PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION THEORY: JUSTIFICATION FOR CONCEPTUALISATION

C. Thornhill
School of Public Management and Administration
University of Pretoria

G. van Dijk
School of Public Management and Administration
University of Pretoria

ABSTRACT

Public Administration has reluctantly been accepted as a science by some of its sister disciplines in the Social Sciences. This may be ascribed to the eclectic nature of the Discipline and its reliance on related disciplines to explain, direct and inform study and practice. Public Administration studies human beings engaged in administrative and managerial duties in organs of state. Therefore, any study should consider the behaviour and actions of human beings in an organisational setting operating in a political environment.

Sciences depend on theory to investigate, explain and predict the phenomena being studied. A science has to be founded on justifiable laws or acceptable theories to develop new knowledge and influence practice. Public Administration is in the unenviable position that it studies social phenomena subjected to continuous change due to societal values and political changes. Thus it has to be able to adopt theories providing for universal truths, but accommodating the new domain of study, *e.g.* the development of public-private-partnerships and the evolution of the developmental state.

Various theories related to Public Administration will be investigated in this article to establish their relevance. This will be used as a foundation to enter into a discourse regarding the identification of the requirements against which Public Administration theory should be tested. With this as a point of departure the possible development of Public Administration related theories will be discussed.

Article

INTRODUCTION

The study of Public Administration has experienced various stages or identity crises since efforts were made to study the requirements for co-operative action to achieve common goals. It is trite to state that the study of Public Administration is a product of the national state. However, it is important to state that the Discipline as a member of the Social Science fraternity is inextricably linked to human action and human behaviour. These phenomena are studied within the framework of organisational structures operating in a particular social context i.e. a political system. Thus efforts to consider the possibility of theorising have to consider the values, the culture, and the social as well as the political environment within which the operational activities of public administration are carried out. Attempts to theorise would therefore, have to be multi-dimensional and eclectic.

The discussion is aimed at briefly tracing the developments in the progress made in defining the operational area on which the study of Public Administration should focus. Attention will also be devoted to the domain of the public sector as *defined* in the current national state to delineate the area within which the study is conducted. The arguments will also note recent developments in the study of Public Administration. These will serve as the conceptual framework for the discussion on theory construction for the Discipline.

THEORY

Defining meaning

The word *theory* is derived from the Latin *theoria* and the Greek *theoro* meaning contemplation, speculation and sight (Hanekom and Thornhill 1983:65). However, for the purposes of discussing the development of theory for scientific study, attention should also be devoted to more relevant interpretations of the term (*cf. Ibid., 65*) *e.g.*:

- a frame of reference;
- a synonym for thoughts, conjectures or ideas;
- an abstracted generalisation or a kind of shorthand that may be used in lieu of
- facts or;
- a summary statement providing an explanation of a phenomenon or range of phenomena that co-varies under particular conditions.

The definitions provided above allow the opportunity to argue that theory reveals some discernible characteristics *i.e.* any theory contains generalisations and, therefore, excludes particular exceptions. A theory represents a mental view of a phenomenon or a system and will form the basis for a chain of reasoning. A theory would, thus, encompass one or more hypotheses (Welman, Kruger and Mitchell 2005:12). This in turn would result in understanding a phenomenon, explaining its characteristics and even predicting particular outcomes. It has to be emphasised that theory does not imply negating reality, but that reality should be considered in the context of its representation as a mental cognition of a system of ideas or statements.

Theories are related to specific disciplines although some theories may be transversal. Concepts are the building blocks of any theoretical model, *i.e.* an abstraction representing an object or phenomenon (Welman, *et al.,* 2005:20). Concepts are crucial in theory construction as they

- form the foundation of meaningful communication;
- introduce a perspective on the object under discussion;
- provide a means of classification and generalisation; and
- serve as components of theories and concomitantly of explanations and predictions.

Attempting to theorise, requires attaching definitions to concepts. Such definitions (*Ibid.,* 21) indicate the unique attributes or qualities of the phenomenon being defined; are stated positively and contain the properties of the concepts being defined; and are stated in clear terms. Thus, it could be argued that one of the requirements of a theory is that it has to define the phenomenon or object being studied and theorised about. In creating a Public Administration theory, concepts such as school of thought, movement and approach have been used. A theory has universal applicability, which is not the case with an approach, movement or school of thought. These concepts are used in attempting to create a universal theory, but have not been tested or universally accepted, as will be discussed later in the paper.

Justification for theorising

It could be argued that a theory is a system used for explaining phenomena or activities to provide an understanding. It also relates concepts relevant to the particular object of study. Welman e*t al.* succinctly define theory as;

A statement or a collection of statements that specify the relationship between variables with a view to explaining phenomena such as human behaviour …in some or other population (universum).

In the search for theoretical bases for the study of Public Administration, it would be incumbent on the theoretician to consider the relationships among the variables. In the case of the social sciences, human behavioural relationships have to be identified concerning attitudes, problem solving, political system, organisational culture and incumbent social strata. It should also be noted that a theory does not concern an individual human being or a limited number of employees in one (public) organisational structure. Theorising is an attempt to identify generalisations and common denominators, *i.e.* to a *universum* of phenomena and should enhance explanation and contribute to predictions regarding the human factor. A theory, to be *universal*, should thus be able to describe the phenomenon or activity; to explain why a particular activity has taken place or has been unsuccessful; and predict what could happen if a particular condition applies in regard to the phenomenon under scrutiny.

Public Administration is an applied science. Therefore, the Discipline has to relate any theory to the practical situations within which public administration is practised. This

does not imply that theorising is superfluous, it is a precondition for scientific study. The justifications could be summarised as follows (*cf.* Hanekom and Thornhill 1998:70; Smit, Cronje, Brevis and Vrba 2007:28):

- it facilitates the orientation of knowledge by explaining administrative phenomena and related activities;
- it provides a framework for ordering facts and values related to administrative phenomena;
- it provides a mechanism to transfer knowledge on the basis of scientifically tested grounds;
- it emphasises significant similarities and differences among related phenomena (*e.g.* human beings and the social environment within which they work); and
- it generalises the causes of actions or attitudes and explains the circumstances causing deviations from the norm.

It should be obvious that theory is an indispensable requirement for scientific study. Simultaneously it could contribute towards improving the quality of the practice of public administration by serving as warning sensors for the practitioner. Public administration takes place in a political framework. Politics is about power and can, therefore, not always be scientifically justified. Thus the Discipline concerned with the administration has to take its cue from an inexact basis, making the Discipline liable to untested facts or even the unpredictability of politics.

Limitations

Any theory should continuously be subjected to testing and should be testable. Only if it could withstand concerted attempts to prove it wrong could it justify its existence. Furthermore, any theory should be able to explain a particular phenomenon or set of occurrences and predict a possible outcome should a process or system fail to comply with the generalised characteristics. In the final instance a theory should ultimately succumb to scrutiny and be discarded in favour of more valid or relevant findings (*e.g.* the scientific management theory proposed by F.W. Taylor after the *Hawthorne Studies* at the Western Electric Company's Hawthorne's Works). Newton's three laws of motion (simplified state that an object moves in the direction in which it is pushed; that it will keep moving in a straight line until some other force acts to slow it down or deflect it; and that every action has an opposite and equal reaction) (Bryson 2003:73). It was more than a century later that the notion developed that there are other factors that could influence Newton's laws i.e. they could be proven incorrect (Bryson 2003:157). For a theory to be accepted in the social sciences, such as in Public Administration, it should be tested against the foregoing criteria. However, it should also be critically analysed continuously to establish its relevance in the imperfect environment in which public administration is practised.

In the so-called pure sciences (Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics) it is often argued that hypotheses can be formulated and proven true or false. The environment within

which most experiments are carried out can be controlled and predictions can be made on the basis of observations or the results from experiments. However, this is not always the case. In the study of the universe, uncertainty is a very real challenge. This even led to the reformulation of mechanics into a new theory called *quantum mechanics,* based on the uncertainty principle (Hawking 2003:59). (This principle states that one can never be exactly sure of both the position and the velocity of a particle; the more accurately one knows the one, the less accurately on can know the other (*Ibid.*, 2003). It could, therefore, be argued that sciences could be subject to uncertainty. This is the case with Public Administration as well. It finds its application in a social and political environment. The social environment changes continuously while the political environment is without doubt riddled with uncertainty. Thus, it should be accepted that uncertainty will have to be acknowledged in any effort to develop any theory within the discipline.

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

From the 16th century, the national state was the reigning model of the administrative organisation in Western Europe. These states needed an organisation for the implementation of law and order and for setting up a defensive structure. The need for expert civil servants, with knowledge about taxes, statistics, administration and the military organisation grew. In the 18th century the need for administrative expertise grew even further and professorates were introduced. Cameralism, an economic and social school of thought within 18th century Prussia, developed to reform society.

Lorenz von Stein, since 1855 professor in Vienna, is considered the founder of the science of public administration in Europe. During the time of Von Stein the science of public administration was considered to be a form of administrative law. His opinions were innovative in several respects *inter alia* he considered the science of public administration a melting pot of several disciplines, *e.g.* sociology, political science and public finance. In the opinion of Von Stein the science of public administration was an integrating science. He considered public administration as leading practicality, but theory had to form the base of such study. He also argued that the science of public administration should strive to adopt a scientific method to study.

In the United States Woodrow Wilson was the first to consider the science of public administration as important. Wilson was more influential to the science of public administration than Von Stein, primarily due to an article Wilson wrote in 1887 (*Political Science Quarterly)* in which he argued in favour of four concepts:
- separation between politics and the public administration;
- consideration of the government from a commercial perspective;
- comparative analysis between political and private organisations and political structures; and
- obtaining effective management by training public servants and assess their quality.

Luther Gulick and Lyndall Urwick contributed substantially to the initial documentation of the study area of Public Administration in the USA. They integrated the ideas of earlier theorists

like Henri Fayol who offered a systematic treatment of management, which was unique at that time. They believed that this could be applied for the management of companies as well as for administrative sciences. They did not want to separate the two disciplines, but believed a single Science of Administration, which transcending the borders between the private and the public sector, could exist. Later on the Science of Administration would focus primarily on governmental organisations. The reasoning concerning the Science of Administration was largely borrowed from the fourteen organisational principles of Henri Fayol. However, this approach did not withstand the test of time.

After 1945 the ideas of Wilson and earlier authors were being questioned. Initially the distinction between politics and the public administration was strongly relativised, but the debate continued. Because of various political scandals in the USA public administration had to detach itself from politics. Thus efforts were made to study Public Administration as though it consisted of pure scientific formulas to be followed to obtain efficiency and effectiveness. However, any attempt to deny the political environment in the study of Public Administration proved unsuccessful. Public Administration concerns the study of human beings operating in a peculiar social but politically driven setting.

George Langrod published a rather inconspicuous titled book: *Some current problems of administration in France today* (1961). The title of the book is rather misleading and does not indicate the valuable contents concerning the roots of administrative studies in Europe in the eighteenth century. The author inter *alia* quotes the Swiss writer Herbert Luethy who argued that the secret of the continuity of French history is found in its public administration and not in any particular farsightedness on the part of her rulers and statesmen. (1961:1). Cases are even quoted of *overinspectors* of Public Administration appointed in 1247. Later under Napoleon's rule *pr*éfets embodied the concept of "…Public Administration as a continuous task to be carried on by a group of civil servants subordinate to the head of State, forming a hierarchical pyramid of monocratic administrative offices…" (*Ibid., 2*). This system has been embedded in the French system the principle of an anonymous and politically neutral body of administrative officers who personify the state (*Loc. cit.).* Any discussion on Public Administration as Discipline and as operational activity in France would be incomplete if reference to the *Conseil d'Etat* is omitted. This *Conseil* could be considered as the cornerstone of French administration and one of the earliest bodies to be involved in the training of civil servants through the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* and the establishment of an elite corps of civil servants with a sense of belonging to the civil service, thus creating an *esprit de corps*. The *Conseil* also *ex post* controlled the legality of all administrative acts affecting the rights and interests of individuals (*Ibid., 9*). Indeed Langrod argues that the science of Public Administration is the result of the *Conseil's* influence (*Loc. cit.*) although the Discipline was not taught prior to the nineteenth century (*Ibid., 76*). The further development of Public Administration in France is not discussed in detail as it is not the focus of this discussion. The brief overview is provided to emphasise the issue that the study of Public Administration was focussed on the activities of the state as identified during the period referred to.

Although Wilson is considered as the father of the study of Public Administration, he only re-invented the science that had been developed much earlier in Europe. The studies

were partly scientific and partly descriptive and involved politics, governing, statistics and accounting. The further developments in Europe are not alluded to as the intention was merely to highlight the fact that Public Administration as a discipline is much older than the popularly held view that it only commenced with Woodrow Wilson's article that was published in 1887. It also underscores the argument that Public Administration concerns the activities related to the functions for which the state accepted responsibility. Again it must be stated that these functions were traditional state functions performed by institutions under the direct control of the legislature irrespective of the fact that in the nineteenth century Germany quoted as an example could be classified as a police state at that stage in history (*Ibid., 76*).

DEFINING THE DOMAIN OF STUDY

Cloete (1981:1) states that administration is found wherever two or more people take joint action to achieve an objective. Administration takes place wherever people work or play and, thus, is found in all spheres of human activity. Administration does not take place in a vacuum and has as its aim the effective and efficient realisation of goals. Simon *et al.,* (1968:4) describe administration as co-operative group action with an emphasis, not only on the execution of an activity, but also on the choices describing how the activity was implemented. Thus, answering the questions relating to how and why become an integral part of administration. Gladden (1961:12) maintains that public administration is concerned with the activities of government and that the word *administration* means to care or look after people, to manage their affairs and that an *administrator* is a servant and not a master. Public administration relates to the activities of the executive branch of government, deals with the formulation and implementation of public policies and involves issues of human behaviour and co-operative human effort (Stillman. 1980:3).

When the adjective *public* is added to administration, it refers to these functions or phenomena being practised in a political environment, aimed at satisfying societal needs as perceived in a specific period. As was alluded to earlier, public administration describes social phenomena and the interaction of human beings performing administrative and managerial functions. Waldo (1994:4-5) explains that public administration is both an area of inquiry and an activity, which means that for a theory to exist, it must describe and explain the boundaries for inquiry as determined by the activity itself. The challenge to theorising on public administration is found in the duality of its existence – the art of administration describes and explains its human interaction; the science of administration is embedded in its generic functions and operation within a political environment.

The first attempts at theorising focused on the generic *administrative* function. Thereafter attempts have been made to describe the social interaction of human beings and their impact on the administration. Gladden (1972: VII) identifies various views through which administration, as a discipline, could be approached. The different views include the constitutional law-, the institutional-, the business economics-, the implementation-, the comprehensive-, the conventional-, the management- and the generic view. The constitutional view regards administration as a function of organisations

concerned mainly with the execution or implementation of governmental activities while the institutional view refers to administration as the work of specific organisations such as health- or provincial administration. The business economics view regards administration as reporting, archives control and general office organisation, thus, the operational routine matters. The management view holds that administration is limited to specific categories of employees with the purpose of activating and fulfilling functional activities. The implementation view refers to administration as the act of implementation found in forms such as administration of legislation or the administration of schools. The comprehensive view considers administration as the total product of human behaviour (individually and collectively) towards the realisation of any goal. The generic view of administration constitutes the functions of public administration, described by Cloete (1981). The functions are generic in nature, because of its universal applicability. Furthermore, the generic functions are also mutually inclusive, implying that collectively they constitute the effective and efficient functioning of the public service (Rowland 1987:62).

More recent attempts at developing Public Administration theory relates to accepted organisation theory, as posited by Smit *et al.* (2007.30-49) who identified 10 different administrative theories, divided into classical and contemporary theories. These include:

- Classical theories, schools and approaches
  - *scientific management* promoting the one best way of performing a task with its champions: F.W. Taylor, Frank and Lilian Gilbreth and Henri Fayol and which contributed to the shaping of administrative theory (Murphy, 1981:23);
  - *bureaucratic approach* promoted by Max Weber proposing the adherence to legal authority, strong control, hierarchy and unity of command;
  - *human relations movement* identifying the need to consider the human element in an organisation as promoted by Elton Mayo, Maslow and McGregor; and
  - *quantitative management theory*, proposing the development of mathematical models to assist managers in decision making.
- Contemporary models and approaches
  - *systems model*, developed in the 1950s to eliminate the deficiencies of the classical models by requiring that any organisation should be viewed as a system and its actions performed in such a way that it remains in equilibrium with Ludwig von Bertalanffy as one of its staunchest proponents;
  - *contingency approach* which is based on the systems model, but positing that management principles depend on circumstances and that there is no one *best way* to manage;
  - *total quality management* implying that every one and everything are involved and the management's responsibility is to manage quality and to inspire as promoted by W. Edwards Dening;
  - *learning organisation* adapted from Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*, based on the systems theory and arguing that the learning organisation is a management approach requiring learning individuals; and
  - re-engineering (with its experts Hammer and Champy) which argues that the way in which organisations operate should be fundamentally reappraised, requiring that

every function and procedure should be re-engineered as they do not work and should be started all over.

The summary of the theories provided above serve to prove that generic administrative phenomena could be identified. However, it should be obvious that each theory/ approach/school of thought contains some characteristics that could be related to Public Administration. However, these examples prove that no single one is perfect. That may also be the reason for using terminology such as approach/school/movement to emphasise that some of the so-called theories do not constitute theory. They are efforts to systematise arguments, views and conclusions concerning particular phenomena. It is the duty of scholars of Public Administration to realign the relevant theories/schools/ movements to suit the requirements of the Discipline. These schools/movements and even paradigms could well be precursors to the development of theories

Contemporary governments believe that the hierarchical structures and top-down approaches to policy implementation no longer address the problem situations faced by policy makers. Public administration exhibits a more client-centred approach, emphasising public involvement in policy formulation and implementation. Public organisations have to be redesigned and the focus is placed on innovative leadership and co-operation among employees in order to ensure effectiveness and efficiency in public service delivery (Dobuzinskis 1997:300-302). The above is illustrated in the paradigms which emerged during this period, including:

- The New Public Administration;
- New Public Management; and
- New Public Service.

The New Public Administration conceptualised during the Syracuse University Minnowbrook Conference (1968), also popularly called the *Minnowbrook Perspective*, provided an alternative perspective to the study and paradigm of public administration, by highlighting the anomalies within the traditional theories, although unable to provide alternatives (Denhardt 2008:102-103). What emerged from the perspective is that public administrators should not only be responsible for policy implementation, but also for policy formulation – thus extending the boundaries of public administration. The reciprocal nature between public administration and political science was strengthened by focusing on the public organisation as not operating on the periphery of politics, but in its mainstream.

The concepts of *relevance*, *social equity*, *adaptation* and *client-focus* became central themes studied and discussed. Cameron and Milne (2009:382) point out that societal reality required the Discipline to respond in a manner it was unable to fulfil. Public Administration could not address the complexities found in contemporary public organisations, which meant a renewed interest in areas such as *inter alia* comparative Public Administration, policy making and administrative rationality.

Frederickson (1971) as quoted by Denhardt (2008:105) maintains that New Public Administration intends to understand the impact of policies on society in order to describe

more effective means of satisfying client demands. What remained vague was the question of which societal values are most desirable for the satisfaction of client demands – whether efficiency or equity, hierarchy or participation would characterise public administration?

Financial crises in the 1970s led to the development of the New Public Management paradigm. Emphasis was placed on improved public productivity, performance-oriented organisations and employees, increased accountability and decentralised decision-making – all in an effort to create a more effective public organisation (Denhardt 2008:137). The New Public Management theory goes beyond the separation of politics from administration and uses the economic market for political and administrative relationships. All that are required are rational inputs and outputs to satisfy the demands of the public. Consideration for the common good is absent from this approach. Within the market-driven principles, public organisations are made to compete, because of their exposure to market forces. According to Bagby and Franke (2001:626), the language of contracts and transactions replace the language of politics with its consideration for equity, fairness and the common good.

Osborne and Gaebler's 10 principles for governmental reform (as discussed in *Reinventing Government,* 1992) serve as the conceptual framework for public administration and became, according to Denhardt (2008:139) an analytical checklist to transform the actions of government. Managerialism, as a school of thought, promotes social progress through economically defined productivity through the application of sophisticated technologies; through a disciplined labour force; through the measurement of performance improvements; and through managerial discretion. However, New Public Management has been severely discredited and cannot be accepted as a paradigm that could result in a theory for public administration. Some of the criticisms against it can be summarised as follows (Noordhoek and Saner 2005:39-43):

- New Public Management does not differentiate between a value driven and an effectiveness driven approach to government. This leads to a culture clash in that the citizen is not merely a client, not a government, merely a company. Citizens have duties which clients do not have and New Public Management needs long term investment, which a short term focused government (in a dynamic and complex world) cannot afford. Thus, New Public Management is a luxury, which public organisations lacking access to basic resources, cannot promote.
- New Public Management implies management principles not found in public service organisations. The benefits derived from a Weberian hierarchy, including predictability, accountability and legality, are not evident in New Public Management. Results oriented performance means the production of numbers as the justification for existence. But numbers lead to performance indicators and a multitude of indicators mean numbers becoming more important than the welfare of the society it serves. Rhodes (1996:663) terms it New Public Management's "obsession with outcomes".

However, the underlying reasons for New Public Management should not be discarded. Government should ensure responsiveness through the use of effective management tools and techniques. The notion of responsiveness and strengthening the interaction

between public administrators and their society led to the conceptualisation of the New Public Service, as proposed by Denhardt and Denhardt in 2003. New Public Service, as alternative to New Public Management, stems from the following (Denhardt 2008:174):

- public administration is concerned with the relationship between citizens and citizens, and between citizens and their government; and
- public administration should concentrate on balancing the alternative approaches to management and organisational design with the more humanistic tradition of serving society.

The notion of building a sense of community among citizens increases the scope of the Discipline. The state becomes responsible for creating public spaces within which citizens could interact with each other in a humanely and respectful manner, while ensuring that each participant's (be it public or private) integrity is maintained.

IMPACT OF GOVERNANCE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION THEORISING

Although the historical foundation for the study of Public Administration is found in political ideology, the reality is that the current scope of administration extends beyond the original boundaries set for the functioning of the state. Contemporary arguments regarding the role and responsibility of the state is conceptualised in a governance perspective. The World Bank, as quoted by Adejemboi (1998:26), describes governance as "consisting of public accountability, transparency in government procedures, abiding by the rule of law and efficient and effective public service leadership and management". The definition posed by the United Nations Development Programme (1997) highlights the specific nature of the concept. Governance is the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority in the management of a country's affairs at all levels. Governance comprises the complex mechanisms, processes and institutions, through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, mediate their differences and exercise their legal rights and obligations.

The following dimensions deduced from this definition can be used as foundation upon which a possible theory of public administration can be developed *viz.* as:

- exercising administrative authority in a complex environment;
- based on the needs expressed by a community; and
- in an attempt to ensure accountability, transparency and the protection of legal rights.

Stoker (1998:18) argues that governance is premised on five propositions, namely:

- governance as referring to a set of institutions and actors that include both public and private sector;
- governance as identifying the blurred responsibility in tackling social and economic issues;
- governance identifying the power dependence between actors involved in collective action;

- governance identifying self-governing networks of actors; and
- governance recognising that achieving goals do not reside with government alone, but entails government using new tools and techniques to steer and guide relationships.

From the above can be deduced that governance has become a perspective for the study of government in exercising its public/private relationships to ensure organisational effectiveness and efficiency as well as customer satisfaction. The governance responsibility is not entirely new, since Aristotle (384-322 BC) already described the civic life of a citizen as *the highest expression of humanity*. The state has the responsibility to ensure common good (Bagby and Franke 2001:624), which highlights the perception that governance is to be holistic and consequential, rather than specific and procedural (Somoleka 1998:164). Positivists, such as Hobbes and Locke, identified the social contract as the basis for government/society interaction. Government was not about producing virtuous citizens, but was merely a means to an end. Similarly, the interaction required between citizens and the state in contemporary governance parlance require from government to act responsibly and responsively.

From a governance perspective, the argument of increased public participation in policy and political decision-making is reinforced. Effective governance, according to Naidoo (2004:180) is to ensure popular welfare and promote "the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people in society" – an argument reminiscent of Aristotle. However, the implication of the above is that public administration theory should not only focus on administrative functioning or the description of social interaction with the state, but should extend to include a societal perspective – one which cannot be contained within a specific boundary and described within a particular perspective.

Stoker (1998:19) cautions against the use of governance as a blanket-justification for the role and responsibility of the state. The argument is augmented by the following dilemmas:
- governance cannot solve the divorce between the complex reality of decision-making and the normative responsibility of government;
- the blurring of responsibilities between public and private responsibility could lead to blame avoidance and seeking a scapegoat;
- the power dependence created because of the multiple actors involved in governance might have unintended consequences for government; and
- difficulties in ensuring accountability create opportunity for governance to fail.

Care should be taken that the bureaucracy (appointed officials) still remains the essence of the governing structure and that the policy implications proposed through a governance perspective might not address the realities of the structure responsible for implementing it.

THEORISING ABOUT PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The discussion in this article focussed on the origin of Public Administration and its domain of study. It was *inter alia* argued that the Discipline is one of the social sciences and that it finds its application in a political, social, economic and particular

physical environment. However, it does reveal some common characteristics peculiar to the area of operation of public officials assigned the responsibility to establish an administrative system within which to manage the resources to achieve the stated goals contained in policies authorised by the respective governing bodies. The issue requiring attention is, therefore, whether the common characteristics are sufficiently grounded to theorise about Public Administration. Key even identified the need for a theory on budgeting in 1940 in an article: *The lack of a budgetary theory* (quoted in Thornhill, 1973 (1984):14) by posing the question: "On what basis shall it be decided to allocate *x* dollars to activity A instead of activity B?" Thus it is clear that Key was aware of the fact that a theory is required to answer a question about a monetary value that could be attached to a public expenditure item, but which requires a political weighting.

Sciences *e.g.* Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics and the social sciences make use of theories to guide study in the particular discipline such as the well known general relativity theory of Albert Einstein: E= mc (where E represents energy, m represents mass and c is the speed of light). This is only one example of a theory in Physics written in a formula format. In Mathematics various theories, which have gained the status of laws, have been developed, *e.g.* Newton's laws which had already been alluded to; Maxwell's theory which predicted that radio or light waves should travel at a certain fixed speed (Hawking, 2003:19). Darwin (1859) (2004) formulated his well known, but controversial theory on the origin of species and natural selection to explain the development of species after his visit to the Galapagos Islands (Darwin 2004:207.) However, he devoted a whole chapter to the topic: *Difficulties of the theory.* He discussed in detail the challenges he encountered in defending his theory and also admitted that he "…could give only one or two instances of transitional habits and structures in allied species, and of diversified habits, either constant or occasional, in the same species." (Ibid., 216)

Charles Lindblom postulated his *Science of Muddling through* in 1959 to legitimise the incremental approach to decision-making as rational (Murphy a.o.1981:20). Max Weber formulated his *Ideal bureaucracy* model based on legal authority. He argued that legal authority stems from rules and other control mechanisms that govern an organisation in its pursuit of specific goals (Smit, *et al.,* 2007:34). The quantitative management theory developed during World War II deals with mathematical models, statistics and other models and their use in managerial decision making (Smit, *et al.,* 2007:37). The well known behavioural scientists, Maslow and McGregor, developed their alternative basic assumptions about human beings and their approaches to work, which they termed *Theory X and Theory Y (Ibid.,* 35-36*).* Lawrence Peter postulated his theory that in large organisations everyone is promoted until they reach their individual levels of incompetence (Murphy 1981:126).

Except for Weber, various authors have attempted to develop theories concerning organising. Richard Daft (2007) *e.g.* writes:

> *Organisation theory is a macro examination of organisations because it analyses the whole organisation as a unit. Organisation theory is concerned with people aggregated into departments and organisations and with the differences in structure and behavior at the organisation level of analysis.*

> *Organisation theory is the sociology of organisations, while organisational behavior is the psychology of organisations.*

The quote clearly indicates that the theory is not contained in a formula, or a statement. It neither explains, nor predicts. Therefore, the question could be posed if this *theory* complies with the definition of theory. Frederick Taylor's scientific management resulted in various techniques *e.g.* time and motion study and production control. These techniques, according to Herbert Simon, are all concerned with *psychological organisation theory* (Quoted in Self 1976:19), although it was a first attempt at improving production, Taylor's scientific management was based on routine work and do not have much relevance to general issues of any large organisation *e.g.* a government department. Earlier proponents of efficiency in the public sector argued within the framework of strong authoritarian rule and mechanistic assumptions (Self 1976:22). Social and political factors were not considered significant. Therefore, the attempts to distil general tendencies and characteristics were not attended to.

Theorising within the domain of Public Administration does not imply that theories should not acknowledge that mistakes could have been made by researchers. As alluded to, theories will eventually be proven incorrect. Even Stephen Hawking admitted in 2008 that his theory regarding the black holes in space contained some inconsistencies. He also quoted the case of Einstein whose efforts to determine a cosmological constant was the biggest mistake of his life. (Hawking, 2003:159)

CONCLUSIONS

The article focussed on the possibility of developing theories within the discipline of Public Administration. It was argued that theories develop over a period of time and after research, observation and knowledge acquisition concerning a particular phenomenon. Examples from the pure sciences were quoted to prove that the search for theories is accompanied by uncertainty and that some assumptions on which such theories are based sometimes prove to contain inconsistencies. Theorising in the social sciences is equally or even more complex than in the pure (or natural) sciences as a discipline such as Public Administration is researched and practised within a social and a political environment. Both these environments are unstable as they are subject to continuous change. Therefore theorising should note that generalised statements would be required. Furthermore no single theory could be postulated in a similar manner as Stephen Hawking argues that a unified theory of physics is still not attainable. Although various theories exist within sub disciplines of Public Administration, the probability of a unified theory seems unattainable at this stage.

The question should, perhaps, not be whether a definitive theory is possible, but rather whether a definitive theory is practical. The constant questioning is a sign of a thriving Discipline and in today's world, constantly testing the validity of what is taught and learnt are prerequisites for responsible governance. As a social science, Public Administration

is dynamic and the theory (ies) underpinning it should make provision for its adaptability and responsiveness.

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