PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION THEORY

Which Side Are You On?

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Sometimes characterized as an occupation, an area of interest, or an academic discipline, public administration as a field of scholarship, teaching, and practice is most widely understood as a profession (Denhardt 1990, 63). As with professions such as business administration, social work, and education, public administration scholarship necessarily draws on the theoretical resources of many disciplines, fields, and intellectual traditions in order to address problems and issues that reside in no single domain of inquiry (Frederickson and Smith 2003).

A recognizable theoretical bent was evident in the earliest days of public administration. How and why does our system of government work? What do the answers imply for the policies and practices of public administration? As Lynn (2008) has noted, that curiosity was seldom dispassionate or narrowly "academic." It reflected awareness that the rapid transformation of American life made research to support the creation of competent governments a matter of urgency. That blend of intellectual curiosity and passion for effective democratic governance remains the hallmark of public administration as a profession, with important implications for theorizing.

The profession's theoretical resourcefulness is regarded by many as healthy (Evans and Lowery 2008; Frederickson and Smith 2003; O'Toole 1995; Waldo 1955). Yet critics view public administration theory as incoherent and inadequate. Rosenbloom (1983, 219) complains that "the discipline of public administration is plagued by a weak or absent theoretical core." Hummel (2007, 292) notes the profession's "present state of theoretical anarchy." Savoie argues that public administration has a chronic identity crisis because it "has no integrative theory and borrows from a variety of disciplines" (Savoie 2008, 187). Of such divergent views, Denhardt (1990, 43) observes that "public administration theory draws its greatest strength and its most serious limitation from [its] diversity."

A sense of inadequacy is symptomatic of another characteristic of theorizing in public administration: the philosophical partisanship among many of its theorists. The often sardonic tone of symposia in *Administrative Theory and Praxis* and the "Disputatio Sine Fine" feature of *Administration and Society* reveals a real animosity between adherents of different "ways of knowing" that aspire to inform practice that is both humane and efficient. Such tensions are inimical to creating an integrated account of how and why public administration contributes to democratic governance. Theorizing is an arena where diverse, passionately held values compete for the soul of the profession.

This chapter provides a broad overview of public administration *theorizing*—this word is chosen to emphasize the processual nature of theory creation—in the context of the tensions that pervade it. The next section discusses the special challenges of theorizing for professional prac-

tice, discussing the meaning of both *profession* and *theory*. Next come three sections on public administration theorizing itself. The first sketches three metaperspectives that reflect the major epistemologies that constitute the foundations for theorizing in public administration. The second presents examples of the kind of theorizing that is associated with the dominant mode of research in public administration: theory-based empirical investigation reflecting a positivist epistemology. The third provides examples of theorizing associated with other foundational epistemologies. The concluding section argues that, because the diversity of theory and tensions among theorists reflects the existential reality of administrative practice, heterodoxy is the profession's identity, not a threat to that identity.

THEORIZING IN AND FOR A PROFESSION

Theorizing is essential in a professional field as diverse as public administration, say Frederickson and Smith (2003). This assertion is not self-evident, however. Many if not most practitioners in humanistic professions believe that the competence and expertise required of them is largely experiential and tacit, comprising lessons, principles, best practices, and wisdom acquired by doing, not by abstract reasoning. To such practitioners, theory tends to be viewed in an Aristotelian sense, as the pursuit of truth for its own sake and, as such, of only occasional relevance to practice. It is revealing that the national selection committee for the Ford Foundation-Kennedy School of Government annual innovation in government awards "has not been favorably disposed to programs that attempt to communicate a theoretical construct as the basis of their innovation" (Christopher 2003, 685).

While most public administration scholars and many administrators reject a dismissive view of theory, the inherent tension between theory and practice is a major reason for the diversity, and divergence, of the profession's theorizing and for the passion infusing the arguments over epistemology put forward in professional forums. Theoretical passion reflects the passions of the public sphere.

The Meaning of Profession

The concept of *profession* implies *practice* (or praxis), that is, the purposeful application of specialized knowledge and skills by those who have been attracted to an occupation requiring them. To define public administration as a profession is not only to associate it with practice but also to assert a jurisdictional claim: the authority to control its knowledge base and its membership, which implies in turn authority over the field's boundaries. In Eliot Friedson's view, "'Profession' is synonymous with 'occupation': it refers to specialized work by which one gains a living in an exchange economy. But it is not just *any* kind of work that professionals do. The kind of work they do is esoteric, complex, and discretionary in character: it requires theoretical knowledge, skill, and judgment that ordinary people do not possess, may not wholly comprehend, and cannot readily evaluate" (Friedson 1974, 200). Thus a profession is founded on theory-based knowledge and specific opportunities to use it, offering the possibility of ascending to higher levels of responsibility and reward.

Early in the history of public administration, academics such as Woodrow Wilson, Frank Goodnow, and Leonard White drew on European antecedents to initiate a literature of ideas concerning the practice of public administration. Formulating a "science of administration" became an early goal of scholars and reformers alike. However, theorizing as it is now understood in the social sciences—conditional causal reasoning leading to explanation, prediction, or prescription—was

difficult to distinguish from political philosophy, or normative reasoning (Lynn 2008). For early theorists, creating competent administrative institutions at municipal, state, and federal levels was a compelling goal. Many drawn to the profession were, and still are, concerned as much with promoting effective democracy as with narrowly academic concerns.

It was fateful, therefore, when, in response to the Depression-era expansion of the public sector, universities began to assume a dominant role in training public administrators, usurping the role then performed by private institutions and municipal research bureaus. From then on, theory and theorizing increasingly reflected the university's role in defining the field's boundaries, content, and membership. University programs in public administration and affairs now claim, implicitly if not explicitly, to possess both uniquely valuable knowledge on which to ground training for practice and legitimate authority to graduate, certify, and honor practitioners. This means, however, that content and boundary defining are affected not only by the needs of practice but also by the economic, political, and sociological pressures that confront members of academic communities.

Just as there can be no separation of politics and administration, then, there can be no separation of the relatively insular world of the academy and the engaged world of praxis. This truth has important implications for theorizing.

The Meaning of Theory

Creating an authoritative knowledge base for professional practice conceived in politics (in the Aristotelian sense of collective action by a polity or community) raises philosophical, ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions: What should a public administration professional know? What are the sources of such knowledge? How can "theorizing" and theory-based scholarship contribute to creating an appropriate knowledge base for practice?

Choices among epistemologies might be assumed to reflect scientific considerations. Such an assumption is only partly true in public administration. Theorizing may reflect policy and political ideologies, with differences reflecting, for example, the relative priority placed on equity, participation, and social justice or on property rights and personal freedom. Theorists may have a priori philosophical commitments, for example, to realism or to postpositivism, with their associated epistemologies and methodologies. Choices may reflect the kinds of questions scholars find most interesting: Why does the administrative system work as it does? How can the administrative state be made to work better? How and by whom should the administrative state be organized?

An enduring view is that theory *follows* practice. As sociologist Robert Park put it long ago, "As a matter of fact and natural history, the problems which attract public attention are usually problems of administration. When emergencies arise, we meet them with some novel administrative measures. But later on we formulate a policy to justify the innovation; we do this by interpreting our legislative and administrative experiments. . . . On the whole, theory follows practice and serves to generalize, justify, and rationalize it" (Park 1917, 64–65, quoted by Rein and Peattie 1981, 527).

This view characterizes much but not all theorizing within public administration. Stillman has argued that "a succession of American theorists have attempted to impose the 'correct' or 'efficient' administrative models on the American state . . . with little or partial success—not to mention considerable frustration" (Stillman 1991, 71). In recent decades, normative theorists have aspired to transform the values underlying practice, sometimes creating tensions with practitioners (Mostel 2009).

Theorizing itself can take many forms, which have been categorized in various ways. Rosenbloom (1983) identifies three "theoretical approaches" corresponding to the three branches of

government: political, managerial, and legal. Denhardt's (1990) classification has two dimensions: the objectivity ↔ subjectivity of epistemologies and the political ↔ organizational focus of the objects of theorizing. To Frederickson and Smith (2003), *theory* takes three forms: deductive, causal explanations; the ordering and classification of information; and normative arguments. O'Toole (1995) distinguishes what he calls explanatory, interpretive, and critical approaches to theorizing; with similar meaning, Denhardt (1990, 64) acknowledges "contending epistemological positions, with positivism, phenomenology, and critical theory being most prominent." This latter scheme will frame the subsequent discussion of theorizing.

The Purposes of Theorizing

In America, the basic frame for mainstream theorizing is, explicitly or implicitly, our constitutional scheme of governance and the administrative institutions created within and legitimated by it. The purpose of theorizing is to explain the workings of this scheme toward the goals of explaining, predicting, and improving its performance.

As just suggested, however, theorists have different purposes, and some adopt frames of reference that that lie outside the prevailing scheme—in other words, outside the status quo—and that would premise the legitimacy of public administration on other than existing systems of power and influence. Their purposes may be to interpret administrative systems from perspectives that reveal their ethical or moral defects, to criticize existing administrative systems from explicitly political perspectives, or both. Their goal is to reconceptualize, reformulate, and reconstruct the status quo based on different ethical, moral, and political precepts, with radical implications for governance and for Madisonian politics.

To illustrate the varieties of approaches that constitute public administration's theoretical enterprise, it is useful to sketch the general assumptions associated with the three dominant purposes of theorizing in public administration depicted by O'Toole and Denhardt: positive/explanatory, interpretive/phenomenological, and critical. The first perspective is generally realist in its philosophical orientation, whereas the latter two are regarded as "postmodern" or "postpositive," that is, reactive to and critical of realist philosophy.

Explaining

Theorists of a "positive" or "positivist" orientation are generally interested in devising explanations for how and why individuals, groups, institutions, and other social entities work as they do. Their question is, Why does governance take the form that it does in any given constitutional system and with what kinds of consequences? Drawing on such explanations, positivist scholars may formulate prescriptions for "interventions," such as public policies, managerial strategies, and organizational reforms, intended to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and availability of services. In that respect, positivist scholars can be said to have an "instrumental," means-ends orientation to public administration.

Positivism is the philosophical foundation of what are generally termed "the scientific method" and "normal science" (Cruise 1997; Doubuzinskis 2003; Meier 2005). Positivism assumes the existence of a "reality," that is, a factual world, or a world of broad intersubjective agreement as to what "exists," that can be observed, categorized, measured, and analyzed so as to reveal correlations and causal relationships that explain the observed "real world." Thus explanations are not to be deduced from metaphysical systems of thought. Valid, that is, well-founded, explanations are those that can be shown to explain the facts of the observed world through appropriate applications of the scientific method. Positivists tend to assume, often without an inculcated self-

awareness of the implications of doing so, that the processes that create and sustain political and administrative institutions are legitimate, and, therefore, so are the institutions themselves and the outcomes that are their consequences.

A scrupulous adherence to scientific method, in particular the methodologies that have been adapted to questions that arise in the social and behavioral sciences and in humanist professions, is believed to guarantee the objectivity, that is, the absence of intentional and corrupting bias, of theory-based research. Such objectivity is a consequence of the transparency and self-correcting nature of the scientific approach, whereby all aspects of an investigation are available for critical scrutiny. Commitment to confirmation or disconfirmation of findings through independent replication is sine qua non to professional judgments concerning what can be held to be "true" and actionable by policy makers and administrators. In public administration education, the approach is taken for granted to such an extent that students may not become aware that there are alternative philosophies for theorizing and research.

Positivist theorizing in public administration reflects the influence of many disciplines and scholarly traditions. The scope of theory-based explanation can be as broad as the administrative state and the constitutional order that underlies it or as narrow as organizing the delivery of one type of service in a given jurisdiction. Potential explanations can be a product of deductive or inductive reasoning. Theorizing and model development can be highly reductive and parsimonious so as to isolate specific causal mechanisms or more expansive or broadly cognizant of potentially influential factors so as to produce insights of greater verisimilitude. Though positivists tend toward methodological individualism and the assumption that choice is rational (or boundedly rational), units of analysis and associated behavioral assumptions can also be organizations, social units, or polities that are said to act on the basis of incentives, norms, rules, shared purposes, or canons of appropriateness. Methods and data employed in the testing of potential explanations can be quantitative, qualitative, or, many would say preferably, both.

Interpreting

An alternative to positivism is phenomenology, a philosophy that holds that "reality" consists of the lived experiences of individuals, of the meanings individuals attribute to specific objects—a Social Security check received, an application to be filled out—within their consciousness, and of how individuals make sense of their environments. Phenomenological assumptions lead, according to Kahn, "to a particular type of methodological pursuit, namely, describing people's conscious experiences as nakedly as possible" (Kahn 2003). As he sees it, phenomenologists tend to prefer qualitative methods, the results of which become the basis "for interpretations that allow for more abstract concepts and theories" (330).

Phenomenological theorizing thus is regarded as "interpretive" rather than "explanatory." In this respect, phenomenology is related to a class of approaches that hold that

> the chief purpose of social theory and research is to interpret the lived experience of intentional agents. . . . Its members include hermeneutics [the process of reflecting on the assumptions behind interpretations, especially in light of their political ramifications], ethnomethodology [describing how people make sense of things], symbolic interactionism [individuals act toward objects based on the meanings of those objects established through social interaction], various "standpoint epistemologies" (feminist theory being the most prominent of these), depth psychology (mainly Freudian and Jungian), the structuralism of Levi-Strauss [identifying the mental structures underlying human behavior], and, finally, the

> post-structuralist approaches [emphasizing the plurality or instability of mental structures or meanings] of Foucault, Derrida, and Baudrillard. (Harmon 1995, 297)

From a phenomenological perspective, all "truth statements," such as those about political behavior, have moral implications, that is, conform to a greater or lesser extent to standards of right or just conduct. It follows that all instrumental decisions that have implications for individuals' lived experiences are moral decisions and must be evaluated on their intrinsic morality, not on their "results." Indeed, "without privileging the moral, a person is not a complete human being" (Farmer 2005, 583).

It follows that theories and theory-based research employing phenomenological assumptions are normative in that they depend on value judgments concerning the nature of right or just conduct. That this is true raises difficult issues. As Spicer notes (2008, 57), "The questions of normative theory in politics and administration such as 'Who should govern?' 'What should government do?' 'What should be the role of administrators in a democracy?' or 'What role should citizens play in governance?' do not admit to an answer using some clear-cut sort of methodology. . . . There is no generally accepted way of either answering or, for that matter, even to begin thinking about how one might answer these questions given the availability of sufficient data or time to think."

Phenomenologists are sharply critical of positivism. The study of human experience is regarded as "tainted to the extent that [it is] clothed in the researcher's own biases, presuppositions, or interpretations" (Kahn 2003, 330). Argues Spicer (2008, 57–58), "The meanings of words like public administration, government, constitution, law, democracy, citizen, and legislature are inherently ambiguous and are never precise or neutral in any scientific sense. They are inevitably tied, in the final analysis, to what sort of institution we think government is, can be, or, for that matter, ought to be. They are inextricably linked through our mental frameworks to what it is that we think government does, can do, or ought to do."

Thus, he says, "in our desire either to be more practical or to meet the canons of a more precise and value-free social science, we often express [philosophical] ideas unconsciously or without thinking. As a result, we may be led to embrace political values that are incoherent with, or that even contradict those which we ourselves hold to be dear and true" (Spicer 2008, 59–60).

The difficulties of doing so notwithstanding, scholars within this philosophical realm advocate a movement from the "is" to the "ought" in public administration: from putatively neutral or instrumental positivist formulations to self-aware normative statements. Denhardt assigns a reconstitutive role to theorists, favoring theorizing that is concerned with "the quality of the public service and the responsiveness of the public bureaucracy in a democratic society" (1990, 65). At the very least, phenomenologists would urge all public administration scholars to bring a philosophical self-awareness to bear on their use of abstractions, categories, terms of art, and analytical constructs such as causality and correlation, recognize the moral implications of their interventions, and include such implications in their instrumental prescriptions. Denhardt believes that "the vocation and obligation of the theorist" is to understand the moral obligations of his or her work, an obligation theorists share with practitioners (66).

Criticizing

The point of departure for critical theorists is a critique of the social, economic, and political order. Their presumption (Boyd and Kyle 2004, 255) is that "humans are enmeshed in relations that facilitate the domination of some by others which limits our freedom. These relations are not maintained solely by overt force (i.e., state power) and economic forces (e.g., capitalist economic arrangements), but they are also legitimated by approaches to governance and administration (e.g.,

new public management) and by ideological beliefs in things like the possibility and desirability of objectivity, professionalism, and expert knowledge."

The extent and persistence of oppression, discrimination, and hegemony are themes of critical theory. The individual's essential humanity is assumed to be diminished as power accumulates in the large, formal organizations of the public and private sectors and is wielded by Weberian bureaucracies through "scientifically justified" uses of various instruments of control and regulation, that is, technical, means-ends definitions of rationality.

Critical theory is the most overtly and programmatically political of the three theoretical perspectives under discussion. Using critical theory as a strategy for promoting democratic redistributions of power and reconceptualizations of reason, "critical theorists hope to engender crises of confidence in a society's ideological and institutional framework" (Sementelli and Abel 2000, 459). "Ideally," says Box, "critical theory aims to create conditions in which a fully conscious public enacts change" (Box 1995, 5). "The space of the economy and of formal organizations," say Salm, Candler, and Ventriss (2006, 527), "needs to be delimited, in a democratic manner, so that the phenonomic and isonomic spaces necessary to a full human existence can be preserved." Clearly, then, critical theorizing is also normative.

The critical theorists' political argument is succinctly summarized by Box: "The freedom of the individual has been twisted into freedom of private corporations to dictate the conditions of life and the physical environment of the world's population" (2004, 590). This development produces a conundrum. People come to realize that "government could be their only protection from the powerful, but government may be the 'property' of the people from whom they seek protection," or, as phenomenologists argue, government itself may, perhaps unconsciously, become an agent of oppression. "In contemporary societies based on liberalism, public institutions are used, in the words of Bowles and Gintis (1986, 17), to 'render democracy safe for elites—democracy is confined to a realm (the state) relatively unlikely to interfere with the wielding of economic power. . . . ' In this situation, democratic practice is 'limited to forms (representative government) insufficient for the consolidation of popular power'" (Box 2004, 590).

Such a corruption of governance is, however, not inevitable, Box insists. "Centralization can result in greater democracy in the long term, even when it appears coercive at the moment" (2004, 590), although a clever politics is essential to a good result. "Advances in democracy may be possible without causing such consternation amongst the powerful that they intervene to curtail them" (592). Continues Box, "discourse theory . . . is an important approach to involving the public in . . . deciding what to do" (598). This will be true, however, only if issues such as access to information, the quality of deliberation, the role of professionals in administration, and the functioning of representative institutions are properly addressed. Doing so may be as much a matter as changing perceptions of the purpose of government and the appropriate locus of decision making as of changing formal legal structures and, on the part of professional public administration, a commitment to social relevance rather than scientific legitimacy.

This pragmatic perspective is controversial, however. Fox argues, for example, that "ultimately constitutionalism fails us because it is simply too conservative; it is reactionary in the noble but still fettering Burkean sense. To defend the administrative state by constitutional inquiry looks back instead of forward" (Fox 1993, 56).

Axes of Reconciliation and Conflict

It should be apparent that phenomenological and critical perspectives are complementary rather than antagonistic. They share a commitment to symbolic and communicative interaction, to the

objective of unifying theory and praxis, and to creating widely shared interpretations of objects and circumstances. This synthesis may, however, require phenomenologists to pay greater attention to the material conditions affecting interpretation that are central to critical theory, but there would appear to be no principled objection to doing so. The goal is that "the field of symbolic or communicative interaction will eventually become embedded in the emergent field of purposive/ rational action, now the basis for the new legitimation of the structure of social power" (Denhardt 1981, 630).

Thus, mutually reinforcing normative theorizing might have as its purpose that which Denhardt has claimed for critical theory: "It is the role of theory to reveal . . . contradictions [between human strivings and the limitations imposed on them by social conditions] and, thus, permit us to pursue our own freedom." The objective is "to transcend the tension and to abolish the opposition between the individual's purposefulness, spontaneity, and rationality, and those work-process relationships on which society is built" (Denhardt 1981, 629).

Some positivists acknowledge the influence on their thinking of various normative perspectives and are sympathetic to their broad purpose of critique that facilitates greater personal freedom and dignity. In the course of their work, positivists may employ phenomenological ideas. For example, in their empirical analysis of public organizational performance, Brewer and Selden acknowledge that "organizational performance is a socially constructed phenomenon that is subjective, complex, and particularly hard to measure in the public sector" (Brewer and Selden 2000, 688).

Indeed, positivists have asserted that propositions derived within normative perspectives might be subject to confirmation or disconfirmation through application of their methods. Most, however, are likely to agree with Sementelli and Abel that "there seems to be no evidence that any immanent critique currently propels or guides the action of any movement, party, interest group or regime. Moreover, forms of life that are distinctly non-emancipatory thrive in many places, even within societies dedicated to an ongoing self-criticism of its institutions and regimes" (Sementelli and Abel 2000, 464–465). "In brief," they continue, "non-emancipatory discourses, institutions and process that do not respect the integrity of the individual (in the sense of self-rule) seem to be working, and nowhere do we find a working model of critical theory as delineated by modern critical theorists" (465).

The possibilities of reconciliation among these three orientations on behalf of a comprehensive and coherent "theory of public administration" must confront the implications of their own premises. Positivists are inherently distrustful of theorizing they regard as tainted by unexamined biases, subjectivity, and self-affirming reasoning. For their part, normative theorists are inherently distrustful of the technical rationality that, by providing apparent scientific legitimacy for agents of hierarchical control of human behavior and experience, are profoundly antidemocratic and inimical to unfettered discourse among equal citizens. Because of these axes of tension, theorizing in public administration is an arena for contentious debate over the profession's values and epistemologies.

VARIETIES OF EXPLANATION

As noted earlier, most theorizing in public administration involves explaining administrative activity or performance through empirical investigation: testing or identifying theoretical propositions in the light of "facts," that is, actual (recorded, measured, observed, and described) events or phenomena: behavior, administrative acts, decisions, legal and organizational structures and processes, service utilization, and the like. The intended uses of such explanations include, in addition to further theory building, contingent predictions—if-then statements—held with suf-

ficient confidence to support arguments on behalf of specific policies, management strategies, and service-delivery practices.

While the tradition of theory-based empirical explanation has its historical roots in the Progressive Era's scientific management movement, empiricism began to assume its present form in the 1930s in investigations by Ridley and Simon (1938; Simon et al. [1941]), Stone, Price, and Stone (1940), and Lipson ([1939] 1968) (for further discussion, see Bertelli and Lynn 2006). Additional momentum was provided by the emergence of the policy sciences, operations research, and systems/policy analysis movements and of Herbert Simon's Carnegie School of behavioral research following World War II, which increased the emphasis on research-based decision making in public administration. The policy sciences, as developed by H.D. Lasswell (1971) and his colleagues, "proposed intellectual tools to aid practitioners in the identification and specification of policy problems and the development of sensible, useful, and politically viable solutions to them" (deLeon and Steelman 2001, 164). Training for understanding and engaging in such research gradually became a staple of professional education in public administration.

Aaron Wildavsky, a seminal figure in the public policy movement, described "the art of policy analysis" as follows (1979, 16): "Policy analysis must create problems that decision-makers are able to handle with the variables under their control and in the time available . . . by specifying a desired relationship between manipulable means and obtainable objectives. . . . Unlike social science, policy analysis must be prescriptive; arguments about correct policy, which deal with the future, cannot help but be willful and therefore political." Policy analysis became firmly institutionalized in public deliberation and decision making in the executive and legislative branches and in legal deliberations at all levels of government.

Further impetus for theory-based empirical research in public administration has come from the recent emphasis on performance: of agencies and organizations, policies, programs, and public officials, specifically on performance measurement and management and on evidence-based policy making and practice. Nonprofit and for-profit research institutes and think tanks have joined universities in meeting steadily growing demands for research and analysis and for theories that explain important facts and predict consequences of policy, regulatory, and service interventions.

A useful characterization of theory that explains administrative phenomena has been formulated by Rockman (2000, 6). "Theory," he says, "constitutes a logical concatenation of ideas that may be formally derived and axiomatic or merely verbal formulations that represent a logical set of hunches about how things work." He elaborates: "An important theory provides us with the power to draw inferences that would not be self-evident but for the organizing principle the theory provides. A powerful theory also helps us understand the mundane by pulling together in a conceptually coherent way a set of behaviors or phenomena we would otherwise see only in isolated terms." Theorizing of this kind seeks to provide logical, empirically verifiable explanations of what Rockman calls the peculiarities of political institutions, and it is enjoying growing global prominence within public administration and management.

The Scope of Explanation

Empirically oriented theorizing varies widely in scope and purpose. A growing body of research is concerned with the determinants of "government performance" (Boyne et al. 2006; Forbes, Hill, and Lynn 2006; Robichau and Lynn 2009). But investigators' more focused concerns, together with limitations of data and analytical methods, mean that much theorizing occurs in the middle range of practical concerns about particular propositions within broader conceptual frameworks,

such as the efficacy of particular kinds of incentives, for example, pay for performance, within a given organizational or institutional context, such as a tenured civil service.

To illustrate the character of this type of theorizing, several examples have been chosen for their quality and representation of the contemporary empirical research agenda. Their scope ranges from explanations of particular propositions to explanations intended to provide more general, or generalizable, insights into organizational and administrative system operation and performance.

Explanations: Partial Theories

Rockman's "logical concatenation of ideas," both verbal formulations and more formally derived hypotheses, provide the basis for deriving administrative propositions intended to have implications for practice.

Are Public Sector–Private Sector Differences Significant? How, why, and with what implications does administration in the public sector differ from that in the private sector? The characteristics that differentiate public from private organizations, the consequences of those differences for performance, and the relationships between characteristics and consequences offer countless possibilities for theory-based empirical research on public-private differences (Rainey and Chun 2005).

An example is Nutt's investigation of differences in the decision-making practices of public and private sector organizations. His theoretical proposition is that these practices differ because "organizations with public features are seen as being constrained in ways that limit what they can do when making strategic choices" (2006, 290). By comparing decision making in a tax-supported public agency with that in a private firm that sells to a market, he seeks to assess "problems and prospects in the oft-repeated call for public sector organizations to adopt private sector practices" (290).

Employing a complex research design involving a simulation, Nutt tests five specific hypotheses concerning "how mid-level managers in [a state department of natural resources and an automotive company] view the prospects of approval and the risk" in budget decisions. His explanatory variables include "sector, budgeting practices, the cognitive makeup of the participant, and level of controversy. The budgeting practices draw on the modes of understanding found in four kinds of decision-making cultures and are applied to controversial and noncontroversial budget requests" (290).

Nutt's broad conclusion is that "managers in the private sector seem to place too much reliance on analytics and too little on bargaining. Those in the public sector may place too great an emphasis on [internal] bargaining and too little on networking [with external actors], but they do seem to understand the limits of analysis" (311). His policy implication is that those who "seek to reform government by calling for the use of private sector business practices . . . should pay more attention to the barriers to using analysis, real and imagined, if they hope to see their recommendations followed. The recommended practices invariably call for analytic procedures and practices [that are] difficult to carry out" in a political setting (312).

How Can Better Client Outcomes Be Achieved? How do program structures, management strategies, operating practices, and client characteristics interact to determine program outputs and outcomes? Theorizing concerning this question varies widely in scope. The object to be explained is usually the outputs or outcomes of a particular type of agency, a specific agency, or a specific program (Heinrich 2003).

Bloom, Hill, and Riccio (2003) conducted a multilevel study of measured impacts on clients of welfare-to-work programs. They were able to pool data "from a series of large-sample, multi-site experiments of mandatory welfare-to-work programs conducted by MDRC during the past 15 years." The authors' theorizing assimilates the conjectures and propositions of other investigators of the determinants of a program's impact on client outcomes. It focuses on the influence of four sets of implementation-related factors on the effectiveness of welfare-to-work programs: program management and treatment practices, client activities, the economic environment in which programs operate, and client characteristics. Their dependent variable is an outcome measure: "the estimated impact on sample members' mean total earnings (measured in constant 1996 dollars) for the first 2 years after random assignment" to a control or treatment group (557).

The authors found that "the emphasis placed by programs on quick client employment has by far the largest, most statistically significant, and most robust effect on program impacts of all that we observed" (565). In addition, "findings for personalized client attention are also striking, statistically significant, and robust" (565). Their policy implication is that "management choices for how welfare-to-work programs are implemented matter a great deal to their success. In particular: a strong employment message is a powerful medium for stimulating clients to find jobs, a clear staff focus on personal client attention can markedly increase their success, [but] large client caseloads can undercut program effectiveness" (571).

How Can Bureaucratic Accountability Be Assured? The importance of bureaucratic responsiveness and accountability to political control has greatly increased as political emphasis on performance and transparency has grown. Questions that arise include those concerning both bureaucratic responsiveness to political authority and worker responsiveness to clients affected by their work.

Based on the literature, Potoski (1999) argues both that bureaucracies can be responsive and that bureaucracies can be independent and even influential in their own right. He chooses to address a question concerning the conditions under which bureaucracies are either more politically responsive or more autonomous. The problem, as he sees it, is that "theories offer widely different and sometimes conflicting predictions about how politicians use administrative procedures to control agencies" (624).

Potoski proposes "a positive (transaction costs) theory of how politicians use administrative procedures to reduce uncertainty about agency behavior." He differentiates between ex ante procedures that "stack the deck" "so that agencies' policy decisions favor the political interests that the legislators target" (625) and ex post "fire alarms," such as transparency requirements, that "reduce the various forms of politicians' uncertainty surrounding bureaucratic performance" (625). Three types of procedures were chosen for study based on discussions with state clean air officials: policy analysis procedures, political consultation procedures, and group consultation procedures" (630). Data for the study were from a survey of administrative procedures used by state air pollution control agencies. Explanatory variables that affect political transaction costs—strength of interest groups, complexity, strength of legislative staff and committees, and political turnover—were included in a multivariate regression model.

His contingent results, Potoski claims, confirm his expectations. "When they face the uncertainty of a turbulent political environment, politicians hardwire agencies by establishing policy analysis procedures. In response to the uncertainty of complex policy problems, politicians expand agency autonomy, reducing oversight procedures in order to capitalize on the technical expertise of unfettered clean air bureaucrats. Finally, politicians with stronger legislative committee and staff resources can use fire alarm procedures to combat the principal-agent problem of overseeing clean air agencies" (637).

Explanations: Organizational Performance

Organizational theory adapted from sociology, economics, social psychology, and other fields has long been featured in public administration theorizing because of the profession's focus on public agencies. In empirical research, such theorizing has focused on the determinants of the performance both of specific agencies or types of agencies and of the public sector, that is, tax-supported organizations more generally.

Why Are Some Organizations More Effective Than Others? How can the fact that some public organizations are more effective than others be explained? Theorizing must contend with the undoubted but difficult-to-assess influence of, among other things, political context, policy design, management, organizational cultures, street-level worker values, skills and practices, and characteristics and behaviors of beneficiaries themselves.

In a well-known article, Rainey and Steinbauer (1999) draw on the literature and research on effective government organizations to select and develop conceptual elements of a theory that would explain their effectiveness. Rather than deductive theorizing based on concepts from public choice theory or the economics of organization, their approach "draws . . . on case studies and empirical research in public administration and public bureaucracy as well as concepts from organization and management theory[,] . . . conclusions from many of the authors on successful leadership and management . . . [and] efforts to characterize government agencies that perform efficiently" (8).

The authors' concept of effectiveness, that is, their generalized dependent variable, "refers to whether the agency does well that which it is supposed to do, whether people in the agency work hard and well, whether the actions and procedures of the agency and its members are well suited to achieving its mission, and whether the agency actually achieves its mission" (13). Their theory is meant to suggest the kinds of complex causal relationships that must be considered in thinking about the determination of organizational performance and in designing empirical research.

What Specific Factors Affect Organizational Performance? An analytic framework such as that of Rainey and Steinbauer is bound to become a point of departure for more focused investigations. For example, Brewer and Selden (2000) contend that both agency-level and individual factors affect organizational performance. They identify five agency-level factors: organizational culture, human capital and capacity, agency support for the National Performance Review (the Clinton administration's public management reform), leadership and supervision, and red tape. Their four individual-level factors are structure of task or work, task motivation, public service motivation, and individual performance.

The authors test their theory using data from the 1996 Merit Systems Protection Board's Merit Principles Survey, which questioned a random sample of 18,163 permanent, full-time employees in the twenty-three largest federal government agencies, and ordinary least squares regression methods. The dependent variable was a measure of organizational performance based on responses to six survey questions. The authors found that agency-level factors most affect organizational performance; organizational culture in particular, which comprises efficacy, teamwork, protection of employees, and concern for the public interest, is "a powerful predictor of organizational performance in federal agencies" (703). Individual-level variables were "modestly important predictors of organizational performance." They claim that their findings have clear implications for the teaching and practice of administration and management.

Does Management Affect Results? Though theory-based empirical research has established that "management matters" to organization results, questions still remain concerning how management matters to government performance.

"Although theoretical ideas about public management and how it shapes governance action proliferate like populations without predators," say Meier and O'Toole (2007), "much of that work is ambiguous in character and unsystematic in sketching causal links between public management and public program performance" (505). Based on theoretical and empirical (mostly case-study) literature in both hierarchical and networked environments, the authors constructed a formal model of the management-performance relationship. According to the authors, in the model governing the relationship between public management and program performance: current outputs reflect prior outputs; fundamental causal relationships are nonlinear; and performance is properly conceptualized in terms of outputs and outcomes.

The Meier and O'Toole model has spawned a large empirical literature by the authors themselves and by colleagues testing the model's logic. The results tend to confirm the authors' reductive theory. That this is so is in contrast to models like that of Rainey and Steinbauer, which, because they are constrained by little or no formal logic, tend to spawn research of considerable theoretical variability. This advantage of the Meier-O'Toole model is offset in part by the ambiguity of the model's variable constructs: "a measure of stability"; "management," which comprises "management's contribution to organizational stability through additions to hierarchy/structure as well as regular operations," management's efforts to exploit the environment of the organization, and management's effort to buffer the unit from the environmental shocks"; and "a vector of environmental forces" (505). With such formulations, construct comparability across studies becomes an important issue.

Explanations: Government Performance

If organizational cultures matter most, according to one study, political support according to another, might their relative influence be assessed? Some of the most ambitious theorizing for empirical research seeks to explain "government performance" within a broad framework that explains the outputs or outcomes (or both) of policies, programs, organizations, or complex administrative systems operating in multilevel political contexts (Boyne 2003; Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill 2001). Such theorizing may encompass both hierarchical and networked or consociation arrangements, multiple levels of hierarchical interaction, and complex dimensions of management and service delivery.

How Can We Understand the Performance of Multilevel Governance? Findings from individual studies suggest that the relationship between public policies and their outcomes is mediated by factors at multiple levels of governance. Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill (2001) have constructed an analytic framework they term a "logic of governance," which identifies these levels of interaction, thus establishing a nexus among policy makers, public managers, service providers, service recipients, and the public. They propose that this framework be used not only to inform theorizing concerning how political-administrative systems are implicated in the shaping and implementation of public policies but also as a framework for synthesizing findings across studies, leading to insights that might otherwise be opaque.

Hill and Lynn (2005), for example, used the logic of governance to synthesize findings from more than eight hundred published studies that investigated interrelationships between two or more levels of governance. A striking finding of their analysis was that, in the vast majority of studies,

"influence is modeled as flowing downward from legislation and management toward treatments [service delivery] and consequences, and this general pattern is evident for virtually every level of governance being modeled" (179). Moreover, "variables at virtually every level of the governance hierarchy both influence and are influenced by variables at other levels, and these relationships can be (but are not always) statistically and substantively significant" (181). Of particular interest, they say, "are constructs . . . over which public managers and their agents have influence: formal organizational structure, public management [strategies], and [service delivery]" (181).

How Do Politics and Management Interact? As managerialism—letting, or making, managers manage—in various guises became a fashionable theme of public administrative reform, theorizing turned to the question of how and why management matters in politically designed, complex government organizations (Hill and Lynn 2005; Meier and O'Toole 2007). Though much empirical research focuses on identifying best practices, effort devoted to theory-based investigations of political influences on management and performance has increased.

For example, Moynihan and Pandey (2005) focus on "key environmental and organizational predictors of performance" (424). They test a number of specific hypotheses concerning "the impact [on organizational effectiveness] of a number of environmental factors (the support of elected officials, the influence of clients, the influence of the public) and organizational factors (culture, centralization of decision authority, goal clarity, barriers to reorganization)" (424). Variables in their study were based on responses from a survey of 274 managers from eighty-three organizations across the fifty states who were engaged in information-management activities in state-level primary health and human services agencies. Based on ordinary least squares regression analysis, the authors conclude that "results . . . support the proposition that organizational performance is shaped both by external environmental factors and internal management factors" (430). Evidence concerning the importance of political support is particularly strong. Further, they note, "the positive impact of public/media influence on performance supports this claim, suggesting that bureaucrats understand performance in terms of responsiveness to the broader public" (432).

How Does Policy Affect Service Delivery? Management matters, but what about the policy designs that those managers are directed to implement? A growing body of theory-based empirical research embeds management in a matrix of interdependent relationships with policy makers and service workers: Management, in other words, is both dependent and independent variable (Hill and Lynn 2005; Forbes, Hill, and Lynn 2006).

Based on their survey of empirical literature, May and Winter (2009) argue that previous research "provides little understanding of the importance of political and managerial influences in the implementation equation" (2). The authors seek to explain the extent to which the actions of street-level bureaucrats reflect higher-level policy goals in reformed Danish employment programs. Their model includes municipal-level considerations such as "municipal policy goals, political attention, and managerial actions, along with . . . attitudinal and contextual variables that relate to individual caseworkers" (12).

With data drawn mainly from a nationwide survey of a sample of municipal caseworkers who are responsible for implementing the laws and intentions of the reform as well as from surveys of employment functions of chief executive officers and municipal middle managers in all Danish municipalities, the authors use hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) estimation methods to investigate "the extent to which caseworkers take actions that are consistent with the national goal of getting people into work" (12). They found that "on the one hand, higher level political [attention of relevant municipal politicians to employment issues] and managerial [supervision,

communicating specific goals] factors influence the policy emphases of frontline workers. On the other hand, the strength of the effects is relatively limited" (16).

VARIETIES OF CRITICAL INTERPRETATION

In contrast to positivist theorizing, what can theorizing within interpretive and critical traditions contribute to the practice of public administration and management? Several classic papers suggest some possibilities.

The Social Construction of Reality

Among the most well-known ideas emerging from nonpositivist theorizing is that the reality that motivates political and administrative behavior is "socially constructed." A social construction is a phenomenon that is held to be real by those who constitute a culture or subculture. Social constructions are "normative and evaluative," not "objective"; homelessness and the homeless, poverty and poor people, veterans, and gender and gender roles are examples of socially embedded constructions implying certain perceived (as well as measured) characteristics and cultural (as well as expert) judgments.

Schneider and Ingram (1993), for example, put forward a theory of the social construction of "target populations"—populations that are the objects of public policy—contending that social constructions become embedded in public policies, "send[ing] messages about what government is supposed to do, which citizens are deserving (and which not), and what kinds of attitudes and participatory patterns are appropriate in a democratic society" (334).

The authors' theory offers not only an interpretation of the behavior of societal actors but also an explanation of political outcomes: who gets what, when, and how. It bridges the divide between phenomenology and positivism in that, as they put it, "target populations are assumed to have boundaries that are empirically verifiable (indeed, policies create these empirical boundaries) and to exist within objective conditions even though those conditions are subject to multiple evaluations" (335). In other words, phenomena that are regarded by positivists as facts are better understood as the resultants of a process of social construction that selects a particular evaluative interpretation of perceived phenomena.

What Is a "Problem" Requiring a Policy Response?

From the wide variety of social constructions that might motivate a political response, only some reach the agenda for political action at national, state, and local levels of policy making. The question is, which culturally identified situations, difficulties, and problems reach that agenda?

This question is addressed by Stone (1989). "Problem definition," she argues, "is a process of image making, where the images have to do fundamentally with attributing cause, blame, and responsibility" (282). That is, political actors must be able to conceive of difficulties as having a cause, and a locus of responsibility, that they can ameliorate by use of the legislative and regulatory tools at their disposal. The causal arguments embraced by political actors may or may not be valid in a scientific sense; policy makers persist in their faith in performance-based pay for civil servants despite the absence of evidence of their efficacy (Perry, Engbers, and Jun 2009). Causal arguments that do have a degree of validity that is convincing to scholars may fail to move policy makers because such arguments do not readily translate into a convincing policy argument. Government performance may have multiple, complex determinants, but rewarding measured performance is an easily grasped idea with popular appeal.

Can Policy Making Be More Democratic?

The relationship between research and practice with respect to public policy and administration has often been characterized as a relationship between specialist professionals and their practitioner "clients." Critical theorists see this relationship differently, as representing "the capitulation of social science to the instrumental and rationalizing processes of the modern techno-industrial system and its state apparatus" (Fischer 1993, 165).

To remedy the technocratic bias inherent in policy making based on positivist policy research, Fischer (1993) puts forward a postpositivist conception of "practical reason," which is a product of "deliberation" and "giving good reasons" and, therefore, of a non-Madisonian politics in which citizens participate directly and equally in the policy-making process (167). The role of experts is transformed from proffering their best technical judgments on problems they themselves define to facilitating citizen efforts to learn and choose for themselves the problems that concern them and reasonable approaches to them. "It involves the creation of institutional and intellectual contexts that help people pose questions and examine technical analyses in their own ordinary (or everyday) languages and decide which issues are important to them" (171). Thus, experts immerse themselves in the very cultural processes described by Schneider and Ingram and by Stone and facilitate social constructions that are democratic. Such "collaborative research" is perhaps best suited to those difficulties or problems that are especially complex, both intellectually and institutionally.

To the objection that widespread participation is difficult to achieve in a mass society subject to competing demands on collective attention, Dryzek (2001) responds by defining the legitimacy of deliberative democracy in terms not of head counts but of "the resonance of collective decisions with public opinion, defined in terms of the provisional outcome of the contestation of discourses in the public sphere as transmitted to the state" (666). The difference between this formulation and contemporary arrangements is subtle: the extent to which discourses are undistorted by elite interests and constructions.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION THEORY: A HETERODOXY

Taken together, the preceding three sections have an important implication. The achievement of an integrated, more coherent understanding of public administration that resolves the identity crisis long perceived by many within the profession is not only a vain hope; it is a misguided one. The controversies that infuse theorizing in public administration reflect the existential reality of public administration's moral, humanistic, democratic, and pragmatic professional concerns. Indeed, because philosophical differences among theorists turn on moral questions, because the suppression of such differences would be greeted with opprobrium by all concerned, and, finally, because advocates of the dominant philosophy, positivism, are hardly unified themselves, public administration theory is fated to remain a heterodoxy of dissenters from orthodoxies favored by one or another philosophical protagonist.

The positivist orthodoxy appears to be, on the whole, more self-critical than the normative orthodoxies. The oft-acknowledged difficulties of conducting research on political and organizational phenomena notwithstanding (Bradley and Schaefer 1998), Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill have argued that "research—carefully conceived and theoretically framed, executed with skill, and appropriately qualified—can produce contingent findings that are sufficiently robust to provide useful contributions to conceptual and practical understanding, contributions that, on the whole, are at least as useful as those provided by any other high-quality research approach" (Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill 2008, 105; cf. Cruise 1997).

As a practical matter—as a matter of professional ethos—theory-based empirical research in public administration is most usefully regarded as a potentially credible source of heuristics for practice, that is, as a source of stimulants to constructive, creative, or critical thought about administrative phenomena and of ideas for deliberation and, if suitably vetted, for action. Well-executed, theory-based empirical research can be insightful about practical matters, cutting through what might otherwise appear to be incoherent complexity. Normative critics must be able to show that they can do better than positivists when confronting administrative problems as they present themselves in practice.

What constitutes "doing better" is a judgment call, however, arguably no more free of ideological bias than normative assertions. Confirmed antipositivists will be disinclined to accept the "highest-quality" positivist research as a legitimate basis for action because positivism tends to ignore the lived experiences of those affected by such action, the cultural bases of social constructions, and the moral implications of acting.

In the light of these difficulties, what the profession might aspire to has been articulated by Evans and Lowery (2006, 2008). They note that "scholars in the field of public administration . . . are generally less free to advance normative claims in so uncritical a fashion than are practitioners, political actors, the general public and even writers of popular fiction. . . . We know, however, that normative claims that set out to answer [important] questions are often advanced with something less than a full articulation of the various philosophical, social, and political beliefs and commitments on which they are grounded. More is needed if a normative claim is to be considered scholarly" (Evans and Lowery 2006, 158). In their view (2008, 21–22):

> Should we choose to see ourselves as a multidisciplinary field of study in support of a broad array of professional practices, our eyes (and hearts) can bask in the beauty shared in a wide range of scholarly arguments, some of them innovative and surprising. The insights embodied in these arguments may have the capacity to open doors to both past experiences and new opportunities. They could evoke the significance inherent in the mundane, practical, and daily experienced truths of those whose explorations into the realm of meaningful practice we profess to guide, even if these truths fly in the face of conventional wisdom.

If that range of scholarly arguments—for example, over reconciling moral imperatives such as the universality of access to health care, educational opportunity, and income security with resource scarcity and individual liberty—includes those put forward undogmatically by individuals who would explain, or interpret, or criticize, then both the symbiosis and the serendipity among theorists and between theorizing and practice on which a healthy sense of professional identity depends may be within reach.

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