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Article

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Review

Mitigation of Learned Helplessness for Enhanced Bureaucratic Organizational Responsiveness in Public Administrations

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Abstract: Organizational bureaucratic responsiveness, the readiness and ability of public organizations to respond to public needs, in particular in times of change, requires collaborations between public organizations and citizens and responsiveness to citizens' evolving needs. One of the organizational barriers to such collaborations may be learned helplessness (LH), the belief that actions and outcomes are unrelated and a lack of sense of control. However, the relationship between the two in the framework of public organizations in current times has been little examined. This paper proposes a novel theoretical framework for collaborative responsiveness that builds on a process-based approach and thereby indicates the potential impacts of LH on collaborative responsiveness in public organizations, particularly in current times when it is most needed. Practical ways for mitigating learned helplessness and supporting collaborative responsiveness in changing times are suggested.

Keywords: learned helplessness; bureaucratic responsiveness; public administration; collaboration



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1. Introduction

Public organizations have a long-standing history of adapting to evolving societal needs. However, the 21st century, with its dynamic reality, presents unprecedented challenges that necessitate modifications in organizational and strategic processes (Yurchuk & Lyashch, 2024).

These challenges include accelerated technological advancements, in particular Artificial Intelligence, shifts in professional requirements, expanding social networks and mediated communications, and increasingly diverse societies and workforces, as well as complex national and global interdependencies and processes of political misalignment (Ansell et al., 2021; Rizvi & Sikand, 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis exemplified the profound impact of this hyper-dynamic reality, exposing the limitations of traditional ready-made bureaucratic coping methods and the standard repertoire of foresight and resilience, and highlighting the need for adaptive strategies (Ansell et al., 2021). Public employees, particularly during crises, are expected to learn constantly (Kraatz & Zajac, 2001), identify and seize new opportunities, innovate, adopt new strategies, and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances (Wushe & Shenje, 2019).

This adaptive capacity is central to building dynamic capabilities that enhance *organizational responsiveness*—the readiness and ability of public organizations to address public needs effectively, including in service delivery. Strengthening responsiveness requires

fostering collaborative mechanisms that encourage citizen feedback and proactive institutional responses (Stivers, 1994). Poor bureaucratic responsiveness can erode public trust in government institutions' ability to meet their needs, while failures to address critical events may have cascading negative consequences and could undermine public support systems and practices when faced with other challenges (Bryer, 2009). Conversely, learning from crises and fostering collaboration within organizations and with citizens can generate meaningful improvements in bureaucratic responsiveness (Burke et al., 2008). However, such actions necessitate a sense of control, agency, and resourcefulness of public employees (Halvorsen, 2003).

One of the organizational barriers to such collaborations is learned helplessness (LH), i.e., the belief that behaviors and outcomes are independent from each other, resulting in a diminished sense of control over external events (M. E. P. Seligman & Maier, 1967). In today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) work environments, frequent change and ambiguity can contribute to LH among public employees, adversely affecting both individual performance and organizational outcomes (Rizvi & Sikand, 2020). Given that an organization's coping abilities are often critical to their capacity to recognize and to adapt to the heterogeneity of public needs, LH may significantly impair both personal and organizational responsiveness (Yüksel & Özkiraz, 2012).

1.1. Research Aim and Questions

This paper examines LH as a critical impediment to bureaucratic responsiveness in public administrations. We propose that when public institutions fail to recognize the connection between their actions and outcomes and feel a lack of control, their capacity for organizational learning is undermined, further reducing their responsiveness to present and future public needs. We further suggest that LH could reduce organizational ability to cope with changes in dynamic environments. Despite extensive research on the effects of LH in organizational and group settings, its impact on bureaucratic responsiveness in the public sector remains largely unexplored.

To address this gap, we explore the following research questions:

1. How does LH affect bureaucratic responsiveness, particularly in collaborations between public organizations and citizens?
2. What strategies can public organizations employ to mitigate LH among public sector employees and improve bureaucratic responsiveness?

1.2. Research Approach

This study adopts a conceptual approach to investigate these questions. We argue that bureaucratic responsiveness depends not only on public employees' adherence to organizational routines but also on their ability to be flexible, proactive, and innovative—qualities that require a sense of control and resourcefulness. Moreover, we suggest that shifts in work environments can contribute to LH, which must be addressed to sustain responsiveness and respond to evolving needs.

Building on prior research, we analyze how LH may affect three sets of capabilities aligned with the three stages of Bryer's (2009) collaborative responsiveness framework: socialization, coping, and learning. These stages, and corresponding capabilities, represent a transition from political control to bureaucratic values and emphasize the role of civic engagement in public policy. We examine how LH disrupts established modes of interaction between administrations and citizens, linking key elements of responsiveness with observed outcomes of LH in public organizations.

By demonstrating how LH contributes to unresponsiveness and related bureaucratic behaviors, we establish meaningful connections between mitigating LH and enhancing

bureaucratic responsiveness through organizational socialization, coping, and learning processes. This paper presents a novel theoretical framework that integrates a process-based approach to collaborative responsiveness, offering both conceptual insights and practical implications. Our findings contribute to future theoretical considerations and empirical research, and provide valuable guidance for managing bureaucratic responsiveness in an era of rapid change.

2. Theoretical Background

Bureaucratic responsiveness plays a crucial role in both democratic governance and the operational efficiency of public administration. Beyond increasing citizen participation in decision making, responsiveness enhances the functionality of state institutions and strengthens public trust (Hult et al., 2005). Several studies have identified key factors influencing bureaucratic responsiveness. Burke et al. (2008) emphasized the importance of organizational adaptability, professionalism, and responsiveness to stakeholders in driving change. Similarly, Stivers (1994) argued that responsiveness requires a shift from hierarchical decision making toward inclusive governance, where public administrators actively engage with diverse stakeholders to foster legitimacy and accountability.

Alford (2002) challenged the notion of citizens as mere “customers” of government services, instead framing bureaucratic interactions as “social exchanges”. He suggested that public organizations depend on citizen trust and cooperation, which in turn enhances service delivery. Yang and Pandey (2007) reinforced this idea, showing that organizational culture and leadership commitment to responsiveness significantly impact how administrators perceive and engage with the public and how they adapt to new conditions. This understanding of responsiveness aligns with Halvorsen’s (2003) study, which examined how direct citizen engagement shapes public perceptions of government agencies. He found that when employees actively participated in quality meetings, the public viewed agencies as more attuned to their concerns. Furthermore, he identified a reciprocal process: when citizens perceive government responsiveness, they are more likely to participate in deliberations, reinforcing institutional legitimacy and increasing public support for administrative decisions. This dynamic suggests that agencies perceived as responsive enjoy greater acceptance of their policies compared to those that do not engage in public dialogue (Halvorsen, 2003). Building on these findings, Bryer (2009) explored collaborative learning processes involving neighborhood councils and city officials, noting that responsiveness emerges as a dynamic interaction rather than a static bureaucratic function. He found that trust, shared goals, and openness to citizen knowledge enhance responsiveness, whereas rigid hierarchies and risk aversion hinder it. Furthermore, in line with the noted need for lifelong learning in the current era (El Mawas & Muntean, 2018), public administrations may seek to capture value from growing opportunities to improve organizational learning (Puppim de Oliveira & Berman, 2021) and increase responsiveness. Organizational learning is a critical process that enables organizations to adapt to environmental changes and demands through acquiring new knowledge and skills, and modifying behaviors and actions (Kraatz & Zajac, 2001).

The role of external pressures, particularly media scrutiny, in shaping responsiveness has also been widely studied (Rimkutė & Van der Voet, 2024). Erlich et al. (2021) used Mexican federal government data to show that negative media attention on government failures increased responsiveness, while coverage of corruption had the opposite effect. Their findings underscore the media’s power in shaping bureaucratic behavior and suggest that any model of bureaucratic responsiveness must account also for external influences. Rimkutė and Van der Voet (2024) further highlighted the importance of taking consideration of the interactions between external demands’ source, content, and salience.

At the institutional level, [Alkadry \(2003\)](#) examined how power dynamics, gender disparities, and administrative discretion influence responsiveness. He argued that while public institutions aim to be responsive, structural inequalities often shape whose voices are heard and whose concerns are prioritized. In a similar vein, [Hult et al. \(2005\)](#) emphasized the importance of institutional flexibility and leadership support in fostering responsiveness, noting that bureaucracies often struggle to balance efficiency with public engagement.

The evolution of the New Public Management (NPM) movement introduced both opportunities and constraints for bureaucratic responsiveness. [Vigoda \(2002\)](#) warned that the NPM model, which treats citizens as passive “customers”, could hinder meaningful public engagement, as effective governance requires collaborative partnerships between administrators and the public. [Poulin \(2020\)](#) expanded on this perspective, noting that while citizens are becoming more involved in governance, they still perceive public officials as figures of authority rather than partners in decision making. He suggested that public administrators must reconcile these dual roles, ensuring that responsiveness remains a flexible and creative process valued by citizens.

Despite growing research on bureaucratic responsiveness and the benefits of collaboration, gaps remain in understanding its limitations. Notably, while it is clear that responsiveness requires a sense of control, agency, and proactiveness of public organizations and employees, only a few studies have highlighted the negative impacts of learned helplessness (LH), i.e., the belief that behaviors and outcomes are independent from each other, resulting in a diminished sense of control over external events ([M. E. P. Seligman & Maier, 1967](#)) and on bureaucratic responsiveness. Of these, none offer a systematic and extended approach linking the two constructs.

Learned Helplessness (LH)

Learned helplessness (LH) is defined as “a reaction to loss of control that involves cognitive, motivational, and emotional deficits following the expectation that responses and outcomes are independent of each other” ([Raps et al., 1982](#), p. 1036). First introduced by Seligman ([M. E. P. Seligman & Maier, 1967](#)), LH describes a condition in which individuals who have repeatedly failed to cope with certain stressors become passive and unresponsive to similar situations in the future. Negative experiences associated with such failures impact learning processes, reinforcing the belief that efforts are futile. While initially studied in animals ([Hiroto & Seligman, 1975](#)), LH has been recognized as a fundamental concept in human psychology. It is understood as a cognitive state in which individuals, experiencing a lack of contingency between their responses and desired outcomes, generalize this perceived lack of control to other areas of their lives ([Flannery, 2002](#)).

Seligman’s seminal experiments with dogs illustrated how exposure to uncontrollable stressors led to behavioral passivity. Dogs subjected to unavoidable electric shocks failed to escape them later, even when escape was possible, demonstrating that prior experiences shaped their future responses ([M. E. P. Seligman & Maier, 1967](#)). This expectation of powerlessness persisted even when conditions changed, a pattern later confirmed in human experiments. Moving into human study, [Hiroto \(1974\)](#) and [Hiroto and Seligman \(1975\)](#) found that students who initially encountered unsolvable problems later exhibited helplessness even when presented with solvable tasks, suggesting that LH could manifest cognitively and physically. Common characteristics of LH include a perceived lack of control, low motivation, disengagement, and social withdrawal, all of which can affect workplace performance ([Ghasemi, 2021](#)). Subsequent studies by [Ghasemi \(2021\)](#) linked LH to depression, trauma, and post-traumatic stress disorder, including low well-being and high levels of distress and helplessness at work ([Qourrichi et al., 2024](#)).

However, not all individuals exposed to helplessness-inducing situations develop LH, as personal differences shape its effects. [Cemalcilar et al. \(2003\)](#) suggested that outcomes vary, with some individuals experiencing improved performance (facilitation), others suffering reduced performance (interference), and some remaining unaffected. Research indicates that chronic, global, and stable attributions of helplessness are more likely to result in LH. Individuals who perceive stressors as persistent, global, and beyond their control, e.g., “It’s my fault, it will always be this way, and it affects everything”, tend to experience more severe LH ([Abramson et al., 1978](#); [Flannery, 2002](#); [Martinko & Gardner, 1982](#)) and are more prone to depressive responses compared to those attributing setbacks to external, temporary, and specific causes.

The relationship between attribution styles and LH has been widely explored. [M. E. Seligman \(2004\)](#) framed optimism as the conceptual opposite of LH, suggesting that attributional styles determine an individual’s susceptibility to LH. [Yüksel and Özkiraz \(2012\)](#) provided examples illustrating this dynamic: parents facing an incurable illness in their child, who attribute the event to external, uncontrollable causes, may experience lowered self-esteem. Conversely, a student failing an exam due to inadequate preparation (an internal attribution) is less likely to suffer lasting psychological consequences. Expanding on this, [Dweck \(2017\)](#) noted that individuals with a fixed mindset, who view abilities as unchangeable, are more prone to helpless reactions, as they attribute failures to uncontrollable personal deficits. [Peterson et al. \(1993\)](#) similarly linked helpless attributional styles to negative outcomes, conceptualizing LH as involving three components: contingency (perceived uncontrollability), cognition (attribution of events to underlying causes), and behavior (persistence or resignation in the face of obstacles).

Several studies have examined factors that mediate LH’s impact on performance, including achievement motivation, locus of control, resilience, intelligence, and learned resourcefulness ([Maadikhah & Erfani, 2014](#)). Traits such as neuroticism, agreeableness, and conscientiousness have also been linked to LH, with self-concept, coping abilities, and adaptive skills playing a role in either its development or resistance to it ([Ghasemi, 2021](#); [Sorrenti et al., 2018](#)).

Empirical research on LH in public organizations has expanded over the past four decades, particularly concerning organizational learning processes and their role in mitigating LH. [Lennerlöf \(1988\)](#) introduced the concept of competence learning as a protective factor against LH, alongside influencing learning, which enhances an individual’s ability to enact change. Studies on organizational culture suggest that it significantly influences the emergence of LH among employees. [Saxena and Shah \(2008\)](#) argued that workplace stressors related to its culture—such as rigid deadlines, high performance expectations, and lack of autonomy—contribute to LH by fostering a sense of powerlessness. [Kumari and Manohar \(2017\)](#) further examined organizational factors that shape LH, distinguishing between internal (e.g., self-doubt, personal inefficacy), external (e.g., bureaucratic structures, policies), and global (e.g., widespread organizational norms) attributions. Their findings align with [Karasek’s \(1979\)](#) Demand–Control model, which posits that stress arises not only from job demands but also from an individual’s perceived ability—or inability—to control them.

Research also highlights how fostering an empowering organizational culture can counteract LH. [Rizvi and Sikand \(2020\)](#) suggested that organizations promoting autonomy, knowledge sharing, and goal alignment help employees overcome LH. Encouraging a growth mindset within organizations was noted to foster innovation, learning, and collaboration by allowing employees to experiment, learn from mistakes, and seek creative solutions without fear of failure ([AlSaied & Alkhoraif, 2024](#); [Han & Stieha, 2020](#)).

Empirical studies specifically examining LH in public administration include [Yüksel and Özkiraz's \(2012\)](#) analysis of the Turkish public sector, where indicators of LH included inefficiency, resistance to reform, strict hierarchical structures, low employee motivation, and an aversion to decision making. The authors attributed these traits to Turkey's centralized, bureaucratic administrative model, which limits discretion in decision making. Similarly, a survey among public employees in San Diego ([Yüksel et al., 2015](#)) found that LH correlated negatively with seniority and education—suggesting that experience and skills development mitigate helplessness. Younger, less-experienced employees were more likely to exhibit LH, while managers in decision-making positions demonstrated greater resilience. Interestingly, gender did not significantly impact LH levels.

While existing research suggests that reducing LH can enhance organizational responsiveness in public administration, studies explicitly linking these two concepts remain rare. Addressing this gap, as noted in this paper's introduction, is essential for understanding how mitigating LH can foster more bureaucratic responsiveness.

3. Improving Bureaucratic Responsiveness—A Collaborative Process for Reducing Learned Helplessness

The present paper has been guided by the assumption that learning processes that contribute to collaborative responsiveness in public administrations can become more effective if LH is well managed. This assumption was based on the broad understanding of bureaucratic responsiveness as a learning-based process, whereby “Members of the public move through dialog from unstable preferences and opinions to stable and informed judgment” ([Bryer, 2009](#), p. 487). More specifically, it was assumed that such a learning process requires a space in which public managers can examine the concept of dialogue as a responsive practice, comprising multiple voices, and involving ambiguity, uncertainty, and incompleteness ([Anderson, 2012](#)). To provide such a space, it is crucial that public administrators play a proactive role in opening administrative decision-making processes to the public.

However, LH among public administrators could pose a barrier for their participation in such dialogues and learning processes.

In this section, we focus on ways by which LH might affect the three stages of collaborative and responsiveness-building processes, as defined by Bryer (i.e., socialization, coping, and learning ([Bryer, 2009](#))). We reason that the mitigation of LH and its effects in public administrations could support the development and enhancement of specific capabilities that underlie each of Bryer's three stages.

3.1. Stage One: Socialization

Organizational socialization is the process by which individuals come to appreciate values and behaviors associated with the organizations they belong to and become part of the team. This process has been seen to underlie effectiveness, success, and the ability to adapt to change among employees ([Burgess et al., 2021](#)). [Vigoda \(2002\)](#) argued that in the 21st century, collaboration between citizens and public employees necessitates a greater ability to extract and interpret information from constantly changing organizational environments; that is, greater socialization capabilities. Socialization capabilities, in turn, have been noted to play an important role in helping public administrators minimize the negative consequences of LH, such as impeded development of a shared understanding of goals, slow internalization of common goals ([Bryer, 2009](#); [Sayeeduzzafar, 1995](#)), and reduced ability to achieve them.

Organizational socialization encompasses a number of factors:

Reaching a shared understanding of goals calls for the identification and setting of common goals and for their appropriation by public employees. Expectations and responsibilities regarding goal-setting, policy-setting and decision-making processes need to be discussed and clarified. When shared goals are not negotiated, the autonomy of public employees, and particularly their independence during decision making, may be at risk. Furthermore, when goal-setting and decision-making processes involve employees who exhibit LH, goals may not even be considered possible, which may further hinder the negotiation process.

Conversely, the setting of consensual and comprehensive objectives on which public administrators can agree enables public organizations to provide the appropriate response to demands from the public and/or from other stakeholders.

Internalization of common goals and interests refers to the process by which employees become aware of their interdependencies and the manner in which these interdependencies are managed and translated into a sense of belonging, knowledge of peer values, discipline, and mutual trust.

Adopting a constructivist approach to socialization processes in organizations, [Moyson et al. \(2018\)](#) assumed that interactions among employees, combined with the negotiation of formal and informal norms within their organizations, could result in new perspectives, loyalties, and identifications, all of which could help mitigate LH. The authors further noted that an organizational culture that cultivates open discussions of common goals among employees can help individuals with LH gain confidence and a sense of control over their tasks.

Furthermore, based on the assumption that LH is associated with high levels of negative emotions ([Sujan, 1999](#)), [Naude et al. \(2014\)](#) suggested that the cultivation of an environment that promotes emotional identification and expression, and elicits positive emotional experiences such as enjoyment and relaxation, could decrease experiences of LH stress and fear.

3.2. Stage Two: Coping

Coping generally refers to the development and implementation of solutions for specific challenges ([Duchek, 2020](#)), and the choice of strategies for implementing them ([Mikulincer, 2013](#)). LH may diminish the ability of public administrators to interpret and understand adverse situations and/or conflicts between diverse demands, and may impede problem-solving processes, especially in crisis situations, thereby diminishing their coping capabilities.

Yet, a shared understanding between official employees and the general public, based on common goals and trust in the competencies and responsibilities of public administrations, must build on the ability of public employees to cope effectively with unexpected events and with conflicting commitments ([Thunman et al., 2020](#)). Coping abilities among public employees can be enhanced by several mechanisms:

Appropriate Information: An appropriate use of gathered information, the transformation of information into a set of adequate solutions, and finally, the consensual selection and implementation of the best solutions in a timely manner.

Diversity: [Pregenzer \(2014\)](#) asserted that diversity of skills, personalities, and perspectives in public organizations could enhance creativity and innovation and lead to improvements in decision making and problem solving. Indeed, collaborative responses in unknown and critical situations and a diversity of backgrounds among employees have both been noted to improve decision-making processes in public organizations ([Carrell & Mann, 1995](#)). In additional studies, diverse individual psychologies were consistently noted to lead to the adoption of diverse coping strategies and of other emotional and regulatory

resources in response to difficult or changing situations (Freire et al., 2016). Thus, when it comes to crisis management, diversity of experiences, approaches, and crisis-management tools among public employees can lead to stronger and more comprehensive information-processing and/or decision-making abilities (Bowers et al., 2000) and could offer strong advantages for coping. However, for such diversity to be expressed, employees should feel a sense of belonging, safety, and appreciation (Hofhuis, 2022).

Coping skills: Coping is broadly defined as a mechanism that includes both behavioral and cognitive aspects to manage and reduce the impacts of internal and external threats. Coping mechanisms can be categorized into two distinct categories: emotion-focused, which focus on personal coping resources, and problem-focused solutions, directed toward the root causes of the stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). As some of the external challenges cannot be controlled, enhancing coping skills is of much importance. Individual coping skills that have been noted to reduce stress, enhance well-being, and positively impact self-efficacy and performance include resilience; effective interpersonal relationships; effective decision making and problem solving; emotional self-awareness and self-management; and flexibility and empathy (Esmailmotlagh et al., 2018). Such skills impact behaviors and outcomes and play a major role in coping with life and work challenges. Importantly, they can be cultivated in organizational settings (Bar-On, 2006). Cherniss and Goleman (2001) argued that in addition to their contribution to personal coping abilities and resilience, individual coping skills often contribute to group-shared skill sets, and lead to high levels of trust, cooperation, and flexibility in organizational settings (Ugoani, 2015). Danaeefard et al. (2018) similarly noted that individual coping skills contribute to the emotional intelligence of groups, thereby enhancing organizational effectiveness and learning. It follows that public organizations could benefit from coping-skills training and should encourage employees to explore and improve individual coping strategies (Mikulincer, 2013).

3.3. Stage Three: Learning

Learning has been shown to produce dynamic skills that can facilitate continuous adjustments in response to collaborative challenges (Anderson, 2012). In particular, learning has been recognized as an important complementary step to processes of reflection on past crises or on adverse situations, and as part of the LH mitigation process (Tennen & Eller, 1977). In public organizations, such learning could involve groups of employees and could focus on outcomes and feedbacks, as well as on reflections and discussions of outcomes and errors, all while maintaining trustful and open communications between management and employees.

Organizationally induced helplessness can often be attributed to several factors: Failure of leadership to empower employees; excessive criticism of employees; or the promotion of excessive competition between employees and of a fixed mindset culture. Such practices create a non-supportive work environment and promote LH. Thus, to mitigate LH in public organizations, learning processes need to focus on several main areas: The development of leadership skills among public administrations, successful implementation of collaborative processes, and thoughtful consideration of how to best divide responsibilities between employees and stakeholders. These, in turn, require a focus on constructive feedback, as well as on well-developed emotional intelligence and leadership skills.

Feedback environments: Feedback, defined as the delivery of information regarding performance with the intention to improve effectiveness, play an important part in creating or inhibiting positive, non-threatening, and non-judgmental learning environments (Naude et al., 2014). Such environments enhance learning, promote the acquisition of skills, and drive professional growth and development. When feedback is constructive, learners are not threatened by interference, feel comfortable considering new ideas, and demonstrate

creativity, intellectual curiosity, and higher-level thinking skills. Poor feedback, on the other hand, often leads to dismissive and defensive reactions and could reduce motivation and limit engagement with future feedback (Omer & Abdularhim, 2017) or be used as a remedy for organizationally induced learned helplessness.

In a seminal study by M. E. Seligman et al. (1990), replicated later by others (Ortín et al., 2011), negative feedback was found to negatively impact swimmers' outcomes. This impact, particularly evident among pessimistic participants, was attributed to LH. M. E. Seligman (2004) proposed the use of productive feedback that refers to elements of behavior that are within one's control, both as a preventive measure and as a remedy for LH. A later study by De la Vega et al. (2012), conducted among 53 Spanish football players, showed that the impact of feedback on players' self-efficacy owed less to the players' pessimistic or optimistic personalities, and more to the type, amount, and graduality of feedback, highlighting the importance of these parameters.

A field study by Sparr and Sonnentag (2008), conducted among 345 participants in three different industries, showed correlations between positive environmental feedback, workplace satisfaction, and personal control over information and decisions. Supportive feedback environments were positively correlated with job satisfaction and with personal control over information and decisions, and negatively correlated with helplessness, job depression, and turnover intentions, highlighting the benefits of feedback environments that leave room for errors and facilitate change.

Cemalcilar et al. (2003) outlined two types of feedback, associated with two classical approaches to therapy, for the mitigation of LH. The first—providing participants with experiences of efficacy in given tasks (with the expectation that they would establish an internal attribution for success); and the second—inducing a pleasant mood among participants, to counteract negative feelings associated with experiences of helplessness. They further described a cognitive therapy approach which involved a retroactive reevaluation, rather than causal attribution, of failure experiences. In line with Dweck and Yeager (2019), who noted that growth mindset feedback focuses on learning processes rather than on end goals, these findings suggest that organizational feedback could be tailored to cultivate growth mindset in employees in general, and, more specifically, in employees with LH.

In particular, growth mindset-based feedback enabled participants to attribute failures or successes to efforts and knowledge, therefore promoting a sense of control over outcomes. Conversely, the attribution of outcomes to inborn traits has been seen to induce a fixed mindset and a sense of helplessness (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Yeager and Dweck (2012) noted that supporting and cultivating growth mindset through constructive feedback could alleviate and change perceptions of helplessness. Similar to Sparr and Sonnentag (2008), they noted that organizations could engage in such efforts, as well as in providing efficacy-inducing tasks or creating a positive, supportive, and constructive, rather than critical, atmosphere, leading to successful outcomes in organizational settings. In line with Dweck (2017), public organizations could improve processes of learning, creative and innovative problem solving, and risk taking by providing feedback on processes and efforts, rather than on outcomes.

Emotional intelligence: A wide range of learning philosophies and studies have highlighted the importance of emotions in learning processes (Naude et al., 2014). This holds for LH, which is not only a cognitive phenomenon but also an emotional one (Mikulincer, 2013). Individuals who are aware of their emotions and those of others, understand their origin, information, and likely impacts, use emotional information in thought processes, and regulate emotions in themselves and in others can better overcome challenges (Bar-On, 2006), and are more likely to regulate emotions induced by dysfunctional attributions, thus reducing stress levels, increasing stress resistance, and mitigating LH (Yurchuk & Lyashch, 2024).

The cultivation of social–emotional skills that underlie coping abilities has been found to be crucial for shaping both resilience and coping abilities among university students (Sarrionandia et al., 2018), for maintaining positive and collaborative relations in adults (Parker et al., 2021), for learning processes in organizations (Danaeefard et al., 2018), and for integrating conflict resolution in public organizations (Shih & Susanto, 2010).

Flannery (2002) described interventions aimed at developing a sense of mastery, resilience, stress tolerance and adaptive problem-solving skills in order to reduce LH. He noted that the ability to solve problems, for example, could be improved through the accurate identification of problems, gathering of information, implementation of solutions, and assessment of effectiveness, all of which could mitigate the impacts of LH. A study of a training program focused on emotional intelligence as a method for coping with organizational incivility in a public organization revealed an enhanced sense of control and reduced sense of LH in participant employees (Itzkovich & Dolev, 2021).

In order for emotional intelligence to help overcome LH among public employees, effective emotional intelligence training programs in public organizations should include several stages: Providing participants with knowledge on LH and emotional intelligence; teaching emotional intelligence skills that can mitigate LH to employees; practicing selected skills; modifying behaviors that could induce LH; and monitoring progress (Gino & Coffman, 2021).

Leadership: While failures of leadership can contribute to LH, leadership can also play an important role in raising awareness of LH and thereby in supporting collaborative responsiveness in public organizations. Leadership which is experienced in working with a wide range of stakeholders and work situations can mitigate negative outcomes of LH while encouraging and fostering proactivity, engagement, and confidence.

This can be accomplished by public administrators who are mandated to engage in the mitigation of LH, or with the help of external experts. In order to develop awareness to a wide range of perspectives, interests, and needs from different stakeholders, leaders need to possess specific skills and abilities. For example, they must be lifelong learners, adapt easily to environmental changes, show empathy, communicate effectively, manage collaborations, and cope successfully with LH experiences among employees. Furthermore, leadership should develop mechanisms for exchanging information between stakeholders and employees, such as committees and consultative forums, where stakeholders can voice their complaints, so that public policies can be adjusted accordingly. Guidance and direction from leadership could foster collaborative responsiveness by providing venues for mutual acquaintanceship and by establishing an organizational culture of participation and communication. For example, public employees can be given work-related assignments, and success in those assignments could promote their sense of competence. Kankus and Cavalier (1995) suggested several additional confidence-enhancing steps that could reduce LH, such as breaking projects into smaller tasks, encouraging employees to have high expectations for success, setting optimistic but realistic goals, and analyzing failures with a focus on temporary and impersonal attributions (encouraging optimism and growth mindset). Leadership can further reduce LH by cultivating trust, fairness, and transparency, and by managing overloads and stress levels.

Most importantly, LH can be mitigated through leadership creating a climate of reciprocity, trust, and safety (Dennis, 2016) which encourages the open exchange of ideas and risk taking in a non-judgmental atmosphere. Several authors noted that a focus from leadership on what's right in their organizations, groups, or communities, rather than on what's wrong, could have an empowering effect on employees. This could be accomplished through a process of Appreciative inquiry, providing leadership with a positive, active, and engaging framework for change, and/or by guiding organizations and employees through

a process of discovery: Identifying successes and strengths, envisioning aspirations, and designing and executing plans for a desired future (Davis, 2019). Such a process can create motivation, energy, and a sense of competence, all crucial for overcoming LH. Conversely, a focus on problems can lead to a paralyzing sense of hopelessness among employees (Martinetz, 2002).

3.4. Practical Implications for Public Administration

This study has significant practical implications for public administration, particularly in enhancing bureaucratic responsiveness through the mitigation of LH. Since responsiveness is critical for public trust and effective governance, addressing LH among public employees can lead to improved decision making, citizen engagement, and overall organizational efficiency. One key implication is that organizational learning and adaptive capacity should be prioritized within public institutions. This means that public agencies must develop mechanisms for continuous feedback, skill development, and knowledge sharing to help employees feel a greater sense of agency in problem solving and policy implementation. By fostering a lifelong learning-oriented culture, public organizations can equip employees with the tools to overcome passivity and disengagement caused by LH.

Another major implication relates to leadership strategies. Public sector leaders must recognize the role of LH in shaping bureaucratic behavior and take active steps to cultivate an environment of empowerment and autonomy. This can be achieved through transformational leadership approaches that encourage employee participation in decision making, promote innovation, and recognize contributions. Additionally, emotional intelligence training for public administrators can enhance resilience, helping employees better navigate complex and uncertain work environments.

Furthermore, public administration must embrace collaborative governance to counteract LH. Encouraging civic engagement, participatory decision making, and interagency cooperation can reinforce a sense of collective efficacy among employees. When public servants see the tangible impact of their actions on policy outcomes and service delivery, they are more likely to remain engaged and proactive. By integrating proactive feedback mechanisms and ensuring that employee efforts are visibly linked to policy improvements, administrations can reduce bureaucratic inertia and enhance responsiveness.

Ultimately, addressing LH in public administration is not just about improving individual employee well-being—it is about creating a more adaptive, responsive, and accountable public sector that effectively serves the needs of coping with diverse and evolving challenges.

4. Conclusions

Bureaucratic collaborative responsiveness requires public administrators to take a proactive role in fostering civil participation in policy implementation and decision making. However, for such collaboration to be effective, public administrators must be able to process and learn from past negative experiences. When this learning is impeded, bureaucratic collaborative responsiveness is similarly compromised.

This paper highlights learned helplessness (LH) as a significant but previously overlooked barrier to collaborative responsiveness in public administrations. In the face of contemporary challenges, understanding this relationship is crucial for enhancing public sector responsiveness. To address this issue, we developed a conceptual framework that integrates collaborative responsiveness with LH, identifying its potential negative effects on the three stages of the collaborative responsiveness process: socialization, coping, and learning (Bryer, 2009). Based on this analysis, we argue that mitigating LH in public administrations can strengthen the capabilities that underlie these three stages, ultimately

fostering a more adaptive and proactive public sector. Furthermore, our study suggests that an integrated perspective on collaborative responsiveness and LH can support the strategic renewal of public organizations, enabling them to better meet evolving societal and environmental demands.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways:

1. **Theoretical Contribution**—While extensive research has examined LH and bureaucratic responsiveness separately, this paper is among the first to explicitly link LH to bureaucratic responsiveness, particularly in the context of citizen collaboration. The conceptual framework developed here provides a foundation for future empirical research.
2. **Practical Implications**—The study underscores the importance of organizational strategies to mitigate LH, such as enhancing organizational learning and adaptive capabilities, integrating innovative leadership strategies and promoting collaborative governance, and emphasizing both bottom-up and top-down approaches to fostering resilience and responsiveness among public sector employees. We further suggest that educational initiatives—such as integrating LH mitigation strategies into higher education and public administration training programs—could better prepare future public servants for the demands of a rapidly changing world.
3. **Interdisciplinary Perspective**—By incorporating emotional intelligence and growth mindset into the discussion, this paper aligns with broader efforts to develop intrapersonal and interpersonal social-emotional skills within organizations, enhancing their capacity to navigate complexity and uncertainty.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, it has certain limitations:

- **Conceptual Nature**—The framework presented here is theoretical and has not been empirically tested. Future research should validate these concepts through quantitative and qualitative studies that examine the real-world impact of LH on bureaucratic responsiveness.
- **Context-Specific Considerations**—The extent to which LH affects public administrations may vary across different political, cultural, and institutional contexts. Comparative studies across various governance systems could provide deeper insights.
- **Implementation Challenges**—While we propose strategies to mitigate LH, organizational resistance and structural constraints may pose challenges to their adoption. Future research could explore interventions aimed at mitigating LH and how bureaucracies can overcome institutional inertia to foster a culture of responsiveness and learning.

Despite these limitations, we hope that the framework outlined here sparks further research on the interactions between LH and collaborative responsiveness, ultimately leading to more effective and citizen-centered public administration practices.

The study further highlights the links between collaborative responsiveness, LH, and emotional intelligence. This integrated perspective is in line with a growing effort to develop intrapersonal and interpersonal social-emotional skills in individuals and organizations that will help them cope better with current challenges.

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