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Organization Theory for Public Administration

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This book contains 415 pages plus a very rich bibliography, with 244 references, and an index. The book is divided into four parts which contains 12 chapters. It is also very well documented and highly organized.

The purpose of the book is "to use organization theory to illuminate, from a variety of perspectives, the organizational contexts within which public administrators act".

The book is divided into four parts: Part one lays the general framework for examining the world that confronts the public administrator. This part also provides a foil for examining the several theoretical perspectives discussed in Parts two and three. Part two examines the work of three theorists: Max Weber, Frederick Winslow Taylor and Chester Bernard. The main intent of part three is to see how various theoretical perspectives illuminate aspects of the public administration framework. It discussed Neo-classical theories, systems theories, later human relations theories, market theories, interpretive and critical theories and theories of emergence. The book concludes in part four with a summary comparison of the diverse perspectives along six dimensions that implicitly permeate the organizational literature. This summary reflects an appreciation of the relation of theory to administrative practice within the context of the later half of the twentieth century.

One very special feature of this book, is its stress on both the descriptive and normative aspects of public administration practice that together form a unique context for organization theory. The authors have attempted to show how that context

illuminates “the distinctively wicked character of the problems that public administrators are obliged to define, solve, or tame, if only temporarily and imperfectly”.

The authors rightly pointed out that the social values affirmed by organization theories are seldom the products of intellectual choices made prior to and independently of other analytical considerations. Nor are they arbitrarily added on to frameworks for organization of analysis after the fact. Rather, values are embodied in frameworks of analysis.

The authors argue that the practice of public administration is rife with theory; there is no substantive area of public administration (health, education, welfare, science) that is not replete with its own theoretical literature. But there is still a theory/practice gap. The authors argue that the increasing public disenchantment with government evidenced over the last twenty years is in large part the result of social control, which assumes that programmatic and regulatory action are the appropriate means of social problem. The book also argues that paralleling the operant theory is academic public administration’s historical belief in theory as a means for explanation and prediction for purposes of social control. This makes it nearly impossible for the literature to address the concerns of practitioners, namely, by providing them practical knowledge in a form useful for understanding their day-to-day public work settings. The authors believe that it would be essential to revise our thinking about both government action and public administration theory by reassessing our commitment to the idea of social control. Such a reassessment requires a quite different mind set for both acting as a public administration and theorizing about public administration.

The book refers to the representative and influential categorization of theory provided by Stephen K. Bailey who identifies four general categories of theory found in the public administration literature: **1)** descriptive-explanatory theory which encompasses those propositions and models whose intent is systematically to explain and predict action in or related to public administration, **2)** normative theory, whose objective is to establish future states prescriptively by elucidating the value premises on which administrative action should be taken and judged, **3)** assumptive theory, which includes those propositions which articulate the root assumptions about the nature of man and the tractability of institutions and **4)** instrumental theory which refers to those theories whose purpose is the application of knowledge to practical tasks of accomplishing administrative objectives.

The authors compared between the theoretical perspectives according to their practical interest to administrators. Six categories of interests were distinguished: **1)** the cognitive interest of the theoretical perspectives, **2)** the dominant metaphors implicit in the various perspectives, **3)** the primary units and levels of analysis of the perspective, **4)** the basic assumption that the perspectives made about the relation

of the individual to the organization and society, 5) the meaning and locus of rationality assumed by each perspective and 6) the meaning and locus of rationality assumed by each perspectives.

Each dimension suggests corresponding questions of practical interest to administrators; why does or should an administrator want to know about theory? What practical purposes does he hope that it will serve? What general images are, or might be, helpful in ordering his understanding of organizations and organising? Whose point of view should he take: that of an external, disinterested observer, a concerned citizen, top management and ordinary worker? How broadly or narrowly, given the present interest or circumstances of the administrator, should he focus his attention? Should people, himself included, be integrated more fully with organizations, protected from them, enabled to transcend them? Are organizations primarily instruments of social domination, or are they being associations of cooperative activity? Why we do? what we do? and what the consequences of that action will be? Does thought, precede action – or is it the other way round? In other words, does our experience mainly follow from our conscious decisions about goals and objectives, or do goals and objectives emerge out of our experience? What is most important: achieving goals being efficient, acting according to principle, understanding what is being done, promoting human and social processes, being left alone? Whose sides is the administrator on? Do “sides” have to be chosen?

The authors suggested a number of metaphors as concise images of the various theoretical perspectives. The neo-classical theories offer explanation and prediction to enable rational choice, given high uncertainty and imperfect information. The systems theories offer understanding factors related to organizational survival and stability, reducing uncertainty so as to achieve control over or adapt to the environment. The later human relations theories offer information on integrating individual and organizational needs through participative processes and democratic leadership styles. The market theories explain the behaviour of utility maximisation which helps the administrator respond to the diversity of client needs. Finally the theories of emergence help in understanding how noncoerced decisions produce shared experiences that enable the discovery of sensible goals.

The authors consider the problem of rational action an issue of immense practical significance since the meanings of rationality largely determine the particular manner in which organizational effectiveness and efficiency are construed and ranked in relation to other normative criteria of organizational performance. Differences of opinion about the meaning of rationality reflect differing priorities regarding the relation ends (and associated terms such as goals or purposes) and means (*i.e.* social processes). Additionally, theorists disagree as to the level of analysis in which rationality (or the possibilities for it) is located. At the root of these controversies is

the question of whether thought logically precedes action (experience) or action precedes thought.

The book identifies each theoretical perspective by the primary values that it represents or seek to promote. Thus, the locus of rationality for the neo-classical theorist is the decision maker. Its meaning of rationality lies in instrumental attainment of preconceived ends under conditions of uncertainty. While the locus of rationality of market theories is embodied in the self-interest individual. The rationality of these theories is the maximisation of individual and aggregate utility at least cost. And so on for other theoretical perspectives.

The authors argue that the practical value of theory is not mainly instrumental, rather, its value lies chiefly in informing the moral task of clarifying what we both do value and should value.

The author's stress on the moral character of theory may not find a general agreement among administrators. Many still believe that organizational decision makers could benefit from having a theory for the instrumental purposes of explanation, prediction and control. And while Sir Geoffrey Vickers' point about "More ambiguity" is valid, his views on the relevance of organization theory, which the present book would seem to share, are not, to say the least, widely held.

Despite the last comment, we believe the present book is a significant contribution to the literature on Public Administration and we recommend that every library should possess a copy of it. It would be a great asset in the library of those interested in the discipline of "Public Administration".