

ON SHARPENING KNIVES & GOVERNING NETWORKS

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Many thanks to the organizers of this forum and to the reviewers of our essays. It is an honor to be engaged in this dialogue regarding the future of our field with such distinguished scholars, several of whom have influenced my own thinking greatly. It is also an honor to share the forum space with such creative “next generation” thinkers, colleagues who share an interest in boundary spanning, boarder crossing, and envelop stretching. I will do my best to live up to the “young turk” moniker placed on us by Ralph Hummel, this despite the fact that my 13 year old daughter would scoff at the prospects of thinking of her 41 year old father as a “young” anything!

All of the reviewers’ comments have helped me to better understand the implications of the assertions put forth in my original piece. I would like to take this space to address their points in somewhat of a linear fashion.

I want to thank Mark Rutgers for reminding me that we are (and must be) speaking of governance within a democratic context. Although there exist a series of other terms that could be either synonymous with or related to it (including third party governance, collaborative management, joined-up government to name a few), I use the term “governance networks” because in this view, the network serves as the unit of analysis. They are “governance” networks because they exist to create, inform, and/or implement public policies and they are implicated in the spending of public monies in some way. Rutgers is right in observing that “governance is not inherently democratic.” But I am left wondering if all levels of governance need to be democratic, at least when considered at the micro, phenomenological levels of a governance network. The question becomes, which types of decision need to be undertaken democratically?

At the micro level, not all decisions can nor should be made democratically. Within a networked context, getting clear on how, when and where decisions get made becomes the imperative. In some cases, you want government “principals” controlling the behaviors of contracted

“agents.” In other cases, you want to leave room for actors to engage in negotiation and bargaining. In still other cases, you want actors working together, in partnerships engaged in robust, democratic discourses in which a “community of equals” deliberates. Ultimately, the key to governing governance networks is their “democratic anchorage” (Sorensen & Torfing, 2005), a concept that deserves more attention.

I had not thought about Rutgers’ assertions regarding private corporations posing more limitations on personal freedoms than government. It is already the case that corporate America is a highly undemocratic place. Workers, regardless of rank, are often lucky to be consulted with, let alone hold any real bargaining power. In addition to “the worker,” “the consumer” is increasingly facing restrictions and control, particularly as the privatization of public goods and services continues. The overt control over our health care decisions by private health insurance companies is perhaps the most prevalent example of this.

The matter of competing logics of network actors, as Rutgers frames it, can be looked at through the lens of accountability structures and which sectors are guided by what structures. Although the challenges ahead of us will clearly call on interdisciplinary thinking, the public administration field, and our central concerns for public accountability, what accounts for the public interest, and common good, has a particular role to play.

Robert Cunningham draws our attention to the matter of “What is” versus what “Should be,” which may be framed as the difference between empirical and normative ascertains. I would argue that our analysis of governance networks needs to evolve along both lines, simultaneously. “What is” questions are descriptive in nature. “What should be” questions are evaluative in nature. We need to both describe and evaluate governance networks and, if we aspire to influence “what is,” maybe we can provide some guidance for what “should be.”

I really appreciate O.C. McSwite’s reference to identity. I assign their essay “The Delicate Connection of Work to Person” from *Invitation to Public Administration* (2002) to my *Fundamentals of Public Administration* students, and find myself mining that essay for nuggets of wisdom time and time again. The relationship between the work we do and our identities is vitally important, particularly as we rely on the “public spiritedness” of public administrators to serve and protect the public interest. The message my students get from reading their essay is that either you can take responsibility for forming your own identity or you will have that identity shaped for you, and that the stakes are not only personal, but rise to a societal level.

I believe that public administration is an inherently pragmatic field. I mean pragmatic to mean both “practical” as well as pragmatic in the philosophical sense. I have long been a student of John Dewey. Most of my research has been undertaken using applied or action research methods. Perhaps informed by my students’ needs to have theories made tangible and somehow “real,” I have built my “research agenda” on the premise that empirical analysis can have practical utility to and for practitioners. Although I admit to reading philosophy as bedtime reading, I do not assume that everyone else is as enamored with abstraction as I am.

I suppose one way to assert my own identity is to say that I am a neo-pragmatist following in the Enlightenment tradition (as opposed to the post-modern tradition), who is actively involved in experiments designed to build theories, (informally) test assertions, and learn through the thick description of networked phenomena.

How imaginative can we get? Because I am pragmatic (in the practical and philosophical sense), I believe that our imaginations are “only” bounded by the good sense and practical utility of practitioners. To this end, I am striving to advance theories that possess a quality of “simple elegance,” as one network executive director recently put it to me. Although I firmly believe in the power of theory, I also recognize that “theorizing” is undertaken all of time as a natural part of everyday thinking. A practitioner’s view (and by this I mean the perspective of practicing public administrators “in the field”) of theories matter. We need to ask: How will our theoretical frameworks “play in Peoria?” In the conference room? In the boardroom? In the cubical? In town meeting? In the hearing room?

Ralph Hummel’s comments to me, at least, concerned the question: “Is the conciliated, reconcilable?” My response to such a query leads me to pose a question familiar to our field: Can we learn the methods of sharpening a knife from an assassin without adopting his intent?

Woodrow Wilson thought so. It would appear that Hummel (rightly) is unsure. I am left wondering if the posing of the question itself is insurance enough against the possibility of using instrumental knowledge to do evil. The “reflective turn” that such question-posing entails is fueled by both empirical and normative frames of reference.

Hummel appears to be concerned with the role that methods play in the study of governance networks (and thereby methodologists). He is also somehow concerned with the relative “mainstream-ness” of both the methods and the methodologists.

Hummel's assertions force me to ponder the extent to which I personally aspire to mainstreamdom. From a normative standpoint, I am left wondering just how radical and marginal our normative base really is? Are concerns with public accountability and transparency "marginal" or "radical?" They may be for some presidential administrations, but in general, there is very little debate around the need to assert the public administration field's normative foundations. Waldo and Dahl's insights live on, and I would hope that even the PA mainstream recognizes this. Maybe I am being naïve, but I do not believe that the neo-classical economists have taken over the hen house, yet.

What about empiricism and rationality? Are they reconcilable? Is the rise of a soul-less technocracy eminent? Can we safely say that our present era has been marked by a vapid outbreak of rationality? It is hard to make this case given the state of current affairs (be it the still-failed political consensus around global warming or fabricated "evidence" of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq).

Being a neo-pragmatist, I believe we need to develop more tools to use to bring more transparency and, dare I say it, rationalism (both instrumental and communicative), to the governing of our governance networks. There are now more private contractors paid through federal funds than civil servants, leading to the assertion that private contractors have become the "fourth branch" of government (Shane & Nixon, 2007). Couple these known actors with those that go un-named (but often known?) and you get public policies being designed by relatively small networks of "enlightened elites" (in the best case scenarios I suppose) or powerful special interests and ideologues (in the worst case scenarios). We must muster the tools of empirical inquiry and couple them with our normative grounding in democratic values, social equity, due process, etc., in order to monitor current practices and educate future practitioners. Sunlight, after all, halts the growth of mildew.

I ended my original piece by asking whether the fate of our democracy is at stake here. I believe it is. And yes, Kant and Weber and Habermas can be marshaled. But so can Dewey.

REFERENCES

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