Behavioral Public Administration: Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract: The last decade has seen remarkable growth in the field of behavioral public administration, both in practice and in academia. In both domains, applications of behavioral science to policy problems have moved forward at breakneck speed; researchers are increasingly pursuing randomized behavioral interventions in public administration contexts, editors of peer-reviewed academic journals are showing greater interest in publishing this work, and policy makers at all levels are creating new initiatives to bring behavioral science into the public sector. However, because the expansion of the field has been so rapid, there has been relatively little time to step back and reflect on the work that has been done and to assess where the field is going in the future. It is high time for such reflection: where is the field currently on track, and where might it need course correction?

Behavioral Public Administration: Then and Now

The phrase “behavioral public administration” (BPA) is relatively new: the term gained traction rapidly after Grimmeleikhuisen and coauthors proposed a research agenda that would bring together evidence from behavioral science with theories of public administration (Grimmeleikhuisen et al. 2017). Of course, as these authors recognize, use of a behavioral approach in the social sciences can be traced back to the 1900s, or at least to Herbert Simon and Dwight Waldo. More recently, the field has drawn from the growing literature in behavioral economics and judgment and decision-making, which has been formalized by scholars such as Daniel Kahneman, Amos Tversky, and Richard Thaler. Yet what is perhaps more interesting is that much of the evidence base of BPA, particularly the applied empirical results, has developed outside of traditional academia.

There are currently more than 200 units dedicated to using insights from behavioral science in governmental settings, not including any academic research centers or labs (Afif et al. 2018). This is remarkable in many ways, and it highlights the fact that BPA has flourished in public sector environments directly, often with a connection to academia only coming later. For example, one of the earliest adopters on the practitioner side was the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), a now-global team that started in the United Kingdom in 2010 as part of the Prime Minister’s Office. While the team exists because high-level policy makers wanted to explore evidence from behavioral economics and “nudge theory,” the team has moved well beyond consuming other people’s research. To date, the BIT has conducted hundreds of behaviorally informed field experiments with government partners, both in the United Kingdom and globally. The United States followed the United Kingdom’s lead in short order, forming the Social and Behavioral Sciences Team as part of the Barack Obama administration in 2014 (which lives on in the Office of Evaluation Services, or OES, in the General Services Administration, or GSA).

These early adopters—and the evidence they produced—have spawned growing interest in behavioral approaches, not only in other countries (such as Australia, Canada, Singapore, Denmark, and India) but also at the intergovernmental and local levels. For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the World Bank both now have in-house behavioral science units, while New South Wales, Washington, DC, and Philadelphia are among the local governments with dedicated teams. Furthermore, there are increasing numbers of less centralized collaborations between academics and policy makers in the behavioral science space as well, with more and more academics seeking out government partners and vice versa.

The early research using behavioral science in government has shown a great deal of promise, often finding homes in top academic journals in the social sciences. One pioneering study from the BIT found that framing alterations in the wording of tax delinquency letters had a notable impact on payment
of overdue taxes (Hallsworth et al. 2017). Applying a similar template (small nudge-style changes to written communications) has been shown to shape behavior in a number of other policy domains, including uptake of benefits programs (Bhargava and Manoli 2015), police recruitment (Linos 2018), and reduction of energy consumption (Allcott 2011).

However, it is worth noting that a large number of BPA interventions have failed to change behavior in significant ways—the academically dreaded but often quite important “null result.” For example, recent evidence suggests that promising nudges to increase FAFSA completion for U.S. high schoolers did not replicate when tested at scale (Bird et al. 2019). Fortunately, BPA has, like some of its social science cousins, shown an increasing openness to the publication of meaningful and informative null results (examples include Bhanot et al. (2018), Leight and Safran (2019), and the recent commitment of the OES to publish all studies, irrespective of the results).

We think of these null results, or nonreplications, as a feature of academic scholarship, not a bug. Without graduating from a phase of overenthusiasm for nudges in government to a phase of slight disillusionment with null results, the field cannot settle into a more stable equilibrium that places bounds on what is and is not possible through nudges. A 2016 piece by Danny Buerkli placed behavioral insights in government in the Gartner Hype Cycle, a scale developed to track the evolution of technological adoption, at slightly past the “Peak of Inflated Expectations” and rapidly approaching the “Trough of Disillusionment.” Three years later, we feel confident that the “Slope of Enlightenment” and “Plateau of Productivity” are within reach.

Where Behavioral Public Administration Needs to Go

BPA is continuing to mature as a field, and it continues to contribute to our understanding of behavioral science and public administration. However, the field is susceptible to some important structural issues, almost by design, which need to be taken seriously. For example, the first wave of behavioral experiments in government were somewhat ad hoc in nature. This is not entirely surprising; what is feasibly testable in a public sector environment is limited by a host of nonacademic questions: Does this policy area match current political priorities? Is the intervention in line with previous public commitments? Will residents be comfortable with being nudged in this domain? Is there a staff member with the capacity to support the launch of the project? Therefore, many of the influential, “early stage” behavioral experiments in government were successful because of fortuitous circumstances that allowed a rigorous study to be completed, rather than because of a methodical process resulting in a maximally impactful intervention.

Similarly, as with the field of behavioral economics, the early wins in BPA focused more on documenting the existence of cognitive biases in policy makers or frontline workers (or the possibility that behavioral biases may play a role in public administration), as opposed to finding solutions that work in a public sector context. As Battaglio and coauthors (2019) note in their research synthesis, almost 80 percent of primary studies in BPA focus on describing the existence of cognitive biases in the public sector.

These issues, among others, point to a broader question: where does BPA need to go in the months and years ahead to have the greatest impact, from both an academic and a practical perspective? We hope to offer a few insights in this regard, with the hopes of starting a needed dialogue on how the field can best move forward.

First, we hope that BPA will expand beyond nudges to include more behavioral science research that focuses on meso- and macro-level understandings of policies and institutions. In practice, many BPA projects involve academic researchers collaborating with practitioners who are more focused on finding solutions to urgent (and often small scope) public sector challenges than on tackling more complex, longstanding issues. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that nudge-type interventions—quick, simple, cheap, and (perhaps most importantly) low-risk—tend to be appealing for all parties. However, while the nudge framework offers significant promise for public administration, its allure can be a hindrance. Many significant contributions to public administration theory emphasize systemic change, the role of institutions, and the long-term effects of governance structures.

Similarly, much of behavioral science theory has moved beyond the “quick win” behavioral interventions and toward improving our understanding of the deeper psychological processes that drive human behavior, such as identity and cognitive processes, or thornier research questions, such as how to promote long-term habit formation and how to conduct welfare analysis in a behavioral world. These are areas where applied nudge interventions are often less well suited to add value. For BPA to contribute to these ongoing debates, the field must, to some extent, move beyond nudging and into the application of behavioral science to public sector problems in other ways. For example, there would be great benefit in applying a behavioral approach to structuring performance systems in government agencies, understanding how information is shared across governmental units, or building trust in resident-state interactions. This is particularly important if we are to build a more cohesive and unified theory of behavioral science in public sector contexts.

Second, while the growth of BPA is inextricably linked with the growth of experimentation in government, this need not be the only methodology used in the field. Experimentation in government has many positives, to be sure. For example, the process of designing and implementing an experiment can have a number of positive side effects on government processes: it often improves data management techniques, encourages public officials to think carefully about the precise behaviors they are seeking to influence and why, and promotes evidence-based thinking more broadly. However, it can also limit the type of questions that can be answered—not everything can be randomized, and this often leads to some of the most important public sector questions falling by the wayside. Yet the underlying insights of a behavioral approach can be just as useful when using ethnographic and qualitative methodologies, when analyzing legislation, or even when exploring ethical judgments in the public sector. Nonexperimental behavioral science could be used to examine how political appointees negotiate with internal and external stakeholders, how to roll out new legislation that may have costs today but benefits tomorrow (such as a plastic bag tax or a sugar tax), or even how public sector workers understand their roles.
If BPA is to distinguish itself meaningfully from behavioral economics or even “behavioral insights” research that is happening in business schools, psychology departments, and economics departments, it should draw on perspectives—methodological and substantive—that have made public administration research flourish. Specifically, it must lean more heavily into exploring what is unique about behavior in the public sector. For example, research in this space could explore how cognitive biases interact with principles of public service motivation (Perry, Hondeghem, and Wise 2010) to affect public servants’ decision-making or focus on politician-bureaucrat interactions (see, e.g., Nielsen and Moynihan 2017). Indeed, one of the strengths of the field is its ability to define new topic areas for research by pulling academic researchers out of their traditional comfort zones (e.g., campus behavioral research labs or theorizing in their office) and into the real world. By doing so, the field has the potential to foster methodological innovation, by encouraging academics to explore new and rich data sets, combine qualitative and ethnographic research with administrative outcomes, and define new topic areas for scholarly research. One thing we hear over and over from academics working in this space is that interactions with public officials have encouraged researchers to reassess what they consider “important” research questions—though we academics like to think we only study important topics, we have learned from practitioners that a lot of academic discussions in behavioral science center around topics or paradigms with little practical value, while some traditionally ignored research topics are actually of the utmost importance for those working in the public sector.

Relatedly, it is important that BPA researchers seriously consider social welfare when designing and pursuing research projects with practitioner partners. The reality is that academics and practitioners have very different incentives. For a researcher, for example, a costly intervention that proves some relatively small but academically crucial point is a win, but for a practitioner, this might represent an unnecessarily large investment of resources for something of limited social value. In short, we academics need to try our best to act more like the “omniscient planners” we write about, pursuing only those projects for which marginal social benefits exceed marginal social costs. In some cases, that might mean saying no to (academically promising) projects that are not worth the expense in public sector time, money, and personnel.

One way to achieve this would be to collectively invest in a comprehensive database that charts behavioral interventions that have been completed across the public sector and their impacts. While some efforts to build such a database have been made by different organizations, none has taken hold as a go-to source for both academics and practitioners. This is partly because no one truly has an incentive to invest the serious resources needed to make this accessible, concise, and comprehensive. Moreover, the question of how to get policy makers to voluntarily seek out and adopt existing evidence is a behavioral question we have yet to answer.

Another “second-best” approach is to collectively support the transparency and open science standards that have been adopted by other fields. For example, the OES now publishes reports on every single trial it runs, irrespective of the results, in an online searchable database. If all behavioral science units (and academics!) followed suit, it would undoubtedly create a public good with tremendous value and could help alleviate potential inefficiencies in current allocations of funding to BPA projects. Furthermore, it would help bring together lessons learned across domains to prevent duplication of effort across locations or, indeed, to encourage duplication when replication is needed.

Finally, in the next decade of BPA scholarship, we hope to see more women, people of color, and scholars from the global South using these tools and sharing their expertise. It has not passed notice that academic researchers in behavioral science are not demographically similar to either the public sector employees they interact with during academic-practitioner collaborations or the citizenry these employees serve. This is problematic for all the reasons that the public administration literatures on representative bureaucracy and symbolic representation have shown (e.g., Bradbury and Kellough 2011; Riccucci, Van Ryzin, and Jackson 2018). There is a real opportunity here to use BPA’s development to bolster the inclusivity of the academy more generally, by opening up topics of research and avenues for applied research to be recognized. This would fit well, for example, with a growing conversation in the economics profession on whether and how a more applied treatment of economics at the undergraduate level might help that field draw in traditionally underrepresented groups (Matthews 2019).

In short, there are reasons for optimism for BPA going forward, but the promise of BPA cannot be fully realized unless we think seriously about where it has been and where it needs to go. In the same way that even behavioral scientists do not believe that lasting change can come from one-off, small-scale efforts, BPA cannot have the impact it is capable of unless it branches out beyond nudge experiments and expands into alternative methodologies and more macro-level, systemic questions. The good news is that there are large pools of both academic researchers and public sector practitioners with a growing understanding of these realities and a desire to use BPA to improve their communities. It is time for all of us to get to work.

References


