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Alone in the back-office: the isolation of those who care to support public services

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Abstract

Prior research suggests that it is through providing direct support to citizens that public servants gain a source of meaning in their work; and affirm their public service identities. This article explores how employees who work in a public service support function and receive little, if any, direct feedback from citizens may maintain their public service identity during their back office work. The study finds, against much previous empirical research, that these back office employees achieve positive identity affirmation through bureaucratic work. The findings also show that they affirm their caring and community focused public service identity by noting their superiority in this regard when compared with colleagues. However, this augmented self-narrative results in many experiencing feelings of isolation. The article discusses how these findings extend our understanding of identity affirmation among back office public servants and may improve our ability to effectively support these workers.

Keywords
Back office, bureaucracy, identity, office work, public servants, public services, support staff

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Introduction

The public sector has long been promoted as a working environment in which you can enable others to further their education; improve their health; live in safe surroundings; or otherwise support themselves toward fulfilled lives (Lipsky, 1980; Pratchett and Wingfield, 1996; Steele, 1999). For many public servants the virtues of public service are embodied and link with their personal values of caring for individuals and the wider community (Hebson et al., 2003; McDonough, 2006). Public servants are said to draw on feedback from this other-focused work as a means of affirming their identity (Frederickson, 1997; Moore, 1995). However, recent research has highlighted that public servants are not receiving the feedback and intrinsic rewards that their career path offered and are becoming increasingly disengaged (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler, 2000; DeHart-Davis and Pandey, 2005; Gawthrop, 1998; Kernaghan, 2000).

For some public servants disengagement may be explained, at least in part, by a common dilemma facing employees in large organizations. The practical requirements of public service delivery, which necessitates a significant amount of administration, means that many public servants work in back office or support roles (terms that will be used interchangeably) that involve little, if any, direct feedback from members of the public about the impact of their work. Their role may therefore be at odds with the means by which these officers affirm their workplace identity – that is, via directly linking to members of the community. The lack of a direct connection between back office public servants and citizens and its detrimental impact has been noted in prior research (Paarlberg and Lavigna, 2010; Perry et al., 2010; Wright et al., 2012) where the advice typically follows two paths: promote the value of the public service offered by the whole organization and/or offer feedback to support officers that highlights the link between the back office function and front line service delivery. Said
differently, it is suggested that public service support officers will gain meaning from their efforts by knowing that their work enables others to help the community.

Yet much of this advice rests on the assumption that vicarious feedback to those in support roles is necessary; offers positive benefits; and will adequately substitute for direct feedback from citizens. This advice does not recognize the personal nature of identity affirmation (Denissen, 2010; Pritchard and Symon, 2011; Watson, 2009) and highlights a potential gap in our knowledge that this article seeks to explore. With this aim, the article examines identity in public services and in the back office context. This review leads to the following question: how might public servants who are employed in a back office function and receive little, if any, direct feedback from citizens on the value of their work affirm their public service identity?

The study draws on interviews with 84 back office public service employees. The sample was drawn from attendees at a public service conference in the UK. Participants were employed as lower managers in a number of areas including: education; local government; health; housing; and environmental services, and within a range of functions. These functions vary between finance, policy development, business services and performance management but are consistent in that they provide back office support to the delivery of public services. Findings from this research are reported alongside those of prior studies with front line public servants, offering additional insights into the possible influence of work role and context. The present findings suggest that these back office workers: first, against much prior empirical research, achieve positive identity affirmation through carrying out bureaucratic work; and second, affirm their community and other-focused public service identity by noting their superiority in this regard when compared with colleagues. However, this self-augmentation leads many to feel isolated from their co-workers. These findings are important as they offer...
nuanced insights into the manner of identity affirmation for those in back office roles: specifically, the value that employees gain from support work. The findings also highlight how the expectation of making a positive difference to the lives of others via a career in public service can result in back office employees seeking to gain identity affirmation by undertaking isolating and potentially destructive comparisons.

**The nature of public service and the identity of public servants**

Workplace identity – that is, how employees think of, define and locate themselves while at work – has an influence on what they value; how they behave; and the manner in which they make sense of their context (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Despite imprecision in the definition of a public service identity (as with public service ethos, motivation, values or ethic) there is a seeming consensus over its general make-up. Dominant in the literature are studies which suggest a public service identity incorporates altruism (Rainey and Steinbauer, 1999), where people are driven by the notion of community service (Rayner et al., 2010) and providing a public good (Kim, 2005; Moore, 1995). Much research has found that public service attracts individuals with an intrinsic over extrinsic reward orientation (Du Gay, 2000) who, put simply, have a desire to make a positive difference to the lives of others (Frederickson and Hart, 1985) and improve society (Brewer, 2003).

These ideological factors are said to be embodied in those who choose a career in public service and, as such, relational aspects hold significantly more sway than transactional aspects of the employment bargain (Baines, 2004; Du Gay, 2000; Hoggett et al., 2006; Lee and Olshfski, 2002). The relational employment bargain is said to be met via direct feedback from citizens (Brewer and Walker, 2010; Frederickson, 1997) especially when engaged in work that offers ‘face-to-face service and develops the human capabilities of recipients’ (England et al., 2002: 455). It is through providing this direct service to citizens that public
service employees are said to gain a source of meaning in their work and both construct and affirm their identity as public servants (Baines, 2004; Hebson et al., 2003; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003; Worts et al., 2007). Dimensions of acting in the public interest suggested to provide identity affirmation to public servants and commonly cited in the literature are shown in Table 1 below. They are presented with the acknowledgement that public servants are not a homogeneous group (Boyne, 2002) – whether front line or back office – and that the dimensions are often interconnected in the delivery of public services, but are used here as a theoretically informed guide to structure the research findings and discussion.

**Table 1 Dimensions of public interest**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Factors of identity categorisation</th>
<th>Identity affirmation by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal interest</td>
<td>‘Other’ focused, fairness, compassion, not-for-profit.</td>
<td>Receiving feedback on the demonstration of concern for others’ interests above one’s own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community interest</td>
<td>Accountability, equity, transparency, societal responsibility</td>
<td>Acting for the community as a whole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group interest</td>
<td>Collectivism and loyalty within the group</td>
<td>Being supported by and supportive to team members, demonstrating altruism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At a personal interest level, concern for others is said to be a key identity factor and receiving feedback from citizens is important in affirming a valued public service identity (England et al., 2002; Hebson et al., 2003; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003; Worts et al., 2007). In considering the community’s interests, equity and transparency are vital when seeking to demonstrate accountability to the public with their various, and often conflicting, wants and needs (Benington, 2009). Being mindful of the group’s interests and teamwork is also part of acting in the public interest, where altruism is directed both internally and externally (Baines, 2004; McDonough, 2006; Paarlberg and Lavigna, 2010).
Acting in the public interest and the legitimacy of the institution of public service (and relatedly public servants), however, is built on its wider role in society (Moore, 1995) and the confidence that citizens have in its stewardship (Shulock, 1998). Administrative work in this legitimizing context requires due process (Weber, 1997 [1947]); consistency in management systems (Boyne, 2001); and equity and impartiality (Harmon and Mayer, 1986). As a result, the nature of public service means that those who work in support functions may be employed within the institution of public service – with its community focus and where gaining feedback from the public is said to play an important part in identity affirmation – but their role in the back office means that they are working as an integral part of the organization of public service – with its focus on administrative due process – and often receive little, if any, direct feedback on the impact of their work on the lives of citizens.

**Back office identity**

Studies of back office identity have declined in recent years as front line work has received greater attention: in academe, studies have typically ignored support staff (Collinson, 2006); IT based research often neglects those in the back office (Howcroft and Richardson, 2012); and clinicians are largely the focus of identity research in the healthcare sphere (Callan et al., 2007; Currie et al., 2009; Pratt et al., 2006). As a result, the back office is still something of a mystery (Korczynski, 2004). This lack of research attention has not been matched by a lack of attention from other stakeholders. Indeed, back office employees are firmly in the sights of politicians. For example, in his speech to the Lord Mayor’s banquet in November 2013 the UK’s Prime Minister, David Cameron, reported his coalition government’s success in reducing the administrative roles in the health service by 23,000. As a way of highlighting where the funding had been spent, he added that there were now 5000 more medical doctors (Cameron, 2013).
This reduction in administrative roles is part of an extensive re-modelling of public services that has seen an increase in partnerships with other public bodies; sub-contracts to the third sector and other stakeholders; increased involvement of citizens; and the outsourcing of whole services to the market (Andrews and Entwistle, 2010; Hebson et al., 2003; Martin, 2011; Pestoff, 2006). This restructuring is underpinned by a desire to provide better services for the public, often as ‘customers’ (Needham, 2006), while also generating financial savings. Accountability to citizens is key in the provision of public services (Kirkpatrick et al., 2005); as a result, each of the above service models will be subject to performance guidelines and measures which may be input, output or, more likely, outcomes based (Pollitt, 1986). Whichever form of performance measurement is chosen, the associated measures need to be developed, captured, analysed and reported (Boyne and Chen, 2007) and this requires the efforts of support staff. Consequently, it has been argued that the public service improvement agenda has led to more bureaucracy (Farrell and Morris, 1999; Harrison and Smith, 2003), which sits uncomfortably alongside the narrative that foregrounds the role of front line employees in providing value added public services. This contradiction adds fuel to the widespread derision toward back office staff who are considered to be a drain on resources; and estranged from and unresponsive to the needs of the customer (Korczynski, 2004).

The consideration of the impact of this distancing from the end user (be it customer, client or citizen) for those staff who work in the back office opens up our field of study. If public servants gain identity affirmation via direct feedback from the public (Brewer and Walker, 2010; England et al., 2002; Worts et al., 2007) – though for many their role means that they have little opportunity to achieve such affirmation – how does current research suggest they might respond to this mismatch? Responses in the literature include:
1) de-identification (Fiol, 2002), in the public service context this could mean reducing the identification with the notion of public service; 2) dis-identification (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001) – that is, identifying with opposite traits which in the present study may include the development of a profit-seeking ethos; or 3) seeking exit from the context (Pratt, 2000). This review has highlighted the gap in our knowledge about identity affirmation in the back office of public services, with current literature offering a range of differing prospects. It is this gap that this article explores.

**Methods**

The sampling strategy in this qualitative study was purposive: specifically and simply, participants were back office public servants. A conference in the UK in June 2009 was attended by 200 public servants. The conference was organized by a central government body and sought to propagate best practice between public service support staff and included a range of presentations, case studies and workshops to facilitate the cross-fertilization of ideas. The attendees were typically lower managers who provided administrative, financial, policy or performance-related support to a range of functions including: higher education faculty departments; regeneration, children’s and social services in local authorities; housing associations; central support in revenue and customs, environmental agencies, statistical bodies and the police service; policy divisions in local and central government; and geriatric and acute care specialties in the healthcare sphere. A researcher was at the conference for five days and data were collected via: 1) interviews with 70 attendees and 2) detailed field notes taken throughout the conference. The interviews lasted an average of 20 minutes with verbatim notes being taken which were updated after each interview.

In addition, following the conference all attendees were contacted via the conference email list and invited to take part in an individual interview. Semi-structured interviews with 14
public service support officers took place during the spring of 2010; each interview lasted an average of 75 minutes and was digitally recorded. Both sets of interviews included topics such as: why participants joined public services; their belief in the nature of public service and being a public servant; their relationship with their colleagues; and their best and worst experiences at the workplace. The interviews also explored what they did on a day-to-day basis and consequently had a wide reaching conversational approach. Taking the total sample, participants were mainly aged between 35 and 55 years with periods of public service employment ranging from 11 to 30 years, the average being 21 years. A breakdown of interview and conference participants, by gender and areas of public service employment, is shown in Table 2, where ‘Other’ includes police and housing.

### Table 2. Participants’ gender and area of employment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Local government</th>
<th>Central government</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview - 14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference - 70</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total interviewed - 84</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following the interviews, data analysis was performed in an iterative manner. First, for the individual interviews each participant’s digital interview recording was fully transcribed and compiled by the interviewer. The verbatim and field notes from the conference were also word processed and compiled. Second, NVivo was used to create a coding matrix that aligned to broad themes of public interest: personal, community and group. Third, the conceptually clustered matrix method was used for data analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994), with the initial coding matrix being extended with emerging topics. This process resulted in codes being amalgamated, expanded or refined to reflect the thematically similar constructs which surfaced across the interviews. The day-to-day conversational approach of each interaction
meant comparable topics were explored and the two data sources aligned around similar emergent themes. Fourth, each interview and field document was evaluated using the constant comparison method: comparing dynamically within and between interviews (Boeije, 2002) and refining the focus of data and theoretical ideas. Common themes in the data brought refinement and clarity to the study (Polkinghorne, 2005). There were parallels in the responses from support officers across gender and across public service fields. In reporting the findings, all participant details are fully anonymized with interview (I) and conference (C) participants being differentiated.

All in the public interest

The findings will be presented alongside data from studies of front line employees to explore the possible influence on identity affirmation of work role and context; and within each dimension of public interest introduced earlier: personal, community and group interest.

Personal interest

Participants’ public service identity is likely to be influenced by their perception of what it means to be a public servant (Weick et al., 2005). Therefore an exploration of their expectations and how they make sense while in role offers a basis to understand how they may seek and receive identity affirmation. In stating why they joined public services, the majority of participants were explicit: they wanted to help others. In the post of partnership manager, coordinating agreements between different public agencies, the draw of the job is to ‘make a difference, you know, to know you’re having an impact … it’s about others and achieving something’ (male, local government, C). A remark from a local authority officer highlighted the same point:
[I came into this job because of] the lack of information that people have and the lack of choice and opportunity, simply because they don’t know what they are entitled to [...] it infuriated me and I wanted to be involved in that, helping (female, social care, I)

The embodied nature of the role also emerged: many participants spoke of a relationship between their public service identity and their personal identity. As one policy officer pointed out, she applied for her post because ‘I just thought that I had the right skills or enthusiasm to really make a difference for the community. That’s why I wanted to do it: the job fitted me’ (female, central government, I). For those on the front line, the knowledge that you have made ‘a difference’ to the community comes from the face-to-face of public service delivery (Nielsen, 2006): connecting with the public offers a ‘sense of themselves as caring, moral individuals’ (Baines, 2004: 287). A housing officer in McDonough’s (2006: 639) study declared that this personal relationship was vital: ‘I like the fact that I am here and people can talk to me.’

Likewise, in Hebson et al.’s (2003:493) study of private-public partnerships, a housing benefits officer spoke of how they gain public service identity affirmation: ‘You had your stint on the counter and dealt with someone’s queries [...] and they come back and they say thank you very much. We would get thank you cards. I felt like I was really doing something’. The anticipation of feeling that you are ‘really doing something’ as a public servant was emphasised by the majority of our respondents: matching many studies of those who work on the front-line. A healthcare support officer in our study describes what she expected (and, as she noted, still expects) from her career in public services: ‘[to have] done something good [...] helped them with the situation and [...] made a difference to peoples’ lives in a positive way’ (female, health, I).
In stating that their role offers an opportunity to have ‘impact’; do ‘something good’; and make a ‘difference to peoples’ lives in a positive way’ highlights participants’ expectations of both a personal and a societal connection from their back office work. For the majority of the participants then, public service was perceived as a context in which you can not only feel that you are making a difference to others, aligning with much extant literature (Frederickson and Hart, 1985; Moore, 1995), but importantly participants also spoke of somehow being able to know that you are making a positive difference to the lives of others, as individuals and as members of the community.

**Community interest**

At the conference four officers in the policy development field discussed their role as a vital link between the community and those who implement policy in local government or the health service (albeit this connection was sometimes via politicians). They saw their role as not only aligning the often diverse community interests but filtering and ‘managing’ the requirements. One policy support officer reported that a great deal of time was spent in ‘making things do-able but also showing that we’re listening. We must show that we are moving in the direction that people want us to go … and how we do that is by following a process’ (male, central government, C). There was a consensus among the officers, albeit with an acknowledgement that this was not a popular view, that bureaucracy and due process and the equity and impartiality that they represent was a fundamental part of what is required in public service and in the role of being a public servant. One officer who had moved from the private sector said: ‘I know I’m new, well not that new I’ve been here, what, a year but I’m still trying to get used to, I’m still adapting to it. I can see that we must follow the rules. I can see why now too because of the public’ (male, central government, C). This conversation continued and included a discussion of the Freedom of Information Act (FOI) and the
correspondence received – beyond the concern about workload, ‘adding to an ever-growing paper mountain’ – there was agreement that the FOI was ‘a necessary evil’ for its ability to ‘make people see that we are accountable to them … they ask, we answer’ (female, central government, C).

These exchanges suggest that for these officers their work enabled them to engage in a conversation with citizens (albeit at a distance) and that they drew on these interactions to affirm their public service identity. They spoke of their support roles as being part of the equitable transparency that is vital to effective public service governance. This was also reflected in a discussion of healthcare reform, where the rise in the level of performance statistics was being considered by a table of three health service support officers. The cause of their concern, however, was the number of ‘complaints from the clinicians’, as one officer observed: ‘Boy the nurses are bloody furious’ (male, health, C). This account of the response of front line employees to the rise in performance management and related paperwork aligns with much literature. A comment by a welfare officer in Baines’s (2004: 277) study encapsulates this view, stating that administrative work is ‘more of a management tracking system for government legislation than any help. It doesn’t speak to people’s needs and how we are going to get to meet them.’

Participants readily acknowledged that performance systems led to an increased workload for their front line colleagues, but they considered ‘the numbers are vital, we can show that we are doing what we’re supposed to, you know, following professional guidelines, standards of care; and people deserve to know that. How can you show that you follow standards if this stuff [performance information] is not available? It offers the best opportunity to maintain good care for patients’ (female, health, C). There was a convergence of opinion among the officers that demonstrating consistency, backed up by the apparent objectivity of performance
statistics, was an important and necessary service to the community. In describing their part in this process, these officers, along with the majority in this study, appeared to see themselves not as back office bureaucrats but as vital community guardians.

**Group interest**

The strength of collectivism has been subject to the private-public debate with the balance of the argument seemingly suggesting that officers in public services are more focused on group welfare than are private sector workers. This debate aside, appreciating how participants interpreted their colleagues’ actions offered insights into the behaviours and values that they held in esteem; and how they characterized a valued public service identity. When asked of their ideal colleagues the responses were consistent in theme: ‘they’d be supportive’ (female, health, I); ‘they would be [someone who] would be there when you’re in … when you’re unsure’ (male, health, I); ‘be able to understand we’re working towards the same goals’ (female, local government, C); ‘like a brother you know, there for you’ (male, central government, C); and ‘just what you’d expect I guess, a friend who minds your back but also gives you a shove when you need it’ (male, local government, I).

Maybe unsurprisingly, behaviours that were highly regarded included cooperation, helpfulness and being supportive: encapsulated by a male support officer in the police service who remarked that what you want in a team member is someone who would ‘put themselves out’. This opinion aligns to the importance of collaborative working reported by front line workers, with research highlighting that acting in the public interest is an inherently collaborative activity (Hebson et al., 2003; Hood, 1991; Lee and Olshfski, 2002; McDonough, 2006). This viewpoint being summed up in the words of a prison warden: ‘You feel like you’re doing something important, the best it can be done, and doing it with others who feel the same’ (DiIulio Jr., 1994: 278).
Yet despite agreement between our study and prior research on the importance of collaboration in the delivery of public services, when the discussion turned toward participants’ engagement as part of the team, and what team membership means to them, then a different theme emerged. A participant who had described the importance of ‘pulling together’ stated that although happy in her role ‘I feel like an outsider... I don’t really fit [in the team]’. This, she said, was because she was ‘more personally involved than the others’ (female, central government, I). During an interview with a health administrator, she noted that she liked her colleagues but also that:

I feel that I am different from the rest and I’m ...I find it difficult to be different ... but I think it’s ok... I’m quite glad that I am ... I don’t see myself as the same as everyone else here (female, health, I).

In expanding on this conversation the health administrator added that she ‘cared more’ about the wider implications of the job than ‘they’ did. In his team another participant described himself as ‘always the odd bugger out’; he reported that his colleagues ‘seem to accept things that impact on what we do. They don’t seem to want to do the extra, they just don’t care as much’ (male, health, I). These stories of differentiation continued within the policy field when an officer reported feeling ‘generally sort of isolated’ among her group ‘because I can see the connection between what we do and how it affects people and they don’t’ (female, central government, C). She had previously spoken of the importance of collaboration in delivering public services and therefore this declaration was surprising.

When participants commented on their differentiation from colleagues this was habitually accompanied by a powerful assertion of their strong commitment to serving the public. In some cases their assertions verged towards martyrdom. During a conversation with a housing support officer, he described his approach to work and how it differed to the approach taken by his co-workers:
I’m part of a [gesturing inverted commas] team and they are an ok bunch and team work is really important but I’m here for the community. We should all be but I don’t think a lot of them are, in fact I’m sure they’re not. Thing is we deal with vulnerable people and at the end of the day we go home, you know. We have a home, somewhere where our things are and ... I mean ... it’s what I do to make that happen for other people. It’s important for the whole family unit. Too many kids are [living] in temporary places [i.e. third-party housing]. I don’t think the rest of them [his colleagues] think about that. In fact, I don’t think they give a monkey’s [an expression meaning they don’t care] not in that way but I do ... I do. That’s why I’m in the job, that’s why I came here because I do (male, local govt, C)

Further comments representative of this theme are shown in Table 3. The comments speak to the embodiment of personal values as being integral to the participants’ role as public servants. These declarations indicate that it is the personal connection to the public that influences their acts of differentiation and the process by which they gain a measure of public service identity affirmation.

Despite the above participants (along with most interviewees) extolling the virtues of group membership, it was noteworthy that the majority placed themselves outside of the group. This differs markedly from those on the front line where participants typically reported being integrated within the team (Hebson et al., 2003; Hood, 1991; Lee and Olshfski, 2002; McDonough, 2006). In the present study, participants described themselves as not just committed to public service and focused on the needs of the community but as more committed to public service and more focused on the needs of the community than their colleagues. In considering themselves in this manner, however, they were also distancing themselves - setting themselves apart - from members of their team.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Participant comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comment:</td>
<td>Participant characteristics:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are after all providing a public service, some of my colleagues seem to forget that ... it’s not about them or what they want</td>
<td>female, education, C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
[referring to the community] I always remember why I’m here. I don’t know if they do. It’s not about me I know that

Compared to the others, I usually get focused too much on work. It’s probably to my detriment

The public rely on what we do. Most of the people in my office forget that. Quite frankly they can’t be sodding bothered most of them. But that’s why I applied for the job - to do something worthwhile. I’m not like the rest of them

I stay ‘til the work’s done, take it home if need be. After all its people’s lives isn’t it. I don’t think anyone else in my group does that

People [in the team] can probably take a little bit of an advantage of me because they know I will do things because I care about the result

I know I put myself out more than the rest of the team. I link the work to the end result, the outcome for the public. Most of them don’t

Distancing self from others in the workplace has been identified in prior identity research (Bamber and Iyer, 2002; Callan et al., 2007; Coupland, 2001; Gotsi et al., 2010; Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006). In these studies, the acts of separation were typically linked to either the desire to fit into a new or evolving context, or to display traits considered beneficial for career progression. The present findings differ from that prior work. The distancing reported in this study moves beyond separation; instead, participants spoke of an augmented, superior differentiation based on personal, ‘deeply held’ public service values. When participants referred to their placement outside of the group, this was consistently accompanied by a powerful assertion of their strong commitment to serving the public. This relating indicates that these acts of differentiation offered these workers a way in which they could affirm their public service identity: as a community focused public servant who is caring, committed and willing to place the needs of others above their own. However, by setting themselves above and apart from their colleagues, this also led to them experiencing feelings of isolation.
Conclusion

This article has explored public service identity affirmation for back office employees who were lower managers and had little or, more commonly, no contact with the public. The reasons for these back office staff joining public services showed little difference to those attributed to front line employees. Participants spoke of a desire to help people live fulfilled lives; and to support the wider community. However, the nature of their work, distanced from the public, meant that the way in which they affirmed their public service identity differed from those on the front line. The findings are summarized in Table 4 and are set against the three dimensions of public interest that were used as a framework for the study.

Table 4 Research findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension of interest:</th>
<th>Public service identity affirmation via:</th>
<th>Identity affirmation for back-office employees:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal interest</td>
<td>Receiving direct personal feedback from citizens</td>
<td>Distanced communication is suggested to offer a partial proxy for interpersonal interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community interest</td>
<td>Being impartial, showing equitable treatment and transparency</td>
<td>Following due process is considered an affirming behaviour: it demonstrates equity and accountability and is regarded as integral to the delivery of good public service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group interest</td>
<td>Being supportive, signifying altruism</td>
<td>Altruism is present but accentuated and sometimes in sacrificial terms. A perception of superiority in public service values compared to co-workers offers identity affirmation but is also suggested to lead to a feeling of isolation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the present study, there were no occasions in which participants discussed directly interacting with the public. Instead, the interests of the public were met by proxy and the personal connection was filtered through administrative functions. However, participants considered that they were in dialogue (albeit at a distance) with members of the public via responding to Freedom of Information Act requests; the production of policy documents; or the provision of performance information. When considered in this way, the personal connection was administered and blended with the wider community’s interests. Public value was gained through adhering to procedures, with these officers frequently describing how the community was being served via the impartiality and transparency of administrative functions. They regarded following due process as being fundamental to public accountability and integral to good public service governance: due process offered an essential safeguard to the interests of the community. As such, these back office workers regarded their role as being vital objective guardians for members of the public. This viewpoint differs from much prior research. For example, it is in stark contrast to the Taylorization that has accompanied public service reform for many lower level back office employees (Carter et al., 2011); heightened dissatisfaction among senior public service managers (Morris and Farrell, 2007); and frustration with bureaucracy felt by those who work on the front line (Hebson et al., 2003; McDonough, 2006). The lack of negativity that emerged in the present study is suggested to be the result of participants’ position in the organization. Sandwiched in between the process driven lower level officers and the policy driven senior managers, these lower managers occupy a space where they appear to have a porthole through which they can see the benefits of process and policy for those on the ‘outside’.

A second theme that emerged in this study related to the experience of working with colleagues. Despite participants citing the importance of the team and of pulling together, their lived reality engendered, paradoxically, a perception more of otherness than oneness.
Detachment among public servants has been identified in prior research (Pollitt, 1993); differing from that previous work, in this study neither managerialism nor bureaucracy was cited as the cause of the detachment. Instead, detachment is suggested to be based on the desire to affirm a positive public service identity. Participants spoke of their expectations of making a positive difference to the lives of others through their role and of somehow knowing their work was making a difference to the community. The absence of a direct connection to the public, however, meant that they were unable to use these interactions to affirm the other-focused aspects of their identity. Seemingly in place of this direct feedback, when speaking of being caring and community focused, participants consistently highlighted their superiority in this regard when compared to co-workers. That is, participants repeatedly affirmed their public service identity by describing how they offered more and cared more than their colleagues. However, differentiating themselves in this way – setting themselves above and apart from their colleagues – also led them to experience feelings of isolation.

Along with improving our theoretical understanding of identity affirmation among public servants who work in back office functions – specifically lower managers – this research has implications for practice. The form and function of public services is seeing a transformation that is likely to continue apace. In contributing to this sphere, how does this research help policy makers and public service practitioners? The study contributes to the literature and to practice by underlining, against much previous research, that some back office public service employees achieve positive identity affirmation through what are widely regarded as bureaucratic work practices. Administrative work offers the opportunity for these employees to demonstrate values that are (or were) considered vital to effective public service such as accountability, transparency, due process and equality. This insight underlines that there is no need to offer public service support officers vicarious (and largely unrealizable) links between front line and back office in the quest for public value; rather, this research finds that
public value can be found in undertaking support functions. The findings from this research, therefore, send out a note of caution to public service practitioners, specifically those who promote an idealized view of what it means to be a public servant, suggesting they should provide a balanced view of organizational life, managing employees toward realistic expectations. This study suggests that a failure in this regard can lead to employees experiencing isolation and detachment.

Although the diversity and number of participants in this qualitative study provides a compelling and rich data set, the sample was drawn from back office staff who are lower managers and who attended a conference aimed at improving public services and developing best practice. As a result, they may not be representative and future studies could utilize a differing sampling approach to address this limitation. In relation to future work, it would seem reasonable to suppose that public service back office employees are not a breed apart (Boyne, 2002) and that similar processes of detachment and isolation may exist for support officers at a similar level in other organizations that promote ‘helping others’ as part of their employment bargain. This grouping may be extensive with the expansion of corporate social responsibility, organizationally sponsored community initiatives and environmental promotions in recent years. As a result, taking an identity affirmation approach provides an interesting lens through which to address the relative neglect of back office employees in work and employment studies (Korczynski, 2004). Furthermore, in light of the recent reports of poor standards of care in the health and social service sector in the UK, the apparent disengagement of front line public service employees is a serious issue worthy of investigation. Future studies could, for example, explore identity and the processes through which identity affirmation takes place. Drawing on the personal, community and group dimensions of public interest, as used in this research, would offer these and other studies a multi-layered view.
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