

## ***Administrative Courage and the Paradox of Conformity in Public Administration***

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**Abstract:** *Contemporary public administration operates in an environment marked by institutional complexity, procedural pressure, ethical ambiguity, and growing expectations regarding transparency, accountability, and innovation. In such settings, the capacity of public professionals to act courageously becomes increasingly relevant, particularly when formal compliance may conflict with broader responsibilities toward the public interest. Although courage has received growing attention in organizational research, the public administration literature still addresses it only fragmentarily, most often in relation to whistleblowing, ethical leadership, or individual traits. Limited attention has been given to how courage is perceived and enacted in everyday bureaucratic settings and to the organizational conditions that enable or inhibit such behavior.*

*Against this background, this study aims to explore how public administration professionals understand and experience administrative courage, with a particular focus on the forms of courage they identify, the risks associated with courageous action, and the institutional factors shaping its manifestation. The research adopts a qualitative design based on thematic content analysis of open-ended responses collected from experienced civil servants in the Romanian public sector. The empirical material was analyzed with the support of NVivo software through an iterative coding process involving open, axial, and selective coding.*

*The findings indicate that administrative courage is perceived as a multidimensional phenomenon, with moral and spiritual courage occupying a central place in respondents' narratives, while intellectual and interpersonal courage appear less frequently. The analysis also identifies a "Paradox of Conformity," referring to situations in which strict adherence to formal rules functions as a substitute for ethical engagement and discourages responsible administrative intervention. The study adds value by advancing administrative courage as an organizationally embedded construction and by linking it to institutional conformity, public integrity, and administrative innovation. The main beneficiaries of the research are scholars in public administration, public managers, human resource professionals, and institutions interested in strengthening ethical climates and responsible decision-making. The main limitation derives from the qualitative design and small sample size, which do not allow statistical generalization. Future research may develop comparative, longitudinal, and*

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*mixed-method investigations to examine how organizational culture and psychological safety influence courageous administrative action.*

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## **Introduction**

Contemporary public administration operates in an increasingly complex environment shaped by regulatory expansion, institutional pressures, and ongoing digital transformation. Public organizations are expected to ensure transparency, accountability, and efficiency while responding to rapidly evolving societal demands. Within this context, public officials are frequently required to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, balancing strict procedural requirements with broader responsibilities toward the public interest.

Administrative action is therefore not limited to the application of formal rules but often involves navigating tensions between compliance and ethical judgment. In practice, civil servants encounter situations in which existing procedures may provide incomplete guidance or may conflict with perceived notions of fairness, responsibility, or public value. These conditions place greater emphasis on the behavioral and ethical dimensions of administrative decision-making, extending beyond traditional competencies related to technical expertise and managerial efficiency.

At the same time, bureaucratic environments are typically characterized by hierarchical structures, formalized procedures, and strong norms of conformity. While such features are essential for ensuring stability and predictability, they may also generate pressures toward risk avoidance and discourage initiative or dissent. As a result, public professionals often operate within institutional settings where adherence to rules provides security, but may limit responsiveness to complex or ambiguous situations.

In this broader context, understanding the role of behavioral dispositions and decision-making processes in public administration becomes increasingly relevant. Among these, the notion of courage has emerged as a concept associated with acting under conditions of perceived risk, uncertainty, or potential negative consequences. Its relevance is particularly evident in situations involving ethical tension, organizational pressure, or the need to reconcile procedural compliance with responsibility toward the public interest.

## **1. Literature Review**

### **1.1 Conceptualizing Courage as an Organizational Process and Motivational Driver**

Recent scholarship increasingly conceptualizes workplace courage not merely as a heroic or exceptional virtue, but as a deliberate behavioral response to perceived

ethical responsibility under conditions of risk. In organizational research, courage is commonly defined as a voluntary action undertaken despite potential negative consequences to achieve a morally or socially valued objective (Schilpzand et al., 2015). This perspective shifts the understanding of courage from a spontaneous personal trait to a complex cognitive and motivational process. Individuals first evaluate their perceived responsibility to act and subsequently assess the potential social, professional, or psychological costs associated with such action (Schilpzand et al., 2015).

Within organizational contexts, courage is therefore increasingly interpreted as a behavioral mechanism that enables employees to overcome fear and uncertainty in order to pursue ethical goals. Research in organizational behavior suggests that courageous actions often emerge in situations where formal rules provide insufficient guidance, forcing individuals to rely on moral judgment and professional responsibility (Hannah et al., 2011). From this perspective, courage can be understood as an enabling condition for ethical agencies within complex institutional environments.

Recent theoretical developments also propose motivational frameworks in which courage functions as a driver of intentional action. These approaches emphasize the role of courage in transforming ethical intentions into concrete decisions despite perceived risks (Rate et al., 2007; Schilpzand et al., 2015). In public administration settings characterized by bureaucratic constraints and hierarchical authority structures, this motivational dimension becomes particularly relevant, as civil servants must often navigate tensions between procedural compliance and broader public interest considerations.

Consequently, courage can be interpreted not only as an individual disposition but also as a process shaped by organizational contexts, professional norms, and institutional expectations. This perspective allows the concept to be integrated into broader discussions concerning ethical decision-making, accountability, and responsible administrative behavior.

Although courage has increasingly attracted scholarly attention in organizational research, it is frequently conceptually intertwined with related constructs such as integrity, ethical leadership, whistleblowing, or organizational citizenship behavior. Clarifying these distinctions is important to better understand the specific role of courage within public administration contexts.

**Table 1. Conceptual differentiation between courage and related constructs**

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Distinction from administrative courage</b>
Integrity	Consistent adherence to moral and professional principles in decision-making (Huberts, 2018)	Ethical consistency	Does not necessarily involve personal risk or opposition to institutional norms

**Administrative courage and the paradox of conformity in public administration**

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Distinction from administrative courage</b>
Ethical leadership	Leadership behavior that promotes ethical standards through role modelling and accountability (Brown & Treviño, 2006)	Influence of leaders on ethical climate	Focusing on leaders rather than individual action under risk
Whistleblowing	Disclosure of illegal or unethical practices to authorities or external actors (Near & Miceli, 1985)	Reporting wrongdoing	Represents a specific form of courageous action but does not capture everyday administrative decision-making
Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB)	Voluntary behaviors that support organizational functioning beyond formal job requirements (Organ, 1988)	Prosocial behavior	Usually involves low personal risk compared to courageous action
Administrative courage	Intentional action undertaken despite perceived professional or social risks in order to uphold ethical principles or the public interest	Ethical action under risk	Integrates moral responsibility, institutional pressure and individual agency

Source: Author's contribution based on Brown and Treviño (2006); Schilpzand et al. (2015); Near and Miceli (1985); Organ (1988); Huberts (2018)

This differentiation highlights that administrative courage is characterized primarily by the presence of perceived risk combined with ethical responsibility, distinguishing it from other forms of prosocial or ethical behavior within organizations.

Building on the literature discussed above, the present study conceptualizes administrative courage as a behavioral process emerging from the interaction between individual dispositions, organizational environments, and institutional pressures. In bureaucratic contexts characterized by strong procedural norms and hierarchical structures, public officials often face tensions between strict procedural compliance and broader ethical responsibility.

In such contexts, institutional pressures may encourage conformity and risk avoidance. However, when individuals perceive a strong ethical obligation to act, courage may emerge as a mechanism enabling them to overcome fear of negative consequences. This dynamic can lead to what the present study conceptualizes as the "Paradox of Conformity": situations in which strict adherence to formal rules becomes a substitute for ethical responsibility, thereby discouraging courageous administrative action.

The conceptual framework proposed in this study therefore suggests that administrative courage is shaped by three main categories of factors: individual factors, organizational conditions, and institutional pressures. These elements

interact to influence whether public officials respond to ethical tensions through conformity or through courageous administrative action.

In order to operationalize the multidimensional nature of courage in organizational contexts, several scholars have proposed typologies that capture the diverse ways in which courageous behavior may manifest in professional environments. Among these contributions, Mert (2025) proposes a comprehensive framework that distinguishes multiple forms of courage based on the type of risk involved and the psychological or social context in which courageous action occurs.

This typology is particularly relevant for public administration research, where professional decisions frequently involve ethical dilemmas, social pressures, and institutional constraints. By differentiating between various forms of courage, the framework allows a more nuanced understanding of how public officials navigate complex organizational environments.

Building on this perspective, the present study adopts a multidimensional approach to courage that integrates several types of courageous action relevant to administrative contexts. These include moral, psychological, intellectual, interpersonal, physical, social, and spiritual courage. Each of these dimensions reflects a distinct mechanism through which individuals confront different forms of risk while pursuing ethical or socially valuable goals. Table 2 summarizes the typology of courage applied in this research, together with the core definitions provided in the literature.

**Table 2. Types of Courage Applied in the Study**

No.	Type of Courage	Definition
1	<b>Moral Courage</b>	The capacity to act in accordance with ethical principles despite political pressure, opposition, or personal risk.
2	<b>Psychological Courage</b>	The ability to confront internal fears, anxiety, and emotional distress in pursuit of personal values, integrity, or well-being.
3	<b>Intellectual Courage</b>	Willingness to question established assumptions, engage with complex or controversial ideas, and take cognitive risks in the pursuit of truth and understanding.
4	<b>Interpersonal Courage</b>	The ability to engage in difficult conversations, confront wrongdoing, and take relational risks to protect fairness and integrity.
5	<b>Physical Courage</b>	Readiness to face physical danger or harm in order to fulfill duties or protect others.
6	<b>Social Courage</b>	Willingness to risk social status, reputation, or acceptance in order to speak up, challenge norms, or defend what is right.
7	<b>Spiritual Courage</b>	Acting in accordance with deeply held values, meaning, or existential beliefs despite uncertainty, adversity, or moral ambiguity.

Source: Adapted from Mert, 2025

Taking together, these forms of courage provide the conceptual foundation for understanding administrative courage as a multidimensional phenomenon. Rather

than representing a single behavioral trait, courage in public administration emerges through different mechanisms depending on the type of risk encountered—ethical, relational, cognitive, or psychological. This multidimensional perspective allows the study to examine how civil servants interpret courageous action in relation to institutional norms and organizational pressures.

This typology provides an analytical foundation for examining how courage manifests within public administration settings. In bureaucratic environments characterized by hierarchical authority, procedural norms, and political accountability, different types of courage may become relevant depending on the nature of the perceived risk. For example, moral and social courage are particularly important when confronting unethical practices or institutional inertia, while intellectual courage may facilitate administrative innovation and policy learning.

By adopting this multidimensional framework, the present research seeks to capture the complexity of courageous administrative behavior and to explore how these forms of courage are perceived by public sector professionals.

### **1.2 Determinants of courage: ethical leadership and administrative culture**

One of the most frequently identified organizational determinants of courageous behavior is ethical leadership. Leaders who demonstrate ethical consistency and moral accountability contribute to the development of climates characterized by trust, fairness, and psychological safety (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Mayer et al., 2009). In such environments, employees are more likely to express concerns, challenge problematic decisions, and engage in behaviors that protect organizational integrity.

Empirical research indicates that ethical leadership can reduce employees' perceptions of organizational politics and increase their willingness to report unethical practices or procedural irregularities (Cheng et al., 2019). These dynamics are particularly relevant in public sector institutions, where transparency and accountability are essential for maintaining citizens' trust. Ethical leadership thus functions not only as a normative ideal but also as a practical mechanism that facilitates responsible administrative behavior.

At the same time, the broader administrative culture plays a decisive role in shaping the conditions under which courageous actions occur. In highly hierarchical bureaucratic environments characterized by rigid authority structures, dissenting views may be discouraged and interpreted as disruptive or disloyal behavior (Vogel & Masal, 2015). Under such conditions, employees may prioritize conformity and procedural compliance over ethical initiative.

Public sector leadership frameworks increasingly emphasize courage as a core managerial capability. Leadership development models within government institutions, such as those promoted by the Singapore Civil Service College, highlight the role of courage alongside coherence, clarity and consideration as key competencies for navigating complex administrative environments (Khoo, 2017).

Conversely, organizations that encourage professional autonomy, deliberative dialogue, and openness to critique create conditions in which responsible dissent and ethical intervention become possible (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). These institutional dynamics illustrate that courage in public administration is not solely dependent on individual personality traits but also on the broader cultural and organizational structures that either enable or inhibit responsible action.

### **1.3 Courage, public integrity and resistance to symbolic compliance**

Courage is closely connected to the broader concept of public integrity, which refers to the alignment between institutional rules, professional values, and ethical decision-making in public organizations (Huberts, 2018). In practice, however, administrative institutions often face situations in which formal compliance with rules does not necessarily guarantee substantive ethical behavior.

Institutional theory has long highlighted the phenomenon of “decoupling,” whereby organizations formally adopt rules or reforms without fundamentally changing their operational practices (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Bromley & Powell, 2012). In public administration, this dynamic may lead to forms of symbolic compliance, where adherence to procedural requirements substitutes for genuine ethical responsibility. Under such circumstances, courage becomes a critical factor enabling public officials to move beyond formal compliance and actively address problematic practices. Research on organizational silence and employee voice demonstrates that individuals often refrain from expressing concerns due to fear of negative consequences, reputational risks, or perceived futility (Morrison, 2014). Courage therefore plays a role in enabling professionals to challenge dysfunctional practices and promote institutional learning.

Institutional environments characterized by strong formal regulations may encourage what has been described as symbolic compliance, where reforms are adopted at a formal level without producing substantive organizational change (Imbulgoda, 2022). In such contexts, courageous administrative action becomes particularly important for bridging the gap between formal rules and effective institutional practice.

These dynamics are particularly relevant in administrative contexts characterized by strong norms of procedural conformity. In such environments, strict adherence to rules may provide psychological and professional protection, even when it limits the capacity of institutions to respond effectively to emerging problems. This tension between conformity and ethical responsibility constitutes an important dimension of administrative behavior that remains insufficiently explored in empirical research.

Beyond its organizational implications, social courage has also been associated with broader psychological outcomes. Empirical research indicates that workplace social courage is positively related to individual well-being and life satisfaction, suggesting that acting in accordance with personal values may generate both professional and personal benefits (Mert & Köksal, 2022a).

Courage may also interact with personality traits and organizational commitment. Studies conducted in military organizational contexts show that courage can moderate the relationship between personality characteristics and commitment to institutional objectives, suggesting that courageous dispositions may strengthen employees' willingness to remain engaged with organizational goals despite challenging conditions (Mert & Köksal, 2022b).

Whistleblowing represents one of the most visible forms of courageous behavior within public administration. Empirical research on anti-corruption practices shows that whistleblowing decisions are often shaped by the perceived risks associated with challenging hierarchical authority or exposing institutional irregularities (Onyango, 2021). These findings highlight the broader role of courage in enabling public officials to confront unethical practices within bureaucratic systems.

#### **1.4 Courage, innovation and organizational performance**

Beyond its ethical implications, courage also plays an important role in facilitating organizational learning and innovation. Innovation in public sector organizations often requires individuals willing to challenge established routines, experiment with new approaches, and assume responsibility for uncertain outcomes (Borins, 2014). Such processes inherently involve risk, making courage a relevant behavioral component of administrative change.

Research on employee voice and proactive behavior suggests that individuals who express constructive criticism or propose improvements contribute significantly to organizational adaptability and performance (Detert & Burris, 2007). However, these behaviors frequently require the willingness to confront hierarchical authority or challenge prevailing assumptions.

Studies in public administration have similarly emphasized the importance of leadership that encourages initiative and constructive dissent. Leaders who create environments characterized by trust and psychological safety enable employees to engage more actively in problem-solving and innovation processes (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Recent research has also begun to examine how individual characteristics interact with organizational contexts to shape courageous behavior. Personality traits such as conscientiousness and emotional stability have been associated with greater resilience and ethical commitment in organizational settings (Judge et al., 2002). At the same time, institutional factors—including fairness perceptions, transparency, and procedural justice—can influence employees' willingness to assume responsibility and act in the public interest.

Studies examining institutional performance in public organizations highlight the importance of leadership environments that encourage participation and professional responsibility. For example, research on public sector education systems indicates that high-performing institutions often foster climates in which employees are encouraged to contribute ideas and participate actively in decision-making processes (Khatoun, 2021). Such environments may indirectly support courageous behavior by

reducing the perceived risks associated with expressing dissenting views or proposing innovative solutions.

Recent research has also examined how gender dynamics influence the expression of courage in organizational settings. Evidence suggests that men and women display comparable levels of social courage, although the contextual factors triggering courageous behavior may differ depending on perceived fairness, organizational support, or performance expectations (Mert & Köksal, 2026).

## **2. Research methodology**

### **2.1 Research design**

The study employs a qualitative research design aimed at examining how public administration professionals perceive and interpret different forms of courage within their institutional environment. Qualitative approaches are particularly suitable for investigating complex organizational phenomena characterized by ethical dilemmas, uncertainty, and context-dependent decision-making processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The analysis focuses on identifying the meanings attributed to courageous administrative action and on understanding the contextual factors that shape its manifestation within bureaucratic settings.

### **2.2 Research context and sampling**

The research is conducted within the Romanian public administration context, characterized by ongoing institutional reforms, increasing requirements for transparency and accountability, and the coexistence of formal legal frameworks with hierarchical organizational structures.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed in order to select participants with relevant professional experience in administrative decision-making. Data were collected from civil servants recruited through professional networks within public institutions.

The final sample includes nine respondents (N = 9). Although limited in size, the sample provides in-depth qualitative insights due to the professional experience of participants and the richness of the collected data. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, ensuring the confidentiality of responses and encouraging openness in addressing sensitive topics.

### **2.3 Data collection**

Data were collected using a questionnaire consisting predominantly of open-ended questions. This approach allowed respondents to provide detailed accounts of situations involving courageous administrative behavior.

The instrument was structured around two main analytical dimensions:

- types of courage (moral, social, psychological, intellectual, interpersonal, spiritual, and physical);
- organizational conditions influencing courageous action, including facilitating and inhibiting factors.

Respondents were invited to describe concrete situations from their professional experience, as well as the perceived consequences of their actions. The design of the questionnaire was informed by the multidimensional conceptualization of courage presented in the literature (Mert, 2025), ensuring theoretical consistency between the research framework and empirical data.

## **2.4 Data analysis**

The empirical material was analyzed using thematic content analysis supported by NVivo software. The analytical procedure followed a three-stage coding process:

- open coding, aimed at identifying initial concepts and recurring themes.
- axial coding, through which categories were organized into broader analytical dimensions.
- selective coding, focused on integrating the main themes into a coherent interpretative framework.

This iterative process enabled the identification of key patterns related to ethical responsibility, institutional pressures, and perceived risks. In particular, the analysis highlighted the emergence of the “Paradox of Conformity,” referring to situations in which strict adherence to formal procedures substitutes for ethical engagement.

## **2.5 Research limitations**

The study is subject to limitations specific to qualitative research. The small sample size ( $N = 9$ ) limits the generalizability of the findings. However, the research provides analytically rich insights into the interpretation of courageous behavior within public administration contexts.

Future research may extend the empirical scope through larger samples, comparative cross-national analyses, or mixed-method approaches integrating qualitative and quantitative data.

## **3. Research results and discussion**

To complement the visual analysis of the NVivo outputs, Table 3 summarizes the distribution of courage types identified through thematic coding of respondents’ narratives.

**Table 3. Frequency of courage types identified in qualitative coding**

<b>Courage Type</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of references</b>	<b>Analytical interpretation</b>
Moral courage	Acting according to ethical principles despite potential professional consequences	High	Core driver of ethical decision-making in administrative contexts
Spiritual courage	Acting in accordance with deeply held values and moral convictions	High	Reflects the role of personal value systems in sustaining courageous action
Social courage	Speaking up or challenging norms despite potential reputational risks	Medium	Associated with dissent, voice behaviour and resistance to group conformity
Psychological courage	Ability to cope with stress and uncertainty associated with ethical decisions	Medium	Supports resilience in situations involving institutional pressure
Intellectual courage	Questioning established practices and proposing innovative solutions	Low	Limited presence suggests risk aversion toward administrative innovation
Interpersonal courage	Confronting wrongdoing or engaging in difficult professional conversations	Low–Medium	Linked to relational dynamics and conflict management
Physical courage	Facing physical danger in the course of professional duties	Very low	Marginal relevance in administrative contexts

Source: Author’s contribution based on NVivo qualitative coding

The results indicate that moral and spiritual courage occupy a central position in the narratives of public servants, suggesting that courageous administrative action is primarily grounded in ethical convictions and value-based motivations. In contrast, intellectual courage appears less frequently, which may reflect the persistence of risk-averse bureaucratic cultures where challenging established procedures is perceived as potentially threatening.

The qualitative analysis conducted using NVivo software revealed a set of interrelated themes that illustrate how public administration professionals perceive and interpret different forms of courage within their institutional environment. The analysis focused on identifying recurring conceptual patterns related to ethical responsibility, perceived risks, organizational pressures, and the conditions that facilitate or inhibit courageous administrative action.

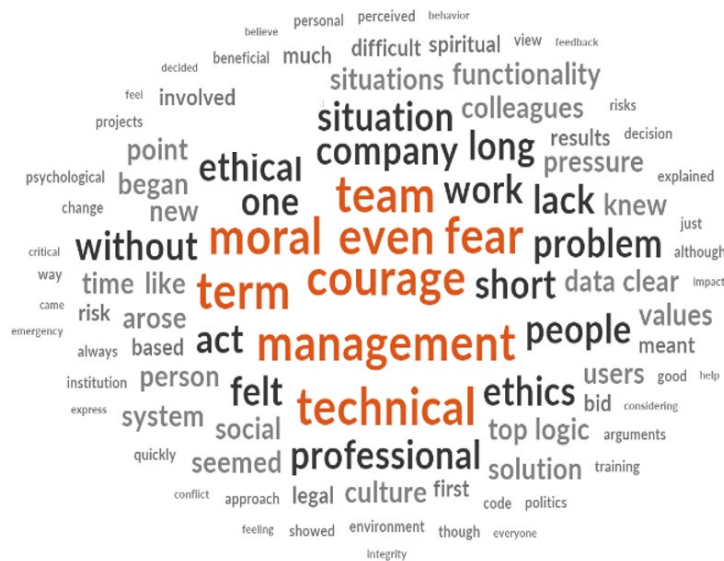
The results support the multidimensional framework of courage discussed in the literature review and provide empirical insights into how different forms of courage manifest within bureaucratic contexts. In particular, the analysis highlights the

central role of moral courage, the influence of organizational conformity pressures, and the differentiated relationship between courage types and perceived risks.

### 3.1 Thematic architecture of administrative courage

The coding process revealed a structured set of thematic nodes corresponding to the typology of courage introduced earlier in the study. Among these, moral courage and intellectual courage emerged as central themes in the respondents' narratives. Figure 1 illustrates the most frequently occurring terms associated with courage in the qualitative dataset.

**Figure 1. Word cloud of terms associated with courage in public administration**



Source: Author's contribution using NVivo

The visual distribution indicates a strong clustering around concepts related to rules, procedures, responsibility, and fear, suggesting that the administrative environment remains strongly shaped by procedural compliance and hierarchical expectations. At the same time, the prominence of terms associated with risk and fear indicates that courageous action is often perceived as involving potential professional consequences.

Several respondents emphasized the tension between ethical responsibility and institutional conformity. For example, one participant noted that: "Sometimes the safest option is simply to follow the rules exactly as written, even if you know the decision may not be entirely fair." (R2)

Such statements suggest that courage is not necessarily perceived as a routine component of administrative action, but rather as an exceptional response to situations involving ethical tension.

### **3.2 The “Paradox of Conformity” and Moral Courage**

A recurring theme in the dataset concerns what the present study conceptualizes as the “Paradox of Conformity.” This phenomenon refers to situations in which strict adherence to formal rules and procedures substitutes for ethical responsibility, thereby reducing the likelihood of courageous administrative action.

Several respondents indicated that procedural compliance is often perceived as the safest strategy in hierarchical institutions. One participant explained: “If you strictly respect the legal norms, nobody can blame you later, even if the outcome is not ideal.” (R8)

This perception reflects a defensive organizational culture in which the avoidance of personal responsibility becomes a mechanism of professional protection. As a result, moral courage may be discouraged by institutional norms that prioritize risk avoidance over ethical initiative.

This finding is consistent with theoretical perspectives emphasizing the motivational role of deeply held values in courageous behavior (Mert, 2025).

At the same time, the analysis shows that social and psychological courage play an important supporting role. Respondents frequently mentioned the need for emotional resilience and social support when confronting institutional resistance or potential professional consequences.

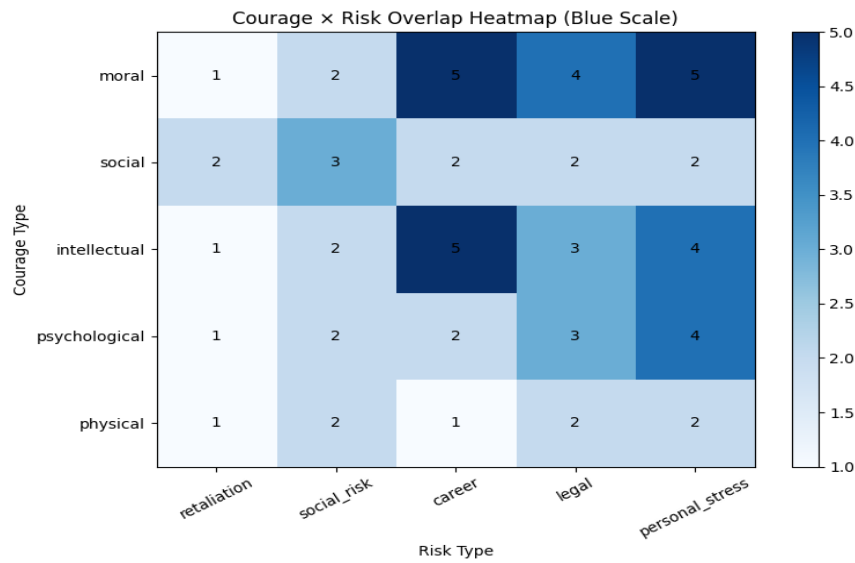
In contrast, intellectual courage appears less frequently in the narratives, which may reflect the persistence of risk-averse bureaucratic cultures. Challenging established administrative routines or proposing innovative ideas may be perceived as particularly risky in traditional hierarchical environments. This finding resonates with previous research highlighting the difficulty of promoting administrative innovation in contexts characterized by strong procedural conservatism (Androniceanu & Șandor, 2006).

### **3.3 Courage and perceived risk profiles**

To further explore the relationship between courage and perceived risks, the analysis examined the co-occurrence between courage types and different categories of risk identified in the qualitative corpus.

Figure 2 presents a heatmap illustrating the intensity of thematic overlap between courage types and perceived risk categories.

Figure 2. Overlap between courage types and perceived risk categories



Source: Authors' own elaboration

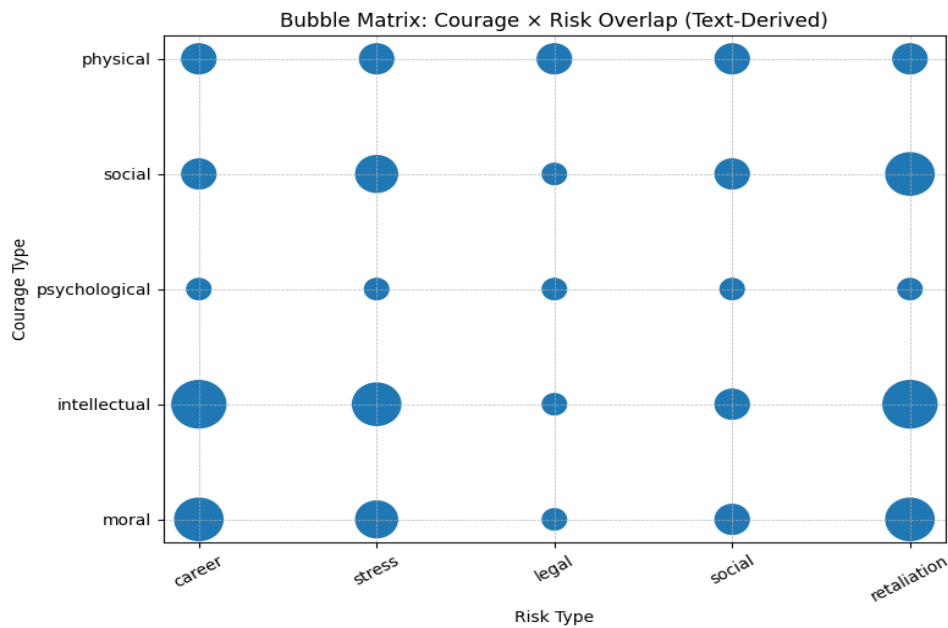
The visual pattern indicates that moral and intellectual courage show the strongest association with career-related and legal-procedural risks. This suggests that ethically motivated or analytically justified actions are most frequently perceived as potentially carrying professional consequences.

In contrast, psychological courage appears more strongly associated with stress-related indicators, indicating its role as an internal coping mechanism that enables individuals to withstand organizational pressures. Social courage shows a more balanced distribution across relational risks, reflecting the importance of managing interpersonal dynamics when challenging organizational norms.

Physical courage appears marginal in the dataset, which is consistent with the administrative context in which physical risks are relatively rare compared to reputational or professional risks.

Figure 4 visualizes the overlap structure between identified courage types and perceived risk categories using a bubble matrix derived from qualitative text co-occurrence analysis. Bubble size reflects the relative frequency with which a courage theme and a risk theme appear together in respondents' narratives.

**Figure 3. Bubble Matrix of Thematic Overlap Between Courage Types and Risk Categories (Text-Derived Co-Occurrence)**



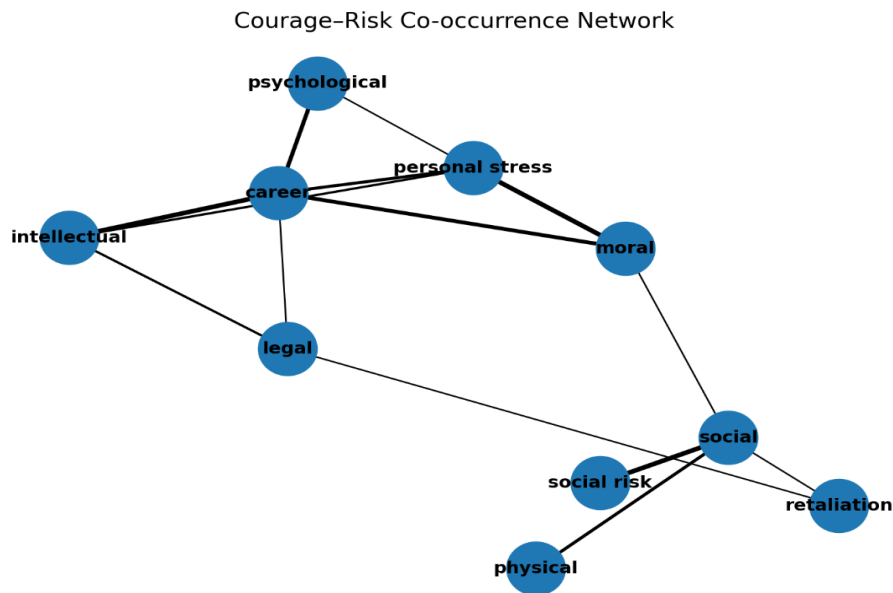
Source: Authors' own elaboration

The matrix highlights a non-uniform overlap pattern, with moral and intellectual courage showing the strongest associations with career and stress-related risks, indicating that ethically and cognitively grounded actions are most frequently perceived as carrying professional and personal pressure costs. Social courage is more strongly connected to retaliation and relational risk, while psychological courage concentrates around stress-linked exposure. Physical courage appears comparatively diffused and low intensity across risk categories, confirming its peripheral role in administrative contexts. The visual distribution supports the interpretation of differentiated courage–risk profiles rather than a single generalized risk structure.

### 3.4 Network structure of courage–risk relationships

The co-occurrence network presented in Figure 4 provides a structured representation of the relationships between different forms of courage and categories of perceived risk, as identified in the qualitative data.

Figure 4. Courage–risk network based on thematic co-occurrence



Source: Authors' own elaboration

The network structure indicates a non-uniform distribution of connections, with moral courage and career-related risk occupying central positions within the relational configuration. Moral courage emerges as a highly connected node, displaying strong associations with both career risk and personal stress, as well as moderate links with social dimensions of risk. This pattern suggests that ethically grounded action is systematically perceived as involving high professional and psychological costs.

Similarly, career risk functions as an intermediary node, connecting multiple forms of courage, including psychological and intellectual courage. Its centrality reflects the salience of professional consequences in shaping administrative behavior, indicating that perceived career implications act as a key structuring factor in decisions involving risk and responsibility.

Intellectual courage appears closely linked to both career-related and stress-related risks, suggesting that challenging established procedures or proposing alternative solutions is associated with both professional exposure and cognitive pressure. In contrast, psychological courage shows a more focused association with stress-related outcomes, supporting its interpretation as an internal coping mechanism that enables individuals to sustain action under conditions of uncertainty and pressure.

The network further highlights a distinct cluster around social courage, which is primarily connected to social risk and, to a lesser extent, to retaliation and physical exposure. This configuration reflects the relational nature of social courage,

particularly in hierarchical organizational contexts where dissent may generate reputational or interpersonal consequences.

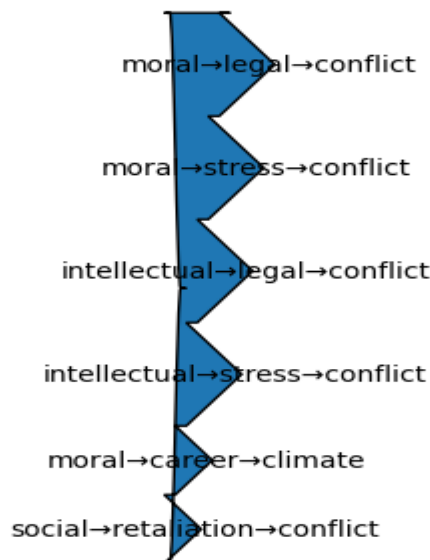
At the periphery of the network, retaliation and legal risk display more limited connectivity, functioning as secondary but contextually relevant factors influencing specific forms of courageous action. Their positioning suggests that while such risks are acknowledged, they are not as structurally central as career or stress-related considerations.

Overall, the network supports the interpretation of differentiated courage–risk profiles, in which distinct forms of courage are associated with specific categories of perceived risk. Rather than reflecting a uniform behavioral pattern, courageous administrative action appears as a context-dependent process shaped by the interaction between ethical commitment, perceived professional consequences, and organizational pressures.

### 3.5 Courage, risk and administrative outcomes

Finally, the Sankey diagram presented in Figure 5 illustrates the dominant analytical pathways linking courage types, perceived risks, and reported outcomes.

**Figure 5. Courage → Risk → Outcomes flow structure**  
**Sankey Flow: Courage → Risk → Outcomes (Top Paths)**



Source: Authors' own elaboration

The analysis indicates that moral and intellectual courage are most frequently associated with legal–procedural and stress-related risk perceptions, which in turn

lead to outcomes such as interpersonal conflict, organizational tension, or changes in the institutional climate.

These patterns suggest that courageous administrative action often involves navigating complex trade-offs between ethical responsibility and professional stability. Rather than representing isolated acts of heroism, courage appears as a situated organizational behavior shaped by institutional constraints, perceived risks, and individual value systems.

Taken together, the results support the conceptual framework proposed earlier in the study and provide empirical evidence for the existence of differentiated forms of courage within public administration contexts.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This study examined how administrative courage is perceived and enacted within public administration, with particular attention to its relationship with institutional pressures and perceived risks. Using a qualitative thematic approach, the research advances the understanding of courage as an organizationally embedded process rather than a purely individual trait.

The findings confirm that administrative courage is a multidimensional construct, predominantly grounded in moral and value-based considerations. Moral and spiritual courage emerge as central drivers of action, while intellectual and interpersonal forms appear less salient, suggesting the persistence of risk-averse bureaucratic environments that discourage critical engagement and innovation.

A key contribution of the study is the identification of the “Paradox of Conformity.” The results indicate that, in highly procedural contexts, strict adherence to formal rules may function as a substitute for ethical responsibility. This dynamic reinforces risk avoidance and limits the expression of courageous administrative behavior, aligning with institutional perspectives on symbolic compliance and decoupling.

The study also shows that courageous action is shaped by the interaction between perceived risks—particularly career-related and stress-related—and organizational conditions. Courage, therefore, emerges not as an exceptional act but as a context-dependent response influenced by institutional constraints, professional incentives, and individual value systems.

Overall, the findings suggest that strengthening administrative courage requires not only individual ethical commitment but also supportive organizational environments that reduce perceived risks and encourage responsible dissent.

#### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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