"Mainstream" Public Administration Over Time: A Topical Content Analysis of *Public Administration Review*

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This article focuses on the question, how have the theoretical and substantive concerns of the public administration community changed over time? In other words: What is "mainstream" public administration and how has it changed? To answer this question, we analyzed the contents of a sample of over 50 years of *PAR* articles.

The Classification Scheme

Content analysis presupposes the existence of a scheme of content categories for use in text classification. The task of distinguishing the appropriate category for a particular *PAR* article required identification of the salient attributes of that article and matching these attributes with the characteristic attributes of one of the content categories. Articles in the same category were presumed to have similar identifiable attributes.

The idea behind this approach was to use established empirical methods to answer the research question by drawing inferences from the frequency with which *PAR* articles appeared in the various categories. The frequencies of articles in categories were presumed to reflect the relative emphasis placed by public administrators and academics on the corresponding activity areas. Likewise, changes in these frequencies over time were presumed to reflect corresponding changes in emphasis in the field.

In addition, different people must classify the same article in the same way. It turned out that the pertinent categories presented themselves with notable clarity

through examination of consistencies across introductory public administration textbooks; a more-or-less common classification scheme was used by textbook authors. Such categories offered a highly respectable approximation to administrative activity. Thus an article about public finance could be readily categorized differently, for example, from an article about human resources management or organizational theory. The introductory textbooks upon which the category scheme was based included Denhardt (1991), Henry (1989), Palumbo and Maynard-Moody (1991), Rosenbloom (1988), and Straussman (1990). Through a review of these texts, we clustered public administration interest and activity into 14 distinct categories. Table 1 presents abbreviated definitions of the topical categories derived from the texts reviewed.

Expectations

It was hypothesized that the emphasis given to the various categories in *PAR* would shift over the years. For example, we expected that the percentage of articles devoted to the category intergovernmental relations would be fairly limited during the 1940s and 1950s but would then blossom during the 1960s as intergovernmental programs expanded under the administration of Lyndon Johnson. Interest in intergovernmental relations was then expected to remain fairly high during the 1970s as block grants and revenue sharing appeared and as scholars wrote of an overloaded and ineffective system. Concern was expected to remain at a fairly high level during the early

1980s as debate about President Reagan's attempted devolution of federal programs to the states occurred.

A different pattern might be expected concerning the number of articles dealing primarily with ethics in public administration. A concern with ethical issues in government might be viewed as a fairly recent phenomenon—reaching back to about the Watergate era. From an academic perspective, however, a significant concern with ethical issues in public administration is probably even more recent—a characteristic of the 1980s.

The two categories, implementation and program evaluation/planning, were expected to exhibit similar patterns of interest. Interest in implementation essentially dates back only to Pressman and Wildavsky's book, *Implementation* (1973). The concern that they, and others, raised—that many government programs do not work—led legislative bodies and grantors to require that planning and evaluation be an integral part of most programs. In addition, it was really not until the 1960s that evaluation methodology was firmly developed (Campbell and Stanley, 1963).

Other categories are also relatively new areas of interest primarily because they are reasonably new developments. They include public policy analysis, management science and technologies, and decision making. Policy studies as a "branch" of political science was born in the 1960s but might have reached its zenith in the 1970s. This is not to suggest that policy studies was merely a fad—it is still an important area of focus and is supported by several strong professional associations—the Policy Studies Organization (PSO) and the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM). However, one might expect that more public policy articles would have appeared in *PAR* during the 1970s than during any other decade.

The categories management science and technologies and decision making were both be expected to make a significant appearance in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Both are methodologically sophisticated and are generally explicitly quantitative. Both have grown in sophistication and importance for public administration alongside computer hardware and software developments.

Table 1
Abbreviated Definitions of Topical Categories in Public Administration

Category	Definition
Government and organizational behavior	Focuses on one or more of four areas: upon some aspect of the relationship between actors, institutional arrangements, decision situations, and changes in what people or organizations actually do over time; upon the contradiction between the need for bureaucrats to have enough discretion and power to get things done while remaining answerable to a democratic system; upon "theory" in public administration; and upon traditional organization
Public management	Focuses on the internal and management aspects as opposed to the external and policy aspects of governance: control of the relationships between enduring structures within government agencies and the routine and technology of governance; dealing explicitly with matters of manipulation and control; management by objectives, quality circles, improving effectiveness or incentives.
Human resources	Discusses personnel systems, the merit system, job classifications, compensation, conditions of unions, strikes, discrimination, affirmative action, and comparable worth.
Budgeting and finance	Focuses on the roles of the budget, approaches to public budgeting, politics of budgeting, the budgetary process, financial management, risk management, government accounting, taxation, revenue sources, and fiscal stress.
Program evaluation and planning	Discusses the need/purpose of evaluation, evaluation methodology, or the results of an evaluation of a public program; also covers program planning, land-use planning, zoning, and strategic planning (also cost benefit or cost effectiveness analysis).
Introspection	Focuses on "public administration": defines public administration or discusses the quality of research in public administration, courses in public administration, or teaching public administration.
Testimonials	Focuses primarily on persons who have made particular contributions to public administration.
Decision making	Focuses primarily upon some aspect of the relationship between actors, institutional arrangements, decision situations, and changes in what people or organizations actually do over time.
Intergovernmental relations	Focuses primarily on the political, organizational, or institutional aspects of interagency relations between governmental units at the local, state, or national level.
Ethics	Focuses on matters relating largely to normative and prescriptive issues concerning administrative codes of conduct, morals, principles, beliefs, doctrines, outlooks, philosophies, or values.
Management science and technologies	Focuses on some aspect of systems theory or information storage and processing technology—such as linear modeling, operations research (excluding decision theory), computer simulation, decision support systems, management information systems, expert systems—among others—as used in public administration.
Public policy analysis	Gives policy makers specific information about the range of available policy options and the advantages and disadvantages of the various options.
Implementation	Focuses on the extent or the process of governance: either whether the right people are receiving the services or whether a sufficient number are receiving them.
Administrative law	Focuses on (a) the Administrative Procedures Act or some other such explicitly legal concern regarding the attempt to establish uniformity, fairness, or the rules for adjudication by administrative agencies or governments, or (b) the conditions under which interested parties may appeal rulings by administrative agencies, or (c) the interface of law and management.

Note: Abbreviated definitions are presented to conserve space. Full definitions are available from the authors.

A marked and steady decline in testimonials was expected over the 50-year period. In the early days of public administration, articles about the heads of various federal agencies were quite common. Today's testimonials are largely limited to discussions of the influence a handful of academics have had on the field.

Interest in introspection, on the other hand, is probably growing. During the late 1980s and into the 1990s, the academic arm of public administration appeared to be devoting significant attention to issues in this field. The present article is an example.

One might expect public management to show a slow but steady growth over the entire 50-year period. Public management is a major component of the reform movement, particularly in local government. Interest in reform, particularly structural reform, continues to grow.

Budgeting and finance was considered unlikely to exhibit any kind of steady pattern at all. Interest in budgeting and finance in public administration was hypothesized to peak according to economic events. For example, one might expect to see an increase in the number of articles on budgeting and finance as governmental expenditures increase rapidly, during periods of rapid inflation, or during recessions.

Human resources is probably an enigma. It was difficult to hypothesize how this component of public administration has behaved. On the one hand are the long-standing traditional concerns of civil service reform and public employee unions and collective bargaining. On the other hand are the more recent concerns with equity in hiring, equal opportunity employment, racial discrimination, and sexual bias and harassment.

What finally must be considered are the two categories empirically defining public administration that can be hypothesized as losing influence—administrative law and government and organization behavior.

Having specified the content categories, we took a random sample of articles from a universe of 52 volumes of *PAR* issues. One issue was selected at random from each of the volumes. We independently reviewed, assigned, and recorded each article in each of the selected issues into 1 of the 14 categories.

To evaluate our reliability, we counted only those articles that we both had agreed should belong in at least one of the categories. In other words, if either of us could not "fit" the article into 1 of the 14 categories, that article was discarded from the analysis altogether on the grounds that we could not agree it was a public administration article. The resulting sample contained 240 PA articles. The number of these that we both had assigned to the same category were then counted by category. If we agreed on the classification for a particular article, it counted as one agreement for the corresponding category. If, however, we disagreed on which category should contain a particular article, then each category was credited with half of an agreement.

In the end, the appropriate category for 75.7 percent of the articles was thus agreed upon. This indicated the overall level of agreement, or the degree of consistency, between our assignments of articles to categories.

However, this measure of the overall level of agreement was imperfect as a measure of reliability. The overall level of agreement depended upon the probability of an agreement in each particular assignment, which in turn depended upon the number of categories. In general, a tradeoff existed between the number of categories in the classification scheme and the probability of attaining any given overall level of agreement at random. We calculated the probability of arriving at agreement at random at a 75.7 percent level of agreement for 240 articles, given 14 categories. The appropriate statistical approach to this situation is the commonly known Bernoulli process; and the probability involved is infinitesimal (3.02×10^{-221}). This result suggests an extremely high degree of consistency between us, and a high degree of reliability in the analysis.

Administrative law, as a significant component of public administration writing today, is peripheral. One might imagine that administrative law as a field of study was reasonably important in the early portion of the 50-year period but that it linearly declined as a focus of attention in public administration to its current diminished status.

Government and organization behavior as a category includes both organization theory and organization behavior. One suspects that the days of innovative organization theory have long been over and attention to organization behavior has largely been superseded by bureaucratic behavior and public management. Government and organization behavior have always been a major component of public administration and probably always will be, yet their influence on the field may well be declining.

Findings

Table 2 shows the percentage of *Public Administration Review* articles in each category for ten-year increments. Over the time period, surprisingly little change has occurred in the major subjects of concern to the public administration community as determined by articles in *Public Administration Review*. In 1940-49, almost 60 percent of the articles in *PAR* were in three areas—government and organization behavior, public management, and human resources. By the 1980-91 period, articles from these three areas still accounted for about 60 percent of *PAR* articles.

Within these three classifications, however, some interesting variations developed between the time periods. For example, more than one-third of the *PAR* articles during the 1960s covered human resources.

On the other hand, the 1970s was the decade of interest in public management, with 30 percent of the articles having a public management thrust. One might conjecture that public management was popular during this period because of an increase in interest in organizational development (OD) in the 1970s as a result of the emphasis on popular participation in public discussions in the late 1960s. Reaction to the Vietnam War, urban riots, and a culture of participation extended to organizations and resulted in a focus on "hands on" in organizations, which reached its zenith in the 1970s.[1] This period was a grand experiment with "participatory management." Then, in the 1980s, the trend reversed and policy considerations became dominant.

The articles in four areas of the classification scheme rose and fell in popularity much as expected. Interest in budgeting and finance peaked in the 1960s and the 1980s. The 1960s was an era of budgetary reform as scholars and practitioners discussed the issues of program budgeting, zero-based budgeting, and PPBS. High inflation and high interest rates in the late 1970s and early 1980s, coupled with the recessions of 1981 and 1982, spurred interest in budgeting and finance again. But this time the interest was in coping with the fiscal stress brought about by these economic events.

Articles concerning program planning and evaluation became somewhat popular during the 1970s. This was expected and followed the methodological developments and legislated program evaluation requirements of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Testimonials, as expected, were popular during the 1940s and 1950s. By the 1960s and 1970s, however, *PAR* showed little interest in publishing testimonials. Interest in introspective articles comes and goes. The 1950s and 1980s were the decades when *PAR* authors were most intent on examining public administration as a field and their work in the field. Most recently, this has been true of public administration research. In the late 1980s, a number of introspective articles appeared which were fairly critical of the research done in public administration.

What of the other classifications developed from the public administration textbooks? Ethics is perhaps the most surprising. Articles on ethics in public administration received very little play during the 1980s (3.17 percent). On the other hand, no articles on ethics in public administration were found in the sample articles from the 1960s or 1970s.

Administrative law was another surprise. According to our content analysis, articles on administrative law have never been popular in *Public Administration Review*.

Finally, there are the other categories: intergovernmental relations, implementation, decision making, and management science

and technology. Intergovernmental relations received a small flurry of interest in the 1980s, but the other categories were apparently dormant.

Discussion

What conclusions can be drawn from a content analysis of *PAR* articles over the past 51 years? There is the relationship between the topics covered in public administration textbooks and the articles published in *PAR*. The texts clearly cover much more diverse subject matter than that covered by articles in *PAR*. There may be a public administration that is covered in the classroom that differs from the public administration presented in *PAR*.

If public administration, as defined by the texts, is as broad as it appears to be, what accounts for the narrower focus of *PAR*? There are a number of possibilities. One is that research scholars in public administration have interests beyond *PAR*'s mainstream focus and are turning toward more specialized publications as outlets for their research. A case was made a number of years ago that political science was a discipline of generalists and specialists (Bingham and Vertz, 1983), with the specialists having their own networks and publication outlets, which are more important (and prestigious) to them than publishing in a generalist publication.

If this is the case, then journals like *Evaluation Review, Policy Studies, Policy Studies Review, Administrative Science Quarterly*, and various law reviews may be the preferred outlets of research scholars working outside of the more traditional areas of public administration.

A second reason for *PAR*'s apparent narrower focus may concern the editorial policy and review process. It may be that over the years editors, editorial board members, and reviewers have had a bias toward the long-standing concerns of public administration. If this is the case, then it is certainly understandable that *PAR* reflects these concerns.

However, a more likely explanation lies in *PAR*'s audience. As the journal of the American Society for Public Administration, *PAR* must attempt to satisfy both practitioners and academics. It may be that attempting to reach a mixed practitioner/academic audience is a limiting factor, and the articles in *PAR* may represent the common ground deemed to have utility by both camps.

There is no way to examine empirically these three possible explanations of the findings reported here. However, we do have some thoughts on the matter.

We started this article by asking the question: What is mainstream public administration? Following the precedent in other fields, we proceeded to answer the question by undertaking a content analysis of public administration's leading journal. The analysis showed an unequivocal and wide disparity between the contents of the journal and the classification scheme spelled out in introductory textbooks. This disparity appears to be central to what we found authors find to be coherent view of mainstream public administration (Rescher, 1979).

> **If** *public administration, as defined by the texts, is as broad as it appears to be, what accounts for the narrower focus of PAR?*

There is the matter of how to define the term "mainstream." On the basis of our analysis, there seem to be two primary options. If it is assumed that *PAR* defines mainstream public administration, then—as this analysis has shown—the stream is narrower than that of the texts. The difficulty then arises as to how to systematically integrate the great deal of additional content in the introductory public administration texts into one's view of public administration. In essence, this difficulty is that of specifying a set of generalized criteria with which to distinguish mainstream public administration from the rest of the field. If, on the other hand, it is assumed that the introductory texts rather than *PAR* define mainstream public administration, then the content of *PAR* appears to reflect but one vision of the overall field.

Faced with these options, and given the fact that *PAR* has the dual role of appealing to academics and practitioners alike, we believe that the latter definition is more suitable. The fact that the content of the articles published in *PAR* must appeal to the interests of these two groups appears to have narrowed the range of content. It should be noted that this by no means implies anything about the depth of the articles or about how dynamic they are. In any case, we assume the latter definition of mainstream public administration, and so include the broader content of

Table 2

Percentage of *PAR* Articles per Category per Decade, 1940-1991

Category	1940-49	1950-59	1960-69	1970-79	1980-91
Government and organizational behavior	18.39	15.63	25.00	28.16	25.40
Public management	17.24	25.00	17.65	30.10	19.84
Human resources	21.84	15.63	35.29	14.56	16.67
Budgeting and finance	4.60	6.25	11.76	6.80	11.11
Program evaluation/planning	9.20	3.13	1.47	13.59	2.38
Introspection	4.60	8.33	2.94	3.88	8.73
Testimonials	6.90	12.50	2.94	0.00	1.59
Decision making	2.30	1.04	0.00	0.97	3.17
Intergovernmental relations	11.49	6.25	0.00	0.00	4.76
Ethics	1.15	2.08	0.00	0.00	3.17
Management science and technology	1.15	0.00	2.94	0.97	0.00
Public policy analysis	0.00	2.08	0.00	0.97	1.59
Implementation	2.30	2.08	0.00	0.00	0.00
Administrative law	1.15	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.59
Total percent	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
Total number of articles	*43.5*	*48*	*34*	*51.5*	*63*

the introductory textbooks. We thus fully agree with Charles Goodsell: "Mainstream public administration is not a single bastion of thought, but rather an overlap of many fields."[2] The question is: Can, or should, *PAR* articles attempt to reflect public administration as broadly as that which scholars have defined in their textbooks or is it enough that *PAR* reflects a narrower part of the overall field?

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Notes

1. Private conversation with Dr. James Banovetz, professor of public administration, Albert A. Levin Chair of Urban Studies and Public Service, Cleveland State University, February 20, 1992.

2. Private conversation with Dr. Charles T. Goodsell, professor of public administration, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and visiting scholar, Levin College of Urban Affairs, Cleveland State University, February 21, 1992.

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