

## **RATIONALIZING THE RESEARCH TRADITIONS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION USING THE PHRONETIC APPROACH**

Hamza ATEŞ\*  
Elif GENÇ†

### **Abstract**

It is widely accepted within academia that public administration is facing an identity crisis in both Western countries and the developing world. This is not simply because the processes of governing and governmental relationships have become far more complex in today's societies; it is also an organic problem within the domain of public administration itself.

The field has adopted four basic intellectual traditions: scientific knowledge, practical experience, relativist perspective and practical wisdom, and most scholars of public administration feel that this diversity has—intentionally or not—caused broad fractures in the epistemological and methodological stances of the subject in terms of both study and approach.

However, the area can be improved in a holistic sense by benefitting from a combination of the richness these four areas of knowledge offer. This study therefore suggests the phronetic approach as an umbrella framework under which the four strands of public administration theory can be studied inclusively.

**Key Words:** Public administration, research, Phronetic Approach

### **Introduction**

On first sight, it could be said that the field of public administration has improved its epistemological position and updated the methodologies used in the area. However, these improvements have caused separations. Historically, public administration has mainly been debated between positivist and traditionalist, scientific and holist or rationalist and normative schools of thought. Scientists such as Simon (1955) and later Meier et al (2012) suggested more rigid research methods to improve the subject as a science and a solid academic discipline. On the other hand, holists such as Waldo, Stillman and Wamsley are more interested in the broader understanding of government, underlining its existence as a public service in general and its dealing with citizens in particular. Whilst Simon criticized the lack of genuine scientific methodologies in government and public administration, Waldo referred to the fundamentally value-laden nature of the research (Raadschelders, 2008). These profound disagreements between scientists and holists—even on the most basic elements of the subject—have brought about an identity crisis which was widely accepted as having become seriously problematic by the end of the 1960s (Miller and Yang, 2008).

The essence of the matter is a problem of nomenclature concerning the public administration field and whether it should be divided or re-classified. Scholars of the subject agree that it has become fragmented, but they approach this situation from different angles. According to Hood (1990), 'the governmental area is fragmented across intra- and inter-disciplinary interests, and is quite dispersed across a range of specializations'. Authors such as Lynn

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\* Prof. Dr., Istanbul Medeniyet University Faculty of Political Sciences, Department of Politics and Public Administration ates.hamza@gmail.com

† Cardiff University, Institute of Human Resource Management, United Kingdom

(2008) and Pollitt & Bouckaert (2011) assert that all public administration studies should be seen as a single entity without subdivision, stating that boundaries would cause confusion in areas of public administration research. In contrast, opponents of this idea—such as Rainey (2009) and Perry & Kramer (1986)—claim that the research into public administration encompasses various aspects of the governmental domain including policy, organization and behavioural science. Any attempts to conceptualize the demarcations within the subject will inevitably fail to represent its full richness. Miller and Yang (2008) discusses public administration's identity crisis by pointing out that there is no particular place for public administration research in a disciplinary continuum that separates fields into sciences and arts. He states that public sector research is 'neither a pure science nor a value-laden one, but exists somewhere between the two'.

Raadschelders (2012) places emphasis on the fact that the process of government is initially studied as political theory and politics, concentrating on the relationship between those who govern and those who are governed by highlighting administrative arrangements. In their seminal article, Gill & Meier (2000) strongly suggest that whilst public administration borrows methods applied in the other areas, these areas have improved their own methods and theories and these are not always naturally suitable for issues in the public sector domain. They suggest that public administration should develop its own core datasets and methodology with reference to observed shortcomings in the public sector.

It could be said that the absence of a paradigm for public administration studies stems from the idea that every scholar defines the subject in their own way, rather than creating a broader definition on which they can all agree. 'The study of public sector is home to a variety of specializations and a wide range of theories—but we need better frameworks and meta-languages to encompass these specializations and we need comparison, juxtaposition and a synthesis of different approaches to the same thing' (Hood, 1990).

Research into public administration may face an identity crisis dealing with two competing approaches; however there are at least four prevalent intellectual traditions in the Western world in general: scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, practical experience and relative existence. This sets up a further challenge because these different approaches are each used to study public administration. The response to having these various opinions competing within the domain can perhaps be found and investigated within the historical background of each tradition.

### **1. Four Different Approaches to Study of Public Administration: A Historical Perspective**

Public administration studies are not limited to the present. In historical perspectives, it is clear that scholarly interest in government began in ancient times, and the variety of approaches and perspectives emerging in government research thenceforward can be categorised into four main groups (Table 1).

### 1.1. Scientific Knowledge

One of the intellectual virtues characterised by Aristotle was *episteme*, which still appears today in the term ‘epistemology’<sup>‡</sup>. Episteme refers to general rationality, and deals with knowledge that is universal, constant, and context-independent (Devereux, 1986). Its present-day equivalent is natural science and scientific knowledge, which in its analogies is mostly structured as positivism. Episteme is an exact truth that corresponds to universal applicable tenets in contemporary science. Based on rational explanations of idealism, epistemology ‘...is context-independent, objective (explicit) knowledge that focuses on universal validity and remains independent of time or space’ (Nonaka and Toyama, 2007; Clegg and Ross Smith, 2003).

**Table 1:** Four approaches to the study of public administration

	Scientific Knowledge	Practical Experience	Practical Wisdom	Relative Existence
1. Origin	17th-18th century; post-1940s in public administration	17th century; 1900-> in public administration	Aristotle; Mirrors of Princes; 1950s-> in public administration	Romanticism; 1990s-> in public administration
2. Knowledge ideal	unity of knowledge and middle range theory: explanation, objectivity, epistemological integration	standardized activity and grand theory: description, usable knowledge, professional integration	moral truth & grand theory: description, understanding, inter-subjectivity, differentiated integration	no grand narratives or “formal” theory: interpretation subjectivity, no integrative ideal
3. Sources of knowledge	facts, propositions, data, deductive reasoning	precedent, experience, inventory of principles and techniques, inductive reasoning	arguments, moral reasoning, judgment, interpretation, tacit knowledge	interpretations, values, judgment, feelings, emotions
4. Methodology	positivist; “natural-science” style; focus on rationality and episteme (science)	case collection; comparison; textual examples; focus on mechanism and techne (skill)	hermeneutic; discourse; reflection; comparison; focus on rationality, substance and phronesis (prudence)	discourse; reflection; comparison; focus on irrationality and uncertainty; narratives; deconstruction
5. Disciplinary desire/status	mono-disciplinary	multi-disciplinary	inter-disciplinary	non-disciplinary
6. Substantive interest	bureaucracy, efficiency, decision & organization theory	universal principles of organization and management	evolution of governing, authority	language, culture
7. Authors, e.g.	Simon, Krause, Meier	Taylor, Gulick, Kettl, case study authors	W. Wilson, Weber, Waldo, Wamsley	Farmer, Fox, Miller

<sup>‡</sup> The concept of epistemology is used in a broader meaning which includes nature and scope of the knowledge no matter whether it is positivist or interpretivist.

Scientific knowledge arose in the 17th century within the natural sciences, and began to spread to social sciences during the 18th century. Taylor tried to enhance efficiency through “scientific management”, whilst Weber’s bureaucracy model was regarded as the milestone of universal principles in the area of administration (Eliassen, 2013). This concept became pervasive within public administration in Europe from the early 19th century and in the USA from the 1920s onwards; the ultimate supporter in the field of public administration was Simon.

The approach with which firstly Simon and many others are defined was that of logical positivism. Simon sought to adapt this research tradition to the needs of social science, as the substantial difference between natural and social sciences is that the latter concerns with far more complicated social and organizational phenomena upon which experiments cannot be performed, since scientific management brings with it the danger of too much focus on method.

However, the new public administration approach resurrected the idea that the study must be committed to the values of both good management and social equity, areas in which human interaction must be included. Logical positivism failed to take the human side of the subject into consideration, since scientific fundamentalists believed that neutralizing personal thought could give them a sophisticated and substantive knowledge.

The matter of what exactly constitutes science in terms of government may be hard to resolve, but it seems there is place for both Waldonian and Simonian public administration traditions. The former identifies administration through human interaction and the latter uses scientific approaches to administer government. So both ways advocate the designs of science, but from different angles.

Simon (1976) focuses on the decision-making and on organizational behaviour and thinking processes. The science of public administration is a design science insofar as the social world must stem from a concept of bounded rationality and work through from this basis, disconnecting designs or means from the ultimate goals so that the design can assume an optimal sense of future flexibility. Simon’s design science of administration is descriptive, and was explicitly concerned with the activity of information processing and with the human and mechanical parts of man-machine systems. His approach uses a pure science based on facts and tested propositions which does not or should not have any illusions that it is prescribing specifically for public administration and policy. Other scholars agree with the design science concept but in a quite different way than Simon. Miller and Yang (2008) claims that public administration as a design science would be much more helpful than studying the subject via the natural sciences. They (2008) grounds the design of institutions, mechanisms and processes in past experience through human participation and explicitly comprises description and prescription. Nonaka and Toyama (2007) also asserts that learning processes within organizations can allow the transmission of experience, enabling administrators to make use of certain prescribed knowledge.

Simon, who at first was a devout exponent of the rational scientific theory, later softened his attitudes to bounded rationality, which considers that the human mind has limited qualifications, resources and competence, and therefore strives to satisfy instead of optimize (Simon, 1997). Hence, while Simon’s bounded rationality approach approximates his design view with the second tradition of design science, fundamental methodological differences between the main streams are still strictly preserved. Simon’s view characterises governing by quantitative research, whilst alternative, value laden approaches justify qualitative methodology.

## **1.2. Practical Experience**

*Techne* is a philosophical approach that offers room for practical experience in governmental relations, and is based on practical instrumental rationality directed by a conscious goal. It can be also called “craft” as it is directly related to production. It is commonly known today in terms such as technique, technical and technology. *Techne*—the know-how or practical skill required to be able to perform a task—is ‘pragmatic, context-dependent, tacit knowledge aimed at the production of useful things’ (Nanoka, 1994; Flyvbjerg, 2004a).

Practical experience strongly emphasises building solid instruments and techniques to support day-to-day administration and experimental learning. It has a legacy that refers to one of Aristotle’s knowledge types (*techne*), from which German scholars built fundamental approaches that dealt with the practical implementation of techniques based on Aristotle’s ethically oriented practical wisdom in the late 18th century; Gulick and Urwick (1937), Fayol (1916), Taylor (1911) are more contemporary representatives of the practical experience approach; each sought to improve and test theories on the basis of case studies and empirical work.

Nowadays, practical experience in public administration has been proved to work. Case studies serve as illustrations of more generic theoretical principles, requiring that the micro levels of concrete experience are linked to the macro level of theory and social experience. The case study approach is as important as ever in American public administration, although in Europe the practice fell by the wayside until the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Raadschelders, 2005).

This approach is multidisciplinary in nature, as the eclectic borrowing of instruments or theories is driven by the needs of the moment, rather than by academic interest alone. It is essential that practitioners can influence more strongly than those who rely more on academic knowledge in problem solving. In terms of practical experience, this new approach helps to plant new seeds of knowledge about what to do and how to deal with certain settings in terms of similarities and differences between case studies (Thomas, 2011). As an example; practical experience shows what theories work well in specific cases, both theoretically and methodologically. Practical experience also fits well with identifying “black swans” because of its in-depth approach: ‘What looks to be “white” can turn out on closer examination to be “black”’.<sup>§</sup>

Efforts to generalize practical experience in other settings have been difficult. One cannot generalize on the basis of a single case, so every single case study cannot contribute to scientific development. Case studies, especially interpretative ones, have frequently been criticized because they unnecessarily complicate generalizations—although it is a question of some debate whether generalization is really an appropriate way of dealing with case studies in the first place. As generalization is mainly a facet of positivism, taking it into consideration may be opposite to the nature of supporters of empiricism (Prethuis, 1964). Whilst it is agreed that the case study is an extensive examination of a particular case which may be viable in other settings, it is not true to claim that a case study cannot provide solid information about a larger sample.

In summary, practical experience is seen as being very close to the scientific management approach in historical terms, and contingency theory—frequently used in contemporary public management case studies—claims that management style and organizational structure are influenced by various environmental aspects (McLaughlin et al, 2002). We can therefore

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<sup>2</sup> refers to Karl Popper’s critical realism  
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conclude that the practical experience approach does not necessarily have to match traditions of positivist research.

### **1.3. Postmodernism: A Relativist Perspective**

The theories and approaches identified as relative existence or postmodernism have their roots in early 19th century romanticism, a philosophy which states that human values are inconsistent, truth varies from person to person and that consequently there is no single right answer. Postmodernism began to affect public administration in the 1990s as a contrary viewpoint to the prevailing scientific paradigm in the public sector, which was based on positivist traditions. Fox and Miller (1995) sought to augment scientific approaches by emphasising interpretations, values, judgement, feelings and emotions whilst placing more emphasis on diversity and subjectivity—values that had become influential in interdisciplinary areas such as public administration. Postmodernism stresses the importance of denying the grand narrative in favour of more specific details with which individuals can more easily characterise. In terms of practical wisdom, postmodernists emphasise the diversification of values, cultures and traditions of life which must be disseminated in a discursive community so that various solutions to social issues can be considered and a choice made for a consensual solution. A policy maker must know the nature of real and desirable relationships in order to have some command of knowledge about government. Policy makers must also fully comprehend the specific context in which they decide to take action. (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Raadschelders, 2008).

In the field of public administration, postmodernist approaches have been more effective in the area of bureaucratic efficiency than they have in commercial administration. This suggests a social constructivist approach—as opposed to New Public Management (NPM)’s positivist epistemology—and is supported by three arguments: firstly, positivism is regarded as a social constructivist structure because bureaucracy is an organism created by people (Farmer, 1995). Secondly, it is difficult to link global notions such as efficiency or inefficiency which are modernist, culture-specific and non-mystical. Thirdly, while scientific theory is feasible in modernist thinking, postmodernism stands against all ‘absolute, rule-based approaches’ since it is based on uniqueness and flexibility (Raadschelders, 2012).

In *Postmodern Public Administration* Fox & Miller (1995) summarised this general change of approach as basically a move from bureaucratic regimes to democratic and citizen-oriented structures based upon ‘Habermasian discourse theory’, stressing interactive networks. From these definitions, postmodernism emerged in public administration as an opposing paradigm to output-oriented administrative logic, eventually creating a form of public administration that considered human values from a social constructivist point of view, thereby popularising qualitative methodologies at the expense of quantitative approaches.

### **1.4. Practical Wisdom**

Practical wisdom is the oldest of the four headings under discussion in this essay. It is concerned with the development of a form of knowledge that includes paying attention to the ruler’s disposition towards and relationship with the ruled in terms of public morality, shared world-view, and—in contemporary times—social equity, participative citizenship and the improvement of “grand theory.” Aristotle was the first advocate of the concept of practical wisdom, which is also referred to as common sense or prudence. Aristotle claims that phronesis is the most fundamental knowledge type compared with *episteme* and *techne* because it represents a process by which ‘instrumental rationality is balanced by virtue-based rationality’ (Nonaka and Toyama, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2004).

Basically practical wisdom is an intellectual virtue that is reasoned and capable of action regarding things that are deemed good or bad. It is also an action-oriented pragmatic knowledge system which cannot be formalized into generic principles; instead it is always grounded in the experience of specific cases. Put differently, practical wisdom considers contextual settings, refers to specific situations and shifts aims in activity when needed.

Politics and policy making shaped postmodern public administration history, with great contributions, primarily from Dwight Waldo and modern representatives of the philosophy such as Frederickson (1997), Stillman (1999) and Weber (1946). The principal governing rules of public administration shifted from administrative objectivity to bureaucratic politics because of Waldo's criticism of the dichotomy between politics and administration (Whetsell, 1983). Waldo's generic ideas about public administration area fitted well into the practical wisdom approach in the USA, and could be said to symbolise softcore rationalism. Stillman's study (1999) on origin and topic in areas of government represents a historical perspective that applies the idea of practical wisdom to a given situation. Lindblom's incrementalist evolutionary approach, which applies gradual steps to decision making, can also benefit from practical wisdom to take the optimum decisions. Hood (1991) a modern European representative of this way of thinking critically reviews the public management challenges as having monolithic perspectives (Raadschelders, 2008).

Practical wisdom encourages interdisciplinary approaches in the field of public administration. The internal structure of government, with its multiple relationships and initiatives among organizations, as well as its multiple relationships in the external environment at both macro and micro levels cannot be figured out within any particular perspective or approach. Public administration area doesn't fit well into existing disciplinary structures because it is surrounded by theories and approaches from disparate disciplines. The public administration domain, by its very nature, must also balance the practical interests of policy makers with the theoretical ideas from academia, as it must take social wisdom into account. This realisation applies the factor of common sense, and consequently makes room for incremental learning through experience. It is widely acknowledged that there are various national traditions in public administration in terms of its distinctive philosophical theory and its historical and comparative context. It collaborates with human heuristic skills to form the tacit canon of knowledge that links judgement with intuition (Polanyi, 1966; Raadschelders, 2008).

## **2. Phronetic Research Approach to Public Administration**

If we consider these four approaches as part of a continuum, *scientific knowledge*, despite being the most controversial approach, claims to be the most objective. It is better for testing hypotheses, revealing intangible rules and law-like relationships. *Practical experience* is comparably objective insofar as it strives to characterise elements in organizational structures and managerial processes. These two perspectives concentrate on both discovering universal laws and formulating generalizations. *Practical wisdom* seeks to examine the significance of government for society, focusing on specific times and contextualised knowledge. It is considered the most comprehensive of Aristotle's knowledge types. *Postmodernism* is the most subjective of the four perspectives, since it states that all knowledge is relative. Practical wisdom and postmodernism are most associated with interpretation, interests, values and the relationship between government and people. They are both better at producing established systems of knowledge about how to legislate and behave in context-specific environments, formulating a deliberative approach using certain sets of values of judgments and interests.

Public administration scholars have limited their outlooks by positioning themselves in one of these four intellectual traditions, and this limitation may prevent them from applying different theories, approaches and perspectives, since a wide range of knowledge might be more beneficial to public administration in many ways.

A revolution referred to as the 'Perestroika movement' occurred within the American Political Science Association in 2000. The movement's aim was to compel political science to use methodological pluralism in order to make the field of public administration more approachable to non-expert academics. The movement was established to call attention to the dominance of positivism and quantitative methodology, which were in danger of isolating the subject in academic terms (Landmann, 2008). In the wake of this movement, Bent Flyvbjerg's book *Making Social Science Matter* was published in 2001, and came in to favour with academics and professionals who were concerned with exploring the social sciences from various disciplines in both Europe and the USA. This endeavour became the manifesto of the Perestroika movement, eventually granting policy making process and planning a much more phronetic approach.

Phronetic research is an approach to research and planning based on an up to date interpretation of the classical Greek notion of *phronesis*, diversely referred to as practical judgement, praxis, common sense or prudence. Phronetic social science states that the best way forward is to accept that a more substantive role can exist for social sciences in the form of its impact on policy and praxis<sup>\*\*</sup>. As a study of dynamic social life, interactive social matters can be practiced better when we abandon conventional concepts of objectivity and truth and set aside the facts/value dichotomy (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Additionally, we should stress a context-specific concept of truth that is pluralistic and culture-bound, requiring further involvement with the research subject.

Flyvbjerg et al (2001) put forward the idea that social science should not just be referred to as a natural science. It deals with social and political action as well, and as such any action in the area of social sciences needs a localised knowledge that is unattainable in theoretical terms. In phronetic social science, the term 'applied' refers to thinking about practice and experience with a starting point not in top-down, decontextualized theories and principles, but from a 'bottom-up' contextualised and situated approach. This is based on the context and actions under research and is explored by posing and answering value-rational questions that exist at the heart of phronetic social science. As such, social science also involves interactions, emotions and decisions among people, the result of which cannot help with the provision of knowledge at generalized levels.

Despite attempts to rationalise and improve the subject, it must be remembered the improvements in the field of public administration does not set it apart from generic changes in research methodologies, which may cause disunity in general methodological and epistemological matters in any discipline. Practical wisdom and postmodernist approaches have arisen in opposition to scientific knowledge across academia; even practical experience adopts case study approaches in public administration to some extent, despite its similarities with scientific knowledge. In scientific tradition, Simon is a proponent of bounded rationality, and his statements offer similarities to a more Waldonian type of design science which is definitely value-laden (Raadschelders, 2008; Simon, 1997). As such, each of the four types of

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<sup>\*\*</sup> Phronetic social science understands that the main issue is designed consciously to answer the questions. Flyvbjerg originally proposed in *Making Social Science Matter*: (1) where are we going?; (2) who gains, and who loses, by which mechanisms of power?; (3) is it desirable?; and (4) what should be done?



public administration traditions indicates that there has been a change from objective scientific knowledge to a contextualized approach in keeping with the phronetic philosophy.

In terms of problem-driven research to phronetics, social science may be more open to setting aside its internal crisis in favour of centring studies on the idea of addressing significant social matters by applying whichever approach is best equipped to deal with specific problems. It is wrong to envisage the phronetic approach as being directly opposed to more solid methods, or to make up some form of new over-arching methodology that could be applied to approaches which are more pertinent to the essence of social science studies (Schram and Caterino 2006). Alternatively, it is claimed that a predetermination of method offers an opportunity for a more committed attempt to make the social sciences more relevant.

Debates between positivists and interpretivists have been recently joined by third group who do not locate their positions in either side. This group has involved many scholars who reject the notion that they must restrict their studies to either the natural science or the value-laden camps. Mixed-method researchers have been adopted by academics who lay emphasis on the significance of ‘problem-driven’ over ‘theory-driven’ research (ibid, 2006).

Mixed-methodology fits well with problem-driven research, where a study commences with a certain issue in the world of governance and then uses various perspectives to research it. This mixed approach stresses not only certain methods or data types but also undertaking study that can help improve phronesis by enhancing comprehension and influencing change in particular contexts, rather than investigating abstract traces of universal scientific knowledge. It also invites social scientists to scrutinise their norms for reasonable research methodologies (such as case studies) that could help social stakeholders find out how to appreciate the complexity of relationships and practice a variety of social crafts more efficiently (Landmann, 2008). Therefore the strength of this combined method needs to be considered by supporters of the positivist and the interpretive camps, because the concept of mixed-method research itself can emerge from either paradigm. Put more simply, mixed method research embodies the fact that both qualitative and quantitative data and methods are pertinent to phronesis.

The rise in mixed-method practical knowledge-driven studies may provide a better understanding for delivering the existential commitments of the social sciences to link science with democracy, leading to developments not only in theory but in practice as well (Schram and Caterino, 2006). The public administration area, which mostly requires urgent and solid practical solutions, can provide a suitable field for the application of this approach. Since public administration areas have no specific place in the disciplinary continuum (Miller and Yang [2008] states that it is counted neither science nor value-laden), the mixed method approach can be applied to address this ambiguity.

The four different approaches could benefit various areas of public administration, as everything has value in phronetic research. *Scientific knowledge* could be useful for undergraduate, postgraduate and especially doctoral levels. Practitioners might find it beneficial whether or not it is actually applicable for real world situations. *Practical experience* specifically generates policy and decision makers’ interests from lower to higher levels. The approach is also useful in schools as it brings the practices of government closer to students via examples and cases. *Relativist perspectives* are considerable as long as practitioners and academics are eager to question values and challenge the power of claims and orthodoxies. Uncertainties, which the postmodernist approach suggests, might make the implementations suggested by practitioners more difficult. This perspective is at its most useful in higher educational settings with graduate and doctoral students and experienced professionals, because it requires a foundation in reliable knowledge to find the optimum

solutions to public administration needs. *Practical wisdom* provides an interdisciplinary canon of knowledge by which new and complex types of governance can be examined. It is useful for students of government, public officers in any positions and citizens. Also, believers in pure science should not avoid thinking about the probable social consequences of theory, as they will obtain benefits from adopting a practical wisdom perspective as well (Raadschelders, 2008).

Ultimately, public administration should not be sacrificed to the sort of specialization that results from the influence of narrower epistemological and methodological approaches upon it. Any restriction in perspective might cause limited understanding. The four approaches can contribute more value to this association by encompassing the better comprehension of government, although none of them can exist on its own.

## **Conclusion**

The essay has investigated generic problems in the public administration field by examining different traditions of knowledge. Firstly, prominent scholars' ideas about how and why public administration works in this domain are discussed, dating back to ancient times and struggling to locate itself as a self-contained area. Even though all academics agree that there is a problem in the field, they define this problem from their own points of view and their own academic stances. This study therefore examined four intellectual traditions which public administration scholars have adopted. There is still a great deal of value placed on scientific methodology in academic research, but the criticisms of this scientific position always form a good starting point for designing other positions in the field.

Practical experience, although its origin is quite close to scientific knowledge, supports the idea proposing that specific case studies can be useful for determining particular knowledge about certain matters so that problem solvers can obtain guidance about similar situations in other scenarios. It can be claimed that this knowledge type occupies the middle ground between scientific knowledge and interpretivist ideas. On the other hand, postmodernist and practical wisdom traditions have maintained their stances in government studies as opposite views to an efficiency-oriented scientific approach. These traditions state that public sector studies should be open to interpretation, with the caveat that this interpretative way of understanding may not necessarily be applicable in every case; government works are quite complex and one universal solution cannot be prescribed to every problem.

Since each scientific approach has its own strong tradition and its own approaches to improving the field of public administration, the area should not be limited for the sake of maintaining one particular epistemological and methodological position. Instead, the phronetic approach to social science research proposes methodological pluralism in order to utilize the abundance of intellectual routes no matter which epistemological method the researcher chooses and what methodological stance may influence the study with special attention to the contextual features of the case. Phronetic approaches to public administration enrich the field because they focus on the problem itself rather than concentrating on methodology alone. In other words, positivist and interpretivist methodologies (qualitative, quantitative and mixed approaches) can make up part of the phronetic area of knowledge. However, as the world of governance is complicated enough as it is, public policy makers and managers should have enough capacity and insight both to produce optimum practical decisions and to direct human resources to lead the phronetic approaches to research smoothly. Wisdom and craftsmanship in government should therefore be prioritised above explicit methodological and epistemological positions, since the government sector does the same in practice.

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