

Agency Autonomy in Pakistan: Exploring the Role of Agency Task in Public Sector Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the study: This article aims to empirically explore the effect of the task a public agency performs on its managerial autonomy. The structural-instrumental perspective theorizes that the structure and task of organizations are the principal features based upon which public agencies are granted a certain degree of autonomy.

Methodology: The study adopted a quantitative research methodology by surveying federal public agencies in Pakistan. Data was collected from heads of 145 public agencies by adopting the key respondent approach. It tested hypotheses regarding the perceived autonomy of federal agencies, variation in tasks across these agencies and the role that the task of the agency plays in explaining its autonomy. Data was coded and labelled in SPSS and statistical tests of bivariate correlation were performed. Cross-tabulations were also used to analyze the relationship between the primary task of an agency and its level of managerial autonomy.

Findings: The findings of the study indicated that the overall managerial autonomy of federal public agencies in Pakistan was perceived to be low. Moreover, the task of the agency was found to have a negligible effect on agency autonomy.

Conclusion: The study suggests that considering the contextual and structural features of a country other than agency tasks need to be tested to explain agency autonomy. Agencies are involved in multiple tasks that lead to complexity in task measurement and its impact on autonomy. This has to be taken into account while designing autonomy of agencies. The findings can help policymakers and public managers to adopt public sector governance arrangements and structural and procedural reform initiatives conducive to the successful implementation of managerialism.

Keywords: Autonomy, Agency Task, New Public Management, Reforms, Public Sector Organizations, Pakistan

Introduction

Public agency's task is considered an essential determinant of its autonomy. However, there is little evidence of this in developing countries, where international reform trends often reach through international funding agencies or policy lessons. New public management reforms (NPM) appeared as a doctrine aimed to improve the public sector performance by importing business concepts, techniques,

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practices and values (Pollitt, 2007)...It represents a paradigm shift from administration to management, from traditional public administration to a market-oriented model and a more pragmatic view of the association between the political and administrative leaders (Hughes, 2003). NPM comprises a variety of reforms that most western countries have been implementing from 1980 onwards (Van Thiel and Team, 2009). With the adoption of the NPM model private sector-oriented practices were introduced in the public sector to enhance its efficiency and effectiveness (Blom et al., 2020; Fryer et al., 2009; Roh, 2018). Among them, the concept of ‘agencification’, or distributed governance, is a core element and perhaps its most recurrently adopted and far-reaching policy proposal (Moynihan, 2005). The increased number of agencies in both developed and developing nations was an outcome of the NPM-led public sector reforms initiated in the early 1980s. Whereby, the creation of agencies in Pakistan has been witnessed in various forms throughout the post-independence era until today. However, this reform drive was mainly propagated by the supranational organizations (IMF or World Bank) as a part of the conditionality package imposed on aid-receiving nations (Pratama 2017). NPM-ideal type of agency has a wide span of autonomy for the managers to manage and is susceptible to a high level of result-based control by the parent minister or its ministry (Verhoest and Laegreid, 2010).

Creating agencies with an enhanced level of autonomy is not a new idea, however, after the NPM reform hype more agencies were created with increased levels of autonomy (Jacobsson and Sundström, 2007). These NPM-type reforms were initiated in the UK, USA and New Zealand and then from there travelled to other countries including the Netherlands, Japan, Canada, Australia, Korea, Portugal, Tanzania and Jamaica (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Sulle, 2012). These reforms also reached developing countries somehow based on normative pressures from the supranational bodies and also as a reform lesson for the usefulness of the public sector. Countries in South Asia also introduced service delivery and HR reforms within their public sector (Siddiquee et al., 2019). As the essence of reforms travelling in the whole world is the same, so theoretically meaningful convergence is expected in the degree of autonomy and the elements contributing to the autonomy of these agencies. However, these private-led reforms had variations amongst various countries (Leisink & Knies, 2018), particularly to speak of this distinction between the developed and developing nations in its implementation (Aoki, 2019). Moreover, in developing countries, one of the dominant reasons for the failure of public services is the discrepancy between planned and actual reform measures (Tioumagneng & Njifen, 2019).

Autonomy refers to the discretion or the degree to which an agency can take decisions in matters it considers to be significant (Verschuere, 2009). The autonomy of agencies is a multidimensional concept and can be explained based on different dimensions and aspects (Bouckaert and Peters, 2004; Bach, 2010). The level of autonomy varies along different dimensions and there are always differences in formal and factual autonomy (Van Thiel and Yesilkagit, 2014). Out of all the factors that explain the autonomy of agencies, the task is considered one of the most important in the literature, as NPM reforms highlighted that autonomy is granted based on the task executed by the agency (Christensen, Lise Fimreite, and Lægreid, 2007). Another determining feature of agency autonomy is the prevalence of a culture of political patronage and informal channels of communication between the agency and the government (Hyden, 2005).

This article examines the relationship between the task an agency assumes and its managerial autonomy. Since a majority of studies on agency autonomy are conducted in the western context (Overman and Van Thiel, 2016), this study fills the gap that prevails in non-western countries by exploring the perceived autonomy of federal agencies in Pakistan and the variation in tasks across them. It also analyses the relationship between the task an agency performs with its autonomy.

It is essential to have an understanding of the macro-level country's culture and context to understand reform measures and their implementation in a specific context (Rizwan, Salman and Naveed, 2022). Since, the macro-level environment of a country also affects the implementation of the NPM reforms (Vu et al., 2019). The next section details the context of Pakistan with a brief overview of reform trends in the country.

Public Sector Reforms: The Context of Pakistan

Different reform trends were adopted in different years in the history of Pakistan to improve the functioning and efficacy of the public sector. After independence, the prevailing reform paradigm in the country was development administration under which strengthening and ensuring the capacity of state bureaucracy in policy making and execution was an accepted norm (Jabeen and Jadoon, 2013). The emphasis was on the development of the country's economy while keeping power in the hands of the civil bureaucracy, with an increasing inclination towards hierarchy-type management (Zahra, 2020). But it did not work out to be an effective strategy for the country and its problems.

By 1980 and onward the new reform paradigm reached as a solution to the problems of the public sector. This development management paradigm was inspired by NPM reforms getting hype in the world with a focus on privatization and liberalization (Zahra and Jadoon, 2016). Public agencies were given more autonomy and ultimately, were held responsible before the cabinet for their functioning. These reforms were adopted by introducing changes in the system and increasing the autonomy and number of agencies. Changes in the structure of the public agencies, making them more task specific, decreasing intervention from governments and granting them more autonomy in the operational as well as strategic matters were implemented to improve the overall working of the government. While, varying levels of autonomy were granted to public agencies in different periods (Zahra and Jadoon, 2016). Differences exist in the current levels of autonomy across the public organizations which needs to be explored and will be discussed in this article.

Theoretical Framework

Before presenting the theoretical perspective on the relationship prevalent between the task performed by agencies and their state of autonomy, it is imperative to discuss the New Public Management paradigm, which is the underlying basis of the agency reform model to govern the public entities functioning at the state level.

Both from a theoretical and practical perspective the agency structures are an offshoot of the NPM philosophy of structuring and governing public sector organizations as a reform initiative to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of public entities by granting them discretionary authority to make independent decisions in human resource, financial and policy matters while performing specialized functions within the public sector (Rehman and Mamoon, 2017).

New Public Management proposes that agencies are quite autonomous in their operations and decisions. This universal model has also been implemented in the public sector enterprises of Pakistan, which is a developing nation and intends to replace the traditional management practices with corporate management techniques to improve the performance of its public sector. However, because of the hierarchical culture of public entities in Pakistan (Zahra, 2020), the NPM-based policy shift appears to be a challenge. Moreover, the deviation between the formal level of autonomy and perceived autonomy has often been suggested by various studies (Naveed and Jadoon, 2012; Demmke, Hammerschmid, and Meyer, 2006). Although continuous measures were adopted in developing countries to reform the public sector and enhance its service delivery, introducing NPM as a reform paradigm, it has not been able to achieve the expected quality of service delivery (Mahmoud and Othman, 2021).

The structural-instrumental perspective theorizes that the structure and task of organizations are the principal features based upon which public agencies are granted a certain degree of autonomy. The structural feature of an organization is the determining factor of its autonomy; whereby the task a public entity assumes is a major determinant of the organizational structure (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967). Therefore, as per this perspective, the nature of the task an organization performs determines its structural composition, and its autonomy and control in consequence (Wilson, 1989). Pollitt & Bouckaert (2017) in their study on autonomous public sector entities also found out that the task an agency performs is the basis upon which autonomy is granted to them. Some other scholarly contributions that developed

theories under the rational choice perspective and the economic theory on public organizations which signify the role of organizational task in determining its autonomy and control are; the public choice theory, the agency theory, the transaction cost theory and the bureau-shaping model.

Public organizations are classified based on the task and activities they carry out, which determines the extent to which their outputs and outcomes are measurable (Bouckaert and Peters 2004; Verhoest and Laegreid 2010). Various theorists within the rational choice school of thought expect task characteristics to act as an indicator of agency autonomy and control (Wilson, 1989; Bach, 2010; Painter and Yee, 2011). There are certain task-related features if found to be part of an agency that makes it relevant for an enhanced degree of independence. Out of these task-related features, the measurability of the task performed is one criterion that indicates its level of autonomy and control by its principal overseeing authority (Laegreid, Roness and Rubecksen, 20007). Furthermore, since agencies involved in general public service, business and industrial services portray more measurable tasks, the rational school of theorists expects such entities to demonstrate a higher level of autonomy as compared to those organizations that are involved in policy advice, regulation and exercising other forms of public authority (Verschuere, 2005). Although earlier studies around Europe have found variations in the effect of task on the agency autonomy with a less evident direct effect in most cases (Bach, 2010; Painter and Yee, 2011; Van Thiel and Yesilkagit, 2014).

Categories of Agency Task

Agencies perform different tasks and sometimes multiple tasks are performed by a single agency as per the requirements. Various tasks performed by agencies include advice & policy formulation; monitoring, regulation, inspection, supervision, ensuring compliance to rules; payment or collection of money; registration, licensing, accreditation and quality assessment; tribunal, settling disputes, quasi-judicature, arbitration; policing or guarding; direct service delivery to citizens; information, education, training and research; internal management support unit for government; and business and industrial activities.

Considering the variety of task groups, it seems measurement of the task is a complex phenomenon. An evident reason for saying so is that in practice agencies are not necessarily involved in sole tasks, rather they usually overlap (Christensen and Laegreid, 2006; Bouckaert and Peters, 2004). For the sake of analysis in this study, the task is divided into five categories; (1) policy formulation: (2) regulation/scrutiny (3) exercising other kinds of public authority (4) general public services (5) business and industrial.

The first category of the task is labelled as a policy task. It encompasses activities such as providing policy advice to political authorities (cabinet, parliament), evaluating policies and policy instruments or proposing policies or formulation and developing new legislation (Lægreid, Roness, and Rubecksen, 2008). Autonomy of the organizations with the policy advice task is expected to be less as according to NPM, agencies are more policy implementers building on the politics-administration divide doctrine. More input and autonomy in that case then belongs to the politicians with increased regulation (Van Thiel and Yesilkagit, 2014). The second major task category is regulation and scrutiny. Regulation means to formulate certified sets of rules and other mechanisms for monitoring, inspection and ensuring adherence to these rules among the agencies in their relevant field. The regulatory bodies have the expertise and clear objectives to maintain regulation, which minimizes the control by the ministry or politicians. Many authors agree that regulatory bodies tend to have greater autonomy than agencies that carry out other managerial tasks (Christensen and Laegreid, 2006; Verhoest and Laegreid, 2010).

The third category of the task is to exercise other kinds of public authority which refer to the enactment of tasks according to, on behalf of or based on law, regulations or directives. Providing general public services is a dominant task performed by many agencies and refers to the provision of services of a public character. Research and knowledge generation is another activity that lies within this task category. The fifth and final task category includes those agencies that are involved in doing business and industrial activities directed towards service delivery and production in the form of a market. Theories based on the

principle-agent perspective state that in the case of organizations undertaking public services production tasks that are measurable and defined objectively, the principle clearly defines the organizational output (Jensen, Michael and Meckling, 1976; Wilson, 1989). The activities are homogenous, and the level of asset-specific investments is relatively low (Williamson, 1988) and can be monitored and controlled easily by their overseeing bodies because of showing transparent results, outputs and outcomes (Jensen, Michael and Meckling, 1976). This increases the possibility of providing greater autonomy to agencies. Rational choice theorists believe that agencies having these above-mentioned task features can be put at a distance from the central ministry more effectively, thus expected to have greater discretion to make managerial decisions independently (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). Since agencies that deliver general public services and those that are involved in business and industrial service provision have more of these characteristics, therefore they have a greater potential of having more autonomy as compared to agencies involved in policy advice and formulation (Verschuere, 2005).

Based on the literature discussed earlier, hypotheses about the nature of the task an agency performs and its degree of managerial autonomy are developed. These hypotheses are tested in this article.

H1: The autonomy of the agency is associated with/affected by the primary task it performs.

H2: Public organizations that have the task to provide policy advice or develop policy have less autonomy than agencies performing other tasks.

H3: Regulatory agencies are more autonomous than agencies with other tasks.

H4: Public organizations that perform the task of general public services and business and industrial services have more managerial autonomy as compared to agencies with other tasks.

Data and Methods

Research Design

This study adopted the quantitative research approach which enabled the researcher to test the hypotheses developed for the purpose of establishing a relationship between agency tasks and managerial autonomy. The empirical basis of this paper is a survey questionnaire that was formally developed by the Comparative Public Organization Database for Research and Analysis (COBRA) team for research on Governance and Management in public sector organizations of the world. The questionnaire was modified according to the context of Pakistan by one of the researchers in coordination with one of the members of COST – CRIPO action. The questionnaire has been used in more than thirty countries for similar studies.

Study Population

The study population included public sector organizations (agencies) functioning at the federal level in Pakistan.

Data Collection

The data for this study was collected using a survey questionnaire which was part of the COBRA project. Directors, CEO's or officials placed immediately after the agency heads in the hierarchy of the federal organization were contacted via phone calls, emails or personal visits for getting the questionnaires filled out. Out of 421 federal bodies which were identified through published government documents at that time, around 250 were contacted for the research purpose and filled questionnaires sent through post/mail or electronically were received back from 145 organizations. All these organizations were working under line ministries at the federal government level as attached departments, semi-autonomous bodies or autonomous bodies.

Study Variables

The variables related to autonomy and the tasks of the agencies were chosen for the research study. Three aspects of autonomy that are human resource management (strategic and operational), financial

management autonomy and policy autonomy were made part of this study to explore the perceived autonomy of the public sector bodies and to measure the relation with the primary task of the agency. For analyzing agency tasks, a variable was created labelled as TASK, the variable was coded with five options that are (1) policy formulation: (2) regulation/scrutiny (3) exercising other kinds of public authority (4) general public services (5) business and industrial.

Analysis of the Data

Data was coded and labeled in SPSS and statistical tests of bivariate correlation were performed. Cross tabulations were also used to analyze the relationship between the primary task of an agency and its level of autonomy.

To have a deeper insight into the autonomy that public agencies have in practice, several questions were asked. The dispersion of responses across different levels of autonomy is discussed. The questions related to human resource management autonomy were divided into two subsections which included Strategic HRM Autonomy and Operational HRM Autonomy. The respondents were given five options which varied from; the autonomy of decisions for all staff without prior approval from the ministry to the autonomy of decisions for no staff at all. Table 1 depicts the level of strategic and operational autonomy that public organizations have in practice.

In the case of strategic HRM autonomy, most responses are heterogeneous and are distributed across all five options without showing any obvious inclination towards a certain option other than the case of the employee evaluation policy and personnel appointment policy where a significant percentage of responses lie towards the autonomy for most staff.

Table I: *Strategic and operational HRM autonomy (percentages)*

	For all staff	For most staff	For some staff	For no staff at all	Number
<u>Strategic HRM Autonomy</u>					
Salaries for groups of staff	26.9	25.5	16.6	31.0	145
Employee promotion policy	22.1	27.6	24.8	25.5	145
Employee evaluation policy	25.5	44.1	10.3	20.0	145
Personnel appointment policy	20.0	37.2	24.1	18.6	145
Downsizing Policy	13.8	16.6	29.7	40.0	145
<u>Operational HRM Autonomy</u>					
Wage of a specific employee	15.2	11.0	26.2	47.6	145
Specific employee Promotion	15.2	20.0	38.6	26.2	145
Specific employee Evaluation	29.7	34.5	22.8	13.1	145
Specific employee appointment	17.9	25.5	31.7	24.8	145
Dismiss a single Employee	12.4	16.6	33.8	37.2	145

This demonstrates that employee evaluation and accountability is a kind of an internal matter of organizations and for most of the staff this is done without any interference. Organizations also showed autonomy for most staff in the case of personnel appointment policies which shows that organizations can decide autonomously about the size of the staff and their requirement in the future. While in the case of downsizing policy most responses tend to fall towards no autonomy at all which makes it obvious that downsizing in the public sector is not an autonomous decision of the organization until it is very much approved by the ministry or government itself. In operational HRM, matters like the wage of a specific employee, most of the responses were towards no autonomy at all as in Pakistan there is a pre-defined salary structure for each level of job and normally managerial staff or heads of organizations cannot make any changes in it.

It also shows that mostly for the salaries of staff, organizations depend on government funding, rendering autonomy to be minimal. In matters of promotion, autonomy for some staff was perceived by the organizations while in the case of employee evaluation autonomy responses are heterogeneously distributed from all staff to some staff which makes sense that employee evaluation is mostly an internal autonomous task. For specific employee appointments, mostly autonomy is perceived only for some staff or most staff based on the requirements of the labour force in the organization. The autonomy to dismiss an employee is also not available or is just perceived for some staff when there are certainly strong reasons such as on account of indiscipline or corruption, which makes sense as employees in the public sector have more job security.

Table II summarizes the perceived financial autonomy of the organizations and respondents were given three choices that are fully autonomous and without conditions set from above, autonomy within conditions set from above and no autonomy at all.

Table II: *Financial Autonomy (percentages)*

	Yes, fully and without conditions set from above	Yes, within conditions set from above	Not at all	N (number of organizations)
Take loans for investment	4.8	20.0	75.2	145
Set tariffs for services or products	20.0	35.2	44.8	145
Transfer of funds between personnel and running costs	15.9	31.7	51.7	144
Transfer of funds between personnel and running costs on one hand and investment on the other hand	10.3	18.6	70.3	144

The descriptive analysis indicates that most organizations perceive no financial management autonomy at all.

Policy autonomy is measured at two levels which include policy development autonomy and policy implementation autonomy. Respondents were given some options ranging from complete autonomy of policy development and implementation with the organizations to complete autonomy with the parent ministry. Table III shows that for policy formulation autonomy 17% of the organizations responded saying they themselves are involved in policy formulation independently, while 45% indicated that they do take such decisions but under minor restrictions from the ministry, while a small number of responses were distributed between the option of the parent ministry itself and parent ministry after consultation. However, a limited number (3-6%) of organizations thought that policy formulation was the responsibility of the parent ministry solely or in consultation with its relevant agency. Such findings disclose that policies are formulated and designed through cooperation and consultation between the parent ministry and its agency. This indicated that for policy development autonomy most of the organizations responded that organizations are themselves involved in policy formulation under minor restrictions while a small number of responses were distributed between the options of the organization itself or the organization after consultation from the ministry.

Table III: *Policy autonomy (percentages)*

	Org. itself	Org under minor restriction	Org after consultation	Org under restriction from the ministry	Parent ministry after consultation	Parent ministry itself	N
Policy development	16.6	45.5	17.9	9.7	6.2	2.8	143

autonomy							
Policy implementation autonomy	33.8	37.9	11.7	9.7	3.4	1.4	142

While in case of policy implementation autonomy the majority perceived complete autonomy of implementation or autonomy under minor restrictions from the ministry. which is the extent to which an agency can take decisions regarding the policy instruments such as the resources it can employ to meet its goals and objectives. Just 2% reported that the parent ministry makes decisions solely on its own; this is recoded as a low level of autonomy, approx. 4% said that the parent ministry made decisions after consulting the agencies, while 22% said agency makes decisions after consulting the ministry or under conditions given by it, whereas 72% perceived to make most decisions themselves or with minimum restrictions from the ministry (this is defined as the high level of autonomy).

Overall, in the case of strategic and operational matters of HRM (Table I), autonomy has more inclination towards lower levels with more involvement from the ministries and politicians. In important matters related to finance, most of the autonomy belonged to those high in the hierarchy (Table II), so it can be said that managers are not given enough autonomy to manage the working of public organizations, this is supported by the descriptive analysis of the research data. Lower levels of autonomy in important matters like specific employee appointment, dismissal, specific employee promotion, the wage of a specific employee (Table I) and almost all financial matters (Table II) shows that the organization has less involvement in most of the operational and strategic matters, depicting that almost no autonomy is given to agencies in important financial matters.

Table III shows that for a majority of organizations studied, the implementation of policies is primarily an organizational matter. Moreover, 75% of agencies are perceived to play an active role in the formulation of policies, both solely as well as after consulting their oversight government ministries/authority. This scenario reflects the considerable autonomy of agencies in framing policies and also in the provision of policy advice to ministries/government.

Autonomy is the dependent variable of the study while the independent variable is the task. The distribution of federal agencies according to the primary task performed by these surveyed agencies is presented in Table IV below.

Table IV: *Task as an Independent variable (percentages)*

Tasks	N (%)
Policy formulation	14 (9.7)
Regulation/scrutiny	25 (17.2)
Other kind of exercising public authority	4 (2.8)
General public services	78 (53.8)
Business and industrial services	24 (16.6)

54% of the surveyed agencies perform the primary task of general public services, whereas regulatory and business and industrial services are rendered by approx. 17% of the agencies. A minimum of 10% of agencies are involved in policy formulation; 13 out of 145 have policy formulation purely as their primary task but do perform other functions as their secondary task. That means general public service is the most frequently rendered task, followed by regulation (17%), business and industrial services (16.6%) and policy formulation (10%).

Agencies carrying out the task of “other kind of exercising public authority” have the least share in the total population of the agencies surveyed.

Cross-tabulation statistical analysis using contingency tables and Pearson's chi-square analysis of the association

The previous section presented the most frequently performed tasks by agencies surveyed. To observe the association between autonomy and agency task inferential statistic method of chi-square was used. Cross-tabulation and chi-square were calculated to study the relationship between task as an independent variable, divided into five task categories as nominal variables and the three dimensions of the dependent variable: autonomy. This was done to assess the relationship of each task category with all three dimensions of autonomy (HR autonomy, financial and policy autonomy).

The expectations developed earlier are tested using cross-tabulation analysis. Statistical techniques of multivariate analysis are not used because of the data having a skewed distribution and secondly the nature of variables being categorical. Table V summarizes the results of the cross-tabulation analysis for strategic management autonomy and all five task categories. Strategic autonomy is stated as either high or low, depending upon the responses given in the data collected. The table indicates that agencies providing business and industrial services have a higher level of strategic autonomy than the agencies having other primary tasks. To further analyze, if there exists a significant relationship between general public service delivery and strategic and financial autonomy, the chi-square test of independence was performed on SPSS, and no relationship was found between the task of public service delivery and strategic HRM autonomy, chi-square (1, N= 145) =.048, p= .827. The same was the case for public service delivery and financial HRM autonomy, chi-square (1, N= 145) =.196, p= .658. Therefore, the expectation that the "autonomy of the agency is associated with/affected by the primary task it performs" is not supported in the case of Pakistani agencies as the task is not found to be the major variable that explains changes in the autonomy of the public sector agencies in all its dimensions. Whereas agencies involved in policy advice and those that exercise other public authority have the least strategic autonomy.

Table V: *Intersection between strategic autonomy and primary tasks*

Strategic Autonomy	Policy formulation	Regulation/Scrutiny	Exercising Public Authority	General Public Service	Business& industrial services	Total
High	28.6%	48%	25%	52.6%	70.8%	51.7%
Low	71.4%	52%	75%	47.4%	29.2%	48.63%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

While in table VI, it is obvious that no matter which task an agency performs, it has a low level of operational autonomy. This means that public organizations in Pakistan do not have complete authority to make day-to-day decisions related to personnel management.

Table VI: *Intersection between operational autonomy and primary tasks*

Operational Autonomy	Policy formulation	Regulation/Scrutiny	Exercising Public Authority	General Public Service	Business& industrial services	Total
High	28.6%	36%	25%	33.3%	45.8%	35.2%
Low	71.4%	64%	75%	66.7%	54.2%	64.8%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

The intersection between financial autonomy and agency tasks is summarized in Table VII. It is very evident from the percentages shown in the low category of financial autonomy that no matter which task an agency performs, its level of financial autonomy is highly compromised. This reassures the dependency of our public organizations on the higher government authorities for various financial decisions. Unexpectedly, even the business and industrial service providing agencies do not have a high level of autonomy over different financial matters. The data shows that no matter which type of task an agency renders, a majority of them perceive a low level of financial management autonomy.

Table VII: *Intersection between financial management autonomy and primary tasks*

Financial Autonomy	Policy formulation	Regulation/ Scrutiny	Exercising Public Authority	General Public Service	Business& Industrial services	Total
High	7.1%	4%	0%	12.8%	20.8%	11.7%
Low	92.9%	96%	100%	87.2%	79.2%	88.3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table VIII presents a summary of the intersection between policy development autonomy and primary tasks. It reports that all the agencies understudy, involved in any one of the five different primary task categories possess a fairly high level of policy development autonomy. A majority of regulatory agencies (88%) are perceived to be involved in policy development task. The same is the case with business and industrial services providing and general public service agencies. This implies that a majority of agencies, no matter what activity they are engaged in, are a part of the policy formulation process. Providing policy advice to the superior government authority; ministries/ministers is also a common practice of agencies under study. However, some agencies having policy formulation as their main task are perceived to deviate from this common practice, since approx. 36% of agencies perceive to have a compromised level of policy development autonomy. Still, 57% of agencies formulating policy are shown to have minimal autonomy to design policies. The implicit expectation of this study that policy development mainly happens within or by ministerial bureaucracies is supported by this finding.

Table VIII: *Intersection between policy development autonomy and primary tasks*

Policy development autonomy	Policy formulation	Regulation/ Scrutiny	Exercising Public Authority	General Public Service	Business & industrial services	Total
High	57.1%	88.0%	75.0%	79.5%	87.5%	80.0%
Low	35.7%	8.0%	25.0%	20.5%	12.5%	18.6%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table IX below shows an intersection between the agency task and its policy implementation role. It suggests that no matter what kind of task an agency performs, a majority of them are perceived to play a dominant role in the implementation of policies framed. This confirms the NPM-based perspective that public agencies are created to carry out policies developed and designed by the central government bureaucracies.

Table IX: *Intersection between policy implementation autonomy and primary tasks*

Policy implementation autonomy	Policy formulation	Regulation/ Scrutiny	Exercising Public Authority	General Public Service	Business & industrial services	Total
High	71.4%	88.0%	75.0%	83.3%	87.5%	83.4%
Low	28.6%	8.0%	25.0%	14.1%	12.5%	14.5%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

The overall results are presented in Table X.

Table X: *Findings of the Study*

Hypotheses	Results in Light of Literature
1. The autonomy of the agency is associated with/affected by the primary task it performs	It is not supported in the case of Pakistani agencies as the task is not found to be a variable that explains or affects any major changes in the autonomy of the public-sector agencies. This result is in contrast to the literature (Wilson 1989; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017) presented.
2. Public organizations that have the task to provide policy advice or develop policy have less autonomy than agencies performing other tasks.	This hypothesis got supported as the public organizations performing the task of policy advice or developing policy have less managerial autonomy than agencies performing other tasks. This is in line with the assertion on increased regulation and control for agencies involved in policy advice (Van Thiel and Yesilkagit, 2014)
3. Regulatory agencies are more autonomous than agencies with other tasks.	It was supported in the case of policy development and policy implementation autonomy, as the bodies that regulate were autonomous in developing & implementing the policies in their respective sectors. This result partially endorsed the claim of earlier studies, which found that regulatory bodies tend to have greater autonomy than agencies that carry out other managerial tasks (Christensen and Laegreid 2006; Verhoest and Laegreid 2010).
4. Public organizations that perform tasks of general public services and business and industrial services have more managerial autonomy as compared to agencies with other tasks.	It was only true in the case of general public services and business and industrial services in HRM autonomy matters; while there was no support for this assumption for other categories of autonomy. This partially supports the hypothesis and thus the assumption in earlier literature which stated that agencies involved in general public service, business and industrial services portray more measurable tasks, therefore such entities demonstrate a higher level of autonomy as compared to those organizations that are involved in policy advice, regulation and exercising other forms of public authority (Verschuere 2005).

Results and Discussion

The results of the study indicated that the overall autonomy of federal public agencies in Pakistan was perceived to be low. It also indicated that most organizations perceived no financial management autonomy at all. This reaffirms the findings of Jadoon (2012); Zahra and Jadoon (2016); Jadoon, Jabeen, and Rizwan (2012) that the finance ministry has a high involvement in setting budgets and other financial matters of agencies in Pakistan. This also ascertains that normally public agencies do not enjoy autonomy in their budget and important financial issues that attributes to vivid gap in-stated and in-practice levels of financial management autonomy. (Zahra and Jadoon, 2016)

Overall, most agencies are perceived to have a high level of policy implementation autonomy. The survey findings suggest that agencies have quite a high level of policy formulation autonomy as well which negates the NPM belief that most agencies are created for policy implementation purposes only, and raises questions on the politics-administration (formulation-implementation) dichotomy. This is indicated by the large percentage of selected agencies that are perceived to have policy formulation autonomy under minor restrictions.

The task perspective to autonomy explicates that the task of the organization is always well aligned with the goals of the organization. It was highlighted in the literature that the degree of financial management, human resource management and policy autonomy varies based on the type and task an agency assumes. While this study revealed that the task is not associated with autonomy significantly. A lack of association between the type of agency task and most of the dimensions of autonomy was in contrast with the literature and theoretical underpinning. The same kind of study in Hong Kong by Painter & Yee (2010) showed that agencies performing the task of service delivery have less autonomy in practice and those performing the task of regulation showed no association with any kind of autonomy. In Germany, research on the relationship between autonomy and task of public organizations found that service delivery agencies have less financial management autonomy but no association between service delivery task was found with policy autonomy. Talking about regulation as a task in German bodies only policy autonomy was found to be higher or else no relation was found with managerial autonomy (Bach, 2010), which was also the case in Pakistan. Van Thiel & Yesilkagit, (2014) also found that only some tasks have some indirect effect on autonomy, quite comparable to Pakistan as well. Since regulatory agencies have comparatively higher policy development and implementation autonomy and more HRM autonomy for business and general public services. The study comparing the autonomy of agencies in Norway, Ireland and Flanders also showed variations in autonomy based on the task of the agencies (Verhoest and Laegreid, 2010). This affirms that the case of a non-western country with hierarchical structures and imported reform models did not show extreme variations from the western cases. Akin to other countries, task does not appear to be the sole factor behind the autonomy of agencies, other factors have to be factored in to understand the autonomy of agencies completely. The structural instrumental and task perspectives have different meanings for various contexts and need to be studied alongside other relevant theoretical frameworks.

Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed to answer two central questions: the level of autonomy that agencies perceive and does task matter for the autonomy of agencies; intended to empirically explore the effect of the task a public agency performs on its autonomy. The results indicated that the overall autonomy of federal public agencies in Pakistan was perceived to be low. While it is certain that some tasks require more autonomy than others, it should be an important determinant of agency autonomy but the picture is quite different. Agencies performing multiple task adds complexity to the picture while emphasizing that other factors need to be counted in while designing agency autonomy.

The present study implies that agency task is not the only determinant of managerial autonomy of a public organization created at arm's length from its core line ministry. Moreover, the findings from a non-western country were in line with most of the western literature, inviting more empirical analysis to understand if the developing and non-western world has very different governance structures and issues. Thus, the study contributes to the agency debate occurring at a global level across developed and developing countries.

It invites the policy makers to understand the complexity associated with agency tasks while they are involved in performing multiple tasks at the same time. This has to be taken into account while designing autonomy of agencies. The findings can help policymakers and public managers to adopt public sector governance arrangements and structural and procedural reform initiatives conducive to the successful implementation of managerialism.

Study Limitations

The researchers identified certain limitations and weaknesses of data and the instrument used while conducting this study. During data collection, there was a probable risk of a non-response error. It was also experienced that the length of the questionnaire appeared to be a common reason for respondents to hesitate either filling it up or delaying it by making different excuses. These factors made the researcher reach them multiple times, either in person or by making repeated telephone calls, which not only added

to the cost but also wasted time and resources. Another limitation of data collection through the questionnaire was that since a majority of the response organizations (federal agencies) were located in Islamabad, not the city where the researcher resided, reaching them in person involved extra funds and time. Another limitation of obtaining survey responses is the inability to probe responses. Since a questionnaire is a structured instrument, it allows limited flexibility to the researcher with respect to response format.

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Conflict of Interest


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