

Whitney Meyerhoeffer

Paper #1

PAPA 5014

Introduction

Like the founders of our nation, public administrators are called to improve their world and, as such, it is imperative that they utilize both their passion and skills to not only further the world but also the profession. Steven Kelman, in chapter 5 of *The Academy of Management Annals* (2007), claims that public administration research is “second rate” due to its lack of study on performance measures. While I agree with Kelman that there is a need for more research in the field that measures performance, I also believe that, one – it is not easy to gather good empirical evidence given the constraints to research and, two – we should be a hybrid field based on both philosophical and honorable roots as well as empirical study.

Studying Public Administration

Scholars of public administration agree with Kelman’s insistence on furthering research in public administration. Woodrow Wilson in his 1887 article “The Study of Administration” states that, “[i]t is the object of administrative study to discover, first, what government can properly and successfully do, and secondly, how it can do these proper things with the utmost possible efficiency and at the best possible cost either of money or of energy.” Today, over 100 years later, Kelman similarly states, “[g]overnment is too important not to propel the goal of improving its performance to a front rank of research attentions.” Both of these thought leaders in public administration agree that further study in the field is necessary in order to improve government processes and efficiency. When we look at how both scholars aim to accomplish further research we see two different approaches.

Wilson and Kelman differ in their methods of studying public administration to find the best system. Kelman claims that it is possible "...to mix questions from mainstream organization theory creatively with the special political context of government..." whereas Wilson, on the other hand, claims, "it is best on the whole to get entirely away from our own atmosphere and to be most careful in examining such systems as those of France and Germany." Kelman urges more research that is similar to business research be done in order to enhance government performance while Wilson believes studying the methods of other countries and applying them to our constitutional ways is best.

Another scholar that agrees in the importance of research that has measurable outcomes is Herbert Simon. In his article, "The Proverbs of Administration", Simon (1946) argues that results of studies in administrative organization should be "observed and analyzed." Simon goes so far as to say "[u]ntil administrative description reaches a higher level of sophistication, there is little reason to hope that rapid progress will be made toward the identification and verification of valid administrative principles." This quote is one that Kelman would agree with. He states, "Simon pointed public administration on a path that would have reached out to the emerging field of organization studies." It is clear that both Simon and Kelman are believers in research that can be measured and that such research is needed in the field of public administration. Although there are many who agree that Kelman's critique of the study of public administration is in need of more empirical research, there are others who have a different opinion of what studying public administration means.

A different point of view on the issue of the study of public administration is Richard Green's idea that the foundations and philosophies of public administration matter more to the field than empirical research. In his article "Alexander Hamilton: Founder of the American public Administration" (2002) he states, "[i]t matters if public administrators view themselves as

technicians trained in a universal science of administration versus being socialized and educated for service in an administration tailored to a specific political culture and regime structure.” Kelman would disagree and claims, “...government underperforms because, compared with firms, government pays less attention to performance in the first place.” Green says that the origins of public administration are what the public views and what make the field legitimate to the public, whereas Kelman believes that research and empirical study are what legitimize the field.

Reflection on Useful Scholarship in Public Administration

I believe that both Wilson and Kelman argue valid points and methods of studying. I think we can learn from both recommended methods of researching and improving public administration. By studying other countries methods of public administration we can learn a great deal without having to start from scratch. It is important to look at what has worked in other countries and apply it in a modified way to American government systems. Then we can begin performance reviews, as Kelman suggests, tweaking programs and improving them.

Likewise, I agree with Kelman that Simon was on the right path. I believe we need to definitely incorporate more data and begin testing different research methods. Simon lays out a valid approach to the study of administration in which the research done shows “how weights can be assigned to the several [diagnostic] criteria when they are, as they usually will be, mutually incompatible.” Both Simon and Kelman are insisting on research that is measurable and applicable to the field public administration. While I wholeheartedly believe that more measurable and applicable data on performance is important to the study of public administration, I also feel that the field has a unique historical context that should not be dismissed.

I have an appreciation for what Kelman claims is “essayism” in the field. Kelman says that essayism “means research on agencies lacks sophistication, which inhibits the ability to draw

conclusions strong enough to use for improving performance.” The founding of our country is an experiment, and in every experiment, theories provide the basis of further research, philosophical debate and new ideas for the future. Without essays and passionate philosophical thinkers in the field, the study of public administration would be merely a technical science. I believe we need to recognize that people are called to be public administrators and be proud of the fact that there are such great philosophical foundations. Scholars such as, Woodrow Wilson, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and Herbert Simon are resources that we can pull from to create research designs and subsequently, efficient programs that benefit the public in a way in which we feel honors our calling.

Conclusion

Wilson agrees that there needs to be research in the field of public administration and sees the need to study other countries administrative practices. I believe Greene is correct that the founder of public administration is Hamilton, and that he was setting the foundations to what the field should be today – a distinguishable position of authority. Kelman believed Simon was on the right path, as do I, however I believe the issue becomes sticky when there are so many varying cities, towns, states. What works for one population in America may not work for another because of an unlimited amount of variables such as population demographics, the environment, etc. The challenge for American public administration research is creating systems that work for a city in very different areas. I also feel it is important to appreciate the “essayism” that Kelman does not care for. I recognize that I am called to public administration because I want to change the world and make it better, however, I want the field I am in to honor that passion as well as use worthy research to back it up. I feel it is a disservice to our field to not push new research methods and empirical studies

forward, but I also feel it is a disservice to our field to dismiss past thought leaders as merely steering the field in the wrong direction.