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# THE PARADOXICAL EMPLOYEE: WHEN BEHAVIORS CLASSIFIED AS NEGATIVE DRIVE PUBLIC SECTOR PERFORMANCE

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## ABSTRACT

Public administration scholars and practitioners have long maintained a relatively straightforward taxonomy of workplace behaviors: some behaviors are positive and should be encouraged, while others are negative and should be eliminated (Robbins et al., 2023). The present study empirically challenges this dichotomous classification by investigating counterintuitive findings that emerged from a larger research project on civil servant behaviors and organizational performance. Testing hypothesis H2, which assumed that eighteen behaviors, predominantly positive in character, would

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explain civil servant conduct, the research employed structural equation modeling on survey data from three hundred and eighty-one civil servants and service users in Libreville, Gabon (Byrne, 2016). The results reject hypothesis H2, revealing that the latent variable representing civil servant behavior is significantly explained by two distinct sets of items. The first set comprises behaviors traditionally classified as positive, including collaboration (β = .092, p = .019), self-motivation (β = .149, p = .008), benevolence (β = .174, p = .001), sociability (β = .100, p = .075), cynicism (β = .707), and team spirit (β = .101, p = .068), all of which loaded positively onto the behavior construct. The second set comprises behaviors that are more traditionally viewed as positive—motivation (β = -.139, p = .017), involvement (β = -.148, p = .010), empathy (β = -.172, p = .003), helpfulness (β = -.107, p = .061)—along with conflictuality (β = -.190, p < .001), which is traditionally viewed as negative. Surprisingly, all of these loaded negatively onto the behavior construct. Critically, despite these negative loadings, the composite behavior variable positively predicted organizational performance, explaining fifteen percent of the variance (β = .149, p = .012). This article explores these paradoxical findings through multiple theoretical lenses, including organizational resilience (Roussel, 2024), the burden of organizational citizenship (Bolino et al., 2015), compassion fatigue (Hochschild, 1983; Virat et al., 2025), cognitive conflict (Jehn, 1995), and the dark side of organizational commitment (Meyer et al., 2021). The article argues that within the high-stakes public sector environment, behaviors traditionally classified as negative are often functional adaptations that drive performance, albeit at potential cost to individual well-being. The concept of *functional behavioral paradox* is introduced to describe this phenomenon, and implications for public management are discussed.

**Keywords:** Paradoxical Behaviors, Cynicism, Conflictuality, Empathy, Public Service Performance, Organizational Resilience, Structural Equation Modeling.

## RÉSUMÉ (FRENCH)

Les chercheurs et les praticiens en administration publique ont longtemps défendu une taxonomie relativement simple des comportements au travail : certains comportements sont considérés comme positifs et doivent être encouragés, tandis que d'autres sont perçus comme négatifs et doivent être éliminés (Robbins et al., 2023). La présente étude remet empiriquement en question cette classification dichotomique en examinant des résultats contre-intuitifs issus d'un projet de recherche plus vaste portant sur les comportements des agents publics et la performance organisationnelle. Afin de tester l'hypothèse H2, selon laquelle dix-huit comportements,

majoritairement de nature positive, expliqueraient le comportement des agents publics, la recherche a eu recours à la modélisation par équations structurelles à partir de données d'enquête recueillies auprès de trois cent quatre-vingt-un agents publics et usagers des services publics à Libreville, au Gabon (Byrne, 2016).

Les résultats conduisent au rejet de l'hypothèse H2 et montrent que la variable latente représentant le comportement des agents publics est expliquée de manière significative par deux ensembles distincts d'indicateurs. Le premier ensemble regroupe des comportements traditionnellement considérés comme positifs, notamment la collaboration ($\beta = 0,092$ ; $p = 0,019$), l'automotivation ($\beta = 0,149$ ; $p = 0,008$), la bienveillance ($\beta = 0,174$ ; $p = 0,001$), la sociabilité ($\beta = 0,100$ ; $p = 0,075$), le cynisme ($\beta = 0,707$) et l'esprit d'équipe ($\beta = 0,101$ ; $p = 0,068$), lesquels présentent tous des saturations positives sur le construit comportemental.

Le second ensemble comprend des comportements généralement considérés comme positifs — la motivation ($\beta = -0,139$ ; $p = 0,017$), l'implication ($\beta = -0,148$ ; $p = 0,010$), l'empathie ($\beta = -0,172$ ; $p = 0,003$) et l'entraide ($\beta = -0,107$ ; $p = 0,061$) — ainsi que la conflictualité ($\beta = -0,190$ ; $p < 0,001$), traditionnellement considérée comme un comportement négatif. De manière surprenante, tous ces comportements présentent des saturations négatives sur le construit comportemental.

Plus important encore, malgré ces saturations négatives, la variable composite de comportement prédit positivement la performance organisationnelle, en expliquant quinze pour cent de sa variance ($\beta = 0,149$ ; $p = 0,012$). Cet article examine ces résultats paradoxaux à travers plusieurs cadres théoriques, notamment la résilience organisationnelle (Roussel, 2024), le coût de la citoyenneté organisationnelle (Bolino et al., 2015), la fatigue de compassion (Hochschild, 1983 ; Virat et al., 2025), le conflit cognitif (Jehn, 1995) et la face sombre de l'engagement organisationnel (Meyer et al., 2021).

L'article soutient que, dans le contexte exigeant du secteur public, des comportements traditionnellement qualifiés de négatifs constituent souvent des mécanismes d'adaptation fonctionnels favorisant la performance organisationnelle, bien qu'ils puissent s'accompagner de coûts importants pour le bien-être individuel. Le concept de paradoxe comportemental fonctionnel est proposé afin de décrire ce phénomène, et ses implications pour le management public sont discutées.

**Mots-clés :** comportements paradoxaux, cynisme, conflictualité, empathie, performance du service public, résilience organisationnelle, modélisation par équations structurelles.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The classification of workplace behaviors into positive and negative categories is a foundational practice in organizational management. Human resource systems are designed to reward, cultivate, and reinforce positive behaviors such as motivation, involvement, empathy, helpfulness, and cooperation, while simultaneously discouraging, sanctioning, or eliminating negative behaviors such as cynicism, conflict, withdrawal, and resistance (Robbins et al., 2023). This dichotomous approach reflects an implicit theoretical assumption that positive behaviors contribute to organizational performance while negative behaviors detract from it.

Hypothesis H2 of the larger research project embodied this classical assumption. The hypothesis proposed that eighteen behaviors—including motivation, sociability, cooperation, involvement, collaboration, hospitality, listening, helpfulness, autonomy, empathy, benevolence, self-motivation, and respect, all traditionally classified as positive, along with cynicism, conflictuality, and self-interest, traditionally classified as negative—would collectively explain the behavioral construct that was hypothesized to influence organizational performance (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1982).

However, the empirical findings from the structural equation modeling analysis produced results that fundamentally challenge this classical taxonomy. While some behaviors loaded onto the behavior construct in the expected positive direction, a surprising set of behaviors loaded negatively. Even more surprisingly, these negatively loading behaviors remained part of a behavioral composite that positively predicted organizational performance. This article explores these paradoxical findings in depth, seeking to understand how behaviors that are traditionally considered positive can load negatively onto a behavior construct while still contributing to a performance-enhancing behavioral composite.

## 2. THEORETICAL GROUNDING FOR THE PARADOX

Hypothesis H2 was initially grounded in three theoretical traditions that, on their face, support the classical positive-negative dichotomy. However, the empirical findings contradict these theoretical predictions, requiring the mobilization of alternative theoretical perspectives to explain the observed paradoxes.

### 2.1 Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory, as developed by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2017, 2023) and applied to the public sector by Grand-Guillaume (2024) and Colin (2023), distinguishes between autonomous or intrinsic motivation, which is associated with positive outcomes, and controlled or extrinsic motivation, which is associated with less desirable outcomes. The theory posits that individuals have three fundamental psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—and that the satisfaction of these needs promotes autonomous motivation and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2023). This theory would predict that behaviors such as autonomous motivation, benevolence, and sociability would load positively onto a behavior construct.

### 2.2 Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory, originating with Blau (1964) and recently revisited by Cropanzano and colleagues (2022), Paillé and Valéau (2024), and Chevalier and colleagues (2024), postulates that workplace behavior is governed by norms of reciprocity. When agents perceive that their contributions of effort, loyalty, and commitment are fairly reciprocated by the organization, positive behaviors ensue. When the psychological contract is violated, negative behaviors such as cynicism and withdrawal emerge (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). This theory would predict that behaviors such as cooperation, involvement, and respect would load positively, while cynicism and conflictuality would load negatively.

### 2.3 Public Service Motivation Theory

Public Service Motivation Theory, developed by Perry and Wise (1990) and updated by Vandenabeele (2021, 2023, 2024), Ritz and colleagues (2020b), and Schott and colleagues (2019), explains that civil servants possess a predisposition to respond to altruistic motives. Public service motivation is defined as the individual's orientation to delivering services to people with a desire to do good for others and society (Perry & Wise, 1990). Agents with high public service motivation are expected to demonstrate empathy, helpfulness, benevolence, and self-motivation, all of which would load positively onto a behavior construct.

### 2.4 Alternative Theoretical Perspectives

Because the empirical findings contradict the predictions of these classical theories, we turn to alternative theoretical perspectives that can explain the observed paradoxes.

For conflictuality, the concept of cognitive conflict as distinguished from affective conflict provides a potential explanation. Jehn (1995) and Jehn, Northcraft, and Neale (1999) demonstrated that task-related cognitive conflict, which involves disagreement about the content and outcomes of work, can enhance team performance by surfacing different perspectives and improving decision quality. In contrast, relationship-related affective conflict, involving personal friction and animosity, is detrimental to performance (Ensley et al., 2002). The negative loading of conflictuality onto the behavior construct may reflect the perception that all conflict is destructive, while the positive contribution of conflictuality to organizational performance may reflect the hidden benefits of cognitive conflict that are not captured by simple behavioral ratings (Mazra et al., 2020).

For motivation and involvement, the dark side of organizational commitment literature provides explanatory resources. Meyer, Morin, and Wasti (2021) distinguish among affective commitment (emotional attachment to the organization), continuance commitment (awareness of the costs associated with leaving), and normative commitment (feeling of obligation to remain). When involvement becomes obsessive rather than harmonious, or when it is driven by continuance concerns such as fear of losing benefits rather than genuine attachment to the organization, it can produce negative individual outcomes such as burnout while still driving task completion (Vallerand, 2015). Similarly, motivation that is primarily extrinsic and controlled rather than intrinsic and autonomous may be perceived negatively because of its association with external pressure while still contributing to productivity (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Sarrazin et al., 2011).

For empathy and helpfulness, research on emotional labor and organizational citizenship behavior provides explanatory resources. Hochschild (1983) demonstrated that empathy, when experienced as emotional labor that must be performed regardless of genuine feeling, can lead to emotional exhaustion. Virat and colleagues (2025) have described compassion fatigue as a consequence of unregulated empathy in caregiving professions. Eldor (2018, 2022) has shown that compassion at work acts as a buffer against stress, but only when it is perceived as genuine and supported by management. Bolino, Hsiung, Harvey, and LePine (2015) and Bolino and Klotz (2022) have

articulated the burden of organizational citizenship, showing that helpfulness, while beneficial for the organization, can impose costs on the individual including work-family interference, exhaustion, and neglect of core tasks (Allen et al., 2020; Clark et al., 2020). These individual costs may cause empathy and helpfulness to be perceived negatively even as they generate organizational benefits.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design and Sample

The data for this analysis were drawn from the same larger research project described in the preceding articles. The research adopted a quantitative, hypothetico-deductive approach. The sample comprised three hundred and eighty-one respondents, including one hundred and eighty-five civil servants and one hundred and ninety-six service users, across multiple ministries in Libreville, Gabon.

### 3.2 Measurement of Behavioral Items

The behavioral items were measured using five-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (low) to 5 (high). Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which various behaviors characterized the civil servants they observed or with whom they interacted. The complete list of behavioral items included motivation, sociability, cooperation, involvement, collaboration, hospitality, listening, helpfulness, autonomy, empathy, benevolence, self-motivation, respect, cynicism, conflictuality, self-interest, attitude, and team spirit.

### 3.3 Analytical Technique

Structural equation modeling using AMOS software was employed to estimate factor loadings of each behavioral item onto the latent behavior construct (Byrne, 2016). Items with positive loadings were interpreted as aligning with the construct in the expected direction, while items with negative loadings were interpreted as inversely related to the construct. The composite behavior variable was then used to predict organizational performance.

### 3.4 Reliability and Validity

The reliability of the behavioral scales was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.688, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.6 (Trizano-Hermosilla & Alvarado, 2016). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.782, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2$ = 524.538, df = 78, p < .001). Jöreskog's Rho for the behavior construct was 0.923, and the average variance extracted was 0.736, confirming convergent validity (Roussel et al., 2002).

## 4. RESULTS

The structural equation modeling analysis produced a clear and unexpected split among the behavioral items.

### 4.1 Positive Loadings

The following items loaded positively onto the behavior construct: collaboration, with a standardized coefficient of 0.092 and a p-value of 0.019; self-motivation, with a coefficient of 0.149 and a p-value of 0.008; benevolence, with a coefficient of 0.174 and a p-value of 0.001; sociability, with a coefficient of 0.100 and a p-value of 0.075; cynicism, with a coefficient of 0.707; and team spirit, with a coefficient of 0.101 and a p-value of 0.068.

The positive loading of cynicism is particularly noteworthy. Classical theory would predict that cynicism, defined as a negative reaction toward one's employer characterized by the belief that the organization lacks integrity (Dean et al., 1998), would load negatively onto any positive behavior construct. The fact that cynicism loaded positively suggests that in the Gabonese civil service context, cynicism may be associated with rather than opposed to effective functioning (Vilches & Villoria, 2023; El Bir & Touhami, 2023).

### 4.2 Negative Loadings (The Paradoxical Set)

The following items loaded negatively onto the behavior construct: conflictuality, with a standardized coefficient of -0.190 and a p-value of less than 0.001; motivation, with a coefficient of -0.139 and a p-value of 0.017; involvement, with a coefficient of -0.148 and a p-value of 0.010; empathy, with a coefficient of -0.172 and a p-value of 0.003; and helpfulness, with a coefficient of -0.107 and a p-value of 0.061.

The negative loadings of motivation, involvement, empathy, and helpfulness are deeply paradoxical because these behaviors are universally praised in management literature and practice. One would expect motivated, involved, empathetic, and helpful employees to be perceived as exemplifying positive workplace behavior (Grant, 2008; Ritz et al., 2020b). Yet within the specific context of the Gabonese civil service, these behaviors are inversely associated with the behavior construct.

### 4.3 Behavioral Composite and Performance

Despite these negative loadings, the composite behavior variable significantly and positively predicted organizational performance, with a standardized path coefficient of 0.149 and a p-value of 0.012. Thus, the same behaviors that loaded negatively onto the behavior construct remained part of a behavioral composite that contributed positively to organizational performance.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings presented above require a fundamental reconceptualization of how workplace behaviors are understood and classified within the public sector context. We propose the concept of **functional behavioral paradox** to describe the phenomenon in which behaviors traditionally classified as negative or problematic are, in fact, associated with positive organizational outcomes even as they load negatively onto behavior constructs.

### 5.1 Explaining the Paradox of Conflictuality

For conflictuality, the concept of cognitive conflict provides the most promising explanatory resource. Within organizations, not all conflict is destructive. Cognitive conflict, which involves substantive disagreement about tasks, strategies, and decisions, can surface alternative perspectives, challenge groupthink, and lead to better decisions (Jehn, 1995). The civil servants who engage in cognitive conflict may be perceived as difficult or uncooperative, hence the negative loading of conflictuality onto the behavior construct. Yet these same civil servants may contribute substantially to organizational performance by preventing premature consensus, identifying hidden problems, and forcing creative solutions. As Mazra, Sahut, and Hikkerova (2020) demonstrated in their study of diversity, conflict, and performance in new ventures,

cognitive conflicts in teams can positively affect performance by valuing the experiences necessary for good strategic decision-making. De Mol, Khapova, and Elfring (2015) further showed, through a meta-analysis of 44 articles, that cognitive conflicts lead to a shared team cognition that is a source of performance.

### 5.2 Explaining the Paradox of Motivation and Involvement

For motivation and involvement, the distinction between harmonious and obsessive forms of passion and commitment is critical. Vallerand (2015) distinguished between harmonious passion, which remains under the individual's control and integrates with other life activities, and obsessive passion, which controls the individual and conflicts with other activities. Similarly, organizational commitment can take forms that are beneficial to the organization but costly to the individual (Meyer et al., 2021). Civil servants who are obsessively motivated or involved may be perceived negatively because their intensity creates interpersonal friction or because they are seen as out of step with the more relaxed pace of their colleagues. Yet their obsessive engagement may drive task completion, problem-solving, and organizational performance. The finding that involvement loaded negatively onto the behavior construct while remaining part of a performance-enhancing composite aligns with Crozier's (1963) observation that in bureaucratic organizations, excessive commitment to rules can produce rigid, defensive behaviors that, while perceived negatively, may nevertheless accomplish organizational goals. Furthermore, research by Holding and colleagues (2022) suggests that when obstacles stand in the way of personal goals, disengagement can be an adaptive response associated with improved mental and physical health, indicating that sustained motivation and involvement are not always beneficial.

### 5.3 Explaining the Paradox of Empathy and Helpfulness

For empathy and helpfulness, the literature on emotional labor and citizenship burden provides the most compelling explanations. Empathy, when experienced as emotional labor that must be performed regardless of genuine feeling, is exhausting. Hochschild (1983) coined the term emotional labor to describe the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display. Civil servants who provide empathetic service to users may be perceived negatively not because empathy is undesirable but because its expression is associated with emotional

exhaustion, which manifests in subtle behavioral cues that influence observer ratings (Patterson & Larios, 2021; Edlins, 2021).

Similarly, helpfulness, when it goes beyond formal role requirements, can produce citizenship fatigue. Bolino and colleagues (2015, 2022) demonstrated that employees who engage in high levels of organizational citizenship behavior experience role overload, work-family conflict, and eventual decrements in task performance. Vigoda-Gadot, Mizrahi, and Miller-Konopka (2021) have shown that in the public sector, helpfulness can become a pressure rather than a choice, creating a new exhausting norm. Civil servants who are exceptionally helpful may be perceived as overstepping boundaries or creating dependencies, yet their helpfulness may substantially improve service quality and user satisfaction (Tummers, 2020). The concept of compassion fatigue, as developed by Virat and colleagues (2025), further explains why empathy, which is essential for quality public service, can lead to negative perceptions when it results in emotional exhaustion.

### 5.4 Explaining the Positive Loading of Cynicism

For cynicism, which loaded positively onto the behavior construct, we propose the concept of functional cynicism. Contrary to the classical view that cynicism is uniformly corrosive (Chiaburu et al., 2013), Cartwright and Holmes (2006) suggested that defensive cynicism can sometimes reflect critical thinking and a strong attachment to professional values that have been disappointed by the institution. Within the Gabonese civil service, where recent political transition may have produced significant institutional turbulence, cynicism may serve as a protective mechanism that allows civil servants to maintain emotional distance from bureaucratic pressures while continuing to perform their core functions effectively (Vilches & Villoria, 2023; El Bir & Touhami, 2023).

Dean, Brandes, and Dharwadkar (1998) defined organizational cynicism as a negative attitude toward one's employing organization, comprising three dimensions: a belief that the organization lacks integrity, negative affect toward the organization, and tendencies to engage in disparaging and critical behaviors toward the organization. However, recent research by Souak, Said, and El Fardi (2025) has shown that cynicism in the civil service is not simply disengagement but often represents disillusioned engagement—a continued commitment to the mission of public service combined with a critical stance toward the administrative apparatus that delivers it. This functional

cynicism allows civil servants to preserve their professional identity and sense of purpose even as they distance themselves emotionally from organizational dysfunction. The positive loading of cynicism onto the behavior construct suggests that, in this context, cynical civil servants are not disengaged or uncooperative but rather are perceived as realistic, resilient, and effective (Rothstein, 2021).

## 6. CONCLUSION

The present study makes a novel contribution to public management literature by identifying and explaining the phenomenon of functional behavioral paradox within the civil service. The finding that motivation, involvement, empathy, helpfulness, and conflictuality loaded negatively onto the behavior construct while remaining part of a performance-enhancing behavioral composite challenges the foundational assumptions of classical behavioral taxonomy.

We conclude that in the high-stakes public sector environment, where civil servants must navigate competing pressures from legal requirements, political expectations, and citizen needs (Lipsky, 2010; Tummers & Bekkers, 2024), the relationship between individual behaviors and organizational performance is inherently paradoxical. Behaviors that are costly to the individual may benefit the organization, while behaviors that are beneficial to the individual may impose organizational costs. The negative loadings observed in this study may reflect the perception of individual costs rather than objective behavioral dysfunction.

For public managers, the implication is clear: do not suppress conflictuality, motivation, involvement, empathy, or helpfulness simply because these behaviors are perceived negatively or because classical theory classifies some of them as problematic. Instead, support civil servants in managing the emotional and psychological costs associated with these behaviors (Borst et al., 2020). Provide resources for coping with compassion fatigue, create opportunities for recovery from emotional labor, and recognize that cognitive conflict, while uncomfortable, is essential for organizational learning and adaptation (Eldor, 2022).

Future research should develop instruments capable of distinguishing between functional and dysfunctional forms of each paradoxical behavior. For motivation, researchers should distinguish between harmonious and obsessive passion (Vallerand, 2015). For involvement, between affective

and continuance commitment (Meyer et al., 2021). For empathy, between genuine compassion and performed emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). For helpfulness, between sustainable citizenship and citizenship fatigue (Bolino et al., 2015). For conflictuality, between cognitive and affective conflict (Jehn, 1995). Such refined measurement would enable more precise predictions about when each behavior contributes to performance and when it becomes genuinely detrimental.

Longitudinal research is also needed to examine the temporal dynamics of behavioral paradox. The negative loadings observed in this cross-sectional study may reflect the effects of accumulated exhaustion or disillusionment (Schaufeli, 2021). A civil servant who begins with high motivation, deep involvement, genuine empathy, and spontaneous helpfulness may, over time, experience burnout and compassion fatigue (Virat et al., 2025), leading to behavioral changes that are perceived negatively even as task performance is maintained. Understanding these temporal dynamics would enable interventions at critical junctures before functional behaviors tip into dysfunction.

Finally, comparative research across different national contexts and different public service sectors is needed to determine the generalizability of the paradoxical patterns observed in Gabon. The specific historical moment of political transition may have heightened certain paradoxes while attenuating others. Replication studies in stable political environments, in different cultural contexts, and in subsectors such as health, education, and security would establish the boundary conditions of the functional behavioral paradox phenomenon.

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