Reversing the Theoretical Parsimony and Pragmatic Richness Dogma in Public Administration: Gaps, Traps, and Maps

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ABSTRACT

It is too easy to play the "blame game" and to debunk individuals, organizations, programs, and policies when maladministration occurs. It is pertinent to view how public administration theories share the blame and accept responsibility. In an effort to reverse the theoretical parsimony and pragmatic richness dogma that has lead to radical anti-essentialism, scholars need to assess theory in a way that demonstrates direct or indirect value to public affairs. This assessment can redefine pragmatism that would lead to theory-based essentialism in public administration. This process would bridge theory-practice gaps, avoid labeling traps, and provide maps that would direct theoretical redescription.

INTRODUCTION

Theory is anti-essential to public administration. There cannot be a grand narrative or meta-theory for public administration. On the other hand, it would be inappropriate to maintain that any "hunch, comment, value judgment, speculation, or ideological exhortation is 'theory'" (Cohen 1994, 67). We are caught between too much and too little theory. Perhaps public administration is too applied, multidisciplinary, and practical to be concerned with theory?

Most public administrationists\(^1\) are concerned with theory. However, few public administrationists are concerned about the standards for deciding the context and criteria that could be used to evaluate public administration theory. "We

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\(^1\)The term "public administrationist" is used in this research to refer to the commonalities between academicians and practitioners of public administration. Each public administrationist may work under different job descriptions, but both employ theory and work to enhance practice in the field of public administration.
all make such judgments, but for the most part we make them quite unselfconsciously; we treat them as matters of taste, value judgments and, thus, as not subject to rational debate” (Cohen 1994, 68). Rational debates, or discourses, are necessary to reverse the theoretical parsimony and pragmatic richness dogma in public administration.

In this century, public administration practice has shouldered the blame and accepted that responsibility for maladministration. Public administration scholars become “Monday morning quarterbacks” to assess practice after the investigations have occurred (see Ink, 2006; Menzel, 2006). It is often easier to evaluate practice than theory or philosophy. Practice is often blessed or cursed with tangible or empirical components.

REALITY AND CONSTRUCTS

Public administration theory may or may not work in reality. Universal theories do not exist, and universal essences cannot be found in reality. The use of theory to impact reality in practice must include social, administrative, ideological, and intellectual constructs. These constructs are dependant on communication and leadership skills of public administrationists.

The social construct is extremely important as impact does not occur in a vacuum. Impact often involves others in organizations which may be face-to-face, phone-to-phone, or e-mail to e-mail. This dynamic helps to frame theoretical application. Administrative constructs can be related to primers on human resource management, structural and hierarchal concerns, and dictation by policies and procedures. Ideological constructs include the multitude of views a person can hold about theories, people, programs, policies, organizations, and institutions. Intellectual constructs are based on ones mental capacity and desire to understand theoretical perspectives that can impact reality.

GOALS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION THEORY

Public administration theory seeks to be useful. If theory is useless it should be discarded. Simon, Smithburg, and Thompson address the goals of public administration theory without fully talking about theory (1950, 19-24). They do note, “At the present stage of knowledge, administrative
theory is of far more practical use in diagnosing situations than in prescribing suitable courses of action” (pp.20-21).

What makes public administration theory useful? The easy answer is that they theory has to be capable of being applied in practice, but just the application in practice is not sufficient. The theory must be applied in a way that upholds the public trust and the values important to public administrationists. The application should not be inefficient, ineffective, hidden, or immoral. It should be efficient, effective, transparent, and ethical. A complete reversal of these application standards does not fit the anti-essentialism doctrine as contradictions can occur as being transparent may require inefficiency.

The more difficult answer is to the question, is the theory valuable to public administrationists? Theorists should be concerned with building theory and the contributions to this process. “Theories become useful in the discovery, organization, and explanation of what we individually observe” (Abel and Sementelli 2004, 10). Public administrationists who consider themselves theorists are also responsible for disseminating knowledge to those who practice. Theorists would often like to promote better practice.

Frederickson and Smith (2003) appear to agree with Abel and Sementelli when they note that “The validity or usefulness of any theory depends on the capacity to describe, to explain, and to predict” (5). It is not clear why this belief places Frederickson and Smith in a positivist tradition. Theory becomes “a highly reliable guide for action,” “the ordering of factual material,” and determining “what ought to be” (7).

If a goal of public administration theory is self-improvement, a building process has to occur. Foundational knowledge must be used within contextual concerns to allow for bottom-up theory building. For example, the foundational knowledge may pit traditional versus behavioral interviewing for new employees. The theoretical question becomes which interviewing technique will allow for the selection of the best candidates? The best candidates could be determined at a later date based on actual job performance and there would have to be a belief that the answers to the traditional questions or the
described behavioral traits allowed for the better selection of employees. The closeness of the match would validate the theory that one type of interviewing could better predict on-the-job performance.

WHY THIS DISCUSSION IS IMPORTANT

First, we must continually seek improvement in theoretical discussions. By viewing the theoretical past and present we can gain legitimacy by thinking about what is next (Fox and Miller 1996, 40). To improve theory, assessment is required. “Assessing the state of theory development requires context and criteria” (Cohen 1994, 66). This paper seeks to work on the criteria requirement.

Second, public administration practices have a bias on evaluation. These practices include program evaluation, performance appraisal, performance budgeting, and systems analysis. Many of these practices are built on a logical positivist tradition of quantitative measurement. Postmodern public administration is critical of these traditions by highlighting the problems of these practices (Fox and Miller 2007, 12-17). Public administration theory does not emphasize evaluation on a systematic or continual basis. A bias is present if what is published is accepted as good theory. When authors of published work are assessed for tenure and promotion it is often easier for academic administrators to use quantitative rather than qualitative criteria.

Third, we must find accurate ways to assess theory to evaluate contributions and importability to scholarship, training, and practice. These ways will often include the mapping of theoretical impacts. Boje (2006) provides a linear narrative of genealogy of premoderns, moderns, and postmoderns that may be used to view theoretical transitions. Box (2005) has placed 25 years of publications into five substantive categories: the nature of knowledge; the relationship of Dialogue/ATP theory to mainstream public administration; normative public administration theory; social and political theory; and marginalization and oppression. Both Boje and Box provide conceptual maps that are important as public administrationists need a means to distill knowledge applicable to work realities.

The mapping generated by Box raises important issues of the need to provide “a window into the work of importing
theories into a practice-oriented field to generate understanding beyond instrumental techniques" and noting that scholarly work can fall into the trap of being ignorant of past contributions if careful literature reviews are not conducted (2005, 459-460). The biggest concern for Box’s work is with the methodology used to generate the map or the five substantive categories. Could other public administrationists review the same data and develop different substantive categories?

Fourth, there is a need to avoid theoretical traps. These traps may include those that profess theory that is not true, theory that is not understood by scholars and has limited contribution to the field, theory that is not recognized by practitioners, and theory that is ignored by trainers. However, we must continue the discussion as to whether “true” is a realizable criterion that can be used to recognize a trap. If the theory is not false it may be true. “The more a statement endures repeated attempts to falsify it, the more that statement is accepted as true” (Miller and Fox, 2007, p. 18).

Fifth, there is a need to develop useful theories. “Theories become useful in the discovery, organization, and explanation of what we individually observe” (Abel and Sementelli, 2004, p. 92). Do theories become useless if they do not assist in the discovery, organization, and explanation of our observations? For example, what does it mean when an observer communicates that an administrator practices an “old school” philosophy? How does the observer know that the “new school” philosophy is better than the “old school”? These judgments are based on the usefulness and evaluation of theory.

WHAT IS THE ANTI-ESSENTIAL APPROACH EVALUATING THEORY?

The essentialist approach assumes that you can develop a solid set of evaluation criteria that can be applied to theory. The anti-essentialist or nominalist approach argues that it is not possible to develop the essences to determine good or bad theory. In ethics reform, it may be difficult to provide a substantive view of the good or the bad. The “open-ended specification of end values leads logically to a procedural view of how good and happiness are to be achieved” (Fox and Miller 1996, 21). These essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches may be both correct and an attempt to use realism to bridge these
approaches may be important. Realism can reject the impractical and accept a limited number of universals. These universals will view applications of theory to provide evaluation. The evaluation criteria provide a judgmental map. Most public administrationists are well versed in the processes of making judgments. For example, supporting or not supporting the hiring of a person, recommending or not recommending the promotion of a subordinate, or recommending acceptance or rejection of a manuscript all involve making judgments. In each case evaluation criteria are established in documentation, by subjective thinking of the reviewer, or by some combination of each.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF EVALUATION CRITERIA

Evaluation criteria are significantly different than the goals or purposes of public administration theory. Any set of evaluation criteria that can be developed will be open to discussion, questioning, and criticism.

The development of evaluation criteria to assess public administration theory involves the public administrationists’ academic and applied biases. For example, an academic may be concerned with scholarly contributions to the field of public administration. These contributions have to offer some type of “ground breaking” and cannot “plow the same field.” However, knowledge and documentation of the field is important. The practitioner may be concerned with knowing the “how to” aspects of public administration along with a deeper understanding of contextual concerns. Finding evaluation criteria applicable to both academic and practitioner biases of public administrationists may be a challenge. Therefore, universal criteria to evaluate public administration theory cannot be established. The evaluation of public administration theory as having merit, worth, or value depends on the person, program, organization, or institution using the theory. Useful theory for each public administrationist may and perhaps should be different.

Evaluating Theory

Table 1 recaps the different attempts to evaluate theory. The selection of these attempts has not been exhaustive, but they help to set the stage for the anti-essentialism approach to evaluating theory.
Glasser and Strauss (1967) develop properties of grounded theory that apply to sociologists and layman. The bias of these properties is on practical application. Glasser and Strauss find it very important to show how grounded theory incorporates these properties to determine “why and how the theory can be used in practice (237). The four properties are fitness, understanding, generality, and control. Fitness relates to where the data can be applied to the situation. It is not clear what the data would entail and it would appear that quantitative and qualitative data sources could be used. Theory is understandable if it makes sense “to the people working in the substantive area” (239). Through generality, the theory makes changing conditions understandable and “flexible enough to be readily reformulated virtually on the spot, when it does not work in application” (242). The person using the theory must “have enough control in everyday situations to make application worth trying” (245).

Glasser and Strauss are application oriented in their evaluation criteria. They assume that theory comes from academic storehouses but that does not have to be the case as practitioner-held and build theory may be assessed to these criteria equally as well.

**Table 1 Evaluation Criteria For Theory**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glasser and Strauss</th>
<th>Herzog</th>
<th>Frederickson and Smith</th>
<th>Anti-Essentialism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fitness</td>
<td>Generality</td>
<td>Parsimony/Elegance</td>
<td>Constructivism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Scope</td>
<td>Explanatory Capacity</td>
<td>Originality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generality</td>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>Replicability</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Testability</td>
<td>Descriptive Capacity</td>
<td>Multifaceted</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Simplicity</td>
<td>Predictive Capacity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Internal Validity</td>
<td>Empirical Warrant</td>
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<td>Predictability</td>
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Herzog (1993) attempts to assess practitioner-held theory from a set of “general evaluation criteria applicable to all theories” (448). All theories would include the variety produced by public administrationists. These general evaluation criteria include generality, scope, relevance, testability, simplicity, internal validity, and predictability (see Table 1). Generality is contingent on the external validity of the theory. The scope of the
theory relates to how encompassing (i.e., that is broad or specific) the theory is in application. The relevance criterion is tied to Glasser and Strauss’s fitness criteria. Testability of the theory occurs when “practitioners and scholars can determine or verify the ability of actions to yield intended results” (449). Simplicity refers to the gap between theory and application. Internal validity is of interest as it refers to “the methods used to construct the theory” (449). Predictability refers to the consistency of consequences from various actions. Herzog provides both academic building and practitioner application concerns when developing his evaluation criteria.

Frederickson and Smith (1993) attempt to answer the question, “Does theory have a useful role in the field as fragmented and applied as public administration” (229)? “The primary purpose of theory is to assemble facts into a comprehensive explanatory picture and to use this comprehension to usefully inform policy making and guide public policy implementation” (229). Frederickson and Smith appear to have a bias toward academics producing the theory and practitioners applying the theory. Applicability of the theory would be the most important evaluation criteria. Frederickson and Smith appear to dismiss practitioner-held theory. They note that theory would “reflect a more accurate understanding and greater predictive power than arguments reliant on intuition, common sense, political expediency, ideological preference, or individual experience” (229). It would seem that academics should also profess ideas based on intuition, common sense, political expediency, ideological preference, or individual experience. In Table 1, Frederickson and Smith’s core purposes of theory are listed.

(1) Parsimony/Elegance refers to the theory’s ability to account concisely for the phenomenon under study by using tightly ordered internal logic. (2) Explanatory capacity refers to the theory’s ability to explain real-world phenomena. (3) Replicability refers to the theory’s ability to generalize beyond the confines of one case or a handful of cases. (4) Descriptive capacity refers to the theory’s ability to portray the real world accurately as it is observed. (5) Predictive capacity refers to the theory’s ability to generate testable hypotheses and make
probabilistic assessments about the future. (6) Empirical warrant refers to the relative success of the theory in gaining empirical confirmation for the hypotheses and probabilistic assessments in generates (230).

These purposes, or evaluation criteria, have academic and practitioner flavors to them. These core purposes are not developed or systematically discussed when Frederickson and Smith present each of the eight categories of theory in their concluding chapter of their book. This lack of discussion suggests the difficulty of the task of generating evaluation criteria to assess public administration theory.

**Critique of Frederickson and Smith**

Some comments on Frederickson and Smith’s purposes, or categories, are in order. (1) Finding the “tightly ordered internal logic” is problematic. Each individual has an internal logic that if it is tightly ordered, or wound too tight, will cause difficulties. Accounting for phenomena may be done with interpretive methods that combine the factual with the explanatory information. (2) The explanation of “real-world phenomena” is important; however, can we explain phenomena that are outside the real-world? (3) Generalization beyond “one case or a handful of cases” would assume that law-like generalizations would be forthcoming. These aspirations are difficult to achieve in a field as fluid as public administration. (4) To “portray the real-world as accurately as it is observed” requires methods beyond capability. Many would argue that it is impossible to accurately observe the real-world. We can embellish, communicate, and ignore our observations. (5) The development of testable hypotheses and the making of probabilistic assessments may require scientific methods that are more common to the natural sciences than to the social sciences. (6) The attempt of “gaining empirical confirmation” must also acknowledge empirical disconfirmation. The contextual nature of public administration theory suggests that what works in one setting may not work in another setting.

**AN ANTI-ESSENTIALISM APPROACH TO EVALUATING THEORY**
In Table 1 there is an attempt to build an anti-essentialism approach to evaluating theory. This approach argues that there cannot be a set of penultimate criteria that are relevant to public administrationists. The criteria listed in Table 1 under the anti-essentialism category are constructivism, originality, useful, and multifaceted.

Does theory meet the constructivism test? To meet this test theory must contribute to reality in understanding and observation. “Public administration theory is no less socially constituted than any other public administration “fact” or understanding” (Farmer 1995, 12). Understanding may often occur away from application and observation (e.g., when writing a manuscript or memo) and is geared toward providing a meaningful lens or perspective to view or influence organizational life. New ways of conceptualizing are invaluable. Constructivism does not attempt to “account concisely for the phenomenon under study” as suggested by Frederickson and Smith. With constructivism, there is a need for theory to be flexible and falsifiable. With flexibility, the theory can be interpreted and applied in various ways. Part of the constructivism test is determining whether the theory is falsifiable or inappropriate. Given the evidence of a problem, a theory is solicited for a solution. What if the solution as implemented did not solve the problem? Is this dilemma because of the evidence, the theory, or implementation? If the theory is incorrect it is falsifiable within the context where constructivism is applied. It is maintained that theory that meets the constructivism criteria “has advantages over one that does not” (Farmer 1995, 12).

The originality or ownership criteria are important. Often theorists fall into the “dead white man trap.” Articles are written that are dependant on acute understanding of the original work of an individual scholar. If the reader is familiar with the original scholarly work, that is great. If they are not, the reader is open to the descriptive capacity and interpretation of the author or what could be called “second-hand” information. This can create a theoretical trap where theory is based on interpretation, is received with interpretation, and applied with yet further interpretation. Iterations of interpretations may foster innovative and creative theory building where
claiming accurate theoretical accounts or applications would be false.

Theory has to be useful at some level. There are two basic levels: theory that is built and theory that is held. Understanding these two levels provides a conceptual map.

Public administration theory that is built concludes with a dissemination process that must be communicated by written, oral, or nonverbal mediums. It is possible to disseminate theories and not to hold them. The phrase “Do as I say, not as I do” highlights this tendency where espoused theories do not match theories-in-action. Dissemination in scholarly arenas is dependent on individuals (authors). Dissemination in applied arenas may be more complex. Public administrationists may provide individual theories but they may also be the voice for the program, department, policy, organization, or institution. Theories that have direct application may raise the potential for usefulness. For example, an organization will have a policy that Internet use should be regulated. The theory is that employees should only use the Internet for work related activities because the use of the Internet for personal affairs has ethical concerns and productivity effects. If employees abide by the policy it does not mean that the theory is held. The theory should be held by administrators that formulated and approved the policy. Thinking through the theoretical aspects during the policy making is useful. An attempt by a public high school to adopt a formal dress code needs to be built on theory that is held by administrators. The Nacogdoches Independent School District principal noted:

Some of the potential benefits of standardized dress include fewer discipline referrals, increased attendance, reduced evidence of economic differences, ability to identify people who do not belong on campus, decreased cost in clothing for students and increased professionalism and focus on academics (Taravella 2007, 4A).

Administrators responsible for building the theory should believe that it is useful. During implementation of the policy it is doubtful that the theory will be unanimously held by parents and students. The theory may not be useful for those that do not hold the theory.
Theories need to be multifaceted in design. Theory needs to have properties that will enable it to be tested, modified, held, or valuable. Some combination of these properties is necessary. In the anti-essential spirit of the criteria it cannot be stated that all of these properties are necessary.

THE THEORY-REALITY LOOP MODEL

In Figure 1, there is a search for the denotative links between theory and reality. Each of the links in Figure 1 are affected or originates with the public administrationists (the stick people). Public administrationists are influenced by theory (arrow 1) and they impact reality (arrow 2). These public administrationists are impacted by reality (arrow 3) and in turn may influence theory (arrow 4). This circular path may form a continuous loop for many public administrationists where reality is dependent on theory without universal essences because of the contextual nature of public administration. The anti-essentialism description of the theory-reality loop model could benefit from further discussion and application.

Figure 1. The Theory-Reality Loop Model

It should be noted that arrow 3 observations will have to be processed given the confines of language and feelings.
Observations at times are not capable of being discussed or processed because of the limitations of language and feelings. For example, we often hear phrases like, “I do not know how to say it,” or “I cannot get a hold of my feelings.” These utterances may make it difficult for the public administrationists to lay an imprint on theory (arrow 4). Attempts to make and disseminate observations are often incorrigible. Public administration theory allows for more complex naming and framing of our observations. After sufficient influence by arrow 1 the impact of arrow 3 may be enhanced.

**CONCLUSION**

In an effort to get public administrationists that are responsible for theories to share the blame and accept responsibility, there needs to be a means of assessment. This paper proposes a set of evaluation criteria called an anti-essentialism approach to evaluating theory. These criteria have a rationalistic flavor to them; however, they offer a starting point for discussion that others are unwilling to take. Hopefully, this discussion has helped bridge the theory-practice gap, avoided labeling traps, and provided some maps and direction that can promote theoretical redescription.

**REFERENCES**


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