

PEOPLEGOV NEWS

The People in Government Lab bi-monthly newsletter



WELCOME

Welcome to the PeopleGov newsletter, a bi-monthly publication with updates on the People in Government Lab's (PeopleGov Lab) research and engagement activities. If you would like to (un)subscribe, please email peoplegovlab@bsg.ox.ac.uk.

We were delighted to welcome Visiting Scholar, Lars Tummers, to Oxford in May for a month-long visit to the Blavatnik School of Government. The last months also featured several research presentations by team members, the development of a new case study, and ongoing preparation for our international conference on 15 July. Find out more below.

Do unethical leaders produce unethical followers?

Postdoctoral research fellow, Javier Fuenzalida, presented a working paper to the faculty of the Blavatnik School of Government on 28 April on 'Unethical Leadership, Moral Compensation, and Unethical Follower Behaviour: Evidence from a Survey Experiment with 19,000 Chilean Public Servants'.

Numerous studies have associated ethical leadership with ethical behavior in the public sector. Yet unethical leadership need not beget unethical followers. Javier argued that some bureaucrats may perceive unethical leadership as a moral threat and respond to it with moral compensation and greater ethical behaviour. Javier's team conducted a vignette experiment with 19,000 bureaucrats in Chile, in which bureaucrats exposed to unethical role modeling by their superior or peers reacted with greater ethical awareness and ethical intent. This effect was concentrated among those recruited through merit rather than connections, implying that their public service identification affects whether bureaucrats are morally threatened by unethical leadership. The consequences of unethical leadership in the public sector thus seem to differ from the mere absence of ethical leadership.

Nudging, stereotypes and compassion: Visiting Scholar Lars Tummers at the Blavatnik School of Government

The PeopleGov Lab team were excited to receive a visit from Visiting Scholar Lars Tummers from 25 April to 26 May. Lars is a Professor of Public Administration and Organisational Science at Utrecht University and an expert in public management, leadership, and behaviour change. During his visit, Lars shared his ongoing research on nudging, stereotypes of public workers, and compassionate behaviour and took time to meet individually with members of the PeopleGov team.



On 12 May, Lars presented the results of a project called 'Lazy bureaucrats' to the faculty of the Blavatnik School of Government. The project aims to understand stereotypes of public servants and their impact on those working in public service using experiments, interviews, and representative citizen surveys in

multiple countries. The study found that – contrary to expectations – many people have quite favorable views of public sector workers. They see civil servants as responsible, knowledgeable, and as serving society. However, although stereotypes are often positive, there are clear differences across groups in society. People working in core governmental sectors have a much more positive view of civil servants than non-profit and private sector workers. Lars also discussed how these stereotypes could be improved by eliciting compassion towards public sector workers.

You can read more about this topic here:

[Public servant stereotypes: it is not \(at\) all about being lazy, greedy and corrupt](#)

[Socioeconomic status and public sector worker stereotypes: results from a representative survey](#)

[Compassion, bureaucrat bashing, and public administration](#)

Lars also held a seminar on nudging for current MPP students. Nudging is a way to steer behavior without forbidding options or changing incentives. Examples include saving automatically for retirement and making vegetarian dishes the default for a dinner. Governments worldwide have embraced nudges and although some have been extremely successful, nudging is controversial. Critics argue that nudges manipulate citizens and that the effects are much smaller than claimed. Lars discussed the promises and pitfalls of nudging and how the field should move forward. A highly engaging discussion followed in which students questioned how to implement nudging effectively and transparently, how to use nudges to empower decision-making and avoid infantilisation, the difference between nudging and anchoring, and the potential impact of the data collection imbalance between government and big industries when it comes to influencing behaviour.

For an introduction to nudging, you can read Lars' article '[Nudge, nudge: 9 out of 10 people read this article](#)'.

Using behavioural science to fight corruption

On 6 May, Margarita Gómez, Executive Director of the PeopleGov Lab, chaired and presented in a panel on Contributions of behavioural science and design thinking to policy processes for the Latin American Studies Association Virtual Congress 2022.

Margarita's presentation, entitled, 'Applying behavioral science to increase ethical behavior in public servants: New ways to fight corruption', explored the empirical evidence from the behavioural science that shows that corrupt acts are not necessarily committed by those whom we could likely picture as bad people and discussed the results of a field experiment run in Mexico to increase the compliance and reports of the gifts received by public servants.

Margarita explained how unethical behaviours gradually slide into habits, without the person thinking of them as a wrongdoing, and that there is a blind spot and limited attention to ethical considerations. The behavioural sciences' approach brings to the discussion of corruption a new perspective as it demonstrates that people do not always behave according to the rational choice model. We must understand corruption as the result of a set of individual behaviours that occur in a specific context and decision moment.

Margarita also presented the results of the study, [Applying behavioral science to increase compliance and reports of gifts received by public servants in Mexico](#), which answers the question: What kind of message, informed by behavioural sciences, is more effective to change public servants' behaviour to comply with the regulation of gifts in Mexico? The authors sent five behaviourally informed messages to 157,586 public servants during the Christmas holiday season 2016-2017. The results show that a simple email informing public servants of their obligation to report and give back the received gifts had the greatest effect on the compliance with the regulation.

CASE STUDY: CIVIL SERVICE REFORM IN GHANA

Martin Williams, associate professor in public management and academic co-director of the PeopleGov Lab, recently brought his research to life in the classroom with a new case study, 'Civil service reform in Ghana,' in collaboration with Sarah McAra, senior case writer and associate director of the Case Centre on Public Leadership.

The case is set in 2014, just after Nana Agyekum-Dwamena was named Ghana's Head of Civil Service and was tasked with reforming the 14,000-person institution. Students are asked how they would enact civil service reform, considering both a funding offer and the effectiveness of previous reform efforts.

Click for details of the [case study](#) and how it impacts the teaching of public policy, or to read Martin's paper, '[Management, organizational performance, and task clarity: evidence from Ghana's civil service](#)'.

PeopleGov International Conference, 15 July

The PeopleGov International Conference: Global perspectives on the future of public service will be held online from 1pm to 4pm BST on 15 July.

Building on our two main research projects, Voices of People in Government and the Future of Work (remote work project), we will explore how COVID-19 has transformed the civil service across the world, what lessons have been learned, and how governments should be preparing for the future in terms of hybrid and flexible work, new skills and leadership, and technology adoption.

Session 1, 1pm

Public sector transformation: leadership and working practices

Session 2, 2.30pm

The future of work in the public service: key themes and opportunities

To register, please click [here](#).

Our publications

X. Pizarro, M. A. Pavez, J. Inostroza, T. Soto, J. Fuenzalida, 'Crisis Sanitaria y Servicios Públicos de Seguridad Laboral: Recomendaciones para orientar políticas y prácticas de gestión', published online by Instituto de Asuntos Públicos, April 2022.

<https://inap.uchile.cl/publicaciones/185407/crisis-sanitaria-y-servicios-publicos-de-seguridad-laboral>

This policy paper (in Spanish) identifies and analyses the consequences that remote work had on public organisations responsible for public policies on social security and labour, and proposes recommendations based on these findings.

WELCOME TO THE TEAM

Miguel Moctazuma and Pablo Soto Mota have recently started working with the PeopleGov Lab.

Miguel is a Chevening Scholar at the University of Oxford. He is a prevention of violence advocate, researcher and consultant, specialised in narratives as policy coordinating devices. Miguel will be leading the PeopleGov Lab's communications and engagement activities.



[Pablo](#) is a Ph.D. Research Scholar at the Norwegian School of Economics, specialised in behavioral economics and experimental methods. He is consulting as behavioural data analyst for the PeopleGov Lab's remote work project.

