

Theory to Practice: Building Blocks for the Bridge

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## Abstract

This subject matter paper discusses bridging theory to practice. An established, solid relationship between public administration theory, research methods and designs, and public managers could prove useful to theorists, practitioners and the rising pracademics. The rift between academia and practitioners in the field of public administration is evident and has sparked controversy and passionate discussions across the discipline. Theory building techniques such as Merton's middle range theory; adequate and sometimes non-traditional research techniques; and modification of language as to increase practitioners' exposure to publications of public administration theorists are some of the building blocks that may contribute to the bridge.

The concept of theory to practice has been a source of controversy and discussion for several decades. The reason for this is very simple. Jamil Jreisat (1978) stated in his article *Public Administration and the Theory/Practice Controversy*, that “in most aspects of public administration, the conceptual and the practical are intertwined” (pg. 504). He postulated that to focus on one without the other would create not only dissatisfaction within the student body of public administration, but an unprepared “professionally trained public personnel” as well (pg. 509). Mark Evans’ article, *The Art of Prescription: Theory and Practice in Public Administration Research* ask us should academic knowledge be used in order to better practice and if so, how? (pg. 128).

At this stage of public administration’s search for an identity as a field, it seems plausible that there would be some difficulties finding ways to bridge research, theory and practice. This difficulty may be the result of the dualities that live within our profession. Public administration scholars continue to engage in debate about whether we are are we a science or an art or some complicated relationship between the two. Lynn (1994) stated in *Public Management Research: The Triumph of Art over Science*, that “if communicable clarity and understanding are the goals...art and science must both be crafted into balance” (pg. 254). Donna Shalala spoke of these dualisms in her article, *Stimulating the Exchange of Experience* in 1977. She stated that the “field was riddled with dualisms: politics vs. administration, fact vs. value, and academic vs. practitioner” (pg. 570). Behn (1995) states that “the clean division of labor between politics and administration...is...completely unconnected to reality” (pg. 317). Lynn (1993) describes how “public managers are both principals and agents” (pg. 13). We make legislation or policy for others that we also have to live by. We create procedural rules for public agencies that prevent the achievements of the agency, for which public managers are responsible for (Behn 1995). It is

only logical to assume that the theoretical bases, research methods and practical applications that make up public administration would be diverse and sometimes, polar opposites.

Addressing these dualities begins with asking the question as to how to align theory to practice. This process starts with public administration theory development. Perry (1991) discusses a possible strategy towards developing and improving upon public administration theory, the utilization of middle range theory. I argue that it may be one of the best ways to add to public administration's body of knowledge and practical application. I believe this strategy creates a much needed balance by considering the need for both empirical or scientific study as well as the importance of practical application to real life situations. This theory building strategy could be used in bridging "practical inquiry-focused on the immediate, relevant, common-sense world – and the theoretical inquiry" (pg. 14). Many of my fellow practitioners yearned for academic theories could be translated into actual solutions relevant for the populations we served.

Perry (1991) discusses how Merton's concept of middle range theories can help to explain the relationship between "interconnected sets of propositions midway between unified theory that explains all uniformities and minor, working hypothesis" (pg. 6). Certain characteristics of middle range theory may better embody the nature of the relationship between public administration theory and public management practice. For instance, middle range theory states analytical concepts can be more abstract than empirical generalizations found in other cognate fields of study (pg. 7). Another characteristic is that middle range theories are usually derived from data rather than grand theories (pg. 7). Often, in practical application, issues and solutions can be identified from the data that is currently available or specific phenomena

actively affecting the society (i.e. how many people are living with AIDS or how many people do not have healthcare).

Craig Christiansen (2012) speaks to changing how academics use language in their articles. He discusses how academics could revamp who is included in their audience by changing their use of language and as a result, attract practitioners as a reading base. He suggested that theorists try to remember that those who are not theoreticians will benefit from being given definitions of conceptual constructs. He states that even those practitioners who dismiss theory as irrelevant, are actually indicating that they want “theory that is applicable to their daily practice” (pg. 479). He suggest that by using strategies such as explaining the plausibility of the theory and its practical application, we could improve practitioners’ exposure relevant conclusions for daily practice generated from theory.

The next step is conducting research conducive to theory to practice initiatives. Some of these research techniques include problem-solving oriented research, action research designs, and empirical analysis of practice. Empirical studies such as Williamson and Snow (2013) used descriptive statistics and correlations to examine and determine the extent to which practices within local school districts, were consistent with public management reform theories (pg. 162). Their study identified that they were “major gaps between theory and practice for practitioners and researchers to study” (pg. 171).

The discipline could benefit from opening itself to unconventional experimental research designs, if we want to understand how to turn current theory into practical application. In Riccucci’s (2001) article, *The Old Public Management Versus the “New” Public Management: Where Does Public Administration Fit In*, she emphasizes compromise over the utilization of different research methods as to obtain knowledge within our ever changing, “more than multi-

disciplinary” field, (Newland, 1994). She argues that public management and/or public administration issues do not totally lend themselves to empirical study and that “knowledge is derived from impressions both on intellect and on the senses” (pg. 174). Arthur Sementelli (2009) suggested using “popular media to bridge theories and practices” by presenting an approach for using “film and video to integrate contemporary social theory into management instruction and inquiry” (pg. 607). He argued that these strategies were contextual in nature and required commitment from practitioners and professors. This commitment was identified as a desire to stay relevant, current, as well as increasing our awareness in the “shifts of how meaning is conveyed” (pg. 617).

Perry, J. L. (1991) stated in his article, *Strategies for Building Public Administration Theory* that public administration “has grown so broad and so involved with activities at its periphery” (pg. ) and therefore has become “diverse and complex” (pg. 6). The diversity and complexity of public administration and management lies within the fact that it contends with the human condition constantly, in theory and in practical application. New phenomena emerges as “marketlike mechanisms, hierarchical arrangements and social relationships” (Lynn, 1993) change over time. There are implications for practitioners and academics which push us to strive to build a bridge between theory building, research designs, and practical application in order to shoulder the needs of the diverse society we serve.

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