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The Case for Public Administration with a Global Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Globalization has been challenging the theory and practice of Public Administration at an unprecedented level. Major policy issues cross national boundaries cannot be solved without international collaboration—even domestic issues will be better understood and addressed with a global perspective. To advance Public Administration theory building, we need to examine issues across national and ethnodemographic divisions in order to better understand and explain context-specific phenomena. To ensure Public Administration’s relevance to practice, we must reach out to the global public administration community in academic exchanges, global innovation and diffusion of best practices, and collaborative education. In the Minnowbrook spirit, we advocate moving toward “Public Administration with a Global Perspective” (PAGP) to render our teaching, research, and engagement more relevant to the changing reality of globalization. PAGP emphasizes serving a global community by building theories that offer greater explanatory power, have higher acceptability, and are more responsive to the demands in diverse and specific contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of relevancy has been a lasting theme at the Minnowbrook conferences. As an interdisciplinary applied field, Public Administration1 should develop theories useful for both scholars and practitioners in order to stay relevant. In the 21st century, critical public problems are increasingly interdependent across national boundaries. The traditionally US-oriented Public Administration is no longer adequate, nor is the traditional comparative Public Administration. In the Minnowbrook spirit, we advocate “Public Administration with a Global Perspective” (PAGP) to advance knowledge building, address practical issues, improve Public Administration education, and, ultimately, increase the relevancy of the field. PAGP emphasizes theory building that bridges “particularism” and “universalism,” attending to observations in specific ethnic, cultural, and political contexts, while at the same time looking for greater explanatory power, wider practical implications,

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1 In this essay, we use the lower case “public administration” as a function or phenomenon and the upper case “Public Administration” for the research and study thereof, that is, the scholarship.

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informed policy learning, and transfer. Aiming to serve a global community, PAGP may achieve higher theoretical acceptability and better satisfy practical demands in diverse and specific contexts.

**GLOBAL CHALLENGES DEMANDING A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**

The world has increasingly been integrated and transformed through the process of globalization in recent decades. The impact of globalization on public administration and governance has evoked various responses both intellectually and practically. Critical public problems are increasingly interdependent across national boundaries (Robertz 2004). A vast array of emerging issues, such as antiterrorism wars, natural and human disasters, epidemic diseases, economic crises, energy and environmental problems, and ethnic conflicts, are all globally interconnected. Even problems within the traditional domestic policy realms, such as public transportation, information management, and defense and security, have been pushed across national boundaries by extended privatization and contracting efforts, demanding global perspectives in building knowledge and seeking solutions. Such problems in the public sphere present challenges to the often US-centric Public Administration theories and practices. We need a new theoretical perspective of Public Administration that embraces the opportunity to learn at the global level. The emergence of a new world order manifested by the rising power of the European Union and transitional/developing economies suggests the inadequacy and obsolescence of the Public Administration framework predominantly based on US experiences.

Disenchantment over the ethnocentric and parochial nature of American Public Administration has been well expressed in the literature (Heady 1995; Hood 1989). US-centric Public Administration was not considered by many as either informative or applicable to non-western nations. Non-western states and the European communities have explored practical solutions and generated valuable lessons that should not be ignored by the mainstream Public Administration literature. The increasingly integrated and invigorated European communities challenge the leading position of the United States in Public Administration theory building and practice innovating. The extensive experience of the former Soviet administrative systems striving for democracy and capitalism is valuable to other transitional or nondemocratic states in Asia, South America, and Africa. The abundant knowledge from E-government development in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Korea greatly complements the US and European experiences. The success stories of China’s economic development zones along its coastal areas also enlighten many of the distressed western economies. Russia, China, and other transitional democracies can learn from capitalism and public administration in Westminster countries just as the present and future public administrators in America and Europe can learn from the innovations of China, India, Korea, and other countries.

**GLOBAL COMPONENTS ALREADY IN PA LITERATURE**

Traditionally and even currently, Comparative Public Administration (CPA) has been regarded as a “subfield” of Public Administration. Reflecting a parochial and US-centric orientation, this perception has influenced our thinking of Public Administration for the last 50 years. It demonstrates the assumption that American Public Administration is the mainstream, whereas studies of other countries, all categorized in CPA, are non-mainstream or
substreams. This interpretation should have been changed as we have reached a “destination” (Riggs 1991, 474) that “we shall no longer need to speak of ‘comparative administration,’ but only of the study of ‘public administration,’ and of its subfield, the study of ‘American Public Administration’” (Riggs 1976, 652).

CPA grew as a subfield of Public Administration in the United States after World War II. The American Society for Public Administration created the Comparative Administration Group (CAG), which, with grants from the Ford Foundation and the US government, published a series of occasional papers focusing on development administration. Attempts by former colonial countries to learn from western nations, the establishment of international organizations such as the United Nations, and extensive funding opportunities during the Cold War were some of the driving factors that shaped the scope and perceptions toward CPA in the United States (Farazmand 1996).

Despite its accomplishments in the 1960s and 1970s, CPA lost momentum, especially after the Vietnam War when US-based funding institutions lost interest in comparative research (Farazmand 1996; Jreisat 2002). It is worth noting that this decline of CPA occurred mainly in America. The early 1990s witnessed a renewal of interest in CPA among Public Administration scholars in the United States, pertaining to the New Public Management (NPM) movement. NPM has revived American interests in the comparative approach and the determination to learn from other countries. This renewed CPA movement again is based on the American perspective, in conjunction with a few Anglo-Saxon countries.

It is of value to assess the global inclusiveness of American Public Administration journals and curricula as they are the main vehicles for Public Administration knowledge dissemination. Tummala (1998) reported that only 14% of National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration member schools in 1996 offered an option in comparative administration. Our survey of articles from 2003–2008 in 12 selected journals shows that only 35% of all the articles published covered cases outside the United States (753 articles out of a total of 2136). The other two-thirds were all US focused. Overall, the theoretical perspective and practical relevance of Public Administration scholarship is still seen as lagging behind the increasing pressure for global Public Administration knowledge. Observation of these journals’ composition of their editorial boards reveals that most board members are US-based scholars (213 out of the total 400 members or 53%). The lack of

2 The CAG was set up in 1960. Fred W. Riggs was its leader; its renowned members included Dwight Waldo, Ferrel Heady, Donald Stone, Milton Esman, and Frank Sherwood.

3 CPA expanded our understanding of the role of PA in society and how to build administrative capacities and launch administrative reforms (Jreisat 2002). It led to the construction of administrative typologies that provide frameworks for data collection and analysis (Banks and Textor 1963; Esman 1966). CPA also established patterns of functional administrative processes in multiple cultural settings, such as in budgetary behavior (Wildavsky 1984) and budgeting for results (Schick 1990). CPA also articulated and advanced development administration.


5 International Journal of Public Sector Management, Public Management Review, Global Governance, and Governance were among the journals with the highest proportion of non-US-based board members.
diversity among editorial boards also suggests the dominance of American scholarship, which can lead to biases in the decision to recommend articles for publication. We contend that if the leading journals of Public Administration were to broaden their scope of research coverage beyond a US perspective, Public Administration scholarship could be strengthened and generalized to cover a greater range of contexts and issues facing nations around the world. Achieving this goal requires a new set of strategic initiatives for integrating public administration research and practice with a global perspective.

We argue that the concept of CPA in the traditional US-centric sense will be obsolete and that the comparative approach in Public Administration scholarship should be the norm. Studies of Public Administration in any context with a comparative approach or deliberate consideration of application to other contexts provides new, fresh blood for theory building and testing. The purpose of comparative work goes beyond mere comparison—it should be and has, in the research by many scholars, become an important, established approach of general knowledge building, through which we advance theoretical understanding of public issues, domestic or global, and improve our capacity to address these issues. The oft-cited phrase—“it depends on the context”—testifies to the creditability of Public Administration scholarship done via the global perspective lens.

We envision a transformed Public Administration field that views the scope of all public issues in diverse national and ethnodemographic contexts. In this vision, “comparative” is not the right word as the “global content” has been set by the environment for the field of Public Administration. The distinction between “comparative” and “country specific” will lose its original meaning and significance because individual countries, while important, are discrete organisms that will be better understood in reference to each other and will work together in a larger symbiotic relationship in the global governance environment. Therefore, PAGP must not be downgraded to a subfield of Public Administration that attracts only a small group of scholars with international backgrounds or interests; it is a perspective that all public administration scholars should consider to embrace.

ESSENTIALS OF A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

The global nature of public administration practice, training, and scholarship in the 21st century necessitates a new perspective that fully addresses the transnational connectedness, interdependence, and complexity of the field. PAGP will avoid ethnocentrism, the tendency to study and make judgments about other societies in terms of one’s own cultural assumptions or bias. Objects of study and observation are no doubt always taken from the context of specific cultures and countries, with traces of certain political and state characteristics. But our research should not be so relativistic that it becomes impossible to apply any generic cognitive or evaluative criteria. PAGP will also emphasize historicism. Researchers should place their studies into the context of the stages of human development in socio-economic dynamics, with a retrospective view into the past for lessons, experience, and inspiration, and with a prospective view into the future for challenges and solutions. When placed in a longer historical frame, even the most stable political, social, and economic institutions are amenable to change; hence, they should not be treated as reasons for particularism but instruments from which we can learn. PAGP further requires balancing nomotheticism, the tendency to generalize, and idiographicism, the tendency to specify.

PAGP is not proposed as a grand theory nor a movement toward grand theory. It is best viewed as an “approach,” an epistemological calling in conducting research. It is not
designed (it does not even attempt) to offer “a comprehensive theory” to “unify the study” or “a central demarcating concept” (Raadschelders 1999). It does not impose restrictions with tools to be used or the deductive or inductive inclination in conducting research. PAGP aims to redefine the scope of Public Administration to be globally relevant in all our activities of teaching, research, and services. PAGP entails knowledge of, or familiarity with, diverse cultures and countries. Researchers or cross-cultural collaborative teams employing PAGP will be more advantageously situated, so they can overcome with relative ease those global challenges mentioned in the first two sections.

Given the increasingly more complex ethno- and geo-political background of global public services, theories based on PAGP will be useful in handling the “increasing incidence and intensity of conflict among diverse stakeholders” (Brinkerhoff 2002), so that different civilizations do not necessarily have to conflict. Since more and more issues have become global in scale and no single country can handle them or treat them well, theories from PAGP will be particularly useful in developing practical and acceptable global public policies. PAGP will also encourage the innovation and diversity of Public Administration practices.

**TOWARD RESEARCH AND TEACHING WITH A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**

We advocate active changes in our scholarship to conduct research and teaching with a global perspective to advance general Public Administration theory building, to improve the global relevance of Public Administration education, and to address practical issues that are increasingly interdependent across national borders. The agenda is especially urgent for the American Public Administration community because we are lagging behind in this effort, given that most Public Administration schools outside the United States have been generally committed to a comparative approach in their research, publishing, and teaching (Riggs 1991, 475).

Research first. The integration of a global perspective in all Public Administration research focuses on building theories that “account for the continuously changing properties and problems faced by governments as they seek to implement public policies” (Riggs 1991, 473). Not only does such research expose us to administrative problems in other countries, it also helps scholars better understand American public administration in a global framework and discover alternative ways to advance public service in the United States.

The global perspective in Public Administration research shall be both outward and inward. We need to advance our knowledge of public administration activities in diverse contexts, including governance structure, managerial systems, and political and cultural norms in different countries. Such studies should go beyond the collection of cases unique to their contexts but aim to identify the mechanisms linking the cases to the contexts and assess whether such mechanisms will work in other contexts. In addition, even US scholars who focus on domestic issues may place their issues in comparisons to those in other polities. Experiences in alternative contexts could provide reference points to understanding particular issues in the United States, contribute to theory building by revealing underlying assumptions that may be parochial or ethnocentric, and help find alternative solutions to address our problems.

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6 Raadschelders (1999) makes a clear and forceful argument on this point.

7 Jreisat (2005) offers a detailed account of this point.
To create a global perspective of Public Administration scholarship, we should promote viable, integrative, and relevant cross-country and cross-culture studies. In doing so, we emphasize the formation of cooperative teams of researchers from the United States and the target countries, and encourage multiple case analyses from comparable countries, not the single-case approach. We also promote the combination of “inside-out” and “outside-in” approaches, that is, first identifying and investigating the unique, interesting, and important issues in the target country’s context and then trying to make connections with the core literature.

Now teaching. Many Public Administration schools have experienced increasing needs to globalize the Public Administration curriculum in recent years. Although the primary goal of Public Administration education in the United States is to focus on domestic practices, many schools have enrolled additional number of international students. Purely US-oriented Public Administration education will not sufficiently serve their needs because practices in the United States may not apply in other contexts. For US students, early exposure to international experiences is critical for both personal growth and career development. Public Administration education with a global perspective will deepen their understanding of American public administration, raise their awareness of global issues, and enhance their capacity in analyzing and managing public policy problems.

These urgent education needs call for scholars to incorporate a global perspective in the design of courses within the Public Administration curriculum, including questioning the relevance of theories in international settings, using international examples, and introducing comparative literatures. We should also create more study-abroad or student-exchange programs for Public Administration students. Significant barriers include identifying funding sources, finding suitable hosting institutions, and creating educational opportunities beyond sightseeing and superficial cultural exposure. Some of these barriers may be overcome by finding institutional partners. In recent years, some schools have established global connections with such partners through international fellowship programs, foreign executive training programs, or academic exchanges. We hope this trend becomes the norm rather than the exception for most Public Administration schools.

NOT YET TO CONCLUDE

We propose PAGP as a new approach for Public Administration in the 21st century. PAGP is an idea to be further explored and substantiated. Transcending the division between cultures and national boundaries, PAGP builds and tests theories outside of country-specific contexts to study global issues of public administration. This essay advocates that PAGP become the mainstream for Public Administration education in the United States. We offered some preliminary suggestions to advance Public Administration scholarship, both in research and teaching, in the hope that it will generate wider discussions to clarify what PAGP should or should not include. We believe that adopting a global perspective will make the field of Public Administration more relevant and vibrant in the quickly globalizing world.

REFERENCES


