ANALYSIS OF THE FIELD OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT: A RESPONSE TO KELMAN, THOMPSON, JONES AND SCHEDLER

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the field of public management as explicated in the dialogue between Kelman, Thompson, Jones and Schedler (2003) and others, from the perspective of the philosophy of science. While there may be wide consensus that a substantial body of information about public management exists, Kelman, Thompson, Jones and Schedler are consistent in their view that empirical generalizations and underlying principles do not exist. This assertion notwithstanding, this essay does not attempt to make sense of the theories of public management, rather it tries to make sense of public management as a separate and distinct field of scientific inquiry, and, for that purpose, the philosophy of science is useful. What follows are three views of public management looking through that philosophical lens: the origins of the discipline, the nature of the practice, and the community of scholars.

INTRODUCTION

The *International Public Management Review* published in late 2003 a dialogue that occurred on the list server of the International Public Management Network that addressed the discipline of public management[2]. The dialogue began with Harvard's Steven Kelman sharing the outline of his plenary address at the Association for Policy Analysis and Management's annual research conference, entitled "The M in APPAM." In those remarks, Kelman discussed the origin and state of the field. In turn, Fred Thompson of Willamette University, Larry Jones of the Naval Postgraduate School and Kuno Schedler of the University of St. Gallen examined the field's origins, evolution, and attempted to define it as an academic field. What was striking about this dialogue was the general consensus that the field of public management is one in search of an identity or – perhaps, alternatively, one with a split personality.

This essay examines the field of public management as explicated in that dialogue between Kelman, Thompson, Jones and Schedler (2003) (hereafter referred to collectively as KTJS), and others, from the perspective of the philosophy of science. Some may say this is a fool's errand; as Fisher (1978: 37) states, "the philosophy of science is able to provide no assistance whatsoever in understanding the scientific theory of a given discipline of study until that discipline develops a rather substantial body of information in the form of empirical generalizations and underlying principles." While there may be wide consensus that a substantial body of information about public management exists, KTJS are equally consistent in their view that empirical generalizations and underlying principles do not exist. That notwithstanding, I am not

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attempting to make sense of the theories of public management, rather I am attempting to make sense of public management as a separate and distinct field of scientific inquiry, and, for that purpose, the philosophy of science is useful.[3] What follows are three aspects of public management looking through that philosophical lens: the origins of the discipline, the nature of the practice, and the community of scholars.

ORIGINS OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Is public management (PM) a distinct field of scientific inquiry or merely a subset of another? The answer to that question was not clearly established in KTJS. Kelman opens with the phrase "At the time of its birth, public management..." (p. 2) and while not giving us the results of the paternity test, sees PM as primarily as an offshoot of public policy but with origins in (or as he also put it, a "declaration of independence from" (p. 3)) political science, policy analysis and public administration. Thompson and Jones view PM as a managerialist discipline with its roots in generic management and, secondarily, public administration, Jones going so far as to refer to "the nascent sub-discipline of public management (i.e., part of the larger discipline of management)" (p. 9). Jones, in fact, said more about the origin of PM than the other three, noting it "evolved as a highly interdisciplinary field" (p. 9) with roots in the social sciences, biological and physical sciences, and applied fields of study - he then provided evidence of each. Schedler provides this dialogue its international flavor, specifically the continental European perspective, attributing the field's origin firstly to public administration and secondly to public law.

None of the authors cited a phenomenon approximating a Kuhnian revolution, "a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field's most elementary theoretical generalizations" (1970: 85). It is not clear that we have consensus on a set of fundamentals or elementary theoretical generalizations. Kuhn alternatively defines a revolution as "those non-cumulative developmental episodes in which an older paradigm is replaced in whole or in part by an incompatible new one" (1970: 92). A revolution requires incommensurable states and it is not evident that we have clearly distinct states that one could identify as pre-revolutionary or post-revolutionary. These aspects will be addressed further in the practice of PM section of this essay. However, two patterns were evident in the KTJS discussion of the origins of the field: the first was the relationship between PM and public administration and the second the relationship between generic management and PM.

Public management vs. public administration

Kelman views PM as operating in the realm of strategic management, value creation, and agency top leadership's interaction with the political system, whereas public administration is concerned with lower levels of management and internal agency functions. Jones draws a detailed and clear distinction between PM and public administration: "...the former focuses more on what happens within governments and on the operation of the individual functions of government while public management pays more attention to the operation of governments from the perspective of their interaction with the environments in which they operate" (p. 10). From a philosophical viewpoint,

this perspective very neatly parallels Simon's (1996) view of inner and outer environments and the artifacts at the intersection; here, PM is that artifact. Jones further considers how PM scholars borrowed from generic management, economics, sociology, and even the business community to answer questions that public administration was incapable of answering. Were these questions anomalies in the sense that Kuhn (1970) would use them? Jones makes the case that public administration (and, less frequently, other disciplines such as public choice, public policy analysis and political science) was incapable of solving certain problems resulting in tools, theories and techniques being borrowed from other disciplines to stretch the framework of discovery and inquiry. This is indeed similar to the manner in which Kuhn describes a field addressing persistent anomalies. Schedler's view is distinct from Kelman and Jones in that management had until recently been viewed as a subservient field to the "primacy of politics [and the] rule of law" (p. 14) and management was considered part of the administration of government manifest at all supervisory levels of the organization, not just the top.

Public management as managerialism

Kelman does not credit the field of management as a foundation for PM and bemoans the quantity and quality of research conducted on public organizations.

> A very large amount of management research exists...often done by social psychologists or sociologists typically working at business schools. Virtually none of this research involves public sector organizations. As a result, organizational issues especially relevant to public organizations...receive grossly insufficient attention from the mainstream of academic management research (p. 4).

He further states that the PM field has isolated itself from management. Thompson and Jones, seeing the roots of PM as more managerialist, take a different view. Thompson defines the field according to a strong managerial focus first offered by Garson and Overman (1983) and concludes, "I still think this is a pretty good way to think about public management as an academic field. Indeed, defining its subject-matter boundaries along explicitly managerialist lines..."(p. 5). Jones concurs with Thompson's assessment that "PM tends to de-emphasize the differences between management in the public and private sector" (p. 13), and that management theory is ecumenical, despite the difference in context and objectives. Schedler is not far from Kelman's position. Having established the primacy of political science and law, he notes that while management is ecumenical, it hasn't greatly influenced continental PM, in fact he sees PM as a discipline similar to but not part of general management: "It shares its fate with general management in that it has to draw its scientific approaches from sociology, psychology, economics, and other disciplines" (p. 17).

Asking again, is the origin of PM the result of a Kuhnian revolution? No, but it certainly shows signs of a field in crisis. More precisely, the field of PM appears to be itself the response to crisis. The question then is which field is in crisis? Is the crisis in the field of management whereby questions surrounding the public sector are inadequately addressed by the generic management paradigm, or is the crisis in public administration which is incapable of answering questions pertaining to the artifacts of agency-client interaction? The answer seems to be both. Public management appears to be a product of the pushing

of the bounds of management toward the public sector and of public administration (as well as ancillary fields such as sociology and political science) towards generic management in search of answers. It exists in the region of overlap between these fields – the fragment at the center of the overlapping circles of the Venn diagram. The next section will explore whether the field is having much success dealing with the crises.

THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

While origins of fields of study are of concern to philosophers of science, what capture their attention more are the practices within the field: its research methods, theories, tools and techniques. Kuhn (1970) refers to this collection as the paradigm[4]: "a set of recurrent and quasi-standard illustrations of various theories in their conceptual, observational, and instrumental applications" (p. 43). Churchman (1971) and his protégé Mitroff (with Pondy, 1974) describe the various inquiring systems, which may be employed by an academic field. This section will explore how KTJS view the practice of public management through the perspectives of Kuhn, Churchman, and Mitroff. In general, the field of PM lacks general unifying theories, uses predominantly interpretivist methodologies, is rather pragmatic and less heuristic in its pursuits, and seeks more to describe and explain than to predict or ascribe causality. The subsequent section will explore whether the PM community is satisfied with this.

Theory

There is consensus among the four authors that a general, unifying theory of PM does not exist and is needed; they disagree, however on how to discover one and whether the field is even trying. Kelman argues that relevant work exists throughout the social sciences, but is irresponsibly ignored by PM scholars. He writes,

> Our justified declarations of independence from political science and policy analysis became to a significant extent a declaration of independence from accepted standards of and the intellectual contributions made by scholarly research in the social sciences. At its most arrogant, we have sometimes assumed that no existing social science research is relevant to what we do.... I think we very much suffer from a collective 'not invented here' syndrome (pp. 3-4).

Thompson argues that theory will develop from the fruits of "good clinical analysis...Once one has good principles to work with, good theorizing can (and probably will) follow" (p. 6). Jones agrees with Thompson that theory will emerge from application: "...I want to emphasize again the importance of an applied perspective in how I define and conceive of public management -- as learning from application and then, perhaps, building hypotheses that, if tested well, might lead us to the formulation of useful theory, i.e., that which is valid, replicable and answers the questions we pose" (p. 15). Jones, in his description of the origin of the field observes that those varied disciplines also serve as sources of theory about PM. Schedler is more aligned with Kelman in that the field seems disinterested at this point in discovering such theory: "...public management is still a discipline without its generic theory (or method) ...our discipline lacks of generic and original theory building including an ambition that aims at more than just the case under observation" (p. 17).

Kelman and Jones expressed sentiments similar to Gruening (2001) in his analysis of the field, which looks back to the field's origin for possible theoretical grounding, including such divergent ones as transaction-cost economics, rational management, public-choice theory, principal-agent theory, and jurisprudence. Such divergent sources of theory seem to fit the interdisciplinary roots of the field. Unfortunately, Gruening is not optimistic that such unifying theory is possible to find. Others seem to think that they could arise from the synthesis of case study findings. The struggle has been and continues to be how to perform that synthesis, an issue to which we now turn.

Methodologies

Without a basis in unifying theory, what methodologies are in practice? Kelman writes more about pedagogy and sharing the fruits of the field's research than the research itself except to criticize its (as noted above) somewhat arrogant and insular style of problem solving that tends to ignore relevant work in other fields. He wrote that, "A disappointingly small fraction of public management research is conducted in accordance with accepted scholarly standards...datasets [are not] large enough to permit quantitative analysis" (p. 4). Thompson argues that the field is not yet ready for normative and empirical models until such time as it has identified proverbs (citing Simon, 1946) or principles (Lynn, 1996). He further notes that "Good clinical analysis is the better way to find principles...Once one has good principles to work with, good theorizing can (and probably will) follow" (p. 6). He spends considerable time describing clinical research and analysis, calling it both hermeneutic and practical (p. 7). He even admits that he's personally discomfited about this:

> I was trained in positive science and methodological individualism, empirical testing of carefully specified models derived from first principles –that's the kind of research I used to do (occasionally still do). My experience leads me to conclude that at this time it's not a practical way to go about answering most of the kinds of questions about public management we'd like to be able to answer (p. 8).

Jones notes similarities between PM and public policy and public administration in the research methodologies used (e.g., case analysis) even if the foci are different, and PM more readily accepts "methodological concepts and tools from the business sector much more readily than PA" (p. 12). Jones spends more time discussing the types of phenomena each discipline chooses to address and less time on the appropriate methodology for addressing them. Regarding methodology, Schedler notes that the field lacks "an ambition that aims at more than just the case under observation...the hypotheses generated in case studies need to be tested" (p. 17). Schedler agrees with Kelman, "that public management is in need of theory building, and sound empirical testing" (p. 18) and that through the use of those theories, the hypotheses may be tested. The problem is that such theories do not yet exist and his thoughts about that are addressed in the next section.

Despite a desire among some members to perform more positive research, the methodologies of public management research are heavily interpretivist. The field is evidently not equipped with enough robust theory to permit positive research and must

continue to seek out these theories. Mitroff & Pondy note "Leibnizian inquiry says that we haven't understood something until we have a good formal theory of it, Lockean inquiry says we haven't understood something until we have collected some good data on it" (1974:2). Of course, PM deals with inherently ill-structured problems; for those, Mitroff & Pondy would suggest a Kantian (or more sophisticated) approach. Unfortunately, much PM research is aimed at narrowly defined problems with pragmatic (applied) objectives, rather than pure (heuristic) objectives that are necessary to discover the desired theories. As Jones & Thompson put it: "Social scientists build elegant, logically consistent models; public managers deal with messy, real-world problems" (1999:9). What is desired (by the researchers) and what is done (for the stakeholders) appear to be at odds. All four, it might seem, would agree with Mitroff & Pondy's assessment that "we live in a culture that has given its major scientific allegiance to Leibnizian and Lockean modes of inquiry. As a result, we have preponderance of research dealing with scientific modeling and model solving but comparatively little research dealing with conceptualization and implementation" (1974:7).

Pragmatism

Speaking of implementation, the field of PM does seem to devote more attention to practical problems of the day and not the development of the craft for its own sake.[5] In addition to his related observations, above, Kelman observes, "There is too much of 'guru' style writing of the kind many faculty at the Harvard Business School get away with for practitioner audiences, but that is widely scorned by business school academics at other institutions" (p. 4). Thompson acknowledges the limitations of his advocacy of clinical research methods, "clinical research is especially in need of sound conceptual frames" (p. 8). A Kantian philosopher of science would argue that *some* conceptual frame must be present to have formed the basis for data collection in the first place – this is a question each researcher should ponder about his own work. Kelman briefly responded to Thompson (p. 8) describing the clinical approach as "Tackling specific management problems and searching for pragmatic solutions." In drawing his distinctions between PM and public administration, Jones provides myriad examples of the types of practical problems PM seeks to resolve, concluding with the comment, "I want to emphasize again the importance of an applied perspective in how I define and conceive of public management..." (p. 15). Schedler, alternatively, makes the case for theory-building work, "what we need is a set of original theories that are identified as public management" (p. 17), and notes some work in progress on the rationalities model, customer-citizen actor theory; and the functional use of power at the boundary between politics and administration. While noting the lack of original theory, none of the four actually advocated nor championed purely heuristic work. In fact, in an earlier co-authored publication, Jones & Thompson referred to pure research as "irrelevant" and applied research as "relevant" (1999:9) and commented that "our clients are much more interested in diagnosing and treating administrative problems than in pursuing Herbert Simons project of building an administrative science" (p. 8). Clearly, PM, at this stage in its maturity as a distinct field, is barely ready (or willing) to attack the big questions.

Description and Explanation

The fourth observation of the field of PM that emerged from KTJS is the field's predilection to describe and explain rather than predict or ascribe causality. Kelman raised a

> ...very important shortcoming: there is not nearly enough prescriptive (or even explanatory) research being produced about how to achieve high performance in government organizations. Our stance has contributed to this problem because the very declarations of independence from the traditions of political science, policy analysis, and public administration that allowed the field to emerge and make a contribution have also hurt our ability to produce good research (p. 3).

Thompson states that the field is not yet ready for "good, normative models" due to an absence of what Simon (1946) refers to as "proverbs of administration" or Lynn (1996) refers to as principles or rules. Thompson states, "In most areas of public management research, I am inclined to believe this agenda [normative models] is premature. We should seek out proverbs of administration rather than try to deduce rules from first principles (p. 6)." This goes back to our theme of missing theory. Thompson further makes note that "a good normative model is merely a good empirical model run backwards" (p. 6). While a physicist may disagree, PM's focus of inquiry is the complex adaptive system coping with bounded rationality – things just aren't as "clean" as physics. Fisher notes that "Explanation in the social sciences does not and can not consistently satisfy the criteria for causation...Yet, in practice, social scientists use their explanations as though they implied casual relationships" (1978:34). Jones notes that "...what we were interested in finding out in public management...was, in essence, "What works, what doesn't and in what contexts these successes and failures have occurred...and why?" (p. 15).

THE COMMUNITY OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT SCHOLARS

Since Plato wrote of Socrates' dialogue with Gorgias, the ability to persuade has been vital for scientists, philosophers, politicians, and humankind in general. Science is about persuasion if nothing else, most specifically, about persuasion within a community. As Kuhn says, we "have to examine not only the impact of nature and of logic, but also the techniques of persuasive argumentation effective within the quite special groups that constitute the community of scientists" (1970: 94). Understanding the field of public management necessarily includes a look at its community of scholars, who they are, how they interact, where they publish. Kelman, as was noted above, expressed concern about the field of PM becoming too insular,

> In isolating ourselves from larger scholarly communities, we have exacerbated...existing trends away from production of research on the management problems of the public sector by scholars outside our community...Our challenge in our own community will be to associate ourselves intellectually with relevant academic disciplines - including social psychology and sociology, and with academic management research at business schools (p. 4).

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Thompson, viewing PM as an offshoot of generic management noted that PM's roots are less grounded in APPAM than they were in the Academy of Management, citing many of the top contemporary PM scholars as having backgrounds in that tradition (e.g., Jim Perry, Barry Bozeman, Hal Rainey). Other scholars noted in KTJS who could be considered a fair part of the nucleus of the community of PM include Christopher Hood, Laurence E. Lynn, Michael Barzelay, and Mark Moore. Certainly, one would also need to include in this nucleus Kelman, Thompson, Jones and Schedler themselves, and some whom this article cites (e.g., Robert Behn and Donald Kettl).[6]

Jones expresses the obvious point that the KTJS dialogue on the International Public Management Network is an embodiment of a portion of the community. The network serves as a communication medium; a tie that binds; and a gatekeeper and mouthpiece (through two journals) for those in PM with interest in international public management issues.

"Speaking of identity," wrote Schedler,

> …it seems to me that public management lacks of something else: a 'culture'. Following the Schein model, we need artifacts: how do we look like How do we smell what is the sound of public management...On the other hand, public management as a discipline trying to develop a common culture could also mean to exclude lateral thinking. We could develop into a closed social system, with all the drawbacks of self-referencing...one thing to discuss further (p. 17).

Schedler wrote more than the others about the community, touching also on the international aspect and the relevant journals:

> We will have to test our publications against two measures: a) how is my result new to the public management community, and b) which is my contribution to different disciplines, be they closer (such as general management) or further away (such as communication or linguistics)." (p. 19)
> "I believe that foreign students of public management in the USA are more critical today than ever before in the assessment of its transferability to their own politico-administrative systems. The time of the missionaries is up, even if masqueraded as development agencies or international organizations. (p. 19)

While both Schedler and Thompson refer to the internationalization of PM, there is no unity in the field, on an international level, on solutions to the problems the field addresses. That is, while management may be ecumenical, *public* management is not (Jones and Thompson, 1999; and Schedler's portion of the dialogue, p. 17). Distinctions are made in the literature between US and other governments, such as the American-Westminsterian discussion (Kettl, 2000), and the notion that PM is an Anglo-American convention (or at least one applicable to only developed nations) (Barzelay, 2001; OECD, 1995). So while there is an international community working similar types of problems, they do not necessarily work them using similar epistemologies and certainly their prescriptions vary depending upon the political structure of the country in question. What is interesting is that this fracture of the community does not impede communication. Herschheim and Klein (2001) write of an arguably equally immature community of

scholars (Information Science) that is fractured and, thus, suffer from disconnects in communication. The field of public management, through international dialogue, conferences, journals and formal networks, willingly share and debate despite their differences.

CONCLUSIONS

The introduction of KTJS begins with the question: "How may we define public management as an academic field?" (p. 1). The four scholars who contributed to that article did an admirable job of (a) describing the disciplinary roots of PM, (b) the foci of research in practice, (c) the contributions and shortcomings of that research, (d) the field's relationship to other disciplines, and (e) the direction in which the field appears to be headed.

This essay has attempted to answer the same question by examining KTJS, and some related literature, through the lens of the philosophy of science. What we learn is that the field of PM derives from a complex but not universally-accepted lineage and that it, perhaps, is not so much its own field as it is the manifestation of other more mature fields' inability to answer the questions that have arisen in the last two decades. We learn that the field uses primarily interpretivist methodologies, lacks general unifying theory, selects problems that are pragmatic, and yields primarily descriptive and explanatory results. While this is satisficing to stakeholders and PM practitioners, the academic community longs for theory to call its own and the ability to conduct positive research, but is taking few steps – largely because they are premature – to discover those theories. Lastly, we learn that the PM academic community is engaged among themselves despite their differences; but may be too disengaged with similar, relevant external communities.

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NOTES

[1] The author would like to acknowledge the comments and suggestions of Fred Thompson and Larry Jones in the development of this essay.

[2] Many of the thoughts in this essay cited as belonging to others were originally made in reference to a sub-field/phenomenon/evolution of public management referred to as New Public Management. For the sake of argument, the use of the term public management in this essay should be construed as encompassing NPM.

[3] An acknowledged limitation of this essay is which, or whose, philosophy of science is appropriate to the task. Since the purpose of this inquiry is to better understand the field of public management, not the applicability of one philosophy or another, an eclectic mix will be used and should be sufficient.

[4] Whether PM is its own paradigm is not addressed here due to the difficulty in defining and using this somewhat overworked term. Readers interested in such a discussion are referred to Gruening (2001), Behn (1998), Lynn (1997), OECD (1995), Osborne & Gaebler (1992), and Bozeman (1991).

[5] For a thorough treatment of the concepts in this section and the next, see the discussions on "practical argument" and "social scientific explanation" in Hood and Jackson (1991) and Barzelay (1999).

[6] A list of this sort is awkward to prepare and I'm certain my ingenuousness has resulted in missing a few key names.

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