Existentially Pragmatic:  
Public Administration and Goal-Oriented  
Public Activity

T. Lucas Hollar

Florida Atlantic University  
School of Public Administration

A paper for the Anti-Essentialism Conference  
Florida Atlantic University  
Fort Lauderdale, FL

March 2007
Introduction

Historically, the theoretical emphasis of traditional public administration has been to develop and apply scientific, rational, and universal principles and methodologies to the study and practice of governance. Accordingly, writers within public administration have worked within this theoretical framework on ways of identifying, understanding, and addressing public problems. These efforts have currently resulted in the application of several goal-oriented theories and schools of thought based on rational principles that demonstrate their utility in “efficient” and “effective” public administration. “For example, movements such as Management by Objectives, New Public Management, and Performance Based Budgeting have employed these ‘rational’ narratives” (Hollar and Staniševski, 2006, p. 1). By doing so, these goal-oriented approaches to public administration have justifiably sought to increase efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability within public administrative efforts.

Traditional public administration’s goal-oriented policy, planning, and activity, based in rationalism, has done much in organizing public administration’s theoretical and practical work. However, there appear to be some pitfalls awaiting public administration’s beloved rational, goal-oriented rationality endeavors. These potential shortcomings suggest that rational goal-oriented theory and practice might outlive its usefulness in times of networked governance and increasing multiculturalism (Hollar and Staniševski, 2006).

Public administration’s rationality project is becoming less and less applicable to the problems of open societal and governmental systems and cultural-historically divided communities. The problems public administrators face are “ill-defined, and they rely upon elusive political judgment for resolution (Not ‘solution.’ Social problems are never solved. At best they are only re-solved – over and over again)” (Rittel and Weber, 1973, p. 160).
Additionally, public problems are not things in and of themselves. Public problems are person-made. They are things that concerned individuals and/or groups choose, or happen, to care about, argue about, and, sometimes, work to resolve. The identification and description of public problems is not a rational activity. Problem recognition is interpretive and political (Rittel and Weber, 1973; Stone, 1997; and Wildavsky, 1989).

Therefore, rational, goal-oriented approaches to handling public issues ignore important, potential epistemological and teleological shortcomings. The dominance of goal-oriented public administration and public policy discourages other voices from entering the discourse. The gates of accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness continuously slam in the faces of differing approaches to studying and addressing public issues. However, by casting off a seemingly supernatural faith in the importance of goal-oriented public activity, it is possible that public administration and policy scholars can find alternative approaches to handling public problems and administrative effort. Ideally, these alternatives could produce richer and more publicly responsive approaches to creating, studying, and implementing public policy.

Before I continue, I would like to state that I see value in goals as instruments for guiding behaviors. However, I also recognize the extreme importance of acknowledging the role of context, culture, and history in the identification of issues to be associated with goals, the behaviors written into goals, the means of evaluating performance towards goals, and the decisions to declare success, failure, or neither in goal-oriented public activities. Due to the importance of context within goal-oriented activities, a goal that no longer matches its context is irrelevant, insignificant, and potentially dangerous.

Stone (1997) seems to agree. Stone writes that “even though, as I argue, the broad goals and principles at the heart of political conflict – things such as equity, efficiency, liberty, and
security – can never be reduced to simple deterministic criteria and, therefore, cannot tell us how we should best decide policy questions, broad goals and principles can serve a crucial purpose” (Stone, 1997, p. xii).

Therefore, in this paper, I question goal-oriented public administration and public policy from three directions: social issues as wicked problems, goals as strategic proclamations of identity and politics, and goals as self-justifying devices in the midst of meaninglessness left over from the deconstruction of grand narratives. I go on to offer an opportunity for a replacement to public administration’s current approaches to viewing public problems and public action. I suggest that public action can have relevance and significance outside of goal-centric approaches to public issues. Such relevant and significant action can take place through existential pragmatic public administration. Let me begin by first addressing elements of pragmatism that I feel set the stage for questioning the appropriateness of goal-oriented administration.

**Introductory Comments on Pragmatism and Goal-Oriented Administration**

In order to loosen the chokehold of a goal-oriented paradigm on this conversation, let me first perform a brief review of elementary aspects of pragmatism that, when considered in the context of this paper, begin to show the peripheral importance of goals rather than the front and center attention that they currently receive.

Pragmatism provides a method for individuals and/or communities to settle metaphysical disputes that would otherwise be unending (James, 1960). As such, within pragmatism, theories are instruments for, not answers to, dealing with enigmas (James, 1960, p. 32). In public policy and public administration, these enigmas would include policy issues such as political
uncertainties, ambiguous clientele, and possible means for addressing constantly evolving policy problems. “The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences” (James, 1960, p. 29). Accordingly, “notions” realize truth [little-t truth] and value to the extent that they help people to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of their experience of reality (James, 1960), policy making, policy implementing, policy evaluation, etc.

Pragmatism finds its utility in public administration through its concern for praxis. Praxis involves the integration of theory and practice. Another way of putting it is that pragmatism integrates thought and action (White, 1999). Dewey (1960) refers to pragmatism as intelligent action. Intelligent action “centers upon finding out something about obstacles and resources and upon projecting inchoate later modes of definite response” (Dewey, 1960, p. 183).

In his essay “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy,” Dewey (1910) draws connections between the pragmatic method of generating responses to problems and Darwin’s ideas of genetic variation and natural selection. Dewey’s essay, commenting on Darwin’s influence, illustrates aspects of pragmatism that are capable of critiquing goal-oriented methods within public administration and public policy.

Dewey writes that old ideas give way slowly. These old ways are habits, attitudes, and preferences. Postmodern pragmatists would refer to such old ways as ideographs (Miller, 2004\(^1\) and 2002) and relics of cultural inertia (Miller, 2004\(^1\); and North, 1990). Ideas, habits, attitudes, and preferences are contextual. As such, any purposive goal making that occurs, occurs within a specific context. Meanwhile, contexts evolve, or abruptly end, and the goals, relics of the previous context, lose meaning and relevance in their new environments.
The questions asked by such old ways can not be answered in terms of the alternatives that the questions themselves suggest or create. Instead, it is through the abandonment of such questions that science moves on (Dewey, 1910). “Old questions are solved by disappearing, evaporating, while new questions corresponding to the changed attitude of endeavor and preference take their place” (Dewey, 1910, p. 19). This idea is similar to Darwin’s natural selection. Here, there are interesting connections to policy studies and public administration.

The concerns of Dewey’s old ways do not get solved. They are perhaps resolved. “We do not solve them; we get over them” (Dewey, 1910, p. 19). Policy issues fight for places on the policy agenda. As political and social environments and attitudes change, issues come and go from the agenda and the public discourse (Birkland, 2001). As such, which social programs have worked and which have not? Certainly, policy success and policy failure are politically defined (Birkland, 2001; and Stone, 1997). Situation is important to acknowledge here. Kingdon (1995) points out how significant windows of opportunity are to the birth of policy – and, therefore, to the potential death of other policy. Considering the links between policies and their subsequent goal-orientations, it is a very small step to recognize that goals are equally as malleable and momentary as the policies to which they are connected. Goals, and the policy issues to which they are attached, are socially constructed and deconstructed, or abandoned, through the ebb and flow of public awareness and attention.

Going back to Dewey’s approach to Darwin, Dewey praised Darwin’s work for challenging the conceptions about reality and science held by those during his time. Such ideas, and even ideas today,

rest on the assumption of the superiority of the fixed and final; they rested upon treating change and origin as signs of defect and unreality. Inlaying hands on the
sacred ark of absolute permanency, in treating the forms that had been regarded as
types of fixity and perfection as originating and passing away, the *Origin of
Species* introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the
logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion
(Dewey, 1910, p. 1).

The ramification of natural selection and Darwinian philosophy, in addition to pragmatism,
rattles the comfortable pedestal on which goal-oriented approaches to public work rest. By
drawing connections between the unending circular activity of effort and consummation (Miller,
2005) and the ever-evolving policy issues faced by policymakers and administrators, just how
truly goal-like and significant are policy and administrative goals?

A pragmatist’s view of public administrative work, which at first glance appears to agree
with goal-oriented activity, shows the dubious throne on which goals preside over policy
formation, implementation, and evaluation. This quick, introductory review of pragmatism sets
the stage for further questioning the utility of goals from three directions: social issues as wicked
problems, goals as politics, and goals as self-justifying devices. In order to demonstrate how
well-intentioned rational approaches to goal-oriented policy, planning, and action have the
opportunity to come up short within serving the public, I would like to introduce Rittel and
Webber’s (1973) discussion of social issues as wicked problems.

**Social Issues as Wicked Problems**

Rittel and Weber (1973) provide an insightful and cautionary look into the realm of
planning. It makes sense to use it in this discussion of goals. The problems the authors point out
in planning are the same that public administrators face by participating in goal-oriented public activities.

As they present the concept of social issues as wicked problems, Rittel and Webber (1973) acknowledge that scholars and practitioners are preoccupied with the consequences for equity that result from the tests of efficiency public administration uses to measure accomplishment. Although such an observation is fairly common amongst scholars, the authors challenge their readers to go a step further. In addition to growing sensitivities to equity, as a result of an increasingly diversifying population, public administrators are starting to have a greater sensitivity to “the waves of repercussions that ripple through such systemic networks and to the value consequences of those repercussions” (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 156). Any activity aimed at solving a wicked problem will produce subsequent waves of consequences over an extended, and possibly unlimited, period of time.

A key feature of public problems as wicked problems is that they do not possess clarifying traits, such as clear missions and clear finish lines. Problems of that nature are “tame” or “benign” problems. Those are the problems of mathematicians and chess players. Public administrators face elusive, interconnected, constantly changing problems. Social issues of primary concern shift from such things as security issues to economy issues to administrative or executive oversight issues to emergency preparedness and response issues as they relate to issues of socioeconomic and racial justice, and so on.

The flux and flow of “public interest” environments result in, and are created by, the involvement of competing groups within particular and individually experienced contexts. Interested parties compete for ways to define, act on, and evaluate these public problems. Therefore, solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Instead,
they are determined to be good-or-bad in specific local and historical contexts. As such, the evaluation of public activity against wicked public problems is at best negotiated into contextually determined *shades* of good or bad.

Part of the wickedness of public issues is that there is no universal way to identify and explain them. “The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem’s resolution” (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 166). The authors say that such explanations are arbitrary in the logical sense. We suggest that such explanations are rooted in political, cultural, and historical logics. Based on their cultural-historical perspectives and interests, individuals/groups select explanations most plausible to them. One might say that individuals or groups identify and explain particular public issues in ways that best suit their intentions and that best conform to the possible actions available to them. Therefore, individuals’ and groups’ worldviews are the most important determining factor in explaining a public problem and in resolving it (Rittel and Webber, 1973).

Similar to cultural worldviews explaining public problems, the process of solving a problem is synonymous with the process of understanding its nature. Therefore, with no criteria for understanding, and with the interconnectedness of issues tossing out the idea of some ultimate end, the public administrator could always do more. Wicked problems have no stopping rules (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Accordingly, the public administrator terminates activity towards a problem for reasons external to the problem. The funding for a project runs out; competing projects crowd out efforts towards other projects; changes in management bring with them changes in organizational priorities.
Lastly, the importance of contextually and discursively approaching administrative effort against the wickedness of public problems can be seen in the potential negative consequences of poor policy and administration on vulnerable segments of the society. Considering the long term web of consequences for every policy decision, each attempt at solving a public problem is significant. Each solution to a wicked problem is a one-shot deal. This is a sobering statement to all public administrators. Every policy action is consequential. Each leaves “traces” which can not be undone (Rittel and Webber, 1973). For example, “one cannot build a freeway to see how it works, and then easily correct it after unsatisfactory performance. . . . Whenever actions are effectively irreversible and whenever the half-lives of the consequences are long, every trial counts. And every attempt to reverse a decision or to correct for the undesired consequences poses another set of wicked problems, which are in turn subject to the same dilemmas” (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 163).

Considering the contextual significance of socio-politically defined and interconnected social issues, it is difficult, if not impossible, to ignore the significance of the groups involved in and affected by varying social issues. Each group brings to the table alternative culturally, historically contingent views and ways of understanding public issues. Additionally, some groups cooperate, some groups compete, and most groups alternate between cooperatives and competitors. Therefore, public administrative thinking and acting takes place within context dependent, multicultural situations.

The arguments and stories that different communities use for understanding and evaluating public issues and public administrative effort reflect their varying cultural-historical characteristics. The ways communities, scholars, and practitioners view things involve issues of identity and politics. Therefore, goal-oriented approaches to public administration do not only
begin to fail as a result of public issues’ wickedness bucking their rationality project handlers. The supposed rational objectivism in which rational goal making, acting, and evaluating is based begins to show itself as non-rational interpretivism based on groups’ and individuals’ cultural-historical identities and understandings of their worlds.

**Goals as Strategic Proclamations of Identity and Politics.**

Having confronted the ambiguous, duplicitous nature of public issues and public activity in Rittel and Webber (1973), Stone (1997) continues the discussion with similar complications in goal-oriented approaches to public activity. However, where as Rittel and Weber do a good job of identifying and discussing the “wickedness” of problems one faces in social policy by way of structural, systems, and political approaches, Stone focuses much more on the political epistemologies and teleologies of individuals and groups involved in the political discourses within public activity. This is why I rely on Stone to guide us through this section of the paper.

Goal-oriented public activity is entirely politically constructed. “Each of the analytic standards we use to set goals, define problems, and judge policy solutions is politically constructed” (Stone, 1997, p. xi). Therefore, I assert that goals are more about bolstering political interests and power positions than about improving “the public good” – unless, of course, one is talking about “the public good” as the champions of the political discourse see it. As such, goals are strategic proclamations of identity and politics.

The reason I include identity in this discussion with politics is due to the idea that, as in many other relationships, the two are reciprocal. An individual’s self-interest, cultural-historical inertia, and subsequent identity in the face of current contexts influence one’s politics. Likewise, one’s politics influence one’s self-interest, cultural-historical inertia, and identity. This is due to
the fact that politics do not take place in isolation, apart from other likeminded or disagreeing individuals. Politics is a discursive event between people, groups, and institutions.

The reason I include strategy in this discussion is fairly obvious. Goals reflect and transmit political ideals and values. For political ideals and values to win their way into the coveted goal-slots of public activity, they must beat out competing political ideals and values. “Behind every policy issue lurks a contest over conflicting, though equally plausible, conceptions of the same abstract goal or value” (Stone, 1997, p. 12). However, it is important to keep in mind that we are not just discussing drama infused cable news politics here. We are discussing strategic, combative discourse over the very categories that shape societies’ experiences of realities. (I say “realities” because it is interesting how significantly different one segment of the population’s reality can be from another.) In policy making, and the apparently requisite goal definitions and evaluations, there is “a constant struggle over the criteria for classification, the boundaries of categories, and the definition of ideals that guide the way people behave” (Stone, 1997, p. 11).

Considering the epistemological and teleological significance of goals within politics and identity, it is interesting to take this discussion one step further into people’s actual experiences of reality within a postmodern world of deconstructed grand narratives and reconstructed local narratives. These deconstructed and reconstructed narratives include the social/political capital of images/symbols traded within politics. Therefore, let me now discuss goals as self-justifying devices in the midst of meaninglessness left over from the deconstruction of grand narratives.
Goals as Self-Justifying Devices

In order to explain the idea of goals as self-justifying devices, let me start by describing how postmodernism has dismantled the significance and legitimacy of grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984). To do so, I will contrast interpretivism and objectivism by way of two paradigms within Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) four sociological paradigms for organizational analysis: the interpretive paradigm (interpretivism) and the functional paradigm (objectivism). Then, I will provide three examples of deconstructed grand narratives from three prominent public administration scholars. Lastly, I will suggest that the subsequent existential ramifications of such deconstruction lead individuals/societies to create goal-oriented administration in order to provide themselves with pseudo-teleological life rafts.

Objectivism within the Functional Paradigm

Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) functional paradigm has been the principal paradigm within organizational research. This paradigm supports rational human action and assumes that one can understand organizational behavior by way of objective observation and measurement. As such reality and facts are things in and of themselves. Therefore, this paradigm employs objectivism.

Objectivism assumes that reality exists independent of human experience and perception. Truth, big T truth, is not socially constructed to the positivists (Miller, 2002). “Objectivism’s conceptualization of reason is rooted in the principle of the primacy of existence. This axiomatic principle states that reality exists independently of consciousness” (Locke and Becker, 1998, p.658). With this belief in an over-arching truth independent of human experience and interpretation (Gray, 2002), researchers like Taylor (1989) hold universal ideas like Taylorism’s one best way and Gulick’s singleness of purpose (Spicer, 2001).
Within the objectivist’s functional paradigm, all research, including social science research, performed through an academic and/or business perspective has evolved neutral and value free (Simon, 1960). From an epistemological perspective, postmodernists disagree with these assumptions. What these logical positivists see as “Truth,” those outside the dogma of the school see as a collective evaluation of knowledge claims by a relevant community of peers (Miller and Fox, 2001; Rorty, 1991, and Kuhn 1970).

Interpretivism within the Interpretive Paradigm

Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) interpretive paradigm involves understanding organizational and individual behavior as an on-going process. This understanding results from individuals’ points of views. Accordingly, organizational and individual reality is not some thing independent and detached from those involved. Instead, organizational and individual realities are socially constructed and experienced moments.

It is generally considered amongst the postmodernists that there is no enduring truth, and there are no enduring standards with which to measure or evaluate truth because things (the objects within people’s experience of reality) have multiple and unstable meanings. Accordingly, there are no precise definitions and no true knowledge (White, 1999; and Derrida, 1973). The unstable and multiple meanings come from the lack of any grand narrative and the failure of correspondence theory assumed by the positivists (Miller, 2002; White, 1999; and Lyotard, 1984).

Lyotard (1984) points out that narratives of some sort have been a means of transferring information from one generation to the next in societies around the world. Norms and rules were thus communicated, and individuals were socialized into their cultural-historical paradigms
accordingly. A major feature of modern society was the presence of grand narratives. They shaped both collective and individual action (White, 1999).

In America, grand narratives contained the themes of “progress, individualism, efficiency, charity, manifest destiny, freedom, exploitation, domination, and nationalism” (White, 1999, p. 157). Postmodernism broke down the legitimizing force of grand narratives by way of deconstructing their reified nature (Lyotard, 1984). In their place, we were left with a pluralism of local narratives. Local narratives are culturally, historically, and geographically determined. As such, they are group-specific. “They are only legitimating for the interested group or community” (White and Adams, 1995, p. 3-4). Sometimes local narratives can agree, and sometimes they can not.

Due to the contextual nature of lived experience, knowledge is a social creation accomplished within a community of knowers; human knowledge is not a mirror of some sort of objective reality (Rorty, 1979). It is a social construction. Therefore, it is evident that there are different types of reasoning taking place between positivists and postmodernists. Positivists deal in instrumental reasoning, while postmodernists work with an idea of interpretive reasoning.

*Exemplars of Deconstructed Grand Narratives: Bureaucratic Efficiency, Administrative Legitimacy, and Morality*

Having discussed the ideas and processes of deconstructing grand narratives, let me provide a few examples of deconstructed grand narratives. To do so, I would like to quickly point out Farmer’s (1997 and 1998) deconstruction of bureaucratic efficiency, McSwite’s (1997) deconstruction of administrative legitimacy, and Harmon’s (1997) deconstruction of morality.¹

¹ These examples are present within Bogason’s (2005) “Postmodern Public Administration,” a book chapter he wrote for *The Oxford Handbook of Public Management* (Ferlie, Lynn, and Pollitt [eds.], 2005).
Farmer (1997 and 1998) deconstructs bureaucratic efficiency along four lines. Firstly, bureaucratic efficiency is socially constructed. Its value and characterization depend on the way people interpret it. Secondly, efficiency is culturally specific to modernist, Weberian desires for increased production. Matter-of-fact, Farmer points out that one can not find the term in all cultures. Thirdly, “the binarity between efficiency and inefficiency is ambiguous, e.g. it does not guarantee a just outcome” (Bogason, 2005, pp. 11-12 [discussing Farmer]). Lastly, efficiency is only held in high regard in cultures that value and emphasize control.

McSwite (1997) does a similar deconstruction of legitimacy in *Legitimacy in Public Administration*. McSwite shows the contextual dependence of any understanding of the term “legitimacy.” McSwite suggests that once public administrators reframe discourses and institutions based on mutual surrender within discourse oriented relationships, current problems with legitimacy will disappear. Legitimacy, as it is currently framed, is the product of the institutionalized and socially reinforced understandings and structures of government.

Harmon (1997) challenges the grand narrative of morality. Having been questioned by Geuras and Garofolo (1996) for being one of a group of “subjectivists” not able to defend their perspectives on ethical grounds, Harmon retorted with an explanation as to why the grand narrative of morality is neither something to be determined by seeking it out as if it is something in and of itself nor something to be determined willy-nilly by individual, emotive principles. Harmon states that morality is a question of process rather than any absolute value; it is a relationship, and it consists of the sentiment, feeling, or impulse of being for the Other; morality is an act or process of self-constitution. The morality of ends, then, is dependent on the morality of process, i.e. of social relationships that are
meant to regenerate and maintain the social bond, which permit moral impulses of being for the Other to be expressed (Harmon, 1997, pp. 15-16).

Now that I have examined the postmodern activity of deconstruction and have given examples of such deconstruction, let me move on to the next item of interest in this section. With the deconstruction of these grand narratives, with no telos towards which to aim one’s principles and feelings, what does one do?

The Reification of Goals for Self-Justification

Based on the discussion above, communities of individuals have dismantled the significance and legitimacy of grand narratives. Therefore, there is no overarching narrative to give meaning or guidance to people’s lives. This has existential significance. Without grand narratives, without any overarching purpose or “truth,” with only a world of contingency and consequence (Sartre, 1938), what does the individual mean? What is his or her condition and/or role? All people are left with, post-deconstruction, is a pluralism of particular local narratives of which to make sense.

These local narratives are themselves authorless in their cultural historical evolution. They are continually evolving or continually beginning and ending cultural threads purposively and accidentally fed by multiple sentient and non-sentient influences. As citizens, scholars, and public administrators, all we are left with is our interpretations of the local narratives in which we face policy problems.

Therefore, in the face of a purposeless, nonexistant big picture, certain individuals reify goals into teleological life rafts that they cling to so as to not drown in the perplexing,
tumultuous sea of social construction, structuration, and constantly evolving public issues. One can hear them crying out from their rafts such things as “but how are we going to know if our organizations are effective?” “How are we going to ensure efficiency?” “How are we going to keep public officials accountable?” “How do you know that you’re actually doing your job if you can’t demonstrate that you’re getting results? How do citizens know that they are getting the results that their tax dollars are supposed to be financing?” (Juszczak, 2005, pp. 11).

Those guilty of reifying their goal-oriented approaches to public management into justifications for, and guardians of, favored ways of thinking and ruling would be well informed to read or revisit Rittell and Webber (1973) and Stone (1997). In cases of efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, and results, the constructs being measured, the social value of the constructs, and the means of measuring the constructs are all local narratives authored by those in the reigning governmental entity and epistemic community – which just happens to be those performing the evaluations of goal attainment. By way of authorship, discourse, and interpretation, “rationality and power become interwoven” (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 123).

Therefore, by acknowledging the epistemological, teleological, and even ontological necessity of goals to those uncomfortable with their existential predicaments, it becomes more evident what role goals play in public policy and public administration. Goals are ideographs reinforcing particular worldviews. These positions provide community and belonging to individuals/groups in the midst of their deconstructed understandings of meaning and reality. Therefore, this topic incorporates the other two discussed in this paper.

In light of this discussion of goals as self-justifying devices, the consequentiality and randomness of wicked problems, and the constructivism of goals as strategic proclamations of identity and politics, I offer existential theory within pragmatic public administration as a way to
respond to the consequentiality, political constructivism, and deconstructed grand narratives in which public activity takes place. This largely involves the practice of pragmatic techniques guided by existential theory.

**Existential Theory and Pragmatic Action**

Existential theory within public administration provides a way of viewing public administrative efforts with an awareness of the relativity and the evolution of public issues. Additionally, an existential theory of public administration addresses the importance of consequentiality as the effects of decisions and actions in a particular environment or moment in turn affect/frame future problem recognition and decision making environments or moments. This all takes place by way of existentialism’s understanding of individuals and societies making decisions and implementing decisions in the absence of any grand narratives or telos.

Some would say that a philosophical view that does not recognize any purpose or meaning to existence does not lend itself well to a discipline and practice such as public administration. Public policy and public administration’s commitments to governance and to such grand narratives as freedom, justice, and liberty seem to require a meaningful existence and a profound sense of individual and corporate purpose. After all, frequently cited reasons for individuals taking on careers in government are the desires to help make a difference in the world, to help better society, and to feel as though one has contributed something somehow (Partnership for Public Service, 2004; and McSwite, 2002).

Responding to some of the initial ideas of an existential theory of public administration, a Senior Executive Service member asked what such a theory offered so as to discourage public administrators from jumping off bridges (Simeone, 2005) – or at least over-indulging in alcohol,
or abusing drugs (Sementelli, 2006). This concern for free-falling bureaucrats comes from an initial reaction to the existential idea that there is no universal, overarching purpose or meaning in the world and to the admittance that social issues are ongoing events that seem impervious to political or administrative attempts to solve them. It is only fitting to have such a reaction. Most existentialists have reacted this way. However, this is only one of three general reactions to an existential awareness.

An existential awareness results in three types of responses: forfeit, impotence, or action. Forfeit involves the individual committing suicide – usually this is a figurative suicide: depression, withdrawing from one’s previous activities or work, and/or losing one’s ambitions. This is the bureaucrat jumping from the bridge. Existentialists acknowledge the rationale for this forfeiture, but they do not typically recommend suicide (Tolstoy, 1905; Sartre, 1938; and Camus, 1955).

Impotence involves staying in a stagnant place in which one can not accomplish what one desires, in which one is painfully aware of one’s mundane day-to-day routines, and/or in which one does nothing to alter one’s predicament and/or disillusionment. Here we find Kafka’s metamorphosed bug and grey bureaucrats. Also, Dostoyevsky’s anonymous narrator from the underground writes “I am a sick man. . . . However, I know nothing about my disease, and do not know what ails me. I don’t consult a doctor for it, and never have, though I have a respect for medicine and doctors” (Dostoyevsky, 1918). Lastly, there is action.

Action involves defying one’s meaninglessness by acting on one’s desires in the face of adversity or in the face of the imminent inability to manifest one’s ambitions entirely. This is the bureaucrat defying his or her absurdity by persevering in the midst of bureaucratic red tape, an allegedly apathetic public, vocal special interests, and social issues most accurately weighed on
cultural-historical scales. Existential public administration promotes significance through action; therefore, this theoretical approach does not discourage effort; it encourages more effort. One should not throw oneself from a bridge as result of it; one should acknowledge the significant effects one can have in one’s community and/or government by way of contextual action and perseverance.

Existential theory shares a good bit with pragmatism, particularly by way of its interest in action, experience, and contextualism. However, it does not fall prey to the same epistemological problems that have evidenced themselves within pragmatic public administration.

History, culture, and politics reconstitute the deconstructed grand narratives into reconstructed personal narratives – realistically co-authored by local narratives. As such, the existential pragmatist says “who gives a dern about, say, correspondence theory? ‘Classical’ pragmatists and ‘neo-pragmatists,’ and any other groups with incommensurable epistemologies, are just going to paradigmatically speak past each other anyway.” Accordingly, the modernist, “classical” pragmatist sees the “neo-pragmatist” as irrelevant to life-world moments, and the “neo-pragmatist” sees the modernist, “classical” pragmatist as naïve to the ingredients of problems facing public administrators. The blind men in the elephant analogy (Shields, 2003, 2004, and 2005) do indeed miss out on the “majesty” of the elephant (Miller, 20042 and 2005) – “majesty” reflecting an internal and/or social perception of the elephant.

The pragmatic existentialist, while being aware of those paradigmatic battles, worries not about such epistemological differences, since there is no meaning or purpose outside of one’s awareness/reconstruction of meaning and purpose to determine one side in a battle to be the undisputed champion. Instead, the pragmatic existentialist concentrates on the politically
discursive outcomes of recognizing “problems,” determining options, and implementing actions aimed at resolution – versus “solution.” Due to the nature of social problems as wicked problems, the desired resolutions most often result in resolved versus solved social issues. The floor is always open for advocates of individual causes/interests to place “old” problems back onto the agenda, put “new” problems onto the agenda, or to suggest that public effort had never adequately addressed the original issue in the first place.

Existential theory allows for legitimate debate amongst epistemological approaches because existentialism recognizes individual/group contexts. Individuals only have an understanding of “purpose” and reality dependent to their experience and the way that they process their experiences through their cultural historical socialization and setting. Therefore, people can argue what they believe; people can expect or not expect others to accept or not accept their approach to issues. Existential theory allows for a multi-pronged approach to public issues (sometimes goals work; sometimes they don’t); it encourages discourse in and amongst academic, practitioner, and political circles.

**Conclusion**

What I have sought to do in this paper is draw attention to potential problems within public administration’s use of goal-oriented public activity. I do so to encourage scholars and practitioners to pause and reflect when they find themselves identifying goals, developing goals, and thinking about the constructs involved in operationalizing and measuring their goals. Additionally, I hope to encourage them to make sure that their methods and ends actually match the experienced realities of the evolving social contexts in which this all takes place. The way they do so says a lot about their theoretical/epistemological approaches to public administration.
In order to draw attention to potential problems of goal-oriented public activity, I have suggested that public administration should cast off its hegemonic use of goal-orientated public activity for creating, studying, and implementing public policy. Additionally, I have acknowledged that such a suggestion will be met with enthusiastic protests concerning issues of accountability, efficiency, effectiveness, and legitimacy. These attacks and criticisms will consist of questions like “how are you going to know if the policy has worked” and “how are you going to keep the bureaucrats and politicians accountable?” Such protests, critiques, and questions come from a modern mindset that is unresponsive to and incompatible with the “wickedness” of interrelated, constantly evolving social issues. Accordingly, modern objectivist goal-oriented public administration discourages other voices from entering the discourse.

Therefore, by allowing for approaches other than goal-oriented ones, public administration and policy scholars have the opportunity to produce richer and more responsive public activity and public policy.

Pragmatism provides an interesting context for this discussion. Its action orientation, its concern for praxis, and its historical development suggest interesting opportunities to explore epistemological and teleological issues related to goal-oriented public activity. Elements of its theory suggest temporary, contextual moments when the utility of a goal thrives and then dies – regardless of its attainment. However, the unresolved epistemological arguments and norms of inquiry arguments between “classical” pragmatism and “neo-pragmatism” distract scholarly and practitioner attention from resolving social issues.

Therefore, by questioning goal-oriented public administration and public policy from three directions: social issues as wicked problems, goals as strategic proclamations of identity and politics, and goals as self-justifying devices in the midst of meaninglessness left over from
the deconstruction of grand narratives, I offer a replacement to public administration’s current approaches to viewing public problems and public action. Relevant and significant action can take place through existential pragmatic public administration. After all, who cares about issues of efficiency and effectiveness if efficient and effective work is not contextually relevant or significant to the populations served? Contextually relevant and contextually significant public activity can take place outside of goal-centric approaches to public issues.

Framed within individuals’ and societies’ culturally-historically determined local narratives and matted beneath the relativity and evolution of public issues, public administrators’ culturally and professionally determined best shot is to make pragmatic choices that resolve current social issues - with well intentioned hopes of setting up future actions so as to avoid issue near-sightedness. Such a decision process is in agreement with James’s (1960) pragmatic method trying to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences and Dewey’s (1910) idea that we do not solve [old] problems; we get over them.
Works Cited


