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Sanjay K. Pandey¹

Abstract

Despite widespread agreement about goals of knowledge development in public administration, there is imbalance in efforts directed at these goals. The overlap between the domains of theory and practice is not substantial. Important concerns in public administration theory and practice are outweighed by naïve quantitative bias (NQB), an unfortunate methodological artifact. This symposium seeks to highlight this imbalance and to nudge the public administration scholarly community toward paying attention to theoretical and practical matters, recognizing NQB and mitigating its undesirable effects on knowledge development. Broadly speaking, two recommendations emerge from symposium contributions. The first recommendation emphasizes paying attention to theoretical goals. The second recommendation is to promote reflexivity about how the domains of theory and method interact to counter the methodological artifact of NQB. A brief overview of each article in the symposium and its contribution to advancing knowledge development is provided.

Keywords

theory, practice, method, naïve quantitative bias (NQB), methodological pluralism, methodological determinism, theoretical determinism

Let me begin by making two uncontroversial points that seem almost jejune at first blush. First, as a scholarly community, we want public administration research to be theoretically rich and insightful. Second, we want public administration research to be well grounded in and useful for public administration practice. We are likely to get widespread agreement on these two points. Yet, the road beyond easy agreement on these two points is neither well-paved nor pretty.

¹The George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA

Corresponding Author:

Sanjay K. Pandey, Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration, The George Washington University, 805 21st St NW, Washington, DC 20052, USA.
Email: skpandey@gwu.edu

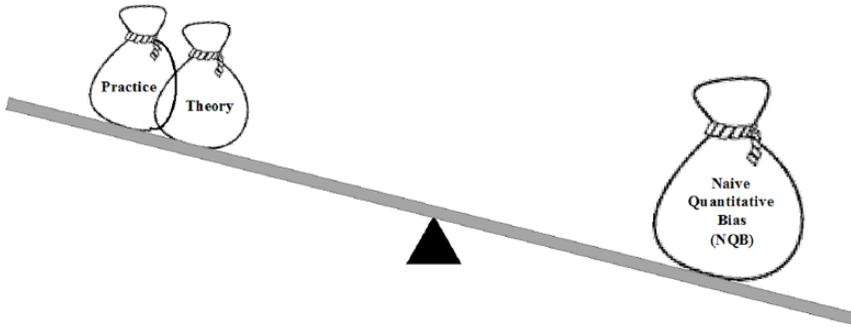


Figure 1. Methodological artifact of NQB outweighs theory and practice concerns.

Why is it so? Because as a scholarly community, our efforts are misaligned and we are not appropriately reflexive about the relationship between theory and method. Ideally, the rich world of public administration practice would loom large in setting the research agenda for the field. Relatedly, public administration theory should be a big player, and the rich interplay between theory and method should guide the trajectory of knowledge development in a happy direction.

The reality, however, is that this interplay is unbalanced (see Figure 1). Although there is some overlap between the domains of theory and practice, it is not substantial. Moreover, taken together important concerns in public administration theory and practice do not receive as much weight as they should. Counterbalancing and perhaps tipping the scale is NQB, an unfortunate methodological artifact. I want to be clear here that I see value in quantitative methods, and thus, my goal is not to articulate an anti-quantitative position; rather highlight the opportunity costs of misplaced vim and vigor.

Why should we care about NQB if our goal is to create better theory and promote better integration with practice? Because NQB distorts the goals of knowledge development enterprise in public administration. Pandey, Pandey, Breslin, and Broadus (2017) draw attention to NQB trade-offs that remain invisible to active participants thus: “[Overestimating] the power of quantitative techniques results in acts of methodological hubris that showcase ‘smoke and mirrors’ effects and slow down theoretical advancement” (p. 322). To invoke the cliché, NQB represents triumph of technique (method) over purpose (theoretical and practical knowledge). This loss of perspective is aided by acts of linguistic distancing. The richness of phenomena experienced and described by public administration scholars and practitioners in plain language must abide by the straitjacket of mathematical and statistical terminology. This would not be a problem worth puzzling over if rich and meaningful two-way communication existed. Unfortunately, there is a secular trend leading to an impaired ability to clearly communicate about tools of analysis and goals of analysis.

The symposium seeks to highlight this imbalance and to nudge the public administration scholarly community toward paying attention to theoretical and practical matters, recognizing NQB and mitigating its undesirable effects on knowledge development. We were fortunate to attract prominent and/or emerging junior scholars who worked in collaboration with noted senior scholars on this important undertaking. About six contributors are recent doctoral graduates or current doctoral students, seven contributors have played leadership roles in a variety of scholarly societies, and two contributors have been decorated with the Waldo Award, the lifetime achievement award in public administration scholarship. This diverse group of contributing scholars and the editor owe a debt of gratitude to the journal's anonymous reviewers who raised significant issues and challenged the contributors to hone their contributions. Nine articles were accepted as part of the symposium—Six are featured in the current issue and the remaining three will appear in the next issue.

What do symposium contributors recommend for bringing balance to the reality depicted in Figure 1? Broadly speaking, two recommendations emerge. The first recommendation emphasizes paying attention to theoretical goals. The second recommendation is to promote reflexivity about how the domains of theory and method interact to counter the methodological artifact of NQB.

Prioritizing Theoretical Concerns

Public administration as a discipline prizes practical and usable knowledge. Compared with other practice-oriented fields, public administration scholars have favored the theory-development route to knowledge development (Frederickson & Smith, 2003; Riccucci, 2010). The term *theory*, however, covers a large terrain from grand theory to a spatially and temporally localized understanding or technique. Grand theories seek to explain too much and make sweeping assumptions leading to an inability to come up with granular predictions and guidance. Hyperlocalized understanding, on the contrary, does not generalize well and offers a poor guide for action in other related contexts.

Prioritizing theoretical concerns in public administration, therefore, is about undertaking theoretical work that falls in the vast chasm between grand theories and localized understanding. A key theoretical task in this domain is elevating theoretical concerns over methodological minutiae. There are several ways this can be accomplished. Symposium contributions illustrate at least three different ways of prioritizing theoretical concerns, namely, using middle range theory to systematize knowledge, developing action-oriented context-sensitive practical knowledge, and bringing new theory to address central but neglected themes in public administration research.

Gordon Abner, Sun Young Kim, and James Perry (2017) propose that public administration scholars embrace middle range theory and use it as a “tool for theory-building.” The value of middle range theory lies in offering a roadmap, a systematization of seemingly unrelated empirical findings. Abner et al. apply this approach to empirical research on two central themes in public sector human resource management—performance-related pay and representative bureaucracy.

Estelle Raimondo and Kathryn Newcomer (2017) challenge the public administration scholarly community to rethink the role of theory. They argue that given the closeness of the field to the world of practice, there is a need to invest in developing theoretical knowledge that is context-sensitive and practical. Raimondo and Newcomer argue that the rise of mixed-method research design offers opportunities for public administration scholars to generate such knowledge. They illustrate this with a discussion of how mixed-method design approaches can be used in typical quantitative studies and also offer an example of a mixed-method study at an international organization.

Rachel Breslin, Sheela Pandey, and Norma Riccucci (2017) introduce intersectionality as an analytic tool, relevant to public sector leadership theory and practice. Their premise is that public sector leadership research has, thus far, failed to account for the unique experiences and structural limitations faced by those who occupy multiple marginal social categories. Breslin, Pandey, and Riccucci advance intersectionality as a way to drive public leadership research beyond its current focus on individual and monolithic categories of social inequality.

Promoting Reflexivity in Theory and Method Interaction

Prioritizing theoretical goals over methodological goals, however, is not enough. We need a deeper understanding of the interplay between theory and method, one that goes beyond mastering and implementing arcane and sophisticated methodological techniques. We need to foster reflexivity about the interplay of theory and method. As Michael Patton (2015) reminds us, “Reflexivity encompasses reflection—indeed, mandates reflection—but it means to take the reflective process deeper and make it more systematic than is usually implied by the term reflection” (p. 70). To be reflexive, thus, requires an awareness and curiosity at many levels—cognitive, political, sociological, cultural, and philosophical.

Promoting reflexivity on how the domains of theory and method interact in public administration needs to begin by recognizing two common knowledge development pathways: *theoretical determinism* and *methodological determinism*. The *theoretical determinism* pathway gives priority to theory and views methodological choices as subordinate to theoretical concerns and intellectual curiosity about phenomena. Carried to an extreme, this can result in theoretical knowledge that is not particularly relevant to practice. The *methodological determinism* pathway, on the contrary, gives priority to developments in the state of the art in methodology. Like a fire feeding itself with all that lies in its wake, methodological determinism can undermine rich theoretical conversations by reorienting discourse and focusing scholarly community’s energy almost exclusively on methodological matters.

Methodological pluralism (Riccucci 2010), an otherwise laudable feature of public administration scholarship that fosters an openness to different approaches, makes public administration scholarship vulnerable to methodological contagion effects. This is because public administration, unlike sister disciplines, does not have a self-identified group of methodological specialists in its ranks and peer-reviewed public

administration journals that focus on methodology (Grimmelikhuijsen, Tummers, & Pandey, 2017). Thus, methodological pluralism combines with methodological determinism to create tailwinds that can power some perverse trends.

Some of these trends begin with good intentions that are not fulfilled. The well-known limitations of cross-sectional analysis and its inability to uncover underlying causal dynamics is a point of departure for many efforts. Cross-sectional analysis, relying on data collected at one point in time typically through a survey questionnaire, is a staple in public administration methodological toolkit, indeed in most social sciences. Two broadly competing approaches have emerged to address limitations identified with cross-sectional data, with one appealing to theory and offering testable propositions consistent with theory and the other proposing empirical and analytic means for uncovering causal dynamics. Although well-developed efforts that follow either approach can be functional, the risks of methodological opportunism also abound. The development of empirical strategies, for example, has also produced tropes that are trotted out without due diligence and necessary discrimination.

There are two ways symposium contributor efforts contribute to promoting reflexivity about the interplay between domains of theory and method. First, contributors take an in-depth look at methodological trends as tropes and offer suggestions on appropriate ways of using method to advance theoretical concerns. Second, contributors use peer-reviewed literature in highly regarded public administration journals over the last two to three decades to (a) conduct a social network analysis of the important literature on public service motivation and draw out implications for the interplay between theory and method, and (b) identify characteristics of highly cited articles, using citation as a proxy for impact. A brief overview of each of these studies is provided below.

Justin Stritch (2017) discusses the emergence and integration of panel designs and longitudinal analyses in testing causal theories. Stritch demonstrates that only a small proportion of quantitative studies published between 2011 and 2015 in top public administration journals were longitudinal. Given the relative novelty of such methods, scholars need to be aware of the potential for misapplication. First, the novelty of such methods might create the false impression that analysis of longitudinal data is inherently better than cross-sectional data. Stritch cautions that while longitudinal data hold greater *potential* for causal inference than cross-sectional data, whether the potential is realized is based on both the data and analytic decisions. Second, it is possible that researchers discount time itself as a theoretical construct of interest. Finally, the easy availability of longitudinal data from some sources may also influence the substantive foci of public management research.

Randall Davis and Edmund Stazyk (2017) focus their attention on the use of structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques, developed by applied psychologists, in public administration. First, assumptions underlying various SEM and econometric techniques compete, creating significant challenges in integrating multiple methodological approaches. Researchers tend to make the questionable assumption that simultaneous use of multiple advanced statistical techniques provides a superior test of theory. Second, inherently confirmatory techniques are often used in an exploratory

manner. To some extent, methodological determinism thus encourages scholars to morph statistical techniques designed to confirm theory into exploratory techniques suited for generating theory. This leads to methodological progress being mistaken for theoretical development, casting doubt on substantive conclusions.

Bert George and Sanjay Pandey (2017) take up the almost fetishized response to common source bias in public administration scholarship and argue for a more sanguine and level-headed engagement with common source bias. They argue that the epistemic standard of predictive accuracy, undergirding calls to correct for common source bias, is ill-suited for public administration research. George and Pandey draw upon extensive psychology and management scholarship to offer a balanced perspective on how public administration scholarship can deal with common source bias.

Nicola Belle and Paola Cantarelli (2017) advance the methodological debate within experimental public administration by tackling the foundational elements of the theory of experimentation and related methodological implementation challenges. In particular, they discuss the assumptions behind the theory of experimentation and the consequences of their violation, the main types of experimental designs, the computation of optimal sample sizes, and the procedures for dealing with noncompliance in field experiments. Belle and Cantarelli, then, conclude with a to-do list to develop an experimental public administration that closes the gap between valid randomized trials and real problems in public organizations and institutions.

Deneen Hatmaker, Amy Smith, Sanjay Pandey, and Sushmita Subedi (2017) carry out a social network analysis of nearly 30 years of public service motivation scholarship. Hatmaker and colleagues divide the study period into three distinct eras and find that the social networks connecting scholars is not dense and cohesive and this does not change even as the area of inquiry matures and attracts many more participants. Hatmaker and colleagues identify benefits and risks associated with the diffuseness of the social network. On the positive side, a disconnected network is more receptive and open to diverse perspectives. On the contrary, diffuse networks run the risk of conflating methodological and theoretical concerns.

Rebekah St. Clair, Diana Hicks, and Kimberly Isett (2017) take a look at last 20 years of public administration scholarship and identify characteristics of the most cited articles. St. Clair, Hicks, and Isett use a fairly conservative standard of citation impact, requiring that the article be cited consistently across time. They find that articles with highest citation impact typically give higher priority to theory, with more than half appearing in *Public Administration Review* (32 highly cited) and the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (14 highly cited).

Conclusion

The symposium contributions raise significant questions and offer constructive suggestions on how we can improve the knowledge development enterprise in public administration. There is much that authors need to be responsive to in an individual peer-reviewed contribution, and therefore, it is unfair to hold every single paper accountable for the state of the discipline. This is where the auto-pilot of the “invisible hand” of peer-reviewing (or

orchestration of a specific point of view through a few peer-reviewed articles) needs help, and we hope that the symposium contributions provide that help!

As an intellectual community, we need to keep our eye on the prize. We need better and more theory, we need to enhance the relevance of theoretical knowledge to practice, and we need better methods (sans NQB). As the articles in the symposium testify, there is no better way to keep our eyes on the prize than fostering reflexivity about the labors and products of generating new knowledge.

Sometimes, NQB elevates technique over purpose and we lose perspective on the goals of knowledge development enterprise. For example, the methodological contagion effects set off by common source bias remediation frenzy may suppress promising avenues of research and also give rise to questionable practices and trends. At other times, it is a misunderstanding or misapplication of technique that leads to dubious and unsupported theoretical claims.

Perhaps, one of the most challenging tasks facing us as a community is making knowledge development enterprise more relevant to the world of practice. Whereas public administration has notable institutions (e.g., *National Academy of Public Administration*; *American Society of Public Administration*) that can theoretically support this task, we still have not perfected an institutional niche where practitioners and scholars can work collaboratively to advance this important purpose. More than a single act, single article, or a single journal, we need an ecosystem that supports and encourages meaningful dialogue and action on generating practical and usable knowledge.

May the spirit of the Sanskrit invocation, *tamaso ma jyotir gamaya*, guide us as we seek to balance and rejuvenate the link between theory and practice in public administration, appreciating the benefits of methodological progress, questioning broad sweeping claims or methodological contagion effects when appropriate, and promoting theoretical development that better serves public administration practice.

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Author Biography

Sanjay K. Pandey is Shapiro professor of public policy and public administration at the Trachtenberg School, The George Washington University. He is a recipient of the NASPAA/ASPA Distinguished Research Award and an elected fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration.