

Rethinking Public Administration in an Age of Increasingly Uncertain and Complex Societal Dilemmas

Saba Siddiki

Keeping Public Administration Relevant

The Minnowbrook conferences offer opportunities for deliberation about the state and trajectory of the field of public administration. One question consistently motivating Minnowbrook deliberations is – how do we keep public administration relevant? My response: maintaining the relevance of public administration requires periodically rethinking whether prevailing governance approaches are adequately designed to respond to evolving qualities of societal dilemmas. Further, it requires thinking about whether our predominant theoretical approaches have the explanatory bandwidth to reflect these qualities. I argue that we are in an age in which societal dilemmas are growing in uncertainty and complexity, and that the evolving nature of these dilemmas is challenging the relevance of our public administration approaches and theory.

What makes an issue uncertain? What makes an issue complex? Roe and Van Eeten (2001) define an issue as uncertain when causal processes are unclear or not easily understood. They define issues as complex when they, and their effects, are numerous, varied, and inter-related. Issues like global climate change, international terrorism, and energy and environmental security all fit the bill. To the advantage of the field in addressing increasingly uncertain and complex dilemmas in theory and practice is accessibility to vast amounts of data, demonstrated ability to analyze these data using sophisticated analytical techniques, and accumulated substantive expertise on various dimensions of salient policy issues. And, to be sure, there is no public policy challenge that could be considered simple, and we have evidently become quite adept at addressing a wide range of intractable issues. The point here is that various factors are leading to heightened uncertainty and complexity of societal dilemmas. I argue that in order to reflect this observation, public administration theory and practice needs to focus more on *adaptive governance mechanisms*, the *link between policy and administration*, and *cross-scale linkages*. I elaborate briefly on each of these below.

Adaptive Governance Mechanisms

To respond to uncertain and complex dilemmas, we need responsive – or what is referred to here as adaptive – governance mechanisms. Adaptive governance mechanisms are policy instruments and administrative structures that are designed to be flexible, receptive to (indeed, encouraging of) experimentation, accommodating of new information from scientific communities, policy stakeholders, and the general public, responsive to changes in governance contexts, and enabling of public participation. Fundamentally, they are contextually appropriate, “information seeking,” and designed to support iterative, rather than linear, modes of problem solving (Koski and Workman, 2018). Importantly, adaptive governance simultaneously embraces localized agency and self-governance *and* the role of the administrative state (DeCaro et al., 2017). As DeCaro et al. (2017) note, adaptive governance requires distributed decision-making authority that supports local innovation, social learning, and deliberation, but also traditional centers of authority for establishing “...enabling conditions for adaptation [of governance mechanisms] using a suite of

legal, economic, and democratic tools [that] legitimize and facilitate self-organization, coordination, and collaboration across scale.”

One concrete operationalization of an adaptive governance mechanism is an adaptable policy; or a policy that is designed to be responsive to changes in contextual conditions. Among the characteristics of an adaptive policy is that it relies on proportional rather than fixed standards, incorporates planned periods of comprehensive evaluation (e.g., legal sunsets), institutionalizes authority for local autonomy to promote responsiveness to local conditions, creates opportunities for public participation, establishes external and internal monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, includes policy triggers that adjust performance standards based on policy or contextual feedback, and accommodates decentralization in decision making to the lowest and most effective jurisdictional level (DeCaro et al., 2017; Swanson et al., 2007). Leveraging policy design to further an understanding of adaptive governance is logical since policies specify channels of information flow, establish protocols for collective decision-making, offer instructions for policy implementation, and structure opportunities and incentives for public participation (Schneider and Ingram, 1997; Ostrom, 2005). They thus establish opportunities and constraints for adaptive governance.

Adaptive governance also prompts new ways of thinking about policy effectiveness that are more appropriate in the context of uncertain and complex issues. Within the context of adaptive governance, effective policies are not necessarily those that yield desired outputs at one point in time, but rather are those that are robust across time and contexts. This robustness results from the incorporation of provisions that allow policies to be flexible and adapted in response to changes in contextual conditions.

Linking Theories of Policy and Administration

The study of uncertain and complex societal dilemmas requires thinking through interactions among different components of governance systems; critically, policy and administrative components. Thus, I suggest integration of theory and knowledge from policy and administrative studies. Policy theories give us insights about the processes through which particular instruments to deal with dilemmas are identified, the designs of these instruments, how to evaluate the systemic implications and impacts of policy instruments, and the opportunities and challenges of collective action in the policy process. Specified within policy theories are models of individual decision making that articulate motivations and cognitions that influence policy interpretation, cooperation, and compliance (DeCaro, 2018). Administrative theory gives us ways to think about how the structure, management, culture, and context of governing institutions temper the relationship between de jure and de facto policy. Intersection among theories of policy and administration will contribute to increased understanding of how mechanisms to deal with uncertain and complex dilemmas are both developed *and* applied.

Previous scholarship has planted seeds for thinking about the integration of the policy and administrative dimensions of governance, but none of these have been zealously sown. In their seminal study of policy implementation, Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) suggest – no, warn – that the “separation of policy design from implementation is fatal.” Operationally, they urge decision makers to craft policies considering the contexts of administration that will influence

how policies are carried out. Their work also stimulated intellectual inquiry. Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) built on the work of Pressman and Wildavsky in identifying a set of empirically testable statutory attributes presumed to influence policy implementation. Their work is particularly inspiring for thinking about the link between policy and administration in the context of uncertain and complex societal dilemmas because they connect statutory and administrative variables directly to problem tractability. Vincent Ostrom, and later Elinor Ostrom, directed attention to the designs of rules (e.g., policies) that govern how diversely structured administrative units produce and provide public goods and services. They too suggest the criticality of considering the unique attributes of dilemmas addressed through governance mechanisms. The work of Vincent and Elinor Ostrom has spawned a rich body of research on governance rules. However, even among this body of scholarship, the link between policy and administration has largely been lost. The suggestion to integrate policy and administration theory is not necessarily tied to the work referenced here, but rather an agnostic appeal to the field.

Cross-Scale Linkages

The heightened uncertainty and complexity of societal dilemmas suggests a greater need for research that addresses cross-scale linkages; research that leverages and integrates insights from micro-level theories of decision making, meso-level theories of group behavior, and macro-level theories that offer systems oriented perspectives. Studying uncertain and complex societal dilemmas from a cross-scale perspective is critical as many macro trends are fundamentally derived from challenges in individual decision making. Kahneman (2011), for example, highlights challenges rooted in psychology that make policy related decision making relating to the uncertain and complex issue of climate change so difficult: the effects are distant, the issue is viewed as abstract, and the information about it is contested.

But cross-scale analyses are no doubt difficult to conduct by scholars working on their own with the limited set of analytical tools that they know best. Thus, the recommendation to pursue cross-scale analyses naturally prompts continued receptivity and incentives for collaborative – and also interdisciplinary – research, which allows for the integration of diverse theoretical and methodological orientations. It, at least, requires more intellectual cross-over among scholars of public policy, public management, and public administration that remain remarkably siloed through the designs of our institutions and professional associations.

In Sum...

This paper uses evolving qualities of societal dilemmas as an anchor to discuss future directions for the practice and study of public administration. Globalization, growing populations, and increasing heterogeneity among populations across a wide range of dimensions are some of the factors associated with the heightened uncertainty and complexity of public policy challenges. These trends will undoubtedly endure; indeed, they are likely to accentuate over time.

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