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# The Struggle Within: Public Managers' Identity Struggles in Citizen Collaboration and Their Response Strategies

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# **The Struggle Within: Public Managers' Identity Struggles in Citizen Collaboration and Their Response Strategies**

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## **Abstract**

Public managers are increasingly involved in collaborative relationships with citizens. This paper examines public managers' identity work in relation to citizen collaboration. Based on thirty-seven interviews with public managers from Germany, four major identity struggles that public managers face in citizen collaboration are revealed and corresponding response strategies that managers apply in order to cope with these struggles are presented. By adopting an identity perspective, this paper sheds light on how public managers handle and frame the spread of New Public Governance through identity work. It thus provides insights into micro-processes taking place within the reform of the public sector.

**Keywords:** citizen collaboration, identity work, identity struggle, New Public Governance

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The rise and spread of New Public Governance (NPG) as a dominant reform paradigm of the public sector in the last decades requires public actors to collaborate with multiple actors from beyond the public sector. Apart from private and non-profit organisations, this includes collaborating with citizens in order to ensure the production and provision of public services (Osborne 2010; Thomsen and Jakobsen 2015; Yang 2017). Policy advisory bodies (OECD 2011) and public management scholars (Parrado et al. 2013; Jakobsen et al. 2016; Wiewiora, Keast, and Brown 2016) widely acknowledge citizen collaboration as a proper approach to solve the so-called wicked problems in public management. While citizen collaboration is said to yield several benefits such as access to citizens' knowledge (Sørensen and Torfing 2011) and reinforcement of democratic responsiveness (Chen and Aitamurto 2018; Neshkova and Guo 2018), it poses multiple practical challenges such as the definition of collaborative processes and structures (Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015) and the development of recruitment and selection processes (Thomas 2013). Furthermore, citizen collaboration challenges public managers' understanding of their roles and behaviours (Dunston et al. 2009; Tuurnas 2015).

The concept of identity provides an understanding of how individuals handle such transitions and disruptions in their environment (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Hogg, Terry, and White 1995; Stets and Burke 2000). In this context, identity theory differentiates between social identity and self-identity (Kramer 2006; Watson 2008; Lok 2010). Social identities are discursively constructed interpretations of environmental contexts and expected behaviours of individuals. They provide individuals with a feeling of belonging to specific social groups and with an idea of what being part of such a group means (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995; Kärreman and Alvesson 2004). In contrast, self-identities are individuals' very own constructions and interpretations of who and what to be (Watson 2008). In order to make sense of multiple social identities and to sustain a coherent understanding of self, individuals continuously engage in the process of identity work (Watson 2008; McGivern et al. 2015). In times of disruptive transformations and changes in individuals' environment, identity work is particularly relevant and challenging as individuals struggle to make sense of these changes and of emerging and transforming social identities. In order to cope with identity struggles, individual actors apply different response strategies (Petriglieri 2011; Langley et al. 2012; Smets et al. 2015).

In the context of public management, identity work has previously been used to describe how public servants handle contradictions arising from the co-existence of classical Public Administration (PA) and New Public Management (NPM) (Bovaird and Downe 2006; McGivern et al. 2015) and to investigate the emergence of collaborative identities within collaborative projects (Mandell, Keast, and Chamberlain 2017; Mangan et al. 2017). However, insights into how individual identities are affected by the emergence of NPG and citizen collaboration are scarce (Rigg and O'Mahony 2013). This paper addresses this gap and examines how collaborating with citizens challenges public managers' identities and how public managers handle these challenges. The purpose of this paper is hence twofold: First, by examining identity struggles that public managers face in citizen collaboration, it provides insights into the challenging situation managers experience when collaborating with citizens. Second, by investigating corresponding strategies that public managers apply to cope with these struggles, it provides insights into public managers' identity work in relation to citizen collaboration. The study is based on thirty-seven interviews with public managers involved in citizen collaboration projects in Germany.

By adopting an identity lens to elucidate public managers' behaviour in citizen collaboration, this paper contributes to public management research in three ways. First, by investigating identity struggles of public managers, it enhances our knowledge of the micro-level problems that are related to citizen collaboration. This is in some contrast to the current debate that focuses on organisational, structural, and task-specific challenges of citizen collaboration (Tuurnas 2015). Second, by investigating coping strategies public managers apply to resolve identity struggles, it shows how individuals try to frame social discourses on citizen collaboration. Therefore, this paper complements research that calls for settings that favour collaborative approaches and examines the agency of individuals in strengthening such an attitude (Sørensen and Torfing 2011; Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015). And third, by including the NPG logic in investigations on identity work of public managers, in particular in a country with a strong bureaucratic-legalist tradition, this paper deepens our understanding of how managers handle and resolve institutional complexity (Pache and Santos 2013; Jancsary et al. 2017).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: The next section presents the theoretical background. The following section describes the research design and the empirical setting of the study. After a presentation of the findings in section four, the paper concludes with implications for research and practice and discusses future lines of research.

## **2 THEORY: IDENTITY WORK AND THE PARADIGM OF CITIZEN COLLABORATION**

### **2.1 Citizen Collaboration as a Challenge for Public Managers' Identity**

Public actors increasingly seek to involve citizens in the delivery of public services, which leads to a proliferation of investigations regarding the collaboration with citizens (cf. Jakobsen et al. 2016; Osborne, Radnor, and Stokosch 2016; Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017). The scope of citizen collaboration is vast and varied and includes, but is not limited to, participative processes in the design of public services (Bryson et al. 2013), the co-creation of services and public value (Bryson et al. 2017), the co-production of specific services (Wiewiora, Keast, and Brown 2016), and collaborative innovation (Collm and Schedler 2012). Despite differences in the configuration and implementation of these concepts, they share the fundamental idea of a shift in the relationship between citizens and public administrators. Instead of a unidirectional relationship, citizen collaboration proposes interactions between citizens and public administration that are based on bilateral relationships of equals (Vigoda 2002). For citizens, this approach bears possibilities to voice needs and contribute ideas to and actively participate in the solution of public problems (Vigoda 2002; Thomas 2013). Accordingly, Brainard and McNutt (2010, 842–843) highlight that government-citizen collaboration requires public actors to ‘engage with citizens to collaboratively identify and define problems and create and implement solutions to those problems. As part of this, government-citizen relations would become more deliberative and dialogic rather than regulative and based on authority.’

Collaborating with citizens poses a multitude of organisational and individual challenges. Several authors examined organisational challenges including the abilities to apply proper selection mechanisms for participants (Bryson et al. 2013), to structure collaborative projects (Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015; Aschhoff 2018), to ensure diversity among participants (Collm and Schedler 2012; Wiewiora, Keast, and Brown 2016), and to provide incentives for participation and motivation (Osborne and Stokosch 2013). With regard to challenges for public managers, several studies focused on the development of trustful relationships with citizens (Bryer 2009; Fledderus, Brandsen, and Honingh 2014) and on how communication skills of public managers support collaborative processes with citizens (Weber and Khademian 2008; Farr 2016).

Due to these multiple challenges, the tasks and roles of public organisations and public managers are currently changing. For a very long time, public managers have been

the sole possessors of specific knowledge and commanders of resources for the solution of public problems (Brandsen and Honingh 2013). However, the insight that the knowledge and resources for the solution of wicked problems can be on the side of the citizens requires public managers to act as coordinators and facilitators of collaboration (Brandsen and Honingh 2013). Weber and Khademian (2008, 338) argue that this shift in the role of public managers emphasizes the importance of not only 'the skills and competencies of a manager as collaborative capacity builder but also [...] the importance of a mind-set that becomes a critical component of effective collaborative problem-solving capacity when the context involves a wicked problem.' Recently, other scholars supported claims for a change in the mind-set of public managers in order to foster collaborative endeavours with citizens (Farooqi 2016; Mangai and Vries 2018; Pestoff 2018). However, perceptions and role interpretations of individual social actors only change very slowly, and such changes or transformations will most likely be painful (Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2016). Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland (2016, 16) exemplify that 'public managers who see themselves as efficient managers in charge of a stable, high-performing organization will be terrified by the thought of collaborating with individuals from other organizations and sectors that they cannot control.'

While organisational, structural, and task-specific challenges of citizen collaboration are broadly covered in the literature, less is known about the abovementioned emotional and perceptual challenges public managers face when confronted with citizen collaboration. Therefore, Tuurnas (2015) argues that more research is needed in order to understand how individual perceptions regarding citizen collaboration change and evolve. Such research would allow an understanding of individual perceptions and role interpretations of public managers (Denis, Ferlie, and van Gestel 2015; Tuurnas 2015). The concepts of identity and identity work foster our understanding of the micro-level attitudes towards citizen collaboration and can provide important insights into how public managers experience and frame identity changes (Dunston et al. 2009; Sirianni 2009; Denis, Ferlie, and van Gestel 2015).

## **2.2 Identity Work as a Response to Identity Struggles**

In general, identities are 'socially-constructed and socially meaningful categories that are accepted by individuals as descriptive of themselves or their group' (Thoits and Virshup 1997, 106–107). In this context, individual identities or self-identities provide individuals with an answer to the question 'who am I?', compared to social identities that provide an answer

to the question 'who are we?' (Thoits and Virshup 1997; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Watson 2008). Therefore, Watson (2008, 131, emphasis in original) defines 'self-identity as *the individual's own notion of who and what they are* and social-identities as *cultural, discursive, or institutional notions of who or what any individual might be*'. With the emphasis on social construction, self-identity and social identity differ from self-descriptions that solely build on biographic details and experiences (Thoits and Virshup 1997; Avanzi et al. 2016). Thus, socially constructed identities have the ambiguous characteristic of providing distinctiveness and sameness at the same time: identity describes what is specific to an individual or organisation (distinctiveness) and describes what an individual or organisation shares with others (sameness) (Kärreman and Alvesson 2001; Langley et al. 2012).

While identities and single features of identities can be stable over time, they are subject to change and social construction and are interpreted as 'partly a temporary outcome of the powers and regulations the subject [an individual or an organisation] encounters' (Kärreman and Alvesson 2001, 63). However, it is debated who is responsible for this outcome. Several studies, especially from institutional theory, highlight how institutional and organisational leaders – referred to as 'institutional entrepreneurs' (Rao, Morrill, and Zald 2000; Greenwood and Suddaby 2006) or even idolized as change agents with 'heroic' attributes (cf. Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009) – frame and affect change and, consequently, the construction of identities on an individual level. According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), the ability to condition and regulate individual identities is an important measure of organisational control.

In contrast, Lok (2010) points out that the focus on institutional entrepreneurs as a driving force in the construction of identities neglects the influence everyday interpretation and action have on individual identity. While institutional entrepreneurs are regarded as 'active *producers*' of identity, the targets of this identity production are considered as 'passive *consumers*' (Lok 2010, 1307). Shifting attention towards the reflexive activities of identity targets reveals how individuals challenge and modify imposed constructions of identities in everyday life. Lok (2010) claims that contradictions and ambiguities provide an opportunity for interpretation and modification of institutional logics by individuals' identity work, regardless of how highly legitimated or diffused a logic seems to be. With an emphasis on both the internal and the external part of the construction of identities, identity work '*involves the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with*



and, within limits, to influence the various social-identities which pertain to them in the various milieux in which they live their lives' (Watson 2008, 129, emphasis in original).

Identity work is particularly relevant in times of change and institutional complexity as individuals continuously try to sustain a coherent notion of self despite emerging and transforming social identities (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Langley et al. 2012; Ritz and Brewer 2013). In order to cope with resulting identity struggles, individuals develop and apply different response strategies (Petriglieri 2011; Pache and Santos 2013; Smets et al. 2015). Reviewing the literature on individual coping responses, Petriglieri (2011) extracted six response strategies that either aim to protect or restructure identities (see Table 1). These strategies can address the source of an identity struggle in order to protect the identity and lead to changes in a specific identity in order to reduce struggle (Petriglieri 2011). This is in line with prior considerations that identity work includes external (identity-protection) and internal (identity-restructuring) aspects.

**Table 1: Response strategies to identity struggles (adapted from Petriglieri 2011)**

<i>Category</i>	<i>Response strategy</i>	<i>Description</i>
Identity-protection	Derogation	Discounting the source of an identity struggle and questioning its rationale
	Concealment	Compartmentalising questioned identity from particular ('dangerous') contexts
	Positive-distinctiveness	Framing identity discourse in order to change attitude of actors that threaten identity
Identity-restructuring	Importance change	Reducing or enhancing self-attributed importance of particular identity
	Meaning change	Changing self-attributed characteristics of a particular identity
	Identity deletion	Refusing to relate to a particular identity any longer

In summary, the rise and spread of NPG and the respective claims for collaborations with citizens trigger identity struggles and identity work at the individual level as traditional understandings of public managers' roles and behaviours are challenged (Dunston et al. 2009; Sirianni 2009). Yet, while the identity perspective has often been applied to the public sector to investigate the co-existence of classical PA and NPM (Meyer et al. 2014; McGivern et al. 2015), knowledge of identity work and corresponding response strategies to cope with identity struggles related to NPG is scarce. This paper addresses this gap by analysing thirty-seven interviews with public managers involved in citizen collaboration.

### **3 DATA AND METHODS**

#### **3.1 Empirical Context**

Germany is regarded as a role model for the Prussian tradition of public administration with a strong emphasis on stability (Parrado et al. 2013). Focusing on the legality and rule-boundedness of procedures and a distinct hierarchy, the German public sector exhibits traditional characteristics of Weberian bureaucracy (Jann 2003). For several decades, people with a juridical background were, by far, the largest group among civil servants (Derlien 1991), which indicates the high legal orientation of the German public sector. In the 1990s, Germany has witnessed major changes in the administrative system with the spread of the New Steering Model (NSM) that resembles NPM reforms (Hood and Peters 2004; Kuhlmann 2010; Vogel 2012). Furthermore, several studies indicate that the German public sector opens up to principles of NPG, including the comprehensive collaboration with citizens (Pestoff 2006; Parrado et al. 2013; Bovaird et al. 2015). In addition, publications of authorities (BMZ 2014; BMBF 2016) and think tanks (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2013) indicate that citizen collaboration is part of the discourse on public management. Still, Germany is a country with a strong tradition of professionalism (Meyer et al. 2014), which makes it a particularly interesting field for an investigation of identity struggles related to citizen collaboration.

#### **3.2 Data Collection**

The analysis is based on Lok's (2010) interpretation that individuals are not just '*passive consumers*' of identity formation but actively engage in identity work in order to make sense of the multiple discourses they face in their daily work and sustain a coherent picture of self. This entails that individuals change and frame the identity discourse (Lok 2010). In order to explore identity work in relation to citizen collaboration, thirty-seven interviews were conducted with public managers who are directly involved in citizen collaboration in Germany. These interviewees provide information on the different types of identity struggles that public managers face in citizen collaboration and on the different response strategies they apply in order to cope with identity struggles (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Petriglieri 2011).

Purposeful sampling was used as a recruitment strategy (Patton 2002) with the aim to select interviewees who are directly engaged in citizen collaboration. In order to compile a diverse set of interviewees, the sample contains public managers from different parts of

Germany, from different policy sectors, with different experience in public administration, and with different educational backgrounds. Overall, this recruiting strategy led to thirty-seven interviews (see Table 2).

The interviews were based on an interview guideline (see Appendix A), but were still flexible. Questions were purposively designed broadly to allow respondents to report their individual experiences, attitudes, and perceptions. Interviewees were asked to explain the collaborative projects, their working environment, their attitude towards, and their experiences with citizen collaboration. The interview guideline also included questions regarding the problems and challenges the interviewees face in citizen collaboration and ways and measures they respond to such problems (without explicitly asking for 'response strategies'). These insights allowed me to elicit cues on identity struggles public managers face in citizen collaboration and corresponding response strategies (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003).

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

While identity work has been studied in multiple settings including the public sector (Meyer et al. 2014; Cooper 2015; McGivern et al. 2015), knowledge on the cultural and individual responses to NPG is scarce (Coule and Patmore 2013; Tuurnas 2015). Therefore, a data-driven inductive approach was chosen to analyse the identity struggles of public managers (Corbin and Strauss 2015). In a first step, all statements indicating identity problems or threats public managers experience in regard to citizen collaboration were coded with in vivo codes (Saldaña 2016). This included explicit statements by public managers, but also covered indirect statements on identities (Lok 2010). Subsequent comparisons and re-categorisations of initial codes led to the identification of 2nd-order themes (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013) and, ultimately, to four dominant identity struggles that public managers experience in citizen collaboration (see Appendix B).

**Table 2: Interview participants**

<i>No.</i>	<i>Administrative level</i>	<i>Individual position</i>	<i>Policy Sector</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Public sector job experience</i>
1	State	Head of division	Environment	F	Less than 10 years
2	State	Project manager	Infrastructure	M	Less than 10 years
3	State	Project manager	Infrastructure	F	Less than 10 years
4	State	City planner	Infrastructure	M	More than 20 years
5	State	Project manager	Open Government	F	Less than 10 years
6	State	Group manager	Security	M	More than 20 years
7	State	Group manager	Social Affairs	F	10 to 20 years
8	District	Head of department	Infrastructure	F	10 to 20 years
9	District	Team leader	Integration	F	Less than 10 years
10	District	Project coordinator	Integration	F	10 to 20 years
11	District	Project coordinator	Integration	M	More than 20 years
12	District	Project coordinator	Integration	F	10 to 20 years
13	District	Head of division	Marketing	F	More than 20 years
14	District	Trainee	Marketing	M	Less than 10 years
15	District	Head of department	Open Government	M	Less than 10 years
16	District	Project coordinator	Open Government	F	Less than 10 years
17	District	Agency head	Social Affairs	F	10 to 20 years
18	District	Team leader	Social Affairs	F	More than 20 years
19	Municipality	Social worker	Culture	F	More than 20 years
20	Municipality	Agency head	Engagement	F	10 to 20 years
21	Municipality	Head of department	Infrastructure	F	More than 20 years
22	Municipality	Head of department	Infrastructure	F	More than 20 years
23	Municipality	Head of department	Infrastructure	M	More than 20 years
24	Municipality	City planner	Infrastructure	F	Less than 10 years
25	Municipality	Urban development manager	Infrastructure	F	Less than 10 years
26	Municipality	City planner	Infrastructure	M	Less than 10 years
27	Municipality	City planner	Infrastructure	M	10 to 20 years
28	Municipality	Team leader	Labour	F	10 to 20 years
29	Municipality	Case manager	Labour	F	Less than 10 years
30	Municipality	Case manager	Labour	F	Less than 10 years
31	Municipality	Team leader	Social Affairs	F	More than 20 years
32	Municipality	Head of department	Social Affairs	M	More than 20 years
33	Municipality	Representative	Social affairs	M	Less than 10 years
34	Municipality	District coordinator	Social affairs	F	Less than 10 years
35	Municipality	District coordinator	Social affairs	F	10 to 20 years
36	Municipality	Urban development manager	Social affairs	F	More than 20 years
37	Municipality	Head of division	Youth	F	More than 20 years

In contrast, to identify public managers' response strategies to identity struggles, Petriglieri's (2011) categorisation of six response strategies to identity struggles was chosen as a deductive template since it provides a comprehensive review of several studies on this topic. Circulating between theory and data and comparing definitions of response strategies with interview data repeatedly (Miles and Huberman 1994), this approach proved to be very useful in examining the response strategies of public managers for each of the four identity struggles.

## **4 RESULTS: COPING WITH IDENTITY STRUGGLES IN CITIZEN COLLABORATION**

### **4.1 Complexity and Identity Struggles**

The analysis of the statements about struggles, problems, and contradictory demands that public managers experience in relation to citizen collaboration revealed four major identity struggles of public managers in citizen collaboration settings (paraphrased with questions): *Citizen or professional?*, *Loyal to whom?*, *Still administrative enough?*, and *Collaborative all-rounder?* Table 3 summarizes the different identity struggles and lists statements exemplifying the problems.

In general, the four identity struggles highlight that in citizen collaboration public managers face multiple normative expectations of how to act. Managers try to fulfil these multiple demands that are voiced by different stakeholders, including politicians, citizens, and colleagues. Apart from these external expectations and norms, managers also notice self-imposed expectations that reinforce the identity struggles. Overall, managers perceive this challenging position as very stressful as it continuously provides a feeling of being 'in-between': 'This job is exhausting and stressful because I am working between different levels' (Interview 25). In the following, the four identity struggles are described in detail:

**Table 3: Identity struggles of public managers in citizen collaboration**

<i>Struggle</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Citizen or professional?	Public managers are citizens themselves and have trouble to separate personal opinions from professional claims.	<p>'Certainly, there are conflicts where I wonder: "I don't get that. I wouldn't like this either when I was living there." But that is part of the problem: On the one hand, there is the individual and, on the other hand, there is the greater whole. How should one deal with that? It is obvious that it is not possible to satisfy everybody's needs – in particular with our topic where things happen in people's backyards. It is of advantage that I am living in another district. Still, at times, I wonder: "Why is it done this and that way?" In my view, that is a constant conflict.' (Interview 16)</p> <p>'Certainly, there are decisions that I do not like. Still, I have to represent them. I say to the people "That is the way it has to be done" and "That is the decision that has been made". I have to be careful that I do not add "But this is not how I wanted it to be" all the time. [...] It's an odd situation to represent decisions that I personally don't perceive as useful.' (Interview 25)</p>
Loyal to whom?	Public managers feel obligated to advocate citizens' interests but, at the same time, know that they represent political and organisational will and colleagues.	<p>'Certainly, it's not easy to be in-between. It's kind of challenge for me. I'm an employee of this city. Therefore, I'm a colleague of anybody from an internal department, but, at the same time, I'm the one who tries to support citizens and their engagement. It's a balancing act.' (Interview 12)</p> <p>'I know that my colleagues are not to blame for everything and I try to make people aware of that. Sometimes it's due to processes, sometimes it's due to political constraints, sometimes it's due to a lack of resources. I always try to show such things. [...] Sometimes, I have to draw a line and I have to be careful that citizens don't exploit my position and me.' (Interview 26)</p>
Still administrative enough?	Public managers question whether they are still perceived as an 'in-group'-member by other (non-collaborative) managers.	<p>'What we do is unusual for administration and I think that other employees make fun of us. [...] At times, it's exhausting. We are met with resistance from within and the perception is: they do something that has nothing do with 'real' public administration. It is not a legal obligation. It's voluntarily. Still, it's supported by politics. This creates feelings of envy within the agency.' (Interview 1)</p> <p>'We are quite extraordinary compared to other divisions within this department. [...] At times, our way of working is not understood at all. [...] It's a very different approach. This causes friction. At times, there is no mutual understanding of these different approaches.' (Interview 25)</p>
Collaborative all-rounder?	Public managers struggle to make sense of the multiple and sometimes contradicting	'Sometimes, I'm not able to act on eye-level because I need to adhere to certain guidelines. Sometimes, bureaucracy and acting on eye-level are contradictory.'

<i>Struggle</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples</i>
	expectations (they perceive are) raised towards them.	<p>There are guidelines and we have to say: “No, I’m not allowed to do this.” Certainly, it’s also very political. This is definitely an issue. We have to stick to political precepts.’ (Interview 24)</p> <p>‘It’s tough to explain to citizens that we have this hierarchy and that we can have legal restrictions and that we can even have internal restrictions. [...] Then, citizens approach us and say: “We thought we would be partners and we implement this project collaboratively. Why are you not able to tell me what I need to do? Why are you not able to tell me what the problem is?” Here, classical, hierarchical guidelines meet collaboration and this causes conflicts. [...] At times, this is an odd role. [...] There are so many different levels.’ (Interview 18)</p>

First, public managers experience difficulties to draw a line between being a citizen and being an employee of the public sector (paraphrased with the question: *Citizen or professional?*). They have personal opinions as a resident of a certain district, city, or even of Germany as such. These opinions are not necessarily in line with what public managers have to represent in their work life. Citizen collaboration often is about expressing personal opinions on what is wrong or can be improved in a district, city, or country. Public managers are reminded of their personal opinion in this context (arguably more than in professional contexts without close citizen contact) because they are able to relate to opinions citizens share:

Surely, I have my very own perception and opinion. I don't think this can be left out. Luckily, I did not experience a conflict yet where I thought that I don't think this way at all or that I could not reconcile this opinion with my personality. But for sure, I'm not just a robot fulfilling this role. I have a personality and I take this personality into the project. (Interview 16)

In contrast to the three struggles described in the following, there seems to be no external trigger for the *Citizen or professional?*-struggle. Instead, just the 'internal' awareness of being citizen and public manager at the same time triggers the perception of a struggle between these different aspects of self-identity.

Second, public managers experience a feeling of being equally loyal to citizens and loyal to their colleagues and members of the public sector in general, which leads to conflicts of loyalty (*Loyal to whom?*). By design, citizen collaboration requires public managers to build connections with participating citizens. This often leads to an improved understanding of citizens' wishes and arguments. Ultimately, managers are able to develop trustful relationships with citizens, one of the cornerstones of citizen collaboration (Yang 2006). At the same time, public managers are, literally speaking, employees of public organisations, which means that they are continuously confronted with all the professional standards of the public sector (Brandsen and Honingh 2013; Tuurnas 2015). Especially in cases of conflict and dissatisfaction between citizens and administration, public managers engaged in citizen collaboration perceive it as difficult to take sides.

It feels like I am split in two. [...] I can explain the argument of administration to outsiders and relate to administration. I can explain the argument of outsiders to administration and relate to outsiders. Then, at home, I wonder: What was that again? (Interview 19)

Furthermore, some public managers even report that they need to make sure that citizens do not exploit the trustful relationship: 'Sometimes, I have to draw a line and I have to be careful that citizens do not exploit my position and me' (Interview 26).

Third, public managers experience that they are no longer perceived as a member of the 'in-group' of public managers by other (non-collaborative) managers (*Still administrative*



*enough?*). Collaboration with citizens requires a different skill set and includes tasks that differ from 'traditional' aspects of public service delivery. Therefore, non-collaborative public managers question the status of collaborative public managers. This troubles collaborative managers because they still perceive themselves as part of the bigger picture public sector. Especially in cases where non-collaborative colleagues do not see the benefit of collaboration collaborative public managers feel like outcasts:

'When an employee is not able to show his or her colleagues the value of collaboration, it's going to be tough on him or her. Then he or she – in the perception of the colleagues – is a misfit that has no clue about how 'real' administration works. (Interview 32)

Fourth, public managers experience difficulties arising from the multiple, and often conflicting, roles they perceive they have to fulfil in citizen collaboration (*Collaborative all-rounder?*). According to the perceptions of the interviewees, they have to be able to facilitate citizen collaboration and exploit citizens' knowledge for organisational purposes. At the same time they should act in accordance with political will, adhere to organisational rules and professional standards, ensure that citizens stick to formal guidelines as well as legal and program restrictions, and, lastly, ensure that collaborating with citizens does not lead to unforeseen consequences:

We have to be able to take our colleagues from different departments along and to identify the demands and suggestions citizens have. (Interview 22)

Technically, what we have to do may not reflect our opinion but it is an assignment by the council. (Interview 32)

I take it for granted that every employee of public administration sticks to the rules. (Interview 37)

They [citizens] decide on public money and, therefore, there have to be rules. (Interview 7)

This multitude of perceived normative expectations causes stress and pressure for public managers since they are keen to follow all of these frames. They often struggle to determine which of the multiple expectations to fulfil in specific collaborative situations:

For example, it's like hitting a brick wall when you're asked to accelerate every procedure while letting everyone participate at the same time. (Interview 22)

In my view, so much of creativity is lost in such [collaborative] processes when one has to adhere to formal rules before further steps can be taken. This is a real burden. I would wish for this to be easier and less regulated. But then, there may be complaints on abuse of administration and so on. And it is one of my duties to avoid something of that kind. (Interview 21)

We have to motivate and facilitate participating but at the same time we have to be restrictive. For me, this is more difficult than working with colleagues or employees where you just assign a task. (Interview 17)

Overall, due to the contradicting nature of the different expectations, managers perceive it as a mission impossible to fulfil all requirements. They suggest that further developments are required in order to fulfil all demands:

It is a demand to include citizens. If this is the case, different circumstances are required in the departments that have a lot to do with citizens. [...] A different structure is required that we do not have. More staff is needed in order to do such things. It is not a good idea to always use a cost-performance analysis and claim that it is too expensive. (Interview 34)

## 4.2 Response Strategies to Identity Struggles

The analysis of public managers' responses to identity struggles reveals that they use different strategies for each identity struggle. Furthermore, the comparison of response strategies across cases suggests that managers even combine different strategies. For instance, Table 4 highlights that public managers apply an identity-protection strategy and an identity-restructuring strategy to cope with the struggles *Citizen or professional?*, *Loyal to whom?*, and *Collaborative all-rounder?* In contrast, only protective strategies are applied to cope with the *Still administrative enough?*-struggle.

**Table 4: Public managers' response strategies to identity struggles**

<i>Struggle</i>	<i>Response strategy</i>	<i>Situation-specific explanation</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Citizen or professional?	Concealment	Denying citizen identity and personal opinions in work contexts	'I try to block it [personal opinion] out. I have to fulfil a task here. It's a duty I have to perform. My personal interests are not of great importance in this [work] context.' (Interview 16)
	Importance change	Focusing on importance of work role/identity	'Certainly, I have an opinion, but I recognize that it's not about my opinion. I have to highlight the collaborative aspect. Even if I'm convinced about a certain idea personally.' (Interview 26)
Loyal to whom?	Positive-distinctiveness	Highlighting advantage of mediating position between citizens and administration	'It's a position of mediation. In my view, it makes more sense to send professionals instead of leaders. I got the feeling that this makes more sense because it's more likely that people engage on an operational level together. Citizens see that we are "normal" people; people they can talk to; people that keep returning; people that don't promise everything under the sun.' (Interview 27)
	Meaning change	Shifting discourse from 'citizen's advocate' to 'gatekeeper of information'	'I'm satisfied when I got the feeling that I did everything to enable exchange between both parties and to mediate in a situation of conflict. [...] There's a lot of superficial knowledge, and misunderstandings cause discontent. As soon as everybody is on the table and we transfer

<i>Struggle</i>	<i>Response strategy</i>	<i>Situation-specific explanation</i>	<i>Examples</i>
			information from both sides conflicts are solved.' (Interview 12)
Still administrative enough?	Derogation	Claiming 'traditional' public administration as anachronistic	'It's a new generation of administration and we dare to ask citizens for their expertise.' (Interview 14) 'We hail from an era of administration in which public servants played God. [...] For about ten years, we've had a new approach to administration. We want to support them rather than constrain them. This doesn't work everywhere because there are some old hands, which do not change anymore.' (Interview 14)
	Positive-distinctiveness	Framing collaboration as something that advances 'traditional' public administration	'One of my tasks is to familiarize departments that are not used to collaboration with this topic and to show them the advantages.' (Interview 16)
Collaborative all-rounder?	Derogation	Claiming multiple requirements as unrealistic and inappropriate	'I'm engaged in several projects. I don't find the time and leisure to go to a collaboration meeting every Saturday. Personal and personnel resources limit the possibilities.' (Interview 4)
	Meaning change	Understanding collaboration as part of the task rather than 'the' task	'I've got a problem that I need to solve. I'm the one who has to consider many different aspects. This includes private organisations, politics, colleagues as well as citizens.' (Interview 4)

Intriguingly, the analysis of applied response strategies suggests that managers combine strategies in order to simultaneously frame the social discourse on identities (social identity) and achieve or sustain a coherent picture of self (self-identity), reflecting external and internal aspects of identity work (Watson 2008). For example, managers used the strategy of *derogation* to cope with the *Still administrative enough?*-struggle. In this context, derogation means that public managers dismiss the 'traditional' understanding of PA (cf. Brandsen and Honingh 2013) as old-fashioned (Interviewee 19: 'There are colleagues that have been doing their work in this way for a hundred years and this makes me wonder: Why have you never thought about doing it collaboratively?'). This approach can be seen as a way of self-protection. Collaborative managers experience a struggle between still being part of the 'in-group' of public managers or not. Therefore, these managers describe the group as something that is not desirable to be part of. However, managers also apply the strategy of *positive-distinctiveness*. They try to frame the social discourse so that collaborating with citizens is perceived as something positive that advances public service delivery. This seems to be an attempt to convince proponents of 'traditional' PA that citizen

collaboration is a necessity of public administration (Interviewee 4: 'I wouldn't be able to implement such a process without collaboration. This wouldn't work anymore.'). If 'traditionalists' follow this argumentation, the social discourse on public managers identities will possibly shift towards citizen collaboration, allowing collaborative public managers to perceive themselves as member of the 'in-group' again. Following this interpretation, individuals apply response strategies to identity struggles for two purposes: to frame social identity discourses and to sustain a coherent self-identity.

As mentioned above, the *Citizen or professional?*-struggle is mainly an 'internal' identity struggle as it is caused by the mere fact of being citizen and public manager at the same time. Therefore, this struggle is a special case of coping as there is no 'external' source of identity struggle. Still, public managers apply an identity-protection strategy in order to cope with this struggle. By neglecting their identity as a citizen in professional contexts, public managers try to avoid problems in their collaborative work. As a consequence, identity-protection strategies can also be applied to 'internal' identity work.

## **5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### **5.1 Public Managers' Active Production of Identities**

While knowledge on new modes of governance in general and on collaborating with citizens in particular has significantly progressed in recent years (Jakobsen et al. 2016), little is known about how individuals in the public sector handle and frame the spread of NPG (Tuurnas 2015). Based on evidence from thirty-seven interviews with public managers that engage in collaborative projects with citizens in Germany, this paper has explored which identity struggles public managers experience when collaborating with citizens. The analysis of public managers' identity work in relation to citizen collaboration revealed four major struggles paraphrased in the questions: *Citizen or professional?*, *Loyal to whom?*, *Still administrative enough?*, and *Collaborative all-rounder?* In addition, it was found that public managers apply different response strategies in order to cope with these struggles.

Following these results, the analysis supports the stream of identity theory that challenges the view of individuals as passive identity targets of identity formation by 'heroic' change agents (Lok 2010; Bévort and Suddaby 2016). Instead, public managers respond to identity struggles triggered by the emergence of citizen collaboration with different strategies. These strategies allow managers to actively influence and frame identity discourses. Furthermore, these strategies help managers to achieve a coherent self-identity.

In addition, the analysis revealed that response strategies to identity struggles are equally applied to struggles with 'external' triggers or 'internal' triggers.

In addition, the interviews provide first insights that coping with identity struggles and applying different response strategies is closely associated with specific identity narratives, i.e. established stories about the own role or person. These identity narratives are the result of public managers' identity work, and the interviewees repeatedly refer to such identity narratives, for example to the notion of a 'modern' public manager that combines collaboration with traditional aspects of public administration. Identity narratives are said to be an instrument that allows individuals to close gaps between pictures of self and social expectations (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010). Therefore, public managers may use identity narratives to provide frames for identity discourses.

## **5.2 Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. First, the study is restricted to citizen collaboration in the German public sector, which provides a specific context. This context can have an impact on how the NPG paradigm and claims for citizen collaboration diffuse in the public sector and, furthermore, are interpreted by public managers. Second, the aim of the sampling strategy was to assemble a broad range of collaborative activities. Yet, due to the rich variety of possibilities of how citizen collaboration can be organized and in which fields and towards which aims it can be used (cf. Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017), this paper can only include a small sample of citizen collaboration. These two aspects limit the generalizability of the findings of the study. While the identity struggles of public managers that have been identified provide a good understanding of NPG-related identity work, the study does not claim that these are the only struggles that can occur. Therefore, further studies need to test whether different contexts and different settings of citizen collaboration lead to different insights. Finally, this analysis focuses on public managers' interpretations and perceptions of the NPG paradigm and citizen collaboration. However, social identities and self-identities are part of larger frames with multiple stakeholders and groups that construct logics and identities. Therefore, further research could apply a multi-level and multi-stakeholder approach to deepen our understanding of identity work in relation to NPG and citizen collaboration.

### 5.3 Implications

Despite these limitations, the findings have important implications for different streams of research in public management. First, the analysis of identity work of public managers in relation to citizen collaboration adds to our understanding of the challenges managers face when collaborating with citizens and, thus, complements literature on structural and task-specific challenges (Bryson et al. 2013; Boswell, Settle, and Dugdale 2015; Wiewiora, Keast, and Brown 2016). Apart from the provision of resources, the development of organisational structures that fit collaborative purposes, and the qualification and training of public servants, citizen collaboration requires public leaders to also consider individual identities and possible identity struggles. Even if organisational and structural circumstances are aligned with collaborative work with citizens, identity struggles can be a barrier for citizen collaboration and require public leaders to react. If, for instance, a public employee engaged in citizen collaboration is not able to ignore their citizen identity and behave in line with political and organisational aims, public leaders can think about withdrawing this employee from citizen collaboration contexts. Further research is required to understand managerial consequences to identity struggles of individuals.

Second, the identity perspective on citizen collaboration provides insights into the micro-processes that take place with reforms in the public sector. Several studies have investigated how members of the public sector make sense and frame discourses related to classical PA and NPM (Meyer et al. 2014; McGivern et al. 2015). The diffusion of NPG reinforces the institutional complexity of the public sector. Identity theory can provide important insights into how individual actors handle this institutional complexity and cope with contradicting demands and norms. This paper pioneers research on identity struggles and corresponding response strategies in relation to citizen collaboration, but further studies are required in order to deepen our understanding of how the co-existence of PA, NPM, and NPG affects identity discourses and self-perceptions of individuals.

Finally, the notion of public managers as active producers of identity and first indications of specific identity narratives have implications for future investigations of identity work in public management. Further research on whether certain response strategies to identity struggles are associated with specific identity narratives can lead to specific self-identities and, therefore, interpretations of social identities public managers develop when confronted with identity struggles. Knowledge of these self-identities can foster our understanding of public managers' behaviour in specific situations (Kärreman and Alvesson

2004; Lok 2010). Furthermore, understanding public managers as active producers of identity shows the complexity in identity formation in public management in general and in collaborative contexts in particular. Recent studies have argued that the development of a collective or collaborative identity is an important aspect of collaborative projects and that public managers try to frame such an identity (Mandell, Keast, and Chamberlain 2017; Mangan et al. 2017). In this sense, public managers can be regarded as active producers of their own identity and active producers of the shared identity of others. Arguably, such a position increases the complexity of identity work as it could trigger problems in delineating self-identity, social identities, and collective identity. Further research is required to investigate the complex interplay of identity work in collaborative settings. Such research could also have implications for the meta-governance of networks (Sørensen and Torfing 2009).

#### **5.4 Concluding Remarks**

The concept of collaborating with citizens to design, implement, and evaluate public services has gained increasing attention in the last two decades. The present study has complemented the comprehensive literature on this topic by applying an identity perspective to understand the challenges and problems public managers experience when collaborating with citizens. It has shown that even collaboration enthusiasts among public managers face identity struggles that affect their daily behaviour and practice. Nevertheless, the present study has also revealed that such struggles provide public managers with the agency to form and frame the change that is inherent in the rise and spread of NPG.

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## Appendix A: Interview guideline

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<i>Topic</i>	<i>Questions</i>
General Information	What is/are the objective/s of the collaborative project/s?
Collaborative process	How is/are the project/s structured? How does the actual collaboration take place? What do you perceive as important for the implementation of the project/s?
Personal attitude	In your view, how important is collaboration with citizens for the public sector in general? How important is collaboration with citizens to you personally? In your view, what is your task in collaborative projects?
Collaboration practice	Are there any problems you experience in the collaborative work? If so, how do you handle such problems? Which improvements could be made to the project/s? Describe your relationship with participating citizens.

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**Appendix B: Coding scheme for identity struggles**

