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A research agenda for public administration

Andrew Massey (Ed.) (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar; 2019; ISBN: 978-1-788117-24-1; 256 pp; £100)

A Research Agenda For Public Administration is a collection of essays edited by Andrew Massey, Professor of Politics at the University of Exeter. While written to present a new research agenda, the book also asks important questions about the relevance of the field. It makes suggestions on the future of public administration (PA) research and the directions it may, or should, take. The chapters, written by active researchers, have overlapping theoretical, thematic and geographical perspectives. All chapters suggest how research should be conducted in a way that can serve knowledge and provide useful evidence to policy practitioners in seeking better governance.

Chapter One, written by Massey, is an introductory chapter to the book and looks at how knowledge can be pursued in ways that provide an evidence base to deliver effective and economic public services, while also highlighting pressing policy problems. He calls for a stop to paradigm wars and introduces one of the themes of the book: the need for interdisciplinary research approaches in PA.

In Chapter Two, written by R. A. W. Rhodes, the theme of an interdisciplinary approach to PA is at the forefront, with interpretive approaches and ethnographic methods endorsed. This chapter is far from groundbreaking, with the advantages of ethnography already well known and the recognition of the disadvantages of ethnography deduced to a single sentence. Its lack of implementation in PA research maybe highlights its unfeasibility, as is the case in other disciplines.

Chapter Three, written by Christopher Pollitt, is an engaging chapter which introduces a new theme that recurs throughout the book: PA research and practice. Pollitt believes that academics have an ethical disposition to bond academia and practice in order to contribute to the public good, and backs this claim by highlighting the

current academic culture, with its focus on peer-reviewed journals, its lack of for-practitioner research, as well as the advancement of specialisation and professionalisation, which is lessening the relevance of practice and also decreasing the likelihood of communication across fields.

Chapter Four, written by David Walker, asks whether scholars have an impact on the work of governments, despite the fact that charting intellectual influence is difficult. Walker ultimately asks, how can PA frame questions in ways that deliver useful answers to policymakers and practitioners? The identifying moment of this chapter is in the discussion about whether academics' relationship with the state is subversive, supportive or indifferent, and, in a timely manner, it points out the propensity for policymakers to cherry-pick research and questions whether policymakers even listen to the research.

In Chapter Five, written by Trui Steen, Taco Brandsen and Bram Verschuere, the theme of interdisciplinary approaches is revisited, but with the added twist of technology and social innovation. This chapter is spurred by disconnect, inequality and division in society and by the fact that technology makes it easier to collect information and self-organise. Importantly, the authors point to the need to understand professionals' willingness and skills in co-production with citizens and other professionals such as IT and legal experts. The chapter ambitiously suggests the need for a common conceptual vocabulary if these fields' paths do begin to cross, perhaps creating a new field in itself.

Chapter Six, written by Claire Dunlop, addresses whether PA scholarship and research are ready to be relevant and impactful. To fix the issues addressed in Chapter Four, Dunlop suggests that PA scholars must shape the impacts, as opposed to just dealing with the outputs of politics. Eloquenty highlighted are the challenges faced when trying to be relevant such as possibly tainting the research question, oversimplification and making things so obvious that they are not interesting. Dunlop believes that methods of enquiry must be adapted, methods of training must be reoriented and the development of an interdisciplinary approach must be introduced.

Chapter Seven, authored by Claire Dunlop and Claudio Radaelli, is on the topic of regulation and corruption, stating that any sort of government intervention can lead to corruption. The authors put forward the causal story well, that controlling the size of the regulatory state can limit corruption, and that people are corruptible rather than corrupt. These statements frame the question of the chapter perfectly:

how do regulation and policy instruments trigger or hinder the mechanisms of corruptibility? However, nothing can be solved on the topic until there is clarity over what exactly causes corruption. They note that it is context specific and thus there is a need to look at how communities socially construct corruption.

Chapter Eight, by Pan Suk Kim, is a review of East Asian PA. This chapter is lacking in direction, with the research agenda only emerging at the end. The bulk of the chapter is a history of East Asian PA developments. There is an expectation that East Asian countries will become leaders in PA areas such as mobile and interactive e-governance and smart public services which utilize AI and robotics technology. However, Kim posits that there are many challenges for East Asian countries such as state authority, legitimacy and governability. To no one's surprise, the West has influenced East Asian PA, but to some surprise, there is a prediction that East Asian PA has the potential to influence Western PA in terms of technology.

Chapter Nine, written by G. Zhiyong Lan, is a research agenda and warning system for PA in China under the Xi 'New Era' of governance, which will address megatrends and could possibly see China becoming one of the leading nations shouldering global responsibility. Lan analyses China's position from the perspective of six traps that, he argues, PA research must address. Some traps of note are the Tacitus Trap, in which trust and legitimacy in government is lost; the Kindleberger Trap, which is the threat to global peace because of China and America's shifting balance of powers; and the Gramsci Trap, which is the struggle of government elites to stay at a socially non-privileged standard of living. However, it is not just China who is at risk of the traps, with Western PA being at risk of the Tacitus Trap, for example.

Chapter Ten, written by Mark Evans, Patrick Dunleavy, Carmel McGregor and Max Halupka, all from the University of Canberra, looks at the potential research agenda for digital era governance, using Australia to analyse its potential. The authors look at the drivers to change and the barriers experienced, with the Australian experience highlighting the uneven capacity of departments and agencies to adapt to new realities. They convincingly suggest that, at a time when trust and interest in government is low, digital change offers governments an opportunity to reconnect with citizens and remedy this. This change would require huge amounts of institutional change, as it would drastically challenge how policy is made and how public services are delivered, monitored and evaluated.

Chapter Eleven, written by Tiina Randma-Liiv and Külli Sarapuu, is unique, and looks at the underdeveloped issues and challenges faced by small states in terms of public governance and PA. The authors theorise that, because generalized PA knowledge comes from large states, the governance problems of small states could be due to this. It is thoroughly explained how small states' unique social, political and administrative characteristics can offer practical and theoretical insights into the functioning of governance and democracy. This chapter fills a gap in the literature about the consequences of smallness on governance and shows how small states can be a testing ground for studying certain phenomena.

Chapter Twelve, written by Sabine Kuhlmann, provides an overview of the significant research issues in comparative PA and suggests future themes and topics in PA. She delightfully shows that the comparative study of administrative systems and reforms has enhanced empirical and theoretical knowledge of PA, and argues that the explanatory power of institutional variables deserves much more attention. The reader is left wondering about the consequences of different administrative models and civil service systems remaining dominated by their historically inherited institutional features and legacies.

Chapter Thirteen, written by Gene Brewer, covers the topic of public service motivation (PSM). The scholarly community is divided over the validity of this topic. Researchers have not adequately explored the dark side of PSM, only studying the positive manifestations of the concept, which suggests that it is simply being advanced normatively. In all, the chapter recommends that researchers continue to explore motivation in the public sector and public service, with this knowledge having the potential to improve public service performance and effectiveness.

Chapter Fourteen, written by Wolfgang Drechsler, is a critique of the US and Dutch PA scholarship and journal publishing for being too narrow, overselling their findings and asserting a positivist approach. The author calls for the recognition of methodological and cognitive diversity. Drechsler believes that project-funding criteria and publication requirements all push PA in the wrong direction, with this chapter being a call for the removal of technicalities and for research to be more closely anchored in philosophical thought. It is refreshingly discussed how countries are being forced to adopt western PA and not being allowed to develop their own strengths based on their traditions because of the current culture.

In all, this book has succeeded in its task of creating a new research agenda for PA, by eloquently advocating for future routes of research and the expansion of interdisciplinary approaches with the social sciences, STEM and medicine. The book is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in PA research with regards to the directions it is, and should be, taking, and will assist students of PA and public policy, as well as established researchers, in understanding emerging issues within the field. Massey makes it clear that there is a disconnect between the PA research agenda and current practitioner problems such as climate change, demographic change, globalisation and technological change, which are all certain to influence the future environment in which PA practitioners will work.

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