Meaningful knowledge about public administration: Epistemological and methodological antecedents

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ABSTRACT

While scientific knowledge has become valuable in creating national and global policies, the influence of Public Administration knowledge may be perceived as limited and thus not meaningful. This study aimed to understand the epistemological and methodological antecedents for meaningful knowledge about public administration. It departed from two assumptions, namely that of a social ontology of a complex, emerging and socially constructed public administration reality, and that of the co-situatedness of scholars, administrators, politicians and citizens in the public administration reality. The current study has shown that a situated knowledge quest for this reality implies, firstly, an extended epistemology to recognize and consider all forms of tangible and non-tangible knowledge about public administration within relevant contexts. Secondly, it implies an interscience methodology drawing from multi- and transdisciplinary traditions for comprehensive knowledge about public administration within relevant contexts. Meaningful knowledge about public administration can influence public policy only if (a) it is consistent with the social ontology of this reality, (b) it is of value for the situated and interconnected knowledge stakeholders, (c) this emerging, irreducible and complex reality is explored through an extended epistemology, and (d) results from a methodology of interscience and complex thinking.

KEYWORDS: Epistemology; extended epistemology; interscience; knowledge; meaningful knowledge; methodology; ontology; situated; socially constructed; social ontology

Introduction

While the Covid-19 pandemic has challenged governments globally with a series of wicked problems, Public Administration knowledge has not featured notably in governments' considerations of public policy options. This pandemic is not the first instance of the perceived lack of influence of Public Administration[1] knowledge in governments' considerations of policy options to deal with challenges confronting them. Various scholars (Cameron, 2013; Ospina & Dodge, 2005b; Wessels, 2021a) attributed this phenomenon to the lack of

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[1] In this article, following a similar convention as Rutgers (2010, p. 3), I use 'Public Administration' for referring to the academic subject which makes a study of the ontic reality 'public administration'.

meaningfulness of this knowledge. In a previous contribution, I subsequently argued that meaningful knowledge about public administration likely depends on the presence of at least four antecedents, namely

- a social ontology that recognizes an emergent, diverse, complex, multi-connected and socially constructed public administration;
- the recognition that the quest for meaningful knowledge is situated within this reality of interconnected actors;
- an epistemology that is appropriate for a situated quest for knowledge about this socially constructed reality; and
- an appropriate and comprehensive way of knowing (Wessels, 2021a).

I previously focused on the first two antecedents and argued that the ontology of public administration, being a macro-intervention, consists of socially constructed and interconnected elements. These elements include the executive authority, policies, functions, tasks, activities, institutions and their bureaucracies, citizens, as well as the academic subject field Public Administration. The form of this reality can, at best, be described as diverse, complex, and emerging. Furthermore, I have argued that public officials, politicians, communities, individual citizens and Public Administration scholars are co-constructors of this reality due to their interconnected situatedness in this emergent reality.

While a situated social ontological perspective on public administration reality may be a necessary condition for meaningful knowledge, it is not sufficient. In this regard, I found myself in the good company of Raadschelders, who claims "ontology will generate theories about what we can know (epistemology), how we can produce that knowledge (methodology), what research practices we apply (methods), as well as how seemingly objective, research findings can be valued (axiology)" (Raadschelders, 2012, p. 20). An appropriate and inclusive epistemology to articulate appropriate knowledge questions about this reality, and a methodology that recognizes and considers all forms and sources of tangible and non-tangible knowledge about this reality is thus necessary. In the current article, I explore the epistemology and methodology implied by the first two antecedents as necessary for meaningful knowledge of public administration.

An epistemology appropriate for a situated quest for knowledge about public administration

What is known about the socially constructed reality of 'public administration'? In this section, I argue that an epistemology appropriate for a situated quest for knowledge is a necessary condition for meaningful public administration knowledge. I use the concept 'epistemology' not only in referring to a "sub-discipline of philosophy devoted to questions of knowledge and justification" (Cook & Wagenaar, 2012, p. 9), but in referring to a specific understanding of the nature of public administration knowledge and the conditions for justifying knowledge claims as valid and true (Cf. Heidelberg, 2018, p. 23).

Since epistemology refers to knowledge and its truthfulness, one can reasonably expect an appropriate epistemology for public administration – as an emerging, complex and socially

constructed macro-intervention – to find answers to "the questions of existential and social life" (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2020b, p. 896). The implication of a social ontology and the situated quest for knowledge is that these questions are posed and responded to by the diverse inter-connected stakeholders located in this reality. In this regard, Salomon remarked that the knowledge problems of developing countries might not "excite the international scientific community" (2000, p. 245). This implies that the knowledge questions about public administration within the South African context may not be of equal value to scholars and practitioners in, for example, the United States of America (USA) or Europe.

Within the Public Administration subject area, there is a substantial collection of scholarship on the so-called 'big questions' in the field (Behn, 1995; Callahan, 2001; Catlaw, 2006; May & Jochim, 2013; Raadschelders, 2011, 2019; Stout, 2018; Wessels, 2008). However, while the big questions are expected to define the field (Behn, 1995, p. 134), there is no evidence of a universal agreement on these questions within the field of Public Administration (Callahan, 2001; Raadschelders, 2019; Wessels, 2008). In fact, according to Raadschelders (2011, p. 918), public administration (as an object of study) attracts researchers from various disciplines and subject fields, but is studied globally as a phenomenon in its specific, local situatedness. The intrinsic value of the obtained knowledge is thus articulated through the 'who' and 'what' questions about a specific public administration reality. The knowledge obtained through these questionings is valued and makes knowledge explicit so that it can be known (Cf. Roux & De Beer, 2013, p. 308). Being known, it has the intrinsic value of making sense of social, political, moral and public administration problems and giving "meaning to life" (Atlan, 1996, p. 2).

Within the South African context, knowledge questions about public administration are inevitably closely aligned to attaining the constitutionally enshrined ideals of improved quality of life and people's unrestricted potential (Cf. Republic of South Africa, 1996, p. Preamble). This alignment to the Constitution poses highly contextualized knowledge questions about, for example, the improvement of citizen's quality of life through, amongst others, employment equity policies (Wessels & Naidoo, 2021a), child support grants (Wessels, 2021b), and the deinstitutionalization of mental healthcare patients (Wessels & Naidoo, 2021b). The epistemic questions about citizens' quality of life resulted in South African-specific knowledge questions on the meaning of 'quality of life' within particular contexts, its defining attributes, and the most appropriate way of observing it (Schlemmer & Møller, 1997; Møller, 1998; Møller, 2007; Møller, 2018). As knowledge can be known and gives meaning, and as an epistemology is concerned with the truthful (quality) answering of important (valuable[2]) questions, an appropriate Public Administration epistemology is imperative to attain meaningful knowledge about the implementation of specific policies to improve the quality of life of a context-specific society. Appropriateness thus refers to the teleological dimension of knowledge, namely being truthful, integrated and purposeful (Foucault, 1980, p. 224; Newton, 2011, p. 7; Rooney & McKenna, 2008, p. 710). Therefore, within the South African context, a big question may be: What can we know about public administration as an intervention to improve citizens' quality of life?

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[2] Its axiological dimension (Raadschelders, 2012, p. 19)

Public Administration literature revealed several epistemological approaches in the world of public administration (Heidelberg & Desai, 2015; Raadschelders, 2008; Schön, 1995; Stivers, 2006; Terman, 2011). These approaches include the traditional positivist epistemology, the epistemology of practice, the interpretive epistemology, and the extended epistemology (see Table 1).

The traditional positivist or logic-empirical epistemological approach (Cf. Raadschelders, 2012, pp. 9, 19) to the study of public administration is characterized by the ideal of a unity of knowledge. This unity consists of objective facts obtained through procedures emanating from the natural sciences, propositions, data, and rational deductive reasoning (Raadschelders, 2005, p. 608). Scholars working within this tradition are typically highly skilled in using mathematics and statistical analyses and report their findings in formal "scientific-language" (Raadschelders, 2005, p. 619). They also tend to read complex texts such as research reports, legislation, policies and procedures in a reproductive modality as if the meanings of these texts are rigid, single and univocal (De Beer, 2014, pp. 208, 220).

While the positivist epistemology focuses nearly exclusively on relatively static and specific empirical phenomena, it seemingly does not provide for the study or questioning of non-empirical constructs, such as the relationship between science and politics, science and power, and science and violence (Cf. Serres & Latour, 1995, p. 17). This relationship between scholarship and power has direct epistemic implications for public administration. In this regard, Heidelberg (2018, p. 38) observes that debates in the field tend to be more concerned with "getting it right" than epistemic issues. The emphasis appears to be on providing knowledge necessary for policy- and decision-makers in government "to intervene upon and manipulate conditions in the world" (Heidelberg, 2018, p. 38). This epistemology implies that knowledge precedes and determines practice and contributes to evidence-based policymaking. Two noteworthy South African examples of attempts to inform policy decisions by dedicated studies are the 1981 investigation by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) on education provision in South Africa (HSRC, 1981; Collins & Gillespie, 1984; Wessels & Pauw, 2018; Pauw & Van Zyl, 2021) and the Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training (CEHET, 2017). Both these high-level investigating bodies were appointed to advise the government-of-the-day on policy changes. In both cases, the relevant government-of-the-day accepted only some of the findings (Wessels & Pauw, 2018; Wessels, 2021c).

Since public administration, as macro-intervention, aims to improve societies' quality of life, it makes sense that decision-makers are concerned with predicting and measuring these interventions against their purposes. Schön (1995, p. 34) refers to this approach as the epistemology of technical rationality; an epistemology that does not recognize, consider or study anything outside the "table" of the technical reality (Catlaw & Treisman, 2014, p. 444); all other notions are thus excluded (McKernan, 2008, p. 20). This epistemology provides knowledge about elements of the phenomenon that can be predicted and measured, and not the phenomenon as an undivided reality consisting of both empirical and non-empirical elements. In this regard, Morin (1985, p. 166) refers to a paradigm of simplification and disconnection "which reduced communication between scientific knowledge and philosophical thought to a trickle, … to deprive science of any chance of knowing itself, thinking about itself, and even conceiving itself scientifically". The epistemology of technical rationality has seemingly evolved to become the flagship of positivist epistemology.

A conspicuous absentee from the positivist scientific table is the human observer (scientist or researcher). While the researcher's role is acknowledged as being that of the objective recorder of data, the researcher is regarded as non-existent when results are presented – perhaps out of fear that "their presence as persons will endanger the objectivity of the research" (Wessels & Pauw, 2006, p. 170). The French biologist and philosopher Henri Atlan (1996, p. 2) refers to this epistemology as a "piece of nostalgia based on the illusion of a universal theory that would explain everything, things as they are and as they ought to be". This epistemology, which is "founded on the ideas of order, determinism, necessity, clarity, certainty and measurement" (De Beer, 2015, p. 113), does not seem appropriate for dealing with emerging and complex public administration challenges with no up-front solutions for decision-makers (Heikkila, 2017, p. 18). For this reason, Heikkila and Skinner argue technical evidence alone is insufficient for informing decisions to deal with complex problems (Heikkila, 2017, p. 18; Skinner, 2017, p. 15).

While knowledge questions from the epistemological perspective of technical rationality seem to be popular amongst public administration decision-makers, this positivist epistemology of over-specialization is fragmenting complex fabrics of realities into "arbitrary snippets" (Morin, 1985, p. 167). It is therefore not sufficient to serve as the only or dominating epistemic approach to an emergent and complex socially constructed public administration reality.

Let us turn then to the more inclusive epistemology proposed by Cook and Wagenaar (2012, p. 9) as being "an inquiry into the possibilities and constraints of being engaged, embodied, contextualized agents". This epistemology does not imply an abundance of factual and technical knowledge. Similarly, Raelin argues for practical judgment, which draws from technical knowledge while considering "the diversity and changeability in the workplace … [and] real-time experience" (Raelin, 2007, p. 500). This epistemology promotes the study of practice by engaged, self-reflective and contextualized public officials situated within the intersubjective world of a shared practice of public administration, drawing from their tacit knowledge (Cf. Jun, 1994, p. 204; Raelin, 2007, p. 499). An epistemology of practice postulates the embeddedness of all knowledge, including tacit knowledge, in ordinary experience; it reflects a situatedness from which knowledge gets its meaning and life (Cook & Wagenaar, 2012, p. 8). While this epistemology constitutes a clear break from the view that "knowledge necessarily precedes, underlies and enables action" (Cook & Wagenaar, 2012, p. 26), its proponents do not ascribe exclusive epistemological status to it. Nonetheless, this epistemology has been shown to be appropriate for comprehensive knowledge questions about an emerging and complex public administration. It specifically includes the explicit and tacit knowledge of practitioners situated within public administration.

While the interpretative epistemology appears closely related to the epistemology of practice, it reflects perhaps the clearest break from the positivist epistemology (Heidelberg & Desai, 2015; Raadschelders, 2008; Cf. Stivers, 2006; Terman, 2011). In contrast with positivist epistemology, the researcher, within the tradition of interpretative epistemology, is visibly and directly engaged in the research process and thus with the phenomenon (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2020a, p. 459). Within the context of nursing practice, Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2020b, p. 890) argue that interpretative epistemic questions are "closely connected to and arises from (nursing) practice". It is also noteworthy that Heidegger (1988, p. 20) draws a direct relation between

interpretation and time by emphasizing only "the interpretation of being by way of temporality can make clear why and how this feature of being earlier, apriority, goes together with being". Considering the complex and emerging nature of public administration, it makes sense that the interpretative quest for knowledge occurs within historical contexts. As part of this tradition, the interpretive epistemology prompts research on existential and social issues that allow for ambiguity and valid meaning of the interconnections between the whole and the parts of reality (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2020b, p. 461; Morin, 2007, p. 6).

Merleau-Ponty alerts the researcher about the invisible nature of meaning, being the inner framework of the visible: "The … visible is pregnant with the invisible" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 216). Thus, what is hidden by the visible behavior and measured orientations of the residents of a local municipality? These invisible existential and social matters are rooted in human beings' experience of being in the world and their perception of that existence (Schmidt, 2000, pp. 268, 269). Through this epistemology, situated public administration stakeholders set out to make sense of each other's efforts in ascribing meaning to public administration challenges (Wagstaff & Williams, 2014, p. 21). While these invisible matters inevitably fall outside the scope of the positivist epistemology, the interpretive, socio-phenomenological research tradition appears appropriate in exploring society's invisible values and interests. It serves as pre-theoretical and empirical data for informing meaningful praxis by satisfying the needs of society (Jun, 1994, p. 204).

Furthermore, Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2020a, p. 894) draw the reader's attention to the embeddedness of an "intentional direction toward meaning" in the interpretative epistemology. Within the South African context, the Constitution of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996) inevitably serves as such an intentional direction towards meaning. An example of this intent is the interpretative undertaking by the reader of a text, something described by De Beer (2014, p. 208) as a self-imposed "system of control over meaning". A South African example of this self-imposed control over meaning is the Constitutional Court's interpretation of 'fairness' as a constitutional value in respect of the implementation of the employment equity plan by the National Commissioner of Police (Wessels & Naidoo 2021a). This intentional dimension corresponds to Polanyi's quest for a teleology-embedded epistemology for the study of apparent purposeful and integrated patterns (Newton, 2011, p. 7) of reality "that are least tangible" (Polanyi, 1965, p. 15). The interpretive tradition subsequently also provides for non-explicit, tacit knowing as "we know more than we can tell and we can tell nothing without relying on our awareness of things we may not be able to tell" (Polanyi, 1962, p. x). Our knowledge and subsequent meanings are thus preliminary, similar to the results of the hermeneutic reading of texts (De Beer, 2014, p. 220).

Insert table here: **Table 1: Comprehensive, inclusive and non-restricted epistemology for the situated study of a complex, multifaceted, multi-connected and diverse reality of public administration**

The search for an appropriate epistemology to gain meaningful knowledge about public administration inevitably implies exhausting all knowledge possibilities by also considering "knowledge outside science [and] … scientific knowledge outside certain definitions of what scientific knowledge entails" (De Beer, 2007, p. 228). The implication of such an epistemology

is that lay knowledge, obtained through citizen participation, may be viewed as legitimate and valid for comprehending, framing and making sense of public administration realities (Juntti et al., 2009, p. 209). Kakabadse et al. (2003, p. 368) refer to this as an extended epistemology that provides for the co-creation of knowledge about reality "that reach beyond the realm of theory into experience and practice". This epistemology assumes an interplay of different ways of knowing, such as propositional knowledge, action-related knowledge, experiential knowledge (things as actually experienced), and presentational knowledge; for example, images, stories or dreams (Jakubik, 2011, p. 4; Kakabadse et al., 2003, pp. 368–369).

However, in addition to and in contrast with these empirical forms of knowledge is the non-evident, hidden or obscure knowledge (Cary, 1999, p. 418; Serres, 1995, p. 148). This is the knowledge that remains hidden and does not reveal itself within the traditional epistemologies (Serres, 1982, p. 90). An extended epistemology is thus also one that extends beyond unproblematic issues to question "fictions and hidden knowledges" embedded in the "narratives of the redemptive culture of the social sciences" (Cary, 1999, p. 419). The extended epistemology promotes optimal participation among interconnected stakeholders, thoughtful action, a plurality of knowing, quality engagement in relevant and important work, emergent inquiry and applied collaborative learning (Jakubik, 2011, pp. 71–72). It results in radically new solutions for complex problems (De Beer, 2015, p. 126). In this regard, Paviani (2007, p. 136) refers to the inter-sciences that are "constituted of the confluence of various disciplines of different areas of knowledge". For Sha (2009, p. 661), imagination is "located between various sciences" and is an inter-science that serves as a bridge between art and science. Conway further uses the concept 'inter-science' in referring to the participation of various sciences within the realm of post-disciplinarity (Conway, 2004, p. 297). Within the South African context, Pauw argues that Public Administration is a subject field (and not a discipline) exploring public administration through the application of several disciplines such as historiography, psychology, sociology, hermeneutics, philosophy, mathematics and logic (Pauw, 1995, p. 49). It goes without saying that very few Public Administration scholars are adequately equipped in all these disciplines. Pauw asserts that the disciplines of historiography, sociology and hermeneutics may be the most widely used by Public Administration scholars. Within the South African context, Public Administration scholars frequently work simultaneously within the epistemological traditions of historiography, sociology and hermeneutics in addressing issues such as engaged scholarship (Maserumule, 2015), the South African scholarship of Public Administration (Maserumule & Vil-Nkomo, 2015), transdisciplinarity (Ndaguba & Ijeoma, 2017; Tempelhoff et al., 2021) and the influence of a scientific study on policy (Pauw & Van Zyl, 2021). While De Beer has not used the concept 'interscience', his argument implies that Public Administration has evolved to become an interscience "establishing links and building connections within the framework of knowledge networks" (2005, p. 113) with the potential for inventiveness.

Confronted with an ontology that provides for a messy public administration reality, an inclusive and non-restrictive epistemology seems appropriate and necessary to attain meaningful public administration knowledge. An extended epistemology excludes the research (knowledge) purposes associated with the traditional positivist epistemology. However, it includes the epistemology of practice and the interpretive phenomenology necessary to comprehend public administration messiness, referred to as "irreducible and always embedded

interplay of processes, practices, experiences, ways of knowledge and values" (Stengers, 2011, p. 11). An epistemology appropriate for a situated quest for meaningful knowledge about such public administration realities is one that sets out to explore this emerging and irreducible phenomenon with its constituting elements, its purpose, and reflects on its complexity. In addition, it sets out to acquire knowledge for improving or healing a phenomenon to meet its purpose, and to invent new meanings of phenomenon within its context of time and space.

Even though the extended epistemology does not exclude any form of knowing, it includes all knowledge configurations and invented of meanings. Suitable methods for obtaining inclusive and non-restrictive knowledge about the diverse socially constructed reality of public administration are discussed next.

An appropriate and comprehensive way of knowing public administration

An appropriate way of knowing is proposed as the fourth antecedent to attaining meaningful knowledge about public administration. This antecedent, traditionally referred to as the methodological dimension, has been well-researched and reported on by, amongst others, Perry and Kraemer (1986, p. 216), Gill and Meier (2000), Ospina and colleagues (Dodge et al., 2005; Ospina, 2011; Ospina et al., 2018; Ospina & Dodge, 2005a; Peredo et al., 2013) and Raadschelders (2000, 2011). Within the South African context, similar studies were conducted by Cameron (2013), Pauw, Thani and Wessels (Thani & Wessels, 2011; Wessels et al., 2009; Wessels & Thani, 2014a; Wessels et al., 2014). A golden thread through these contributions is a quest for the most appropriate methods to obtain meaningful knowledge about public administration.

The prevailing criterion for selecting appropriate research methods in the field of Public Administration appears to be the epistemological and methodological preferences of esteemed and so-called high-impact journals, such as the *Public Administration Review*, the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, and *Public Administration*. These journals prefer contributions reporting on "theoretical and empirical research about public organizations" (Public Administration Review, 2020), "the highest quality theoretical and empirical work in the field" (Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 2020), and "theoretically and empirically rigorous research on topics of broad and vivid current interest" (Public Administration, 2017). While the positivist epistemology may be viewed as a "piece of nostalgia" (Atlan, 1996, p. 2), Public Administration scholarly journals[3] nevertheless promote research topics of broad or global interest. They also advocate for the study of predominantly empirical phenomena through standardized methods of data collection and analysis, the idea of a unity of knowledge, objective facts, as well as universal theories and propositions.

A classic example of positivist methodologies serving as a benchmark for Public Administration research is the article 'Research Methodology in the Public Administration Review 1975–1984'. In this article, Perry and Kraemer (1986, p. 216) report how research methodologies in the Public Administration Review "measure up against mainstream social

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[3] One of the exceptions is the journal *Administrative Theory & Praxis* who is positioned specifically for "critical, normative, or interpretive scholarship focused on various aspects of public administration theory, governance, and management" (Administrative Theory & Praxis, 2020)

science research". The current study, and specifically this section of the article, use a different benchmark for Public Administration research methods, focusing on its appropriateness for obtaining meaningful (quality and valuable) knowledge about the phenomenon 'public administration' (cf. Thani & Wessels, 2011). This appropriateness benchmark is informed by the researcher's situatedness within the public administration reality, the nature and form of this reality, and the situated quest for inclusive, non-restrictive, extended, and truthful knowledge that answers situated questions about human existence and interaction within this reality.

Following from the preceding analysis, it is argued that the positivist-informed methodology, which studies public administration from the outside, is not appropriate on its own for obtaining meaningful knowledge about a socially constructed, interconnected, diverse, complex and changing public administration reality. Hence, additional ways of knowing need to be considered.

While the biomedical sciences may be traditionally associated with positivist epistemologies and methodologies, the need has recently (nearly 24 years after the remark by the biologist Atlan, to which I referred earlier) been articulated for "a bigger and well-furnished store of methods for multifaceted designs… [and] better insights in how to combine qualitative methods with quantitative" (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2020a, p. 7), and applying interpretive methods in this field (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2020a, p. 459). This need for additional methods has emerged from a gradual acknowledgment of the presence of the human being central to the medical sciences' ontology and epistemology.

While several and dissimilar classification systems for research methods in the field of Public Administration exist, the classification used in this article is informed by five variables, namely the researcher's position in relation to the phenomenon under investigation, the phenomenon under investigation (the ontic dimension), appropriate sources about the phenomenon, the nature of the knowledge (the epistemic dimension), and the epistemic purpose (the teleologic dimension) of the study.

As an established subject field, the global methodological profile of Public Administration has been dominated by mainstream social science methods (Gunn, 2017a, 2017b; Ospina, 2011; Perry, 2012, 2016; Perry & Kraemer, 1986). For this article, methodologies have been categorized into the following broad classes (De Beer, 2014, p. 220; Wessels & Thani, 2014b, p. 176):

- methods for the collection of primary numerical data from human participants (quantitative 1),
- methods for the analysis of existing numerical data about human participants (quantitative 2),
- methods for the collection of primary textual data from human participants (qualitative 1),
- methods for the analysis of existing textual data (qualitative 2),
- historical studies, such as ethnographies and auto-ethnographies, for the collection and analysis of primary textual data,
- methods for concept/construct analysis,

- methods (reproductive, hermeneutic, ideology-critical, deconstructive and euretic[4]) for the reading of texts,
- comparative studies using methods for the collection and analysis of primary and secondary textual and numerical data, and
- content analysis using methods for the analysis of primary and secondary textual data.

While the above (and more) methodological approaches or traditions are applied to varying degrees by Public Administration researchers universally, it does not imply these methods are appropriate or sufficient (on their own) for knowing the public administration reality. Furthermore, considering that these methods represent distinct disciplinary traditions, it is unlikely for an individual scholar to skillfully apply all these methods simultaneously. Therefore, it is not uncommon for individual scholars to have distinct methodological preferences. These preferences may be influenced by paradigmatic and institutional traditions, and not necessarily by their appropriateness for answering specific knowledge questions about the research phenomenon (Quinn & Wennes, 2008, p. 360; Wessels, 2010, p. 545; Wessels & Thani, 2014a, p. 62). These methodological preferences frequently result in scholars becoming specialists in applying specific methods to obtain at least fractions of knowledge from their distinct situated perspectives. However, a fraction of knowledge about a wicked problem barely enlightens a small part of a complex phenomenon. In fact, Morin argues that these methods may result in "blind intelligence" (Morin, 1985, p. 167); hence, the inevitability of selecting methodologies within the tradition of the epistemology of practice, the interpretative phenomenology, and the extended epistemology with direct methodological and researcher implications (see Table 2).

Methodologically, the extended epistemology implies the inclusion of as many as possible methodologies appropriate for exploring, describing, explaining, comprehending, interpreting, unmasking, discovering, and inventing knowledge about the public administration reality. An extended epistemology, thus, does not imply the demise of discipline-specific nurturing of scholarly capabilities. Instead, it reflects the enhancement of disciplinary capabilities, an appreciation for diverse epistemological approaches and methodologies, as well as the capability to integrate various meta-theoretical, a-theoretical and inventive approaches to attain meaningful public administration knowledge. The appropriateness of methodologies also does not signify a reduction of methodological choices, but an abundance of methods for exploring and making sense of both tangible and non-tangible knowledge.

The most important methodological ability may therefore not be found amongst the list of methods discussed earlier, but in what Morin (1985, p. 168) refers to as the ability of "complex thinking" to face the tangible as well as the uncertainty and contradictions of a complex reality. For Morin, complex thinking is the ability to "distinguish without disconnecting, associate without identifying or reducing … integrate classical logic without losing sight of its *de facto* … and *de jure* limitations" (Morin, 1985, p. 169). Complex thinking seems to be a necessary condition for the epistemic purposes of interpretation, supple meaning, exploration, description, explanation, comprehension, invention, unmasking, sense-making,

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[4] De Beer (2014, p. 218) defines 'euretic' as "related to the term 'eureka' which means 'I have found (it)'. Euretic means finding out, inventing."

discovering and tacit knowing (see Table 2). These complex ways of attaining meaningful knowledge about public administration seem to affirm the notion that the subject has become an interscience (De Beer, 2005, p. 13) in the true sense of the word.

The unavoidable researcher implication is a transition from individual and isolated scholarly work to that of complex, interconnected and dynamic knowledge work; it involves, amongst others, scholars from diverse disciplines, policymakers and policy-implementors as well as citizens within a shared situatedness of time and space. Such an inclusive approach to finding meaningful knowledge has radical implications for the current structuring of higher education institutions. The subsequent inclusive multi- and transdisciplinary approach to understanding public administration challenges requires the rethinking and redesigning of current practices of individual and discipline-specific Master's and Doctoral research, as well as individual assessments, recognition and rewarding of those research outputs.

Insert table here: Table 2: Ways of obtaining meaningful knowledge about public administration

Conclusion: Meaningful knowledge about public administration

This study set out to explore what is required for Public Administration knowledge to be meaningful, namely, to be of impeccable quality with intrinsic value. Subsequently, I argued that meaningful knowledge of public administration requires at least four antecedents to be in place or present.

The first requirement is a social ontology that recognizes the nature of public administration as a multifaceted, multi- and interconnected, diverse, complex and socially constructed phenomenon consisting of the State's organized, non-political, executive functions. The second antecedent, directly related to the first, is the situatedness of the quest for knowledge about this reality from within the reality itself. The implication of a shared situatedness of scholars, administrators, politicians and citizens in the public administration reality is that these inhabitants have a stake in this reality and the knowledge available about this reality. They are thus not only part of this reality but also co-constructors and sense-makers of it. Their quest for knowledge about this reality is ultimately rooted in their situatedness and interconnectedness within this reality. Hence, knowledge about this reality does not only need to be of impeccable quality, but of value for the situated beings-in-the-world; the knowledge becomes meaningful through their situatedness. The evidence-policy gap referred to earlier in this article, as well as the absence of knowledge situated in the world of public administration during governments' attempts to manage the Covid-19 pandemic, are both indications of inadequate interconnectivity amongst co-inhabitants in the world of public administration.

The multi- and interconnected attributes of public administration and its situated inhabitants pose specific challenges to the Public Administration scholarly community. Difficulties are experienced in clarifying the nature and structure of connections amongst diverse stakeholders within public administration and its scholarly domain, Public Administration. Postgraduate student researchers, for example, are often employed as officials in public administration or as politicians in one of the spheres of government. Hence, these

researchers are simultaneously situated in the overlapping worlds of public administration and scholarship. Conversely, researchers who are full-time academics may not be directly situated within the specific public administration reality, but obtain their knowledge through, amongst others, their knowledge networks, which may also include public administrators. De Beer's (2015, p. 108) reference to the gradual emergence of knowledge networks is thus highly applicable to public administration.

Situated quests for knowledge about this reality are frequently articulated and answered using tacit, obscure or experiential knowledge from within the world of public administration. While these types of knowledge are not recognized by the traditional positivist epistemologies, they are of value in making sense of and contributing to meaningful knowledge about public administration. Appropriate, comprehensive, inclusive and non-restrictive epistemologies to recognize and consider all forms of tangible and non-tangible knowledge applicable to the knowledge quest are thus necessary. The implication of such an epistemology is the extension of the epistemic purposes of public administration knowledge quests to include more than just the one-dimensional description of fractions of reality and narrow theoretical and statistical modeling and predictions. Meaningful knowledge thus requires meticulous and careful epistemic purposes to explore, discover, consider, comprehend, interpret, make sense and unmask complex realities to attain quality knowledge with intrinsic value.

Lastly, I have argued that the recognition, procurement, configuration and consideration of all forms of knowledge require an appropriate methodology drawn from various disciplinary traditions. This will result in the retaining of selective existing methodological traditions, the inclusion of additional methods, and a re-configuration of researchers and research participants in knowledge networks, as required by an extended epistemology. Furthermore, a comprehensive way of knowing implies a multi- and transdisciplinary interscience approach to complex public administration challenges, drawing from all relevant disciplines' experiential, theoretical and methodological expertise, as well as non-formal and tacit knowledge expertise. An extended epistemology's fundamental consequence for public administration is situated knowledge workers' ability to engage in comprehensive and complex thinking.

This study has shown that meaningful knowledge about public administration can indeed influence public policy only if (a) it is consistent with the social ontology of this reality, (b) it is of value for the situated and interconnected knowledge stakeholders, (c) this emerging, irreducible and complex reality is explored through an extended epistemology, and (d) results from a methodology of interscience and complex thinking.

The situated quest for meaningful knowledge about public administration challenges, as well as the aforementioned antecedents, raise specific questions on the appropriateness of public universities' current models of highly specialized subject-specific structures. These structures seem not to foster an inclusive epistemology necessary for dealing with complex problems, but rather perpetuate specialized discipline-specific epistemologies. Such epistemologies are evidently not appropriate for understanding the complexity of challenges, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Governments' mainly universal approach, predominantly led by virologists' advice, has been shown to be inappropriate in dealing with the pandemic's expanding complexity that far exceeds the boundaries of the biomedical sciences. The pandemic's complexity has demonstrated the need for an interscience approach involving

diverse knowledge networks and ways of knowing to deal with the outbreak within different contexts. The presence of complex thinking within these networks seems foundational to these networks' ability to contribute meaningful knowledge about public administration challenges.

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Table 1: Comprehensive, inclusive and non-restricted epistemology for the situated study of a complex, multifaceted, multi-connected and diverse reality of public administration

Epistemology	Epistemic purpose	Characteristics of knowledge
Epistemology of practice Situated scholars, politicians, practitioners, decision-makers & citizens: Active, present, engaged, embodied, inter-connected and situated	Explore Describe Evaluate Improve/heal	*Experiential/Tacit*: emerging and complex *Exact*: factual, propositional, data, rational deductive reasoning, mathematical and statistical analysis *Ambiguous*: ordinary experiences, tacit
Interpretive epistemology Situated scholars, politicians, practitioners, decision-makers & citizens: Visible and directly engaged in the research process and with the phenomenon	Explore Comprehend Evaluate Reflect Meaning	*Experiential/Tacit*: emerging and complex *Description* of ambiguous ordinary experiences *Interpretation* of factual, propositional, data, rational deductive reasoning, mathematical and statistical analysis *Meaning of* ambiguous, existential interrelations between the whole and the parts of public administration *Valid*
Extended epistemology Situated scholars, politicians, practitioners, decision-makers & citizens: Visible and directly engaged in the research process and with the phenomenon	Explore Comprehend Improve/heal Invent	*Lay-knowledge*: legitimate and valid for comprehending, framing and making sense of public administration realities *Interscience*: Interplay of different ways of knowing: propositional, action-related, experiential, presentational (images, stories or dreams); non-evident, hidden or obscure; interconnection of the whole and parts of reality *Invention*: real and significant transformations

Table 2: Ways of obtaining meaningful knowledge about public administration

1 Researcher position	2 Ontology: What is studied	3 Units of observation	5 Teleology: Epistemic purpose	6 Methodology / Ways of knowing
Situated within	Constructs within contexts	Non-empirical phenomena Texts	Interpretive Supple Meaning	Reading of texts: reproductive, hermeneutic, ideology-critical, deconstructive and euretic Concept analysis (family resemblance)
	Interventions within contexts	Interconnected individuals	Explore Describe Comprehend	Quantitative 1: surveys, structured interviews, and field experiments Qualitative 1: participant observation studies, participatory action research, case studies, unstructured interviews; recollected experience; auto-ethnography; explore and comprehend lay-knowledge; interpretive phenomenology; narrative; fiction; inter-connectedness
		Interconnected collectives, institutions, & organizations	Explore Describe Comprehend Invent	Quantitative 1: surveys, structured interviews and field experiments Qualitative 1: participant observation studies, participatory action research, case studies, unstructured interviews; recollected experience; auto-ethnography; explore and understand lay-knowledge; interpretative phenomenology; narrative; fiction
		Texts Textual secondary data	Unmask Sense-making Comprehend Invent Discover	Quantitative 2: Systematic content analysis Qualitative 2: Reading of texts: Euretic reading modality; deconstructive reading modality; ideological-critical reading modality Historical studies such as ethnographies and auto-ethnographies for collecting and analyzing primary textual data
		Numerical secondary data: Statistical reports	Explore Describe Explain Measure Invent	Quantitative 2: Statistical modelling and computer simulation studies Comparisons; evaluations; inventions
		Invisible/ Obscure/ unknown	Discover Unmask Tacit knowing	Invention; interconnections; interrelationships; narrative; fiction