

THE VARIETIES OF THEORY AND THEIR ROLES IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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The truth is that the whole fabric of our knowledge is one matted felt of pure hypothesis ... Not the smallest advance can be made in knowledge beyond the stage of vacant staring, without making an abduction at every step.
(Peirce, 1901)

Claims regarding the nature of sound theory and the character of proper enquiry are conveyed by way of *Master narratives* (Boje, 1991), *Dominant discourses* (Gee, 1992), and *Cultural texts* (Denzin, 1992). By enabling and constraining what may be said intelligibly, these devices facilitate thought and communication. In the social sciences, these narratives, discourses and texts draw distinctions among *empirical (positive) theories* expressing opinions about what is the case objectively, *normative (evaluative) theories* expressing judgments about what is desirable or undesirable, *interpretive theories* seeking inter-subjective meaning, and *speculative theories* conjecturing beyond what is observable to what might be the case (Warren, 1989; Wagner, 1963). And the tales these narratives tell “suggest that theories grounded in certainties can and ought to replace the [other] approaches” (Warren, p. 606). For this reason, a movement is afoot to cut much of what currently weighs-in as social scientific theory from social science curricula .(Rehfeld, 2010, p. 466).

This paper argues that neglecting *normative, evaluative, interpretive* and *speculative* theory in Public Administration is a detriment to sound thinking and effective practice. Toward this end, the paper first delineates the rationale for either deemphasizing these varieties of theory or replacing them altogether with empirical theory. It goes on to identify the non-

empirical assumptions and ontological commitments of empirical theory and argues that these may only be justified by interpretive, normative and speculative theories. It concludes by demonstrating how *normative*, *interpretive* and *speculative theory* are necessary to progress and decision-making in several kinds of administrative contexts where empirical theory cannot attain our ends. Put another way, this paper argues that the move afoot to eliminate *speculative*, *interpretive* and *normative theory* from social science and its curriculum is an attempt to close the *theory-space* of the social sciences in a way that must reduce necessarily our capacity to make certain kinds of decisions and to progress towards whatever ends we think we might wish to seek.

THE RATIONALE

The subjects, objects and ends of the social sciences are multifarious, multifaceted, compound, convoluted, intricate, essentially contested, elusive, and unstable. Accordingly, the logics of enquiry are disparate and the theoretical discourses rife with values, hopes, fears and ideals. Often, these are held with some passion, and at times set forth with an exaggerating force of imagination. Additionally, the development of some theories betrays a tendency to the prescriptive rather than the descriptive and explanatory. Others include what can only be called *hypotheses* by analogy as they are propositions incapable of demonstration as true or false. And still others seek to advance certain concepts, principles and models as tools for comprehending behavior and establishing norms that are well beyond those that might follow straightforwardly from what is observable. Added to the mix is a tendency among a few to impart a numinousity to ancient notions, the results of which are a “nostalgia for paradise,” a bittersweet longing for the perfection and beatitude prior to the fall (Eliade, 1979, *passim*) that seems to be more pleasing aesthetically than illuminating.

Empirically oriented philosophers of science pose an offer of relief from the difficulties and frustrations inherent to theorizing in this milieu. A series of coherent statements is both true and worthy of the rubric *theory*, they propose, if (and only

if) those statements both (1) correspond closely to what is observed objectively or can be immediately inferred impartially, and (2) do a respectable job of describing and explaining those observations and inferences in such a way as promises to enable us to attain our ends reliably, both now and in the future. Additionally, coherent statements are theory if they are logically consistent with other theories we hold to be true, and they fail as theory if inconsistent with claims and beliefs held to be true by way of those theories.

In the *natural sciences*, defensible claims of clarity, accuracy, cogency and precision follow upon certain behaviors devolving from this use of the word *theory*. Not unexpectedly, then, it acts as a siren call to many in the *social sciences* who, in seeking to win for their disciplines the accolade of *true science*, strive to emulate and to promote the same practices characterized as *objectivity*, *meticulous conceptualization* and *methodological rigor* that are engaged in by those denoted *scientists* in the *natural sciences*. Cultural texts result, encoding sets of attitudes, values and beliefs that channel social science narratives concerning *theory* into expository discourses composed of existential, stative and equalitive propositions that follow directly upon methodologies that operationalize various means of verifying, falsifying, and increasing the verisimilitude of . Put another way, directing methodological practice by discourses denoting primarily one particular set of behaviors as *theorizing*, some social scientists seek to marginalize normative, interpretive and speculative theory, accomplishing precisely “the abandonment of critical discourse that marks the transition to a science” that was identified by Kuhn (1970b, 6).

Accordingly, *theory* comes to denote only one particular set of endeavors and occurs in certain sorts of sentences distinctly unlike those employed by the less empirically engrossed. For these reasons,

Many ... theorists [in the social sciences] share their colleagues' belief that [the sort of thing they call] theory is not part of a social scientific understanding. Some theorists claim to be concerned with interpreting ... rather than explaining its causal mechanisms, a

distinction other theorists have claimed makes theory a humanistic, not a scientific, endeavor. Some theorists “have come to see themselves as engaged in a specialized activity distinct from the rest of political science” primarily because they distance themselves from the broader scientific aspirations of the discipline. Other theorists are even more ... As Raymond Geuss claimed, “If one thinks that the mark of an ‘empirical science’ is to yield successful, reasonably precise predictions that go beyond the pronouncements of common sense in complex and changing situations, then it is a genuinely open question whether there are any social sciences.” And some political theorists, like Sheldon Wolin, believe their vocation should be an engaged and critical activity, involving advocacy, nuanced understanding, and deep appreciation, rather than a systematic attempt to know observer-independent facts about the social world (*references omitted*). (Rehfeld, 2010, p. 466)

These claims and beliefs are understandable, evolving naturally as perspectives within a framework most appreciative of only a narrow conception of analytical rigor; one that adheres to particular principles of verification, falsification and increasing verisimilitude, takes statements as meaningful only when either analytic or warranted by a minimum set of inductions that are in turn warranted by experience replicable under specified conditions. The constraints of this frame devalue, if only tacitly, interpretive theories as inductive leaps from literal or symbolic behavior to subjective meaning (Riesman, 1950; Becker, 1953; Goffman, 1956), normative theories as involving at best abducted and at worst imposed statements about what is favored or distained (Becker, 1953; Goffman, 1956), and speculative theories as proceeding by way of philosophical ruminations on human nature, life, the universe and everything that these entail (Lynd, 1939; Wolff, 1959; Thompson, 1961). However, this frame holds only so long as the theorist remains committed to certain presumptions that are derived by way of speculative, normative and interpretive theory and that prove

useful in many contexts of the *natural sciences* though not as nearly so in the social sciences.

ASSUMPTIONS AND ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS

Philosophers of science, keen upon identifying and systemizing those elements of scientific procedure accounting for the successes of the *natural sciences*, were once most certain that like an industrious tailor cutting and shaping a cloth until it fits precisely, scientists applying the methodological principles of the *natural sciences* would craft an ever clearer, more accurate, more consistent and certainly most precise accumulation of knowledge (Nagel, 1934, p. 195; Nagel, 1961, Ch. 1). In this narrative, *empirical theory* was at first distinguished from *normative, speculative and interpretive theory* by its commitment to verifiability by testable observation. But as all theories proved equally verifiable (Hempel, 1965), empirical theory was delimited alternatively by a commitment to falsifiable observations (Popper, 1963). But as all theories proved equally un-falsifiable (Lakatos and Musgrave, 1970, pp. 51-58), empirical theory came to be delimited by either the confirmation of an unlikely hypothesis or the falsification of a likely one (Chalmers, 1982, pp. 54-55).

These efforts to mark off *empirical theory* by bright lines were confounded by the realization that the notions of *falsifiable and verifiable observation* are part of a *master narrative*, an ideological or metaphysical script invented by scientists, projected outward onto the “great blooming, buzzing confusion” (James, 1890, p. 462) and then “read-back” as insights into reality, warranted as useful by experience, and attaining their vigor by way of auxiliary theories and hypotheses (Churchland, 1988). To say meaningfully that we saw an apple fall from a tree, for example, we need at the very least a theory of gravity, causation, consistency, and what counts as both trees and apples. This, in turn, implies that observation is meaningful only within a discourse that is itself laden with non-empirical theories since to be meaningful our observations must be interpreted and evaluated. This being our lot, any theory might be maintained, even in the face of the most distinct contradiction,

by making the most moderate of adjustments in the theory itself or any of its auxiliary theories (Churchland, 1986, p. 263). This realization renders confirmation, falsification and any combination of the two problematic necessarily (Abel and Oppenheimer, 1982). So, what counts as a proper observation is multi-theory dependent and these theories are ultimately constructions reflecting at best an agreement, however tacitly fashioned, on what is useful and works given our *form of life* (the sociological, historical, linguistic, physiological, and behavioral matrix within which we act and discourse) which, as Wittgenstein might say, is all that is the case.

By way of rejoinder, empiricists argue that the mildest alteration in the criteria of falsification is all that is required to maintain the demarcation between empirical theorizing and the rest. To wit: If,

“for the sophisticated a scientific theory T is *falsified* if and only if another theory T’ has been proposed with the following characteristics: (1) T’ has excess empirical content over T: that is it predicts *novel* facts, that is facts improbable in light of, or even forbidden by T; T’ explains the previous success of T, that is, all the unrefuted content of T is included (within the limits of observational error) in the content of T’; and (3) some of the excess content of T’ is corroborated” (Lakatos, 1970, p. 116. Italics in the original).

Empirical theory, that is, might be separated out on the basis of *verisimilitude* or closest fit. This criterion seems to minimize the role of norms and speculation while retaining falsification as the means of separating empirical theory from the rest. However, the postulated situation is most probably impossible. Unless T’ is always true, it cannot be always more accurate than T (Miller, 1975). This is because just the right aspects of the reality being described and explained can always be assembled in such a way as to reverse the relative verisimilitude of any two theories. Consider Table 1 (Abel & Oppenheimer, p. 49).

Table 1.
Reversing the Accuracy of Predictions

	X	Y	V= f(X, Y) = X + Y
Reality	8	0	8
Predictions by A	7	2	9
Predictions by B	4	4	8

Here, theory A predicts reality most accurately. However, depending upon our purposes, values, or curiosity, we can construct a new aspect of reality (V), the arithmetic sum of X and Y, that reverses the verisimilitude of A and B. Pragmatically, unless A is isomorphic with reality, so that V cannot happen, V always has a finite probability of occurring and B always has that probability of being the more *versimilitous* and so better at serving our purposes. Briefly put, all *empirical theories* that are not isomorphic with reality, are equally unverifiable, equally unfalsifiable, and equally subject to decreasing verisimilitude.

From this state of indeterminism in the natural and social sciences alike, we can infer reasonably that marginalizing normative, interpretive and speculative considerations in theory construction and choice are unrealistic. And this opens the narratives, discourses and cultural texts on theory to *normative, interpretive* and *speculative theory*. As illustrated above, it opens a space for norms, understandings and values in solving the problem as well as identifying what the problem might actually be. Additionally, “as theories may be *chosen* to fit only part of our world, they may also be *developed* to satisfy certain limited ends” (Abel and Oppenheimer, 1978, p. 52, italics in the original). And so, in that process, the inclusion of *normative, interpretive* and *speculative theory* increases the robustness of our ability to seek resolutions to our problems as well.

Some philosophers of science take refuge in either collectivity or *Realism*. The collectively disposed simply agree to commit themselves as a group to certain concepts, principles, assumptions, premises and practices that accomplish certain of

their desires. What emerges is a certain *Cultural Text*, a meaningful artifact echoing certain attitudes, values and beliefs that, when emulated, accomplishes fairly enough of what scientists and we as a people think we want. So, whenever an observation jangles the text, scientist strive to interpret what they've seen to fit the narrative (Chalmers, pp. 80-81); and only when this cannot be accomplished satisfactorily over a sufficient number of times, do those in this scientific community agree to rewrite certain portions of the text (Kuhn, 1962). Those marshaled to Realism maintain that as *empirical theory* and its methodologies are laden with auxiliaries, the empirical theories must be true quite literally; otherwise it is impossible to explain adequately the remarkable progress in science (Boyd, 1992).

In these ways, some philosophers of science persist in closing the theoretical narratives and discourses, remaining committed to the idea that *empirical theory* is distinct, and so endeavor to reserve the term *theory* to sets of general statements, derived from the most meticulous of what is agreed upon as legitimate observations, that accomplish what are agreed upon to count as descriptions, explanations and predictions about whatever is both interesting to them and can be cast as existing empirically. Appropriating the term to any other use, they are wont to hold, gives such charter to mistake that precautions of the most severe quarantine must be established against it. Though these adumbrations are taken as written out in immortal syllables, they are abundant demonstrably in uncertain promises and conserve in important ways, at least in the popular mind, the regrettable scientific discourse initiated by Galileo as he pronounced that in "the studies called humanities...there is neither truth nor falsehood... But the conclusions of natural science are true and necessary, and have nothing to do with human will" (Galilei, 1632).

THE NECESSITY OF NORMATIVE, SPECULATIVE AND EVALUATIVE THEORIES

Galileo's underestimation of the role performed by human will in empirical theory is thrown into sharp relief by considering how empirical theories operating in the *social sciences* seem absent a certain *depth* which results in both inductive uncertainty as to what a theory actually explains and predicts and a lack of efficacy in many contexts. Consider, for example, that empirical theory operates first by positing, at least tacitly, (1) the (speculative?) existence of raw kinetic process, from which emerge the interactive subjects and objects of theoretical discourse (e.g., the "big bang," "string" and chaos theories)—a discourse that forms our experience of raw process into concepts, thereby making reference, narrative and epistemology possible; (2) the (equally speculative?) independence of the emergent "causes" from both the events they generate and the context in which they operate—consequently, that they will go on acting as they have before; and (3) conditions (presumptively emergent as well) wherein the subjects and objects operating upon each other may be maintained, altered or destroyed.

For the moment, let's take as given all three (speculative and interpretive) assumptions, albeit they call for warrant via some theory. Still, the emergent is to us initially only visceral "sense-data." And so, on our way to cultivating discourse, we must evolve collaboratively a scaffold of concepts, principles and frameworks that we find useful in crafting our raw impressions into relationships and probabilities that describe and explain to us what we sense. This interpolation of conceptual frameworks between sense data and discourse transforms our understanding of those initial impressions into a human product; an interpretation that our speculations suggest will aid us in realizing something we value. Briefly, normative, speculative and evaluative theorizing must ground empirical theory. Of course, our values and interpretations might begin as simple intuitions. And we can then expect our empirical theories to be wanting in some respect and to then, themselves, initiate more

refined intuitions, by way of recompense, culminating in more and more progress toward sophisticated grounding theories.

Additionally, as our raw experiences, are initiated by sense-perceptions bounded by what we are capable as human beings of sensing, we perceive empirically only the surface of certain aspects of reality (consider Abbot's *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, 1884). In consequence, there is an inevitable inductive uncertainty as to what an empirical theory actually explains and predicts. Given this, to embark upon theory-making in the natural and social sciences alike we must agree, for some sufficient reason, to mark out, perceive, recognize and focus our attention upon certain phenomena and then to elaborate concepts, principles, epistemologies and trajectories of discourse that control the boundaries of acceptable descriptions and explanations of those phenomena in useful ways. From this exercise may arise either *open* or *closed theory-spaces* depending upon our purposes. If we choose an *open theory-space* it is because our purposes require communicative environments that promote highly dynamic and ongoing negotiations of what is useful and included in the focus of attention and what constitutes acceptable concepts, principles, discourses, narratives, descriptions and explanations. By way of securing this dynamic, *open theory-spaces* aspire to both unlimited discussion, free of all constraint and domination, and a substantive equality of opportunity to initiate and to perpetuate discourse by putting forward uncomfortable thoughts, or by calling claims and proposition into question, and by supporting or opposing statements, explanations, interpretations and justifications with reasoned argument. If we choose a *closed theory-space* it is because our purposes are best served by a dominate discourse, epistemology, narrative or ideology that excludes certain claims, propositions and interpretations, and offers limited opportunities to speak, perhaps excluding some from speaking altogether.

As *theory-spaces* are artifacts of our own devising, they are at different times and places regularly more or less *open* or *closed*; and so their receptivity to change is always a matter of degree. Both are rendered sound through an organized discursive core whose concepts and principles are logically coherent,

parsimonious, correctable, useful, and progressive. This discursive core includes a core complex of purposes, values, practices and behaviors (Kuhn's "disciplinary matrix"), and It grounds a periphery of related discursive complexes identifiable by their *family resemblances* to the core (Wittgenstein, 1953, *passim*). In open theory-spaces both the core and the periphery are negotiable and regularly challenged, the difference being that *open* spaces allow radical renegotiations of the core while closed spaces do not.

Any decision, then, to tag any grouping of statements as *proper theory*, as properly within the *theory-space* of social science, is defensible by an appeal to what we decide may be useful in context, to what is taken as a useful delimitation of not merely the physical and behavioral raw sense-perception but the particular cultural, social and linguistic milieu as well. That is to say, theories properly conceived are expedients in our way of behaving, the usefulness and propriety of which is bourn out or refuted by their consequences in contexts that are culturally and linguistically, as well as empirically, defined. Accordingly, the commitment to an *empirical theory* must entail necessarily ontological commitments to *interpretive*, *normative* and *speculative theories* as well. Otherwise the concepts, principles and criteria of its success could not be themselves defended.

For these reasons, normative, speculative and interpretive theories employing, for example, humanistic, hermeneutic and critical methodologies, recommend themselves to many as logics of inquiry from which important understandings might be gleaned (Ball, 1976). What *theorists* of these sorts suggest is that the inclusion of these discourses in the *theory space* provides useful and intriguing devices for providing *depth* to our theories by revealing inclinations, uncovering power relationships and incorporating divergent values into analysis, and by so doing uncover certain culturally fundamental conceptions, values, attitudes and conventions that are tied inextricably to particular notions of human purpose that are helpful toward the solution of problems and the accomplishment of desired ends in ways that empirical theories alone cannot. Put another way, empirical theory provides an important surface-layer interpretation of whatever we are

describing and explaining in the social sciences, but whatever we perceive is necessarily multi-layered. More complete explanations are provided by integrating the surface-level constructions with the phenomena they veil and with which they are implicated necessarily. This is accomplished by opening the *theory-space* to interpretive, speculative and normative theory.

THE PROBLEM IN THE CONTEXT OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Theorists in Public Administration are engaged in revealing the relationships and tendencies underlying political, social and economic events and conditions that impact meaningfully policy, administration and governance. Based on these revelations, they attempt to state general principles about the way the world of policy-making, administration and governance work. And given the accuracy, efficiency and fairness required of the profession, administrative practitioners and academics together work away at being conceptually precise, free of bias and well-substantiated by empirical evidence.

Now, as empirical description, explanation and prediction are underdetermined by observables and lacking by themselves in depth, it doesn't matter really whether the *realist* or the *collectivist* resolution to the problems with verification, falsification or increasing verisimilitude is accepted. Each theory constructed empirically is, in order to accomplish meaning, an artifice crafted by received concepts, principles, values, interests, hopes and assumptions, as well as certain tacitly accepted relationships among these constituents that are endogenous to the theories themselves. They are in this sense *ideologically* or *metaphysically* bolstered by a *master narrative* composing visions of human purpose and the nature of a good society, instrumentally pursued; and as such they are dependent ultimately upon the kind of systematic analysis traditionally practiced as *normative*, *interpretive* and *speculative theory*.

Accordingly, wherever social scientists forgather to share and discuss their findings it is only good form to proceed by first confessing that the *theory* under test is *mostly true* at best

(i.e., its verisimilitude is less than 1 necessarily). And should the results of any experiment suggest a theory's isomorphism with reality (i.e., that it is *completely true*, that its verisimilitude is 1), it is most typical to assume that the data are biased in some way not yet understood. Characteristic are such comments as, "The results ...are a bit embarrassing. We cannot report as single failure of the competitive solution. In fact, we might even hope for a few failures to render these results more believable (McKelevy & Ordeshock, 1978a, pp. 28-29). And in a later version of the same paper, the authors offered some possibilities.

Clearly, much additional analysis and experimentation is required. The subjects in these experiments are not known for their lack of competitiveness and, doubtless, this improves our results. Further, alternative configurations of preferences and utility functions should be considered. (McKelevy, *et al*, 1978b, p. 614).

So, as the likelihood of isomorphism is understood to be so remote, theory construction and "choice must depend upon another standard, e.g., its relevance to important social concerns or its efficacy in resolving immediate problems" (Abel and Oppenheimer, 1978, p. 52); that is, upon speculative, normative and evaluative criteria as to what will likely prove instrumental to ends we believe we desire (Abel and Oppenheimer, 1978, *passim*).

It is well to keep all of this this in mind when theorizing in Public Administration particularly as Public Administration is singular among the social sciences. This singularity not only conditions its logic of inquiry but points to the need for something more than empirical theory. To put things briefly, the profession enjoys a distinct nature arising from the not especially popular fact that Public Administration is simultaneously a scientific, socio-psychological, economic and political endeavor (Abel and Sementelli, 2003). Accordingly, governance as experienced by real people is, in point of fact, those interpretations of law, executive order, and judicial decision that are both made and put into practice by public administrators.

And it is no secret in the circles of administration, that the interpretation of any given legislative, executive, or judicial charge requires administrators to identify and prioritize not only the empirical evidence of what might work best in a utilitarian sense, but the social values, attitudes and beliefs that are implicated, and to make some very hard choices when those cultural artifacts come necessarily into conflict.

More pointedly, administrators fashion and implement policy (1) by interpreting the perspectives, attitudes, values and beliefs of politicians, those they regulate and to whom they provide services, the public at large, and their assembled personnel, (2) consulting the data concerning which of many workable policy choices are within the *Overton Window* (i.e., within the *acceptable* –to- *popular* range of both public and political reaction), (3) making value choices while speculating on the range of possible consequences (political, social and economic) that those choices will have not only immediately but as precedents and rationales for government intervention and practice (Yates, 1981, 306), and (4) speculating upon how successful they might be in securing an inter-subjective experience of good governance (Abel and Sementelli, 2003). No other profession, neither medicine, nor engineering, nor the law, requires its practitioners to engage in both political and social-scientific endeavors, and then, regardless of the fruits of those endeavors, to correctly assemble and properly operate political, economic, and social-service institutions in accurate, efficient, and fair ways that may be said honestly to improve governance (Abel and Sementelli, 2003). And typically, to accomplish all of this, public administration must operate on a regular basis at that point where agreements break down, and where rival interpretations, speculations and normative principles demand opposing conclusions as to what we should do when faced with the same or similar situations. As all of these demands enjoy strong proponents in positions of formal, informal, legal, and situational power, to whom the administrator must answer, the consistent use of any definitive course of action is most often precluded, regardless of any obvious empirically concluded advantage that it may boast. This is reflected, of course, in administrative law, a governing principle of which is that no

formulaic due process may be employed in making administrative decisions; the controlling issues being whether the administrative behavior in question was within the agency's statutory authority, and whether the decision itself was arbitrary or capricious, quite broadly defined in terms endogenous to the situation at hand (*Heckler v. Campbell*, 461 U.S. 458 (1983)).

Second, Public Administration is unique in that it involves, more than does any other profession, the manipulation of ideologies, materials, and technologies by both the clumsy and the expert; and these manipulations may be both enabling and resistant. Each administrative decision, for example, is subject in its execution to a wide array of agents who function in contexts of trust and distrust, cooperation and conflict, competition and cooperation, and the a more or less accurate exchange of ideas and information, whether face-to-face or by the effective and ineffective uses of the communications media. And finally, public administrating is unique in that its high realm of concepts and theories, that realm of discourse comprising discovery and justification that is accomplished through mental acts of imagining, conjecturing, confirming, and refuting, a discourse so vaunted and common in the natural and social sciences, struggles against the inertia of tradition, against the regularity sought by those who labor in the trenches of each bureaucracy, and against the skepticism that meets any discourse of innovation.

This leads many practitioners and scholars of Public Administration to view their profession as a field rather than a discipline, a field encompassing a vast and heterogeneous range of paradigms, "schools of thought," theories, narratives and "guiding ideas." As a consequence, some argue that Public Administration lacks any single, common set of practices, purposes, values and behaviors upon which scholars and practitioners might settle to build theory. It follows, in this trajectory of discourse, that Public Administration should not be so much concerned about theory-building as about developing and elaborating a "framework" that sorts out, compartmentalizes, makes ready or "integrates relevant knowledge from whatever origin" as might be (and proves to be) of use to practitioners and scholars (Rutgers, 1998, 554). In fact, many of these scholars go

so far as to suggest that the development of a unified body of theory in Public Administration is “prohibited” (Raadschelders, 1999, 298), or that such a body of theory is undesirable as it unnecessarily confines both practice and scholarship in disagreeable ways (Rutgers, 2001). Hence, the complexity that results from encompassing many different and sometimes competing definitions of the proper subject matter and knowledge base for Public Administration leads many to conclude either that Public Administration suffers from an inherited “identity crisis” (White, Adams, and Forrester 1996) or that this confusion really constitutes the actual distinctive, defining characteristic of “Public Administration (Rutgers 1998). All of this argues against the likelihood of rigorous inquiry and theory-building, and this argument is in its turn bolstered empirically by studies of the research methodologies peppering the Public Administration literature and concluding that research and theory in Public Administration lack an analytical rigor commensurate with the norms of empirical science (Stallings and Ferris, 1988; Houston and Deleven, 1990), in part because the research focuses on problems relating to administrative practice rather than on developing and testing theoretical propositions.

But these assessments seem both retrogressive and beside the point. As to the first, at one time, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries perhaps, science was about primarily (1) discovering and naming what entities (subjects, objects and events) exist (or perhaps that can be said to exist discursively), (2) grouping, categorizing, relating hierarchically, and subdividing those entities according to definitive similarities and differences, and (3) employing those subjects, objects and events categorized in particular ways in the contrivance of ideas about a reality considered, in the mainstream, subject to universal principles that could be expressed in by laws (Menand, 2010, *passim*). This approach indeed held useful theorizing in abeyance, encouraging a jumble of intellectual movements mired in the complexity resulting from encompassing many different and sometimes competing definitions of the proper subject matter and knowledge base for science and yielding an identity crisis that was resolved by the success of statistics and probability theory applied to evolutionary theory, cultural

pluralism, legal realism and experimental psychology. The result was to inure science to probability and the relationships among phenomena, moving it away from mere taxonomy and the plethora of inferences therefrom that resolved scientists into warring camps without method of resolution. Returning to that *status quo ante* as a default position in Public Administration would not appear useful.

As to the second point, it is not empirical rigor alone that is the standard. The point is to dive deeply into the phenomenon under study by way of numerous forms of information collected for further examination through a variety of methodologies applied from an expanding number of angles and advanced or suggested by different sorts of people in different sort of circumstances developing different sorts of theory (i.e., speculative, evaluative interpretive). Its intent is not to confirm or to increase empirical evidence but to enrich empirical descriptions and interpretations (explanations), thereby orienting empiricism to new horizons. Finally, developing and testing theoretical propositions by way particular observational and inductive techniques is considered sound (rigorous) in the domain of natural science only because it has proven useful to the resolution of conundrums and the solving of problems that applied scientists encounter in practice.

THE ROLES OF THEORY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

In this milieu normative, interpretive and speculative theories are important to include for the reasons noted; but they important in their own right as well. They accomplish by themselves something other than grounding and *stage setting* for empirical investigation. Put succinctly, they are indispensable to practitioners in Public Administrators as they go about daily organizing, managing and leading, by accurate, efficient and fair means, to the end of securing the inter-subjective experience of good governance (Abel and Sementelli, 2003). Herein lays a conundrum. This end is only achievable if the both administrators and recipients of public goods and services value the decisions made and the policies pursued. And constraining

theory to empirical theory puts everyone at a distinct disadvantage in this regard.

Regarding good governance, public administrators, to value what they do, are keen on their obligations in their role as professionals and good citizens. Seemingly, to have such obligations demands at a minimum that they can perceive some good following upon their particular role, whether by the regulations they promulgate, or their actions at implementation, or by following well their empowering legislation, or by their fidelity to the democratic cause. Often this perception follows primarily from some descriptive or justificatory theory which takes the place of arbitrariness and makes us feel that the quality of our choices and behaviors are not a matter of indifference. To confirm that some good is served, some reference to some kind of general theory is necessary to confirm that following settled policies, procedures and doctrines is a good thing to do; good in the sense that such policies, procedures and doctrines, and their implementation, serve some end that is sufficiently worthy not only to obligate but to commend them to our sense of contribution.

Consider, for example, whether fining a violator of environmental regulations is good. Under a retributive theory, it may be. Still, to value the decision, administrators and the public need a theory of agency, a theory of causation, a theory of probability, and a theory of deterrence. Additionally, retributive theories presume that one entity, one person, or group or corporation, may be identified readily and clearly, and that they acted with a clear understanding. But what if a particular kind of violation results from a division of labor? Dividing up the behaviors that taken together make a violation, with different individuals taking part in different stages with no clear indication of the probability of violation or how it will all sum up, renders responsibility less obvious. So we need a different theory. And why assume retributivism? Why not a theory of reparation or a theory of social harmony? Fundamentally, we start with retributivism as its postulates of agency, responsibility, and causation are the twine of our social form of life, despite the fact that deterrence theory has little empirical confirmation (Wright *et al*, 2004). It is normative, interpretive and speculative theory

that carries the burden here. Briefly, interpretive theories facilitate choices and practices that administrators can believe the public will understand as meaningful, and all three non-empirical theory-types facilitate the administrator's belief that they are choosing and acting accurately, efficiently and fairly.

Toward the goal of accuracy, speculative and normative theorizing serves where there is no precise language in an agency's charter or regulations that covers a particular good or service. Consider the FCC, created by the Communications act of 1934. It is empowered to restrict indecent and obscene broadcast material under the Interstate Commerce Clause. The act contains, however, no obvious grant of power over the internet. Does the Act allow a principled extension to the novel case? It is speculative, interpretive and normative theory that allows, or disallows, the kind of generalization that extends regulation to new areas. Likewise, the Act embraces no definition of obscenity or indecency, leaving the determination of these terms to the normative and interpretive speculative cogitations of administrators, their adjudicative bodies and the courts.

Toward efficiency, speculative and normative theories serve a heuristic function. Rules of thumb are easier to know and remember than is an Everest of finely grained data. And it is good for those whom administrators serve to hold such theories as well as it lessens confusion and heightens the acceptability of self-executing policies and regulations. By serving a heuristic function, descriptive and justificatory theories serve the *good* of efficiency most roundly.

Finally, toward the end of fairness, the goal is to deliver high quality goods and services accurately and efficiently to people differing only by the fact that they happen to occupy niches isolated by our politico-socioeconomic scheme. Suppose, for example, that public schools are accorded public funds for the transportation of students while parochial schools are not. Although compartmentalized in different areas of policy for purposes of the establishment clause, one might well think that there is no relevant difference between such institutions for purposes of transportation. One simply cannot decide in any but

a capricious way when or if it ever is that both are deserving of like treatment absent some theory as to what are relevant similarities and differences. And this cannot be decided empirically, but only evocatively by way of some judgment as to the justice of the potential discrimination. It is *speculative, interpretive* and *normative theory* that allows one to see and evaluate such difference and similarities as may obtain.

One reason to construct such theories, then, is to enhance equity in the delivery of public services. All in all, then, *empirical, normative, interpretive* and *speculative* theorizing weave a single wickerwork of abductions, every strand of which is necessary to believing that any description, explanation or prediction we devise is sufficient, nearly enough, for us to surmise what is probably going on, or what we should probably do, or what is quite likely to secure something we are likely to consider progress. And in those instances when all observation, interpretation, speculation, and evaluation fail, we can do no better than to rely upon “any flight of imagination provided this imagination ultimately alights upon a possible practical effect” (Peirce, 1903). So we might conclude that rather than closing the theory space we ought to broaden it; that we ought to include creative flights of fancy along with *empirical, speculative* and *normative* theorizing.

CONCLUSION

Theories are our attempt to know not reality or even the social world, but how to successfully go on together by way of solutions to specific problems emergent from specific domains that we choose for sufficient reason to define and investigate. That investigation begins and continues in a theory-space that may be more or less open, depending upon our purposes and what turns out to promote our ability to get on to where we want to go. Demonstrably, we cannot be successful at such endeavors in any discipline by closing of the theory space to *normative* and *speculative* theory. What is more, in Public Administration going *on together* means providing *good governance*; and that takes work at the interstices of black and white where the incline of the balance sways precariously and the success or failure of

decisions, policies and programs depends upon multifarious, complex and self-altering dynamics. What imperils us most in such a context is an absence of self-criticism, innovative thought, and the best decision-making that follows upon those accomplishments, regardless of whether what they counsel is isomorphic with reality.

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