

# **Behavioral Public Administration: Connecting Psychology with European Public Administration Research**

Asmus Leth Olsen<sup>\*\*\*</sup>, Lars Tummers<sup>\*</sup>, Stephan Grimmelikhuijsen<sup>\*</sup> & Sebastian Jilke<sup>\*\*12</sup>

<sup>\*</sup>Utrecht University, <sup>\*\*</sup>Rutgers University, <sup>\*\*\*</sup>University of Copenhagen

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## **Abstract**

Well-known public administration scholars have stressed the importance of psychological research for the study of public administration. Neighboring disciplines such as economics and political science, have witnessed the emergence of the psychology-informed subfields of behavioral economics and political psychology. Along the same lines, an emerging behavioral public administration is an approach characterized by 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. In the chapter we connect past calls for a behavioral public administration with current research in public administration, and outline a path for future integration of public administration and psychology in European public administration.

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<sup>1</sup> Each author contributed equally.

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## Introduction

There have been longstanding calls from eminent public administration scholars to seek greater integration between our field and that of psychology (for instance Simon 1947; Waldo 1948). Also recently, public administration scholars have begun borrowing and extending theories from the field of psychology. This includes studies on topics such as public service motivation (Bellé 2015), transparency (Grimmelikhuijsen and Klijn 2015), public service competition and choice (Jilke 2015), performance information (James 2011; Olsen 2015a) and trust of civil servants (Van Ryzin 2011). At the same time, the methodological toolkit of public administration scholars is becoming more informed by developments within psychology, for instance, by using experimental methods (Margetts 2011; Bouwman and Grimmelikhuijsen 2016) and measurement techniques (e.g. Perry 1996; Tummers 2012; Kim et al. 2013). Furthermore, some psychologists are explicitly integrating psychological theories into the field of public administration (e.g., Tybur and Griskevicius 2013; Wright and Grant 2010; Bakker 2015). Hence, there is indeed some cross-fertilization between public administration and psychology.

These developments may signal the emergence of a distinct psychology-informed approach towards public administration. Although this chapter is primarily aimed at the scholarly community, practitioners in public administration use and benefit from insights from psychology as well (e.g. Thaler and Sunstein 2008; Olsen 2015b). In the United Kingdom, a Behavioral Insights Team was created by the Cabinet Office and across the Atlantic, in the United States, President Obama established a White House Social and Behavioral Sciences Team. The idea is that policy makers acknowledge the bounded rationality and cognitive limitations citizens have, and use psychological insights to encourage desired behavior.

A *behavioral public administration* can be seen as an approach where public administration scholars and psychologists exchange findings and inspire each other. We define behavioral public administration 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*. This definition has three main components: 1) individuals and groups of citizens, employees and managers within the public sector are the unit of analysis; 2) it emphasizes the behavior and attitudes of these people; and, most importantly, 3) it does so by integrating insights from psychology and the behavioral sciences into the study of public administration

(Grimmelikhuijsen, Jilke, Olsen and Tummers 2017). In short, behavioral public administration studies the behavioral microfoundations of public administration through theories developed in psychology and the behavioral sciences more broadly (see also Jilke 2015).

One interesting example of such work related to behavioral public administration is the PhD-thesis of Sebastian Jilke at Erasmus University Rotterdam (2015). Jilke investigated the privatization of public utilities such as electricity, water and telephone. The utilities sector was opened to competition between providers which means that providers must compete for customers. It was envisioned that in this way, citizens would receive better services for lower prices. Jilke showed that – when citizens have more choice in delivery of utility services - they switch *less*. He interprets this via the psychological concept of "choice overload". Moreover, Jilke provided evidence that especially potentially vulnerable groups (such from lower socio-economic classes) change less quickly, even when they are dissatisfied. This does not improve equality among citizens. Hence, policy makers must be careful when allowing providers to enter such markets.

To further this line of research, this chapter outlines a behavioral approach towards public administration by focusing on *European* behavioral public administration. We will explore this topic by posing and answering the following questions: Is there such a thing as a European behavioral public administration? And, if so, is this different from a more general approach behavioral public administration?

The chapter is set up as follows. First, we review the historical background on a closer bond between public administration and psychology. Second, we conduct a quantitative analysis of the application of behavioral public administration in the core European public administration journal, aptly entitled *Public Administration (PA)*. We will also compare this with the two key American journals: *Public Administration Review (PAR)* and *the Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory (JPART)*. Third, we will show two concrete examples from *PA* of how psychology can be helpful for analyzing public administration challenges. Fourth and finally, we conclude with an agenda on how a 'European' Behavioral Public Administration can be developed.

## **Behavioral Public Administration: History, Neighboring Disciplines, and Definition**

We can trace calls for integrating public administration and psychology a long way back in *American* public administration research. Key figures in the field like Herbert Simon and Dwight Waldo have in many instances stressed the importance of psychological research for the study of public administration (Simon 1947a, 1965, 1979; Waldo 1948, 1965).

Simon stresses in his 1978 Nobel Prize speech how his seminal book *Administrative Behavior* (Simon 1947a) grew from the conviction “[...] that decision making is the heart of administration, and that the vocabulary of administrative theory must be derived from the logic and psychology of human choice.” (Simon 1978, 353). While Robert Dahl differed with Herbert Simon on a number of issues he shared Simon’s view and stated that public administration must be based on an “understanding of man's behavior in the area marked off by the boundaries of public administration” (Dahl 1947, 7). Along similar lines, Dwight Waldo noted important psychological insight “[...] that man is in small part rational” (Waldo 1948, 25). Frederick Mosher (1956, 178) discussed how public administration relates to other social sciences (including psychology) and called for more interaction between them.

However, while the calls have been many, there has also been widespread acknowledgement of the broader failure of integrating public administration and psychology. Waldo noted how “little touched” our discipline is from ideas in psychology (Waldo 1948, 25) and later evaluated the spread of psychological insights into public administration and came to the same conclusion (Waldo 1965). Simon also recognized the great distance between public administration and psychology and noted, for the sake of both disciplines, that “[...] a marking stone placed halfway between might help travelers from both directions to keep to their courses” (Simon 1955, p. 100; see also Olsen 2015b). More recently, Jones (2003, p. 395) has argued: “Most people who study politics and government care little about the fine details of the specifics of human cognition”.

In addition to the historical debates within public administration it is also worth stressing how neighboring disciplines have integrated psychological insights. Notably, disciplines like political science and economics, among others, have been vivid adopters of a behavioral approach, yet in very distinct ways. Indeed, both have developed psychology-informed sub-disciplines. For the development of a distinct behavioral approach towards public administration, it is useful to cast some light on how these disciplines went about in establishing the psychology-informed subfields political psychology and behavioral

economics.

Although psychology-informed political science can be traced back to the early 1930s, and the “behavioral turn” in political science of the 1950s and 1960s changed the predominant unit of analysis to the individual level (Dahl 1961), it was not before the 1980s that political psychology as a distinct subfield came into being (Lavine 2010). Political psychology nowadays studies the inherent connections between politics and psychology by mostly examining political behavior from a psychological perspective. In this way, politics remains as a field of application, but theoretical paradigms from psychology are applied to interpret them.

Political psychology has grown into an interdisciplinary field that gained great prominence in recent years. For example, a large amount of political psychology studies appear in the general political science flagship journals, such as the *Journal of Politics*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, and the *American Political Science Review*. This upsurge in political psychology has led to theoretical advances in many different topic areas, including voting behavior, political identity, or elite bargaining.

Behavioral economics came into being as a response to a growing unease with the neoclassical model of the rational man. Inspired by the body of work of, among others, psychologist and Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman, behavioral economists study how people’s market behaviors deviate from the conception of the *Homo Oeconomicus*. Kahneman and Tversky’s work highlight economic agents’ limited selfishness, cognitive biases and bounded rationality of individual decision-making processes (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Kahneman 2003). Indeed, these are among the key reasons for individual’s deviation from the conception of the rational man.

Like political psychology in political science, behavioral economics is becoming mainstream in economic research, with a steep increase in psychology-inspired studies appearing in the pages of the key economic journals, and faculty searches in economics are increasingly on the look-out for behavioral economists. Yet, while both subfields enjoy great prominence in recent years, they seem to have developed differently. Whereas the upsurge of behavioral economics was mainly inspired by a growing unease with neoclassical economic theory, political psychology developed not in response to a disciplinary paradigm, but seeks to complement “traditional” political science research.

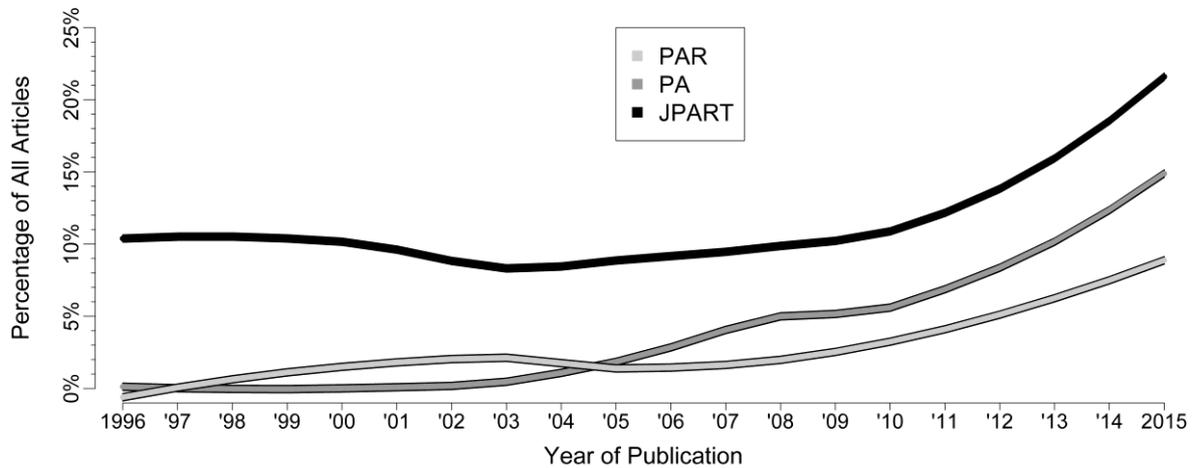
## **Behavioral Public Administration in the *Public Administration***

We assess the extent of psychologically-informed European public administration research by systematic analysis of all published articles in the journal *Public Administration* (PA) from 1996 to 2015. We also include analysis conducted in the two leading American-based journals *Public Administration Review* (PAR) and *Journal of Public Administration Research* (JPART). These are included to contrast the development of BPA in European and American research. Via the Scopus database we can identify the geographical location of the authors' institutions. These data supports that PA is a European dominated journal with about 80% of articles stemming from European institutions. The primary European countries in the journal are UK, Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany. The European dominance relative to American scholars is highlighted by the fact that UK scholars have published four times as much as US scholars in the journal. On the other hand, PAR and JPART are much more American dominated with more than 50% of articles from US institutions.

In the period 1996-2015 a total of 836 articles were published in *Public Administration*. Among these we searched for articles containing the word "psychology" in either the title, abstract, body text or references. This search provided us with 125 articles. These articles were then hand-coded to identify if they in fact had micro-level focus and made a substantial use of psychology. Examples included articles that explicitly use psychological theories or discuss results against a backdrop of existing psychological research. This subset of articles amounts to 42 or just about 5% of all published articles in the study period. A similar coding procedure was used in PAR and JPART (see Tummers et al. (2016) and Grimmelikhuijsen et al. (2016) for further details.). In PAR we found 63 articles (3,5%) out of all articles to follow the same criteria and in JPART about 11% (74 articles).

Figure 1 shows a smooth (lowess) line for the share of behavioral public administration across the three journals. Here we can see that most of the (European) public administration in PA is found after 2006 with a steady increasing share. A similar pattern is found in PAR and JPART. However, while we observe an increasing share of behavioral public administration in both European and American dominated journals, it is still a relative small share of the total research output.

**Figure 1: “Behavioral Public Administration” in Public Administration, Public Administration Review and Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory (1996-2015).**



**Examples of Behavioral Public Administration in *European Public Administration***

In this section we will discuss two examples of articles from the European-based journal *Public Administration* with a behavioral approach to highlight the diversity and added value of such an approach.

Sulitzeanu-Kenan (2006) carried out a web-based experiment to investigate the effect of public inquiries – used to investigate particular political matters more in-depth – on blame attribution. The basic idea behind these inquiries is that crises or public scandals can result in loss of trust in a given political organization. Trust, then, can be restored only by carefully investigating and exposing the facts to public scrutiny. On the other hand, public inquiries are believed to be a mechanism used by ministers to evade responsibility. For instance, a public affair that is investigated is temporarily removed from the political agenda and “buys time”. Building on the idea of ‘blame attribution’, which has been developed building on psychology-informed theories about blame avoidance (Weaver 1986) and negativity bias (Lau 1985), the latter being essentially a psychological concept (e.g. Rozin and Royzman 2001), Sulitzeanu-Kenan investigates employing two experiments whether a public inquiry can shift blame attributions.

He finds that a public inquiry does not appear to reduce responsibility attribution to office

holders who instigated the inquiry. Furthermore, Sulitzeanu-Kenan goes on to demonstrate in a second experiment that a public inquiry is only assessed as more credible if it reports a negative story. He refers to this finding as ‘conditional credibility’ of public inquiries, because their credibility is contingent upon the content of their report. The experiments by Sulitzeanu-Kenan provide a micro-level test of macro-level theoretical expectations about blame avoidance effects of public inquiries. In this case, the experiments show that, at least at the level of individual citizens, public inquiries may not have the anticipated effect on the attribution of blame or responsibility. Next to ‘falsifying’ a macro-level expectation, this study illustrates that a behavioral approach can add nuance theoretical expectations about public inquiries (namely that their credibility hinges on their content and not their source).

A second example, on a very different topic, is an article by Tummers, Steijn and Bekkers (2012) on the willingness to implement policy changes by professionals. Policy implementation is a long standing research topic in our field (e.g. Lipsky 1980). Often policy implementation and the lack thereof is explained from an institutional, macro-level, point of view. Tummers et al. use a framework to test influences on policy implementation at the individual level.

First, they use the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen 1991) to operationalize the impact of subjective norms. The theory of planned behavior posits that subjective norms from significant others guide one’s (intended) behavior. For instance, if the peers of a public professional - such as direct colleagues - think a certain policy is valuable, this person will be more likely to implement a certain policy. Second, Tummers et al. use psychological research on personality traits to assess if a professional’s personality – more specifically rebelliousness and rule compliance tendency – affect willingness to implement a policy. This is interesting because personality characteristics are often ignored in the literature examining attitudes towards change, such as a new policy (Judge et al. 1999, p. 107).

Based on a survey design, Tummers et al. (2012) show firstly that subjective norms from professional colleagues were especially important – more important than the subjective norms of the manager. Hence, it seems more important what the professional colleagues think of a policy than what the manager thinks. Second, they show that the understudied variable – personality characteristics – indeed plays a role in willingness to change. Rebelliousness negatively affects willingness to change, whereas rule compliance positively affects willingness. This is an important addition to many implementation studies that do not take

this into consideration. Also for policy practice this is an important notice: for instance, more rebellious public professionals may not be willing to collaborate with the implementation of policies, regardless the content of it. This study, using a behavioral approach, shows that a new policy is partly determined by the psychological predispositions of professionals and the norms of their societal context.

### **Conclusions and Discussion: A European Behavioral Public Administration?**

In this chapter we argue for a tighter integration of psychology and public administration. A behavioral approach could be useful to make sure that public administration research has an ongoing dialogue with psychology on the theories and methods relevant to administrative settings. Our plea is therefore one of pluralism and greater cooperation between public administration and psychology. Our empirical analysis of behavioral public administration in the European flagship journal of Public Administration indicated that European behavioral public administration is limited but growing.

We therefore spend the final part of the chapter on discussing ways to promote a European behavioral public administration in the future. We envision the following three principles to further develop the infusion and cross-fertilization of psychology and public administration in an European context: 1) extending behavioral public administration to more public administration topics; 2) strengthening behavioral public administration as a mature subfield; and 3) increasing value for public administration practice.

#### *1. Extending behavioral public administration to more public administration topics*

Some areas of public administration research have already witnessed an increase in research that could be placed under the heading of behavioral public administration, mostly in public management-related topics such as public service motivation and leadership. Other areas could also benefit from a stronger connection with psychology. For instance, topics related to policy and politics had a much smaller share of “psychology-informed” articles in our review. Areas of investigation that currently consider insights from psychology to a much lesser extent are, for instance, e-government, network governance, street-level bureaucracy, the relationship between elected officials and public administrators, and accountability. We envision a broad variety of other research questions in public administration that can be addressed in the spirit of behavioral public administration. For instance, research questions in the study of accountability that regard the effects of the political environment on how

accountability operates could as well benefit from insights from the behavioral sciences (e.g. Schillemans 2015). For instance, psychologist Philip Tetlock (1983) carried out experiments and showed how individuals engage in more complex information processing and elaborate justifying behavior if there is a hostile audience. The application of these theories could be very useful for public organizations that often operate in a hostile media environment. Since the institutional and cultural context is so diverse across countries in Europe, it would be interesting to study the cultural and institutional conditions of various European countries and sectors (for instance, governance structure, media attention) and analyze how this affects accountability behavior.

## *2. Reinforcing a two-way street between psychology and public administration*

We argued that public administration scholars could benefit from integrating psychology-informed theories into their projects. This implies an open attitude toward theories and methods developed in psychology. Specifically, this entails that a research project in behavioral public administration not only draws on the best available knowledge within public administration but also from state-of-the art knowledge from psychology. By studying concepts derived from psychology in public administration settings, behavioral public administration will also be better positioned to provide constructive and critical contributions to psychology. Second, general (European) public administration research could benefit from insights from psychology as many administrative processes under study are linked with individual thinking and behavior. For instance, developing a policy is based on assumptions about the causes and solutions of particular societal problems; and this thinking is non-rational, bounded and prone to biases (e.g. Lindblom, 1959)

Yet ‘it takes two to tango’ and therefore behavioral public administration should be a two-way street for scientific discovery. Think, for instance, of the work done by Tom R. Tyler, which psychological insights on fairness in justice settings (e.g. Tyler 2006). Theories in psychology are often backed by experiments conducted with a student sample in a highly controlled environment such as the laboratory. A political-administrative setting provides a real life laboratory to study human judgment and decision-making in which the ecological validity and practical implications of psychological theories can be tested (Morton and Williams 2010). Certain concepts from public administration, such as public service motivation (Perry and Vandenabeele 2015) and red tape, can further inform thinking in

psychology. This can be linked to for instance psychological models like the job-demands resources model (Bakker 2015). Next to this, psychological concepts can be studied in an administrative context. For instance, can an increase in a micro-concept like burnout be explained by a change in the macro political-administrative setting (see for a related study Bellé and Ongaro 2014).

### *3. Increasing value for public administration practice*

Finally, behavioral public administration can be beneficial for practitioners, such as policy makers, public managers and public professionals in Europe. The gap between research and practice in public administration has been intensively debated and commenters have been rather critical about the value of public administration theory and research for practice (Bogason and Brans 2008, 92). Some topics might be very suitable for knowledge transfer though, such as the performance of public institutions. A behavioral approach can provide evidence about what should – or should not – be done to improve perceived performance. For instance, psychology-informed research has shown that perceived performance can only be mollified to a limited extent. For instance, negative attitudes of citizens toward government are not merely a product of bad performance, but in large extent determined by unconscious negative biases (Marvel 2016). In addition, Hvidman and Andersen (2016) found – using a Danish sample - that public organizations are perceived as less efficient, yet more benevolent than similar private organizations simply because they are public.

Secondly, scholars can become involved in practice themselves. For instance, behavioral economist Richard Thaler (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) became actively involved in the Behavioral Insights Team, a unit set up to apply behavioral economics and psychology to improve government policy in the United Kingdom. Such endeavors may be fruitful to connect behavioral public administration and society. Related to this particular movement, public administration scholars can critically discuss the notions put forward by psychologists by entering in the public debate via working articles. For instance, public administration scholars Lodge and Wegrich (2014) developed a working article criticizing the nudge movement in government, with the provocative title “Rational tools of government in a world of bounded rationality.” The authors use key public administration studies such as Lindblom’s ‘The science of ‘muddling through’ (Lindblom 1959) to criticize nudging as a policy tool. Such endeavors are valuable as these do not take psychology at face value, but

explicitly connect it with public administration knowledge.

*How can we foster a behavioral approach to public administration?*

Now that we have discussed what can be done to foster a behavioral public administration, the next question is how this can be done. First of all, it is important to highlight that various activities under the heading of behavioral public administration are already ongoing, such as panels at major European conferences for public management scholars, such as the European Group of Public Administration. To make behavioral public administration a sustainable endeavor, these activities can be extended to PhD and graduate students. To broaden the substantive scope of behavioral public administration - colloquia aimed at PhD students could help young scholars to become acquainted with peers and senior researchers using the same approach. Also, to reinforce the two-way street on a longer term, courses could be developed that bring together students of both public administration and psychology. Another way to bring the disciplines together may be to develop special issues, symposia, or edited books for which both psychologists and public administration scholars are invited.

In summary, in this book chapter we have discussed what could be the possible value of Behavioral Public Administration in a European context. We do not intend to give a blueprint. We only want to give a description of what we believe is an important development in the PA community. We hope this contribution – purposefully located within a handbook centered on public administration and management in Europe - may foster a fruitful conversation that leads to a scientific and practically relevant research area where public administration scholars and psychologists work together and learn from each other.

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