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# THE ENTERPRISE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: SCHOLARSHIP AS A LOOSELY COUPLED SYSTEM

Robert Schuhmann  
Department of Political Science  
University of Wyoming  
and  
Larry Hubbell  
Department of Political Science  
University of Wyoming

## Abstract

*Particularly during the past 40 years, many public administration scholars have been concerned that the “field” lacks a unifying paradigm. Engaging in what Berger and Luckman would probably refer to as “sense-making,” some public administration academics have even wondered whether public administration is, in fact, an academic field at all. In this article, the authors review what has been written on this subject and speculate that the lack of a unifying canon is actually an advantage. They also explore the idea that public administration is in actuality what they refer to as a loosely coupled discipline.*

## Introduction

Is public administration an academic subfield within political science or is it a distinct discipline? Is the academic study of public administration the delinquent stepchild of political science or an authentic, fully constituted area of academic inquiry in its own right? Is

public administration really an academic field or is it instead an interdisciplinary, eclectic mix of economics, psychology, social psychology, sociology, policy analysis, political economy, literary analysis and other more recognized academic fields? If public administration is, in fact, an interdisciplinary mix of more established academic fields, is such a condition desirable? The debate has raged on for years.

In the authors' view, the academic field of public administration lacks a single unifying paradigm. Just who are we anyway? As Rodgers and Rodgers noted, "The truth of the matter is that public administration has always been a little schizophrenic about its identity" (2000:p.435). Many authors have focused on this issue. Ostrom in *The Intellectual Crisis of Public Administration* addressed this issue. Writing about paradigmatic cleavages, he noted:

Yet the study of public administration during this period of crisis has been characterized by the proliferation of numerous versions of the prevailing theory, by the willingness of scholars to engage in methodological experimentation, by the expression of explicit discontent, by recourse to philosophical speculation, and by debate over fundamental epistemological issues (1973:p.18).

In this article, the authors explore how public administration scholars have tried to search for an identity for their field; how other authors perceive heterogeneity as an advantage; and the authors also posit a new way of looking at the field of public administration.

## **Public Administration: The Search for an Identity**

### **Academic Public Administration Becomes Divided**

Berger and Luckman in *The Social Construction of Reality* indicated how important it is for people to make sense out of the human condition. They wrote: “While it is possible to say that man has a nature, it is more significant to say that man constructs his own nature, or more simply, that man produces himself” (1966:p.49). How frustrating it can be when that social construction no longer seems to dovetail with reality, as was the case when public administration scholars began to question the public/administration dichotomy, which since the field’s origins had been a bedrock philosophy unifying the field. “Although inklings of dissent began in the 1930s, a book of readings in the field, *Elements of Public Administration*, edited by Fritz Morstein Marx, was one of the first major volumes which questioned the assumption that politics and administration could be dichotomized (Henry, 1975:p.380). Wald was even bolder than Henry in describing this development. “The erosion of the classical paradigm of public administration, which began in the 1940s accelerated disillusionment, revolt and ambiguity in the field of public administration” (1973:p.366).

The field’s scholars became further disoriented when Herbert Simon in *Administrative Behavior* (1957) poked holes in many of the administrative truisms that many scholars held sacred. Waldo wrote:

In the immediate postwar years, were added intellectual challenges that brought public administration to the point of crisis, of possible

collapse and disintegration. A groundswell of doubt and dissatisfaction brought about by measuring POSDCORB public administration against the war years was topped by criticism of the most searching and damaging kind by a new generation of students (1968:p.4).

The positivist revolution in the 1950s and 1960s further divided scholars between those who viewed the field as subject to the scientific process and those who didn't. Finally the Minnowbrook Conference in 1968 was an expression of some scholars' discontent regarding the field's relevance, given the socio-cultural events that were profoundly affecting the United States in the late 1960s.

### **Public Administration Faces a Kuhnian Crisis**

These events led to a classic Kuhnian crisis; a situation in which old theories no longer explain existing anomalies. The challenge facing scholars in a field "in crisis" is both intellectual and emotional. It can be intellectually challenging because it presents choices to scholars, especially new scholars, choices that previously were probably never considered by them. It can be emotionally challenging, especially to older scholars, who have in many cases, built their careers on theories, which in the midst of or following a crisis have become less credible. As Kuhn noted:

But there are always some men who cling to one another of the older views, and they are simply read out of the profession, which thereafter ignores their work. The new paradigm implies a new and more rigid definition of the field. Those unwilling or unable to accommodate their work to it must

proceed in isolation or attach themselves to some other group (1962:p.19).

Indeed, to be largely discounted by the scholar's in one's field is to experience a kind of psychic death. When a paradigm shift occurs, the personal and professional stakes are quite high.

### **Public Administration Scholars Confront Their Field**

What specifically have public administration scholars written about this crisis that has confronted the field for more than four decades? In 1956, Mosher was one of the earliest scholars to ask questions about whether public administration was actually a field. He wrote:

Is there a 'field' of public administration, or in the academician's glossary, is there such a 'discipline'? If so, what is its scope, its rubric, its method? I am not sure that either question can be answered... Public administration cannot demark any subcontinent as its exclusive province – unless it consists of such mundane matters as classifying budget expenditures, drawing organization charts, and mapping procedures (1956:p.177).

Martin Landau echoed Mosher's concerns, he wrote in 1962: "Indeed, without a center, it [public administration] has no circumference: a condition usually associated with unstructured, unsystematic and undisciplined effort. And this, perhaps, is the basis of the present fear that public administration, that lusty, young giant of a decade ago, may now 'evaporate' as a field" (1962:p.2).

Peter Savage noted: "American Public

Administration has long suffered from an identity crisis to the extent that rarely do people who profess to study it share even a rough agreement about what it is and how to study it” (1975:p.147). Nicholas Henry saw the field broken into a succession of five overlapping paradigms: the politics/administration dichotomy, 1900-1926; the principles of administration, 1927-1937; public administration as political science, 1950-1970; public administration as administrative science, 1956-1970; and public administration as public administration, 1970-? (1975:p.378-385). Henry also noted: “As an intellectual enterprise, public administration has reached a point of radical departure from its own past (1975:p.378). Referring to the field’s ‘crisis of identity,’ Golembiewski wrote: “The core difficulty is widely perceived to be the lack of an organizing focus. Without such a focus, research lacks coherence and lacks cumulative relevance. The danger is particularly great today, given the manifold approaches to public administration that are both possible and necessary...” (1977:p.5). We believe that Golembiewski’s contention was unfounded. Shortly after he wrote this statement, Burrell and Morgan wrote their groundbreaking book *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*, which demonstrated that the field of, at least organizational analysis could be diverse, but still coherent.

Ramos was concerned that the field has been too repetitive of other disciplines and has consequently lost its theoretical core:

The disciplinary field of public administration has been so promiscuously receptive to influences from so many different areas of knowledge that it now seems to have lost a sense of its specific assignment. Although cross-disciplinary revelations are in general positive and even necessary to

creativity, it is time for a serious appraisal of the state of the administrative discipline, lest it become a hodgepodge of theoretical ramblings, lacking both force and direction. Any discipline must have a modicum of intolerance in its transactions with other disciplines, otherwise it will lose its reason to exist. To have identity and character is in a sense to be intolerant (1978:p.550).

Emmert noted: “PA is seldom referred to as a well-defined discipline and most often as not a discipline at all. The field has been considered to be in the ‘pre-paradigm’ stage since the decline of scientific management and the politics-administration dichotomy” (1983:p.243). Lovrich saw the field as divided between “two prominent world views’, specifically between “advocates of an optimistic and a pessimistic view of the administrative capacities of government (1985:p. 309). Finally, Stillman indicated: “Here perhaps is the central characteristic – and problem – with public administration theory in America: namely, its continued failure to define its scope and substance as a coherent theory, even in the late twentieth century” (1991:p.9).

### **The Advantages of Heterogeneity**

While many public administration scholars alternately characterize the lack of a unifying paradigm in public administration as a crisis or a problem, other scholars have been encouraged by this development. Burrell and Morgan in their groundbreaking book *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis* (1979) see public administration theorists as falling into four different paradigms: functionalism, interpretivism, radical humanism and radical structuralism.

To a great extent, this book, which is frequently cited in the public administration literature in the 1980s and 1990s, helped legitimize the less recognized paradigms within public administration, namely interpretivism, radical humanism and radical structuralism. The legitimation of multiple paradigms was not only given impetus by Burrell and Morgan's book, but it was also propelled forward earlier by the New Public Administration movement in the 1970s, thus contributing to public administration's heterodoxy and, some might say, its theoretical confusion. Indeed, these phenomena contributed to the dethroning of functionalism as the "one best way" of conducting research. Both the movement and the book legitimized alternate forms of research that prior to the 1960s would generally be considered by most public administrationists as falling outside the field.

Editors and editorial boards of public administration journals, playing their role as gatekeepers, undoubtedly prior to Burrell and Morgan's book prevented some alternate points of view, outside the accepted paradigm from being published. Bowman and Hajjar noted in their content analysis of public administration literature: "Professional journals of public administration play a prominent role in influencing the study and practice of administration" (1978:p. 156). As Forrester and Watson noted: Through the review process, journals not only establish quality standards but also provide a gatekeeping function, deciding the nature and scope of the ideas presented to the practicing and academic communities for discussion" (1994:p.474). Furthermore, Morgan indicated that "the control systems developed by journals and university departments alike often exert a confining, if well-meaning hold on the jugular of scholarship, in ways that hamper the development of new styles of research"

(1986:p.326).

Many scholars have applauded the increasing heterodoxy within public administration. For example, White in an article commenting on Burrell and Morgan's book noted that "the project of the book is: namely to establish heterodoxy in organizational research. The authors wish to provide the legitimacy of an intellectual lineage to themes of theory and research that at present occupy only a marginal position as satellites to the dominant functionalist perspective" (1983:p. 269). Furthermore, Mainzer asked the rhetorical question:

**Is there one best way** to study public administration? Perhaps a parallel exists. Just as there is more than one persuasive model of a good person or a good life, there may be more than one fruitful way to understand a subject or a problem. Rejection of a single form or virtue or of truth, however, need not lead to nihilism or relativism (1994:p.359).

In another article, Lan and Anders noted: "it could be argued that the existence of competing paradigms in public administration strengthens, instead of erodes, the future of the field. Theoretical breakthroughs (reconstruction of new theories) may come more readily when competitive approaches are allowed to coexist" (2000:p.162). On a related point, Rodgers and Rodgers made the case for a type of researcher they refer to as an "undisciplined mongrel," who has little regard for disciplinary boundaries. They also advocate for a less structured discipline. They wrote: "the field is undisciplined. So what? It is possible for researchers to become more focused and disciplined. But why? (2000:pp.441-442). Borrowing a concept from the sociologist Ralph Whitley, Emmert described the field as

being 'polytheistic.' Emmert described a polytheistic discipline as one "with only a common, vague conception of what constitutes appropriate disciplinary work which may be incapable of being articulated (1983:p.252).

As many of the previous writers have indicated, public administration's heterogeneity has been variously described as a problem and even a crisis. Public administration has been criticized for lacking a core, for being undisciplined. Some doomsayers have even foretold the death of the field as we know it. The authors would like to reframe our conception of public administration.

Is the field of public administration more intellectually vital because of its heterogeneity or does this very heterogeneity create a confused mishmash of uncoordinated theories that serve to undermine the field? Although the authors are philosophically inclined to favor the former point, they also believe that theoretical heterogeneity may be almost an inevitable consequence of the field's diverse origins. Having borrowed from so many other fields, public administration may also be more likely than other fields to lack a commonly accepted theoretical core. This lack of a theoretical core leads to what the authors refer to as public administration: the loosely coupled discipline. Here, the term "loosely coupled" is not another term for "overlapping" or "interdependent," but rather implies something very different in that the field of public administration is a rather large tent that accommodates diverse ideological and methodological world views.

## **Public Administration as a Loosely Coupled Discipline**

How have various scholars chosen to characterize loosely coupled systems? What makes for a loosely coupled system? Glassman noted that loosely coupled systems have few variables in common or the variables in common have a weak relationship (1973). Karl Weick indicated: "By loose coupling, the author intends to convey the image that coupled events are responsive, but that each event also preserves its own identity and some evidence of its physical or logical separateness" (1976:p.3).

Several authors have emphasized the chaotic nature of loosely coupled systems. Indeed, Lutz has characterized loosely coupled systems as being "organized anarchies" (1982:p.655). Corwin noted that "A loosely coupled system is a complex organization characterized by a degree of autonomy among its interdependent parts and isolation between strata" (1981:p.262). Gamoran and Dreeben noted that in loosely coupled systems "activities and decisions made at one level do not necessarily reverberate in clearly patterned ways elsewhere. Administrators do not directly govern activities that take place in the technical core" (1986:p.615).

Since Karl Weick popularized the concept of loosely coupled systems in the 1970s, many scholars have written on the subject. The bulk of the literature pertaining to loosely coupled systems is written about educational organizations. Summarizing the literature on the topic, Orton and Weick wrote that scholars have identified the following types of loose coupling: individuals, subunits, organizations, hierarchical levels, organizations and environments, ideas and intentions and actions

(1990:pp.203-223). Interestingly, no scholars, according to Orton and Weick, have noted that disciplines, fields or subfields can be loosely coupled.

If something as abstract as activities, intentions and actions can be loosely coupled, then why not academic fields? Academic fields do not fall under the purview of a single organization, but the individuals who compose them do share some characteristics in common. The authors concede that some academic fields, especially those that are guided by a unifying paradigm, may, in fact, be tightly coupled systems. However, perhaps owing to its diverse origins, the field of public administration appears to be a loosely coupled system.

Can public administration or other academic fields be considered systems? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word 'system' as "A set or assemblage of things connected, associated or interdependent, so as to form a complex unity; a whole composed of parts in orderly arrangement according to some scheme or plan" (1971:p.3213). It is the authors' contention that an academic field's complex unity is maintained in several ways.

Academic fields are monitored by accrediting institutions, which ensure that member departments uphold certain standards, which the accrediting bodies hold as central to the field. For example, within the field of public administration, the National Association of Schools Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) usually insists that accredited institutions have a minimum of five full-time faculty who teach public administration. They also insist that programs under their purview offer certain courses, like budgeting, organization theory and public personnel management. Nevertheless, they also allow for differences

between programs. Thus, some public administration programs can fall within political science departments and other programs can offer courses using extended learning formats. Accrediting organizations, like managers of other loosely coupled systems, provide for both coordination and autonomy.

Another reason, the authors would argue why academic disciplines could be regarded as loosely coupled systems is because their members share certain common values. Although the members of a discipline may disagree about a field's theoretical constructs, at least within the field of public administration, they generally share the belief of the importance of the field; believe that public administration is ennobling; and maintain a relative consensus about what constitutes a public administration education. Indeed, Orton and Weick noted that shared values can help hold together a loosely coupled system (1990:p.212).

Is it disadvantageous for the field of public administration to be a loosely coupled system? The authors believe that there are both advantages and disadvantages if a system is loosely coupled. Weick and other scholars have adopted a fairly catholic view of loosely coupled organizations. Weick noted: "people who are steeped in the conventional literature of organizations may regard loose coupling as a sin or something to be apologized for. This paper takes a neutral, if not mildly affectionate, stance towards the concept" (1976:p.6). One could take a contingent view of the value of loose coupling, depending upon the system – sometimes being loosely coupled is functional, other times it is dysfunctional. One scholar, however, took an unabashedly positive view of loose coupling.. He noted: "the concept of loose coupling is attractive precisely because it is unsettling and counter-

intuitive. It suggests that some classical principles of administration, like centralized control and rational planning, may not be as useful as is often believed” (Firestone, 1985:p.6).

### **How Public Administration Meets Weick’s Criteria as a Loosely Coupled System**

In an article titled “educational Organization as Loosely Coupled System,” Weick identified seven specific characteristics of loosely coupled systems. The authors compare how the field of public administration meets Weick’s criteria.

First Weick noted “Loose coupling lowers the probability that the organization will have to – or be able to – respond to each little change in the environment that occurs... While loose coupling may foster perseverance, it is not selective in what is perpetuated. Thus archaic traditions as innovative improvisations may be perpetuated” (1976:p.6). This point seems to be congruent with Kuhn’s analysis that discredited paradigms within a discipline are permitted to exist as long as the believers in those paradigms continue to remain active in the field. In a loosely coupled system, the members of the larger system tolerate, even if they do not encourage, the deviant views of the discredited minority. Paraphrasing Max Planck, Kuhn noted that “a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die” (1962:p.151). Thus, in a loosely coupled system, adherents of such formerly accepted truisms as POSDCORB and the politics/administration dichotomy continue to propound their doctrines, even though such doctrines have lost their

credibility among the large public administration community.

Secondly, Weick noted that “loosely coupled systems preserve many independent sensing elements and therefore ‘know’ their environments better than is true for more tightly coupled systems which have fewer externally constrained, independent elements” (1976:p.6). Here, perhaps Morgan’s *Images of Organization* is applicable. In his book, Morgan identified various metaphors that organizational scholars use to understand organizations. Specifically, he identified the following metaphors: organization as machine, organism, brain, culture, psychic prison, system of flux and transformation and instrument of domination (1986). The authors submit that not only do public administration scholars use these metaphors to understand organizations, which they do not inhabit, but they also use these metaphors, employing their special organizational expertise, to make sense of their own organizational environments. This special knowledge of their own environments allows public administration scholars to further hone what Weick refers to as their “sensitive sensing mechanism” (1976:p.6).

Third, Weick wrote: “If all the elements in a large system are loosely coupled to one another, then any one element can adjust to and modify a local unique contingency without affecting the whole system” (1976:pp.6-7). Public administration scholars are not only members of a “discipline,” “field,” or “subfield” – take your pick – they are also members of formal organizations, i.e. academic departments. For example, an academic department may have to make allowances for the population they serve. An illustration of this principle applies to the authors’ own department. Their university is located in a corner of a geographically large state, making

them more than 400 miles away from some of their students. Furthermore, their public administration program offers a MPA and that MPA program is the only one offered in their state. Consequently, they offer a MPA program that makes extensive use of compressed video and intensive weekends (a practice condoned by NASPAA in some cases), whereas most MPA programs offer more traditional classes.

Fourth, Weick maintained that

in loosely coupled systems where the identity, uniqueness and separateness of elements is preserved, the system potentially can retain a greater number of mutations and novel solutions than would be the case with a tightly coupled system. A loosely coupled system could preserve more 'cultural insurance' to be drawn upon in times of radical change than in the case for more tightly coupled systems (1976:p.7).

The authors would argue that because the field of public administration is a loosely coupled system, it is easier for it to adapt to radical changes brought about by a disillusionment with the politics/administration dichotomy, principles of administration articulated by Urwick and Gulick and to a certain extent the principles of positivism. Academics in a more rigid tightly coupled system would have been more likely to hold fast to these principles. Many public administration academics of the 1950s and 1960s who worried about the field's demise perceived the disruption of the field to be a negative development, when in the authors' view, the disruption was fraught with possibilities.

Fifth, Weick indicated "if there is a breakdown in

one portion of a loosely coupled system then this breakdown is sealed off and does not affect other portions of the organization” (1976:p.7). The authors apply this characteristic to public administration by once again citing Kuhn. Kuhn indicated that when an anomaly occurs there is “the recognition that nature has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations that govern normal science” (1962:pp.52-53). The corollary for public administration is as follows. If one of the paradigms within public administration no longer provides a suitable explanation for an important phenomenon, then the entire field of public administration is not discredited, but rather the phenomenon only has a significant impact upon the particular paradigm in question. If one is to accept Burrell and Morgan’s typology, the public administration scholar has four paradigms from which to choose.

Sixth, Weick noted that “it may be consequential that in a loosely coupled system that there is more room for self-determination by the actors” (1976:p.7-8). It appears quite evident that as the field of public administration became more heterogeneous and more loosely coupled with the development of multiple paradigms that it provided more possibilities within the field for creativity and personal fulfillment. Certainly, some would argue, and the authors believe convincingly, that the dominance of one paradigm curtails critical thought. As White noted: “the orthodoxy that accrues from the dominance of a single paradigm can overwhelm individual choice and stifle human reason” (1983:p.270).

Finally, Weick noted “a loosely coupled system should be relatively inexpensive to run because it takes time and money to coordinate people” (1976:p. 8). What expenses are generated to maintain the field of public administration? Relatively few. The principal expenses

appear to be the cost of maintaining journals within the field, which serve as a means of disseminating information and normative positions. Conferences perform a similar function. The only other significant expense are costs associated with NASPAA, which serves to establish and enforce guidelines among member programs and conduct audits of programs seeking accreditation.

## **Conclusion**

Being a member of a loosely coupled academic field means, in part, living with ambiguity. It means no defined and universally accepted canon, but rather multiple canons. It means that the borders of the field are porous and relatively undefined. A loosely coupled academic field appears to many to be chaotic, perhaps even lacking substance, a field appealing perhaps to academic dilettantes. Such a field also probably suffers from a lack of status. For some scholars this condition of loose coupling may be disheartening.

Certainly, public administration academics do not enjoy the same reputation of their distant second cousins in business administration, as measured by such crude, but telling indicators as pay, perquisites and public standing. Political scientists, who are closer cousins, if not always disciplinary brothers, have also often regarded the field of public administration with mild disdain. Waldo noted, "In the perception of most political scientists down to this day, I judge public administration concerns the lower things of government, details for lesser minds" (1990:74). In addition, many political scientists believe that some of their public administration colleagues down the hall are employing suspect methodologies. Some of them may not even be engaging in science

Nevertheless, for others, the condition of a loosely coupled discipline offers hope, particularly for those who are positioned on the fringe of the discipline – the so-called undisciplined mongrels – who appreciate the freedom such a field offers.

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#### About the Authors

Robert A. Schuhmann is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wyoming where he teaches public budgeting, public policy and administrative law. He has published articles in *Public Administration Review*, *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, *Social Science Quarterly*, *the Social Science Journal*, *the Municipal Yearbook* and this journal.

Larry Hubbell is a professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wyoming where he teaches public personnel management, organization theory and organization development. He has had articles published in *Administration and Society*, *American Review of Public Administration*, *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, *Humanity and Society*, *Political Science and Politics*, *the Journal of Thought*, *Public Voices*, *the OD Practitioner*, *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, *the Public Manager*, *Practicing*, *the Journal of Asian Affairs*, *CUPA/HR Journal* and several foreign journals.

**Please contact Larry Hubbell at [Hubbell@uwyo.edu](mailto:Hubbell@uwyo.edu).**  
**His address is           138 Domino Road**  
**Laramie, WY 82072**