

Public Administration research in South Africa

An assessment of journal publications, 1994–2006

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Abstract

The hypothesis of this article is that academics in the field of Public Administration academics are focusing primarily on practice-oriented applied research and are not enhancing knowledge development. There has not been the same development of a cumulative and meaningful knowledge base in the discipline that there has been in the other social sciences. Theory development is weak. An empirical database was developed to test this hypothesis. An analysis was undertaken of the two main South African Public Administration journals, the Journal of Public Administration (JOPA) and Administratio Publica (AP), from 1994–2006, to establish the state of academic research in the field. A database of 383 articles was compiled, including 278 articles from JOPA and 105 from AP. The methodology used was a content analysis, consisting of both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. By triangulating findings from the six main analytical variables (research topic, research purpose, research methodology, research focus, research cumulativeness and institutional funding), it was concluded that there has been little theory development in South African Public Administration. There has also not been the development of a cumulative and meaningful knowledge base in the discipline. There are a number of reasons for this, which are discussed below. The article concludes by suggesting ways to improve the quality of research in Public Administration academia.

Introduction

Unlike most other social science disciplines, Public Administration is both an academic discipline and an applied field with a career professional path. Internationally this is a long-standing tension in the discipline. This debate is also prevalent in South Africa but with an added dimension. It has been argued that the imperatives of fast-tracking skills and capacity building in the 'New South Africa' have led to many Public Administration academics being sucked into utilitarian activities at the expenses of academic research and theory development in the field (Cameron 2005).

One of the key ingredients of an academic discipline is the quality of research in its journals. Do the articles that are published enhance theory development and knowledge in the discipline or are they largely practically oriented?

There is a debate in American Public Administration that has lasted two decades (see, for example, McCurdy & Cleary 1984; Perry & Kraemer 1986; Stallings & Ferris 1988; Houston & Delevan 1990. 1994 ; Box 1994; Adams & White 1994; White & Adams 1994; Lan & Anders 2000; Wright *et al* 2004). Studies by the authors listed above generally conclude that Public Administration research not only fails to contribute to a systematic and growing body of knowledge, but also fails to adhere to scientific standards of rigorous research (White 1999:1). Perry & Kraemer noted that Public Administration research:

continues to be eclectic, skewed towards problem-solving and poorly supported...(it) has not matured to a point where it is capable of sustaining the knowledge creation needs of the field Perry & Kraemer (1986:364).

Adams and White (1994:575) comment that Public Administration 'showed both low conformity to mainstream research and low quality', while Houston and Delevan (1990:678) argue that it is 'engaged in little theory testing...perhaps the persistent lack of empirical research explains the gap between theory and practice'. McNabb (2002:16) states that most Public Administration research has focused on the resolution of practical problems faced by public administrators.

Cloete (2000), Mabin (2004) and Cameron (2005) have all argued that the quality of Public Administration research in South Africa is very low, with the latter suggesting that more empirical research is needed to test this proposition.

The hypothesis of this chapter is that the problems of research that the American academics identified also apply in South Africa. Researchers in Public Administration are focus primarily on practice-oriented applied research and are not enhancing knowledge development. There has not been the same development of a cumulative and meaningful knowledge base in the discipline that there has been in the other social sciences. Theory development is weak. There are a number of reasons for this, which are discussed in this article.

Public administration research, research methodology and theory development are inextricably linked. Research is used to test existing theories to see if they are strengthened or weakened. Research methods have to be carefully designed to ensure the validity of the findings (see McCurdy & Cleary 1984). Notwithstanding this, we agree with Perry and Kramer (1990:353) that the ultimate test of methodological modes of research is whether they contribute to the development of knowledge of the field.

An empirical database has been developed to test this hypothesis. An analysis of the two main South African Public Administration journals, *Journal of Public Administration (JOPA)* and *Administratio Publica (AP)* from 1994–2006 was undertaken to establish the state of academic research in the field. A database of 383 articles was compiled, consisting of 278 articles from *JOPA* and 105 from *AP*.

A systematic database on Public Administration research was developed. For the purposes of this article, only selected variables are used to test these propositions. The variables examined are research topic, research purpose, research methodology, research focus and research cumulativeness and institutional support.⁴

A fundamental question is whether these two journals are representative of South African academic publications in the field of Public Administration. It is argued that these are the two premier Public Administration journals in the country. They both appear regularly and are peer reviewed in order to ensure professional standards. In fact, the only other Public Administration journal in South Africa is *Politea*, which is published every second year. It appears that South African Public Administration academics largely publish in local journals, rather than in international ones. A perusal of highly ranked international journals showed that very few South African academics have published there during the last 12 years. It is therefore contended that *JOPA* and *AP* are representative of Public Administration research in the country, with the possible exception of the Universities of Cape Town and Witwatersrand

where academics tend to publish elsewhere (in the case of the University of Cape Town, they tend to publish in international journals).

The need for theory in Public Administration

According to Frederickson and Smith (2003:5–8), theory is important in an applied, practical and interdisciplinary field such as Public Administration. The validity of any theory depends on its capacity to describe, explain and predict. The authors point out that there are three main meanings of theory:

1. In the natural and physical sciences, theory involves the rigorous testing of hypotheses using observable and compatible data. These hypotheses form the basis of theories. This is also the bases of social science research. The criteria McCurdy and Cleary (1984:50) use to advance the knowledge base of the field include:
 - *Purpose*: Does the study have a research purpose, namely, did it set out to conduct basic research and report on the findings?
 - *Validity*: Was the study set up in such a way that it is possible to infer its applicability to similar situations? This entails questions of internal and external validity and questions of research design. Experimental and statistical methods meet this test but case studies generally do not.
 - *The testing of theory*: Does the research strengthen or weaken an existing theory or establish conditions under which the theory operates?
 - *Causal relationship*: Does the study lead to the embodiment of a causal statement of any kind?

There is a debate about the extent to which rigorous social science criteria are applicable to Public Administration and about the extent to which the aims of Public Administration theory are different, if not lower (White 1994; Frederickson and Smith 2003).

2. In Public Administration the second meaning of theory entails the ordering of factual data (history, events, cases, stories, observation) in order to present evidence through definitions, concepts and metaphors that promote understanding. Frederickson and Smith (2003) acknowledge that this form of theory is subjective and there is indeed a debate as to whether it is a scientific theory at all.

3. The third meaning of theory in Public Administration is normative, namely theories of what ought to be. An example of this would be Waldo's administrative state theory.

According to Frederickson and Smith (2003), it is often true that Public Administration theorists use a mix of the second and third definitions of theory.

Lynn, Heinrich and Hill (2001:156–157) point out that most of the recent literature on Public Management has been oriented towards identifying the adoption of 'best practices'. This research is generally inductive and based on observations provided by practitioners of specific cases and experiences. Practitioners tend to regard this type of research as credible and view 'practitioners learning from practitioners' as the best way to improve governance. For the most part, the lessons and prescriptions emanating from 'best practice' have not, however, survived systematic tests of their validity, most notably around issues of causality. There are a number of problematic issues around exporting 'good practice'. Did the intervention really work or was the intervention due to other reasons? Why did it work? If it worked, was it because the situation contained a unique set of elements, or can the interventions be exported to other situations, (that is, the question of external validity is pertinent) (Stallings 1994:176). Bretschneider *et al* (2004:308–309) believe that 'best practice' methods are often based on a common sense approach rather than rigorous scientific methods (although the authors believe there is room for more scientific approaches to 'best practice'). Dobel (quoted in Lynn 1994:234) states that 'heroes and entrepreneurs (rather than conceptual clarity and analytical rigour) became the stock in trade of (practitioner-oriented) case studies'.

White (1994 and 1999) comes up with a similar definition to that of McCurdy and Cleary but suggests that new knowledge can come from literature reviews as well as empirical research. He argues that explanatory (positivist research) is one form of public administration research but there are other forms, namely interpretive and critical research. In interpretive research a researcher arrives at an interpretation of a phenomenon by developing subjective meanings of social events and actions. It is based on the analytical philosophy of language, hermeneutics and phenomenology. Critical research attempts to look at harmful or alienating social conditions. It draws its traditions from Marxian critical sociology and Freudian psychoanalysis.

As important as this debate is, the ultimate test of the value of all these modes is whether they contribute to the development of knowledge in Public

Administration (Perry & Kramer 1990:353), which is the primary focus of this study.

One of the questions that can be asked is whether this argument is not developing a rigid distinction between theory-generating research and practitioner-oriented research. This dichotomy is rejected. One needs to be reminded of the old adage of Lewin that ‘there is nothing so practical as a good theory’ (cited in Bourgon: 2007:15). Denhardt (2001:257) suggests that theories of public organisation provide a basis for understanding practice and should inform everything that a ‘reflective practitioner’ does. Theory can add value to practice in that it opens new possibilities for practice. Advocates of this position would argue that despite the applied nature of Public Administration, it must still have an empirical, rigorous and systematic core (McCurdy 1984:53). Theory is therefore equivalent to learning the ‘logic’ of the field, so regardless of how today’s details of practice may change the logic will continue to apply tomorrow (Denhardt 2001:527). Stallings and Ferris (1988) argue that ‘the daily realities of practice cannot alone drive theory building because the type of knowledge required for one is different from that needed from the other’. Bourgon (2007:15), a practitioner, argues that there is a need for a modern unifying theory of Public Administration to guide the actions of practitioners in order to breach the gap between theory and practice.

Contribution to knowledge in Public Administration by previous studies on Public Administration research

Perry and Kraemer (1986) conducted a study to assess the state of research methodology in Public Administration. They did this by analysing the contents of the American *Public Administration Review* (PAR) during the period 1975–1984, and compared changes in research methodology during this ten-year period. Their commentary revolved around two interwoven influences on Public Administration research: firstly, the methodology used in academic research, which they viewed as a conscious effort to advance knowledge about Public Administration; and secondly, the outcome and quality of research during this period.

They reached three broad conclusions or evaluative statements about public administration research (Perry & Kraemer 1986:218–220). Firstly, they conclude

that research is applied rather than basic. Nearly three quarters of the articles focused on problem delineation or variable identification, while less than a quarter dealt with theoretical relationships among variables. They found that the purpose of research was problem-oriented, which limits the development and the testing of empirical theory.

At their initial stages of research most articles were involved in identifying problems and variables for future studies. Perry and Kraemer imply that most research exists at a 'superficial' and simple level, whereby a descriptive stance is adopted rather than the generation of new theories or hypotheses.

Secondly, they found that Public Administration research lacks cumulateness. This suggests that authors are not engaging with earlier studies to build on or extend prior knowledge. In a similar fashion authors are unaware of the criticisms and shortcomings of certain approaches, which is vital information to the validity and scientific face of research.

Thirdly, they found that research lacked adequate financial institutional support, for example from organised research entities.

Stallings and Ferris (1988) carried out an extension of Perry and Kraemer's (1986) study. These authors examined methodological trends of research over a 45-year period in *PAR*. One way in which Perry and Kraemer's study can be faulted is that they created variable categories that were not mutually exclusive, for example their category of 'research stage' which aimed to place articles in their representative stage of research, thereby determining the reason for research. Stallings and Ferris (1988:596) argue that coding should meet two main criteria, namely, categories should be *exhaustive* (categories must exist for all known phenomenon) and categories must be *mutually exclusive* (there must be one and only one category into which the phenomenon being coded can properly be placed). 'It is the failure to meet this second criterion that constitutes a major weakness in the Perry-Kraemer study' (Stallings & Ferris 1988:596).

Consequently, Stallings and Ferris (1988:581) adapted their methodology slightly and three new binary variables were created (conceptual, relational and evaluative). Despite the slight methodological difference in overall research design, they reached similar conclusions to Perry and Kraemer. They conclude that research is still confined to its preliminary stages with little evidence of theory-testing or causal analysis. The authors note that '...conceptualisations remain the most frequent reported form of research, making up 70% of articles in the *PAR*, as Perry and Kraemer noted' and 'our data show that lack of funding

is clearly not a new problem' (Stallings & Ferris 1994:115–117). In addition, the authors note that there is an infrequent use of advanced and sophisticated research methodology, such as multivariate analyses, frequently found in other traditional social science disciplines. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, conventional mainstream research, using explanatory designs, contributed to less than 30% of the research.

One criticism of both the above two studies is the underlying assumption that *PAR* (and *A&S* in the case of Perry and Kraemer) was representative of all research published in Public Administration. Based on these criticisms Houston and Delevan (1990) set up a study to extend the knowledge on Public Administration research to six journals other than *PAR*. Once again, the previous findings were verified. The authors concluded that not only does the field of Public Administration lack a broad theoretical framework/paradigm to guide and inspire scholars, but research is engaged in little theory-testing (Houston & Delevan 1994:134–136). These two factors not only impact on and reinforce one another, but they also have serious implications for the development and maturity of the field.

The lack of funding for Public Administration research can be explained from various angles. One explanation is that Public Administration research proposals do not successfully compete against other disciplines for funding. As a result, there is a greater need for research to be institutionalised (Perry & Kraemer 1986:364). An alternative explanation is that since research is not extending beyond the initial descriptive and conceptual stages, there might be no 'real' need for fieldwork, data collection and statistical analysis and therefore no requirement for funding. Perhaps it comes down to a combination of both. Whatever the exact reasoning behind the lack of funding, Stallings and Ferris (1994:121) note that if Public Administration authors are content to continue with research that is descriptive and characterised by research methods that are not explanatory, then the lack of funding is 'really self-imposed'.

South African studies on Public Administration research

There is limited empirical literature on the state of Public Administration research in South Africa. Only two previous empirical studies have attempted to analyse Public Administration research, namely Hubbell (1992) and Wessels (2006). In the dying days of apartheid Hubbell explored the question of where

South African Public Administration as an academic field has been and in what theoretical direction it was heading. His study entailed a qualitative assessment of the *Journal of Public Administration*, published by the South African Institute of Public Administration (SAIPA), from 1986–1990. He concluded that the majority of articles analysed fell within what could be termed a functionalist perspective, lacking any critical analysis (Hubbell 1992:13). He argued that the majority of articles were not scientific in nature, ignoring crucial variables such as, most notably, the impact of apartheid on public administration.

Wessels' more recent (2006) study of journal articles takes a slightly different approach from international studies on Public Administration research, as he analyses whether research findings are addressing the core knowledge needs of the government.

Articles from the *Journal of Public Administration* from 2000–2004 were the unit of analysis in Wessels' study. As in Hubbell's study, the focus was on only one variable, namely research topic. In Wessels' study, categories of classification are informed by the proposed unit standards for the Standards Generation Body for Public Administration and Management for the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). His findings reinforce the international dilemma at a local level: the majority of research articles are primarily practice-oriented with little emphasis on theoretical development. Approximately 82% of the articles relate to the management of the public service, such as management of public institutions/organisations and human resource management. Only four articles focused on Public Administration theory and research issues. 'The relatively low percentage of articles focusing on Public Administration and as a subject, theory, and methodology, is an early indication of a possible bias towards practice application and a possible theory-less empiricism' (Wessels 2006:1506).

While Wessels' contribution to South African Public Administration research is a major advancement on knowledge, his study can be challenged on several grounds. Firstly, the reason of academia is not solely to serve as a utilitarian 'sausage machine' for the needs of the state. Essentially, what Wessels does is equate the core problems and knowledge needs of the government with those of the academic field of Public Administration. Secondly, he stresses the importance of the relationship between scientific knowledge and its contribution to Public Administration theory development. After advocating a move away from the use of practical indicators as the basis of knowledge, he goes on to use practically oriented benchmarks to form the basis of his study.

The proposed unit standards for Public Administration and Management are a product of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), established by the ministers of education and labour to oversee the development of the NQF. Clapper (2000:56) notes that SAQA has an operative agenda in that it is concerned with the skills-base needed by public servants, so that there is 'an inordinately strong emphasis on tasks only'. Wessels' study uses indicators that are designed to serve the needs of the state and not necessarily the development of knowledge in Public Administration.

The third criticism of Wessels study is that 'research topic', which is the variable he focused on, is a largely descriptive variable. It tells you little about research methodology as such.

The content analysis

Data collection

Data for this study was gathered through a content analysis of published research material in the *JOPA* and *AP*. Content analysis can be described as the quantitative component of document analysis, involving compartmentalising the written material into researcher-selected units or categories (McNabb 2002:24). Measurement and interpretation of these categories make explanatory and critical analysis of the data possible, for example using statistics. Traditionally, interpretation of the data gathered through this process was limited to quantitative analysis but from the early 1970s this strict quantitative-qualitative distinction seemed too rigid and unwarranted amongst researchers. Holsti (quoted in McNabb 2002:24), suggests that content analyses should use a combination of the qualitative and quantitative approaches.

The main advantage of the content analysis is that it gives the researcher a structured method to quantify the contents of a qualitative text in a simple, clear format. The main disadvantage is that there is a built-in bias of isolating pieces of information from their context (McNabb 2002: 414-416). This article has tried to avoid this pitfall by tracing the history of Public Administration research in South Africa.

As in previous studies, such as Perry and Kraemer (1986), and Stallings and Ferris (1988), it was felt in this study that the greatest probability of finding research outputs was in those pieces published under the heading 'articles'. Symposia articles, book reviews, conference papers and review essays were excluded from the analysis. Therefore, only published data found under the

heading 'articles' were used as the unit of analysis for this study. Included in the analysis were 294 *JOPA* and 98 *AP* articles. In this article, the following six variables are examined to test the hypothesis of the study: research topic, research purpose, research methodology, research focus, cumulateness and institutional support.

Variable 1: Research topic

The research topic concentrates mainly on the research preferences of academics the author is interested in, or, put differently, what are Public Administration authors writing about? Although they are slightly different, both previous South African studies of this nature (Hubbell 1992; Wessels 2006) centre their work entirely on this variable.

At an international level Perry and Kraemer (1986) and Stallings and Ferris (1988) are the only studies to use this variable (among other variables that they used) to describe research characteristics. Although this variable has been classified as descriptive in nature, it is also analytical to a certain degree since it can be used to deduce useful information about whether research is being conducted with theory-generation in mind.

Generic topics used in previous studies, such as public policy or ethics, were obviously replicated in this methodology since they can be applied across any public administration era, at least since the 1960s. Given the broad changes that have occurred in the field since the 1980s, when most of these studies were conducted, as well as the particular South African context to which this methodology applies, new and arguably more relevant research topics were added within this category for this study. These included the topics of information technology and communication (ITC) and e-governance, as well as local government reorganisation that is specific to the South African context.

As pointed out, a criticism of Perry and Kraemer's 1986 study was that their categories were not mutually exclusive (Stallings and Ferris 1988:123). A similar problem applies with this variable. It is possible that articles could be placed within more than one category. For example, an article on performance management is related to public management but is also relevant to human resource management and to financial management. During the coding process, articles were allocated on the basis of where it was deemed that they *primarily* fitted.

As far as possible, the variables were based on themes. This differs from the Perry and Kramer study in which sphere of government was allocated its

own sub-variable. This study tried to avoid categories based on levels/spheres of government. For example, an article on financial management at local government level was coded into the financial management category. There was, however, one category dedicated entirely to a single sphere of government, namely that of local government reorganisation. This category deals primarily with questions of administrative transformation at local government level.

The categorisation of the research topic is as follows:

Public administration research and theory

This sub-variable focuses on the development of Public Administration research and theory. Articles were placed into this category if they contributed to topics such as Public Administration research, administrative theory, bureaucratic theory, organisational theory and research methodology.

Given the centrality of the development of Public Administration knowledge to this study, this sub-variable is pivotal to the testing of the hypothesis.

Administrative reform

This sub-variable was introduced to relate specifically to South Africa's political transformation. South Africa's recent post-apartheid history has seen a major reorganisation of the state. While such articles might not necessarily be specifically linked to theory development, they are concerned with the broad reorganisation and transformation of the public service.

Public Management and Administration

This is a relatively straightforward category that deals with generic public management and administrative functions such as planning, organising, controlling and leadership, including African political leadership. Articles looking at performance management were also classified under this heading.

Public policy

This category incorporates articles dealing with policy analysis. This would include the complete policy cycle, including policy formulation and policy implementation, as well as policy articles that are primarily sectoral in nature such as those dealing with housing, health and the environment.

Ethics and accountability

The category of ethics and accountability includes those articles that are associated with broader ethical questions, codes of conduct, anti-corruption

strategies and policies that are intended to bring about more transparent and accountable activities within the public sector.

Development and citizen participation

The Constitution makes provision for developmentally oriented Public Administration and the South African state has pushed this strongly. There are also links between public participation and development. Public participation is the cornerstone of development policies.

This variable aims to capture articles dealing with these developmental issues. Articles were included in this category if they dealt with issues of public participation, questions of public involvement, community development and environmental development.

Human resource management

Articles in this category focus on labour relations, personnel management and wage-related issues including recruitment, tenure and discipline.

Financial management

Articles were placed into this category if they discussed issues relating to financial management, including budgeting and auditing.

Intergovernmental relations

In line with the Wessels study, there is a separate category on intergovernmental relations (IGR). The three spheres of government relate to one another through the constitutional principle of cooperative governance, which is the basis of intergovernmental relations. It was accordingly decided to include IGR as a separate sub-variable. Articles concerned with the relationships between more than one sphere of government were placed in this category.

Information, communication, technology (ICT) and E-governance

This is a modern sub-variable designed to deal with the technological advancements in managing information, communication, knowledge and technology in the public sector. For example, articles relating to e-governance and the internet were placed into this category.

Service delivery

This sub-variable is somewhat different from the citizen participation and development sub-variable in that it deals specifically with service delivery. It is linked largely to the legacy of New Public Management (NPM), which identified

improved service delivery as a key goal (Hughes 2003). Articles discussing these and related issues were classified under this heading. Service delivery issues such as Batho Pele, customer/citizen care issues and concerns around payment for service delivery fell into this category.

Local government reorganisation

This category is designed to take account of transformation in South Africa. Articles in this category deal largely with the metropolitan reorganisation at the local level, highlighting issues that are associated with redefining boundaries, new governmental structures and reallocating service delivery responsibilities.

Other

This category contains miscellaneous articles that do not fall into the mainstream Public Administration categories. They deal with, for example, globalisation, economists' explanations of the informal economy, international relations issues and federalism in other countries.

Research results

Figure 1: Distribution of articles by primary subject matter in JOPA (N=278)

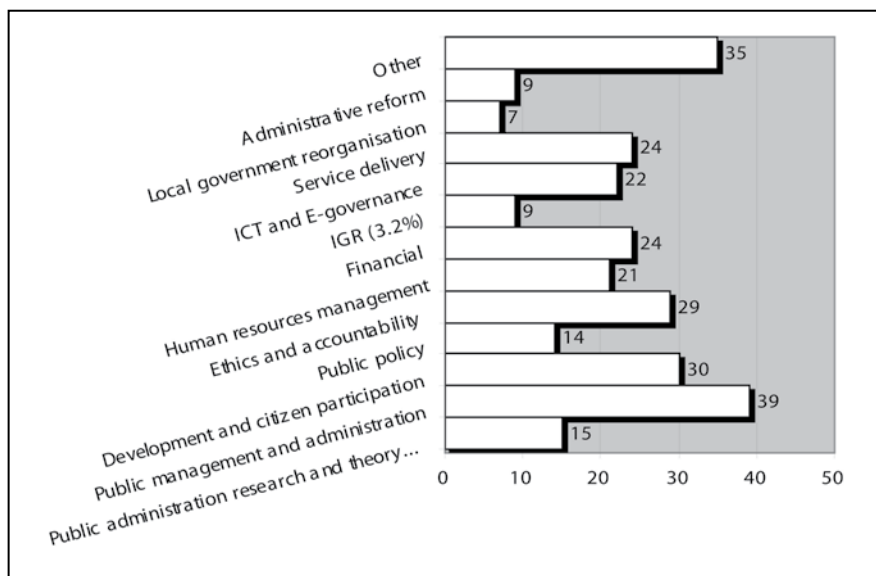
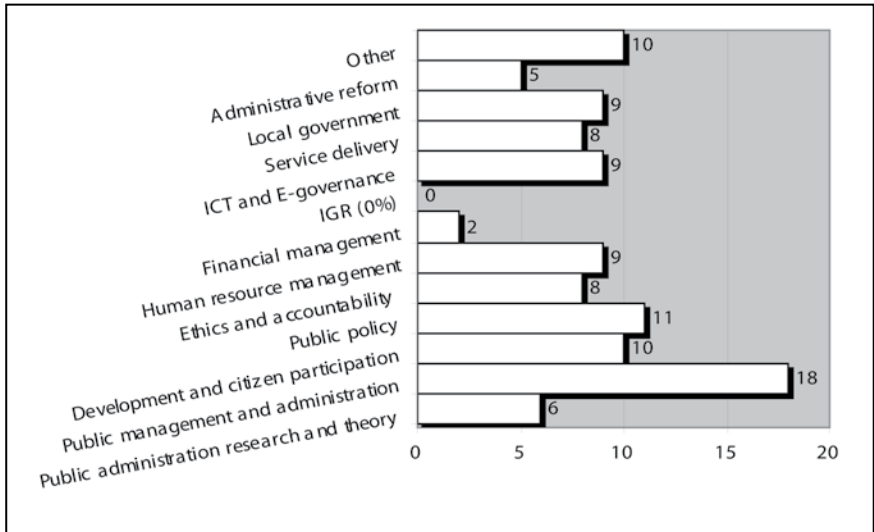


Figure 2: Distribution of articles by primary subject matter in AP (N=105)



Findings

The findings indicate the broad dispersal of research within the field. An analysis of this variable confirms that subject matter is more evenly distributed in *JOPA* than in *AP*. Despite this slight variation both journals share the most frequent subject matter: public management and administration, measuring 14% (*JOPA*) and 17.1% (*AP*) of the articles analysed. This confirms that areas relating to public management and administration issues were the most popular area of research. No topic accounts for more than 20% of research but prevalent themes in *JOPA* are development and citizen participation (10.9%), ethics and accountability (10.4%), financial management/budgeting (8.6%), service delivery (8.6%), ICT and E-governance (8%) and HRM (7.6%). In *AP*, common research areas are public policy (10.5%), development and citizen participation (9.5%) and HRM, ICT and E-Governance and local government reorganisation (all 8.6%). Comparison of subject matter also indicates that there is minimal research interest in IGR in both journals: 3.2% in *JOPA* and 0% in *AP*. In both journals, there are considerable research areas that can be classified as ‘other’: 12.6% in *JOPA* and 9.5% in *AP*. This is perhaps an illustration of the multi-disciplinary nature of Public Administration. Financial management scored higher in *JOPA* (8.6%) than in *AP* (1.9%).

Finally, and most importantly, public administration research and theory scored poorly in both journals: *JOPA* 5.4% in *JOPA* and 5.7% in *AP*. This is the topic that is most likely to equate with basic research and knowledge development.

Variable 2: Research purpose

This variable is borrowed from earlier work by Stallings and Ferris (1988), who developed three mutually exclusive variables to make up this category, namely conceptual, relational and evaluational. This variable answers the question, ‘what was the purpose of the study or research?’ For example, articles were classified as conceptual if their primary purpose was to identify and conceptualise a researchable problem, often being largely descriptive in nature. They were placed into this category if they delineated a problem or identified a problem or identified a crucial variable for future research. There is a modification of the Stallings and Ferris framework in that normative approaches, which offer seemingly timeless and universally applicable solutions to Public Administration problems, are also included in the conceptual category.

Articles examining causal relationships among variables were placed into the relational category. This would include quantitative analysis but also rigorous qualitative techniques. The third binary variable was constructed to house those articles that evaluated or analysed a particular policy or programme.

Figure 3: Distribution of articles according to research purpose in *JOPA* (N=278)

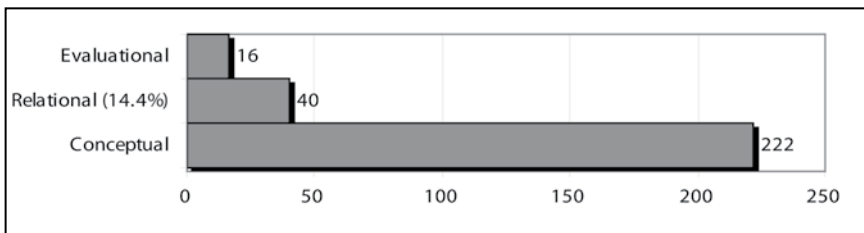
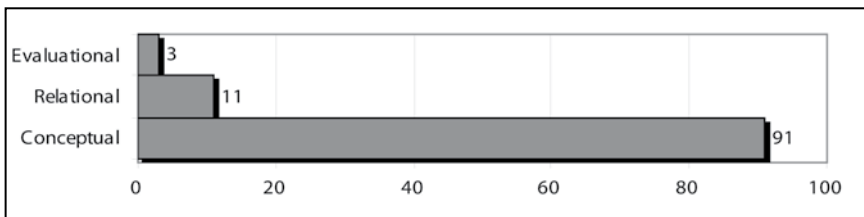


Figure 4: Distribution of articles according to research purpose in *AP* (N=105)



Findings

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate that Public Administration research emphasis is predominantly conceptual in nature. An overwhelming 79.9% of articles in *JOPA* and 87% in *AP* were catalogued under this heading, indicating that most Public Administration research concentrates on this largely formative stage of research.

This indicates that most research in the two journals have as their primary purpose identifying and conceptualising researchable problems, suggesting that the research is largely descriptive and normative. Efforts to examine causal relations among variables appear less frequently in both journals. Only a low 14.4% of the total *JOPA* journal articles were classified as relational, while *AP*'s total was 10.5%. In both journals, the least frequent research purpose was to evaluate or analyse a policy or program (in *JOPA* it was 5.7% and in *AP* it was 2.5%). Surprisingly, *JOPA*, which caters for both academics and practitioners, presents slightly better findings than the academically oriented *AP* in all three of the categories.

Variable 3: Research methodology

This variable reflects general methods and approaches of enquiry used in Public Administration research (Perry & Kraemer 1990:354). It is designed to answer the question: 'what methodologies are employed to conduct Public Administration research?' This was addressed by examining the research designs, unit of analysis, quantitative techniques if any, and the data that was collected. Three sub-variables were created to reflect these different methods, namely desktop, qualitative and quantitative.

An article was classified as desktop if the study consisted primarily of secondary research, that is, if it did not contribute to new knowledge in the field. This category was designed to incorporate those articles where information was obtained from journals, books and existing databases. It presumes that no (or insignificant) empirical research was undertaken, whether of the quantitative or qualitative variety. It also presumes that no significant new theory or framework was developed.

Quantitative research involves the use of numbers. It involves statistical steps and experiments to identify relationships between variables (McNabb 2002:21–22). It includes experimental research, such as treatment and control groups, and quasi-experimental research, such as correlational, time series and

longitudinal studies (Johnson 2002:43). It also includes descriptive statistics, surveys and regression analysis.

One of the debates in Public Administration (as in political science) is whether much qualitative research is indeed rigorous enough to be classified as good social science research. The premier Public Administration academic network in the world, the Public Management Research Association (PMRA), in its call for papers for its 2007 conference, has a strict definition of non-quantitative research. It defines it as:

non-empirical pieces that develop a theory or theoretical framework that provides insight into a compelling research question or subject of study in public management. Strong conceptual papers should identify foundational assumptions and key concepts, develop an internally consistent logic or model of causation, and result in specific programmes or testable hypotheses (Public Management Research Association, 2007).

This article does not follow such a strict definition of qualitative research. However, it does take the view that certain minimum standards must be met. At the other extreme is the definition Lowery and Evans use (cited in Luton 2005), which is that that qualitative research is anything employing non-quantitative methods. The problem with this loose definition in the South African context is that it would include the large amount of secondary literature. One or two new ideas do not mean new theory, unstructured participation observation is not qualitative research nor are a few unstructured interviews. Even a well-put together literature review is not a new contribution to knowledge.

In some cases, the research methods (if any) were not evident in the papers analysed. If articles had these underdeveloped methodological features, they were classified as desktop.

In the light of the previous discussion of White's interpretive and critical research (1999), we have gone for a reasonably strict but not overtly restrictive definition of qualitative research. Ethnography, phenomenology, case studies, hermeneutics, grounded theory and action science are examples of qualitative research (McNabb 2002:277). Johnson (2002:118) says that qualitative data analysis is used for data collected in a semi-structured way, such as analyses of written documents and focus group transcripts.

One possible criticism of this approach is that the three categories are too broad. This point is noted but if more categories would make one be vulnerable to the major criticism of the Perry and Kraemer approach, namely that there would be the creation of categories that are not mutually exclusive.

Figure 5: Distribution of articles according to research method in *JOPA* (N=278)

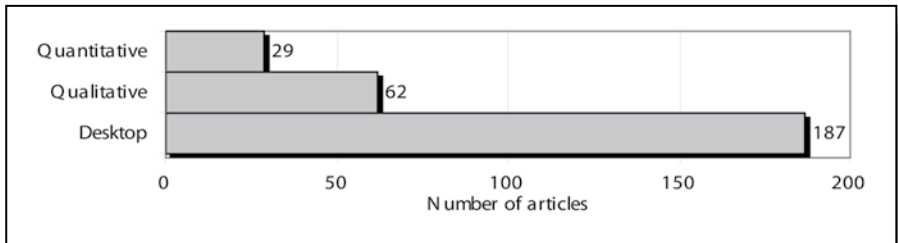
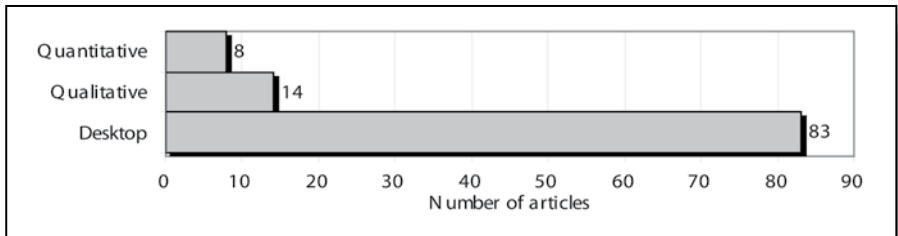


Figure 6: Distribution of articles according to research method in *AP* (N=105)



Findings

Figures 5 and 6 indicate that 67.3% of the articles in *JOPA* and 79% in *AP* can be classified as desktop. In some cases, the research methods and approaches (if any) were not evident in the research articles.

When research has been empirical in nature, the data demonstrates that there is a definite preference towards the use of qualitative rather than quantitative research methods. In *JOPA* 22.3% of the research articles made use of qualitative approaches compared with 13.3% in *AP*. There was little use of quantitative methods in either *JOPA* (10.4 %) or *AP* (7.7%) articles. Rather surprisingly, *JOPA*, which represents both academics and practitioners, shows better results than the more academically focused *AP*.

Variable 4: Research focus

This variable was borrowed from Perry and Kraemer's 1986 study. It is designed to answer the question: 'is the research being conducted oriented more towards theory generation (needs of academics) or more towards practical problem-solving (needs of the practitioners)?' Articles were classified as being theory oriented if they contributed to the development of new social science

knowledge. If, however, the article suggested more practical recommendations, it was classified as being practice-oriented. There is one caveat that has been discussed earlier in the paper: there is not necessarily a rigid distinction between theory-generating research and practitioner-oriented research.

Figure 7: Distribution of articles according to research focus in JOPA (N=278)

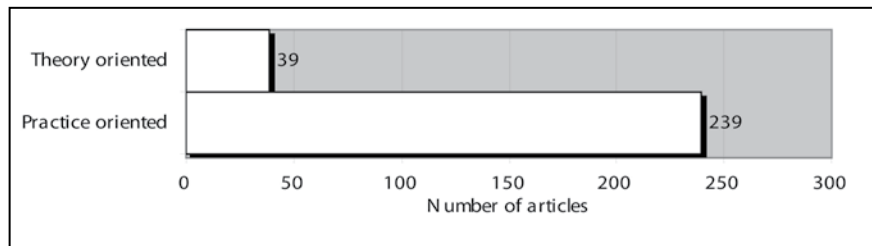
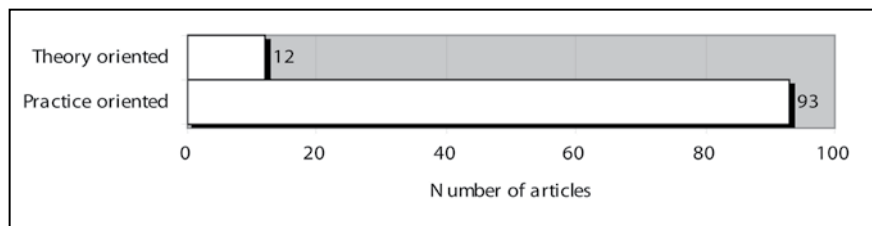


Figure 8: Distribution of articles according to research method in AP (N=105)



Findings

Figures 7 and 8 indicate that the majority of research articles published are geared more towards practical problem-solving (needs of the practitioners) than theory generation (academic needs). In *JOPA*, 86% of the articles are practice-oriented articles while *AP*'s figure is 89%. This is not to say that problem-solving, applied research cannot contribute to theory-generation, but it cannot simply be descriptive and normative in nature; it also has to make use of the appropriate methods to allow this. For example, although categorising articles as being practice-oriented does not necessarily mean that they are also desktop in terms of the research purpose variable, there in fact a clear correlation between articles that were classified as desktop, on one hand, and practice-oriented, on the other.

Variable 5: Research cumulativeness

Research cumulativeness implies that the researcher has engaged with the grounding debates within their particular area of study and built on or extended that knowledge. Cameron (2005) postulated in his review of South African Public Administration that authors often ‘cherry pick references’ and that important local and international work is ignored. This variable tests this proposition.

Literature reviews and bibliographies of the relevant articles were perused for cumulativeness. Considering that one cannot be a specialist within all topics, the authors acknowledge that there are a few grey areas when it comes to material on certain topics. This was probably the most difficult variable to classify.

Figure 9: Distribution of articles according to research cumulativeness in JOPA (N=278)

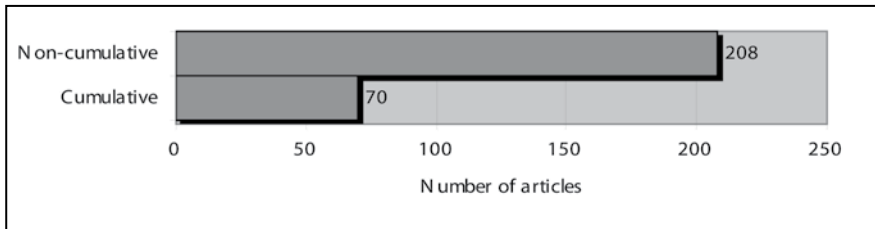
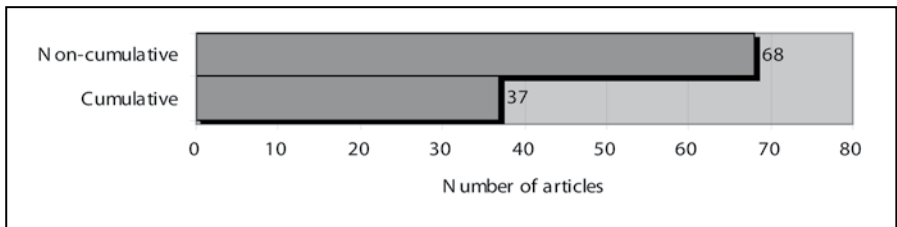


Figure 10: Distribution of articles according to research cumulativeness in AP (N=105)



Findings

More than 60% of articles in both journals are not cumulative: the figures are 87% for *JOPA* and 64.8% for *AP*. Thus, in 13 years, only 25% (*JOPA*) and 35.2% (*AP*) of articles were cumulative in nature, suggesting that the majority of articles do not engage with the necessary literature to build on existing debates in Public Administration. This is one of the few variables where *AP* fares slightly better than *JOPA*.

Variable 6: Institutional support

The literature identifies the issue of lack of institutional support and funding as a key Public Administration research issue. This variable is therefore interested in the contributors to research in the field and is designed to answer ‘what is the frequency of funding for Public Administration research?’ As Houston and Delevan (1994:128) note, the level of institutional and financial support for Public Administration studies is an important ‘reputational indicator’ of the field’s research. It is therefore useful to determine both the type and level of support for Public Administration as a field in this country, as well as which institutions are most likely to support Public Administration research.

This variable was based on the assumption that if authors had received some form of financial or institutional support, they are required to reference this contribution at the beginning or at the end of their articles.

Figure 11: Distribution of articles by institutional support in JOPA (N=14)

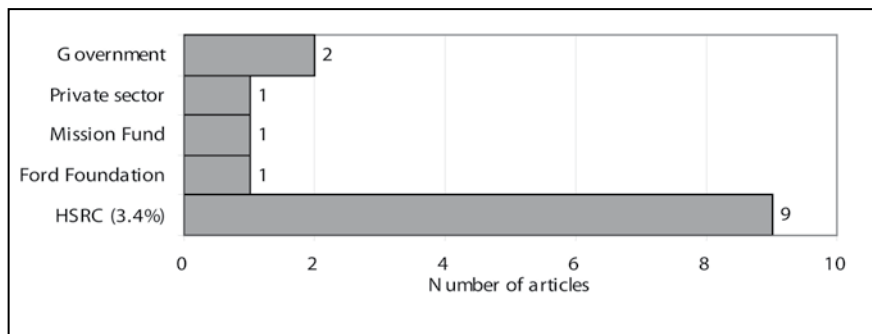
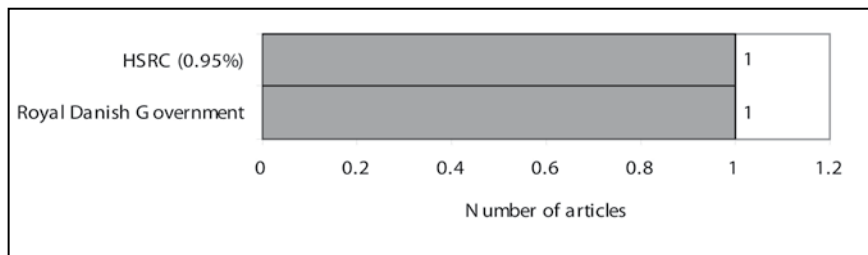


Figure 12: Distribution of articles by institutional support in AP (N=2)



Findings

Figures 11 and 12 illustrate trends in institutional funding. They indicate that there is a clear lack of funding for research within the field. In total, 14 *JOPA* articles indicated some form of institutional support while in *AP*, only two articles receiving some form of institutional or financial support throughout the entire period under review.^b It is possible that some authors did not acknowledge financial assistance but this is hardly likely to affect the overall findings.

Conclusion

By triangulating findings from the six main analytical variables (research topic, research purpose, research methodology, research focus, research cumulativeness and institutional funding), one can conclude that there has been little theory development in South African Public Administration. There has also not been the development of a cumulative and meaningful knowledge base in the discipline. These findings also corroborate the conclusions of the Hubbell and Wessels studies in South Africa in a far more systematic way, given the wider scope of this project.

The analysis of a number of variables confirmed this hypothesis. Most research is conceptual in that it was largely descriptive, normative and/ or identified problems and variables for future studies. There was little testing of validity or causality. Very little original research was carried out, with most of the articles being of the desktop variety. Luton (2005) suggests that every review of public administration research in America found that qualitative research dominates the field. While different categorisations are used in this study, the situation in South Africa is worse, with secondary research dominating. The findings indicate that hardly any of the articles receive institutional support. Most of the research was atheoretical. Most articles tend to be problem-solving which limits development and the testing of theory. In addition, most of the knowledge was non-cumulative, suggesting that most contributors were not aware of the state of literature in their particular fields. While 'topic' is largely a descriptive variable, it also an indicator that very little research has been undertaken on Public Administration research and theory.

These findings suggest that Public Administration research in South Africa is in a parlous state. There appears to be a low level of conceptualisation in the field, perhaps one step removed from practitioners 'day-to-day' discourse.

This problem-solving approach has limited the development and testing of empirical theory.

Given these findings, the comments of American scholars are also valid in South Africa. McCurdy and Cleary (1984:52) state that concern for real world application has prevented the field from being committed to scientific inquiry that generates academic respectability. A research agenda cannot develop from the world of every day practice. (Stallings 1994:175–176) states that there is a fundamental difference between the problems of running a particular government department, and acquiring problems that can be generalised to the majority of government departments. White (1994:13) (quoting Perry and Kramer) states that problem- and practice-oriented research tends to reduce the chances that the conditions of sound theory will be met.

What are the reasons for this poor quality of research? Part of the problem could be due to the nature of the discipline itself. Globally Public Administration lacks a common theoretical framework or paradigm. There is no unifying theory to guide scholars. It is arguable that this has contributed to the lack of theory, inappropriate research tools and the non-cumulative nature of the discipline (Houston and Delevan 1994:136). It is suggested that many departments of Public Administration and Management have low expectations for scholarly research in South Africa, particularly if located in Business and Management Faculties. Many cash-strapped universities see Public Administration schools and departments as ‘cash cows’ to earn a third stream of income through consulting and training. It is not only at the institutional level that there is the opportunity for consulting. The change from the apartheid system to a democratic system required firstly a more representative bureaucracy. A number of talented black (and some white) scholars went into government to help build the capacity of the new state. Secondly, the bureaucracy required major administrative reorganisation and transformation. This has created opportunities for large-scale consulting. Some excellent scholars in the field have been lost to the consulting field. Many senior people who remain in academia also focus on consulting at the expense of research and scholarship (Cameron 2005).

There are also concerns about the impact of Public Administration teaching on research. It has been argued elsewhere that the rise of New Public Management (NPM) in South African Public Administration academic departments has led to an overemphasis on skills and techniques at the expense of theory and knowledge development (Cameron 2005).

How to does one begin to address this low value attributed to research in

many departments? Funding for rigorous Public Administration research needs to be improved. The discipline needs to be more vigorous in chasing research funding. Many departments have employed staff whose primary task is to compile tenders for possible consultancy. Is it not possible for departments to employ staff to write up research proposals, albeit it on a part-time basis?

What about senior staff acting as mentors to their junior counterparts? One immediate problem is that many senior faculty do not have sufficient research experience and are unlikely have the experience to be effective mentors. One suggestion is that faculty (senior and junior) should be spending their sabbaticals at credible overseas Public Administration academic institutions. The current thinking is not on these lines. The proposed 'revolving door' suggestion of the state, which would entail academics and practitioners spending sabbaticals at each others' institutions, has the advantage of allowing practitioners to stand back from their work and reflect – the so-called 'reflective practitioner'. However given the differences between practitioners' day-to-day problems and the need to generate knowledge it is doubtful whether the 'revolving door' will add value to academics attempting to improve their theoretical and methodological skills.

Secondly, Public Administration researchers need to develop systematic databases, whether they are of the quantitative or systematic qualitative variety. Lynn, Heinrich and Hill (2001:114–115), in an overview of a debate on American Public Administration data, point out that that one of the challenges in building a cumulative body of research is lack of data. Common data sets might promote interaction among researchers and opportunities for collaboration and replication of research. They do, however, argue that governance research is characterised by unique as opposed to common data sources, which can make acquiring knowledge about governance difficult.

Thirdly, in order for scholarship in the discipline to develop there needs to be a more rigorous peer review of articles that are accepted for journals. One sign of an internationally rated journal is one that has a high rejection rate of papers submitted. There is a perception that the peer review process of the journals has been dominated by a 'baantjies vir boeties' approach rather than any rigorous scholarship standards. This is an area where perhaps more research is needed.

One of the problems in improving the peer review process is that there is a very small pool of experienced (and largely overstretched) South African Public Administration academics that can be drawn upon to referee articles. Perhaps more use should be made of international referees.

Fourthly, while Public Administration academics have increasingly been attending international Public Administration conferences in recent years, questions can be raised about the quality of some of these conferences. Some are aimed primarily at solving the problems of practitioners rather than at promoting knowledge and theory development. Some are also what can be called ‘tourism conferences’, where social activities are seemingly at least as important as the formal academic programme. South Africans academics in this field should be attending higher quality academic conferences in order to improve their research skills.

Finally, there is the issue of consultancy. Given the poor level of academic remuneration, it is recognised that the extra income derived from consultancy is an important component of many academics’ income. What is needed, however, is what we term ‘smart consultancy’. Firstly, academics should focus on consultancy that is consistent with a higher education approach. This could include activities that require careful methodological approaches such as surveys and skills audits. It could also include systematic analysis of policy alternatives. We should stay away from day-to-day practitioners’ problems, such as sorting out basic workflow procedures and designing job descriptions. Some issues are best dealt with by consultants *qua* consultants. Secondly, if academics do undertake consultancy in line with scientifically acceptable methodology, they should be encouraged to write up their experiences in an acceptable academic format and submit it to accredited journals for publication. This is a ‘win-win’ situation. In effect, the income from consultancy can be used as a research grant to undertake research. Academics must however be aware of possible conflicts of interest between the needs of their client, on one hand, and the need to be relatively objective, on the other.

In conclusion, unless there is a turnaround in the quality of research, the future of Public Administration as an academic discipline in South Africa is not a rosy one. As Stallings and Ferris (1994:121) point out:

If the field of public administration is clinging to its practitioner focus as a justification for its existence within higher education, then such self-consciousness may be self-defeating in the long run (Stallings and Ferris 1994:121).

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