

A CRITIQUE OF FRED W. RIGGS' ECOLOGY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT

Parsons once said that sociologists all critique Max Weber, but no one can do social research independently and scientifically without referring to Weber's theories. By the same token, those who study comparative public administration will inevitably find reason to critique Fred W. Riggs' "fused-prismatic-diffracted model", but in conducting research, no one is free of Riggs' influence. From the perspectives of heterogeneity, overlapping, formalism, and social transformation, the model observes particular characteristics in prismatic society. Even though the theory behind it needs refinement, it has exerted tremendous influence on the understanding of public administration and organizational behavior. This article's general critique of Riggs' theory is organized as follows: (1) achievements and contributions, and (2) limitations and discussion.

INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning, Riggs made a great effort in searching for an objective and effective model for analyzing public administration in developing regions. With his background in sociological theory, Riggs created the "fused-prismatic-diffracted model." This model covers a wide range of research. For instance, economic life, social structures, political symbols, and the allocation of power are all part of the analysis of structural function. From the perspectives of heterogeneity, overlapping, formalism, and social transformation, the model observes peculiar characteristics in prismatic society. Even though the theory behind it needs refinement, it has exerted tremendous influence on the understanding of public administration and organizational behavior. This article's general critique of Riggs' theory can be summarized as follows.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Heady once praised Riggs for his "wide range of knowledge and the depth of his theoretical viewpoints; he is one of the most represented theorists in modern society" (Heady, 1979:11). Even though his "administration development" is at present unsatisfactory, without Riggs' efforts the field of public administration would still be barren. Currently, theories of comparative public administration cannot be practically used to study actual administrative behavior. Riggs' theory, however, opens up an entirely new field of study. In the following sections, the contributions that Riggs has made towards understanding public administration systems are presented.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A polarized model is inadequate in depicting the characteristics that contribute to a developing country's administrative system. As a result, Riggs abandoned models that differentiated between agrarianism and industrialism. Rather, Riggs opted to create a more diverse, yet simplified model, namely, the "fused-prismatic-diffracted" model or what I have chosen to call a "prismatic" model.

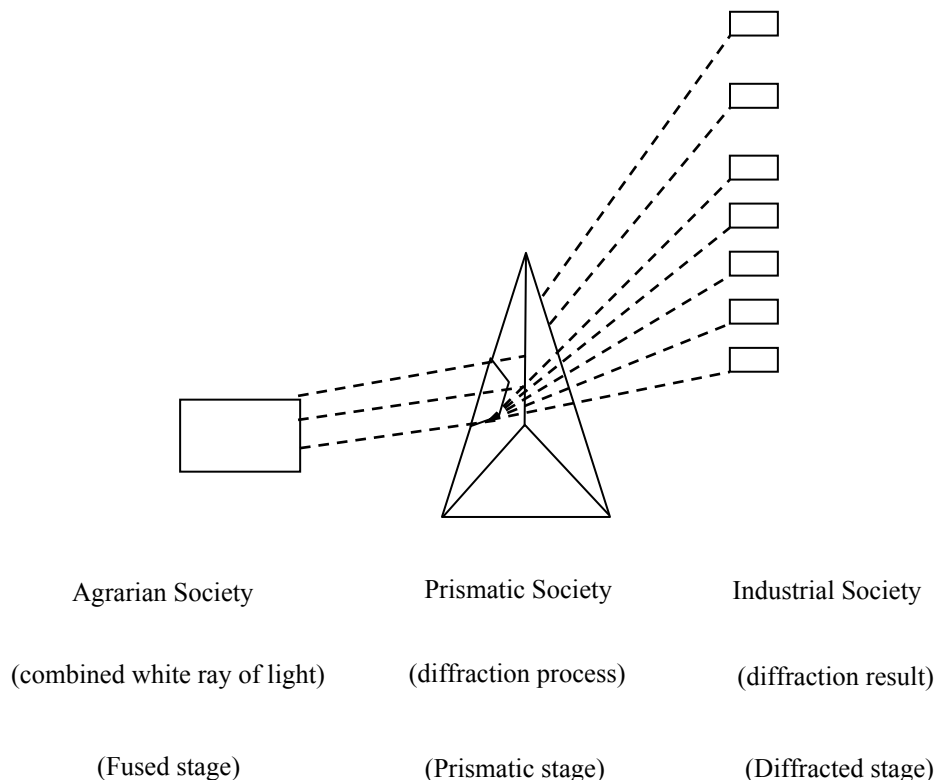
The formulation of the prismatic model was primarily based upon the extent to which a social administrative system undergoes functional differentiation. The model is appropriate for studying three societal types: highly developed Western industrial societies and traditional agrarian societies, as well as developing societies. Each society has its own social, economic, politically symbolic, and communicative attributes, as well as its own political system and concepts of individual rights. Yet, these attributes as a whole eventually develop into different administrative systems. Riggs believed that the degree to which each component of a society differs from another in function is measurable, and that measures of functional differentiation can be used to locate the three societal types along a continuum. Simultaneously, Riggs believed that his theoretical model can be used to compare the fundamental structure of various societies. Through his model, one is therefore able to comprehend each country's administrative attributes and differences.

Riggs' own analysis of public administrations primarily relies upon a functional-structural analytical approach. He refers to structure as a society's pattern of activity, while function is considered to be the outcome of a pattern of activity. Given this analytical approach, one discovers that traditional agrarian societies, highly developed industrial societies, and developing societies are functionally and structurally distinct. Such functional and structural attributes can be further examined by using a biological approach, that is, via a spectrum. Taking a traditional agrarian society as an example, say a traditional Thai society, one notices that various social functions and social structures are highly functionally diffuse, that is, there is no organized division of labor. This analogy serves to demonstrate the consequences of an unorganized functional and structural system in a traditional agrarian society. But, should a white ray of light be beamed through a prism, it would disperse into a wide range of colors. Riggs uses the word "diffract" to refer to this phenomenon (different than its meaning in physics) as a metaphor for the functional and structural system that is highly functionally specific, as found within an industrialized society. However, Riggs believes that there is a third scenario in addition to the two diametrically opposed extremes. That is, one must also contemplate the condition of the white light during the process in which it is being beamed through the prism itself. Specifically, the white ray is just starting to be diffracted, but the diffraction process has yet to be completed. (the inaccuracy of this metaphor from the perspective of physics aside).

Social differentiation, hence, cannot be successfully achieved overnight. Likewise, social transformation does not progress at a consistent speed. The question thus remains, how does a traditional society become modernized? Moreover, how does a fused society become a more diffracted society? Between the two extremes of a "lack of division of labor" society versus a diffracted society, one may ask, what other possibilities are there. Through his model, Riggs suitably and thoroughly addresses these questions. Riggs first tackles these issues by describing how a ray of light passes

through a prism: when a fused white light is beamed through a prism, the white light is subsequently diffracted into a rainbow of colors. Riggs further conceptualizes the diffraction process itself as creating a continuum. This conceptualization can be also applied to the real world such that a prismatic society can be theorized as a continuously expanding and developing system. Riggs' concept is illustrated in the following diagram (Figure 1):

Figure 1: Riggs' "Fused-Prismatic-Diffracted" Model Process

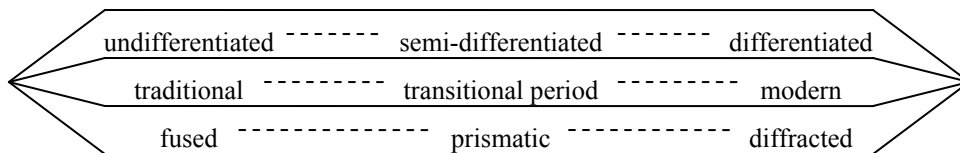


Riggs' believes that when analyzing prismatic societies, most social scientists fail to understand how they essentially function. More significantly, they are unable to fully understand the conditions under which a society experiences diffraction. That is to say, such social scientists only grasp the concept of a specialized structure, and are not able to conceptualize the entire social structural system. Taking a family household as an example, in a fused society the family is the model by which politics, the administrative system, religion, and ethics are judged. In contrast, in a diffracted society, the family household's influence on other social structures is negligible. Yet, in a prismatic society the degree of influence lies within these two extremes. In other words, a family household's influence on various other social structures is less than in a fused society, but more than in a diffracted one. The study of economic behavior can be applied in the same manner. In a prismatic society, should one ignore the interrelationship between political, administrative, social, and economic factors, and limit one's analysis to economic behavior alone, one not only fails to fully grasp the larger picture, but more importantly, misunderstands the role of economic behavior as well.

BI-LINEAR PRISMATIC MODEL

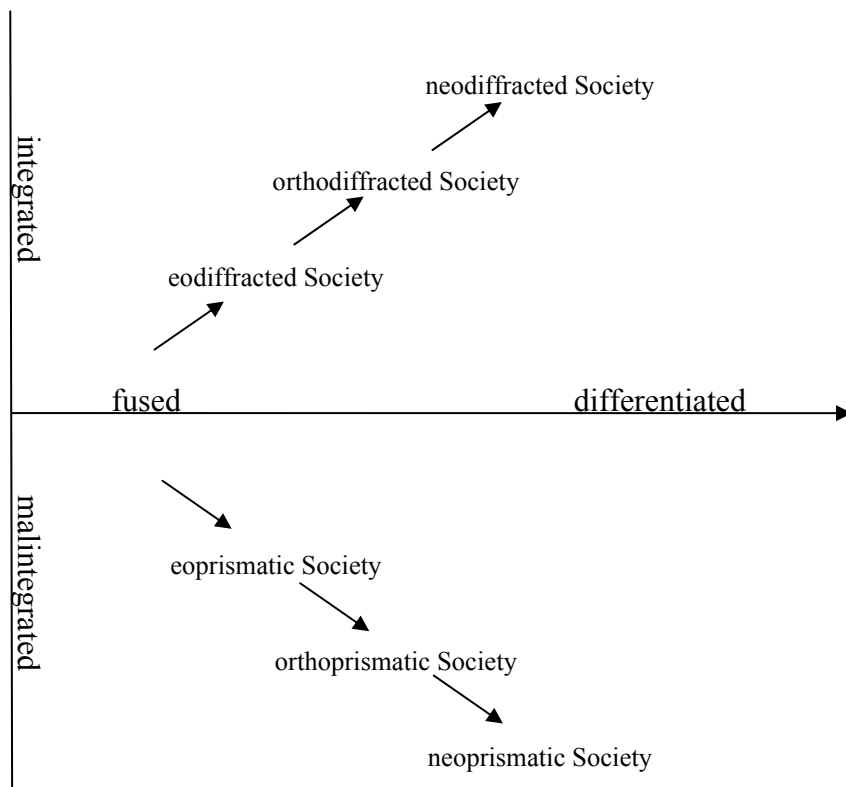
In the ten years since the introduction of the “prismatic model,” Riggs himself has suggested improvements or alterations to the model. The main reason for such improvements is to probe and question the unilinear model of thinking. In the “prismatic model,” “degree of differentiation” was considered to be the only standard against which prismatic societies were judged; that is, it was believed that the higher the degree of differentiation, the greater the degree of diffraction. However, this inferential relationship cannot adequately explain the following: when a social system is already differentiated/diffracted, and yet is malintegrated as a whole, how can it remain stagnated in a prismatic social state (Riggs, 1973:7)? Riggs’ original prismatic model was generally referred to as a “unilinear path” model, as depicted in the following diagram (Figure 2):

Figure 2: A diagram of a unilinear path prismatic model



Riggs himself admitted that the model’s reasoning was faulty and would lead to misleading thinking; therefore, within the “unilinear path” concept Riggs added a “degree of conformity” axis. In contrast, the “bilinear path” proposes that a prismatic society is not determined by economic development, nor by achieving modernization alone; rather, it can be found in different societies in various degrees of differentiation. Consequently, prismatic societies are not limited to underdeveloped countries. More precisely, the more differentiated a society is, the greater the need for conformity in order to reach a state of diffraction; however, the social risk is also greater, as is the likelihood of disastrous consequences, including prismatic breakdowns. Riggs’ theory is based on nonconforming behavior as found in Western societies—including metropolitan crises, ethnic riots, student boycotts, social distancing, as well as “the hippy phenomenon”—characteristics particular to prismatic societies in highly developed countries. The abrupt rise of the Nazi and Fascist movements in Europe, as well as the Great Depression of the 1930s represent two vivid examples. Figure 3, below, illustrates the “bilinear path” model (Riggs, 2006:52-56):

Figure 3: Diagram of a bilinear path prismatic model.



Riggs uses the three prefixes of “eo”, “ortho”, and “neo” to establish six new forms of social phenomenon. This distinction allows for greater descriptive flexibility, as well as a finer understanding of the dynamics of change.

From Riggs’ introduction of these three phases one realizes that “present-day Riggs” is in fact the most blunt and harshest critic of “former Riggs.” Yet, despite the fact that Riggs continuously modifies his theory in order to create the perfect model, Riggs’ critics are endless. Prethus, for instance, regards Riggs’ model as too broad and abstract. Arora, in a quite lengthy article, analyzes the “negative character” of the prismatic model. Specifically, he argues that the model holds a Western bias, and moreover, the terminology used to describe the particular characteristics of the prismatic model are value-laden, and consequently, tend to emphasize the negative characteristics of prismatic societies. Monroe also considers the prismatic model a reflection of Western standards, and urges Riggs to study prismatic phenomena within American society in order to improve his model. As to Riggs’ promotion of “formalism”, Valson and Milne raise several points of contention; namely, the terminology “formalism” constitutes the disparity between that which is “formally prescribed” and that which is “actually practiced.” It follows that the advantages and disadvantages of “formalism” cannot be broadly encapsulated, but rather are determined through context (Heady, 1979:73).

Undoubtedly, these criticisms have contributed to the adjustments made in Riggs’ model, such that many points of contention have already been clarified within his book *Reexamining Prismatic Societies*. However, in order for Riggs’ model to have an even

more concrete influence, it must have more solid impressions. Braudy uses Riggs' theory to study Japan's legislative proceedings. In his study, Braudy's findings were that practical applications and conclusions drawn from the prismatic model can be broadly utilized; however, it is more difficult to compare factors and conditions within the model, for one may not find every factor listed within the model in Japanese society itself (Braudy, 1965:314-324). It can therefore be stated that given the challenges and adjustments Riggs' model faces, its structural path must be predicated on resolving these issues in the near future. If maladjustment is equated with stress, then it is an aversive psychological state that will create negative evaluations of and negative affect toward the stimulus that created it. Moreover, the lack of a large number of negative feedback events may also cause the expatriates to ignore cues about behavioral appropriateness (Harrison et. al., 2005:263).

THEORETICAL MODEL AND APPROACHES OF STUDY

Riggs has placed great emphasis on ecological methodologies. This approach not only widens the scope of the study of public administration, but also regards society as organic in nature. Apart from that, this approach supplements traditional research. In doing comparative public administration research, one should always examine other related factors such as historical background, ideologies, value systems, economic structure, social structure, etc. (McCurdy, 2006:46-49). This is because social systems evolve gradually, rather than transforming abruptly. In addition, the environment always plays a vital role in forming and transforming social systems; that is, different environments will produce different systems. To view the study of public administration as a closed system, isolated from its environment would, bluntly speaking, would be out of touch with reality.

The ecological approach, by definition, focuses upon the relationship between an organism and its environment. Factors that the ecological approach takes into consideration are numerous; they primarily include, however, the influence of recent developments in social sciences methodology, experience from technological aid to foreign developing countries, and the influence of social systems theory. Riggs' ecological approach is predicated on the basic characteristics of ecology. The notion that functions are interdependent, dynamic balancing relationships, or adaptations and structural developments, etc., is consistent with prismatic theories. To explain the possible occurrence of ecological relationships between public administration and other factors, Riggs proposes an alternative hypothesis, one that is to be tested through observation and empirical evidence. Ecological public administration not only can provide a solid basis for research, but can explain and predict public administrative behavior as well. More than being merely a powerful tool for uncovering "ailments" within public administrative systems, the ecological approach can, in fact, address and correct them.

Another laudable academic contribution of Riggs is his use of pan-disciplinary research. This type of research is derived from his dissatisfaction with traditional monolithic and inter-disciplinary studies. Pan-disciplinary research, by definition, also studies politics, law, anthropology, economics, psychology, etc. to analyze public administration. Riggs

argues that to gain a deep and thorough understanding of public administrative phenomena in a prismatic society requires not only the observation of superficial attributes, but the examination of other equally significant cultural factors as well, the reason being that the more transparent a prismatic society, the more complex its public administrative structure. In the past, the induction method was criticized as being too subjective and limited. Although prismatic theory is based on logical induction, it is not subjective and restrained, for the theory's pan-disciplinary approach prevents it from being so.

Comparative public administrative research, under the influence of social science methodology, has recently placed more emphasis on cultural factors. This reflects the limits of traditional public administrative studies, which use a more static approach. Confronted with a diverse and changing world, the evolution process both of modernized diffracted societies and transforming prismatic societies fail as adequate explanations. With the view point of systematics, a society is a balanced entity even when facing continuous change. The ultimate principle of social transformation is modernization. Riggs defines modernization as a multi-faceted transformation process caused by the influence of more developed countries on less developed countries. C.E. Black, in contrast, argues that modernization is a process of self-adaptation by traditional societies when confronted with external challenges. Regardless of which one subscribes to, Riggs' perspective of external impact or Black's definition of internal adaptation, implicit in both of these viewpoints is a construct on how a society evolves. Only by explaining the process of transformation can the goal of improving a society be realized (Peng 1988, 67-72; Yang 1974, 94-99).

LIMITATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Fred W. Riggs' article "Agraria and Industria: Toward a Typology of Comparative Administration," published in 1955, won him wide acclaim among scholars. Since the publications of *The Ecology of Public Administration* (1961) and *Administration in Developing Countries* (1964), Riggs' position and reputation in the field of comparative public administration has been peerless. T. Parsons once said that "sociologists all critique Max Weber, but no one can do social research independently and scientifically without referring to Weber's theories." In the same manner, those who study comparative public administration will criticize Fred W. Riggs' "fused-prismatic-diffracted model," but in conducting research, no one is free of Riggs' influence. The limits of Riggs' theory can be summarized along the following lines.

First, one school of thought that supports the "fused-prismatic-diffracted model" believes that this model can replace empirical studies in general. In other words, empirical studies are regarded as having little to no value. The primary reason for this stems from the perspective that empirical studies are time-consuming and expensive. As Milne astutely points out, however, it is dangerous for novice scholars to rely entirely upon model theories. Shortcomings arise when scholars erroneously believe that once one is familiar with one model of administrative theory, one can draw broad conclusions about the administrative features of all regions without conducting empirical research.

A second critique of Riggs' theory identifies the scope of the "fused-prismatic-diffracted model" as being too broad and abstract. Riggs' structural function studies, which include several cultural factors--including economic, social, and political--are difficult to follow. Therefore, some scholars may be tempted to denounce this kind of large-scale theory as middle-range theory, and hence, consider empirical investigations as supplemental. The objective is thus to shorten the distance between theory and practice. Concrete examples include the study of the influence of foreign capital enterprises on political transformations, and minutely detailed categorizations of hierarchical power systems.

LACK OF EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Another critique of the "fused-prismatic-diffracted" model argues that while it is predicated on the notion of deduction, there is little empirical evidence to support it. Most sciences require empirical evidence so that results can be verified, not only repeatedly but also at any time and place. Moreover, objective comparisons would then likewise be possible. Riggs, however, endeavors to prescribe "formalism" as a given standard, and most scholars consider this concept as unsatisfactory. Moreover, when scholars attempt to use Riggs' model to study the administrative systems of foreign countries, they often encounter numerous difficulties.

Scholars have also found that in some cases the "fused-prismatic-diffracted model" ignores certain variables, but in others it exaggerates them. For instance, as Riggs himself pointed out, aside from cultural factors there are others that should also be considered. These include historical background, the political structure of post-colonial countries, territorial size, the status of hierarchical power, and the role of the military, as well as social ideologies. Most importantly, the unique circumstances of each country will have a profound influence on administrative behavior. Yet, these are factors that Riggs seldom discusses.

IGNORING THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

In adopting a deductive process, the "fused-prismatic-diffracted" model likewise ignores the ultimate goal of public administration in its attempt to build a value-free science. W. Wilson argues that the primary function of any public administration is to work efficiently. Therefore, it should be obvious that a public administration cannot and should not abandon certain values.

Moreover, while the "fused-prismatic-diffracted model" tends to supplement its theory with empirical evidence, it is sometimes difficult to find appropriately related evidence. The uniqueness of Riggs' theory is undeniably influential. Yet, his theory is to some extent predicated on logical speculation or assumptions. For instance, Riggs believes that formalism is the primary and sole factor in increasing administrative hierarchical power within prismatic societies. This argument, however, is too simple and unequivocal to accept. To illustrate his argument, Riggs uses American society as his

model of a diffracted society. The shortcoming here is, although American society is a developed and industrialized country, one cannot infer that it is free of formalism and no longer a prismatic society. Therefore, the theoretical hypothesis that American society is a model which one should use in constructing a diffracted society is both inappropriate and unsatisfactory.

Although the analytic pattern of the “fused-prismatic-diffracted model” is based on a structural functional approach, the primary focus of Riggs’ analysis is placed instead on social factors. This analytical perspective tends to exclude other factors, which by extension prevents alternative explanations including the psychological and cognitive aspects of a prismatic administrative system. It is therefore evident that Riggs overemphasizes the organic and unified nature of social systems.

At this point, it is significant to note that Riggs repeatedly emphasizes that the primary reason he uses the terms “fused,” “prismatic,” and “diffracted”, rather than classical words like “traditional,” “transitional,” and “modern”, is to avoid any insinuation of determinism. However, in characterizing prismatic theory as “a vast and remote serial structure” Riggs has not diminished its deterministic air. Riggs’ use of the prefixes eo- (primitive, old) and neo- (new, modern) are no less value-laden and deterministic than the terms agrarian and industrial, and perhaps even more so. Furthermore, the use of ortho- (straight, correct) for the transitional stage is puzzling. Instead, his choice of terms has only served to highlight criticisms of Riggs’ supposedly value-neutral public administration model.

It is widely acknowledged that constructional theorists often fall prey to committing causal inferential errors, and Riggs is no exception. To his credit, Riggs openly admits that the prismatic model is suitable only in examining phenomena that occur during the social transformation process. In an actual society, however, “independent variables” and “dependent variables” are complex and thus hard to predict. Consequently, causal inference is difficult to avoid.

From a purely functional or linguistic point of view, the “fused-prismatic-diffracted” model uses too much terminology and specialized jargon. To understand it, one must patiently wade through the definitions provided by Riggs himself. Thus, in designing a new model, and in the effort to distinguish it from others, Riggs established a unique vocabulary that has no application whatsoever to other models.

In addition, from a structural perspective, the “fused-prismatic-diffracted” model is awkwardly divided into three sections. This type of organization reflects the model’s formalist limitations. Factors that cause or instigate social transformations are latent, unstable, and indefinite at best. In describing the evolution of Middle Eastern society, D. Lerner’s “The Passing of Traditional Society” proves this point decisively. Certainly, there are societies whose transformations have occurred as a result of powerful external forces. Under these circumstances, if one insists on using the “fused-prismatic-diffracted” model for analytical purposes, the result would be irrelevant to the facts. Thus, rather than starting from the angle of time and history in analyzing social transformations, one should study the interrelationship between the endogenous and the exogenous in order to better comprehend social change and development. As Pawson and Tilley (1979: 294) have argued, programmes cannot be considered as some external impinging ‘force’ to which subjects ‘respond.’ Rather, programmes ‘work’ if subjects

choose to make them work and are placed in the right conditions to enable them to do so. If evaluation remains oblivious to contextual factors and fails to draw upon practical and experiential insights, we will never discover why any given project ‘work’ or not, why it may be successful for some and not others and which features of it might successfully be transplanted elsewhere (Squires and Measor, 2005:27).

Still others argue that Riggs’ prismatic model presents an overly pessimistic perspective in its analysis of transitional societies. It is more likely, however, that Riggs’ is merely skeptical about the prospect of modernizing developing regions. One reason for his attitude is that he views the transition process of non-Western societies from the epistemology of Western culture. A strong and valid criticism argues that not only is it inappropriate to apply Western standards to non-Western societies, but it is highly improper and dangerous as well.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, an ecological public administration should improve upon its weaknesses in the following ways. First, in using ecological public administration as a research approach, the notion that the environment alone can determine administrative behavior should be avoided. Riggs observes that, while it is important to describe the environment’s influence on other subjects, inversely, one should also acknowledge the influence individuals have on the environment. Only by taking into consideration the dual aspects of interacting influences can we hope to develop an authentic ecological model.

Second, although the ecological approach attempts to explain the transformation process within an existing system or within the functioning of a peculiar environment, it still largely ignores the ultimate concern of public administration, namely, the evaluation of policies and the realization of intended goals. Milton J. Esman, a comparative public administration scholar, points out that in addition to traditional research, one should also pay more attention to those studies that make a direct contribution to the substance of public administration. These include studies on industrial development, education, public sanitary science, personnel administration, and financial-economic policies, among others. Thus, rather than pointing out behavioral limitations, the ecological approach should emphasize strengths in problem-solving instead.

Lastly, public administrative models that build upon the foundation of the ecological approach are usually predicated on intuitive and *a priori* assumptions. The models are found to be inefficient and cumbersome due to their lack of empirical experience. John Forward thus proposes an ecological public administrative model that employs statistical analyses to study related ecological factors that are based on empirical experience.

The aforementioned criticisms of Riggs’ “fused-prismatic-diffracted” model are not, of course, without their own shortcomings. Some of them may have misrepresented and even distorted the essence of science, while others are derived from entirely different analytical approaches. In light of the fact that each scholar has his or her own

interpretation and criticisms, one shouldn't completely ignore the "fused-prismatic-diffracted" model's contributions and strengths¹. Should we as social scientists and scholars fail to apply effective tools that appropriately acknowledge the "kaleidoscope" of attributes that comprise each society, then, I fear, the future development of sociology is itself rather limited indeed. Contemporary approaches to public sector strategic leadership in global and domestic arenas reflect a shift toward intangible assets rather than physical or financial capital as sources of sustainable world-class public service (Teece, 1997: 509). This is true whether the focus is organization-specific resources, core competencies, knowledge management, or organization learning. Sustainable world-class public service occurs when an operating unit implements a value creating strategy (originated, exemplified, or endorsed by the global leader) that other global units are unable to imitate (Petrick, 2005:256; Hitt et al., 2001). Increasingly, this value creating strategy is based on intangible capability-based factors, that is ecological environment. The use of public office for personal ambition and private gain not only turns the traditional public service ethos on its head but may require an entirely new response in developing a responsible accountability or ecological environment.

In conclusion, Riggs argues that listing merely one environmental factor does not constitute adopting an ecological approach. What ecological public administration requires, or more specifically what defines research as being ecological, is the identification of critical variables as well as the demonstration of administrative items and plausible patterns of correlation.

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¹ In Rigg's ecological approach, his cultural and environmental dimensions are too broadly and vaguely defined. If his theory is to be more useful, for the theory of PA, a middle-range scope and clarification of definitions are necessary.

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ABOUT IPMR

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