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Viewpoint Article:
Global PA
Symposium

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Comparative Studies in Public Administration: Intellectual Challenges and Alternative Perspectives

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Abstract: *In the current age of globalization, there is a greater need for comparative studies in public administration to explore cross-national variations in adopting new global models. Many of the major challenges impeding the intellectual promises of earlier waves of comparative administration continue to affect the contemporary state of the field. As a part of the PAR Symposium on Comparative Public Administration, this short article explores the ideational, epistemological, structural, and institutional challenges to comparative administration and briefly suggests some remedial alternatives.*

Comparative studies in public administration are crucial for the field’s knowledge-building process by making theoretical generalizations based on cross-national patterns in institutions, structures, causal relations, and normative priorities (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011). Making such generalizations, however, often involves the disaggregation of administrative narratives into narrow empirical research questions without paying much attention to the embedding sociohistorical contexts shaping each nation’s administrative system, especially in non-Western developing countries (Drechsler 2013; Fitzpatrick et al. 2011; Jreisat 2010; Riggs 1964). With regard to the significance of paying attention to contexts, it has been highlighted that, even among Western nations, “policy learning—if it is to be successful—is at least as much about the analysis of the *circumstances* in which particular innovations succeed (or fail) as about the innovations themselves” (Klein 2009, 306).

In recent years, the significance of comparative studies has increased with the transnational imposition or imitation of dominant administrative models or paradigms (Farazmand 2001; United Nations 2001)—including Weberian bureaucracy, Development Administration, and New Public Management (NPM)—without much attention paid to the contextual variations in the developing world. Concomitantly, the universality of administrative principles developed by early administrative thinkers such as Woodrow Wilson and Frank Goodnow was questioned by a generation of scholars that emerged after World War 2 (e.g., Riggs, Siffin, & Heady).

They highlighted the limits of using imitative models and drew attention to the context boundedness

of knowledge building in public administration (Jreisat 2010; Riggs 1991). However, the context for comparative public administration has become more challenging due to the global adoption of business-type reforms affecting major dimensions of public administration (e.g., citizen–administration relationship) that produced highly divergent cross-national administrative outcomes (Kim 2008; Leach 2016).

Many critics of postwar comparative administration have argued that Western administrative models imposed or imitated in postcolonial countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America remained largely Western-centric and were often inappropriate for many non-Western countries (Adamolekun 2006; Burns and Bowornwathana 2001; Candler, Azevedo, and Albernaz 2010; Riggs 1991). In fact, since the early 1970s, intellectual confidence in the practical use of comparative public administration began to diminish as its prescribed administrative reforms failed to demonstrate convincing administrative performance in developing countries (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011; van Wart and Joseph Cayer 1990).

However, cross-regional and cross-national comparative studies in public administration began to receive greater intellectual attention starting from the early 1990s (Jreisat 2011; Leach 2016). In 2011, a section on “Comparative Public Administration Research: A Senior Academic Exchange” was published in *PAR (Public Administration Review)* (71, 6), which highlighted the significance of comparative administration in the globalized world. As highlighted by Fitzpatrick et al. (2011, 821), “*Intensified globalization, especially the necessity to learn more about how administrative reforms work effectively*

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in different cultural contexts, requires public administration research to embrace comparative perspectives [original italic].” In particular, the need for comparative research is explained by the gradual global spread of NPM-inspired ideas (Hood 1996).

As NPM spread globally from the early 1980s onward, its practices were translated very differently across the world’s regions and countries (Lynn 2006; Painter and Peters 2010; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). One major cleavage on which the differentiated patterns are discerned is between the Western and non-Western worlds. In Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, NPM emerged as a loose set of efficiency-driven and promarket principles branded and leveraged differently by political-administrative elites in each country. This has led to a wide range of brands of NPM (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017; Suleiman 2003). In contrast, in the non-Western world with less matured economic settings (Schick 1998), NPM was largely introduced through reform programs of international governance organizations, with national political-administrative elites being less influential. Some authors have observed that a standardized NPM model was prescribed to various countries irrespective of considerable variations in these countries’ political, economic, and administrative realities (Jreisat 2010; Turner 2002). In this regard, Schick (1998, 124) cautioned that “there are important preconditions for successfully implementing the new public management approach and that these should not be ignored by countries striving to correct decades of mismanagement” (Schick 1998, 124).

Thus, although major NPM ingredients (managerial and financial autonomy, outsourcing, privatization, public-private partnership, and performance management) were globalized and adopted through externally enforced and mimicked public sector reforms in many Asian and African countries, there were cross-national variations in the extent of such reforms and their outcomes (Haque 2007; Jreisat 2010; Pollitt 2002; Turner 2002). However, most comparative studies have focused mainly on the cross-national convergence and divergence of such reforms (Hood 1996; Pollitt 2002).

Comprehensive studies on the contextual appropriateness of globalized NPM-type models (or post-NPM models such as Network Governance and New Public Governance) and their consequences for developing regions with unique features remain quite rare, with some exceptions (see Drechsler 2013; Podger 2017; van der Wal, Mussagulova, and Chen 2020). As a result, decontextualized knowledge building exacerbates some of the field’s inherent conceptual, epistemological, and structural limits in its comparative efforts. These limits are further explored in the remainder of this article.

Ideational and Epistemological Challenges

First, a major challenge to cross-national comparisons in public administration is the pervasive ideational framework rooted in Western traditions, which became globalized through colonial imposition and postcolonial imitation or prescription in many non-Western settings (Harris 1990). During the colonial period, various widely known precolonial administrative traditions (e.g., Confucian, Indian, Persian, and Ottoman) were replaced or

restructured (Holtbrügge 2013). In Asia, colonial rule led to the replacement of precolonial governing systems and the imposition of Western administrative systems (e.g., British rule in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia; American legacy in the Philippines; Dutch rule in Indonesia; and the French system in Vietnam and Cambodia). To various degrees, common priorities were given to bureaucratic principles such as specialization, hierarchy, qualification, and impersonal rules (Common 2001; Harris 1990) to ensure discipline, security, control, loyalty, and law and order.

Many of the elements that in the West have come to be known as belonging to the “Weberian bureaucracy” find their roots in the Chinese bureaucratic tradition (dating back to the establishment of the Ch’in dynasty in 221 BC) (Jacobs 1998). Nineteenth-century British and Prussian public administration reformers took inspiration from the rationality and efficiency of the Chinese system (Drewry and Chan 2001). In contrast, in other parts of the world, imposing Western administrative concepts under colonial rule led to the erosion of precolonial systems of governance (Inyang 2008, 122).

In the postcolonial period, many countries in Asia and Africa attempted to reconstruct their public bureaucracy for rapid progress and renamed it development administration (Wong 2004), with features such as decentralization, participation, innovation, and an interventionist role of the state (Régnier 2011). Still, these administrative principles were prescribed mostly by Western-dominated international organizations, donor agencies, and administrative experts (Dwivedi and Nef 1982). The more recent wave of administrative reforms and practices again originated in Western countries. In this vein, Common (1998, 440) has questioned whether administrative reform that is “confined to piece-meal copying and adaptation, or even imposition” of Western practices can even justifiably be interpreted as “globalisation” and “convergence.”

What makes this a challenge to comparative administrative studies is that such Western-centric conceptual categories often do not have corresponding conceptual roots in non-Western societies, thus limiting scholars in pursuing contextually rich cross-national comparisons. One specific example is the borrowing and adoption of the American concept of performance budgeting in developing countries, which demonstrates that “meaningful contextualization of reform initiatives in specific national circumstances is critically important” (Ho and De Jong 2019, 7). Without such contextualization, comparative studies of borrowed concepts tend to become parochial.

In addition, indigenous concepts of these societies are often awkwardly presented as “local knowledge” or neglected in scholarly research (Candler, Azevedo, and Albernaz 2010). For instance, even administrative institutions and scholars in Africa often disregard indigenous local views and mostly use Western management concepts and principles (Inyang 2008), although the recent mushrooming of policy education in the non-Western world pursuing a more localized brand of public policy is a promising development (Nair, El-Taliawi, and Van der Wal 2021).

Second, another challenge to comparative studies in public administration is its positivist epistemological underpinning and

methodological design prioritizing the objectives of building universal knowledge based on scientific validity and empirical research tools (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011). To establish such universal validity of public administration knowledge, there is a dominant tendency to take context-based specific administrative experiences (e.g., American, British, or French) out of context and present them as general empirical evidence with universalist claims. In this regard, Raadschelders (2011, 917) suggests that “there is an unmistakable bias in American administrative sciences to idolize a specific, positivist, type of knowledge.” In questioning such a tendency toward a decontextualized scientific approach found in policy studies and policy transfer, it has been emphasized by Klein (2009, 307) that “policy learning in practice is not about the transfer of ideas or techniques—in this respect the transplantation metaphor is misleading—but about their adaptation to local circumstances.”

Positivist epistemological dominance poses a major challenge to comparative studies exploring the contextual (political, social, and cultural) determinants of administrative systems in different regions and countries. Despite these limits of existing Western administrative knowledge, its claim to universality is often used for its advocacy, imposition, and imitation. Examples include the conceptual and theoretical contributions made by classical and neoclassical thinkers such as Wilson, Goodnow, Taylor, and Gulick (Candler, Azevedo, and Albernaz 2010; Raadschelders 2011) who wanted to construct a universal “administrative science” with cross-national relevance and applicability.

Although many concepts and models within the positivist administrative knowledge are “practiced in numerous governments worldwide,” and they are often claimed to have “no nationality” (Jreisat 2011, 834), many scholars working on Africa have highlighted the importance of transcending positivist–empiricist methods favored by African researchers (Mathebula 2018) so that they can study “local phenomena using local language, local subjects, and locally meaningful constructs” (Holtbrügge 2013, 5). In this regard, Fitzpatrick et al. (2011, 826) emphasizes the need for multimethod approaches “to gain real understanding of the interaction between context, independent variables, and dependent variables and to build theory.”

Structural and Institutional Challenges

In addition to the above-mentioned challenges to comparative studies in public administration posed by the conceptual–theoretical dominance of few Western countries and their claim to universality, challenges to comparative studies also exist due to structural and institutional inequalities in knowledge production, utilization, and ownership or management. First, in the existing stock of public administration knowledge, scholarship from non-Western countries may be underrepresented as most leading journals in the field originate in the United States and Western Europe. For instance, a study conducted by Candler, Azevedo, and Albernaz (2010) on 12 leading public administration journals discovered that the research focus on the United States alone accounted for 53 percent of all articles published in these journals during 2003–2008, and most editorial board members for these journals are United States-based academics. This puts the notion of public administration as a global scholarly field in perspective.

In a similar vein, Gulrajani and Moloney (2012) observed that, of all the articles published in five years in 10 major public administration journals, only 14.39 percent were focused on developing countries, while 69.6 percent of their authors were located in Western nations. Similarly, Ko and Prameswaren (2010) found, in their study of seven public administration journals, that only 3.1 percent of all the articles published during 1990–2009 were on Asian countries. This potential underrepresentation of non-Western countries and authors in the field is likely to constrain balance when making cross-regional and cross-national comparisons. In recent years, however, there has emerged a certain sense of optimism as many American scholars have become more engaged in learning from “scholars and practitioners in other parts of the world,” and non-Western countries are increasingly more careful about the relevance of United States-based research and findings to their own circumstances (Podger 2017, 153).

Second, another challenge to comparative studies in public administration is posed by the patterns of knowledge utilization in terms of which publications are more frequently used or cited in teaching and research. In the above-mentioned survey on seven leading public administration journals by Ko and Prameswaren (2010), it was found that the authors mostly used books and journal articles published in English. An effect of the citation pattern in top SSCI journals in social sciences (Gingras and Mosbah-Natanson 2010) may be that authors in developing countries hardly utilize their publications in research. In fact, they mostly cite publications authored by European and North American scholars. As a corollary, Wu, He, and Sun (2013) suggest that the strong tendency of authors in developing countries to cite Western scholars points at a weak recognition of local publications in public administration. In this regard, Podger (2017, 155) draws attention to the recent encouraging trend of greater cross-national diversity in knowledge building and knowledge utilization achieved by involving more international observers and scholars in academic associations and journals such as the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) and *PAR*.

Third, the intellectual fairness in comparative studies in public administration is often compromised because most well-known book publishers (especially top university presses like Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Stanford), as well as the top journals, are owned and managed by institutions and scholars located in Western, developed countries (Gingras and Mosbah-Natanson 2010). This imbalance in the ownership and management of knowledge production outlets in public administration (Candler, Azevedo, and Albernaz 2010; Gulrajani and Moloney 2012) constitutes a formidable barrier for scholars in developing nations to get their research outputs published, especially when these are on non-Western countries based on local sources, although recent years have shown a promising increase of international scholarship in major journals.

In this regard, some authors have highlighted the advantages of globalization for comparative administrative studies in terms of rising interest of Western scholars in non-Western administrative systems, greater recognition of scholars and institutions from developing nations, and increasing participation of these scholars and institutions in academic debates and publications (Fitzpatrick

et al. 2011; Jreisat 2011; Podger 2017). However, some other scholars draw attention to significant inequalities in globalizing and exchanging administrative ideas based on the dominance of Western Europe and North America, often at the disadvantages of non-Western regions (Kim 2008). Although globalization has led to the restructuring of financial, managerial, and technical domains of public administration in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, especially under the auspices of international agencies, there have not been corresponding changes in these regions' social, political, and cultural contexts of bureaucracy (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011; Kim 2008). This continuing gap between public administration and its indigenous contexts remains a challenge to context-based comparative administrative studies.

Concluding Remarks

This article has argued that, while the dominant Western models of public administration have been globalized, some major challenges to comparative studies in the field remain due to their overstated universalism, positivist epistemology, and imbalance in terms of scholarly outputs and their ownership and management (Candler, Azevedo, and Albernaz 2010; Gulrajani and Moloney 2012). In order to address these challenges to comparative public administration, three key issues should be seriously considered. First, it remains essential to critically assess claims of universality and recognize diversity in public administration knowledge and experiences based on a greater appreciation of indigenous contexts in Asia, Africa, and Latin America through appropriate methodological choices and multidisciplinary approaches (Common 2001; Harris 1990). This context-based comparative study has become even more crucial in this age of globalization when the newly emerging administrative models (e.g., NPM) have been prescribed and adopted often without exploring their contextual relevance (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011; Kim 2008).

Second, as there are exogenous colonial and postcolonial legacies in public administration in non-Western regions or nations, more academic initiatives would be welcomed that explore the patterns of precolonial administrative systems in Asia and Africa, examine their relevance to the contemporary contexts of these developing regions, and pursue certain modes of indigenizing public administration in order to be more relevant and effective (Haque 2007; Harris 1990). This indigenizing initiative, however, should be based on the examination, alteration, and co-optation of the major merits of Western administrative models, especially in the current context of a globalized world (Jreisat 2011). Third, in order to reduce external dependency and generate intellectual confidence, it is crucial to launch sustained initiatives, especially at universities and research institutions in developing nations, and to develop world-class publication outlets dedicated to comparative administrative studies. Although certain progress has been made during the current phase of globalization in expanding the academic participation of scholars from these countries (Podger 2017), such institution-building measures are essential for their intellectual self-reliance.

To conclude, pursuing such initiatives requires a new generation of committed public administration scholars in the developing world who are willing to devote their academic career to indigenous knowledge building by appreciating and utilizing local knowledge and experiences and developing research networks with likeminded

scholars. Such comparative efforts and their outputs are likely to reduce the intellectual dependency of scholars from developing nations (Jreisat 2010) and contribute to a more balanced and richer knowledge base. In the age of globalization, while "comparative perspectives should be incorporated into all topics of public administration" (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011, 827) to reduce any ethnocentric parochialism in the field, achieving this intellectual balance or fairness is needed to recognize that "concepts that work in some settings may or may not work so well in others..." (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011, 826).

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