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## Chapter 2.1

# A Novel Definition of Professional Staff

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### Abstract

Based on a review of professional staff (PS), which includes research managers and administrators, in 54 academic publications, I propose a novel definition for this category of staff: ‘degree holding university employees who are primarily responsible for developing, maintaining and changing the social, digital and physical infrastructures that enable education, research and knowledge exchange’. The proposed definition facilitates the development of new research questions that target the level of the organisational fields of higher education and science, to complement research on the university and individual levels. This view supports the study of the contributions of PS to higher education and science. I anticipate that such a broader focus will help to counter and nuance accounts of ‘administrative bloat’ by focusing on how PS as a group shape and are shaped by the organisational fields of higher education and science, rather than dismissing them as superfluous or parasitic.

**Keywords:** Professional staff; research management; universities; review; definition; higher education

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## Introduction

Based on a review of definitions of PS in academic literature, in this chapter, I propose a novel definition for this category of staff: ‘degree holding university employees who are primarily responsible for developing, maintaining and changing the social, digital and physical infrastructures that enable education, research and knowledge exchange’. I propose a new definition for two reasons: (1) the existing popular narrative and even much of the scholarly research on PS defines them by what they do not do (research and teaching), and the proposed definition aims to enable more inclusive and constructive narratives around PS; and (2) the existing body of literature on PS is highly dispersed and does not agreed upon a definition of PS, so by proposing an overarching definition I aim to help integrate the body of literature about PS and stimulate future research on PS. In particular, I believe that research on the level of the organisational fields of higher education and science to be promising. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) define organisational fields as ‘those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life’. As such, building upon existing insights about individuals and their roles within universities, research at this level about PS will contribute to a nuanced understanding of the role of this group in higher education as a whole. Research managers and administrators constitute one of the occupational groups that fall under this category of university employees.<sup>1</sup> I hope that this novel definition facilitates practical discussions about the role of research managers and administrators, as well as research into this specific role.

In recent decades, a new and distinct group of employees has emerged at universities. On the one hand, the primary responsibilities of these employees are not in teaching and education, distinguishing them from academics. On the other hand, in general, they hold higher education degrees (Acker et al., 2019; Allen-Collinson, 2007; Berman & Pitman, 2010; Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004; Harman & Stone, 2006; Krücken et al., 2013; Rytberg & Geschwind, 2017; Shelley, 2010; Szekeres, 2011), possess highly specialised knowledge (Karlsson & Rytberg, 2016; Qu, 2021; Rytberg, 2020), experience considerable levels of autonomy (Aarrevaara & Dobson, 2016; Karlsson & Rytberg, 2016; Qu, 2021; Rytberg, 2020; Rytberg & Geschwind, 2017), and hold strategic positions in networks both within and beyond the university (Cox et al., 2017; Daly, 2013; De Jong et al., 2016; Harman & Stone, 2006; Rytberg, 2020), which sets them apart from the clerical, technical and manual staff, such as secretaries, laboratory analysts and animal caretakers. I refer to this group of employees as PS, as this term is most commonly used in the literature (Whitchurch, 2020) and preferred by these employees themselves (Sebalj et al., 2012).

Despite the rapid growth of this body of staff (see for instance Stage & Aagaard, 2019, who report a 500% increase in Denmark between 1999 and 2018), there is relatively little research available about PS (Bossu et al., 2018). Evidence-based discussions about PS are further complicated by national differences in referring to this group of employees (Acker et al., 2019). As far as I am aware, existing academic reviews about PS have not concentrated on terms and definitions (e.g. Gander et al., 2019; Schneiderberg & Merkator, 2013; Szekeres, 2011; Veles & Carter, 2016). Therefore, I took up the task of reviewing the academic literature about PS to identify the diversity of

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<sup>1</sup> Additionally, organisations such as consultancy firms, hospitals, public research organisations and research funders may employ research managers and administrators. The definition of PS that I propose in this chapter, however, is based on literature about PS employed by universities.

alternative terms that authors use, as well as the definitions or descriptions of these terms. The analysis of terms, definitions and descriptions in 54 documents enables me to propose a novel definition of PS that unites the different national and disciplinary discussions.

The remainder of this chapter is organised as follows. In the next section, I explain the methodology. The Web of Science and Scopus were consulted to retrieve relevant documents, and searched for terms and definitions within these documents, which I subsequently analysed. In the following section, I discuss the results and support the proposed novel definition of PS. The section includes an overview of retrieved terms, definitions and descriptions, as well as a visualisation of the construction of the definition that I propose. In the final section, I conclude by discussing the rhetorical and analytical value of this definition.

## **Method**

I reviewed the terms for and definitions and descriptions of PS that authors use to refer to this category of employees in their research. This chapter is based on a body of literature that was collected to review the available insights on the contribution of PS to academic knowledge development. Thus, studies about PS who solely work in education or other student-related areas of work, such as sports or counselling, were not included in the analysis. In this chapter, I summarise the different steps of the literature collection and the description of the dataset. See De Jong and Del Junco (under review) for a more detailed exposition. I also explain how I analysed the data for the purpose of this chapter.

## **Data Collection**

The collection process consisted of four steps. In step 1, Cay del Junco and I searched the Web of Science (21 June 2021) and Scopus (13 July 2021) for articles, books, book chapters, reviews, and ‘early access’ articles (in the case of the Web of Science) containing *universit\** AND (*administrat\** OR *staff*) in their titles. After comparing the results and removing duplicates, we retained 2,197 documents. Step 2 entailed an analysis of titles and abstracts to identify those documents that were likely to talk about the involvement of PS in academic research. Many titles that included *administrat\**, were about drug administration or senior leadership of universities, which in the United States are often referred to as ‘administrators’. Only 42 documents were retained in step 2. In step 3, we used forward and backward citation tracking to identify additional relevant documents, as we expected that the wide distribution of relevant publications and terms that we were not aware of prevented us from capturing all relevant publications. We repeated this process until we no longer found relevant publications that were not included already. A total of 103 documents were added in this step. In step 4, we considered documents that were not linked to the original set of documents through citations, but that colleagues suggested during informal discussions, as well as seminar and conference presentations. Only documents that were included in the Web of Science and/or Scopus were retained. This resulted in the identification of an additional 22 documents. Due to the goal of the review that the dataset was collected for, in step 5 we only retained documents for further analysis that presented original research (thus excluding reviews, theoretical papers and opinion pieces) about the competencies, relationships and influence of PS that are relevant for their contributions to academic knowledge development.

### ***Description of the Dataset***

The final dataset consists of 54 documents, including eight book chapters and 46 journal articles, authored by 71 unique authors. The journal articles were published in 26 unique journal titles, in line with the hypothesis that the academic literature about PS is highly dispersed. Doubtless, the focus on competencies, relationships and influence will have resulted in the exclusion of publications that are considered to be seminal to broader discussions about PS, but that did not present original research relevant to the broader review. Nevertheless, I believe that the broadness of the dataset will have guarded me against overlooking crucial elements for the construction of a novel definition. Also, I realise that limiting the search to the Web of Science and Scopus may have excluded publications authored by PS in professional journals. Yet, the perspective of PS is well represented in our dataset. All three most cited authors currently work or have worked as PS.

Thirty-two documents are about PS in general, or position the study of particular roles within the broader discussion of PS. The definitions and descriptions of PS in these documents serve as the main input for the novel definition. Twenty-two documents focus on specific PS roles. The definitions and descriptions in these documents help to fine-tune the novel definition, making it inclusive to a broad diversity of specific roles. The three most represented organisational roles in the overall set are research managers and administrators (15 documents), librarians (10 documents) and technology transfer officers (7 documents). The three most represented countries of study are the United Kingdom (14 documents), Australia (10 documents) and Germany (6 documents). Note that a single paper can cover multiple roles and/or countries.

### ***Data Analysis***

The final set of documents was analysed in NVivo (version 12.6.1) software for qualitative analysis. I searched each document for the term(s) that the authors used and for corresponding definitions of the terms. If no definition was provided, I searched for descriptions that reveal how authors had implicitly defined the term(s) they used to refer to PS. Inspired by the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2012), which supports the systematic and inductive analysis of qualitative data, I identified commonly used components of definitions and descriptions of PS. These components were used to develop the novel definition of PS.

## **PS: Terms, Definitions and Descriptions**

In this section, I review the terms that are used to denote PS. I also discuss the definitions and descriptions of these terms.

No less than 18 alternative terms are used to refer to PS in the reviewed documents (Table 2.1.1). Some of these terms are contested. Allen-Collinson (2007) considers ‘support’ pejorative, a label that Szekeres (2004) attaches to ‘administration’. Similarly, several authors suggest that ‘non-academic’ is problematic, as it others and disrespects people by negating them – labelling them by what they are not (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Dobson, 2000; Mcinnis, 1998). Therefore, a novel definition of PS should avoid these words due to their negative connotations.

Related to the variation in terms to refer to PS, there does not seem to be a widely agreed-upon definition of PS yet. For the 19 terms that authors use, including ‘PS’, I found 22 definitions and descriptions. Seven studies did not explicitly define or describe the term(s) used, leading to four terms that were not defined in any of the reviewed

Table 2.1.1. Terms and Definitions.

Term	Definition or Description
(the) Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘given the job of trying to balance external and internal needs’ (Frølich et al., 2019)</li> </ul>
Administrative professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Administrators work in strategic areas such as internationalization, business liaison and research funding support’ (Karlsson &amp; Rytberg, 2016)</li> </ul>
Administrative personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘clerical staff and professional administrative staff/ higher administrative staff’ (Gornitzka &amp; Larsen, 2004)</li> </ul>
Administrative staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘all persons working as support staff in administrative units without managerial competencies’ (Krücken et al., 2013)</li> <li>• Not explicitly defined or described in reviewed document (Hüther &amp; Krücken, 2018; Mcinnis, 1998)</li> </ul>
Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘focused on the management and support of the primary process’ (Kallenberg, 2016)</li> <li>• ‘Academic university management (President/rector, vice-presidents, deans, heads of institutes, etc.): this includes all leading managerial positions within the university that are held by academics, typically only for a limited period of time. 2. Administrative university management (senior administrative managers, heads of offices and service facilities, etc.): this includes full-time administrative management staff with responsibility for staff, organization and resource administration within a specific area. 3. Administrative staff: this includes all persons working as support staff in administrative units without managerial competencies’ (Krücken et al., 2013)</li> </ul>
Allied staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘non-academic staff’ (Wohlmuther, 2008)</li> </ul>
Blended professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals ‘whose roles include initiatives associated with the social responsibilities of institutions to their communities, as well as more market-oriented, income generating projects’ (Whitchurch, 2010c)</li> </ul>
General staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not explicitly defined or described in reviewed documents. (Dobson, 2000; Szekeres, 2006)</li> </ul>
Grassroots administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not explicitly defined or described in reviewed document (Qu, 2021)</li> </ul>
Higher education professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘not primarily active in teaching and research, although they might be involved in some teaching and some research, but entrusted mainly to prepare and support decisions of the management, establish new services or professionalize existing ones, and actively shape the core activities of the organization’ (Kehm, 2015a, 2015b)</li> <li>• Organizational professionals working in a management role or a support and services role (Schneijderberg, 2015)</li> </ul>

(Continued)

Table 2.1.1. (*Continued*)

Term	Definition or Description
New professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not explicitly defined or described in reviewed document (Daly, 2013)</li> </ul>
Non-faculty professional staff members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not explicitly defined or described in reviewed document (Sprague, 1994)</li> </ul>
Para-academic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘staff’ who specialize in one type element of academic life’ (Macfarlane, 2011)</li> </ul>
Professional and managerial staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘a large and influential group, responsible for the day-to-day operation, management, and planning of the university or college’ (Wilkins &amp; Leckie, 1997)</li> </ul>
Professional and scientific staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘employees without academic appointment whose jobs require some higher education or equivalent experience, the ability to exercise independent judgement, and minimum supervision’ (Henkin &amp; Persson, 1992)</li> </ul>
Professional staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘All had management or developmental roles and were not employed on academic staff contracts (although as we will see, many undertook work which was “academic” in nature) and all were employed on HEE Level 7 or above’ (Berman &amp; Pitman, 2010)</li> <li>• ‘the graduate and/or professional entry staff that have high levels of autonomy and responsibility for managing and leading business-related functions in the university’ (Kallenberg, 2020)</li> <li>• ‘administrative staff, general staff, non-academic staff, allied staff’ (Szekeres, 2011)</li> <li>• Refers to Whitchurch’s (2009) notion of the ‘blended professional’ (Takagi, 2015)</li> <li>• ‘staff’ who increasingly, for instance: have academic credentials such as master’s and doctoral level qualifications, or a teaching or research background in the college sector; work in teams, dealing with institutional initiatives that require a range of specialist, academic and policy contributions, from bids for one-off infrastructure funding to the establishments of more long-term regional partnerships; undertake quasi-academic functions such as conducting study-skill sessions for access students, speaking at outreach events or conducting overseas recruitment visits; and have the possibility of moving into an academic management role, for instance, a pro-vice-chancellor post with a portfolio such as quality, staffing or institutional development’ (Whitchurch, 2008a)</li> <li>• Not explicitly defined or described in reviewed document (Gray, 2015; Whitchurch &amp; Gordon, 2009)</li> </ul>

*(Continued)*



Table 2.1.1. (Continued)

Term	Definition or Description
Professional support staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘individuals in support roles who are commonly highly qualified and have an academic degree. They do not necessarily identify as administrators, nor are they employed as academics. They are situated somewhere in between. According to this research, they may also be viewed as actors in a third space. This is a concept used when exploring groups of staff at HEIs who do not fit the conventional binary descriptors of “academics” or “non-academics” [...]’ (Ryttberg, 2020)</li> <li>• ‘Their functions typically require highly educated specialists and experts in specific areas of administration [...]. Furthermore, they do not identify themselves with the term administrator [...], which refers to functions that are more clerical or secretarial [...]’ (Ryttberg &amp; Geschwind, 2019)</li> <li>• Not explicitly defined or described in reviewed document (Ryttberg &amp; Geschwind, 2017)</li> </ul>
Third space professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Described as individuals working in ‘an emergent territory between academic and professional domains, which is colonized by less bounded forms of professional’ (Whitchurch, 2008a)</li> <li>• ‘groups of staff’ in higher education who do not fit conventional binary descriptors such as those enshrined in “academic” or “non-academic” employment categories ... They are likely to work in a multi-disciplinary or multi-professional environment or team, either for a time-limited period or on a permanent basis. They may also build up new forms of expertise, such as tutoring in academic literacy or the conversion of teaching programmes to online platforms, that represent new space and require a blend of academic and professional inputs’ (Whitchurch, 2015)</li> </ul>
University professional services staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘provide specialist functions to enable other staff to focus on their own areas of competence and responsibility’ (Gibbs &amp; Kharouf, 2020)</li> </ul>

documents at all – but may have been defined elsewhere. One term, ‘para-academic’, is defined as ‘individuals who specialise in one type of element of academic life’ (Macfarlane, 2011), which includes PS, but not exclusively. The term refers to those with full-time research or full-time teaching positions as well. Although this captures an interesting development in academia, it is too broad for the purpose of defining PS. Regarding the definitions and descriptions of the remaining terms, ‘allied staff’ simply describes PS as non-academic staff (Wohlmuther, 2008).

My analysis of more elaborate definitions and descriptions identifies identity (Ryttberg, 2020; Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2017, 2019), academic degree (Ryttberg, 2020; Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2017), organisational roles (Gibbs & Kharouf, 2020; Kallenberg,



2016), nature of the work (Berman & Pitman, 2010; Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004; Henkin & Persson, 1992; Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2009; Kallenberg, 2020; Kehm, 2015a, 2015b; Krücken et al., 2013; Szekeres, 2011; Whitchurch, 2008c, 2010c; Wilkins & Leckie, 1997) or even specific jobs (Karlsson & Rytberg, 2016; Krücken et al., 2013) as elements of definitions. Still, some of these definitions and descriptions also include ‘othering’ elements, by referring to non-academic employment statuses (Berman & Pitman, 2010; Henkin & Persson, 1992; Rytberg, 2020; Rytberg & Geschwind, 2017, 2019; Whitchurch, 2008c).

A closer inspection of these elements of definitions and descriptions informed which elements I incorporated into the novel definition. ‘Academic degree’, including bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees, was included as in general this is a distinctive characteristic of PS compared to secretarial, technical and maintenance staff. As ‘university’ denotes the type of organisation that PS commonly work at, this element was included as well. The ‘nature of the work’ was identified as ‘enabling primary processes’, following Kallenberg (2016) and authors that talk about involvement in for example research. Gibbs and Kharouf (2020) and the objective to exclude othering elements inspired the use of ‘enabling’. I did not include ‘identity’, as a closer reading reveals that the main point of this element is that PS do not identify as administrators nor academics. Thus, this would introduce a negative or othering element to the novel definition. Still, I made sure not to include references to administration (or academics) in the proposed definition to respect the identity of PS. I did not include references to specific roles either as this would limit the scope of the definition. Yet, I translated these roles into generic responsibilities. For example, Karlsson and Rytberg’s (2016, p. 1) definition included examples of concrete roles in ‘internationalization, business liaison and research funding’, which simultaneously indicate responsibilities around social infrastructures (relationships with international partners and companies) and primary processes in universities (knowledge development and knowledge transfer).

Next to PS and its alternatives, 22 documents focus on one or more of the following subgroups: research managers and administrators (10 documents), librarians (8 documents), technology transfer officers (2 documents), faculty managers (1 document), grant officers (1 document), information technology staff (1 document) and staff involved in developing research data management policies (one document). Although these roles both inform the definition of PS that I present in this section, due to space limitations I have not included the corresponding terms in Table 2.1.1.

The analysis of definitions and descriptions of these specific roles provides further support for the included elements, as well as for fine-tuning them. The work on research managers and administrators (e.g. Allen-Collinson, 2006; Beime et al., 2021; Ito & Watanabe, 2021) and technology transfer (Harman & Stone, 2006; Sapir, 2020) highlighted the enabling of primary processes as central to the work of PS. Although librarians are not defined in any of the included documents, a closer reading of these documents (e.g. Antell et al., 2017; Cox et al., 2017; Joo & Schmidt, 2021; Sanches, 2015) shows that in addition to managing collections of books and other texts, they increasingly have responsibilities around data management, digitalisation of libraries and online-repositories. This led to the addition of ‘physical’ and ‘digital’ to the element of infrastructure.

Combining the elements that I identified through our analysis of existing terms, definitions and descriptions I propose to define PS as ‘degree holding university employees who are primarily responsible for developing, maintaining and changing the social, digital and physical infrastructures that enable education, research and knowledge exchange’. See Fig. 2.1.1 for a visualisation of the construction of this

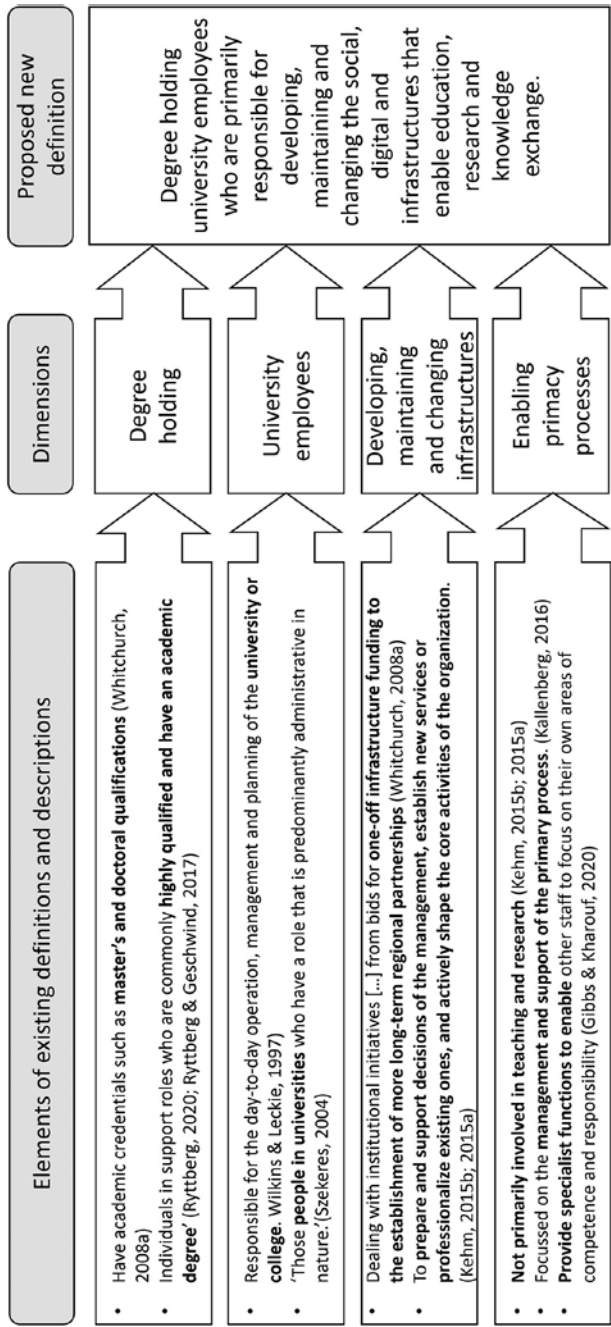


Fig. 2.1.1. Data Structure.

new definition based on elements of existing definitions and descriptions. Words and phrases that are printed in bold informed the identification of the elements.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed the terms that authors use to refer to PS in academic literature, as well as the definitions and descriptions of these terms that they provide. This analysis resulted in a novel definition of PS:

Degree-holding university employees who are primarily responsible for developing, maintaining and changing the social, digital and physical infrastructures that enable education, research and knowledge exchange.

Rhetorically, it defines PS by what they do, rather than by what they do not do, and puts them at the centre of the core tasks of the university, rather than positioning them at the periphery, as terms such as ‘administration’ and ‘support’ signal. Thus, the definition steers us away from narratives about PS that can be characterised as ‘othering’ or ‘pejorative’ (Allen-Collinson, 2006, 2009; Dobson, 2000; Mcinnis, 1998; Szekeres, 2004).

Analytically, while acknowledging that the division of different types of responsibilities in academia is increasingly blurred (Bossu et al., 2018; Kallenberg, 2016; Krücken et al., 2013; Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2013), it distinguishes different functions in universities based on primary responsibilities (Stage & Aagaard, 2019).

Such a distinction facilitates the development of new research questions that target the level of the organisational fields of higher education and science, to complement research on the university and individual levels. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), the advantage of the organisational field perspective is that it takes into account ‘the totality of relevant actors’. This view supports the study of contributions of PS, including research managers and administrators, to higher education and science, rather than limiting it to the study of roles in the specific organisations they work for. I anticipate that such a broader focus will help to counter and nuance accounts of ‘administrative bloat’ (cf. Ginsberg, 2013) by focusing on how PS as a group shape and are shaped by the organisational field of higher education, rather than dismissing them as superfluous or parasitic. In particular, the proposed definition resonates with the concept of ‘institutional work’, which refers to ‘the purposive action aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions’, and facilitates understanding how micro-level actions relate to institutional change (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). Sapir (2020) and Beime et al. (2021), both included in the reviewed dataset, provide examples of such work. The first study shows how technology transfer professionals maintain social infrastructures for knowledge exchange by securing the freedom to publish in collaboration with industry, whereas the second demonstrates how grant advisers change social infrastructures by stimulating competition among academics. The proposed definition enables identifying similar contributions of PS, for example, through the lens of institutional work.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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