Research in Business & Social Science

The use of theoretical frameworks by Master of Public Administration (MPA) graduates at a selected South African university of technology

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A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Scholars contend that public administration as a discipline, is still in its infancy, and more often than not, fumbles for its own identity. It is generally regarded as an amalgamation of various disciplines. It is therefore no wonder that scholars in public administration, more often than not, fail to locate their empirical research, in sound theoretical frameworks for research in public administration, in general. The core objective of the study was to determine whether Master of Public Administration (MPA) graduates, from a selected university of technology in South Africa, grounded their research in theoretical frameworks, rooted in the identified public administration domains. Desktop research was employed where purposely selected MPA dissertations were scrutinised, using content analysis. MPA qualifications generally comprises a range of modules in conjunction with the production of a mini-thesis. This has not been the case at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) since 2016. MPA graduates are required to produce a full dissertation only. The study's intention was to highlight the importance of conducting research which contributes to public administration theory development especially at universities of technology. The study found that if CPUT wants to acquire a competitive edge in the international higher education landscape in general, and in the field of public administration in particular, it must aspire to deliver MPA graduates who demonstrate the ability to grow the mass of theoretical knowledge in the discipline. The study recommends that theoretical frameworks, in the study domains associated with research in public administration be taught explicitly in the form of seminars in the absence of teaching them in formal credit-bearing modules, which is the case at CPUT.

Introduction

South African universities of technology (known as technikons pre-2004), was historically established to facilitate the theoretical aspects of apprenticeship training and education, and the preparation of students for specific occupations. At the outset, postgraduate research, did not fall within its ambit of assigned endeavours (Hendrickse, 2015, p.7-8). Today, the production of postgraduate students, are one of the core outputs of universities, irrespective of whether the university is classified as a traditional university or a university of technology. This shift in focus to research at all universities, came about after the change in South Africa's higher education landscape which saw the merging of thirty-six (36) higher education institutions into twenty-three (23) universities. The mergers took place from 2004 to 2007 (Baloyi, 2015, p.1).

This article is located within the realm of postgraduate research, with a particular focus on the Master of Public Administration (hereafter referred to as MPA) qualification offered at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (hereafter referred to as CPUT). Its core objective was to review MPA dissertations produced by the aforementioned institution, in order to determine whether postgraduate students, grounded their studies in specific theoretical frameworks located in the Public Administration paradigm. The aim was to advise on the importance of locating one's empirical research in sound theoretical frameworks to ensure, not only scientific meticulousness, but also to accentuate the importance of theory development in Public Administration's corpus of knowledge as

advocated by Van der Waldt (2017, p.201). To this end, desktop research was employed. Whilst South African scholars such as Thornhill and Van Dijk (2010); Cameron and McLaverty (2008); Thani (2012), Auriacombe and Schurink (2012) and Auriacombe and Holtzhausen (2014), amongst others, have undertaken research pertaining to theoretical and philosophical considerations of public administration as a discipline, a study of this nature has not been undertaken before.

The first section of the article provides a cursory overview of the purpose of an MPA qualification as regulated by the South African Higher Education Qualification Framework (hereafter referred to as SAQA). This section is followed by a discussion on theoretical frameworks in general. Thereafter theoretical frameworks in Public Administration are explored. The aforementioned comprises the literature review. Document analysis was utilised to review purposely selected MPA dissertations, produced after 2016, when the MPA programme was introduced at CPUT, to assess whether theoretical frameworks underpinned the selected studies. The article concludes with findings and recommendations as part of the conclusion.

Master of Public Administration (MPA)

The MPA qualification is generally a course-based postgraduate programme aimed at training practicing public servants in managerial positions. In South Africa, this Master degree is offered by various higher education institutions and regulated by the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) (Wessels, 2012, p.158). CPUT's Department of Public Administration and Governance, with the re-curriculation of their postgraduate programmes, switched from offering a Master in Technology degree in Public Management (a choice existed between registering for a course-based, plus mini-thesis or full dissertation degree), to offering the MPA degree, full dissertation only (Ballard, 2022). A full dissertation MPA, is contrary to Wessels' (2012, p.170) assertion that an MPA degree generally comprises six modules. The MPA offered by CPUT purports "to introduce you to the public sector which is committed to professionalism and good governance at senior management level, to drive and maintain the many changes and high standards required for effective service delivery" (Studyportals, 2007-2022). However, if no course-work underpins the MPA offering, the researcher contemplated how the aforementioned learning outcomes would be achieved and whether MPA candidates had a sound understanding of theories or theoretical frameworks underpinning Public Administration as a discipline in general, and in particular study domains as identified by Van der Waldt (2017). He forwards the following study domains associated with research in Public Administration. The domains include:

i. *Policy Analysis and Management*
ii. *Development Management*
iii. *Public Organisational Development and Management*
iv. *Managing public service delivery*
v. *Financial Management and Procurement*
vi. *Information, Knowledge, Communication and Technology Management*
vii. *Public Management Ethics;*
viii. *Public Administration and Management history, theory and research*
ix. *Disaster Studies*
x. *Inter-governmental Relations and*
xi. *Government and governance (Van der Waldt, 2017, p.191).*

As each domain has clear conceptual dimensions, the researcher was curious to explore, whether a clear theoretical framework or theoretical frameworks, underpinned purposely selected MPA dissertations produced at CPUT, as universities of technology as alluded to earlier, historically focused on occupation specific training and not necessarily on philosophical discussions and the consideration of theories, when conducting research. Curiosity as defined by Grossnickle (2016, p.23) relates to a need for new knowledge or information and the motivation to pursue it through exploration. This definition aptly captures the researcher's intention in the writing of this article.

A review of online marketing material of universities in South Africa, pertaining to the MPA offerings, are all underpinned by similar rhetoric and reveals that the programme gives advanced and specialised professional preparation for senior public managers (See www.mancosa.co.za; www.uwc.ac.za; www.cput.ac.za; www.tut.ac.za; www.sun.ac.za). According to Wessels (2012, p. 163) there seems to exist a diversity of curriculum compositions amongst the various higher education institutions offering this programme. The author contends that: " [t]he trend in the discourse of MPA curricula seems to be in the direction of the creation of learning environments in which learners can apply various theoretical tools to reflect on professional problems" (Wessels, 2012, p.163). Furthermore, Wessels (2012, p.168-169) continues that senior public managers need to demonstrate competences by:

i. *Gaining and applying specific theoretical knowledge in Public Administration*
ii. *Sythesising information autonomously in specialised fields in order to deal with contradictions*
iii. *Performing advanced professional, leadership and managerial tasks in the public sector*
iv. *Applying research methods and techniques solving problems which need scientific solutions, and*
v. *Writing high level texts.*

The above is supported by an article in the Local Government Bulletin (2020) entitled: "An analysis of the competency levels of senior managers in South African municipalities".

Whilst the mentioned competences could be imbedded in specific modules to be covered in a generic South African MPA programme, CPUT's MPA is not a course-based programme, but rather focused on the formulation of a full dissertation, as mentioned before. The university's website indicates that postgraduate students would be required to conduct supervised research in a specialised area of public management and complete a dissertation. The programme further aims to develop management skills to ensure that middle and senior managers in the public sector have the required competencies and associated proficiency levels to succeed at strategic level (CPUT, Faculty of Business and Management Sciences Handbook, 2021).

According to the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) (undated) a research Master graduate must be able to:

i) *identify and understand at an advanced level the main trends, themes and debates within the field;*

ii) *identify, debate and apply at an advanced level the main theoretical approaches developed in related knowledge areas,*

iii) *apply relevant methodological approaches and key research techniques*

iv) *conduct advanced literature searches to inform reviews of specialised literature in the field;*

v) *prepare professional papers for peer review;*

vi) *where relevant, apply cross-disciplinary knowledge to respond to practical problems facing societies in transition in Africa generally and South Africa in particular.*

vii) *prepare and present research proposals and to act as a research and policy consultant in relevant fields.*

The aforementioned emphasises ontology, epistemology and methodology, core aspects of any research dissertation in general and the core components of a theoretical framework in particular. In the context of formulating a dissertation, a theoretical framework, forming the basis of the research project, is thus imperative. Therefore, the next section explores theoretical frameworks in general and in Public Administration as a discipline, in particular.

Theoretical Frameworks

A theoretical framework typically provides the grounding from which constructs associated with the phenomenon under investigation can be studied (Littlejohn and Foss, 2005, p. 189). Miles and Hubermann (1994, p.18) contend that a theoretical framework is a written or visual presentation that "explains either graphically, or in a narrative form, the main things to be studied – the key factors, concepts, constructs or variables – and the presumed relationship among them". A theoretical framework is thus a core aspect in the research sojourn, yet it is often misconstrued by postgraduate candidates as they prepare their dissertation research journeys. It was noted that some postgraduate students tend to briefly mention a theoretical framework at the start of the dissertation but fail to return to it throughout the rest of the written work. Still others omit the inclusion of a theoretical framework in the research proposal and have to return to the document, to include this information after feedback is received from a research review committee for example (Grant and Osanloo, 2015, p.12). Turning to Public Administration, the discipline within which this writing is located, Van der Waldt (2017, p. 183) points to the importance of theory in social sciences. The author contends that it is imperative to provide philosophical underpinnings on aspects such as: ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods and accordingly identified and devised categories of theories for the analysis of key domains in Public Administration as a field of study as highlighted earlier (Van der Waldt, 2017, p.185). Frederickson and Smith (2003) purport that from an international perspective, Public Administration research in general relied too much on practice rather than the creation of new theory. Cameron (2013, p.579) supports this notion and states that: "There has also been little theory development in South African Public Administration. There appeared to be a low level of conceptualisation in the field. This problem-solving approach has limited the development and testing of empirical theory". Furthermore, "[f]rom a theoretical perspective, Public Administration recounts historical foundations for the study of government as well as epistemological matters associated with public service as a profession and an academic field. Research in this field is generally complicated by the fact that governance-related phenomena are complex and require multiple dimensions, approaches, models and theories to analyse them" (Van der Waldt, 2017,p.184). Still, theoretical frameworks according to Grant and Osanloo (2015, p. 12) is the basis from which all knowledge emanates. It underpins the structure and support for the study's rationale, the research problem, the purpose, the study's significance and the research questions. It thus provides an anchor for the literature review, the research methodology and data analysis components (Grant and Osanloo, 2015, p.12). Accordingly, it is imperative for postgraduate candidates to choose and clarify a theoretical framework from the conceptualisation phase of the topic and be versed in Public Administration theories in particular.

Theories for Research in Public Administration

According to Nhema (2015, p.167) Public Administration is still in an emergent phase fumbling for its own identity. Thornhill (2014, p. 4-5) contends that the discipline is an eclectic science implying that it is an amalgamation of broad and often interdisciplinary fields of enquiry emanating from political science, sociology or another social science like organisational theory or history for example. Gordon (1978) as cited in Nhema (2015, p.167) supports the aforementioned notion and speaks of blurred boundaries between Public Administration and other disciplines. In general, there are three common approaches to making sense of Public Administration *vis a vis*: Classical Public Administration Theory, New Public Management Theory and Postmodern Public

Administration Theory. Prominent scholars in various fields, such as: Max Weber (*On bureaucracy*), Frederick Winslow Taylor (*The principles of scientific management*), Luther Gulick (*POSDCORB*), Woodrow Wilson (*The study of public administration*), Mary Parker Follet (*Management theory*), Chester Barnard (*Inducement contribution theory*), Herbert A Simon (*Administrative behaviour*) and Dwight Waldo (*The administrative state*), made significant contributions to theory development in Public Administration, and the three common approaches referred to (Dobuzinskis, 1997, p.300-302; Van der Waldt, 2017, p.189; Nhema, 2015). Modern day scholars who grew the corpus of knowledge to include wide-ranging governance and managerial perspectives include for example: Bouckert, Hughes, Bourgon, Frederickson, Raadschelders, Pollitt and Rutgers (Van der Waldt 2017, p.189). This particular article was prompted by Van der Waldt's (2017) paper, as cited throughout these writings, which explicitly list a host of core theories to be considered when undertaking Public Administration research. The aforementioned common approaches, are embedded in Van der Waldt's (2017) work. The table of core theories forwarded by the author served as a frame against which the researcher assessed whether the purposely selected MPA dissertations utilised any theories in their literature review and theoretical orientation to explore constructs associated with the research topic under investigation.

The process Van der Waldt (2017, p.190) followed in order to identify relevant theories was as follows. The author searched a number of bibliographic databases (Google Scholar, Science direct, Taylor and Francis online and Web of Science) by using pre-determined keywords. Online forums such as ResearchGate.com and the Postgraduate Forum (www.postgraduateforum.com/) were scanned, as well as the data bases of the following international and national associations:

    i.   American Society for Public Administration (www.aspanet.org/);
    ii.   Asian Association for Public Administration (www.aapa.asia/);
    iii.   Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management

(https:// www.capam.org/);

    i.   Institute of Public Administration (www.ipaa.org.au/);
    ii.   International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration

(www.iasia. iias-iisa.org/);

    i.   International Institute of Administrative Sciences (www.iias-iisa.org/iasia);
    ii.   International Public Policy Association (www.icpublicpolicy.org/);
    iii.   National Academy of Public Administration (www.napawash.org/);
    iv.   National Forum for Black Public Administrators (www.nfbpa.org/);
    v.   The Global Standard in Public Service Education

(www.naspaa.org/students/ resources/ journals.asp);

    i.   The Institute of Public Administration of Canada (www.ipac.ca/); and
    ii.   South African Association of Public Administration and Management

(www.saapam.co.za/).

The author reported that this extensive search resulted in the identification of a significant number (>350) of potentially relevant theories. In light of the extensive number of theories uncovered, only those with a direct bearing on main Public Administration domains were reviewed further and eventually included in a table (see Table 1). The author considered the disciplinary bias governing the application of these theories (e.g. public-sector related focus). In the end, a shortlist of theories was drafted to cover the most pertinent conceptual dimensions of the field of study (Van der Waldt 2017, p.190).

Table 1: Van der Waldt's (2017) Core theories for Public Administration research

Unit of analysis/Focus of the study	Meta-analysis/key issues	Grand & substantive theories
Theme 1: Government and governance		
Origin	Ideal state Rule of law Treaties of government Network governance Neo-liberal Corporate governance Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Cicero, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Jean Jacques Rousseau. Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States (1933)	Force Theory Evolutionary Theory Divine Right Theory Social Contract Theory Conquest Theory Coercion Theory of State Formation Polinsky, AM: Public Enforcement Theory Domhoff, GW: State Autonomy Theory Jellinek, G (1900): General Theory of the State Marxist Theory of the State Theory of Liberal State Bremer's Theory of Foundations of the Constitutional State Islamic Government Theory Constitutive Theory Declaratory Theory Moral Government Theory
Goodness of governance	Outcomes-/results-based; value-for money Basic human rights Efficiency & effectiveness Economy Productivity Performance State stability Law and order Social well-being Growth Merit and spoil systems NPM Corporate Governance (King I-III etc.)	Moore, MH: Public Value Theory Rothstein, B, Samanni, M & Teorell, J: Quality of Government Theory Theories of Governance Samuelson, PA: Public Good Theory Korpi (1983); Huber & Stephens (2001): Power Resource Theory (PRT) Grotius, H: Moral Government Theory Grunig, J: Excellence Theory
Global governance	Systems thinking Strong/weak states Imperialism Core/periphery Bretton-Wood institutions United Nations Washington Consensus Treaty of Westphalia	Von Bertalanffy, L (1968): General Systems Theory Wallerstein (1976): World Systems Theory Prebisch (1960): Path-dependency Theory Max Weber: Iron Cage Theory World Government Theory Game Theory International Political Theory Complexity Theory International Relations Theory Davis, G (1950): Theory of International Integration One World Government Theory (Conspiracy Theory)
System of government/ state structures	Osborne & Geabler (1992): Reinventing government Corporatisation Network Government Whole-of-government Third-party government Collaboration Comparative analyses	Von Bertalanffy, L (1968): General Systems Theory Wallerstein (1976): World Systems Theory Bureaucratic Politics Theory Theory of Bureaucracy Big Government Theory Citizen-over-state theories of government size and growth Mooney, Knox & Schacht (2007): Functionalist Theory Callon, M; Latour, B: Actor Network Theory
Co-operative Governance and Intergovernmental Relations	Systems of Government Statehood	Political Systems Theory Principal-Agency Theory

	Constitutional dispensation	Social Exchange Theory Saunders (1982): Dual State Theory Public Institutional Theory Organisation Theory
Local Government	Constitutional obligations Statutory and regulatory framework Functions Role-players and stakeholders Developmental mandate Provincial oversight Grants	Saunders (1982): Dual State Theory Ross, S & Mitnick, B: Principal-agent Theory Domhoff, GW: State Autonomy Theory Goodwin, M: Regulation Theory Duncan & Goodwin (1982): Theories of local planning and spatial development Cockburn (1977): Local State Theory
Unit of analysis/Focus of the study	**Meta-analysis/Key issues**	**Grand & substantive theory**
Theme 2: Public Administration and Management		
Paradigmatic perspectives (classical to postmodern)	Three main branches of theory: Classical Public Administration, New Public Management Theory, and Postmodern Public Administration Theory Approaches: i.e. administration/politics dichotomy OECD: Modernising government Minnebrooks Conferences (also see Government – origin)	Theories of Luther Gulick: general principles of administration Theories of Mary Parker Follett Theories of Henry Fayol Theories of Chester Barnard Theories of Herbert A Simon: Administrative Behaviour Theory Theories of Dwight Waldo Theories of Woodrow Wilson: Administration/ politics dichotomy Theories of Max Weber: Bureaucratic Theory Theories of Frederick W Taylor: Scientific management Theories of Lyndall Urvick: Science of Administration Theory Theories of Rensis Likert: 4 Systems of Management Theories of Chris Argyris: Fusion process theory of management Mayo & Roethlisberger (1927): Human Relations Theory of Public Administration Theories of political control of bureaucracy Theories of bureaucratic politics Public Institutional Theory Raadschelders: Public Administration as interdisciplinary study Frederickson, HG: New Public Administration Theory Bouckert, G & Pollitt, C: Public Management Reform Theory Hughes; Peters & Guy: Public Management Theory
Public Administration Teaching & Learning	Curriculum design Qualification and educational programmes Skills development SAQA & NQF Vocational/practice dichotomy Blended/mix-mode teaching Teaching technology Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Skills Multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity Approaches: pedagogy, didactic, androgogy, experiential, directive, supportive, facilitating Connectivism (digital learning)	Piagetian: Learning Theory Bruner: Constructivism Watson, JB: Behaviourism Vroom (1964): Expectancy Theory Classical Gestalt Theory Tolman: Sign Learning Theory Active Learning Theory Kirkpatrick: Learning and Training Evaluation Theory (Four-level) Bandura: Social Learning Theory Argyris, C: Double-Loop Learning Deep Profound and Surface Learning Theory Learning as Transformation Theory

		Cognitivist Theory
		Feedback and Reinforcement Theory
		Staff Development Theory
		Adult Learning Theory
		Continuum Theory
Research (knowledge construction and production, and theory development)	Epistemology Ontology Phenomenology Theism Interpretivism Constructivism Paradigms Grand, interlevel and interfield theories Scientific principles Positivism (logic) Empiricism Reductionism Induction & deduction Logic (argumentation) Disciplines Multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity A-priori knowledge Hermeneutics Qualitative, quantitative, mixed method research Approaches i.e. historical, legal, institutional, behavioural systems, political, structural functional, public policy, political economy, and managerial approaches	Grounded Theory Critical Theory Feminist Theory Social Sciences Theory Interpretive Theory
Public Management - Functions - Applications - Skills - Techniques and Tools	Managerialism Business-like Market-based Network Rationalisation Reform	Taylor, F; Gilbreth, F: Scientific Management Theory Gulick, L & Urwick, L (1937): Principles of management Koontz, H & O'Donnell, C (1964): Principles of management Drucker, P (1954): Management Practice Theory Theories of Public Management Classical to modern management approaches and theories
Unit of analysis/Focus of the study	**Meta-analysis/Key issues**	**Grand & Substantive theories**
Theme 3: Public organisations		
Organisational development Management Structure and design Bureaucracy Hierarchy	Structural-functionalism Mechanistic and organic systems Cybernetics Learning organization Departmentalisation	Classical Organisation Theory: Taylor (1916): Principles of scientific management Gullick (1937): Papers on the science of administration Gullick & Urwick (1937): Theory of departmentalisation Weber (1946): Bureaucracy Simon (1946): Proverbs of administration Fayol (1949): General principles of management Neoclassical Organisation Theory: Merton (1957): Social theory and social structure March, J G & Simon, H A (1958): Organisations Barnard (1966): The functions of the executive Katz, D & Kahn, R L (1966); Hirokawa, R Y (1979): Organisation Communication Theory Modern Structural Organisation Theory:

		Burns & Stalker (1961): The management of innovation
		Blau & Scott (1962): Formal organisations
		Walker and Lorch (1968): Organisational choice: Product versus function
		Mintzberg (1979): The Structure of organisations
		Jaques (1990): In praise of hierarchy
		Adaptive Structuration Theory
		Cooley, Mead and Goffman: Organisation culture, climate
		General:
		Principal-agent Theory
		Theory of bureaucracy
		Public Institutional Theory
		Contingency Theory
		Public Institutional Theory
		Mechanistic and Organic Systems Theory
		Albert, S A & Whetten, D A; Cheney and Christensen: Organisational Identity Theory
		Cox, T & Blake, S: Theory of prejudice, discrimination, stereotypes, ethnocentrism
		Grunig, J: Excellence Theory
Unit of analysis/Focus of the study	**Meta-analysis/Key issues**	**Grand & Substantive theories**
Theme 4: Human Resource Management		
Motivation	Behaviouralism	Maslow (1943): Hierarchy of needs: Motivation Theory
Skills and competencies	Industrial Revolution: "worker-asmachine" metaphor	Elton Mayo, Kurt Lewin, Raymond Miles: Human Relations Theory
Supervision	Organisational culture	Herzberg: Motivation-hygiene Theory
Team building	Organisational climate	
Recruitment, selection, induction, and placement	Human motivation	Douglas McGregor: Theory X and Y
Grievance and discipline	Team dynamics	Skinner: Behaviourism
Career development	Group conflict	Vroom (1964): Expectancy Theory
Performance appraisals	Personnel and staff	Rensis Likert: Participative Decisionmaking Theory
Remuneration and compensation	Line and support functions	
Talent management	Human resources	Hargreaves, A & Dawe, R: Path of Professional Development Theory
Training and development	Strategic human resource management	
Labour relations, collective bargaining, and conflict resolution		John Baird (1977); BW Tuchman's Model of Groups Theory
Equal employment opportunities		Cohen and Bailey (1997); Drexler, A, Sibbet, D and Forrester, R (2009): Team Performance Theory
		Jablin, FM (2001); Kramer MW (2010): Anticipatory Socialization Theory
		Saks, AM and Gruman, JA (2012): Socialization Resources Theory
		Adams, J S: Equity Theory
		Jablin F M (2001): Disengagement Theory
		Janis, L (1983): Groupthink Theory
		Berko, R, Wolvin, A & Wolvin, D (2012): Team Conflict Theory
		Wanous J P (1980): Self-Selection Theory
		McGuire, W J (1961): Inoculation Theory
		Phillips, J M (1998): Realistic Job Preview Theory

Unit of analysis/Focus of the study	Meta-analysis/Key issues	Grand & Substantive theories
		Jablin, F M (1984); Klein, H J & Polin, B (2012): Assimilating Theory Contingency Theory
Public leadership	Personality Political leadership Administrative leadership Leadership approaches and skills Organisational culture Group dynamics Societal values, norms and traditions	Zaleznik, A (1977): Trait Theory Fiedler, F: Contingency Theory Hersey, P & Blanchard, K: Situational Leadership Theory Chester Barnard: Functional Theory Blake, R & Mouton, J: Managerial Grid Theory • Graen, G: Leader-member Exchange Theory • Burn, J M: Transformational Theory
Unit of analysis/Focus of the study	**Meta-analysis/Key issues**	**Grand & Substantive theories**
Theme 5: Public service delivery		
Systems, procedures	NPM Customer Outsourcing PPPs Commercialisation Privatisation	Samuelson, P A: Public Good Theory Maslow's Hierarchy of human needs: Motivation Theory Social Equity Theory
Processes improvement	Alternative service delivery Programme evaluation	Public Institutional Theory Theories on public accountability Behaviour Change Theory Theory of Reasoned Action Social Practice Theory Diffusion of Innovation Theory Continuum Theory Ajzen (1985): Theory of Planned Behaviour Reckwitz (2002): Social Practice Theory Ryan & Gross (1943): Diffusion of Innovation Theory
Principles	Normative, public sector values Professional and ethical standards Good governance Administrative fairness and reasonableness Service liability Responsiveness and accountability Transparency and openness Batho Pele principles	Samuelson, P A: Public Good Theory Social Contract Theory Decision Theory Homans (1961): Rational Choice Theory Public Value Theory Public Choice Theory Social Exchange Theory
Unit of analysis/Focus of the study	**Meta-analysis/Key issues**	**Grand & Substantive theories**
Theme 6: Public ethics		
Corruption Maladministration Nepotism Public sector values Public ethos Professionalism Conduct	Normative, public sector values Professional and ethical standards Good governance Administrative fairness and reasonableness Service liability Responsiveness and accountability Transparency	Nicomachean ethics (classic) Samuelson, P A: Public Good Theory Social Contract Theory Moral Government Theory Sidgwick, H: Meta-ethical Theory Munroe et al. (2007): Theory of Planned Behaviour
Unit of analysis/Focus of the study	**Meta-analysis/Key issues**	**Grand & Substantive theories**
Theme 7: Technology in Public Administration		
Information and communication technology e-Governance e-Democracy e-Decision-making Big Data Knowledge Management Management information systems	Digital-era governance Early-adopters	Diffusion of Innovation Theory Critical Mass theory Knowledge Gap Theory Muted Group Theory Ryan & Gross (1943): Diffusion of Innovation Theory Callon, M, Latour, B: Actor Network Theory
Unit of analysis/Focus of the study	**Meta-analysis/Key issues**	**Grand & Substantive theories**

Theme 8: Development management		
Developmental state/ developmental local government	City resilience Adaptation Urbanisation	Stewardship Theory
Ecological/environmental (protection)	Sustainable Development Goals International treaties, protocols and conventions Climate change Ecological approach Entropy Green Economics	Stewardship Theory • Environmental Theories
Unit of analysis/Focus of the study	**Meta-analysis/Key issues**	**Grand & Substantive theories**
Theme 9: Public policy		
Design Implementation Analysis Statutory & regulatory framework	Administrative law Constitutional dispensation Public good Well-being Societal values and norms Political dynamics	Lippmann (1922): Public Opinion Theory McCombs & Shaw (1986): Agenda Setting Theory Mass-elite Theory Tankard et al. (1991): Framing and Priming Theory Social Contract Theory Contingency Theory Public Value Theory Public Choice Theory Rational Choice Theory Whitney & Becker (1982): Gate-keeping Theory Public Good Theory Democratic Theory Jowett, Jowett & O'Donnell (2012): Propaganda Theory Public Persuasion Theory Political Systems Theory Game Theory Social Exchange Theory Dependency Theory Dialogic Communication Theory Knowledge Gap Theory Group Theory Social Interaction Theory Muted Group Theory Spiral of Silence Theory Expectancy Value Theory Social Penetration Theory Political Systems Theory Principal-Agency theory Organisation Theory
Local democracy/ Public participation in policy-making Constitutional and statutory obligations Ward Committee System	Principles of good governance Transparency Democratic dialogue	Herodotus: Classical Democratic Theory Pateman, C; Mosca; Michaels; Dahl, R: Modern Democratic Theory Davies; Elazar, D: Participatory Democratic Theory Follet; Dewey: Social Reform Theory Lippman; Schumpeter; Mill, JS: Citizenship and Public Service Theory Gate-keeping Theory Agenda Setting Theory Social Exchange Theory Media Richness Theory Medium Theory Dependency Theory Argumentation Theory Expectancy Value Theory Social Penetration Theory Dialogic Communication Theory Cognitive Dissonance Theory

		Priming and Framing
		Hypodermic Needle Theory
		Cultivation Theory
Procurement	Keynesian economics	Public Value Theory
Budgeting	Smith: Wealth of nations	Stewardship Theory
Allocation	Weber: Protestant ethic	Public Choice Theory
Distribution	Karl Marx: Das Capital/ Communist	Economic Theory
Revenue generation and	Manifesto	Theories on public accountability
collection	Wildavsky: Budgeting as political instrument	Decision Theory
Auditing and accounting	Welfare versus prosperity/market driven	Agent Theory
	economic approaches	Rational Choice Theory
	Fiscal and monetary policy approaches	Human Capital Theory
	Stabilisation	Contingency Theory
	Economic growth/wealth creation	Scientific Management Theory

Source: Van der Waldt (2017, p.192-200)

The next section, focuses on the research methodology applied in the study.

Research and Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach, with a focus on document analysis. Qualitative research, according to Welman, Kruger and Mitchell (2006, p.188) is "an umbrella phrase covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning of naturally occurring phenomena in the social world. Therefore, the qualitative approach is also fundamentally a descriptive form of research".

The core objective of this paper was to determine whether MPA dissertations, produced at the case study university of technology, beyond 2016 (the year of the inception of the qualification), were underpinned by clear theoretical framework(s) as posited by Van der Waldt's (2017) table (See Table 1) of theories in public administration, listed elsewhere in the article. In order to undertake the aforementioned, the researcher accessed a link to MPA dissertations found at: https://etd.cput.ac.za/handle/20.500.11838/1631. The selected MPA dissertations, thus constituted secondary data, used for analysis. According to Bryman and Bell (2016, p.350) there is no obvious reason why qualitative data (MPA dissertations) cannot be the focus of secondary analysis.

The analysis of qualitative data or secondary sources of information can take many forms. Authors such as Kumar (2014, p.318) and Bryman (2016, p.11) suggest the use of content analysis, thematic analysis, grounded theory and the like, all analytical tools with which to analyse either primary or secondary data generated by a researcher. Content analysis for example, can be described as a quantitative component of document analysis, involving cataloguing written material into researcher-selected categories or units. It thus involves the analysing of qualitative data by reading a large number of transcripts looking for similarities or differences, and subsequently finding themes and developing categories (Wong, 2008, p. 14).

It is primarily a research technique for analysing text (Bryman, 2016, p.11). This analytical tool proved apt for a study of this nature, as the researcher was curious to scrutinize whether Van der Waldt's (2017) theories (See Table 1), crucial as per the author when undertaking research in public administration and management, were used as philosophical lenses in the six MPA dissertations produced at CPUT for the period 2016 to 2021. It should be noted that whilst 29 Master degrees were awarded in Public Administration at CPUT for the period 2016 to 2021, only 6 were MPA degrees, whilst the rest constituted Master of Technology in Public Administration degrees, with mini-theses at its core. The focus of this research is on the MPA degrees only. Table 2 that follows, captures the year in which the degree was awarded, the title of the dissertation, as well as a column demonstrating the theoretical framework if any, which underpinned the study.

Table 2: Master of Public Administration degrees awarded

Disser-tation Number	Year	Dissertation Title	Theoretical Framework: - **Key factors** - **Concepts/Constructs** - **Variables**
1.	2017	The equity composition of employees in a selected provincial government department in the Western Cape, South Africa	Human resource management concepts and constructs were explored. These underpinned the empirical research.
2.	2017	Perceptions of the financial sustainability of an indigent policy in a selected municipality in the Western Cape, South Africa	The two concepts: "indigent" and "free basic services", were explored and underpinned the qualitative enquiry.
3.	2017	The impact of irregular expenditure in South African public finance with specific reference to the National Department of Public Works	This study is located within the context of public financial management. No theoretical underpinnings were forwarded nor tested. Literature pertained to legislation only.
4.	2019	Local economic development assessment on the proposed nuclear power station at Thyspunt site in the Eastern Cape Province	Local economic development theories were explored in particular: Territorial theory, Deleuzian theory and neo-liberal theory. The theories were forwarded but did not underpin the empirical investigation.
5.	2020	The role of leadership communication in achievement of strategic alignment within a selected national government department, Western Cape, South Africa	The theoretical focus was on leadership communication. Concepts pertaining to leadership, communication and leadership communication for example, were unpacked and underpinned the empirical investigation.
6.	2021	The role of stakeholder management in the successful execution of service delivery projects in the Cape Metropolis townships	Theories pertaining to: stakeholder analysis, stakeholder management and leadership styles were conceptually explored. Constructs in relations to stakeholders underpinned the empirical study. Leadership styles were theoretically referred to but not further explored.

(See: etd.cput.ac.za/handle/20.500.11838/1631?offset=20)

The next section provides a synthesis between Van der Waldt's (2017) core theories for public administration research and the findings forwarded in the third column of Table 2, headed: Theoretical frameworks: key factors, concepts/constructs and variables, above. The aim is to determine, as mentioned before, whether the dissertations were underpinned by theoretical frameworks, if any.

Discussion

This section compares the theoretical underpinnings identified in the selected dissertations (Table 2) with Van der Waldt's (2017) proposed core theories for public administration research as forwarded in Table 1. Van der Waldt's (2017) table is divided into: unit of analysis; meta-key issues and grand and substantive theories. In this paper, the researcher interrogated each dissertation in order to ascertain if units of analysis, meta-key issues or grand and/or substantive theories, were evident in any of the studies.

Dissertation 1: Theme 4 in Table 1, speaks to Human Resource Management pertinent to the overall topic explored in this dissertation. None of the grand or substantive theories forwarded in Theme 4 of Table 1, were drawn upon by the MPA candidate. General human resource management concepts and constructs were discussed and underpinned the empirical research.

Dissertation 2: This dissertation focussed on only two concepts, namely: indigent and free basic services. Local government as the unit of analysis, grants and developmental mandates as meta-key issues, under Theme 1 in Table 1, which speaks to government and governance, best suits the theoretical disposition of this study, yet it was not explored nor was any of the grand and substantive theories forwarded (See Table 1), considered. Theme 9 (Table 1), which relates to public policy could have been considered as well. This was not the case.

Dissertation 3: The best suited theoretical underpinning for this dissertation is located under Theme 1 (Table 1) which speaks to government and governance. The dissertation only drew on a legislative framework and none of the units of analysis, meta-key issues or grand and substantive theories proposed in the aforementioned Theme 1, were considered.

Dissertation 4: This dissertation focused on local economic development. Theories such as: Territorial theory, Deleuzian theory and neo-liberal theory, were conceptually forwarded but were not tested in the empirical investigation. Theme 1 (Table 1) which addresses local government, Theme 2 (Table 1) focussing on Public Administration and Management, and Theme 8 (Table 1), which speaks to development management, forward a host of units of analysis, meta-key issues, as well as grand and substantive theories

which the author of this dissertation could have considered. It should be noted that Van der Waldt's (2017) does not include territorial theory nor Deleuzian theory, the core theories this dissertation explored.

Dissertation 5: The focus of this dissertation was on leadership communication in particular its impact on the strategic alignment in a public organisation. The unit of analysis was thus leadership communication. Its underlying meta-key issues were unpacked and informed the study's empirical work. Theme 4 (Table 1) which speaks to human resource management would have been the best theoretical frame for a study of this nature. A host of units of analysis, meta-key issues and more importantly, grand and substantive theories, are forwarded (see Table 1). Whilst the study explored various concepts and constructs, it could have been strengthened by the consideration of theories as suggested in Theme 4 (Table 1).

Dissertation 6: This dissertation focused on stakeholder analysis, stakeholder management and leadership styles in the execution of service delivery projects. Whilst the study's empirical investigation was underpinned by a theoretical discussion of stakeholder analysis and stakeholder management, leadership styles were not explored in the same manner. Grand and substantive theories under Theme 5: Public service delivery (See Table 1) in particular a selection of Samuelson, P A: Public Good Theory, Social Contract Theory, Decision Theory, Public Value Theory and for example Social Exchange Theory, would have located the dissertation soundly within the realm of the public administration discourse.

Conclusion

SAQA (undated) as mentioned in earlier text, contends that Master degree graduates in Public Administration, as one of the core outcomes of the qualification, should be able to: "identify, debate and apply at an advanced level the main theoretical approaches developed in related knowledge areas". In social science in particular, the application of existing theories to address a research problem, should produce new knowledge as a form of theory-testing. Master research dissertations should preferably, test exiting theories, and build new or forward enhanced theories. Accordingly, it is preferred that dissertations be located within well-articulated and sound theoretical foundations. Various authors contend that the practice, as well as the discipline of public administration, is not sufficiently supported by informed and newly developed theory (Lynn, 2008; Rugters, 1998; Greenwood and Eggins, 1995). This study supports the latter notions forwarded. MPA dissertations produced between 2016 and 2021, was interrogated with the view to determine whether the content was, not only supported by a vast array of established theories, but also, whether any new theories were advanced or existing theories augmented. Only 6 MPA qualifications were produced by CPUT from the inception of the qualification in 2016. One dissertation was constructed around a legislative framework only. The rest attempted to underpin their work with references to either one or two theories, key factors, concepts, constructs and variables found within broad theoretical frameworks. The core theories for research in public administration, which preferably should be present, as per Van der Waldt (2017), were considered to a lesser extent.

If South African universities of technology want to acquire a competitive edge in the international higher education landscape in general, and in the field of public administration in particular, it must aspire to deliver MPA graduates who demonstrate the ability to grow the mass of theoretical knowledge in the discipline. Currently, modern day MPA graduates, are still too focused on the solving of practical problems to the detriment of theory development. It is imperative for theory-building and theory-development to become a core focus of the business of postgraduate production at CPUT in particular, and universities of technology in general. One cannot exclusively conclude, that the absence of specific modules in an MPA programme as posited by Wessels (2012: 170), which would generally deal with grand and substantive theories for example, may be the reason why there is a paucity in the use of theories in the dissertations of MPA qualifications at CPUT.

This article recommends that theories and theoretical frameworks, in the study domains associated with research in Public Administration namely: Policy Analysis and Management; Development Management; Public Organisational Development and Management; Managing public service delivery; Financial Management and Procurement; Information, Knowledge, Communication and Technology Management; Public Management Ethics; Public Administration and Management history, theory and research; Disaster Studies; Inter-governmental Relations and Government and governance, explicitly be taught in the form of webinars, seminars or workshops, in the absence of teaching them in credit-bearing formal modules. In this way, there will be some kind of insurance of the "legitimacy" of public administration as a field of study, instead of its continuous association with fields such as history, sociology, political science, organisational development and the like.

This study has implication for quality assurance endeavours when producing MPA graduates particularly at universities of technology in South Africa. It is recommended that a study of this nature be extended to all universities of technology in South Africa, offering an MPA programme as the current findings cannot be generalised to all.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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