
Introduction to Virtual Issue

Introduction to the Virtual Issue on Behavioral Public Administration

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Abstract

For public administration scholars, psychological theories and methods can be extremely helpful, especially when studying attitudes or behaviors of (groups of) citizens, public professionals, or public managers. Behavioral public administration explicitly connects public administration and psychology. For this Virtual Issue, we analyzed the articles of JPART from its inception (1991) to the current day (2015). We find that around 10% of the articles in JPART made a substantial use of psychology. The trend also seems to indicate a recent increase of this type of articles. We highlight eight of these articles in particular. These eight articles are excellent examples of the potential added value of psychological insights to key public administration questions. We hope that this Virtual Issue inspires scholars and practitioners to deepen the dialogue between public administration and psychology.

Toward Further Cross-Fertilization Between Public Administration and Psychology

Various eminent public administration scholars, such as Herbert Simon and Dwight Waldo, have argued for a tighter connection between the fields of psychology and public administration. If we look at neighboring disciplines such as economics and political science, psychological research has had a profound impact. This is reflected in the emergence of the psychology-informed subfields behavioral economics and political psychology. In public administration, such a subfield or approach has not yet been developed, although both disciplines could benefit from increased cross-fertilization. For public administration scholars, psychological theories and methods can be extremely helpful, especially when studying *attitudes* or *behavior* of (groups of) citizens, public professionals, or public managers. Next to this, psychologists can learn from the field of public administration by testing whether their generic theories hold—or should be nuanced—in the complex and fascinating public context. Therefore, we argue that behavioral public administration can be, as Herbert Simon puts it:

“[...] a marking stone placed halfway between might help travelers from both directions to keep to their courses” (Simon 1955, 100; see also Olsen 2015).

Behavioral public administration can be described as *the interdisciplinary analysis of public administration from the micro-perspective of individual behavior and attitudes by drawing upon recent advances in our understanding of the underlying psychology and behavior of individuals and groups* (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2015). This definition has three main components: (1) it rests on a micro-level focus (i.e., [groups of] citizens, employees, and managers within the public sector are the unit of analysis); (2) it studies how these people behave and form attitudes; and, most importantly, (3) it does so by integrating insights from psychology and the behavioral sciences into the study of public administration.

Degree and Development of Behavioral Public Administration in JPART

In order to develop this Virtual Issue on Behavioral Public Administration, we decided to systematically assess the

extent of psychologically informed public administration research in the *Journal of Public Administration, Research and Theory* (JPART) from its inception (1991) to the current day (2015). In the period 1991–2015, a total of 757 articles were published. Among these articles, we identified 256 articles containing the word “psychology” or “psychological” in the title, abstract, body text, or references. In order to get a better grasp of the actual use of psychology in this subset of articles, we read these 256 articles. Based on our reading, we identified which ones had a micro-level focus and made a substantial use of psychology (for instance, by using psychological theories or methods). We identified 75 psychologically informed articles. This amounts to 9.9% of the full body of articles. Figure 1 shows that there has been a steady proportion of articles in JPART that have made substantive use of psychological theories. The trend also seems to indicate a recent increase of this type of articles.

Eight Examples of Behavioral Public Administration in JPART

From these 75 articles, we discuss eight in particular. We could only select a small number of articles for the Virtual Issue, which meant that we excluded some excellent articles. We choose these eight articles based on various criteria. First, psychological theory or psychological methods are at the heart of these studies, including an explicit micro-level focus. Furthermore, we wanted the selection to exhibit a diversity in substantive topics in public management and administration (e.g., decision making, motivation, rule following,

citizen attitudes) as well as a diversity in psychological fields that they use (e.g., cognitive psychology, industrial and organizational psychology, social psychology, personality psychology). Below, we show a short summary of each of these articles.

The first prime example was published just after the inception of JPART. In 1992, [Bretschneider and Straussman](#) published “Statistical laws of confidence versus behavioral response: How individuals respond to public management decisions under uncertainty.” The authors use cognitive psychology to explain why individuals are overconfident in assessing the underlying risk inherent in policy-relevant statistical estimates. For the empirical test, they use an experiment.

[Landsbergen et al. \(1997\)](#) also relies on experimental data to test whether the use of expert systems improve decision making. They draw on psychological theories regarding quality, confidence, and commitment in judgment and decision making. Based on their experiment, they show that expert systems helped people make higher quality decisions but also show that the decision makers using expert systems were less confident and less committed to their decisions.

On a quite different vein, [White \(1999\)](#) investigates a fundamental question of gender differences in moral development: Are women more ethical than men? Building on theories and validated scales in social and personality psychology, the survey results from the US Coast Guard indicate that females do in fact show higher levels of moral judgment.

[Jones \(2003\)](#) makes a strong plea for the integration of the behavioral model of “bounded rationality,” as firstly

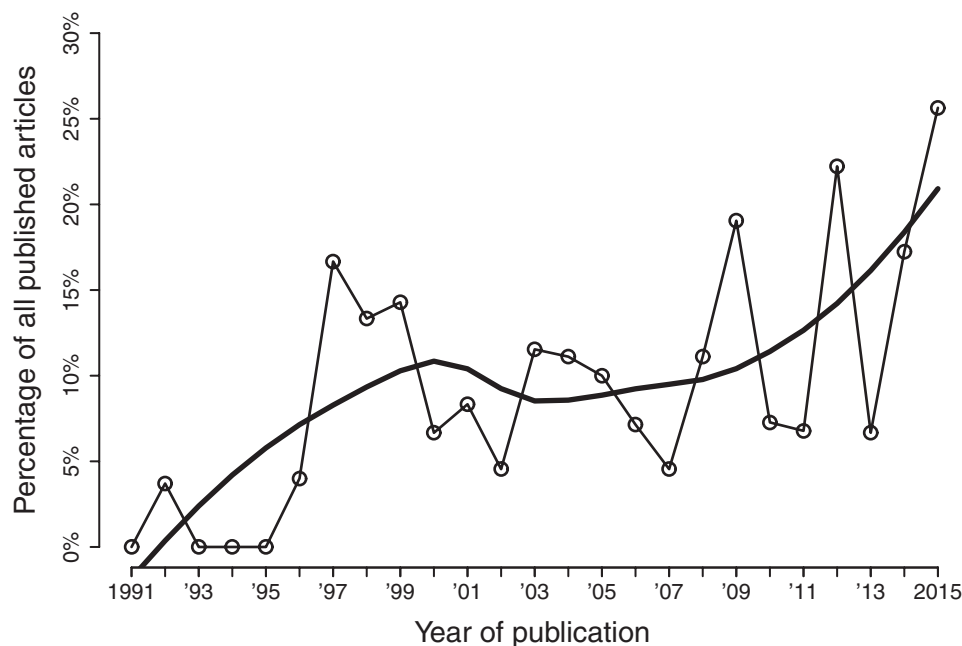


Figure 1. “Behavioral Public Administration” in the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (1991–2015). Note: Psychologically informed articles ($n = 75$) as a share of all articles published in the time frame ($n = 757$).

developed by Simon, in the field of political science, and more specifically public policy and administration. He compares this model with the common alternative—that of rational maximization—and argues that bounded rationality is superior in (1) linking the procedures of human choice with organizational and policy processes and (2) predicting various organizational and policy outputs.

In 2004, Wright published the article “The Role of Work Context in Work Motivation: A Public Sector Application of Goal and Social Cognitive Theories.” From the title alone, it becomes clear that the article draws substantially on psychological theories and aims to connect this to the public sector context. Wright analyzes how the organization’s work context—such as the degree of goal conflict, goal ambiguity, and procedural constraints present—can impact work motivation. Based on a survey of over 300 New York State employees, he empirically shows that goal conflict, goal ambiguity, and procedural constraints can have a detrimental effect on work motivation via their influence on antecedents of motivation (such as job goal specificity).

Oberfield (2010) also uses survey data to study socialization of street-level bureaucrats. He uses continuity theory to study socialization. Continuity theory posits that internal attributes such as personality and beliefs are likely to remain relatively stable throughout someone’s life. He more specifically analyzes how individual psychological characteristics affect bureaucrats’ rule-following identities during organizational socialization. By studying police officers and welfare workers during the course of their first two years on the job, he found that bureaucrats’ rule following identities changed during organizational socialization, but also that their entering identities still remain important in predicting the identities they developed. The article nicely reflects the interplay between psychological traits and organizational forces in predicting bureaucrats’ work behaviors.

Another interesting application of psychological theory to public administration is the study of Weibel, Rost, and Osterloh (2010). They research the introduction of “pay for performance” schemes in public institutions. Using motivation crowding theory, the article illustrates that the impact of extrinsic rewards on work motivations is dependent on boundary conditions. Extrinsic rewards can even decrease motivation in some instances. Indeed, this decrease may backfire in terms of a lower overall work performance. Using an experimental design among students of an executive MBA program, authors find striking evidence for such a crowding-out effect. The article neatly illustrates the practical and theoretical pedigree of psychological theories in studying contemporary public management techniques.

The final article we included in the Virtual Issue is by John Marvel (2015). Marvel investigates citizens’ unconscious biases against the public sector. In order

to do this, he uses Implicit Association Tests, a method frequently used in psychology. Based on three survey experiments, he shows that (1) people’s evaluations of government performance can be influenced by their unconscious views of the public sector, (2) the effect of information on performance evaluations can be short-lived, and (3) people beliefs about performance of the public sector are sometimes quite difficult to change.

Concluding, the articles in this Virtual Issue show that theories and methods from psychology can help us to better understand key research questions in our field. Furthermore, they vividly show how the public sector can be a highly interesting “case” for psychology to see to whether and to what extent their theories hold in an applied context. In our view, these articles are excellent examples of the potential added value of a behavioral approach to public administration. We hope that in this way, this Virtual Issue inspires scholars and practitioners to deepen the dialogue between public administration and psychology.

Articles Selected for the Virtual Issue

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