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Coping with organizational changes due to executives' succession: the role of personal and contextual resources for job crafting

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Coping with Organizational Changes Due to Executives' Succession: The Role of Personal and Contextual Resources for Job Crafting

Design/methodology/approach. This study adopts a deductive qualitative approach. Data for this study were collected through 47 interviews conducted with public managers working at the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

Purpose. Each time there is a government change (indeed a very frequent scenario for Italy), the leadership team of strategic offices and operations in the public administration is usually replaced. Using the job crafting theoretical framework, the purpose of this study is to investigate how the uncertainty generated by changes in the leadership teams of public offices shapes the public managers' coping strategies.

Findings. The results of our study suggest that job crafting – a proactive approach aimed at customizing the content and nature of one's job – represents a frequent strategy that public managers undertake, drawing on the personal and contextual resources at their disposal, to reduce perceived uncertainty associated with manager transition.

Originality/value. Questions related to the positive or negative impact of managerial transitions generated conflicting opinions in the literature. We demonstrate that job crafting could represent a valuable strategy adopted by executive managers to cope with increasing uncertainty associated with managerial transition due to government change, especially when these strategies enable to gain valuable personal and contextual resources for managers.

Keywords: job crafting; coping; organizational change; managerial transitions, public managers.

INTRODUCTION

Italy is one of the countries with the most frequent managerial succession in Prime Minister and key ministry roles in the world. Since 1946, the average length of the Italian government has been of 14 months (Cross-National Time-Series Data Archive)¹. Although changes in government are somehow positive, as they bring to a country a new leadership team, new energies and resources that could help accelerating reforms and changes (Horowitz, Hoff, & Milanovic, 2009), frequent political transitions enhance the perception of instability among all different stakeholders. Every time a new government is elected, there is a rapid replacement (the so-called spoils system) of all top executives and leadership teams of public offices. If not managed properly, these frequent transitions can generate severe problems in the daily activities of the country.

So far, there has been scant systematic investigation of how the changes generated by managerial transitions affect the activities of public offices (Homberg, Vogel, & Weiherl, 2019; Wang & Sun, 2022) and less is known about the consequences faced by individuals working in these offices when a new leadership team is nominated (Rafferty & Jimmieson, 2017). Our paper tries to examine this issue. More specifically, we aim at understanding *how public managers cope with the changes caused by managerial transitions due to government change, and how the availability of personal and contextual resources shapes this process*.

To shed light on these issues, we draw on recent theoretical advancements in management suggesting that individuals can react to changes by assuming a proactive approach, i.e., by adopting specific strategies that can enhance their control over the situation (e.g., Tummers, Bekkers, Vink, & Musheno, 2015). More specifically, we rely on the job crafting framework (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) as it elucidates a series of coping strategy

¹ In this ranking, Italy is located above the other countries of the world, such as Lebanon (which is located at the second position and which has experienced half of Italy's government crises) and Turkey (located at the third position) (Banks & Wilson, 2017).

through which individuals can effectively cope with organizational change (Petrou, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2015; Petrou, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2017). More specifically, job crafting refers to the individual process of customizing the physical, relational, and cognitive boundaries of one's job to enhance control over it and to favor a better alignment of the characteristics of the job with personal preferences, identities, and skills (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Prior research suggests that enacting in job crafting behaviours represents a critical strategy that individuals can adopt to cope with a changing work environment (Van den Heuvel, Demerouti, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2010). When facing uncertain and ambiguous situations at work, individuals can decide to redesign some aspects of their jobs in the attempt to reduce the frustration and discomfort associated with situations that are out of their control (Petrou, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2018). Indeed, prior research has shown that in complex work environments, job crafting provides a sense of control and helps employees acquire important resources and adjust better to the changing context (Petrou *et al.*, 2018). This is particularly true in less prescribed jobs, like those of managers, as the lack of formal and rigid prescriptions gives individuals more freedom to customize the job as they prefer (Kira, van Eijnatten, & Balkin, 2010). However, studies focusing on job crafting behaviors implemented by managerial figures are scarce in the literature (Shin, Hur, Park, & Hwang, 2020).

In this paper, we use a deductive qualitative methodological approach (Azungah, 2018), through semi-structured interviews conducted with public managers affected by uncertainty generated by government change. We believe that our study can contribute to the existing literature in many important ways. First, this study aims at investigating the behavioral and cognitive responses enacted by public managers when they experience a situation of uncertainty, as the one generated by political instability – an increasing situation for many countries in the world. This topic has been marginally studied so far, especially with

the focus on job crafting that could represent an important approach providing adequate answers on how better cope with such situations (e.g., Petrou *et al.*, 2017; 2018). Moreover, our study contributes to advancing prior research on the antecedents of job crafting (Buonocore, de Gennaro, Russo, & Salvatore, 2020; Hu, McCune Stein, Mao, & Yan, 2021; Huyghebaert-Zouaghi, Berjot, Cougot, & Gillet, 2021; Yoon, Kim, & Eom, 2019), by exploring how perceptions of uncertainty can influence job crafting behaviors (Barclay, Kiefer, & El Mansouri, 2022; Chen & Tang, 2021). Finally, using a qualitative approach in the study of job crafting is an important methodological advancement, as research on the topic is predominantly quantitative (Zhang & Parker, 2019), therefore unable to provide in-depth insights into the process underlying the adoption of these proactive behaviors (Lazazzara, Tims, & de Gennaro, 2020). The practical implications of this study are geared toward identifying new ways for management to manage uncertainty (see Petrou *et al.*, 2018) in order to channel proactive job crafting behaviors by subordinates toward desired directions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The moments that precede and follow a managerial transition may have disruptive effects on individuals and organizations, as the uncertainty regarding who will be the newly nominated leadership team – including what their ideas and/or leadership style might be – can nurture rumors and false information, distract employees from their regular job and deplete their cognitive resources (Andrews & Boyne, 2012). Indeed, prior research has shown that one of the major sources of uncertainty causing high stress is the lack of information on the change and how it may impact the jobs and resources of organizational actors (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). Resources are important to people as Conservation of Resources theory has demonstrated as resources enable individuals to achieve the things that matter to them in their lives (Hobfoll, 1989). As a consequence, individuals tend to experience high psychological

distress when facing situations that could put them at risk of losing important personal and/or contextual resources (Hobfoll, 2002).

Organizational researchers have identified several coping strategies that individuals can use to reduce the negative consequences and stress associated with changes (see Callan, Terry, & Schweitzer, 1994). Coping strategies represent a set of cognitive and behavioural actions and decisions that individuals undertake with the goal of minimizing the external demands generated by the stressful situation and maximizing the resources at their disposal that could be mobilized to cope with the situation (Ito & Brotheridge, 2003). In the public sector, despite the lack of a comprehensive analysis of the variety of coping strategies that individuals can adopt (Tummers *et al.*, 2015), some promising studies have shown that public managers tend to cope with uncertainty by readjusting their priorities and focusing on their core activities (Tummers, 2017). A key aspect for the successful implementation of coping strategies are the resources that individuals can mobilize in this process (Van den Brande, Baillien, Elst, De Witte, & Godderis, 2019). Prior research distinguishes between personal and contextual resources (Hobfoll, 2002; ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Personal resources are located within an individual and refer to personal characteristics and traits like optimism, resilience, hardiness, and emotional intelligence, which are useful to make an individual capable of dealing with the consequences of stressful events and framing these situations in more positive terms (Callan *et al.*, 1994). Contextual resources are located outside the individual and refer to the social network, supportive relationships, welfare benefits, and opportunities for development that an individual can find in the social environment (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012).

An important generative behavior that has the potential to make individuals accumulating and gaining important personal and contextual resources is job crafting (Chen & Tang, 2021). Job crafting is a job design process consisting of making strategic changes to

one's role and to the tasks performed in that role to customize the job and make it more aligned with personal preferences, identities, and skills (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) described the job crafting process as a bottom-up behavioral process through which individuals seek to customize three important boundaries of their job, namely, the task, relational, and cognitive dimension. Task crafting is a process through which individuals transform – by adding, reducing, or removing – their core activities to match more their personal preferences, abilities, and inclinations. Relational crafting is the process through which individuals seek to enhance the quality of their social interactions with colleagues, supervisors, and/or clients to experience meaningful relationships at work. Finally, cognitive crafting is the process through which individuals seek to reshape the perception and scope of their job to emphasize its value and potential contribution to the self, the organization, and the entire community.

Scholars converge in suggesting that job crafting is a form of proactive behavior that implies purposely changing the characteristics of their jobs, with the goal of increasing or reducing the demands and/or personal and contextual resources associated with their role (Tims & Bakker, 2010). In the case of an unpredictable and/or high-stressful situations, individuals likely react in a defensive way with the goal of minimizing external demands. Therefore, they could decide to drop some activities and/or turning down new assignments (Kira, Balkin, & Sun, 2012). When a situation is perceived as more predictable or less stressful, individuals may have more cognitive resources and become more open to assume a proactive approach that could lead them to modify their work in order to incorporate additional tasks and activities in their role (Lazazzara *et al.*, 2020).

Although this is an increasingly recurring phenomenon, the literature has overlooked the impact of organizational change and managerial transition on the functioning of public offices (Homberg *et al.*, 2019; Wang & Sun, 2022) and particularly on the behavioral

reactions of individuals concerned by such changes (Rafferty & Jimmieson, 2017).

Responding to recent calls in the literature for studies that analyze contexts in which managerial turnover is an everyday phenomenon (e.g., Løkke & Sørensen, 2021), we have used in this paper the job crafting framework to analyze how individuals react when facing uncertainty generated by change associated with managerial transition (Chen & Tang, 2021; Petrou *et al.*, 2017; 2018; Vakola, Petrou, & Katsaros, 2021). Drawing on this theoretical perspective, we intend to respond to the following research questions: *What behaviors do public managers enact when coping with uncertainty at work generated by managerial transition? What role personal and contextual resources play in this context? Would personal and contextual resources enable public managers to engage in job crafting behaviors?*

METHOD

Context

This study adopts a deductive research approach, focusing in depth on a single case (Pearse, 2019). Data for this study were collected through interviews conducted with public managers working at the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM). The PCM is a critical administrative office within the National public administration. It supports the Italian President of the Council of Ministers in exercising the functions of political orientation and coordination of other administrative offices. The structure of the PCM is hierarchical, with multiple levels of authority (Gagliarducci & de Gennaro, 2020). The top of the structure includes the Prime Minister and the leadership team, who is in charge of the management of strategic offices and departments, directing and coordinating various political and institutional areas (e.g., legal and legislative affairs, accounting standards, etc.) and providing constant support to the activities of the Prime Minister. At a lower level, first-line managers coordinate general offices, while second-line managers coordinate operational offices. Finally, employees work on daily operations and tasks. PCM personnel include around 4,000 people,

including 300 managers; they are the most important actors of the administrative machinery that ensure the good functioning of the basic operations of the nation (Gagliarducci & de Gennaro, 2020).

The PCM represents an interesting context to study since it is the area mostly subjected to the spoils system as each Prime Minister brings in his or her leadership team. The spoils system is a political practice, established in the United States in the 1800s, whereby the top management of the public administration is replaced when a new government is elected. The rationale is to ensure a fit between political power and administrative management; indeed, the spoils system provides that the new leadership team is empowered to entrust the leadership of the public administration to executives who can support the achievement of government objectives. In Italy, and specifically in the PCM, the spoils system involves senior executives who have held top management positions in public administration and who automatically turn and change office and/or assignment 90 days after the appointment of the new government.

Data Collection

To answer our research questions, we used a deductive qualitative approach (Azungah, 2018), using an organizing framework that provides in advance two main themes, namely coping strategies and resources and job crafting, conceived as a starting list (Miles & Huberman, 1994), in order to analyze some key concepts in the data. The deductive approach differs from other qualitative approaches as it establishes a starting point, based on the study of the literature reference, and it enables to analyze data based on the research questions (Pearse, 2019).

Before starting the qualitative – predominantly interview-based – study, the research team retrospectively analyzed the changes in the structure of the PCM since 2000 (e.g., organization chart, division of offices, and areas of competence) to develop an in-depth

understanding of the functioning and organizational configuration adopted in recent years. Moreover, formal documents, such as appointment decrees and job descriptions, gave the research team an overview of the organizational structure of the PCM and the nature of the activities performed. Then, we organized two focus groups, involving 8-12 executives in top positions in the PCM who were different actors than those participating in the qualitative interviews, lasting about 2 hours each, to develop initial understandings on how they were perceiving the managerial transitions and typical reaction to this frequent condition. The insights developed in the focus groups were used as an exploratory avenue to understand the logic and functioning of these offices and dynamics that usually occurred before and after a government election, allowing us to effectively “enter” the administration. Then, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 47 PCM managers of different departments (e.g., Department for European Policies, Department for Institutional Reforms, Department for Equal Opportunity, etc.), ranging from senior executives to first- and second-line managers, operating in Rome. Semi-structured interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes and were conducted in the interviewees’ offices by two researchers. The mean age of the respondents was 55.2 (SD=7.34), the mean length of employment in that position was 13.2 years (SD=6.23), and 47% of respondents were female.

Coding and Analysing

Following the Gioia method for qualitative analysis (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), the study’s approach depended on a generic research statement: “We intended to examine the impact of uncertainty caused by managerial transitions on public managers’ behaviors and the coping strategies adopted to cope with this frequent situation for the Italian country.”

Accordingly, during the interviews, the research team did not specifically mention the concept of job crafting.

The analysis process involved three phases. In the first phase, the focus was on finding recurring themes in interviews based on the respondents' answers. The notes from the interviews – compared across the raters – were uploaded into Dedoose, an online software program for qualitative data analysis. To analyze the data, a starting list of *a priori* categories was generated in line with the relevant literature (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, two researchers independently coded all the transcribed interviews and subsequently compared personal codes by engaging in a discussion when disagreements emerged. Cohen's κ coefficient was used to estimate the level of agreement between the coders, following an iterative approach (Locke, 2000) and continuously iterating between the data and the emerging conceptualizations. By comparing codes and engaging in discussion when disagreements emerged, the final consensus reached the value of $\kappa=.90$, reflecting good agreement between the raters. Subsequently, patterns were discerned in the data, with the aim of bringing out concepts and relationships and then formulating them in theoretically relevant terms, giving particular attention to nascent concepts lacking adequate references in the literature. Once we identified all the relevant first-order codes/terms and the second-order concepts/themes, we assembled them into a data structure (Figure 1).

[Figure 1 about here]

RESULTS

Consistently with the preliminary insights emerged in the focus groups, managers talked about many interesting strategies and actions illustrating the way they coped with the uncertainty associated with managerial transitions following a change of government. Although terms like 'coping strategies', 'coping resources', and 'job crafting' were not explicitly mentioned by the participants, their answers indicate that managers do not typically follow a conservative "wait-and-see" approach, but rather they try to proactively manage the transition to facilitate the arrival of the newly nominated leadership team to ensure a smooth

transition, but above all the continuity and good functioning of the operations. The intersection of these three literatures – namely, coping strategies, personal and contextual resources, and job crafting – provided an interpretive framework for illustrate our findings, as represented in Figure 2, and discussed in the rest of the paper.

[Figure 2 about here]

Personal Resources and Job Crafting

The findings indicate that managers strongly rely on their personal resources (i.e., personality, self-efficacy, self-control, resilience, prior experience, emotional intelligence) to cope with uncertainty associated with government change. These resources enabled the managers to make sense of the situation, frame it in more positive terms and reconsider the nature and meaning of their work, leading them to not lose motivation and assuming proactive behaviors that match the description of typical job crafting strategies (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). This is consistent with prior research showing that personal resources are an important predictor of job crafting, as they enable individuals to feel better equipped to successfully craft their jobs according to personal hopes and aspirations (Tims & Bakker, 2010). In the following sections, we illustrate how personal resources enabled managers to engage in task, relational, and cognitive crafting behaviors.

Task Crafting

Task crafting is the process through which individuals make adjustments to the tasks performed or to the nature of the activities performed each day with the ultimate goal of making their job more aligned with their personal skills and inclinations (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Our findings suggest that task crafting was a frequent strategy adopted also with the intention to manage the uncertainty associated with the managerial transition – especially when in possession of important personal resources such as a long experience in the role. The following excerpts from interviews with a first- and a second-line manager

illustrate the association between the use of personal resources and the enactment of task crafting.

Every political election requires adjustment and reorganization: it changes the way we set up our work, the way we divide roles and responsibilities, in short, the entire organization of the office [...]. Luckily, I have sufficient experience and abilities to manage my work even without waiting for clear indications from the new Head. I often initiate new tasks compared to those I should carry out based on my formal job requirements. For instance, during a recent change of government, I proposed to the team the adoption of an innovative evaluation system that could help us receive instant feedback on our work and understand more easily the adjustments make to stay on track (example of task crafting from respondent #19, second-line manager).

In the last 7 years I changed my role five times, and this was destabilizing for me. Every time I started a new activity, a few months later I had to change my job and my tasks because of the new Presidency's directive [...]. If you would ask me what enable me to go through all these challenges without losing focus and motivation, the answer is easy: resilience. I use it to not give up and find energies to reorganize my life in the face of problems. For example, to motivate myself during these situations I seek to narrow down my focus and deal only with the activities that I find interesting and motivating to me, avoiding as much as possible boring tasks (example of task crafting from respondent #12, first-line manager).

In the first quote, the possession of prior experience and specific abilities on the job enabled a manager to being autonomous in her job and continuing introducing innovations while also waiting for the new supervisor to get into his or her new position. The second quote indicates that task crafting can also occur by filtering the several tasks at hand, choosing (when possible) those that are more challenging than others, and this capacity is possible also thanks to a strong personal resilience.

Relational Crafting

Relational crafting is the process through which individuals make specific and conscious decisions in their work routine to seek enhancing the quality of interactions with their colleagues (Huyghebaert-Zouaghi *et al.*, 2021). We found that, by using different personal resources, more related to the social and relational sphere, such as cunning, sociability, and empathy, managers claimed to be able to modify the relational boundaries of their jobs and

thus enhance the quality of their relationships within the team also during challenging times as the one preceding or following the leadership team transition.

It happens that we could not have the leadership team in charge of its function for months, and not having a guide often means not even having a clear direction [...]. The most sociable colleagues among us, to thin out uncertainty and facilitate the execution of the work in this “limbo”, created an online blog, inviting also retired colleagues to join, where everyone had a chance to ask questions to solve problems and meet new people. We also organized a dinner together with old and new employees to keep up the morale, especially of younger colleagues who were no used to such leadership vacuum (example of relational crafting from respondent #1, second-line manager).

A few years ago, in the office I had been working since my arrival, we spent 2-3 months working on nothing than ordinary activities, waiting for new director to come [...]. The friendliest colleagues among us then took advantage of this “quiet” time to strengthen and improve the social bonds in the team. For example, they created informal groups to manage the activities that needed to be performed until the new leadership team would be in charge. That helped all of us to feel better and to not lose motivation in what we do (example of relational crafting from respondent #45, second-line manager).

The above quotes describe changes to the relational aspect of work, wherein people who possess good social resources (e.g., those who are more sociable, affable, or cordial) can have a greater impact on the job by favoring the emergence of formal or, more often, informal connections, or simply interacting more frequently to make the climate at work more enjoyable – with positive repercussion on the motivation and productivity as many teams were able to continue performing their tasks even without a formal leadership appointed.

Cognitive Crafting

Cognitive crafting is the mental process through which individuals seek to find a different, and more positive meaning to their job (Buonocore *et al.*, 2020). We found that almost all the managers participating in our study relied on their mental strength to cope with this uncertainty and find a positive meaning in their situation. Specifically, the strategies shared were good examples of cognitive job crafting, which consists of reflecting on the importance of one's job for the community and society. The following interview excerpts give good examples:

We have lost count of the number of times we are forced to rethink and reorganize our work due to a change in the government [...] What is really helpful for me to cope with this frustrating situation is the positive attitude and consideration that I have of my job. I consider it fundamental for citizens...we are important for the people as we make their lives being smoother and we help them to reach their personal goals and aspirations (example of cognitive crafting from respondent #7, second-line manager).

Sometimes I feel stressed, as there is great uncertainty about the future of my department. I wonder what will be the reorganization that the next political party will bring to our offices, if any. This creates a sense of frustration, but I am optimistic and resilient. I know we have survived to so many changes of government so far; I know our office is important and that with our work we contribute to the good functioning of the country [...] this helps me to find my direction and to not give up (example of cognitive crafting from respondent #16, second-line manager).

Personal resources such as optimism and positive regard help managers to focus more specifically on the meaning and purpose of their job, therefore favoring the adoption of proactive behaviours that are instrumental to cope with an uncertain situation. Thinking about how one's daily job contributes to the welfare and the life of so many citizens and represents a motivational lever capable of boosting one's motivation that ultimately enhance the quality of the work even in times of uncertainty.

Contextual Resources and Job Crafting

Contextual resources are located in the work and social environment wherein individuals live on a daily basis, and they include specific conditions like employment type, job security, social network, and different forms of social support, including affect, advice, and respect (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Our findings indicate that contextual resources are an important enabler of job crafting behaviors. This is in line with prior research showing that the possibility to engage in job crafting is influenced by the context wherein an individual is embedded (Kim, Im, Qu, & NamKoong, 2018). In the following sections, we illustrate the findings on how contextual resources enabled managers to engage in task, relational, and cognitive crafting behaviors.

Task Crafting

Insights from interviews suggest that public managers were likely to take steps to modify the content of their work especially when they felt supported and cared for by other colleagues.

The following two excerpts report examples of how social support can enhance workers' personal capabilities to change the nature and boundaries of their job (i.e., task crafting):

The strategies followed by each new government are completely different than the previous ones, and we often find ourselves in the position of committing to a strategy we have no sufficient information about [...] Thanks to the advice of senior colleagues, who have lived more often than us a similar scenario, we can cope with these frequent changes more constructively so as to be able to ensure business continuity [...] Sometimes, thanks to their support, we are also able to predict some of the changes we will need to implement at work and to modify our activities ahead of time on the basis of the new priorities of the administration (example of task crafting from respondent #14, first-line manager).

When we are in a stalemate, it is essential that senior executives can help us understanding the best way to "survive". In the past, it happened that the senior executives, before leaving the office, assigned some members of the team greater autonomy in carrying out the work, encouraging everyone to give their best to the administration even in the absence of an official leadership (example of task crafting from respondent #29, first-line manager).

Connected to this latter example, another participant told us that the support of senior managers was fundamental to not get lost in times of transition. For example, a senior executive advised some members of the team to not just focus on their tasks at hands, but to be curious and participate to training courses, even on a voluntary basis, to acquire the skills suitable for carrying out their duties autonomously even in the absence of clear indications from the new leadership team (respondent #27, senior executive). These examples confirm that the social support received by senior colleagues plays a crucial role in providing the possibility for managers to perform their work effectively even during a very uncertain moment as the one associated with managerial transition.

Relational Crafting

Our findings suggest that managers often seek to cope with uncertainty associated with changes in the leadership teams by creating and strengthening social bonds with colleagues at

different hierarchical levels, leveraging on their professional networks. Indeed, cooperative relationships are developed with the goal of generating positive outcomes, such as enhancing the readiness, commitment, and acceptance to changes. The following two excerpts illustrate examples of how contextual resources, namely the use of social networks and the possibility to participate in decision-making process at work, enabled the managers to engage in relational crafting:

We often experience changes of government or situations of stalemate in which we do not even know for whom we will work after the election [...] In the meanwhile, we do not wait passively the evolution of the situation, but we try to create new teams, based on friendships and personal affinities among colleagues, with the goal of deciding how to organize the activities in this time. It's a nice way to team up and work with people with whom you share thoughts, opinions, and significant work experiences (example of relational crafting from respondent #24, second-line manager).

Sharing the decision-making processes among all of us, without paying too much attention to the status or hierarchy, helped us to understand which directions to take, what activities to implement... in other words, it helped us to understand how to proceed and cope with what it seemed a long period of vacuum during which we would have not had any guidance or leader because of disagreement on whom should have been nominated as head of the office! (example of relational crafting from respondent #31, first-line manager).

The possibility of creating new social relationships or strengthening the existing ones helped the managers to maintain a good motivation and performance despite the high uncertainty to which the team was exposed because of political transitions, and it helped the team to find a common direction and a shared understanding of the situation.

Cognitive Crafting

Finally, the managers participating to this study revealed that it was very difficult for them to accept and handle with changes that were not needed or requested by anyone – nor them or the citizens – but that were imposed by external events related to political dynamics. In these circumstances, developing a collective sense of purpose was an effective coping strategy to maintain a good motivation at work. Despite finding a higher purpose to one's job is often the result of a personal introspective process, the social environment can also play a crucial role

in promoting a more positive perception of one's profession through a collective sensemaking process. It is evident in the following excerpts that describe the importance of engaging in shared reflections with peers and supervisors:

When there is a change of government, I'm scared. I'm scared we need to start all over again and give up with current projects. I'm scared that the huge amount of work done will no longer be useful [...] However, when I share these worries with my colleagues, I feel reassured, as their talks and lucid assessment of the situation and our profession help me seeing more clearly the contribution of what we do every day. For example, a colleague helped me to reflect on how frequently life requires to change, and work is no exception...that helped me to calm down my anxiety and to think more positively about the forthcoming change in our management team (example of cognitive crafting from respondent #2, second-line manager).

Each time, over the years, I felt lost due to constant and unpredictable changes, a frank dialogue with senior executives had always helped me to become more optimistic and face the uncertainty serenely. Thanks to the wise advises by senior executives, I have been able to focus more on the values and mission of our job, such as the contribution that our work offers to the society. This helped me developing a general positive attitude toward my work and framing the change in more positive terms. For example, I was able to realize how useful could have been the arrival of a new managing team that could help us enhancing the quality of our work (example of cognitive crafting from respondent #4, second-line manager).

As these two excerpts demonstrate, public managers were able to develop a cognitive strategy to cope with the forthcoming changes thanks to support and advice received by senior colleagues and executives, which was extremely helpful to develop a shared sensemaking of the situation and recognise more clearly the importance and ultimate scope of their profession. It also helped the managers to develop a better outlook on the forthcoming change. It is important to note that cognitive crafting, in these circumstances, was not just the result of an individual introspective process but, rather, it was facilitated by an organizational context that provided to managers adequate resources to deal with the changes induced by changes of government.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate public managers' reactions to uncertainty generated by government change and the subsequent replacement of leadership teams due to the spoils system. Through a deductive qualitative study with interviews conducted with 47 managers working at various organizational levels at the Italian PCM, we found evidence that when managers could rely on adequate set of personal and contextual resources, they were more able to cope constructively with uncertainty associated with managerial transition through a series of coping strategies that exemplify job crafting behaviours.

The public sector literature has traditionally dedicated marginal attention towards public managers' behavioural reactions to change processes, and in some sporadic cases, scholars have noticed a "passive" role by individuals in these situations – namely, a challenging work environment negatively affects employees' attitudes (Steen & Schott, 2019). In contrast, the results of our study suggest that job crafting – a proactive approach aimed at customizing the task, relational, and cognitive boundaries of one's role – represents a strategy that public managers likely adopt, when in possession of an adequate set of personal and contextual resources (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012), to reduce perceived uncertainty associated with changes in the government coalitions.

This study offers several contributions to theory and research. First, through qualitative research, we could identify in depth the behaviors held by public managers when coping with increasing uncertainty and frequent changes that could block the flow of their operations and also understand the rationale behind certain actions and decisions. Although the literature is inconclusive regarding the positive or negative consequences associated with managerial transition (Homborg *et al.*, 2019), this study identifies two critical elements that can generate a constructive response to uncertainty: the possession of a broad set of personal and contextual resources that could be mobilized to cope with the situation, and the enactment of job crafting behaviors that enable managers to enhance their sense of control over the

situation. In this paper, we suggest that the change of an administration's leadership team can be perceived more positively by public managers, when they possess a broad set of personal (e.g., self-efficacy, resilience, optimism) and contextual (e.g., social network, social support, organizational climate) resources, resulting in a greater individual proactivity that can favour the improvement of organizational processes, enhance the quality of interpersonal relations, and also developing a shared understanding of the importance of the job and forthcoming change. Interestingly, although each respondent varied in describing the salience of different forms of job crafting, all interviews reported examples related to both task, relational, and cognitive crafting.

With the regard to job crafting literature, it is important to note that research so far has dedicated much attention to individual antecedents, overlooking the contextual and socio-environmental conditions that may enable job crafting behaviors (Buonocore *et al.*, 2020; Hu *et al.*, 2021; Huyghebaert-Zouaghi *et al.*, 2021; Park & Park, 2021; Yoon *et al.*, 2019). Our study shows that uncertainty can generate a motivational boost in stimulating proactive behaviours in order to increase a perception of fit in the workplace (Tims, Derks, & Bakker, 2016). Moreover, we address recent calls (Buonocore *et al.*, 2020) to provide new insights on cognitive job crafting, a dimension that has been examined less in the job crafting literature. We demonstrated that the individuals' perception of uncertainty represents a critical driver of the cognitive crafting process and that this is not just directed towards the understanding of the importance of the job, but it also helps framing the change more positively, especially when it is prompted by a collective sensemaking process. Therefore, our study also responds to recent calls for additional studies investigating the relationship between organizational change and job crafting – especially by highlighting the role of the context (Petrou *et al.*, 2017).

Finally, this study also offers a contribution to the literature on organizational change in the public sector. Although prior research has suggested that, as a sort of defensive approach, public workers at all levels tend to favour stability over change (see Huang, Zhang, Zhang, & Long, 2021), this research suggests that, in some circumstances, managers can assume an active role that can also facilitate the acceptance of change at individual and team level. The use of a deductive qualitative approach has been important to examine more deeply the process leading managers to go beyond their ordinary duties, and for example mentoring younger colleagues or favoring the creation of new teams that could work on some innovations at work, which enabled us to shed light on some steps of processes of change management in the public sector – an area that requires further examination as suggested by de Geus, Ingrams, Tummers, and Pandey (2020).

The findings reported in this study are subject to limitations, such as the peculiarities of the context of this study, in that Italy represents, as mentioned, a country with a remarkably high rate of managerial turnover due to frequent changes in the government (on average one each two years). This limitation may give way to other research on the subject to analyze other organizational realities characterized by the spoils system or, in any case, by a managerial turnover. Furthermore, it is important to note that the participants to this study were characterized by a very high professional level and are part of a strategic body of public administration that is particularly shaped by political dynamics and affairs as it is the office that work in more close contact with the newly elected Prime Minister. In the future, it could be useful to examine the reaction by local authorities or peripheral administrative structures to verify the presence of similar or different dynamics to change and uncertainty associated with political elections. Moreover, our study focusing only on managerial figures at the first and second hierarchical levels could be integrated with a study on employees' perception of uncertainty and their coping responses to change. A final limitation concerns the fact that this

study focuses on the antecedents of job crafting, but we had no particular insights on the negative dynamics associated with job crafting and that have led some scholars to believe that job crafting has also a dark side, mostly because of the excessive fatigue, distraction and regrets that is associated with a different design of one's mission and role (Lazazzara *et al.*, 2020). Future research could delve into these issues to understand whether or not behavioral modifications following organizational change can in any way be beneficial to the individual and to the overall interest of the organization.

It is also important to acknowledge the practical implications of the findings. First, our study demonstrates the critical role that public managers have in response to change in the leadership team has their reaction can favor the onboarding and acceptance of the new leadership team and also avoid the slowing down of performance. It is also important to note the critical role of personal and contextual resources that could enhance the likelihood that managers could enact job crafting behaviors. In this respect, it may be useful for organizations to provide training not only to enhance the personal resources at one's disposal but also to encourage greater confidence in the success of job crafting behaviours in the context of organizational change. Public administrations can contribute and support individuals' coping responses through social support actions (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006), to guarantee the contextual conditions for change to be faced as a challenge rather than as a problem. This may open important insights for future research that could focus on providing employees with the tools (e.g., job crafting interventions, Demerouti, Soyer, Vakola, & Xanthopoulou, 2021) to act as job crafters.

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