

Theories and Theory of Public Administration

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Abstract: Scientists usually view theories as rationally thought out explanations of some empirically observed phenomena, consisting of sets of interrelated principles that describe relationships in association with those phenomena for the purposes of understanding, explaining, predicting and, possible, seeking evaluation of the results, and eventual control of the events. Three classifications of public administration theories and theory include (a) the whole body of theories; (b) individual theories covering the whole of theories, and (c) individual theories covering particular aspects or phenomena. However, five fine types of administrative theory, namely, descriptive theory; prescriptive theory; normative theory; assumptive theory, and instrumental theory. All these constitute the subject of this article.

Keywords: theories and theory; empirically observed principles; understanding; explaining, predicting, and evaluation.

I. Introduction

We begin this article by asking what appears to be simple question:

What is the actual motivation for examining theories, in the systematic study of Public Administration?

The question may be better explained by the following quotations by R. B. Smith [1983: 19] also quote by S. B. M. Marume in his book entitled: Public Administration: special contemporary problems and challenges [2015] that:

Robert B. Smith (1983:19)

The current emphasis in social sciences upon techniques and precise empirical data is a healthy one, but skilful collection, organisation, and manipulation of data are worth no more than the problem to the solution of which they are addressed - **Robert Lynd**

A man may be attracted to science for all sorts of reasons. Among them are the desire to be useful, the excitement of exploring new territory, the hope of finding order, and the drive to test established knowledge. Finally, at a still higher level, there is another set of commitments without which no man is a scientist. The scientist must, for example, be concerned to understand the world and to extend the precision and scope with which it has been ordered.

That commitment must, in turn, lead him to scrutinise, either for himself or through colleagues, some aspect of nature in great empirical detail. And if that scrutiny displays pockets of apparent disorder, then those must challenge him to a new refinement of observational techniques or to further articulation of his theories -

Thomas S. Kuhn: 1970.

The present chapter contains only a simplified introduction to and cursory review of administration theory. Most of the aspects brought to your notice here will be dealt with in greater detail in subsequent courses, including the postgraduate Honours and Master's degree courses. Our present purpose is to bring to your attention some of the central issues of the discipline public administration and to clarify, if not to resolve them. This should also give you an insight into the basic aims of the discipline and make its subject – matter meaningful to you. But remember that this chapter, though merely an introduction is the most important in the whole course, and you may, therefore, expect examination questions on it.

We now discuss *theory, methods and approaches*.

The Theory Of Public Administration

What is a theory?

Possible Answers:

According to **S. B. M. Marume** (1988), three definitions of a theory are stated as:

- a. a rationally thought out explanation of some empirically observed phenomenon; consisting of a set of interrelated principles that describe relationship observed in association with that phenomenon for the

purposes of understanding, explaining, predicting and, possibly, seeking evaluation of the results, and eventual control of the events.

- b. a generalisation which draws general conclusions from specific phenomena.
- c. a theory is a kind of generalisation, the validity of which has still to be proved by subsequent observation.

What Then Is Administrative Theory?

Public Administration Dictionary (1995:4-5) defines administrative theory as: “*an attempt at the conceptualisation of what public administration actually is, how to improve the things it is engaged in and how the administrative apparatus of governance may be orchestrated and improved in order to realise previously set goals.*”

Types Of Theories And Theory Of Public Administration

Classifications of public administration theories and theory include:

Distinctions Between Public Administration Theories And Theory Of Public Administration.

Three main striking distinctions between *theories* and *theory* can be stated as follows:

- a. The whole body of theories of Public Administration;
- b. Individual theories covering the whole field of public administration; and
- c. Individual theories covering particular aspects of the theories of public administration [Source: P. S. Botes: 1981

Detailed Explanations Of Three Main Distinctions

Whole body of theories: According to P. S. Botes (1981), by ‘public administration theory’ or ‘the theory of public administration’ *we mean* the totality of theories in public administration, that is, the whole field of thought which explains reality, why reality is as it is implying empirical theories, and also tries to indicate what reality ought to be and why, that is, normative/ moral theories. Public administration theory, therefore, indicates a conceptual framework within which descriptions and sometimes prescriptions are provided of **how** and **why** public administration phenomena occur and are related to one another.

‘**Public administration theory**’ is always concerned with practice or envisaged practice and related to a particular handling and interpretation of facts and value in order to explain (clarify) them; make them acceptable or undesirable. Public administration theory involves more than a mere description of what happens in public administration; it also embraces speculative or normative (value) elements of what ought to be and why, that is, speculative/normative/moral theories. Public administration theory covers both empirical and normative theories.

Individual theories covering the whole field of public administration, examples are:-

- Ronald Warner’s (1947) *principles of public administration*;
- Fred W. Riggs’ (1955, 57, 1961, 64, and 1973) *fused – prismatic – diffracted theories*;
- J. J. N. Cloete’s (1967,71,77 and 1985) *generic administrative process theory*; and
- Robert K. Merton’s (1957, 64, 1970) *middle range theories*.

These theoretical contributions affect the entire field of public administration by *individual theories* of *individual writers*.

Individual theories covering particular aspects or phenomena within the subject of public administration, for instance,

- theory of decision – making;
- theory of personnel administration;
- theory of financial administration;
- theory of control measures and evaluation mechanisms;
- theory on motivation by various individuals and groups of scholars.

On The Basis Of Proof Or Empirical Verifiability:

We may distinguish *two broad categories of theories* that are best explained individually in public administration. These **two categories** are:

- a. The *first* group comprises the *empirical theories*; and
- b. The *second* group consists of the *normative/moral theories*.

On The Basis Of Objectives:

Stephen Bailey (1968:128) explains that **four types** of theory emerge, namely:

- a. **descriptive – explanatory theory** which is concerned with *what* and *why*;
- b. **normative theory** concerned with *should* and *good*;

- c. **assumptive theory** concerned with *conditions* and *possibilities*; and
- d. **instrumental theory** is concerned with *how* and *when*.

But a much closer and penetrating comparative examination reveals **five types** of administrative theory as indicated below:

Five Fine Types Of Administrative Theory:

But on the *basis of uses and objectives*, S. B. M. Marume (1988), and William Fox and Ivan H. Meyer (1995: 4 – 5) state that *five fine types of administrative theory* can be distinctly identified as follows:-

Descriptive Theory:

which describes what is actually happening in public administrative institutions and attempts to discover the causes of the occurrences that have been empirically observed;

Prescriptive Theory:

which *prescribes how* change in the direction of public policy should take by enforcing the expertise and authority of the bureaucracy;

Normative Theory:

which questions the meaningfulness and intelligibility of the roles which *ought, should, or must* be played by the bureaucracy in politics and political development and whether such roles **must, should or ought** to be stabilised, extended, or restricted.

Assumptive Theory

which concentrates on improving public administrative practices by trying to understand the nature of people as they interact with political institutions within a bureaucratic environment; and

Instrumental Theory

which investigates **means** of conceptualising the techniques of public administration in order that policy goals may become more attainable.

What Should Be The Aim Of Public Administration Theory?

The quick and short answer to this question is to have *a theory* which is *a general one* that *facilitates public administrators, scholars and research scientists* to: *understand; explain; predict; evaluate; and control* (S. B. M. Marume, 1982). The *aim* then of the discipline public administration should be the rational construction of general explanatory principles in the form of generalisations which become progressively more general, and which become progressively more general, and which will be able to provide a deep understanding into, a precise explanation of, exact prediction of, and possible control over the confusing multiplicity of administrative phenomena that is, *structures, institutions, dynamics, actions, mechanisms, and processes; operating legally* within a particular *society* as a *comprehensive system, environmental factors, facilitation, adoption of necessary and appropriate government policy* (ies); *economic, efficient and effective implementation of public policies; control of public activities of officials, and evaluation of policy results* (S. B. M. Marume:1988).

A General Theory In Public Administration

A **general theory** then is a type of casual theory that differs from singular theories and partial theories, in scope at least, by virtues of its presumed application to the whole field of inquiry.

What Precisely Should Be The Place And Role Of General Theory In Public Administration

Before we examine the normative factors that explain the nature of public administration and guide the activities of public administrators and their subordinates in their daily tasks of working out priorities and of implementing government policy decisions, in order to achieve predetermined objectives; let us spend some time on what *place* and *role* of general theory, in Public Administration should be.

This will help us to appreciate the significance, purpose, means and ends of public administration in the social system of which it is a part.

What Is The Necessity For General Theory In Public Administration?

Public Administration as a field of study is fairly and generally considered to be new, being only 123 years in existence, and still in the same state of change, chaos and confusion about the modern administrative world, which it aims to understand and explain. The absence of a universal approach causes the study of public

administration to descend to a popular level of being a component of Political Science. And it is to rule out the popularisation of public administration that we have tried to dispose of approaches not based on accountable universal propositions.

Need For Wider Knowledge Of Administrative Phenomena

With the world as it is today, however, most social scientists agree that wider knowledge of administrative phenomena is essential. The problematic issue is how to set about acquiring and establishing this scientific knowledge system. Should we work at the state level or should the knowledge go deeper and wider? As social scientists, practitioners, and students, of course, we know what our approach should be, an *eclectic* one. Although theorising is not quite new in public administration; it was only in 1967 that *J. J. N. Cloete* made impressive effort to develop a carefully constructed rational conceptual framework for theoretical investigation. Consequently, *neither* the student trying to understand public administration phenomena *nor* the ardent practitioner formulating nor implementing public policy had any universally accepted theory to guide him adequately. Fortunately, one of the characteristics of the study of public administration is its concern with this aspect:

- a. with the nature of theory as such and
- b. precisely what such a theory should be like once it has been finally completed and perfected.

At the same time, we find considerable interest in how scientific public administration can be expected to be and particularly in the question whether we shall ever be able to *predict* and, eventually control, or whether we shall for ever have to be content ourselves with the mere understanding and explanation of social and administrative events after they have taken place. It is in this direction, however, that political scientists, public administration scientists, academics, and students are assiduously working in order to come up with a coherent universal theory.

We Are All Theorists

Today, therefore, we are all theorists and social research scientists, studying and analysing the data that come before us not for their intrinsic interest or even their policy relevance, but rather in an earnest endeavour to develop a reasonably coherent conceptual system for classifying of data, that will make it possible to deal with universals rather than with particulars.

Need To Find The Truth In Public Administration

The *objective* in studying public administration is to find the *truth*; in ways more than *two*, as follows:

- a. To examine the nature of administrative phenomena and *how* they are determined;
- b. To relate them one to the other, to examine their connection; and
- c. To ascertain if possible whether there are general principles that determines their behaviour.

The true social scientist aims at understanding and explaining public administration in its totality, and this s/he can do only upon the basis of an articulated and integrated theory, at least, a middle range theory, for practical reasons.

Need To Develop A Theory

Our objective in theorising in public administration is *to develop a theory*, not only for *predicting* public administration, but also for *creating; ordering* devices or approaches which *help* the social investigator and practitioner to make some reasonable sense out of the great diversity of facts and events in public administration. Whatever the *name* of that device, whether a *quasi – theory, model, conceptual framework*, or more simply, a *framework for analysis, its express purpose is to facilitate create understanding by systematic ordering facts and concepts into some meaningful pattern.*

Academics agree unanimously on the necessity for scientific study in public administration as well as on the search for rationally articulated and integrated good explanatory general theory.

We now discuss the functions of, and then the requirements for such a theory, and finally the theory of public administration.

Functions Of A General Theory

What should be the functions of such a general theory?

The functions of a general theory are to:-

1. **to process data** in such a way as to make it **useful** and **meaningful** in subsequent work. In particular, it must enable us to observe in data **regularities** and **irregularities** which we can try to explain intelligently.
2. help us **understand public administrative phenomena** by **arranging** data.
3. **interpret data** of the public administration system
4. to **provide a guide for reasonable action.**

5. **provide its material in an organised form**, which may be **useful** in other disciplines (S. B. M. Marume: 1988).

The Requirements Of A General Theory

What should be the requirements of such a general theory?

1. A Set Of Criteria For A General Theory:

The requirement of a general theory should be as follows:

A general theory must be a **comprehensive, comprehensible, coherent, and self – correcting body of knowledge** contributing to greater understanding, explanation, prediction, evaluation, and control of the bewildering and confusing multiplicity of administrative phenomena. However, a discipline which fulfils all these scientific requirements will be difficult to find, but it is not an impossible ideal to achieve in the distant future. [S. B. M. Marume: Academic work No. 5 of September 3, 1988].

2. An Analysis Of The Requirements (Set Of Criteria)

List Of Essential Terms To The Concept

- comprehensive
- coherent
- empirically verifiable
- explanation
- evaluation
- comprehensible
- self – correcting
- understanding
- predictable and prediction
- control

II. Explanations Of Terms/Concepts

- a. Theory must be **comprehensive**. This means, it should cover the **entire/whole field**; and **all** aspects of public administration ought to be considered. Associated terms include: inclusive, integrative, synthetic, all embracing, encyclopaedic.
- b. Theory must be **comprehensible**. It should be expressed in terms of generalisations as easy to understand and explain, as accurate and as few in words as possible. Bear in mind here that the principle '**non multiplicanda essentia**' (do not proliferate essentials). A discipline should have the least possible numbers of axioms and essentials, for if the number of axioms equals the number of propositions there can be no discipline. Comprehensible means easily understood, understandable, graspable.
- c. Theory must be **coherent** in the sense that every piece of **logic** must fit into the rest; that is, it should be **rational**. That is complementary, meaningful, intelligible, showing unity.
- d. Theory must be **self – correcting**; which means it must be **susceptible** of **continued improvement**.
- e. Theory must be a structural arrangement or **a body of knowledge**, which means its hypotheses and propositions must be **empirically verified**; and its these must be **empirically verifiable** (facts, truth, proof and reality = essential elements).
- f. Theory should contribute towards **understanding and explanation**. These are perhaps the most important aspects, because theory is primarily concerned with the **scientific acquisition and establishment of reliable and valid knowledge**.
- g. Theory should be **predictable** and must contribute to **prediction**. This means we should like to be in a position to say that in X circumstances Y will occur; or if we do A, B will occur. The test of natural sciences lies in their capacity for precise prediction and eventual control, but this type of test is not as a rule available in the social sciences, like political science and public administration. There is still a lot of speculations and assumptions.
Research is still in progress, but a lot of impressive scientific and systematic successes has been achieved, for example, systematised probabilities are possible in the social sciences. For instance, because all human behaviour is not **ipso facto** irrational or capricious, there is a **fair degree of predictability** possible in the social sciences. Valuable generalisations can often be made. If this were not so, no individual would know how to behave towards others. It is perfectly possible, therefore, to classify and study human behaviour, and to reduce it perhaps not to general laws, but **to operationally useful generalisations, or more general middle range theories that are universally application**, more abstract and hold regardless of the time and place of the empirical study.
- h. Theory must also contribute to **evaluation**, however, that is, whether something is right or wrong, good or bad. In the social sciences especially **values** are very important.

III. Greater Future Purposes Of Universal Theory

- i. A theory of this kind must not only be able to predict probable events; but also it must be able to support the greater and better societal values and norms, and must facilitate *governments, public functionaries* (state presidents, prime ministers, cabinet ministers, public administrators, city and town clerks, chief executive officers and so on); as well as *individuals* to make *necessary and appropriate wide ranging valid, relevant decisions that will control events* so that the *greater and better societal values and norms are realised*.
- j. And so our envisaged universal theory must also be able to be in a position *to explain* correctly *how* one administrative system in one civilisation *can develop* from another administrative system from another civilisation.

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