THE THREE FACES OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

As an academic field, public management has several aspects: the one that we may refer to as the technocratic, for want of a better term. I shall call the second the social constructivist and, the last, the clinical or craft perspective. The purpose of this essay is to explain each of these discourses, how each would go about addressing the basic doctrinal issues of public management, and where each offers something uniquely useful to the practice of public management. It also offers an apologia pro curriculum vita sum, emphasizing my meta-theoretical beliefs about the pursuit our joint enterprise of researching, synthesizing, and teaching.

INTRODUCTION - THE THREE FACES OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT*

My topic is roughly the shape and content of public administration as a field of academic contemplation and study. On this topic it seems that I share very few, if any, conclusions with most of my colleagues in the field. We agree that it's an important topic and that it is changing, but we don't agree as to its nature or even its direction. Indeed, reading their comments, along with mine, reminded me of the Zen koan of the blind scholars and the elephant. Each grasped a different part of the elephant and each drew a different conclusion about its essential nature: the sage who grasped its trunk concluded that the elephant was like a hose; the sage who grasped its side, a wall; its leg, a column; its ear, a shade; and its tail, a rope. The point of the Koan is that none of the sages truly grasped the whole elephant.

I wish I could say that I truly grasped the nature of public administration, as an academic field, or even its direction, but I cannot. Moreover, there is no way that I could see further or more clearly than do these five, truly eminent scholars. Instead, I too will focus on my part of the elephant: *the fairly small part of the broader field of public policy and administration, which addresses the following kinds of doctrinal issues: What is the role of public managers? What should be the design of a programmatic organization? How should government operations be led? What public management policies (e.g., financial management, human resource management, procurement, etc.) should be chosen?*[1] My preferred term for this corner of the field is public management, but it should be understood that this is a contested term.

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[1] Barzelay (2001) formulated this statement of the public management agenda. It distinguishes public management from the academic fields of public administration, public policy, political science, & public economics & finance, which it intersects, based in part on its greater overlap with the academic fields of strategic management, business process management, performance management & management control.

As an academic field, public management has several aspects: the one that my colleagues Professors Richard Stillman and David Arellano Gault refer to as the *technocratic*; for want of a better term, I shall call the second the *social constructivist*; and, the last, the *clinical* or craft perspective. My purpose is to explain each of these discourses, how each would go about addressing the basic doctrinal issues of public management, and where each offers something uniquely useful to the practice of public management. I also offer an apologia pro curriculum vita sum, emphasizing my metatheoretical beliefs about the pursuit our joint enterprise of researching, synthesizing, and teaching.

In the history of public affairs, two of these faces tend to recur as part of an ongoing historical dialectic as empiricism and idealism. In Mexican history, for example, we could perhaps associate the point of view taken by the technocrats with that of Francisco Bulnes and that of the social constructivists with Jose Vasconcelos.

Today, most of the technocrats in the academic field of public management are North Americans. In contrast, the Europeans more often adopt a social-constructivist stance, although many of the scholars they cite are North Americans—such as Karl Weick, Don Schön, Hugh Miller, and O.C. McSwite.[2] Thus, when North Americans say agency, they are probably talking about incentive compatibility; when Europeans use the same word, they are usually talking about autonomy or free will. Another tension is that Americans seem more focused on the public part of public management, while paradoxically the non-Americans focus on the management part, inc luding financial management and managerial accounting, personnel management, client management, procurement, operations, and organizational design and change.

There are a variety of reasons for this state of affairs, including differences in location, practical experience, and philosophical traditions. For example, it is a common proverb of policy analysis that where you stand depends upon where you sit. Most of the North Americans teach in schools of public affairs of one sort or another, while most of the Europeans are based in management schools. Further, Non-American public management academics are more likely to participate in processes of governance, whereas North American scholars are largely outsiders looking in. Because non-Americans are insiders looking out, their concerns are much more like their practitioner counterparts, including, I would assert, a very healthy concern with the argumentative, rhetorical, and casuistic aspects of managing. At the same time, their insider perspective may help explain why European public management scholars seem to have so much trouble distinguishing between the practice of public management and its study. Like most things, intimacy has costs as well as benefits.

The difference in approaches to public management between social constructivists and technocrats is illustrated by the first two chapters of the *Oxford Handbook of Public Management*: Larry Lynn's "Public Management: A Concise History of the Field" (2005) and Chris Hood's "Public Management: The Word, the Moveme nt, the Science" (2005). Both are brilliant, original, and challenging. Yet they are beyond talking about

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[2] In my experience, the North American students of public affairs who are social constructivists – OC McSwite, Ralph Hummel, etc. do not as a rule identify themselves with the field of public management or concern themselves with the doctrinal issues I identify here as defining the field.

two ends of the same elephant; they seem to be talking instead about different animal kingdoms altogether.

THESIS: PUBLIC MANAGEMENT IS SOCIAL SCIENCE

Lynn argues that the goal of public management researchers ought to be incontrovertible proof that a given action will produce known outcomes. For example, given that y = f(x), condition set x will produce outcome y, all other things equal; absent set x, y will not occur. Hence, if you want y, do set x. From this highly instrumental perspective, a good normative model is merely a good empirical model run backwards. Lynn also distinguishes between proverbs or principles and rules. Principles are universal truths; they always apply, but are largely devoid of specific content. Thus, pay attention to people. Do first things first. Do what has to be done. In contrast, rules are contingent propositions: if you encounter a problem of the form A, do A*. But don't do A* if the problem is B, because it won't work. In other words, rules are based on robust distinctions. Lynn further argues that formal models help us to deduce distinctions; we do empirical work to test their validity with real data; and then we teach the resulting rules to our students, making certain that, if they are curious, they can find out how the rules were produced. His conclusion is that what we need are diagnostic and prescriptive tools, enabling students to tell A from B and to know what to do, A* or B*, or what questions to ask, in each situation (presuming that we can first sort out the rules).

Lynn and his allies endorse an intellectual agenda for public management as a field of academic contemplation and study first seriously proposed by Herbert Simon sixty years ago. Simon (1946) demonstrated that the field's instrumental knowledge claims were simply not evidence-based and thus failed the correspondence test and that its prescriptions, based upon those claims, were logically inconsistent and thus also failed the consistency test. Correspondence and consistency are, of course, empiricism's only two standards for warranting truth claims.[3] Implicitly, Simon argued that any action that cannot be justified in terms of scientific rationality, technical expertise, and effectiveness is simply not a worthwhile social undertaking. In place of the rules of thumb outlined by most students of public administration, he called for the creation of a positive theory of administrative behavior, based upon rigorous modeling, quantitative hypothesis testing, and logical consistency.

Simon's work stimulated the rise of a science of administration, organization, and governance. But the academic field of public administration largely ignored this movement, both in North America and in Europe. Until recently, most administrative

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[3] Up to this point, I have no argument Simon's argument. Both as a North American and as someone trained in economics, I take evidence and consistency far more seriously than I do appropriateness, vision, or will as warrants for knowledge claims, although I would note that there is a third social epistemology, pragmatism or instrumentalism, which serves to warrant clinical or craft claims.

scientists worked in disciplinary forums outside of public administration[4] – in economics, the social sciences, and the management disciplines (not only organization theory and design, but also strategy, marketing, production and logistics, operations research, human resources management, information technology and knowledge management, finance, and managerial accounting). In other words, the business school disciplines.

It took the rise of the freestanding public policy school in North America to rekindle widespread interest in applying Simon's agenda to the kinds of doctrinal issues we are concerned with here. In many instances scho lars in these schools wished to differentiate themselves from their counterparts in schools of public administration. Several found they could do so by embracing Simon's methodology.[5] This was also politically convenient, since the faculties of public policy schools already typically included many economists, often in positions of leadership, who shared these methodological canons.

One disparages the scientific process at one's peril. This process normally begins with the evidence of the senses, moves then to verbal description, to theorizing and on to formal mathematical models in a progressively ascending arc of ever-greater generality. The last step in this process is to check the math against the evidence of the real world. This is the one fail-safe approach to warranting knowledge. It is perfectly reasonable to believe that it is the only process that will deliver the incontrovertible evidence needed to make better public management decisions. In any case, technocrats now play a significant role in academic public management. They dominate the *Journal of Public Management Research and Theory* and, increasingly, the *International Public Management Journal* as well, and share the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* with their economist colleagues (as junior partners, to be sure).

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[4] Most, but not all – among the public management scholars who early on took up Simon's challenge were his students Pat Crecine, P.D. Larkey, Mark Kamlet, and Phil Bromiley, and others, such as James Perry, Hal Rainey, Brint Milward, and Ken Maier. The reader should note that rigorous modeling, quantitative hypothesis testing, and logical consistency is the norm in the social sciences and that a lot of good social science research on administrative behavior has been done. However, this research has not really come to grips with the kind of doctrinal issues I have identified as comprising the substantive core of the academic study of public management and, perhaps, cannot. I am by no means claiming that social science is impossible, I confess to having practiced social science on any number of occasions, although rarely in the public management arena. Rather, I believe that, so far as public management is considered, Simon's agenda is at best, premature and, perhaps, at worst, misconceived.

[5] Location probably also provides some insight into the emphasis the technocrats give to publicness. Their founders of the public policy schools sought to differentiate themselves from business schools on an intellectual level by stressing the moral dimensions of managing and the importance of managing upward and outward, to use Mark Moore's terms. Business schools often address these issues poorly, where they address them at all. Of course, an emphasis on the moral dimensions of management is more congruent with either a social constructivist or a craft orientation than with a technocratic perspective. However, the technocrats evidently realize that the only thing that distinguishes them from their counterparts in business schools is an appeal to public value and governance institutions. Evidently, academic sectarianism, like other forms of politics, tends to create strange bedfellows.

ANTITHESIS: PUBLIC MANAGEMENT IS ADMINISTRATIVE ARGUMENT

In contrast, the social constructivists insist that Simon's agenda is fundamentally misconceived, that the very idea of looking for incontrovertible answers to the basic doctrinal issues of public management is inherently absurd. According to Hood, public management is "concerned with situations where action has to be taken in the absence of incontrovertible proof that one approach will work better than another." Hence, managing is not decision making; it is practice and, as such, must be understood in terms of the linguistic events and social interactions through which people make sense of situations as they change and develop. More than anything else, managing means dealing with messy, particularistic situations, while trying to do the right things and to do them well. Managers are always on "rough ground" where values, feelings, affect, and ambiguities are simultaneously in play. Hood emphasizes that managing is all about "the power to persuade and shape impressions" and concludes, "the battle for theologically-correct power words is central to the world of government and bureaucracy."

The social-constructivist perspective reflects the notion that the dilemmas encountered in managing are basic, inescapable human predicaments, not technical problems that have scientific solutions. As Lave and Wenger explain (1991: 50-51)

> A theory of social practice emphasizes the relational dependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning and knowing. . . . Learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world. . . . One way to think about learning is as the historical production, transformation, and change of persons.

From this perspective, knowing and doing are not separate processes. Indeed, knowledge can be gained only through active engagement or involvement of the knower with that which is to be known. Further, as Thomas Schwandt (2005: 98) stresses:

> Practice, as understood here, is a particular kind of human engagement that involves one's dealings with, or interactions with, others that unfold in view of some particular understanding of substantive rationality appropriate to the practice in question. Substantive rationality (in contrast to technical or instrumental rationality) is concerned with outcomes that are appraised in terms of human objectives far wider than effectiveness, efficiency, goal attainment, and so on. Those objectives are entailed in answers to questions about what goods a practice aims torealize, what it means to be a good practitioner, and so on.

Hood and Jackson (1991) explain the linguistic events and social interactions through which people try to be good practitioners, do the right things, make sense of situations, and deal with human predicaments in the public management context, in terms of administrative argument. Administrative arguments are sets of ideas concerned with a spectrum of organizational issues; sub-arguments – doctrines and justifications – are concerned with a single issue of organizational design. *Doctrines* say how design issues should be resolved; *justifications* are rationales for those claims. These are ultimately theological in nature, because they are based on debatable administrative va lues.

For example, in the single most widely cited reference on the New Public Management (Hood 1991), Hood uses the term as a conceptual device to structure a scholarly discussion of contemporary changes in the organization and management of executive government. In his view, NPM is primarily an administrative argument, which is based upon public values that stress the efficient performance of tasks, rather than honesty and fairness, the robustness and adaptability of systems, or the logic of appropriateness.

This is a very important point. Indeed, recognition that sustaining the rhetorical burden of casuistic argumentation and ethical reasoning is one of the core intellectual tasks performed by public managers is perhaps the most important contribution the social constructivists bring to the table. Taking it seriously means that the curriculum of schools of public policy and management probably ought to include practical reasoning and argumentation. Lacking shared cognitive models of practical reasoning and communication (Gaskins 1992; Simons 2001; Walton 1994), our students will be unable to engage effectively with others in reflective argumentative exchange, to fully appreciate others' thoughtful responses to administrative situations, or to permit scrutiny of their own positions. Furthermore, if students leave the university without tools to make sense of their intellectual performances retrospectively, it will be difficult for them to mature into genuinely reflective practitioners (Schön 1983).

At a minimum, doctrinal argumentation and persuasio n implies a basic understanding of rhetoric and of the rules of productive conversation. This means that students of public management should understand that any policy proposition must meet certain stock issues (arguably this is merely systematized common sense): need for change/action must be shown, as must the workability of policy alternatives, their practicality, the absence greater evils, and, compared with the alternatives, the recommended policy offers the best balance of advantages and disadvantages (benefits and costs). By workability, I mean that a proposal will at least in theory meet the identified need, i.e., the proposed policy [prescription] will remedy the problem [diagnosis]. Practicality means the resources time, commitment, understanding, etc. – needed to bring about the proposed change are available. Of course, these are all propositions of fact – causal claims, predictive claims, historical claims, and value claims – not facts. They are belief claims for which factual evidence is needed.[6] But, from the standpoint of managerial reasoning, the more important of these claims are value claims.

I would go further than some social constructivists, in part because I believe in instrumental rationality (I am not, in fact, convinced there is any other kind), and suggest that adherence to certain rules will tend to make administrative argumentation more effective. These are:

1. Practice inquiry before advocacy. Be open to a variety of points of view before you embrace any one of them.

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[6] Focus groups made up of our alumni inform us that the ability to define and attack an issue, select appropriate analytical tools, apply them to relevant data, and make concise, persuasive recommendations is what their employers expect of them, what they find themselves doing most of the time, and what they most value from their education.

2. Know your subject [do your homework]

3. Be honest about what you know and don't know [don't invent]

4. Try to tell the truth as you perceive it [don't lie or distort]

5. Don't oversimplify

6. Acknowledge possible weaknesses in your position. Be honest about your own ambivalence or uncertainty

7. Avoid irrelevant emotional appeals or diversionary tactics

8. Appeal to the best motives of your colleagues, not their worst

9. Be prepared to lose if winning means doing psychological harm to others and demeaning yourself in the bargain

So far so good. But, if the technocratic perspective is flawed in its understanding of the nature of managing, the social constructivist perspective suffers an even larger flaw. It implicitly denies that academic contemplation and study of public management has any relevance to its practice, except perhaps insofar as we academics can come up with better power words. Taken literally, the social constructivists seem to be saying that the only way to learn about managing is by managing. Codification of management practice is necessarily misleading, when it doesn't destroy understanding entirely. Indeed, this perspective almost seems to delight in denying the possibility of vicarious learning about public management, since practice requires participant (rather than spectator) knowledge. As for academics, the social constructivist perspective assigns us the role of theological disputants, debating public management fads and enthus iasms, and perhaps clarifying terms and concepts and tracing the sectarian history of the various movements that have swept the field. This is not a satisfying prospect.

## SYNTHESIS: PUBLIC MANAGEMENT IS CLINICAL RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

More than any other scholar, Professor Michael Barzelay of the London School of Economics and Political Science and editor of *Governance*, the journal of the Structure and Organization of Government Research Committee of the International Political Science Association, has consciously sought to create a synthesis (in the Hegelian sense) of the technocratic and the social constructivist positions. The key to Barzelay's synthesis is clinical science, a concept borrowed from medicine, where the idea of evidence-based practice was first introduced. In medicine, evidence-based case management means "the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making health care decisions" (Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes, & Richardson 1996: 71) and the "integration of best research evidence with clinical expertise and patient values" (Sackett, Straus, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes 2000: 1). Notice the specific emphasis on the importance of integrating evidence with clinical judgment.

Barzelay argues that the clinical/design science approach to organizational practices is a sustained, widely distributed, inter-disciplinary, scholarly undertaking oriented to providing usable knowledge for improving organized efforts to create public value.

- It focuses on organizational action, including but not limited to managerial action.

- It aims to attain (ever more) learned understandings about the design and operation of situated practices.

- These understandings are meant to augment and, to a degree, correct, the practical intelligence of people whose work is infused with public authority and responsibility, and is essentially clinical.

- Its scholarly activities include research (discovery), synthesis, and pedagogy.

Barzelay's clinical/design science is a strategy for developing the practice of public management. It is emergent – already reflected in books, articles, and courses and the history of learning within our field. It also draws heavily on the business school disciplines and political science and therefore also reflects diverse intellectual and research traditions within academic social science. And, it is reflective – a conscious, interdisciplinary, cosmopolitan strategy, connecting specific neighboring scholarly undertakings and approaches:

- Theories of situated practice (Wenger, Reckwitz, Feldman and Pentland)

- Analysis and cataloguing of causal mechanisms (Elster, Mayntz, Bunge, Tilly)

- Multi-level analysis (Goodman, Hackman)

- Comparative historical analysis in the Social Sciences (Maloney and Rueschemeyer)
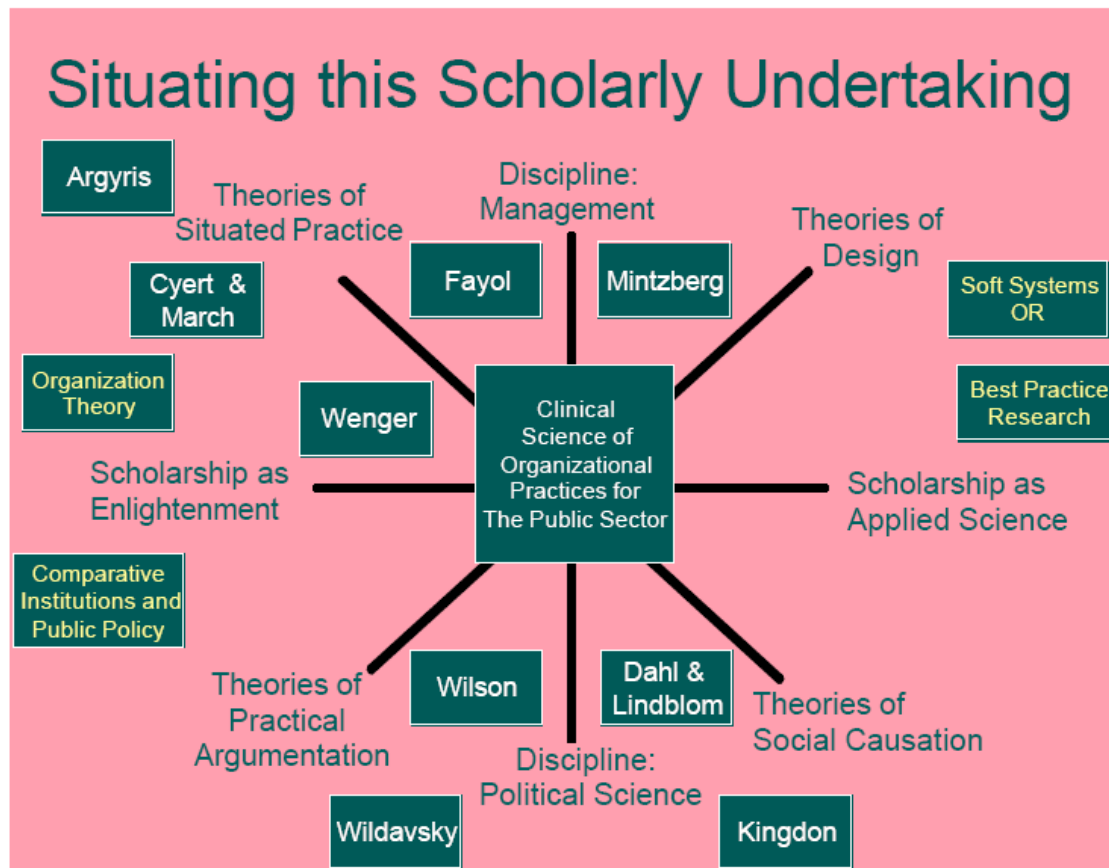
Source: Michael Barzelay, London, 6 June 2006

Barzelay's clinical science of public management takes the social constructivist positions that managing is practice and practice is local, contingent, and contextual. Once these positions are conceded, it follows that instrumental, scientific knowledge must somehow be adjusted or adapted to specific situations. Practice in this view demands a dialectic process of working back and forth from the case at hand to evidence-based knowledge on one hand to values, and commitments on the other.

The one element that is central to Barzelay's synthesis, which is not shared with the other two perspectives, is that it assigns a privileged role to narrative methods in public management research. Barzelay privileges narrative methods for two reasons. The first goes to subject-matter familiarity. If academics are going to provide solutions in the form of intervention and mechanism designs and practice improvisations to deal with real problems, they must first of all understand what public managers do and how they do it. As Graham Allison, then Dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Public Policy, explained in a highly influential article, "The effort to develop public management as a field of knowledge should start from problems faced by practicing public managers" (1980: 38).

Second, clinical analysis and management practice are homologous cognitive, deliberative, discursive processes. That is to say, narrative case-focused research is like managing in that they share the same basic steps: identify the key attributes of the problem (assessment of signs and symptoms), match the problem to others with known solutions (diagnosis), apply known solution to existing problem (prescription), check to see if the situation improves (monitoring), and the same way of reasoning, what might

be termed hermeneutic *bricolage*. People figure out what do by interpreting situations, deciding which facts are important, searching collective memory for similar fact patterns with known solutions, matching those known solutions to the shared interpretation of the situation, and applying the best solution to the problem at hand. If that does not work, they start over. Clinical practice increases one's ability to perform these steps and, on reflection, to apprehend them.

For this reason, narrative case-focused research is useful for teaching the practice of public management, by providing readers with vicarious experience in performing public management. Even Lynn (2005: 48) acknowledges:

> The best of this literature[7] ... represents a thoughtful appreciation of the existential challenges of public management and an attempt to deduce best practices from closely observed successful stories... The oversimplifications of its proponents should not discredit the importance of craft as an element of public management... [I]t is reasonable to assume that public management will be only as effective as public managers are masters of their craft.

While Barzelay's clinical/design approach to public management privileges narrative methods, he also embraces other evidence-based methodologies. Barzelay understands that, while narrative research can illustrate consequentialist relationships and suggest meaningful hypotheses about them, it cannot put those hypotheses to the test. For that, comparative statics are required, ideally in the form of a controlled experiment, quasiexperiment, or econometric analysis. From this perspective, clinical methods are neither conclusive nor robust, although carefully matched case comparisons may approximate the results of other approaches to comparative statics.

Barzelay's clinical approach to public management research embraces administrative and social science; but it also shares the social constructivist's skepticism about the relevance to management practice of straightforward, linear models of consequentialist relationships. Barzelay argues the language of causality, in which a measurable change in one thing causes a proportional change in something else, fundamentally misconceives the nature of many social processes and mechanisms, that important concepts of management cannot be fully grasped if treated in merely formal relationship to one another. As Karl Weick explains in *Making Sense of the Organization (2001, 80):*

> Typically, environmental change is viewed as something largely outside the influence of organizations. The position we are developing suggests a different conclusion. Justifications, assembled into paradigms, can be enacted into a changing environment, thereby imposing some stability on it. Perception guided by a coherent paradigm can prefigure an environment. And confident action based on that prefiguring can actually move the environment in the direction of those paradigmatic preconceptions. That possibility is the important design point that is implicit in serial self-fulfilling prophesies.

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[7] Lynn cites Light's *Sustaining Innovation* (1998) and Bardach's *Getting Agencies to Work Together* (1998).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Ultimately, I have been persuaded that the clinical or design approach offers the avenue most likely to produce knowledge that public managers can use in the near future. My experience suggests that there is a fundamental truth embedded in the notion that, when management principles become the objects of commitment and action, consequentialist relationships – responsibility and authority, knowledge and organization, incentives and cooperation – look quite different from the way they do in the doctoral seminar room. To understand relationships of this kind, perhaps, one must experience them – either directly or indirectly through a narrator's ability to make sense of a particular time and context and convey that sympathetic understanding to the reader.

The possibility that organizational processes are not in fact straightforward consequentialist relationships implies the rebuttable proposition that clinical research is a better way to study them than are methods based on comparative statics. Take the design of organizational interventions. Much of the literature on this topic has focused on identifying change rules, but this technique-oriented literature has one serious limitation: it is not really clear what social mechanisms and processes are supposed to be activated through the initiating and follow-through action by authority figures. That is precisely the kind of question that narration lends itself to.

I accept the argument that any serious attempt to move from principles to practical reasoning requires a conceptual frame. But, the developmental arc of my thinking about public management research goes in precisely the opposite direction of most American students of public management. I was trained in positive science and methodological individualism, empirical testing of carefully specified models derived from first principles – that is the kind of research I used to do (occasionally, still do). Experience leads me to conclude that it is not a practical way to go about answering the kind of questions about public management we would like to be able to answer – for the time being, at least. Hence one of our first aims should be to produce useful case studies, which necessarily requires some mastery of narrative methods, especially the instrumental case study.

Table 1: Functions of an Instrumental Case: Research on Processes

Function	Definition of Quality	How to Perform the Function to High Standard
Present topic	The reader easily grasps the paper's topic	1. Name the topic 2. Position topic in relation to academic, policy, or professional discussions
Justify topic	The reader accepts that the topic is important, legitimate, and requiring additional research effort	1. Demonstrate topic has achieved an established position in the scientific archive 2. Demonstrate lively interest in topic 3. Identify what is unsatisfying about the scientific archive on the topic 4. Argue that more research of sort contained in paper will satisfy the need
Present case	1. The experience studied is perceived as intrinsically interesting (and readily accessible) by readers who do not have a strong interest in the topic 2. Experience studied is intuitively perceived as suitable as an instrumental case study, especially by those with a strong interest in the topic 3. Reader feels confident that author is a skilled narrator	1. Present narrative overview of the experience that lays out the high-tier event structure of the episode 2. Evoke an understanding of the plot of the story 3. Ensure that the narrative overview has a similar event structure and feel as existing case studies on similar topics, with distinctive "twists" on standard tale in evidence 4. Except in naming events, try to avoid observer concepts and use concrete and vivid language from the experience
Justify case	Reader accepts argument that the experience studied is historically and/or analytically significant	1. Present straightforward argument as to historical significance of the experience studied (and/or) 2. Present straightforward argument as to analytic significance of the experience in relation to the topic
Orient to scientific approach	1. Reader perceives that the author has a scientific identity 2. Reader feels confident that the experience studied will be examined and interpreted in a systematic manner 3. Reader feels confident that the author will be able to bring out the analytic significance of the experience studied	1. After both topic and experience studied are presented and justified, provide straightforward introduction to the scientific approach chosen 2. Illustrate how the scientific approach will be employed to order the case evidence (e.g., by identifying analytically significant event outcomes) 3. Illustrate how the scientific approach will be employed

Source: Michael Barzelay, London, 27 October 2002

Even if I am wrong – public management can be and should be science, pure, if not simple, I would suggest that practice is still the best place to start. Consider the history of finance as a field of economic study. The American Finance Association was founded the same year as the American Society for Public Administration, although its journal did not begin publication until after the Second World War. At that time, finance was little more than institutional description combined with practitioner-generated heuristics or proverbs that had little analytical basis and frequently conflicted (for example, buy low, sell high; run your gains, cut your losses). Finance scholars agreed that, in principle, financial problems ought to be amenable to scientific analysis using serious economic theory, but this principle seemed neither workable nor practicable.

Today, all this has changed. Substantively speaking, the intersection of finance and financial economics is now almost complete. Finance's success in overcoming all sorts of problems involving time and uncertainty is honored as, perhaps, economic science's finest achievement of the second half of the 20th Century. Nevertheless, finance and economics have very different cultures. I suspect that the main reason for this difference is that finance departments are in business schools and are oriented toward finance practitioners, whereas economics departments are usually located in colleges of arts and sciences and are largely self-referential. Consequently, finance remains a normative discipline (albeit one with a highly impoverished conception of public value). It is largely concerned with answering what to do questions – best practice, if you will. In contrast, financial economics is almost entirely a positive discipline, largely concerned with existence proofs, equilibrium cond itions, and analytical paradox. Interestingly, even the mathematical tools used by scholars in the two disciplines are different and, arguably at least, reflect this cultural divide. Economists typically use discrete-time models, whereas finance scholars typically use continuous-time models, although continuous-time models are far harder mathematically than are discrete-time models. The main reason for this preference is that discrete-time models often fail to yield numerical solutions. Finance scholars want numerical solutions (for example, they want to know how to optimize a portfolio); economists don't need them (it is often sufficient to show that an optimal portfolio exists).[8]

What is frequently overlooked is that most of the conceptual breakthroughs, which transformed financial economics, occurred in finance departments. Only after finance scholars had mastered the problems faced by financial managers and developed a set of basic tools to deal with these problems, formalized largely in terms of mean-variance analysis, did economists integrate their findings into the body of scientific knowledge. My point is that in the area of administration where we have the best theory, we started with proverbs or principles, the managers who transformed those principles into rules based on robust distinctions, and evidence of the efficacy of those rules – in other words, clinical research.

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[8] Some of my colleagues also tell me that the practical utility of analysis in continuous time comes at the expense of a more coherent expression of underlying economic principles. I am certainly not competent to assess this claim; I am not even sure I know what it means.

Who knows? Much the same developmental process ma y be workable and feasible for the field of public management. In the mean time, we must learn to walk before we can run. We need to understand practice by observing it, by doing it, and by teaching it. We need to tease out proverbs of administration from experience, not try to deduce rules from first principles. In the end, good clinical analysis may prove the best way to find principles we need – those having to with designing organizational practices, processes, and mechanisms –, by working backward from what we understand to what we want to know. With some good principles to work with, good theorizing can (and may) follow.

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