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‘Rationalized incrementalism’. How behavior experts in government negotiate institutional logics

Joram Feitsma

NWO-TOP Research Project Welfare Improvement Through Nudging Knowledge (WINK), Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Public policy design takes place in a complex ‘policy swamp’ that is not easily analyzed, let alone controlled. Nonetheless, recent scientific advances in understanding human behavior have led some to believe there is a way out of this swamp. A ‘Behavioural Insights’ movement has emerged, pushing a seemingly neo-rationalist strategy that clashes with the hitherto incrementalist strategy of policy-making. This article investigates how upcoming behavior experts in Dutch government grapple with this clash, based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork. The article points out that these behavior experts, despite their clear-cut rationalist impression, in the backstage take on the challenge of negotiating competing institutional logics.


KEYWORDS


Behavioral Insights; nudge; evidence-based policy; ethnographic fieldwork; Dutch government

Introduction

Worldwide, governments are making a ‘behavioral turn’ (e.g. Strassheim, Jung, and Korinek 2015; Leggett 2014; Whitehead et al. 2017; John 2018; Malecka and Lepenies 2018; Schubert 2017). Increasingly, findings from the new school of behavioral economics in particular – showing how people systemically deviate from *homo economicus* behavior – are being considered to achieve policy goals, whether that concerns sustainable environments, healthy lives, or compliance with security laws or tax regulation. This behavioral turn has materialized in the rise of a ‘Behavioral Insights’ movement (Dolan et al. 2010; John 2018). Apart from writing influential reports like *Mindspace* (Dolan et al. 2010), this movement develops savvy ‘nudges’ (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) that go with the grain of human behavior, while drawing on rigorous Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) methodology to test the causal effects of their interventions. Behavioral Insights’ core aim thus is to align public policy-making with the psychology of human decision-making, making effective policies based on experimental evidence.

Despite the global achievements of forerunning behavioral units (John 2018), a successful deep institutional change like the behavioral turn is far from guaranteed. Governments are at this moment still ‘experimenting’ with behavioral units and associated practice in relatively marginal capacities. Also, the establishment of Behavioral Insights is not a neutral project. It has evoked skeptics and critics across the science-

CONTACT Joram Feitsma  j.n.feitsma@uu.nl

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policy-politics nexus who explicitly resist the behavioral turn. More implicitly, Behavioral Insights faces a systemic resistance to change within the public domain (Ansell, Boin, and Farjoun 2015), while eliciting a paradigmatic struggle between contrasting knowledge disciplines that is not necessarily in favor of the as of yet fledgling behavioral science perspective (although see Malecka and Lepenies (2018) on the ‘scientific imperialism’ of the behavioral sciences). An additional puzzle is that Behavioral Insights – despite its self-invented rhetoric of ‘Radical Incrementalism’ (Halpern 2015) – appears to hold a very *rationalist* outlook on policy design, attributing a central importance to scientific design and analysis in its quest to manage social problems (Lodge and Wegrich 2016). Decades of policy studies have shown that such an outlook is far from obvious. The policy world is actually rather *incrementalist*, and attributes a much more limited and messier role for science (e.g. Lindblom 1959). This evokes the paradoxical observation that while Behavioral Insights accentuates the bounded rationality of policy subjects, it still tends to assume unbounded rationality in policy designers and governmental processes.

In light of the abovementioned ‘rationality paradox’ (Lodge and Wegrich 2016), this article seeks to understand what happens when behavioral units try to inject their neo-rationalist ideas and methods into government organizations and policy subsystems that seem to run counter to such a rationalist ambition. It explores how behavior experts grapple with these conflicting (i.e. rationalist versus incrementalist) logics of policy design. Grounded in ethnographic fieldwork on Dutch governmental behavior experts over the course of 4 years, I observed that these behavior experts carry out a strong and unequivocal rationalist message in the ‘frontstage’. In the ‘backstage’ however they attempt to harmonize their frontstage image with the ‘real world’ of incrementalist policy-making. The distinctive contribution of this article therefore lies in challenging the wholly post-political, neo-rationalist imago of Behavioral Insights from an empirically informed perspective. Drawing on observations from the field, it will be demonstrated how in the backstage a more hybrid, ‘rationalized incrementalist’ logic is operative.

The rationalism versus incrementalism debate

In the existing behavioral policy literature, there is little mentioning of the rationalism that appears to underpin Behavioral Insights at a deep level. Its rationalist outlook on policy mostly seems assumed and therefore remains unaddressed. This article however takes this implicit rationalism as its explicit object of analysis. Doing so, it falls within a small group of critical studies that have been scrutinizing developments of modernization, scientization, and rationalization in the field of behavioral policy (e.g. Lodge and Wegrich 2016; Strassheim, Jung, and Korinek 2015; Feitsma 2018a). It adds to this critical literature by approaching this rationality theme through the lens of the classic rationalism versus incrementalism debate within public administration science. A recap of this debate is presented below.

Policy design has generally been construed as an inherently messy phenomenon. This messiness reflects in well-known metaphors relating policy design to ‘primeval soups’ (Kingdon 1984), ‘garbage cans’ (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972), and ‘swampy lowlands’ (Schön 1983). At the same time, public administration has a long history of rationalist waves attempting to dodge the messiness of the ‘policy swamp’ (Parsons

2002). Under a rationalist view, policy design can and should be approached scientifically and synoptically, through analyzing problems in all of their aspects, mapping out all possible solutions, and selecting and rolling out the most optimal solutions based on their identified consequences (Lindblom 1959). An early and prominent rationalist wave was the Anglo-Saxon positivist policy analysis movement in government that arose after World War II (Fischer et al. 2015). Since the 1970s, there was a new wave arguing for more ‘research utilization’ in policy (Weiss 1979; Newman 2016). Since the 1980s, the idea of ‘social marketing’ gained widespread popularity (Pykett et al. 2014), and since the 1990s another wave emerged in the form of the ‘evidence-based policy’ movement (Strategic Policy Making Team Cabinet Office 1999; Strassheim 2017). A most recent wave is the rising Behavioral Insights movement, whose rationalist bend is highlighted by its evidence-based approach and radical advocacy of RCT methodology (e.g. Lourenço et al. 2016; OECD 2017; Behavioural Insights Team UK 2012).

Against the rationalist logic, an incrementalist logic has been posited, memorably depicted by Charles Lindblom (1959) as ‘Muddling Through’. This has sparked a long-standing academic debate about the rationalist versus incrementalist nature of policy design (Lindblom 1959; Dror 1964; Etzioni 1967; Smith and May 1980). In this debate, the rationalist view has been critiqued on several of its implicit and explicit assumptions, including its beliefs in: the unboundedly rational nature of the policy process; the possibility of synoptic analysis and radical policy change; the fixed nature of knowledge; the hegemony of causal knowledge; the solely instrumental role of evidence; and the appropriateness of a command-and-control policy delivery model (Lindblom 1959; Parsons 2002; Cairney 2017; Boswell 2017; Strassheim 2017). Table 1 summarizes the main issues in which these logics clash.

Importantly, Behavioral Insights cannot be wholly generalized as ‘just another’ rationalist policy wave. One aspect in which it seems to have embraced incrementalist critiques on rationalist views is its departure from a radical design theory. Instead, Behavioral Insights seeks to generate social change by working incrementally, underpinned by its promoted philosophy of ‘Radical Incrementalism’: ‘the idea that dramatic improvements can be achieved, and are more likely to be achieved, by systematically testing small variations in everything we do, rather than through dramatic leaps into the dark’ (Halpern 2015, 291). While with regards to this aspect of making small steps

Table 1. A rationalist versus incrementalist logic of policy design (drawing from Lindblom 1959; Smith and May 1980; Parsons 2002).

| Rationalist logic | Incrementalist logic |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Policy design as a rational–analytical and value-free enterprise ● Comprehensive analysis of values, alternatives, and outcomes ● Radically new designs ● Outcome driven ● Emphasizes fixed, decontextualized, causal ‘what-works’ knowledge (Episteme) ● Assumes an uninterrupted way from science to policy ● Requires a top-down, managerial, powering model for policy delivery | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Policy design as a rationally bounded and political affair ● Partial, economized analysis of values, alternatives and outcomes at the most ● Only incremental changes ● Process driven ● Emphasizes ambiguous, local, experiential ‘how-to’ knowledge (Phronesis and Techne) ● Assumes a diffused and ‘brokered’ way from science to policy ● Requires a bottom-up, fragmented, local puzzling model for policy delivery |

(versus radical systemic change) Behavioral Insights indeed makes a shift toward incrementalism, it would be inaccurate to depict ‘Radical Incrementalism’ as incrementalist in the original Lindblomian sense. Even when making only one small policy change at the time, this strategy still adopts a strongly rationalist, scientized, engineerist policy approach toward the ‘management’ of social problems. This stands at odds with the incrementalist observation of a chaotic and politicized process in which little steps are made not through deliberate synoptic analysis but through highly satisfied decision-making resulting from negotiated, contingent, unplanned prioritization of certain values and interests over others (Lindblom 1959).

We might then view ‘Radical Incrementalism’ not so much as an accurate description of the actual institutional logic guiding behavioral policy, but more as a strategic politico-epistemological frame that helps the Behavioral Insights field to guise some of its rationalist traits. ‘Radical Incrementalism’ might even act as a ‘magic concept’ (Pollitt and Hupe 2011) to transcend the ‘old’ rationalism–incrementalism impasse. This article will however critically scrutinize this rhetorical frame by resituating it in the long-standing rationalism–incrementalism debate it has either explicitly or implicitly ignored. Through the lens of this classic public administration debate, we come to see the more balanced, mixed, ‘rationalized incrementalism’ that actually underpins Behavioral Insights.

Methods

This article is grounded in long-term ethnographic fieldwork on Dutch behavior experts. I have studied these experts in their professional environments, for longer periods of time, trying to grasp their ways of making sense of the world, making observations, taking notes, and constructing a personal narrative from it (Rhodes, ‘T Hart, and Noordegraaf 2007). As of yet there is only a limited body of qualitative studies on how behavioral policy is developing (e.g. John 2014, 2018; Ball, Hiscox, and Oliver 2017; Jones, Pykett, and Whitehead 2013; Jupp, Pykett, and Smith 2016; Feitsma 2018a, 2018b; Whitehead et al. 2017). More of such studies would seem needed to gain a deeper understanding of actual behavioral policy practice, especially as the literature currently tends to be dictated by either (overly) optimistic ‘behaviouralists’ reiterating the same type of generic ideas and success-stories, or (overly) critical ‘ethicists’ offering rather abstract critiques (Whitehead et al. 2017). Qualitative, ethnographic approaches can help to go beyond the current ‘trench warfare’ type of debate, and build more empirically grounded accounts of behavioral public policy. These approaches can help to go beyond the fabricated ‘frontstage’ of behavioral institutions and retrieve insights about what happens ‘backstage’ in the field (Goffman 1959; Van Hulst 2008).

This article gathers its data from an overarching study on the emerging behavioral state, divided over four distinct research phases. The general research context is Dutch government, where various behavioral practices have been developed since 2009 in a relatively decentralized manner (for more detail on the rise of Behavioral Insights in the Netherlands, see, e.g. BIN NL 2018; Feitsma 2018a; Feitsma and Schillemans [Forthcoming](#)). From 2014 to 2016, I performed semi-structured interviews (with 35 experts across 20 organizations) and short-term observations (about

55 h) of a wide range of Dutch behavior experts at the level of central government. During this time, I was also involved in a local nudging project as an academic adviser over the course of 10 months. In 2016, I worked as employee-ethnographer for a small Dutch behavioral team for a period of 4 months (from September to December 2016, totaling about 400 h of participant-observation). From 2016 to 2017, I conducted another round of semi-structured interviews (with 15 experts across 11 organizations) and short-term observations (about 19 h), this time focusing on behavior experts in local government. In a last phase in 2018, I conducted a focus group with a mixed group of behavior experts in order to validate concluding insights gained from the fieldwork. The findings presented in this article have also been discussed in-depth during this focus group.

I have thus far published about the emerging behavioral state from different theoretical perspectives, *inter alia* focusing on *everyday practices* (Feitsma 2018a), *professionalism* (Feitsma and Schillemans [Forthcoming](#)) and *modes of expertise* (Feitsma 2018b). This article adopts its own distinctive lens, looking at the particular *institutional logics* that underpin behavioral policy against the background of the long-standing rationalism versus incrementalism debate within public administration.

Regarding my sampling strategy: I specifically looked for self-proclaimed governmental behavior experts who were explicitly and structurally making use of behavioral scientific knowledge. No further search criteria were adopted – for instance regarding professional background or organizational design – as the professionalism of behavior experts was still in the process of being developed and already relatively fragmented – despite some shared core traits (Feitsma and Schillemans, [Forthcoming](#)).

Throughout the overarching study, interviewed and observed experts were generally made aware of my research aims, approach, and scope of study, typically during introductions and the process of negotiating access. At the same time, in practice the line between overtness and covertness in ethnographic fieldwork can become blurry, as awareness of the researcher's identity can fade during the fieldwork and time and space to make known the research agenda may be unavailable (Lugosi 2006).

An important question is whether my observations of Dutch behavior experts are reflective of the wider international landscape. While Dutch experts are clearly informed by international role models (Feitsma and Schillemans [Forthcoming](#)), numerous aspects of this context – for instance its traditional modes of expertise, public innovation culture, and particular history with ‘evidence-based policy’ – are likely to shape behavioral policy practice in unique ways. Exploring the role of such contextual aspects in shaping varieties of behavioral policy practice forms an important avenue for future research (for an example, see Strassheim, Jung, and Korinek 2015).

A related question is whether I have really been able to uncover the better hidden backstage of behavioral practice. During interviews and short-term participant-observations, I was a relative outsider which made it more difficult to be let into backstage processes. However, in some longer term involvements – collaborating in a local nudging project and working directly for a ministerial behavioral unit – I was part of daily backstage operations. At the same time, it has been my experience that the

boundaries between the frontstage and backstage can be blurry. My use of the frontstage/backstage dichotomy should therefore be taken as a loose heuristic.

One last question is whether the fact that I have been conducting research on behavioral public policy for the last 4 years, and have myself been embedded in a behavioral team, has led me to overestimate the significance of ‘the behavioural turn’. It should therefore be kept in mind that in the wider institutional picture behavioral policy still remains marginal – despite the attention that the topic has received from numerous governments and the launch of new policy units (Whitehead et al. 2017).

Findings

In his dramaturgical theory, the sociologist Goffman (1956) observes how people display different behaviors across different stages. An important distinction is that between the formal frontstage behaviors that serve as a form of ‘impression management’ (Goffman 1959) vis-à-vis the outside world, and the informal backstage behaviors that occur out of the public eye and allow for preparing for, reflecting on, and possibly deviating from the frontstage impressions. This frontstage/backstage distinction helps to make sense of my observations of Dutch behavior experts. These experts tend to tell a highly rationalist story in the frontstage. In the backstage, however, a more complex reality becomes apparent in which they try to harmonize rationalism with incrementalism through various ‘balancing acts’. This section will first describe the rationalist frontstage, after which the more hybrid backstage realities will be analyzed.

The rationalist frontstage

In frontstage settings (e.g. public events, lectures, newsletters, strategic documents, or introductory conversations), behavior experts express a strong rationalist ambition in which emphasis is placed on managing the behaviors of policy subjects through comprehensive analysis, rigorous *ex ante* evaluation, and systematic design. A first aspect of this rationalism is the experts’ adherence to the traditional rationalist policy cycle, moving from problem definition to analysis to solution design to implementation to evaluation (Cairney 2017). These various steps in the rationalist cycle reflect in the type of step-by-step approach that the experts typically promote. For instance, BIT IenW, the behavioral team of the Ministry of the Infrastructure and Water Management, follows a comparable approach (‘DOE-MEE’) which entails four phases: unraveling, designing, experimenting, monitoring, and evaluating (BIN NL 2017). Such step-by-step approaches are generally presented as core aspects of behavioral practice, both in lectures and public reports (e.g. BIN NL 2017), but also during interviews. Table 2 (first theme, also see online addendum) provides evidence of the behavior experts’ adherence to the rational policy cycle, seeking to shape policy-making into a systematic problem-solving exercise.

Beyond this frontstage promotion of step-by-step problem-solving methods, another aspect of rationalism in the world of behavior experts relates to their both implicit and explicit beliefs about the ‘readability’ and ‘craftability’ of human

Table 2. Evidence of rationalism.

| Theme | Example |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Rationalist policy cycle | An interviewee at the Dutch Healthcare Authority, and who is part of a behavioral network, talks about her daily practice: 'That's actually pretty broad. Mostly... we're busy with looking how we can steer behaviour. That tends to begin with the development of a regulation strategy. Then we try to analyse certain structures in the behaviour, analyse the behaviour, and on the basis of that we also explore which interventions might be most effective to change the behaviour'. |
| Belief in readability and craftability of human conduct | Various experts talk about their behavior change approach in terms of finding out 'what makes people tick' and 'pushing the right buttons'. They adopt different models to find out what these buttons are. One interviewee at the Royal Netherlands Army distinguishes between three 'buttons', being greed, fear, and sociality. In his view, these 'buttons' can be operationalized into behavior change interventions, which he called 'weapons of influence'. Another interviewee, working at Rijkswaterstaat, distinguishes between three other 'buttons': opportunity, motivation, and capability. He notes how all human behavior can be explained with the psychological theory of Maslow's pyramid of human needs, from basic needs to social status-related needs to the need for self-actualization. |
| Hegemony of RCTs | A key report in the field describes one of the lessons learned when applying Behavioral Insights. Running field experiments is seen as a core pillar of behavioral practice: 'Testing measures in practice is crucial. Something can look good on paper, but the question is always whether it actually works in the relevant situation. (...) Use field experiments: test the interventions on a small scale in order to see what works and what doesn't. It is thereby important to measure what exactly the behavioural effects of the measure are, and what factors influence those behavioural effects. The rapid developments in data analysis and big data facilitate this' (BIN NL 2018, 44). |

behaviors. While one might expect these experts to emphasize a degree of analytical uncertainty in their work, moving away from clear-cut *homo economicus* assumptions while incorporating the complex and arcane territory of the human unconscious, expressions of such uncertainty are rather scarce at the frontstage. Rather conversely, it seems as recent behavioral scientific discoveries have strengthened the experts' analytical confidence. This for one reflects in the type of behavioral analytical models they employ. These models tend to categorize the origins of behavior into several dimensions, for instance capability, opportunity, and motivation. Such models implicitly assume the possibility of clean-cut analysis in which the origins of behaviors can be determined with certainty and can be neatly fit into a given analytical framework. The idea furthermore is that when the specific drivers and barriers behind behaviors are determined, those behaviors can be altered by making targeted interventions that address those drivers and barriers. From their increased confidence in their ability to analyze, or 'read', citizen behaviours, behavior experts thus also gain more confidence about their ability to 'craft' citizen behaviors. The perceived simplicity of reading and crafting behaviors is symbolized by a prevailing mechanistic language, framing behavior change as finding out 'what makes people tick' and 'pushing the right buttons'. Table 2 (second theme) gives examples of the expressed belief in the readability and craftability of human conduct.

A third aspect of rationalism is found in the experts' common adherence to a strict hierarchy of evidence, with RCT-based knowledge as the 'gold standard' of

evidence. This hegemony of RCTs is one of the quintessential elements in the ‘Radical Incrementalism’ philosophy, wanting to improve public services ‘one RCT at the time’ (Halpern 2015). Generally, behavior experts will show their support for experimental evaluation. It is telling that the first update report of the Behavioral Insights Network Netherlands (BIN NL 2018), one of the more institutionalized Dutch networks of behavioral expertise, showcases its recent activities with the results of a series of field experiments. The emergence of behavioral policy thus aligns well with the RCT-oriented evidence-based policy trend which has been in vogue for some longer time already. Table 2 (third theme) shows another observed example of the attributed authority to RCTs.

Balancing acts backstage

In contrast with the strong rationalism propagated at the behavioral policy front-stage, in backstage-settings I observed behavior experts seeking ways to alleviate the tensions that follow from carrying out a rationalist message in a not-so-rational policy environment. These ways, some occurring deeper in the backstage than others, showed behaviour experts distancing themselves from several rationalist assumptions such as: an ‘unbrokered’ and apolitical science-policy nexus; the need for and possibility of comprehensive analysis; a predominant focus on outcomes; and the hegemony of ‘what works’ knowledge (see Table 1; Lindblom 1959; Cairney 2017; Newman 2016; Boswell 2017; Parsons 2002). This is not to say that behavior experts fully lost their rationalism backstage. Rather, they tried to live up to their rationalist ideal of basing policy design on scientific evidence (Newman 2016) as much as possible, while at the same time acknowledging existing incrementalist forces that run counter to such an ambition.

This negotiation between institutional logics reflects in particular ‘balancing acts’. In the following sections, I will highlight four particular backstage balancing acts that emerged as salient in a process of linking my field experiences with the sensitizing concepts from Table 1: (1) knowledge brokering; (2) focusing on outputs; (3) analytical satisficing; and (4) horizontalizing the hierarchy of evidence. The first balancing act of knowledge brokering refers to the ongoing negotiation and merging between competing logics that happens at the *procedural* level. It refers to the blurred and politicized relationships of behavior experts with their outside worlds, which cannot be successfully managed by following a rationalist logic alone. The other three balancing acts are tied to the negotiations between logics that take place at the *substantive* level; they are about how the work methods, theories, and criteria of behavior experts are adapted in light of competing logics. In an overarching sense, all four balancing acts follow the same mechanism: strong rationalism is dismissed and a degree of incrementalism acknowledged, while rationalism is preserved as much as possible.

Knowledge brokering

The specific mechanism behind the first balancing act, knowledge brokering, goes as follows. A rationalist logic assumes an automatic flow from evidence to policy (Cairney 2017). Behavior experts, however, both implicitly and explicitly reject this assumption.

They recognize that evidence needs to be properly introduced, moved around, translated, and (re)contextualized before it gets ‘used’. Therefore, they adopt the role of a ‘knowledge broker’: a mediator between behavioral science academia and the policy-making world (Knight and Lyall 2013; Hoppe 2010; Ward, House, and Hamer 2009). This knowledge brokering role becomes apparent in at least three aspects. A first aspect concerns the experts’ efforts in forming networks of expertise and circulating knowledge throughout the policy process. A second aspect is their support given to others regarding the concrete application of behavioral knowledge. A third aspect is their strategic work in seeking to build political-administrative legitimacy. Table 3 gives more evidence of these three ways of knowledge brokering (for a more detailed analysis of behavior experts as knowledge brokers, see Feitsma 2018a; for more empirical evidence see the online addendum).

These three ways of knowledge brokering reflect a shift toward incrementalism. The knowledge circulating function appears more in line with an incrementalist logic, acknowledging the distorted path from science to policy. Similarly, the help with concrete application reflects an incrementalist recognition that abstract behavioral scientific does not get automatically taken up within the broader policy system. Rather, it needs to be structured, concretized, and translated into more intuitive and action-oriented insights. The politico-strategic work performed backstage is also a shift toward incrementalism, understanding that the take-up of knowledge requires political persuasion and legitimization – in the absence of a universal consensus about what counts as valid evidence. To ‘sell’ their approach,

Table 3. Evidence of knowledge brokering.

| Theme | Example |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Smoothing the circulation of knowledge | One interviewee notes that her team operates as a loose network, consisting of policy advisers, knowledge institutes, behavioral scientists, and expert practitioners. Her daily work consists for a large part of connecting and interacting with people. Her perceived added value is largely due to her built-up combination of ‘know-what’ and ‘know-who’: ‘I have many interactions, a large part of my working hours is filled with interactions. Yes, you could say my job is interactions. And making use of the network to supply policy makers with content. But I also dive in the subject and in the studies myself. I can only think along with policy if I do my homework myself. The advantage is: I know both the content and the people. I also know what’s necessary and what it is the people do and can provide’. |
| Facilitating concrete application | A ministerial behavior expert explains the importance of facilitating others in the concrete application of behavioral knowledge. His team has developed its own ‘DOE-MEE tool’ to do so. ‘Policymakers certainly realize that behaviour is an essential factor in achieving successes. But they’ve got their own professionalism, which is often judicial, technical, or economical. That’s the basis from which they develop ideas. That’s what they hold on to, because people know how to do that. That’s what they studied for. That’s what they’ve gained experience in. That our behaviour also plays a role, and that it also works unconsciously, they realize all of that. Only the how-question hasn’t been answered. Of: how do I then deal with it? How do I ensure that it becomes part of my policy process? This is where we step in with our DOE-MEE approach. We try to answer the how-question. That’s why we also called it a “tool”’. |
| Politico-strategic work | A municipal behavior expert elaborates on a key challenge, which is not just a substantive challenge but also a political challenge of having to authorize oneself within the established policy system. The burden of proof is always important when telling your story. Is it scientifically proven to actually work? That’s an important question and always important for political figures like my alderman. Because yea, (...) he has to make a case for why we’re doing what we’re doing. The scientific substantiation can be difficult. Although with telling examples and qualitative substantiation you can often come a long way’. |

behavior experts harness the argumentative power of numbers, percentages and ‘killer charts’. They construct clear-cut success-stories while making subtle choices that frame the outcomes in the most positive way (for an example, see the case of the behavior experts at the City of Enschede in the online addendum). At the same time, it should be emphasized that this knowledge brokering role remains underpinned by a strong rationalist ambition. It forms an incrementalist ‘patch’ in service of the further rationalization and scientization of the policy process. It is in this sense that two distinct institutional logics – rationalism and incrementalism – merge.

Focusing on outputs

The focus of the article will now turn to more internally oriented, substantive matters of behavioral policy practice – e.g. adopted theories, methods, quality criteria – and explore how they are adapted in light of competing logics. The balancing act discussed below specifically concerns how behavior experts measure their own success. Rationalism would assume that social change can be ‘crafted’ by means of systematic policy analysis. Accordingly, it measures policy success by actual changes in policy outcomes (Lindblom 1959; Parsons 2002; BIT UK 2012). My observations however suggest that behavior experts make a gradual shift toward incrementalism, in the sense that they moderate their outcome focus and also aim at making accomplishments earlier in the policy process. This is not to say that they fully operate according to a process-driven logic (Lindblom 1959). Rather, they balance between a process and outcome orientation. They adopt a mixed, modestly optimistic attitude, on the one hand trusting their behavior change capabilities and drawing confidence from dozens of successful examples, while also acknowledging the limitations to their efforts. They cannot guarantee successful policy outcomes. Rather, they can ‘improve the chance of success’ – through better underpinned analysis and design. Their realistically achievable success thus becomes one of ‘engineering’ the policy *process*, rather than actual outcomes.

Behavior experts particularly derive their success from developing and refining policy analyses from a behavioral perspective. Behavioral analysis has a central place in the practice of Dutch behavior experts (Feitsma 2018a) and it involves, for instance, making step-by-step analyses of why citizens would invest in solar panels, how job seekers could be engaged in more compliant job seeking behavior, and how CEO’s could make more sustainable strategic choices. A core belief of behavior experts is that behavioral knowledge helps to construct policy designs that are richer and better underpinned. While the refinement of policy analyses may yield improved outcomes in the end, in a more direct way it provides them a sense of argumentative legitimacy. With a clearer, thought-through narrative, it is easier to justify choices for particular policy designs. [Table 4](#) evidences how behavior experts authorize themselves by producing valuable outputs, revised policy analyses in particular.

Analytical satisficing

The previous section showed how behavior experts, in the face of competing logics, do not focus strictly on actual behavior change outcomes. Their realistically achievable success lies in developing valuable policy outputs like sounder policy analyses. This

Table 4. Evidence of output focus.

| Example |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>During an on-site conversation with a member of a ministerial behavioral team at the coffee-machine, he tells me a story that he used often to explain his team's vision and working method. His story comes from an episode from the TV-show South Park about 'Underpants Gnomes'. He describes how the episode features a group of gnomes with a 'genius' profit plan. They collect underpants and sell them, in three phases:</p> <p>Phase 1: Collect underpants Phase 2: ? Phase 3: Make profit</p> <p>Phase 1 is <i>what</i> they do, collecting underpants, and Phase 3 <i>why</i> they do it, making profit. Phase 2 concerns the reasoning behind how they will turn their collected underpants into profit. But the gnomes skip this phase. The behavior expert explained that this is exactly what happens in policy-making too. Phase 1, the activities, and Phase 3, the expected results, are clear, but Phase 2, the reasoning about <i>how</i> your activities will lead to those results, is lacking. There is a 'world of behaviour' underneath a certain case that you first need to map out in order to formulate a clear rationale. The team helps to uncover that world and think policies through. That requires hard work and a structured approach, deciding on what behavior is desired, which behavioral barriers and motives need to be triggered, and accordingly, which measures can do so. The expert tells me that Behavioral Insights is thus not only about effectiveness, but also about legitimacy. It is the underlying reasoning that matters. As a policy-maker, you stand much stronger with a well-supported narrative, allowing you to explain why you do what you do (on-site observation, 8 November 2016).</p> |

section follows on from this by looking further into how behavior experts execute their analyses. It is argued that within this practice of policy analysis a balancing act is operative too. That is: while a rationalist logic assumes the possibility of and need for comprehensive analysis (Lindblom 1959), my observations suggest that behavior experts make a gradual shift toward incrementalism as they relax their ambitions at comprehensive analysis. They distance their practice from a purely scientific logic, noting that it is 'not a university' and that 'the field is not a lab'. They also distance themselves from the need to produce complete analyses, knowing that in practice these will inevitably contain uncertainties and assumptions. Rather, they try to identify behavioral determinants and map out solutions and their consequences as accurately as possible within their bounded capacity, while drawing confidence from the progress that *is* made.

The distancing from the need for full scientific certainty also reflects in how behavior experts employ scientific models. While in the frontstage they may confidently present clear-cut models with which to analyze human behavior, in the backstage they may point at the inconclusive nature of such models. They realize that such models are simplifying heuristics. An interviewee states: 'The power of models is that they are simplifications, abstractions of reality to make that reality more manageable'. Behavior experts also point at the immense complexity of their cases in terms of why targets behave as they do. This 'richness of behaviour' is not easily mapped out, and does not per se fit in the scientific frameworks produced by behavioral scientists. This shift in how the status of these analytical models is perceived backstage, i.e. from conclusive frameworks to loosely guiding heuristics, reflects that experts do not expect their behavioral analyses to be wholly conclusive and certain.

Such *analytical satisficing* suggests that experts try to balance between rationalism and incrementalism. On the one hand, they are cautious not to take insufficient time for the analysis and 'jump to solutions' in the decision-making process. On the other, as timely, efficient, and widely applicable actions are needed, they are also cautious not to analyze too far, in too much detail, with too little tolerance for uncertainty and

inconclusiveness. The balancing act is therefore one of gathering just enough facts, tolerating a degree of ‘not-knowing’, coming to crucial insights quickly without stranding in ‘paralysis analysis’. Table 5 further evidences this balancing act.

Horizontalizing the hierarchy of evidence

The previous two sections showed behavior experts balancing between an outcome versus processual focus, and between synoptic versus satisfied analysis. The balancing act discussed below deals with the type of methods that behavior experts authorize as valid. A rationalist view starts from a clear ‘hierarchy of evidence’ in which knowledge gained from (meta-analyses of) RCTs gains the highest epistemic authority (Cairney 2017; Newman 2016). This view is however not wholly reflected in the field of behavioral expertise, in which RCTs appear to form a defining and yet also partially contested source of expertise. While some behavior experts remain strictly tied to their ‘what works’ methodology, others challenge and depart from the rationalist idea that RCT methodology provides the ‘the holy grail’ of evaluation (also see Feitsma 2018a). They point to the technical, methodological and juridical limitations of field experiments. Also, they note that other ways exist to gain valuable insights into the effectiveness of interventions (including qualitative and experience-based methods), thus arguing for the use of a wider palette of evaluation methods. Doing so, they move from a strictly rationalist hierarchy of evidence to a more pluralistic, *horizontal* version.

Those behaviour experts that move toward a more horizontal palette of evidence bases do not however devalue RCTs entirely. They can be still directly involved in running and ‘selling’ experimental projects. But rather, they adopt a more nuanced stance, appreciating RCTs for their rigor and causal explanatory power, but simultaneously downplaying them in terms of their general usability. Specific concerns, *inter alia*, relate to: the inability to fully control field settings and thus conduct proper experiments; ethical and juridical arguments against randomizing treatment groups that thereby lead to unequal treatment of policy subjects; uncertainty about the transferability of experimental findings. Table 6 (first

Table 5. Evidence of analytical satisficing.

| Example |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>A behavior expert talks about the workshop sessions he hosts, and the importance of striking a fine balance between analyzing too little and too much: ‘When we host a session and people find it interesting, you’ll often see that they explore about two more ideas and that’s it. You shouldn’t bother them anymore with it then. That’s the knowledge base. It’s quite fragile. But we will go on in the process, over to the Design phase. Because we know that when you linger on in the Analysis phase, then people will drop out. It takes them too long. What they really want is to jump to solutions, but we’re already restraining them from that. If we succeed in that, that’s beneficial, but when you go on for too long, it becomes counterproductive. They’ll say that it’s going nowhere, so never mind. So you’ve got to push through. In a very big project we’ve experienced that you get commitment to do thorough analyses. But now in this (...) project, the participants only get a few homework assignments and we’re already glad when they make those. It means that your analysis will improve, and that you’re momentarily withholding people from jumping to solutions, which is very advantageous. But it’s very relative. It depends on who you’re working with, how much political-societal pressure rests on the case, and how much willingness there is amongst policymakers to invest in this. (...) So, yea, it’s quite delicate. But everything you can achieve is an added benefit, is my feeling’.</p> <p>Furthermore, interesting about the work method of this behavior expert is the space that it leaves open for ‘not-knowing’. In his workshops, he works with an analytical tool that explicitly asks users to list what is <i>not</i> yet known about a particular case. One of his team’s core principles is: ‘Check your assumptions: be aware that much of our thinking is based on assumptions. Make them explicit and make sure that you check them during the process’ (BIN NL 2017, 7).</p> |

theme) further evidences how behavior experts partially distance themselves from a rationalist logic by deemphasizing the value of RCTs, arguing that they are ‘just one tool in the kit of the researcher’.

Besides *deemphasizing* the epistemic authority of RCTs, a substantial group of behavior experts also *reemphasizes* the value of nonexperimental types of knowledge in developing interventions and making informed statements about ‘what works’. These experts work in ways that could be described as ‘behaviourally-informed’, loosely informed by behavioral science theories, rather than a ‘behaviourally-tested’ way that is strictly informed by local field experiments (Lourenço et al. 2016). As Table 6 (second theme, also see online addendum) shows, this looser approach features an eclectic range of methods, including literature study, interviewing, and observing, but also common-sense reasoning, professional

Table 6. Evidence of the horizontalization of the hierarchy of evidence.

| Theme | Example |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Deemphasizing the value of RCTs | <p>To improve waste sorting in high-rise buildings, one behavior expert mentions that his team started a key project that followed a so-called ‘royal route’, moving from in-depth behavioral analysis to mapping out and <i>ex ante</i> evaluating prioritized solutions in the field. He however expresses some worry that despite the rigor of the ‘royal route’ in producing and evaluating intervention strategies, in the end success would depend on how these interventions were locally implemented. A more nuanced stance versus field experiments is expressed: ‘With the waste sorting project I’m a little bit afraid that per case it’ll be so specific and context-dependent that you’d need to fully map out and understand the target group and the context in each and every case, before you can choose rightly between the possible intervention strategies (...). And that each subproject in every Dutch municipality will still become as extensive as [our project]. Except that (...) it does make it easier, the royal route. Because you know what matters and what you need to know to make head-way. That’s already a whole lot... (...) and I think that the most important intervention strategies derive from following the royal route. That those strategies, in one way or another, do have much potential in specific situations. It’s just that for the specific composition, the specific design, you’ll still need to do your own analysis of all the particular aspects. And doing that is demanding, not something that I see happening in a lot of municipalities’.</p> |
| Reemphasizing the value of non-experimental knowledge | <p>A behavior expert, working at the implementation agency Rijkswaterstaat, emphasizes the need for creative knowledge beyond insights gained from traditional behavioral analysis. Creativity is particularly necessary in making the step from analyzing behaviors to designing fitting solutions. He keeps a list of all of his creative thinking techniques, varying from ‘knowledge-based brainstorm’ to ‘I Ching’ and the ‘Synectics-technique’, a methodology that works with metaphor and analogy to come up with original ideas. Besides creative knowledge, he also emphasizes the value of local knowledge brought in by regional public officials, but also local community workers and citizens: ‘How you make that translation [from analysis to local solutions]? That’s quite a tricky one. I once organized a benchmark-session, just showing a movie of Cialdini and his principles [of social influence] and then letting the audience think about how they could apply this in [the policy area of] waste separation. You notice that they get through the movie quite easily and that applying each behavioural change technique to the specific situation and the identified “customer journeys” yields some nice results. So that’s one nice way to do it. Those people also know the target group so they’re able to think along. [It is important to] engage them with these techniques and let them think along about how to modify those or assess whether they work or not. That they develop a sensitivity for it. I don’t think you can do all of that by yourself’.</p> |

judgment, creative thinking, and brainstorming with local citizens. This suggests that behavioral policy is not necessarily coupled to a rationalist RCT-approach but can also be grounded in wholly different knowledge bases that are more in line with incrementalism.

Discussion

A classic debate within public administration asks about the nature of the policy process. The academic consensus points toward an incrementalist nature (Bendor 2015). Yet, against the background of the flourishing of behavioral science, rationalism seems to have been revitalized in governments, exemplified by the rise of a ‘Behavioural Insights’ movement. This article has explored, based on ethnographic fieldwork in the context of Dutch government, how the members of this movement put their methods and ideas into practice in a not-so-rationalist environment. An important observation has been that, in pointing out where these behavior experts fall on the rationalist–incrementalist spectrum, it differs whether you look at their frontstage or backstage operations. In the frontstage, behavior experts push for strong rationalism. However, in the backstage, they seek to harmonize their rationalist image with the incrementalism present in the wider policy system, resulting in various ‘balancing acts’.

These findings challenge the idea of Behavioral Insights advocates as the ‘new rationalists in town’. The real introduction of behavioral science in the existing policy system does not reflect the strong rationalism that is implicit in the dominant behavioral policy discourse (e.g. see Dolan et al. 2010; OECD 2017; Lourenço et al. 2016). It would be more accurate to depict that introduction as an ambiguous, negotiated and political process in which conflicting institutional logics merge and interact. Typically incrementalist features, like analytical satisficing, are mixed with typically rationalist features, such as the adherence to the rationalist policy cycle. The result is a hybrid, ‘rationalized incrementalism’ that operates in the backstage of behavioral public policy. This confirms earlier scholarly pleas advising not to approach the rationalism–incrementalism spectrum too binarily (Smith and May 1980; and in relation to the equivalent rationalism–constructivism debate: Newman 2016; Strassheim 2017). Rather than a dichotomy, a dynamic continuum exists in which rationalist and incrementalist forces coexist and blend on various dimensions (see Table 1). More fundamentally, this understanding questions the helpfulness of thinking in terms of two supposedly opposite and separated logics in the first place (Strassheim 2017).

The observation of this more hybrid, ambiguous logic operating in the behavioral policy process shows interesting analogies with the in and of itself ambiguous nature of the knowledge discipline by which behavioral policy is primarily underpinned (i.e. the new school of behavioural economics). An inherent ambiguity exists about new behavioral economics’ stance toward rationality. It is on the one hand defined by its focus on how real people *deviate* from the rationality principle, yet it nonetheless still takes the rationality principle as its fundamental benchmark, thereby reproducing the idea of rationality (Sent 2004). Analogously, this article has shown how behavior experts seek to cope with the ways in which real-world policymaking deviates from their rationalist ideals, yet while doing so they still take the wholly rationalized policy process as their benchmark and even come to defense of that benchmark in the frontstage. Thus, just as new behavioral economics relates ambiguously to rationality, so do behavior experts,

continuously switching between rationalist and non-rationalist assumptions across different organizational stages.

An interesting question is whether the observed compromising between conflicting institutional logics is a general feature of expertise being taken up in the policy system. This claim would be supported by other similar observations of how institutional logics merge as new modes of policy-making make their appearance (e.g. Bjerregaard 2011). At the same time, the introduction of behavioral expertise may evoke a particularly strong clash between logics. The propagated hardcore rationalism of Behavioural Insights, with its strong assumptions about the readability, measurability and craftability of individual behavior, stands in rather sharp contrast with the incrementalist logic underpinning real-world policy-making. Due to this stark clash, a greater need to compromise between logics can be expected.

The ability of behavior experts to balance between institutional logics may well be a vital aspect of their legitimacy. Generally, as organizational practices are faced with competing demands, they will tend to search for ways that allow them to strike a tactful balance between those demands so that they are all sufficiently met (Brunsson 2007). This article suggests that behavior experts are capably doing so too. They engage in particular balancing acts to negotiate between a competing rationalist and incrementalist logic. More broadly, they have constructed a rationalist frontstage which 'talks' differently, if not oppositely, in relation to what its backstage 'does'. For critical scholars, such inconsistency could be an easy opportunity to debunk yet another rationalist policy trend. However, from an organizational point of view, this inconsistency may exactly be what allows behavior experts to thrive. It is a deliberate, *organized hypocrisy* (Brunsson 2007) that makes productive use of ambiguity. As behavior experts compromise between competing logics and preach different messages across different stages, they show themselves to be tactically adaptable, able to meet seemingly incompatible demands at once.

At the same time, early signs of a less hypocritical, more self-reflective turn in the field of behavioral public policy may be observed. At the frontstage of the field, academic thought leaders have been exploring new questions, for instance looking into how elements of deliberative democracy can be incorporated into behavioral policy so that it becomes less technocratic (John 2018). Also, trendsetting units are devoting full reports to reflect on the limitations of a strong rationalist approach (BIT UK 2018). Such reflective developments seem to suggest that the critical behavioral policy literature is being heard, and that also on a broader level, debates on the limitations of evidence-based policy-making as well as discussions about the 'replication crises' in the fields of medicine and psychology (Deaton and Cartwright 2016) are impacting the field, also in its frontstage discussions and agenda-setting. The front- and backstage of behavioral public policy might thus be coming closer together.

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Notes on contributor

Joram Feitsma, based at Utrecht University School of Governance, is currently working on his dissertation *Inside The Behavioral State*. He conducts ethnographic fieldwork on the emerging ‘Behavioural Insights’ movement to study the recent take-up of behavioral science in governments. He has published in *Policy Sciences*, *Policy & Politics*, and the forthcoming *Edward Elgar Handbook of Behavioral Change and Public Policy*.

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