

Goal Ambiguity in Public Organizations: A Systematic Literature Review

Antonio Botti¹, Antonella Monda¹

¹ Department of Management and Innovation Systems, University of Salerno, Italy

Correspondence: Antonella Monda, Department of Management and Innovation Systems, University of Salerno, Italy, Via Giovanni Paolo II, Italy. E-mail: anmonda@unisa.it

Received: March 27, 2019

Accepted: April 15, 2019

Online Published: June 15, 2019

doi:10.5539/ijbm.v14n7p137

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v14n7p137>

Abstract

In the literature on the public-private organizations is well known that public organizations have more ambiguous elements than private ones, such as ideology and objectives, that negatively influence the enthusiasm (Brunsson, 1986), motivation and performance of public employees (Pandey & Raney, 2006), as well as organizational performance (Chun & Raney, 2005). The close relationship with performance led many public administration scholars to deepen the concept of goal ambiguity in public management. However, given the lack of a univocal conceptualization of the phenomenon, the present work aims to contextualize goal ambiguity in the public administration, carrying out a systematic literature review. The results bring out goal ambiguity methods of measurement, its antecedents and consequences and the relationship between goal ambiguity and performance. From a theoretical point of view, the study allows systematizing the contributions on goal ambiguity, while from a practical point of view, a thorough knowledge of the concept allows public managers and policy-makers to obtain valuable information for the achievement of good organizational performance.

Keywords: goal ambiguity, organizational goal, systematic literature review, performance management system, organizational performance

1. Introduction

In the literature on the public-private differences, it is known that public organizations have more vague and ambiguous goals than private organizations. The greater goal ambiguity is linked to the nature of this type of organization, the absence of profit indicators, the political pressure exerted by the stakeholders and the lack of a clear purpose (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000; Jung & Ritz, 2014; Jung, 2014).

In the public sphere, organizational goal ambiguity (or goal clarity or goal specificity) is the interpretative leeway in the way in which a goal or set of goals are conceived, pursued or interpreted (Chun & Rainey, 2005a). Therefore the ambiguity affects both goal formulation (Sawyer, 1992) and goal communication (Chun & Rainey, 2005a) and this makes it a concept difficult to measure.

In line with the goal-setting theory (Lee et al., 1989, Locke & Latham, 1990), according to which more specific goals correspond to better results, several studies show how the reduction of goal ambiguity, obtained through the goal specification, affects the effectiveness of employees and contributes to improving their performance (Wright, 2004). However, although most studies identify a negative relationship between goal ambiguity and performance (Chun & Rainey, 2005b; Jung, 2011; 2014; Calciolari et al., 2011) there is no agreement on the sign of this relationship. It is not excluded that, in certain contexts, goal ambiguity can be functional to the government of public organizations (Ravishankar, 2013) as it enhances the possibility of compromise between the parties (Matland, 1995).

The close link between goal ambiguity and performance has increased the interest in this issue; however, in literature there is not a shared position on the factors that produce goal ambiguity, on the consequences generated by it and on the measurement methods.

For these reasons we conducted a systematic literature review that allows answering to the following research questions:

1) RQ1: how is goal ambiguity measured?

- 2) RQ2: which are the variables that affect (antecedents) or are affected (consequents) by goal ambiguity?
- 3) RQ3: what is the relationship between goal ambiguity and organizational performance?

2. Goal Ambiguity in Public Organizations

First studies on goal ambiguity (Rainey, 1983; Rainey et al., 1995; Bozeman & Kingsley, 1998) start from the assumption that public organizations have multiple, vague, conflicting goals and therefore more ambiguous goals than those of private organizations (Dahl & Lindblom, 1953; Chun & Rainey, 2005a; 2005b; Matland, 1995).

Although the assumption of a greater goal ambiguity in the public sphere is shared from a conceptual point of view (Dahl & Lindblom, 1953; Lowi, 1979; Wilson, 1989), it is not confirmed at the empirical level; first studies attempting to measure goal ambiguity use a perceptual measurement (by survey) and show how public and private managers do not perceive a substantial difference in terms of goal ambiguity (Rainey et al., 1995, Bozeman & Kingsley, 1998; Rainey & Bozeman, 2000).

Rainey and Bozeman (2000) believe that the reason of this disagreement between theoretical deduction and empirical evidence can be traced back to the problem of “social desirability”, for which public managers, fearing a negative judgment, are led to give untruthful answers, but socially shared, or to the excessive simplicity of the questions asked to the interviewees, which would not allow to correctly measure a concept as complex as the ambiguity. These problems prompted scholars to take a different approach to measurement. Chun and Rainey (2005a) are the first ones to propose an objective measurement of goal ambiguity. The work of the two authors paves the way for a new line of research (objective studies) that gives way to a decade full of contributions in the field of goal ambiguity (Jung, 2014) that is studied at organizational (Chun & Rainey 2005a; Jung, 2011), at individual (Stazyk & Goerdel, 2010) and at programs level (Jung, 2014).

3. Research Methodology

To contribute to a better understanding of goal ambiguity, the methodology adopted in this paper is the systematic literature review. It was carried out following the recommendations by Briner and Denyer (2012), which allows compliance with the principles of transparency, replicability, credibility and relevance of research.

Papers were identified by searching through one of the most used databases for bibliometric studies (Furrer et al., 2008; Saggese et al., 2015): Web of Science (WoS). Specifically, we focused on peer-reviewed articles published in international journals in English, as they guarantee the quality of articles (Rashman et al., 2009; Sarto et al., 2014).

The screening methodology employed has been articulated in different steps.

In the first step the keywords and the analysis period were identified. About the keywords, Boolean searches were conducted using truncated combinations of search strings (Sarto et al., 2014). Specifically, fourteen keywords concerning the main research topic (“goal ambiguity”) and its main synonyms used in literature, such as goal clarity (Stazyk, 2009), goal specificity (Wright, 2004), inconsistent goal (Brunsson, 1986), were selected. Regarding the time frame, no restrictions were placed, therefore all contributions published until 2018 were considered, since the research was carried out in the period from October to December 2018. Initially, this search strategy returned 158 hits.

This first step was followed by the analysis of the abstract. We checked the keywords in the 158 abstract and carefully read the abstract of the papers, with the subsequent elimination of 32 non-relevant contributions.

Finally, as suggested by Tranfield et al. (2003), the selection of the papers was made by two researchers, who analyzed the works on the basis of the content of the article, choosing those that could provide any insight to the research questions. Articles were carefully read, reaching a list of 58 papers. Furthermore, following previous literature (Rashman et al., 2009), we completed our list of papers by hand-searching and citation-tracking additional relevant articles, reaching a final list of 75 papers (see Figure 1).

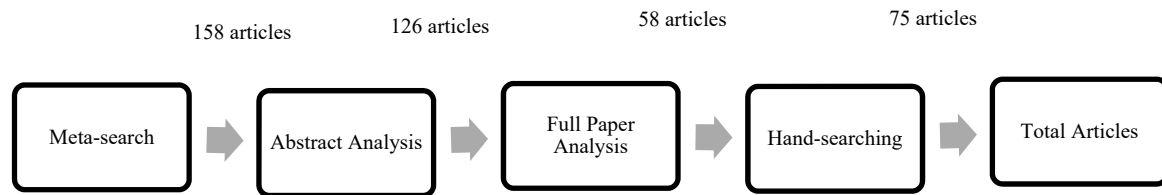


Figure 1. Research methodology

4. The Methods for Measuring Goal Ambiguity

From the analysis of the selected contributions, multiple measurement methods and analysis techniques used to measure goal ambiguity emerge. In order to achieve a clear classification of the selected papers, we decided to catalogue them according to the measurement approach of goal ambiguity. We identify two main approaches that we call: perceptual approach and objective approach.

In the first group all the contributions that measure goal ambiguity through a subjective perception, detected through surveys and interviews, are classified. The second group includes papers that evaluate goal ambiguity through objective measures. In most cases, studies that measure goal ambiguity with perceptual methods identify the concept as a unitary variable, which cannot be broken down within itself, while the studies that detect goal ambiguity through objective measures consider it a complex construct, decomposable into subdimensions.

The analysis considers 57 perceptual studies, of which the majority is represented by quantitative studies, only six studies adopt qualitative methods, and 18 objective studies, of which two are quantitative studies.

4.1. Measurement of Goal Ambiguity according to the Perceptual Approach

Perceptual studies start from the first studies on the perception of goal ambiguity by public and private managers (Rainey et al., 1995, Bozeman & Kingsley, 1998, Rainey & Bozeman, 2000), to arrive at the most recent analyses on the perception of goal ambiguity by public employee (Alongi, 2015; Hassan & Rohrbaugh, 2012; Sun et al., 2014).

Most of the studies classified as perceptual studies measure goal ambiguity through surveys to detect the perception of respondents. These studies are quantitative and use items that have the function of specifying the different characteristics of goal ambiguity. In almost all the perceptual studies (Rainey, 1983; Rainey et al., 1995; Bozeman & Kingsley, 1998; Wright, 2001; 2004; Pandey & Rainey, 2006; Pandey & Wright, 2006; Chen & Williams, 2007; Stazyk, 2009; Stazyk & Goerdel, 2010; Stazyk et al., 2011; Wright & Pandey, 2011; Moynihan et al., 2011; Hassan & Rohrbaugh, 2012; Sun et al., 2014; Peng et al., 2015; Davis & Stazyk, 2015; Desmidt, 2016; Campbel & Im, 2016), goal ambiguity is measured using three items, that was originally formulated by Rainey (1983), or some variants of them. The three items are the following: 1) this organization is clear to almost everyone who works here; 2) it is easy to explain the goals of this organization to outsiders; 3) this organization has clearly defined goals. However, these items are not sufficient to measure goal ambiguity as they take into consideration only subjective perceptions and do not seem to completely cover the articulated construct of goal ambiguity (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000, p. 452).

Although it is confirmed that three items are not sufficient to measure goal ambiguity in public organization, they are used by most perceptual studies; few are the studies that formulate (Calciolari et al., 2011; Jung, 2010; Jung & Lee, 2013; Jung & Ritz, 2014; Kim & Chang, 2009; Sawyer, 1992,) and use (Ayers, 2015; Caillier, 2016a; 2016b; Langbein & Stazyk, 2018) other items than the three above-mentioned.

4.2 The Measurement of Goal Ambiguity according to the Objective Approach

The objective studies measure goal ambiguity by using secondary data and by characterizing the construct as multidimensional.

The first significant work of this category is the study of Chun and Rainey (2005a) which responds to criticisms to perceptual studies (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000) developing and testing four objective dimensions of goal ambiguity: mission comprehension ambiguity, directive goal ambiguity, evaluative goal ambiguity, priority goal ambiguity.

Mission comprehension ambiguity is defined as the “interpretative leeway in the comprehension (understanding), explanation and communication of organizational mission” (Chun & Rainey, 2005a, p. 3). It is the least used dimension because it is not significantly correlated to any independent variable with which it was related (Chun & Rainey, 2005b).

The other three dimensions were used in various studies, both objective (Jung 2012a; 2012b; 2013a; 2013b; 2014; Jung & Rainey, 2011; Lee et al., 2009; Rainey & Lee, 2005) and perceptual studies (Moynihan, 2015), showing a significant relationship with some of the variables with which they were linked.

Specifically, *priority goal ambiguity* represents the ambiguity resulting from the decision to prioritize certain goals rather than others; *directive goal ambiguity* is the interpretative leeway that intervenes in the translation of the organizational mission and of organizational goals in guidelines; *evaluative goal ambiguity* represents the ambiguity in the measurement of a goal, therefore in the evaluation of progress towards the achievement of the organizational mission. These dimensions have an inverse relationship with managerial effectiveness (Chun & Rainey, 2005b), thus showing an inverse relationship between managerial effectiveness and the overall level of organizational goal ambiguity.

Jung (2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2012c; 2013; 2014) introduces two other dimensions of goal ambiguity: target-specification ambiguity and time-specification ambiguity. These two dimensions refer, respectively, to the lack of clarity in identifying the quantity and/or quality of the work required to achieve the goal, as well as the lack of clarity in defining the time necessary for this. Jung (2011) also considers the “number of organizational goals” as a further dimension of goal ambiguity. This last dimension arises from the assumption that a large number of goals can make it difficult to select the most important ones, thus creating uncertainty (Wilson, 1989).

Jung shows that ambiguous goals for lack of specific time and target determine an increase in the willingness of staff to change jobs (Jung, 2012b), a decrease in performance, and organizational effectiveness (Jung, 2011; 2012c; 2014; Jung & Rainey 2009) and job satisfaction (Jung, 2013). Therefore, the ambiguity in goal specification seems to have a negative effect both on employee satisfaction and on organizational performance.

The analysis of the objective studies, however, does not allow to draw general conclusions as in the various studies the relationships described are not always confirmed with the same level of statistical significance. This condition represents the main limit of the objective approach that considers hypothetical relationships between goal ambiguity and other variables not always significant (Chun & Rainey, 2005b).

5. Antecedents of Goal Ambiguity

To classify the antecedents of goal ambiguity we adopted the framework developed by Lee et al. (2009) that classify them according to three dimensions (table 1): organizational characteristics, managerial actions and influences, external environmental influences.

The first dimension, “organizational characteristics”, includes variables such as age, size, policy responsibility, financial publicness, complexity and routines. Chun and Rainey (2005a; 2005b) believe that goal ambiguity depends on the organizational age and size - as for the first one Authors argue that more lasting organizations produce lower levels of directive goal ambiguity, while as for the second one they assume that the larger agencies, having more goals, should have more difficulty in listing the objectives in order of priority than the smaller agencies, and this causes increased levels of goal ambiguity.

In the second dimension, “managerial actions and influences”, factors connected with the manager’s personality and with his managerial skills are included. Sun et al. (2014) hypothesize that the existence of a certain convergence (fit) in the interactions between manager and employee reduces the level of ambiguity perceived by the latter. Although in this study the report is not meaningful at an empirical level, other works show that as the managerial capacity increases, the perceived level of goal ambiguity decreases (Moynihan et al., 2011, Lee et al., 2009). Moynihan et al. (2011) show, in fact, that transformational leadership positively and directly influences both the organizational culture and goal clarity and, indirectly, the performance.

Finally, in the third dimension of the framework of Lee et al. (2009) external factors mainly due to conflicting requests from external stakeholders (Chun & Rainey, 2005a) and to the influence of politics are included (Lee et al 2009, Pandey and Wright 2006). A complete list of all antecedents of ambiguity is given in table 1.

Table 1. Antecedents of goal ambiguity

DIMENSIONS	ANTECEDENTS	AUTHORS
Organizational characteristics	General organizational characteristics (Size, age).	Alongi (2015); Chun and Rainey (2005a)*; (2005b)*; Lee <i>et al.</i> (2009)*; Jung (2013a); Rainey (1993)*.
	Organizational red tape, formalization, task specialization, centralization; effective internal communication, policy problem complexity.	Chun and Rainey (2005a); (2005b); Lee <i>et al.</i> (2009)*; Pandey and Rainey (2006)*; Sawyer (1992).
	Sector, Publicness.	Lee <i>et al.</i> (2009)*; Peng <i>et al.</i> (2015)*; Rainey (1993)*.
	Affective commitment, job involvement, professionalization, person-team fit, person-job fit, role ambiguity.	Pandey and Rainey (2006)*; Sun <i>et al.</i> (2014)*.
Managerial actions and influences	Leadership; transformational leadership, job motivation; person-supervisor fit.	Lee <i>et al.</i> (2009)*; Moynihan <i>et al.</i> (2011); Pandey and Rainey (2006)*; Rainey (1993)*; Sun <i>et al.</i> (2014)*; Stazyk and Goerdel (2010).
External environmental influences	External political context (political influence, political support, political control).	Calciolari <i>et al.</i> (2011); Chun e Rainey (2005a); (2005b); Clare and Krogman (2013); Lee <i>et al.</i> (2009)*; Pandey and Rainey (2006)*, Pandey and Wright (2006); Peng <i>et al.</i> (2015)*; Rainey (1993)*; Rainey and Lee (2005)*; Stazyk and Goerdel (2010); Stazyk <i>et al.</i> (2011); Zhan <i>et al.</i> (2014).
	Competing demands from constituencies.	Chun and Rainey (2005a); (2005b); Clare and Krogman (2013).
	Engagement in networked environment.	Davis and Stazyk (2015).

Note. Authors marked with an asterisk (*) identify more than one antecedent.

The analysis of the antecedents shows the presence of a main antecedent – which occurs more than the others – represented by the political context (table 1). The influence of the political context is a construct that includes both the political support provided to a public organization in the form of financial, social and legitimacy support, commitment and political direction (Carpenter, 2001, Meier & O'Toole, 2006), and the political control and the complexity of political problems affecting public organizations (Chun & Rainey 2005a; 2005b; Stazyk *et al.*, 2011).

In line with Rainey (1993), in which the political control and political influence are seen as antecedents of goal ambiguity, the relationship between political influence and goal ambiguity was significant both in perceptual studies (Pandey & Rainey, 2006; Pandey & Wright, 2006; Stazyk & Goerdel, 2010; Calciolari *et al.*, 2011; Chen & Williams, 2007) and in the objective studies (Lee *et al.*, 2009; Gilad, 2015; Lee *et al.*, 2009; 2010).

Several authors investigated the relationship between these two variables. Particularly, the relationship between the political support and goal ambiguity was often found significant and inverse: with the increase of political support, there is a decrease in goal ambiguity (Pandey & Rainey, 2006; Stazyk & Goerdel, 2010). On the other hand, the relationship between political control and ambiguity was significant and positive.

Although political influence is the main antecedent of ambiguity, there are some elements, such as the absence of differences between the perception of ambiguity in the public and private sphere (Rainey, 1983, Rainey *et al.*, 1995) and the fact that the ambiguity varies from organization to organization (Chun & Rainey, 2005a), which highlight the importance of the subjective element in the perception of ambiguity. It can be affirmed that the perception of ambiguity, albeit minimally, is conditioned by subjective factors that involve both the actors who generate it (Matland, 1995; Sawyer, 1992) and those who perceive it (Wright, 2004; Pandey & Rainey, 2006; Stazyk & Goerdel, 2010).

6. Consequences of the Goal Ambiguity

The consequences of goal ambiguity can be divided into two categories: the first concerns results, decisions and rules linked to the organization, the second affects decisions and perceptions of public administration employees (table 2).

The first category includes organizational performance (Moynihan *et al.*, 2011, Rainey, 1993, Ravishankar, 2013, Stazyk & Goerdel, 2011, Zhan *et al.*, 2014), the level of bureaucracy (Rainey *et al.*, 1995), the ambiguity of the

managerial role, the way in which the manager perceives and interprets the ambiguity related to the role he plays in the organization (Davis & Stazyk, 2015, Pandey & Wright, 2006), the risk culture (Bozeman & Kingsley, 1998), performance information use (Moynihan, 2015) and improper exercise of the regulation function (Clare & Krogman, 2013).

The second category contains subjective states of employees of the public administration, such as job satisfaction (Sawyer, 1992; Wright & Pandey, 2011; Stazyk, 2009; Zhan et al., 2014), job motivation (Rainey, 1993; Stazyk, 2009; Wright, 2001; 2004) and the emotional commitment (Hassan & Rohrbaugh, 2012; Jung & Ritz, 2014; Rainey, 1993; Stazyk et al., 2011), but also the engagement towards the values of the public service (Bastien, 2009; Peng et al., 2015) and staff turnover (Jung, 2010; 2012b). All these elements are negatively influenced by goal ambiguity, except for the turnover.

From the analysis of the 75 selected papers emerges that the main consequent of goal ambiguity is the organizational performance, both in perceptual studies (Alongi, 2015; Calciolari et al., 2011; Moynihan et al., 2011; Rainey, 1993; Ravishankar, 2013; Stazyk & Goerdely, 2011; Zhan et al., 2014) as well as the objective ones (Chun & Rainey, 2005b; Jung, 2011, 2013a, 2014; Jung & Rainey, 2009).

Table 2. Consequences of goal ambiguity

DIMENSIONS	CONSEQUENTS	AUTHORS
Results, decisions and rules connected with the organization	Organizational Performance, Performance	Alongi (2015); Calciolari <i>et al.</i> (2011); Chun and Rainey (2005b); Jung (2011); (2013a), (2014); Jung and Rainey (2009); Moynihan <i>et al.</i> (2011); Moynihan (2015); Rainey (1993)*; Ravishankar (2013); Stazyk and Goerdely (2011); Zhan <i>et al.</i> (2014)*.
	information use	
	Red Tape	Pandey and Wright (2006); Rainey <i>et al.</i> (1995).
	Role ambiguity	Davis and Stazyk (2015); Pandey and Wright (2006).
Decisions and perceptions of employees	Risk-taking	Bozeman and Kingsley (1998).
	Job motivation	Jung and Rainey (2011)*; Rainey (1993)*; Stazyk (2009); Wright (2001); (2004).
	Job satisfaction	Jung (2013b); Jung and Rainey (2011)*; Sawyer (1992); Stazyk (2009); Wright and Pandey (2011); Zhan <i>et al.</i> (2014)*.
	Commitment	Hassan and Rohrbaugh (2012); Jung and Ritz (2014); Rainey (1993)*; Stazyk <i>et al.</i> (2011).
	Turnover	Jung (2010), (2012b).
	Organizational value engagement	Bastien (2009); Peng <i>et al.</i> (2015).

Note. Authors marked with an asterisk (*) identify more than one antecedent.

7. The Relationship between Goal Ambiguity and Performance in Public Organizations

The relationship between goal ambiguity and performance is not yet univocally identified, however, the review conducted in this work shows (predominantly) an inverse relationship between the two variables. Both in perceptual (Calciolari et al., 2011, Wright, 2004, Zhan et al., 2014) and in objective studies (Chun & Rainey, 2005b; Jung, 2014) the idea that organizational performance improves when goal ambiguity decreases is prevalent.

In perceptual studies, Wright (2004) states that if public employees perceive organizational goals (mission, vision, values) as ambiguous, job goals will be perceived ambiguous too. According to the author, organizational goal specificity affects job goal specificity that, in turn, positively influences work motivation and individual

performance. Moynihan et al. (2011) instead consider goal clarity, together with the organizational culture, as a mediation variable between transformational leadership and performance. Authors' hypothesis, that is empirically confirmed, demonstrates how performance information use changes depending on goal clarity and organizational culture, which together explain almost half of the variance of performance information use (45%). Also Calciolari et al. (2011) show that managers report lower levels of performance concurrently with a perception of high levels of ambiguity.

In objective studies, Chun and Rainey (2005b) show a predominantly negative relationship between goal ambiguity – made up by four dimensions (cfr. par. 4.2) - and organizational performance - measured by four performance dimensions: managerial effectiveness, customer service orientation, productivity and work quality. Specifically, two dimensions of the goal ambiguity (directive goal ambiguity and evaluative goal ambiguity) are always significant and show a negative relation with the four performance dimensions. Also the dimensions of goal ambiguity identified by Jung (2011) report a significant and negative relationship with the performance, measured using actual goal attainment rate.

Although ambiguity is often seen as an unwanted and unethical condition, which can lead to dangerous and uncontrollable consequences (Paul & Strbiak, 1997), it is possible to find in the literature contributions in which it is claimed that goal ambiguity is also a positive element (Pandey & Rainey, 2006, Pandey & Wright, 2006). In contrast to the goal setting theory (Lee et al., 1989, Locke & Latham, 1990), these works recognize that too specific organizational goals can have negative consequences on employees, who risk neglecting equally important but vague objectives (Pandey & Rainey, 2006). These works support the idea that a certain degree of goal ambiguity is indispensable in a complex and conflictual context such as the public sector (Alongi, 2015). Pandey and Wright (2006) consider goal ambiguity a necessary element within public organizations, arguing that excessive goal clarity can even be counterproductive. This thesis is already supported by Brunsson (1986), who states that public organizations use structures, processes and outputs to reflect external ambiguity, in order to acquire support and legitimacy in the environment. In line with this idea there is the concept of “strategic ambiguity” (Eisenberg, 1984), that is the purposeful and intentional use of vagueness and/or incompleteness in the conception and articulation of a strategy in areas that are reasonably tolerant of ambiguous rules, such as the political context (Matland, 1995, Ravishankar, 2013).

Finally, a middle way is represented by studies which consider indispensable the role of the intervening variables in defining the relationship between goal ambiguity and performance. Stazyk and Goerdel (2010) demonstrate how goal ambiguity mediates the relationship between political support and organizational performance and how hierarchical authority - understood as an intervening variable - mitigates the negative effect of goal ambiguity on performance. Therefore, it appears clear how in the relationship between goal ambiguity and performance the effect of intervening variables should not be underestimated, as they can change the intensity or the direction of the relationship.

8. Discussion of Results and Future Research

The growing interest in goal ambiguity in the public organization made useful to review the topic. From the analysis of the results emerged elements of uncertainty about three aspects of goal ambiguity: the measurement methods, the variables that influence and are influenced by goal ambiguity, the relationship between goal ambiguity and organizational performances.

About the first aspect, the measurement methods of goal ambiguity have been classified based on two approaches: perceptual and objective.

The perceptual approach uses subjective methods for detecting goal ambiguity, which is considered in most cases a concept that cannot be further broken down internally, mostly detected with only three items (Rainey, 1983). However, these items are considered too simple and direct to be effective in measuring goal ambiguity (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000).

The objective approach, on the other hand, uses objective dimensions to measure goal ambiguity. Such dimensions guarantee greater semantic coverage than the items used in perceptual approach (Rainey, 1983). However, in these studies, goal ambiguity is often included in simple models, considering few variables, and therefore far from reality. However, the main disadvantage of this approach is linked to the fragmentarity of the variable, which is composed of subdimensions that are not always statistically significant.

As regards the second aspect, different antecedents and consequents are identified; however, a main antecedent and a main consequent can be identified. The main antecedent is the influence of the political context, which includes both the political support, with which goal ambiguity has an inverse relationship (Pandey & Rainey,

2006, Stazyk & Goerdel, 2011), and the political control, with which goal ambiguity has a positive relationship (Chun & Rainey, 2005a; 2005b; Stazyk et al., 2011).

The main consequent is represented by organizational performance, with which the relationship is controversial. Most of the studies, both perceptual and objective, demonstrate the negative influence of goal ambiguity on performance (Chun & Rainey, 2005b; Jung, 2011; 2014; Calciolari et al., 2011), in particular by highlighting how goal ambiguity invalidates managerial effectiveness, productivity, quality of work (Chun & Rainey, 2005b), but also employee effectiveness and motivation (Jung and Raney 2011, Wright 2007), affective organizational commitment (Hassan & Rohrbaugh, 2011) and employee satisfaction (Jung, 2013b; Wright & Davis, 2003). However, a minority of studies show a reversed relationship between goal ambiguity and performance. These studies claimed that an excessive precision is counterproductive therefore is important to understand the circumstances and the contexts in which goal clarity helps to improve performance (Pandey & Rainey, 2006, Pandey & Wright, 2006).

The analysis of the relationship between goal ambiguity and performance represents the third aspect of goal ambiguity analyzed in this study and the main reason for the interest in studying goal ambiguity in public organizations.

9. Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research

The study proposes a systematic literature review that addresses three research questions. However, some issues are still unsolved. The first one concerns the identification of contexts and situations in which ambiguity should be avoided or sought. This problem is emphasized by the presence of strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984) that refers to the deliberate search for ambiguity as a means to increase public organizations' survival (Brunsson, 1986) and to avoid conflicts between parties, particularly in a political context (Matland, 1995). For these reasons, we argue that goal ambiguity could be pursued with external authorities and stakeholders, while it should be avoided within the organization, where it produces negative effects on the work attitude, satisfaction and motivation of the employees.

Moreover, the absence of a univocal measurement method, as well as the limits of existing approaches, affects the difficulty of evaluating both the goal ambiguity itself and its consequences. In fact, since a commonly accepted measure of ambiguity misses, it is not possible to verify the impact it has on the organization and performance. This consideration allows to reveal a space for future research aimed at deepening the measurement methods for goal ambiguity and at highlighting the benefits and the limitations of the different potential methods in order to propose an all-encompassing methodology.

Eventually, the review carried out in this paper allows outlining an overview of the concept of goal ambiguity in public organizations obtained from the classification of the works according to the approach used to measure the variable, from the identification of the most used indicators and dimensions and from the description of the relationships between its antecedents and its consequents. The main limitation of the work can be found in the adoption of one research database to investigate the construct.

However, the study allows to synthesize the existing literature and offers some interesting practical implications. The relations between goal ambiguity and its antecedents and consequents, for example, allows identifying the factors that produce and that are affected by goal ambiguity. Therefore, from an operational point of view, it offers a picture of the factors that can contribute to foster or avoid goal ambiguity, depending on the contexts, and enriches the understanding on the possible goal ambiguity consequences. Moreover, by highlighting the incompleteness of goal ambiguity measurement methods, the study also identifies some future directions research.

References

- Aguinis, H., & Glavas, A. (2012). What We Know and Don't Know About Corporate Social Responsibility: A Review and Research Agenda. *Journal of Management*, 38(4), 932-968. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0149206311436079>
- Anderson, D. M., & Stritch, J. M. (2016). Goal Clarity, Task Significance, and Performance: Evidence from a Laboratory Experiment. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 26(2), 211-225. <http://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muv019>
- Ayers, R. S. (2015). Aligning individual and organizational performance: Goal alignment in federal government agency performance appraisal programs. *Public Personnel Management*, 44(2), 169-191. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0091026015575178>

- Bastien, J. (2009). Goal ambiguity and informal discretion in the implementation of public policies: The case of Spanish immigration policy. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 75(4), 665-685. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0020852309351472>
- Bernstein, J., & Shierholz, H. (2014). A response to Joseph J. Sabia. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 33(4), 1047-1049. <http://doi.org/10.1002/pam>
- Bozeman, B., & Kingsley, G. (1998). Risk culture in public and private organizations. *Public Administration Review*, 109-118.
- Brunsson, N. (1986). Organizing Depression Substitutes for Inconsistencies: Conflict, as and Hypocrisy for Action On Organizational. *Scandinavian Journal of Management Studies*, 2(3-4), 165-185. [http://doi.org/10.1016/0281-7527\(86\)90014-9](http://doi.org/10.1016/0281-7527(86)90014-9)
- Caillier, J. G. (2016). Does Public Service Motivation Mediate the Relationship between Goal Clarity and both Organizational Commitment and Extra-Role Behaviours? *Public Management Review*, 18(2), 300-318. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2014.984625>
- Caillier, J. G. (2016). Linking Transformational Leadership to Self-Efficacy, Extra-Role Behaviors, and Turnover Intentions in Public Agencies: The Mediating Role of Goal Clarity. *Administration and Society*, 48(7), 883-906. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0095399713519093>
- Campbell, J. W., & Im, T. (2016). Perceived Public Participation Efficacy: The Differential Influence of Public Service Motivation Across Organizational Strata. *Public Personnel Management*, 45(3), 308-330. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0091026016664899>
- Chen, G., & Williams, D. W. (2007). How political support influences red tape through developmental culture. *Policy Studies Journal*, 35(3), 419-436. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.2007.00231.x>
- Chun Y. H., & Rainey, H. G. (2005). Goal Ambiguity and Organizational Performance in U.S. Federal Agencies. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 15(4), 529-557.
- Dahl, R. A. & Lindblom, (1953). Politics, economics, and welfare. New York: Harper and Row
- Davis, R. S., Girth, A. M., & Stazyk, E. C. (2016). Social and technical determinants of perceived contract performance: Rules, autonomy, and ethics. *Public Performance and Management Review*, 39(3), 728-755. <http://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2015.1137773>
- Davis, R. S., & Stazyk, E. C. (2015). Examining the Links between Senior Managers' Engagement in Networked Environments and Goal and Role Ambiguity. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 26(3), 433-447. <http://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muv023>
- Desmidt, S. (2016). The Relevance of Mission Statements: Analysing the antecedents of perceived message quality and its relationship to employee mission engagement. *Public Management Review*, 18(6), 894-917. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2015.1051573>
- Gilad, S. (2015). Political Pressures, Organizational Identity, and Attention To Tasks: Illustrations From Pre-Crisis Financial Regulation. *Public Administration*, 93(3), 593-608. <http://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12155>
- Hassan, S., & Rohrbaugh, J. (2012). Variability in the organizational climate of government offices and affective organizational commitment. *Public Management Review*, 14(5), 563-584. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2011.642568>
- Hassan, S., & Rohrbaugh, J. (2011). The role of psychological climate on public sector employees' organizational commitment: An empirical assessment for three occupational groups. *International Public Management Journal*, 14(1), 27-62. <http://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2011.547818>
- Hsieh, J. Y. (2016). Spurious or True? An Exploration of Antecedents and Simultaneity of Job Performance and Job Satisfaction Across the Sectors. *Public Personnel Management*, 45(1), 90-118. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0091026015624714>
- Jung, C. S. (2010). Predicting organizational actual turnover rates in the U.S. federal government. *International Public Management Journal*, 13(3), 297-317. <http://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2010.504124>
- Jung, C.S. (2011). Organizational goal ambiguity and performance: Conceptualization, measurement, and relationships. *International Public Management Journal*, 14(2), 193-217. <http://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2011.589760>
- Jung, C. S. (2012a). Developing and Validating New Concepts and Measures of Program Goal Ambiguity in the

- U.S. Federal Government. *Administration & Society*, 44(6), 675-701. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0095399711413730>
- Jung, C. S. (2012b). Why are goals important in the public sector? Exploring the benefits of goal clarity for reducing turnover intention. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 24(1), 209-234. <http://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mus058>
- Jung, C. S. (2012c). Navigating a rough terrain of public management: Examining the relationship between organizational size and effectiveness. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 23(3), 663-686. <http://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mus040>
- Jung, C. S. (2013). Organizational goal ambiguity and job satisfaction in the public sector. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 24(4), 955-981. <http://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mut020>
- Jung, C. S. (2014). Extending the theory of goal ambiguity to programs: Examining the relationship between goal ambiguity and performance. *Public Administration Review*, 74(2), 205-219. <http://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12176>
- Jung, C. S., & Kim, S. E. (2014). Structure and Perceived Performance in Public Organizations. *Public Management Review*, 16(5), 620-642. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2012.743576>
- Jung, C. S., & Lee, G. (2013). Goals, Strategic Planning, and Performance in Government Agencies. *Public Management Review*, 15(6), 787-815. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2012.677212>
- Jung, C. S., & Rainey, H. G. (2011). Organizational goal characteristics and public duty motivation in U.S. federal agencies. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 31(1), 28-47. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0734371X10394404>
- Kim, S. E., & Chang, G. W. (2009). An empirical analysis of innovativeness in government: Findings and implications. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 75(2), 293-310. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0020852309104177>
- Kjeldsen, A. M., & Hansen, J. R. (2018). Sector Differences in the Public Service Motivation–Job Satisfaction Relationship: Exploring the Role of Organizational Characteristics. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 38(1), 24-48. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0734371X16631605>
- Kroll, A. (2015). Drivers of Performance Information Use: Systematic Literature Review and Directions for Future Research. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 38(3), 459-486. <http://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2015.1006469>
- Langbein, L., & Stazyk, E. C. (2018). The Anatomy of Retention in the U.S. Federal Government: Exit, Voice, or Money? *International Public Management Journal*, 21(1), 33-52. <http://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2017.1325806>
- Lee, J. W., Rainey, H. G., & Chun, Y. H. (2009). Routineness in Federal Agencies. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 40(3), 284-308.
- Lega, F., Longo, F., & Rotolo, A. (2013). Decoupling the use and meaning of strategic plans in public healthcare. *BMC Health Services Research*, 13(1), 1. <http://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6963-13-5>
- Lowi, T. J. (1979). The end of liberalism: The second republic of the United States.
- Manuel, D. G., Lam, K., Maaten, S., & Klein-Geltink, J. (2011). Using administrative data to measure the extent to which practitioners work together: “interconnected” care is common in a large cohort of family physicians. *Open Medicine*, 5(4), 177-182. <http://doi.org/10.1002/nml>
- Meynhardt, T., & Diefenbach, F. E. (2012). What drives entrepreneurial orientation in the public sector? Evidence from Germany’s Federal Labor Agency. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 22(4), 761-792. <http://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mus013>
- Moynihan, D. P. (2013). Advancing the Empirical Study of Performance Management: What We Learned From the Program Assessment Rating Tool. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 43(5), 499-517. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0275074013487023>
- Moynihan, D. P. (2016). Uncovering the circumstances of performance information use findings from an experiment. *Public Performance and Management Review*, 39(1), 33-57. <http://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2016.1071160>
- Moynihan, D. P., Pandey, S. K., & Wright, B. E. (2011). Setting the table: How transformational leadership

- fosters performance information use. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 22(1), 143-164. <http://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mur024>
- Moynihan, D. P., Wright, B. E., & Pandey, S. K. (2012). Working Within Constraints: Can Transformational Leaders Alter the Experience of Red Tape? *International Public Management Journal*, 15(3), 315-336. <http://doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2012.725318>
- Moynihan, D. P., & Pandey, S. K. (2005). Testing How Management Matters in an Era of Government by Performance Management. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 15(3), 421-439. <http://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mui016>
- O'Toole, L. J., & Meier, K. J. (2015). Public management, context, and performance: In quest of a more general theory. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 25(1), 237-256. <http://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muu011>
- Pandey, S. K., & Wright, B. E. (2006). Connecting the dots in public management: Political environment, organizational goal ambiguity, and the public manager's role ambiguity. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 16(4), 511-532. <http://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muj006>
- Park, S. M., & Kim, M. Y. (2015). Accountability and public service motivation in Korean government agencies. *Public Money & Management*, 35(5), 357-364. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2015.1061178>
- Pasha, O., Poister, T. H., Wright, B. E., & Thomas, J. C. (2017). Transformational Leadership and Mission Valence of Employees: The Varying Effects by Organizational Level. *Public Performance and Management Review*, 40(4), 722-740. <http://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2017.1335220>
- Paul, J., & Strbiak, C. A. (1997). The ethics of strategic ambiguity. *The Journal of Business Communication*, 34(2), 149-159.
- Peng, S., Pandey, S., & Pandey, S. K. (2015). Is There a Nonprofit Advantage? Examining the Impact of Institutional Context on Individual-Organizational Value Congruence. *Public Administration Review*, xx, 1-12. <http://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12357>.
- Rainey, H. G., & Jung, C. S. (2015). A conceptual framework for analysis of goal ambiguity in public organizations. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 25(1), 71-99. <http://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muu040>
- Shim, D. C., & Rohrbach, J. (2011). Government career commitment and the shaping of work environment perceptions. *American Review of Public Administration*, 41(3), 263-284. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0275074010374504>
- Stazyk, E. C., Pandey, S. K., & Wright, B. E. (2011). Understanding Affective Organizational Commitment: The Importance of Institutional Context. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 41(6), 603-624. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0275074011398119>
- Stazyk, E. C. (2016). The prevalence of reinvention reforms in local governments and their relationship with organizational goal clarity and employee job satisfaction. *Public Performance and Management Review*, 39(3), 701-727. <http://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2015.1137772>
- Stazyk, E. C. (2013). Crowding Out Public Service Motivation? Comparing Theoretical Expectations with Empirical Findings on the Influence of Performance-Related Pay. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 33(3), 252-274. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0734371X12453053>
- Stazyk, E. C., & Goerdel, H. T. (2010). The benefits of bureaucracy: Public managers' perceptions of political support, goal ambiguity, and organizational effectiveness. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 21(4), 645-672. <http://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muq047>
- Sun, R., Peng, S., & Pandey, S. K. (2014). Testing the Effect of Person-Environment Fit on Employee Perceptions of Organizational Goal Ambiguity. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 37(3), 465-495. <http://doi.org/10.2753/PMR1530-9576370306>
- Taylor, J. (2013). Goal Setting in the Australian Public Service: Effects on Psychological Empowerment and Organizational Citizenship Behavior. *Public Administration Review*, 73, 453-464. <http://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12040>
- Wilson, J. Q. (1989). *Bureaucracy*. New York: Basic Book.
- Wright, B. E., & Pandey, S. K. (2011). Public Organizations and Mission Valence: When Does Mission Matter?

Administration & Society, 43(1), 22-44. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0095399710386303>

Wright, B. E. (2004). The Role of Work Context in Work Motivation: A Public Sector Application of Goal and Social Cognitive Theories. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 14(1), 59-78. <http://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muh004>

Wright, B. E., & Davis, B. S. (2003). Job Satisfaction in the Public Sector: The Role of the Work Environment. *American Review of Public Administration*, 33(1), 70-90. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0275074002250254>

Zhan, X., Wing-Hung Lo, C., & Tang, S. Y. (2014). Contextual changes and environmental policy implementation: A longitudinal study of street-level bureaucrats in Guangzhou, China. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 24(4), 1005-1032. <http://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mut004>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).