



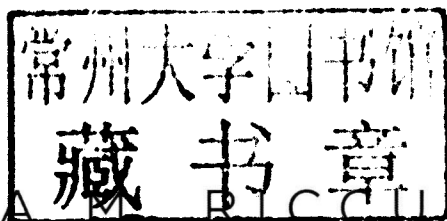
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Traditions *of* Inquiry
and Philosophies
of Knowledge

NORMA M. RICCUCCI

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Traditions of Inquiry and
Philosophies of Knowledge



NORMAN RICCI

Georgetown University Press / Washington, D.C.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Riccucci, Norma.

Public administration : traditions of inquiry and philosophies of knowledge /
Norma M. Riccucci.

p. cm.— (Public management and change series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-58901-704-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Public administration. I. Title.

JF1351.R4648 2010

351—dc22

2010001636

Ⓢ This book is printed on acid-free paper meeting the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence in Paper for Printed Library Materials.

15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

First printing

Printed in the United States of America

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*In memory of my beloved parents,
Tosca and Giorgio Riccucci*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The ideas and research presented in this book emerge from my own intellectual grappling with the logic of inquiry and philosophy of science in public administration over the past few decades. The hope is that it will pave the way for further debate and investigation into this critical area within the field and, perhaps more broadly, the social sciences.

I am grateful to a number of persons who helped along the way. Beryl Radin has provided an extraordinary level of support, encouragement, and guidance, and I am particularly indebted to her. Others have engaged in constructive deliberations and conversations or have provided useful feedback in the writing of the book, including David H. Rosenbloom, Howard E. McCurdy, Craig W. Thomas, Kaifeng Yang, Gregg Van Ryzin, Gerald Miller, and the anonymous external reviewers. I also wish to thank my dean, Marc Holzer, for his support as I wrote this book during my sabbatical leave. Finally, I am grateful to Don Jacobs for his leadership and direction in the culmination of this project.

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Introduction

To doubt everything or to believe everything are two equally convenient solutions; both dispense with the necessity of reflection.

—JULES HENRI POINCARÉ, *La Science et l'Hypothèse*
(*Science and Hypothesis*)

The field of public administration today supports and promotes a variety of research traditions. Some are wholly quantitative, whereas others are qualitative. And some are mixed, relying on both qualitative and quantitative methods. In addition, some research is empirically based, whereas other studies are strictly normative. In fact the various journals of public administration and its subfields are bound to or characterized by these research traditions. For example, one of the leading journals in the field, *Public Administration Review* (PAR), publishes articles ranging from postmodern critiques (e.g., Spicer 2007) to the testing of hypotheses in regression models (e.g., Bretschneider 1990). Other journals, such as the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (JPART), more recently have published articles relying on complex quantitative techniques and analyses. *Administrative Theory & Praxis* (ATP), conversely, publishes normative and theoretical dialogues on public administration. In addition, some journals are geared toward both practitioner and academic audiences (e.g., PAR), whereas others are pitched exclusively to academics (e.g., JPART and ATP). All this research, notwithstanding the methodological approach taken, adds value to the field's literature and theoretical base. One journal is not superior to the other; nor is one research approach more desirable than another. And because of its disciplinary basis (i.e., applied) and related history, as will be seen in this book, public administration will always support a range of different research traditions.

To be sure, there continues to be conflict and dissonance among scholars as well as practitioners over the relevancy and applicability of the various research or epistemic approaches. On the one hand, there is a pragmatic

desire to derive knowledge from common experience; on the other, there is the impulse to appear scientific. Even the lingering concerns over the “identity” of the field, particularly whether it is an “art” or a “science,” are masked by questions such as “What are the appropriate methods for studying or theory building in public administration?” The public administration community continues to ask, for example, whether public administration should strive to be a science, and thus predisposed to the “tools” of science, including its analytic methods.

In the mid-twentieth century Dwight Waldo and Herbert Simon fomented a debate regarding this conundrum over the logic of inquiry in public administration. As is discussed in this book, it created tensions and sometimes ill will among both researchers and practitioners. The question of whether public administration is an art or science, whether it is driven by values or facts, will never be satisfactorily answered, because of the lack of a consensus among the community of scholars within the field. Their debates have raised questions about the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of public administration that continue to challenge the field even today.

In fact, during the past few decades, several studies have examined the quality of research methodology in public administration (e.g., McCurdy and Cleary 1984; Perry and Kraemer 1986; Stallings and Ferris 1988; Houston and Delevan 1990; Box 1992). With the exception of Box’s essay, these studies, based on evaluations of dissertations and journal articles, have found that research in public administration lacks analytical rigor in accordance with the norms and practices of the social sciences. These studies have also concluded that research in public administration focuses on issues pertaining to the practice of the field to the exclusion of theory building. Similar to Box, this book challenges the narrow conception of science and analytical rigor assumed by these studies, and it illustrates the broad range of research traditions that add value to both the field’s theory and practice.

Thus rather than staking a claim for any particular set of research tools, this book enters the debate from the standpoint of reason: It seeks to provide a critical review of theory-building research and public administration epistemology so as to demonstrate that there is a diversity of traditions to studying and conducting research in the field, ranging from interpretive to postmodern critiques. Topics or issues in public administration can be based in, for example, empiricism or rationalism, and studied inductively or deductively, qualitatively or quantitatively, or both. The intended purpose of this book is to engage reasonable-minded public administrationists

in a dialogue on the importance of heterogeneity in epistemic traditions, and in general to deepen the field's understanding and acceptance of its epistemological scope. The field would be more consonant with the recognition that knowledge is derived from impressions on both the intellect and the senses.

SCOPE OF BOOK

Chapter 1 sets out the framework of the book by examining the debates over ontology, epistemology, and methodology in the field of public administration. Somewhat contiguously, ontology asks "What is reality?" and "What is existence?" It questions whether reality can be an objective phenomenon or if it is a social, political, or gendered construct. Epistemology asks "What can we know?" and "How do we know what we know?" Depending upon the ontological framework, it seeks to define the relationship between the research and the researcher (i.e., whether researchers are detached from the research or inextricably linked to it). Methodology asks "How should efforts to know be executed?" It asks whether researchers should seek reality and truth via the manipulation of data, through the mind, or through the words expressed, for example, in texts and behaviors. These debates are tied to the intellectual development of the field. For example, the highly acclaimed debate between Dwight Waldo (1948) and Herbert Simon (1946) over the role and limitations of science in public administration is addressed. This debate, in turn, served as a catalyst for shifts in the field toward, for example, behaviorism. Although these themes have been addressed previously in the public administration literature, chapter 1 represents my foray into the debate and sets the stage for subsequent chapters.

For instance, questions of whether public administration is an art or a science, whether it is based on fact or value, are derivatives of the Waldo–Simon debates and effect epistemic approaches and theory building in the field. A related question is whether public administration has a paradigm. These two closely related perspectives on the logic of inquiry, which frame the essence of this book, are addressed in chapter 2.

Chapter 2 argues that public administration lacks a paradigmatic base because of the very nature of the field, which is applied, and thus characterized by experience and practice. Moreover, those practices and the institutions that control and drive them are imbued with politics, which further precludes the field from acquiring a paradigm. The chapter further shows

that because the field lacks a paradigm, it cannot be treated as a normal science in the Kuhnian sense (Kuhn 1962). Instead, public administration is a postnormal science, one that is driven by multiple norms and traditions, and hence can be studied through a variety of epistemic and ontological lenses.

Chapter 3 illustrates how public administration is not alone in this self-consciousness quagmire. Other disciplines in the social sciences also struggle with whether they are governed by a paradigm and with similar types of ontological, epistemological, and methodological quandaries. The scientific developments in the field of public administration are thus contrasted with the scientific approaches in related fields such as political science and policy analysis. Chapter 3 presents a host of examples and hence may be useful to social scientists in other disciplines as they study similar issues concerning the scope, theory, and methods of their fields.

Chapter 4 presents a typology for epistemic traditions in public administration. More specifically, it provides a framework for a number of research approaches: interpretivism, rationalism, empiricism, logical positivism, postpositivism, and postmodernism. The different ontologies and epistemologies associated with these approaches point to appropriate methodologies and recording techniques for each. Again, the purpose is to show the range of heterogeneity in research traditions for public administration.

Parenthetically, some may argue against the use of the term “logical positivism” or “positivism” in favor of, for example, the “scientific knowledge” approach. However, because this book challenges the traditional use of the term “scientific,” logical positivism is the designated term. Moreover, although some may claim that positivism or logical positivism as a movement is dead, its legacy in the field of public administration as a philosophy of science perdures. As Frederickson and Smith (2003, 110) recognize, “Positivism and the canons of social science methodology and epistemology tend to dominate academic perspectives toward management theory in public administration.”

Chapters 5 and 6 provide examples of different epistemic traditions in public administration research. Qualitative approaches are addressed in chapter 5, and quantitative ones are covered in chapter 6. For instance, interpretive studies in public administration relying on content analysis are qualitatively based and illustrated in chapter 5. Examples of postmodernist critiques as well as qualitative empiricism are also presented in chapter 5. Research approaches growing out of the behavioral movement are steeped in logical positivism; examples of this type of quantitative research are

identified in chapter 6. As the chapters indicate, both qualitative and quantitative research have contributed greatly to theory building in public administration.

Chapter 7 provides examples of research in mixed methods, which combines qualitative and quantitative methods. The benefit of mixed methods—or triangulation, as it is often called—is that it draws on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Moreover, a mixed-methods approach is particularly suitable for applied fields in that it fosters better understandings of complex social phenomena.

Chapter 8 serves as a summary, providing a synopsis of epistemic traditions in public administration. It also emphasizes a caveat regarding this undertaking: Some may be so hardened in their views about the logic of inquiry in public administration that they will remain intolerant of any form of epistemic heterogeneity. This book is not for the faint of heart.

Intellectual Heritage and Theoretical Developments

IS PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AN ART OR A SCIENCE?

It is necessary to deny . . . that empiricism is the essence of science.

—DWIGHT WALDO, *The Administrative State*

The conclusions reached by a particular school of modern philosophy—logical positivism—will be accepted as a starting point.

—HERBERT A. SIMON, *Administrative Behavior*

There are innumerable accounts of the historical developments in the field of public administration (see Frederickson and Smith 2003; Stillman 1999).¹ Every introductory textbook in public administration chronicles the various periods or stages of development in the field (e.g., the orthodox or classical period; the administrative behavior movement), especially from the standpoint of practice. Indeed, the field of public administration emanates from practice, or the practical activity of administration and management in the public sector. In the United States, Woodrow Wilson is generally credited with a shift in focus toward “The Study of Public Administration” as is further discussed below.

By all accounts there tends to be a consensus in the field that there is no single or central core theory of public administration but that it can instead be characterized by its rich intellectual heritage (see, e.g., Rosenbloom 1983b). In effect there is a fundamental lack of agreement regarding the scope of public administration. Some have argued that this dissonance has led to an identity or intellectual crisis in the field (e.g., Ostrom 2008).² But public administration is not unique here, and indeed, this has not

diminished the stature of our applied field. As will be addressed in this book, other branches of the social sciences are afflicted by this same multiple-personality syndrome. For example, sociology has been beleaguered by conflicting theoretical perspectives, which have clouded its intellectual boundaries as a field (see Collins 1986). Moreover, the dissention among sociologists about their identity as a field is “exacerbated by the philosophical and methodological controversies about the feasibility and quality of social scientific research” (Crane and Small 1992, 199). Thus, other social science disciplines face quandaries similar to that of public administration.

The lack of a core theory has had implications for both the practice and study of public administration.³ In particular, it has led to a multitude of approaches to or theories about how public administrators (practitioners) ought to administrate and how public administrationists (scholars) ought to study public administration or engage in theory building and testing.⁴ For example, in his seminal piece “The Study of Public Administration,” Woodrow Wilson in 1887 endeavored to prescribe that in order to promote efficiency, public administrators should not engage in the enterprise of politics. Thus was born his famous (infamous?) politics/administration dichotomy, which continues to be addressed, ad nauseam, in public administrative teachings today.

Other broad frameworks of public administration called for different administrative action or behavior. For example, the human relations school pointed to the importance of human behavior and in particular the interactions between workers and management. Motivational and psychological theories, as opposed to economic ones, were deemed critical for studying and understanding the behavior of people in organizations (see, e.g., Follett 1924; Metcalf and Urwick 1942).

Wilson’s single piece of scholarship, which received virtually no attention in its day, is ascribed to the advent of public administration as a “discipline” or educational endeavor—what Waldo (1980) later called the “self-conscious” study of public administration.⁵ However, it is important that Wilson’s discourse was clearly set in the context of practice, not study. It endorsed rational, instrumental behavior and was followed by a series of writings from others advancing the same prescriptions for administrative behavior, or the practice of public administration, which were cumulatively labeled “classical” or “orthodox” theory. Considered among the most notable are the deliberations of Frederick Taylor (1911) and his call for scientific management, a doctrine supporting a reliance on “science” for determining the best way of performing jobs and then ensuring, for the sake of efficiency, that the jobs are performed according to that “one best way.”

The works of Gulick and Urwick (1937) were also praised at the time for generating a “science” of administration, whereby adherence to a set of prescribed principles, better known as the “principles of administration,” would promote efficiency in government, much like scientific management or Taylorism would for private industry (see, e.g., Stivers 2000). These and other orthodox theorists contributed conceptual themes to the earliest period of our field’s intellectual or theoretical development.⁶ And the continual calls for “science” revolved around the practice of public administration, not the study.

It was in yet another iteration of the field’s intellectual development that a challenge was lodged against the so-called scientific underpinnings of the practice of public administration and, concomitantly, offered prescriptions for the *study* of public administration. Herbert Simon’s (1947) groundbreaking *Administrative Behavior*, along with his earlier writings (e.g., Simon 1946), debunked the principles of administration and argued that a science of public administration could never be built upon a foundation of *practice*, as Taylor, Gulick, and others had advocated. For one thing, Simon challenged the classic textbook accounts of administrators’ ability to make rational, economic, utility-maximizing decisions. Instead, he makes it clear that the “capacity of the human mind for formulating and solving complex problems is very small compared with the size of the problems whose solution is required for objectively rational behavior in the real world” (Simon 1957, 198). Administrators, according to Simon, make decisions that “satisfice,” that is, are both satisfactory and sufficient for the situation at hand. In effect, Simon replaced the maximizing goal of choice with that of satisficing.

Simon also argued that public administration could and *should* be studied from the viewpoint of scientific principles as they were rigorously applied in other social sciences. Thus the administrative behavior movement in public administration and its principal architect, Simon, paved the way not solely for progress in the study and theory building of public administration but also for polemics.⁷ Simon fomented a debate about the appropriateness of certain epistemic traditions or approaches to study and theory building that continues to mire the field even today, influencing the development—or, more appropriately, the conceptualization—of other intellectual undertakings in the field (e.g., policy analysis and public management, which are addressed in chapter 3). But could a field built on pragmatism be studied from the standpoint of “science,” as traditionally defined in the social sciences?

This was a question asked by another major figure in public administration, Dwight Waldo, who took exception to many of Simon’s claims about