

# Rethinking Group Dynamics in Public Organizations: Starting Point for Behavioral Public Strategy Research

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**Purpose:** The paper aims to explore group dynamics in the management and administration of the selected public organization. Specific interest is given to two fundamental domains of group dynamics: 1) communication processes and interaction patterns; 2) group cohesion and climate.

**Methods:** The approach is based on in-depth interviews with public employees representing various departments of a public organization. A total of 34 subjects participated in this study and provided primary data for coding and finding patterns. Both investigator and data triangulation are used to conceptualize group dynamics in the public organization.

**Results:** Public organizations' employees face hardships in knowledge sharing and tend to misunderstand the agenda between various departments and citizens. The participation of citizens in decision making could be seen as a 'double edged sword' that contributes to the implementation of public projects, but often derails efficient organizational processes. Public organizations struggle with employee turnover, insufficient treatment of employee wellbeing, and unwillingness to pursue personal development.

**Conclusion:** Understanding and further defining the level of group dynamics among public employees is the first step towards adopting innovation approaches. The paper highlights the implications for public organizations with an overview of the behaviors needed for a smooth strategy process in development planning based on organizational forces that leads to a better understanding of group dynamics.

**Keywords:** Behavioral public strategy, Group dynamics, Group cohesion, Organizational communication, Organizational climate, Public organization

## 1 Introduction

In the last decade, the area of behavioral economics has become very popular among scholars. Generally, behavioral economics can be defined as a multidisciplinary field of study, which aims to investigate how people make decisions and judgments (Camerer & Loewenstein, 2004). It builds on the fact that people and institutions often do not behave rationally in their decisions and are affected by social, cognitive, and emotional factors (Kahneman,

2011). We can find its application in many areas, including public policy research (Congdon & Shankar, 2018; Hampton & Adams, 2018). The rise of behavioral economics in public policy is related to Richard Thaler, the 2017 Nobel Laureate in Economics. In the famous book *Nudge*, Thaler and Sunstein (2008) described the benefits of the so-called libertarian paternalism model (nudging people to make better decisions) and specific behavioral interventions from the perspective of the public sector.

One of the current theoretical frameworks that integrates behavioral insights in public policy is behavioral

public strategy. Its area of interest is more specific and narrower from behavioral strategy theory, which ‘merges cognitive and social psychology with strategic management theory and practice’ (Powell et al., 2011; p. 1371). From our perspective, public behavioral strategy is understood as a theoretical concept that belongs to behavioral strategy. However, it is focused solely and uniquely on using behavioral sciences in the public strategy research stream. This concept, first introduced by George (2020), brings together three research streams as behavioral public administration, behavioral public policy, and public strategy. According to the behavioral public strategy, it is important that people (mainly represented by policymakers, managers of departments) involved in the strategic decision making of a municipality are not influenced individually or collectively by various sets of biases and heuristics. Moreover, this strategy underlines that individuals are able to work in diversity teams and do not hesitate to use various tools for mitigating biases. As George (2020) adds, the theoretical focus is on understanding individuals, teams, and tools involved in the strategy processes.

In teams, attention is given to so-called group dynamics within teams of policymakers that influence the quality of strategic decisions made in organizations with democratic leadership towards organizational goals. From a more general point of view, group dynamics is described by Macgowan (2009) as the internal and external forces affecting both processes and results in groups. He primarily refers to communication and interaction, interpersonal attraction and cohesion, social integration (power, influence, control, status), and group development. In this paper, the emphasis is primarily placed on the two domains of group dynamics, comprising communication processes and interaction patterns, together with group cohesion and climate. These elements are considered essential to ensure proper team functioning (Keyton et al., 2010), enhance innovation behavior (Thayer et al., 2018), and achieve organizational growth through public service performance (Friolina et al., 2017).

The rationale for this paper could be summarized in two streams. First, according to Ali et al. (2021), the area of group dynamics is under-researched so far in the literature concerning public sector. This is to some extent evident in the literature concerning the public sector. However, the study by George (2020) highlights the importance of group dynamics in behavioral public strategy research. He addresses specific components or dimensions that should be investigated in a more systematic manner. Hence, this paper follows this gap by emphasizing the fundamental domains of group dynamics, concerning communication processes and interaction patterns, together with group cohesion and climate. We believe these group dynamics are critical for proper management and acceptance of innovation in public organizations.

Additionally, this paper also follows a more general call for exploring human behavior in organizations that is

raised in public administration research (see Wright, 2015), and the level of communication between decision makers (George & Desmidt, 2018). We recognize that the research design for behavioral insights and public sector is overwhelmed by applying experimental methods (Battaglio et al., 2019). According to Bhanot and Linos (2020), there is a need to use nonexperimental methods in behavioral science, including qualitative methodologies, to understand the concerning behaviors. In our case, primary data was collected by interviewing 34 public employees who work in 11 departments involved in strategy processes of public organization. The main aim of the paper was to explore group dynamics with particular interest in domains such as communication processes and interaction patterns, group cohesion, and climate.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section introduces the terms relevant to the research focus; the second section describes the methodology; the third section focuses on the results; the fourth section presents a discussion of the results together with conclusions, limitations, and suggestions for the direction of future research.

## 2 Theoretical framework

In this section of the paper, we initially define the concept of behavioral public strategy and distinguish it from other research streams. Subsequently, we look closer at the area of group dynamics, with emphasis on the two fundamental domains. Finally, we formulate the research gap that we intend to address in our empirical paper.

### 2.1 The rise of Behavioral public strategy

Exploring behavioral insights in relation to decision making within the public sector is a relatively new phenomenon. In this context, two main research streams have emerged in recent years, behavioral public policy and behavioral public administration. Regarding the first, scholars are focusing on studying how to nudge citizens and relevant stakeholders to increase their own benefits and the benefit of society as a whole (Oliver, 2013). In practice, these so-called nudges can be used, e.g., to improve tax compliance (Dolan et al., 2012), sustainable transportation (Kormos et al., 2015), or increase retirement savings (Clark et al., 2014). Considering the second, most of the research includes using various experimental methods (e.g. surveys and field experiments) to explain why people in public administration behave as they do and how cognitive biases can systematically affect their decisions (Battaglio et al., 2019). Currently, George (2020) raised the third research stream on which this article is built and is called the behavioral public strategy.

This concept explicitly focuses on strategic decisions that improve public service performance in public organizations and networks by looking at the microfoundations of public strategies. The microfoundations are represented primarily by individuals (heuristics and psychological characteristics), teams (group dynamics and composition), tools (tangible and intangible strategy tools) and underlying public strategy (George, 2020, p. 3). By this definition, the main differences compared to the two research streams earlier (behavioral public policy, behavioral public administration) are seen in looking at behaviors on two levels (individual, team) with the focus on the policymakers (including managers, board members, politicians) involved in strategic decisions of the public organization (municipalities, local authorities). This concept emphasizes the importance of strategic decisions in public organizations and networks. Decisions in this sense are related to strategy formulation, strategy implementation, or continuous strategic learning (Bryson & George, 2020). It is based on the long-term goals and public values that a given organization wants to achieve in the future. However, as George (2020, p. 3) adds, it distinguishes from traditional public strategy research since due to the aim is to use theory from behavioral science to theorize about and test why specific variations in the individuals, teams and tools involved in public strategy influence strategic decisions and, in turn, public service performance’.

## 2.2 Group dynamics in organizations

As stated above, the public behavioral public strategy attempts to understand the individuals, groups, and tools that underlie the strategies. The emphasis is placed on the area of group dynamics that affects strategic decisions in public organizations. The term group dynamics was first introduced in 1947 by the so-called ‘founder of social psychology’ Kurt Lewin, who described groups as open and complex systems in which internal and external forces affect the behavior of the group. Later, Cartwright and Zander (1968, p. 19) defined group dynamics as ‘a field of inquiry dedicated to advancing knowledge about the nature of groups, the laws of their development, and their interrelations with individuals, other groups, and larger institutions.’ In other words, group dynamics is a system of behaviors and psychological processes occurring within the same group (intragroup dynamics) or between two or more groups (intergroup dynamics).

Current research shows that group dynamics influence various aspects of organizations. For example, Wakefield et al. (2019) claim that group dynamics are integral to stress appraisal (e.g., groups can activate stressors that make us feel unworthy, incapable, and unsupported that negatively affect the level of wellbeing of employees). Furthermore, there are strong relationships between group dynamics and

organizational learning (Pokharel & Choi, 2015) and organizational change, meaning that only ‘working together’ will lead to sustainable innovation and organizational goals. In this regard, Bandura (2000, pp. 75-76) adds that ‘a group’s achievements are the product not only of the shared knowledge and skills of its different members, but also of the interactive, coordination, and synergistic dynamics of their transactions.’ However, empirical studies that explicitly focus on exploring group dynamics in public administration are rather limited. For example, scholars are examining the impact of group dynamics in the context of technology-related changes in local government (Hossain et al., 2013) and virtual team performance in a public organization (Elyousfi, 2021). This paper extends this area of research by exploring the fundamental domains of group dynamics (communication processes and interaction patterns, group cohesion, and climate), which we describe in more detail below.

It is necessary to identify the quality of communication between employees in departments to understand the dynamics of an organization. As Toseland et al. (2004, p. 14) added: ‘communication processes and interaction patterns are fundamental group dynamics. They are the components of social interactions that influence the behavior and attitudes of group members’. Therefore, exploring this essential element of group dynamics is desirable to enhance changes in organizations, including applying behavioral insights that foster strategic decision making. This is also in line with the work of Lewin (1947), who argues that in order to understand group behaviour and to manage change, it is important to identify, plot, and establish the forces that influence change. In its current form, the role of communication is critical considering interaction patterns (Kelvin-Iloafu, 2016). Therefore, communication involves social interactions of exchange of information on the internal and external levels, influencing behavior and attitudes in groups (Zainun & Adnan, 2020) together with their work effectiveness (Michailova & Sidorova, 2011).

As Mitu (2021) argued, communication in public administration is a crucial factor for information flow within the system of administration, where internal (between employees) and external relationships (between departments/organisations/citizens) come into play. Therefore, the group dynamics in communication processes comprises verbal, nonverbal, and virtual interactions between departments and units, along with external relationships within the governance system and citizens. Taking into account the public behavioral strategy, both internal and external communication affect the managerial and operational aspects of interdisciplinary strategic decision making (George, 2020). We assume the quality of internal and external communication processes in the organization is essential to group effectiveness and its dynamics. Therefore, focusing on this domain will provide valuable information and ultimately identify areas for improvement to improve

strategic department decisions.

Furthermore, communication processes can influence how employees stick together in the group, leading to the second fundamental domain of group dynamics relevant to our paper: group cohesion and climate that represent other central concepts in the deeper understanding of group processes and its dynamics (Jones, 2013). Tekleab et al. (2009, p. 174) defined cohesion as ‘the total set of forces keeping group members together’ thus being one of the crucial factors influencing group dynamics and interactions between members over time. As Hargie (2011) argued, groups that have an appropriate level of cohesiveness are characterized by, e.g., having satisfied members who have a high commitment to achieving the purpose/task of the group, are willing to listen to each other, and are more productive. According to Beal et al. (2003), the underlying dimensions of cohesiveness involve interpersonal attraction (sometimes viewed as social cohesion), task commitment (task cohesion), and group pride. In our case, we put the emphasis on task commitment, that is, the degree of ‘motivation towards achieving the organization’s goals and objectives’ (Carless & De Paola, 2000, p. 73). This seems to be a condition to enhance innovation behaviors among employees (Mutonyi et al., 2020b; Van der Voet Steijn, 2021), which fits the concept as a behavioral public strategy.

Next, an important aspect that has a strong connection with cohesion and group dynamics, in general, is climate (Mullins, 2010). The ‘dominant approach’ conceptualizes the climate as employees’ shared perceptions of organizational events, practices, and procedures’ (Patterson et al., 2005, p. 380). For example, this may include opinions and attitudes towards decision making, norms, established rules, and regulations that prevail in the workplace. As research suggests, climate plays a key role in employee wellbeing (Mullins, 2010), overall organizational effectiveness (Zhang & Liu, 2010), or implementing innovation processes (Mutonyi et al., 2020a). However, we refer to the model presented by Patterson et al. (2005) who divided climate into four quadrants covering human relations, internal processes, open systems, and rational goals. In our case, we are particularly interested in the first one, that is based on the norms and values associated with belonging and cohesion. We assume that belonging and cohesion are attained through training and human resource development. In other words, it emphasizes the importance of wellbeing, growth, and commitment among group members in the organization.

According to empirical findings in the given domains, it can be said that employee performance and their willingness to accept new ideas and changes within the organization often correlate with the quality of communication (Zainun et al., 2020; Fu, 2020; Mitu, 2021), group cohesion (Carless & De Paola, 2000; Van der Voet & Steijn, 2021), and climate (Hassan & Rohrbaugh, 2012; Mutonyi et al., 2020a). However, these studies overwhelmingly

analyzed the quality of the internal processes of the investigated issues quantitatively in the given organizations. We assume that the qualitative approach that takes part on the group level will bring deeper understanding and ultimately valuable insights into team functioning including its dynamics, since the interaction between examined subjects comes into play. In this regard, we also follow the call for methodological diversity (Bhanot & Linos, 2020; Powell et al., 2011) to explore behaviors between group members in the concerned organization. Additionally, to our knowledge, the above scholars did not put an exclusive focus on the sample that we intended to investigate, the strategic decision making team, which is represented by the departments in the local government departments that are involved in the regional municipality strategy process.

Finally, if we should go back to the work of George (2020, p. 6), presenting the concept of public behavioral strategy, he claims that ‘group dynamics focus on interactions within a strategic decision making team.’ For instance, aspects such as trust (Klijn et al., 2010) or conflict (Grissom, 2014) are deeply studied. However, from the work by George (2020) emerged the main research gap that we intend to tackle with our paper. From our perspective, there is no clear explanation for which specific components must be assessed to understand group dynamics in a public organization. Currently, as Ali et al. (2021) added, there is little evidence of studying group dynamics in the public sector, despite their growing importance. Thus, we react to this gap by our empirical paper that aims to explore group dynamics in local government. Furthermore, we investigate two fundamental general domains of group dynamics, namely, communication and interaction patterns together with group cohesion and climate.

## 3 Methods

### 3.1 Context

The paper employs a qualitative research method to understand group dynamics in public administration better. The first step was to conduct desk research of available documents dealing with the organizational structures of the public administration office to gain an understanding of the internal and external agenda. We focus primarily on the management of human resources and the environment of the department. Additional documents dealing with resources and motivation were accessed to complement human resources management. This source of information provided an outline for designing interviews as the most used method for data collection in qualitative research studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Concerning the context, we assume the Act no. 129/2000 Coll. (Law on Regions) The Czech Republic is divided into 13 regional municipalities and one capital city Prague. Regional mu-



municipalities of the Czech Republic are higher-level territorial self-governing units of the Czech Republic. Every regional municipality is governed by a regional council and a governor. Elections to regional councils occur every four years. Apart from the capital city of Prague, all 13 regional municipalities have comparable competences in the administration of the territory. There are usually between 350 and 700 employees working in the offices of the regional municipalities. In terms of the reliability of the research sample, it can be assumed that most municipalities are dealing with similar problems with respect to research on their group dynamics.

### 3.2 Data collection

The interviews were designed to explore group dynamics in a detailed and holistic approach, in which the respondents could share their experience, attitudes and opinions. They were conducted in all departments, where two to five employees (depending on the overall number) and the director were interviewed to address group dynamics (Hartley et al., 2015). The rationale behind this composition was to address differences in perception of organizational and managerial experience at regional levels (Scott et al., 2018). The interviews were designed around two fundamental domains of group dynamics, communication processes, and interaction patterns together with group cohesion and climate. In the first dimension, the level of internal and external communication processes was thoroughly investigated. The subsection devoted to internal communication was intended to inquire about challenges and pitfalls concerning the communication of employees with management (vice-versa) as part of intragroup dynamics.

On the contrary, the subsection devoted to external communication was directed to reflect on engagement with citizens, the interaction with other departments, and other public institutions as a part of intergroup dynamics. In the second domain, the questions covered issues related to group cohesion and climate in the organization, division of competences and work roles among department members, relationships in the workplace, and the level of welfare in the departments. The basic structure of the interviews is attached to the empirical study in Appendix I. However, due to the interaction between employees during the interviews, other issues related to the group dynamics are raised that are presented in the results section of the paper. Furthermore, respondents could share their views on challenges in the respective department, along with the main agenda and its behavioral problems. The primary data collected during the interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure that no information was missing for subsequent qualitative analysis.

### 3.3 Sample

Respondents were asked to participate in an hour-long session to discuss the above-mentioned topics. The sample consists of 11 departments and 34 participants who are involved in the strategic decision making teams of the regional office (see Table 1 for sample characteristics). Furthermore, all departments participated in interviews to address a variety of behavioral problems related to group dynamics in public administration. The sample was divided into groups to avoid bias towards one type of outcome with a greater diversity of sample respondents. Concerning demographics, respondents in the sample were between 34 and 59 years of age. The respondents were contacted by email to organize face-to-face meetings. More precisely, we contacted the heads of each department to schedule a meeting for interview purposes that occurred at the regional office during January-March 2021. In this case, it was easier to reach the respondents since the research team signed a memorandum of cooperation with representatives of the concerned regional office to participate in the project in which these interviews were conducted.

### 3.4 Data analysis

The first step of qualitative analysis was to proceed with deductive coding to cover and describe the data using theoretical input (Hartley et al., 2015). This step was supplemented by a pilot test on the first portion of the data to assess their possibilities and to remain open to determine codes to produce a substantive analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data analysis is based on investigator triangulation to conduct qualitative analysis from multiple perspectives. Different angles and more moderators in the analysis were involved to overcome personal biases and support the validity of qualitative research. The paper is based on qualitative analysis to conceptualize group dynamics. Subsequently, we move from pilot testing to the analytical pathway to grasp the specificity and complexity of organisational behaviour focused on challenges and dynamics.

The second step was devoted to the interpretation of codes to study the meaning that respondents attribute to their experience, attitudes, and opinions. This step relates to the validation to test the initial results concerning codes and groups of respondents. Furthermore, the aim was to find how codes and categories relate to each other in the sense of patterns regarding refutation and use of comprehensive data for constant testing and comparison. Concerning data triangulation, we developed a frequency distribution of codes in the codebook (see Appendix II) to reflect on the occurrences for each category of the data and to increase the validity of the results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We applied open coding as a first step in the coding

of qualitative data to develop new theoretical prospects by engaging with the data with investigator triangularity. The rationale behind open coding was to allow the authors to compare occurrences in the data continuously.

In the next step, we applied the axial coding to make use of the connections that emerged from open coding. Reading codes repeatedly and grouping them into categories allowed us to create more abstract categories that reflect one or more codes. Thus, the step focused on exploring the occurrence around the central theory of behavioral public

strategy. Axial coding was concluded by refining the codes of the subgroups that include different codes to the final categories. These categories describe the phenomenon of group dynamics in public organizations. As a final step, we calculated Cohen's Kappa statistics to assess intercoder agreement (see Table 2). Cohen's Kappa was selected to address the relative observed agreement between the raters and the hypothetical probability of chance agreement with substantial agreement in the sensitivity codes reaching the value of 0.729 and 85.7% (Warrens, 2015).

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Group number	Name of the department	Structure of the department	Gender of participants
Group No. 1	Culture and preservation of monuments	Culture, Preservation of cultural heritage	3 females
Group No. 2	Director's office	Management, IT, HRM	4 males
Group No. 3	Finance	Asset management, Controlling, Accounting, Budgeting	3 females, 1 male
Group No. 4	Education, youth and sport	Human resources development, Organisation administration, Education funding and budgeting	1 female, 2 males
Group No. 5	Environment and agriculture	Envi risk assessment, Nature conservation, Environmental protection and energy, Water management, Agriculture	2 females, 2 males
Group No. 6	Healthcare	Administration of healthcare, Management and development	1 female, 2 males
Group No. 7	Investment	Investment planning, Asset management, Public procurement	1 female, 3 males
Group No. 8	Legal	Legislation and law, Citizenship and Misdemeanours, Regional trade licensing	2 females
Group No. 9	Social	Social and legal affairs, Social services, Planning and development	3 females
Group No. 10	Spatial planning	Urban planning, Building regulation	2 females
Group No. 11	Transport and road management	Transport and administrative agencies, Public transport, Road management	1 female, 1 male

Table 2: Intercoder agreement with Cohen's Kappa statistic

Symmetric Measures					
		Value	Asymptotic Standardized Error <sup>a</sup>	Approximate T <sup>b</sup>	Approximate Significance
Measure of Agreement	Kappa	,729	,061	8,923	,000
N of Valid Cases		95			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Source: own elaboration

## 4 Results

The findings indicated several behavioral issues that can help better understand the group dynamics in the departments explored. Firstly, we look at specific group behaviors and characteristics related to the domain of group cohesion and climate. Second, the thematic area involving communication processes and interaction patterns in departments is examined. The main findings are summarized in Figure 1.

### 4.1 Group cohesion and climate

In our case, this domain of group dynamics included three key categories of codes that are further described below. Regarding commitment in departments, the most alarming issues are related to employee turnover, including its causes and quality of work. The main codes describing welfare in departments cover sources of workplace stress, insufficient treatment of workplace stress, and employee wellbeing. With respect to training in departments, significant codes include insufficient skills of new

employees and negative attitudes towards new methods, including personal development. Finally, let us mention that after discussion with the research team we decided to exclude one category of codes (titled process issues including working conditions) from the results presented in this research paper. The rationale behind this decision was rather low linkage to group dynamics domains that included characteristics of identified individual codes among this category. More importantly, they were overwhelmingly related to the specific internal processes and procedures applied in each of the studied departments (e.g., complaints about intranet, unified data storage of information, or confusing and unnecessarily complex internal services).

#### 4.1.1 Commitment in departments

The first defined category represents the degree of motivation towards achieving the organizational goals and objectives. We perceive it as a commitment in the departments. In these terms, we found that most of the studied departments struggle with high employee turnover (fluctuation). This indicates that the closeness of some depart-

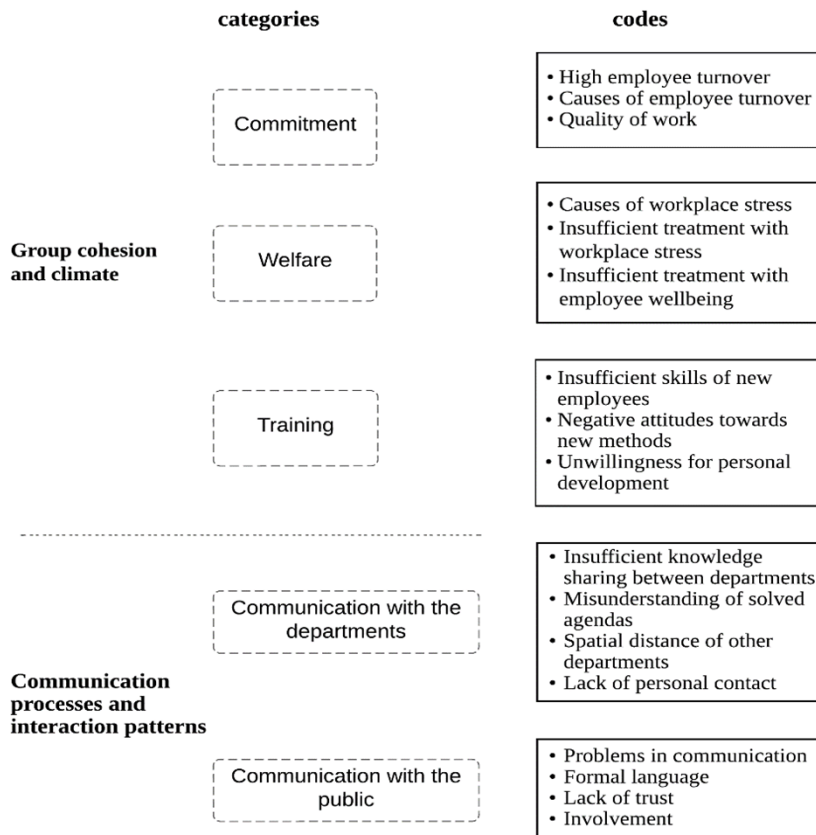


Figure 1: Conceptualization of group dynamics, Source: own elaboration

ment members does not excel. Specifically, such concerns were raised in six groups. According to G2, 'the turnover of the office staff is sometimes up to around 20%.' In this regard, other departments interviewed added that 'the problem is recruiting itself and then keeping newcomers' (G9), which can further lead to 'a loss of established work procedures' (G3). These frequently occurring changes in departments can harm the dynamics of its members and further slow the implementation of innovation approaches. G6 concluded that 'there have been significant changes in staff. The department has been stable for a long time, but then opportunities have opened up elsewhere and people started to look for better jobs.' This brings us to the second code fragment in this category, causes of employee turnover. One of the reasons for the high turnover within the office, as evidenced by the respondents' answers, may be related to the salary conditions in the public sector. For instance, respondents in G3 claimed 'a nonmotivational salary often means that many inexperienced graduates enter the regional office and then go elsewhere.'

Members of G3 added that 'low salaries don't attract and keep college students...' and continued 'we live in a time when there are more job offers and people don't have to try to work hard because they can go elsewhere where work is less bound by the rules.' Moreover, it is obvious that working in the regional office is not for everyone, as the work procedures and conditions are often different from those of private organizations. This is confirmed by other findings from the interviews, e.g., following quote (G9): 'I also perceive the problem in the cumbersome process of public administration and the office cannot keep capable people because such bureaucracy often discourages them.' Finally, in some groups, we indicated concerns related to the contribution and work quality of the younger generation. This is illustrated by the following statements: 'younger employees in particular are less inclined to work overtime' (G6) or 'we are scared that stable employees with a unique qualification will leave and the younger generation will not be able to do such work from our perspective' (G10) and 'the standard of work is declining a bit, the personal responsibility and consistency of younger colleagues are also lacking' (G4). On the groups other hand, two of the interviewed (G1, G7) specifically said that they have no issues with either fluctuation or the quality of work provided by the group members. Even so above-mentioned facts show that due to various reasons, members of these departments are not very consistent and committed to the work agenda.

#### 4.1.2 Welfare in departments

The second category is related to employee welfare, the extent to which the organization values and cares for employees. From the interviews, we observed that work-

ing as a public servant can be seen as a stressful profession. In this sense, making important group decisions that are not related to the strategy processes could be affected by the stress factor. Therefore, it is important to provide active support to mitigate this element. By the analysis, we define the main code in this regard, sources of workplace stress. These are mainly related to the work duties, as the respondents in G9 suggested that 'the stress in the department is obvious because deadlines are really tight and need to be met, especially at certain stages of the year.'

Furthermore, the factor that includes citizens is also strong in this case. This is demonstrated by these statements in the interviews with G6 and G11: 'the psychological pressure on the department's members is especially evident with acting to clients (citizens) who complain to us, so our public officials must be sufficiently armored,' and 'colleagues feel stressed by pressure from the public and others.' Next, some departments raised complaints about a large number of overtime hours: 'most department members have overtime hours, severely disrupts their wellbeing and work-life balance (G9).'

However, it seems that these facts are not well reflected in regional management, for example, by integrating a specific system or treatment for stress management. This is evidenced not only by our observations but also by the responses gathered via interviews (G9): 'Stress is not considered by management to be a factor worthy of special reward or other benefit.' Moreover, respondents in G1 added: 'we would appreciate the opportunity to go out of office for two days, for example, in order to strengthen relations between individual members of the department and get to know each other better outside the workplace.' The respondents were rather cautious with their words on this topic. Lastly, we did not determine any specific measures that would be used to determine the satisfaction level of department members (for example, regular one-on-one meetings, surveys, suggestion box, etc.). We add that the lack of such tools and activities to foster the welfare of employees can, in practice, lead to increasing conflicts in the departments and ultimately damage the group dynamics. From the gathered findings, we conclude that the public organization has shortcomings in the level of care for its members.

#### 4.1.3 Training in the departments

The third identified category is described as a concern for the development of employee skills. Regarding group members, it is important that they have the appropriate skills and are willing to work on their self-development. This provides additional background to foster interactions within strategic decision making teams. In these terms, the interviews revealed that department members widely complained about the skills and expertise of new employees in



the regional office. For instance, this is documented by G5: 'Working in a department requires long-term experience, when a graduate who could potentially carry out an activity comes, he lacks experience.' Furthermore, respondents in G3 and G9 added that 'new people lack expertise' and 'most positions need someone who already has work experience, and people right after school often lack this.' The attitudes towards new methods and personal development are then defined as one of the decisive factors.

The results suggest that employees must be open-minded to implement innovative approaches and concepts within the behavioral public strategy. This is often an issue in practice, for the reason that work processes within public administration are often obsolete and slow. Employees habitually stay in their status quo. Currently, some of the departments interviewed lack this sense, as G8 claimed: 'we would like to change people's attitudes towards introducing new methods, currently a negative setting prevails here instead of focusing on finding a solution.' This information was also confirmed by the HR department (G2) who concluded that 'employees do not work appropriately with some new tools within the office (e.g., the file service) - they see it as a necessary evil rather than a potential for simplification...' and continued 'we also record a very low interest in participating in training focused on soft skills – the objection is that it is time consuming. Our vision is that employees themselves will show an interest in developing skills and relationships within departments.' Finally, it can be said that members of the studied groups do not have much motivation to work on themselves and constantly develop their knowledge of current trends.

## 4.2 Communication processes and interaction patterns

Communication processes and interaction were identified as a second domain of group dynamics that contains two key categories of codes described in more detail within this section. The most pressing issue in the case of communication between departments is reflected in the lack of sufficient knowledge sharing and limiting the group dynamics of the knowledge flow between employees. Efficient knowledge flow is important, especially for newcomers, as most departments struggle with higher employee turnover. Additionally, the results suggest that this issue could also contribute to misunderstanding the agenda of other departments (losing track of the competencies). Taking into account communication with citizens, significant codes include the participation of the public in decision making processes and the misunderstanding of competences, which affect group dynamics related to communication processes.

### 4.2.1 Communication with departments

The first category reflects the communication patterns in an organization that are essential to support strategic decision making and smart governance with different perspectives/expertise – we perceive it as a communication with the departments. In this case, the results suggest that most departments are facing the challenge of efficient knowledge sharing. This indicates that departments do not actively participate in the flow of knowledge that would support strategic decision making considering the variety of expertise and tacit knowledge. According to the G7, we highlight 'Knowledge sharing is not working in the organization, we are struggling with that because the agenda is voluminous and the number of projects is increasing.' This concern was voiced by seven groups. Knowledge sharing could be considered a key in terms of dynamics, especially in the case of passing knowledge in an inter-department manner. The results indicate that intra-department knowledge sharing is considered as a vital part of communication within the department through meetings and workshops concerning interaction patterns. However, knowledge sharing requires open-minded leadership that encourages participation among employees.

According to G12, 'There are weak links between the head of department and the employees, resulting in interaction with each individually.' We perceive it as an issue concerning the importance of personal contact and communication with the departments and their heads. Additionally, this issue often contributes to the second code fragment in this category, misunderstanding of solved agendas from other departments. According to G5 'Others treat us as a service, they don't look at us the same way as other departments. Unlike others, we cannot go out for two days for social activities like team building. The office cannot function without us.' The results suggest that misunderstandings like these could affect the quality of internal communication, which becomes bureaucratic and burdensome. This alarming issue might create a certain tension and misinformation flow through departments and put self-interest above the organisational goal concerning strategic decision making. The tension could be increasing with the spatial distance of departments that are often located in different premises, which we believe derail mutual interaction. This is reinforced by other findings of the interviews, e.g. the quote 'Fairly important departments on our agenda are located in different buildings and it is always a problem to cooperate.' We assume that spatial distance and lack of personal contact could add up to the barriers of communication processes and prevent sustainable interaction patterns.

#### 4.2.2 Communication with the public

The second category concerning communication processes and interaction patterns is a communication with the public, the extent to which the organization communicates, and includes citizens in decision making. Concerning this category, we defined the main code, problems in communication with the public. According to G9, 'We often receive negative feedback on the incomprehensibility of communication to the public, but we must follow the official procedure.' This issue might be related to a previously defined misunderstanding of competence, which makes it difficult to communicate with the public in an efficient way, e.g., preventing complaints. Additionally, G10 added 'Sometimes we have to deal with requests completely irrelevant to our agenda. Finding new forms of communication and compromise with citizens in such situations would greatly help. 'These issues can affect the dynamics between the organization and citizens, leading to a lack of trust and motivation to interact. However, the local government must follow laws and regulations that prevent the development of a specific communication framework. This leads to another main code in this regard, the formal language of communication.

Four groups interviewed emphasized that they are blamed for the formal language of communication, which is often not understood by citizens. The formal language and misunderstandings often result in ignoring/not paying attention to legislation among citizens. This affects dynamics in a negative way as citizens take a passive role, and it undermines mutual trust. Another issue concerning the communication with the public implied by the respondents is that not all formal objections and complaints could be addressed 100%. According to G7, 'The public reacts to some of our activities with distrust and formal objections to our services'. We assume that this puts the organization in a difficult position to maintain efficient communication processes with the public concerning negative interaction patterns, mainly complaints, even though the organization is taking care of the agenda in a systematic manner. Finally, in some groups we indicated aspects related to the involvement of the public in decision making process regarding too much input often cripples the whole process. The issue of crippling processes occurs due to numerous stages of decision making when the public can intervene and cause re-evaluation of the process repeatedly (e.g., land use).

On the other hand, respondents emphasized that public participation in decision making regarding strategies and projects is beneficial and systematic for multilevel governance. Citizen participation in the development and implementation of public projects was identified as a crucial aspect of the interaction patterns between the local government and the public. This interaction is built on com-

munication processes that require interactive communication platforms to gather intelligence for strategic decision making.

### 5 Discussion and concluding remarks

The purpose of this paper was to explore group dynamics in the local government. We investigated two fundamental domains of group dynamics, including communication processes and interaction patterns, together with group cohesion and climate. A deeper understanding of these domains is crucial to foster interactions within a strategic decision making team and to advance the application of innovation methods, including public behavioral strategy. This is supported by findings from other scholars who suggest that the quality of internal and external communication processes (Zainun et al., 2020; Fu, 2020; Mitu, 2021), group cohesion (Van der Voet & Steijn, 2021) and climate (Hassan & Rohrbaugh, 2012; Mutonyi et al., 2020a). These processes are key to accepting changes and developing innovation behaviors within the organization. To address the defined research goal, we chose the qualitative approach in order to gain a deeper understanding of the given issues and follow the methodological diversity (Bhanot & Linos, 2020; Powell et al., 2011).

This paper addresses the knowledge gap mentioned by Ali et al. (2021), who noted a lack of research on the area of group dynamics in the public sector. Based on interviews with variety of groups, we define five categories that have the potential to significantly influence group dynamics and ultimately the public behavioral public strategy of the entire organization. As for domain group cohesion and climate, the codes were related to categories involving commitment, welfare, and training in departments. In this sense, the interviewed groups are mainly struggling with high employee turnover, inadequate treatment of workplace stress, including employee wellbeing, and unwillingness towards personal development. It should be noted that the implementation of changes is smoother when group members stick together and are committed to organizational goals (Mutonyi et al., 2020b; Van der Voet & Steijn, 2021). Furthermore, changes are easier to implement when group members are satisfied in their work environment (Chen et al., 2016; Thayer et al., 2018).

The domain communication processes and interaction patterns emphasizes communication with departments, and communication with the citizens. This domain includes critical codes such as insufficient knowledge sharing, misunderstanding agenda, lack of participation, mutual trust, lack of contact, and spatial distance. In the case of interaction patterns, we identified involvement and trust are seen as a 'double-edged sword' that provides both pros in project planning and implementation. In contrast, the

participation of multiple stakeholders can disrupt decision making processes (formal complaints and objections). Importantly, long-term ignorance of communication processes can negatively influence behavior in groups (Zainun & Adnan, 2020). Ignoring the quality of communication often spoils work effectiveness (Michailova & Sidorova, 2011) and ultimately adversely affects strategic decision making in the organization.

In terms of theoretical implications, our paper extends the work by George (2020) related to behavioral public strategy research. Previous work did not clarify in detail what dimensions should be prioritized when approaching the phenomenon of group dynamics in a public organization. Thus, we fill this gap with our empirical paper. We claim that exploring group dynamics in a public organization environment should focus on studying its fundamental domains, including communication processes, group cohesion, and climate. Moreover, we suggest that specific attention within the explored domains of group dynamics to the listed issues that we identified through interviews with public employees involved in strategic decision making teams.

Regarding the implications for practice in human resource management, the results shed light on organizational forces together with weak points in group dynamics concerning communication, cohesion, and climate. In practice, our findings mainly suggest that there is a need to improve the level of commitment, motivation in personal development, interactions between departments/citizens, and general care for employees. Specifically, these findings are very beneficial to the human resources department of a given regional municipality and could be considered in development and strategy plans. If the public organization wants to move forward applying behavioral insights in strategic decision making processes, the presented findings should be reflected by relevant stakeholders in multilevel governance (local/regional/national organizations and their links).

The findings are limited to public organisations at the local level. Nevertheless, the topic of group dynamics is rather under the radar among public administration research streams and therefore requires increased attention from investigators. Furthermore, the empirical paper presents the findings that cover a public organization in a single geographical area. The results presented cannot be used to generalize to all public organizations. However, as Stake (1995, p. 85) adds, 'people can learn much that is general from a single case'. Another limitation could be seen in the methodology adopted. The interviews were conducted on a group level and not individual, which could generate other behavioral problems among the departments examined. However, given the main thematic focus, it was a necessary step to achieve the goal we developed.

This paper presents the first but crucial step to explore group dynamics in public organizations as one of the key

microfoundations underlying behavioral public strategy. Further research should focus on examining the remaining aspects that underline behavioral public strategies, namely individuals (uncovering heuristics and psychological characteristics of policymakers involved in strategic decision making). That also includes examining tools in terms of their influence on behavior change with measuring the impact of tangible and intangible strategy tools on mitigating cognitive biases. Additionally, the gathered insights could be further analysed and studied for their causes (e.g., what psychological factors are behind behavior, how it affects organizational decisions). That could be tackled by field experiments, including identified behaviors in the organization to achieve a desirable behavioral change (e.g., increase the level of knowledge sharing, welfare, or propensity to self-development).

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## Appendix 1: Interview protocol

### *Basic design of the semi-structured interview deployed in the study – interview protocol*

#### **1) Group cohesion and climate**

- Can you introduce the main competences of your department?
- Can you briefly tell us about your role and your role with this group (department)/ function in it?
- Do you consider the current functioning of your department and division of tasks to be ideal?
- What do you consider to be the biggest problems and challenges in implementing your department's agenda?
- How would you describe relationships between the members in your department?
- What is the fluctuation in your department? What do you think its causes are?
- Are there any specific activities that influence the satisfaction of the group members? How do you take care of group members well-being?
- Is there any specific tool to measure or evaluate satisfaction in your department?

#### **2) Communication processes and interaction patterns**

- How is the communication between the group members (employees of your department)
- How would you describe the quality of communication processes in your department and with other departments involved in strategy processes?
- Which positive/negative factors you see when interacting with group members?
- Do you use any communication tool / software in your department?
- Do you hold regular meetings? What is the time range of the meeting? Are meetings meaningful, will they fulfill their purpose?
- Is there any communication with external subjects (citizens, organizations) at your department? How does your department communicate with the public / with citizens? How do you communicate the results of your work externally? Do you deal with complaints from citizens? If so, what they concern?

## Appendix 2: Codebook

Explored domain of group dynamics in the departments	Description	Category of codes	Description	Individual codes included in the category	Frequencies (the number of statements included in the category)
Group cohesion and climate	Cohesion refers to the closeness of the group and the quality of the relationship between group members. Climate is defined as the employee's perception of organizational features, like decision making, norms and established rules including working conditions.	Commitment	The extent of motivation towards achieving the organization's goals and objectives.	High employee turnover	17
				Causes of employee turnover	
				Quality of work	
		Welfare	The extent to which the organization values and cares for employees.	Causes of workplace stress	15
				Insufficient treatment with workplace stress	
				Insufficient treatment with employee wellbeing	
		Training	A concern with developing employee skills.	Insufficient skills of new employees	14
				Negative attitudes towards new methods	
				Unwillingness towards personal development	
Communication processes and interaction patterns	Social interactions of exchanging information in internal and external levels.	Communication with the departments	Interactions between departments in the regional office.	Insufficient knowledge sharing between departments	24
				Misunderstanding of solved agendas	
				Spatial distance of other departments	
				Lack of personal contact	
		Communication with the public	Interactions between department and citizens.	Problems in communication	17
				Formal language	
				Lack of trust	
				Involvement	