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ABSTRACT

Cultural humility shows when we stay open to learning and adapt to unfamiliar administrative environments. Humble people reflect on themselves accurately and value unfamiliar bureaucratic cultures. I demonstrate how being inclined to this way influences how innovation fellows align or clash as they introduce agile work practices in government settings. Drawing on qualitative interviews with innovation fellows and their government partners, I identify two dimensions of cultural humility: First, when people continue to stereotype bureaucrats, they create tension in their interactions with public servants. Second, when they reflect on their role, recognize inter-sectoral differences, understand work-arounds, and engage deeply with the public-sector context, they can support effective agile learning. I present a cultural humility framework for researchers to test and validate. It can also guide practitioners successfully onboard consultants, improve how they interact with other external service providers, and support public bureaucracies in organizational change efforts.

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KEYWORDS Cultural humility; cultural disharmony; cultural harmony; agile governance; innovation fellows; positive organizational scholarship

Introduction

Public bureaucracies are increasingly experimenting with new ways to modernize their administrative routines so that they can adapt to the fast-changing pace of societal changes and policy requirements (Monteiro and Adler 2022). They bring in external expertise to review and implement new work practices. A formalized way to support public bureaucracies is the introduction of innovation fellows who have experience in other sectors that are less rigid than the hierarchical, rule-based administrative culture of public bureaucracies (Muratovski 2017).

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Innovation fellows successfully transformed the US federal government by supporting the introduction of agile work practices. These are defined as a *'(w)ork management ideology with a set of productivity frameworks that support continuous and iterative progress on work tasks by reviewing one's own hypotheses, working in a human-centric way, and encouraging evidence-based learning.'* (Mergel 2023, 1). They originate from lean product development practices in the automotive industry, are used in software development to deliver digital products in iterative ways, and in recent years have been adopted beyond the software domain to solve other organizational and management problems (Dingsøyr et al. 2012; Dong et al. 2024; Rigby, Sutherland, and Takeuchi 2016; Takeuchi and Nonaka 1986).

Agile teams collect early feedback on their progress from potential users and integrate this feedback as data into the next iteration (Fernandez and Fernandez 2008). They focus on the improvement of project quality, effectiveness in its delivery, and its core values, including user centricity, collaboration with the customers, delivery of working products, and continuous adaptation to the user needs (Beck et al. 2001).

Agile work practices are often foreign to line-based hierarchical bureaucracies and need to be introduced to public servants through training or immersive practices (Dingsøyr et al. 2012; Mergel, Ganapati, and Whitford 2021). To accomplish this and expose the existing workforce to agile work practices, government agencies use the services of external consultants to guide public servants through the application and adoption of agile work practices. Alternatively, they set up temporary fellowship programmes to bring in external agile experts who work alongside public servants on time-bound projects with the explicit goal of applying agile work practices so that they experience Agile in the context of a relevant problem with the goal that this immersive experience leads them to the acceptance of agile work practices (see, for example, Muratovski 2017).

However, agile and flexible work practices often feel foreign to civil servants who are used to line-based hierarchical work practices (Dingsøyr et al. 2012; Mergel, Ganapati, and Whitford 2021; Neumann, Kirklies, and Schott 2024). They feel native innovation fellows who hail from less bureaucratic or regulated work environments in the private sector, in which collaborative project management practices are seen as a competitive advantage, and innovations are part of their daily routines. When entering the public service, innovation fellows therefore experience a cultural shock and feel disoriented in the unfamiliar environment, which prevents them from proceeding in the ways that have become second nature to them. The disaffection includes denial of access and use of web-based tools, such as Google Docs or other collaborative platforms. These experiences lead to 'culture shock' moments that not only feel disorienting but might also create feelings

of alienation, confusion or anxiety about how to navigate the administrative culture (Mergel 2016).

When innovation fellows enter the public sector from a different work culture, they must actively learn to navigate the norms and values of public bureaucracies, their inherent political and legal constraints, symbols, and language in the form of government abbreviations, unspoken traditions, hierarchical rituals, and administrative initiations. It takes time to interpret the meaning of physical objects, such as analog files and their legal meaning. Even though administrative culture and its routines are somewhat dynamic (Feldman et al. 2016), part of the cultural competence is the awareness that administrative values are inherent in each agency's organizational as well as its institutional culture (MacCarthaigh and Saarniit 2019; Riggs 2002). Its basic assumptions are oftentimes implicit, taken for granted, or even invisible, and can only be felt through artefacts, in the form of behaviour, language, procedural patterns or the type of technology that is adopted. The administrative culture might therefore be felt by innovation fellows or consultants, but it remains difficult to decipher (Schein 1984). Innovation fellows need to develop cultural competence to interact with civil servants effectively by learning the patterns, behaviours, values, language, and customs. In this process of developing this form of cultural intelligence in communicating, understanding, and engaging with civil servants, they might mature in their cultural fluency by applying cognitive models to unravel cultural clues from their interactions with civil servants.

The conundrum described here is called humility – the act of being open to and willing to learn how innovation fellows succeed or fail in deciphering the administrative culture. Ou et al. (2014, 14) define humility as a '*relatively stable trait that is grounded in a self-view that something greater than the self exists*'. In this article, I use this human predisposition to explain how innovation fellows from the private sector interact in collaborative arrangements with civil servants when they are introducing and applying agile work practices in a ministerial context. For that purpose, I studied five cohorts of innovation fellows in a European federal government. The innovation fellows were recruited to work on a variety of projects across federal ministries and left their private sector organizations to serve for a six-month project with the federal government.

Phenomenological relevance of cultural humility

The topic of cultural humility is theoretically relevant because it introduces the still underexplored concept of cultural humility to the public administration literature. Cultural humility as a theoretical concept has not been applied in the public administration literature to understand how administrative culture is perceived and what its outcomes on the adoption of new

work practices can be. It is also practically relevant to understand the implications for public bureaucracies and their need to develop cultural competencies when civil servants are interacting with third-party service providers, consultants or temporary innovation fellows.

Bringing agile work practices into public bureaucracies – or more generally, line-based bureaucracies with rigid hierarchical structures – has been documented in the literature in four pathways.

- (1) Either the agile expertise is acquired or bought from the market from vendors or consultants. This model is oftentimes criticized for its lack of quality and what is called ‘faux agile’ practices, with too much accommodation to the sector specifics, ignored agile artefacts, and a fallback into waterfall project management modes (Denning 2020).
- (2) The creation of experimentation spaces located outside or at the fringes of the line organization, which makes the transfer of agile work practices into the rest of the organization problematic (Krogh 2024). These fringe arrangements include policy labs (Carstensen and Bason 2012), living labs (Komatsu et al. 2021; Tönurist, Kattel, and Lember 2017), data labs (Spengeman et al. 2021), or digital labs (Mergel 2020).
- (3) The creation of expertise by training in-house agile coaches to support agile practices to digitally transform administrative processes. This happens in the context of digital service teams (Clarke 2020; Mergel 2019) or in-house consultancies (Schumacher and Scherzinger 2016), which have become especially prominent, for example, through the Ghent declaration in Europe (European Commission 2024).
- (4) Innovative programmes, like the appointment of innovation fellows who join the government for a short-term ‘tour of duty’. In these programmes, external skills and competencies are temporarily infused and again withdrawn after the fellowship ends (Farmer and Panchadsaram 2016; Mergel 2016; Mergel, Bellé, and Nasi 2021; Muratovski 2017). It remains unclear how much of the agile expertise, skills, and competencies stay in the organization or how these programmes impact the ability of civil servants to continually apply new work practices.

The findings of this article show that depending on how well innovators can adapt and compassionately apply cultural humility. They deal differently with their felt frustration. There are differences in their ability to adapt to their new environment and how they accept the otherwise alienating bureaucratic context. In this dataset, I identified four outcomes of cultural humility: innovation fellows either (a) fail to understand the cultural context and as a result exit early, (b) languish by remaining frustrated and continue without

excitement for their task (Keyes 2002), (c) take on a non-related project member role without insisting to introduce agile work practices and let the agency's traditions and rules take over or (d) flourish by adapting their agile practices to the new bureaucratic context and administrative environment (Grant and Cavanagh 2007).

To understand the setting, I will first provide the theoretical background with a conceptual framework for this study and more details about the research design. The findings then focus on the observed degrees of cultural humility and their impact on cultural harmony and disharmony. They serve as the building blocks for the theoretical framework outlined in the discussion section.

Theoretical background

In public bureaucracies, external expertise is oftentimes met with scepticism, leading to resistance to change: administrative traditions that dictate line tasks will always take priority as long as there is no formal mandate to initiate cultural or organizational transformation of the whole organization (Christensen and Lægreid 1999). Even more persistent is administrative culture – defined as the values, beliefs, and norms shared by members of an administrative system that influence their behaviour and decision-making (Dwivedi 2005; Jamil, Askvik, and Hossain 2013; Riggs 2002). However, public bureaucracies remain immune to change that contradicts existing administrative culture (Christensen and Lægreid 1999; Downs 1967; Klemsdal, Alm Andreassen, and Breit 2022). What is necessary is a deeper understanding of the humility that is necessary to remain culturally sensitive when new work practices are introduced to public bureaucracies (Lægreid and Verhoest 2010). I, therefore, rely on the concept of cultural humility to understand why there might be resistance to new work practices that are challenging the status quo.

Humility

Humility has historically emerged as a foundational principle in major world religions (Davis and Hook 2014; Morris, Brotheridge, and Urbanski 2005; Templeton 2012) and is central to philosophical discussions about morality. It describes the predisposition of humans to stay humble about their knowledge acquisition, accomplishment, and status. Nielsen and Marrone (2018, 805) defined humility as the: '[d]ispositional quality of a person – whether that person is a leader or an employee – that reflects a self-view that something greater than the self exists'. It is manifested in self-awareness, openness to feedback, appreciation of others, low self-focus, and self-transcendent pursuit (Morris, Brotheridge, and Urbanski 2005; Ou et al. 2014; Tangney

2000). While these dispositions are confirmed to be stable traits (Leary and Banker 2019), humility might be influenced by situational factors, such as interpersonal exchanges or observations.

Humility needs to be distinguished from neighbouring concepts that are otherwise used in organizational research, such as empathy (Mussagulova 2024), defined as the recognition and mirroring of other people's emotions, compassion for the suffering of others (Decety and Jackson 2006; Dutton et al. 2006) or kindness – how pro-social behaviour helps others (Hart and Hart 2023).

Humility is considered a virtue that guards against excess and focuses on the recognition and appreciation of knowledge and guidance that is held and created by others that goes beyond one's standing in society and knowledge or training (Peterson, Park, and Seligman 2006). Research has distinguished different forms of humility: (a) intellectual humility, which involves being open to the idea that one's own knowledge and ideas might be wrong and the willingness to change one's mind (Leary and Banker 2019; Worthington 2007); (b), ecological humility towards nature and the existence of larger, complex systems (Narvaez 2019); (c) leadership humility by recognizing the contributions of followers and modelling teachability (Kelemen et al. 2023) and (d) cultural humility.

Cultural humility

As one of the modes of humility, cultural humility is manifested in the willingness to view oneself accurately and by displaying appreciation for other cultures' strengths and contributions (Owen et al. 2016). Being culturally aware and remaining humble is an intrapersonal trait of reflexivity that is defined as the „[p]rocess of self-reflection and discovery in order to build honest and trustworthy relationships“ (Yeager and Bauer-Wu 2013, 1). As an interpersonal social concept, it can be observed when people have a strong motive for learning from each other and explore personal beliefs to be more aware of potential judgements or stereotyping. People with high awareness can identify their own beliefs and understand their assumptions and biases, traditions, values, and cultural identities (Kumagai and Lypson 2009; Tervalon and Murray-Garcia 1998).

It encompasses cultural understanding and competence and helps people encode functional diversity to solve problems. Even though ingroup and outgroup behaviour oftentimes lead to the enforcement of existing rules and norms, people with a high sense of cultural humility engage in behavioural or linguistic code-switching (Ahmad and Barner-Rasmussen 2019; E. M. Anicich and Hirsh 2017). They repeatedly move between upward and downward social interactions along the organizational hierarchy (Anicich et al. 2018).

Cultural humility has been claimed as a core organizational virtue to provide moral functioning in organizational environments during unpredictable and unknown situations (K. S. Cameron 2003; Weick 2001). It has been used in different interpersonal contexts, such as physicians' bedside manners when they engage multicultural clients (see, for example, Yeager and Bauer-Wu 2013), and in organizations (Nielsen and Marrone 2018) when a CEO's humility leads to empowering leadership behaviours (Ou et al. 2014) or when they assess diversity among their workforce (Andersen and Moynihan 2016).

The existing literature on cultural humility focuses on two dimensions:

- (1) *Relational dimension*: It includes positive relationships built through the appreciation of others' strengths and contributions (Dutton and Rose Ragins 2017; Seligman 2002; Wagnild and Young 1993). Learning from others occurs from social mirrors and promotes adaptive behaviours, such as help-seeking. People can then collaboratively solve problems, make sense of adversity and create positive relational resilience (Walsh 2003). This dimension captures the interpersonal bond between people as they connect, openly express their emotions, make sense of adversity in the collaborative process, transfer trust, norms, obligations, and identification through their shared interactions.

People with an awareness of their relational traits tend to recognize their embeddedness in the system of social connections (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998). They understand the competencies and ability to navigate the organization, build coalitions, alter their attitudes and awareness for change, relearn work practices, as well as the ability to be aligned and oriented towards organizational needs.

- (2) *Cognitive or intellectual dimension*: Humble people with the ability to recognize and understand (shared) codes, language, and narratives about habits (Kumpfer et al. 2002; Roberson and Kay Stevens 2006), seek an accurate understanding of themselves, realize that individuals with diverse (or other) backgrounds possess different modalities to view the world, get work done, and transcend comparative-competitive responses when interacting with others without feeling threatened (Exline and Geyer 2004). Worthington and Allison (2018, 46–47) summarize the cognitive dimension of cultural humility as '*the ability to treat one's ideas as subject to modification and to negotiate ideas fairly, representing another person's ideas respectfully and honestly, rather than framing his or her ideas manipulatively to influence decisions of others.*'

People with higher degrees of openness or tolerance for mistakes are more inclusive of the diversity of worldviews. They enjoy the freedom to experiment with novel ideas (Cohen and Levinthal 1990) and tend to reflect on the degree of receptivity towards innovations and mindfulness, that is ‘*the awareness that arises through intentionally attending in an open, caring, and nonjudgmental way*’ (Shapiro and Carlson 2009, 4). Ballantyne (2023) showed that when core paradigms and dominant logic of an organization’s operations are questioned, humility helps to regulate one’s ability to revisit core beliefs and adjust to new situations.

Cultural humility is seen as a consistent and robust predictor of generosity towards others (Exline and Hill 2012). Especially in arrangements like the temporary innovation fellowships studied here, humble individuals recognize different value sets. Each tandem partner relies on their strongest value when they enter the fellowship collaboration and might interpret their social interactions differently (Bilgram, Rosenberg Hansen, and Wulff 2023). Without a shared history of learning how to apply their values, they might struggle to accept new work practices. The result might be that each tandem partner behaves differently and, through joint trial and error, they apply agile work practices and experience (increased) performance, which then may lead to cultural harmony or disharmony. Overall, humble interactions may subsequently lead to positive organizational change as indicated in the conceptual framework below (see Figure 1):

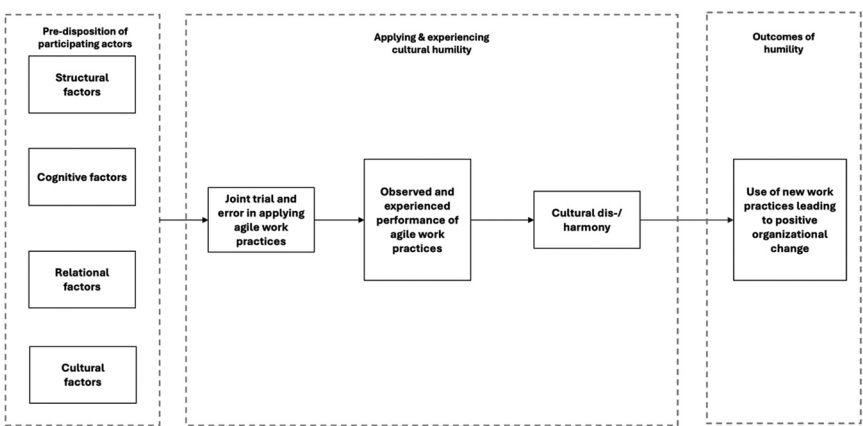


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of cultural humility in agile teams.

I therefore pose the following research question: *How does cultural humility influence the acceptance and adoption of agile work practices?*

Generating and analysing qualitative evidence about cultural humility

Measuring the concept of humility as a personality trait, while it is seen as a strength of character in contemporary research, is rather difficult. So far, self-reports have been used as the dominant way to assess humility, which are oftentimes criticized for their positivity biases: people might gloat about their humility and overreport their trait, while truly humble people might vastly underreport (Davis et al. 2011; Davis, Worthington, and Joshua 2010). As Worthington (2007, ix) stated, ‘*asking a respondent to rate how humble he or she is, is an exercise in futility*’. I have therefore chosen an interpretative qualitative research design to extract tendencies towards cultural humility from in-depth stories people tell without being prompted to report their degrees of cultural humility (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Lincoln and Guba 1985b).

Casing

To understand how the degree of cultural humility impacts the acceptance of agile work practices, I purposively identified a case that had the goal of empowering civil servants at their workplace by training them hands-on to apply agile work practices in a real-life project context with the help of innovation fellows (Patton 2015; Ragin 2009). The country’s political leader has initiated an innovation fellowship open to submissions from federal ministries, providing top management support with the intention of implementing the results. The unit of analysis is therefore not the whole ministry or the project itself, but the fellowship tandems comprised one external fellow from the private sector and their ministry’s counterpart. At times, these civil servants were solely responsible; other times, they worked on the project with several of their colleagues. The context of the studied public bureaucracy is located within the Germanic administrative culture (Peters 2021), which is characterized by the rule of law, hierarchical supervisors, files, and accountability.

Data generation

To generate data about cultural humility as part of the implementation and adoption of agile work practices, I identified the self-views of the participants through semi-structured interviews: I asked each tandem partner questions related to their work arrangements, their perceptions of the sector before and after the fellowship intervention, their previous agile knowledge and skills,

the expected and realized outcomes of the fellowship projects, and extent to which agile practices are transferrable into bureaucratic routines. Each interview lasted on average 1 hour and was transcribed verbatim.

The interview guide included the following question during the pre-fellowship interview: ‘What were your expectations before starting the fellowship?’ And in the post-fellowship interview, I asked: ‘How were your initial expectations met during the fellowship? What was surprising to you during the fellowship?’ I also asked civil servants what their experiences were with different types of agile work practices before and after the fellowship with two questions that (a) focused on their current skill level (to what extent are you already able to apply agile work practices?) and (b) whether they felt confident enough to explain these agile work practices to others, which indicates a higher level of learning.

Data sources

First, I reviewed the call for applications for the fellowships to understand the formal requirements for the fellowship positions. Next, the published project descriptions created by the submitting ministries were reviewed to understand the type of public sector problems. Finally, newspaper articles and blog posts helped to understand some of the context in which these fellowship projects were received.

Three interviews with the leadership team of the Digital Service that hosts the fellowship and three interviews with the fellowship’s programme managers helped to better understand the structural context, the programmatic mission, and the fellowship implementation steps. These interviews enabled me to gain programmatic insights, understand operational goals, and justifications for the fellowship.

An interview with a representative of the Chancellery’s digital government strategy group provided background information about the Digital Service’s embeddedness and the expectations of the coalition government for the implementation of agile work practices across all federal ministries, and an overview of the general political goals of the programme. Additional interviews with the central IT agency and consultants responsible for the implementation of the fellowship prototypes provided background information about the perceptions of the value of the fellowship outputs.

I conducted participatory observations of the companion learning programme designed for civil servants (Musante and DeWalt 2010) to understand what type of questions the civil servants asked when they were exposed to applying agile work practices for the first time; how they aimed to make sense of the implementation of these practices into their bureaucratic contexts, and what additional information they requested to start well informed.

One hundred and sixty-eight interviews with both fellows and their civil service counterparts in the participating ministries provide the basis for the

Table 1. Type and number of interviewees.

	Fellows	Public Servants	Total
Program participants			
Technology fellowship	27	23	52
Work practices fellowship	42	53	95
Program directors & CEOs	—	—	6
Stakeholders	—	—	15
Total	69	76	168

deductive and then inductive analysis steps. The interviewees included fellows and tandem partners from the fellowship years 2018–2021 who provided a post hoc viewpoint on the fellowship. In addition, for the fellowship year 2022, I conducted interviews with the participants before they started the fellowship, observations of online programmatic elements throughout the fellowship, and interviews again after they presented their fellowship results (see [Table 1](#)).

Data coding

With the support of two students, I first deductively coded the broad questions posed to the interviewees in the interview guide. Using a deductive starting list derived from the conceptual framework (see [Figure 1](#)), we coded a subset of the interview transcripts, compared their codes, and discussed potential discrepancies. The codes were adjusted, and when necessary, the coding scheme was adapted. I supported the coding process by frequently meeting with the two coders, clarifying any open questions, and discussing discrepancies with them. Intercoder reliability was not calculated, given the close collaboration and adjustment of the codes in this iterative coding process. After the initial round of deductive coding, in the second round, I individually inductively coded the theoretical dimensions of the core concept, cultural humility. The data coding focused on ‘*expressed behaviors that demonstrate humility and how the behaviors are perceived by others*’ (Owens, Johnson, and Mitchell 2013, 1517).

Data interpretation

I interpreted the data using a thematic analysis described by Miles and Michael Huberman (1994) and demonstrated by Dutton and Dukerich (1991).

- (1) First, based on the memos of the main themes and issues that were written after each interview, I added the interviewee to the interview

contact summary sheet. I then identified themes as issues that were recurring across interviews or were dominant in each interview (Dutton and Dukerich 1991).

- (2) Second, I focused specifically on the overall concept of cultural humility and aimed to identify its cognitive and relational dimensions, as well as high and low levels of cultural harmony (alignment between the tandem partners) or cultural disharmony (lack of agreement and even unpleasant feelings). The quotes were coded as 1st order concepts following Gioia's (2021) data analysis framework for qualitative data. They were then consolidated by aiming to aggregate them into 2nd order concepts. As a group, we discussed quotes that might fit several categories and then added them to what we identified as the most dominant logic of the statement the interviewee made. This coding process resulted in 175 quotations focusing on cultural humility.
- (3) From the summative data structure and the interview quotes, I then created a narrative analysis of the accounts of the interviewees. In the process, patterns emerged of the degrees of cultural humility expressed by the tandems, which led to an assessment of whether they felt in cultural harmony or continued to experience cultural disharmony. Both are identified as expressions of cultural humility and have an impact on the continued willingness and ability to apply agile work practices beyond the temporary project context of the fellowship.

The following [Figure 2](#) shows the data structure as a result of the analysis and interpretation steps based on Gioia (2021):

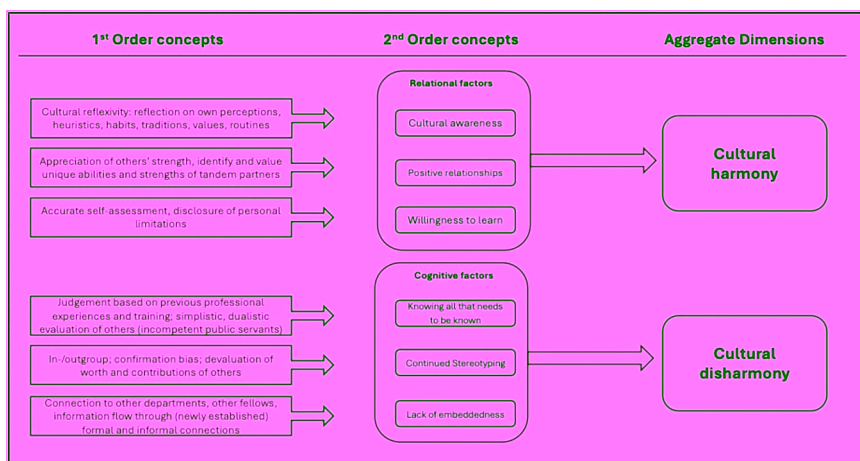


Figure 2. Data structure.

Results

In the following, the findings of the data analysis and displayed as contextual factors that influence cultural humility and the cognitive and relational dimensions of the concept.

Finding 1: Setting the context for fellows

The setup and framing by top-level programme leaders and the communication about its goals have an important impact on how the participants perceive their roles and acceptance of new work practices. In this case, the fellowship managers spoke a lot about bringing in fellows with unique knowledge and competencies to ‘empower’ civil servants. This language indicates a power imbalance: civil servants are seen as unable to tackle the current societal and technological challenges.

The civil servants usually saw their programme participation as an add-on that needed to fly under the radar without rocking the boat too much to gain momentum. They focused predominantly on newsworthy success stories at the end of the six-month fellowship, instead of continued implementation efforts after the fellowship period ended. This is understandable given the project’s nature and the unclear organizational embeddedness of the organizers’ subunit in the first few years of the fellowship. Negative news stories would have derailed efforts to permanently establish the fellowship programme or even the digital service itself.

The implementation of the fellowship components was delegated to mid-level programme officers with an agile coaching or design thinking background, but without relevant public sector knowledge or experience. They designed the onboarding programme for the external fellows to increase cultural awareness. The fellows received an orientation about the public sector with rudimentary public administration knowledge. This was delivered with a lot of humour and at times comedy about the slowness of the sector and its innovation hostility or immunity to change. The public sector was contrasted to innovators in the technology and software industry, and their failure to deliver innovative public services in comparison to services provided by Amazon, Apple or start-up companies.

The programming elements for civil servants, in contrast, focused on a deep dive into agile methods. It became clear that the methods were oftentimes not applicable or understandable in a purely theoretical context, and that the use of the introduced tools was prohibited in most ministries. During the fellowship, both tandem partners were invited to retreats and talks by other government officials who had already successfully implemented an agile transformation. However, the line responsibilities and time constraints prohibited many civil servants from participating. In the end,

they felt that the programmatic elements predominantly focused on the fellows' needs and availability – a missed opportunity to create a shared understanding of each other's roles and expectations to create cultural humility. This also became clear by one of the programme officers' claims: *'I am designing the program for the fellows, not for civil servants. I don't care what they need. I only care about the fellows: they need to have a good time with us! My only goal is that one of them might like the public sector more at the end'*. While this is an commendable goal, it counteracts the overall goal of the program to 'empower' lifetime civil servants.

Finding 2: Cognitive dimension of cultural humility

The cognitive dimension of cultural humility includes those predispositions that help fellows learn about the differences between the public sector and other sectors, their expectations, and pre-fellowship work practices. Some of the fellows were missing a crucial pre-existing understanding of what working in the public sector means. They lacked the legal context in which administrative procedures are designed and executed. The fellows had to gain an understanding of the specificities of a public sector bureaucracy in contrast to other private sector bureaucracies, such as those of airlines or startups. In two cases, the contrast was so detrimental to the project that the fellows left.

In other cases, the fellows used the first month(s) to explore administrative processes and their new cultural environment. They metaphorically ran into closed doors and reported their experiences with anecdotes of failure that deepened stereotypes of innovation-hostile bureaucrats. Their encounters compromised opportunities to understand the context. The fellows noticed a lack of understanding of new technologies, even access to the Internet, or workshop materials, so that many felt they needed to start with the basics of Agile before they could start work on the core problem of their project. This *'failure to launch'* led to a significant loss of time during the six-month fellowship period and a confirmation of the 'slowness' stereotype as one fellow recounts, *'In the beginning, it was a case of first of all understanding what makes the Federal Office tick, what makes the department tick, who are the important people I need to know so that it can work? I would say that I mainly used the first months to talk to people.'* Another fellow claimed that they weren't able to work with familiar technologies and needed to wait for most of the fellowship period to set up their professional work environment they knew from their previous jobs, as one of the fellows stated: *'As a result, five Apple devices were [arranged] for the Innovation Lab. It took so long until that was there, the fellowship [was over], so in the very last week I got a tablet.'* This rather unproductive downtime was passed by talking with

other fellows and creating an even larger cognitive dissonance between the initial expectations and the actual implementation reality, instead of focusing on potential workarounds.

High levels of cognitive humility can be observed when some of the fellows reflected on the sector and what is needed to understand it: They need *'a very high level of empathy and a great deal of openness to the circumstances. By that, I mean that you first listen before you come up with your ideas, that you adapt first, so adaptability to the situation, then flexibility, because there is a huge range of possibilities in agile working or modern working, that you flexibly offer what suits them, and of course encouragement and support is a very central competence for me at this point, and then, of course, a high level of imagination'*. Those with lower humility displayed a lack of positive attitudes towards public sector innovation capacity.

Some fellows expressed a rather low level of conscientiousness towards positive modelling of agile work practices in a highly regulated and process-oriented bureaucracy. One of the fellows said: *'One of my expectations was to let off steam in a playground and simply try out this very exciting, really cool method in the public sector, which was cool for me, but I think it simply didn't work for the target group, because the target group simply didn't work in an agile way, and OKR was simply too high a bar for this group'*. This quote highlights the lack of cultural humility: Agile professionals usually work in the service of a client in established organizational settings. They need to evaluate what the problems are that the client wants to solve before they select a method. Pre-selecting a method that doesn't match the needs or abilities of the client leads to frustration on both sides.

At the same time, civil servants expected that fellows would not be there to support the agile work practices but that they were 'hired' to implement the work on their own, as one of the civil servants mentioned: *'I think the fellows who join us are great, they have an incredibly high level of intrinsic motivation, for me it's an extended workbench'*. This expectation of not being involved or simply delegating the agile project management implementation to a fellow shows the lack of openness towards new methods, low levels of social affordance of what the methods can help them do as a tandem, and a misfit of the expectations with the formal programme requirements. Civil servants experience the 'otherness': *'We find it incredibly difficult in the administration with the people who come in, simply bring a different perspective, a different experience, a different dynamic, and energy. They are different from the classic civil servant; they have a certain risk appetite, in that they simply leave their established organization for six months, not knowing whether this will be to their disadvantage or not, and that is pretty much the opposite of what a civil servant would do.'*

Others highlight the need for guidance by the fellows to understand what an agile process looks like, and slowly easing into it because they haven't experienced this kind of openness to innovation and exploration: *'We in the ministry have never done anything like this before, so it's completely normal to say: "Wait a minute, why should I do this now? It has worked for the last 40 years. Why should I change it?" Just because someone comes along and tells me I must do it now, it's a completely normal reaction that when you tell them you must do things completely differently, you first ask: "Why?" And then you must explain it to them because it's not self-explanatory. It all must be justified'*. The rather low level of openness towards agile methods might also lead to the rejection of Agile if the fellow doesn't understand that cognitive dissonance between the standard operating procedures and agile methods exists. Oftentimes, this type of rejection was seen as a lack of understanding, and one fellow quickly dismissed the qualifications of their tandem partner: *'My tandem partner a) wasn't really qualified to do this project with me, b) the project wasn't properly validated by them either. They simply wanted to take part in [the fellowship program]. They had a topic but somehow didn't think about what kind of responsibility it was'*.

At the same time, the fellows observed a lack of adaptive behaviour when faced with adversities. One of the fellows explained that the civil servants left the project to them and saw it as a temporary opportunity without absorbing the challenge and the opportunities it might provide to them. One of the fellows explained: *'I had the feeling that it was great for them that I was there, that I placed the topics, and it also gave them attention. I don't think they took this step of sustainable anchoring for themselves or wanted to. So, it was clear to them, it was practically at the end, you can't take it any further and build it up like that. And that is, of course, super frustrating, because then I ask myself, why are you doing [the innovation fellowship]?' The civil servants went back into their day-to-day routines and gave up on their goal of pursuing the sustainability of the project when they were faced with adversities like a lack of top-down support: *'To really roll it out on a large scale, you need support from the top, or rather from the cross-divisional departments, such as the central department'*.*

However, many civil servants were looking forward to learning from the fellows. They experienced the dreadfulness of bureaucratic slowness in modernizing government operations and its limitations as a result of the zero-failure culture. They are very open to learning new work practices and methods: *'We all suffer from not making progress, and we all suffer from not being able to do things because someone else is always in charge. So, you'll want to throw all this stuff overboard, simply ignore the barricades of responsibility, just try something out, and get the plan set for it. There's a saying that*

you only shoot if it's sure to be a hit; that's the administration in this country. You only do something if it's sure to work because everyone has a certain reverence for mistakes, you don't know what will happen, and then you'll be reprimanded or won't get a promotion, or it will cost you social recognition'. The fellowship was therefore seen as an opportunity to try out new work practices and have the top-down sanctioned possibility to experiment without continuously waiting for approval from superiors who are usually seen as risk-averse.

Finding 3: Relational dimension of cultural humility

The relational factors of cultural humility range from low ability of strengths recognition in each other's abilities to high levels of relational humility, which was expressed mostly in the way that responsibilities and accountability were absorbed by each tandem partner.

Delegation and acceptance of change responsibility to fellows

In many tandems, civil servants and fellows had a different understanding of what their role was. Some expected to remain in a coaching role, teaching from the back of the room instead of creating a working relationship on an equal footing.

One fellow with rather low relational humility expressed their pre-made understanding of their role, which they never changed throughout the fellowship: *'I went in with the assumption beforehand that they need agile project management. It became clear relatively quickly that there was no knowledge, in other words, and no need. Even if you now believe that this is smart project management, it's just rubbish to offer it. If the perception is not there, it is then quickly discarded'.* The fellow didn't understand her role as a mediator or trainer of new methods and as a translator of the methods into the administrative context. Similarly, another fellow states: *'I didn't think I had the project management role, but I thought I was just a fellow and would come in, and the project would primarily be managed from their side. But then I came in, and the tandem partner saw me in the project management role relatively quickly, even though I communicated that differently. That irritated me again because I realized that if I took on this role, nothing would happen'.* These statements represent those fellows who could not understand what the needs of the organization were, who had a clear roadmap in mind before they entered the public service, and who were not able to revise their preconceptions when they experienced initial opposition against agile methods. Similarly, they experienced civil servants, who also believed that organizational change was the

responsibility of the external fellows, as one civil servant explained their expectation: *'I don't think the understanding of roles was sufficiently clear. For me, I am still the one who decides where everything is going, and the fellows follow, work, and move things forward. Unfortunately, it was the other way around for us. The fellows wrongly believed they were in charge of things and that this was their project, and they were the ones who were tasked with doing it'.*

In contrast, other fellows expressed high levels of cultural humility in their relationships with the civil servants: many fellows created positive relationships when they entered the public sector and worked hard to create positive emotions. Fellows who are reflective about their interactions with civil servants were much more open to the hard work that relationship building required: *'A lot of work needs to be done on understanding roles at the beginning. Because I was, in the end, the personal advisor to the head of the subdivision. For everything up to and including: Can you make the slides look nice again? Until I realized where I found myself, a bit of time passed. Then my demarcation process took place, which could have been initiated differently'.* This shows that the fellows who understood the cultural differences also worked towards recreating relationships that helped them focus on the purpose and outcomes of the project.

At the same time, civil servants with the openness to understand the differences in experiences and competencies were much clearer in their expectations of the relationship and knowledge exchange with their fellows: *'I see the fellows more as agents for change. For our project, we can use an outside perspective to set up our very complex structure in a much simpler way. So, I'm hoping for advice and support from outside to improve internal collaboration'.* They integrated the fellow into their unit, provided clear communication channels, were available for difficult conversations, and aimed for openness to adopt agile work practices more broadly in their teams. This was matched by fellows with high levels of cultural humility who eased into their role by first understanding what the needs and expectations of their tandem partner were. As one fellow expressed their desire to understand the tandem partners: *'I had an intensive exchange with my partner, what the project is about, where we stand, what he expects from me. We set goals together. It was important to first understand where he comes from, what would be important for him to achieve, how it won't work, and what his expectations are of the fellowship. The important thing was to always get a bit of feedback from him and to always be transparent.'*

In summary, [Table 2](#) provides a classification of the cultural humility dimensions, their related quotes, and observations.

Table 2. Exemplary overview of expressed humility in the adoption of agile work practices.

Respondents Dimensions of humility	Innovation fellows				Civil servants			
	Observation	Sample quote of lower humility	Observation	Sample quote of higher humility	Observation	Sample quote of lower humility	Observation	Sample quote of higher humility
<i>Relational</i>	Fellows with a low degree of relational humility are more likely to reject roles in the network that they don't feel they should be taking on.	<i>'I didn't think I had the project management role. I thought I was just a fellow, would come in and the project would primarily be managed from their side. But then I came in and I think [they] saw me in the project management role relatively quickly, even though I communicated that differently. I think that irritated me again because I realized that if I took on this role that nothing would happen.'</i>	Fellows with a high degree of relational humility are more likely to work on gaining a shared understanding of role expectations, responsibilities and supportive forms of interactions.	<i>'I had an intensive exchange with my partner, what the project is about, where we stand, what he expects from me, we then also set goals together (...) it was important to first understand where he comes from, (...) what would be important for him to achieve, how it won't work, what are his expectations of the fellowship. The important thing was (...) to always get a bit of feedback from him (...) and to always be transparent.'</i>	Civil servants with a low degree of relational humility are more likely to believe that their role definitions are the only feasible roles and more likely to ignore the needs of the fellows.	<i>'I don't think the understanding of roles was sufficiently clear. For me, I am still the one who decides where everything is going, and the fellows follow, work and move things forward. Unfortunately, it was the other way around for us. The fellows wrongly believed they were in charge of things and that this was their project, and they were the ones who were tasked with doing it.'</i>	Civil servants with a higher degree of relational humility are more likely to work towards inclusive work environments, change their role expectations and work towards positive relationships.	<i>'She was always part of our daily team meetings, and she was fully integrated into our unit. So I have to say that I think we have very clear communication in our team, and our fellow was an excellent fit because she also had very clear communication, which was also very structured. Yes, in that respect I can't remember any difficulties or misunderstandings.'</i>

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Respondents Dimensions of humility	Innovation fellows			Civil servants		
	Observation	Sample quote of lower humility	Observation	Sample quote of higher humility	Observation	Sample quote of higher humility
Cognitive	Fellows with lower cognitive humility are less likely to believe that the knowledge and agile methods they bring into public sector organizations are superior to the existing bureaucratic routines.	<i>'My impression is that it also has to do with the fact that the two or all three of them were very, very solution- oriented right from the start and they found it very scary that we somehow coded something within a week and the design prototype was created within one and a half to two weeks. That was just too quick and too short for them.'</i>	Fellows with a higher degree of cognitive humility are more likely to recognize that they need to work towards a shared understanding of agile approaches and how they can be implemented in the public sector.	<i>'First of all an understanding, a mutual understanding, then you can build on that, so maybe that's basically the first thing, more communication, then as a fellow, to deal with this black box of public administrations, perhaps a certain tolerance for ambiguity. I don't know what's coming, jumping in at the deep end. It will certainly feel like that during the initial period, that I don't know how everything works, who I must talk to now and there will be a lot of ambiguity or uncertainty.'</i>	Civil servants with a lower degree of cognitive humility believe that they have all the right knowledge that is needed and are less likely to accept new information created through unfamiliar agile methods.	<i>"The fellows' first suggestion was that we build an information portal and leave out the complaints tool. And then [my colleague] and I said: 'No', as it now turns out, quite rightly. We said: 'No, we will do a complaints tool'. They looked at us wide- eyed because that was against their results, but we said: 'We can't just provide information, we also have to incorporate the complaints tool. Even if your user results say something different'.</i>
					Civil servants with a high degree of cognitive humility are more likely to aim to transfer new knowledge and methods they absorb during the fellowship into the bureaucratic routines in a way that is also understandable to the rest of the organization.	<i>'You must do a certain amount of translating for someone who is new to an organization. You simply must explain certain things and explain them a few times, which is totally understandable, because a lot of things that we take for granted here, people who come across something like this for the first time naturally don't take for granted'.</i>

Discussion and conclusions

The data presented in the findings led to three modes of cultural humility in agile transformations:

Mode 1: Continuous stereotyping and cultural disharmony

Fellows with a lower cultural humility continue to believe that they know everything, to form a judgment and continue to confirm their bias in judgment on what they believe is known about administrative culture. They continued to claim professional superiority. Every hint that shows that civil servants have less knowledge and experience reinforces their cultural clichés (Willems 2020). Fellows continue to express limited ability to recognize what is unknown to them or recognize that they might need to learn new aspects of the field. Similarly, civil servants who felt that they had entered unknown territory, in response, declined to cooperate fully and expressed lower cultural humility in their limited openness to learning new work practices. They mostly left the leadership role to the external fellows instead of partnering with them to learn agile work practices. This combination has led to continued stereotyping and cultural disharmony: Agile work practices were not considered as an alternative to line-based administrative routines.

Mode 2: reflection and recognition of differences and workarounds

Fellows and civil servants who recognize the differences between their approaches and reflect on them generally experience cultural harmony in their exchanges. Other than a full immersion, they have expressed that they might nevertheless be resistant to fully accepting agile work practices. Instead, they find workarounds and adapt agile to the necessary extent, but do not fully reject it. This might either lead to languishing – losing steam to fully immerse in agile work practices – or to the adjustment of agile artefacts which then feel more like workarounds and faux-agile practices (Grant and Cavanagh 2007; Keyes 2002).

The administrative culture dominates the (somewhat) protected fellowship time, and a lot of accommodation happens instead of fully accepting agile practices. The languishing feeling with the loss of integrity of the agile process might persist. There is the potential that local values and persistent behaviours overshadow the potential of agile and deepen cultural disharmony.

Mode 3: Full immersion leads to shared understanding and learning

Lastly, mode 3 then explains those projects in which both fellows and civil servants were able to fully accept each other's cultures, not as something foreign but as an opportunity to learn. The fellows fully immerse themselves in the administrative culture, learn about administrative beliefs, values, and traditions, and aim to communicate effectively. Both tandem partners are what Schein and Schein (2018) call 'humble learners'. They generally express positive attitudes and proactively mentor and coach their tandem partners. They focus on positively deviant performance and celebration of successes despite general adversities in public bureaucracies. They also proactively went beyond their role expectations, helped to co-implement the fellowship findings, and transferred the results to the whole organization. Both adapted to new mental models in the form of double-loop learning (Argyris 2002; Chan and Reece 2021). Civil servants fought for time off to dedicate to the project, took an active co-leadership role, asked to be actively involved in the project instead of delegating the project's success to the fellows, and implemented innovations during the fellowship time by seeking out sustainable continuation of agile practices.

Based on these findings and the discussion of the three modes, I derived the following grounded model of cultural humility in agile work environments (see, Figure 3):

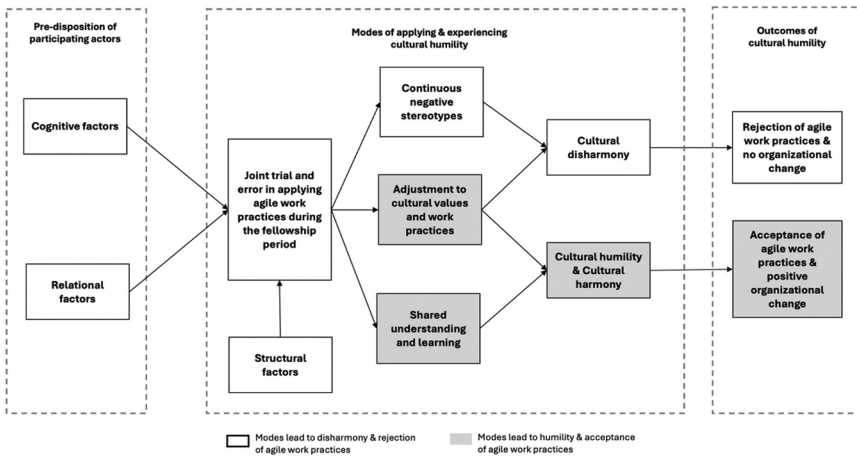


Figure 3. Grounded model of cultural humility in agile work environments.

Theoretical contributions

In this paper, I introduced the concept of cultural humility to the public administration literature in the context of the introduction of agile work practices to a rigid bureaucratic environment. Cultural humility is a concept that has so far not been studied widely in our field, but it is a core concept of positive organizational scholarship that can help public administration researchers understand how bureaucracies might introduce new work practices (Monteiro and Adler 2022). Here, I aimed to show how essential it is to accept and learn about the existing cultural values and traditions as a prerequisite for the introduction of Agile work practices: leaving negative stereotypes at the door and joining the public sector with an open mindset towards learning. Agile may lead to positive organizational change if public sector organizations can apply new practices, tools, and methods, but also reflect on the efficiency of their standard operating procedures (K. Cameron and McNaughtan 2014). It is necessary to be open to the reflection of the appropriateness of existing processes and methods to be able to change bureaucratic processes.

In addition, this manuscript expands the dimensions of the concept of cultural humility by showing how high and lower levels of cultural humility can be identified and categorized – an approach that has so far not been covered in the existing literature on cultural humility. The cognitive and relational dimensions of the concept are developed for the concept of public bureaucracies. It also contributes by providing a theoretical framework of cultural humility in public bureaucracies that can be tested and validated using quantitative approaches.

Practical contributions

The public sector is the largest buyer of services and products from other sectors. However, it is often misunderstood what the context means for innovation and modernization efforts. Given that civil servants will more likely need to continue to collaborate with external service providers and consultants, it would be helpful to develop programmes and interventions to support cultural humility (see, for example, Khoury et al. 2022).

Public agencies might want to think about how to select employees and external service providers based on dimensions of cultural humility. This includes a humble mindset to translate experiences and competencies from other sectors into the public sector context. At the same time, there is little research on how to support existing employees and managers to gain an agile mindset, which includes many of the cultural humility dimensions discussed in this article. Among them is the openness towards innovation, moving from a fixed to a growth mindset, but also the courage to speak at eye level with consultants and other external service providers. This is important in

contexts where disharmonies and inefficient administrative routines are persisting and are impacting the delivery of public value.

Potential limitations and transferability

Qualitative research is not statistically generalizable. Given the nature of the lack of measures of expressed cultural humility, the data for this manuscript did not consist of a random sample of a smaller group to transfer the results to the population at large. Instead, I focused on collecting the expressed cultural humility in the form of interview data to understand the thought processes and experiences of both fellows and civil servants. I aimed to generate a unique data set that includes all participants of the first 5 years of the fellowship. In this project, I focused mostly on data that allowed for an accurate representation of the empirical phenomenon and aimed for resonance rather than generalizability: I aimed to accurately represent the experiences of the civil servants and fellows in a wide range of cases (Geertz 1973; Hellström 2008; Lincoln and Guba 1985a).

Qualitative research is always criticized for its data quality and the black box of the coding process. By showing the quality of the process and discussions with the research team, I focused on the transparency of the coding process. This will help with the reproducibility of data generation and analysis steps in case other researchers aim to replicate this study in their own countries.

The question remains whether these findings apply to other types of bureaucracies or are limited to Western bureaucracies and specifically the Germanic administrative culture. Here, I aimed to focus on depth rather than breadth to show one case in much detail. I believe that the findings are transferable to situations in which civil servants collaborate with external consultants, temporary innovation fellows, or within innovation units and need to find ways to understand each other's contexts, remain open to acquiring new knowledge and competencies, and need to transfer the innovations back into the bureaucratic routines of their public sector organizations (Lincoln and Guba 1985b).

Future research

Tangney (2000) pointed out that humility is still a rather underdeveloped concept. This might be because it is implicit, therefore difficult to express, and must be observed in social interactions. More research is needed that focuses on the antecedents, the resulting degrees of humility, and their impact on dyadic and team relationships in organizations, especially when employees start to collaborate more across internal organizational boundaries and departmental settings.

To study the context of intra- and inter-organizational collaborations as part of an agile transformation, it would be helpful if future research

developed measures to resolve cultural ambivalence to increase cultural humility and harmony when modernizing public bureaucracies. For that purpose, we will need to be able to systematically measure the dimensions of cultural humility and their impact on project outcomes and the performance of cross-functional teams, especially because large parts of software development, implementation work, and other service delivery tasks are outsourced to outside vendors and consultants.

However, not only are these collaborative contexts significantly under-researched, but humility is also important in public bureaucracies that are aiming to modernize themselves (on their own or with the help of others, such as change managers, agile coaches or other types of change moderators). Humility is an important predisposition to understand that local work practices might not be the best way to deliver public services. This important intellectual and cognitive work needs to be done by public managers and civil servants alike and the prerequisite is the form of openness towards new work practices that have been tested and proven to be useful in other sectors or types of management problems.

The existing literature links humility also to the quest to learn from others (Davis et al. 2011; Exline and Hill 2012; Hook et al. 2013). In zero-failure cultures like public bureaucracies with oftentimes predefined professional degrees that don't focus on innovation in the form of exploration of innovative opportunities and work practices and instead focus on the exploitation of pre-existing legal and managerial competencies, remaining open to learning is limited. Oftentimes, the inculturation into the existing norms, values, and bureaucratic traditions and habits is seen as the most important feature of becoming a civil servant. Future research should focus on opportunities to move from this rather fixed mindset to a growth mindset that helps civil servants in their quest to learn about more effective ways to fulfil the mission of their agencies (Dweck and Yeager 2019).

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