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Exorcising Our Demons: Comments on a New Direction for Public Administration

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The field of public administration has grown accustomed to the presence of an identity crisis. In his opus, Dubnick (2018) addresses the existence of this crisis, noting where we are as a field and highlighting some of the debate that got us there. In response to Dubnick, I argue that our position as a profession rather than a discipline relates to the failure of the field to pay attention to our history. Giving consideration to our history, we find that public administration as a discipline contains those who study public administration, and a profession or practice of those who are public administrators. As a field, the conversation should move beyond the study or the practice and accept the duality that is a sign a mature subject area.

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Is there an identity crisis within the field of public administration? Dubnick (2018) begins his composition by arguing that not only is there a crisis, but that the crisis has been ongoing for some time. In many ways, I agree. We have challenged the concept of “public administration” to its very core, nearly reaching where anything can fit within the umbrella of the field. Early in my academic career, I was told that public administration was dead, public affairs rules the day, and that I had best accept that the inevitable: an interdisciplinary field of pure practice. As a field, we train managers—nothing more, nothing less. Future research should speak directly towards this perception. This perspective is not what I was taught during my graduate studies; it is not what I teach to my graduate students; and it is not why I chose public administration as an academic home. There is an identity crisis within public administration, but I would argue that this crisis is self-inflicted and self-perpetuating.

In this response to Dubnick’s article, I am looking at the concept of public administration as a field in light of the work that has been done since he first presented his paper at the annual conference of the American Political Science Association in 1999. I am centering my argument on what created the crisis and tying a solution to the crisis back to the establishment of the public administration discipline in the United States. I do not pretend that I alone can solve the

crisis in the minimal words that I am have for my commentary; however, I hope that I can provide some direction on how we as a discipline can begin to move past this crisis. If we are a field of demons, I hope to provide guidance on how we might exorcise some of them.

The New York Bureau of Municipal Research

Our crisis starts in much the same way as any identity crisis does – by either never knowing your history or by losing knowledge of it. By not knowing your past, there becomes an uncertainty of your place in the world. It is hard to know who you are and where you are going without knowing where you have come from. The impact of the disconnect between origin and present only grows across generational divides. Stories become lost and roots become harder and harder to trace. This failure can be seen in my own subfield of public budgeting and finance. Since Key's (1940) publication on the lack of budgetary theory, the common perception is that the subfield emerged without a theoretical foundation (also see Schick, 1988; Rubin, 2015). What this viewpoint neglects is that public administration, as we know it in the United States, emerged out of the New York Bureau of Municipal Research and its training school.

Founded as the Bureau of City Betterment in 1905 (Bruere, 1912; Dahlberg, 1966) and incorporated as the Bureau of Municipal Research in 1906 (McDonald, 2010; Stivers, 2000), the New York Bureau of Municipal Research operated on the belief that government administrators act ethically and efficiently when the citizenry are informed (Beard, 1919). As the first attempt in New York City to evaluate a government agency's operation to increase efficiency, it was believed that applying Taylor's principles of scientific management to city government would increase in the awareness of the citizenry to the activities of their elected officials and public administrators. By having an active citizenry, the Bureau hoped to make "democracy a living, vital thing" (Allen, 1949/1950, p. 159). Demonstrating the Bureau's dedication to the science of government, the subtitle of *Efficient Citizenship*, the Bureau's publication, was "[t]o Promote the Application of Scientific Principles to Government" (Bureau of Municipal Research, 1912, 1914). The Bureau did not limit itself to efficiency, however, as Henry Bruere (1947), one of the former directors of the Bureau, said that "[a]ll was historically logical in what we undertook" (pg. 46).

The success of the Bureau in New York City led to the formation of similarly structured bureaus throughout the United States, establishing the survey method as the foundation of administrative methodology (Dahlberg, 1966; McDonald, 2010). To meet this increased demand for experienced staff to run the new organizations, and the associated drain on their own staff, the Bureau establish a training school in 1911. Intending to "train men for the study and administration of public business" (Upson, 1938, p. 173), the training school emphasized the teaching of scientific principles to those who had an interest in the public sector (Allen, 1945). The school's curriculum included a series of lectures and symposiums, which often featured guests, including Frederick Taylor and Mary Parker Follett. While the school differed from traditional academic institutions in that it emphasized practical experience alongside theoretical education, the educational piece of the curriculum focused on the theory of good government and effective administration. The practical experience focused on how to apply the theory. By studying public budgeting, accounting, law, and municipal politics; graduates of the training school were ready to address the current problems in government faced at the time, but also prepared for addressing future concerns. To assist in the sharing of knowledge, the Bureau, its staff, and its graduates published some of the first research on public management, and produced the first public administration textbook in the country (McDonald, 2010). Ultimately,

the experience of the Bureau and their training school led to the creation of the first public administration programs at universities in the United States.

Established as a Duality

It should be noted that the Bureau envisioned itself as developing a science rather than a profession (Beard, 1919). Like other sciences, what the Bureau epitomized was a field that included its scientific study, but also its practical application. We abandoned this perspective at some point between the end of the Bureau experiment in 1921 and the publication of Key's article in 1940. In its place, we moved to disciplinary obscurity. This obscurity led to Key (1940) and others to conclude that we have no theoretical foundation. It is also this obscurity that Dubnick (1999, 2018) explores and challenges.

I first read Dubnick's (1999) conference paper in Richard Feiock's "Logics of Inquiry" course at Florida State University (for his own commentary of Dubnick's opus, see Feiock [2018]). Over the years, the memory of the piece has stay with me, leading me to assign it to my own doctoral students here at NC State University. While Dubnick (personal communication, October 12, 2017) has said that he has softened somewhat in his views since he presented the paper at the annual conference of the American Political Science Association, I am not sure that the field has come to an agreement. Whether we believe that public administration is a practice or a discipline, we must acknowledge that in our infancy we were established as a field that incorporates both.

To put our duality into perspective, I would like to draw a comparison between the field of public administration and medicine. A doctorate of medicine (MD) trains individuals to be physicians. Graduates of MD programs are prepared to treat the sick. In effect, they embody the practice of medicine. Although less common, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs exist, often times within medical schools, preparing scientists for the rigorous study of medicine. The graduates of the PhD programs study the illnesses and diseases that strike the human body and work to develop cures. Within the medical field, the discipline and the practice are two sides of the same coin. They work in tandem to create the ultimate outcome: a healthy society.

In public administration, we have the same dual nature. Master of Public Administration (MPA) and Doctorate of Public Administration (DPA) programs around the world train graduates for the task of working in public organizations. That is, graduates are prepared for the practice of the field. PhD programs, on the other hand, train researchers in the science of the discipline to advance the theory that guides new generations of practitioners. This is who we are and how we were created as field. Any departure from this duality would be misguided.

Concluding Notes

Dubnick (1999, 2018) argues that public administration needs a consensus on "the field's status as a social science discipline" (p. 61). While it has been nearly twenty years since the argument was first made, the question remains to be answered of whether we have met this consensus. Based on my own view of the field, I fear that we have not yet reached that agreement. If anything, I believe that we have gotten worse. The divide between those who favor the practice and those who adhere to the discipline is ever growing, with both sides entrenching into their own academic corners.

But hope is not lost. I joined the Midwest Public Affairs Conference (MPAC) as its treasurer just as the organization was beginning to form. It was through my position on the MPAC board that I helped recruit the first editor-in-chief, and many of the editorial board members, for the *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs*. In the early days of the journal we established our principles as being a publication outlet interested in connecting research to practice. Rather than choosing sides, we planted ourselves in the middle, much in the way that I believe the Bureau founders would have wanted us too. Good research should inform the science of public administration, but should also inform how we practice in our field. We might not have reached the consensus that Dubnick desires, we started that way and we are making gains to return to our roots.

Disclosure Statement

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