

# Rethinking Difference in Public Administration

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Participating in PAT-Net 2010 was an enriching experience that provided new insight and challenged me to reevaluate my ontological lens for approaching theoretical and practical public administration questions. The concept of *difference* was a recurrent theme throughout the conference and underpins much of my research. The treatment of difference, or dissimilar physicality, social, and political perspectives, in public institutions can be ambiguous, complicated, and contentious given the type of difference and context in which this difference is (de)valued. This reflection focuses on considerations surrounding difference in the preconference workshop for doctoral students on intellectual identity and Dr. Michael Spicer's plenary session, "In Defense of Politics in Public Administration: A Value Pluralist Perspective." From these sessions, I make connections to other literatures addressing difference and the value of these treatments of difference for public administration.

The preconference workshop encouraged doctoral students to identify and justify our intellectual commitments, using the notion of intellectual craftsmanship proposed by C. Wright Mills as a point of departure. We were asked to think critically about our substantive areas of research but, more important, to reflect on our ontological basis of what we know about these areas of interest. From my own perspective, a key point emerging from this workshop was the need for singularity in public administration or that the role of public administration should be to create space for each unique person as an individual. To do this, the idea of absolute particularity should be embraced by democratic society. Connecting the doctoral workshop to Dr. Spicer's plenary, his basic claim was that politics protects the plurality of perspectives in democratic society. Moving politics from scholarship to action, Dr. Spicer emphasized that politics is a reminder of the moral responsibility inherent in the act of public administration. Spicer explains, "A major reason why a defense of politics in administration would seem especially important right now is that our discipline is showing a renewed interest in a more scientific approach to governance and public management" (2010, p. 5). Like Spicer, Richard Box offers a similar critique:

While clearly embedded in the functionalist paradigm, [neoinstitutional scholars] incorporate the language of its critics . . . some examples

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include Lynn (1996) and Kettl (1997), both of whom express concern about the narrow foundation and the seeming hyperbole of New Public Management. Their responses, however, call for more rigorous methods of research, consistent with the post-exchange view of economics. (2004, p. 259)

Like Box (2004) and Spicer (2010), I take a radical humanist perspective—drawing primarily on Farmer (2005), Miller and Fox (2007), and Spicer (2010)—in suggesting that a critique of the basic assumption that difference should be managed or administrators should mitigate the consequences of difference within bureaucratic systems to produce greater efficiency misses the mark in achieving the larger, more fundamental goals of public administration.

To embrace difference through value-pluralism, a significant shift in thinking and practicing public administration is necessary. This drastic departure should involve a greater emphasis on the individual bureaucrat and her or his role in positively contributing to larger social issues, which involves both greater autonomy and responsibility, as opposed to tightening the span of control, hierarchical structure, or redefining labor divisions. Before the actual structure and function of public organizations change, the way in which administrative purpose is understood must be rethought. Farmer identifies what he believes to be the ultimate aim for public administration: “Let’s create a post-traditional consciousness that can revitalize governance and bureaucracy” (2005, p. ix). Farmer sees the need for practitioners as artists. He argued that “practice as art should include thinking as playing and justice as seeking. . . . The art of governance should seek to kill the king. One face of the king is the view of governance as a matter of machine systems and technicism” (p. 129). Farmer does not believe it is necessary to arrive at an alternative model or prescriptive method for the functioning of bureaucracy. Instead, “the post-traditional practitioner should be motivated as a regulative ideal by love rather than by mere efficiency. It should embrace unengineering as a symbol” (p. 177). The essential elements in moving away from the strictures of the traditional approach toward administration involve rethinking what we know about administrative behavior and changing our language and practice to allow for greater difference and democratic possibilities to take form. Farmer explains, “In aiming toward opening democracy, the practitioner as artist should share responsibility for changing the language. A new language is desirable as a constitutive feature of difficult political action” (p. 191). This understanding opens the door for greater awareness and responsibility of each bureaucrat’s identity, role, behavior, and potential for positively shaping democratic practice.

Yuval-Davis’s (1997a, 1997b) work on difference is key for understanding the complexity and barriers to value-pluralism in practice. Namely, Yuval-Davis questions how to recognize group difference (and socially constructed

identities), while, at the same time, accounting for individual subjectivity. This is one of the fundamental questions underlying most of Iris Marion Young's (1986, 1989, 1990) work as well. Yuval-Davis stated,

In the liberal tradition citizenship has been constructed in completely individualistic terms . . . [alternatively,] according to T.H. Marshall status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All those who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed. (1997a, p. 69)

As Marshall explains, "my primary concern is with citizenship, and my special interest is in its impact on social inequality" (Marshall & Bottomore, 1992, p. 17). He divided citizenship into three dimensions: civil, political, and social (p. 17). For Marshall, citizenship is defined as "a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed . . . social class, on the other hand, is a system of inequality" (p. 18). The primary concern for difference by this understanding is questioning the communal inclusion and equality of all citizens.

According to Iris Marion Young (1990), justice in a group-differentiated society requires social equality of all groups and a mutual understanding and affirmation of group differences by actively voicing different social perspectives. In practice, "attending to group-specific needs and providing for group representation both promotes that social equality and provides the recognition that undermines cultural imperialism" (Young, 1990, p. 191). Attempts to deny, mask, or eliminate difference will result in unfair and unrepresentative administrative practices. Young argues,

For a norm to be just, everyone who follows it must in principle have an effective voice in its consideration and be able to agree to it without coercion. For a social condition to be just, it must enable all to meet their needs and exercise their freedom; thus justice requires that all be able to express their needs. (p. 34)

Young's treatment of difference among social perspectives shares the basic assumption of Spicer's (2010) value pluralism, that difference should be accepted and promoted in political systems. At the heart of value pluralism is openness to voicing different perspectives, groups, and the willingness to recognize the Other. Young (1990) believes that this sort of acceptance can be an equalizing factor in public decision making. Rethinking the way difference is treated to provide legitimate inclusion is central in Young's theory of achieving a just public decision-making process. She contends, "Difference here always means absolute otherness; the group marked as different has no common nature with the normal or neutral ones. The categorical opposition of groups essentializes them, repressing the differences within groups" (Young,

1990, p. 170). Value pluralism builds on this understanding by rejecting the commonality of groups, whether by some form of identity, marker, or perspective, and by emphasizing the multitude of values within a particular public.

Public administrators have an obligation to attempt to remedy the most pressing social ills, and to do that, administrators should begin with thinking beyond the orthodoxy of administrative behavior and adopting a more critical lens for calling even the most mundane administrative tasks into question. This involves being more aware, responsible, and dynamic in promoting positive social change (Farmer 2005; Miller & Fox 2007; Spicer 2010). A critical issue surrounding the representation of difference that has not been adequately addressed by the literature is the basic question of what meaningful bureaucratic representation entails. Farmer (2005), Miller and Fox (2007), and Spicer (2010) all discussed more authentic approaches to representation, whether through recognition of difference, value pluralism, communitarianism, or Aristotelian ideals of citizenship. Yet, no scholarship goes as far as answering this key question of what the goal of bureaucratic representation should be—representation of individuals, groups, social perspectives, or more abstract forms of representation surrounding individual/collective values or assessments of merit in the form of educational or economic success. Theorizing around this theme has the potential to link the imaginative and creative administrative dimensions with tangible outcomes for the represented.

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