Conceptualizing talent in public sector municipalities

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Abstract
While talent management is considered a top priority among practitioners and constitutes a major research area, the actual meaning of talent still remains largely undefined. In response to a lack of clarity and empirical basis regarding the notion of talent, various calls have been made for exploring how organizations conceptualize talent, particularly in the public sector context. This article answers these calls by adopting a qualitative in-depth case study to explore how senior Human Resources (HR) managers in public sector municipalities conceptualize talent in practice. The findings illustrate how HR managers use a variety of conceptualizations of talent. We analyze and theorize this variation and the ways of conceptualizing talent using two conceptualization categories: non-contextual conceptualizations, which are general and related to official practices (i.e. talent as future leaders and talent as a general commitment and drive forward), and contextual conceptualizations, which are specific and related to informal assumptions (i.e. talent as Trojans and specialists, talent as individual agility, and talent as public service awareness).

Points for practitioners
Human Resources (HR) managers use a variety of conceptualizations of talent in practice. Two conceptualization categories — that is, “non-contextual” (general and related to official practices) and “contextual” (specific and related to informal assumptions) — help us understand this variation and the ways of conceptualizing talent. HR managers are only partly shaped by the particularities of the public sector context, and some of the talent philosophies held by HR managers do not align with the existing and official talent management practices.

Keywords
municipalities, public sector, talent, talent conceptualization, talent management, talent philosophies

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Introduction

While there has been a surge in research on talent management (TM) (Collings et al., 2018), the actual meaning of talent is still largely undefined (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Meyers et al., 2020). The mainstream literature is rather unclear and lacks empirical basis regarding the notion of talent (McDonnell et al., 2017). This is a major limitation, as it is essential to have a mature understanding of what talent means and how it is conceptualized in practice in order to develop a well-functioning TM system (Jooss et al., 2019). Various calls have therefore been made for research exploring how talent is understood in organizations, particularly in the public sector context (Thunnissen and Buttiens, 2017; Tyskbo, 2019; Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020).

This article answers these calls by contributing to better conceptualization of talent through focus on the context of public sector municipalities. The broader TM literature has also paid little attention to the public sector in general (Kravariti and Johnston, 2020; McDonnell et al., 2017; Thunnissen et al., 2013), despite its economic and social importance in many countries, and its significant talent shortages and struggles in attracting and retaining talent (Glenn, 2012; Mensah, 2019). We ask the following research question: How do HR managers conceptualize talent in public sector municipalities? By focusing on public sector municipalities, we aim to reveal whether there are any particularities of the public sector context that shape the meaning of talent, thereby also providing important and sought-after insights into whether the TM ideas prevalent in the literature on private organizations also resonate in other contexts, such as in public sector organizations (Kravariti and Johnston, 2020; Thunnissen et al., 2013; Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020). Understanding the organizational context when studying TM in the public sector seems critical, as it has been highlighted as a unique context that is significantly impacted by complexity and institutional mechanisms (Blom et al., 2020). Public organizations are strongly impacted by the principle of equality, relying more on egalitarian values compared with private organizations (Christensen et al., 2007), which we would expect to see translated into a reluctance to use the formal label of talent and an endeavor to implement inclusive TM approaches and views of talent (Boselie and Thunnissen, 2017; Thunnissen and Buttiens, 2017). Public sector organizations are also highly impacted by the orientation of delivering services to people with a purpose of doing good for others and society (Perry and Hondeghem, 2008). With this focus on improving the lives of the people they serve and responding to societal needs, we would also expect these organizational values to impact how HR managers think about the talent needed to deliver against these ambitions (Mensah, 2019). However, as few empirical studies have been conducted in a public sector context, the extent to which this is the case is unclear. In this study, we address this by using a qualitative in-depth case study focusing on the practice level, thereby showing how talent is conceptualized in practice by HR managers.

The findings illustrate how HR managers use a variety of conceptualizations of talent. This variation and the ways of conceptualizing talent are analyzed and theorized using two conceptualization categories: non-contextual conceptualizations, which are general and related to official practices (i.e. talent as future leaders and talent as a general
commitment and a drive forward), and contextual conceptualizations, which are specific and related to informal assumptions (i.e. talent as Trojans and specialists, talent as individual agility, and talent as public service awareness). In showing this, the study contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, the study develops a better conceptualization of talent by bringing to the fore how HR managers use a variety of conceptualizations in practice, and how the rationale underpinning this variation and understanding can be analyzed and theorized using two conceptualization categories. Thus, it answers the call for empirical studies exploring how talent is understood in organizations, particularly in the public sector context (Thunnissen and Buttiens, 2017; Thunnissen et al., 2013; Tyskbo, 2019; Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020). Second, the study makes an important theoretical contribution by advancing the theoretical understanding of how talent and TM are contextually situated (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020). As one of the few empirical studies conducted in a public sector context, it demonstrates that the meaning of talent is shaped by some, but not all, of the particularities of the public sector context.

Theoretical framework: talent philosophies and approaches to talent

TM is commonly referred to as principles and activities in organizations that have as their main purpose attracting, selecting, developing, and retaining high-performing or high-potential employees in pivotal positions (Collings et al., 2018).

One of the most important questions in TM relates to who and what should be considered talent (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Meyers et al., 2020). To tease this out, we can make use of talent philosophies, that is to say, “fundamental assumptions and beliefs about the nature, value, and instrumentality of talent that are held by a firm’s decision makers” (Meyers and van Woerkom, 2014). Four distinct talent philosophies have been proposed: exclusive/stable, exclusive/developable, inclusive/stable, and inclusive/developable. These philosophies vary along two dimensions, where the first dimension captures the assumed exclusiveness of talent, and the second dimension captures the assumed malleability of talent (Meyers et al., 2020). The exclusive/stable talent philosophy implies that only a small group of employees within an organization are talented and that these employees have been provided with special skills or capabilities by nature (Meyers et al., 2020; Tansley, 2011). The exclusive/developable talent philosophy implies that talent is a rare and latent construct, and talents are those employees who have the potential to perform at high levels (Gagné, 2004). The two exclusive philosophies often restrict the talent definition to leadership talent (Meyers and Van Woerkom, 2014; Tyskbo, 2021). The inclusive/stable talent philosophy implies that talent is a rare and latent construct, and talents are those employees who have the potential to perform at high levels (Gagné, 2004). The two exclusive philosophies often restrict the talent definition to leadership talent (Meyers and Van Woerkom, 2014; Tyskbo, 2021). The inclusive/stable talent philosophy is based on a universal view of talent and implies that every employee is talented through their stable and positive traits, referred to as “strengths”, and the aim is to increase person–job fit. The inclusive/developable talent philosophy implies that every employee can become talented if they are given the opportunity to develop through training and dedication (Meyers and Van Woerkom, 2014). The two inclusive philosophies do not always ascribe the talent
concept the meaning of being a leader or a manager, but instead often consider various forms of talent.

To advance our understanding of who and what is considered talent, we can also make use of the distinction between the object approach and the subject approach to talent (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Jooss et al., 2019). The object approach implies that talent is about the exceptional and exclusive characteristics demonstrated by individual employees. Within the object approach, it is possible to further distinguish between four approaches to talent, namely talent as a natural ability, talent as mastery, talent as commitment, and talent as fit (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). By approaching talent as a natural ability, the exceptional characteristics or abilities of employees are viewed as, and assumed to be, innate and rare (Meyers et al., 2013). In contrast to the natural ability approach, employees’ characteristics can also be viewed as, and assumed to be, developable and nurtured with practice and learning. Here, talent refers to the mastery of advanced knowledge, skills, and abilities. By approaching talent as commitment, the focus is on how employees are committed to their own work and to their organization. Here, talent refers to the intrinsic force that channels focus and enthusiasm, and to the eagerness and striving of employees to invest effort and energy into their organization’s success. The final “object” approach to talent refers to it as the fit between an individual employee’s talent and the practical context, that is, the right place, position, and time within which the employee works (Coulson-Thomas, 2012). Here, talent is seen as highly contextual and not as something that is necessarily transferable to all contexts, thus highlighting the importance of the specific organizational context (Groysberg et al., 2006).

Within the subject approach, organizations can further take either an inclusive or exclusive approach to talent (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). The inclusive approach means that talent refers to all employees of an organization, and applies a focus on individual strengths that could potentially be of added value (Buckingham and Vosburgh, 2001). The focus is on treating all employees in an organization as equals, and on providing them with an egalitarian distribution of resources, something which seems to be especially prevalent in service-oriented organizations (Jooss et al., 2019). In contrast to the inclusive approach to talent, the exclusive approach is instead based on a workforce segmentation, which means that talent refers to a subset of employees in the organization. This segmentation is often based on performance and potential as two important criteria. With performance as the criteria, talent refers to high-performing employees, that is, A players, who rank at the top in terms of performance and capability. With potential as the criteria, talent refers to high-potential employees, that is, those employees who can turn into something additional to what they currently are and who demonstrate the potential to advance and progress faster than others (Pepermans et al., 2003).

Taken together, these various talent philosophies and approaches to talent demonstrate that there are different views on, and understandings of, what talent means and highlight that these are largely dependent on, and impacted by, the surrounding context (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013; Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020). Thus, it is important to incorporate contextual awareness/sensitivity (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020) when
studying how organizations understand and view talent. This becomes especially important when considering who and what should be considered talent in the public sector context.

The public sector context has generally been described as different from the private sector context (Boyne, 2002; Christensen et al., 2007), specifically because of the significant impact of complexity and institutional mechanisms (Blom et al., 2020). First, by being strongly impacted by the principle of equality and relying more on collectivist and egalitarian values than private organizations, we would expect to see a reluctance to use the formal talent label and a greater fit with an inclusive approach to TM and conceptualizations of talent in public sector organizations. Second, by being highly impacted by public values and ambitions, we would expect public sector managers to value and think of talent as employees delivering against these values and ambitions – for example, the ones demonstrating the abilities of doing good for others and society, as well as improving the lives of the people being served and responding to the needs of the society (Mensah, 2019; Perry and Hondeghem, 2008).

We would expect these given particularities of the public sector context to also translate into different and distinct TM approaches and views of talent. How and to what extent this is the case in practice is, however, not well understood because the public sector context has been neglected in general TM research (Boselie and Thunnissen, 2017; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; McDonnell et al., 2017; Thunnissen et al., 2013). A recent systematic review of TM research with a focus on the public sector (Kravariti and Johnston, 2020) and the few existing empirical studies that have been conducted in various public sector organizations, such as healthcare organizations (e.g. Macfarlane et al., 2012; Tyskbo, 2019), educational organizations (e.g. Davies and Davies, 2010; Thunnissen and Buttiens, 2017; van den Brink et al., 2013), and governmental organizations (e.g. Clarke and Scurry, 2020; Glenn, 2012; Grant et al., 2020; Harris and Foster, 2010; Poocharoen and Lee, 2013), together all highlight the value and importance of TM for public sector organizations. However, these studies also indicate that both TM and the talent construct need to be adapted to the public sector context, and call for more research that focuses on this and that sheds light on the transferability of TM and talent to the public sector (Garrow and Hirsh, 2008). In this study, we respond to this call by critically challenging the assumptions made in the TM literature through empirical data rather than taking them as a given (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016).

**Methodology**

To understand how senior HR managers in public sector municipalities conceptualize talent in practice, an exploratory qualitative case study was found to be appropriate (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This method was also appropriate because the majority of TM studies, particularly those focused on talent conceptualization, have been on private organizations (McDonnell et al., 2017). Thus, studying how talent is conceptualized in the public sector context is a novel research area and a new field of inquiry (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). To select the participating municipalities, we obtained data from
Statistics Sweden (SCB, 2020) to retrieve the 50 largest municipalities in Sweden, of which 26 agreed to participate. Swedish municipalities are self-governed, and have a high level of political autonomy and large amounts of public resources. They are the main provider of childcare, primary and secondary education, and elderly care for the population. Other responsibilities include welfare provisions and public transport. Despite their high economic and social importance, Swedish municipalities still face significant talent shortages, and struggle to attract, develop, and retain talent. Working more explicitly with TM is generally recognized as important for overcoming these challenges. The management of talents aims to give the talents themselves the opportunity for personal development, and for each municipality to take advantage of each talent’s potential within the organizations.

Data collection

In total, 26 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior HR managers working in public sector municipalities in Sweden. Owing to COVID-19, it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews, and we therefore instead used Microsoft Teams (which was the preferred software by the interviewees) to facilitate the interviews. We did not have a predetermined definition of talent. Our data collection instead aimed at exploring the conceptualizations and principles of the studied public sector municipalities. This is important because normative approaches and predetermined conceptualizations of TM have been shown to not sit easily with the realities of public sector organizations, which results in the risk of concluding that not much is being done in the organizations studied (Tyskbo, 2019). Interviews were conducted in Swedish and lasted 55 minutes on average. The interview questions focused on which TM principles and practices were adopted in the municipalities in order to get a first glimpse at talent, and then in more detail on how the senior HR managers understood and viewed talent within their organizations. We purposively included senior HR managers in the interviews because they are generally considered “knowledgeable persons” and are often part of the “dominant coalition” (Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Paauwe, 2004), which together makes it possible for them to both deeply understand their organization’s TM strategies and policies, and to have the opportunity to influence them. Moreover, focusing on senior HR managers as key informants is in line with the recommendations in the broader Human Resource Management (HRM) research as well as in TM research (Meyers et al., 2020). Interview data were supplemented by data from organizational documents and information about the municipalities’ talent policies and practices published online.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The original interview transcripts were inductively analyzed (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) by reading each interview and coding it line by line. In a first step, we focused on using in-vivo codes (Locke, 2011), drawn from the interviewees’ accounts. This included their interpretations of what TM
principles and practices their respective municipality engaged with, and their interpretations of what and who was considered talent. After we had searched for perceived differences and similarities between the various interviewees and the identified in-vivo codes, our analysis shifted to axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), during which we grouped the first-order codes in relation to their focus, iterating back and forth between the literature and the data. In this way, we could reduce the first-order concepts to second-order themes, which were clustered in relation to their focal point. The second-order themes included talent as future leaders, talent as a general commitment and a drive forward, talent as Trojans and specialists, talent as individual adaptability and agility, and talent as public service awareness. Constantly comparing the data enabled us to start identifying the theoretical framework relevant and useful to our study. After it had become evident that there was some variation in how the senior HR managers understood talent and how their conceptualizations often centered around the questions of exclusivity and malleability, we detected concepts in the TM literature that emphasize talent philosophies as being useful. When understanding that the distinction HR managers made with regard to talent was similar to talent as people and talent as characteristics, we further discovered that the object and subject approach to talent are valuable for capturing some of the underlying rationale for the observed variation. After a more frequent iteration of going back and forth between data and theory, we could distill the second-order themes into two aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013), which we labeled non-contextual conceptualizations of talent and contextual conceptualizations of talent. Figure 1 provides an overview of our data structure. In the following section, the findings are presented in line with our second-order themes and alongside these two aggregate dimensions.

Findings

Non-contextual conceptualizations of talent

Talent as future leaders. HR managers described that they were working with and prioritizing various principles and practices that were similar to those under the TM umbrella. The ways these official principles and practices were designed and structured could relate to what talent was valued and sought after, thus also giving us a first glimpse at how talent is conceptualized:

“Our program called ‘tomorrow’s leaders’ is part of talent management. There, we work quite a lot to find out who the talents are, i.e. those with a profile to be able to become leaders in the municipality” (HR Manager, Municipality A).

Thus, from the official organizational practices, the first glimpse we got at the HR managers’ conceptualization of talent seemed to be that it was exclusive and focused on talent as future leaders. When asked to elaborate on what characterized these talents, HR managers adopted the object approach to talent, using the labels “charismatic
“leaders” and “transformational leaders”, and stressing the importance of communication skills, persuasiveness, and charm to influence and develop others.

If we talk about a leader, a talent for me is a person who’s direct, and communicates straight and honestly. I think communication is very important. Some have had difficulty communicating properly and are therefore not talents. (HR Manager, Municipality B)

If we take a leadership talent, then you don’t need to have the best expertise, but you need to be a talent in terms of being a good leader and in particular a charismatic leader as it’s called in the books. (HR Manager, Municipality C)

We’ve been working with TM since 2013 in the form of what’s called developing leadership, and that’s our leadership platform. Here, we value talent according to what we’ve learned as transformative leadership. (HR Manager, Municipality A)

While the existing official TM principles and practices were mostly related to leadership, most of the HR managers also stressed that the talent concept did not just mean being a future leader, but that it also included a general commitment and a drive forward.

Talent as a general commitment and a drive forward. In line with an object approach and the focus on commitment and particular skills and behaviors, HR managers also highlighted the importance of having a passion for the job and a drive forward in order to be considered as a talent. As with talent as future leaders, these competencies were represented in official organizational practices, but were also related to individual assumptions and beliefs held by the HR managers in practice.

I see talent as the employees who have a drive, a commitment and who want to deliver more than expected all the time. We have a few such employees who not only deliver something new, but also have a big picture perspective. Those who are one step ahead and who want a little more. Talent is, thus, the solution-focused employees who have a drive. In our processes, we strive to find them and to take care of them. (HR Manager, Municipality D)

We should identify precisely those who want to move forward, and not those who are satisfied, which are quite many. During performance appraisals, we ask if they [employees] want something more. Last year, there were two out of 18 employees who were not satisfied, but instead clearly communicated they wanted to move forward. (HR Manager, Municipality B)

Distinguishing between the broad mass of employees who perform as expected and are satisfied with the current situation and the scarce talent who wants something more and is moving forward, indicates an exclusive approach to talent. Yet, when describing these various required competencies, HR managers did not seem to closely relate them to the particularities of the public sector context, but rather attributed them as general talent skills and competencies, which pervade the practitioner literature and general HRM discourse. However, there were other competencies, skills, and behaviors that
seemed to be much more connected to the specific public sector municipality context and that were not always visible in official organizational practices.

**Contextual conceptualizations of talent**

**Talent as Trojans and specialists.** When describing their fundamental assumptions and beliefs about the nature and value of talent, HR managers went beyond the existing and official TM principles and practices that were more general and exclusive, and also drew on informal talent assumptions and beliefs that were more specific and inclusive. For example, this was done by pointing out in various ways that talent was not only about future leaders. They stressed the negative consequences of only considering the usual suspects (i.e. future leaders) in the way it risked overlooking the critical mass of employees who continuously deliver stable and good performance.

I think it’s a shame to just talk about talent as these smart brains who can think outside of the current work role. Because then you lose these extremely stable suppliers of everyday work. These fantastic employees who go to work every day and do their job with good performance. That’s also a talent, but we rarely talk about them as talents. (HR Manager, Municipality E)

Talent management must be balanced; that talent also means that it’s perfectly fine to toil on and work like a Trojan. To be a good worker who continues and enjoys what you do. And that’s not the same as lacking ambition, if you’d like to do the job you already do, but do it really well every day. (HR Manager, Municipality F)

Here, we can see how HR managers framed the talent concept within the specific public sector context in the way they understood and evaluated talent using a more inclusive approach. This reflects the reliance on egalitarian values in public sector organizations (Christensen et al., 2007), but was also based on the requirements and abilities of delivering and sustaining high-quality public services to the citizens. One HR manager stressed, “It’s just as important to have employees who keep up and ensure that the public sector does a good job today and tomorrow” (HR Manager, Municipality, G). In addition, and as these previous quotes touch upon, HR managers did not just relate the talent concept to leadership abilities or competencies and upward career advancement, but also to specialized knowledge and the possibility of deepening or broadening one’s career. This was especially important in a public sector municipality context with its broad areas of responsibility:

Talent does not only have to be linked to a straight career ladder, but can also be related to broadening one’s area of expertise and responsibility. Given our huge breadth of activities in the municipality, it’s important to acknowledge this when considering talents. That we match with career opportunities and find sidetracks, and that we really identify these talents. (HR Manager, Municipality H)
It [talent] does not have to be about becoming a manager; it can also be about changing jobs or moving on to a different area. Talent can also be about becoming better at what one is already doing, developing deep expertise, or maybe broadening and doing additional things. (HR Manager, Municipality I)

**Talent as individual adaptability and agility.** Contrary to the general view and understanding of public sector organizations as bureaucratic, slow, and conservative (see Claver et al., 1999; Luoma-aho, 2008), several HR managers described the context of public sector municipalities as constantly changing, with a resulting demand for talents being adaptable and agile. This is expressed by two HR managers as follows:

A talent is someone who has the personal abilities and attitude to working life that enables them to constantly adapt, change, and develop based on the emerging needs that arise. (HR Manager, Municipality J)

For me, talent is mostly about being versatile and actually adaptable. It’s important to be able to fit in many places and have the ability to adapt to our rapid changes. (HR Manager, Municipality K)

Some HR managers even argued that this individual adaptability and agility were more important than past performance or specialized knowledge in relation to talent owing to the particularities of public sector municipalities:

Historical performance is important when it comes to talent because it’s the foundation you’re standing on. At the same time, development and change take place so fast, and what you need to know and master is changing at double speed. Our organization is being restructured, and change processes are constantly ongoing. So, if you can’t cope and keep up with that, it weighs heavier than not having the actual professional knowledge. Because that’s easy to train and develop. (HR Manager, Municipality L)

HR managers explained that the importance of exhibiting adaptability and agility becomes particularly significant and clear during crisis situations, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, when there is a high degree of uncertainty and rapid changes need to be made:

In times of crisis, it’s clear whether you’re a talent, whether you’re something to have. To me, talent then is about being able to be versatile and actually adaptable. To be able to adapt and be able to fit in many places. (HR Manager, Municipality M)

Not least now during COVID-19, it becomes clear that it’s important for talents to have an ability to handle the uncertain. This applies to all occupational groups because it’s so complex today that it’s not possible to rely on order and structure. You must be able to handle rapid changes and adapt to new situations all the time. This question with talent,
then people who need to work according to a spreadsheet go away because it’s not possible to say in advance that these 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 specific points need to be made and then it’s done. Because, especially in workplaces in municipalities, you must be able to handle the unknown and be fine not knowing in advance what is happening. (HR Manager, Municipality N)

In addition to how the public sector municipality context demanded talent competencies, abilities, and behaviors linked to adaptability and agility, HR managers also pointed out the importance of demonstrating a public service awareness to be considered talent.

**Talent as public service awareness.** A talent was not only someone who could handle the unpredictable, but someone who also had the right values and the right attitude. According to several managers, this was something that was particularly important in the public sector context, where “performance alone is not enough” in terms of only providing public services, but where one must be aware of and adhere to “public service behaviors and core values”. One HR manager described this public service awareness as follows:

I view a talent as a person who has the right public sector attitude. It’s important to have the right values and approach. You need to understand this specific context that you’re part of. This is clearly linked to the approach and attitude to take on the duties. I have met people who are very competent and have a good education, but they lack the specific attitude or have an attitude that I don’t think is beneficial either for their specific assignments or for the municipality’s overall purpose. They are then not talents. (HR Manager, Municipality O)

When elaborating on these public service behaviors and core values, or as they were loosely called “public spirit”, the HR managers emphasized the importance of liking people:

A talent for me is a person who likes people; that’s what you need here with us. You may not need it in another industry, but if you work within the municipality with its main purpose, it’s important that you’re interested in people. (HR Manager, Municipality P)

One important aspect for being considered a talent is that you need to think it’s fun to work with people. That it’s our inhabitants that you’re passionate about and have empathy for. (HR Manager, Municipality Q)

When talking about the recruitment for leadership talents, one HR manager substantiated the importance of public service awareness and added the necessity of talents being able to adopt an employer perspective. Serious risks of not conceptualizing talent based on this contextual awareness and understanding were also raised:

To be a talent, you must have a clear employer perspective. You’re a representative of the municipality; you’re a representative of a politically controlled organization. All these things are not that easy. Especially not if you do what I sometimes see as a mistake. That you identify the best in the class as talents. Then it’s easy to end up with someone who’s
the best in the class, i.e. who can perform well and has expertise and so on, but who doesn’t understand the specific context they’re part of and doesn’t have the right approach. (HR Manager, Municipality R)

Discussion

We asked how HR managers conceptualize talent in public sector municipalities. By adopting a qualitative in-depth case study focusing on the practice level, we could show important nuances in the ways HR managers use a variety of conceptualizations. This finding supports arguments made in the literature that hold that the concept of talent is not always that perpetually defined (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). Importantly, we move beyond showing that talent is an ambiguous construct, and that HR managers’ ideas on talent can differ (Meyers et al., 2020), also analyzing and theorizing this variation and ways of conceptualizing talent using two categories.

We found that HR managers conceptualize talent based on two conceptualization categories: non-contextual and contextual conceptualizations of talent. The former category includes the conceptualizations of talent as future leaders and talent as a general commitment and drive forward and illustrates non-specific conceptualizations of talent that are not directly related to the organizational context, but rather are based on more general assumptions about talent. The conceptualizations of talent included in this category were exclusive, meaning focused on a subset of the employees, and followed the object approach to talent (talent as characteristics of people) (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). As HR managers described talent as rare and innate, this category also resonates with the exclusive/stable philosophy, as proposed by Meyers and Van Woerkom (2014). This finding also lends further support to arguments regarding how senior organizational leaders are often the focus of talent and TM (e.g. Collings et al., 2018; Tyskbo, 2021).

However, when probing into the HR managers’ fundamental assumptions and beliefs in practice in relation to the nature and value of talent, they went beyond these existing and official TM principles and practices and expressed a more specific and contextualized understanding of talent. Thus, the latter category that included the conceptualizations of talent as Trojans and specialists, talent as individual agility and adaptability, and talent as public service awareness illustrates contextual conceptualizations of talent, thus largely reflecting the particularities of the public sector context. In contrast to the former category, the conceptualizations of talent included in this category were more inclusive, meaning focused on the strengths of all employees. However, it shared with the former category an object approach to talent, through which the focus was on talent as characteristics people have rather than on talent as people (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2013). Interestingly, these characteristics were not represented in any formal organizational frameworks or practices, but were instead related to the informal talent assumptions and beliefs held by the HR managers in practice. An important aspect to being labeled talent, and that has received little attention in the mainstream literature, was the demonstration of and alignment with the public sector organizational values (Jooss et al., 2019; Mensah, 2019). More specifically, HR managers were highly impacted by the public sector organizational values and purpose of doing good for
others and society, as well as responding to societal needs, when conceptualizing talent (Perry and Hondeghem, 2008). Furthermore, as HR managers attributed talent to something common and that can be developed, it resonates with the inclusive/developable philosophy (Meyers and Van Woerkom, 2014). This contrasts the extant literature in which TM and talent is most often conceptualized in an exclusive way (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016), with our findings showing that, in practice, the inclusive understanding is also common among HR managers (Meyers et al., 2020). One plausible explanation to why the HR managers in this study hold more inclusive talent philosophies is how they are shaped by the public sector context being strongly impacted by equality and egalitarian values (Christensen et al., 2007; Thunnissen and Buttiens, 2017).

Previous views have stressed the importance of organizational context when conceptualizing talent, and claimed that the meaning of talent is contextually situated and that it is the context that largely determines who and what we consider to be a talent (e.g. Nijs et al., 2014; Thunnissen et al., 2013). While our findings largely support these views and arguments, they also raise a warning finger by showing through the non-contextual conceptualization category that the opposite is also partly possible. One possible explanation to why the HR managers in this study drew on these more general and non-contextual conceptualizations of talent is that they are likely being exposed to and impacted by similar macro ideas and values and normative-centric practitioner literature (Perkmann and Spicer, 2008). This finding has important implications for how we theoretically understand the talent construct. It is a construct that is not only or fully context-dependent, but also made up of institutionalized and non-contextual or universal elements. We encourage more empirical research into this matter.

Given the present findings, we can also see a potential non-alignment between some of the talent philosophies held by HR managers and the existing and official TM practices. This is because it was mainly the non-contextual conceptualizations of talent that were visible in the official organizational practices, while the contextual conceptualizations were not, instead being intertwined with the informal talent assumptions and beliefs held by the HR managers in practice. However, even if these contextual conceptualizations are not represented in any official organizational practices, they can nevertheless influence how talent is conceptualized in practice, as HR managers’ inherent beliefs about the nature and value of talent will likely shape how they perceive, interpret, and use the official organizational TM practices and talent conceptualizations (Meyers and van Woerkom, 2014; Meyers et al., 2020). This non-alignment further highlights the importance of not equating an organization’s talent conceptualizations with what is captured in official organizational documents and practices, but instead also including the assumptions, beliefs, and actions by HR managers.

**Contributions, limitations, and future research**

We make a number of important contributions. First, we contribute to the literature by answering the call for empirical studies exploring how talent is understood in
organizations, particularly in the public sector context (Thunnissen and Buttiens, 2017; Thunnissen et al., 2013; Tyskbo, 2019; Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020). We contribute to better conceptualization of talent by not only relying on existing and official TM principles and practices, but also considering HR managers’ fundamental assumptions and beliefs about the nature and value of talent. By adopting a qualitative in-depth case study, we could show how HR managers use a variety of conceptualizations in practice. Importantly, we also move beyond existing arguments made in previous research that hold that talent is an ambiguous construct and that HR managers’ talent philosophies can differ by also analyzing and theorizing the rationale underpinning this variation and the ways of conceptualizing talent.

Second, we contribute to the literature by advancing our understanding of how talent and TM are contextually situated (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Wiblen and McDonnell, 2020). This study is one of the few empirical studies conducted in a public sector context, which is underlined as a unique context with regard to talent conceptualization (Boselie and Thunnissen, 2017; Thunnissen and Buttiens, 2017). By focusing on the practice level, we were able to show that talent is conceptualized both contextually – that is, relating it to the immediate organizational context (impacted by public sector values) – and non-contextually – that is, not relating it to the immediate organizational context, but rather to more general talent assumptions (e.g. focus on exclusivity and leaders). In showing this, we add to the theoretical understanding of the talent construct by highlighting that the meaning of talent is shaped by some, but not all, of the particularities of the public sector context.

In terms of practical contributions, HR managers in public sector organizations need to be careful using exclusive approaches to talent conceptualization and balance them with what the values in the current public sector allow. Focusing on talent as future leaders and as a subset of the employees may be called into question if employees perceive a large discrepancy between the conceptualizations adopted by HR managers and the surrounding public sector context. Moreover, although the informal talent assumptions and beliefs held by the HR managers that were not visible in any official organizational practices can influence how talent is conceptualized in practice, there is still a risk that these are not seen or understood by the employees. This can result in uncertainty and a questioning of the transparency of HR managers’ views and actions.

This study has certain limitations that offer potential avenues for future research. First, while benefitting from in-depth qualitative data, the study is limited with regard to the level of generalizability. This study was conducted in a specific cultural setting. As a result, the understandings and assumptions of the interviewees are likely to have been shaped by the norms and values in this specific context. Thus, one important avenue for future research is studying talent conceptualizations of HR managers in other public sector organizations in order to corroborate the findings. Second, this study only included HR managers. Although this was a conscious choice with clear benefits (Meyers et al., 2020), it would be valuable to include other organizational actors for a comparison of perceptions on the talent construct.
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Supplemental material

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Notes

1. Information on the respondents: 20 female/six male; 12 within the age range 40–49, nine within the age range 50–59, five within the age range 60+; one with 3+ years of experience, seven with 5+ years of experience, 10 with 10+ years of experience, seven with 15+ years of experience, and one with 20+ years of experience.
2. See Figure 1 online at https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ras.

References


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