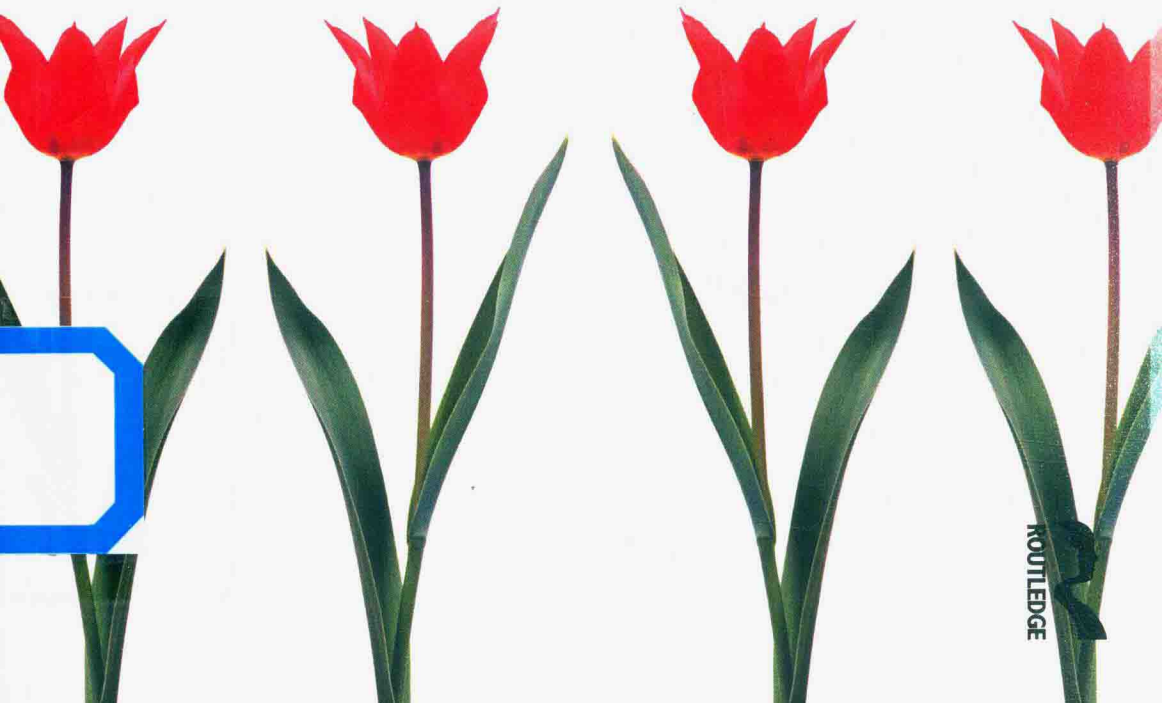
ROUTLEDGE MASTERS IN PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

SANDRA VAN THIEL

RESEARCH METHODS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

AN INTRODUCTION



ROUTLEDGE

Research Methods in Public Administration and Public Management

An introduction

Sandra van Thiel

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'This invaluable book provides a wealth of practical advice and methodological insights. It draws from Professor van Thiel's extensive experience as a leading public administration scholar, and someone who is equally at home in undertaking research for theory testing, issue exploration, or policy development. The book contains numerous worked examples, case studies and a glossary, making it the ideal companion for the public administration researcher at whatever stage in their career.'

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'Writing methodology books in such a messy field as public administration is difficult. Writing them for beginners is doubly difficult. Sandra van Thiel has overcome these difficulties to give us a book that is concise, accessible and comprehensive. She has also managed to treat the methodology wars within the field in a very even-handed way: even where I disagreed with her I found her account balanced and fair. Highly recommended.'

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'Sandra van Thiel has produced the solution for a problem faced by students and supervisors of research in public administration: how to make a rigorous exposition of research methods relevant to the investigation of problems in public policy and management. Embedded in the problems faced by public and related organisations, Research Methods in Public Administration and Public Management is a thorough, clear and focused exposition which will enable its readers to choose the right research strategy and carry out relevant and useful research.'

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'Many scholars would argue that research in all the social sciences is essentially the same. Sandra Van Thiel demonstrates rather conclusively that there are special issues of research in public administration, and that our methods need to be considered in light of those issues. This is an extremely useful text for students embarking on investigating the workings of the public sector.'

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Research Methods in Public Administration and Public Management
An introduction
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Acknowledgements

Teaching students of public administration – whether it be at the undergraduate, Master's or PhD level – about research methods is a challenging but rewarding task. Courses in research methods are usually not the most popular with students, either because the subject seems unimportant with a view to future jobs in the public sector, or because people feel fazed by statistics. In actual fact, however, doing research is far more about logic than statistics. To demonstrate this, I decided to write an introduction to research methods in Public Administration (PA) and Public Management (PM) that offers lots of practical guidance and examples.

In 2007, I made the deliberate choice to write this book in Dutch, intending to make the text easily accessible to a wide variety of students, including post-graduates. Moreover, I wanted to provide an introduction into Dutch PA and PM research, and show its diversity as regards topics, methods and findings. After its initial publication, the book soon became popular with lecturers all over the country, being used for teaching at different institutes for higher education as well as universities. Student evaluations were positive, too, leading to a second edition in 2010, which made some minor adjustments, and provided additional exam questions for online self-testing.

Over the years, many foreign colleagues enquired about my book, yet I always had to disappoint them when they asked whether they could use it for their own tuition. A call issued by Stephen Osborne (on behalf of Taylor & Francis) for manuscripts on research methods in Public Administration and Public Management opened the prospect of getting my book translated and published for the international market. I would sincerely like to thank Stephen Osborne, Taylor & Francis, David Varley and Rosemary Baron for giving me this great opportunity, and I am grateful for their sustained cooperation. I also hope that the present volume will inspire a new group of lecturers who teach research methods, and that students will enjoy the material it offers.

This book could not have been realized without the assistance of Rina F. de Vries, who translated the original text for me, remaining faithful to the spirit in which I first wrote the Dutch version. Needless to say, any remaining mistakes are entirely mine. The Dutch publishing company Coutinho N.V. rendered

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Sandra van Thiel
Nijmegen, 30 June 2013

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Chapter 1

Research in public administration

Public Administration is the study of the management, operation, and functioning of government bodies and organizations in the public sector. As such, it is not unique: other disciplines study this subject as well. Public Administration (PA) distinguishes itself, though, by analysing the public sector from several angles in an integrated manner. In other words, it is interdisciplinary in character, employing knowledge from various disciplines in an integrated manner – or at least it is a multidisciplinary form of research, which applies the insights from different disciplines to one and the same subject.

Public Administration builds on four parent disciplines, namely law, economics, political science and sociology. Not only does it make use of the theories in these fields, but it applies the associated methods and techniques. However, the distinctive features of Public Administration mean that researchers use these methods and techniques in their own particular way. A separate textbook on research in Public Administration is therefore indispensable (see Burnham, Gilland, Grant, & Layton-Henry, 2008, and Pierce, 2008, for comparable introductions into political science research).

What are these unique features of Public Administration research? This forms the subject of the present chapter.

1.1 THE UNIQUE FEATURES OF RESEARCH IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Apart from its interdisciplinary approach, Public Administration research has three other distinctive features. These unique features all influence the way in which research is conducted.

The first distinctive feature has to do with the central object of research in Public Administration, which is the public sector. In the past few decades, the definition of what is generally regarded as the public sector has grown ever wider. Indeed, the public sector has evolved into much more than just 'the government' in a narrow sense, such as politicians and civil servants. In particular since the early 1980s, the sector of semi-government has increased rapidly in size; examples of new elements that have developed are independent executive agencies, private non-profit organizations – such as charities and non-governmental

organizations (NGOs) – and state-owned enterprises (Pollitt & Talbot, 2004; OECD, 2002). In addition, citizens, interest groups, civil societies and companies are ever more actively involved in policy development and decision making. As a consequence of all this, Public Administration and Public Management research concerns itself with an ever wider array of subjects, which can range from things like the construction of a new railway line to local policies on the sales of soft drugs, political leadership, the voting behaviour of citizens, departmental reshuffles, assigning funds for scientific research, international security policy, or the privatization of a national airport (see Box 1.1 for more examples).

BOX 1.1 EXAMPLES OF PREVALENT TOPICS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND PUBLIC MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

- *New Public Management* (NPM) comprises a range of reform measures that were first introduced into the public sector in the 1980s. NPM encompasses business management techniques such as performance measurement, benchmarking, one-stop shops, vouchers, structural disaggregation of government units (into semi-autonomous agencies, or even privatization of state-owned enterprises), and much more. Numerous publications deal with the reasons why governments have adopted such reform measures, how they have been implemented, and what results have been achieved. For a seminal article, see Hood (1991). These days, the debate often focuses on the question whether NPM is still alive and kicking (Lapsley, 2008), or whether we have entered the post-NPM era (Christensen & Laegreid, 2008).
- *Co-production* refers to the fact that policies cannot be developed and decided upon by politicians or civil servants alone; citizens need to cooperate as well. For example, the redevelopment of disadvantaged neighbourhoods has a bigger chance of success if local inhabitants support the policy measures to be taken: support can be created by involving citizens in the decision-making process. Co-production goes beyond consultation, as it requires active citizen involvement from the earliest stages of policy making. The questions of how government officials can achieve true co-production and what the consequences are for democratic accountability processes usually occupy a central place in publications that deal with this topic (see, amongst others, work by Pestoff for more information)
- How and why the current *financial crisis* developed is another hot topic, in particular when it comes to the role that central governments may have played in bringing it about. Could the government have prevented the crisis, for example, by stricter regulation and monitoring (consider, for example, the role of the central banks)?

National governments have responded differently to the economic downturn, sometimes introducing budget cuts, sometimes making certain investments or carrying out takeovers in the form of, for example, the nationalization of banks. As the crisis continues to unfold, however, new research into such questions needs to be carried out. (For an overview and analysis of government action in the early years of the crisis, see Taylor, 2009.)

- *Leadership* in the public sector, by politicians and top civil servants, is a subject that has been studied extensively (see, for example, the work carried out by Downs in the 1960s). There are numerous theories on leadership, with each theory describing a different leadership style. Recently, the research done by Bass (1990) on transformational leadership has received much attention: transformational leaders have a clear vision of what needs to be done, which they can communicate well. Moreover, transformational leaders exhibit a high level of trust in their employees. By empowering employees to act and decide autonomously, such leaders promote self-actualization (a term developed by Maslow) in their employees.
- As a consequence of the processes of *globalization*, there are ever more governmental actors involved in the development and implementation of policies. See, for example, the transposition of European Union (EU) directives into national legislation, the rise of international markets or cross-border forms of cooperation, besides other phenomena such as traditional military cooperation, within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations (UN). *Multi-level governance* (see, for instance, the work carried out by Marks and Hooghe) and *Europeanization* (see the research by Majone, Knill, or Scharpf) are but a few of the strands of literature that deal with the consequences of globalization, and the effects it has on central (and local) governments.
- *Crisis management* has become a growing industry; consequently, it is an ever more important topic in Public Administration and Public Management research. Crisis management is often strongly related to problems of *security*, which these days concern not just military issues, but also include other security threats, such as environmental (e.g. CO_2) and health problems (e.g. SARS – Severe acute respiratory syndrome). Numerous publications are available on this subject, as well as a number of specialized journals for studies on crisis management and international security issues.

As will be clear from this list, many research subjects in Public Administration are unique. For example, there is only one central bank, one system for national elections (e.g. proportional representation), and one president or prime minister. What is more, when it comes to certain other subjects, such as regional

governments, coalition parties and universities, the number of cases often tends to be small. On the one hand, this will make research easier; it is clear which organizations or respondents have to be included in a study. On the other hand, drawing firm conclusions will be difficult, as material for comparison is not available, which may hamper the generalization of research results to other situations or translating them into theory (see Chapter 4 on validity). Because of this, researchers in Public Administration and Public Management often have to use special methods that allow for drawing scientifically sound inferences on the basis of subjects that are singular, unique or rare. The case study is a typical example of a method frequently applied in Public Administration research (see Chapter 8).

That research in Public Administration often involves but a limited number of cases does not necessarily mean that the amount of data to be processed is always small. Quite the contrary, in fact: many subjects of study will turn out to be extremely complex and substantive. Consider, for example, a study on decision making. In principle, a decision can be reduced to a simple 'yes' or 'no', yet in practice the situation is frequently complicated. Usually several different actors are involved in the decision-making process, such as politicians, civil servants, interest groups, companies and international organizations. Each of these parties will have their own interests and beliefs, which all have to be incorporated into the decision finally made. Indeed, research on decision making often comprises a large amount of information on numerous actors, who interact with each other for a prolonged period of time, in order to reach a shared decision in the end (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2004). This means that a unique case can generate a sizeable body of data.

The second unique feature of research in Public Administration has to do with its applied nature. Public Administration is still a relatively young discipline, and research typically concentrates on finding solutions to topical issues in the public sector (Ricucci, 2010). Stated differently, Public Administration researchers usually do not study subjects in a laboratory setting; rather they tend to concern themselves with problems situated in everyday reality (Robson, 2002). Moreover, they are frequently hired by organizations or policymakers to address a certain problem or give specific advice. When researchers convert the knowledge they have acquired into recommendations or suggested solutions (see Chapter 12), they move from an empirical method to a more normative one. Legal research is a typical example of this: on the basis of the analysis of legal rules, advice is given on how to proceed. However, as we shall see in Chapter 3, not all researchers find making recommendations or giving advice an equally useful or worthy purpose.

The applied nature of PA research points to a third important characteristic of Public Administration – namely, its limited body of knowledge. As it is the case, Public Administration has produced but few big theories of its own. Of course, exceptions can be mentioned, for example public service motivation (Perry & Wise, 1990), network theory (Kickert, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 1997), and New Public Governance (Osborne, 2009). Having said this, most theories

used by researchers in Public Administration originate in the parent disciplines (for an overview, see the various handbooks, such as Dryzek, Honig, & Phillips, 2006; Moran, Rein, & Goodin, 2006; and Ferlie, Lynn, & Pollitt, 2007).

This lack of an own body of theory can partly be explained by Public Administration being such a young discipline (Ricucci, 2010). What is more, research tends to follow the changes and developments taking place in the public sector: such trends often set the research agenda. Political and social problems can prompt new subjects of study, too. Think, for example, of the rise of New Public Management, the response to acts of terrorism after 9/11 and, more recently, the effects of the financial crisis (compare Box 1.1). All in all, therefore, Public Administration focuses more on finding solutions to everyday problems rather than developing new or big theories. If we add the fact that many of its study subjects are unique – which makes generalized, theoretical advancement difficult at any rate – it will be clear that research in Public Administration is more often practical in nature than theory-oriented.

Taken together, the distinctive features of Public Administration lead to a predominant use of methods which are suitable for studying a small number of cases, and which allow for a direct application of results to everyday practice. This does not preclude research also being conducted into historical subjects (over time), however, or the application of statistical techniques in large-scale studies. Likewise, fundamental research – which focuses purely on the development of new theories – is frequently carried out, as we shall see later on. Still, the features described above typify the nature of mainstream research in Public Administration (Pollitt, 2006; Perry, 2012).

1.2 RESEARCH IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND POLICY

As we have seen, research in Public Administration aims to study and find solutions to topical issues and problems in the public sector. Such issues and problems can concern a broad range of subjects, such as the success or failure of social integration, improving government efficiency, determining the right composition of a government coalition, predicting the consequences of population ageing, or making decisions on awarding contracts for the construction of new roads or housing estates. What these subjects have in common is that they all revolve around public policy, whether it concerns the development and design of new policies, the implementation of existing ones, or the evaluation of the effects of policies applied in the past.

Public Administration conducts both research *into* policy and *for* policy, and it studies all aspects *of* the policy cycle, from the very beginning of setting the policy agenda to the possible termination of a policy. Roughly speaking, we can distinguish between: 1 research in which public policy is the *subject* of study; 2 research that has a certain policy as its *outcome*; and 3 research that *feeds into* the policymaking process (Pawson & Tilley, 2004; Parsons, 1995). Often these different research aims interconnect, and a certain study fulfils several different purposes. In Chapter 12 I shall elaborate on this point, and also discuss

the fact that the findings of policy-oriented research are not always acknowledged or applied in practice. Regrettably, recommendations made by researchers in Public Administration are frequently mothballed.

Policy as a subject of research

In research where public policy forms the subject of study, policies are usually regarded as instruments or methods to achieve certain goals (Parsons, 1995, p. xv). The policy content is less relevant in this case. Different types of policy spring to mind here: laws and regulations, subsidies, contracts, but also matters such as the best way of structurally designing a public-private partnership, or even the application of management techniques by organizations in order to reach a certain policy objective.

Research in Public Administration that concentrates on the subject of public policy aims to contribute to a better insight into and a more efficient use of policies: the intention is to improve policy in an instrumental sense. Often-cited examples of this type of research are the development of decision-making models (for example, the 'garbage can model'), the design of manuals for policy design or memos, and the reconstruction of programme theories (see Box 1.2; compare Parsons (1995, p. 440) on forensic analysis). Research results can ultimately be used to create new policies, take decisions, or evaluate policy effects, although this need not be a primary objective.

BOX 1.2 RECONSTRUCTION OF PROGRAMME THEORIES

A policy programme is often defined as a plan to solve a particular problem; it describes a policy, social or organizational problem, as well as the means that will be deployed to solve this problem. A reconstruction of the underlying assumptions of the policy plan enables researchers to assess the consistency and validity of the policymakers' logic; such studies often form part of the evaluation of the effectiveness of the proposed measures. Programme assumptions can be based on knowledge derived from scientific theories or on advice given by academic researchers, but they are not scientific elements in themselves. A reconstruction of the assumptions underlying a policy plan consists of taking the following steps (Leeuw, 2003):

1 Gather information on the statements policymakers make about the background against which the policy is set. Such information comprises, for example, the minutes and reports of meetings, memoranda and official advisory reports.
2 Sift through the data for information on problem perception, such as explanations given about why the suggested policy would form a solution to the problem. The researcher must also try and identify

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