

PAR Interview: Patricia Shields, May 2008

For authors, part of what makes writing for PAR a rewarding experience is the process of creation, critically examining a field, and engaging in public debate. Until recently reading the Journal has been more of a passive experience. The PAR Interviews are one way to share with readers some of the excitement of exploration and tension of debate, connecting readers with authors. Each issue, we will ask one or more authors to answer a few questions about their contribution to PAR, how they came to write that article, and what it means to them.

In this interview, Patricia Shields talks about her article, "*Rediscovering Public Administration's Taproot: A Senior-Junior Exchange*," which appeared in the March/April 2008 issue of *PAR*.

Jim Heichelbech: Can you tell me a little bit about your background in terms of your relationship to pragmatism? How did you first come to learn about pragmatism and how did it change and inform your perspectives on the more commonly cited intellectual roots of public administration?

Patricia Shields: As a Ph.D. student in economics I realized I did not want to devote my life to a subject based on complicated mathematical theories that celebrated selfishness and efficiency. Economics seemed sterile and left out most of the things in life I valued. Luckily, public finance economists that felt much the same way had built the Ohio State Public Administration Ph.D. Program. I moved to public administration, happy to be in a field that stressed public service and dealt with real world problems. PA was somewhere I could happily build a career. When I got to PA, however, and learned of the field's history and theories, I missed the rigor and depth of economics. I felt early on that PA could use a more comprehensive theoretical perspective.

As a new Assistant Professor, I used my economics and PA training to study user fees. This was shortly after Proposition 13 severely cut property taxes in California. User fees seemed like an obvious under employed revenue source. Unfortunately, there were equity issues. I looked to mental health centers and their fee structures to learn how they used sliding scales to take into account client's income. I read social work and economics literature. To my utter amazement, social work based their fee theory on Sigmund Freud: while economists described fees as a public price. The two worlds were so completely alien it was difficult to imagine they were discussing the same thing. I wrote an article designed to show how different participants in the policy process could come from completely different perspectives. Their language and thought patterns were as if they came from different universes. The article entitled "Freud, Efficiency and Pragmatism" tried to capture the worlds of the social worker, economist and public administrator as they thought about user fees and equity. I was not sure what word to use as the organizing principal for public administration. It seemed to me that public administrators would look at fees pragmatically as a revenue source. So, I used pragmatism in the title of the article.

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To my utter surprise, I received a letter from Amitai Etzioni, an ethics chair at the Harvard Business School. He told me how much he liked Freud, Efficiency and Pragmatism. I was happy and made copies of the letter. The chairman of the Texas State University philosophy department walked by as I copied Etzioni's letter. He asked me what was going on, I showed him the letter and he asked to see the article. I asked why, he obviously was not an economist or social worker. He then uttered the words that changed my life. He said, "I study pragmatism."

This is when I learned that pragmatism was a philosophy. I asked him more. I found a philosophy that captured the pragmatic world of the public administrator. Vince Luizzi, the philosophy chair, was the perfect mentor. And, as a lawyer and a municipal judge, his experience lay at the intersection of law, administration and philosophy. The Patterson article, which I quote quite often in the Taproot article, was my introduction to the philosophy of pragmatism. It stressed the legal aspect and placed Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. at the founding and center of the philosophy. The more I read, the more it became clear that classical pragmatism provided the depth, rigor and connection to practice I was looking for.

Like many scholars, I have many research agendas. Aside from pragmatism and public administration I examine military policy. My dissertation examined the equity of the military recruitment process during the Vietnam era. As an assistant professor, I was working on a book that examined how the many professions influenced observed military policy. A cubist painting reveals many perspectives, so, too observed policy reveals the influence of the professionals that make it. I had chapters like "Efficiency" for the economist and "Profit" for business. Originally "Implementation" was the title for public administration.

The Efficiency chapter was easy to write. Unfortunately, I got stuck trying to write the PA chapter. Here I was, a person with a Ph.D. in Public Administration and I was having trouble articulating PA's imprint on policy. It began to dawn on me that the pragmatism of James, Dewey Pierce and Holmes might be a better way to express PA's imprint on policy. Unfortunately, there was no literature that linked the ideas of James, Dewey, Peirce or Holmes to PA. This meant I would need to detour and make the case.

Fortunately, an elder statesman of Public Administration, Emmette Redford, had become my friend. I went to him with the dilemma. Did I continue with implementation as the organizing principle for PA or take the risky jump to pragmatism? His answer was simple. "Pat", he said, "Implementation is a fad. It will only last a decade or two. Look at Dewey's pragmatism." So, with the blessing of Emmette Redford, I made the pragmatic turn.

Jim Heichelbech: The "provisional" aspect of pragmatism comes through clearly in the practice of public administration. Would you say that an emphasis on pragmatism offers an important perspective for PA students entering the field as practitioners?

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Patricia Shields: My students are both pre-service and mid-career. Both groups find pragmatism appealing. They like its problem orientation and the crucial role of practitioner experience. The provisional nature of pragmatism is useful in providing long-term perspective. It is possible to celebrate victories with realism and weather wrong-headed policies. The provisional nature of classical pragmatism also provides a vocabulary that makes negotiation less threatening – “let’s try something and see if it works.”

The emphasis on inquiry is also somewhat self-sustaining. Public administrators never run out of problematic situations. If approached as pragmatic inquiry (creativity, critical optimism, participation, etc., and action) practitioners have the potential to create better policy and give their life more meaning. The public administrator trained in classical pragmatism approaches problematic situations with tools to resolve them. Note the term “resolve” as compared to “solve.” Resolution implies provisional. Solution suggests end of quest.

I also think classical pragmatism has the potential to inspire practicing public administrators. If they incorporate the four “Ps” into their perspective, practitioners will see their actions and experiences as creating democracy. This is not the political or legal democratic framework they work within. Democracy is experienced in their conversations with citizens, clients, co-workers, etc. Dewey and Addams imagine a kind of democracy that can be actively practice in the day-to-day life of public administrators. The humble activities of public administration have the potential to be part of ongoing democratic processes. Processes that involve people every day – not just on Election Day or through the activities in a distant state capitol building.

Obviously this is an idealized vision. Yet practical problems provide what Dewey described as the “post of use.” A wealth of ideas and perspectives (pluralism) provide approaches to the problem, widespread participation is essentially a democratic process and the provisional nature means it is never perfect. At its best critical optimism allows pragmatic public administrators to view the problem realistically and keeps them focused in spite of roadblocks and frustrations. They can be inspired and grounded at the same time. They are tethered to the post of use with a rope long enough to see beyond the immediate and to feel inspiration in large and small victories. This is a perspective that should be useful and add meaning for PA students entering the field and those in the midst of a public service career.

Jim Heichelbech: What might be some examples of where this perspective would be helpful? Policy making? Budgeting? Human resource management?

Patricia Shields: Clearly the insight that the enterprise of PA is inherently provisional is one that should help students make sense of the environment. It would allow them to see how change in their work environment is a natural byproduct of the provisional nature of public policy and management. It also

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provides the public administrator with the humility to approach policy resolutions in a participatory environment.

Jim Heichelbech: The "invisibility" of pragmatism in the literature about public administration is really interesting. It seems like those who would be most motivated to advocate pragmatism would also be the most motivated to leave academia and enter public administration as practitioners.

Patricia Shields: Clearly, PA is an interdisciplinary field. The pluralism is obvious. The pluralism aspect of pragmatism is in plain sight invisibility. The classical pragmatism perspective treats the theories and findings within the many disciplines as tools that help us make sense out of and address problematic situations. The disconnection of pluralism from the problematic situation hid the insights of classical pragmatism from an explicit place in the field.

One reason I was drawn to the Brendel framework was its potential to move classical pragmatism to the light. The "Taproot" article was also designed to do this. And, as shown in the "Taproot" article there is a small yet significant public administration literature that has applied pragmatism to public administration. Brendel's four P's help us to get our arms around a complex, comprehensive, diverse philosophy.

Jim Heichelbech: To the extent that there is such a tendency, we might see less discussion of pragmatism in the literature simply because those who are contributing to the literature are less inclined in that direction. But that would mean that, in order to facilitate attention to pragmatism in the literature, we would need to create, preserve or recognize the voice of practitioners in the literature?

I have some well-defined ideas about how the voice of the pragmatic practitioner will be preserved in the literature. In my life as a professor I supervise MPA students in their capstone project the Applied Research Project. Since the mid 1990s I have been applying principles of classical pragmatism to this effort. An empirical research project is inquiry and inquiry is a central organizing concept in classical pragmatism.

The results have been nothing short of spectacular. Five of the papers have taken the best paper award from Pi Alpha Alpha, the public administration national honor society. The 250+ students' papers all apply principles of pragmatic inquiry and are available on the Texas State University institutional repository <http://ecommons.txstate.edu/arp/>. As of the end of March 2008 there have been 56,000 full-text downloads of these papers. The Texas State Applied Research Projects have been cited in dissertations, policy reports, and books. Graduates have been asked to be consultants in distant cities, review research proposals for university consortium and present their work at conferences. State agency internal auditors evaluate programs using models developed by my students. Graduates also report the papers help them get entry-level jobs; switch careers and supervise research projects work.

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Further, the tools and processes of inquiry they learn during their Applied Research Project can be applied every day. They see the benefits at work (e.g., testifying before legislatures, organizing committee meetings, project management) and, also in their personal life (e.g., planning weddings, climbing mountains).

The power of these ideas has led me to write about them. I have three journal articles and a book that apply the principles of classical pragmatism to scholarly research. One article examines classical pragmatism as a philosophy of science for public administration. The principles of classical pragmatism are illustrated within the context of the applied research projects as a problematic situation (how to get students to write quality empirical research). It can be downloaded at <http://ecommons.txstate.edu/polsfacp/33/>.

Another discusses conceptual frameworks as an organizing tool for empirical research <http://ecommons.txstate.edu/polsfacp/39/>. The book, *Step-by-Step: Building a Research Project*, is in its third edition. It is an organizing tool that facilitates the transformations of inquiry. The ideas of Peirce, James, Addams and Dewey are central to each publication.

The magnitude of the downloads of these papers suggests that there is a demand for practitioner research – something that is more applied than the research produced by academics in search of tenure. Also, there is now a technology to get this work to the broader PA community. I believe that we are only seeing the beginning of the impact of classical pragmatism driven practitioner oriented applied research.

It should also be noted that both Peirce and Addams were engaged in applied PA focused research as they conceptualized the new philosophy pragmatism. *Hull-House Maps and Papers* is a masterful piece of applied research. The sanitation and health research was instrumental to subsequent policy reform. The Maps of the surrounding neighborhood helped to create community and were the springboard for subsequent work by the University of Chicago Department of Sociology where Urban Studies was born. Brilliant scientist Charles Sanders Peirce made major contributions to the field of geodesy as he worked on the maps that kept ships safe from shoals. The maps worked if the ships arrived safely. The truth is in the practical consequences. There is incredible intimacy between today's practitioner confronting a problematic situation and the problematic situations that provided the experiences that birthed classical pragmatism. I just find it fascinating.

Jim Heichelbech: Well it is definitely fascinating and it's pretty clear that the perspective of pragmatism is a valuable lens for understanding public administration. Thanks for writing the article for PAR and for the insights behind the work.

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