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## Toward a Public Administration: Minnowbrook III. A Reflection and Proposal

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### Hacia una administración pública: Minnowbrook III. Una reflexión y propuesta

**Resumen.** Por muchos años ha existido una polémica en administración pública respecto de las bases teóricas que sustentan a esta disciplina. La discusión enfatiza la aparente falta de objeto de estudio dentro de este campo del conocimiento. Investigadores y profesores han intentado explicar por muchos años qué es o debiera ser la administración pública como área de estudio. Entre los esfuerzos más importantes que se han realizado para lograr esta definición, se encuentran las dos reuniones de Minnowbrook. Este breve ensayo explora algunas de las ideas más importantes que, respecto de la definición del campo de estudio de la administración pública, fueron desarrolladas en estas reuniones y propone algunos temas que debieran ser considerados para un siguiente congreso en Minnowbrook.

**Palabras clave:** administración pública, ciencia social, bases teóricas, definición, desarrollo.

**Abstract.** There has long been a polemical discussion within the field of Public Administration regarding that field's theoretical basis. This discussion especially emphasizes the field's seeming absence of subject. Academics have long sought to explain and define that the field of Public Administration is and what it should be. Two of the biggest efforts to do so are represented by the first two Minnowbrook meetings. This brief paper explores some of the important ideas about the field of Public Administration that were developed in the course of these meetings, and proposes some topics to be covered in the Minnowbrook III conference.

**Key words:** Public administration, social science, theoretical basis, definition, development.

### Introduction

There has long been a polemical discussion within the field of Public Administration regarding that field's theoretical basis. This discussion especially emphasizes the field's seeming absence of subject.

Some authors argue that Public Administration is, or used to be a part of, an "actual science", such as political science or management (Kaufman, 1956). Others consider Public Administration to be a multidisciplinary area of interest in which many tools from

many sciences are used (Mosher, 1968). Academics have long sought to explain and define that the field of public administration is and what it should be. Two of the biggest efforts to do so are represented by the first two Minnowbrook meetings.

This paper explores some of the important ideas about the field of Public Administration that were developed in the course of these meetings, and proposes some topics to be covered in the Minnowbrook III conference. For this purpose, in the first part of the paper we present some of the ideas and concerns about Public Administration that were analyzed in the first two Minnowbrook meetings. Then, we discuss some of the topics that are still on the agenda. Many of these themes are related to the difficulties of constructing a science called Public Administration. Finally, we state a general conclusion about this proposed conference. We believe that the vision of this third meeting is not to build a new public administration, but to understand all the elements that are important in the construction of Public Administration as a social science.

## 1. A Brief History

It is important to present a brief description of the first two conferences, in order to help to discern what topics should be covered at this third meeting. I think that the main idea of this third meeting is not to add more topics to the agenda, but to identify the different visions and approaches that we have already developed in the past Minnowbrook sessions and to propose a series of topics that the field still needs to deal with. This section presents the most important topics covered during the past two conferences.

### 1.1. Minnowbrook I

*...What Minnowbrook helped to inaugurate was a greatly needed and highly significant discussion. Here was fresh and original thinking on the role of Public Administration in the "time of revolutions" in which we find ourselves.*

Dwight Waldo, 1970

One way to have a good idea about the main topics discussed at Minnowbrook I is to review Frank Marini's *Toward a New*

*Public Administration* (1971). In this book, Marini selected nine papers that cover the more important themes analyzed during the conference. These papers are the following:

a) *"The Recovery of Relevance in the Study of Public Administration"* (Todd R. La Porte)

Marini tells us that 'relevance' was an extremely popular word at Minnowbrook and can be identified as one of the three or four major rubrics under which the themes making up the 'Minnowbrook perspective' can be grouped. In this essay, La Porte argues that the discipline, profession, values, literature, in short the very components of the public presence of the field of Public Administration, are out of keeping with the problems we face. La Porte then tries to show us the way to 'recover relevance' and bridge the chasm with the real world.

b) *"Social Change and Administrative Adaptation"* (Orion F. White, Jr.)

In this work, White analyzes and illustrates some of the important ways that our society is changing, indicates how these changes are affecting the political and administrative reality, and urges the development of a cluster of adaptations through confrontation instead of our politics of contract and bargain.

c) *"Some Implications of Adaptation Capacity for Organizational and Political Development"* (Robert P. Biller)

In this discussion, Biller supports and supplements the La Porte and White view of the state of affairs of the field of Public Administration. Biller's labors on the road to theoretical and practical improvement center on the concept of development, but along the way he stops to explore several dilemmas of the study and practice of Public Administration, including a redefinition of 'public' which incorporates turbulence as a essential element.

One way to have a good idea about the main topics discussed at Minnowbrook I is to review Frank Marini's *Toward a New Public Administration* (1971).

d) *"Toward a Theory of Public Administration"* (Larry Kirkhart)

This is the first paper in *Toward a New Public Administration* that focuses on the relationship of Public Administration to social-scientific theory. Kirkhart finds that many of the difficulties of defining or building a theory of Public Administration are related to the history and context of the social sciences. He traces out some of the newer trends in social science, with special reference to philosophy, sociology, and psychology, and attempts to discern their implications for the theory of Public Administration.

e) *"Normative Theory and Public Administration: Some Suggestions for a Redefinition of Administrative Responsibility"* (Michael M. Harmon)

Harmon approaches the topic of normative theory in Public Administration through the problem of administrative responsibility. He finds our ideas of administrative responsibility quite inadequate in terms of our present social and political state. Harmon believes that some recent thinking introduces ideas that are promising and no more devoid of empirical support than traditional notions.

f) *"The Scientific and Moral Authority of Empirical Theory of Public Administration"* (Philip S. Kronenberg)

Kronenberg presents a critical assessment of empirical theory in Public Administration. He selects two bodies of theoretical literature for special focus: com-

Guy (1989) establishes that the eleven themes teased from the deliberations of Minnowbrook II represent a certain period in the history of public administration, basically a story of good news, but with a bit of bad news as well.

parative national Public Administration and organizational behavior. Many of the problems that Kronenberg identifies are integral parts of arguments that are made in earlier papers in the book.

g) *“A New Comparative Public Administration” (Keith M. Henderson)*

In this paper, Henderson grapples with the past, present, and alternative futures of comparative Public Administration as a field of study from the standpoint of ‘non-comparative’ Public Administration. He attempts to assess the merits of international comparative study with special attention to current American problems and relevance to practicing public administrators.

h) *“Constraints on Innovation in Policy Making: Economic Development and Political Routines” (Ira Sharkansky)*

This paper is the first that deals with practical problems of administration. Sharkansky’s paper reflects some themes that represent an active and growing research debate and tradition in the field of political science that he believes has been of “profound importance for the policy makers”. His effort is to seek “an understanding of which limitations may come to the policy maker from economics and which from his own decision routines, and under what conditions these limitations are likely to inhibit innovation”.

i) *“Analysis, Rationality, and Administrative Decision Making” (S. Kenneth Howard)*

Howard takes a very critical look at PPB and asks what kind of rationality it is

that those who would “rationalize public-expenditure decisions” have in mind. In a manner that adds weight to and draws strength from some earlier papers, he discusses the complex world of the administrator.

With this brief review, we now have a good idea of the topics covered during Minnowbrook I. Frederickson (1989) offers a good summary of the themes developed at this conference:

- the field has, to a significant degree, shifted focus from the management of agencies to policy issues;
- social equity has been added to efficiency and economy as a rationale or justification for policy positions;
- ethics, honesty, and responsibility in government have returned again to the lexicon of Public Administration;
- as public needs change, government agencies do not and thus often outlive their purposes;
- change, not growth, has come to be understood as the more critical theoretical issue;
- effective Public Administration has come to be defined in the context of an active and participatory citizenry;
- in the 1970s it came to be better understood that the more difficult challenge is to carry out decisions;
- the correctness of the rational model and the usefulness of the strict concept of hierarchy have been severely challenged; and
- while pluralism continues to be widely accepted as useful device for explaining the exercise of public power, it has ceased to be the standard for the practice of Public Administration.

## 1.2. Minnowbrook II

*In contrast to Minnowbrook I, which challenged Public Administration to become proactive with regard to social issues, Minnowbrook II retreated from an action perspective to cerebral examinations of democracy, ethics, responsibility, philosophy, and even economics.*

Mary Timney Bailey, 1989

Holzer (1989) says that although the somewhat naive self-confidence of the 1960s was missing at Minnowbrook II, the conferees evidenced a ‘constrained hopefulness’ for the 1990s. He identifies two main arguments for Public Administration as a challenging pursuit. First, citizens are again seeking a renewed sense of community and shared endeavor, emphasizing interpersonal values and de-emphasizing personal gain. Second, public servants are an important link in the social system. Society will have to look to Public Administrators to solve a continuing stream of problems.

Guy (1989) establishes that the eleven themes teased from the deliberations of Minnowbrook II represent a certain period in the history of Public Administration, basically a story of good news, but with a bit of bad news as well. In this section we are going to present the summary of the main topics developed by him.

a) *The concerns for social equity that predominated at Minnowbrook I are largely at peace now.* According to Guy, no significant disagreement was voiced over the importance of this issue at Minnowbrook II, and there was a concomitant sense that social equity was much closer to reality in 1989 than it was in 1968.

b) *Strong concerns were expressed about democratic values and the centrality of Public Administration to promoting them.* This concern was manifest in the focus on ethics, accountability, and leadership in Public Administration.

c) *The debate between the normative and behaviorist perspectives has not diminished.* Guy (1989) states that the epistemological question of how people learn about the field has left the realm of science and entered the realm of theology, judging from the intensity of the debates. As a field, Public Administration is still in disagreement about how to get there.

d) *Diversity in society and in the work force was accepted as a basic value among participants.* Diversity was identified in three main contexts: the issue of generalists vs specialists; racial, ethnic, and sexual diversity; and gender diversity.

e) *The tone of Minnowbrook II was one of constrained hopefulness.* A revised sense of what government should do and what government can do was being debated in the nation at the time. Participants seem to have come to terms with this change and are hopeful for a constructive role for Public Administration to play on both the national and global scale (Guy, 1989).

f) *Certain 'rules of the road' were accepted.* Visions were of the near future, not the long-term future, and the participants were voluntarily constrained to that which was judged by participants to be realistic.

g) *A professional 'ethnocentricity' or parochialism prevailed, indicating that Public Administration as a field is having a hard time dealing with its interdisciplinary roots.* Guy (1989) establishes that rather than being concerned with integrating available knowledge, many discussants were busily reinventing the wheel when, in fact, other work over the past decades has invented a perfectly acceptable round wheel. Public Administration was having trouble building on earlier achievements. Instead of spending energies perfecting the carriage that would roll on the wheels, some feel it necessary to reinvent the vehicle from the ground up.

h) *A strong adversarial attitude toward business was evident.* Guy tells us that, even with the tacit acceptance of privatization, there was at Minnowbrook II a disdain for business as an enterprise. Guy establishes that if one of the challenges to Public Administration is to manage the 'seams' of society, then building on the best that business offers, as well as the best that the not-for-profit and public sectors offer, is essential.



i) *Impatience with the constraints of public personnel systems was evident.* Innovative personnel practices were described or called for in order to move away from public manager's current inability to hire employees on a timely basis, promote the best employees, and reinforce high productivity while being able to discharge nonproductive employees.

j) *Unwillingness to address technological issues was evident.* Technology was seen as diminishing public service rather a tool to improve it. Even with the presence of papers that referred to artificial intelligence, expert systems, design science, the interface of public productivity and

technological systems in high-reliability organizations, and the role of universities in research and development, this theme prevailed in the conference as a whole.

k) *Unwillingness to look at the specifics of what government should do was evident.* According to Guy, even in the midst of discussions on the inevitability of administrators exerting control over policy agendas, the politics/administration dichotomy appears to be alive and well.

## 2. Minnowbrook III: What Are We Missing?

There are many lessons to learn from the first two Minnowbrook meetings. According to Guy, compared to Minnowbrook I, at Minnowbrook II Public Administration appeared at peace with its core values and its sense of relevance and purpose. Whole-hearted acceptance of democratic values and preeminent attention to issues of social equity were unquestioned. She also says that the papers and deliberations were permeated with a determination to make the public service better, with better-trained practitioners and more positive image of the public service.

On the other hand, she says that some bad news came out of Minnowbrook II as well. She describes a public administration that may be being dragged kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century. Throughout the 1988 Minnowbrook deliberations, little attention was devoted to the realities of implementation. There was little vision of how the public service can function at its best within what promises to be a future of declining market share, as the United States faces the reality of a global economy and a changing industrial base.

As we can see, the results of the first two conferences were generally positive. The first five themes of Minnow-



brook II provide a historical perspective, comparing the discussion to the legacy of Minnowbrook I. The last six papers focus on the current and future visions of the field. There are advances and limitations to what was covered by the first two groups of participants. Looking to the results of these past two efforts, we can have a very good idea of how the agenda for the next meeting should look like.

Minnowbrook III, like Minnowbrook II and Minnowbrook I, should also be a self-governing conference. It should include scholars from many countries, not only the United States. It should be designed in such a way as to have representation of minority groups (different races, women, etc.). The focus of the conference should be a mixture between topics not yet covered by the Minnowbrook series and issues that are of perennial importance to the field. However, the objective of the conference should not be to simply add more and more themes to the ones developed in the first two conferences. The purpose of Minnowbrook III should be to develop a better understanding of the different positions and start building a consensus about the construction of a science of Public Administration.

In this section, I propose some themes for inclusion on the Minnowbrook III conference agenda. The list is just to illustrate some of the missing pieces in the complex construction of Public Administration as a scientific discipline. As we can see, many of the themes from the first two meetings remain relevant and important for this new session. However, we are going to focus only in the topics related to the theoretical development of Public Administration.

### 2.1. Internationalization of Public Administration

It is clear that most theoretical developments in the discipline of public admi-

The purpose of Minnowbrook III should be to develop a better understanding of the different positions and start building a consensus about the construction of a science of Public Administration.

nistration have been developed by American scholars and based on American cases. However, it is difficult to affirm that this is applicable to other realities, with other political values, other bureaucratic organizations, and different perceptions by citizens about what Public Administration is and about what it should do. There must be other factors and explanations.

It is often supposed that science is something that could be generalized to other realities, but, in the case of Public Administration, are we not talking about creating specific theories for specific realities? Do we not choose from a kit of different tools and methods according to the reality to be analyzed? Should a concept developed in United States apply in a general way in developing countries? Is Public Administration a discipline only for developed countries?

*Suggested participants:* professors and researchers from universities of different countries such as Michael Crozier (France), C. Clegg (England), Michelangelo Bovero (Italy), Rafael Bañon (Spain), David Arellano (Mexico), etc.

### 2.2. Public and Private Administration

The division between public and private administration did not exist in antiquity and medieval times because it was not necessary and it was meaningless for that

time (Waldo, 1980: 5). Nowadays, we have a division of powers, checks and balances, profit organizations, non-profit organizations, a representative government, etc., things not imaginable in earlier ages. It is so difficult to think of Public Administration solely as an administrative tool, which can be taken from or shared with private enterprises?

We are not only talking about efficiency, effectiveness or profitability, as we can do it in private enterprises. In Public Administration we also need to talk about legality, accountability, representation, justice, general interest, public benefits, public welfare, etc. I think that Public Administration does not only study the best way to apply administrative tools and techniques to government. There is a polemic about what really Public Administration studies, but in my opinion it is clear that Public Administration is not merely business administration for government.

*Suggested participants:* Donald Kettl, Paul Appleby, Frederick Mosher, Graham T. Allison, Bozeman, etc.

### 2.3. Politics and Administration Dichotomy: Practice and Research

For this problem, many different answers stemming from many different approaches and tools are possible: performance-oriented budgets, motivation and leadership, principal agent theory, organizational theory, among others. But we already have the dilemma between politics and administration. We can agree that separation between these two functions exists, but how can we explain the power that many bureaucrats have to change the content of a public policy? Is that not a public decision about goals and interests?

We can also take the opposite side and think that separation is only for study purposes or it doesn't exist. But, in this second case, how can we make compatible the democratic ideas and public

expectations with having an efficient and effective government? How can we deal with politicians that want to influence in administration issues and with managers that take advantage of their position to pursue a political position?

*Suggested participants:* Laurence Lynn, Richard Stillman, Robert Gage, John Dilulio, Paul Light, Frank Thompson, Robert Behn, Norma Riccucci, Martha Derthick, etc.

## **2.4. Public Administration: Art, Science or Something Else**

What is really the importance of Public Administration becoming or being recognized as a science? What is the problem with its being with being just another academic effort? The paradigm of modernity has put science in the highest possible position and that is why most of us, as scholars, want to be sure that what we are doing is science, that what we are doing is helping to develop the world and to make people's lives better. We can think for a minute that maybe Public Administration, medicine, engineering and other disciplines are neither sciences nor arts. I do not think that we live in a world in which if something is not a science, then it must be an art.

Why do we not make an intellectual exercise to imagine other category, maybe between a science and an art, or maybe totally different? The fact is that Public Administration exists and needs to be studied. The fact is that many scholars and professors research and teach Public Administration. The fact is that we are generating knowledge in a systematic way. Public Administration is an area of study and research and maybe we need to think in something different from a quantitative positivist science, but maybe not.

*Suggested participants:* Laurence Lynn, Michael Barzelay, Robert Denhart, Eugene Bardach, etc.

## **2.5. Comparative Approaches: Social versus Natural Sciences**

Comparative approaches seem to be a true path to a science of Public Administration. It seems that it is only about doing more comparative research for many years and then we can see the start of that science. But, in this whole idea, we are accepting that natural and social sciences have similar ways to generalize. We are assuming that our classifications of governments, political systems, and other social phenomena related to the Public Administration topic are really welldefined, and they are as clear as are their counterparts in natural sciences.

In my opinion, policy analysis is really a part of the broader field of study called Public Administration.

We are assuming that we can obtain a consensus from the different academic and scientific communities involved in this topic. This consensus is not only about results of doing research, but also about the comparative method being the best way to develop a science of Public Administration. It seems that the comparative method is a good alternative to have a broader scope in the field, but we have much more to do in the way of having something called a science.

*Suggested participants:* Ali Farazmand, Fred W. Riggs, Krishna Tummala, etc.

## **2.6. Policy Analysis and Public Administration: Two Sides of the Same Coin?**

We think the most important issue here is the ways that policy analysis has failed to do the job Public Administration seemed not to do. Policy analysis has tried to differentiate from public administration and, actually, policy analysis uses some different scopes and tools. However, we must ask whether

or not policy analysis has been more successful than Public Administration in the practical arena. How can we measure the success of each field? Are they really different disciplines at all?

In my opinion, policy analysis is really a part of the broader field of study called Public Administration. Policy analysis is another ingredient in the study of Public Administration, public problems, and public solutions. Public Administration is not the opinion of only one author or scholar; it is a core of theories that includes many different practical and theoretical tools and approaches. If we want to say we study public administration, we need at least

to know the basics of policy analysis, just as we need to know the basics of public management, economics, or political science.

*Suggested participants:* Beryl Radin, Peter DeLeon, Charles Linblom, Eugene Bardach, Robert Nakamura, etc.

## **2.7. Public Management: Big Question versus Narrow Visions**

New public management has been developed in a kind of narrow view. Researchers are focusing on single values (efficiency, effectiveness, etc.), single cases (some agencies, or some programs), and/or single situations (national reforms). They try to find organizational factors and variables that they can apply in other realities as best practices. They think that the best way to construct Public Administration is by answering small, detailed and well-defined questions. We are not sure if this is the way to have a general knowledge about Public Administration. It is difficult to construct a discipline by putting a lot of single cases together. Besides, unfortunately in many

cases it is not clear the methodology and they do not appear systematic in a scientific way.

On the other hand, with big questions (Kirlin, 2001), I think we are on the boundaries between Public Administration and many other social sciences. We in the field are trying to say that the field of Public Administration is a practical and theoretical combination of small parts from many other disciplines. We are trying to have so wide a scope that we can get lost easily. If we are not cautious, we can all end up studying the economics or sociology of

Public Administration. So what should we do? What is the way or at least not the worst way to build our science? Is there a way to combine these two approaches and make a bridge between them? Could this bridge be useful for Public Administration?

*Suggested participants:* John Kirlin, Laurence Lynn, Norma Riccucci, Patrick Dobel, Michael Barzelay, etc.

### Final Reflection

Public Administration as a discipline has evolved for many decades.

Academic efforts like the two past Minnowbrook conferences have helped to have a good diagnosis of the development of this field. We do not pretend to say that the topics that we just listed are the most important ones for a better understanding of the discipline. We think different academic communities that do research in very different national realities should decide the actual topics for the conference. These are just some ideas of missing and/or important themes that might be included in a next Minnowbrook conference.

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