung by the multiple uses and applications of the term itself... Whilst some of these concepts may be mutually compatible others clearly derive from distinct disciplinary traditions and the tendency of these traditions to 'talk past' one another means that it is often not clear whether these multiple 'publics' are fundamentally different or have simply been developed independently of one another.

Other authors have written of the different framings of the private, and the different ways in which public and private intersect (Benn and Gaus, 1983; Okin, 1991).

However, perhaps because interviewees were very familiar with the framing, public and private was a binary which kept reoccurring in the interviews. For interviewees and survey respondents, it was a common way to talk about their working practices, their career paths and communication techniques. This could relate to structural reform (greater privatization of previously public services), for example, or changing career paths (greater fluidity between public and private sectors). Some of our interviewees were located in the third (non-profit) sector, and this gets in the way of a simplistic public/private binary by sector. However, the third sector interviewees also talked about their roles in ways which were expressive of pro-public or pro-commercial values and identities.

Catherine Needham is a reader in Public Policy and Public Management at the Health Services Management Centre, University of Birmingham, UK.

Catherine Mangan is a senior fellow at the Institute for Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham, UK.

Research design

The research presented here is located within a broader project which aimed to capture the different roles, competencies and skills of the 21st-century public servant, the support and training requirements of these roles, and the ways in which central and local government can better support and promote public service careers. A range of practitioner-focused resources have been produced by the project (Needham and Mangan, 2014; Needham *et al.*, 2014). In this paper we focus on emergent findings relating to the framings of public and private, which were developed inductively from the interview and survey data.

Forty interviews were conducted with a range of people working in the public sector (for example in local authorities, the National Health Service, the fire and rescue service, the police service), the private sector (service providers, commissioning support functions) and the third sector (service providers, service user and carer advocacy bodies). We also conducted a focus group of officers and members in one local authority, and undertook a survey with recent graduate entrants into local government.

The interviews and focus group drew on a purposive sample of people working in public services in the West Midlands region (including frontline workers, managers and leaders) and in national stakeholder organizations. We used semi-structured interviews, based on a standardized topic guide, with questions derived from themes drawn from a literature review (Needham *et al.*, 2014). Interviews were audio recorded. The survey was undertaken online, with a link sent to 100 recent recruits to the National Graduate Development Programme for local government. Fifty-four people responded, a response rate of over half, which is generally considered as acceptable for online surveys (Rubin and Babbie, 2010, p. 117). Ethical approval for the project was granted by the University of Birmingham.

Interview and focus group transcripts were analysed thematically according to the themes developed in the literature review (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Coded sections were shared between the two researchers to enhance consistency in the analysis. Coding was done by hand, working off hard copies. The quotations used in this paper were selected for inclusion on the grounds that they were illustrative of the patterns found in stage 1 or stage 2 of the analysis. Descriptive statistics were produced from the quantitative survey data using tables generated by Survey Monkey. Survey verbatims were analysed through the same two-stage

process as the interview data.

The three framings of public and private that emerged from this analysis process relate to ethics, careers and identities. After setting these out, we then explore the key contingent factors that interviewees identified as shaping their capacity to respond to the challenges. The first is the degree of austerity they were facing; the second is the extent to which they were able to engage in reflective practice.

Ethics

In the interviews, focus group and survey we asked people about whether the term 'public service ethos' had any resonance to them. The public service ethos has been a common reference point in discussions about public service reform for many years. Ethos captures the sense of an intrinsic motivation to serve the public, distinct from extrinsic motivations such as material reward or fear of sanctions (Le Grand, 2003). Intrinsic motivations are particularly important in public services since users often cannot impose extrinsic sanctions like exit on poor quality providers (Chapman, 1993; Le Grand, 2003).

The survey of graduate entrants into local government showed that 'wanting to serve the public' was the most powerful motivator of choice of career. Two-thirds of National Graduate Development Programme respondents believe that there is a distinctive set of public service values, and interviewees similarly spoke about wanting to serve the public. However, both survey respondents and interviewees highlighted the ethos as something which was in flux, rather than stable. Of the 33 survey respondents who believed in a public service ethos, around three-quarters felt that these values are changing as public services adapt to reduced public spending. Comments included:

As finances are tightening and we are looking to make money out of council services, I believe the whole ethos of the public sector will have to change and public sector workers' mindsets may need to evolve if this is to be a success. There is also no longer a 'job for life' so I think people in the sector feel less secure in their jobs which may well have an effect on their morale/performance/values at work.

Values are being shared and amalgamated across the two sectors.

[Local government is] becoming less responsive to public opinion as cuts are becoming more necessary. Public services being run more like private services. As councils look for a way to save money there is more of a drive for self-funding services or social

enterprise spin-offs. The impact of this is that services become more profit driven and focused on delivery of outcome rather than the process... Treating everyone fairly can be missed as those most vulnerable are the most difficult and costly to support and may be neglected compared to the easiest as is the same in the private sector.

In response to this new financial context, interviewees talked of the need to acquire more commercial skills:

We need commercial acumen. That's not been favoured... in the past. But it's not about profit, it is about what things costs, are we making the best use of public money? And can the third sector or private sector sometimes do things better, better value for money?

Local government will need more private sector skills, more crossover of skills and people. If staff in local government don't have the commercial skills, they won't be employable. We have to help them get them.

Chief officers will probably need a whole new set of skills. How do you do business relationships—how do you take elected members with you?

What it meant to be more 'commercial' was interpreted in a range of different ways. For some, it was about more efficient monitoring of contracts with the private sector, whereas for others it was about securing better value for money from in-house services. One interviewee expressed this ambiguity surrounding the term:

Commercial skills—we know what we mean but if I said to you what would a commercial social worker do, does it mean I can make money for the council or I can make relationships with commercial partners, does it mean I can sell things? A piece of work needs to be done that fleshes those out.

Some interviewees did not see a tension between a commitment to publicness and a stronger set of commercial skills within the public sector. Better value for money and more effective contract management were both felt to be strongly in the public interest. Others felt that the two were operating in tension, which was reflected in the language they used to describe the environment in which they were working. As one interviewee said: 'I think there will be a fight between altruism and commercialism. We need managers who still care'. A new graduate responding to the survey reported a similar sense of tension:

There is a conflict with the dogma that councils must 'think like a business' and the idea that the council should continue to provide services for free and look favourably on the vulnerable.

These findings are consistent with the literature on public service ethos, which has argued that from the new public management (NPM) era onwards, there has been a shift away from talking about a public sector ethos towards a public *service* ethos. This new ethos was seen as the basis for a 'synthesis' between the traditional ethos and private sector models of customer service (Brereton and Temple, 1999; Needham, 2006). In the customer orientation the ethical considerations of public service are transferred from process to end product (Brereton and Temple, 1999, p. 471). '[E]thical considerations are now couched in terms of optimum outcome for customers rather than the motives of the actors engaged in service provision' (Hebson *et al.*, 2003, p. 485). This responsiveness to customers suggests an agnosticism about whether services are located within the public or private sector.

NPM-type approaches have been superseded by other frameworks, such as new public governance which claim more conceptual insight and normative appeal (for example Osborne, 2010). However, what emerges from our research is that the NPM drive for commerciality is only now being felt strongly by those working in frontline public services, because of the tightening grip of austerity. In the interviews and survey, people explained that they were now being asked much more explicitly by council leaders and managers to take a commercial approach in ways that they had not in the past. Yet this commercial approach has not so far been well defined within their organizations, leading to the tensions described above as public servants try to reconcile their understanding and affiliation with the concept of public service with a call to be more commercial.

Careers

Many interviewees felt that a new kind of career path is emerging, far removed from the traditional 'job for life' that was seen to characterize some parts of the public sector in the past. As one interviewee put it:

People will have portfolio careers, working in different sectors, working for different people at the same time, not just sequentially. It's not a job for life, or even for five years.

One interviewee described it as a 'zigzag' career path, rather than the traditional linear one where people moved up the hierarchy within a single organization.

Interviewees from the public sector talked about the dilemmas they faced in deciding whether to stay within their organization or to move into public service delivery bodies in the private or third sectors. Some were fearful for their jobs in shrinking public sector organizations, feeling that they may be forced out of public sector work rather than being able to make a choice. For some of the interviewees, the notion of a 'portfolio career' was felt to be a euphemism for race-to-the-bottom employment practices in public service organizations that were rapidly shrinking in response to austerity ('the weekly sound of hand-clapping for another leaving do').

However, for others, there was a positive aspect to having a career which took in a number of different organizations and sectors. There was a recognition that in a complex delivery context public servants need to have a better understanding of the cultures and motivations of other agencies who have roles in achieving outcomes for citizens:

If you've had couple of roles in commissioning, you need to experience life on the provider side, support service or central service—get different perspective and get broader experience.

People in the third sector spoke of the value of encouraging more local authority workers to experience other sectors, and vice versa:

The local authority has a particular problem in that because they are historically and culturally established institutions they get a lot of people who are used to one culture... There is less of that in the third sector, funding comes and goes and people are more mobile. It is useful for the third sector to get into the local authority and see the whites of their eyes.

An interviewee from the private sector also spoke about the benefits of working across boundaries, and how people could be better supported to do this:

I've learned a huge amount by having crossed over into the private sector from local government. I would do my old job in a much different way with the skills and experience I've learned. I don't see enough of the skills I've acquired in my current role being applied in the public sector. The private sector can learn from the public sector as well as

vice versa. I brought some skills to my current role that many of my peers who have never worked in the public sector haven't got, and in particular around working in a political environment.

Creating a shared understanding of other sectors and organizations would create 'more understanding and more mutual respect', as one interviewee put it.

A willingness to look across boundaries to other parts of public services was also evident within the survey of recent graduate entrants to local government. Although a third saw themselves as likely to be working solely within local government in five years' time, a quarter saw themselves working in the wider public sector, and 10% saw themselves as likely to be working in different delivery vehicles, such as social enterprises. The remaining 30% did not expect to be working in public service delivery at all.

Sabbaticals and secondments were seen as useful tools for sharing learning and gaining exposure to other organizational cultures:

Where I have gained most has been being located in those organizations. There needs to be structured placement opportunities of some significant length with requirement to be reflective, and some tasks as part of that. Experiential stuff is the best.

Interviewees also referred to coaching, mentoring, shadowing and action learning as effective ways of developing new skills, as well as networks and relationships across the organization and more widely:

We train people into their role too much. We don't do any real training and development. We need more work shadowing, but with a structure. It doesn't need to cost a lot. We need to get people working across the council with partners, not just within directorates and services. Managers need to do a lot more developing as part of the [personal development review] process.

People's willingness to consider working in different sectors, or experience of having done so already, links to Lewis' (2008) empirical work with third sector leaders. In interviews she found that many of them lacked 'an explicitly "sectored" perspective on their careers'. However, our interviewees suggested that the mechanisms to support a career path that moves between sectors are not yet in place. Those individuals who had experienced working in different sectors clearly stated the benefits but did not feel that the organizations they worked in recognized the

need for or the value of the knowledge they brought with them. Although we might conclude from the interviewees that, for the broader public service workforce, the notion of a career being 'sectored' is out of date, this may not yet be apparent in the way in which organizations develop their workforce.

Identity

A third framing of public and private that emerged from the data was around identity and the boundaries of the public and private self. This is a different kind of public/private boundary from the previous two (Benn and Gaus, 1983). As Okin (1991, p. 68) points out: "Public/private" is used to refer both to the distinction between state and society (as in public and private ownership), and to the distinction between domestic and non-domestic life'. Here it is the latter sense which interviewees were deploying.

This was manifest in a number of ways. The first was in relation to the individual values that people hold and are expected to model at work. The importance of individual staff behaving 'as a human' was a recurrent theme of the interviews, indicating that good service meant sharing something of oneself rather than hiding behind a professional role or job title: 'People need to be able to relate humanly to each other in the way they deliver services', as one interviewee for that project put it. According to others: 'It's about being human, that's what we need to do' and 'It's [not] about the kind of job you do but the kind of person you are'.

The importance of relational approaches has been emphasised in a range of recent reports on public service change, highlighting the importance of caring and supportive relationships between citizens and staff (Cottam, 2013; Muir and Parker, 2014; Needham and Mangan, 2014). A lack of compassion among nursing staff at Mid-Staffordshire Foundation Trust was felt to be part of the explanation for the preventable deaths that occurred at the hospital (Department of Health, 2013). One of the recommendations of the Francis Report into those events was a drive to identify individuals with the 'right' values for nursing (Department of Health, 2013).

A number of interviewees spoke about the need to think differently about recruitment practices in order to allow a focus on applicants' values, broadening the pool of potential applicants as well as reviewing them according to different criteria. However, interviewees also recognized that recruiting for subjective qualities such as personal values may run counter to employment and equalities legislation. One

interviewee, running a third sector organization, said:

Some of the equalities thinking has made it harder to recruit for aptitude and personality. Those are really important for a relational model, but they are more subjective. [At this organization] we put personal qualities and aptitudes and ask for demonstrations of how they were used in a current job. We are looking for a kind of person. In most of government they put out an advert, rather than headhunting, because they feel it's fair, but I'm not sure it's a very good way of getting the right person. We don't do it, we advertise and we use our networks to get people to apply.

A second issue in relation to public and private identities was evident in relation to the communication practices of individual public servants and the need to utilize social media in ways that reconcile the public and private self. The people we interviewed discussed the difficulties they faced in trying to use social media in a way that felt 'authentic', but wasn't too personal and didn't get them into trouble with their organization:

You have to be careful with Twitter. It's difficult to draw the line between personal and professional life. I tend to re-tweet things but without a value statement attached. We are in politically restricted posts so we have to be careful.

Twitter and Facebook are about publishing what you do in your life. But huge parts of my life are in the public arena and I want to keep part of it private.

Another expressed the tension between authenticity and organizational reputation:

A lot of public sector organizations fall into the trap of putting out this bland stuff... We're talking about personality now. Comms are saying you need to be blogging as yourself. But when I do get the time, fitting it into the day job, what guarantees do I have that no one is going to say you've overstepped the mark here?

Some of the people interviewed were 'early adopters' who had built up a Twitter presence before their organizations had developed a social media strategy. Others were keen to get started on social media, but were struggling to do so in the context of organizational guidelines about correct usage. A third group was being told to use social media to communicate with the public, but were anxious and uncertain about how to get

started. Some of the barriers to using social media were technical (for example not having access to the relevant websites due to organizational firewalls); others were about overload and time management, with staff struggling to understand how to fit it into their already pressurized schedule.

From our interviewees we gathered a sense that as public services change the ways in which they interact with local residents, they are being expected to be more visible, available and prepared to interact in a genuine and perhaps more informal way with residents than they have done in the past. This expectation is a cause of anxiety as public servants struggle to find time for this new demand and to find an appropriate blend of the public and the personal in how they present themselves through social media.

These three framings of public and private—as ethics, careers and identities—expose dilemmas and pose challenges for people working to deliver public services. In responding to these issues, people talked about the contingent factors which were helping and hindering their ability to cope with these boundary issues. The first relates to the degree of fiscal austerity they were facing within their organizations. The second relates to the extent to which they were able to deploy reflective approaches which allowed them to develop coping strategies in contexts of ambiguity.

Austerity: ‘It’s not salami-slicing because you wouldn’t have salami that big’

The context of long-term public service austerity as the key background condition and threat facing public servants was evident in all the research that we did. In the current fiscal climate, public service organizations in the UK are struggling to balance the imperatives of short-term cost-cutting and redundancies with a strategic vision for change. Many interviewees gave a sense of moving into a second phase of austerity:

There may have been a narrative about the cuts being a burning platform for stuff that should have been done years ago, but it doesn’t feel like that anymore, the easy stuff has all been done.

It’s not about doing more with less now, it’s about saying what we can’t do, being very clear to the public about the limitations of that and say well yes we can do this but only to that standard, or we can’t do it, or accepting that someone else might be better able to do it.

For some interviewees the current ‘narrative of doom’ was inhibiting their ability to cope with change. Some talked about a sense of loss and grief for the past, with organizations paralysed by the impact of the cuts, and unable to provide a new vision to work towards. As one put it: ‘No message of hope—leadership is putting council into survival mode by the language they’re using. Nobody is planning for post-austerity’. One interviewee spoke about the effect of losing large numbers of staff: ‘You hear the language of loss everywhere. I get affected by it’. These sentiments resonate with findings from research into local government responses to austerity, by Lowndes and McCaughie (2013) which concluded that ‘ideational continuity seems to dominate within local government...witness in salami-slicing tactics (less of the same) rather than bold new visions’. One of the interviews gave a slightly different take on the salami metaphor:

It’s not salami-slicing because you wouldn’t have salami that big, it’s hacking things off. It’s about rethinking the role of the state in light of the changing economy, technology, the changing ways that people live their lives. The cuts are so big that we have to confront the questions we have been putting off: what is a library service, what is a leisure service?

The biggest shift being driven by austerity was developing a different relationship with citizens, based on more coproductive ways of working (Needham, 2008):

We won’t have the money so we will have to focus on the enabling and facilitating, enabling the rest of the community to do it.

As another interviewee put it:

You can only get so far by being a supply-side mechanic, cutting and slicing. You need a better sense of what your people are like, who they are, what their networks are, how they can do more not for themselves but how they can be more a part of the value that you create about what you do as a council.

This perspective is supported by research which concludes that the role of institutional ‘bricoleurs’ will become more important: individuals who bring together or recombine resources in distinctive ways to bring about opportunities (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013).

However, another interviewee described the difficulties she encountered in reconciling the

efficiency/austerity agenda with more relational ways of working:

There is a complicated tension between the desire on the one hand for efficiency and rational processes versus the expectations and needs of customers which is more relational and focused on the personal and local. Public service workers have to find their way through that knot. We are expected to do both, to move to the more relational in the government's commitment to localization and neighbourhoods. But elsewhere we are moving to customer relationship management and call centres. You phone or visit a call centre, pick up a ticket, it's not a holistic relationship with the person on the other end of the phone.

Reflective practice: 'You need spaces where you take yourself apart'

Many interviewees felt that more value is placed on activity, rather than reflection, and this leads to risk aversion and lack of innovation in response to the issues set out above. The financial challenges are driving high levels of activity as councils work to find ways to cut budgets and deliver services differently, reducing their workforce and leading to staff taking on increasing levels of work. But as one interviewee put it:

We put huge amount of store in activity and need to get better at valuing reflection, anticipating. The risk is if we focus on here-and-now we may not be able to transform and innovate. How do you slow it all down?

Another said:

You need spaces where you take yourself apart and sort it out [but] the organization is expecting you to glide along like a swan looking serenely happy with no mistakes whatsoever. Self-assurance can be a reason for making an appointment but then that person can be very short-fused. How can you recruit for self-criticism?

This reflective practice can help people to cope with the emotional aspects of their work, highlighted above. It can also be a way to manage the anxiety that people are dealing with because of cuts. Managers in the interviews suggested that they don't have resources to do the job and something will go wrong and no one is listening to them: 'Directors of adult care are taking decisions about where best to create the harm', as one put it. The end result is a 'fake resilience' which is unsustainable.

The reflective practice that could help staff to cope with these multiple challenges was seen as best supported through experience, coaching and mentoring than traditional training courses. One interviewee said:

There is a real need to work on people's ability to learn, not just sitting in a classroom, go out, think for yourself, what it is that we don't know. We need managers who are able to do that and do that with their staff and think about how do we help people learn.

Several participants suggested that people should view their relationships at work with colleagues and line manager as the best source of education and skills: 'It's less about training, more about experience'.

Interviewees also felt that organizations need to be receptive to the learning that comes from exposure to other ways of practicing. One interviewee expressed her frustration: 'People have been out and brought ideas back, but it's like throwing seeds onto stony ground'.

Formal personal development reviews were felt to be too process oriented, with little emphasis on personal development and no sanction for managers who didn't take it seriously:

There is limited effective challenge for managers who don't develop their staff, no one notices, whereas if people didn't manage their budget effectively we'd be down on them straight away.

Staff were seen to need more help to carve out time for reflection and training:

We don't create the right environment for internal managers to develop the skills and knowledge that they now need. The biggest barrier to that is people's time. There is a lot of organizational support, please feel free to take this course, but translating that aspiration into staff doing the training takes a different lever. You have to make the space for it to happen, you have to make them learn, otherwise they won't find the time because there is never enough time to do everything already.

The clear sense that we got from the interviewees was of a workforce that was stretched and anxious, where reflective and learning practice was not valued as highly as more tangible forms of activity. Many recognized the importance of reflection and peer support, but few felt that there were opportunities for this in their daily work.

Conclusion

The paper has presented three framings of public and private which emerged from the research undertaken as part of the 21st-Century Public Servant project. People's uncertainties about the boundaries of public and private related to ethics, careers and identities. Notions of the public service ethos were felt by some to be under threat as they responded to pressures within their organizations to be more commercial. Career patterns were felt to be changing, with more expectation that people will work outside the public sector for a time, and this again brings both challenges and opportunities for the workforce. In relation to identities and the sense of self, there are dilemmas relating to privacy, authenticity and self-care which emerge in a context in which people are being expected to bring more of themselves to work. These issues are being intensified by the context of austerity, which seems to be exposing people more profoundly to public management trends which have been observed by academics for more than a decade. Reflective practice was seen as a way in which people could help prepare and protect themselves from some of these trends, although organizations were not yet felt to be doing enough to support this.

There is a danger, of course, that too much of this falls on the heroic individual practitioner: the fleet-of-foot worker, who manages a portfolio career and sustains an emotionally rich engagement with citizens at the same time as exercising personal development and self-care. We found little in our research to suggest that public service organizations are acting to sustain and prepare workers for the public service labour of the 21st century. Senior leaders and human resources practitioners need to recognize these issues, and how they are likely to impact on their workforce, in order to develop organizational and collaborative strategies to support the public servants of the future.

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