

CONCEPT OF STRATEGY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: A STUDY OF THE PERCEPTION OF PUBLIC SERVANTS

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Abstract:

This study verifies public servants' perceptions of concepts of the strategy used in the public sector. A total of 804 public servants answered an electronic questionnaire containing 19 concepts associated with public strategy. Using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), the concepts were grouped into three latent conceptual views of public strategy, namely, 'stakeholder negotiations,' 'performance improvement,' and 'public commitments' factors. Thus, this study offers three new conceptual approaches to strategy that can help actors in the public sphere better understand how they can sponsor, contribute, or influence collaborative strategies within their sector.

Keywords: *strategy; public sector; concept of strategy; public servants.*

JEL Classification: H83

CONCEITO DE ESTRATÉGIA NO SETOR PÚBLICO: UM ESTUDO DA PERCEPÇÃO DOS FUNCIONÁRIOS PÚBLICOS

Resumo:

Este estudo verifica a percepção dos servidores públicos sobre os conceitos de estratégia utilizadas no setor público. Um total de 804 servidores públicos respondeu a um questionário eletrônico contendo 19 conceitos associados à estratégia no setor público. Usando a Análise Fatorial Exploratória (AFE), os conceitos foram agrupados em três visões conceituais latentes da estratégia no setor público, fatores 'negociações com os stakeholders', 'melhoria de desempenho' e 'compromissos públicos'. Assim, este estudo oferece três novas abordagens conceituais para a estratégia no setor público que podem ajudar os atores da esfera pública a entender melhor como eles podem patrocinar, contribuir ou influenciar estratégias colaborativas em seu setor.

Palavras chave: *estratégia; setor público; conceito de estratégia; servidores públicos.*

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1. Introduction

Despite the growing presence of public organizations in modern societies (Montanari & Bracker, 1986), a predominant share of the literature on strategy is concentrated in studies of private organizations. Thus, the theoretical framework developed, to a large extent, has not been concerned with the understanding of strategy, as applied to the public sector (Llewellyn & Tappin, 2003; Stewart, 2004; Andrews, Malcom & Elif, 2017). In this context, this work verifies the general perception of public servants about their concepts of strategy.

Even with the advancement of research on strategy in the private sector, researchers have been slow to apply their theories to public organizations (Jenhaug, 2021). The gap between the two sectors drives the public away from using some of the analytical concepts of strategy that could potentially assist public institutions in tackling social problems (Rose & Cray, 2010). Thus, further studies have been encouraged to understand how those in the public sector understand the term strategy (Bragança, Mainardes & Laurett, 2015). A shared meaning allows for the coordination of actions in the construction of direction and can mobilize actors towards a strategic objective (Jalonen, Schildt & Vaara, 2018).

Challenges to the formulation and implementation of strategies stem from cycles of political change, complex internal and external dynamics, highly bureaucratic structures, and a wide variety of stakeholders (Rose & Cray, 2010). Such challenges underscore the importance of mapping the understanding of concepts in the public context (Abutabenjeh, 2021). The public sector is not static and faces ever-transforming problems like problems in the social and natural environments. Strategy in the private sector, which is based on gaining a competitive advantage over other firms, while helpful, is not entirely adequate to deal with the unique changes typical to the public sector (Alford & Carsten, 2017).

The complexity of the situations experienced by public organizations requires different combinations of strategic implementation styles, and these combinations may have different implications for organizational outcomes (Andrews, Malcom & Elif, 2017). Due to variations and implications of strategy in a governmental context, it is relevant to know how public servants perceive ideas related to the concept of strategy. Concepts, rather than simple means of communication, are essential components and indispensable tools that actors use to give practical meaning to an organization's strategy (Jalonen, Schildt, and Vaara, 2018).

In order to map public servants' perceptions and understandings, 19 concepts associated with public strategy were identified in the literature and sent to respondents for analysis. The data was collected through an electronic questionnaire in October of 2018, resulting in a sample of 804 public servants. The exploratory factor analysis identified factors that were labeled 'Negotiations with stakeholders,' 'Performance improvement,' and 'Public commitments.' This systematization contributes to aiding in the understanding of the different approaches toward strategy in the public sector. It can help managers and organizations develop a better conceptual understanding of the concept of strategy. The utility of this improved understanding is that a more solid and unified grasp of the concept of strategy could legitimize and reorient the construction of meaning within the sector.

In terms of theoretical contributions, the present discussion within the public context can collaborate with studies of formulation, implementation, and elaboration of analytical strategy constructs (Alford and Carsten, 2017; Andrews, Malcom & Elif, 2017; Vining, 2016). These constructs contribute to giving meaning to the concept in the public sector (Jalonen, Schildt, and Vaara, 2018).

Identifying the perception among public servants of the concepts of strategy allows for a deeper level of research to be carried out in this area (Rho, Jung & Nam, 2021). The contextualized analysis undertaken in this study works to systematize strategic thinking from the perspective of other important actors (Crubellate, Grave & Azevedo Mendes, 2004), in this case, public servants. A broader and more accurate comprehension of what a public servant sees as 'strategy' in the public sector makes possible to effectively communicate the adopted strategy, by linking the understanding to key points of the strategy. Such understanding can favor the implementation of strategies in the public sector.

In practice, it is vital to know the understanding of the meaning of strategy for those engaged in policymaking and the provision of public services. Strategy is a social activity, and its understanding can help people improve the implementation of strategy concepts within organizations (Whittington, 2004). In turn, it may result in the increased effectiveness of government actions within a contradictory landscape

featuring both demands for quality public services and a scarcity of financial resources to implement these demands

2. Literature Review

2.1 *The Origin and the Application of Strategy in the Public Sector*

Derived from military operations, the term strategy (from the Greek *strategos* – the art of the general) has had several meanings throughout history. It has not lost its semantic root of defining paths, retaining its original meaning (Mainardes, Ferreira & Raposo, 2012). However, when it was incorporated in the context of organizational management, the term became multifaceted, making it difficult to establish a single, uncontested definition (Fedato Alvez de Lima, Martín Pires & Trez, 2017). At the beginning of the 20th century, more precisely in the 1920s, Pierre Du Pont and Alfred Sloan applied systematic management approaches that, decades later, came to be known as strategic management and strategic planning (Barker & Smith, 1997).

In the post-war period, the understanding of strategy has diversified with the growth of organizations, consolidating into a field of research. In the 1960s and 1970s, Alfred Chandler stood out as the first researcher to give conceptual clarity to the term strategy. According to Chandler, the strategy is ‘the determination of the basic long-term goals and objectives of an enterprise, and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources for carrying out these goals’ (Chandler, 2003). Chandler also differentiated the formulation of strategy from its implementation (Whittington, 2008). Throughout this period, many strategic tools and concepts were developed. However, only in the early 1980s did public organizations begin to use the concepts and techniques of strategic management, which had been developed first in the private sector (Johnsen, 2015). Also, in this decade, a theoretical hegemony was formed in the private area, which researchers developed from the Business Policies Model of Harvard Business School. A version for the public sector emerged from this model, currently known as New Public Management – NPM (Alford & Carsten, 2017).

However, management in the public sector, generally more bureaucratic, constitutes a set of significantly different activities from those practiced in the private sector in several aspects (Boyne, 2006). These differences made applying New Public Management (NPM) to governmental management difficult. Factors such as the political objectives of elected officials, demands of powerful groups and individuals, judicial decisions, budget constraints, and financing capacity, among others, hinder the strategies of public bodies (Wechsler & Backoff, 1987). Therefore, the formulation and implementation of strategies in the public sector have certain particularities that cannot be disregarded.

In this context, three issues have contributed to keeping strategic management out of public sector plans. First, competitive advantage did not make much sense in a monopolistic service delivery scenario. Second, the presence of resistant bureaucratic dysfunctions that undermine efforts to deliver change. Finally, for many stakeholders, an ever-present context of conflicting demands, often considered insoluble, hindered strategy formulation (Llewellyn & Tappin, 2003). The matter becomes even more worrying when many public organizations do not even have a strategy to follow (Montanari & Bracker, 1986).

This lack of strategy in the public agenda does not mean that the public sector does not face challenges akin to the private sector’s (Llewellyn & Tappin, 2003). Identifying what the private sector found to be helpful while considering the peculiarities of the public sector in developing strategies to create public value is a means of incorporating and moving beyond traditional strategic thinking (Alford & Carsten, 2017).

In turn, Steurer & Martinuzzi (2005) summarize that, even after incorporating the governmental sphere, there still is no consensus as to what public sector strategy models should be. However, a new traditional business model is emerging. Researchers seek to combine elements of various schools into a consolidated theory that combines forces of formal plans with incremental learning processes (Steurer & Martinuzzi, 2005). For Alford and Carsten (2017), without due adjustment to the contents to consider the distinctive realities of government organizations, the model can distort the understanding of strategy by those who handle it in a highly detrimental way.

Despite the convergence of the potential benefits of applying strategy and its terminological consequences – formulation, implementation, management, and strategic planning (Poister, Pitts & Hamilton Edwards, 2010) – elaborate instruments seem not to have yet been sufficiently adapted to contexts of public organizations (Mazouz & Rousseau, 2016). However, social pressure for quality public services has required public organizations to rethink their operations (Lima, Ribeiro Serra, Coehlo Soares &

Montenegro de Lima, 2020). Because of this, incorporating strategy and strategic management into the public sector has never been as urgent and legitimate as in recent years (Favoreu, Carassus & Maurel, 2016).

2.2 Concepts of Strategy in the Public Sector

Even with academic development and a growing volume of content and process literature, the effectiveness of public sector strategy remains controversial (Johanson, Pekkola & Husman, 2017). Although the concept of strategy is one of the most investigated, it is, contradictorily, one of the least understood. Thus, there have been recommendations to carry out studies to clarify the understanding of the term (Bragança, Mainardes & Laurett, 2015). The clarification of the concept of strategy in the context of public service may lead to a new line of research on the concept of strategy for members of public organizations, improving its application (Jalonen, Schildt & Vaara, 2018). This continuous emergence of new concepts has led to inquiries into the coherence, use, and understanding of the term strategy within organizations. It was identified the main concepts associated with public strategy, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Concepts of Strategy in the Public Sector

#	Source	Concept of Strategy
1	Wechsler and Backoff (1987, 36)	'[A public organization's strategy] include specific choices and actions, both within and outside the organization, that result in major organizational commitments, set direction for the organization as a whole, and establish its character and purpose.'
2	Abrucio (1997, 20)	'The strategy in public management differs from the logic of planning and technical rationality. The logic of strategy in public management is one that takes into account relationships between the actors involved in each policy, in order to create scenarios that allow necessary flexibility for possible changes in government programs and requires a monitoring of reactions of society and employees to government actions.'
3	Stewart (2004, 19)	'[Public] policy strategy is what government wants to change — its agenda, and the ways in which the agency will move to help it achieve this agenda.'
4	Stewart (2004, 20)	'[Public] organizational strategy is more akin to strategy in the private sector. It is what the organization does to meet the needs and expectations of its stakeholders, what it does to underpin its future in a world in which competitive pressures are never far away.'
5	Stewart (2004, 20)	'[Public managerial strategy are] the technical activities of budget-making and reporting, the vast array of operational decision-making and the deployment of resources for achieving agreed objectives.'
6	Stewart (2004, 21)	'From an agency's point of view, strategic thinking should be about understanding and managing risk, not simply in the sense of identifying and managing operating risks, but also with a view to reconciling the constraints of a necessarily bureaucratic form, with the needs of productive policymaking in an increasingly fluid environment'
7	Steurer and Martinuzzi (2005, 468)	'[Strategic public management] a hybrid approach which seeks to combine the strengths of formal plans with those of incremental learning processes (...)employing different modes of governance (also hybrid ones) in a problem-driven way.'
8	Kang (2005, 85)	'Strategic management in the public sector can be defined as a management system that integrates planning, implementation, measurement, and allocation as an ongoing process in public organizations. It is a results-oriented approach that can be applied to all levels of government.'
9	Bryson, Ackermann, and Eden (2007, 702)	'[The strategy of public organizations should be based on] identifying and building strategic capacities to produce the greatest public value for key stakeholders at a reasonable cost'
10	Borges, Junior, and Oliveira (2008, 87)	'In the Managerial Public Administration, strategy is: (1) to define precisely objectives that public administrator must achieve in his unit; (2) to guarantee manager's autonomy in management of human, material and financial resources made available to him in order to achieve established objectives; and (3) for control or subsequent collection of the results '.
11	Johanson (2009, 873)	'Strategy is about purpose, direction and goals; these are as important in public sector organizations as in private.'

Table 2: Concepts of Strategy in the Public Sector (cont)

#	Source	Concept of Strategy
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12	Brown (2010, 212)	'The practice of public sector strategy – the development and execution of a plan of action to guide behavior in pursuit of organizational goals – and the immediate context in which strategizing takes place have evolved in ways that potentially enhance the effectiveness of decision making and planning.'
13	Boyne and Walker (2010, 185)	'Strategy in the private sector is often viewed as a way of defeating rivals in competitive markets. In the public sector, strategy is more appropriately conceptualized as a means by which organizations can improve their performance and provide better services.'
14	Frączkiewicz-Wronka and Szymaniec (2012, 18)	'In public organizations, [strategy leads to] satisfying the largest possible number of stakeholders, which is a difficult task for decision-makers due to the fact that stakeholder needs are non-contradictory at best.'
15	Johnsen (2015)	'Evidently, strategy in practice either in business or the public sector would likely be a mix of experiences, ideas, and tools that would either be hard to categorize or would almost by definition fit the configuration school.'
16	Ferreira et al. (2015, 89)	'[Public sector] strategy emerges from political bargaining between internal groups and between organization and its stakeholders. In this scenario, public policy that has the greatest political support becomes the effective strategy.'
17	Mazouz and Rousseau (2016, 414–415)	'In the public sphere, the strategic exercise is determined by three powers: the power of choice, the power of law and the power of ways and means. "The strategic latitude" (...) is defined by the ability of public managers to integrate these three powers. (...) Strategy must be defined with respect to the way public leaders understand issues and work towards the common good and the bettering of public services'
18	Alford and Greve (2017, 14)	'Strategy in the public sector is moving from being mostly about corporate planning models in single public sector organizations in the NPM-era to a broader and more widely dispersed activity that several managers and organizations participate in. (...) [P]ublic managers must pay more attention to forming and shaping public value propositions, and to engage with other stakeholders and citizen participants in doing so. Politicians, stakeholders and citizens all play a part in realizing the goals of a strategy.'
19	Johanson, Pekkola, and Husman (2017, 3)	'Strategy can be thought of as a tool, a process or a document provided by the administrative (managerial) public office holders and the policy guidelines for administrators (managers).'

3. Methods

To accomplish this research's goal, it was determined that the population should be composed of public servants in general. In order to access this group, the survey was disseminated to people in the national registry of the School of Public Accounts of the Espírito Santo State Court of Auditors (TCEES). The Court School offers a series of free face-to-face and online courses for public servants from any Brazilian state at all three levels of government. Using non-probabilistic sampling by accessibility, the survey strategy resulted in a sample of 804 respondents.

The questionnaire is structured in three parts. The first part comprises an initial explanatory text and a question of population control. There is a self-assessment to confirm if the respondent is a public servant. It also asks the respondent to assess if 'I am convinced that I clearly understand the meaning of the term Strategy in the public sector,' on a scale from 0 (no conviction) to 10 (fully convinced). In the second part, public servants are presented with each of the 19 concepts of strategy presented in Table 1. Respondents are asked to indicate their degree of agreement with each one using a Likert scale ranging from 'zero' (maximum disagreement) to 'ten' (maximum agreement). In the third and final part of the questionnaire, respondents are asked to provide demographic data related to gender, age, schooling, income, ties with public administration, position, length of service in the public sector, and unit of the federation in which he/she carries out his/her professional activities. These answers allow us to create a profile of respondents' characteristics.

The pre-test of the data collection instrument was performed with 20 public servants of the Court School registry between October 2 to 4, 2018. It was identified the need to simplify concepts in order to facilitate understanding by respondents. After corrections, a link to our Google Forms questionnaire was sent to servants from the registry via email. Data collection took place through the remainder of October 2018.

The initial analysis is a characterization of the demographic profiles. Next, descriptive statistics allows to examine the data in terms of frequencies, proportions, central tendency, and dispersion. Finally, to accomplish the research's goal, it was conducted an exploratory factorial analysis (EFA). This technique allows to reduce the number of variables to a relatively simple structure of statistically interrelated sets of concepts. These underlying factorial dimensions, separate from the initial structure, are named based on concepts of the highest load in each factor. Subsequently, each factor is analyzed, taking strategy studies into consideration, which allows the construction of three conceptual constructs. Thus, it was created summaries that consolidate the meaning of the term public strategy for the relevant sample of public servants.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion of Results

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

The demographic results of the sample of 804 public servants are presented in Table 2, in which the most frequent groups are in bold.

Table 3: Sample characteristics

Variables	Values	Frequency	%
Sex	Female	393	48.9%
	Male	411	51.1%
Age group (years)	from 21 to 30	114	14.2%
	from 31 to 40	282	35.1%
	from 41 to 50	259	32.2%
	from 51 to 60	125	15.5%
	over 61 years	24	3%
Schooling	High school / vocational	46	5.7%
	College	235	29.2%
	Non-degree postgraduate	431	53.6%
	Master	72	9%
	PhD	16	2%
	Others	4	0.5%
Income	up to R\$ 1,500.00	53	6.6%
	from R\$ 1,501.00 to R\$ 3,000.00	151	18.7%
	from R\$ 3,001.00 to R\$ 5,500.00	246	30.6%
	from R\$ 5,501.00 to R\$ 8,500.00	161	20%
	from R\$ 8,501.00 to R\$ 11,500.00	69	8.6%
	from R\$ 11,501.00 to R\$ 15,000.00	48	6%
	over R\$ 15,001.00	76	9.5%
Type of affiliation	Permanent servant	635	79%
	Temporary servant	146	18.2%
	Other	23	2.8%
Do you hold a leadership position?	Yes	523	65%
	No	281	35%
Service time	< 5 years	157	19.5%
	≥ 5 years; < 10 years	191	23.8%
	≥ 10 years; < 15 years	167	20.8%
	≥ 15 years; < 20 years	94	11.7%
	≥ 20 years; < 25 years	88	10.9%
	≥ 25 years; < 30 years	51	6.3%
	≥ 30 years	56	7%
Region of professional performance	North region	28	3.5%
	North East Region	92	11.4%
	Midwest region	62	7.7%
	Southeast region	560	69.7%
	South region	62	7.7%

Notes: One US Dollar was worth about R\$3.80 as of August/2019.

Table 2 shows that the sample is reasonably balanced between men and women, aged between 31 and 50 years, with up to 10 years in public service, highly educated and mostly (74.7%) with incomes above R\$ 3,000.00 (top 10% when compared to Brazilians' income). Although R\$ 3,000.00 is a relatively low remuneration by the general standards of public service, the Court School registry, to a large extent, contains servants from the municipal public administration, who are generally less developed compared to state and federal spheres. Lastly, those who are permanent employees occupying leadership positions are highly represented, with most of them carrying out their activities in the country's southeast.

4.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis

Descriptive statistics (Table 3) display relatively high means, indicating that strategy concepts in the public sector, as extracted from the literature, have high agreement among public servants. These results are relevant because how these public agents understand strategy are essential pieces of knowledge that enable them to collectively formulate new understandings of the organization's environment and create new strategic responses to improve government performance (Jalonen, Schildt & Vaara, 2018).

Table 4: Descriptive statistics

Rank from Mean	Concept number	Concepts of Strategy in the Public Sector	Mean	Standard Deviation	Asymmetry	Kurtosis
	13	'Public strategy is a means by which public agencies can improve their performance and provide better services.'	8.53	1.989	-1.912	4.099
2	11	'Public strategy is related to public purpose, direction and objectives.'	8.33	1.961	-1.585	2.914
3	1	'Public strategy includes specific choices and actions that result in commitments that define the direction of the public organization and establish its character and purpose.'	8.32	1.886	-1.507	2.722
4	12	'Public strategy is the development and execution of an action plan to guide behavior in pursuit of public goals.'	8.11	2.158	-1.479	2.089
5	8	'Public strategy is a results-oriented public management system that integrates planning, implementation, measurement and allocation.'	8.11	2.240	-1.608	2.582
6	2	'Public strategy considers the relationships between the actors involved in each policy to have flexibility and requires monitoring the reactions of society and civil servants to government actions.'	7.74	2.383	-1.344	1.544
7	18	'Public strategy is an activity in a collaborative networked governance environment aimed at forming public value propositions, in which politicians, stakeholders and citizens play a role in achieving the goals of public strategy.'	7.38	2.612	-1.186	0.885
8	10	'Public strategy focuses on defining the objectives that the public administrator should achieve, ensuring their autonomy in the management of human, material and financial resources and controlling results.'	7.28	2.592	-1.048	0.496
9	7	'Public strategy seeks to combine the forces of formal plans with those of incremental learning processes, employing governance to solve public problems.'	7.26	2.526	-1.092	0.785
10	14	'Public strategy should aim to satisfy as many stakeholders as possible.'	7.08	2.821	-0.947	0.107
11	15	'Public strategy is a mix of versatile experiences, ideas and tools for a whole range of different public issues and contingencies.'	7.06	2.593	-0.891	0.271

Table 5: Descriptive statistics (cont)

Rank from Mean	Concept number	Concepts of Strategy in the Public Sector	Mean	Standard Deviation	Asymmetry	Kurtosis
12	19	'Public strategy is a tool, process or document with policy guidelines for public administrators.'	7.04	2.718	-0.984	0.350
13	17	'Public strategy is about how public leaders understand issues and work towards the common good and improving public services.'	7.01	2.910	-0.944	-0.021
14	5	'Public strategy is budgeting and reporting, operational decision-making, and resource deployment to achieve public organization goals.'	6.99	3.036	-0.994	-0.074
15	6	'Public strategy is understanding and managing risk to reconcile bureaucratic constraints with policy needs.'	6.80	2.947	-0.922	-0.070
16	9	'Public strategy is based on identifying stakeholder expectations in order to create greater public value for key stakeholders at a reasonable cost.'	6.78	2.804	-0.817	-0.152
17	4	'Public strategy is what the organization does to meet the needs and expectations of all stakeholders.'	6.63	3.048	-0.751	-0.457
18	3	'Public strategy is what the government wants to change, it's its agenda and the ways management will move to help it achieve that goal.'	6.51	3.006	-0.712	-0.480
19	16	'Public strategy emerges from political bargains between internal groups and between the organization and its stakeholders.'	3.79	3.480	0.386	-1.259
						N=804

Notes: 'Concept number' refers to the column '#' of

Table 1. Concepts were presented on the questionnaire according to this order. 'Concepts of Strategy in the Public Sector' is the simplified text obtained from the original concepts, translated from the original Portuguese questionnaire.

Concept 16, from Ferreira, Najberg, Porto, Sousa, & Barbosa (2015, p.89), differs from others by presenting a meager average of 3.79. It was posited that such a low level of agreement comes from the word 'bargaining.' Although the creators meant it as a political articulation between government and society, it was posited that the word has acquired a derogatory meaning within the political context in Brazil, leading to the observed low score.

In Table 4, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (BTS) tests indicate, respectively, the statistical presence of common variances and significant intercorrelations between concepts grouped into the factors. The value of 0.92 from the KMO test suggests validation and consistency of the sample's number of observations and variables, indicating that exploratory factorial analysis can be used. Then, BTS's p-value < 0.05 suggests that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix, pointing out that there are relations between variables to be analyzed.

Table 6: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.920
Approx. χ^2	4925.612
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Degrees of freedom 153
	P-value 0.001

Note that the variable represented by the concept ‘Public strategy is a tool, a process or a document with the policy guidelines for public administrators’ (12th highest average) was excluded from the analysis since it did not present a substantial factorial load in any of the factors presented. Table 5 presents the results for the principal components analysis. Each one of the 18 observed concepts is arranged in degrees of commonality and factorial loads obtained with orthogonal rotation Varimax, used to determine which variables are loaded in each factor. The factorial loads of variables reaching values between 0.424 and 0.8 indicate significant correlations between original variables and factors, while commonality scores ranging from 0.402 to 0.662 suggest adequacy of analysis.

Table 7: Factors and respective rotation matrix components

Factor	Position in questionnaire	Variable	Factor loadings	Communality
F1	16	‘Public strategy emerges from political bargains between internal groups and between the organization and its stakeholders.’	0.717	0.523
	6	‘Public strategy is understanding and managing risk to reconcile bureaucratic constraints with policy needs.’	0.659	0.526
	9	‘Public strategy is based on identifying stakeholder expectations in order to create greater public value for key stakeholders at a reasonable cost.’	0.576	0.573
	4	‘Public strategy is what the organization does to meet the needs and expectations of all stakeholders.’	0.574	0.443
	14	‘Public strategy should aim to satisfy as many stakeholders as possible.’	0.544	0.484
	15	‘Public strategy is a mix of versatile experiences, ideas and tools for a whole range of different public issues and contingencies.’	0.514	0.547
	17	‘Public strategy is about how public leaders understand issues and work towards the common good and improving public services.’	0.512	0.443
	3	‘Public strategy is what the government wants to change, it's its agenda and the ways management will move to help it achieve that goal.’	0.493	0.425
	7	‘Public strategy seeks to combine the forces of formal plans with those of incremental learning processes, employing governance to solve public problems.’	0.486	0.511
	5	‘Public strategy is budgeting and reporting, operational decision-making, and resource deployment to achieve public organization goals.’	0.458	0.402
F2	13	‘Public strategy is a means by which public agencies can improve their performance and provide better services.’	0.800	0.662
	12	‘Public strategy is the development and execution of an action plan to guide behavior in pursuit of public goals.’	0.699	0.586
	8	‘Public strategy is a results-oriented public management system that integrates planning, implementation, measurement and allocation.’	0.556	0.461
	11	‘Public strategy is related to public purpose, direction and objectives.’	0.548	0.554
F3	1	‘Public strategy includes specific choices and actions that result in commitments that define the direction of the public organization and establish its character and purpose.’	0.737	0.596
	2	‘Public strategy considers the relationships between the actors involved in each policy to have flexibility and requires monitoring the reactions of society and civil servants to government actions.’	0.665	0.514
	10	‘Public strategy focuses on defining the objectives that the public administrator should achieve, ensuring their autonomy in the management of human, material and financial resources and controlling results.’	0.455	0.454
	18	‘Public strategy is an activity in a collaborative networked governance environment aimed at forming public value propositions, in which politicians, stakeholders and citizens play a role in achieving the goals of public strategy.’	0.424	0.421

Notes: Extraction method is Principal Component Analysis.

The individualized observation of variable loadings made it possible to identify those of greater importance for each factor, presenting at least one concept with a factorial load above 0.7. Based on these three higher scoring concepts and the literature in the area, it was possible to name the factors, as shown in Table 6.

Thus, 18 concepts (variables) with their respective authors were structured under the following factorial axes: F1 - Negotiations with stakeholders, F2 - Performance improvement, and F3 - Public commitments.

Table 8: Naming factors

Source	Variables	Factors
Ferreira et al. (2015, p.89)	'Public strategy emerges from political bargains between internal groups and between the organization and its stakeholders.'	F1 - Negotiations with stakeholders
Stewart (2004, p.21)	'Public strategy is understanding and managing risk to reconcile bureaucratic constraints with policy needs.'	
Bryson, Ackermann & Eden (2007, p.702)	'Public strategy is based on identifying stakeholder expectations in order to create greater public value for key stakeholders at a reasonable cost.'	
Stewart (2004, 20)	'Public strategy is what the organization does to meet the needs and expectations of all stakeholders.'	
Frączkiewicz-Wronka & Szymaniec (2012, p.18)	'Public strategy should aim to satisfy as many stakeholders as possible.'	
Johnsen (2015)	'Public strategy is a mix of versatile experiences, ideas and tools for a whole range of different public issues and contingencies.'	
Mazouz and Rousseau (2016, 414–415)	'Public strategy is about how public leaders understand issues and work towards the common good and improving public services.'	
Stewart (2004, 19)	'Public strategy is what the government wants to change, it's its agenda and the ways management will move to help it achieve that goal.'	
Steurer and Martinuzzi (2005, 468)	'Public strategy seeks to combine the forces of formal plans with those of incremental learning processes, employing governance to solve public problems.'	
Stewart (2004, 20)	'Public strategy is budgeting and reporting, operational decision-making, and resource deployment to achieve public organization goals.'	
Boyne & Walker (2010, 185)	'Public strategy is a means by which public agencies can improve their performance and provide better services.'	F2 - Performance Improvement
Brown (2010, 212)	'Public strategy is the development and execution of an action plan to guide behavior in pursuit of public goals.'	
Kang (2005, 85)	'Public strategy is a results-oriented public management system that integrates planning, implementation, measurement and allocation.'	
Johanson (2009, 873)	'Public strategy is related to public purpose, direction and objectives.'	
Wechsler and Backoff (1987, 36)	'Public strategy includes specific choices and actions that result in commitments that define the direction of the public organization and establish its character and purpose.'	F3 - Public Commitments
Abrucio (1997, 20)	'Public strategy considers the relationships between the actors involved in each policy to have flexibility and requires monitoring the reactions of society and civil servants to government actions.'	
Borges, Borges de Freitas Junior & Rodriguez de Oliveira (2008, p.87)	'Public strategy focuses on defining the objectives that the public administrator should achieve, ensuring their autonomy in the management of human, material and financial resources and controlling results.'	
Alford and Carsten (2017, p.14)	'Public strategy is an activity in a collaborative networked governance environment aimed at forming public value propositions, in which politicians, stakeholders and citizens play a role in achieving the goals of public strategy.'	

Table 7 shows the total variance explained, as well as the degree of reliability from Cronbach's alpha. It was seen that the three factors together explain 50.69% of the total variance. However, the first factor has a more substantial impact since it explains alone 36.59% of the accumulated variance, while the other two accounted for 8.18% and 5.91%, respectively. These data indicate that the first factor, 'Negotiations with stakeholders,' tends to be the one that exerts a greater degree of influence on public servants' understanding.

Table 9: Total variance explained

Factor	Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Cronbach's alpha
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	
Negotiations with stakeholders	6.587	36.592	36.592	0.845
Performance Improvement	1.473	8.182	44.774	0.750
Public Commitments	1.064	5.914	50.688	0.664

Still, in Table 7, Cronbach's alpha values show reasonable internal consistency in terms of the mean correlation between concepts of each factor, indicating a coherent grouping of concepts. It can highlight again Factor 1 that presents very good consistency with an alpha of 0.845, while Factor 2, presenting an alpha of 0.750, is at a good consistency level, and Factor 3, with an alpha of 0.664, is at a moderate level of consistency. Therefore, results show that the concepts gathered in the factors all share a common construct.

5. Discussion

It was identified which constructs display the highest factor loads on each factor to understand their possible latent meanings better. Using a political approach, the latent view in Factor 1 suggests that public strategy is the result of an ongoing negotiation process among various stakeholders, as opposed to a rationalist approach centered on planning and control actions. The strategic decisions made depend on and are legitimized by the level of consensus among the actors who produce them (Favoreu, Carassus, and Maurel 2016).

Four of the five highest loadings of Factor 1, including the highest loading, indicate that public strategy can be seen as a continuous process of negotiation among various stakeholders. Hence, the formulation of strategy in the public sector implies identification, negotiation, and meeting the expectations and needs of interested parties (Ferreira et al. 2015; Bryson, Ackermann, and Eden 2007; Stewart 2004; Frączkiewicz-Wronka and Szymaniec 2012).

This perception of public sector employees suggests an understanding that a proactive strategy integrating internal and external stakeholders may reveal new opportunities for improving government actions, consequently enhancing their relationship with society. In line with this view, Johanson (2009) argues that managing a public organization requires balancing the demands of various stakeholders. Therefore, incorporating the diversity of demands into strategy formulation is more challenging for public servants, considering that stakeholders in the public sector have different values, priorities, engagement levels, and often complex problems (Brønn and Brønn 2018).

In Factor 2, Performance Improvement, public servants show a conceptual construct where public sector strategy corresponds to a results-oriented management system. This system integrates planning, implementation, measurement, and allocation of resources as a means of improving performance in providing services and guiding behavior towards the pursuit of public objectives. In this factor, presenting a seemingly rational approach to strategy formation, tends to predominate in the concepts a methodological and procedural perspective. From this perspective, the approach is organized into a sequential and structured process of the strategy (objectives, plans, goals, performance analysis and results-oriented management) employed to make government decisions effective (Favoreu, Carassus, and Maurel 2016).

The third factor, about Public Commitments, presents an approach anchored on collaborative governance for strategic management in the public sector. According to Favoreu, Carassus, and Maurel (2016), the formulation of strategy in the public sector is seen as a complex phenomenon resulting from interactions and exchanges between groups or networks of interdependent actors that produce shared solutions and collective strategies. These factor results point to a summary in which public strategy in a collaborative network governance environment considers the relationships and reactions of the actors involved to have flexibility and offer public propositions of value. In addition, this strategy seeks to define objectives to guarantee autonomy in managing and controlling results, in terms of which choices and actions result in public commitments.

These three conceptual approaches are a tool through which public servants express their interests and ideas (Jalonen, Schildt, and Vaara 2018). From these findings, a factorial solution and the elaborated constructs can help managers and public communities reach a conceptual understanding of the strategy perceived by public servants. These results can legitimize and reorient the construction of meaning in advertising strategy in the efficacy of government actions.

6. Conclusions

By mapping public servants' understanding of public strategy concepts, this study offers a new analytic perspective on how strategy is perceived in the public sector. The study makes significant theoretical contributions and has practical implications. At the theoretical level, the micro-conceptual approach to strategy in the public sector is valuable since strategy is a 'concept' (Jalonen, Schildt, and Vaara 2018). Concepts are tools that can collaborate in understanding formulation (Alford and Greve 2017), implementation (Andrews, Beynon, and Genc 2017), the elaboration of analytical constructs (Vining 2016), and directions of strategy in the government sector (Jalonen, Schildt, and Vaara 2018). In this sense, given its relevance, and since strategy in governmental organizations still lacks studies and theories based on the context and the distinctive characteristics of this sector, this research contributes to organizing understandings of the concept of public strategy as presented in the literature.

In practical terms, the contextualized analysis, based on the perception of concepts, is an instrument for managers to understand applied governmental strategy (Jalonen, Schildt, and Vaara 2018). According to the defined public objectives, it may favor legitimization or even reformulation of strategy to help managers grasp how they can sponsor, contribute to, or even influence the formulation of strategies in the public sector.

In addition, the strategic vision made explicit in the constructs 'Negotiations with stakeholders', 'Performance improvement' and 'Public commitments' can assist managers and organizations in their conceptual understanding of strategy, which can legitimize and reorient collective or collaborative directions of government strategy. When relations between concepts of public strategy are evidenced, employees demonstrate their understanding of the meaning of the term strategy in the context of the public sector, as involving stakeholders, performance, and service to society. Such understanding can favor the implementation of strategies in the public sector. When one knows what public servants understand as public strategy, it is possible to transmit the adopted strategy effectively.

Regarding the research limitations, possibly there are more than the 19 identified concepts of strategy applied to the public sector. Thus, future research can broaden the mapping of concepts, resulting in new factorial dimensions, making it possible to compare with the findings of this study. Despite the sample being non-probabilistic, these findings may constitute theoretical-methodological propositions that could be tested in other contexts to compare results. Last, the three constructs of public strategy lack confirmation and validation. It can be accomplished with the new collection of data and the usual process of confirmatory factorial analysis: measure confirmatory factor loads and test convergent and discriminant validity.

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