

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Resolving Agile Ambidexterity: Between Ambivalence, Adaptation, and Accommodation

Ines Mergel^{1,2,3} ¹Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Konstanz, Konstanz, Germany | ²School of Management, University of Vaasa, Vaasa, Finland | ³Fraunhofer Institute for Open Communication Systems, Berlin, GermanyCorrespondence: Ines Mergel (ines.mergel@uni-konstanz.de)

Received: 22 December 2025 | Revised: 5 June 2026 | Accepted: 29 June 2026

Keywords: accommodation | adaptation | agile governance | ambidexterity | ambivalence

ABSTRACT

Public bureaucracies address challenging and complex problems by applying agile work practices when standard operating procedures or routines fail. In these situations, public managers need to decide whether to exploit existing bureaucratic routines or explore novel solutions through non-routine agile work practices. This study shows how public managers maneuver between different adoption decisions: (1) remain ambivalent and reject agile, (2) accommodate the needs of the bureaucracy and adjust agile work practices to align with administrative routines, or (3) adapt in an ambidextrous manner by becoming agile literate and choosing the appropriate work practices depending on the public management problem. This study contributes to the literature on agile governance by incorporating the notion of ambidexterity into the existing theory of 21st-century bureaucracy.

1 | Introduction

Modern bureaucracies are facing the tension to address multiple crises while working in their traditional top-down, line-based administrative routines (Foster 1990; Monteiro and Adler 2022). To resolve these tensions, agile work practices are implemented to allow for project-based, cross-functional work teams to work on strategically relevant issues. Agile work practices apply project management productivity frameworks, such as Scrum (Rigby et al. 2016). They were summarized in the Agile Manifesto (Beck et al. 2001) and considered more efficient (lead to testable results faster) and produce a higher project quality compared to traditional waterfall project management approaches or strategic planning (Dong et al. 2024; Kautz et al. 2014; Parker et al. 2015).

The assumption is that agile work practices can support the existing administrative processes and potentially scale to the whole organization (Rigby et al. 2018). The goal is to work in transdisciplinary teams to have all decision-makers at the table, work in shorter iterations to create a testable product, process, or service that can be evaluated by the project partners, so that

their empirically validated feedback can be included in the final solution.

Public bureaucracies have different motivations to adopt agile work practices (Tripp and Armstrong 2018): They range from the expectations of increased productivity and cost reduction to more job satisfaction. At times, their application is even mandated through political decision-making in government programs, executive orders, or coalition agreements. At the same time, the decades-old administrative culture and routines remain the dominant way of working in public bureaucracies, and agile teams must be ambidextrous (Hamblin et al. 2024) by understanding when bureaucratic routines can be exploited or deciding when agile work practices might have to be explored as an alternative way to work through complex, never-before-addressed problems.

However, we know little about the process of how public bureaucracies apply agile, how the lessons learned can be applied to the standard operating procedures, or how the newly learned competencies and project management approaches

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2026 The Author(s). *Public Administration* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

can be transferred to the rest of the organization. Here, I empirically demonstrate the implementation of agile work practices from the perspective of civil servants who have experienced agile, understand its contributions, and are now expected to transfer agile work practices into the established administrative routines.

The topic is phenomenologically relevant because many governments have created digital service teams that apply agile methods to the development of digital public services as part of their digital transformation or are aiming to de-bureaucratize their operations (Mergel 2016; Mergel et al. 2019). Agile work practices have become more pervasive and are applied to public management problems: public managers apply agile principles in situations where a pre-existing routine does not allow for adequate procedural solutions to respond to the multiple crises that the public sector is currently facing. In these situations, public managers need to decide whether to exploit the existing bureaucratic routines along their line organization or explore novel solutions by applying agile work practices in project groups. Previous research has already described some of these activities (Mergel 2016; Neumann et al. 2024). However, so far, we have mainly been able to observe rather isolated agile teams working in innovation labs or other types of experimentation spaces at the fringes of government agencies or departments.

In the following, I will therefore first review the existing theory on agile and provide a brief overview of the core concept of ambidexterity. I will then present the methods used to generate and analyze the data to answer the research question. The results contribute to the development of a theory of agile ambidexterity in public administration. Lastly, I will discuss the findings considering their theoretical and practical contributions.

2 | Theoretical Background

Agile work practices are usually implemented while the dominant organizing principles remain hierarchical and rely on administrative routines. This leads to increased tensions at times when civil servants need to implement agile while being conscious of what the rest of the organization needs. This simultaneous ability to decide and apply both approaches and potentially integrate them is a rather novel approach for public administration. I will first review the existing literature on agile work practices and then introduce the concept of ambidexterity.

2.1 | Agile Work Practices

Not all public management problems can be solved with the existing routines or standard operating procedures. Public bureaucracies need to build new and even flexible routines so that they build in-house capacity and don't need to outsource problem-solving to external vendors or consultants (Monteiro and Adler 2022). Agile has emerged as an approach to build project management capacity that is adaptable and flexible, and at the same time follows a transparent protocol. Previously, these agile work practices were defined as: "Agile refers to a work management ideology with a set of productivity frameworks that support continuous and iterative progress on work tasks by

reviewing one's hypotheses, working in a human-centric way, and encouraging evidence-based learning." (Mergel 2023, 1). This definition is useful as it refers to the full range of values and principles as stated in the original Agile Manifesto (Beck et al. 2001) and adequately reflects the actual work practices that are currently transferred into public bureaucracies when different organizations are tailoring agile work practices based on their needs (Campanelli and Parreiras 2015).

The need for adopting agile work practices is often mentioned in connection with the digital transformation of the public sector (Looks et al. 2021; Mergel et al. 2018; Soe and Drechsler 2018). The concept has also been extended to review process (in)efficiency in bureaucracies (Greve et al. 2020). It is applied in situations where the existing best practices or established administrative routines cannot offer a solution to an emergent problem (Mergel 2016; Mergel et al. 2021; Neumann et al. 2024). It usually involves self-organizing cross-functional teams that prioritize their tasks, iteratively work through the list of these tasks, continuously review their progress, and shift workloads when necessary. They include feedback or new data from their clients and project partners, review their progress and goals, shift gears when necessary to include empirical evidence, and iteratively work toward the next version of their project. Agile teams evaluate this data in an evidence-based manner by applying user-centric (research and design) approaches. The goal is to work toward a learning culture instead of a zero-failure culture and increase transparency and speed.

When bringing agile work practices into public bureaucracies, we end up with two conflicting work management ideologies that are not well aligned and focus on different forms of effectiveness. Based on the proverbs of public administration by Simon (1946), and revisited by Meier and O'Toole (2009) and Williams (2000), as well as the explanations of Agile developed by Mergel et al. (2021), I have developed the following contrasting underlying principles of what effectiveness means in the mainstream public administration literature and how it is seen in contrast in an agile work environment (see Table 1): The principles of administrative effectiveness focus on exploiting the deep siloed work based on life-long specialization that aim to establish routines with unity of command, span of control to limit the numbers of subordinates, and authoritative decision making to provide a public service most effectively and efficiently. Agile focuses on exploring how to bring together expertise ad hoc when needed, operating under shared leadership of cross-functional teams that make evidence-based decisions based on their professional judgment when empirical data becomes available, while they solve problems. Ultimately, agile teams are superior in their effectiveness when the administrative routines of existing problem-solving solutions cannot be exploited:

These two contrasting expectations will either cancel each other out, with the bureaucratic paradigm dominating the administrative culture, or, and that is what is happening in public administration practice at the moment, they can exist in parallel, and public managers might choose which work practice to apply given the type of problem or situation they are facing (Baxter et al. 2023). This is why it is important to understand how public bureaucracies are achieving either one of those stages: rejection or ambidextrous application of agile work practices.

TABLE 1 | Contrasting administrative and agile effectiveness.

Principles of administrative effectiveness	Principles of agile effectiveness
Specialization to increase administrative routines is usually pre-defined by experts	Ad hoc specialization by bringing on specialists when needed during the process
Unity of command: placing members in a determinate hierarchy of authority along fields of specialization	Shared leadership and shared decision preparation by cross-functional teams
Authority makes decisions and provides top-down coordination to avoid confusion (Gulick 1937)	The team makes evidence-based decisions based on professional judgment
Span of control to limit the number of subordinates who report directly to only one administrator	Enact equal plausibility that administrative effectiveness is enhanced when only the agile team prepares and makes decisions
Organization by purpose, process, clientele and place “to render a particular service” (Gulick 1937, 21)	Organization around problem to solve (or purpose, even if ad hoc emerging)

2.2 | Achieving Ambidexterity of Work Practices

Ambidextrous organizations can achieve efficiency by using approaches of exploitation of existing routines and exploration of innovative practices at the same time (Gibson and Birkinshaw 2004; Raisch and Birkinshaw 2008). Ambidexterity theory is a rather new concept in the field of public administration. In their recent bibliometric review, Hamblin et al. (2024) show that out of the overall 533 included studies, only 40 studies were published in public administration journals. The concept was first used in 2015 and slowly picked up momentum, highlighting the field's predominant focus on the inert and rigid dimensions of bureaucracies that exploit rather than explore. As an example, organizational ambidexterity has recently been applied by Cannaerts et al. (2020) to explain the design and leadership decisions that public managers must make to remain efficient and at the same time be innovative when responding to multiple crises. Smith and Umans (2015) show this in the context of Swedish public organizations operating in the waste management and water and sewerage industries, and Alkaabi et al. (2024) show how ambidexterity has an impact on public service quality in the Arabian Peninsula Gulf States. Consequently, Page et al. (2021) call on public sector organizations to build up ambidextrous capabilities to both exploit and explore knowledge.

O'Reilly and Tushman (2013) distinguish four types of ambidexterity:

1. *Organizational ambidexterity* means that the organization itself can simultaneously exploit existing routines and standard operating procedures and explore new venues or work practices to solve emergent problems for which there is no existing blueprint or best practice that can be easily followed. The authors define ambidexterity as the “ability to pursue both incremental and discontinuous innovation from hosting multiple contradictory structures, processes, and cultures in the same organization.” (O'Reilly and Tushman 2013, 324).
2. *Simultaneous or structural ambidexterity* explains ways in which organizational structures are realigned to reflect changing environmental conditions or strategies. On the organizational level, we can observe that public bureaucracies are responding to environmental triggers with new structural forms, such as innovation labs (Carstensen and Bason 2012; Tönurist et al. 2017) or digital service teams (Kattel and Takala 2023; Mergel 2019). This might happen simultaneously in addition to the existing hierarchical organizational structures and administrative processes.
3. *Sequential ambidexterity* describes how, over time, organizations are changing their structures or work practices to adapt to changing market, environmental, or societal needs. They might be moving step-by-step from individual to team and on to a full organizational agile transformation. Changes in technology, laws, and policies are some of the triggers that prompt public bureaucracies to sequentially adapt to agile.
4. *Contextual ambidexterity* allows individuals in organizations to decide how to shift between exploration and exploitation. Contextual ambidexterity is defined by Gibson

& Birkinshaw (2004, 2009) as “the behavioral capacity to simultaneously demonstrate alignment and adaptability across an entire business unit.” In public bureaucracies, this behavior can be observed when government innovation fellows work with teams, civil servants who receive agile training apply and test some of the agile practices in their projects, or when in-house agile coaches are deployed to support departments.

In the context of this study, ambidexterity is defined as the ability to decide which problem-solving technique can be applied or tailored to the type of public management problem. Does it make more sense to explore new ways of solving a problem using agile approaches when no pre-existing solutions exist, and the project team needs to be flexible and experiment? Or should the project team exploit mature organizational routines that can be applied in a focused and efficiently controlled process, and the problem can be solved (Snowden and Boone 2007)?

Based on the reviewed literature on ambidexterity, I assume that public bureaucracies might first apply structural ambidexterity by starting to introduce agile work practices in localized attempts as part of innovation labs or digital service teams. In these cases, agile is in alignment with the existing bureaucratic routines. As they experience the efficiency gains and job satisfaction when civil servants can apply agile work practices, they might aim to either simultaneously or sequentially apply both exploitation and exploration approaches, which ultimately depend on the situations or contexts in which they operate.

The research question for this study is therefore: *How do public bureaucracies integrate agile work practices into administrative routines to become ambidextrous?*

3 | Methods

In the following section, I will discuss the choice of setting and subjects to answer the research question, as well as the steps for the data generation and analysis.

3.1 | Choice of Setting and Subjects

I purposefully sought out cases that aim to bring agile work practices into public bureaucracies (Ragin 2009). This is happening in agencies and departments where, in parallel to the continued administrative routines, the organization deliberately encourages the exploration of agile work practices, albeit in a traditional exploitative bureaucratic environment. For this paper, I have chosen the innovation fellowships that were introduced by a Northern European country's federal government.

As part of the fellowship program, federal agencies and departments were asked to submit project descriptions to a competition. Depending on the type of project, its maturity, strategic significance, and potential to be implemented, the cases were matched with private sector innovation fellows' competencies and experiences. The fellows hailed either from startups in the private or non-profit sectors or worked in their independent consulting companies. They declared a willingness to step outside

their current jobs and contribute for 6 months to the implementation of agile competencies in the public sector. The program was modeled after the Presidential Innovation Fellowship program in the US (Muratovski 2017).

3.2 | Data Generation

In partnering with the two CEOs of the digital service team hosting the fellowship program, I recruited interviewees, identified opportunities to participate in the training program, observed meetings, reviewed retrospectives, and the final presentations of the fellows. The participating fellows and civil servants were instructed in one of the first emails they received that an official research project would accompany their program in 2022, with the option to opt out if their project was not suitable for an academic evaluation. In addition, I presented the research project to the whole cohort during their onboarding week and answered any questions the participants might have about the way that the data was collected and used. The program officers wrote recruitment emails to the fellowship cohort as well as to the former participants in the preceding four cohorts to request their participation in the interviews, making it a full sample of all fellowship years with close to 100% participation of the fellows and civil servants who were part of the program. For the 2022 fellowship program, I was allowed to interview the fellows and their public sector tandem partners before they started the project, observe their interactions during the 6-month program, participate in the accompanying training program, and interview them after their final presentations.

I interviewed the CEOs, the leadership team, and the program managers of the fellowship program. To gain a broader perspective, I reached out to the Chancellery, the program sponsor, and interviewed the policy officer in charge of the program, as well as the central IT agency and several consultants who were involved in reusing or further developing the solutions that came out of the five cohorts of fellowships included in this dataset.

In total, I interviewed 168 participants, including 69 civil servants, 76 innovation fellows, 6 program leaders and officers, as well as 15 external stakeholders, including policy implementors, oversight bodies, and IT service providers and consultants responsible for the implementation of the prototypes in the participating federal ministries (see Table 2).

In the semi-structured interviews, I asked each group the same questions with adjustments for the type of program and the role of each interviewee as part of the combination of a deductive qualitative and inductive interpretative research logic (Gilgun 2019; Glaser and Strauss 2014). Through the interviews, I received accounts in organization-specific contexts and themes that emerged across the agile teams.

3.3 | Participant Observations

I complemented the interviews with about 30h of observations. These included the onboarding sessions at the beginning of the fellowship, which gave me a sense of the program's intent and the aims of the program managers. It helped me familiarize

TABLE 2 | Type and number of interviewees.

	Fellows	Public servants	Total
Program participants			
Technology fellowship	27	23	52
Work practices fellowship	42	53	95
Program directors and CEOs	—	—	6
Stakeholders	—	—	15
Total	69	76	168

myself with the formal components of the program. Throughout the fellowship, I also participated in bi-weekly training sessions that introduced both agile methods and government experts who had already adopted these methods in comparable ministerial settings. In addition, I observed the reflection meetings of the fellows and civil servants. Throughout these meetings, I took copious notes. The questions and discussions of the participants with each other, their peers, and trainers provided supplementary insights into the issues civil servants face when they aim to apply agile methods.

3.4 | Archival Data

A third piece of data collection included program documents, project descriptions submitted to the program, and the final descriptions posted on the website. After each of the fellowships, several fellows and civil servant groups posted statements about how public bureaucracies need to upskill their employees and what additional resources are needed for a successful transformation of the federal government. In addition, I reviewed fellowship publications from previous years on blogs and websites, as well as their current implementation status. The project descriptions consisted of a maximum ½–2 pages on the host's website. I also collected artifacts, such as presentations on Miro boards, blog updates of the fellows, and newsletter emails about the fellowship program and its outcomes. Media coverage remained limited and focused predominantly on the creation of the host organization.

At the end of each interview and observation, I wrote memos to extract the main insights and new ideas in the form of field notes. During the Corona pandemic, all interactions with the participants took place via the videoconferencing tool Zoom and were audio-recorded and transcribed with their permission (Archibald et al. 2019).

3.5 | Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the Gioia method in an interpretative research approach “that gives voice to the people actually experiencing those events” (Clark et al. 2010, 143). The analysis

started immediately after the initial rounds of interviews with the incoming cohort. The focus was twofold: (1) to understand how civil servants used agile methods from a procedural analytical standpoint, and (2) to evaluate the variance in how they might differ depending on the context, type of problem, and available resources to show a causal mechanism that leads to acceptance or rejection of agile work practices (Maxwell 2010).

The basic assumption of the Gioia methodology (2013, 17) is that the “organizational world is socially constructed,” and “the people constructing their organizational realities are knowledge agents, namely that people in organizations know what they are trying to do and can explain their thoughts, intentions, and actions.” Therefore, I have chosen an inductive research approach to extract meaning from the reports and experiences in the stories my interview partners shared with me (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015). As Corley and Gioia (2011) show, this approach provides opportunities for themes and concepts to be discovered in the interviewing and observing phases, and I, as the observer and interviewer, avoid imposing theoretical concepts on them by introducing them as part of the interview process.

I first identified the interview questions and corresponding text elements in the transcripts in a deductive manner (Gilgun 2019) to understand the two distinct lived experiences of innovation fellows and civil servants during the fellowship period.

As a last step, I then mapped the resulting categories from the data to the existing literature on organizational ambidexterity to progress toward a theoretical framework. The analytics steps are included in the following Figure 1, displaying the data structure.

4 | Results

In the following, I will present the findings based on the data analysis and with the support of quotes extracted from the interview transcripts. First, I explain why public bureaucracies are trying to bring agile work practices into their bureaucratic routines. Then, I will show three different pathways in which they either remain ambivalent toward agile or work toward ambidexterity through adaptation and accommodation.

4.1 | Reasons for Applying Agile Work Practices

The civil servants interviewed for this project named several reasons they were interested in gaining experience with agile work practices. Some mentioned that they see the need to modernize their institutions because recruiting younger people into an aging work environment has become increasingly difficult. They explain that the federal administration is seen as outdated and overaged and has therefore not been recognized as an attractive workplace. Jobs remain open while many civil servants are reaching retirement age, so that even more open positions are feared to remain open.

They also noticed that the multiple societal and geopolitical crises are not manageable with existing administrative routines and competencies. As one of the interviewees points out, “It is across the whole administration that something needs to

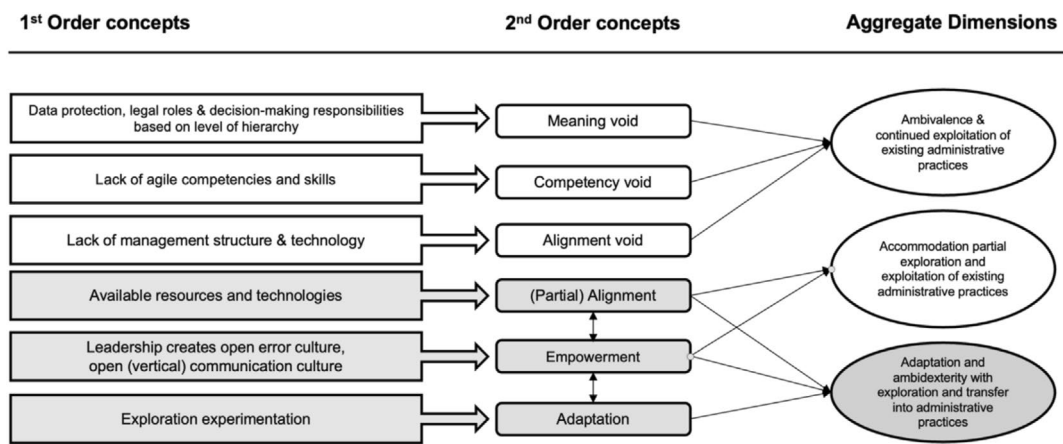


FIGURE 1 | Data structure.

change.” They point out the inefficiencies of their internal work practices and the necessity to review existing processes and optimize them by using agile. The existing coordination and collaboration mechanisms have become too complex to get things done, and this form of risk minimization has become unsustainable in a multi-crisis situation.

Another major reason for their interest in learning agile work practices is that they recognize the general hostility of their profession toward innovation and their immunity to change within the given legal framework. The skills and competencies are outdated, and they identify a need to learn from others, given the high reliance on external vendors and consultants. Therefore, the civil servants interviewed for this study were generally interested in exploring agile work practices, but at times remained hesitant because they had not experienced agile in their work environment yet, and did not experience it to increase effectiveness and efficiency. One civil servant summarizes this motivation as follows: “We need to understand: How do others do this? How are they dealing with the current challenges? How do others cope with the challenges?” The hope is that the introduction of modern work practices that potentially bring higher quality and effectiveness to their outputs will increase employee motivation and retention.

Overall, I identified three different pathways in which agile work practices were absorbed by the participating federal ministries: (1) ambivalence or even rejection due to the continued tension between agile work practices and administrative routines, (2) adaptation through agile tailoring, and (3) accommodation toward organizational ambidexterity.

4.2 | Pathway 1: Ambivalence and/or Rejection Based on Continued Tension Between Agile and Administrative Routines

Going into the fellowship, many of the civil servants expressed an initial high interest in learning new work practices. As soon as they started to work with the fellows, it became clear, however, that they were experiencing a cognitive dissonance between the agile work practices that were introduced by the fellows and the way the rest of the bureaucracy continues to work. This *meaning*

void, which means the lack of understanding of what the substantive meaning of agile work practices is, becomes especially obvious in the way that they spoke about agile. As with many of the colloquial meanings of the term agile, they equated it with being especially fast and flexible and worried that it might mean that they must abandon many of the administrative principles, responsibility, and accountability mechanisms.

They continued to experience the vertical tensions between the institutional and organizational structures that prioritize urgent political issues over learning and innovation in modern work practices. As an example, one civil servant mentioned that he and his fellow had scheduled “Dailys,” regular short morning meetings to talk about the tasks they wanted to accomplish that day, but this was derailed by requests from parliament with immediate response obligations. They reported this as a lack of shared perspective on coordinating tasks in response to internal and external preferences. The team norms (i.e., standards for accepted behaviors within a team) and team identities (i.e., rules of action for decision-making that help resolve ambiguities) diverge significantly, which had to do with both the expectations of the fellows for immediate change and the lack of freedom given to the civil servants to abandon their line tasks.

In essence, the continued tensions led to a discordance with the existing administrative routines and a continued *alignment void*: The civil servants were not used to feedback cycles and iterative learning at their workplace. They had to learn how to incorporate the input from short feedback loops into the next tasks they were planning. This resulted in time pressure to do justice to each of their obligations, which resulted at times in debilitating effects of stress.

It also became clear that a *competency void* exists. The fellows reported that the civil servants had very little training in, experience with, or knowledge of agile work practices. As with many work practices, learning remained tacit because it was seen as highly context-specific, which led to reduced knowledge accumulation and transfer into the rest of the organization. This was combined with a lack of organizational routines to integrate new knowledge about agile practices into daily operations and facilitate access to iteratively evolving organizational knowledge. The lack of documentation—a cornerstone of bureaucratic work

environments—reduced the transfer of work-relevant knowledge about agile practices to the rest of the organization. The fellows aimed to mitigate this by offering workshops on Fridays that were open to everyone; however, the time to learn or apply any of the innovations that were explored during these sessions was too short.

When these voids and tensions were not resolved, civil servants remained ambivalent toward agile work practices: “Synchronization and weaving it into the current process presents a certain difficulty...” They experienced agile approaches as part of their innovation fellowships, as “on top” work that must be accomplished in addition to their existing regular workload. While they enjoyed the encounters with the innovation fellows, they saw that an alignment with how the rest of the organization worked was not possible as a result of the fellowship alone, and remarked that the missing support from higher up in the hierarchy and their managers’ lack of awareness likely led to the rejection of agile.

4.3 | Pathway 2: Adaptation Through Agile Tailoring

The most dominant way of learning agile work practices during the innovation fellowship occurred through tailoring agile methods to adapt to the public sector context. As one of the civil servants expressed it: to find support for agile during ongoing operations, they required that “successful work practices are further modified and brought in the ‘right’ direction.” The civil servants relied predominantly on voluntary participation without top-down instructions and started by applying individual agile methods to their project management context. As an example, they started to use Kanban—a visual management method to display progress on their project—and placed the board in the hallway so that others who were walking by were able to ask questions, hoping that they might become interested in the method as well.

The metamorphosis toward an administrative agile method set is, however, rocky, as one of the civil servants points out: “We adapted everything: We couldn’t stick to the script. We have decreased the frequency of agile events dramatically. We didn’t discuss it much there was simply no other way.” While some form of agile tailoring is necessary in all organizations, it does seem as if public bureaucracies need to move toward faux-agile at times when the adaptation to the context goes so far that the original intent of the agile artifacts and efficiency criteria is undermined. As one of the civil servants said, the fellowship tandems constantly had to negotiate the extent to which agile methods were implemented with their original intent in mind. Here is an example: “Do we need Dailies? Isn’t it enough to do this once a week or every three weeks?”—where the iterative nature of progressing toward a joint goal is sabotaged by fully accommodating to the public sector or agency context and thereby changing the agile work practices to become a waterfall work practice.

Besides these more extensive adaptations, agile work practices might be continued by the civil servants if they can slowly adapt to the new work practices.

4.4 | Pathway 3: Accommodation Toward Organizational Ambidexterity

In cases where the fellowship tandems found ways to resolve the initial tensions between the existing administrative routines and agile work practices, the team also reported that they were able to accommodate their new way of working. They found ways to demonstrate the efficiencies between their previously learned line work and the new iterative approaches. As one of the civil servants interviewed for this study said, it was: “... surprising that this really works!”

The accommodation of agile into the bureaucratic routines worked in those cases where the civil servants had a high motivation to change and were used to working on project teams instead of purely working only on their line tasks within the deep silos of their own department.

They also had stronger buy-in from their superiors and made immense efforts to bring agile work practices and their learnings into the rest of the organization. The fellows were invited to present their way of working, and the demonstration of their progress to the management and executive levels was supported by a general openness toward learning from the fellowship experiences.

While there was no single case where the whole department went through an agile transformation, ambidexterity was accepted, and the commitment instilled that, depending on the problem, agile was one of the methods in the department’s general toolbox of approaches to solve administrative problems.

5 | Discussion

Based on the findings of this large-scale qualitative study of how civil servants and their private-sector tandem partners work together to implement agile work practices in a European federal government, I derived a grounded model of how agile ambidexterity might be accomplished in public bureaucracies.

Depending on the extent of alignment of agile work practices with the existing bureaucratic routines, the innovation fellow tandems were either able to resolve the tension between exploitation of the existing administrative routines or they remained unresolved. In the former case, the meaning void between the incompatibility of the existing administrative routines to solve the public management problems the teams set out to solve remained, and they became open to applying agile work practices. However, oftentimes during situations of meaning voids, the established, dominant routines are no longer meaningful, but new routines are not yet formed to replace them. In case the tension between administration routines and agile work practices persisted, no alignment is achievable, and the innovation fellow tandems either remained ambivalent toward agile work practices or were able to choose to accommodate the methods to their needs.

Proposition 1a. *No alignment occurs when the tensions between administrative routines (tendency to exploit the existing standard operating procedures) and the exploration of agile work*

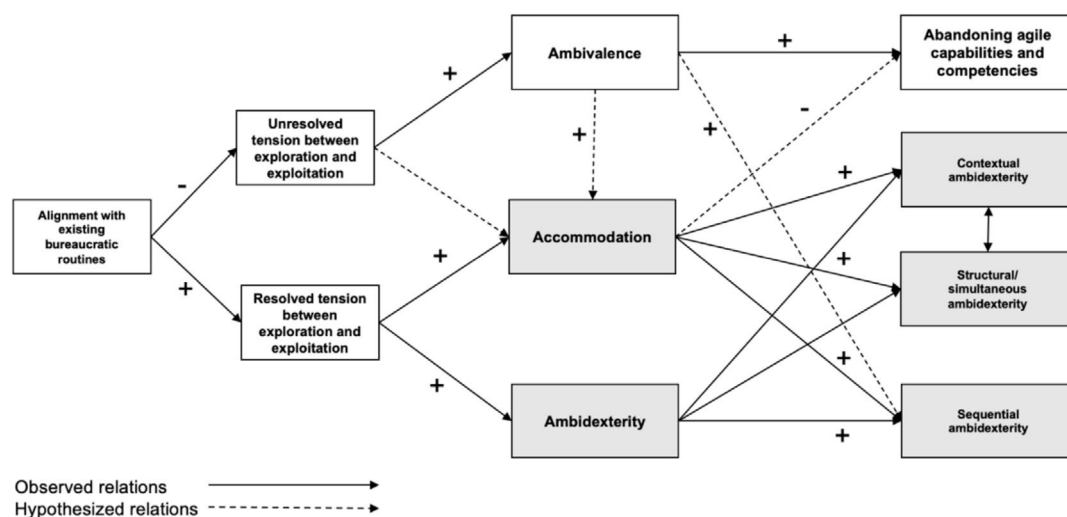


FIGURE 2 | Theoretical framework of agile ambidexterity in public bureaucracies.

practices cannot be resolved, and bureaucratic work practices remain dominant.

Proposition 1b. *In the case of a positive relationship between tensions and contextual ambidexterity, public bureaucracies will find alignment when agile is the only way to conduct the tasks as part of a one-off project approach.*

For each situation, however, there remains the hypothetical option to still work toward sequential ambidexterity—meaning that after a while of observing potential success stories of other agile projects in their organization, civil servants might still be able to work toward ambidexterity and implement agile subsequently.

The observed outcome is that in cases of unresolved tension between bureaucratic routines and agile work practices, the predominant mindset toward agile work practices is one of ambivalence and the high likelihood that civil servants will abandon agile work practices. Others might be able to resolve the tension and work toward contextual ambidexterity on the individual project level but might not be able to transfer the results to the broader organizational environment. The result is therefore similar: they might become ambivalent over time, given that they continue to work differently from the rest of their colleagues.

In cases in which there is a great extent of alignment between the resources allocated, the supportive leadership style, and an absorptive bureaucratic culture, civil servants can resolve the alignment of agile work practices with the dominant bureaucratic routines. They might then be able to develop simultaneous ambidexterity. A status in which they can decide whether they continue to exploit the existing administrative routines or explore new solutions using agile work practices.

Proposition 2a. *Simultaneous ambidexterity will persist when parts of the organization see alignment and are allowed to continue to use agile and simultaneously continue to perform*

their line tasks following administration routines. As a result, contextual ambidexterity might also result in simultaneous ambidexterity or resolution.

Proposition 2b. *Unresolved tension then led to sequential ambidexterity (do it once, then go back to standard operating procedures) or led to continued ambivalence and was more likely to lead to abandonment of the newfound agile practices.*

Proposition 2c. *Contextual ambidexterity has a similar hypothesized outcome: either it leads to forms of sequential ambidexterity, or it might have negative results, such as ambivalence or abandonment.*

In this proposed grounded model, only simultaneous and sequential ambidexterity have the potential to lead to overall organizational ambidexterity because they leave room for experimentation and the exploitation of new organizational and operational knowledge:

Proposition 3a. *A situation where civil servants accept both work practices are allowed to experiment, select in which situations or for what problems it is useful to use, and exploit the new knowledge that is created.*

Proposition 3b. *Members of bureaucracies with established administrative cultures and routines will engage in agile practices when the emergent practices are combinable with and applicable to their existing routines.*

Proposition 3c. *Members of bureaucracies with established administrative cultures and routines are willing to experiment with agile practices when there is a clear leadership decision to form new organizational routines.*

Proposition 3d. *Members of bureaucracies with established administrative cultures and routines will not engage in agile practices if the discrepancy from the actions and routines of the rest of the organization is too large.*

The interactions between the concepts are displayed in the following theoretical framework (see Figure 2).

6 | Contributions

6.1 | Theoretical Contributions

In this paper, I contribute to the existing literature on bureaucratic rigidity (Foster 1990) by showing how agile work practices can contribute to a pragmatic, adaptive, and enabling model of bureaucracy (Monteiro and Adler 2022). By moving from stale to adaptive agile work practices, civil servants have demonstrated that under certain conditions, they can change their organization's rigid mindsets toward an adaptable failure culture and learn new work practices.

In alignment with Raisch and Birkinshaw (2008), acceptance to work in an ambidextrous work environment was necessary to accommodate and adapt agile work practices by starting to experiment with otherwise alien modes of operations. At the center of the findings are those civil servants who understood how to accommodate the existing bureaucratic routines and were able to adapt agile work practices to the context of the public sector reality. Accommodation theory states that accommodation occurs when individuals process new information and experiences, and as a result of their thought process, their existing schemas of thinking or routines (Piaget 1963). Here, I demonstrate how both sides accommodate their rather strict mandates to be able to adapt the purest form of agile and tailor it to the context of public bureaucracies.

An ambidextrous public bureaucracy is then a bureaucracy that aims to adapt to new circumstances, allows for experimentation within its administrative principles, and evaluates how the lessons learned can be integrated into its standard operating procedures: this might be by exploiting the administrative routines when a blueprint for the solution of a public sector problem exists, a combination of exploitation and exploration of agile work practices, when the problem allows accommodation and adaptation, or pure exploration using agile work practices when no existing problem solution can be exploited or acquired from the market.

6.2 | Practical Contributions

Whether the findings can contribute to practice is a measure that can only be evaluated by agile practitioners in public bureaucracies. Nevertheless, the hope is that the findings resonate with those civil servants who see parallels to their own experiences trying to move toward an ambidextrous public bureaucracy that is flexible enough to make decisions about the appropriate work practices based on the type of public management problem they are aiming to solve.

The findings might be transferable to an adjacent context in which civil servants have to collaborate with private sector consultants and want to take ownership of the actions, instead of letting consultants direct the work and its outcome without empowering or transferring any of the results back into the hands

of civil servants. These can be situations in which administrative routines persist, and new work practices are introduced, leadership stays within existing boundaries and does not become servant or agile leaders, and consultants dominate the procedures, work practices, and thereby the outcomes.

Furthermore, the three pathways might help policymakers and public managers to be aware of the need to resolve the tensions between the principles of effectiveness that are known for administrative routines but might not yet be explored enough for agile work practices.

6.3 | Representation of the Concepts in Other Empirical Contexts

Qualitative research is not statistically generalizable: In qualitative studies, researchers cannot take a random sample of a smaller group to transfer the results to the population at large. However, I believe that it is more important to seek resonance of the represented concepts among the experiences that the subjects are making rather than seek generalizability. I therefore focused on transparency in the coding process so that others might be able to reproduce a similar data generation and analysis approach in their own countries or even in cross-country studies. Here, my goal was to focus on depth rather than breadth to show how one federal government was able to implement an innovative fellowship program and introduce agile work practices to otherwise stable and rigid administrative routines.

6.4 | Transferability of the Findings

The case selected for this study is unique in many ways, given that it focuses on a very specific Western European ministerial context (Gomm et al. 2000). However, the general research question and its findings posed here are of high relevance to those types of bureaucracies on all levels of government that are working with external service providers, both on technology innovations as well as on new work practice implementations (Maxwell and Chmiel 2014). When we dive deeper into the findings, the empirical results of this case are, therefore, not as unique as they might seem: Public bureaucracies are building digital service teams or innovation labs to increase the development of agile work practices or have created national strategies to establish user-centric approaches, design thinking, or specifically label themselves as agile bureaucracies. The experiences are typical and therefore transferable because they fit similar professional bureaucratic contexts and support the development of hypotheses and theoretical propositions that “may be transferred from one context to another” (Guba 1981).

Single case studies sometimes have their perceived problems in that the insights gained here might not be extendable to other cases, contexts, or even sectors. This study highlights several problem dimensions and concepts that are, however, comparable to at least other situations in the public sector when civil servants are searching for approaches to mitigate some of the shortcomings of the rigid and too-stable administrative routines by applying new work practices that have not yet been accepted into the standard operating procedures.

All types of bureaucracies face similar challenges and even demands from their members to work in different ways and enrich the bureaucratic experience of citizens and civil servants alike. While some of the elements of the local context might differ, bureaucratic processes, administrative routines, and their characteristics are comparable across domains. Agile work principles and methods are universally adopted (Beck et al. 2001) and have been adapted to complex problems other than software development worldwide. Even though their concrete application needs to be adapted to each project, I, therefore, believe that the model developed in this study can be utilized, expanded, and tested in other bureaucratic and managerial settings as well.

7 | Future Research

In multiple crises, strategic planning and rigid administrative routines have reached their limits (Bryson 2021). The robustness of planning and decision-making processes is questioned when it comes to complex problems of innovation creation or the response to never-before-seen problems. The accommodation processes described here have become far more the rule than the exception. We lack, however, a theory on how these rather transformative changes can be implemented in public bureaucracies. Future research might focus on how ambidextrous public bureaucracies can remain true to their administrative and legal principles while at the same time exploring new ways of working that help to solve problems in-house instead of outsourcing them to market vendors.

Lindblom (1959, 1979) has suggested the need for iterative planning or successive limited comparisons to find the most appropriate way for action. Similarly, Bendor (1995) suggested a model of muddling through using incremental search and seriality so that, like agile work practices, civil servants gain empirical insights and can change their behavior or the project goals they are working on. Kowalkowski et al. (2012) have shown that these types of agile incrementalism are well adopted in other industries. Future research can focus on this gap in the public administration literature and aim to understand how bureaucracies might be able to adapt a model where they embrace incrementalism, learn from the insights, and adapt their bureaucratic routines and administrative work practices accordingly to achieve ambidexterity.

An important research stream that seems underdeveloped in the literature focuses on how civil servants can develop an agile mindset or a growth mindset and abandon a fixed mindset that rejects innovations and is generally hostile toward innovations. Insights from the positive organizational behavior or positive organizational scholarship literature might help to understand how these types of innovation-friendly mindsets can be developed (Dweck and Yeager 2019). One necessary precondition might be a servant, transformative, or host leader mindset that supports experimentation with new methods and work practices, even if they are alien to public bureaucracies (Greenleaf 2003). An agile mindset might help public managers to explore alternatives to administrative routines that might then be sequentially or simultaneously implemented in an ambidextrous bureaucracy.

Based on the insights of this article, future research should also focus on the development of measures to resolve the ambivalence between line-based administrative routines and agile work practices to allow for ambidexterity. One pre-requisite might be the assessment of how agile work practices can contribute to the increase of administrative effectiveness, innovativeness, the satisfaction of leadership, employees, and stakeholders, and the quality and efficiency of service delivery in public bureaucracies. At this stage, these research insights still seem to be underdeveloped in the literature.

At the center of many of these observations is the lived difference between a learning culture and the zero-failure culture in public bureaucracies. The first ideas were already published by Tangsgaard and Fischer (2024) and Fischer and Weißmüller (2024). While many of the structural elements, like innovation labs, have tried to establish experimentation spaces to fail and make mistakes in a protected environment, it seems that they were not able to actually transfer the culture of experimentation and thereby learning from one's mistakes early. There is little research so far on how to establish a learning culture in public bureaucracies (Lavé 2009).

Additional research is necessary to understand how agile work practices can be adapted to administrative routines or replaced without losing the original intent of either one of them. Here again, agile leadership is a necessary precondition to provide the psychological safety (Edmondson and Lei 2014). Can public bureaucracies remain stable in their administrative routines and at the same time evolve into a more responsive form of agile governance?

Acknowledgments

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

References

- Alkaabi, S., J. Hazzam, S. Wilkins, and S. Dan. 2024. "The Influences of Ambidexterity, New Public Management and Innovation on the Public Service Quality of Government Organizations." *Public Performance and Management Review* 47, no. 5: 1110–1137.
- Archibald, M. M., R. C. Ambagtsheer, M. G. Casey, and M. Lawless. 2019. "Using Zoom Videoconferencing for Qualitative Data Collection: Perceptions and Experiences of Researchers and Participants." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 18: 1609406919874596.
- Baxter, D., N. Dacre, H. Dong, and S. Ceylan. 2023. "Institutional Challenges in Agile Adoption: Evidence From a Public Sector IT Project." *Government Information Quarterly* 40, no. 4: 101858.
- Beck, K., M. Beedle, A. van Bennekum, et al. 2001. "The Agile Manifesto." Agile Alliance. <https://agilemanifesto.org/>.
- Bendor, J. 1995. "A Model of Muddling Through." *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 4: 819–840.

- Bryson, J. M. 2021. "The Future of Strategizing by Public and Nonprofit Organizations." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54, no. 1: 9–18.
- Campanelli, A. S., and F. S. Parreiras. 2015. "Agile Methods Tailoring—A Systematic Literature Review." *Journal of Systems and Software* 110: 85–100.
- Cannaerts, N., J. Segers, and R. Warsen. 2020. "Ambidexterity and Public Organizations: A Configurational Perspective." *Public Performance and Management Review* 43, no. 3: 688–712.
- Carstensen, H. V., and C. Bason. 2012. "Powering Collaborative Policy Innovation: Can Innovation Labs Help?" *Innovation Journal* 17, no. 1: 2.
- Clark, S. M., D. A. Gioia, D. J. Ketchen Jr., and J. B. Thomas. 2010. "Transitional Identity as a Facilitator of Organizational Identity Change During a Merger." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 55, no. 3: 397–438.
- Corley, K. G., and D. A. Gioia. 2011. "Building Theory About Theory Building: What Constitutes a Theoretical Contribution?" *Academy of Management Review* 36, no. 1: 12–32.
- Dong, H., N. Dacre, D. Baxter, and S. Ceylan. 2024. "What Is Agile Project Management? Developing a New Definition Following a Systematic Literature Review." *Project Management Journal* 55, no. 6: 87569728241254095.
- Dweck, C. S., and D. S. Yeager. 2019. "Mindsets: A View From Two Eras." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 14, no. 3: 481–496.
- Edmondson, A. C., and Z. Lei. 2014. "Psychological Safety: The History, Renaissance, and Future of an Interpersonal Construct." *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 1, no. 1: 23–43.
- Fischer, C., and K. S. Weißmüller. 2024. "What Determines Civil Servants' Error Response? Evidence From a Conjoint Experiment." *American Review of Public Administration* 54, no. 8: 747–770.
- Foster, J. L. 1990. "Bureaucratic Rigidity Revisited." *Social Science Quarterly* 71, no. 2: 223.
- Gibson, C. B., and J. Birkinshaw. 2004. "The Antecedents, Consequences, and Mediating Role of Organizational Ambidexterity." *Academy of Management Journal* 47, no. 2: 209–226.
- Gilgun, J. F. 2019. "Deductive Qualitative Analysis and Grounded Theory: Sensitizing Concepts and Hypothesis-Testing." In *The SAGE Handbook of Current Developments in Grounded Theory*, 107–122. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Gioia, D. A., K. G. Corley, and A. Hamilton. 2013. "Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology." *Organizational Research Methods* 16, no. 1: 15–31.
- Glaser, B., and A. Strauss. 2014. "Applying Grounded Theory." *Grounded Theory Review* 13, no. 1: 46–50.
- Gomm, R., P. Foster, and M. Hammersley. 2000. "Case Study and Generalization." In *Case Study Method*, 98–115. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Greenleaf, R. K. 2003. "The Servant-Leader Within: A Transformative Path." Paulist Press.
- Greve, C., N. Ejersbo, P. Lægrend, and L. H. Rykkja. 2020. "Unpacking Nordic Administrative Reforms: Agile and Adaptive Governments." *International Journal of Public Administration* 43, no. 8: 697–710.
- Guba, E. G. 1981. "Criteria for Assessing the Trustworthiness of Naturalistic Inquiries." *ECTJ* 29, no. 2: 75–91.
- Gulick, L. 1937. "Notes on the Theory of Organization." In *Papers on the Science of Administration*, edited by L. Gulick and L. Urwick, 3–45. Institute of Public Administration.
- Hamblin, R., G. Plimmer, K. Badar, and K. Lasthuizen. 2024. "Organizational Ambidexterity: A Bibliometric Review and Framework for Future Public Administration Research." *Public Performance and Management Review* 47, no. 5: 1073–1109.
- Kattel, R., and V. Takala. 2023. "The Case of the UK'S Government Digital Service: The Professionalisation of a Paradigmatic Public Digital Agency." *Digital Government: Research and Practice* 4, no. 4: 1–15.
- Kautz, K., T. H. Johanson, and A. Uldahl. 2014. "The Perceived Impact of the Agile Development and Project Management Method Scrum on Information Systems and Software Development Productivity." *Australasian Journal of Information Systems* 18, no. 3: 303–315.
- Kowalkowski, C., D. Kindström, T. B. Alejandro, S. Brege, and S. Biggemann. 2012. "Service Infusion as Agile Incrementalism in Action." *Journal of Business Research* 65, no. 6: 765–772.
- Lavé, J. 2009. "The Practice of Learning." In *Contemporary Theories of Learning*, 208–216. Routledge.
- Lindblom, C. E. 1959. "The Science of Muddling Through." *Public Administration Review* 19: 79–88.
- Lindblom, C. E. 1979. "Still Muddling, Not Yet Through." *Public Administration Review* 39, no. 6: 517–526.
- Looks, H., J. Fangmann, J. Thomaschewski, and E.-M. Schön. 2021. "Towards a Process Model for Agile Transformation in e-Government Projects." *Journal of Information Systems Engineering and Management* 6, no. 1: 1–7.
- Maxwell, J. A. 2010. "Using Numbers in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, no. 6: 475–482.
- Maxwell, J. A., and M. Chmiel. 2014. "Generalization in and From Qualitative Analysis." In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, vol. 7, 540–553. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Meier, K. J., and L. J. O'Toole Jr. 2009. "The Proverbs of New Public Management: Lessons From an Evidence-Based Research Agenda." *American Review of Public Administration* 39, no. 1: 4–22.
- Mergel, I. 2016. "Agile Innovation Management in Government: A Research Agenda." *Government Information Quarterly* 33, no. 3: 516–523.
- Mergel, I. 2019. "Digital Service Teams in Government." *Government Information Quarterly* 36, no. 4: 101389.
- Mergel, I. 2023. "Social Affordances of Agile Governance." *Public Administration Review* 84: 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13787>.
- Mergel, I., N. Edelman, and N. Haug. 2019. "Defining Digital Transformation: Results From Expert Interviews." *Government Information Quarterly* 36, no. 4: 101385.
- Mergel, I., S. Ganapati, and A. B. Whitford. 2021. "Agile: A New Way of Governing." *Public Administration Review* 81, no. 1: 161–165.
- Mergel, I., Y. Gong, and J. Bertot. 2018. *Agile Government: Systematic Literature Review and Future Research*. Vol. 35, 291–298. Elsevier.
- Monteiro, P., and P. S. Adler. 2022. "Bureaucracy for the 21st Century: Clarifying and Expanding Our View of Bureaucratic Organization." *Academy of Management Annals* 16, no. 2: 427–475.
- Muratovski, G. 2017. "Tour of Duty: A Conversation With Mitchell Sipus—Presidential Innovation Fellow at the White House." *Journal of Design, Business and Society* 3, no. 1: 7–20.
- Neumann, O., P.-C. Kirklies, and C. Schott. 2024. "Adopting Agile in Government: A Comparative Case Study." *Public Management Review* 26, no. 12: 3692–3714.
- O'Reilly, C. A., III, and M. L. Tushman. 2013. "Organizational Ambidexterity: Past, Present, and Future." *Academy of Management Perspectives* 27, no. 4: 324–338.
- Page, S. B., J. M. Bryson, B. C. Crosby, D. Seo, and M. M. Stone. 2021. "Ambidexterity in Cross-Sector Collaborations Involving Public Organizations." *Public Performance and Management Review* 44, no. 6: 1161–1190.

- Parker, D. W., M. Holesgrove, and R. Pathak. 2015. "Improving Productivity With Self-Organised Teams and Agile Leadership." *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management* 64, no. 1: 112–128.
- Piaget, J. 1963. "The Attainment of Invariants and Reversible Operations in the Development of Thinking." *Social Research* 30, no. 3: 283–299.
- Ragin, C. C. 2009. *Reflections on Casing and Case-Oriented Research*. Vol. 31, 522–534. Sage Publications.
- Raisch, S., and J. Birkinshaw. 2008. "Organizational Ambidexterity: Antecedents, Outcomes, and Moderators." *Journal of Management* 34, no. 3: 375–409.
- Rigby, D. K., J. Sutherland, and A. Noble. 2018. "Agile at Scale." *Harvard Business Review* 96, no. 3: 88–96.
- Rigby, D. K., J. Sutherland, and H. Takeuchi. 2016. "The Secret History of Agile Innovation." *Harvard Business Review* 94, no. 5: 40–50.
- Simon, H. 1946. "The Proverbs of Administration." *Public Administration Review* 6: 53–67.
- Smith, E., and T. Umans. 2015. "Organizational Ambidexterity at the Local Government Level: The Effects of Managerial Focus." *Public Management Review* 17, no. 6: 812–833.
- Snowden, D. J., and M. E. Boone. 2007. "A Leader's Framework for Decision Making." *Harvard Business Review* 85, no. 11: 68.
- Soe, R.-M., and W. Drechsler. 2018. "Agile Local Governments: Experimentation Before Implementation." *Government Information Quarterly* 35, no. 2: 323–335.
- Tangsgaard, E. R., and C. Fischer. 2024. "Disentangling Risk Management and Error Management in the Public Sector: A Theoretical Framework." *American Review of Public Administration* 54, no. 6: 540–554.
- Tönurist, P., R. Kattel, and V. Lember. 2017. "Innovation Labs in the Public Sector: What They Are and What They Do?" *Public Management Review* 19, no. 10: 1455–1479. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2017.1287939>.
- Tripp, J. F., and D. J. Armstrong. 2018. "Agile Methodologies: Organizational Adoption Motives, Tailoring, and Performance." *Journal of Computer Information Systems* 58, no. 2: 170–179.
- Williams, D. W. 2000. "Reinventing the Proverbs of Government." *Public Administration Review* 60, no. 6: 522–534.
- Yanow, D., and P. Schwartz-Shea. 2015. *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*. Routledge.