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Public Policy and Administration 2007; 22; 128
DOI: 10.1177/0952076707071508

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The Art of Prescription
Theory and Practice in Public Administration Research

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Abstract
This article addresses a perennial controversy in the study of public administration – should academic knowledge about public administration be used for its betterment? And, if so, how should academic knowledge about public administration be used for its betterment? It is claimed that the answers to these questions lie in the symbiotic relationship between knowledge and action, theory and practice. In consequence it is argued that it is the responsibility of public administration scholars not only to provide explanations and understandings of administrative and political subjects but also to defend bureaucracy and to seek progress through ‘enlightened’ prescription. With these arguments in mind, first a ‘critical approach’ to public administration for reconciling the world of thought and the world of action is presented in which the prescriptive enterprise is used to integrate theory and practice. Second, a set of principles for ‘enlightened’ prescription is formulated to ensure that the knowledge claims that emerge from this process remain as rigorously conceived as possible. And third, a methodology is developed through the use of a logical framework matrix to provide both a practical device for evaluating the utility of public administration research for public action and to draw attention to putative problems in research in terms of theorization, method, data analysis and synthesis – thus demonstrating the benefit of ‘enlightened’ prescription to both the study of public administration and its practice.

Keywords: logical framework, practice, prescription, public action, public administration, theory

To deride the hopes of progress is the ultimate fatuity, the last word in poverty of spirit and meanness of mind. (Peter Medawar, cited in McEwan, 2005: 77)
The Poverty of Prescription: A Very Peculiar British Practice

I should say at the outset that this article is deliberately provocative. Its purpose stems from an observation about the contemporary study of British public administration and the application of its findings to public discourse – that the relative absence of prescription and the failure to integrate such an approach into the core of the discipline is damaging both to the public standing of the sub discipline and indeed to its academic credentials.¹ This is not to claim that public administration research that does not engage in prescription is irrelevant or unimportant. Quite the contrary, it should continue to be the main concern of the subject. And neither is this a historical claim; for the poverty of prescription has not always been a feature of the study of British public administration. A sporadic argument has characterized the history of British political science about the merits and demerits of the role of prescription in the social sciences more generally, and political science in particular. Indeed, while the anti-prescription approach currently holds sway, the study of public administration for much of the 1950s and 1960s was characterized by a ‘compulsive reformism’ (Fry, 1999: 532). It is to claim, however, that ‘enlightened’ prescription can reinforce the explanation and understanding of administrative and political subjects and should not be the preserve of the applied social sciences (see Amann, 2000).²

The central research questions that this article addresses are: should academic knowledge about public administration be used for its betterment? And, if so, how should academic knowledge about public administration be used for its betterment? It is claimed that the answers to these questions lie in the symbiotic relationship between knowledge and action, theory and practice. By implication it is the responsibility of public administration scholars not only to provide explanations and understandings of administrative and political subjects but also to defend bureaucracy and to seek progress through ‘enlightened’ prescription.

The arguments that follow proceed from three main assumptions about the character of the study of public administration in Britain. The first is that public administration is considered in this article to be a sub discipline of political science that takes as its starting point the study of public institutions within a multi-level domain of governance. It attempts to reconcile the world of thought and the world of action and it continually suffers from a crisis of identity largely due to its interdisciplinary character. The second assumption and the key bone of contention in this article is that in Britain prescription is currently an underutilized area of institutional studies largely due to current fashions in political science. The third assumption is that prescription can only be effective if it is based on rigorous theoretical and empirical research. Prescriptive theories aim at identifying the best means of achieving a desired condition but this can only be achieved on the basis of the establishment of strong knowledge claims about administrative and political subjects.
This article therefore seeks to establish what is termed a ‘critical approach’ to public administration for reconciling the world of thought and the world of action. It attempts to do this in four stages: first, it provides an investigation of the ‘Golden Age of Public Administration’ in order to set arguments about the merits and demerits of the role of prescription within a historical context and to identify historical continuities and discontinuities. Second, it presents a set of philosophical, professional and political arguments to support the exercise of linking theory to practice through prescription. Third, it formulates a set of principles for ‘enlightened’ prescription for ensuring that knowledge claims that emerge from this practice remain as adjacent to the ‘truth’ as possible. And, fourth, a methodology is developed through the use of a logical framework matrix to provide both a practical device for evaluating the utility of public administration research for public action and to draw attention to putative problems in the research in terms of theorization, method, data analysis and synthesis – thus demonstrating the benefit of ‘enlightened’ prescription to the study of public administration and its practice.

The Rise and Decline of the Golden Age of Public Administration

The intellectual origins of the study of British public administration lie squarely with the pioneering work of the Fabian thinkers Sydney and Beatrice Webb in their classic studies of local government in England and poor law administration. The Webbs sought to combine rigorous social investigation with reformism based upon rational planning. The emphases that they gave to pragmatic ethical socialism and the importance of establishing a rational technocratic and meritocratic bureaucracy as an instrument of socialist transformation was given institutional expression with the establishment of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in 1895 as a centre for training an administrative cadre for governing a socialist Britain. The pragmatic linkage in Fabian thought between social investigation and political action dominated the traditional study of public administration for much of the 20th century and indeed heavily influenced the development of British political science at the LSE under Harold Laski in the first half of the 20th century.

In the early 1960s, Maurice Cowling (1962) and others vilified British political science for its attempts to influence government. Cowling (1962) is worth quoting at length in this context:

An academic subject-matter arises when a world of activity is isolated from the whole of activity: when attempts are made to understand and explain it: and when its exponents obey the injunction to turn back upon the temptation to alter, control or participate in it. To turn back in this way is the beginning of explanatory activity, is the academic function: and the academic function is lost in irrelevance or practice if the injunction is ignored . . . The use to which Rutherford’s (or Keynes’s) work could be put to use in
Cowling’s criticisms centred on what he considered to be the prevailing liberal orthodoxy in British political studies; which began with the 18th-century supposition that philosophy can replace religion. His critique of British political science and its tendency to drift from explanatory concerns towards prescription focussed on the work of high profile academics such as: K.C. Wheare’s (1945) work on the machinery of government and Government by Committee (Wheare, 1955); W.A. Robson’s (1956) comparative research on civil services in Britain and France; and W.J.M. Mackenzie’s (1958) work on elections, among others. This was the ‘Golden Age of Public Administration’ in which almost all the most highly respected figures engaged in the academic study of politics in Britain had been or were still involved with public administration in a period of ‘compulsive reformism’ (Fry, 1999: 532).

Mackenzie’s work on elections is a particularly pertinent example as it was heavily influenced by his work as a wartime senior civil servant and by his role in designing independence constitutions for Britain’s former East African colonies. As he put it in a published collection of his papers from 1951–1968, Explorations in Government, that appeared in 1975:

There is a useful legend that somewhere in the heart of the British system there is an annotated index of ‘the good and great’ – those apt for service on official committees. Clearly I got on to it for the first time when I was ‘parachuted’ into Tanganyika in 1952, age forty-three . . . I have always been more interested in ‘governments’ than in ‘parties’, but governments are by nature discreet and difficult to research. I cannot avoid the awkward conclusion that to study government one must participate in government, and this has grave risks. One is that unpaid service may imply an exchange: one is there as someone’s stooge and must not speak out of turn. Another is that one is tacitly pledged to discretion. Also, one may take on unawares the attitudes of the very pleasant people with whom one is working. Finally, there are serious risks of boredom and futility: one may be a token member, learning nothing and contributing nothing. I think I have been lucky: but I can’t conceal from myself that it has made me in a sense an ‘establishment figure’, a proper object of contempt. (Mackenzie, 1975: 107)

Geoffrey Fry (1999: 532) writes that if there was one single day that represented ‘the apogee of academic public administration in Britain, it may well have been 20 July 1967’, when three of its leading figures – D.N. Chester, W.A. Robson and A.H. Hanson – appeared before the Select Committee on Nationalized Industries to give evidence about the ministerial control of those industries (House of Commons, 1967–8: 522–44, q. 1857–1910).

The legitimacy for scholastic involvement with the British system of government in this period was founded on a widespread belief both in the efficacy of liberal-democratic institutions and the Westminster model of parliamentary government subject to the occasional need for institutional reform and administrative
tinkering. Throughout this era the study of public administration remained insulated from developments in political science elsewhere, particularly the behavioural revolution that emerged in the 1940s in part from the philosophical precepts of positivism and was dominant in the USA until the early 1970s. The emphasis on empirical observation, scientific testing and explanation was clearly at odds with the traditional atheoretical concern of British public administration with employing the historical case study for analysing and mapping the growth and functions of British government (see Hood, 1990). Indeed both Rod Rhodes (1991) and Andrew Dunsire (1999) in two seminal reviews of the study of British public administration identify hostility to theorization, particularly of the American kind, during this period.

This included the policy movement formed after the Second World War and led by Herbert Simon (1947), which attempted to improve administrative decision-making through scientific enquiry by simplifying policy making into a rational process and providing objective scientific input to improve the process. Simon argued that there was a need for an administrative theory because there are practical limits to human rationality, and these limits are not static, but depend upon the organizational environment in which the individual’s decision takes place. The task of administration is therefore to design this environment in such a way ‘that the individual will approach as close as practicable to rationality (judged in terms of the organisation’s goals) in his decisions’ (Simon, 1947: 8). For Simon, the rational project required the development of models of decision-making in which policy making progresses through clearly defined stages and, on the basis of maximum information, rational choices are made between policy options. In his later book, *The New Science of Management Decision*, Simon (1960) argued that decision-making could be improved by increasing the scope of programmed, as opposed to non-programmed, decisions. This was in keeping with the notion that rationality should be the key goal in decision-making.

These positivist aspirations largely failed as an academic exercise due to the complexity and ambiguity of value-laden public policy processes but it was enormously successful in spawning academic departments, think-tanks and not-for-profit knowledge institutions devoted to a problem-solving policy science and a fascination with planning and management by objectives, cost–benefit analysis, business plans, the stages approach and using quantitative and/or qualitative methods to choose between options. However, as Dunsire (1999: 364) observes, ‘[T]here was nothing for Britain remotely resembling Simon, Smithburg, Thompson (1950)’ and even the emergence of policy science in the early 1970s under Harold Lasswell (1970, 1971) whose pragmatism as an alternative school of thought to positivism focused on problem definition, environmental contexts and the investigation of the normative judgements of subjective actors was largely ignored by British public administrative for a decade or more.
Dilemmas

So why did this prescriptive approach to British government diminish as a core concern of the discipline? Three main observations can be drawn here. First, Britain’s retreat from Empire and the continual failure of its governments to meet the demands of representative and responsible government led to the demise of the Westminster model as the international exemplar of parliamentary government (Birch, 1979). While it would be ludicrous to blame British political science for British decline it is evident that both the international standing of the British public administration community and the intellectual confidence of the sub discipline suffered as a consequence. It is also evident that from this period there were more limited commercial opportunities for the publication of informed polemics by British political scientists because of the difficulties of marketing such work to an American audience. Indeed, it is notable that since the 1980s, prescription has tended to be the preserve of political journalists or applied social scientists.12

Second, at the same time American political science became increasingly influential in setting the intellectual parameters of the study of public administration in particular and political science more generally (Henry, 1987). Policy science, organizational theory and a little later public choice theory began to exercise a significant influence on public administration research (Rhodes, 1991).13 By the late 1970s, Dwight Waldo’s (1968: 5, 10) observation of a ‘crisis of identity for public administration’ in the USA had become a more apt description of the study of public administration in Britain. While traditional approaches persisted, the field of study was characterized by a greater eclecticism, debate over new disciplinary dilemmas and flirtations with new fashions in political science.

Third, as the era of Conservative administration (1979–97) progressed and the shift from traditional public administration to New Public Management (NPM) advanced, most public administration scholars found themselves in opposition to government on almost every aspect of change from privatization to contracting-out, from the attack on elected local government to the rise of the new managerialism.14 The era of conviction politics was not a fertile time for prescription, particularly of the Fabian variety. The absence of prescription has been most evident in regard to research on NPM. Despite its obvious deficiencies (ably demonstrated in recent research by Gerry Stoker [2005] on the prescience for public value management) it remained the ‘only show in town’ for over two decades with the relative absence of counter critique or a compelling alternative vision.15 Indeed, despite the unhappiness in the academic community with the epithets of public management, several universities sought to take advantage of new commercial opportunities for establishing undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and professional training courses that often involved changing the names of departments or merging departments with business schools.
Disjunctures

As with most attempts to identify distinguishable trends in political science there are always exceptions to the rule. The remained two avenues open to public administration scholars interested in ploughing a prescriptive furrow – constitutional studies and involvement with (largely Fabian) think-tanks/knowledge institutions. With regard to the former, talking about constitutional politics became ‘sexy’ in Britain. In addition to several populist polemics written by political journalists (see Freedland, 1999; Hutton, 1995; Mount, 1992), an extensive academic literature emerged mainly concerned with four issues: modelling liberal democracy and assessing its defects from a normative perspective (see Beetham, 1994; Giddens, 1998); identifying the limits of British parliamentary democracy (Foley, 1999; Oliver, 1991); and, latterly, prescribing the way forward for New Labour on constitutional matters (Blackburn and Plant, 1999; Hazell, 1999); and explaining the rise of a New Constitutionalism under the present Labour government (Evans, 2003).

Constitutional matters have also been a key concern for think-tanks such as the Fabian inspired Demos and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), together with pressure groups such as Charter 88; all of whom have called upon scholars from the public administration fraternity to help them forward their aim in converting New Labour to the cause of liberal constitutional radicalism. For example, both Charter 88 and the IPPR launched research projects on constitutional reform in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the financial support of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust project, which drew on the expertise of prominent lawyers and political scientists that were concerned with Britain’s democratic deficit.

The Fabian Society has continued to publish an exhaustive range of prescriptive political analysis written from a centre-left perspective on most aspects of British politics through its Fabian Ideas pamphlets. This has often included the work of high profile scholars of British Government. Moreover, the Fabian-inspired journal, The Political Quarterly, has also remained committed to publishing prescriptive articles on aspects of public administration and other subjects: ‘[S]ince its foundation in 1930, The Political Quarterly has explored the key issues of the day from a centre left perspective and promoted debate about them. It is dedicated to political and social reform and has long acted as a bridge between policy-makers, commentators and academics.’

Bringing Prescription Back In

Since the turn of the century two new prescriptive avenues for public administration scholars have emerged associated with evidence based policy making (Burton, 2001, 2006; Davies et al., 2000) and comparative public policy (Evans, 2004; Rose, 2005). The first was largely a response to new political dynamics. The Blair government’s 1999 ‘Modernising Government’ White Paper represented an acknowledgement of the need to modernize policy and management at the centre...
of government providing fertile ground for Fabian prescription. It argued that Government ‘must produce policies that really deal with problems; that are forward-looking and shaped by evidence rather than a response to short-term pressures; that tackle causes not symptoms’ (Cabinet Office, 1999: 2). The Government’s aspiration was given institutional expression through the creation of the Centre for Management and Policy Studies, which had a clear mandate both to establish more productive relations between government and academia in order to generate high quality evidence-based research to inform practice and to consider the broader training needs of the civil service.

The Cabinet Office’s (2001) ‘Better Policy-making’ mapped out an evidence-based approach to policy for achieving the former based on: reviewing existing research; commissioning new research; consulting relevant experts and/or using internal and external consultants and considering a range of properly costed and appraised options (Centre for Management and Policy Studies [CMPS], 2002); while the Cabinet Office’s (2005) Professional Skills for Government programme dealt with the skills and training requirements of the civil service. There has subsequently been an explosion of intellectual and discursive activity around the evidence-based practice approach, the establishment of the ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy-making and Practice at Queen Mary College, University of London and even an academic journal (Evidence and Policy), but little evidence as yet of improvements in government policy and operational delivery.

The second prescriptive avenue has emerged from within the comparative public policy literature on policy transfer or lesson-drawing. Richard Rose’s (2005) Learning from Comparative Public Policy: A Practical Guide confronts, though perhaps unwittingly, two of the central problems with much of the present academic literature on public administration in general and lesson-drawing or voluntary policy transfer in particular. First, there is the relative absence of enterprising prescription to help public organizations solve public policy problems and, second, a stark failure to engage with practice, reflected in the reluctance to make social scientific enquiry relevant to practice. This has made it all too easy for practitioners to dismiss social scientific enquiry as ‘abstract’ and ‘impractical’ at a time when academics should be helping to set the public policy agenda. As the British Prime Minister Tony Blair puts it, ‘this government expects more of policy-makers. More new ideas, more willingness to question inherited ways of doing things, better use of evidence and research in policy-making and better focus on policies that will deliver long-term goals’ (Wyatt and Grimmeisen, 2002: 12). The integral relationship between evidence-based practice, rational lesson-drawing and good policy making has created a political space for comparative public policy specialists to provide a unique contribution to public policy discourses. Rose’s stimulating book provides a perfect example of the type of research necessary to bridge the world of theory and practice in a way that reinforces the strengths of both communities.
Most significantly for our discussion none of the work identified in this section has been effectively integrated as a central concern of the sub discipline. This problem is evident in three seminal reviews of the study of public administration that straddle at least three decades of administrative enquiry. In 1982, Patrick Dunleavy (1982: 255) noted that the study of public administration is ‘quite largely “applied” and closely linked with practical problems and practiced solutions’ but he provides no insights into the character of this prescriptive enterprise. Rod Rhodes (1991: 535) also argued in 1991 that Public Administration research was ‘practical rather than theoretical’. However, he fails to elaborate in any detail on the character of its practical content and whether it involved a prescriptive enterprise. He then concludes the article by emphasizing the importance of ‘defending bureaucracy’ – clearly a normative endeavour – but does so without providing a methodology for engaging in such activity. Rhodes (1991: 535) goes on to claim that a ‘focus on institutions, on public bureaucracies, is a central fact in the history of Public Administration. Yet bureaucracy currently has few defenders, even within the subject of Public Administration’. In 1999, writing in a similar vein, Andrew Dunsire (1999: 360) begins his elegant survey of the study of public administration by attempting to ‘answer [W.A.] Robson’s call for more attention to the relation between the “world of thought and the world of action”’.24 Dunsire (1999: 371) argues that changes in the subject from 1975–99 were to some extent generational and to some extent ‘the fashionable import of ideas from USA and Germany’. Dunsire (1999: 371) then concludes with the remarkable observation that the ‘dramatic changes to the field over the last half-century or so did indeed owe their general form to academic thought though hardly at all by academic Public administration specialists (with the possible exception of INLOGOV in local authority management)’.25

In sum then, the story of the rise and decline of the Golden Age of Public Administration is a tale of two subjects. The Golden Age depicts a traditional subject uncertain of its theories and methods but confident in its capacity to engage in enlightened prescription, while the wilderness years are characterized by the search for a subject, greater methodological pluralism and integration with the social sciences but the absence of a broad social purpose. We will now turn our attention to the philosophical, professional and political arguments in defence of the role of prescription in public administration research.

In Defence of ‘Enlightened’ Prescription

My main submission in this section of the article is that the study of public administration would benefit from the hard thought and controversy that would inevitably arise from the adoption of a prescriptive approach in defence of bureaucracy. Furthermore, that the prescriptive enterprise can and should be defended on both professional and academic grounds (Adams, 1994).
Professions, Progress and Public Esteem

The study of public administration continues to be ‘in rather a queer state’ (Mackenzie, 1975: 5) in the sense that it suffers from low public esteem due to the failure of government to harness its creative energies in teaching, professional training and research. The evidence in support of this assertion can be located both in the limited input that the academic public administration community has made to the Modernising Civil Services agenda in general and the Professional Skills for Government agenda in particular and the absence of systematic governmental accreditation of postgraduate qualifications in public administration and public policy. This is clearly at odds with New Labour’s espousals of the importance of the knowledge economy to the economic and social well-being of the nation and its attempts to create world class publicly funded universities. Britain’s higher education system remains one of her most productive assets and the failure to make use of its knowledge and courses is both inefficient in public expenditure terms and demoralizing to those working in the sector. At a time when resources for research and development are becoming increasingly scarce it is irresponsible for public organizations to turn to private sector consultancies for research support or to cherry pick academic consultants to deliver professional training courses through interpersonal networks rather than open competition.

However, the academic community must share part of the responsibility for this queer state of affairs (Amann, 2000). The reluctance to engage in ‘enlightened’ prescription and to integrate such activity into the core of the discipline has made it too easy for government to ignore its potential contribution. This has proved damaging both to the public standing of the sub discipline and indeed to its academic credentials. Max Beloff (1958) put it eloquently when he argued in his inaugural lecture at Oxford University that:

If the universities can give no guidance at to the methods by which the ‘problems [of] the modern world’ can be solved, that advice will be sought elsewhere, and to our dis-advantage. (Beloff, 1958: 7)

This problem is particularly acute in the study of public administration as most public administration scholars proceed from the normative assumption of the importance of defending bureaucracy and ‘public’ administration.

The normative argument runs thus – although the fundamental role of public administration is to formulate, plan, implement and terminate public law when necessary, it also has a higher social purpose. Public administration should exercise moral leadership in the society it serves as the guardian of a good society and its freedoms established and regulated under the rule of law. In theory it performs this role through the equitable allocation of public goods and services to the people it serves and to whom it is accountable. Several principles can be identified in these two sentences – the rule of law, equity of service provision, accountability, and citizen responsiveness – that in combination make up what in modern parlance is referred to as Good Governance. Good Governance and by implication
bureaucracy is commonly exhorted as an essential component of a good society. It is thus the responsibility of public administration scholars not only to provide explanations and understandings of administrative/political subjects but also to defend bureaucracy and to seek progress through ‘enlightened’ prescription.

The British government’s Modernising Civil Services agenda and its application of an evidence-based practice approach to policy making provide a window of opportunity for public administration scholars to demonstrate the utility of their research for public action. But this will require a change of approach in which the knowledge claims of the subject are tied to the satisfaction of human purposes and desires and linked to purposive public action. Perhaps the best current illustration of this endeavour can be found in Gerry Stoker’s (2005) work on public value management. Stoker draws on rigorous empirical evidence to develop a broad framework (‘Public Value’ Management) in which to comprehend the management challenge posed by networked governance. It is informed by four central propositions:

Proposition 1: public interventions are defined by the search for public value.

Proposition 2: there is a need to give more recognition to the legitimacy of a wide range of stakeholders.

Proposition 3: an open-minded, relationship approach to the procurement of services is framed by a commitment to a public service ethos.

Proposition 4: an adaptable and learning-based approach to the challenge of public service delivery is required.

The public value paradigm thus demands a commitment to broader goals than those envisaged under traditional and NPM management regimes as managers are tasked with steering networks of deliberation and delivery as well as maintaining the overall coherence of the system. It offers a new paradigm and a different narrative of reform in the sense that it centres:

...on a fuller and rounder vision of humanity than either traditional or NPM. People are, it suggests, motivated by their involvement in networks and partnerships, by their relationships with others formed in the context of equal status and mutual learning. Some will find its vision attractive but the realists or cynics may prefer to stick with traditional new public management or NPM. (Stoker, 2005: 16)

But what are the academic arguments in support of ‘enlightened’ prescription and the integration of such activity into the core of the discipline?

Pedagogy
The academic justification for enlightened prescription or what I will term here a ‘critical approach’ to public administration rests on the acceptance of five interlinked propositions about the general philosophical problem of how knowledge is related to action. These questions are rarely considered in the study of public
administration, reflecting the drawing of clear distinctions in the use of knowledge by political and social scientists and political philosophers (see Fay, 1975; Lobkowicz, 1967). 27

Proposition 1: The Application of a Critical Approach to Public Administration

A critical approach to public administration would assert that in order to constitute a subject at all the researcher must attempt to understand the intentions and desires of the actors he is observing, as well as the norms and values of the institutional structures in which they work and those of the external structures that influence their working lives.

Proposition 2: The Application of a Critical Approach to Public Administration that Provides an Account of the Relationship between Structure and Agency

A critical approach to public administration would also assert the importance of identifying the model of structure and agency that underpins its account of political and administrative change. It is a key concern of contemporary political science whether political continuity and change should be understood as: (1) the product of the agency of autonomous individuals; or, (2) the product of the structure and conditions in which the individual operates and over which they have no control, and that a great deal of what people do to one another is not the result of conscious knowledge and choice; or, (3) the product of the interaction between structure and agency. A critical approach to public administration is one that actively seeks to understand the relationship between structure and agency in institutional settings (see Hay, 1995). This is central to the generation of solid knowledge claims and causal pathways.

Proposition 3: The Recognition of the Relationship between the Study of Administrative/Political Subjects and Practical Public Action

Above all a critical approach to public administration recognizes that the study of public administration is interconnected with administrative and political practice such that what is counted as a knowledge claim is partially determined by the specific ways in which theories and methods for studying public administration are related to understandings of practical action. This proposition holds irrespective of whether one adopts a positivist or interpretive approach to public administration. 28

As Fay (1975: 94) observes,

implcit in a positivist and an interpretive account of social science was a notion of how the knowledge gained from these sciences would be translated into action, and indeed that it was this very notion which was a defining element of what constituted knowledge.

Hence one of the key elements of the epistemological framework that defines what should count as knowledge in the social sciences irrespective of the model of social scientific enquiry is how theory is related to practice.
Proposition 4: The Recognition of Ideological Bias in the Study of Administrative/Political Subjects

In contrast to positivist social science, it is further contended that social science cannot be value-neutral as the researcher’s values prejudice what questions he/she asks and what areas he/she studies. In this sense the ideas of the researcher are constantly contaminated, unconsciously or not, by their own views on what is good and bad practice. As Cowling (1962) puts it:

Those who want this sort of political science want something they cannot have. The assurance that prejudices are principles, preferences reasons, and the arbitrary opinions they adopt a rational expression of the universal law, is something political science cannot supply. (Cowling, 1962: 10)

This proposition does not, however, deny the significance of the aspiration of objectivity in public administration research. It suggests the importance of the use of stringent methods for ensuring that research findings remain as adjacent to the truth as possible.

Proposition 5: The Application of a Critical Approach to Public Administration that is Based on Rigorous Theoretical and Empirical Research

Prescriptive theories aim at identifying the best means of achieving a desired condition. This does not merely involve clarifying the possible outcomes of certain courses of action but actually choosing the most effective course of action on the basis of the most compelling empirical information. Hence, effective prescription can only be achieved through the establishment of strong knowledge claims about administrative/political subjects that link theory and empiricism to public action.

These five propositions about the general philosophical problem of how knowledge can be related to public action provide an academic justification for the prescriptive enterprise in public administration research based on the argument that social science is rooted in practice. But on what basis can we assess the utility of public administration research and its appropriateness for public action?

Principles of ‘Enlightened’ Prescription

The philosophical, political and professional arguments in support of linking theory to practice through prescription have been advanced. My task now is to present a range of principles to militate against the misappropriation of knowledge in public administration research.

Academic Freedom and Accountability

George Orwell (1949: 62) observed in Nineteen Eighty-Four that ‘Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two makes four. If that is granted, all else follows’. The foundation principle informing effective prescription must be the exercise of academic freedom. This is a sticky concept in the sense that the very nature of presenting explanations, understandings and prescriptions of administrative/political
subjects may well bring scholars into conflict with government which in other regimes has resulted in producing restrictions on academic freedom. Consider, for instance, the fate of social scientists at the University of Makere in Kampala, Uganda under the ruthless dictatorship of Idi Amin. The solution to this paradox lies both in the application of academic rigour and the exercise of good judgement. The nature of political research should, in theory, always involve autonomous ‘free-thinking’ rational researchers working without constraint but in practice this is not always the case. The reason for this is that the quality of research is often circumscribed by access issues and to gain access sometimes means sacrificing independence.

The researcher is also to some extent accountable to those from whom information is obtained, to his or her own organization or, to a lesser degree (depending on contractual obligations), to whoever commissions or sponsors the research. However, ultimately the objectivity of the research is dependent on the researcher’s independence from research subjects. Good applied research is not purely about providing evidence of ‘what works’ or providing evidence to support and inform policy and implementation processes. It is also about identifying what does not work and challenging prevailing orthodoxies. The exercise of such judgement requires academic freedom.

A Clear and Accessible Subject Matter
At the outset, it is important to be clear about the phenomenon under study. This may appear a superficial point but there is a tendency in contemporary academia to over-intellectualize the purpose and meaning of research. A clear and accessible subject matter is a key determinant for getting research into practice (National Audit Office, 2003). The overall practical aim to which the research is expected to contribute must therefore be clear at the outset.

Verifiable Theory
Regardless of the epistemological position or the type and role of theory in public administration research it is essential that it can be tested against the world of observation to ensure that the findings are appropriate to practice. This principle applies regardless of whether public administration scholars are addressing: normative (theorizing about how the world ought to be); prescriptive (theorizing about the best means of achieving a desired condition); evaluative (evaluating the best course of action on the basis of given values and concepts); descriptive-empirical (building explanation on the basis of facts); or predictive (theorizing on the basis of a set of premises what if?) research questions (Nutley et al., 2002).

Credible Evidence
This criterion relates to the degree of rigour exhibited by the researcher in the process by which data about the research subjects has been gathered, analysed and synthesized. Rigour means being able to demonstrate that: (1) enough evidence
has been generated to justify the conclusions that have been reached; (2) that the evidence has been obtained properly; and (3) that contrary evidence has been investigated but found wanting. Credible evidence rests on the development of a clear theoretical perspective or line of argumentation, the use of tried and tested methods, systematic data collection and analysis and the presentation of clear knowledge claims (Davies, 2004). While attempts to develop a hierarchy of knowledge that distinguishes between ‘hard’ (primary quantitative data) and ‘soft’ (qualitative data) evidence should be rejected (see Marston and Watts, 2003), it does remain important that the methodology is relatively uncontested and that the evidence can be triangulated if the research is to be acted upon (Nutley et al., 2002).

Critical Reflexivity

In order to ascertain the utility of public administration research the researcher should engage in a four-stage process of critical reflexivity. The first stage involves critical reflection on the generalizability of the evidence generated by the research. This principle refers to the appropriateness of making inferences from a particular set of research findings for other contexts. The researcher should evaluate how far his/her findings can be generalized to other organizational contexts.

The second stage involves critical reflection on the reliability of the data that has been produced. The researcher should be clear about the dependability of the evidence in the medium to long term and reflect on whether the data is time bound and/or context specific.

The third stage of critical reflexivity involves an evaluation of whether there exists an inherent bias in the theory, method or evidence base or indeed whether the theory requires amendment to make for sounder knowledge claims. The researcher should be willing to re-conceptualize theory in the light of new and compelling evidence in an attempt to remain as objective as possible. This may involve running counterfactuals to explore counter-intuitions and discover nuances within the evidence.

Finally, in order to ascertain the appropriateness of public administration research for public action the researcher should engage in the self-conscious integration of theory and practice. This works at two levels – practical application and communication for practice. The former involves identifying the elements of the research that are both relevant and irrelevant to practice and the elements that are missing from the research that would be relevant to practice. The latter focuses on developing a sense of audience. Getting research into practice is often a difficult process because policy makers often describe research articles as being inaccessible (National Audit Office, 2003). It is therefore important to write accessibly always keeping the audience in mind. This is a self-educative process that can only be understood through interaction with public servants and the real world of practice.
Practical Application

These principles can be included within a logical framework matrix in order to aid the application of the principles to practical examples (see Dale, 2003; Gasper, 2000). As Figure 1 illustrates, the logical matrix summarizes the constituent elements of the research and links them to each other allowing for conclusions to be reached as to the utility of research for public action. Moreover, the logical framework also demonstrates the academic benefits of prescriptive analysis as it draws attention to putative problems in theorization, method, data analysis and synthesis. The matrix of the logical framework is organized around four columns: a narrative summary of the potential of the research for public action; verifiable indicators; means of verification; and critical reflexivity. Let us consider the purpose of these four aspects of the matrix in more detail.

Narrative Summary (Column 1)

The narrative summary defines the character and the structure of the research. In order to ensure clarity of purpose for practice, care should be taken to clearly distinguish between concerns at the level of theory, method, analysis and synthesis and critical reflexivity.

Verifiable Indicators of Rigour (Column 2)

This column identifies the indicators of rigour. Any indicators that are used to demonstrate rigour should be measurable, or amenable to qualitative evaluation, or both.

Means of Verification (Column 3)

This column sets out how and with what sources of data each of the indicators of rigour in the previous column have been measured or assessed.

Critical Reflexivity (Column 4)

This final column records the factors that support or undermine the case for the use of the research for public action and as such provide indicators for risk assessment. The process of critical reflexivity is summarized in the final horizontal axis providing a final assessment of the utility of the research for public action.

Endnote: Towards Enlightened Prescription?

Conservatism discards Prescription, shrinks from Principle, disavows Progress; having rejected all respect for antiquity, it offers no redress for the present, and makes no preparation for the future. (Benjamin Disraeli, 1844: 26)

Disraeli’s scathing analysis of the plight of Conservatism in 19th-century Britain can be applied in equal measure to the present study of public administration – it discards prescription, shrinks from principle, disavows progress, offers no redress

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<tr>
<td>Goal – the overall practical aim to which the research is expected to contribute</td>
<td>Identifying the measures that show the potential of the research for public action – theory, method, data, analysis</td>
<td>Identifying the sources of information and methods used to show achievement of the goal</td>
<td>Reflecting on the utility of the research for public action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Approach</td>
<td>Is the theory or approach verifiable? Can it be tested against the world of observation?</td>
<td>Is the theoretical approach tenable? If they exist, are the core propositions of the theory tenable?</td>
<td>Is there inherent bias in the theory? Does the theory need to be reconceptualized? What amendments to the theory need to be made to make for sounder knowledge claims?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Does the methodology allow for the verification of the theory? Are these tried and trusted methods?</td>
<td>Have appropriate documentary, qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods been used?</td>
<td>Is there inherent bias in the method? Has the evidence been obtained properly?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis and synthesis</td>
<td>Is the evidence credible? Has enough evidence been generated?</td>
<td>Has the data been verified through triangulation and the use of counterfactuals</td>
<td>Is the evidence reliable, and generalizable?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-conscious integration of theory and practice</td>
<td>What elements of the research are relevant to practice? What elements of the research are irrelevant to practice? What elements of the research could have been relevant to practice but are missing from the research agenda? Is the communication of the research accessible to practice?</td>
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Figure 1  A Logical Framework for Assessing the Utility of Research for Public Action
for the present and makes no preparation for the future. In so doing, the public standing of the subject has declined, disrespecting the legacy of the great public administration scholars of the 20th century who are rarely even cited in contemporary research. It has thus become only too easy for government to ignore the potential contribution of public administration scholarship to public action and institutional capacity development.

I have attempted to sketch a response to these academic and professional dilemmas through the presentation of a ‘critical’ approach to public administration, which argues for the integration of the world of thought and the world of action through ‘enlightened’ prescription. This approach recognizes that academic knowledge about public administration should be used for its betterment not just because the defence of bureaucracy demands it but because all that we do as scholars of public administration is rooted in practice. Furthermore, engaging in ‘enlightened’ prescription founded on strong principles of academic freedom and rigour helps to improve explanations and understandings of administrative and political subjects. These arguments demonstrate the benefit of ‘enlightened’ prescription to both the study of public administration and its practice. This article has been written to deliberately provoke controversy. If it succeeds in this aim it has been worth the writing.

Notes


2. See Frank Fischer (2003) and Paul Burton (2006), for two alternative accounts of the relationship between knowledge and policy making and the role of the policy analyst. Both of these accounts reflect the greater academic attention that applied policy science pays to issues of prescription.

3. The phrase the ‘Golden Age of Public Administration’ is borrowed from Geoffrey Fry’s article published in 1999 on the evolution of the British tradition of Public Administration.

4. Beatrice Webb (née Potter) (1858–1943) and Sydney Webb (1859–1947): pioneers of British social and economic reform; joint authors of A Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975 [1920]), The History of Trade Unionism (1894) and Industrial Democracy (1897); and founders of the London School of Economics and of the New Statesman. Sydney Webb was: Labour MP for Seaham, 1922–9; President of the Board of Trade, 1924; Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, 1929–30; Secretary of State for the Colonies, 1930–1; and he was elevated to a life peerage as 1st Baron Passfield, 1929.


6. Harold Laski (1893–1950): political scientist, economist and political activist;

7. It is noteworthy that despite Cowling’s firm belief that political science, sociology and political philosophy ought ‘to focus on explanation and not exhortation’ it did not stop him from becoming editor of the book pages of the weekly political magazine *The Spectator* in 1971, which became a serious voice of reaction.

8. Fry (1999: 532) adds D.N. Chester, S.E. Finer and A.H. Hanson to this list.


10. See David Sanders (1995: 58–75) for an account of the rise of the behavioural movement and its core characteristics.

11. It is noteworthy that Simon’s work did influence British economists particularly with regard to programme budgeting and cost–benefit analysis. As Andrew Dunsire (1999: 366) observes, ‘[C]ost-benefit analysis and programme budgeting flourished, and the government hired economists by the hundred – from about a dozen in the 1950s, the new Government Economics Service had nearly 200 in 1969, and 400 in 1976’.

12. For examples of the prescriptive work of political journalists see: Neal Ascherson (2002); Jonathan Freedland (1999); Will Hutton (1995); Peter Jenkins (1987); Andrew Marr (1995); Ferdinand Mount (1992); and Hugo Young (1993). For examples of the prescriptive work of applied social scientists see Alan Maynard (1986) and Peter Smith’s (2000) applied work on health policy.

13. See for example: Dunsire (1973); Smith (1976); Jenkins (1978); Hogwood and Gunn (1984).

14. There was less hostility towards participatory (quality management) and deregulatory (employment practices) reform and initiatives to enhance public accountability under the Major government.

15. Patrick Dunleavy’s (1991) *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice* and John Stewart’s (1992) *The Rebuilding of Public Accountability* were two exceptions to this rule.

16. For example, the study of development administration differs markedly from its British counterpart. Its main journal *Public Administration and Development* (London: Wiley) edited by Paul Collins has an editorial commitment to improving development administration.


18. Visit these organizations online at: (http://www.charter88.co.uk/), (http://www.demos.co.uk/) and (http://www.ippr.org.uk/) for information on their aims and history.

19. For example, see John Keane’s (2002) *Whatever Happened to Democracy?* published by the IPPR. Charter 88’s Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom
involved several leading members of the public administration community including Patrick Dunleavy, David Judge and Kevin Theakstone, among others. For a detailed discussion of this project see Mark Evans (1995) *Charter 88: A Successful Challenge to the British Political Tradition?*


22. See the Cabinet Office’s overview of the Professional Skills for government programme at: http://psg.civilservice.gov.uk/

23. For a taste of this literature see: Burton (2001, 2006); Davies (2004); Marston and Watts (2003); Moseley and Tierney (2004); Mulgan (2003); Nutley et al. (2002); and Shaxson (2005).


26. For example, Sir Gus O’Donnell, Head of the Civil Service and alumnus of Warwick University, recently wrote to departmental permanent secretaries espousing the virtues of Warwick’s Executive MPA offering and encouraging participation. This is hardly in keeping with the civil service’s commitment to equal opportunities.

27. There are, of course, the rare exceptions to this general rule. See, for instance, David Beetham’s (1994) masterly work for the Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom, which sought to devise principles and indices for measuring the quality of democratic life in Britain that would provide an evidence base for constitutional reform.

28. By positivist social science I refer to what is popularly termed the ‘metatheory of social science’ based on the modern empiricist philosophy of science associated with Carl Hempel (1965), Ernst Nagel (1961) and Karl Popper (1959, 1969). In contrast, interpretive social science is constructed from the perspective of analytic political philosophy with its focus on the application of action concepts to the study of social science. One of the major tasks of interpretive social science is ‘to discover the intentions which actors have in doing whatever it is they are doing’ (Fay, 1975: 73). An anti-foundationalist interpretive approach can be found in the work of Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes (1999).

29. As Fry (1999: 530) observes there is a historical dynamic to this problem,

    The Treasury in those days had detected and distrusted the influence of the Webbs . . . In a notable attack on the ideas of Harold Laski, Sir Gwilym Gibbon, a former higher civil servant, wrote in the 1940s that he did not think that there was much point in being taught the ‘unfolding pattern’ of society from that source . . .
30. The logical framework approach (LFA) is a management tool that provides a structured and logical method for planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programmes, and organizational work plans. The LFA has become the dominant method in the planning and management of development interventions over the past three decades. Its origins lie in a planning approach for the US military, which was then adapted for the US space agency NASA before being adopted by USAID for development programmes in the late 1960s. The LFA was viewed to be a pragmatic response to many of the prevailing problems with development programming: poor planning; the absence of coordinated action; the failure to stay focused on programme goals and stay within budget; and the emergence of implementation gaps which undermine programme goals.

31. I say the following with ‘tongue in cheek’ but the first three columns of the matrix could also inform the work of public administration scholars in the classroom in order to avoid both the political indoctrination of students and the tendency of some scholars to present popular versions of their work in the organs of opinion over which they exercise control.

References


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