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Comparative Public Administration in a Globalized World: Moving Beyond Standard Assumptions Toward Increased Understanding

Guest Editorial

Abstract: *Today's globalized world calls for a deeper understanding of how and why administrative practices differ across regions and what that means for theory and practice. However, empirical comparative studies in public administration incorporating local and regional particularities in their design, constructs, and interpretation of results are scarce, with the exception of studies on specific constructs such as public service motivation, professional values, and emerging approaches to non-Western public administration. Consistently, scholars engaged in comparative studies highlight theoretical, methodological, and empirical difficulties in comparing public agencies, employees, and practices as the research instruments and assumptions used often originate from Western countries. Thus, there is a serious need today for adopting more context-sensitive and balanced approaches to advance our scholarly understanding of systems and practices in different regions. This symposium aims to advance comparative public administration by bringing together novel empirical comparative contributions from scholars from different parts of the world.*

Increasing interconnectedness, collaboration, and competition in today's globalized and multipolar world necessitate a deeper understanding of how and why administrative practices differ across regions and what that implies for potential collaboration and performance. Recent global concerns such as the Coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, and the vastly different ways in which governments have addressed this crisis, with huge variance in public health outcomes as a result, have further enhanced the need for systematic and meaningful comparisons. Sometimes, comparisons are rather superficial and anecdotal and, thus, too easily dismissed ("the context is just too different"), hampering mutual learning and understanding and improving administrative structures and practices (cf. Van der Wal, Mussagulova, and Chen 2021).

Until now, two contrasting scholarly perspectives dominate the scholarly discourse in comparative public administration. The first perspective emphasizes cross-regional *divergence* as it suggests that public servants in various hemispheres hold divergent sets of values and attitudes engrained in their respective traditions. In this oft-oversimplified view, the developing world's traditions are characterized by a collectivist approach, top-down power structure, loyalty, subordination, and patronage, whereas the 'Western' tradition is claimed to be based on rule of law, political neutrality, bureaucratic autonomy, and detached 'managerial' professionalism (Van der Wal, Mussagulova, and Chen 2021; Van der Wal and Yang 2015).

The second perspective highlights global *convergence* in administrative practices and norms resulting from greater academic, economic, and political exchanges, as well as the alleged universal adoption of New Public Management and Good Governance paradigms (Kettl 2005; Mahbubani 2013). Some even claim that such universalistic models are preferable, implying that Western-inspired transition should be embraced rather than rejected on certain specific grounds. Once again, this perspective often overgeneralizes complex institutional and cultural realities.

Indeed, some studies highlight considerable differences *within* each of the major traditions. For instance, Asian countries under the Confucian tradition, such as China, Singapore, Japan, and South Korea, are not only distinct from non-Confucian countries, but they themselves differ tremendously in terms of the role of government and the nature of administrative practices and behavior (e.g., 'Japanese exceptionalism' versus 'China's market socialism').

However, empirical comparative studies in public administration that take into account local and regional particularities in their design, constructs, and results are scarce, with the exception of studies on specific constructs such as public service motivation, work values, performance appraisal, and emerging approaches to non-Western public administration (e.g., Drechsler 2018). Consistently, scholars engaged in comparative efforts highlight the theoretical, methodological, and empirical difficulties in making

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cross-national comparisons of public agencies, employees, and practices as research instruments and assumptions often originate from Western countries.

Scholarly Bias and Western Centricity

It is likely that Western centricity in public administration has created institutional bias, which limits the relevance and applicability of findings to non-Western jurisdictions (Van der Wal and Demircioglu 2020). Indeed, this bias in our field has been criticized by several scholars in recent years (Gulrajani and Moloney 2012; Milward et al. 2016). Although studies from Asian countries have certainly become more prominent, their practices and approaches, and the theoretical and empirical implications resulting from those, are still not considered norm-setting despite countries like China, Hong Kong SAR, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan being consistently ranked highly when it comes to innovation, service delivery, e-governance, change readiness, and policy experimentation (KPMG 2019; Van der Wal 2017; Van der Wal and Demircioglu 2020; WEF 2017; World Bank 2018).

Indeed, for some decades, these countries have been frontrunners in certain public administration practices, evidenced by the so-called East Asian miracle and the rise of the 'Asian Tigers' (Fukuyama 1995; Woo-Cumings 2019). Elucidating how their administrative practices, structures, and cultures compare with practices in the West is highly relevant in the 'Asian century' in which the political and economic center of gravity is moving East (Khanna 2019; Mahbubani 2008, 2018; Vielmetter and Sell 2014). So far, our field has viewed the role of public administration in the Asian century mostly through the Western lens (Bice, Poole, and Sullivan 2018; Haque 2013, 2019).

In this vein, we agree with Haque's suggestion that 'there is a need for building public administration knowledge and profession guided by the contextual realities and local needs of developing societies in Asia and other regions' (Haque 2013, 263). Indeed, the institutional, cultural, and administrative differences between these regions and the West—in terms of political-administrative dynamics, public-private sector relations, the role of state-owned enterprises in public sector innovation, and the degree of vertical government intervention (Zhu 2014)—give rise to many intriguing and unanswered questions. However, the same goes for the many similar questions regarding the vast differences *within* and *between* highly diverse regions such as North America, Europe, and Asia (Raadschelders, Toonen, and Van der Meer 2015).

Aims of the Symposium

Clearly, there is a serious need today to adopt more context-sensitive and balanced approaches to advance our scholarly understanding of administrative systems and practices in different regions and nations. Based on the above observations, this PAR Symposium aims to advance the global debate about comparative public administration by bringing together empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions from scholars from different parts of the world. In particular, we hope to advance comparative public administration debates with regard to the following issues and questions:

1. The *contextual* determinants shaping administrative systems and practices may cover historical factors (e.g., noncolonial versus colonial legacies), politicoideological outlooks (e.g., capitalist versus socialist state structures), and sociocultural issues (e.g., ethnic composition, cultural tradition, and religious beliefs). For example, to what extent do such deep-rooted traditions determine public service professions, practices, and values in different regions, and how can we classify and study their dynamics? To what extent do long-standing ideologies, social norms, and cultural-religious traditions still impact public administration and public policy?
2. The *institutional and structural* factors relating to public administration include state formations and state-society relationship (e.g., the welfare versus developmental state), forms of government (e.g., parliamentary versus presidential systems), and interplay between institutional units (between politics and administration, between the executive and the legislative branch, and between the central and local government). How do these institutions and structures affect administrative practices and vice versa, and how can we better understand the mechanisms at play?
3. There are *normative* dimensions of public administration, including issues of ethics, values, and norms. How do the public sectors in different parts of the world compare in terms of values such as efficiency, accountability, neutrality, and representation? Why do these differences exist, and how do they manifest themselves? Do they stand in the way of more convergence and collaboration between Western and non-Western countries? What is the potential for further developing a "non-Western" or Asian public administration approach for teaching and research in a field normatively dominated by Western scholars, concepts, and assumptions?
4. *Internal management* issues include motivation, leadership, personnel management, and performance management. Do significant regional differences exist with regard to these internal administrative issues? What are the theory-practice gaps between formal rules and actual practices, especially in developing countries? Should they reconsider or completely redesign existing management instruments and approaches? How do we design comparative research on such management issues in light of existing differences in traditions, cultures, and languages? How can we improve cross-cultural learning to facilitate knowledge exchange and policy transfer?

Contributions to this Symposium

The contributions to this symposium display a wide range of state-of-the-art empirical research and theory-building efforts from different regions, including comparative empirical studies focusing on European countries and Central and South Asia, and contributions employing secondary data from a wide variety of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and non-OECD countries. Topics addressed include gender and representations, motivation and performance, fiscal policy, and quality of governance. Below, we briefly highlight and synthesize the four contributions and their key findings. We conclude this introduction with three overarching contributions of this special issue.

Using a historical comparative perspective, Mohr, Raudla, and Douglas (2021) look at the use of cost accounting to study the influence of administrative traditions in different regions of Europe. Their research finds that, while the use of new public management practices is associated with the greater use of cost accounting, there are important regional differences. In particular, the Nordic and Anglo-Saxon countries have high cost-accounting use. Interestingly, fiscal stress does not influence cost accounting in the short term. The research shows the value of using a comparative perspective when studying established administrative systems and practices like cost accounting.

Van der Wal, Mussagulova, and Chen (2021) compare the motivations and attitudes of public servants in Kazakhstan and Pakistan, two developing Asian countries with distinct administrative traditions and path dependencies. They find that, despite an overlap in Islamic societal values, public servants' motivations and attitudes differ: Lower prosocial proclivity and more aspiration for money in Kazakhstan may be partly explained by the Soviet administrative tradition, while higher prosocial propensity and lower concern with pay in Pakistan may be attributed to the South Asian tradition. The authors conclude that historical legacies help explain cross-country differences in employee motivation and attitudes, while their comparative findings also improve our knowledge about the potential of reforms within the examined conditions.

In yet another empirical comparative piece on a very different topic, Park and Liang (2021) examine whether gender representation in both legislative and executive branches improves social equity related to women's social outcomes and how this effect is moderated by the status of democracy. They show that, in non-OECD countries, political gender representation has a significant, positive impact on female educational attainment and overall gender equality, while bureaucratic gender representation is found only for educational attainment. For OECD countries, political representation has a consistent effect on educational attainment, labor force participation, and the overall gender equality, but bureaucratic representation does not have such effect. Democratization plays a more critical role in shaping the relationship between institutional representation and women's social outcomes in non-OECD countries than their OECD counterparts, where gender equality may be more attributable to broader social, economic, and cultural factors.

Finally, Porcher (2021) addresses an even more macro-level question by empirically investigating the relationship between culture and the quality of government. Quality of government is measured via indicators of government efficiency, impartiality, and professionalism of public administration. Culture is measured by individualism as computed by Hofstede. Individualism has a positive impact on the quality of government, which remains stable even after controlling for different measures of institutions and alternative measures of individualism. His results thus reveal the importance of culture in the understanding of cross-national differences in the quality of government and open new avenues for research in comparative public administration in a globalized world.

Conclusion

When synthesizing the main findings of the diverse set of contributions to this special issue, three key novel contributions to the comparative public administration literature emerge:

1. First of all, all contributions highlight the need for our field to go beyond the divergence–convergence debate, by examining more closely how administrative practices, relations, and effects of policy and reform *actually differ* rather than testing or reiterating how (often Western) scholarly views suggest they *should differ*.
2. Second, historical legacies and path dependencies do play a large role in explaining current practices, as well as (sometimes suboptimal) outcomes of generic reform efforts. Historically shaped cultures, values, and practices run deep. Our field would be enriched by recognizing and appreciating pervasive differences more while critically viewing fads and hypes that claim universal applicability.
3. Third and final, the increased availability of high-quality and large-scale primary and secondary datasets allows for the detailed examination of specific effects and correlations, rendering the excuse obsolete that more qualitative and anecdotal empirical efforts often lack internal and external validity, and scholars should therefore refrain from comparative research altogether.

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