



Big Questions for a Significant Public Administration

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During the 1999 “Building Bridges Tour” (see Stivers 2000), *PAR* readers encouraged the editors to focus more attention on the so-called “Big Questions/Big Issues” of the field of public administration. In response to this suggestion, we created a new forum for scholarly discourse simply called “Big Questions/Big Issues.” This inaugural forum begins with a context setting essay by John Kirlin, a leading proponent of the Big Questions/Big Issues perspective. Kirlin’s essay is immediately followed by Laurence E. Lynn Jr.’s thought provoking piece, “The Myth of the Bureaucratic Paradigm: What Traditional Public Administration Really Stood For.” Lynn’s essay is important for it takes to task those who carelessly attack “traditional public administration.” We asked J. Patrick Dobel (University of Washington), David Rosenbloom (American University), Norma Riccucci (State University of New York at Albany), and James Svara (North Carolina State) to respond to Lynn’s essay. We invite *PAR* readers to join the conversation using *PAR*’s message board online at ASPA’s Online Community (<http://www.memberconnections.com/aspa/>) or by writing directly to the authors and/or editors.—LDT

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Big Questions for a Significant Public Administration

Big questions/big issues and bridges between practitioners and academics are the themes that emerged from the recent “Building Bridges Tour” of the *Public Administration Review* editors (Stivers 2000). The editors conclude that a focus on the big questions of public administration is meaningful to both academics and practicing professionals. In a democracy, “big questions” tackle issues that not only engage and energize practitioners and academics, but also have meaning for large numbers of citizens. Public administration must be a profession and a field of inquiry in service to society at large.

The biggest challenge to success in identifying and engaging big questions is our habit of focusing too closely on instrumental issues of day-to-day operations of public-sector organizations. Big questions must not focus on instrumental questions, but on the consequences and value for the larger society in which public administration is embedded. How public administration affects society should be the overarching focus from which big questions are derived. The focus must be understanding the role of public administration in influencing society historically and understanding its use to shape society in the future.

The most important values in our society derive from its democratic and capitalistic character. Both require a strong state to exist, but they achieve greatest success by providing the institutional context for action outside gov-

ernment—action by individuals, businesses, civic associations, and nonprofit organizations. To be consequential in society, perhaps even significant, public administration must address questions at this level, which are ultimately questions of institutional performance measured at the jurisdictional level. This was achieved during the Progressive Era, when just-emerging, self-conscious public administration successfully addressed the infrastructure and public-health barriers to the growth of cities and industry and attacked corruption in government.

However, the pull toward public-agency-level instrumentality is powerful in our field. Sometimes this focus on the doing of public administration is stated unambiguously, as in Behn’s (1995) three big questions of public management (micromanagement, motivation, and measurement), characteristic of those who focus on organizational-level phenomena and public management.

In other cases, the focus is less obvious, though it remains. For example, Frederickson (1999) sees the field making progress by focusing on how public administrators of functional systems overcome the disarticulation and

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fragmentation that is characteristic of the modern state, drawing on theories of governance, networks, and administrative conjunction to improve understanding. The focus remains on the operations of agency-level public administrators, expanded to include nongovernmental actors affecting public affairs.

In another example, the Priority Issues Task Force of the National Academy of Public Administration proposes “the transformation of governance” as its defining focus for the next several years, seeing three elements in this transformation: “(1) the growing complexity of relationships between government and civil society, in pursuit of public purposes; (2) the shifting of national responsibilities both in the direction of international bodies and systems and in the direction of states, localities, and community-based institutions; and (3) the need for greater capacity to manage these relationships” (NAPA 2000, 2). Again, the focus is how changes in societal factors affect the agency-level activities of public administration.

Kettl’s (2000) analysis of public administration at the millennium explicitly sets administrative ideas in a context of competing political theories derived from Hamilton, Jefferson, Wilson, and Madison. However, the focus remains on the management of agencies, with progress expected through greater theoretical rigor. Public administration is seen as embedded in political culture, but not as a force that also shapes society.

My earlier piece on the big questions of public administration in a democracy (1996) sought to frame the issue in terms of the effect on society, suggesting four criteria that big questions must satisfy: (1) achieving a democratic polity; (2) rising to the societal level, even in terms of values also important at the level of individual public organizations; (3) confronting the complexity of instruments of collective action; and (4) encouraging more effective societal learning. Seven big questions were identified that meet these criteria, each having long-standing and contemporary relevance. I remain convinced of the necessity of the democratic-value basis for all that we do, and I am equally convinced that focusing solely on the organizational level of analysis and action easily becomes antidemocratic.

Not only big questions, but also answers to those questions are needed. The quality of the answers should improve over time, and it is ultimately the quality of the answers that will prove the usefulness of any big question. Useful answers must be theoretically robust, empirically accurate, and actionable.

Claims of good results from theory and practice are often advanced without any evidence of effects, and, when evidence is advanced, it is often of inputs or intermediate measures of activity, with little linkage to any societal effects. For example, the recent evaluation of the management capacity of city, state, and federal public agencies on

five dimensions (Maxwell School 2000) provides no evidence of the effects of differences identified on any measure of outcomes. This work is actionable—management practices can be changed—but any effects of those efforts are unknown. If the National Performance Review claims a reduction of civilian employment in the national government of more than 300,000 as a measure of success, this is an input measure. Light (1999) shows that the implied societal effect—reduced cost—is likely to be a chimera, as other categories of workers implementing national government policies and programs increased even as those counted officially decreased. But the cost of running government (however determined) is still an input measure, providing no evidence of effects on the quality of life in a society, of economic performance, or of any dimension of citizenship. Easily obtainable evidence suggests that “cheap” government alone is not widely desired, or people and investment capital would flow toward states in collapse, where the costs of government become very small. Neither area of work is grounded theoretically, nor do they seek to make theoretical contributions; such efforts cannot build toward a generalized, theoretical understanding of public affairs.

Good examples of analyses of the effects of public administration on society exist, especially in regard to economic performance and values, but also the effects on the extent and character of citizen engagement in shaping the future of communities.

Empirical evidence is growing that competent performance of the core governmental roles and commitment to democratic values are the *largest* contributors to the economic performance of nations over time (Hall and Jones 1999; World Bank 1997). This empirical work does not seek to address the nuances of the effects of any specific approach to the doing of or theorizing about public administration. It does appropriately frame the important question as *outcome* measures of *institutional* performance at the *jurisdictional* level, not the inputs or intermediate activities of any single public agency or set of networked public, nonprofit, and private organizations. Positive economic outcomes can be found at lower levels of institutional action. Ottensmann (2000) finds that the nearby presence of a parish or school of the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland increased housing values between 3.2 percent and 11.6 percent, increased rents 2.2 percent to 7.2 percent, and reduced vacancy rates 6.9 percent to 15.5 percent—all statistically and societally significant effects. These analyses are grounded, sometimes implicitly rather than explicitly, in theories of institutional design and collective action, where institutions are defined as sets of rules providing constraints and incentives for individual and organizational actions (North 1990). This line of theory is proving robust, with applications at the nation-state level

(Hall and Jones 1999), providing a framework within which path dependence offers useful mid-range theorizing (David 2000) and being extended to general models of collective behavior (Ostrom 1998).

Measuring the impact on economic performance is easier than measuring the impact on the actualization of democratic values. However, there are examples of such research: Berry, Portney, and Thompson (1993) analyze how changes in administrative structures and program design affected citizen behaviors in cities. Weeks (2000) shows how substantial numbers of citizens can be engaged in “deliberative democracy” to make important choices about the future of the cities. Governmental action can also suppress citizens’ democratic desires, impoverish, or even kill large populations, as seen too frequently in history. Tarrow’s (1996) critique of Putnam’s (1993) analyses of Italy chronicles how national policies and administrative actions suppressed democratic participation and civic infrastructure in southern Italy. In this nation, when citizens’ aspirations meet obfuscation from public officials, when publicly sanctioned discrimination of whatever form stifles opportunity, or when the presumed superiority of elite decisions supplants public judgment, success requires the complicity or acquiescence of those who do and write about public administration.

Public administration is a central part of the grandest of human endeavors—shaping a better future for ourselves and those yet unborn. The institutions crafted to achieve human aspirations require administration, including public agencies; however, the measure of success is not at the

instrumental level, but in its enduring value not only to those in a particular nation, state, or city, but worldwide to all who aspire for improved lives. In his 2000 Jefferson Lecture, noted historian James McPherson (2000) framed President Lincoln’s contribution in those terms. Lincoln enunciated a positive definition of liberty that justified the exercise of public power to ensure opportunity for all, and he defended the union against secession by advocates of negative liberty (freedom to own slaves). This exercise of political leadership, won through a bloody Civil War with more than half a million deaths, set the context for public policy and administration in this nation and provided an example that stimulated expansion of the democratization of politics and abolition of slavery in other nations.

How best to devise and administer institutions, social infrastructure, policies, programs, and public agencies to the ends of this scale is a formidable challenge. It is worthy of the best efforts of those in the practice of public administration and of those who analyze, theorize, and teach about public administration. We should take our role in society very seriously—the big questions of public administration must address how we make society better or worse for citizens.

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