

Chapter Title: Public Administration in the Netherlands: State of the Field

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Book Title: European Perspectives for Public Administration

Book Subtitle: The Way Forward

Book Editor(s): Geert Bouckaert, Werner Jann

Published by: Leuven University Press. (2020)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvv417th.25>

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Public Administration in the Netherlands: State of the Field

*Philip Marcel Karré, Martijn van der Steen, Zeger van der Wal,
and Thomas Schillemans*

1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the state of the field of public administration in the Netherlands. We paint a picture of the current state of Dutch public administration, and discuss where it might go from here. We do so based on our book on these questions (Karré, Schillemans, Van der Steen & Van der Wal, 2017) which developed from a series of articles published in *Bestuurskunde*, the Dutch journal of public administration. In this series, each individual author approached the state and future of the field of public administration in a personal and rather unique way. Martijn van der Steen organised a survey among public administration professionals, following a discussion on national television about the societal benefit (or, better, lack thereof) of social sciences. Zeger van der Wal analysed the challenges public managers face in the twenty-first century and developed ways of dealing with them. And Thomas Schillemans developed a road map for where our field of study should go in the future. In the following paragraphs we present short summaries of each of these contributions. In order to put them into context, we start with a short elaboration on the state of the field of public administration by Philip Marcel Karré.

2 State of the field: public administration between academia and practice (Philip Marcel Karré)

Public administration has left its mark on Dutch society: public administration scholars play an important role in consulting government and public organisations. Many public managers, as well as ministers of the current and former governments, are alumni of public administration programmes.

Dutch public administration scholars are highly productive and have a high standing in the international scientific community.

But there are also those who doubt public administration's scientific character, mainly due to the field's close links with administrative practice. An example of this are the words uttered by Jacques van Doorn, former professor of sociology and the very first dean of the faculty of social sciences at Erasmus University Rotterdam, when he learned that the university was planning to introduce public administration to his faculty in the 1980s. Van Doorn experienced this as a personal defeat and left in disgust. To him, public administration was "purely practical, with some theoretical concepts thrown in here and there. A great field of study, for sure, but it does not belong at university" (Dicke, 2003, p. 25).

This prejudice is nothing new. Gerrit van Poelje, a lawyer and civil servant, who became the first professor of public administration, had to deal with similar sentiments. In 1928, Van Poelje accepted a position at the institution that later developed into Erasmus University Rotterdam. However, public administration did not yet exist as an independent field of study. Van Poelje's position was at an institution which, at that time, mainly focussed on promoting commerce at the behest of Rotterdam's business tycoons. Knowledge about public administration was seen as an essential tool in this, but not as a goal or valuable field of study in itself. Hence Van Poelje was not given a full professorship with the corresponding institutional and societal status. He left after five years to work once again as a civil servant. Yet, Van Poelje had managed to establish the field of public administration in the Netherlands. The prize awarded by the Dutch Association of Public Administration (*Vereniging voor Bestuurskunde*) still bears his name. His spirit and ideas are still felt to this day, e.g. his call that public administration should be an applied science in close connection with administrative practice.

As an independent and institutionalised field of study, public administration has a history of only about 45 years in the Netherlands. In 1974, *Vereniging voor Bestuurskunde* was established, and in 1976 the very first stand-alone educational programme at the University of Twente. Since then, public administration has seen a steady rise, growing and further developing as an academic field in sync with the development of the Dutch welfare state and the subsequent discussions about its reform, and the ever shifting relationship between state, market and society as ways of dealing with public issues. It is no longer merely seen as an important tool to foster business but as a grown-up and fully developed field of study that can help us make sense of a complex, uncertain and highly dynamic world.

There are now courses and educational programmes in public administration, both at research universities as well as at universities of applied sciences.

Civil servants and other public sector professionals can also choose from several post-experience programmes. Research in public administration is still closely linked to administrative practice, as demanded by Van Poelje, but is also undergoing a process of “scientification” with the development and application of more rigorous research strategies and methods. For some, this is an important step to develop public administration into a “real” science instead of mere “consultancy,” while others fear that straying away from practice will make our discipline become irrelevant for tackling real-life social problems. This discussion is not unique to public administration in the Netherlands (political scientists and sociologists are debating the very same issues) but is perhaps indicative of a discipline that is still developing and, after 40 years, sees itself at a kind of crossroads where new choices have to be made between societal relevance and methodological rigour.

In the aforementioned series in *Bestuurskunde*, Gadellaa, Curry and Van der Walle (2015) and Braun, Fenger, ‘t Hart, Van der Veer and Verheij (2015) describe how the field of public administration in the Netherlands presents itself today. The modern founding fathers, who helped to establish public administration as an independent field of study in the 1970s, i.e. Roel in ‘t Veld and Henk Brasz, were of the same opinion as Van Poelje that it should be *science for policy*. This was an odd choice at a time when the world of science was steeped in activism and serious, yet often also rather pompous, debates were raging on the role of science in criticising and changing society’s *status quo*.² The modern founding fathers of the field of public administration in the Netherlands saw it as their mission to support the professional development of administrative practice. In order to achieve this, it was deemed necessary to establish a close and pragmatic relationship.

In later years, the field of public administration in the Netherlands has distanced itself somewhat from administrative practice amidst discussions that a more critical approach was needed. This process was accelerated by a further “scientification” and internationalisation of the field. As the field of public administration grew up, it sought closer connections with its peers abroad. Nowadays, the overall majority of research in Dutch public administration is published in English and scholars aim to publish in international journals, which are often not read by practitioners. This leads to the paradoxical situation that while public administration scholars mostly do empirical research, its results do not naturally reach those who could use it most. By doing so, we seem to be wandering off the road set out by Van Poelje with his focus on integrating science and practice.

Dutch public administration, just like its counterparts in other countries, is a multidisciplinary field based on insights from a diverse range of fields, e.g.

law, economics, sociology, political sciences, psychology and communication sciences. Just like scholars of historical science, who use several auxiliary sciences (e.g. epigraphy, genealogy and heraldry) to help them in their research, scholars of public administration avail themselves of insights from these other disciplines to understand what is happening during collective efforts to tackle public issues. Public administration is understood to be more than just the sum of these other academic disciplines though. It is seen as an independent field of research and not as part of, let us say, management sciences. A majority of scholars in the field have a degree in public administration, a survey found on which Gadellaa, Curry and Van der Walle based their article. They do not come from other disciplines but often use insights from those disciplines in their research.

In order to establish how this research has developed over recent years, I have undertaken a small comparison of the content and methodological approach used in the PhD theses that won the prestigious Van Poelje prize awarded every year by the Vereniging voor Bestuurskunde for the best dissertation in the field of public administration (Karré, 2017). I found indicative for developments in the field as a whole, that four distinct yet interconnected developments had taken place, which he refers to as *reticulation*, *refinement*, *dilation* and *diversity*:

Reticulation refers to the fact that while public administration in the Netherlands always has been a multidisciplinary field of study, researchers now go far beyond the traditional auxiliary disciplines in order to enrich our understanding of how public issues can be dealt with. Behavioural economics in particular is now often used, but Dutch public administration scholars also do not shy away from writing philosophical monographs.

A second trend concerns a refinement of theories and methods used. In general, public administration research conducted in the Netherlands always was of high quality, but we now see an increased number of PhD theses which score excellent on all quality aspects of the Van Poelje prize.

Dilation refers to the development that scholars from other disciplines increasingly discover the field of public administration and help to develop it further by adding insights from their own disciplines, often research using mixed methods. Also, public administration is no longer “only” the study of government but also of governance, adopting a broader definition of the field than its original founding fathers’ focus on science for policy. Public administration now is more science for society, though this new focus comes with its own challenges (see the following section).

Diversity, finally, refers to the variety of research that can be found in the field of public administration in the Netherlands today. There are philosophical monographs and historical analyses, next to quantitative and qualitative

studies. What is evident is that public administration scholars in the Netherlands do not adhere to one single philosophy or school of thought, but are as diverse in their work as the social reality they study in their research.

3 What Dutch public administration professionals say about their field (Martijn van der Steen)

In a popular news programme in the Netherlands there was recently a discussion about how government policy could help migrants find jobs. One of the guests on the programme was an academic scholar, who was asked by the anchor of the show to explain to viewers how government policy might help. The scholar started by explaining how complex the issue was, and stressed the “wickedness” of the problem. He was asked if the government was aware of the size of the problem and the urgency of the need to act; he sighed deeply and explained that it was actually not all that clear what the size of the problem really was and that there was much debate about the actual urgency of the issue. In fact, he continued, it was not really clear what the problem was exactly, and if it was really a problem. The anchor of the show looked at the academic for a while and asked him, with a troubled look, “What good are you to us?”

It was not the anchor’s intent to offend his academic guest. He was merely expressing that the intention in inviting an academic was to shed light on the issue and help the audience understand it better. What he got in return was an academic who did a good job in explaining that it was all much more complicated than that and the issue itself was not clear at all. “Still confused, but at a higher level,” but that was not the intention of the show.

At the same time this exchange is recognisable for many public administration scholars and professionals. One of the features of the discipline is that it explains that issues are often more complicated, that easy solutions do not exist, and that clear and simple definitions often cover only part of the problem. That draws attention to the news anchor’s question; what good is public administration anyway?

We thought that it would be interesting to ask public administration professionals – academics and practitioners – how they would answer that question. Not necessarily to investigate whether or not the discipline is useful – we are quite sure it is – but to learn more about what professionals themselves see as the heart and use of the discipline. We selected an audience of over 80 active contributors to a popular Public Administration Blog website. Some contributors are academics, others are practitioners. We asked them to answer the question of the “use” of public administration in four different contexts;

- The context of a popular television programme; what is the use of public administration for the broader public?
- The context of a conversation with a Director-General of a Ministry, about an important policy issue; what is the use of public administration in the context of a practitioner who is desperate for a solution, or even a quick fix?
- The context of a reflection in private; what does public administration mean for me personally; what is the use of it for me, or what is my “use” as public administration professional?
- The context of the future; what is the future of public administration and can it remain useful?

We will briefly discuss the patterns in the answers here.

3.1 A public administration professional in a television programme

The respondents stress that there is great value in the ability to show the complexity of issues. Most respondents feel that public administration can provide a broad public with a good understanding of the issue; not by providing them with clear-cut black and white explanations, but by showing the different shades of grey and the various sides of the issue. They also feel that a good public administration professional is able to do that in a way that is understandable for a broader audience.

Respondents argue that public administration contributes to society in an “indirect way”; public administration professionals help by helping government to govern society better. It is good for society that public administration reflects on what government does. Good government is a crucial enabler of a strong society, and good public administration is an enabler of good government. That is why most respondents think that public administration is highly relevant and “present” in the daily lives of ordinary people. Because the consequences of government intervention are all around them, the consequences of public administration are too.

Most respondents also agree that all this is and will remain hard to explain in the context of a fast-paced news programme. Some even argue that perhaps public administration scholars should avoid such contexts; they do not think that the kinds of theories and knowledge that public administration produces are suitable for 30-second soundbites. However, most respondents say that they consider the understanding of the ambiguity and complexity of issues to be the heart of public administration, and that they should at least try to make that case to the broader public.

3.2 A public administration professional at the Ministry

Most respondents find it much easier to explain the use of public administration insights to the Director General. Again, they all choose to stress the complexity of the issue and stress the absence of quick-fixes; they argue that they are doing the DG a favour by explaining how “impossible” the proposed solution is.

In fact, most respondents feel that this is really a crucial matter for the field; public administration should always keep its autonomous position when offering advice to government. That is a core value for all respondents; even though the DG will probably reward a clear answer and a seemingly “ready to use” solution, public administration professionals should never give up their professional autonomy.

Respondents also quite agree about the nature of their advice. They would probably start by looking for the deeper underlying public value(s) behind the perceived problem; they all also stress the importance of extending the number of stakeholders and look at patterns in the dynamics between actors. Respondents all stress that they would probably not advise on the “content” of the solution, but rather lay out a process that allows a solution to emerge. Public administration also provides insights into how such processes work, how they can be managed, and offers very practical tools and instruments for doing so. In order to help, respondents argue, public administration first makes the issues more complex, and then helps to navigate the complexity.

3.3 A public administration professional at home

In this question, respondents take a more personal approach; what is their personal drive to be active in the field of public administration? Many respondents see public administration as a mission, not just as a profession. They want to contribute to society and feel that their work as public administration professionals is the way to do it.

What is very interesting in the respondents’ answers is that they make a clear distinction between the political and a more technical way to contribute society. They do not have a political agenda, but want to help the government to govern better; almost no matter what the exact political direction of the government is. To them, public administration is not a political project, but a technical one to help democratically elected politicians govern and protect the rule of law.

At the same time, this is exactly the main critique of several others; they argue that public administration has become overly technical and has lost

its activism and its political commitment. This is becoming a more urgent issue with the rise of populist and at times outspoken “anti-government” political parties.

3.4 Public administration professionals about the future

Respondents are positive about the future of public administration, but they see important challenges ahead. They are worried that government cannot keep pace with societal dynamics. They are worried about the adaptive capacity of government and see that as an important issue for public administration.

Respondents stress that public administration should be careful not to lose itself in hypes. For example, bottom-up networks and self-organisation are “real” and deserve scholarly and practical attention, but they should also be reviewed critically and in context. Respondents also see the importance of rebalancing traditional values of good governance and the rule of law with the dynamics of networks, new technologies and situational logics in the approach to problems. Respondents see it as their mission to find new ways to balance these different values.

4 Public administration and the public manager of the twenty-first century (Zeger van der Wal)

The operating environment of the public servants and organisations we study, teach and consult for is dynamic and changes constantly.¹ A popular saying these days is that our objects of study increasingly operate in a “VUCA world” (Johansen, 2007), characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. These are the working conditions that public administrations in The Netherlands very much recognise as the everyday context of their work; and one that is becoming ever more important to them.

Clearly, this operating environment poses various challenges for public administration professionals; it is the context for the public administration of the (very near) future. However, emerging developments also provide exciting opportunities for achieving unprecedented levels of public service excellence, together with citizens and vanguards of change from other sectors. In order to turn challenges into opportunities, twenty-first-century public servants need to acquire and display a variety of skillsets and mindsets, all of which affect our field as well in terms of the research and teaching we conduct, and how that will continue to be perceived as relevant.

At the same time, the nature of what makes public servants and organisations “public” implies that changes and reforms may by definition be less radical and drastic than in corporate environments. Indeed, despite decades of discussing new types of public management and public managers, one key aspect will always differentiate them from business managers. This key aspect is their additional onus of upholding public values and interests, and safeguarding institutional integrity without overstepping the politician’s comfort zone.

Moreover, much of the discourse on private sector-oriented and cross-sectoral network management seems to ignore how legal and constitutional responsibilities and mandates of public servants have remained in place. Indeed, many of the responsibilities and qualities of public servants are institutional rather than transformational.

Still, in recent years, a dazzling number of recent scholarly articles and books as well as consultancy reports and government documents have discussed the future public sector workforce. According to such writings, “new style” public servants should be entrepreneurial and locally minded, display interpersonal skills and commercial savvy, master collaboration and communication, and lead and manage change, deliver projects and programmes, redesign services and deliver them digitally. They should have the ability to operate in increasingly cross-sectoral, international and co-producing networks in which citizens manage alongside public servants rather than being managed by them.

Others suggest that in an era of networked governance public managers should retreat from business-like skills and approaches to return to six classical qualities or administrative “crafts.” The six crafts he puts forward are counselling, stewardship, prudence, judgment, diplomacy, and political nous, referred to by others as political savvy, political antennas or “political astuteness.”

Dutch colleagues of the Netherlands School of Public Administration (NSOB) portray this hybrid reality of public servants as “sedimentation” to indicate that effective public servants combine the various repertoires corresponding to the three key paradigms in our field – Traditional, ‘Weberian’ Public Administration, New Public Management and New Public Governance that emphasises horizontal collaboration – in complementary ways. In their prioritisation, such public managers are mindful of when repertoires come into or out of fashion, depending on context, key events and the government of the day. As an example, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008, many governments re-emphasised the importance of a “strong state”

while pointing to the shortcomings of markets, with some even suggesting undoing prior privatisations.

Various authors have addressed the “multiplicity” and “ambiguity” of public sector settings before. However, the magnitude and interrelatedness of twenty-first-century trends and drivers mean that new demands and dilemmas will be:

- The norm rather than the exception;
- Mutually reinforcing and exacerbating (with decreasing predictability);
- Affecting all types of public managers rather than just those at the very top; and
- Affecting the nature and practice and not just the content of (public administration) work.

Box 1 lists a number of commonly observed consequences and challenges produced by global megatrends and what they mean for the study of public administration.

Box 1 Global megatrends: consequences for public actors and educational programmes

1. Stakeholder dynamics, a multiplication of – more ambiguous – interests that must be taken into consideration;
2. Collaborative modes of working in co-producing stakeholder networks requiring power sharing, use of new media and open innovation;
3. Power shifts away from traditional to new authorities, and more frequent and sudden authority shifts from one leader or constituency to another;
4. Increased legitimacy and performance requirements towards an increasingly assertive, savvy and scrutinising array of stakeholder networks
5. New working practices, the emergence of new types of work, working and workers due to technological revolutions, changing attitudes towards work and new generations of employees;
6. Pressures for smarter organising and budgeting due to scarcity of talent and natural resources and the use of advanced technology in an era of low growth and austerity;
7. Ethnicisation, a demand for the highest ethical standards from organisations and their leaders.

Do we need drastically to reform MPA, MPP, MPM and Executive Education programmes, or is the way in which they currently take shape sufficient for producing twenty-first-century skills, competences and values? In my view, we should aim to

further update and upgrade existing frames, tools and assumptions as times progress, and make the learning we offer more experiential and experimental.

For instance, the readings and frameworks we use all propagate “collaboration” – but do we actually teach future managers how to collaborate, beyond the mandated group work so dreaded by most students? Similarly, do we optimally utilise opportunities for students to mix with their future counterparts from other sectors, by offering exciting combined modules, projects and internships with programmes in business administration, law, social work, economics, computer science, marketing and engineering?

Do we pay sufficient attention to “skills” in general – sometimes looked down upon in academic environments – let alone specific new skills such as designing social media campaigns, video editing, prototyping policies and services derived through open innovation, and big data analytics? No school or programme can do everything, but given the rapidly changing environment of public managers and of higher education itself, public management education also needs to become twenty-first century proof.

What are the key scholarly implications of this dynamic and constantly changing operating environment, in terms of what we should teach and research?

Comparative global studies of senior civil servant training note that expectations towards senior public servants have risen in recent years. Public sectors are increasingly concerned with formulating key competences and designing various types of training. A degree from an elite institution is no longer sufficient for one to rise through the ranks as it was one or two decades ago. To become twenty-first-century public servants, employees need to pursue exchanges with other organisations, sectors, and networks, and upgrade both generic and specific skills and competences based on frequent, critical assessments. To meet such dynamic lifelong learning demands, public management education has to evolve as suggested in Box 1.

Indeed, while training is important, experience is king. Inspired by such studies, I suggest that aspiring twenty-first-century public servants take the following into account:

1. The amount of time spent in the field or in a specific agency remains key (with the average time spent in the same function, role or agency likely continuously to decrease);
2. While experience may be a good teacher in itself, this is not so much the case in dysfunctional systems, creating serious issues for HR managers in such systems;

3. (Reverse-)mentoring provides hands-on opportunities to experience how systems operate, and to identify skills gaps and training and development needs of individuals and teams;
4. Rotational opportunities and experiences – including (overseas) study trips, “secondments” to the political, private sector or non-profit domain, and participation in peer networks and long-term experiential training programmes – all widen the views of (aspiring) public managers, challenge current assumptions and provide exposure to potential collaborators, competitors or adversaries in other sectors and countries;
5. Critical, transparent and high-quality feedback and appraisal systems that combine qualitative and quantitative assessment, and include individual and collective exercises and indicators, produce more competent and conscious managers.

To conclude, relevant research into twenty-first-century public professionals and organisations is likely to have the following features:

1. It is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, and much like in the early days of the field constantly aiming for links with other relevant fields (some of which, however, were considered much less relevant in the early days of the field), such as management studies, computer science, media studies, environmental sciences, marketing, design studies and behavioural psychology and economics;
2. It happens “on the ground,” with critical distance and rigour but at the same time being closely related to administrative and managerial practices that matter, and in doing so creating meaningful feedback loops that produce new questions for academic research while improving and inspiring practice at the same time; and
3. It is international and comparative in nature, as there is still much to gain from gaining insight into how actors in other, sometimes politically and historically very different regions and jurisdictions, and despite significant progress in the internationalisation of our field in recent years (including the Anglo-Saxon top journals), much research is still fairly parochial and both academia and practice would benefit from more comparative insights into how public actors in vastly different contexts deal with the rather universal trends and challenges discussed in this chapter.

5 Public administration in The Netherlands: where to go from here? (Thomas Schillemans)

Now, where does Dutch public administration stand? To answer this question, we rely on Burawoy's (2005) analysis of the state of sociological research and apply his analytical perspective to Dutch public administration.

In his paper, Burawoy distinguishes two crucial dimensions with relevance for any social scientific discipline. The first distinction refers to the type of research that is developed. The work of many scholars can be understood as instrumental, positive science, where scholars build on each other's work and aim to make progress within generally accepted theoretical, conceptual and empirical parameters. Instrumental, positive science aims to push the known frontiers further. Others engage in more reflective, critical or dialogical research, in which common assumptions, theoretical foundations and popular myths are addressed. In an almost Kuhnian sense, this type of research challenges the status quo in the field in a disruptive way. This distinction between instrumental and reflective knowledge aligns with Argyris and Schön's (1978) distinction between single loop (aka instrumental, positive science) and double loop (aka reflective science) learning.

The second distinction refers to the type of audience a discipline addresses with its publications and other types of output. On the one hand, some scholars principally relate to and write for others in the discipline and engage with problems identified and defined by other scholars. Some others, however, focus on other publics such as political leaders, civil servants, other practitioners in the field or the general public. In this approach, scholars engage with and focus on the problems identified as salient, and the understanding of those problems by people outside the disciplinary field.

If we combine these two distinctions, a neat 2*2 emerges with four versions of public administration, as is visualised in the table below: Academic Public Administration, Applied Public Administration, Reflective Public Administration, Public Administration for the Public.

Table 1 Four Public Administrations

		Type of audience	
		Internal	External
Type of knowledge	Instrumental	Academic Public Administration: Instrumental, positive social science	Applied Public Administration: Research for policy practices
	Reflective	Reflective Public Administration: Challenging assumptions, foundations and myths in the field	Public administration for the public: Engaging with the public and public debate

5.1 Academic Public Administration: a forceful field moving further

In comparative perspective, Dutch public administration is relatively institutionalised and “forceful,” as it was described more than ten years ago (Noordegraaf et al., 2006). Dutch public administration has a relatively long history: Van Poelje was appointed the first professor in public administration as early as in 1928 and the first academic journal in Dutch is more than 70 years old (Reussing, 2016). Now, almost all Dutch universities have public administration (sub-) departments and various teaching programmes. The number of students studying public administration is also relatively high, which is in turn reflected in the fact that twice as many Dutch PA scholars studied public administration themselves, compared to their colleagues in other European countries (Gaedellaa et al., 2015).

Dutch public administration is also quite visible and strong in the international academic field. Two thirds of the EGPA study groups for instance have co-chairs affiliated to Dutch universities. Five Dutch public administration departments are ranked among the best 25 PA departments according to the Shanghai ranking of 2018. And if one browses through the tables of contents of the various top journals, many publications from Dutch universities are featured.

In the past decade or so since the Noordegraaf et al. (2006) publication in the field, Dutch public administration has more forcefully advanced in this top left corner of the disciplinary 2*2. Dutch public administration has been going through a process of academisation (Braun et al., 2015) of which the scholars in the field are acutely aware. There have been various debates, surveys and interview studies in recent years on the state of the field in which

this deepening of academic public administration always surfaces as the main issue (Karré et al., 2017).

The sunny side of this academisation process is the increased methodological quality and rigour of the field in combination with a more truly international theoretical approach. The evolution of PhD theses over the years for instance clearly demonstrates that (younger) scholars engaging in technically more advanced research are writing almost exclusively in English and oriented towards the international (top) journals. Dutch scholars play important roles in advancing sub-fields characterised by methodologically demanding research, such as behavioural public administration and public sector HRM and personnel. This contributes to academic research in a field which is theoretically more integrated than ever and is methodologically almost uniquely diverse (Hood, 2011).

At the same time, however, there is some reason for concern. Does the academisation process not come at the expense of the relevance of this research? And is the focus on top publications and glamorous research grants not distracting from important critical reflection and engagement with the wider public? In short, is the expansive academic public administration not straddling the other three forms of scholarship?

5.2 Applied Public Administration: awareness of relevance

As mentioned, in surveys of public administration scholars and debates and interviews, the tensions between the rigour of academic public administration and the relevance of research for the real world of public administration always surface. The founding fathers of the discipline such as Van Poelje in the Netherlands and Wilson in the US already stressed the “applied” nature of the field (Gadellaa et al., 2015) and the importance of “discovering” what governments can do and how they can do this efficiently (Wilson, 1887). The advancements in academic research are now sometimes seen to threaten the focus on practical and applied knowledge for policy-makers. A survey amongst public administration scholar for instance found that Dutch scholars were less focused on applied research and policy practice than their colleagues in other European countries (Gadellaa et al., 2015). These signs suggest that the relevance of the “technically” expanding public administration community may be at issue.

But looks can be misleading. If one compares the numbers of students, staff, universities where public administration is studied and relationships to policy-makers to the scan made more than ten years ago (Noordegraaf et al., 2006), there are no signs of decline; even the opposite. One important trend

is the further disciplinary collaboration with other disciplines and also with representatives from policy practice. This also implies a shift towards more societally defined challenges and issues in various universities. There is also a rich body of applied public administration research. This was noted by the research review of Dutch public administration research in 2014:

“Dutch researchers continue to undertake research in an engaged way, working with a range of stakeholders to define problems and develop solutions. The societal impact of the research (...) spanned local, regional, national and international spheres. Policy-makers, public managers, professionals and citizens benefit from the public value created with and through the research.” (Hartley et al., 2014: 5).

So far, thus, the advancements of academic public administration do raise concerns and critical thoughts about the relevance of applied public administration research, yet “on the ground” there are few real indications of loss. We would contend that this widespread mental awareness of the relevance of relevance is a good sign and is probably really helpful in safeguarding this constitutional value of the field. However, other constitutive values may also be challenged, and this suggests that there is more reason for concern related to the reflective and public character of public administration.

5.3 Reflective and public: where do we stand?

From the early days of the discipline, public administration has aimed to separate politics from administration, leaving the former to others while focusing on the latter. The contention was that political decisions need to be made in the democratic arena and that the true task of public administration research and practice is then to “discover” how such decisions can be translated effectively and efficiently into policies. Leaving the criticism of the politics-administration divide aside, it is important to note that this disciplinary self-understanding is based on at least two premises. First of all the premise that policy decisions are democratic, constitutional and legally sound, and need no further normative consideration by the public administration scholar herself. Once the dust settles on the political dispute and a decision has been taken, the public administration can go about its business and deliver that policy in a neutral way. Secondly the premise was that it is accepted and expected by politicians and the wider audience that these politically defined tasks are enacted by public administrations, thus, by bureaucrats and governmental organisations.

But times are changing, and so is the academic field of public administration itself. The internationalisation of academic research takes insights and research from Dutch (and other) public administration scholars to countries where the decision-making is not democratic at all. The rise of autocratic politicians challenges democratic and constitutional principles in established democracies. The rise of populism challenges the in principle technocratic ideal of neutral policy implementation by public administration experts and bureaucrats. And in the heated public discussions these days on politics and policies, the capacity of governments effectively to address issues is strongly questioned. The current practices in public administration may be at odds with popular perceptions of governance (Stoker, 2019).

The foundational premises of the field thus seem to be affected by internal and external developments, yet, at least in the Dutch public administration, the field is relatively quiet in addressing this in academic and public settings as most of the energies are spent on the nexus of rigorous and relevant research. There are relatively few reflective or public-public administration scholars. While in the past, scholars like Michel Foucault and James C. Scott have forced public administration to reconsider its foundations; it would seem relevant in the current politically turbulent times of globalisation to reflect more self-critically on the foundations of the field. Simultaneously, as Burawoy (2005) pleaded for a public sociology engaging with the social issues identified by the public, and as Flinders (2012) rose to the defence of politics, a truly public version of public administration is still to be developed. At least in the Netherlands, the relatively forceful field of public administration scholars has been relatively quiet in the public arena.

Notes

1. Parts of this chapter are edited and updated paragraphs from Van der Wal, Z (2017). *The 21st Century Public Manager*. London: Macmillan.
2. With the Daudt-affair in Amsterdam in 1969 as its low point, when Marxist students managed to practically oust a professor, Hans Daudt, from the university because he did not fit their idea of an academic joining activists on the barricades fighting against the capitalist exploitation of the working man – Daudt rather thought it to be important to be able to assess critically what was going on, instead of becoming immersed in activism of one sort or another.

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