

Re-examining the Perceived Complexity of Public Administration and its Implication for Research in the Discipline

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Abstract

The intricate nature of Public Administration as a discipline is well established in literature but a concern that stems from such disposition is its implication for the discipline's research tradition/methodology. This paper attempts to contribute to the longstanding debate of what constitute the research tradition of Public Administration by first re-examining the question of why Public Administration as a discipline is complex with focus on issues categorized as endogenous (i.e. issues that stem from within) and exogenous factors (issues that stem without from research environment) in the discipline. Again, the paper also sought to highlight some of the challenges researchers face in conducting inquiry in the field and their implication for research. To achieve the above objectives, relevant literatures such as journal articles and books were consulted. The paper argues that contention over identity of Public Administration, the evolution and presence of multiple paradigms are among major endogenous sources of complexity of discipline while the influence of other disciplines and environment of Public Administration are among key exogenous factors. The paper argues also that researchers contend with a number of dilemmas including the challenge of standardization of research approach. The paper therefore concludes that Public Administration researchers must have a deep understanding of multidisciplinary (especially social science and management science) research traditions and methodology as well as each research environment/context to align with global best practices and the evolving tradition of Public administration research.

Keywords: Complexity, Public Administration, Research, Methodology

1.0 Introduction

To assert that the subject matter of Public Administration is complex and multifaceted will only be restating the obvious, given the ambiguity, volatility, 'infiniteness of public administration policy and service problems (Eppel, & Rhodes, 2018). Arriving at a clear and unique conceptualization of complexity appears to be problematic in extant

literature; instead, complexity is described using real-world systems (Rosenhead, Franco, Grint, and Friedland, 2019). For instance, complexity is described as the study of phenomena which emerge from a collection of interacting objects (Johnson, 2009, p. 1 in Rosenhead, Franco, Grint, & Friedland, 2019). Given the multidimensional nature and contentions in

the field of study of Public Administration (Frederickson, Smith, Larimer, & Licari, 2018), complexity is also apparent. Examples of contention and complexity include the identity crisis that challenged the discipline since its inception as well as the societal and ethical complexity on the field (Waldo, 1975; Riccucci, 2007). The extent of complexity in the discipline of Public Administration virtually permeates what we know and how we come to know ideas in the discipline (Riccucci, 2007). Various scholarly evidences attest to presence of complexity in Public Administration. For instance, the classical debate over the scientific status of the discipline (Wright, 2015; Riccucci, 2007; Renwick, March 1944; Dhal, 1947) and the attendant polarization of scholars over the scientific affiliation of the discipline reveals evident intricateness in the discipline. Similarly, the divergent views held about the scope of the discipline are yet another source of discrepancy. To a school of thought, Public Administration is perceived as a managerial function (comprised of roles and functions peculiar with managers such as planning, organizing, staffing, directing, budgeting, and controlling) while to another Public Administration is seen from an integral perspective (i.e. Public Administration encompasses both managerial and subordinate functions).

The scope of Public Administration is also embedded in contention as divergent notions of the scope of the discipline have developed over the years. For instance, there is the managerial view (i.e. Public Administration covers functions carried out

by managers such as planning, directing etc.) in contrast to integral view (both managerial and subordinate functions). Again, traditional writers restrict the scope of public administration to the executive branch of the government, modern scholars extend the scope of the discipline to the whole government and the governance perspectives include activities of Non-Governmental Organization (Shafritz, Russell, Borick, & Hyde, 2017; Chakrabarty, and Chand, 2012). Riccucci, classified Public Administration as post normal science and further asserts that the logic of inquiry in the field of public administration is multifaceted with enormous room for a diversity of perspectives (Riccucci, 2007). Osborne, Cui, Aulton, and Macfarlane, (2023) and Mitchell (2018) have both highlighted disconnect between theory and practice of public administration as another concern. The central questions deserving cogent answers are: why has the discipline assumed such a complex state?; what are the sources of complexity in the discipline?; what challenges do researchers face in conducting inquiry in the field?; what are their implication for research? To answer the foregoing questions attention will be turned to literature.

A cursory glance at literatures of Public Administration reveals that several works have been published to highlight varying perspective of diversity (elements of complexity), such as establish the academic status of the discipline of Public Administration within the continuum of science (Wright, 2015; Riccucci, 2007; Renwick, March 1944; Dhal, 1947), to

underscore the various paradigm and approaches (Yang, Zhang, & Holzer, 2007; Wright, 2015;), to stress the far reaching effect of a dynamic environment of public administration (Ongaro, Gong, & Jing, 2021; Chakrabarty, and Chand, 2012) as well as essays and studies aligned towards the application of complexity theory to the study of issues in public administration (Wernli, et. al 2023; Tenbenschel, 2020; Rosenhead, Franco, Grint, & Friedland, 2019; Rhodes, & Eppel, 2018; Teisman, & Klijn, 2008).

It is imperative to note that existing literatures have illuminated different paths of complexity theory and its application to various areas of practice in public administration/public sector. Yet, there appears to be a missing link in extant literature on the broad categorization of the sources of complexity in the field of Public Administration as an academic discipline, and the implication of such complexity for research/ researchers in the discipline also. Hence, this paper is an attempt to fill this apparent void through a qualitative research approach that leverages on relevant extant literature including journal articles, books and reports to elucidate key points.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: 2.0 covers theoretical underpinning of complexity and its intersection with the discipline of Public Administration, 3.0 dwells on complexity and the discipline of Public Administration while 4.0 examines challenges of Public Administration research arising from complexity, 5.0 wraps up with conclusion and implication of the

complexity of Public Administration to researches in the discipline.

2.0 Theoretical Underpinning of Complexity and its Intersection with Public Administration

This sub-section begins by establishing the theoretical base of the concept of complexity before proceeding to highlight its link with the discipline of Public Administration, 3.0 examines complexity in the discipline of Public Administration

2.1 Theoretical Underpinning of Complexity

It is evident from literature that the concept of complexity can be safely anchored upon complexity theory. Complexity theory has roots in various disciplines, including biology, physics, and computer science (Klijn, 2008). Klijn further argues that complexity theory is actually a collection of a number of different theories namely complex adaptive systems dissipative structures, autopoiesis theory, chaos theory, and increasing returns and path dependency. Rosenhead, Franco, Grint, and Friedland on the other hand suggest that the ideas that evolved into what is known as Complexity theory is traceable to three broad strands of theoretical lens namely: 1. *Holism*, 2. *Cybernetics & General Systems Theory*, and 3. *Chaos & Adaptive Systems* (Rosenhead, Franco, Grint, and Friedland, 2019). *General Systems Theory* pioneered by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in response to the limitations of traditional linear and mechanistic models in understanding dynamic, unpredictable systems (Bertalanffy, 1968). Other contributions to complexity theory are John Holland's work

on adaptive systems (Holland, 1992) and Ilya Prigogine's argument on the on dissipative structures and the concept of "order out of chaos (Prigogine, & Stengers, 1984). Complexity theory holds that complex systems such as economies, societies, and ecosystems are composed of numerous interconnected elements that interact in non-linear, unpredictable ways from the parts and systems naturally organize into patterns without external direction (Wernli, et. al. 2023; Rosenhead, Franco, Grint, & Friedland, 2019; Teisman, & Klijn, 2008; Klijn, 2008). Head, (2022) for instance, illustrates complexity as a variable that intersect with uncertainty and value divergence to yield wicked problems of public policy (i.e difficult and multidimensional problems).

Critics of the theory especially from management field including Lynn, (2005) and Bovaird (2008) berates complexity theory's abstract nature, focus on uncertainty and unpredictability, stressing that it is difficult to apply the theory to address practical issues, for decision-making and it also lacks prescriptive power in the contexts of Public Administration..

2.2 Intersection of Complexity Theory and Public Administration

Extant literature evidence suggests that there has been a rise in the application of complexity theory to the study of public administration and policy (Jalonen, 2024). The debate over the applicability of complexity theory to public administration however rages on, with some scholars advocating for its capacity/attempting to use it to explain dynamic governance systems such as network governance, agile or

adaptive governance systems (Wernli, et. al. 2023; Osborne, Cui, Aulton, & Macfarlane, 2023; Tenbessel, 2020; Eppel, & Rhodes, 2018; Castelnovo, & Sorrentino, 2017; Rosenhead, Franco, Grint, & Friedland, 2019; Rhodes, & Eppel, 2018; Teisman & Gerrits, 2014; Teisman, & Klijn, 2008; Meek, 2010) and others critiquing its limited practical use (Bovaird, 2008; Lynn, 2008). The key issue remains how public administration can balance the need for adaptability with the need for stability and accountability as an applied discipline.

3.0 Complexity in the Discipline of Public Administration

The focus here is to establish the nature of complexity in the Discipline of Public Administration, identify and discuss the sources of complexity in the discipline of Public Administration

3.1 Nature of Complexity of in the Discipline of Public Administration

Diverse arguments have been advanced extant literature to highlight the intricacies/issues that amplify complexity in the discipline of Public Administration (Head, 2022; Hustedt, Randma-Liiv, & Savi, 2020; Shafritz, Russell, Borick, & Hyde, 2017; Waldo, 1975; Eppel, & Rhodes, 2018). For instance, the field of Public Administration is reportedly burdened with questions about its "identity" (there is an age long question of whether the discipline is a science or an art) since its birth and many questions continue to challenge the study, teaching, and practice in the discipline (Ricucci, 2007; Waldo, 1975).

There is also contention among scholars (Osborne, Cui, Aulton, & Macfarlane, 2023;

Head, 2022; Mitchell, 2018; Van der Walddt, 2017; Meier, 2015; Head, 2010) over the strength of the link between theory and practice of the discipline. For instance, Pollit, (2020) argues that there is disconnect between the public administration research agenda and current practitioner problems and further asserts that public administration scholarship seem to be slipping away from the world of practice. At the centre of the debate are scholars (Osborne, et. al., 2023; Mitchell, 2018) that call for reconciliation between the two sides of public administration as an applied field of study.

Also, Hustedt, Randma-Liiv, & Savi, (2020) used the metaphoric expression “chameleon” to describe public administration, arguing that public administration changes its colour based on its environment. It is argued that the contextual dynamics of the environment of Public Administration makes it difficult to arrive at truly universal generalizations in the discipline without recourse to variation in local and social characteristics that impinges on public administration (Eppel, & Rhodes, 2018). Still, scholarship in the discipline of Public Administration has been found in a systematic literature review of public administration papers published in a century (100 years) to be fragmented. Such fragmentation stems from the integration of scholarship influenced by specific cultural geographical, historical, and institutional contexts on the one hand and on the other due to the embedment of varying professional habits and standards from multiple disciplines such as political science, economics, law, public policy, management, sociology (Vogel, & Hattke, 2022). The

position of Vogel, & Hattke, was earlier echoed by Bauer, (2018) and Riccucci, (2007).

3.2 Sources of Complexity in Public Administration Discipline

Arising from the varying lens of analysis in extant literature, this paper attempts to classify the factors that spur complexity in the field of Public Administration into two broad categories, namely: *endogenous* (inherent) and *exogenous* (referred to as external/environmental) factors. It is important to note that even though each category of these sources are distinguishable, from the other, there is no water tight separation, as there are sometimes overlap among these categories.

3.2.1 Endogenous factors of Complexity in Public Administration

The issues included under this grouping mainly emanate from within the discipline, its scholars and focus of inquiry. They include: contention over identity and approach to study in the discipline of Public Administration, *The evolution and presence of multiple paradigms*,

Contention over identity and approach to study in the discipline of Public Administration: firstly, since its inception, Public Administration has been marked by on-going debates about its identity, particularly regarding whether it should be considered a science or an art. These debates continue to influence how the field is studied, taught, and practiced (Riccucci, 2007; Waldo, 1975). Scholars also disagree on the extent to which theory and practice in public administration are connected

(Osborne, Cui, Aulton, & Macfarlane, 2023; Head, 2022; Mitchell, 2018; Van der Walddt, 2017; Meier, 2015; Head, 2010) with varying positions for or against linking theory with practice. For instance, Pollitt (2020) argues that there is a gap between public administration research and the issues faced by practitioners, lamenting that academic work in the field is becoming increasingly detached from practical concerns. More concerning is the widening and entrenching gap between scholars aligned with practice and those for theory in the discipline Public Administration with attendant growing followership across the divide in academic communities (Dubnick, 2018 in Osborne, Cui, Aulton, & Macfarlane, 2023).

The evolution and presence of multiple paradigms: a Secondly, it is also possible to link the complexity of Public Administration discipline to the evolution and presence of multiple paradigms (philosophical approach/lens) of interpreting reality in the discipline (Hussain, Elyas, & Nasseef, 2013). For instance, the traditional Public Administration paradigm associated with theoretical orientation of bureaucracy influenced and still influences scholarship and practice (Frederickson, Smith, Larimer, & Licari, 2018). Similarly, development administration movement, public management movement, the positivist, post-positivist, the modernist, post-modernist, and the likes of have all contributed to the surge in heterogeneity in philosophy and methodology within the discipline (Durant, & Rosenbloom, 2017). This has consequently created divergent schools of thought and understanding among scholars

(Shafritz, Russell, Borick, & Hyde, 2017; Riccucci, 2010; Riccucci, 2007). The development of Public Administration as a distinct discipline has evolved with it, several lens of reality which continues to influence scholarship in discipline (Riccucci, 2010).

The complexity of human beings as a key element of Public Administration discipline: Thirdly, Public Administration as an applied field of study has to interface with and obtain data from or through human beings in most inquiry just like other social sciences and related fields. Empirical evidence suggests that human beings are dynamic, unpredictable and subjective (Dhal, 1947). Reflecting further, Robert Dahl argued that it may be difficult to employ experimental approach in studies involving disciplines that deal with human beings. Although, modern research advancement as reported in recent studies has made it possible for experimental approach to be used (Stritch, Pedersen, & Taggart, 2017), the classical concern of Dhal over the dynamic and unpredictable nature of human beings still hold today (Shafritz, Russell, Borick, & Hyde, 2017). Eliminating bias/value judgement may be difficult in the field even when study focus on organizations because the complexity of organisations populated by human beings may influence responses that may be gathered for research (Riccucci, 2007). Consequently, the concern is that behaviours or performance that can be observed to generate data for a study may be subjective. This characteristic of Public Administration and other social sciences with similar attributes in research inquiry has led some

critics to refer to it as “soft science” or post normal science (Neuman, 2014; Riccucci, 2007).

3.2.2 Exogenous factors of Complexity in Public Administration

The influence of other disciplines: A major source of complexity in Public Administration is the influence of other disciplines culminating in its multidisciplinary nature. Public Administration field is heavily influenced by other disciplines. Scholars argue that public administration was shaped by political science, enriched by social and behavioral sciences, and further developed by management sciences (Vogel, & Hattke, 2022; Hustedt, Randma-Liiv, & Savi, 2020; Bauer, 2018; McNabb, 2017). This has influenced the knowledge, theories, and research methods used in the field, many of which are borrowed from these disciplines. As a result, public administration is often seen as lacking a core theory of its own, instead inheriting various theories from its diverse disciplinary roots (Riccucci, 2010; McNabb, 2017). Public administration scholarship is fragmented due to its integration of diverse cultural, geographical, historical, and institutional influences, as well as the inclusion of professional standards from various disciplines like political science, economics, law, public policy, management, and sociology (Vogel, & Hattke, 2022). This multidisciplinary nature introduces a variety of traditions and values, making it challenging for researchers to adhere to a single, unified tradition within the field.

The environment/ Context of Public Administration: another external source of complexity and divergence in Public Administration discipline is the varying environmental contextual setting of Public Administration. Vogel, & Hattke, (2022) for instance revealed from a study of articles published in a journal over a period of 100 years that Public Administration scholarship was influenced by specific cultural geographical, historical, and institutional contexts. Ongaro, Gong, & Jing, (2021) while citing Virtanen, (2013, pp. 9-10) also stress the role of the environment which is referred to as *factual contexts* and it connotes entities or dimensions of social reality: place (where?), time (when?), actors (who?), and substances (what?) and factual context is the context of public administration as part of social reality. Thus context is not just one context, instead, it can be multiple and intersecting contexts that may include political, social ideological, cultural, economic etcetera which act upon and influence the outcome of Public Administration studies (Ongaro, Gong, & Jing, 2021).

4.0 Challenges of Public Administration Research Arising from Complexity

Consequent upon the foregoing, some challenges to Public Administration research stemming from complexity of the discipline in extant literature are identified and discussed as follows:

The challenge of standardization of Research Approach/Technique in the Discipline: Research traditions in the field of public administration today are numerous and varying. Some traditions are entirely

quantitative, others are qualitative, and there are still research traditions that enjoin mixed method i.e. combining both qualitative and quantitative methods (Riccucci, 2010). Scholars of public administration continue debate over the best approach to use in research inquiry over the years (Neuman, 2014). The challenge of developing an all-embracing research tradition is not peculiar to public administration but it has also characterised other social sciences (Riccucci, 2010). Sometimes, the dominant orientation in a given clime or faculty can be arguably said to significantly influence the type of research methodology and theoretical point of view to be adopted (Creswell, 2012).

Respondents Bias: Research inquiry in the field of public administration involves data collection from human beings/organisations which is mostly applied. Hence, like most social science and related discipline research, it is often difficult to separate values and bias of respondents from the facts on ground (Neuman, 2014). The researcher in public administration inquiry is most likely to face a real world situation where government organizations, officials as well as and nonprofits organizations constitute the sample frame or units of analysis. The respondents operate in an environment where multiple political norms, diverse values and interest interplay (Riccucci, 2010). It is therefore very difficult to eliminate respondent bias given such situation.

Accessing target respondents/official documents: accessibility of respondents is a critical factor in social and management

science research. Practically speaking, most research endeavours in the field of Public Administration deals with respondents that are predominantly senior public officials and accessing them can be an uphill task because of the bureaucratic nature of public organisations and the often busy daily schedule of officials which make it very difficult/impossible to track them down to answer relevant questions that will help the researcher achieve the objectives of the study. It is even more difficult to employ observation research technique to gather data in closed public organisational setting than open ones. In this sense, the close organisations uphold high level of secrecy and their documents are highly classified. Still, gaining access to some hard to reach respondents such as victims of abuse, people with disability and the likes may be difficult in traditional survey research (Stritch, Pedersen, & Taggart, 2017). Related to the challenge of accessing public officials or organisations is the difficulty in accessing relevant official documents for an inquiry. Hence, there is need to seek permission to obtain data (Cresswel, 2012). In situations where the nature of the research problem necessitates collecting data from official documents or official records, the researcher will also face the problem of restriction of access to certain classified documents.

Upholding ethical obligations: As an applied field of study, public administration research usually involves human beings who are either; members of the public, public officials, groups, or public organisations and cannot manipulated or treated like objects or chemicals as it is done in the pure/natural sciences without being mindful of ethics.

Ethics defines what is or is not legitimate to do or what “moral” research procedure involves (Neuman, 2014p.145). Ethics may not always maintain the same position as law. Violators may therefore not receive direct sanctions but may suffer reputation loss if discovered. It therefore embodies the moral codes that a researcher is expected to recognise and abide by before, during and after a study. It includes any kind of moral predicament that should be avoided. Kumar, (2011) pointed out some behaviours in research that are considered to be unethical and they include causing harm to individuals, breaching confidentiality, using information improperly and introducing bias. These issues and more constitute unethical conduct in research. Neuman, (2014) further offers an elaborate enumeration of ethical requirements in research both on the side of a researcher and a sponsor. They include **i.)** Avoidance of research fraud (avoid rigging the data of research result and dishonesty) **ii.)** Informed consent (participation in research is voluntary and prospective participant must be allowed to decide whether or not to be involved, **iii.)** Ensuring no (physical, psychological, legal and economic) harm is allowed is caused to research participants, **iv.)** Assuring and ensuring that privacy anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants is guaranteed, **v.)** No use of deception, **vi.)** Truthful declaration of the research findings, all the above mentioned points are critical ethical requirement in research but not exhaustive. In the field of public administration, researchers may also ensure gender consideration when deciding on respondents

and how data would be collected. Arising from the foregoing, researchers in the field of public administration like other social sciences counterpart are bound to face the challenge of adhering to ethical requirements when dealing with human beings.

Balancing ethical obligations and professional scientific principles: Public Administration researchers are not only required to uphold ethical obligations but are expected to maintain a balance between ethical obligations and professional scientific standard in the conduct of any inquiry (Creswell, 2014; Kothari, 2004). In observing ethics therefore social science researchers (including researchers of Public Administration) are expected to balance the ethical obligations on the participants and the research sponsors as well as ensure the professional scientific standard of research are maintained (Neuman, 2014). This put the researcher in a practically delicate position to uphold truth, ensure the principles and procedures are held high while observing the ethical obligations expected of him.

5.0 Conclusion and Implications of Complexity of Public Administration to Research in the Discipline

5.1 Conclusion

Conclusively, it is evident from extant literature that Public Administration is an intricate discipline due to internal and external factors highlighted earlier, and as such, researchers in the field contend with a number of challenges including difficulty in standardization of research method which makes inquiry in the field contentious and

difficulty for researchers. Hence, Public Administration researchers must seek a deep understanding of multidisciplinary (especially social science and management science) research traditions and methodology, as well as a robust understanding of each research environment/context to develop a pragmatic research worldview (Onwuegbuzie, & Leech, 2005) so as to align with global best practices and evolving tradition of inquiry (O'Sullivan, Rassel & Berner, 2007; Riccucci, 2010) in this unique field of study.

5.2 Implication of the Complexity of Public Administration to Research(ers) in the Discipline

Stemming from the enumerated sources of complexity in the discipline of Public Administration, it is therefore imperative for early researchers (especially students and early career researchers) to be mindful of the implications that arise from such to navigate through the challenges and anchor their research to the evolving global best practice of research in the discipline. Hence:

i. Public administration researchers must study and understand the research paradigms, traditions or orientations in the discipline: into any investigation/inquiry must proceed based on a thorough grasps of the suitable traditions to the problem of inquiry at hand, justify the chosen tradition so as to overcome the challenge of lack of standardization of research approach/technique in the discipline.

ii. Minimise bias by employing triangulation: Bias is impossible to eliminate in research involving human

element like the field of public administration but can be minimised. To minimise bias therefore, researchers of public administration must strive as much as possible to employ triangulation. This can be in form of triangulation of measurement (using different tools to measure a particular phenomenon in a way that will offer different perspectives to the issue at hand) for instance, questionnaire, interview and observation can be combined to achieve triangulation in addition to other reliability techniques (Neuman, 2014).

iii. Strategize and conduct a pilot study to familiarize with approach to use in accessing respondents: Accessing target respondents/official documents in bureaucratic public organisations can be some worth difficult and worse for close organisations. Yet, getting responses from suitable respondents is crucial to achieving the overall objectives of a study. Hence, a research must find a way to access respondents and official documents by clearly strategising ahead and if possible, the researcher should conduct a pilot study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2005) to ascertain the effectiveness of the strategy and have it reworked.

iv. Adhere strictly to ethical code of conduct: The researcher should first understand the ethical issues involved in any inquiry to be undertaken beforehand, integrate them in the research plan and firmly uphold ethical conduct before, during and after the study bearing in mind that the researcher as the driver of the research process is critical to ethical conduct (Creswell, 2012). Neuman, (2014) also

observes that ethics begins and ends with the researcher and the researcher's moral code is the most excellent tool to guard against unethical conduct in a research. In other words, the ethical research depends on the personal integrity and values of the researchers.

v. Strike a balance between ethical obligations and professional scientific principles: To balance ethical obligations and professional scientific principles, it is important for the researcher to constantly evaluate the research procedures and techniques to ensure they are in tune with both requirements. However, if the researcher discovers threat to compromise of any of them it must be proactively addressed.

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