

Historical development of public administration



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Since at least the 1970s, public administration has been characterized by an intellectual identity crisis, the various dimensions of which can be most compactly summarized as the “ legitimacy problem.”

Drawing from specific authors and schools of thought, outline the major dimensions of the legitimacy problem in public administration and describe the ways in which scholars and reformers have diagnosed and attempted to “ resolve” this problem.

Next, explain why the legitimacy problem matters. What is at stake? In considering this aspect of the question, you should think about how the issues presented via the legitimacy question affect the everyday practice of democratic government and the identity of public administration as a field of study.

The debate over public administration identity and its legitimacy problem have been the focus for many years, and very likely to continue in foreseeable future. Previous scholars in public administration have examined this issue through a variety of approaches and perspectives. More specifically, the framing of the legitimacy issue and identity crisis in the discipline are all subjected to different scholars’ own focus and perception about the world. Perhaps the origin of the problem can be dated back to the establishment of US nation, when Founding Fathers drafted the constitution and design three branches of government with check and balance mechanism, they left out public administration, which others might considered that public administration is not a democratic production due to its hieratical structure, and therefore, does not have a legitimate place in

government. In general, we can summarize these debates into following aspects: the accountability aspect, constitutional aspect, role of government aspect, and method of public administration employ to approach both academic study and practical matters. These issues affect how we conceptualize the practice of public administration as well as the conduct of research inquiry in the field.

Historical development of public administration (accountability aspect)

The earliest scholars who mention the identity of public administration are Woodrow Wilson and Goodnow, which also raise the issue of politics-administration dichotomy. During the early period of 20th century, the government system is considered to be corrupted with patronages. Therefore, Wilson argued that there should be a distinct separation between politics and administration, and Goodnow further conclude that politics is the representation of people's will and administration is the execution of that will. They envision a bureaucratic system with hierarchical structure and formal rules and regulations, and expert administrators will act faithfully according to the political system. This notion give rise to the debate between Friedrich and Finer, where on one hand, Finer believes in strict regulation that guard against administrators abuse the power and administrators should only focus on the technical issues, while Friedrich was arguing administrators are experts and should actively engage in policymaking process. In addition, such dichotomy between politics and administration also revisited by scholars Dwight Waldo and Herbert Simon. Waldo in his Administrative State, points out that the dichotomy is between facts and values, which is impossible and

should not be separate in government, since public administration deals with people's perception toward the state, and the study as well as practice of it should be guided by different normative values. Simon on the other hand, in *Administrative Behavior*, arguing while there is close relation between politics and administration, the purpose of public administration should focus on the most efficient way to carry out those values.

Empirical aspects of legitimacy problem

(Role of the government aspect) There are multiple aspects revolving legitimacy problem, from empirical and practical aspect, Nye et al in their book *Government and its Discontented* perform empirical test and found that US public has low trust in government and perceive it as inefficient and ineffective which poses the legitimacy problem for the government. Such negative perception toward government, according to David Harvey is stem from neoliberalism, especially against Keynes approach to expand the government during Roosevelt administration. Essentially, the debate over the role of government, or the tension between neoliberalism and Keynes approach, is about the identity of public administration. In other words, neoliberalism considers administrators as hindrance while Keynes supporter see positive value in them. This also introduced the era of New Public Management (NPM) reform. According to scholars Lynn and Kettl, NPM advocates for emphasis on efficiency and accountability to customers, and the market approach which include privatization of services, contract out government service to private and non-profit sectors. However, recent scholars like Stivers, King et al, Denhardt, Fung, Nabatchi, and Lucio, they see weakness in empathizing rolling back or hollowing out the state, and

highlight the importance of people trust and connection with others, which government should play active role.

(Constitution aspect) Another point of attention in legitimacy problem resides in the constitution, or federalist and anti-federalist debate. Constitution did not directly mention the creation of an administrative system but focus on separation of power, which produced the ambiguities of whether public administration is legitimate or not. Scholar Spicer believe the reason is because constitution regards people as not always rational and must rely on formal rules and structure, and government establishes its legitimacy through a federalist view. However, other scholars have different perspectives than Spicer's. For example, McSwite argues that the creation of constitution is a compromise act, a conflict between the social elites that want to ensure their interests and lower members of society, in which the elites successfully create a centralized government that serve the interest of few. Therefore, McSwite was champion a more direct form of democracy system that can alleviate the legitimacy problem. On the other hand, scholar Rohr disagree with McSwite's position and believes that constitution was actually intended for public administration to exist because constitution limits the legislature branch's ability to fully represent people's will. In other words, Rohr suggest that the legitimacy problem occurs due to different interpretation of constitution, and the solution to government legitimacy problem is public administration since administrators are closer to the people compare to congress.

Major schools of thoughts and scholars (method aspect)

It is not surprising that same constitution could have several different meaning for different scholar, which correspond to scholar David Farmer's argument that social reality is different for different groups because each scholars understanding and approach the field is limited by their own experience and knowledge. Coming from a post-modernist perspective, Farmer suggests that the study of public administration should approach through examining the characteristics underlying in current society. In other words, Farmer's solution to the public administration identity crisis is to examine the reality through different perspective, which allows for a better understanding of reality. In particular, he points out the limitation of contemporary methods in the practice of public administration which include emphasis on scientific reasoning in the discipline and market-ism in practice. On one hand, scientific reasoning overlooks values and ethic dimension. On the other, market approach practice contradicts with government's goal of improving public wellness. Fundamentally, post-modernist perspective caution that reasons and rationality might hinder our understanding of the reality. Similar to Farmer's post-modernist perspective, Stivers approach this science and enterprise method in public administration through feminism perspective. Stivers points out that current foundation for public administration was established on gender differences, where masculine attributes like science and rationality overcome the common attributes like trust and caring which considered to be feminine. In addition, Stivers believes that the legitimacy crisis is rooted in the nature of public administration, in which she argues that it is essentially about public trust and connection with each other, the attributes considered to be feminine.

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Yet public administration legitimacy was established through masculinity, therefore, which caused the decrease of interest in social wellness and seeks efficiency of individual interest. According to Stivers, the end result of that conflict leads to the legitimacy problem, therefore, Stivers believe the solution to the problem is that administrators should focus on improving the relationship and connection between individual among society, and enhance people's notion of the public. Similarly, Stivers's notion corresponds to Waldo's previous suggestion. Waldo strongly disagree with public administration as a value-neutral discipline that apply scientific method to pursuit efficiency, he argues that efficiency is essentially a value also, and to emphasize on efficiency along will sacrifices other normative values. The famous example Waldo use is that Germany's approach during World War II of ethnic cleansing is extremely efficient. Recent scholars like Denhardt also argue another weakness in scientific inquiry into public administration study is the risk that disregard as irrational in people's behaviors that are not driven by rationality or self-interest.

To summarize the method aspect of legitimacy problem, for practitioners, the identity crisis resides in their perception toward different governance approaches: in traditional governance, the method is command and control; in market governance, the method is self-interest; and in collaboration governance, the method is trust and negotiation. How administrators identify which approach should take depend on their beliefs and perception. On the other hand, the methodological aspect of identity crisis in the academic study of public administration revolving around whether public administration is an art that surround with different values and perspectives;

or a science that focus on analyzing facts. Scholar Raaschelders propose his solution to identity crisis by acknowledging there are advantages in each of inquiry methods, and the solution to this problem is to put this debate aside and move on.

Why legitimacy problem important?

Legitimacy issue is a critical challenge facing public administration for both government and academic discipline. Not surprisingly, scholars who participated in the debate over identity crisis all have their own argument why legitimacy issue is a serious problem. For example, scholar Rohr points out that if administration was seen as illegitimate to the people, this will lead to social unrest. Also, Ostrom, in the book “intellectual crisis in public administration” mentioned that the incidents like Watergate could be attributed to the crisis of legitimacy. Aside from previous scholars’ concerns, in my opinion, for academic scholars studying in the field of public administration, if we fail to reach consensus on what is public administration and what elements constitute a legitimate knowledge inquiry, then, public administration might be under the risk of being a subfield to another discipline, or even fractionized into several. In addition, the identity crisis of “what is public administration” can also complicated the intellectual crisis of “what the study of public administration should focus”. The failure of defining core identity and drawing a clear boundary of inquiry might jeopardize future development of public administration study. While my concerns might not be the same as what scholars like Raaschelders and Denhardt have argued, Raaschelders suggests that current debate over identity of public administration on its methodological approaches is backward, and somewhat

meaningless due to the complexity nature of government rendering the true understanding of reality impossible, therefore, future scholars should just move beyond this debate and consider public administration discipline as an interdisciplinary study like a harbor anchoring multi-face studies. Denhardt on the other hand, argues that current emphasis on scientific method might limit the room for other considerations. Therefore, the study of public administration should include other perspectives. These are valid arguments, however, I believe how scholars perceive their studies and how the field defines itself will significantly shape future study and the methods. Yet in the education of public administration, which deals with the training of future administrators, and the curriculum design is associated with what capacity scholars believe administrators should have. My argument for the importance of legitimacy problem is that while public administration discipline includes various schools of thought with their own advantages and weakness, if the academic field is so complex and scholars cannot draw a boundary to the knowledge, then the accumulation of knowledge created since the inception of public administration, combine with extreme diverse scholars' perception and methodology, I fear that the wide range content cover in current education system might exceed student's capacity to comprehend. In more simplistic terms, my argument is that there is no doubt that every schools of thought is valuable and impossible to decide which one is outside the realm of public administration, however, the sheer amount of public administration knowledge still requires and challenges this discipline to triage its body of scholars' work, so that the training and cultivation of future administrator is possible. Otherwise, over time, this problem of drawing definition might translates to future government administrators and

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the public struggling with the different experience and understanding; perceptions of government's role; and their approach to formulate and implement policy.