

UNDERSTANDING THE SCIENCE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: THE THEORY AND PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the science of public administration is tied to understanding the nature of public administration. This paper set out from a theoretical point of view to simplify and thereafter put to rest the confusion about whether public administration qualifies to be a science or not as well as show the connect between the theory and practice of public administration. Utilizing evidence based secondary information; the article clearly established that public administration is both a scientific and practical discipline, depending on which of the divide one is looking at. And this primarily draws from the nature of the subject matter which is an embodiment of theory and practice: theory (principles) and practice (processes or activities). However, the paper posits that it is remarkable to note that public administration is not a science when the yardstick of controlled experiments and measured and testable observation are applied, but it is, if we use the term ‘science’ in the sense of the spirit of enquiry and systematic research and investigation, as it is more commonly interpreted in the social or management sciences today.

Keywords: Public administration, science, practice, theory, understanding

INTRODUCTION

There is no gain saying the fact that ideas precede reality. As a natural law, ‘before anything can exist in the physical material form, it must first and foremost exist as an idea in somebody’s mind’. It must be thought out before it can be designed, invented or put to practice. And this is usually through the scientific process; the most acceptable means of directing reality, especially as it pertains to knowledge creation and accumulation. The scientific process is a means of knowing things as distinguished from many other ways in which man can access knowledge about reality such as personal experience, faith and reason. As a priori, emphasis is placed on methodology. That is, the method through which knowledge is acquired, hence the description of science as “a set of methods used to collect information about phenomena in a particular area of interest and build a reliable base of knowledge about them” (Bordens and Abbott, 2010:2).

It was in recognition of the role of cognition in knowledge creation and utilization of same for meaningful purposes that the traditional managerial approach to the study of public administration emphasizes a scientific method in developing knowledge. The kernel of the idea that public administration could be a science was contained in Woodrow Wilson’s 1887 essay “The Study of Administration”. This fact is buttressed in his famous essay, where he clearly

stated that the science of administration is the latest fruit of the study of the science of politics. By 1926, Leonard White noted that public administration was being transformed from an art into a science and, in 1937, Luther Gullick and L. Urwick could publish, most influentially, *Papers on the Science of Public Administration*. These classical thinkers firmly believed that the efficiency and economy of the organization can be maximized when it is established in accordance with certain fundamental principles. They also believed that administration is everywhere irrespective of the nature, type or context of work. It was concluded that above all, principles of administration have universal validity (Rosembloom & Kravchuk, 2002).

Leonard, D. White, the author of the first major public administration textbook in the world, titled “Introduction to the study of public administration (1926)” viewed public administration as “the heart of the problem of modern government” and consequently, central to modern government. White tried not only to explain and cover his subject matter comprehensively but also to frame the discipline of public administration as a scientific process of producing reality or acquiring knowledge through application of methods and techniques that can guarantee utmost reliability or solutions to modern governmental problems. He presented the discipline of public administration as an intellectual framework that can be a device for developing a deep and comprehensive understanding of contemporary public administration in all its complexity. However, to be able to qualify as a scientific discipline or a process that guarantee utmost reliability in knowledge creation and its application for problem solving, a number of issues are relevant about the method and technique to be employed. This include but not limited to causality, logicity, objectivity, systematic nature, and being cumulative (Isaak, 1969; Obasi, 1999). Science therefore seeks knowledge by carefully defining its parameters, seeking out relevant information and subjecting proposed solutions to rigorous testing through the instrumentality of well-established theory (Kuhn, 1970).

As a result, the close connection between scientific research and theory is generally implied in the discussion of their interrelatedness and functions in several disciplines. Stated more explicitly, the critical impetus for scientific research in disciplines is understanding the role of theory. Thus, theory development relies on scientific research, and scientific research relies on theory. The relationship between theory and scientific research can be characterized as dialectic; a transaction whereby theory determines what data are to be collected and research findings provides challenges to accepted theories (Neuman, 2007). Theory building and its successful application is the very kernel of the admittance of any discipline to qualify as a scientific discipline. This is because, it is central to the process of knowledge creation or research in general. It performs the same function in every type of research, since the essence of science is the accumulation of knowledge which is total and whole. First, knowledge about reality is discovered piece meal and from different areas. And when it acquires the status of generalization and makes meaning within the context of what is already known as a reality, it attains the status of a science (McMillan and Schumacher, 2000).

In the light of these parameters, some schools of thought have cast doubt on whether every academic discipline can fully admit the status of science. For instance, Sharma and Sadana (2007: 30) opine that “practically, every social discipline finds itself confronted with the question of whether it is or can be a science. It has been asked of disciplines such as history, economics, sociology, political science, ethics, public administration and several other study areas bothering on human activities. Invariably, if some disciplines admit to be qualified as science without much ado and others are questioned, what then is the basis of this distinction? Before examining

the concerns raised about the distinction that exist, let us first examine the concept of public administration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Administration Defined

Public administration, like many human endeavors, is difficult to define. Dwight Waldo in his contribution to the “Classics of Public Administration” titled “What is Public Administration?” observed that at first glance, one might be inclined to ignore the problem of its definition. He also observed that any one-paragraph or sentence definition of public administration is bound to prove temporarily mind paralyzing (Sharfritz and Hyde, 1978:2). This is because public administration as a category is so abstract and varied that it can only be described in vague, general, amorphous, and somewhat competing terms (Rosenbloom and Kravchuk, 2002:4). Yet some attempt at clarifying the meaning of the subject matter is important.

One can find a wide variety of definitions of public administration, the following are among the most serious and influential efforts to define the field. Woodrow Wilson who wrote when the science of public administration had just started emerging as a separate area in the study of the science of politics, defines public administration as “government in action, the executive, the operative, the most visible side of government” (Sharfritz and Hyde, 1978:3). In the same vein, Corson and Harris defines public administration as “the action part of government, the means by which the purposes and goals of government are realized” (Stillman, 1978:2).

For W. F. Willoughby (1927) another early writer on the discipline of public administration, he described the discipline of public administration as the function of actually administering the law as declared by the legislature and interpreted by the judicial branches of the government (Sharfritz and Hyde, 2007). Towing this line of definition, Nicholas Henry explains that “the process of public administration consists of the actions involved in effecting the intent and desire of a government. It is thus the continuously active, ‘business’ part of government, concerned with carrying out the law, as made by the legislative bodies (or other authoritative agents) and interpreted by the courts, through the processes of organization and management” (Rosenbloom and Kravchuk, 2002:4).

According to Dimock (1937), public administration is a synthesis of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of government. The ‘what’ just like the ‘how’ addresses the scientific aspect of the discipline, the technical knowledge of the field which enables an administrator to perform his task. The ‘how’ is the technique or principle according to which the operative programmes are carried through to success. Dimock further explains that public administration is the fulfilment or enforcement of public policy as declared by the competent authorities. It deals with the problems and powers, the organization and techniques of management involved in carrying out the laws and policies formulated by the policy making agencies of government.

There are other later writers who have equally given a different tilt to the definition of public administration. Prominent among them is Pfiffner and Presthus (1960). They posit that “public administration as a field is mainly concerned with the means for implementing political values” (Stillman, 1978:3) “Their emphasis is on processes and the coordinating role of administration. Hence, they observe that public administration consists of getting the work of government done by coordinating the efforts of the people in the most scientific and acceptable way so that they work together to accomplish their tasks (Olaopa, 2008:9). This is why Hodgson (1969:1) posits

that public administration comprises of all activities of persons or groups in government or their agencies, whether these organizations are international, national or local in scope, to fulfill the purposes of these governments or agencies.

An encompassing definition of public administration is that by Rosenbloom and Kravchuk, (2002). They posit that public administration is “the use of managerial, political, and legal theories and processes in fulfilling legislative, executive, and judicial mandates for the provision of governmental regulatory and service function”. What conclusions can be drawn from the variety of definitions of public administration and their myriad nuances? One is that public administration is multidisciplinary in nature. The field or discipline of public administration overlaps a number of other disciplines, including political science, sociology, economics, psychology, business administration, and law. Importantly, it also does involve principles, processes and activities. It is concerned with politics and policy making. In practice, it tends to be concentrated in the executive branch of government, and concerned with implementing the law. Judging from the foregoing prisms therefore, we can safely and broadly define public administration as the scientific derivation of principles and processes and their efficient and effective application for proper organization and management of human and material resources to achieve the goals and purposes of government.

Theoretical Perspective

This study is anchored on the concept of ‘Theory’ as a theoretical underpinning. Theory as the fulcrum of science took its etymological root from the Greek word ‘theoria’, which means to reflect, contemplate, observe or consider. The Aristotelian use of the word theory, contrast with another word ‘praxis’ meaning, practice. It simply refers to how humans act and conduct themselves in the pursuit of day-to-day activities and survival (Harrington, 2005). Obviously, this contrast of ‘theoria’ and ‘praxis’ is fundamental to our understanding of the science of public administration, as it is with understanding the meaning of theory and how it relates to the empirical world of facts and practice. Buttressing this point of view, Harrington in one of his postulations, revealed that for the Greeks, contemplation of the cosmos was an indispensable aid to making sense of our lives in the ordinary world of society or city or what they called the polis. In other words, they believe that people who did not engage in contemplation and reflection had no point of orientation for conducting their lives in practice, in the political world of actions and interaction with other people. Thus, theoria for the Greeks remained indispensable to members of the public who sought wisdom, happiness, and the good life in the realm of the praxis (Harrington, 2005:2). Contemplation is the fountain that provides humans with knowledge of general principles (laws) that guide, explain, predict and describe particular practical action.

The word ‘theory’ as used in scientific enquiry today as it was in the days of the Greek city states still retains this basic meaning and feature of providing orientation for ordering and understanding reality or phenomena. As the fulcrum of science, its primary goal is to aid understanding of facts or reality. Thus, Harrington (2005:5) avers that “if research consisted only of theories, it would lack reference to the real world... if research consisted of only constructions in the imagination of researchers, it will be empty of content, and, and it would be incapable of being validated or tested in any way”. On the other hand, “if research consisted of only data collection, it would lack all order and sense. If research consisted only of heaps of information, it will be no more than chaotic bundle of statements, impossible to decipher or evaluate or to apply to any meaningful purpose” (Harrington, 2005).

It is now common knowledge even among scholars that reality is perspectival and thus, applies to any object of knowledge. What this mean is that everything cannot be perceived in one whole swoop. It has to be grasped in piece meal. Understanding an issue, problem, fact or phenomena is always guided by a logical structure of a theoretical scheme (Parson, 1938). For any phenomena or issue whose understanding we seek, Parson (1938:15) remarks that “we never investigate ‘all the facts’ which could be known about the phenomenon in question, but only those which we think are important”. Theory provides this qualifying important aspect to our view of reality under consideration. In other words, a theory focuses on some selected aspect of a phenomenon under consideration, and there could be several or even many theories dealing with the same phenomenon (Holmberg, Moore and Peters, 2007). A theory therefore is a set of statements or propositions that seek to explain or predict a particular aspect of life (Schweingruber, 2005).

To Martin (1985), he defines a theory as “a partially verified statement that cannot be directly observed”. Borden and Abbott (2010:30) define a theory “as a hypothesis or an idea that need to be tested; an explanation for a phenomenon. It is a set of interrelated propositions (and corollaries to those propositions) that attempt to specify the relationship between a variable (or sets of variables) and some behaviour”. A theory is not only a set of interrelated propositions and their corollaries, neither does it just state a relationship but it is an organized body of concepts, principles, definitions, propositions intended to explain a particular phenomenon (Haugh, 2012:4). It also provides the “how” and “why” something operates as it does (Johnson and Christensen, 2007:7).

The common focus of all the definitions above is that a theory is a partially verified statement because it states a relationship that cannot be directly observed except by application to a particular phenomenon and the verification of a theory in one instance or multiple instances has not given foolproof assurance that the theory cannot be faulted in other circumstances. Though theory is abstract, the proposition it makes is about facts and is subject to verification. Hence, a scientific theory must be consistent with the facts; otherwise, it is a mere fiction. Theories should be verifiable by experiments or methodological observation (Holmberg, Moore and Peters, 2007). Thus, if we cite an example with the institutional theory, which among other propositions claims that rules and regulations determine and regulate the behavior of members of the institution, organization or society, we cannot observe and verify this relationship directly except by application to a particular case study, that is, an organization or institution in order to investigate and validate the claim by the theory. Of course, this set of propositions about what determine behavior at the work place has been verified under various organizational and societal situations before considering it a theory, but could also be rejected under certain prevailing conditions. Therefore, the theory stands to be modified in the light of new discoveries about conditions that make institutionalism possible or impossible. Hence, the theory as it is remains a partially verified statement and the basis for scientific research, knowledge creation or the accumulation of knowledge in most fields.

Basis for the Qualification or Disqualification of Public Administration as a Science

Understanding the science of public administration is tied to understanding the nature of public administration. Broadly speaking, public administration can be viewed from two perspectives viz as a body of knowledge and as a practice. Viewed as a body of knowledge, public administration is directed towards understanding of governmental administration. This is an area of intellectual inquiry, a discipline of study for students and scholars who conducts research in the field. This is the theory of public administration.

As a practice, it concerns itself with the activities that come directly under the government of any given society. Hence, it is sometimes referred to as governmental administration. Specifically, this implies the administrative processes in government-owned or controlled organizations such as the civil service, the police, public corporations, etc. These processes that take place in these organizations constitute the area of practitioners and thus, the practice of public administration. The two views presented above have generated an age-old debate about the distinction between the theory and practice of public administration, otherwise known as the science-art controversy. The main source of this debate is closely related to the dual usage of the concept of public administration – as a field of study (discipline) or as a process (activity) of administering public affairs. While the two meanings are closely related, they are nevertheless different. Obviously, a great deal of the controversy or confusion must have emanated from the failure to agree on which public administration was being discussed; the discipline or the activity. As such, two schools of thought have emerged in this regard.

The first school of thought argues that public administration can only be meaningfully conceived of as an art; and not a science. It posits that the requirements of controlled experiment and measured observation which are replicated and tested are difficult, if not impossible, in the area. The school posits that the main concern of public administration is human behavior in the area of services performed or delivered by governmental agencies and this limits the immediate potentialities of science of public administration. This is because it diminishes the possibility of using experimental procedures which are crucial in the scientific method. In addition, they argued that human behavior is highly complex and unpredictable and these limit the applicability of the laws of public administration. To further buttress their argument, they posited that the influence of employee personal history, social work situation and attitudes on employee's performance as discovered in the Hawthorne experiments by Roethlisberger in 1928 support the unpredictability of human behavior. Consequently, since administration relates to human behavior in organizational context, there are obvious problems in formulating principles of human behavior which have universal application. The possibility of independent verification is limited because of the complexity of human nature. In addition, public administration is laden with numerous normative values, hence it cannot be a science.

The proponents of the science of public administration on the other hand assert that in administration, there are certain fundamental principles of general application that are analogous to those characterizing any science (Willoughby, 1927). Similarly, Urwick (1937) contends that there are certain principles which govern the association of human beings for any purpose, just as there are certain engineering principles which govern the building of a bridge. Consequently, approaching administration through individuals who participate in it, and by the study of the behavior of the individuals in their work situation or environment, uniformities based on human nature, may be described in the form of propositions and hypotheses that might be tested by observation and experimentation.

In the same vein, the comparative approach to the study of public administration as argued by Fred Riggs (1964) can be regarded as a genuine effort in making public administration a true science. The interest and efforts of scholars to develop universal theories of public administration that could be used to classify the multitude of administrative systems into a few that will be easy to use and provide results that are agreeable and also leads to generalizable administrative knowledge through empirical approaches and models can safely be regarded as a science (Laxmikanth, 2002). Such approaches and models that have been employed in comparative

public administration study include: the bureaucratic model; structural-functionalism; ecological approach; decision making approach; institutional method; and the behavioural model, among others. The bureaucratic model by Max Weber is described by Laxmikanth (2002) as the most influential and useful model. Dwight Waldo (1964) also describes it as a model that is set within a large framework that spans the history and cultures and relates administrative systems to important societal variables while focusing attention on the key structural and functional characteristics of the bureaucracy in almost all society.

To strike the balance and off-set the long-aged controversy, Adamolekun (1983) argues that, if the yardstick of controlled experiments and measured and testable observation are applied, the subject matter of public administration dominated by human beings engaged in activities that are constantly changing, public administration does not qualify to be called a science. However, if we use the term science in the sense of the spirit of enquiry and systematic research and investigation, as it is more commonly interpreted in the social sciences, then public administration is qualified to be called a science. Stemming from the foregoing therefore, we can safely conclude that when we refer to the 'practice' of public administration, the various forms of governmental organization and the processes that take place within them, we are concerned primarily with the 'art', the area which the practitioner dominate. However, when we refer to the creation and accumulation of the body of knowledge or the spirit of enquiry and systematic research and investigation, as it is more commonly interpreted in the social and management sciences, we have in mind the science of public administration, the activities that are of concern to the students and scholars of the subject.

Public Administration, a science and an Art

Public administration is both a science and an art. It is an embodiment of theory and practice. On the one hand, public administration is a theoretical or scientific discipline that seeks to create and accumulate knowledge about the administration of human affairs for public good. The goal here is to discover laws and postulate theories that can advance the most appropriate way to set up public organizations for efficiency and effectiveness in the management of both human and material resources to achieve governmental goals as well as having the capacity to explain social phenomena. In other words, it is an effort geared toward building scientific knowledge for the effective administration or management of public affairs. This is loudly remarked as a process marked by observation and testing using more accurate instruments and more informed logical reasoning (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

On the other hand, public administration as an art, is the process of experimenting with, putting into effect or implementing already agreed principles, policy or programme of action by the government. It is the action part of government, the most visible side of government as seen in the statutory mandate and function of ministries, departments and agencies of government. In other words, it is the means through which theories and formulated policies of government are put to practice or implemented for the purposes of development. It covers a vast number of activities such as health, education, environment, security, mining, agriculture, exploration of outer space to sweeping the streets. It is a cooperative group effort in a public setting that extends beyond the boundary of the executive branch. It covers the procedural and processual activities of all the three branches of government – executive, legislature, and judiciary – their interrelationships.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the science of public administration is tied to understanding the nature of public administration. Public administration is both science and art. However, it is remarkable to note that while public administration is not a science when the yardstick of controlled experiments and measured and testable observation are applied, it is a science if we use the term 'science' in the sense of the spirit of enquiry and systematic research and investigation, as it is more commonly interpreted in the social or management sciences.

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