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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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How do public servants frame and practise empathy?

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Abstract

This article examines how public servants use empathy in their work by distinguishing between empathy as a frame or a way of defining phenomena, and empathy as a practice or a concrete way through which care, understanding, and responsiveness are enacted. Drawing on survey data from the public service of New South Wales, Australia, the study identifies five categories of empathetic practice: helping clients, improving communication, facilitating teamwork, decision-making, and program design. Our findings show that while empathy is often framed by public servants as a feeling or an emotional state, it is also used in practice as a cognitive and political tool, enabling public servants to frame problems, engage with lived experience, and challenge dominant assumptions embedded in policy settings. This article contributes to our understanding of empathy as a distinct practice in public servants' work which can inform the design of institutional settings that enable empathy in public service.

KEYWORDS
empathy, frames, practice theory, public service

Points for practitioners

- Empathy can be a strategic skill, not just a soft skill. It can help public servants interpret evidence,

understand diverse perspectives, and make decisions that lead to better outcomes for clients.

- Empathy should be supported across a variety of roles, not just at the frontline. Public service leaders should create space for empathetic engagement in policy and organisational processes.
- Lived experience should inform policy design and advice. Practising empathy means going beyond consultation to meaningfully incorporate the experiences of people affected by policy in program design.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Empathy occupies a peculiar place in government work. It is labelled as a foundational value of public service (Zanetti, 2011) while at the same time efficiency, economy, and effectiveness are named as the cornerstones of governance and public service delivery (Kelman, 2007). Emotions and empathy are said to be at odds with bureaucratic neutrality and objectivity (Meyer et al., 2022) and are seen as 'a marginal mode of experience to be minimised in routine organisational life' (Putnam & Mumby, 1993, p. 41) while at the same time public servants are asked to be compassionate, understanding, and empathetic (Collingwood-Richardson, 2017; Dolamore & Whitebread, 2022; O'Flynn, 2025). When it comes to empathy and emotions more broadly, public servants receive mixed signals (Boswell et al., 2024; O'Flynn, 2025) which make it difficult for them to understand what role empathy should play in their work or what shape and form empathetic practices could take.

Academic scholarship has made some strides in the past decade in discussing the role of empathy in government work (Dolamore, 2021; Edlins, 2021; Mussagulova, 2024; O'Flynn, 2025). Most of these discussions are normative in nature: they canvas important ways in which empathy can help public servants do their jobs better, improve administrative and decision-making processes (Paterson & Larios, 2021), address historical injustices (Dolamore, 2021), make policy more inclusive (Edlins, 2021), and increase public trust in government. On the other hand, very few studies provide much-needed empirical accounts of how empathy is incorporated in the work of policy makers (see Boossabong, 2025; Boossabong & Chamchong, 2024; Dolamore, 2021).

Another important aspect of the scholarship on empathy, both in public administration and beyond, is its treatment of empathy as a trait or a state (Cuff et al., 2016) but rarely as a behaviour or a practice. For example, Cuff and his colleagues in a 2016 review of 43 discrete definitions of empathy note that empathy is commonly conceptualised as an 'ability' or 'capacity', implying a stable trait concept, as a context-specific, temporary emotional 'state', or as an interaction of both. Some public administration scholars also treat empathy as an ability, a skill, or a state (see Mussagulova, 2024) while arguing that, as a skill, it can be fostered, for example, through training (Burnier, 2021; Mumford, 2022).

When considered together, these two characteristics of the existing empathy scholarship in public administration and public policy disciplines mean that there is a predominance of studies

discussing that empathy is a character trait or a specific state that public servants should display and can develop. On the flipside, there are virtually no studies that describe helpful empathetic behaviours, actions, or practices that are already taking place in the public service. As a result, we know little about the situated, performative, and strategic dimensions of empathy in bureaucratic work.

In this article, we aim to address this gap by answering the following questions: (1) *How is empathy understood by public servants?* and (2) *How do public servants practise empathy in their work?* We rely on two open-ended questions from a survey of 1273 respondents working in the state public service of New South Wales (NSW) in Australia. We frame our study using the lens of practice theory which posits that practices, or routine activities that people perform, shape social structures and produce social life (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996, 2002; Shove et al., 2012). Empathy as practice in public service reframes empathy not just as an emotion or personality trait but as something performed in the routine work of public servants. Looking at empathy as a practice can contribute to our understanding of how empathy is enacted and structured into public service work rather than felt individually.

Our study has several theoretical and practical contributions. First, it advances our understanding of how empathy functions in public service not just as an emotion or a personality trait but as a cognitive practice aimed at improving outcomes for the public. We propose to strengthen the body of evidence for relational (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020) and affective public administration (Guy & Mastracci, 2018). Practically, the study provides insights for training programs and organisational practices of empathy that can help foster genuine empathetic understanding and engagement of the public, not just performative displays or normative discussions.

2 | Theoretical framework

2.1 | Definitions of empathy

Most existing scholarship on empathy recognises that it has both an affective and a cognitive component, in other words that empathy entails identifying and understanding other people's emotions (cognitively) and feel what the other person feels (affectively), knowing that those emotions are distinct from their own (Cuff et al., 2016), although the debate about the inseparability of rationality and emotion is also prominent (see Damasio, 1994). Still, some definitions of empathy are based only on its affective or cognitive component. Whatever the approach, there is a broad consensus that these two constructs are distinct, demonstrated by evidence from neuroscience on distinct brain regions associated with each (Zaki et al., 2009). Further, some individuals may lack one element of empathy without a concurrent deficit in the other (Blair, 2005). The distinct nature of the two components of empathy does not mean that they can be separated. The absence of an affective component would render the empathic process devoid of emotion which runs counter to its emotional nature (Strayer, 1987).

The above-mentioned definitions of empathy treat it as a personality trait or an emotional state. However, some scholars acknowledge a behavioural aspect of empathy. For example, Pease (1995) argues that empathy is an action and an experience. Other scholars argue that empathy can result in action based on its cognitive and affective components (Brems, 1989; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Gerdes and Segal (2009) argue that 'empathy… is an induction process that culminates in empathic action' (p. 121), going as far as to suggest that without action in response to the

emotional stimulus, 'a person is not truly empathic' (Gerdes & Segal, 2009, p. 122). Finally, Batson et al. (1991) in their work on the link between empathy and altruism posit that empathy leads to helping behaviours, although the two are separate processes.

On the other hand, there is a number of arguments presented by scholars of empathy that it is typically located at an earlier stage and is separate from a response behaviour (Polaschek, 2003) while at the same time helping behaviours can precede empathy, for example, in the case of an emergency (Pithers, 1999). Others argue that behaviour sparked by empathy only happens in the presence of sympathy (Lishner et al., 2011) or may not happen at all if it poses danger or if competing interests are present (Polaschek, 2003).

The above-mentioned definitions of empathy hail from psychology and neuroscience, although conceptualisations and definitions of empathy exist in a variety of different disciplines, from economics to philosophy, sociology, and law. For the purpose of our study, it is important to understand how empathy is defined and treated in the disciplines of public administration and public policy that study public service and public servants, and whether a distinct understanding of empathy exists in this body of scholarship.

2.2 | Empathy in the public service

Empathy lacks a clear definition in public administration and has received limited attention, despite the field's people-centric focus (Frederickson, 2010). A recent review (Mussagulova, 2024) highlights key gaps in the literature: research on empathy is fragmented and lacks a cohesive theoretical foundation (Edlins, 2021). As a result, most studies focus narrowly on street-level bureaucrats, whose frontline roles are conducive to empathetic engagement (Borry & Henderson, 2020; Jensen & Pedersen, 2017; Visintin et al., 2021). Theoretical models of empathy in bureaucracy (Edlins, 2021; Fenley, 2022; Larios & Paterson, 2021) remain underexplored, with limited empirical application (Boossabong & Chamchong, 2024; Dolamore, 2021). Much of the existing work draws on insights from other disciplines, rather than grounding empathy within core public administration theories such as public service motivation, bureaucratic representation, or administrative burden. As a result, the discipline lacks understanding of how empathy is applied beyond encounters with frontline staff, for example, in policymaking.

In addition, definitions of empathy in public administration research vary widely and are often inconsistently applied. A systematic review of the literature by Mussagulova (2024) highlights that many studies refer to empathy without clearly defining it, often treating it as a background or contextual concept. When definitions are provided, they frequently draw from psychology, emphasising empathy as the ability to understand or share another person's perspective—commonly described as 'stepping into someone else's shoes'. Some studies adopt a more proactive view, describing empathy as a response, emphasising the importance of understanding context, listening, and identifying with others. A smaller but notable group of studies defines empathy in more normative and relational terms, framing it as a value grounded in care, compassion, and responsiveness to citizens' lived experiences. These approaches may align empathy more closely with the core values and responsibilities of public administration (Mussagulova, 2024). Still, this overview of definitions demonstrates that public administration literature often assumes, rather than interrogates, what empathy means to public service practitioners.

This overview of two streams of scholarship on empathy—from interdisciplinary studies of emotion and public administration and policy—demonstrates that academic definitions tend to

decontextualise empathy. This is especially salient in the scholarly caution against assuming that empathy necessarily leads to observable behavioural outcomes, emphasising that empathy can exist as a cognitive or affective process without directly shaping action. At the same time, we do not know how empathy is understood and practised by public servants when it does become salient in their work. A rare effort in this regard is a recent book by Boossabong (2025) who advocates for an empathetic policy design and draws on multiple case studies around the world that bring to light various ways in which such a design can come to life. A similar substantive account of how empathy is understood and used by public servants in their jobs presents a largely unaddressed research gap in public administration and public policy literature. Focusing on empathy as a situated practice that can be employed depending on context allows for a more grounded understanding of empathy's role in public administration, one that avoids normative assumptions while still attending to its practical significance.

2.3 | Empathy as practice

We draw on a practice-based approach to empathy. Practice theory is concerned with how social life is constituted through patterns of activity—what people do, how they do it, and how meaning is produced through action. It shifts the analytical focus away from individual traits or institutional structures and instead explores how practices reproduce and transform the social world (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002). Practices are understood as routinised, embodied, and meaningful ways of doing things which are patterned, but also adaptive, and are shaped by the norms and context in which they occur (Nicolini, 2012). In other words, practices reflect what individuals actually do in specific contexts and situations rather than what they believe should be done. Practices also reveal a shared understanding of a phenomenon created through participation in social and organisational contexts. This understanding refers both to templates of organised activities, or expectations for and norms of how they should be performed, as well as the realisation of these templates in everyday life based on the context (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002).

Rather than treating empathy as a stable trait or emotional state, approaching empathy through a practice theory perspective allows for its nuanced understanding as a routinised, material, and practical form of social action. This lens is useful for analysing how public servants define and apply empathy in their work, as it captures both their understanding of the concept and how they operationalise it in everyday contexts. By viewing empathy as a practice, we explore how public servants 'do' empathy, for example, through listening, showing care, or making policy decisions.

2.4 | Public servants' definitions of empathy as 'frames'

Even if empathy is a practice, its meaning is not fixed. To understand how empathy is practised, we must understand how it is framed by practitioners themselves. While academic definitions of empathy are important because they are grounded in scientific research, these definitions are abstract and cannot capture the practical and situational understanding of empathy. In contrast to relying on academic or popular definitions of empathy, such as 'walking in another person's shoes', it might be more pertinent to view definitions of empathy as specific frames (Goffman, 1986; Schön & Rein, 1994) used by public servants to construct meaning and make sense of their work.

Different public servants will use different frames of empathy. Goffman (1986) argued that frames are 'definitions of a situation … built in accordance with principles of organisation which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them' (pp. 10–11). Thus, public servants' definitions of empathy reflect professional norms and expectations, and institutional rules and constraints. Since a frame is also defined as a way of 'selecting, organising, interpreting, and making sense of a complex reality' (Schön & Rein, 1994, p. 26), a public servant's empathy frame is not merely a personal attitude or emotional response but a framing device—a cognitive and normative structure that organises experience, guides judgement, and shapes action. In other words, empathy frames will dictate how public servants apply empathy in their work, for example, in interactions with the public, policy design and implementation, and so forth.

3 | DATA AND METHOD

3.1 | Study context

Our study was conducted on the public service of NSW, Australia's most populous state. While there are no relevant research studies, 'Act with empathy' is one of the NSW Government Customer Commitments (NSW Government, 2021). 'Trust' and 'Service' are two of the core values of the NSW public service that are grounded in serving the public and empathising with their perspectives. Behaving and listening with empathy is also part of the guide on behaving ethically developed for all public servants (NSW Public Service Commission, 2014).

In addition, in 2021 the NSW Public Service Commissioner outlined several initiatives aimed at developing 'empathetic, compassionate and customer-centric' (NSW Public Service Commission, 2021) ways to deliver services to the residents, for example a trauma-informed workforce to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; Inclusion and Belonging strategy; Positive and Productive Workplaces program (NSW Public Service Commission, 2017); and as part of human-centred design of public services (Capdevila, 2019). Having said that, empathy has not featured much in any public materials produced by the NSW government since.

3.2 | Procedure and participants

Data were collected in collaboration with the Public Service Association (PSA) of NSW which is the labour union for the state government employees. The PSA has around 40,000 members. Data collection took place in August and September 2024 using an online questionnaire. Participants were invited by email sent out by the PSA using their membership mailing list. Invitations were sent to all members. After deleting missing and duplicated data listwise, the dataset included 1082 valid responses for the question on the definition of empathy and 884 valid responses for the question on the practice of empathy.

In the sample, 69% are female, and most respondents are between 40 and 59 years of age. A total of 31% have an undergraduate degree, 28% have a high school diploma, 23.4% have a graduate diploma or certificate, and 17% have received some form of postgraduate education.

We rely on two open-ended survey questions that were included in the survey. The first one is 'What is empathy?' and the second one is 'How do you use empathy in your work?' The respondents were asked to answer the questions in a free format without any response options.

3.3 | Method

We analysed the two open-ended survey questions using a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns and themes in participants' responses. First, we familiarised ourselves with the data by reading through all responses multiple times to gain an overall sense of the content. Initial coding was then conducted independently by two coders, who identified keywords and phrases representing meaningful units of information. After this, we compared and discussed our codes to assess intercoder reliability, resolving any discrepancies through discussion to ensure consistency in the coding process. The codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected common themes across responses. These themes were refined through an iterative process, ensuring they were coherent, distinct, and well-supported by the data. This approach allowed for a systematic and flexible interpretation of participants' perspectives, capturing both the frequency and nuance of their views.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | How do public servants frame empathy?

Table A1 is a summary of 1082 valid responses to the question 'What is empathy?' with sample quotes. The results reveal that definitions cluster into three main frames: affective, cognitive, and a combination of both. Affective empathy or 'empathy as emotion' frame is the most common interpretation (44.4%), with respondents emphasising emotional connection, compassion, and shared feeling, describing empathy as 'connecting with someone else's emotions' or 'experiencing feelings as a result of care and compassion for someone'. The predominance of this frame may speak to the prevailing view among public servants that empathy is first and foremost an emotional experience. This understanding of empathy is aligned with what some scholars and practitioners describe as the inherently emotional work of public service (Guy et al., 2008). This frame may also reflect public servants' recognition of the established norm that empathy is predicated on an emotional connection. For example, guides for public servants in NSW on helping customers in distress, trauma-informed care, and Aboriginal cultural capability frameworks include discussions of how empathy is needed to establish a human connection and convey compassion and concern (NSW Public Service Commission, 2023; NSW Government, 2023). In addition to the recognition of empathy as an emotion, this frame may also reflect the normative acceptance by public servants that empathy is an emotional experience, in line with Zanetti's (2011) description of public servants as 'active sustainers of empathy as a normative value in public administration' (p. 84). Overall, this understanding of empathy contradicts the view of an 'emotional hole at the heart of government' (Boswell et al., 2024) and demonstrates that despite the legal–rational nature of bureaucracy, individual public servants recognise the emotional side of empathy first.

Cognitive empathy frame or 'empathy as understanding' accounts for 32.4% of responses, focusing on understanding other people's feelings and circumstances and perspective-taking without feeling what they feel, for example: 'the ability to understand another's feelings, even when you do not feel them yourself' or 'being able to see in a non-judgemental way and understand another person's issues'. This definition of empathy is often used to underscore the skill of attributing emotional states, or sometimes even beliefs and desires (see Stueber, 2006), and is related to the theory of mind (Blair, 2005), a concept describing people's ability to understand other individuals by ascribing emotional states to them. This is a non-emotional aspect of empathy and is often used

interchangeably with 'perspective-taking' (Cuff et al., 2016). Framing empathy as a non-emotional state, experience, or skill is more consistent with the classic view of the government as technical, neutral, rational, and interested in people from an 'input-to-output behaviours' perspective (Meyer et al., 2022). Understanding stakeholder perspectives is a common phrase used in government communications (Australian Public Service Commission, 2021) and is often used in the context of evidence-based policy, where those perspectives are seen as an input in the policy process. This view is the next most common after the affective frame of empathy and may also reflect more than just personal understanding of what empathy is—it may be an indication of a broader set of norms indicating low tolerance for emotional deviation and the requirement for public servants to embody the detached professionalism of the ideal Weberian bureaucracy (Boswell et al., 2024). The focus on what Bloom (2016) calls 'rational compassion', which is essentially about understanding other people's circumstances without feeling for them, reveals the normative discomfort around the affective side of empathy which is said to lead to bias, side-taking, or 'spotlight vision' (Bloom, 2016; Breithaupt, 2018).

Finally, 23.2% describe empathy as a combination of affective and cognitive elements. These responses highlight the framing of empathy as comprising both emotional resonance and reasoned perspective-taking, for example: 'The capacity to understand another person's situation and to put yourself in their shoes emotionally' or 'To emotionally understand what other people feel, and/or see things from their perspective and imagine yourself if in their place'. This group of public servants hold a holistic view of empathy which some scholars describe as understanding affective empathy as the content and cognitive empathy as the process through which the content is shaped (Strayer, 1987).

Discussions of empathy definitions in psychology and neuroscience tend to converge around the view that even though the affective and cognitive components are distinct, they cannot be separated (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Duan & Hill, 1996; Singer, 2006). Empathy is both an emotional experience and a cognitive effort to understand another person's feelings. of other people. What matters to our findings is not whether the frame adopted by public servants is aligned with the existing scholarship, or whether it is right or wrong, but rather what this frame may mean in the context of public service and the established norms around empathising with the public and using emotions more broadly. Despite the often-discussed caution towards emotions in government work, public servants do see empathy as first and foremost an emotional experience rather than a cognitive or analytical one. This understanding could reflect not only individual conceptions of empathy but also ones shaped by institutional norms towards what entails acceptable use of emotion, and the NSW government does produce guidelines on showing empathy, compassion, and care to the public in certain contexts.

Table A2 presents a summary of frames that indicate how public servants frame empathy and its instrumentality—whether it is seen as a feeling which may be more challenging to control and channel; a skill, which may imply that it can be learnt and has some instrumental value; and whether empathy needs to go hand in hand with action or behaviour. These frames can be helpful for explaining whether empathy is seen as an unwieldy emotion or an input skill, and whether it needs to be outcome-oriented or can exist as part of the process.

The majority of respondents frame empathy as a feeling and often associate it with kindness, care, compassion, sympathy, and concern. For example, one respondent used Adam Smith's (1853) conception of empathy as 'fellow feeling'. In a similar vein to frames of empathy definitions, this frame shows that to the majority of public servants in our sample, empathy is a feeling, or an emotional state or experience which runs counter to the view of the government as purely rational and devoid of emotion (Boswell et al., 2024).

The next most common frame is of empathy as a skill, ability, or capacity. The view of empathy has overlaps with cognitive empathy; however, we included the ability to feel in this frame, as well as we were more interested in frames that focused purely on empathy as an affective state versus empathy as something that an individual is able to do and, potentially, can learn or acquire. For example, a feeling is a subjective experience that may have a spontaneous nature, whereas a skill is seen as something that can be purposefully developed, mastered, and applied. Further, skills in the context of public service are valued and rewarded, depending on their nature, which is the complete opposite of the 'denial of the emotive' in public administration (Guy & Mastracci, 2018, p. 281).

Finally, fewer than 2% of the respondents (or 17 individuals) identified empathy with a tangible action or outcome as a result of emotional experience. Even though this is not a surprising finding, as most people see empathy as an emotional state or a cognitive skill, it is intriguing that in the context of serving the public, empathy is not linked to action. Gerdes and Segal (2009), for example, argue that a person is not truly displaying empathy unless they follow it up with a tangible action (p. 122). Their insights from social work are aligned with the core tenets of the concept of public service motivation (Perry & Wise, 1990), whereby public servants are said to be driven by the desire to serve the public in a substantial, outcome-altering way. On the other hand, Edlins' (2021) model of empathy for public administration is not intended to change the outcome but rather to change the experience, although one could argue that this is an action in and of itself. Overall, the scant nature of this category of frames might be reflective of the overall reluctance of public servants to act upon empathy which may be construed as biased or overly emotional.

4.2 | How is empathy practised?

Despite framing empathy as an ability rather than an action, public servants apply it in very concrete ways that amount to proactive action which is completely at odds with the frames of empathy described above. We identified five prominent ways in which public servants use empathy, and in order of frequency, these are: to help customers (or clients); to improve communication with customers or colleagues; in interpersonal interactions with colleagues and teams of colleagues; when making decisions and engaging with evidence; and in program design or policy advice. Table A3 provides themes, frequencies, and proportions of the total responses for each theme with sample quotes.

Slightly less than a quarter of public servants use empathy to help customers in some way. This may involve not only improving the outcome for the client but also contributing to a better process or experience in line with Edlins' (2021) conceptualisation of empathy in public administration. For example, several respondents mentioned that they use empathy to understand how people would like to be treated, or that they approach interactions with empathy. Another person said, 'I don't use [empathy] I become it, for families' to describe how they embody empathy in their work which is aligned with our approach to empathy as embodied practice. In this theme, respondents also mentioned their motivation to empathise with and help customers because they understood the challenges of navigating government processes and structures from the point of view of systemic disadvantage. A few respondents use empathy to remind themselves of the source and circumstances of their clients' challenges and also reflect on the possibility that anyone could find themselves in a similar situation. One respondent specifically labelled this process as imagining 'lived realities and cultural differences'. This category of practice reflects both an instrumental

value of empathy for public servants' work and its role in understanding the humanity and the socially constructed nature of clients' experiences and circumstances.

The next most common category of empathetic practices focuses on improving communication with customers or colleagues. This category follows the previous one very closely in terms of incidence (24.1% vs. 24.2%). Understanding empathy as instrumental for relationships and interpersonal interactions, including communication, is in line with the common conception of empathy as an important element of listening (Bruneau, 1989) and altogether more supportive and effective communication (Burleson, 2003). Respondents in this category of practice mentioned how empathy can be helpful for diffusing tense situations and conflicts, understanding why people hold different opinions, and providing better support to neurodiverse individuals. One of the most common themes was the role of empathy in developing an appreciation for differences between people and the understanding that these differences will lead to better communication, stronger rapport, and, ultimately, stronger relationships, regardless of whether these better relationships have instrumental value or are the end in themselves.

The next most prevalent practice of empathy (22.8%) involves interactions with colleagues. This is qualitatively different from the previous category on improving communication with colleagues, as it specifically describes ways in which public servants tap into empathy to support their coworkers and team members and maintain positive work environments. This understanding not only results in better communication but also usually takes the form of tangible action aimed at improving interactions and providing better outcomes for staff. For example, one respondent mentioned that they put together a staff roster and, in doing so, they try to empathise with staff's circumstances and requests. This category is similar to the first category of empathetic practices on improving outcomes for clients in that public servants who provided responses in this category aim to improve outcomes for their colleagues by making an effort to understand their circumstances, family responsibilities, struggles, and when they are under stress. One respondent mentioned that empathy is needed when supporting colleagues who are victims of bullying or discrimination, while another mentioned that empathy for them means being kind and respectful to colleagues. Both of these perspectives demonstrate that empathy in this context can be used to improve both the outcome and the experience.

Empathy is used in decision-making and engagement with evidence by 20.8% of the respondents. This is one of the less intuitive categories, as empathy is most often associated with interpersonal interactions and frontline work (see Mussagulova, 2024). Public servants provided a variety of examples in this category, ranging from talking to people and identifying opportunities for improvement of processes, to engaging in perspective-taking to understand how a particular decision will impact people, and tailoring interventions based on specific emotional and psychological needs. Other instances include using empathy when conducting and interpreting research to understand people's circumstances and needs and developing recommendations 'to provide better public services in an equitable way'. Responses in this category reflect various ways in which public servants use empathy as a cognitive tool when they lack information or when they are motivated to make a decision based on a more fulsome understanding of the situation. This category provides insights into the use of empathy beyond interpersonal interactions of public servants with the public and demonstrates how perspective-taking can be used by public servants in decision-making and collection and interpretation of evidence.

The final category of practice is the least frequently employed (8% or 71 respondents) and involves using empathy in program design and policy advice. For example, some respondents

TABLE 1 Overlaps between practices of empathy and common empathy frames.

Practice	Affective empathy	Cognitive empathy	Both
To help customers/clients	89 (42%)	79 (37%)	45 (21%)
In interactions with colleagues	95 (48%)	53 (27%)	50 (25%)
To improve communication with customers/clients and colleagues	86 (40%)	68 (32%)	59 (28%)
In interpreting evidence	80 (43%)	65 (35%)	39 (21%)
In program design	27 (39.1%)	26 (38%)	16 (23%)

mentioned how empathy with human experiences helps them contribute to policy recommendations of the organisation that they work for. They also mentioned how empathy is used to inform policy advice and recommendations to address policy issues regarding the experiences of the clients, for example, through consultations and co-design. Interestingly, one respondent said that empathy enables them to speak up on program design, prompting a proposition that empathy could be investigated in the context of public servants' voice behaviour (Hirschman, 1970). After all, the Robodebt whistleblower was driven by empathy in reporting the wrongdoing in the former Department of Human Services (Coade, 2024). Another respondent provided the following quote: 'I approach the work that I do politically. We all are impacted by bad government policy, we are all impacted by bad economic policy. Our societal problems should be a concern to us all, they are not only reserved for the "disadvantaged". Disadvantage is manufactured and can be corrected. Empathy is recognising that it is political'. This quote demonstrates the criticality with which this public servant engages with their work and recognises the broader societal benefit of using empathy in the public service. Empathy according to this response can be used to recognise that disadvantage is socially and politically constructed (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Other responses in this category demonstrate a similar level of awareness of the merits of empathy in addressing injustices experienced by various groups and improving outcomes for people not by helping them to navigate a service or a program already designed and put in place but by incorporating their perspectives in policy design.

Finally, an important insight from our findings is that empathy frames do not dovetail with empathetic practices (Table 1). Public servants who use empathy in a more 'traditional' sense—for relationship-building, improving communication, and establishing connection—are just as likely to define empathy as an affective state as those public servants who use it as more of a cognitive resource. This might be because practices are shaped by contexts or what Schatzki (2002) calls 'social sites' (p. 18), in which they occur. For example, the practice of helping clients or customers, or using empathy to improve interactions with clients, most likely takes place at the frontline; however, policy design and policy advice do not: the practices of empathy in these domains look different. Therefore, even though empathy may be defined as a feeling by public servants who engage in non-frontline tasks, it actually looks different between roles and policy domains.

Another manifestation of this is the fact that the overwhelming majority of respondents frame empathy as a feeling, and, with the exception of those who use empathy in program design, very few public servants defined empathy as something you can learn or as a tangible action (see Table 2). Despite this, most of the instances of empathy as practice are purposeful, proactive actions, and very often they are also cognitive and emotional skills and abilities that need to be intentionally mastered to become effective practice.

TABLE 2 Overlaps between practices of empathy and common empathy frames.

Practice	Feeling	Ability/skill	Action
To help customers/clients	145 (66.8%)	69 (31.8%)	3 (1.4%)
In interactions with colleagues	120 (57.7%)	81 (38.9%)	7 (3.4%)
To improve communication with customers/clients and colleagues	150 (69.4%)	64 (29.6%)	2 (1%)
In interpreting evidence	119 (64.3%)	65 (35.1%)	1 (.6%)
In program design	40 (54%)	31 (42%)	3 (4%)

5 | DISCUSSION

Empathy in scholarly literature is often treated as a personality trait or an emotional state, and public administration and policy literature is no exception. In this article, we argue that empathy is not just a trait; it is a practice that is context based and may differ from an established frame of empathy as a feeling or an emotional state. This perspective allows us to move away from an assumption that there are empathetic people in the public service and they act a certain way, when empathy may be reflected in a multitude of practices—not all of which will reflect individual personality or identity or a current emotional state but rather a moral stance, pragmatic considerations, institutional values, among others. This is why it is important to see how public servants define empathy and how they practise it, and whether there is any overlap between the two.

Our findings demonstrate that the way public servants frame empathy and the way they practise it are not neatly aligned. Even though almost half of public servants in our sample frame empathy as a feeling or emotion, when asked how they practise empathy, respondents mentioned a variety of ways in which they practise empathy, not all of which involve feeling what the other person feels but rather represent actions or cognitive skills. This misalignment of frame and practice may hint at institutional norms that shape what is seen as acceptable for a public servant, or at a pragmatic sensibility of how emotions need to be channelled into work. Frames may reflect ideals or constraints, while practices are situated in 'social sites' (Schatzki, 2002, p. 18) and are shaped by contexts in which they take place.

We emphasise that the frames of empathy identified in this study are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive. Rather, they are heuristic categories designed to illuminate patterns in how public servants describe empathy. These categories serve as analytical tools to make sense of practitioner perspectives, without implying that empathy in public service is limited to these three modes of understanding.

Empathy is widely used by public servants as an interpersonal resource to improve relationships with both clients and colleagues. In this relational mode, empathy functions as a way of recognising others' emotions, perspectives, and social contexts, helping to build trust and reduce friction in service delivery and team environments. Existing perspectives on emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) help explain how empathy becomes a tacit skill that supports smoother interpersonal interactions within the often emotionally charged settings of public service. In this sense, empathy can be recognised as not simply a personal trait but a relational competence that enables public servants to maintain cooperative relationships.

Public servants also use empathy in more instrumental and immediate ways to assist clients facing difficult or distressing situations. This practical use of empathy involves recognising vulnerability and responding with tailored support. Scholars such as Maynard-Moody and Musheno

(2003, pp. 16–23) have shown that frontline workers often act as moral agents, interpreting not just the letter of the law but also the ethical demands of the situation.

Beyond individual cases, empathy is also used by public servants to grapple with structural disadvantage and incorporate lived experience into policy design. This reflects a broader interpretive and affective engagement with policy problems where empathy is not just about 'feeling with' but about understanding how policy problems are framed, echoing the tenets of interpretive policy analysis (Yanow, 2000). Empathy, in this sense, becomes a political and cognitive tool allowing public servants to incorporate the stories, voices, and perspectives of marginalised groups in ways that challenge dominant assumptions and reorient policy toward equity and care.

Our study expands the existing scholarship on empathy in public administration, where it is frequently treated as a background or contextual concept rather than as the central focus of inquiry. Much of the existing literature draws on psychological aspects of empathy, often conceptualising it as an individual trait or affective disposition (Jensen & Pedersen, 2017; Visintin et al., 2021). A smaller body of scholarship has examined empathy through normative and relational lenses, positioning it as a value grounded in care and compassion (Edlins, 2021; Fenley, 2022; Larios & Paterson, 2021) and accountability (Boossabong, 2025; Boossabong & Chamchong, 2024). Yet, across these strands, empathy tends to be assumed as categorically valuable rather than interrogated in terms of how public servants themselves define and operationalise it in their work. As a result, the meanings and practices of empathy as articulated within bureaucratic contexts remain underexplored.

This study is the first step towards exploring how public servants frame and describe empathy in their own terms, moving the field beyond static definitions toward a richer understanding of empathy as a dynamic practice of governance. Further, our findings contribute to emerging theoretical debates on empathy in public administration by expanding the understanding of empathy beyond individual disposition or frontline client interactions. While existing literature tends to focus on empathy as a feature of street-level service delivery (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003, pp. 16–23), this study demonstrates that empathy also plays a meaningful role in policy advice, program design, and intra-organisational collaboration. Our findings suggest that empathy is not only interpersonal but also cognitive and policy-minded. It shapes how public servants make sense of evidence, define problems, and engage with systemic disadvantage. Our research also advances the field by theorising empathy as a practice ranging from the relational and immediate (helping clients and improving communication) to strategic and structural (designing more inclusive programs, incorporating lived experiences).

Practically speaking, our findings emphasise the value of recognising and supporting empathetic practices across public service, not just in service delivery roles. Empathy, when institutionalised thoughtfully, can improve internal teamwork, communication, and the responsiveness of policy design. However, for this to happen, public organisations must move beyond rhetorical commitments to empathy and instead develop structural supports, for example, through job crafting, guidelines that allow the use of empathy, training, and leadership that values empathy as a form of professional competence. We encourage future research to explore how empathy can become more visible, valued, and embedded in public service.

5.1 | Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The data are drawn from a large-scale survey, combining quantitative measures with relatively brief open-ended responses. While

this design allowed us to identify broad patterns and public servants' frames of empathy, it cannot fully capture the complexity of relational practices in context. Self-reported data are inherently limited in their depth and are shaped by respondents' own interpretive framing at the moment of response. Richer qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, or ethnographic approaches, would be better suited to illuminate the lived, interpersonal dynamics of empathy in practice. Accordingly, the findings presented here should be understood as an initial step toward identifying how public servants conceptualise and practise empathy, rather than as a comprehensive account of its enactment. Future research could build on this study by employing ethnographic methods to trace how empathy is practised in bureaucratic settings and by integrating multiple data sources to examine how organisational contexts shape, constrain, or enable empathetic practices.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Empathy frames based on accepted definitions of empathy.

Frame	Number and % of responses ($N = 1082$)	Sample quotes
Affective empathy—'empathy as emotion' (shared feelings, compassion, emotional connection, care)	475 (44%)	- 'The ability to tune into what others are feeling and feel what they are feeling'. - 'Making room for other people's thoughts and feelings important to them'. - 'Genuine ability to switch shoes with someone else, unconditionally care about a person and their situation'. - 'Imagining or experiencing to some level the emotional experience or state of someone else'. - 'Empathy is the caring feeling toward others and observation of their situation'. - 'Experiencing feelings as a result of care and compassion for someone, even if their situation is not one you have experience or may ever experience'. - 'Empathy is a feeling of care and concern for others'. - 'Compassion, picking up on the feelings of others, putting yourself in their shoes emotionally'. - 'Connecting with someone else's emotions'.
Cognitive empathy—'empathy as understanding' (understanding others, perspective-taking)	353 (32.6%)	- 'The ability to understand another's feelings, even when you do not feel them yourself'. - 'Understanding someone's feelings and perspective towards a situation'. - 'The ability to understand the position or situation of another person in a given set of circumstances'. - 'Understanding what someone is going through'. - 'The capacity to understand the emotions of others'. - 'To understand a person's current trauma and that their behaviour is a trauma response'. - 'Being able to see in a non-judgemental way and understand another person's issues from their perspective'. - 'Making a genuine effort to understand and act in a way that considers someone else's personal situation'. - 'Understanding others' misfortunes'. - 'Understanding and acknowledgement of the experience of others'.

(Continues)

TABLE A1 (Continued)

Frame	Number and % of responses ($N = 1082$)	Sample quotes
Empathy as both cognitive and affective	254 (23.4%)	- 'The ability to imagine how someone else may feel in a given situation and react accordingly. It differs from sympathy where you may still feel and act apart from the subject of the emotion'. - 'Compassion, care, respect and understanding for how others think, feel, act and being aware of contextual factors that may be driving how they are'. - 'Empathy means not only having the ability to imagine another's situation but to also consider their experience. Those with empathy are able understand another's feelings, emotions within the context of various situations and can make decisions with that can foresee how others would not only be impacted but also how it would affect their welfare'. - 'The ability to recognise, understand and respond to another person's experiences and feelings'. - 'Empathy is recognizing our shared humanity and not judging people for how they might behave in a difficult situation or blame them for their misfortune'. - 'To emotionally understand what other people feel, and/or see things from their perspective and imagine yourself if in their place'. - 'Empathy is about demonstrating understanding and care towards others'. - 'The ability to understand what others may be feeling or going through. Seeing things from another's perspective, "walking in their shoes"'. - 'The capacity to understand another person's situation and to put yourself in their shoes emotionally'. - 'Empathy is understanding people and their thoughts, motivations, needs and desires'. - 'Being able to listen and understand someone's feeling and experiences despite whether you may or may not agree with them'.

TABLE A2 Empathy frames based on public servants' understanding of the nature of empathy.

Frame	Number and % of responses ($N = 1082$)	Sample quotes
Empathy as a feeling (of care, compassion, kindness)	704 (65.1%)	- 'Showing kindness and caring'. - 'Feeling the pain of, and with, those around you'. - 'Feeling a reactive emotion when others display emotions'. - 'A feeling of understanding and sympathy with other people's emotional situations'. - 'Fellow feeling'. - 'Empathy is a feeling of care and concern for others'.
Empathy as a skill/ability (to listen, engage, understand, not judge)	361 (33.4%)	- 'Being able to tell what a person is feeling and being able to see their emotional state from their point of view'. - 'The ability to view an issue from someone else's viewpoint'. - 'An ability to recognise and care about the feelings of others'. - 'Be able to listen to others experiences and consider how this is making them feel'. - 'Having the ability to understand, feel, listen to another person's feelings and putting myself in their shoes'. - 'The capacity to put yourself metaphorically in someone else's shoes and try to see things from their perspective, without negative judgement'.
Empathy as action (providing support, helping with a tough situation, outcome)	17 (1.6%)	- 'To recognise emotional responses in others, for it to resonate with you and often motivate a desire to act'. - 'Having the ability to identify the needs of others and being able to provide support/understanding'. - 'Empathy is the ability to see situations from another person's perspective and support them accordingly'. - 'Putting myself in someone else's shoes to feel how they might be feeling and being able to help in some way'. - 'The care and support in actions towards others'. - 'Feeling what another person feels, and attempting to help'. - 'An awareness of how other people are feeling, along with a desire to act in response to that'. - 'Empathy is expressed as I see you, how can I facilitate your path to betterment, rather than I have sympathy for you, poor thing'.

TABLE A3 Practices of empathy.

Practice area	Number and % of responses ($N = 884$)	Sample quotes
To help customers/ clients (3)	214 (24.2%)	- 'I manage a frontline operational team we speak with, make decisions about services people receive every day. We need to ensure we approach our interaction and decision making every day with empathy, respect and clarity to ensure someone has the best outcome to reach their goals balanced with the fiscal responsibility of managing funds on behalf of government and the people of NSW'. - 'Empathy underpins my entire role and allows me to be the best support I can be to students'. - 'I put myself in the shoes of our clients and think about how I would like to be treated/the service delivery that I would expect from my organisation if I were them'. - 'Understanding that some employers don't know how to support injured people, and recommending to the employer how to provide that support'. - 'It becomes me, our work requires empathy 100% of the time. I don't use it I become it, for families'. - 'It helps me to imagine Aboriginal lived realities and cultural differences and keep working on myself to eliminate prejudice'. - 'The students I work with are from troubled households. I need to be able to understand where they are coming from and the fact that they come in everyday is a huge achievement'. - 'I train child protection caseworkers. We can't do casework without empathy. I share my experiences of working with clients, support people to learn how to use empathy to deeply listen to understand people and their behaviours/motivators. I also use empathy to support learners in this new work environment that can be really overwhelming'. - 'I try to understand and empathise with their situation and do my work to the best of my ability equally for all clients so that I am not adding to their stress, and see to it that their claims are done as accurately and promptly as possible'. - 'Child protection doesn't discriminate and the issues facing our families could very well be issues my own family may be faced with. When I work with families I tell them that I am not judging them, my role is to support them to be the best parents they can be'. - 'I use empathy with the clients and client families I deal with who have often experienced significant disadvantage or adverse life events. In practice this means recognising that what may be easy for me to achieve, for example, dealing with government departments, accessing various services, may be very difficult for some clients. They may need extra support in doing these tasks wither by me or referring to external support services'. - 'I use empathy every day to make sure my work is to help children and families and to really understand their challenges, successes and support needs. I have to hide my empathy at work as it is seen as unprofessional to see people not numbers and results'. - 'Listen to my customers take their circumstances into account and on face value 99% of the time to assist in making decisions best for both the customer and the business'.

(Continues)

TABLE A3 (Continued)

Practice area	Number and % of responses ($N = 884$)	Sample quotes
To improve communication with customers/ clients andx colleagues (5)	213 (24.1%)	- 'When I allow a person to give their version of events so they can feel heard and when detaching from bad behaviour from the customer but I can understand why they would be behaving that way'. - 'I use empathy all the time when homeless clients are telling me their story of how they became homeless. It's important that I listen to them and show empathy and respect for them in their time of need'. - 'To de-escalate situations, interact with colleagues who struggle, calm potentially violent clients'. - 'Always for clients and for my colleagues—understanding their point of view even if I disagree with it'. - 'To understand the perspective of the Aboriginal community; to understand other people's arguments and differing opinions; to be tolerant and accepting of those that are different or if their behaviour is difficult or unusual'. - 'As many colleagues are neurodiverse, and I was able to gain a better understanding of how to support neurodiverse colleagues through conversations with them, as well as formal information sessions and training'. - 'Observing how others respond (body language/language/tone) during communication and using this to decide how to manage and respond'. - 'Knowing everyone is different, being mindful of those differences, making allowances sometimes, working on communication and taking cues from body language as well as verbal and written communications'. - 'Perhaps when considering how to communicate my work to a wider audience'. - 'In communicating with clients to find a respectful and dignified solution to their concerns'. - 'In dealing with Traditional Owners, in doing compliance'.

(Continues)

TABLE A3 (Continued)

Practice area	Number and % of responses ($N = 884$)	Sample quotes
In interactions with colleagues (4)	202 (22.8%)	- 'By supporting colleagues both emotionally and with work tasks and ensuring they know I'm available to talk about anything'. - 'To maintain positive working relationships and try to support coworkers to maintain their wellbeing'. - 'I try to be empathetic with my team and understanding their behaviour is sometimes caused by personal issues'. - 'I moderate day to day interactions with people at work by sensing how they are feeling and then determining best way to engage with them'. - 'Notice when people are stressed by workload and offer to help'. - 'In my work I have to roster people so I use empathy in how I roster people i.e. would not roster people shifts that I would not want to work, I use empathy in making decisions for people to request days off due to situations in their life'. - 'With my colleagues who have a very difficult director, who has zero empathy or leadership ability. I empathise with them because of the way they are treated'. - 'By ensuring that my staff are able to meet their life requirements as well as their work requirements. By looking after my staff, they look after the Business and the community'. - 'Not to expect others to be constantly "on the ball" and have patience as everybody is working through their own unique set of struggles'. - 'A level of "quiet" care and ability to sense in a work colleague when they are under stress or not feeling okay. A quiet conversation to support a work colleague and readiness to advocate for those who are in a position when they are unable to'. - 'Being kind and respectful. Supporting my team mates'. - 'I use empathy to support people my organisation looks after and support colleagues who faces bullying or discrimination'.

(Continues)

TABLE A3 (Continued)

Practice area	Number and % of responses ($N = 884$)	Sample quotes
In decision-making and engagement with evidence (1)	184 (20.8%)	- 'Having empathy allows me to write decisions that consider each person's experience of a very difficult process'. - 'Facilitating workshops, talking to people about their experiences while trying to identify opportunities for continual improvement'. - 'To try and gain an appreciation of the views and opinions of others prior to making decisions'. - 'By helping to understand and address the underlying issues that lead to delinquent behaviour'. - 'I need to put myself into the shoes of the applicant, and any other parties that have an interest, in order to make a balanced decision'. - 'In providing research insights about community perspectives'. - 'When making decisions, I attempt to understand the impacts on others before taking significant action'. - 'Tailor interventions and decisions based on individuals' emotional and psychological needs'. - 'Conducting and interpreting research to understand the situations of others and how this might impact their needs, developing recommendations to provide better public services in an equitable way'. - 'As an investigator, I use empathy to understand how a person feels/felt when they were detrimentally affected by another person's conduct, and I also try to understand why a person engaged in misconduct and what circumstances lead to that decision'. - 'Gathering as much information as I can on the impact my work can have on others'. - 'Understanding how others are feeling and what they are going through'. - 'Listening to people I work with, trying to make supportive decisions, not arrogant ones, when safe to do so'.

(Continues)

TABLE A3 (Continued)

Practice area	Number and % of responses ($N = 884$)	Sample quotes
In program design, policy advice (2)	71 (8%)	- 'Always putting myself in the position of the people our programs are for'. - 'I routinely feed human experience into the policy conclusions and recommendations of the *** that I work for'. (organization anonymized) - 'To understand the environmental impact on others and the impact of regulatory actions'. - 'I empathise by speaking up on program design, security, funding etc. I work hard to ensure programs are funded and continued'. - 'I use it to inform advice and suggestions to address policy issues affecting people experiencing domestic and family violence'. - 'I have to find common ground and understand what makes people/departments/stakeholders tick if I have to design policy solutions/program/service systems'. - 'I approach the work that I do politically. We all are impacted by bad government policy, we are all impacted by bad economic policy. Our societal problems should be a concern to us all, they are not only reserved for the 'disadvantaged'. Disadvantage is manufactured and can be corrected. Empathy is recognising that it is political'. - 'Understand clients to design better policy (we usually speak to them directly)'. - 'Being able to consider the impact of policies on the lives of people who will be affected by these policies and projects'. - 'Adjust responses/actions within policy, in order to accommodate individual's situations and/or responses to ordered contact with our service. Tailor our contact to suit individual needs, while maintaining our service delivery standards'. - 'As we represent the people of NSW, when considering policy that affects the people of NSW, empathy allows us to understand the differing views of those impacted by the work, and consider the best options to balance all the competing priorities of the work'. - 'To develop programs and strategies that support and include the broadest possible cross section of society'. - 'I use it all the time e.g. to design consultation processes based on the consultation group; deciding how to talk to someone and what words to use; deciding how to write to someone (e.g. I write differently for a very busy person); trying to identify the policy problem by identifying what's motivating the stakeholders; interpreting opinions of stakeholders'. - 'I try to through policy instrument design that publicly states it will measure/factor community quality-of-life through public consultation that will provide evidence for government to address inequality through data and funding. For example, my attempts include First Nations peoples' inclusion and culturally competent co-design due to Indigeneity and structural disadvantage'.

Note: Asterisks (***) are used to anonymise the respondent's workplace.