How Can We Improve Our Science to Generate More Usable Knowledge for Public Professionals?

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This editorial is an appeal for prospective *Public Administration Review* (*PAR*) authors to send us more research of the kinds I enumerate below. In some respects, my list may be viewed as personal. In the sense the remarks below reflect my strongly held beliefs—beliefs that may not be shared universally—then they are indeed personal. They are not, however, idiosyncratic. Instead, they reflect norms across professional and scientific fields with which public administration shares commonalities.

At the outset, let me comment on the type of research we are seeking. I would like to encourage prospective authors to think about *PAR* as an outlet for usable knowledge. What is usable knowledge? By usable knowledge I mean that it meets users' priorities and needs and is research of high scientific quality. It is scholarship that consciously attends to managing trade-offs between the ability to make causal statements and generalize those statements to other settings, that is, internal and external validity, against the ability of a broader audience to accept and apply them, i.e. contextual realism (Wright and Grant 2010).

The two attributes—scientific quality and relevance—taken together are an important trademark of what *PAR* is about. We want to publish research that meets users' priorities and needs. At the same time, we also are interested in publishing high quality science. I believe this is what *PAR* has been about during its 72 years of publication. My hope is that we can strengthen the creation of usable knowledge.

Attention to the Boundaries of Knowledge

A common thread in manuscripts we receive at PAR is, not surprisingly, their references to “public administration scholars” and “public administration research.” Although the phrases are entirely reasonable in context, I am not comfortable with the implicit boundaries that come with these labels. Who are “public administration scholars”? Are they only faculty in departments or schools that carry the words public administration, public policy or public affairs in their names? Does a scholar have to self-consciously identify with public administration to be considered a public administration scholar? My point is that the phrases “public administration scholars” and “public administration research” are too often codes that reflect isolating scholarship that claims to be about public administration from knowledge creation in other fields. We need not only to become more attentive to the implicit boundaries we draw around relevant research, but we should proactively seek new ideas and evidence from wherever we can find it. This strikes me as critical for producing usable knowledge.

Brad Wright’s (2011) analysis of citations between public administration and law, management, and political science reveals the consequence of putting on the “public administration blinders.” As a means to assess the extent to which public administration as an interdisciplinary field is integrated with or isolated from other fields, Wright looked at the degree to which research published in public administration journals cites or is cited by research in law, management and political science. He found few cross-over citations between public administration journals and major law, management and political science journals. Wright concluded:

> Work published in the top management or political science journals is cited relatively infrequently, while citations of work published in the top legal journals are even less common. A second way to gauge the potential isolation of public administration research is to look at the frequency with which the work published in the top legal, management, and political science journals cites the research published in public administration journals. Doing so makes the isolation seem even more striking (97).

An important step toward creating more usable knowledge for public professionals is to re-set how we think about the boundaries of our field. We need to venture beyond our comfort zones more frequently and invite "outsiders" to join us in our pursuit of usable knowledge.

Research Methods

As *PAR'*s new editorial team, my co-editors, staff and I recognize that we have relatively little influence over some facets of the journal. We are not likely, for instance, to change core topics quickly even if we choose to do so. One area where we might have some influence is the research methods we encourage and publish. An earlier study (Gazell 1973) of empirical research in public administration and political science found a high degree of methodological stability over time. Scholars kept using familiar, traditional approaches rather than learning new methods. Within public administration, survey research is our most used method (Perry and Kraemer 1986; Raaschelders and Lee 2011) and we have relied upon it for a very long time (Raadschelders and Lee 2011). How well is it serving us in producing usable knowledge? Do we have alternatives to what we are now doing? I offer some answers to these questions below.

Survey Research

In the January/February 2012 issue of *PAR*, we published "Survey Research in Public Administration: Assessing Mainstream Journals with a Total Survey Error Framework" (Lee, Benoit-Bryan, and Johnson 2012), which assesses the adequacy of survey methods in mainstream public administration journals. The authors selected 264 articles from five public administration journals (including *PAR*) over an eight-year period. Lee et al used the total survey error (TSE) framework, which assesses "all possible sources of error that can bias survey findings, including sampling error, coverage error, nonresponse error, measurement error, and processing error" (88).

The article makes a compelling case for serious deficiencies in the way we do survey research. Deficiencies were found across all potential sources of error. The authors concluded:

> Our findings show that survey research in the public administration literature generally features small-scale surveys, heavy reliance on a single specific mode (mostly mail surveys), unspecified sample frame quality, unspecified sample selection procedures, and wide use of linear regression analysis models but without specifying the extent to which model assumptions were evaluated (93).

So what can we do? We have several options. One is to do less survey research. A second choice is to do higher quality survey research (i.e., survey research that seeks to minimize total survey error). A third way exists—we could conduct more studies that draw upon several methods rather than a single method.

Multi-Method Research

Multi-method research combines research methods to address specific research questions. It is an effort to use multiple methods to triangulate answers to research questions. Several very good reasons account for the use of multi-method research (McKendrick 1999). It may compensate for weaknesses in traditional approaches when there are rationales (e.g., comparability) for retaining a traditional method. A second reason is that multi-method research has the potential to provide a richness of understanding consistent with "academic ideals of scholarship" (McKendrick 1999, 42). Yet another, less high-minded reason for using multi-method research is "to gain the confidence of an audience" (McKendrick 1999, 42).

For all of the reasons above, I would like to see more multi-method research submitted and appearing in *PAR*. I believe a side benefit of multi-method research would be to lessen the narrow framing of research submitted to this and other journals that seeks to maximize the article count from a given research project or database. Our quest for usable knowledge demands higher standards of our scholarship.

Experimental Research

Another research method I would like to see more frequently in *PAR* is experiments. Experimental research, both the laboratory and field variety, should get a larger share of attention from scholars and practitioners. Twenty years ago, Barry Bozeman and Patrick Scott (1992) offered a brief for laboratory experiments. They bemoaned the relative absence of experiments in public management and policy research. It is fair to observe that not much progress has been made in the intervening years in the application of experimental methods to our field.

Although Bozeman and Scott's brief was for laboratory experiments, they also identified why field experiments should be attractive to public administration scholars. "Field experiments," they wrote, "even given the limitations of quasi experiments, provide an element of rigor and encourage thinking about causality" (294). Field experiments are also attractive to the practitioner because the setting is one the consumer of the research understands and trusts. "Findings of field experiments are amenable to direct application," Bozeman and Scott write, "and indeed there are many instances in which the findings of field research based on quasi experimentation have been the source of new public policies" (294).

We are less comfortable with laboratory experiments, but they afford us advantages that survey methods do not. Well-designed experiments, in combination with other methods, hold the prospect for advancing our pursuit of usable knowledge.

Meta-Analysis

After reviewing research in *Public Administration Review* from 1975-1984, Ken Kraemer and I (Perry and Kraemer 1986) concluded that scholars studying public administration needed to do a better job mining information and data from past research by applying techniques of meta-analysis. Meta-analysis represents a range of methods, largely statistical and distinct from traditional literature reviews (Cooper, Hedges and Valentine 2009), for cumulating evidence from previous empirical studies.

Despite our call in 1986 (a mere quarter century ago!) for more extensive use of meta-analysis, my search of *PAR* reveals few meta-analytic studies. Among the handful of studies is Rodgers and Hunter's (1992) assessment of 70 studies about management by objectives, which serves as a model for future meta-analyses that would enhance the editorial content of *PAR*.

Meta-analysis is now used routinely in fields such as medicine and management to help sort out results across large bodies of empirical research. Thus, the precedent exists for more common use of meta-analysis. In 1986, two factors may have impeded meta-analysis. One was a dearth of empirical studies that could be the raw material for meta-analysis. But case-based studies have increasingly been replaced in public administration by larger N studies that are ripe for meta-analysis. Thus, the underlying body of empirical evidence is less an impediment today.

A second impediment in 1986 was the dearth of good methodological guidebooks to investigators interested in conducting meta-analysis. Scholars and analysts now have many available resources, including a second edition of Cooper, Hedges and Valentine's *Handbook of Research Synthesis and Meta-analysis* (2009), which was first published in 1994. In the very near future, *Meta-Analysis for Public Management and Policy*, edited expressly for public administration and policy scholars by my colleague Evan Ringquist, will be available.

Wider application of meta-analysis is not a cure all for answering all the controversies in the field, but it is a start. It gives us another tool for cumulating knowledge. As Ken Kraemer and I noted in our 1986 review of research in *PAR*, meta-analysis could also help to position public administration scholars to interact more meaningfully with scholars in management, political science and other disciplines. We wrote: "An ancillary benefit of greater use of meta-analysis is that it can also be valuable for integrating results across different academic fields, which is a particularly important objective for an interdisciplinary enterprise such as public administration" (223-224).

I am convinced we would know more about many issues were scholars to turn to meta-analysis more routinely as a tool for cumulating and assessing what we know about the research questions we study. With what issues could it help? The topics include a range of public-private differences variables (Rainey, Backoff and Levine 1976), performance management and change in public organizations (Gerrish and Wu 2012), public service motivation and organizational performance (Warren and Chen 2012), and a vast range of evaluation and implementation studies about specific interventions or programs.

Measurement

I would be remiss if I did not include measurement as one of the areas for methodological improvements in what is submitted—and subsequently published—in *PAR*. An assessment of quantitative research measurement across six public administration journals over a 3-year period in the late 1990s raised concerns about the state of measurement practice (Wright, Manigault, and Black 2004). One of the concerns raised in the assessment was that research often relied on preexisting data sets and self-administered surveys. Wright and his collaborators (2004) concluded that reliance on these data sources could restrict the range of possible research problems or result in use of inappropriate data collection methods. I share these concerns. We must do better developing data sources and measures that permit us to study the most consequential questions for public professionals.

Conclusion

Let me return to where I started, the quest for usable knowledge. Those seeking to create usable knowledge for public administration must be attentive to meeting the needs and priorities of public professionals *and* conducting research of high scientific quality. We in public administration must act to increase the internal and external validity and contextual realism of our research.

I identified several steps we can take that collectively will support usable knowledge development. The first is a matter of our mindset or mental models. Let us reduce silos across fields. We must think and act as members of a larger scholarly community. We also need to produce less survey research, but increase the quality of the survey research we publish. Given the limitations of survey research, scholars should conduct and publish more multi-method studies. Triangulation across several methods has the potential to increase our confidence in the validity and meaningfulness of our research.

We can take additional steps to improve our methods. We can increase the volume of laboratory and field experiments we conduct. Meta-analysis should be used more extensively and strategically. More attention needs to be given to customized measures and measurement quality.

One by-product I envision from the changes advocated above is that research about public administration will better reflect settings familiar to the professionals who consume our research that will, in turn, increase the extent to which research meets the needs and priorities of users. This is not likely to happen, however, unless the professionals who seek to consume high quality research about public administration become more engaged in the research process by helping scholars to frame research questions and giving scholars greater access to settings and opportunities for research. The multi-method studies, field experiments, and measurement improvements will not come to pass unless practitioners become more involved in the scholarly research enterprise. Public professionals can facilitate the research process by being more open to partnerships with universities and research institutes, creating opportunities for field experiments, and other similar proactive steps.

I have observed public administration scholarship long enough to know that the changes I advocate above—and other desirable changes about which I did not write in this editorial—will not happen immediately. At the same time, all public professionals—scholars and practitioners—have a stake in advancing this agenda. Let's get on with it.

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