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# **Putting on the velvet glove: The paradox of "soft" core values in "hard" organizations**

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# **PUTTING ON THE VELVET GLOVE: THE PARADOX OF ‘SOFT’ CORE VALUES IN ‘HARD’ ORGANIZATIONS**

## **Introduction**

Bureaucracies in the traditional sense depend on the legitimated authority of the state to act and make decisions. They are instruments for political leadership in implementing public policies, not expected to have their own agenda or possess the capacity to act on the basis of their own goals, interests, and strategies. Over the last decades, however, a growing trend in most OECD countries has been to turn public sector entities into actors in their own right (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; De Boer, Enders, & Leisyte, 2007). Comprehensive reforms have installed more rational features in public sector entities and made them more similar to the abstract and generalized idea of what a sovereign, empowered organizational actor is and looks like.

The explicitly stated rationale for many of these reforms is the lack of efficiency in public bureaucracies. Since the 1970s, public sector entities have been associated with declining legitimacy and negatively charged labels and stereotypes such as inefficiency, waste, rules, incompetence, and rigidity. Comprehensive reforms referred to as New Public Management (Hood, 1995) or Reinventing Government (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992) were undertaken to address these problems and restore trust in government. The ideal public sector entity is the autonomous, empowered, accountable organization whose objectives and performance are clearly specified, monitored, and evaluated (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000), and whose behavior is managed by ‘hard’ values such as efficiency, results, and performance (Waldo, 1992). A general identity as formal organization has become a dominant script (Drori,

Meyer, & Hwang, 2006a; Meyer & Bromley, 2013; Meyer, Drori, & Hwang, 2006), prompting social entities to emphasize similarity with other organizations and tone down their category-specific and institution-specific identities.

In this paper I seek to extend the work of scholars who have described the proliferation of organization- and actorhood-building reforms in the public sector by highlighting how ‘hard’ aspects of organizational actorhood combine with ‘soft’ values and characteristics in expressions of organizational identity. By ‘hard’ I mean values and characteristics that indicate calculation, work, energy, and production, such as efficiency, performance, rationality, results, excellence, and accountability (c.f. Waldo, 1992). By contrast, ‘soft’ values and characteristics are associated with people, family, care, emotions, and community, such as compassion, trust, integrity, respect, and inclusion (c.f. Brickson, 2005; Lebow & Simon, 1997). Although it seems reasonable to expect empowered public sector entities to claim to represent hard values such as efficiency, results, and performance in an attempt to conform with legitimacy requirements, we do not know if this is an identity with which these entities want to be associated. I challenge the notion of ‘hard’ actorhood by opening up the possibility that alternative identities exist and that these identities are relevant, supplemental, perhaps competing, and perhaps perceived as more legitimate than the identity as formal organization – even for those entities that have been subjected to comprehensive organization-building reforms – and will inevitably come to expression.

To inquire into these assumptions, this study examines an organization-building element whose contents are particularly expressive of identity: core value statements. A core value statement is a brief definition of an entity’s values, articulated in an official setting such as a strategy document or a publically available

web page. As a very visible organizational building block, ideal for shaping legitimacy (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975), its contents can be expected to reflect hard actorhood values so as to conform to prevailing modern norms of rationality and efficiency (Drori et al., 2006a). Claiming adherence to hard values might be relevant for any public sector entity whose commitment to efficient service production has been questioned. This has indeed been the case for many entities in the public sectors of the entire OECD area at least since the 1980s. However, this study of the core value statements of federal agencies in the United States highlights the importance of other types of values. Reflecting a mix of identities, the values primarily facilitate an understanding of the agencies as caring about good relationships and wanting to be associated with soft rather than hard values. The most frequently occurring values are those that are important in inter-personal relationships such as integrity, respect, and openness.

This is a paradox with important implications for our understanding of organizational actorhood in general and the construction of organization in a public sector setting in particular. It questions the legitimacy of the identity as rational organization, drawing attention instead to a relational identity expressed by people-oriented values. This emphasis suggests that the relational identity is the more ‘appropriate’ and legitimate one, more so than the identity as formal, managed organization. As a result, I argue that rational, output-oriented thinking is one aspect of organizational actorhood – an other is a social dimension that thus far has tended to be neglected in the research on the construction of organization. This study highlights the need to explore this dimension in order to expand our understanding of how empowered organizational actors are constituted, perceive themselves, and want to be perceived.

The American context is chosen for this study because it is a setting characterized by ‘incomplete’ entities often criticized for not being sufficiently efficient, accountable, or performance-oriented, and thus have been, and still are, under strong pressures of transitioning towards higher degrees of organization. The first part of the paper presents the central tenets of organizational actorhood theory and shows how actorhood reforms in the U.S. federal administration have followed from a global proliferation of a general concept of ‘organization’. The second part describes the methodological approaches that were chosen. The third part presents the results, followed by a discussion of how the findings improve our understanding of organizational actorhood.

### **Theoretical observations**

#### *Actorhood theory and the proliferation of ‘organization’*

The corporation is the ‘prototype’ organization. It is “empowered, like a real person, to conduct business in its own name, acquire assets, employ workers, pay taxes, and go to court to assert its rights and defend its actions” (Bakan, 2004, p. 16). It is an organizational actor in its own right with the ability to set goals, develop strategies, make decisions, and act on behalf of its interests, “deliberately choosing its own actions and that can thus be held responsible for what it does” (Krücken & Meier, 2006, p. 241).

This prototype model of organization has currently become a dominant and socially legitimate ideal to follow in practice (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Drori et al., 2006a; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Meyer & Bromley, 2013; Meyer et al., 2006). It is reflected in the now rather universal adoption of standard organizational building blocks such as accounting procedures, annual reports, risk management,

performance management, communication strategies, branding, and mission and core value statements. These are the building blocks of ‘organization’ and the benchmarks of organizational actorhood (Power, Scheytt, Soin, & Sahlin, 2009); they are something that social entities need to have in order to be seen as ‘complete’ organizational actors with a demonstrated capability to set goals and pursue them rationally. As noted by Drori, Meyer, and Hwang (2006b, p. 1) “the core meaning of the term organization seems to sharply focus on the idea of actorhood”. Similarly, King, Felin, and Whetten (2010, p. 299) observe that social entities begin to “look like actors when they develop organizational properties”. The more social entities develop these properties, the more they conform to widely accepted notions for how organizations in general should look, function, and behave, and the less different and institution-specific they appear (Bromley & Meyer, 2014).

When adopted, organization-building elements symbolize an entity’s transition from category-specific entity into ‘organization’ (Drori et al., 2006a; Meyer & Bromley, 2013). It implies moving away from a concrete self-understanding (e.g. “we are a charity”, “we are a church”, “we are a school”, or “we are a public agency”) towards a more abstract and generalized understanding emphasizing shared characteristics (e.g. “we are a formal organization, just like everyone else”). By declaring its membership in such a general identity category, the entity renounces some of the aspects that define its uniqueness. It paves the way for the redefinition of the entity’s business in organizational terms and for the corresponding adoption of building blocks that help transform the entity into ‘organization’. Krücken and Meier (2006, p. 242) describe this redefinition in the following way: “Nowadays, firms, hospitals, public administration agencies, and universities are conceptualized first and

foremost as *organizations*, having typical *organizational* problems and being in need for efficient *organizational* solutions” (italics in original).

As the identity as organization spreads, it becomes institutionalized and taken for granted as “an abstract and deeply cultural form” (Drori et al., 2006a, p. 17). Indeed, “(e)very imaginable social group—economic, ethnic, political, religious, educational, medical, or scientific—is likely to claim explicitly and self-consciously to be an organization” (Drori et al., 2006b, p. 1). It follows that “(n)o one is now surprised if a baby-sitting cooperative among some parents, or a religious congregation, or an elementary school is found to have an organizational structure, with officers, committees, goals, annual reports, and the like” (Meyer et al., 2006, p. 46). To this list one could add public agencies, which are the focus of this study.

#### *Organizational actorhood in a public sector context*

Public sector entities are traditionally regarded as different from other entities, having a different mission and working from different logics and values. Whereas private sector organizations exist to pursue their own interests, public sector entities exist to handle multiple and often conflicting political, economic, and social concerns and goals in the pursuit of the public interest. They are not assumed to have their own agenda or act on behalf of their own goals and values. Instead, they incorporate all sorts of goals and values due to their multifunctional nature (Christensen, Læg Reid, Roness, & Røvik, 2007; Goodsell, 1989). As a result, they have been described as having an unclear identity, lacking a defined hierarchy, and not being sufficiently rational (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

However, today, it is commonly believed that public sector entities should be regarded as organizations no different from others and held to the same standards of

efficiency, accountability, and rationality as any other formal organization. Evidence for this claim comes in two forms; the first is when public entities model themselves on the basis of this ideal prototypical organization, the other is large-scale reforms involving new ways of organizing and managing public services based on the ideal concept of organization.

First, public sector entities adopt organization-building elements even when not formally required to do so. Various forms of performance measurements (van Dooren, 2005), balanced scorecard (Chan, 2004), lean (Radnor, 2010), strategic planning (Berry, 1994), risk management (Power, 2004), and vision, ethics, and core value statements (Kernaghan, 2003) are much more prevalent now than only a few decades ago. These adoptions can be explained by the individual entity's desire to improve performance and efficiency (Rogers, 2003; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983) or the need to conform to socially accepted practices (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), but also by identity change: A huge demand for generic, universal organizational solutions has been created due to the fact that public entities increasingly understand themselves more as formal organizations and less as specific cases of public sector entities (Bromley & Meyer, 2014; Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

Second, a host of organization- and actorhood-building efforts in most of the Western world, typically subsumed under New Public Management or Reinventing Government reforms (Boston, Martin, Pallot, & Walsh, 1996; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992), have sought to bring public entities closer to the ideal model of the prototype organization and give them the necessary organizational 'credentials'. These reforms entail the construction of public agencies as 'actors' with clear identities, formal hierarchies, and higher degrees of rationality (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). An important organization-building reform-type is 'agencification', i.e. the

disaggregation of previously monolithic public sector entities into smaller ‘single-purpose’ units (Christensen & Lægheid, 2006; Verhoest, van Thiel, Bouckaert, & Lægheid, 2012). In the United States, however, agencification carries a slightly different meaning because it was the general norm for decades. Federal executive agencies were created in several waves from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for purposes of coping with a variety of issues on an independent basis (Peters, 2012). Therefore, a more common organizational reform-type in the United States concerns the modes of managing, controlling, and accounting for responsibilities, functions, and outputs. Reforms include performance reviews and greater emphasis on output controls, combined with the notion that managers should be entrepreneurial and unburdened by rules and ‘red tape’ (Hughes, 1998; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). A major reform in the United States in this respect is the 1993 (revised 2010) Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), enacted by the Clinton Administration, and strongly inspired by Osborne and Gaebler’s (1992) philosophy concerning the reinvention of government. Its explicit purpose was to “improve the confidence of the American people in the capability of the federal government by systematically holding Federal agencies accountable for achieving program results” (U.S. Congress Committee on Governmental Affairs, 1993, p. 1). The reform requires U.S. federal agencies to produce 5-year strategic plans that should include mission statements and goals, specify how goals are to be met, produce annual performance reports, and describe how the performance goals can be verified. According to the then President Bill Clinton (1993, p. 1), the purpose of the reform was to “change the culture of our national bureaucracy away from complacency and entitlement toward initiative and empowerment”. Thus, the GPRA reform is “liberation management” (Light, 1995, p. 14): It constructs federal agencies as empowered and accountable

organizational actors in their own right, making them responsible for their own performance, goals, and results. This way, hard values such as efficiency, outputs, accountability, independence, and performance become more likely in official statements of core values.

### *Core values as statements of organization*

Values are abstract beliefs about desired end-states of existence that influence choices made by individuals (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992) and central in order to understand what actors do and why they do it. Although ‘every’ social entity is defined by distinct values (Selznick, 1957), not every entity has an official core value statement. This, however, appears to be changing. In the same way that a number of organizational building blocks have become something that a social entity ‘must have’ to be a ‘fully fledged’ organization, core value statements have become increasingly widespread, in private firms (Forster, Loughran, & McDonald, 2009; Ki & Kim, 2009; Murphy, 1995, 2005; Wenstøp & Myrmel, 2006) as well as in public agencies (Jørgensen & Isaksson, 2015; Kernaghan, 2003; Wæraas, 2010, 2014). Research on core value statements is limited but suggests that while a main concern for private firms is to signal expertise (Jørgensen & Isaksson, 2015) and social responsibility (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014), firms have difficulties differentiating on the basis of their values (Forster et al., 2009). Conversely, while public agencies tend to favor the presentation of a more lenient identity than what could be expected (Jørgensen & Isaksson, 2015; Wæraas, 2010), the choice of official core values varies across different types of agencies (Wæraas, 2014).

When core values are included in official core value statements, they serve several organization-building functions. Firstly, as a formal document of desired end-

states, a core value statement is evidence of rationality. Previous studies have shown that organizations introduce values-based management practices and connect core values to output-oriented control systems and scorecards used for performance reviews (Holzer, 2009; Paarlberg & Perry, 2007), under which employees are rewarded for acting in accordance with specific values. A core value statement thus signals that the entity is a coherent organization united around a set of values that guide everyday behavior towards official goals. Secondly, as observed by a number of scholars (Aust, 2004; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Selznick, 1957), core values are evidence of organizational identity. The proliferation of organization-building reforms and the general diffusion of the identity as organization require entities to develop consistent accounts of who they are and what they stand for. The development of such accounts entails the search for old, institutional values that have evolved as a response to the organization's internal and external conditions (Selznick, 1957). However, it may also entail the search for new values that are more geared towards the projection of a more 'modern' identity as organizational actor. Thus, the adoption of a core value statement signals an entity's membership in the shared, global identity category of organization, making it a particular actor with a particular identity or character and signaling 'this is what we stand for', in similarity but also in contrast to others (Deephouse, 1999; Gioia, 1998).

Although there are other official documents and statements that express organizational identity (e.g. vision and mission statements, marketing material, and strategy documents and annual reports), a core value statement is the only one whose sole purpose is to *explicitly* express official organizational core values to a general audience. It follows that this particular type of organization-building element is a very direct symbol of identity, and particularly for a public sector entity. When a public

entity is perceived as a purely bureaucratic instrument, it is not expected to stand out with its own identity. Organization-building reforms, however, allows for an entity to differentiate itself from the superior unit, thereby signaling its autonomy as an actor in its own right with its own identity. Having a formal set of values that is different from that of the parent ministry demarcates an entity's independence from the superordinate structure.

A core value statement thus operates at the junction between sameness and difference, defining the organization not only as similar to but also different from others at the same time (cf. Deephouse, 1999; Gioia, 1998). While the core value statement in itself signals similarity with the general category of formal organization, its contents could in principle include any value and reflect any identity so as to signal difference. For example, an entity could design its statement to reflect a unique identity through institution-specific values, shared by no one else (Selznick, 1957). With the increasing emphasis on branding and reputation management in the public sector (Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012), such a scenario is not unlikely. Alternatively, a public sector entity could signal similarity by reflecting a public sector identity through traditional public service values such as impartiality, legality, equality, responsibility, and justice (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007). By doing so, it supports the wider mission of the public sector as a whole instead of its own interests and agenda.

Perhaps as a measure to ensure that similarity and public sector values are respected, the central governments of all OECD countries have imposed government-wide ethics guidelines that tend to be dominated by traditional public service values (OECD, 2000, p. 32). The U.S. Office of Government Ethics (1999) has issued guidelines that require public officials and administrators to adhere to 14 principles,

among them impartiality, loyalty to the Constitution, conscientious performance of duty, adherence to the law, and equality. However, neither the GPRA reform nor the guidelines issued by the Office of Government Ethics require U.S. federal agencies to formulate and express a formal core value statement. Once an agency makes a decision to adopt this type of organization-building element, it is free to form its contents as it sees fit. Whether the result is a statement filled with typical actorhood values, traditional public sector values, unique institutional values, or a combination of them – or something else – is a question that will be explored in the remainder of the paper.

## **Method**

### *Data selection*

The web site *usa.gov*, administered by the General Services Administration, served as a starting point for selecting agencies, supplemented by the *federalregister.gov* web site, Wikipedia, and agency web sites. This approach yielded a sampling frame of more than 400 federal administrative bodies. The large number is partly due to the fact that the term ‘agency’ is used broadly about almost any kind of government entity in the United States (Peters, 2012). In order to narrow down the variation to a more coherent sample, the following criteria were adopted: The agency should be (1) subordinated to the core executive; (2) an ‘agency’, ‘institute’, ‘administration’, ‘bureau’, or ‘service’; (3) integrated within the structures of an executive department or have an independent status; (4) serving the entire country; and (5) serving policy preparation, implementation, or regulatory functions.

These criteria are still quite broad because they include independent agencies, regulatory agencies, and units integrated within department structures of various

names and functions. This is different from other conceptualizations that focus on agencies that are structurally disaggregated from parent ministries (e.g. Pollit, Talbot, Caulfield, & Smullen, 2004; Verhoest et al., 2012). However, in the American context, there are relatively few independent agencies outside federal executive department structures. Many of the most well-known ones including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the National Security Agency (NSA), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) are integrated within the structures of their respective parent departments. Thus, together, the chosen criteria offer consistency by ensuring a sample of agencies that represent the executive branch of government and excluding smaller or less permanent entities such as boards, offices, inter-agency bodies, commissions, and committees, unless they are independent or regulatory. When these criteria were applied, the number of agencies dropped to 177.

Of these 177 agencies, 75 (42.4%) displayed a core value statement labeled “values”, “core values”, “our values”, or “agency values”, or something similar on their web sites. These statements, which included a total of 394 core values, were collected and subsequently analyzed.

### *Analysis*

The 394 values were coded through content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) and analyzed in three stages using the computerized qualitative analysis tool Provalis QDA Miner.

The first analysis was theory-driven and intended to map the prevalence of typical actorhood values reflecting an identity as organization. That is, values similar to or associated with efficiency, performance, accountability, results, excellence,

outputs, and so on, were categorized as hard actorhood values to the extent that they expressed the meaning of these values. They are contrasted with two other types of values:

- Public sector values: These are the fundamental values of the public sector that are connected to the public interest and the welfare of society as a whole. Examples of such values include rule and law orientation, justice, fairness, equity, public interest, democracy, and objectivity (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007).
- Unique values: These are values that are unique, occurring only once in the data material, and reflecting an identity as institution (Selznick, 1957).

The second analysis was data-driven and inductive. It was intended to bring out more nuances in the data than the three predefined categories could provide. Provalis QDA Miner was used again to generate labels. After counting and grouping together values multiple times and creating and recreating categories based on emerging patterns, the process resulted in three additional labels: (a) People-oriented values reflecting a *relational identity* such as integrity, respect, openness, customers, and people. (b) Internal culture and work values sharing the reflection of a *good workplace identity*, such as informality, diversity, employee enabled, and personal development. (c) Competence values implicating a *professional identity*, and referring to virtues and values such as knowledge, competence, professional attitudes, and science.

It is not assumed here that core value statements are filled with either one type of values or the other. Rather, the six categories serve as a typology or framework for analyzing the contents of the statements and for assessing which type of values are the most frequently occurring overall. The typology offers the possibility that the agencies are coherent organizational actors, relying on only one type of core values –

presumably actorhood values – however, it also leaves open the scenario that the agencies combine values from all these categories in their core value statements.

In a third stage of analysis, QDA Miner was used to determine which identities are reflected simultaneously through the core value statements and which identities tend to co-occur more often than others. Given that organizational identity is a key resource for acquiring legitimacy (Brown, 1997), the co-occurrence analysis may help us understand which projected identities the agencies believe are the most beneficial in their quest for legitimacy. The co-occurrence analysis is based on Sorensen's similarity coefficient, which ranges from 0 (no similarity) to 1 (full similarity).

## **Findings**

Among the 75 federal agencies that display a core value statement on their web pages are many well-known agencies. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) are some of the most visible and well-known agencies whose activities are claimed to be guided by official core values (Table 1). For example, CIA stands for service, integrity, and excellence. EPA stands for science, transparency, and rule of law. Clearly, when organizations such as these display core value statements, they must be of some significance.

However, lower profile agencies have also defined core value statements (e.g. the U.S. Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA) and the Rural Development Agency (Table 1)). The implication appears to be that 'any' agency might adopt a core value statement. Thus, consistent with organizational

actorhood theory and the proliferation of organization- and actorhood-building reforms, the study finds that the adoption of a core value statement among U.S. federal agencies is not uncommon. None of the agencies are required to have a generic organizational building block of this kind, let alone post it on their web sites. Yet, 42.5 percent, many of which are high profile federal agencies, have one.

TABLE 1: Examples of core value statements. Source: Agency web sites

<b>Agency</b>	<b>Core value statement</b>
Administrative Conference of the US	Efficiency, fairness, and satisfaction
Agency for International Development	Loyalty, character, service, accountability, community
Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau	Excellence, integrity, quality, diverse, innovative, well trained, learning, change
Army Audit Agency	Service, ethics, progress
Bureau of Engraving and Printing	Integrity, fairness, performance, respect
Central Intelligence Agency	Service, integrity, excellence
Citizenship and Immigration Service	Integrity, vigilance, respect, ingenuity
Defense Military Agency	Service, dedication, strength, urgency of purpose, customer focus, integrity, accountability, commitment to inquiry, creativity, innovation, teamwork, leadership
Environmental Protection Agency	Science, transparency, rule of law
Federal Aviation Administration	Safety, quality, integrity, people
Federal Bureau of Investigation	Obedience to the Constitution, respect, compassion, fairness, integrity, accountability, leadership
Federal Emergency Management Administration	Teamwork, motivated employees, empowered employees, clear, well communicated, customer focused, results oriented, field based, compassionate, strong leadership, accountability, professional workforce, partnerships, business approach, technology, equipped to act
Federal Highway Administration	Public service, integrity, respect, family, collaboration, personal development
Federal Reserve	Public interest, excellence, efficiency, effectiveness, independence of views
Fish and Wildlife Service	Stewardship, people, science, partnerships, professionalism, legacy, service
Food and Drug Administration	Science-based decision making, innovation, collaboration, transparency, accountability
Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration	Integrity and professionalism; innovation among individuals and teams; diversity in the workforce; employees and customers; and fiscal responsibility.
Mine Safety and Health Administration	Health, safety
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	Safety, integrity, teamwork, mission success
National Institute of Standards and Technology	People, integrity, customer focus, excellence
Office of Personell Management	Service, respect, integrity, diversity, enthusiasm, excellence, innovation
Postal Service	People, excellence, integrity, community responsibility, customers
Secret Service	Justice, duty, courage, honesty, loyalty
Securities and Exchange Commission	Integrity, accountability, effectiveness, teamwork,

Small Business Administration	fairness, commitment to excellence Outcomes driven, customer focused, employee enabled, accountable, efficient, transparent
Substance Abuse and Mental health Services Administration	Accountability, capacity, effectiveness

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When examining the contents of the core value statements, a more nuanced picture of the core value statements as organization-building devices emerge. First, the core value statements are not characterized by values that reflect a single organizational identity only, such as either an identity as formal organization, or an identity as public sector organization. As demonstrated by Tables 2 and 3, they display an eclectic mix of values reflecting multiple identities. In fact, only two agencies rely on one single type of values to signal their identities.<sup>1</sup> With an average of over five values per core value statement, the agencies prefer to combine values from various – sometimes contradictory – identity categories. Sorenson’s similarity coefficient shows particularly strong co-occurrences between the following pairs of labels (Table 2): “Relational identity” and “identity as organization” ( $QS=.848$ ), “relational identity” and “public sector organization” ( $QS=.708$ ), “relational identity” and “good workplace” ( $QS=.737$ ), “identity as organization” and “public sector organization” ( $QS=.667$ ), and “good workplace” and “identity as organization” ( $QS=.641$ ). Thus, the relational identity, which implies a concern for others, co-occurs frequently with the identity as organization (a total of 53 co-occurrences), which reflects a more self-centered way of behaving. Given that organizational actors are expected to be coherent and express actorhood values, the combination of such opposite identities is unexpected.

Table 2

	Public sector	Organization	Good workplace	Institutional	Professional	Relational
Public sector	1.000					
Organization	0.667	1.000				
Good workplace	0.505	0.641	1.000			
Institutional	0.115	0.156	0.189	1.000		
Professional	0.211	0.261	0.345	0.421	1.000	
Relational	0.708	0.848	0.737	0.160	0.250	1.000

Second, the most frequently occurring values are not ‘hard’ actorhood values, but ‘soft’ values primarily implicating relational and good workplace identities. 33 percent of all values fall into the relational identity category (Table 3). Many of them either highlight a ‘two-way’ relationship by emphasizing characteristics that are reciprocally important in maintaining good relations, such as respect, openness, inclusion, and partnership, or they highlight the moral character of the actor such as integrity and honesty. Others, such as customer orientation and responsiveness, express a more unilateral relationship through which the agency caters to its stakeholders in a more direct manner. Almost all agencies (90.7%) have included at least one value reflecting a relational identity in their core value statement. Even regulatory and law enforcing agencies, which are not normally expected to cater to the general public, want to be associated with people-oriented values (e.g. the FBI, which stands for respect and compassion).

Although some internal culture and workplace values could be interpreted as ‘hard’ because they are, at least to some extent, associated with production and goals (e.g. quality, teamwork, and innovation), many of them pertain to the ‘soft’ dimension of organizational identity. Examples are informality, diversity, collegiality, team spirit,

valuing our staff, and personal development. Accounting for 19.4 percent of all values (Table 3), they highlight the values that guide work settings and relations between colleagues as they interact with each other. Teamwork and innovation are the most typical ones. 61.3 percent of the agencies have at least one such value in their statement.

Less than 25 percent of all values reflect an identity as formal organization through hard actorhood values. Examples include excellence, effectiveness, efficiency, results- and outcomes-oriented, business approach, and so on. 76 percent of all agencies have included at least one such value in their core value statement. Thus, as a whole, actorhood values are definitely not missing from the data, but it is fair to say that they are not as prominent as could be expected from existing research and theory. In fact, the most frequently occurring actorhood values; excellence and accountability (Table 2), could be considered some of the ‘less hard’ ones, while values such as efficiency and outcomes driven, producing outcomes, results oriented, and so on, which could be seen are some of the ‘harder’ actorhood values and therefore the most visible manifestations of an identity as organization, do not make it to the list of the five most frequently occurring values within this category.

It is also noteworthy that traditional public sector values such as the public interest, fairness, objectivity, and public service are outnumbered not only by people-oriented values but also actorhood and internal culture and workplace values. Although 60 percent of the agencies have included at least one value implicating a public sector identity in their core value statement, only 16.7 percent of all values fall into this category. Given the historical importance of these values, and the emphasis placed on them in government-wide statements of ethics, this finding is a paradox. On the other hand, agencies that worry about their legitimacy may prefer not to be

associated with such values, which have been claimed to produce images of bureaucracy, red tape, rules, and regulations (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). Examples of agencies that still ‘dare’ to emphasize such values are the Secret Service, which stands for justice, duty, and loyalty; and the FBI, which stands for obedience to the Constitution and fairness (Table 1).

Finally we note the low frequencies of unique values reflecting an institutional identity and competence values implicating a professional identity. Unique values, of which there are eight, are values that occur once among the 394 values and/or express a meaning not shared by anyone else, e.g. ownership, necessary, and field-based. As for competence values, only 3.3 percent of all values are of this type, among them knowledge, science, and professionalism. Only 12 agencies have included at least one such value in their statements.

TABLE 3: Categories of values (N = 394)

Type of values	Identity reflected	Agencies	Core values	Examples	Five most frequently occurring values*
People-oriented	Relational	68 (90.7%)	133 (33.6 %)	Honesty, compassion, responding to needs, listening to people, respect, integrity, customer service, people, family, responsiveness, inclusion	Integrity (45) Respect (19) Openness (11) Customers (10) People (7)
Actorhood	Organization	57 (76%)	97 (24.5%)	Effectiveness, efficiency, results- and outcomes-oriented, business approach, strong leadership, excellence, accountability, independence	Excellence (28) Accountability (25) Effectiveness (6) Leadership (6) Performance (6)
Internal culture and workplace	Good workplace	46 (61.3%)	77 (19.4%)	Innovation, quality, informality, diversity, motivated employees, collaboration, collegiality, team	Teamwork (14) Innovation (13) Quality (9) Diversity (8) Collaboration (6)

Public sector	Public sector organization	45 (60%)	66 (16.7%)	spirit, valuing our staff, personal development Community, public interest, safety, stewardship, needs of future generations, prevention of waste, fraud, and abuse, community responsibility	Service (16) Fairness (8) Objectivity (7) Safety (4) Stewardship (3)
Competence	Professional	12 (16.0%)	13 (3.3%)	Knowledge, science, professionalism, competence	Science (4) Professionalism (3) Competence/knowledge (2)
Unique	Institutional	7 (9.3%)	8 (2.0%)	Ownership, necessary, field-based, legacy, merit	(n/a)

\* For simplicity, frequencies in this column reflect groups of values expressing the same or very similar meaning (.e.g. “inclusion” is grouped with “broadly inclusive”, “excellence” with “correctional excellence”, “customer focus” with “customer orientation”, “mutual respect” with “individual respect”, and so on.)

## Discussion

In observing tendencies of some values being favored more than others, the study highlights the relative importance of these value categories and their associated identities. First and foremost it highlights the *social* aspect of organizational actorhood. Two observations from this study are of particular importance for our understanding of this aspect: First, the eclectic nature of the core value statements suggests that organizational identity does not come to expression as a single, unified, holistic phenomenon. While an organizational actor is assumed to be “integrated” (Krücken & Meier, 2006, p. 241), “bounded” (Drori et al., 2006a, p. 18), like “a single individual” (Whetten & Mackey, 2002, p. 395), and representing a “coherent pattern of choices” (King et al., 2010, p. 292), no agency in this study relies on one type of value only to signal its identity. Like individual identity tends to be composed of multiple and sometimes contradictory identity elements, the agencies in this study represent themselves through values that reflect different organizational identities, such as concern for the greater good on the one hand, and on the other, a concern for

efficient production. Such combinations of inconsistent identities are problematic from the point of view of a coherent actor (Brickson, 2005). However, they do make sense when understanding organizations as social actors, engaging with other actors in different social settings. An organizational actor operating in a variety of settings, each defined not only by different tasks or functions, but also preferences and interests, is likely to develop identities that match these settings. The actor would be constrained and less capable of relating to others on the basis of a core value statement reflecting a single identity because it would only apply in one particular setting or to one single function.

The other observation concerns the heavy emphasis placed by the agencies on ‘soft’ values. Emphasizing hard actorhood values only might lead to a general impression of the organization as ‘machine bureaucracy’ and lead to ‘disenchantment’, alienating those to whom the organization needs to relate (Weber, [1922] 1968). Conversely, emphasizing a relational identity through soft people-oriented values as well as attractive workplace values has the benefit of allowing the organization to de-objectify or ‘re-enchant’ itself. The organization enables itself to show that it is more than an instrument for goal-oriented behavior; that it is populated by ‘real’ human beings and has a value of its own. This, in turn, allows external observers to recognize it as a social actor. In the case of U.S. federal agencies, the need to appear as a social actor is evident in the use of people-oriented values such as integrity, respect, openness, customers, people, responding to needs, honesty, and compassion. It also comes to expression in the use of internal culture and workplace values such as team spirit, diversity, and collaboration.

In addition to emphasizing the social dimension of actorhood, the findings have implications for our understanding of the legitimacy of different value categories

and their associated identities. Whereas previous studies have emphasized the ideal of organizational actorhood and the capacity of an actor to act and pursue its interests (Drori et al., 2006a), this study suggests that not every social entity want to be understood as such, also when it de facto has been structurally transformed into an organizational actor in its own right. As an actor in its own right, it acquires its own mission, goals, and performance standards, and is held accountable for its actions and decisions. It is more visible than before, and the legitimacy of its identity becomes more crucial. But instead of displaying a corresponding identity as formal organization through hard actorhood values, it is more likely to display a relational identity through soft people-oriented values.

The inconsistency between on the one hand the proliferation of core value statements as organization-building elements and, on the other hand their contents, raises doubt about the legitimacy of the identity as formal organization. To understand this finding, there is a need to consider the emergence of the emotional order to which authors have referred as the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) or dream society (Jensen, 1999), in stark contrast to the rational order inherent in the audit society (Power, 1999) as well as the rationalization (Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1994) or ‘McDonaldization’ of society (Ritzer, 2004). This emotional order motivates organizational actors to emphasize relational rather than rational actorhood values. Legitimacy follows from being an expressive organization (Schultz, Hatch, & Larsen, 2000), engaged in the branding of an attractive organizational identity and appearing as a charismatic actor (Hatch & Schultz, 2013).

These observations concur with Inglehart’s (1990) description of the emergence of the post-industrial society. As he argues, the quest for material wealth is fading while the pursuit of happiness and self-expression is growing. Combined with

the increasing disembodiedness of individuals from traditional social contexts (e.g. the ‘family’, the ‘social class’), which makes social roles and positions less relevant for the construction of identity (Giddens, 1991), the post-industrial society motivates individuals to understand and express themselves through the discovery of their inner self. The characteristics used by individuals to describe themselves have transitioned from reflecting a utilitarian (or ‘hard’) to an expressive (‘relational’, ‘soft’) conception of the self towards the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Buchmann & Eisner, 1997). Similarly, as social entities transition from being cases of specific categories (e.g. the ‘church’, the ‘charity’, the ‘public agency’) into members of a generic category of organization, they too begin to express themselves on the basis of soft values and characteristics. Obviously, this is not to say that formal organizations neglect the importance of hard values. Such values may come to expression in other documents such as annual reports, strategic management documents, meeting minutes, and perhaps also mission statements and corporate visions. However, when the agencies in this study decide to define *explicitly* and *specifically* which values they stand for, there is a tendency of favoring soft values over hard ones.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of examining the contents of organization-building elements. Previous studies rely on the adoption of organization-building elements and building blocks as an indicator of the current rationalization of our modern society. The findings from this study add an important nuance to this approach: They show that some organization-building elements, in this case core value statements, have a content that may or may not support the proliferation of organization. They may include a complex mix of values and reflect a variety of identities. Whereas the diffusion of the organization-building element in itself is evidence that social entities understand themselves as organizations with a need for

organizational solutions, there is no guarantee that the entity will form the contents of the element in accordance with values such as efficiency, rationality, performance, and so on. Thus, the paradox of soft core values in hard empowered organizational actors under pressure to pursue efficiency and results suggests that the proliferation of organization-building elements cannot be taken as evidence of the primacy of organization without examining the actual contents of these elements.

## **Conclusion**

Attempts at turning public sector entities into complete organizational actors in their own right have proliferated during the last few decades. While the transition from category-specific entity into organization is assumed to be accompanied by a hard identity as organization, the reality highlighted in this study is that public agencies prefer to become associated with multiple values, favoring soft people-oriented values reflecting a relational identity over other values. This is despite the pressures of efficiency and performance under which they operate, and suggests that the proliferation of organization is not as pervasive as assumed by previous research and theorizing. Granted, many public sector entities have become constructed as hard, empowered, and autonomous actors in the pursuit of their own interests and objectives. And, in their core activities, they may very well pursue actorhood values and ideals such as efficiency, independence, rationality, and accountability. Their core value statements, however, are more comparable to a 'velvet glove' that serves to soften the impression they give of themselves to the general public.

Together, the findings and their implications contribute to a better understanding of what it means to be an organizational actor in its own right. The results of the current study raise questions about the legitimacy of the identity as

organization and its corresponding values, encouraging us to delve deeper into the pressures that induce formal organizations to identify themselves as people-oriented social actors. The findings highlight the need to examine the potential effects of the relational identity on daily activities, and how the expression of such an identity combines with efficiency and performance pressures to which modern agencies must relate. Studies of organizational building blocks other than core value statements would be particularly valuable.

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<sup>1</sup> The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration stands for actorhood values such as accountability, capacity, and effectiveness, while the Mine Safety and Health Administration claims to represent internal culture and workplace values such as health and safety (Table 1).