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## Assumptions about behaviour influence the policy preferences of public officials

Malte Dewies<sup>a</sup>, Lee de-Wit<sup>b</sup> and Lucia A. Reisch<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>El-Erian Institute of Behavioural Economics and Policy, Cambridge Judge Business School, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK; <sup>b</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Cambridge, Downing Pl, Cambridge, UK

### ABSTRACT

Public officials often aim to change people's behaviour to achieve policy goals. Policy design and behavioural perspectives suggest that individual factors such as officials' assumptions about behaviour — or implicit theories — can influence officials' policy choices. This pre-registered survey study examines how assumptions about cooperation, behavioural malleability, and self-control influence policy preferences among 1,015 public officials in the Netherlands. Results show that officials who believe in high levels of cooperative behaviour and behavioural malleability support more government intervention, while assumptions about self-control have no significant effect. Additionally, a quasi-experiment with an information-based intervention led officials to update their assumptions towards greater accuracy.

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Human behaviour is central to many policy challenges, including climate change (Creutzig et al. 2022) and progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2023). Increasingly, scholarship in public policy and administration acknowledges the importance of behavioural factors in shaping policy outcomes and influencing administrative practices (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017; Hallsworth 2023). The behavioural perspective posits that more effective policies and administration can be achieved by first understanding how people, including public officials, are likely to behave and then adapting government actions accordingly (Einfeld 2019; Halpern and Mason 2015; Kasdan 2019; Leong and Howlett 2021).

**CONTACT** Malte Dewies  [m.dewies@jbs.cam.ac.uk](mailto:m.dewies@jbs.cam.ac.uk)

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This approach is closely tied to a commitment to experimentation, where interventions are piloted and behavioural responses are studied before full-scale implementation (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017; Kasdan 2019). In contrast, traditional approaches have often assumed that individuals respond rationally to policy tools, frequently implemented without prior testing (Jones 2003, 2017).

Governments around the world have increasingly recognised the value of behavioural insights (Straßheim 2020). The United Kingdom (UK) and the United States were early adopters, establishing dedicated behavioural science units within their administrations – the Behavioural Insights Team within the UK cabinet (Halpern and Mason 2015a) and the White House Social and Behavioral Sciences Team (Congdon and Shankar 2015). These units, often employing a small number of members, use analytic, step-wise procedures to test behavioural interventions and develop policy advice (Mukherjee and Giest 2020). Their success spurred similar efforts globally, including by the United Nations, World Bank, and OECD. Today, hundreds of public organisations apply behavioural science to improve policy (Naru 2024). Evidence suggests that behavioural units can significantly improve an organisation's capacity to influence behaviour (Benartzi et al. 2017; DellaVigna and Linos 2022; Dewies et al. 2022).

Despite these advances, behavioural considerations often remain under-utilised in everyday decision-making by public officials (Olejniczak, Śliwowski, and Leeuw 2020). Many decisions in policy design are made without deliberate efforts to uncover and deliberate the behavioural dynamics underlying policy tools and people's likely responses to interventions (Kuehnhanss 2019). Research suggests that public officials instead rely on implicit assumptions to make sense of human behaviour, which in turn can shape their policy preferences. For example, officials who viewed behaviour as difficult to change were more supportive of government intervention to slow down the spread of COVID-19 during the pandemic (Dewies et al. 2022).

Assumptions about human behaviour influence how public officials engage with policy discourse (Feitsma and Whitehead 2022; Hall, Galvez, and Sederbaum 2014). A well-documented example is poverty: when poverty is attributed to internal and controllable factors support for redistributive policies tends to be lower than when poverty is seen as the result of contextual factors (e.g. Krijnen et al., 2022; Piff et al. 2020). This study investigates the research question how three general assumptions about human behaviour – cooperation, behavioural malleability, and self-control – affect policy preferences. To explore this, we conducted a survey among public officials (e.g. policy advisors, programme designers) across the Dutch public sector (national government, local government, judiciary, etc.). In recent years, behavioural assumptions held by public officials have received

growing attention in Dutch policymaking (Blijleven et al. 2023), making this population particularly relevant for our study. Notably, the Dutch government has introduced a mandatory behavioural audit during policy development to assess whether proposed policies are grounded in realistic assumptions about human behaviour (see Keizer, Tiemeijer, and Bovens 2019).

## Theoretical background

We contextualise this study in the policy design and social construction literature, drawing on empirical findings on implicit theories. More than three decades ago, Linder and Peters (1989), famously argued that individual perceptions held by public officials significantly influence their policy design choices. This marked a shift away from the view that national policy styles, organisational settings, or problem characteristics determine tool choices. A recent survey revisiting Linder's and Peters' argument among Czech ministerial and regional officials yielded inconclusive results, however. While factors such as education and organisational setting had limited or no influence on tool preferences, demographic variables like age and sex did show some effect. Notably, officials did not differentiate between specific tools but rather exhibited a general preference across all tools, with support for different instruments being positively correlated (Veselý and Petrúšek 2021). This pattern suggests the presence of an underlying orientation towards government intervention (see also Dewies et al. 2022). The inconclusive and limited findings indicate a knowledge gap regarding what drives public officials' preferences for policy tools. Indeed, Capano and Howlett (2020), in a recent review of the policy tool literature, identify behavioural factors as one of the most significant unknowns in explaining policy design.

Building on the central claim of behavioural public policy, namely that realistic assumptions about human behaviour are essential for designing effective interventions, we argue that the behavioural assumptions held by public officials are highly relevant to public administration (Howlett 2018). These assumptions shape how officials interpret societal problems and, consequently, how they choose to intervene (Kasdan 2019). In line with this, we propose that individual public officials hold assumptions about behaviour that can be conceptualised as implicit theories. Implicit theories are a psychological concept to describe mental models that frame people's perceptions of the world (Surel 2000) and help them explain 'how the world works' (Rodrik 2014). Unlike systematic inquiry or expert consensus, implicit theories are based on personal experiences and common-sense, which is why they are also called 'lay theories' (Furnham 1988). Despite their implicit nature, people can articulate implicit theories when being asked (Plaks 2017; Wegener and Petty 1998).

Implicit theories are likely shaped by how public officials perceive the target populations they serve (Neel and Lassetter 2015; Schroeder, Waytz, and Epley 2017). It is well established that public officials develop and maintain representations of different target groups, often constructed from the bottom up through personal experience, peer learning, and organisational settings (Zacka 2017). Such constructions help officials distinguish between different types of targets and respond accordingly. Recent research identifies six distinct prototypes of citizens that public officials implicitly rely on in their work (Vogel et al. 2024). Social construction theory argues that officials tend to respond more favourably to groups perceived as deserving and powerful, while showing less responsiveness to those viewed as undeserving and powerless (Kreitzer and Smith 2018; Pierce et al. 2014; Schneider and Ingram 1993). One of the key promises of behavioural public policy and administration, as noted by Howlett (2018), lies in its ability to recalibrate the construction of policy targets to be less reliant on utility-maximising individuals for a better selection and design of policy tools.

Little is known, however, about which behavioural dimensions are relevant in the process of social construction and forming policy preferences. To address this gap, we investigate the influence of three behavioural dimensions particularly relevant for public policy and administration, namely people's tendency to cooperate, the changeability of behaviour, and people's satisfaction with their self-control. In doing so, we shift the focus of behavioural public administration and policy research. Rather than concentrating on deliberate efforts to study and influence behaviour through behavioural experts, we broaden the scope of behavioural public policy and administration to include how behavioural assumptions are implicitly embedded in everyday policymaking. In doing so, we control for other known influences such as public officials' demographic characteristics and political orientation (Kahan and Braman 2006).

### ***Implicit theories on cooperative behaviour***

Cooperation is a fundamental dimension of societal functioning. Many policy interventions directly aim either to promote cooperative behaviour (e.g. compliance with public health guidelines) or to discourage uncooperative behaviour (e.g. tax evasion). Public officials may vary in the extent to which they believe target populations are inclined to act honestly and cooperatively towards one another. Thus, implicit theories on cooperative behaviour refer to people's confidence in the integrity and cooperation of others (see Robinson 1996).

The direction of the effect of such implicit theories on public officials' preference for government intervention is not obvious, however. Viewing people as low in cooperative behaviour might lead public officials to favour

more government intervention to increase compliance with rules and regulations, such as enhanced monitoring, sanctions, and enforcement (Reed 2001). Similarly, viewing people as high in cooperative behaviour might lead to a preference for less intervention, as people are more willing to cooperate with the government ex ante and voluntarily. This perspective, rooted in deterrence theory (Pratt et al. 2008), suggests a negative effect of implicit theories regarding cooperative behaviour on the preference for government intervention.

Conversely, there might also be a positive effect of implicit theories regarding cooperative behaviour on the preference for government intervention. Viewing people as high in cooperative behaviour might lead public officials to favour more government intervention because officials anticipate reciprocity and positive responses; whereas assuming low cooperative behaviour might suggest a pessimistic view, including uncooperative and potentially destructive responses to government intervention. This perspective is mirrored in social capital theory (e.g. Putnam, Leonardi, and Nonetti 1994), arguing that cooperative behaviour is a crucial element for encouraging participation, interest in the common good, and the building of communities and institutions. This perspective also aligns with social construction theory (Schneider and Ingram 1993), which suggests that the more a target group is perceived as cooperative, the more it is seen as deserving, making it a safer choice for policymakers to support and more likely to receive policy benefits. Based on a pilot study that preceded our main survey, we hypothesise that we will find more support for the latter perspective, implying a positive effect of implicit theories regarding cooperative behaviour on public officials' preference for government intervention.

### ***Implicit theories on the malleability of behaviour***

Perceptions of malleability have a long history in implicit theory research, mostly related to beliefs about one's own personal characteristics (Burnette et al. 2013; Dweck and Yeager 2019). Recent research (Dewies et al. 2022) shows that public officials also hold implicit theories about the malleability of behaviour shown by others. Some officials believe that behaviour can be shaped through effort and targeted interventions, whereas others view it as relatively fixed and resistant to change. Such implicit theories directly link to the expected effectiveness of government interventions in changing behaviour, with low malleability limiting and high malleability enabling the success of government interventions (Neel and Lassetter 2015). In fact, policy design literature concludes that a frequent underlying dimension shaping support for interventions is their perceived effectiveness (Capano and Lippi 2017).

However, the impact of implicit theories regarding the malleability of behaviour on a public official's preference for government interventions is not straightforward. Viewing behaviour as rather fixed might lead public officials to prefer more government intervention to change stubborn behaviour (Dewies et al. 2022). This perspective suggests a negative effect of implicit theories regarding the malleability of behaviour on preferences for government intervention.

Alternatively, viewing behaviour as fixed might lead public officials to expect lower effectiveness from government intervention. As a result, they might avoid supporting interventions they do not believe will be successful (Capano and Lippi 2017). This aligns with previous research showing more support for interventions aimed at malleable targets (Anisman-Razin and Levontin 2020; Lassetter and Neel 2019; Li, Kokkoris, and Savani 2020; Septianto, Seo, and Paramita 2022). Similarly, social construction theory implies that target groups perceived as capable of behavioural change are viewed as more powerful, which can lead to greater government engagement and intervention with those groups. Based on this, and the results of a pilot study, we hypothesise that this latter perspective will find more support among public officials.

### ***Implicit theories on self-control satisfaction***

Self-control is a key concept in behavioural science with interpersonal differences in self-control capacity being of direct relevance to public policy (Hofmann 2024; Tiemeijer 2022). It influences behaviour in domains that are central to government, such as public health (e.g. substance use), finances (e.g. saving for retirement), and education (e.g. persistence in learning; De Ridder et al. 2012).

Public officials can view people as more or less satisfied with their self-control, and hence as more or less benefitting and in need of government intervention (Hall, Galvez, and Sederbaum 2014). Specifically, public officials viewing people as dissatisfied with their self-control capacity likely prefer more government intervention in response, supposedly to compensate for the failure of citizens to pursue long-term goals independently. This would suggest a good fit with people who tend to demand external support when dissatisfied with self-control (Grelle and Hofmann 2024; Kukowski et al. 2023; Van Rooij, Kool, and Prast 2007). Such a perspective is aligned with policies aiming to make people 'better off, as judged by themselves' (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, 5). Therefore, we hypothesise that public officials with implicit theories of low satisfaction with self-control prefer more government intervention.

## **Accuracy of implicit theories**

The hypothesised influence of implicit theories on preferences for government intervention introduces the potential for unwanted variability in the judgments and decisions of public officials (i.e. noise; Belle, Cantarelli, and Wang 2024; Kahneman, Sibony, and Sunstein 2021). Beyond such noise, implicit theories may also contribute to systematic bias if officials' assumptions about behaviour consistently lead to deviations from objective standards. For example, if many officials overestimate the cooperativeness of target groups, they may fail to detect instances of fraud or exploitation. The accuracy of these implicit theories, meaning the extent to which officials' assumptions align with actual human behaviour, is therefore of critical importance.

However, it's equally important to recognise the limitations individuals, including public officials, face in achieving such accuracy. Human behaviour is highly context-dependent and inherently complex to understand and predict (Bryan, Tipton, and Yeager 2021; Muthukrishna and Henrich 2019), including for experts (Cohn et al. 2019; Milkman et al. 2021, 2022; Vlasceanu et al. 2024). As Lindblom (1959, 86) famously stated '[n]either social scientists, nor politicians, nor public administrators yet know enough about the social world to avoid repeated error in predicting the consequences of policy moves'.

Early evidence suggests that when officials are presented with evidence contradicting their assumptions about behaviour, they tend to update them towards greater accuracy (Bursztyn and Yang 2022; Vivald and Coville 2023). Moreover, recent survey experiments found limited evidence for motivated reasoning among public officials, instead indicating a general orientation towards accuracy and evidence-based policymaking (Migchelbrink et al. 2024). Therefore, we hypothesise that officials will respond to objective information about cooperation, malleability of behaviour, and self-control by adjusting their implicit theories. Specifically, if officials underestimate (overestimate) cooperation as measured in real-world academic studies, they are expected to update their respective implicit beliefs upwards (downwards) after learning about the objective information.

## **Present study**

Taken together, this study extends the core hypothesis of behavioural public policy and administration that accurate behavioural assumptions are key for effective decisions about policy to the micro-level of individual decision-making, thereby extending the scope of these fields to include implicit assumptions held by public officials. Specifically, we aim to evaluate the hypothesised relationships outlined earlier. We conduct an online survey

with 1,015 Dutch public officials to examine how their self-reported implicit theories predict their stated preference for government intervention. We also provide public officials with an information-based intervention that details real-world observations of cooperative behaviour, the malleability of behaviour, and people's self-control capacity to study how this information affects the updating of implicit theories. By doing this, we provide both correlational and quasi-experimental evidence on how implicit theories influence public officials' preferences for government intervention.

## Methods

We conducted a pilot study to test our measures and select studies that could inform public officials about real-world cooperative behaviour, the malleability of behaviour, and self-control capacity. All research activities were performed in compliance with relevant laws and institutional guidelines, and were approved by the appropriate institutional ethics committee at the Cambridge Judge Business School (23–41 for the pilot, and 24–23 for the main study).

The main study, including the hypotheses, was preregistered (<https://doi.org/10.17605/osf.io/nwj2s>). All study materials and the analysis code are publicly available (<https://doi.org/10.17605/osf.io/5fhj2>). The data cannot be shared due to legal restrictions. However, we mimicked the original data set using the *synthpop* package for the R computing environment, allowing the analysis to be replicated with this synthetic data set.

### *Pilot study*

For the pilot, we recruited a gender-balanced, non-representative sample of 175 respondents via Prolific. These respondents were residents of the Netherlands, fluent in Dutch, and working either part-time or full-time. Compared to the general Dutch population, our sample was younger, more highly educated, and leaned more towards the political left. We found that implicit theories expressing high cooperative behaviour were significantly positively correlated with a preference for government intervention,  $r(173) = .30, p < .001$ . The same was true for implicit theories expressing a belief in the malleability of behaviour, although the correlation was smaller,  $r(173) = .17, p = .023$ . Implicit theories among respondents regarding people's satisfaction with their self-control were not related to a preference for government intervention,  $r(173) = -.01, p = .913$ .

### *Accuracy information*

The pilot study also served to test and select descriptions of studies that could provide clear evidence on the extent of real-world cooperative behaviour, the malleability of behaviour, and self-control to be used in

the main study. The pilot, therefore, presented respondents with the description of multiple studies (for a description of all studies see Table S1 in the Supplementary Material) and asked respondents to estimate the results for each of them. We considered the percentage of respondents familiar with each study and the distribution of estimated results in selecting three studies to be used in the main study. Moreover, we considered the correlation between respondents' estimated results and their respective implicit theories.

For example, for cooperative behaviour, we selected a 'wallet study' investigating the share of people returning a lost wallet (Cohn et al. 2019). In the main study, after having provided their estimate, respondents would receive information on the results (e.g. 'You estimated that [insert respondent's estimate] in 100 people would return a lost wallet. In fact, 71 in 100 people returned the lost wallet'). No respondent in the pilot knew the wallet study and remembered the correct result. The estimated results ( $M = 72$ ,  $SD = 20.1$ ) varied nicely around the actual result of 71% returning the wallet. This way, it was likely that similar shares of public officials would overestimate and underestimate cooperative behaviour, allowing us to study the updating of implicit theories, after learning about the actual result, in both directions. Moreover, the estimated results for the wallet study correlated more with respondents' implicit theories on cooperative behaviour than estimates for the other two studies tested,  $r(173) = .09$ ,  $p = .212$ , although the correlation was low and non-significant.

For the malleability of behaviour, we selected a study testing the effect of repositioning healthy snacks in a shop (Kroese, Marchiori, and De Ridder 2016); and for satisfaction with self-control, a study measuring in the proportion of people who followed up on their intention to inform themselves about options to save for retirement (Krijnen et al. 2022). We revised the descriptions of the three selected studies for the main study by adding details that pilot respondents had indicated were missing, in order to support a more informed estimate. All three studies were conducted in the Netherlands, and the final descriptions used in the main study can be found in Table S2 in the Supplementary Material.

### **Sample**

For the main study, we relied on a sample of employees from the Netherlands. Specifically, we recruited public officials using the Flitspanel, a service established in 2006 by the Dutch Ministry of Interior to enable quick and effective information collection on topics relevant to public sector work. The panel comprises about 10,000 employees who voluntarily signed up, and has been used previously in research to study topics like creativity, integrity, discrimination, and leadership (De Graaf, Huberts, and Strüwer

2018; Houtgraaf, Kruijen, and Van Thiel 2024; Offringa and Groeneveld 2024; Raaphorst, Ashikali, and Groeneveld 2025; Toepoel, Vermeeren, and Metin 2019).

Public employees working for national, regional, or local government, as well as the police, judiciary, water boards, and combined public bodies, were deemed eligible for this research, representing the whole public sector excluding education and the military. From 3,441 eligible panel members, 1,040 answered the survey (response rate 30%). We excluded 25 employees because they were older than the legal retirement age (i.e. 67 years of age). This left us with a sample of 1,015 public officials, which was sufficient with respect to our pre-registration for detecting small effect sizes. On a scale from 'not relevant' (1) to 'very relevant' (5), most respondents (86%) reported implicit theories on people's behaviour to be relevant for their work (i.e. answering 3 or higher).

Comparing sample characteristics to the total population of public officials, our sample contained more public officials from the national government (46% in our sample vs. 33% of all public officials), fewer from local governments (23% vs. 37%), and slightly fewer from the police (9% vs. 14%). The remaining differences were less than five percentage points. Additionally, there were fewer female respondents in all sectors in our sample, with the regional government being the least representative (28% in our sample vs. 49% of all public officials) and the judiciary being the closest to representative (52% vs. 61%). Moreover, our sample was older in age than public officials in all sectors, with the police being the least representative (57.9 mean years of age in our sample vs. 44.1 mean years of all public officials). The judiciary was the closest to representative (57.8 vs. 51.1). Table 1 provides an overview of the descriptive statistics for our sample.

**Table 1.** Sample frequencies and characteristics per sector.

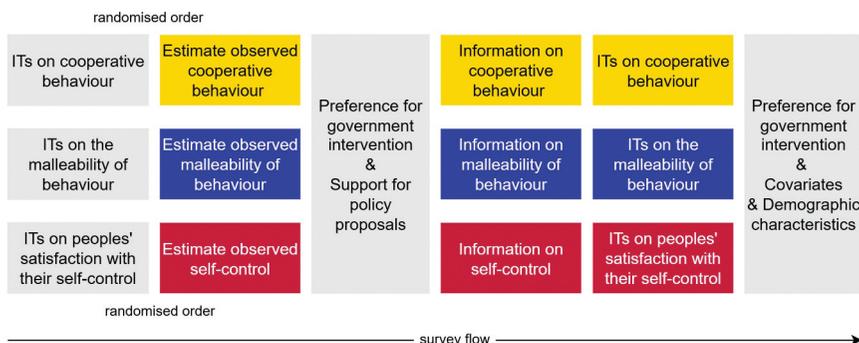
	NG	RG	LG	P	J	WB	CPB	total
n	467	68	235	94	21	64	61	1,015
Female	167 (36%)	19 (28%)	84 (36%)	21 (22%)	11 (52%)	15 (23%)	21 (35%)	338 (33%)
Age <sup>a</sup>	55.3	58.1	57.3	57.9	57.8	56.2	55.3	56.3
Education								
– Lower secondary	10 (2%)	1 (1%)	7 (3%)	10 (11%)	2 (10%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	31 (3%)
– Upper secondary	78 (17%)	12 (18%)	58 (25%)	48 (51%)	0 (0%)	15 (23%)	12 (20%)	223 (22%)
– Tertiary	371 (81%)	54 (81%)	167 (72%)	36 (38%)	19 (90%)	48 (75%)	48 (80%)	743 (75%)
Supervisors	67 (15%)	3 (4%)	31 (13%)	28 (30%)	2 (10%)	14 (22%)	12 (20%)	157 (16%)
Tenure <sup>a</sup>	23.7	27.4	27.7	32.4	29.0	24.5	25.8	26.0

Note. NG = national government, RG = regional government, LG = local government, P = police, J = judiciary, WB = water boards, CPB = combined public bodies. Percentages are calculated per sector. <sup>a</sup>means in years.

## Procedure

Respondents received an email invitation from Flitspanel to participate in the online survey. Data collection took place between 30 August and 16 September 2024, with a reminder sent halfway through. Completing the survey took approximately 10 to 15 minutes. Before starting the survey, respondents provided their consent and confirmed their eligibility. Unbeknown to them, respondents were randomly assigned to one of three groups receiving information on cooperative behaviour, the malleability of behaviour, or self-control capacity to study the updating of implicit theories.

Initially, respondents reported their implicit theories for the three behavioural concepts in a randomised order (see [Figure 1](#)). Depending on their group, participants also read a description of a research study investigating cooperative behaviour, the malleability of behaviour, or self-control (for details see Accuracy Information) and were asked to estimate the study result. Subsequently, respondents reported their preference for government intervention and support for various policy proposals. After this, they were informed about the actual result of the study and how their estimate compared to that result. To enhance the processing of this information and increase the strength of the manipulation (see [Parada et al. 2024](#)), respondents were asked to summarise it in their own words using one sentence. Respondents then reported the implicit theories for their respective group again. For example, a respondent estimating cooperative behaviour and receiving information about real-world cooperative behaviour (i.e. the wallet study) would be asked to report their implicit theory on cooperative behaviour again. Finally, all respondents reported again their support for government intervention and provided a range of



**Figure 1.** Survey flow. Grey rectangles = survey questions shown to all respondents, coloured rectangles = survey questions shown only to the respective group. IT= implicit theories.

covariates and demographic information. The complete procedure is shown in [Figure 1](#).

## Measures

### *Implicit theories on interpersonal cooperation*

We measured respondents' implicit theories on cooperative behaviour using three questions from Rosenberg (1956) frequently used in large multi-country surveys. Questions were adapted to refer to the respondent's perception of other people trusting each other rather than oneself trusting others (for the questions see [Table 2](#)). Responses were scored on a scale from 1 to 5 and averaged, with 5 indicating assuming cooperative behaviour. The reliability of these three questions was acceptable, with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  being .72.

**Table 2.** Concepts and items used.

Measure Items	Reliability M (SD)
<i>IT on cooperative behaviour</i>	
	Cronbach's $\alpha$ =
(1) Do you think, in general, that people can trust each other, or that they cannot be careful enough when dealing with others?	.72 (.78) 3.3 (0.93)
(2) Do you think most people would try to take advantage of others if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?	3.6 (0.88) 3.3 (0.95)
(3) Do you think people usually try to be helpful or do you think they usually look out for themselves?	
<i>IT on behavioural malleability</i>	
	Cronbach's $\alpha$ =
(1) A person's behaviour determines who they are and can't be changed very much. <sup>a</sup>	.84 (.88) 2.5 (0.92)
(2) A person's behaviour can change a bit, but you cannot really change the important behaviours. <sup>a</sup>	3.1 (1.02) 2.5 (0.90)
(3) Everyone behaves in a personal way, and there is not much you can do to really change that. <sup>a</sup>	
<i>IT on self-control satisfaction</i>	
	Cronbach's $\alpha$ =
(1) Most people are satisfied with their ability to resist temptations.	.79 (.81) 2.9 (0.92)
(2) Most people are satisfied with their ability to work effectively towards long-term goals.	3.0 (0.85) 2.9 (0.92)
(3) Most people are satisfied with their ability to resist things that are bad for them.	
<i>Preference for government intervention</i>	
	Cronbach's $\alpha$ =
(1) The government interferes far too much in our everyday lives. <sup>a</sup>	.79 (.82) 2.9 (1.05)
(2) Sometimes government needs to make laws that keep people from hurting themselves.	3.9 (0.79) 2.4 (0.97)
(3) It's not the government's business to try to protect people from themselves. <sup>a</sup>	3.0 (1.07) 3.1 (1.03)
(4) The government should stop telling people how to live their lives. <sup>a</sup>	3.1 (1.03) 3.7 (0.97)
(5) The government should do more to advance society's goals, even if that means limiting the freedom and choices of individuals.	
(6) Government should put limits on the choices individuals can make so they don't get in the way of what's good for society.	

Note. IT = implicit theories. Reliability in brackets refers to the respective second measurement (see [Figure 1](#), Procedure).

<sup>a</sup> Values were reverse-coded before calculating a composite score.

### ***Implicit theories on the malleability of behaviour***

Implicit theories on the malleability of behaviour were measured using three items previously used by Dewies et al. (2022) adapted from Levy, Stroessner, and Dweck (1998; Table 2). Responses were scored on a scale from 1 to 5. The items were reverse-coded and averaged to calculate individual scores, with 5 indicating high malleability. The reliability of these three items was good, with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  being .84.

### ***Implicit theories on self-control satisfaction***

We used three novel items to measure public officials' implicit theories on self-control satisfaction (see Table 2), which were pretested during the pilot study. Responses were scored on a scale from 1 to 5 and averaged, with 5 indicating high self-control satisfaction. The reliability of these three items was good, with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  being .79.

### ***Preference for government intervention***

Preferences for government intervention were assessed using six items from the cultural cognition scale developed by Kahan and colleagues (2011; Table 2) and translated to Dutch by Tiemeijer and de Jonge (2013). Responses were scored on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating a preference for (more) government intervention. The reliability of items was good, with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  being .79.

### ***Policy support***

To explore the translation of implicit theories to support for concrete policy proposals, we also measured respondents' support for bans, enabling policies (e.g. information provision), and controls as policy types in three domains: food, sustainability, and finance. Support was measured on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 indicating the strongest policy support. A scree plot suggested two underlying factors (i.e. eigenvalues  $> 1$ ) based on policy types. An exploratory factor analysis with two factors and Varimax rotation yielded the first factor, capturing support for paternalistic policies (bans and monitoring), explaining 28% of the variance in respondents' support. The second factor captured enabling policies, explaining 24% of the variance. The reliability for both factors was good, with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  being .81 for paternalistic policies and .86 for enabling policies. We calculated average scores for both factors per public official.

### ***Analytic strategy***

We estimated bootstrapped ordinary least squares regressions to study the effect of public officials' implicit theories on their support for government

intervention. Specifically, we included all three implicit theories and added covariates in a stepwise procedure.

To investigate the updating of implicit theories, we calculated adjusted implicit theories. For this, we subtract the initially reported implicit theory from the implicit theory measured after respondents had been informed about real-world cooperative behaviour, malleability of behaviour, or self-control capacity. We then tested whether the participants' estimate of the study was correlated with any adjustment in their implicit theory. For example, a public official might report a higher implicit theory on cooperative behaviour the second time this implicit theory is being measured, that is after being informed that more people than expected by the public official had returned a lost wallet, suggesting a negative correlation.

## Results

Descriptively, most respondents held implicit theories suggesting high levels of cooperative behaviour and behavioural malleability. Specifically, 68% of respondents scored above the mid-point for cooperative behaviour, and 59% did so for behavioural malleability. There was, however, no clear majority for self-control satisfaction. A large majority (71%) preferred government intervention, scoring above the mid-point on this measure.

Randomisation checks showed no significant differences between the three groups in terms of gender, education, sector, age, tenure, implicit theories, and preference for government intervention, indicating successful randomisation. Group sizes were similar with 368 respondents receiving information on cooperative behaviour, 315 respondents receiving information on behavioural malleability, and 327 receiving information on self-control.

To formally test our hypothesis regarding the influence of implicit theories on respondents' preference for government intervention, we bootstrapped 5,000 ordinary least squares regressions. As shown in Table 3, implicit theories on cooperative behaviour ( $\beta_{\text{coop}} = 0.20$ , 95% CI [0.14, 0.27]) and malleability of behaviour ( $\beta_{\text{mall}} = 0.9$ , 95% CI [0.04, 0.15]) significantly predicted respondents' preference for government intervention. In line with our hypotheses, the more cooperative behaviour respondents assumed, and the more they viewed behaviour as malleable rather than fixed, the more they preferred government intervention. This effect was larger for cooperative behaviour than for malleability of behaviour. However, implicit theories on self-control satisfaction did not affect the preference for government intervention ( $\beta_{\text{scont}} = -0.04$ , 95% CI [-0.10, 0.02]), contrary to our hypothesis. The model's exploratory power was limited, with all three implicit theories together explaining 7% of the variance in preference for government intervention. This result was robust even after

**Table 3.** Regression results for the prediction of preference for government intervention.

Model	1	2	3	4
Intercept	2.51 (0.16)**	3.86 (0.28)**	4.03 (0.36)**	3.85 (0.39)**
<i>Implicit theories</i>				
- Cooperative behaviour	0.20 (0.03)**	0.09 (0.03)**	0.08 (0.03)**	0.06 (0.04)
- Malleability	0.09 (0.03)**	0.06 (0.03)*	0.05 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
- Self-control	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)
Political orientation (right)		-0.29 (0.03)**	-0.28 (0.03)**	-0.28 (0.03)**
Political interest		-0.05 (0.06)	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.03)
Generalised trust		-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.06)
<i>Personal</i>				
- Cooperative behaviour			0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)
- Malleability			0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)
- Self-control			-0.04 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)
Education <sup>a</sup>				0.10 (0.04)**
Age <sup>a</sup>				-0.02 (0.03)
Tenure <sup>a</sup>				0.01 (0.03)
Supervisor (yes)				0.02 (0.05)
<i>n</i>	1,010	1,010	1,010	933
adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	7%	19%	19%	26%

Note. Coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses) based on 5,000 bootstrapped linear least squares ordinary regression analysis. <sup>a</sup>Predictor was categorised. \*(\*) Confidence interval using percentiles does not include 0 at the 95% (99%) level.

adding political orientation, generalised trust in others, and political interest as covariates (see Table 3). However, only implicit theories on cooperative behaviour ( $\beta_{\text{coop}} = 0.08$ , 95% CI [0.02, 0.15]) remained significant when further adding respondents' own cooperative behaviour, the perceived malleability of respondents' own behaviour, and respondents' satisfaction with their own self-control. This may be due to the strong correlation between implicit theories on behavioural malleability and the perceived malleability of respondents' own behaviour,  $r(1,008) = .72$ ,  $p < .001$ , suggesting that these two perceptions are highly linked. Implicit theories were no longer significant when demographics were added as further covariates. Unsurprisingly, political orientation consistently emerged as the strongest predictor of respondents' preference for government intervention (see Table 3).

Taken together, these results suggest that implicit theories on interpersonal cooperation and the malleability of behaviour predict respondents' preference for government intervention. However, they are related to political orientation, education, and respondents' perception of their own behavioural malleability, acting as covariates in our data.

To evaluate the effect of respondents learning about actual behaviour, we investigated potential changes in respondents' implicit theories. For respondents learning about cooperative behaviour, there was a small but significant correlation between respondents' estimate of cooperative behaviour as observed in the wallet study and their change in implicit theories on cooperative behaviour,  $\tau = -0.14$ ,  $p < .001$ . This effect was driven by respondents who underestimated actual cooperative behaviour in the wallet study,

adjusting their implicit theories on cooperative behaviour upwards after being informed that more people than they had estimated had returned the lost wallet,  $W = 2,569.5$ ,  $p < .001$ , as shown by a Wilcoxon signed-rank test.

For respondents learning about the malleability of behaviour, there was a small but significant correlation between respondents' estimate of behavioural malleability and their change in respective implicit theories,  $\tau = -0.10$ ,  $p < .05$ . Respondents who overestimated actual malleability of behaviour in the snack repositioning study adjusted their implicit theories downwards after being informed that behaviour changed less in response to repositioning than what they had estimated,  $W = 1,389$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, this may be a result of a large general overestimation of the malleability of behaviour, and very little underestimation due to the little malleability observed in the real-world study.

For respondents learning about peoples' self-control, there was a small but significant correlation between respondents' estimate of peoples' self-control and their change in respective implicit theories,  $\tau = -0.13$ ,  $p < .05$ , which was driven by respondents who underestimated actual self-control adjusting their respective implicit theories upwards after being informed that more people than they had estimated actually followed up on their intention to inform themselves about retirement saving options,  $W = 7,823$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Taken together, these results confirm that in some cases respondents update their implicit theories regarding behaviour after learning about actual behaviour.

### **Exploratory Analysis**

We investigated to what extent implicit theories regarding behaviour translated not only to abstract preferences for government intervention but also to concrete policy support. Following the same analytic approach as above (see Table 3), support for enabling policies was significantly predicted by implicit theories on cooperative behaviour,  $\beta_{\text{coop}} = 0.34$ , 95% CI [0.23, 0.46], and implicit theories on behavioural malleability,  $\beta_{\text{mall}} = 0.17$ , 95% CI [0.08, 0.26]. That is, the more cooperative behaviour respondents assumed, and the more they viewed behaviour as malleable, the more they supported enabling policies. These results were robust for the inclusion of political orientation as a covariable, but only for implicit theories on cooperative behaviour when further including demographic characteristics and respondents' implicit theories regarding their own behaviour. No effect on support for enabling policies was found for respondents' implicit theories regarding self-control,  $\beta_{\text{scont}} = -0.02$ , 95% CI [0.12, 0.08].

Support for paternalistic policies was significantly predicted by implicit theories on cooperative behaviour,  $\beta_{\text{coop}} = 0.20$ , 95% CI [0.07, 0.32], and implicit theories on behavioural malleability,  $\beta_{\text{mall}} = 0.15$ , 95% CI [0.05,

0.25]. That is, the more cooperative behaviour respondents assumed, and the more they viewed behaviour as malleable, the more they supported paternalistic policies. These results were robust for the inclusion of political orientation as a covariable only for implicit theories on behavioural malleability. However, when further including respondents' implicit theories regarding their own behaviour, this effect was no longer significant. No effect on support for enabling was found for respondents' implicit theories regarding self-control,  $\beta_{\text{sccont}} = -.03$ , 95% CI [-0.13, 0.08].

Taken together, these findings suggest that implicit theories on behaviour also influence concrete policy support. Detailed results with regression coefficients are provided in Tables S3 and S4 in the Supplementary Material.

## Discussion

We surveyed Dutch public officials to study their implicit theories about behaviour and how these theories influence their preferences for government intervention. In doing so, we evaluate a central proposition of behavioural public administration and policy, namely that assumption about behaviour matter on the micro-level of individual decision-making about policy and government intervention. We found that officials who believed people behave cooperatively, and that behaviour is malleable rather than fixed were more likely to support government intervention. This also extended to support for paternalistic and enabling policies in the domains food, sustainability, and finance. These effects persist, albeit somewhat weaker, when controlling for public officials' political orientation, indicating that assumptions about behaviour cannot simply be subsumed into political attitudes. However, they may be embedded in worldviews, as the effects are no longer significant when controlling for demographic and belief variables. When public officials learned about research on actual cooperative behaviour, behavioural malleability, and self-control, we observed a tendency of public officials to adjust their beliefs to be more accurate.

While implicit theories about behaviour do influence policy preferences, their impact is relatively modest compared to the effect of public officials' political orientation. This aligns, however, with prior research and theorising linking political ideology to policy attitudes (Feldman 2003; Maio et al. 2003). Moreover, the explanatory power of implicit theories diminishes when controlling for other factors such as education, suggesting these constructs are interrelated. This is consistent with previous studies associating, for example, beliefs in behavioural malleability with liberal political values (e.g. Bauer and Hannover 2020; Chiu et al. 1997; Lassetter and Neel 2019; Weimann-Saks, Peleg-Koriat, and Halperin 2019), educational success (e.g. Costa and Faria 2018; Fuesting et al. 2019; Neel and Lassetter 2015), and

cooperative behaviour (e.g. Dang and Liu 2022; Liem et al. 2012). Taken together, these findings suggest that implicit theories about cooperation and behavioural change are embedded within broader socio-political worldviews that shape how public officials evaluate and prefer different policy instruments.

Our findings show that officials do not default to assumptions of rationality, as sometimes assumed. Instead, they tend to believe that people are generally cooperative and that behavioural change and self-control are limited. Moreover, our findings indicate that public officials adjust their implicit theories about behaviour after being exposed to empirical evidence of actual behaviour. This supports the notion that implicit theories are, at least in part, context-dependent and malleable (Katz et al. 2022; Neel and Lassetter 2015; Schroder et al. 2016; Wilson and English 2017; Zhu, Zhuang, and Cheung 2020). This may help explain why we found no support for the anticipated relationship between officials' implicit theories about peoples' self-control and officials' preferences for government intervention. Experiences of success and failure in self-control are common, often varying across domains and even within individuals (Bernecker and Job 2017). As such, general beliefs about self-control, as measured in this study, may not translate directly into specific policy preferences. Instead, perceptions of self-control in particular contexts may be more predictive of support for targeted interventions (see, e.g. Kukowski et al. 2023).

Interestingly, officials updated their implicit theories in distinct ways. They reported greater assumptions of cooperative behaviour, reduced beliefs in behavioural malleability, and increased satisfaction with self-control after learning about corresponding behavioural data. Given the nature of the study materials, which made it difficult to substantially underestimate behavioural malleability, it is unsurprising that updates in this domain were predominantly downward. In contrast, the reluctance to revise beliefs towards less cooperative and less self-controlled views may reflect a bias against negative constructions of target populations. This interpretation aligns with prior research suggesting that public managers may perceive a functional necessity to think positively of their target groups (Migchelbrink & Raymaekers, 2025). Such asymmetric updating raises the possibility of motivated reasoning, whereby officials interpret new information in ways that reinforce their existing beliefs, preferences, or interests (Baekgaard et al. 2019; Bolsen and Palm 2019). Although previous studies (e.g. Migchelbrink et al. 2024) found no direct evidence of motivated reasoning, our study captures belief updating in a more indirect manner, potentially making it more susceptible to biased processing (Evans and Stanovich 2013).

## Implications

This study contributes to the growing literature on policy design. We corroborate emerging findings from previous studies that officials' self-reported support for various policy tools tends to be positively correlated with each other rather than revealing preferences for specific tools (Dewies et al. 2022; Veselý and Petrušek 2021). Even when forcing officials to choose between tools, their preferences can appear inconclusive or highly context-dependent (e.g. Migchelbrink and Raymaekers 2025). Yet, different tools are grounded in fundamentally different behavioural assumptions (Howlett 2018; Lascoumes and Le Gales 2007; Schneider and Ingram 1990). For instance, enabling tools (e.g. information provision) rely on voluntary cooperation and behavioural change more than paternalistic tools (e.g. bans, sanctions). One might therefore expect officials who view behaviour as malleable and cooperative to favour enabling over paternalistic approaches (Migchelbrink and Raymaekers 2025). However, our results indicate that implicit beliefs about behavioural malleability and cooperation predict support for both types of tools in similar ways. This suggests a potential need for greater reflection among public officials on the behavioural conditions under which different policy instruments are most effective.

Another key practical implication of this study is that public officials in government or related professions may benefit from adopting a predict – test – learn – adapt approach to critically reflect on their implicit theories of human behaviour. These implicit theories vary across individuals and can lead to noise in decision-making. A structured predict – test – learn – adapt approach can help uncover and interrogate these assumptions either individually or in groups to lead to more consistent decision-making across individuals and contexts (Cooper and Kovacic 2012). The Dutch government has been making some steps in this direction lately with a mandated behavioural audit (Mills 2024) as part of the policymaking procedure.

Yet, the question of how accurately public officials can assess behavioural tendencies remains open. While anecdotal evidence suggests that severely flawed assumptions may be identified before they result in ineffective policy decisions using a predict – test – learn – adapt approach (Abbasi 2020), even accurate assumptions can lead to unintended consequences. For example, assuming low levels of pro-social motivation may prompt officials to use extrinsic incentives (e.g. monetary rewards) to encourage behaviours such as blood donation. Although effective in the short term, such incentives have been shown to crowd out intrinsic motivation over time, potentially making pro-social behaviour contingent on continued external rewards (Niza, Tung, and Marteau 2013; Wollbrant, Knutsson, and Martinsson 2022). Consequently, it may be more relevant to focus on the functional utility rather than the accuracy of behavioural assumptions (Zacka 2017). For

instance, public managers may pay attention to diversity in implicit theories held by officials when composing teams, to ensure diversity of views.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, the research context was abstract and removed from real-world policymaking. The survey design likely attenuated the influence of contextual factors that shape policy preferences in practice, such as political affiliations and institutional policy styles (Howlett and Tosun 2018, 2021). Second, policy decisions are rarely made by individuals in isolation. Rather, policymaking is a complex, collective process in which behavioural insights are negotiated, mediated, and embedded within broader institutional and political dynamics (Ball 2022; Feitsma 2018, 2019; Van Ryzin 2021). In this context, implicit theories about behaviour interact with competing interests and are integrated into policy deliberations (Dewies et al. 2022; Gopalan and Pirog 2017), consistent with our findings on belief updating.

Another important limitation concerns the method used to measure implicit theories. Their implicit nature suggests that they influence cognition and behaviour without officials' explicit awareness (Plaks 2017). However, our study relied on self-reported measures, which may not fully capture the implicit nature of these theories. Implicit measurements are generally considered more dynamic and context-sensitive than explicit beliefs, suggesting that our findings may overstate the trait-like and stable nature of implicit theories (Dai and Albarracín 2022). Consequently, the results may reflect a tendency among public officials to activate implicit theories that align with their explicitly stated beliefs reported here across a range of situations.

Turning to the study population, our sample does not fully reflect the broader demographic profile of public officials in the Netherlands. The sample was skewed towards officials from the national government, and overrepresented male and older respondents. This may reflect self-selection bias, a common issue in survey research (Bethlehem 2010). Nevertheless, we found that demographics, except for education, had minimal influence on the key variables of interest, which strengthens our confidence that the findings may still hold more broadly.

Methodologically, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits our ability to draw causal inferences about the relationship between implicit theories and preferences for government intervention. Future research employing longitudinal or experimental designs could help establish causal pathways and better understand the dynamics of implicit theory updating.

Finally, we cannot fully rule out the possibility of common method bias inflating the observed relationships, as independent and dependent variables

were measured concurrently using similar survey instruments (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2012). However, survey-based measures are widely recommended for capturing perceptual constructs such as those examined here (George and Pandey 2017). Moreover, the presence of near-zero correlations where none were expected (e.g. between implicit theories and gender) suggests that common method variance may not have significantly biased our findings. This aligns with recent arguments that concerns about common method bias in public administration research may be overstated (George and Pandey 2017).

## Conclusion

There is still considerable debate about how insights from behavioural science can be integrated into behavioural public policy (Hallsworth 2023). Our results suggest that the preferences public officials express for different approaches to behavioural science are likely to be influenced by their subjective beliefs about human psychology. In this work we only explored implicit theories related to cooperation, behavioural malleability, and self-control, and future work could reveal a wider range of implicit theories that might shape different behavioural public policy preferences. Our work finds evidence that these implicit theories are not entirely independent of an officials' political leaning or educational background, but highlights that they can account for unique variance in policy preferences. This finding suggests that public officials and policy teams could benefit from scrutinising their own assumptions, and the ways in which those assumptions might shape their preferences for different kinds of solutions.

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