

A BRIEF NOTE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION RESEARCH

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Introduction

In this paper, we'll attempt to sketch the main areas of public administration research, commencing with a definition of public administration and a historic overview. We'll introduce the main research themes, discussing the use of science by the UK Civil Service and, finally, will draw conclusions.

Historic overview

To begin with, it would be useful to provide a definition of the term 'public administration', since this has been called many things. It is a subset of political science or, at least, its offspring, as well as being related to the process of government, formalized into a discipline. It may even be called subject matter in search of a discipline.

As a discipline, political science is a primarily American idea, dating back to the 19th century and the scientific management theories of Frederick Taylor and his contemporaries (Waldo, 1968). In the 19th century Europe, the French used formal education for public administration and, by the 1930s, public administration had become more than a system of carrying out policies, coming to include the development of policies to foster and maintain public growth.

After World War II, public administrators went through a period of self-doubt and self-criticism:

'For many, being good policy implementers and managers was no longer enough. Theoretical questions concerning the discipline, whether in fact it was a discipline, were posed. The scope of their role and concerns changed from that of being responsible for traditional planning, organizing, staffing, reviewing and budgeting activities to a much broader charge. Public administrators realized that study of the organization should encompass the study of human

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behaviour, while study of budgeting should include the study of theory as well as practice. Public administrators became aware of inter connections between science and technology and between policy and administration.’ (Prentice, 1984, p496)

The 1960s were characterised by developing techniques for analysing costs and benefits of programmes. There was a clear shift in public administration: away from structures and processes and towards systems analysis. In the 1970s, organisational development showed steady growth.

As identified by Prentice (1984), at the time, public administration included the following features: establishment of objectives and priorities; development of operational plans; organizing and staffing; directing; controlling; dealing with external units of the organization; dealing with independent organizations; and dealing with the press and public. Every function provided opportunities to investigate how decisions were made, to learn the implications of work restructuring.

‘The search for efficiency, the identification of hidden costs, the study of client groups and their interaction with public programmes and a definition of public administration as a scholarly discipline begins to emerge.’

(Prentice, 1984, p.497)

Research Themes

In contrast with other sciences, the research dimensions of public administration tend to follow practice rather than determining it. The nature of such research is mainly of an evaluative character.

The main research themes can be characterised as:

- behavioural research - from the review of personnel structures to motivation and analysis of leadership potential;
- policy analysis - covering several general aspects of public administration and others specific to a process;
- innovation - where part of a routine, it passes through a certain cycle;
- expansion;

- organisational development and change – including adaptation to change and organization of change;
- decision making and decision evaluation - productivity measures;
- personnel - community concerns and socio-political developments;
- financial concerns - how funds are spent, and what is received in return;
- and a market approach to service.

All new dimensions and trends are very much the subject of *The Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*. This serves as a bridge between public administration and public management scholarship on the one hand and public policy studies on the other. Its multidisciplinary aim is to advance the organizational, administrative and policy sciences as they apply to government and governance.

In 2012, the British newspaper 'The Guardian' opened debate on how effectively the UK civil service applied science to government (Smith, 2012). The article quoted Jill Rutter, a programme director at the Institute for Government, who highlighted the fact that civil servants are more focused on responding to situations and than on being experts. Most departmental chief scientists retain a foothold in research, which is not the case with civil servants. The fundamental question posed by the article was how many civil servants have a scientific background. Data were inconclusive, since employees could choose whether to divulge information; there is a good chance that there were a great many more than the 3662 who declared a scientific background (of 444,000 full-time civil servants). Certainly, the UK Civil Service does employ quite a number of specialists.

An interesting pilot project relates to the Living With Environmental Change (LWEC) partnership: created in 2008 by agencies funding environmental research and government departments with environmental responsibilities. "The LWEC is concerned with gathering evidence and improving communication channels," explained Professor Andrew Watkinson, LWEC's Director. (Smith 2012)

Alliance for Useful Evidence

(http://www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/alliance_for_useful_evidence) aims to promote greater use of evidence in UK social policy: from education to drugs and healthcare. It is still very much an experiment and currently undergoing evaluation but aims to provide much needed focus for improving and extending the application of research and evidence in the UK. It is a common belief that there is significant value in developing a collective voice to advocate decision makers' use of rigorous evidence, while collaborating and knowledge sharing across the Alliance.

Conclusion

Not long ago, research into public administration was conducted in a climate of high economic growth, with significant resources available. Current austerity measures leave the public services with limited financial resources. The resulting implication on providing services effectively is the focus of much modern research and will, no doubt, continue; current PhD topics in the areas of Public Administration and Public Policy are determining today's research agenda and that of the future.

References

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