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EDITORIAL



Reconsidering the gap between theory and practice in public administration

Integrating theory and practice is necessary for advancing scientific knowledge and enhancing public service practices. The interconnectedness between scholars and practitioners, a relationship established during the formative years of the field of public administration, however, has not been sustained. In the pursuit of scientific knowledge, scholars have become increasingly concerned with methodological rigour and the refinement of theory, which has led to a decline in attention to real-world problems. In contrast, practitioners are more inclined towards problem-specific research that aligns with real-life problems (Buick et al., 2016; Radin, 2013). The result is often a disconnect between theory and practice.

Despite producing scientific knowledge for theory advancement, public administration research should be aimed at informing practice and addressing complex public service problems. On the other hand, if theory does not guide addressing complex practical problems, we as scholars need to rethink our approach to studying public administration. The pressing question that remains unanswered is how to establish a connection between theory and practice that benefits both academics and practitioners, ultimately strengthening the field of public administration.

We address this issue for two reasons. First, the approach followed by public administration scholars and its utility for practitioners in solving complex governance problems deserves re-examination. Second, the recent wave of democratic backsliding and populist attacks on public servants necessitates fostering collaboration between scholars and practitioners to strengthen the knowledge base for and practice of public administration.

Why should theory and practice be connected?

The need to link theory and practice in public administration has been acknowledged for decades. Dwight Waldo (1948), for instance, emphasised the connectedness between theory and practice because the practice of administration, management, and policy is tightly intertwined, and it is incorrect to think of administration as value-free (Newland, 2000). Waldo (1948) maintained that theory enriches practice by offering clarity, purpose, and normative grounding, making integration not just desirable but essential.

The link between theory and practice encourages collaboration among scholars and practitioners, leading to the coproduction of knowledge, a situation in which scholars and practitioners undertake research designed to produce knowledge that can be implemented to improve practice. Reflecting on a major public sector co-production partnership between the Australian Public Service Commission and three Australian universities – Australian National University, the University of Canberra, and the University of New South Wales, Canberra—Buick et al. (2016) argued that successful partnership between practitioners and scholars can lead to innovation in both theory and practice and better performance

management. This collaboration among scholars and practitioners produces practice-oriented knowledge that helps address real-world public service issues faced by practitioners (Newland, 2000).

The effective integration of theory and practice also improves the implementation of administrative policy by deepening the understanding of successful practices and advancing a conceptual understanding of the science-policy nexus (Egeberg, 1994; Janousek & Blair, 2018). Moreover, researchers and practitioners can collaborate on research in ways that enhance mutual learning, leverage each other's strengths to produce high-quality knowledge, and appreciate and tolerate one another's worlds, styles, and contributions (Ospina & Dodge, 2005; Posner, 2009).

What separates academics from practitioners?

Despite fragmented efforts, a gap between theory and practice exists. A primary reason for the gap is the fundamental difference in roles and responsibilities of scholars and practitioners. Practitioners' roles require them to address issues of public importance that often demand immediate decision-making. They are focused on immediate results in response to the demands of citizens. Conversely, academics are animated by their needs for securing tenure and promotion, which often impose standards that diminish the end of applying research to practice. Moreover, in research-focused universities, engagement with practice is often a secondary or tertiary concern for public affairs faculty (Perry, 2019).

Public administration scholars often employ generic research methods, such as survey research, treating practitioners as subjects and sources of knowledge for their empirical research rather than as research partners (Ospina & Dodge, 2005). This approach leads practitioners to distance themselves from academics, increasing their reluctance to participate in research. Although field experiments can be an effective avenue for engaging practitioners, it is an uncommon research strategy.

Scholars do not often pose research questions in ways that interest practitioners. Most research questions examine problems retrospectively, focusing on what, why, and when, but do not offer guidance on how to resolve practical issues that are important to practitioners. Furthermore, performance evaluation systems for scholars and practitioners seldom provide incentives for mutual collaboration.

Another common reason for the gulf between scholars and practitioners is that the field of public administration has, for the most part, ignored studying public service professions, which makes most of our research acontextual (Perry, 2018). The failure to attend to professional issues in research creates a natural disconnect between scholars and practitioners, steering them away from issues that would bring them together. For instance, scholars have devoted little time studying phenomena like the International City/County Managers' Association (ICMA) Code of Ethics or the military (Charbonneau et al., 2020) as important public administration institutions, two research foci that would unify the interests of academics and practitioners, at least with respect to norms and ethics involving city managers and military professionals.

Finally, professional public administration organisations in the Global North, such as the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), which once facilitated connections among practitioners and academics, have abandoned this role (Perry, 2019). This shift has widened the gap between theory and practice, weakening the

field's ability to address complex public service issues. If academic institutions and associations do not reconnect with practitioners, the discipline risks losing its practical relevance and intellectual credibility. Similarly, organisations like the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration (IASIA), the Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe, and the International Research Society for Public Management have also failed to establish ongoing collaborations between academics and practitioners globally (Bhuiyan & Perry, 2024).

What can be done?

Let us acknowledge that the gap between theory and practice cannot be fully bridged because academics and practitioners perform different roles and responsibilities. Although collaboration between academics and practitioners does happen, it is often scattered and informal. There is room, however, to close the gap by building more intentional, structured ways for academics and practitioners to work together. The important question is who should take the lead in this regard. In our view, scholars have a greater responsibility for linking theory with practice. First, scholars need to study questions that are both interesting and relevant to practitioners. They must engage practitioners at all stages of research, from framing research questions and collecting data to sharing findings that not only contribute to scientific knowledge but also improve public administration practices (Buick et al., 2016).

Second, public affairs schools should aim at introducing institutional incentives and rules that actively connect academics and practitioners. For instance, faculty sabbaticals can be redesigned in ways that incentivise collaborative projects with government agencies (Perry, 2019). Another mechanism would involve reforms of promotion and tenure policies in public affairs schools by incorporating incentives for faculty to collaborate with practitioners (Volcker Alliance, 2017). Furthermore, public affairs schools need to strengthen practitioner-in-residence programmes (Posner, 2009).

Third, research journals should encourage more submissions from practitioners, offering editorial board memberships and providing open-access publication opportunities. Public policy and administration research journals should include features on practice. Current exceptions are *Public Administration Review's* Evidence for Practice and Practically Speaking features and the *Australian Journal of Public Administration's* points for practitioners.

Fourth, interconnectedness between scholars and practitioners can be moderated by pracademics and professional organisations such as NASPAA and the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA). Pracademics can improve synergy between academics and practitioners by serving as network brokers, creating new channels for cooperation and communication across the practitioner-academic divide (Posner, 2009). NASPAA can facilitate this interconnectedness by reinstating defunct fellowship programmes that allowed academics to work with practitioners, as well as introducing new fellowships and placements for academics with practitioners. Similarly, ASPA, which was founded on the ideal of connectedness among practitioners and academics across specialisations and between senior and younger professionals, should play a proactive role in facilitating such collaboration (Newland, 2000). Although a committee has been constituted under Dr. Carissa Slotterback, Dean and Professor in the School of Public and International

Table 1. Integration of theory and practice.

		Practice	
Theory	Low	Low	High
		Result: No Integration Outcome: Limited knowledge, lacks direction	Result: Partial Integration Outcome: Practice-driven knowledge, practically rigorous but disconnected from theory
	High	Low	High
		Result: Partial Integration Outcome: More scientific knowledge, academically rigorous, but disconnected from practice	Result: Full Integration Outcome: mutual learning, collaboration, production of high-quality knowledge, value creation, improved service practices

Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh, to enhance engaged research within the ASPA community and public service practitioners and to promote evidence-informed policy-making, more systematic efforts are required to institutionalise engagement between academics and practitioners.

Finally, integration between scholars and practitioners can be enhanced by making public service professions more integral in the study of public administration and policy. It would require a new commitment from public administration scholars to embark on a mission to produce usable knowledge that meets the requirements of practitioners (Perry, 2012; Perry, 2019). Research on public service professions would also help contextualise public administration research on professional norms and ethics. For instance, studying the code of ethics and professional norms in various professions such as the police, firefighters, and local governments would create many opportunities for convergence between academics and practitioners (Perry, 2018).

The importance of integrating theory and practice, the existing gaps between the two, and how to bridge these gaps are highlighted above. Neither theory nor practice alone can adequately define the knowledge base. Instead, a combination of theory and practice best illustrates the field of public administration. The integration of theory and practice can yield four possible combinations with different results and outcomes, summarised in Table 1.

Conclusion

Despite ongoing yet fragmented efforts at collaboration, the gap between theory and practice remains a persistent challenge in public administration. This editorial emphasises the importance of bridging that divide, examines the reasons behind the disconnect, and outlines steps to build stronger connections. We argue that renewed engagement between scholars and practitioners is crucial not only for the effective functioning of the field but also to ensure that public administration maintains both its practical relevance and intellectual legitimacy. Strengthening the link between theory and practice will encourage mutual learning, advance scientific knowledge, and lead to improved public service outcomes. Conversely, failing to integrate the two diminishes the field’s ability to address urgent public challenges, making both academics and practitioners more vulnerable to the challenges of democratic backsliding and populist pressures.

Disclosure statement

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