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How-to bureaucracy

A concept of citizens' administrative literacy

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How-to Bureaucracy: A Concept of Citizens' Administrative Literacy

Abstract:

Administrative Literacy is the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic information and services from public organizations needed to make appropriate decisions. Citizens' competencies necessary for successful interactions with public administration remain a widely neglected resource. Administrative burden resulting from citizen-state interactions may impact citizens differently depending on their available resources to cope. Research from other fields such as health literacy suggests that these concepts influence a variety of outcomes for both the individual and society. The article develops a concept of administrative literacy in order to provide new approaches to various fields of public administration and management research.

Citizens encounter public organizations in various life situations, be it the police, the tax office or an office for social welfare. On these occasions, citizens interact (more or less) directly with the state and its administration. Yet, '[d]espite the critical importance of this link in public administration, citizen-state interactions have received relatively little direct attention within the field' (Jakobsen, James, Moynihan, & Nabatchi, 2016, p. 1).

While the role of street-level bureaucrats (SLB) in such public encounters (Bartels, 2013; Goodsell, 1981) has been intensely researched over the last decades (Dubois, 2014; Keiser, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012), recently, public administration scholars have also looked at the relationship between SLB and citizens. Research on representative bureaucracy (Lim, 2006) has investigated the effect of ethnic (Hong, 2017), gender (Gul, 2018; Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006; Riccucci, van Ryzin, & Li, 2016), and cultural matches between bureaucracies and citizens (Andersen, 2017). Furthermore, studies have examined the effects of the perceived deservingness of clients (Jilke & Tummers, 2018), signals which are interpreted by SLB (Raaphorst & van de Walle, 2018), causing discriminating behavior (Andersen & Gul, 2019; Nicholson-Crotty, Nicholson-Crotty, & Fernandez, 2017), or the role of trust between both participants in these encounters (Senghaas, Freier, & Kupka, 2019). However, the role of citizens remains mostly passive in these studies, while scholars agree that the abilities and capacities of citizens may be crucial for influencing the behavior of SLB (Ludwig-Mayerhofer, Behrend, & Sondermann, 2014; Senghaas et al., 2019, p. 10), e.g. during negotiation processes (Raaphorst & Loyens, 2018, p. 22). While SLB will tend to treat most clients alike due to routinization, '[...] those who are particularly able to assist in managing their own cases, tend to receive differential responses [from the SLB]' (Lipsky, 2010, p. 122). To what extent are clients with different abilities and capacities able to convince the street-level

bureaucrat to use his or her discretion in favor of the client? Are clients with a better understanding of rules and regulations more capable of avoiding sanctions? This interactional dimension of public encounters remains widely unexplored. This is insofar remarkable as citizens will not only differ in terms of their attitudes and trust towards public institutions (Cook & Gronke, 2005), but also in the way they interact due to their knowledge and skills (Gordon, 1975; Ludwig-Mayerhofer et al., 2014).

Most recently, researchers started to pay attention to this research gap. Bisgaard (2020) provides a highly valuable approach and shows that self-efficacy is a strong determinant of individual behavior during public encounters. Masood and Nisar (2020) describe in their case study how knowledge about bureaucratic rules and procedures enables clients to approach public organizations more proficiently resulting in higher success rates when applying for maternity leave. Nielsen et al. (2020) provide a useful set of client types based on their behavior prior and during public encounters.

This study seeks to further this citizen-centered perspective on interactions. While self-efficacy (Bisgaard, 2020; Kristensen, Andersen, & Pedersen, 2012) is an important antecedent for behavior, it is only one side of the medal. Bandura (1977) differentiates between self-efficacy (as a self-assessed proficiency) and actual competencies. While there is an obvious feedback loop between both concepts, their relationship is much more complex than that (Moore & Chang, 2009; Thomsen, Baekgaard, & Jensen, 2020). For example, high levels of self-efficacy in combination with overconfidence may even result in worse performance (Richard, Diefendorff, & Martin, 2006). Thus, in order to avoid such confounding effects, we need a complementary understanding of competences necessary for clients to interact proficiently

with public organizations. This is further supported by a recent case study by Chudnovsky and Peeters (2020) that emphasize the pivotal role of cognitive capacities and bureaucratic competences that affect non-take-up of welfare programs. In contrast to Masood and Nisar (2020), this covers not only knowledge, but also skills specifically applied to the context of public encounters. Furthermore, their conceptualization of administrative capital focuses specifically on interactional sequence of public encounters. However, success during such encounters will depend on steps taken prior to these while collecting, comprehending and assessing information in preparation. Additionally, the presented concept in this study advances our understanding of citizens' competencies beyond general education and other socio-economic variables often used as rough proxies. Thus, by conceptualizing a model of 'administrative literacy' (AL), this study adds an explanation for differing behavior in public encounters.

This article is structured as follows: First, the role of individual competencies in public encounters will be explicated from a theoretical perspective. Second, the concept of administrative literacy will be developed. At that, the concept of health literacy will serve as a blueprint. Finally, further applications of administrative literacy to practice and other theoretical frameworks will be discussed.

The role of individual competencies in interactions with public organizations

Interactions with public administrations have significant or even severe effects on citizens' everyday lives. Tax returns, applications for social welfare, day care – none of these interactions come without administrative burdens that shape the interactions' outcomes, citizens'

perception, and behavior (Burden, Canon, Mayer, & Moynihan, 2012). Administrative burden manifests in the form of costs that are imposed on the citizen. Moynihan et al. (2014) distinguish between three types of costs. Learning costs incur when citizens have to collect, process, and evaluate information about services and procedures. Which institution is responsible for my application? Am I eligible for the program? Which information is needed from me? The level of these learning costs, however, may differ among individuals who are more familiar with administrative organizations and specific vocabulary, or more skilled in searching for this information. Compliance costs describe the use of resources for following administrative requirements, rules, and procedures. The continuous reporting of family income for the application of welfare support is an example for such costs. Finally, psychological costs describe the loss of autonomy and the stigma of being dependent on programs that are negatively perceived. Herd and Moynihan (2018, p. 16ff) propose a comprehensive model of administrative burden in which they describe antecedents, consequences, and mediating factors. Accordingly, the impact of these costs will differ across different client groups (Herd & Moynihan, 2018, p. 6f). Whether these costs will be easily handled, depends for example on the available human capital, such as skills, resources, and the client's network (Herd & Moynihan, 2018, p. 30f). Moreover, Christensen et al. (2020) postulate the essential role of cognitive capacities to overcome burden, especially for vulnerable groups. Hence, administrative literacy represents a domain specific category of human capital, necessary to reduce administrative burden and lower the related costs.

Citizen-state interactions are special insofar as the context is often highly technical due to legal regulations underlying public services, the higher social status of state institutions, and the

citizen's frequent dependence on decisions made by street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010). These conditions determine the behavior of the clients, as they require certain skills to cope with such situations. The study by Heinrich (2016) offers an analysis of administrative burden in the context of child support in South Africa. In her analysis, she confirms that troubles finding required documents is one of the major factors explaining interrupted payments for an especially vulnerable group.

Citizens falling short of these skills and knowledge may depend on third parties to help them either by supplementing their lack of competencies – e.g. tax consultants or other intermediaries (Döring & Löbel, 2018) – or teaching them the necessary knowledge and skills. In his study on a marginalized genderqueer group in Pakistan, Nisar (2018) finds that NGOs play an important role for members of these groups in supporting them with knowledge and teaching them about administrative processes in order to empower them to overcome the administrative burden. These examples illustrate the role that administrative literacy can play in easing the costs imposed by administrative burden. At the same time, both studies show that general education provides only limited explanation for the effects of administrative burden.

Furthermore, these examples emphasize the impact of AL on social equity. Increasing the level of administrative literacy empowers citizens to access services and decisions for which they are eligible. Having these skills and knowledge at the individual's disposal empowers him or her to interact, even on such an unfamiliar turf as administrative processes.

Similar discussions have been held in public health research. For years, practitioners and scholars have rallied for empowering patients to increase their self-efficacy (Schwarzer, 2014; Strecher, DeVellis, Becker, & Rosenstock, 1986). Under the concept of ‘health literacy,’ studies have investigated the effects of health-related knowledge and competences on patient compliance, number of visits to the doctor, and the perceived health (Baker, Parker, Williams, & Clark, 1998; DeWalt, Berkman, Sheridan, Lohr, & Pignone, 2004).

There is a wide debate on how to conceptualize and define health literacy (Sorensen et al., 2012). The most accepted approach is the ‘skill-based’ concept that builds on knowledge and its application (Kickbusch & Maag, 2008). Accordingly, it is defined as ‘the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions’ (Selden, Zorn, Ratzan, & Parker, 2000, p. ix). Within this skill-based perspective, Nutbeam (2000) identifies three dimensions that make up health literacy: functional, communicative/interactive and critical literacy. While functional literacy describes general reading and writing abilities (Baker et al., 1998), the latter two dimensions push the concept beyond mere information accumulation: A patient with high health literacy is able to read and understand more technical texts (such as drug descriptions). Additionally, the patient is also able to critically reflect on the information and express concerns to the doctor, ask questions and communicate at an eye level despite the typical information hierarchy of doctor-patient relationships (Nutbeam, 2009; Paasche-Orlow & Wolf, 2007).

Manganello (2008) extends this concept with a dimension of media literacy due to the increasing importance of provision and selection of information in a mass media setting. The availability of such media enables clients to become increasingly autonomous while also overloading them with information. This potential overload again demands a critical evaluation of the information and its sources (Knibbe, Vries, & Horstman, 2016). Freedman et al. (2009) shift the concept from an individual level to a macro-level, conceptualizing the effects of public health literacy on complex social structures such as societies. By adding a civic orientation, they want to sensitize researchers to the societal implications of health-related decisions and behavior on the individual level (e.g. vaccination). Zarcadoolas (2005) follows a different approach, creating an analytical framework in which to evaluate the actions of policy actors concerning their communication of health-related issues. Beside functional literacy, she differentiates between science literacy, civic literacy, and cultural literacy. Science literacy constitutes the general knowledge and understanding of science, such as expressions of probabilities and relations (e.g. rates of contagion) and the ability to evaluate those. Civic literacy again resembles the approach by Freedman et al. (2009) in describing an understanding of complex interactions between the individual and society. Finally, cultural literacy emphasizes the relevance of social identities and symbols when communicating about health-related information.

The interaction between doctor and patient is characterized by an information asymmetry that constitutes the basis of a relationship of dependency in which trust is of special importance. These characteristics resemble those of public encounters, as well as the interaction between SLB and citizens.

A concept of administrative literacy

Taking the conception of health literacy and the given approaches defining administrative literacy as a basis, this article conceptualizes a multidimensional model of administrative literacy. For this purpose, six subcategories of administrative literacy will be formed: functional literacy, communicative literacy, structural literacy, processual literacy, civic literacy, media literacy (see Table 1 for an overview). These dimensions are based and derived from similar subdimensions in the health literacy literature, while adding domain specific dimensions on characteristics of administrative structures and processes based on prior studies addressing demands on clients when interacting with public organizations (Goodsell, 1981; Gordon, 1975; Grönlund, Hatakka, & Ask, 2007; Lipsky, 2010; Masood & Nisar, 2020).

Functional literacy describes the basic capability to understand specific bureaucratic language. Therefore, it represents the basis for an understanding of administrative work procedures, writings and requests. Redish (1983) describes bureaucratic language as characterized by a specific technical vocabulary and longer and more complex sentence constructions (in particular, passive constructions). This complex and elaborate language is rooted in a judicial working structure and a depersonalized work manner (Sarangi & Slembrouck, 1996). Therefore, a certain level of functional literacy is necessary for acquiring and exchanging information.

Communicative literacy builds on the basic skills of functional literacy by describing the ability to interact and communicate with others, in our case public employees, case workers etc. This ability includes oral and written expression, actively listening to others, and discussing opinions. Bureaucratic encounters differ from normal interactions insofar as to the legally technical content paired with a strong power asymmetry. Thus, communication differs quite substantially from arguing with, for example, family or friends. Especially in encounters in which the SLB have discretion, expressing one's concerns, persuading the case worker, and objecting to decisions are crucial for citizens. Raaphorst and Loyens (2018) show that negotiations can be a major mechanism in citizen-state encounters. Thus, being able to perform well, playing the right role by choosing the right arguments in different situations can be crucial for convincing street-level bureaucrats.

Structural literacy includes a comprehension of internal and external administrative structures. In particular, it gives insight into the general working and organizational structures of public organizations (Masood & Nisar, 2020). The citizen understands organizations not just as a black box. Furthermore, the citizen is able to find the organizational unit relevant for his or her concerns in a broader bureaucratic system. This may turn out to be crucial in cases in which the client needs to find the right contact person for applications, complaints, or objections. It may also foster an understanding of the structure of work in public organizations and its effects on procedures.

[Table 1 here]

Knowledge about bureaucratic working procedures and the expected forms of interaction with public organizations is described under processual literacy. This is expressed mainly in an impersonal use of communication and a focus on routines (Lipsky, 2010, p. 99f). In order to successfully complete especially long-term administrative processes with multiple episodes, citizens need an awareness and knowledge of procedural steps that may, for example, include the involvement of other departments or organizations that may cause delays (Masood & Nisar, 2020). This knowledge is translated into expected behavior (e.g. patience or consciousness) that may be crucial for appropriate interactions with SLB.

Similar to the health care field, administrative action has a societal regulatory character. Civic literacy illustrates the ability of individuals to deduce the relevance of one's actions in citizen-state interactions for other people and society as a whole (Milner, 2002). For the individual, the purpose of certain regulations and obligations may not always be comprehensible, as they aim for a higher purpose for wider segments of society. Whether regulations are opposed as red tape (Bozeman & Feeney, 2011; DeHart-Davis, Davis, & Mohr, 2015) or understood as justified may depend on that subjective perception.

Media literacy is understood as the capacity to process, understand, and critically evaluate information on policies, programs, or bureaucratic procedures. Sources for these information come in various forms, but mostly mass media, such as the Internet. Again, searching, assessing, and processing information on such programs differs quite substantially from everyday use of media. Media as a source of information is relevant for administrative literacy for different reasons: On the one hand, it influences communication between the political-

administrative system and the citizens (Dahlgren, 2005), e.g. whether the citizen learns about new policies (such as new social programs) and whether he or she is able to judge his or her eligibility. On the other hand, a critical assessment of information gathered from various sources allows validation of its credibility. Internet sources play an increasing role when interacting with public organizations (Reddick & Turner, 2012), e.g. to find forms, but also to get advice from other citizens in forums or social media. A related discussion has developed around the concept of digital literacy. Digital literacy (Gilster, 1997) is a relatively recent concept discussed since the advent of the digital age. While it shares ideas with media literacy in the sense of a (critical) assessment of information from various sources, it also emphasizes the specific differences with digital tools and the presentation of information in that setting. Thus, reading and understanding non-sequential and dynamic material that comes in different medial formats, mastery of specific hard- and software, and the willingness and ability to publish and/or communicate information are specific challenges of the digital realm distinct from traditional channels of interactions (Bawden, 2001). With the progressive introduction of apps and online processing, digital channels become a new default with which public administration provides information or even the service as a whole. Hence, citizens are expected to possess sufficient levels of digital literacy to use these emerging channels.

Bawden (2008) summarizes four components that constitute digital literacy. The general underpinnings, background knowledge, central competencies, as well as attitudes and perspectives. While functional literacy, the critical assessment of information, and a social and societal understanding of one's actions are already covered by the other subdimensions, the addition of digital literacy focusses on the mastery of ICT tools – both hard- and software – the specific processing of information in digital formats compared to traditional media, and

the creation and communication of digital information. Grönlund et al. (2007) find that digital services lower the general knowledge and skill requirements for applicants. However, especially complicated services may cause additional burden and the need for skills to search information online and technological literacy. In a similar vein, Peeters and Widlak (2018) describe how digital architectures can quickly turn into substantial administrative burden trapping citizens in a “digital cage”. For the sake of parsimony, these elements are incorporated here under the broader concept of media literacy.

Hence, the various subdimensions of administrative literacy cover three essential phase of citizen-state interactions from the citizen’s point of view: 1) collecting and assessing information, 2) exchanging information, 3) deriving personal decisions based on step 1 and 2.

As administrative literacy is described here as a skill-based concept, the individual’s level is variable and not fixed. Experience from prior public encounters, information gathered from other sources, advice given by peers – all these aspects may increase (or potentially decrease) administrative literacy. While some subdimensions appear to be more generic than others, it has to emphasized that the context of public encounters poses a specific individual challenge. Reading and understanding forms and administrative guidelines is very different from reading a novel. Communicating and convincing colleagues or friends is very different from talking to your job counselor. Using Facebook is very different from navigating a government webpage. Moreover, administrative literacy does not cover generic executive functions as discussed by Christensen et al. (2020) as they are considered to be domain non-specific to bureaucratic encounters. Thus, if we want to assess public encounters to their fullest extent, administrative

literacy provides a frame to assess situations prior to, during, and after public encounters (Lehmann Nielsen et al., 2020).

The nature of the public encounter the client engages in will determine which of these subdimensions play a more prominent role compared to others. Being confronted with a police control will revolve around questions of communication, role expectations, individual rights, etc. Applying for social security payments, however, demands for skills and knowledge about where to find information and relevant forms, pre-assessing one's eligibility, as well as reading and understanding forms. Thus, how these subdimensions are relevant and combine, is highly context specific.

In general, AL is conceptualized as a universal set of skills and knowledge, applicable to a wide range of policy fields. However, it is primarily focused on formal public encounters that result in either status-changing decisions based on discretion or formal service encounters such as consultation for unemployed. Other more informal interactions that mainly provide a service function (think of parents interacting with teachers concerning their children's grades) may not necessarily be influenced by the AL level of the parents. Nevertheless, such formal encounters are also common in the education sector when parents apply for second-tier schools, exemptions from sports classes (e.g. for religious reasons) and other status-changing decisions.

The effects of administrative literacy

The effects of high AL are expected to be manifold (see Figure 1). On the individual level, all three types of costs related to administrative burden are addressed. Higher capacities are expected to lower learning costs as clients find it easier to gather and process necessary information from various information sources, such as information pages on the internet or directly from forms. Furthermore, compliance costs should be lowered as clients interact and contribute to the service in the 'expected way'. Clients would find it easier to comprehend forms and communicate with their agents on the different matters. Moreover, they could be able to take a stronger stance in negotiation processes to lower expected documentation needs (Raaphorst & Loyens, 2018).

Higher levels of administrative literacy may also cause psychological empowerment, increasing self-perceived efficacy when interacting with official institutions (Kristensen et al., 2012; Paasche-Orlow & Wolf, 2007; Thomsen et al., 2020). Thereby, the psychological costs may be cushioned. This may increase the propensity of citizens to actively engage in voice behavior when dissatisfied with public services (Hirschman, 1970; Wallin Andreassen, 1994). It could, for example, explain why some citizens tend to participate in citizen surveys or panels (Crosby, Kelly, & Schaefer, 1986), or get involved in citizen participation processes (Bingham, Nabatchi, & O'Leary, 2005; Kathlene & Martin, 1991; Weber, Loumakis, & Bergman, 2003). Furthermore, it could prove to be a major antecedent for co-production behavior (Parrado, van Ryzin, Bovaird, & Löffler, 2013; Thomsen, 2017; van Eijk & Steen, 2016). Greater familiarity with administrative vocabulary as well as one's own rights and duties when interacting with public organizations may also influence the citizen's chances for successful applications. By knowing important key words or shortcuts in the administrative process, he

or she may seize opportunities that citizens with lower administrative literacy may not be aware of. The empowerment may also have implications on the overall evaluation of public services. Studies on satisfaction with services in the private sector indicate that greater empowerment and self-efficacy of clients increase their satisfaction with services, positive word-of-mouth, and customer loyalty (Dong, Evans, & Zou, 2008; Fuchs & Schreier, 2011; Soss, 1999; Tiu Wright, Ouschan, Sweeney, & Johnson, 2006).

[Figure 1 here]

On the interactional level, citizens with higher administrative literacy may lower the transaction costs for SLB, as they require less consultation, make fewer mistakes when filling out forms and may be generally better informed. Furthermore, it may also be possible that such citizens behave differently when interacting with SLB. Courtesy and respectfulness, but also deliberately used communication strategies (Kasper & Kellerman, 2014), may influence the behavior of the SLB who will make the decisions.

On the societal level, higher administrative literacy may be associated with higher levels of trust in public institutions – assuming a somewhat functional administrative system. As people understand the nature of bureaucratic organization (and their rationality), public organizations may lose their Kafkaesque aura which often creates prejudice and skepticism about their legitimacy. However, administrative literacy does not automatically translate to more satisfaction and trust with the administrative system. After all, this still depends on actual performance experienced by individuals (James, 2007; van de Walle, 2018). However,

administrative literacy may enable citizens to differentiate between specific causes for dissatisfaction and general 'bureauphobia' (del Pino, Calzada, & Díaz-Pulido, 2016) in a broader sense.

Likewise, AL may be an important factor for the outreach of certain policies such as social programs. In order to be effective, such policy programs need to actually reach the supposed target groups in need. Oftentimes, however, missing knowledge of the existence of such services, one's potential eligibility or access barriers may lower the demand (Cortis, 2012). Thus, differences in AL may explain why programs that are generally open to a broad audience are harnessed by a mere fraction causing greater inequality. Finally, higher administrative literacy may lower the societal costs for unjustified complaints and lawsuits that burden courts.

While the suggested effects may be substantive, citizens remain in an asymmetrical relationship with public organizations. No matter how high the administrative literacy of an individual may be, decisions based on discretion will be made by street-level bureaucrats. Higher AL levels will not create privileges but may help to create more privileged outcomes compared to other citizens.

The concept of administrative literacy is closely related while still distinct to other concepts such as self-efficacy. Cognitive theories conceptualize self-efficacy as the prior assessment of perceived effectiveness when encountering a specific situation (Bandura, 1977). However, this expectation of one's efficacy is complemented by the capabilities and skills that the individual has at their disposal (Caprara, Vecchione, Capanna, & Mebane, 2009). As such, it cannot be taught, but with increasing mastery of certain tasks it will increase as a cognitive learning

process. Thus, administrative literacy represents the capabilities, skills, and knowledge needed when interacting with public administrations. Higher levels of AL, however, will likely increase one's perceived efficacy when having experiences of mastery. Administrative literacy is therefore an addition to understanding citizen-state interactions connected to such concepts as public service efficacy (Bisgaard, 2020; Kristensen et al., 2012). The effect of these necessary skills and knowledge will be mediated by self-efficacy into a more proficient performance (Ozer & Bandura, 1990, p. 473). Individuals with high levels of AL but a lack of self-efficacy are still likely well-prepared for public encounters. However, one can assume that the lack of self-efficacy will result in more passive behavior in interactions, thus not being able to purposefully engage in negotiations (Raaphorst & Loyens, 2018). On the other hand, a lack of AL combined with high self-efficacy might result in overconfidence or impressions of entitlement. Both constellations are inferior to a match of high levels of both aspects.

This also leads to the possible adverse effects of administrative literacy. Citizens with higher levels may be more capable of 'gaming the system,' as they are aware of administrative (inefficient) processes and are more willing to take risks, e.g. when not giving sufficient or necessary information in application processes. Additionally, higher levels could increase a citizen's self-efficacy, which in turn increases the likelihood voicing dissatisfaction with a decision made by the public organization, thus boosting transaction costs. Accordingly, clients with higher AL may be more likely to articulate shortcomings, also due to their communicative skills. Whether such complaints are legitimate or not, an excessive use of complaints binds substantial resources and may cause emotional stress on street-level bureaucrats (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2020).

Furthermore, a broader understanding of a complex and even onerous administrative system may engender skepticism about flaws and inefficiencies within. Moreover, street-level bureaucrats may enact cherry-picking individuals with higher levels of AL as they are “easy cases” that are capable of managing themselves (Lipsky, 2010, p. 122).

In general, differences in individual literacy skills should not be used as an excuse for governmental inaction to overcome inequalities caused by low administrative literacy. Rather, governments should see this concept as a tool to specifically address administrative burden.

Measuring administrative literacy

Gordon (1975) proposed a first attempt at measuring administrative competence. She used a mixture of survey, ethnographic, and quiz-based measures. This included a question about who filled out the person’s tax form, a quiz about bureaucratic vocabulary, and an assessment of the comprehension of vocabulary during an interaction with caseworkers. While this triangulated measurement has its clear benefits in preventing common-method bias, it suffers from low statistical power (Gordon only measured about 60 individuals) due to its costly measurement. Furthermore, there might be concerns with the reliability of the measurement. The conceptualization of administrative competence also remains rather narrow by focusing mostly on functional literacy. Additionally, measurement instruments aimed at such issues need to manage the balance between the specificity of certain administrative fields (such as policing or social services) and general skills that are as widely usable as possible.

A vast landscape of different measurement tools has evolved in the field of health literacy (Haun, Valerio, McCormack, Sørensen, & Paasche-Orlow, 2014). Most of them are related to

the Rapid Estimate of Adult Literacy in Medicine (REALM) or the Test of Functional Health Literacy for Adults (TOFHLA), which serve as gold standards for objective measurement concerning health literacy. However, there is also a variety of self-assessed survey tools. One major advantage of such self-assessments is their efficiency in large-n studies. Despite that advantage, potential self-report bias is a commonly expressed critique of such instruments, as individuals tend to over-exaggerate their competence levels. However, this generic approach to measurement comes with the advantage of broad applicability. More objective measures such as quizzes need to be specific for certain types of services. In this regard, we would need to measure the administrative literacy levels for child support differently than applications for pensions. Moreover, those measures are costlier to implement – e.g. in a survey study – compared to self-assessments.

A Research Agenda: Where to go from here?

Based on these considerations, there are various necessary steps to take next. First, the development of measurement tools is a critical milestone. As discussed in the previous chapter, these tools may follow different methodological approaches, either test based or as a self-assessment. Both approaches provide valuable strategies for further research. The first may be incorporated in specific policy contexts to provide high validity measures, effects in these policy contexts on specific outcomes, and to test the effectiveness of measures to increase the citizens' administrative literacy, e.g. in an experimental setting. The latter approach could prove to be valuable for broader survey-based studies with larger samples. Thus, interactions with satisfaction ratings, trust in institutions, and policy uptake should be examined closely. A purposeful survey instrument should attempt to measure administrative literacy in a formative

measurement model. With such an instrument, studies would be able to disentangle dynamics between subdimensions, the specific relevance of antecedents, and differential effects on outcomes. XXX (reference anonymized for peer-review purposes) provided a first suggestion for such a measurement approach. Additionally, a short-scale measurement would be desirable that covers the basic essence of the concept, e.g. by focusing on the provided definition in this research. This would provide researchers with a flexible yet powerful addition to customer or citizen surveys.

A major challenge of such a survey instrument is the applicability to citizens with severe language deficiencies. The most vulnerable may not be appropriately addressed using such an approach. Hence, other methodological approaches may complement research on administrative literacy, like ethnological approaches (Hand & Catlaw, 2019) by participating in public encounters.

Additionally, it would be interesting to compare such measures with the assessment made by others, explicitly street-level bureaucrats. This could be especially important for research on public encounters. Are SLB able to assess the literacy level of their clients? How does it change their behavior? Will it trigger more facilitative behavior (Boer, 2018), or could it lead to cream-skimming behavior, prioritizing those cases with expectedly lower transaction costs? At the same time, as the concept of administrative literacy is skill-based, the SLB-client nexus could also be one of the major sources of improvement in the citizen's understanding when the SLB invest time to explain different procedures, for example. Therefore, it could also be useful to develop an objective measure of administrative literacy in order to assess individual literacy in long-term service rapports. This could prove especially useful for practitioners and policy

makers. Knowing the level of administrative literacy of their clients could improve the work of public employees, as they can address citizens more adequately and efficiently.

Second, various fields of study within public administration and policy might potentially benefit from this citizen-centered approach. Concepts such as public self-efficacy (Bisgaard, 2020), psychological costs (Thomsen et al., 2020), trust in institutions (van de Walle & Lahat, 2017), compliance, as well as political involvement and co-production (Thomsen, 2017) may benefit from the added perspective of citizens' skills and knowledge concerning the administrative system and processes. Based on the arguments above, one can assume that certain subdimensions are especially relevant with regard to learning costs (e.g. functional and media literacy). Communicative literacy might affect how much citizens are affected by compliance cost by negotiating exemptions or building trust between citizens and SLB. The reduction of learning costs might also decrease psychological costs as the risk of autonomy loss is mitigated. Furthermore, knowledge about rules and procedures (procedural literacy) may increase an understanding of rules and regulations, thereby further decreasing the effect of autonomy loss when facing administrative demands. These expected relations however need to be tested in future empirical studies.

Third, the origin and development of administrative literacy – also over time – are an essential part to study. As mentioned above, administrative literacy is conceptualized as a dynamic set of competences. Basic competences, such as functional literacy, are likely to be based on general education. Thus, interventions to increase functional literacy will need to be substantial and have a relatively long timeframe. Other subdimensions, such as procedural and structural

literacy, however, are less likely to be based on general education as they are rarely addressed in normal school curricula. Rather, they are likely to be affected by knowledge gathered over time through own experience or being taught by experts, either from one's individual social network, intermediaries (Nisar, 2018), or street-level bureaucrats who invest time and information.

Thus, various types of interventions are likely to affect different aspects of administrative literacy. Possible interventions might differ in their intensity and duration. An extreme example could be the inclusion in school curricula, e.g. structure and style of legal texts or a critical use of media. This is also a topic broadly discussed in other policy fields, such as health or data literacy (Torres & Mercado, 2006). Less extensive would be communication workshops that provide proper strategies when engaging in interactions that suffer from power asymmetries, such as public encounters. Finally, the provision of information and explanations of procedures and rules may be the easiest and least expensive approach to increase citizens' administrative literacy. Future studies will be needed to find successful concepts for such approaches. Moreover, the awareness of administrative literacy as a crucial concept within citizen-state interactions may inform politicians and top-level bureaucrats about how to communicate policy decisions and how to design service provision. In line with studies on administrative burden (Carter, Scott, & Mahallati, 2018; Herd, DeLeire, Harvey, & Moynihan, 2013; Lopoo, Heflin, & Boskovski, 2020; Shybalkina, 2020), providing easily accessible information, tailor services for specific target groups, and decreasing complexity through various means are crucial elements of better public services.

Conclusion

Citizens interact with different kinds of public organizations on a fairly regular basis. Understanding the dynamics of these interactions is key to shaping it into an encounter that benefits both sides of the interaction. The awareness that citizens bring different competencies is important for managing the client relationship, e.g. when designing processes or application forms and training staff in communication (Bell, Auh, & Smalley, 2005).

The construct of administrative literacy captures these different competencies. It determines whether citizens can communicate at eye level. Since a lot of decisions by street-level bureaucrats are affected by the appearance and behavior of citizens in public encounters (Andersen, 2017; Jilke & Tummers, 2018; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2018), this factor may be crucial for understanding the use of discretion. Citizens' administrative literacy may also influence their knowledge about policies and their eligibility for social programs or the results of negotiations with public employees. At the same time, public employees may take advantage of the lower transaction costs due to fewer mistakes or questions from the clients, as well as their higher level of compliance with information delivery and deadlines.

The proposed concept is still in its infancy. However, the discussed literature implies its value for further research in various areas of public administration and management studies. This article aims at providing a conceptual foundation for an analytical angle often neglected.

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Figure 1: Different levels of effects

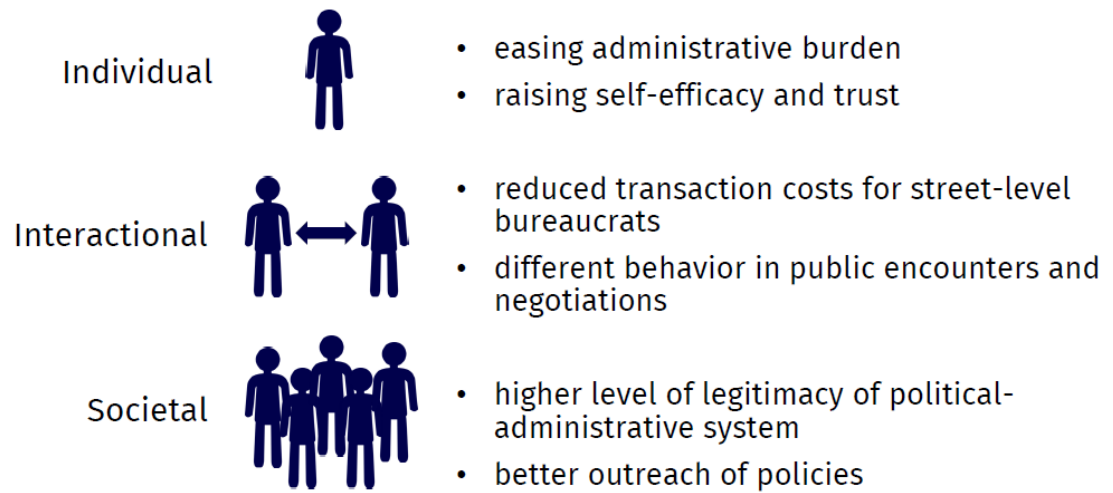


Table 1: Subdimensions of Administrative Literacy

Dimension	Definition	Example
Functional Literacy	ability and knowledge which are necessary to comprehend bureaucratic information given in specific forms and jargon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding forms and official letters
Communicative Literacy	ability and knowledge to actively participate in public encounters to extract and exchange bureaucratic information and derive meaning from different forms of communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehending demands from public employees • Explaining personal needs and reasons
Structural Literacy	ability to navigate the administrative system, by knowing relevant actors, their responsibilities, and available resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing the correct contact to address when applying for services • Understanding division of labor in bureaucracies and its consequences for processing
Processual Literacy	ability to interact appropriately during public encounters due to knowledge about the nature of bureaucratic processes and routines and one's role in them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing procedural steps of applications • Understanding nonpersonal addresses and necessities of certain control and compliance processes • Behaving in a way expected by public employees to achieve favorable outcomes
Media Literacy	ability and knowledge to collect, critically assess, and communicate bureaucratic information relevant for public encounters using various sources, including digital platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researching information on policy programs • Finding out which documents to produce when applying for services • Handling and navigating apps and official webpages in a proficient way to gather information and apply for services
Civic Literacy	ability and knowledge to put individual bureaucratic interactions into their societal context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • realizing the importance of rule compliance as failing to do so may have negative consequences for others (e.g. fire safety regulations, measures to inhibit pandemics)