Taking Behavior Literally in BPA

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This symposium is motivated by a simple observation: Despite the prominence of the word "behavior" in the label of our journal, *Journal of Behavioral Public Administration*, and the broader area of research it intends to contribute to (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017), most studies examine attitudes, intentions, or preferences, not the actual behaviors and actions of individuals or groups. This problem is not unique to our field. In a recent review, Banks and colleagues (2021) concluded that less than 5% of studies on organizational behavior, in fact, include behavioral variables. Similar concerns have been highlighted across the social sciences, including psychology (Baumeister, Vohs, and Funder 2007).

Our objective with this symposium is not to provide an authoritative definition of behavior nor to delimit its study to a narrow set of actions. We aim to broaden the scope of what studies on behavior look like and how they are done. To help kick-start this, we consulted experts across our field to provide insights and inspiration on how other fields can help advance behavioral public administration (BPA) research. We draw on a wide diversity of fields, including economics (Banko-Ferran et al.), policy (Howlett and Leong), non-profit (Qu and Mason), and behavioral genetics (Florczak), as well as PA itself (Mohr and Davis). All of these argue that taking behavior literally and seriously is both a theoretical and empirical endeavor. They also call for a wider purview for BPA that focuses not only on the individual but also groups and systems, calling for insights not just from psychology and economics but also sociology, anthropology, and biology. They argue for an expansive view of behavioral research and theory, which our journal embraces.

To develop, test, and refine theory, we must first conceptualize behaviors, including the dimensions and clusters that characterize them. To advance coherent and evaluative frameworks, we need to carefully consider what behaviors can reasonably be expected to be affected (for instance, when bias might impede behavioral change, see Banko-Ferran et al. or Alon-Barkat and Busuioc in this symposium), who is conducting the behaviors (not just individuals, but also groups or systems, see Mohr and Davis as well as Howlett and Leong in this symposium), and what their implications are.

Methodologically, aligning concepts and measures is foundational for rigorous theory testing. Too often, concepts rooted in behaviors (e.g., leadership) are studied using survey reports (from oneself or by others) or using proxies such as intentions (e.g., intention to co-produce public services). Such measures can be valuable in eliciting attitudes or preferences, but they are not measures of behavior. So, how might we expand the study of behavior in public administration?

The collection of articles in this symposium helps pave the way for an answer to this question by showcasing a diverse portfolio of approaches and perspectives. Experiments play a central role in this endeavor. Laboratory experiments are often used in BPA research because they allow researchers to observe the behaviors and decisions of individuals and groups directly. However, the real challenge is often to measure and capture behaviors outside the confines of controlled settings. Field experiments, such as audit studies, which send out stimuli to real respondents, measure real behavior as it happens. In this symposium, Authement, Landgrave, & Weller (2023) nicely demonstrate how to combine studying administrative behavior in response to an experimental stimulus.

Administrative data or data captured in large registries are often not considered "behavioral," like experiments are, and are thus underutilized in BPA. However, they can be an excellent source for studying BPA (see,

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for example, Pedersen et al. 2018), especially when combined with interventions as part of experiments in the field. While these kinds of data can be difficult and costly to access, we would like to encourage more studies that think creatively about using these kinds of data. Other sources for measuring behavior less commonly seen in BPA research are "unobtrusive" measures, such as indirect measures of behaviors through the analysis of speech (e.g., Jensen et al. 2023) or eye gazes (e.g., Lahey & Oxley 2021). Finally, direct observation methods, such as participant observation studies, are underutilized in BPA. Webeck and Armey (2023), in this symposium, offer a nice example of this approach through a case study of strategic planning in the U.S. Department of Defense. This study also showcases the underappreciated role qualitative research can play in advancing behavioral research in public administration, something we hope scholars will work to rectify in the future.

Contributions

The articles in this symposium address these challenges by defining behavioral research within the respective researcher's field, from economics to policy studies to non-profit studies to genetics. These articles explain how insights from their respective field can be incorporated more fully into public administration or provide new insights about how behavioral public administration (BPA) work can be expanded more generally.

We start our discussion of individual articles with a submission from behavioral economics. Banko-Ferran et al. (2023) define the behavioral model as contrasting with the "rational" model that is standard in economics. Behavioral economics takes insights from psychology and focuses on how people's actual behavior differs from what would be predicted by the rational model in systematic ways. People are not methodological information processing optimizers with well-defined permanent preferences who can perfectly forecast and commit if given full information. Instead, they have incomplete mental models and are subject to heuristics and biases. The authors then call for expanding behavioral work beyond nudges and guide us through various examples of specific ways that aspects of behavioral economics can be incorporated into PA, using the specific example of bureaucratic decision-making. They note that while BPA work has focused on citizens as decision-makers subject to biases, bureaucrats are human too and no less susceptible to behavioral biases. They guide us through how incomplete mental models subject bureaucrats to availability and confirmation biases, how present bias and limited attention can provide inaccurate information about revealed preferences, and how status quo bias, social identity, and self-preservation motives can affect behavior. This latter section offers exciting suggestions for new research ideas.

Alon-Barkat and Busuioc, ABB, (2023) touch on similar issues but couch them within what they call one of the "big" questions for public administration research and practice, namely human-AI interaction. The role of artificial intelligence for public service is large, but it also comes with many unanswered questions; all with important implications for theory and practice. ABB propose that these questions fall in two general buckets. First, how do decision-makers rely on AI when making choices about who gets what, when, and how? And what are some of the biases that may render individuals susceptible or reluctant to technology as an input factor in the decision-making process? The second bucket, ABB suggests, should focus on the interaction residents as consumers of public services have with AI. How do algorithms affect the experience with and response to government services when these rely on or explicitly incorporate artificial intelligence? These and other important questions outlined in this article help pave the way for future BPA studies into the promises and pitfalls of human-AI interaction in public service.

Howlett and Leong (2022) bring insights from policy sciences. Like Banko-Ferran et al. (2023), they contrast "behavioral" with "rational," but they go a step further and focus on the idea that rational has traditionally been defined from a utilitarian standpoint, that is, that rational actors are utility maximizers. They argue that this focus on the individual is narrow and does not fully capture either behavior or allow for a full set of behavioral interventions. They argue for the need for more behavioral research on systems, including how cultural and psychological norms affect behavior and support for policies and how policies can affect social preferences.

Mohr and Davis, MD, (2023) expand on this idea that BPA has focused too much on individual-level behavior. They argue that definitions of behavioral administration should not be limited to the "irrational" as with behavioral economics and that even the broader Grimmelikhuijsen et al. (2017) definition of BPA is too focused on the individual. Drawing on an early debate on the nature of public administration between two of its founding fathers, MD argue that we should give more attention to the term "public" when incorporating

the social dynamics of groups into BPA. Group behavior, social behavior, and public processes matter. Their ABCS model of BPA incorporates Behavior and Cognition, as have earlier BPA studies, but also encourages the study of Affect, or feelings, and how they affect behavior, as well as Social Interactions or group behavior. They suggest drawing insights on group processes from anthropology and sociology to understand cultural and societal influences on behavior better. Finally, they call for a larger methodological toolbox (and more funding!) to test behavioral theory.

In contrast, Qu and Mason, QM, (2023) note that standard non-profit management studies already focus on meso- and macro-level organizational and environmental variables. However, behavioral non-profit management (BNPM) allows for a new focus on the individual. Their multidisciplinary discussion of a definition of BNPM, while focusing on individual-level behavior within organizations, also allows these individuals to work collectively. Unlike that of economics, their definition does not rely on contrast to "rational behavior" and includes both psychological and social mechanisms that drive behavior. They provide a literature review of behavioral work published in the leading non-profit journals and briefly discuss the contributions to BNPM outside these journals. While giving and volunteering have been studied extensively, BNPM has more recently been used to study the fundamental questions of NPM– Why do non-profits exist? What drives resource allocation within non-profits? QM also has an extensive list of innovative suggestions for NPM researchers, calling for increased use of causal inference and of real rather than hypothetical behavior. They also call for extending BNPM to the group level, incorporating things we know about collective action, team performance, and team dynamics from other behavioral literatures. While they encourage increased use of experiments in NPM, they also call for more mixed methods, increased replicability, and publication of powered null results.

Incorporating the science of behavioral genetics into BPA is the focus of Florczak (2023). Behavioral genetics (BG) assumes that behavior (including bounded rationality) is a combination of social and biological processes and that individuals are different because of differences in genetics and environment. BG can provide information on the relative importance of genetics and environment and explore gene x environment interactions. This information is important to scholars and practitioners of PA for several reasons. People may be more sympathetic to needy citizens and public service failures if there is a genetic base to negative outcomes. Additionally, with knowledge, resources can be devoted to processes that are changeable and influenced by the environment rather than those that are unchangeable. Finally, BG influences the recruitment and retention of public servants. Florczak provides a summary of BG BPA research thus far and provides suggestions for incorporating more methods to study BPA questions that affect both constituents and public servants themselves.

Our final two articles are research studies that answer our call for studies that take "behavioral" literally. They explore outcomes of real, not hypothetical, behaviors. These two studies illustrate two important points JBPA wishes to make as a journal. First, behavioral research does not have to be experimental research. Second, we welcome strong replication studies and powered null findings within the experimental literature. Many articles, including those in the previous section, call for increased use of non-experimental methods and, more broadly, replicability within BPA and PA. As a journal, we are committed to publishing high-quality efforts on both fronts.

Webeck and Armey (2023) use a case study and participant observation methods to explore how "boundaries" and "boundary objects," exemplified here by the outcomes of strategic planning activities, are used to simplify how individuals and organizations deal with complexity and the problems that arise with this complexity. In this case study, the authors were called in as consultants to help a Department of Defense organization with strategic planning. The organization had five directorates that worked independently and together in complicated ways, leading to "boundary issues," or problems at the boundary. Using strategic planning exercises helped simplify concerns for some, but not all, of these issues, and the authors tie the ease or difficulty of simplification with the complexity of the boundary. This article demonstrates that qualitative and exploratory work can contribute to BPA theory.

Authement, Landgrave, & Weller (2023) conducted an audit study in which they sent out emailed requests for help to public housing agencies and measured response rates and quality of response by the Hispanic status of the hypothetical requester. Their inspiration was a 2017 article by Einstein and Glick (EG) that found no overall effect by ethnicity but found a significant difference in "friendliness." Because EG was underpowered for the ethnicity part of the experiment, the null result could have been due entirely to noise, so Authement et al. greatly increased the sample size. They also made several other improvements to the experimental design

and were able to explore heterogeneities that EG had been unable to do. Even with the larger sample size, the null result across ethnicity holds, and further, ALW do not find any effect on friendliness.

Conclusion

This symposium provides a clear call for expanding behavioral work in public administration. In addition to our main purpose, to encourage behavioral work that studies literal behavior, this symposium has highlighted the need for expansion across additional fronts. In addition to focusing on individual behavior, more work can be done taking insights from group behavior and how systems affect behavior. Laboratory experiments should not be discouraged, but additional methodologies should also be used, including field experiments, quantitative methods using administrative data, unobtrusive measures, and qualitative work to study actual behavior occurring in real settings. *JBPA* looks forward to being part of this exciting new literature.

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