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# **Do sectors (still) matter? Exploring similarities and differences between public, private, and nonprofit organizations from an organizational identity perspective**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper uses an organizational identity perspective to investigate similarities and differences between public, private and nonprofit organizations. The analysis is focused on three interrelated identity domains: the content used by members to define their organizations; the orientation of the organizational identity (individualistic, relational, and collectivistic); the nature of members' attachment to their organizations (identification, neutral identification, ambivalent identification, disidentification). Using a sample of 256 members of organizations belonging to these three sectors we found that: the content used to describe public, private and nonprofit organizations, although sharing numerous elements, also contains sector-specific meanings especially in nonprofit organizations; concerning the organizational identity orientation, private organizations are seen as more individualistic and more relational than public and nonprofit ones, while public organizations score high in the collectivistic orientation; regarding the nature of members' attachment, although members of the three types of organizations exhibit the same levels of organizational identification and neutral identification, nonprofit organizations generate more disidentification and ambivalent identification among their members than public and private ones. Overall, organizational elements revealing operational practices tend to be similar, while those elements representing organizational identity tend to be different.

Key words: public, private, and nonprofit comparison; organizational identity; identity orientation; identification

## INTRODUCTION

Although not completely consistent across the world, classifying organizations as public, private and nonprofit, or a slightly different terminology, is a generic categorization that actors can use to make sense of economies. Labels representing categories emphasise commonalities and differences between organizations (Hannan et al., 2007), which smoothens the cognitive process of storing and retrieving information about the characteristics of specific category members (Galperin & Sorenson, 2014), enables the assessment of organizations and their products, and shapes material and symbolic exchanges (Durand & Paoella, 2013).

Despite the centrality of the distinction between public, private, and nonprofit organizations, scholars have challenged its appropriateness, highlighting the frailness of the separation between sectors whose limits have blurred (Child et al., 2016). Some organizations can adopt characteristics usually belonging to more than one category, rendering them hybrid. From a nonprofit point of view, the very identity of the sector is being lost: “NPOs are becoming less distinctive because they integrate more and more business and government-like characteristics. *Nonprofit identity is challenged.*” (Knutsen, 2012, p. 990, emphasis added).

Besides the legal status, classifying an organization as public, private, or nonprofit entails different expectations from several external stakeholders regarding the behaviour of organizations belonging to each category (Aaker et al., 2010). From an internal point of view, organizational members engage in reflection processes about the essence of organizations, elaborating the central, distinctive and enduring elements, or the organizational identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Sector is a natural category to which organizational members can refer to gather the material needed to elaborate the meaning they attach to their organizations

(King, et al., 2010). The study of these inside views can provide important data for locating differences and similarities between public, private, and nonprofit organizations.

The relevance of sector induced differences on organizational elements, especially in the healthcare field, has generated a vast number of comparative studies (see Herrera et al., 2014 for a review of nine systematic reviews). However, these studies mainly address organizational outcomes (Min et al., 2022) or management practices (Chapman & Varda, 2017). On the other hand, literature focused on the role of organizational identity (Levine-Daniel & Hekerd, 2019; Scherer, 2017), or related concepts like mission (Beaton, 2021; Lim et al., 2021; Berlan, 2018; Pandey et al., 2017), is predominantly focused on the nonprofit sector, which confines its value. Tendentially, NPOs' organization, goals, and rhetoric are becoming business-like (Maier et al., 2016). As a root, integrative and multilevel construct (Pratt et al., 2016; Brown, 2020), organizational identity provides a suitable perspective for exploring similarities and differences induced by the three sectors.

In this context, this study aims to identify similarities and differences induced by the sector on the content of the organizational identities, on the perception of organizational identity orientation and on the nature of the bond between organizations' and members' identities. An organizational identity perspective, focused on how organizational members perceive the entity they work for (Brickson, 2013), is appropriate for accommodating differences and similarities between organizations, thus contributing to reconciling arguments for and against the blurring of frontiers between sectors. Public, private and nonprofit organizations, we argue, can be different *and* similar.

Using a sample of 256 individuals working for public, private and nonprofit organizations, namely pre-school and kindergarten, a highly institutionalized context, this article joins the discussion about the blurring of sectors and makes three contributions. First, it reveals that

the sector, particularly nonprofit, is an important source of content for building the meaning organizational members attach to their organizations. Second, it shows that the members of organizations belonging to the three sectors perceive the orientation of the organizational identity differently. Finally, besides similarities, it identifies subtle differences between sectors regarding the nature of the bonds that link members to their organizations.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Public, private, and nonprofit organizations: different, similar, or different and similar?**

#### *Why should they be different?*

Explanations of differences between public, private and nonprofit organizations tend to convey the idea of the existence of three different archetypes, or distinct configurations of organizational elements and work patterns (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993), shaping the inner nature of each type and the respective distinctive features. The ideal types (Billis, 2010) and the governance mechanisms (Seibel, 2015) approaches share this core idea, rendering them useful for anticipating differences between sectors.

According to the ideal types approach, each sector is distinct from the others because there are a number of core elements (principles, according to Billis', 2010, terminology) that differentiate the members between categories and maximize the similarities between the members of each category. Ownership, governance, operational priorities, distinctive human and other resources are these organizational elements. Each sector entails a prototypical form - a bureau, a firm and an association - respectively for the public, private and third sector, but less prototypical members can easily be accommodated.

The mechanism approach (Seibel, 2015) underscores the importance of legal and formal arrangements in determining differences regarding how societies provide goods and services and stresses the role of human agency leading to divergent patterns of organizational behaviour, or governance mechanisms. The public sector's dominant governance mechanism is the hierarchy of legal authority, while in the private sector this role is played by competition and exchange, and participation is key in civil society organizations. These three governance mechanisms are generalised, taken for granted, sense-making devices, highly accepted by members of each sector and probably rejected by members of the other sectors.

Together, sector and mechanism approaches recognize the existence of discernible sector-specific characteristics that maximise differences between them. However, both suggest that specific organizations can exhibit features more typical of exemplars of other sectors, questioning the frontiers between sectors, thus rendering hybrids a common organizational form.

*Why should they be similar? Permeable limits and the emergence of the organization as a universal social structure*

The view that underscores differences between sectors has been seriously challenged by scholars for decades, based on a set of arguments named the blurring hypothesis (Child et al., 2016). In essence, the blurring argument states that the boundaries between sectors are eroding, because organizations clearly belonging to one sector are seen to be adopting practices or engaging in strategies usually associated with another sector. The emergence of social enterprises (Battilana & Lee, 2014) has also fuelled these arguments.

Reasons for the blurring trend are multiple, but institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) provides an integrated explanation for organizational uniformity, or isomorphism. Embedded in specific contexts, and surrounded by stakeholders on whose material, human, financial and symbolic resources they depend, public, private and nonprofit entities are influenced by coercive, normative and mimetic pressures leading to similarities. If founders' beliefs can have an important influence in determining organizational specificities (Fauchart & Gruber, 2020), in highly institutionalised fields (Fligstein, 2013), like healthcare or educational services, isomorphic pressures engender similarities between organizations. Empirical evidence shows that isomorphic pressures, particularly normative, influence the adoption of management practices, technologies, and strategies by nonprofit organizations (Hwang & Powell, 2009; Hersberger-Langloh et al., 2021; AbouAssis & Bies, 2018; Zorn et al., 2011).

The erosion of frontiers between sectors is reinforced by the emergence of the “organization” as a universal category and as a new form of social structure that cuts across existing social structures and encompasses a number of attributes considered inherent to the very nature of organizations, even if some fail to reveal a clear connection to relevant outcomes (Bromley & Meyer, 2017; Meyer & Bromley, 2013). As epitomised by Bromley and Meyer (2017) “today, we know a nonprofit is such because it has the appropriate legal status. It becomes harder and harder to determine an organization’s form (business, government, or charity) based on functional activity alone” (p. 957). However, as authors recognize, research on nonprofits shows how some organizations attempt to nurture their identities despite tendencies to formalize or the need to adopt more business-like practices. This focus on the role of identities can contribute to the discussion of similarities and differences. Figure 1 summarizes the interplay of factors prompting similarities and differences between organizations belonging to the three sectors. In this figure, core organizing elements,

including vision, work setting, and outcomes are based on the framework used by Porras and Silvers (1991) and Robertson et al., (1993) to map the literature on organizational development. Overall, both similarities and differences between public, private and nonprofit organizations are plausible, but we expect more differences between sectors around the organizational vision, an element which may continue to be marked by ownership and governance, fewer differences in the organizational work setting, more vulnerable to the organization as a universal institution and to all types of isomorphic pressures, and more similarities in organizational outcomes, since they come from an organizational work setting which is already tendentially homogeneous and because individual and organizational actions are highly sensitive to normative isomorphism, particularly in professional services such as education or healthcare.

INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE

### **Accommodating similarities and differences: a view from organizational identity**

#### *The organizational identity perspective*

The use of identity lenses to understand organizational phenomena has increased (Brown, 2020) and their relevance for advancing knowledge about nonprofit organizations is widely acknowledged (Young, 2001; Heckert et al., 2020; Ávila & Amorim, 2021). In the range of perspectives on organizational identity, the social actor view (Whetten & Mackey, 2002) has emerged as a core metatheory (Cornelissen et al., 2016; Haslam et al., 2017). This perspective sees organisational identity as a generalised attribution of an actor status to an organisation viewed as an entity that portrays a distinctive profile and legitimacy (Pratt et al., 2016; Langley et al., 2020). As social actors, organisations are required to be identified by a



society that expects them to act in a self-directed and accountable way (King et al., 2010; Ashforth et al., 2020), expressing identity claims and presenting themselves as legitimate entities. Like all social actors, organizations can use their membership of categories for self-definition (Whetten, 2006).

As pointed out by Glynn (2008), organisations can use local environments, like industry or geographical clusters, or more distal environments, like global trends or nations, to extract their central, distinctive and enduring self-defining elements. Some elements of the original classification, like being public, private or nonprofit, can remain as self-defining ingredients despite changes in the context and subsequent elaboration of organizations' self-view. Effective location within this environment requires a dynamic state of optimal distinctiveness (Zukerman, 2016) in which organizations embed both conformity and deviation.

Because sectors provide generalised, taken for granted sense-making devices, they can become sources of reference for organizations to build within category similarities and between category differences. As sense-making devices, sectors also provide distinct vocabularies that can be used to feed the processes of self-reflection characterising the identity construction process. In other words, accepted generalised beliefs describing each sector can be used by organizational members as building blocks for the construction of their organizations' identity, providing specific content to be used as raw material for identity construction. Therefore, this study addresses the following research question:

*Question 1: Are public, private and nonprofit organizations described differently by their members?*

### *Multiple organizational identity orientation and sector imprinting*

In essence, hybridity exists when organizations define themselves with two or more identities that do not usually go together (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Foreman et al., 2012), like the co-existence of two seemingly discordant value systems: the utilitarian or business-like, emphasising self-interest and market rationality; the normative or community-like, stressing the general interest and altruistic ideology.

Theoretical and empirical developments in identity hybridity were suggested by Brickson (2007; 2013), who proposes that organizations can be perceived by their members as entities oriented towards establishing certain patterns of relationships with relevant stakeholders. Members perceive an individualistic orientation in their organization when they see it as an atomised entity, distinct from others and attempting to maximize its own welfare. A relational orientation describes organizations seen by their members as having dyadic relationships with specific stakeholders, acting as a partner with other entities aiming to promote particular others' welfare. Collectivistic oriented organizations are perceived by their members as entities embedded in large groups or communities, mainly concerned about the welfare of a larger group. These three identity orientations do not form a mutually exclusive classification system in the sense that organizations can reveal elements of all orientations. Hybridity is the norm and not the exception.

If private organizations embed organizational models emphasising the search for efficiency and profit, following market forces and individual choices (Billis, 2010; Seibel, 2015), we can expect those organizations to engender a more pronounced orientation to individualist, or promoting its own welfare, identity when compared to public and nonprofit ones. In highly institutionalised contexts in which relationships (for example with patients or children and their families) are the core operational activity, differences between public, private and

nonprofit organizations in terms of relational identity orientation will be diluted. Finally, the primacy of public service and collective choice underlying public organizations, and the charitable values associated with an emphasis on commitment to a distinctive mission framing the nonprofit model (Billis, 2010; Seibel, 2015) will facilitate the emergence of more evident collective identities in both public and nonprofit organizations when compared to private ones. Based on these arguments, this study posits the following hypotheses:

*H1a. The members of private organizations perceive higher levels of individualistic identity orientation in their organizations than members of public and nonprofit organizations.*

*H1b. The members of public, private and nonprofit organizations perceive the same levels of relational identity in their organizations.*

*H1c. The members of public and nonprofit organizations perceive higher levels of collectivist identity in their organizations than members of private organizations.*

#### *Organizational identity as a source of members' attachment to their organizations*

Organizational identity represents an important element which members can refer to in establishing their connections to organizations, or organizational identification. As organizational identification is defined as the degree of overlap between how individuals describe themselves and the organization they belong to, organizational identity becomes a privileged context for individual self-definition (He & Brown, 2013; Brown, 2017; Ashforth et al., 2020).

Organizations that pursue ambiguous, multiple or hybrid goals can become complex contexts regarding this self-definition, which might render identification insufficient to address the nature of the members' attachment to them organizations. Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) addressed this issue by expanding the types of connection between members and organizations, adding three other forms to the usual organizational identification: disidentification, ambivalent identification, and neutral identification. Disidentification characterises states in which individuals define themselves using attributes that are non-recognizable in the organization and represents a clear separation from the collective (Ashforth et al., 2013). Ambivalent identification refers to the possibility of individuals simultaneously identifying and disidentifying with an organization, due to the foreseeable complexity and ambiguity of values, goals and beliefs of both individuals and organizations. Hybrid organizations are good candidates as contexts for generating this type of bond. Finally, individuals can espouse a sense of absence of both identification and disidentification regarding an organization. In other words, individuals do not feel that their identity overlaps or separates from the organizations they work for (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004) and use an intentional neutrality to define themselves (Ashforth et al., 2013).

This expanded approach to characterize multiple modes of individuals' attachment to their organizations can reveal dynamics that are hidden using the more conventional identification as a unique measure of the connection between organizations' and members' identities. In this context, this study asks the following research question:

*Question 2. If any, in what type of attachment - identification, ambivalent identification, neutral identification, disidentification – do members of public, private and nonprofit organizations differ?*

## **METHOD**

### **Data gathering and sample**

Teaching, namely kindergarten and pre-school activities, is an appropriate context for identifying differences and similarities, because institutional pressures for isomorphism are considerable, due to high levels of normative and coercive isomorphism, and moderate levels of mimetic isomorphism. Thus, possible differences observed in organizations belonging to the three sectors can be interpreted as evidence of sectors imprinting on members' perceptions.

The Portuguese national education system includes a network of public, private and nonprofit providers, subject to specific regulations (Decree-Law 152/2013) and the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Work, Solidarity and Social Welfare are responsible for providing resources, pedagogic orientation and supervision to specific units, according to a philosophy that stresses the key role of pre-school education in building the foundation, in cooperation with families, for children's balanced development towards autonomous, free and supportive individuals (Decree-Law 5/1997). Teaching activities are carried out by a pre-school teacher whose training, a specific degree in education, is determined by The Ministry of Education (Decree-Law 79/2014).

Schools in the metropolitan area of Lisbon were approached by a research assistant and invited to participate in research into the characteristics of kindergarten and pre-school service providers. Once the management of each school granted authorization for data collection, a research assistant visited the school and distributed questionnaires among employees who volunteered to participate. This procedure enabled us to involve 42 schools (17 public, 13 private and 12 nonprofit) and 256 employees (81 public, 80 private and 95 nonprofit). The mean of organizations' age was 36,93 years (SD=20.33) (public mean=26.69,

SD=13.83; private mean=32.84, SD=21.14; nonprofit mean=49.09, SD=18.13). The mean number of pupils was 124.43 (SD=180.57) (public mean=72.41, SD=21.16; private mean=71.56, SD=37.60; nonprofit mean=213.31, SD=272.37). The average number of employees was 21.07 (SD=27.56) (public mean=9.84, SD=5.87; private mean=14.20, SD=10.21; nonprofit mean=213.31, SD=272.37). Of the total sample, 96.9% of participants were female, with a mean age of 42.89 years (SD=10.43) (public mean=47.16, SD=8.16; private mean=38.27, SD=10.78; nonprofit mean=43.14, SD=10.33). The mean tenure was 14.23 years (SD=9.88) (public mean=16.85, SD=10.23; private mean=10.81, SD=9.18; nonprofit mean=14.88, SD=9.41). Of the total sample, 49.2% were pre-school teachers, and 50.8% were pre-school teaching assistants. The proportion of pre-school teachers was slightly higher in public schools (58.8%) than in private (44.4%) and nonprofit (45.3%).

## Measures

Because identity represents the result of self-sensemaking processes, and words are the substance of sensemaking (Weick, 1995), to prompt an identity-like word generation, respondents were asked to write up to 10 characteristics that define their school representing central, unique and enduring characteristics, regardless of these features being positive or negative. This procedure yielded 2195 expressions (mostly single words but also simple phrases) 722 referring to public, 657 to private, and 816 to nonprofit schools. On average, respondents produced 8.57 characteristics.

Data pertaining to organizational identity orientation were collected using an adaptation of Brickson's (2005) measure. Respondents were asked to think about their organization as a whole and to express (1 = not at all; 7 = to a great extent) how the school sees itself, the most important thing for the school, and the major concern of the school. Three items measure

individualistic, relational and collectivistic identity orientation. Example items are, respectively, for these three orientations: “my school views itself primarily as: distinct and standing apart from other organizations; a good partner to those with whom it interacts (e.g. employees, customers, other organizations); a good member of a wider community”. Reliability analysis reveals acceptable results, with Cronbach’s alphas of 0.71, 0.79, and 0.81, respectively, for individualistic, relational and collectivistic identity orientations.

Kreiner and Ashforth’s (2004) scales of identification, disidentification, ambivalent identification and neutral identification were used to measure the diverse types of members’ attachment to their organizations. Using a rating scale (1= totally disagree; 7=totally agree), respondents were asked to state their agreement or disagreement with 24 items (six measuring each concept) representing the nature of the relationship they have with their organization. Example items are: “when someone criticizes my organization, it feels like a personal insult” (identification); “I am embarrassed to be part of this organization” (disidentification); “I have mixed feelings about my affiliation with this organization” (ambivalent identification); it really doesn’t matter to me what happens to this organization (neutral identification). Internal reliability is acceptable for all scales (identification,  $\alpha=0.73$ ; disidentification,  $\alpha=0.80$ ; ambivalent identification,  $\alpha=0.87$ ; neutral identification,  $\alpha=0.76$ ).

### **Analysis strategy**

In answering research question one, focused on exploring differences and similarities between the content of the perception of public, private and nonprofit schools, we used a conventional thematic analysis approach (King & Brooks, 2018). This procedure led to identifying eight themes: 1-the emphasis of the organizational climate; 2-the characteristics of the physical setting; 3-professionals’ attributes; 4-the attributes of the educational project;

5- top management's perception; 6-the existence of sector specific features; 7-reputational elements of the organization and; 8-specific terms of service delivery.

The hypotheses pertaining to organizational identity orientation (individualistic, relational and collectivistic) were tested using a MANOVA analysis with the sector as independent variable and respondents' occupation (pre-school teacher or pre-school teaching assistant), tenure (years in organization) and age as covariates. The same approach was used in answering research question two, aiming to explore differences between members working in the three sectors regarding the nature of their attachment to the respective organizations (identification, disidentification, ambivalent identification and neutral identification).

## **RESULTS**

The results of the content analysis aiming to determine how members of public, private and nonprofit entities describe their organizations are presented in Table 1. The first theme includes content related to characteristics of the organizational climate. Members of public schools tend to perceive their organizations as including more references to a cohesive and teamwork-based climate (78.8%) and a climate stressing good organization and functioning and clear rules (33.8%). Members of private schools tend to emphasise a family-like and welcoming organizational climate (95.1%), although this characteristic is also highly mentioned by members of the other sectors. More members of private schools perceive their organizations' climate as being focused on innovation and flexibility (61.7%). Interestingly, although it is a low proportion, members of nonprofit organizations describe their schools more negatively, mentioning a conflicting or non-cooperative organizational climate (14.7%) or even a conservative one (11.6%).



The characteristics of schools' physical setting, namely negative, is a type of content especially generated by members of public organizations (77.5%), but these respondents tend also to consider it globally appropriate and offering good conditions (43.8%), with a good outside space or playground (32.5%) or high quality or well-equipped rooms (33.8%). Among members of private schools, 44.4% describe physical settings as globally appropriate, while 42.1% of the members of nonprofit schools describe the physical settings as inappropriate or outdated.

The theme describing professionals' attributes was mentioned particularly by members of public schools. Competent and qualified professionals is a content referred to by 45.0% of members of public schools, while 36.3% use motivated or committed professionals to describe their organizations, a type of content used by only 18.9% of nonprofit school members.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The theme of the educational project's characteristics, namely engaging families, was particularly mentioned by the members of private schools (64.2%). These respondents also tend to stress an educational project that emphasises children's self-determination and a holistic approach to learning (33.3%), in line with the perception of nonprofit schools' members (35.8%). An inclusive and supporting educational project also tends to be more associated by members of public schools (22.5%), especially when compared to members of private schools (9.9%), the same happening with negative mentions of being away from families, mentioned by 12.5% of respondents from public schools.

In the theme encompassing meanings associated with top management, members of private organizations see closer and motivating leadership (27.2%) more frequently, a higher proportion when compared, especially, with members of nonprofit schools (11.6%). This tendency becomes amplified because members of nonprofit schools have a clearly more negative perception of top management, seen as distant and unmotivating (29.5%), unable (24.2%) and non-investing in headcount (17.9%).

Besides the higher proportion of negative contents to describe top managers, members of nonprofit organizations reveal a distinctive pattern of responses in the theme of sector specific features. These respondents evoke more frequently the role of values like solidarity and charity as drivers of their organisations (35.8%), the fact that their schools have a religious orientation (17.9%) and that it is a nonprofit organization (25.3%). In members of both public and private schools, references to these themes are visibly lower.

In the same vein, regarding the reputation theme, members of nonprofit organizations clearly generate more contents describing their organizations as being unique or having a singular history (36.8%) than their public or private counterparts. The perception that their school has a good image in the community is higher among members of private organizations (13.6%).

Finally, in the specific terms of delivery theme, members of nonprofit and private schools evoke more often the quality of meals provided (17.9% and 17.3%, respectively), and the latter group mentions more a schedule that suits families' needs (9.9%).

The results of the hypothesis testing regarding the effects of the sector on organizational identity orientation are shown in Table 2. Overall, data analysis reveals a significant effect of the sector on the three types of organizational identity orientation. In line with hypothesis 1a, members of private schools perceive their organizations as being more individualistic (Mean=5.80) than members of public (Mean=5.22) and nonprofit organizations (Mean=5.14),

with a significant difference ( $F=7.74$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). Post-hoc analysis (Sheffe tests) reveals that private schools score higher than both public ( $p=0.02$ ) and nonprofit ( $p=0.00$ ) ones.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Contrary to the prediction in hypothesis 1b, according to which members of public, private and nonprofit organizations perceive the same levels of relational identity in their organizations, the effect of the sector on this variable is significant ( $F=7.74$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ), with private schools being perceived by their members as significantly more relational oriented (Mean=6.32) than both public (Mean=6.10) and nonprofit (Mean=5.85) schools. Subsequent analysis contrasting pairs of means (Sheffe tests) shows that this difference between private and nonprofit schools is significant ( $p=0.00$ ), but not regarding public schools ( $p=0.24$ ).

Partially in line with hypothesis 1c, predicting that members of public and nonprofit organizations perceive higher levels of collectivist identity in their organizations than members of private organizations, the results reveal a significant sector effect ( $F=4.34$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). However, although collectivistic identity orientation is higher in public schools (Mean=6.27) than in private ones (Mean=6.12), this difference is non-significant ( $p=0.47$ ). The mean obtained in the nonprofit group is the lowest (Mean=5.93), not statistically different from the private ( $p=0.27$ ) but different from the public one ( $p=0.02$ ).

Table 3 reports the results of exploring the differences between sectors regarding the nature of members' attachment to their organizations, as expressed in research question two. The first result to highlight is the absence of differences in terms of identification, with overall high results. The same was observed in neutral identification, but with generalised lower scores. Although also revealing low levels, the sector significantly influences both

disidentification ( $F=6.71$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ) and ambivalent identification ( $F=7.45$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). In both variables, the difference between members of private and public schools is not significant ( $p=0.99$  for disidentification and  $p=0.98$  for ambivalent identification), but members of nonprofit organizations show higher levels of disidentification (Mean=2.17) than members of public (Mean=1.67) and private (Mean=1.68) schools, with significant differences ( $p=0.01$  in both comparisons). The same pattern of results is evident for ambivalent identification, a variable that scores higher among members of nonprofit schools (Mean=2.30) than their public (Mean=1.70) and private (Mean=1.72) counterparts ( $p=0.00$  in both comparisons).

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

## **DISCUSSION**

The categorization of organizations as public, private or nonprofit is being questioned and a growing number of voices argue that the distinction is becoming unnoticeable. The results we obtained show that sectors can be both similar and different. Organizational elements closer to operational practices tend to be similar, while elements closer to organizational identity appear to be distinct between sectors.

A key finding of this study is that just members of nonprofit organizations explicitly use the third sector, and its core values of solidarity and charity, as a source of content to describe their organizations. This is relevant for theories about the influence of the context in providing the content for the identity bricolage (Glynn, 2008) and for social actor theories of organizational identity (King et al., 2010). It seems that members of public and private organizations express organizational identities using other sources of meaning, and do not need to resort to the fact that they are public or private for the sake of self-definition. The

category is relevant just for members of nonprofits, which requires a more nuanced view of the role of categories in shaping organizational identities. In the same vein, claiming uniqueness, a well-accepted feature of organizational identity, was a type of content mentioned almost exclusively by members of nonprofit organizations, reinforcing the relevance of organizational identity as a lens to understand the specificities of this sector (Young, 2001, Knutsen, 2016).

Additionally, members of nonprofit organizations show a relatively less positive view of their organizations, with a more conflictive climate, seen as more conservative, and top management being described more negatively. It seems that nonprofits, and the respective locally produced leadership, do not conform entirely with the institutional accounts of universal organizational form (Bromley & Meyer, 2017), which represents additional challenges for managers of nonprofit organizations.

Content describing core educational characteristics, such as being centred around children's individuality, or using appropriate pedagogical activities, does not distinguish the description of organizations belonging to the three sectors, which reveals the influence of normative and coercive isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In line with Bromley and Meyer (2017), functional activity is not sufficient to determine an organization's form (business, government or charity). However, identity is still sensitive to the category.

Consistently with the predictions of both sector and mechanism approaches (Billis, 2010; Seibel, 2015), private organizations are seen as more family-oriented, creating educational projects that are more engaging for families. They also emphasise innovation and flexibility. The highly relational nature of the activity calls for these organizational attributes as pre-conditions for survival in competitive markets, which can best be achieved if the organization shows adaptive ability. In the same vein, besides providing services in appropriate facilities,

being organized and following clear rules, being inclusive and supporting diversity, and operated by motivated professionals are distinctive features of public organizations. This is foreseeable considering the emphasis on collective choice and the requirement to comply with legislation through hierarchical processes, as suggested by sector and mechanism approaches (Billis, 2010; Seibel, 2015).

As expected, and in line with the role of market forces and individual choice (Billis, 2010), members of private organizations perceive their organizations as being more individualistic than those of public and nonprofit organizations. However, unlike the predictions, private organizations are more relational than the two other sectors. In this kind of activity, survival is dependent on being involved with children and their families. Being innovative, flexible and open to novelty, and having appropriate facilities, also belongs to this configuration of ingredients required to assure the market competitiveness vital for survival.

Contrary to expectations, the level of collectivistic identity orientation perceived by the members of private organizations is not significantly lower than the score given by nonprofit members. In fact, the difference lies between the higher scores of public organizations when compared to those of nonprofits. Regarding public organizations, this result can be interpreted along the lines of the common good as an important governance orientation of public organizations (Seibel, 2015). Nonprofits were also supposed to be more collectivistic than private entities, a result not observed. One possible interpretation is the extra effort made by private organizations to become interconnected with communities, as a pre-condition of survival in this kind of activity, inherently focused on children and their families.

The exploration of differences between sectors regarding the nature of the bonds linking individuals to their organizations reveals important results. The level of organizational identification is not different between members belonging to the three sectors, being high in

all sectors, which is consistent with the low scores of neutral identification. Although average results are generally low, members of nonprofit organizations show relatively higher levels of both ambivalent identification and disidentification. These results deserve consideration, especially combined with the negative view expressed by a significant number of members of nonprofit organizations particularly regarding top management (almost one third expressed at least one negative comment). Perhaps expectations of leadership are different: as a part of the nonprofit ideology, members expect a more people-oriented and values-based leadership than public or private workers. Because participation is a core element of the nonprofit sector, and nonprofit identity includes a strong normative orientation, which includes collective and family-like values, this can induce a higher desirability of peaceful and committed work contexts which, if not fulfilled, can generate violation of an expectation. This can produce a negative evaluation of the context and reduced attachment to organizations.

To tackle these challenges, nonprofit organizations could pay attention to leadership development. Although the literature recognizes that nonprofit leadership has specificities (Lim et al., 2021; Rowold et al., 2014), our results call for an expanded view of leadership development that goes beyond the acquisition of specific skills and focuses on the role of leadership in promoting organizational performance by activating identity related strategies. A formal leadership development plan could focus on two interrelated domains: promoting an organic organizational identity (Haslam et al., 2003) and stimulating a more Janusian style of thought (Rothenberg, 1979). An organic organizational identity, one that includes both a supraordinate organizational goal but also incorporates subgroup differences, can be promoted by the ASPIRe strategy (Actualizing Social and Personal Identity Resources), a leadership development approach tested by Peters et al. (2013). Assuming the complexity and ambiguity coming from hybridity inherent to nonprofit organizing, the development of a more Janusian style of thought, one that requires the ability to notice the concurrent operation

of two contrasting ideas with consequences for implementing organizational routines and nurturing complex cultures, can follow the management development strategy described by Smith et al. (2012) to combine social and business goals.

This study has important limitations. The sector was used in a structural way, and more blended organizational forms could be included, such as public-private partnerships or social enterprises, which would reveal other relevant similarities and differences. In addition, the study focused on organizational members, but top managers play an important role in articulating organizational identity claims (Gioia et al., 2013), and their perspectives may not coincide with those espoused by other organizational members. Finally, other fields in which public, private and nonprofit co-exist might reveal comparable dynamics. The healthcare field shows intense normative, mimetic, and coercive forces toward isomorphism in management and operational practices, and organizations will struggle to find both conformity and deviation. This is a probable context for observing a similar pattern of results to the ones we obtained. Additionally, healthcare systems are different across the world, with regulation, financing and service provision functions being performed by the state, private or social entities (Wendt et al., 2009). This opens up an opportunity to examine how public, private and nonprofit organizations use these institutional contexts to build their identities and position themselves as relevant actors. Effects induced by different national cultures could also be examined.

Besides addressing these limitations, future research could expand the use of organizational identity as a framework to enrich the discussion, namely using a constructivist approach (Gioia et al., 2016). This approach seems to be especially appropriate to examine the dynamics of stability and change of organizational identity and the role of the identity work



(Simpson & Carrol, 2020; Nunes et al., 2020), particularly in emergent fields or when organizations undertake important change events.

Another promising research avenue would be to advance the framing of the sector as categories, which could lead to deepening discussion of the blurring hypothesis. Probably, in parallel to sector blurring, the nature of the categorization process of organizations as being public, private and nonprofit is also changing, and we are observing a new phase in the journey of this important category system (Durand & Khaire, 2016).

## **CONCLUSION**

Whereas the relevance of the fundamental category separating public, private and nonprofit organizations has been questioned by the academic community, from an organizational identity perspective, the limits between sectors are not completely blurred. As actors embedded within specific contexts, in the eyes of their members, public, private and nonprofit organizations exhibit similarities *and* differences. Overall, similarities are located in practices, and differences in identity. Who we are and what we do are human instances that are not always consistent, but one of the functions of identity is exactly to use retrospective and prospective self-reflection processes to achieve a coherent status despite inconsistencies. In short, do sectors (still) matter? According to this study, the answer is yes.

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Figure 1. Factors prompting similarities and differences between organizations

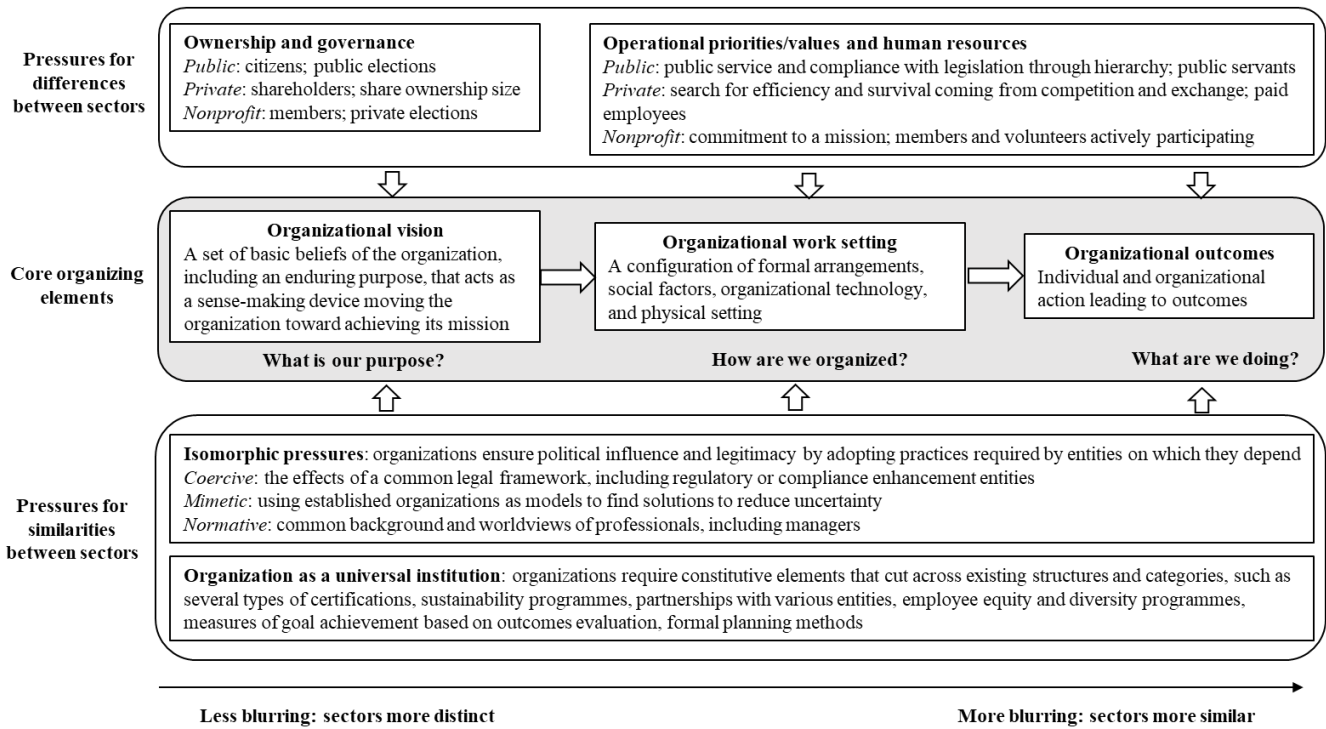


Table 1. Results of content analysis of defining organizational characteristics

	Public	Private	Nonprofit
<b>Emphasis of the organizational climate</b>			
Family-like, welcoming	73.8	95.1	76.8
Cohesion, teamwork, cooperation	78.8	55.6	58.9
Innovation, flexibility, openness to novelty	13.8	61.7	26.3
Positive emotions, affection, love, joy	26.3	44.4	16.8
Organized, well-functioning, clear rules	33.8	17.3	0.0
Promotes professionals' autonomy	5.0	13.6	5.3
Conflicting, no cooperation	6.3	1.2	14.7
Conservative, needs to evolve	0.0	4.9	11.6
<b>Physical settings</b>			
Inappropriate, outdated, insufficient	77.5	16.0	42.1
Globally appropriate, offers good conditions	43.8	44.4	16.8
Good outside space, good playground	32.5	19.8	28.4
High quality rooms, well equipped, good teaching material	33.8	9.9	25.3
Good location	21.3	19.8	15.8
Clean, sanitized	12.5	14.8	6.3
Safe	18.8	9.9	4.2
Low quality rooms, lack appropriate teaching material	20.0	1.2	6.3
<b>Professionals' characteristics</b>			
Competent, qualified	45.0	38.3	31.6
Motivated, committed	36.3	27.2	18.9
<b>Educational project</b>			
Engage families	46.3	64.2	46.3
Centred around children's individuality	33.8	39.5	34.7
Includes appropriate and diverse pedagogical activities	33.8	29.6	32.6
Promotes self-determination and holistic learning	22.5	33.3	35.8
High quality, demanding, prepares children for the future	31.3	22.2	27.4
Inclusive, supports diversity	22.5	9.9	15.8
Open to community, embedded	10.0	4.9	15.8
Away from families	12.5	0.0	3.2
<b>Top management</b>			
Leadership: close, motivating, invest in people	18.8	27.2	11.6
Leadership: distant, unmotivating, does not invest in people	8.8	2.5	29.5
Low management ability, unable to organize	2.5	7.4	24.2
Does not invest in head count	13.8	3.7	17.9
High management ability, organizes	15.0	13.6	6.3
<b>Sectors' specific features</b>			
Solidarity and charity driven	3.8	7.4	35.8
Religious orientation	0.0	0.0	17.9
Included in a school group	23.8	0.0	0.0
Public/Private/Nonprofit organization	0.0	0.0	25.3
<b>Reputation</b>			
Considered unique, with a singular history	2.5	7.4	36.8
Good image in the community	3.8	13.6	4.2
<b>Specific terms of delivery (STD)</b>			
Provides high quality meals	6.3	17.3	17.9
Suitable schedule, corresponds to families' needs	0.0	9.9	3.2

Total number of organizational characteristics: 2195 (public, 722; private, 657; nonprofit, 816). Total number of respondents: 256 (public, 81; private, 80; nonprofit, 95). Percentages computed as a function of the number of respondents in each sector. Categories with frequencies lower than 10% in at least one sector were omitted.

Table 2: The effect of the sector on organizational identity orientation

	Public		Private		Nonprofit		Sector	Occupation	Tenure	Age
<i>Identity orientation</i>	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	F	F	F
Individualistic	5.22	1.42	5.80	0.91	5.14	1.39	7.74**	3.29	0.39	0.02
Relational	6.10	0.76	6.32	0.61	5.85	1.02	8.31**	10.21**	0.10	0.00
Collectivistic	6.27	0.66	6.12	0.71	5.93	0.92	4.34**	2.77	0.15	0.14

N=256 (public=81; private=80; nonprofit=95). \* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ .

Table 3: The effect of the sector on members' attachment to their organizations

	Public		Private		Nonprofit		Sector	Occupation	Tenure	Age
<i>Attachment</i>	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	F	F	F
Identification	5.50	1.30	5.90	0.81	5.67	1.17	2.21	0.04	2.87	1.42
Disidentification	1.67	0.96	1.68	0.84	2.17	1.24	6.71**	0.01	0.15	0.88
Ambivalent identif.	1.70	0.98	1.72	0.82	2.30	1.48	7.45**	0.43	4.16*	1.72
Neutral identif.	1.64	0.89	1.55	0.86	1.72	0.91	0.40	12.60**	0.04	1.21

N=256 (public=81; private=80; nonprofit=95). \* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ .