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Useful to Whom? Public Management Research, Social Science, and the Standpoint Problem¹

ABSTRACT: Answering “Big Questions” in public management will require close connections to social science, in particular political science. Yet connections are impeded by the difference in standpoint from which these questions are regarded by public management researchers and political scientists. Changing to a citizen standpoint changes the Big Questions and pushes political science and PM research toward unification. It also makes research more useful—at least to citizens.

BIG QUESTIONS

The most important methodological question facing public management researchers today is, “What should we be doing?” At the present state of PM research, this is a more pressing question than any issue of methodology in the narrow sense.

Indeed, Behn (1995) goes so far as to say that methodology in the narrow sense has outpaced PM researchers’ ideas about how to use it: “Too often, the result is methodologically sophisticated research that addresses small, trivial issues.” If only it were so; but it is hard to disagree with Behn’s argument that locating the research frontier is a more pressing issue in PM research than, say, a better

understanding of multicollinearity. It may be true, as the Gore (1993) report says, that “if the car won’t run, it hardly matters where we point it”—but the converse is true as well. If we don’t know where to point it, it hardly matters how well it runs.

Behn’s suggestion is that PM research—like, for example, physics—should focus on what he calls “the big questions.” He proposes (315) three such questions for public management, which he calls “Micromanagement: *How* can managers break the micromanagement cycle. . .,” “Motivation: *How* can public managers motivate people. . .,” and “Measurement: *How* can public managers measure the achievements of their agencies. . .”²

These questions themselves raise an obvious question: How do we know that they are big? Behn does not give a clear answer to this, but here is one way we might proceed: to find out what managers themselves think are the Big Questions. We might, for instance, survey managers about what they think their biggest problems are. Seemingly, this has been relatively little done.³ But it seems likely that some form of the three big questions proposed by Behn would be near the top of the list. Let us accept them as bona fide Big Questions for our purposes here.

The point to notice about these questions is that they cannot be answered without considerable research input from social science—in particular, from political science. Start with the micromanagement question, which as Behn (1995, 316) notes, is really the “trust question.” How can public managers reduce the distrust between them and elected officials? This question cannot be answered without reference to the motivations and incentives of elected officials. If elected officials mistrust managers, it is because they have what are, given their goals and the political structure they operate within, good reasons. Answering Behn’s question requires us to understand these reasons. Trust is not primarily a technical problem, but a political one.

The measurement problem does have substantial technical dimensions to it, for it is simply difficult to find good measures of public-sector performance in many areas. But this problem, too, quickly bangs up against political issues: for example, when do elected officials *want* good measurements of accomplishments? Again, the answer may depend on the incentives given by particular political structures (Rubin, 1992).

Finally, the motivation problem clearly requires research input from psychology. It may appear at first to have less to do with political science. But in fact the motivation problem in the public sector cannot be understood without taking into account the existence of civil service personnel systems, and civil service cannot be understood without reference to political institutions and the incentives they create (Frant, 1993).

Behn’s Big Questions may be, as he says (315), “*management* questions.” But important pieces of the answers must come from social science, and in particular, political science.

RESEARCH AND SCIENCE

Saying that public management research needs input from social science, of course, implies that most public management research is not science. This need not be taken as a criticism. Science is only one of many useful and important things that people can do, and it is not necessarily any more socially beneficial than the others. Specifically, public management research does seem to fall in the category of what Lindblom and Cohen (1979) call “professional social inquiry.” What then makes it different from science?

Behn claims that PM research is not scientific *because* PM researchers do not know what the big questions are—that having consensus on some big questions will make public management research more scientific. I do not agree with this claim, or at least, do not understand it. The basis for his assertion seems to be that physicists and the like all know what the big questions are. It is doubtful that causality runs in this direction—that physicists are scientists because they know what the big questions are, rather than the reverse.

Rather, one thing distinguishing science from most public management research is that science is *positive*: it makes statements that may be either true or false, and tries to show that they are true. In contrast, PM research is very often *normative*: it tells managers what they should do.⁴

Since there is some confusion about the relation between the two, it is worth expanding on this a bit. All normative statements have as their basis positive statements. If you tell someone to wear a coat, that is based partly on the statement, which may be true or false, that it is cold outside. If you tell someone to lock the door, that is based partly on the statement that some people are inclined to steal things. If our positive statements are not true, then we will give bad advice. Moreover, social scientists give advice all the time. The reason people listen, if they do, is that they think social scientists may know some true things that they don't.

Of course, there has been quite a lot of good positive work in public management, but most of it is basically descriptive in nature. This can be very helpful. But another characteristic of scientific work, at least in mature sciences, is that it is “nomothetic”—it is aimed at the discovery of general laws or principles. This is what makes forward motion in science possible, and also what gives science much of its utility. PM research has not been very good at making nomothetic statements. Consequently it often seems a bit aimless. Big Questions alone will not fix this; they must be accompanied by positive, nomothetic research.

THE USEFULNESS ISSUE

If one is drowning, of course, it is not very encouraging to be told that great progress has been made in discovering principles of better life-vest design.

Positive, nomothetic PM research is thus open to the criticism that it is “not very useful” (Thompson, 1997, 486), especially to managers. Personally, I take this criticism to heart. I want my research to be socially useful, and so, I think, do most social scientists. But PM research should be useful to future managers as well as present ones (and, as we will see, to other people besides managers). We sacrifice too much if we allow our research agenda to be dictated by the frustrations of current managers.

Yet neither do we necessarily want our agenda dictated by whatever happens to be the current preoccupation of some social science discipline. The virtue of Behn’s Big Question strategy is that it can keep PM research focused on issues that are relevant to improving public management. But these questions must be broken down into their component positive, nomothetic questions.

Thus, for example, we can use the three questions proposed by Behn to generate counterpart research questions. Instead of beginning “How can. . .” these questions begin “Why is. . .” or “How does. . .” Why is there a micromanagement cycle? Why don’t politicians trust managers? How do politicians feel about having good measurement of achievements? Why do they feel that way? These questions are what we might call Medium-Big Questions.

It is very unlikely that we will make much progress on answering the Big Questions without first answering the Medium-Big Questions. The positive foundations must be there to be able to answer normative questions. But the Medium-Big Questions approach is clearly different from much PM-related social science, which lets research directions be determined by interests of the larger social-science field. This is an approach that is focused on finding solutions to important public management problems. If it answers big questions in other areas, so much the better.

Take as an example the issue of research on New Public Management. There is an obvious candidate for a “why” question about NPM: Why do some countries have so much of it and others so little? It is a widely discussed fact that NPM started in the Anglophone world (UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, but much less and later in the US), and has gone much further there than elsewhere. Do we have good theory of why this is?

A CASE

As a start toward answering this question, consider the case of Israel. While research is now going on about the exact extent of NPM in Israel, it is clear that Israel is not a country where NPM could be said to be strong. There has been a certain amount of bottom-up reform along NPM lines, but no determined effort from the top.

This is not because the concepts are unfamiliar. Indeed, as long ago as 1989, a national unity government accepted unanimously the recommendations of the

Kubersky Committee Report, which called for sweeping administrative changes (Galnoor et al., 1998). Many of these recommendations were along clear NPM lines: Spin off non-core governmental functions; decentralize personnel and budget authority; monitor results rather than procedures; set performance targets and link them to budgets. But little of the report has been implemented. The predictable internal opposition of some parts of the bureaucracy (the central control agencies) was not countered by appreciable support from the top. NPM is simply not on the political agenda in Israel to any significant extent.

Question: Why is there so little NPM in Israel? There are a number of possible explanations (Schwartz, 1999). One may, for example, blame Middle Eastern culture for being hostile to administrative reform. And it is true that Israel is “Middle Eastern” in the sense that it has traditionally been renowned for its stultifying bureaucracy, and that some features of its legal system still retain Ottoman features. But in general neither Israel’s politics nor its economy much resembles that of other countries of the Middle East.

Another explanation relates to the traditional focus of Israeli politics on “existential” issues, foremost among them national security. The agenda is simply overloaded (Dror, 1988). In this environment, one might wonder, who pays attention to administrative reform? Yet this explanation seems to contradict a common explanation given for the rise of NPM in other countries: that changes were forced on countries by economic crisis. If this is true, would not a constant state of security crisis concentrate the mind in the same way? Does not management efficiency take on greater importance when the stakes are life and death?

A more plausible explanation for the lack of political interest in NPM is Israel’s unusual political structure. During the period of the rise of NPM around the world, Israeli government was characterized by coalitions in which smaller parties were decisive and hence extremely powerful.

The result has been that particular ministries are controlled by particular parties. For example, for almost all of the last fifteen years, the Interior Ministry has been under the control of a single religiously oriented party (known by its acronym as Shas), and for a number of years before that, under the control of a different religiously oriented party.

The religious parties had, in part, policy goals for wanting to control the Interior Ministry. The Interior Ministry has considerable control (at least of the residual, discretionary kind) over who becomes a citizen, an issue which in Israel has a religious component. For that reason, control of this specific ministry became an issue in the recent election campaign, with an immigrant-based party campaigning—under the slogan “Our control, not Shas control”—on the demand that it be given the Interior portfolio.

But Shas also had electoral reasons for wanting the Interior Ministry. It was able to use its control of this ministry to help it build up an extremely successful

political machine, in the American sense of the term. Control of the ministry gave it access to a large number of political appointments, which it was able to use for patronage. The routine operations of the ministry also brought it into contact with large number of voters to whom it was able to provide services. Since the ministry was so strongly identified with the party, voters receiving these services were apt to feel that they had received them from the party as much as the government.

To this extent, Shas had an interest in effective (if not necessarily efficient) service delivery. The conflict between patronage and effectiveness is a familiar one in political machines.⁵ Certainly improved service delivery would be helpful to Shas.

But in this environment, there is little political constituency for a government-wide administrative reform. Shas, to begin with, has no interest in improved management at, say, the Agriculture Ministry, nor does the party controlling the Agriculture Ministry have an interest in the Interior Ministry. Moreover, improved transparency is probably not high on the list for either party. Even if they are able to manage their own ministries effectively, they do not need to demonstrate this to the country as a whole. They only need to impress their own constituencies.

Thus, understanding the peculiar structure of Israeli political institutions helps to answer the question, why is there so little NPM in Israel? Next we may ask, why do Israeli political institutions have this peculiar structure? Again, we may run through historical, cultural and circumstantial explanations. But in large part the structure of Israeli political institutions is a logical, one might almost say a mathematical, consequence of Israel's voting system. Israel has one of the strongest proportional representation systems in the world: nationwide party-list, with a very low threshold (1.5%) for representation.

As a result, small parties flourish. The latest election had 31 parties competing, of which 15 won seats in parliament. Seven are represented in the governing coalition. Yishai (1994) gives Israel's strong PR system as one reason why it has been particularly hospitable to what she calls "interest parties." An interest party "assumes the name and activities of a party yet remains focused on the quest for private benefits and/or on a single issue." Such parties exist even in Westminster countries with single-member district voting (for example, there is a Green party in Britain), but one does not find them holding important cabinet portfolios there.⁶

A CONJECTURE

What are the implications of all this for public management research? My assertion is that changing the Israeli voting system would change the structure of government. Changing the structure of government would change the incentives of elected officials. Changing the incentives of elected officials would change the likelihood of management reform.

The generalization to other countries is not clear at this point, but it is noteworthy that the countries where NPM was strongest are, or were, Westminster countries where coalitions are not the norm. In these countries, that is, a single party may hold all the ministries, and the incentives for management reform may be quite different. (The exception that proves the rule is the United States, which is Anglophone without being Westminster, and where NPM at the federal level has lagged behind other English-speaking countries.)⁷ I will put this as a testable conjecture:

Conjecture: The likelihood of comprehensive administrative reform depends on the voting system.

The idea of investigating questions like this may not be welcomed by PM researchers. When there are so many management issues that are poorly understood, why should we be looking at voting systems? Political scientists are doing this already.

The problem is that it is hard to get political scientists to pay attention to public management. Students of voting systems are not blind to the larger implications of their work. For example, Myerson (1993) makes a theoretical argument that when voting systems favor minority representation (as do proportional representation systems) there is an incentive for candidates “to create special interest groups and minority conflict even when it would not otherwise exist.” This sounds as though it could well be an important insight about Israel. But the next step of going from political structures to management outcomes has gotten very little attention. Moe and Caldwell (1994) argue that parliamentary systems will in general have more effective bureaucracy than separation-of-powers systems, but they appear to have in mind mainly Britain and the US, and I am not aware of any systematic follow-up of this assertion. I nominate this as another Medium-Big Question for public management researchers.

The good news is that public management researchers may not need to become experts on voting systems. If there is a clear link from voting systems to political systems, and from political systems to management, then in principle political scientists could start at one end and PM researchers at the other, and meet in the middle, the way the transcontinental railroad was built in the US.

FAULTY TIES

Unfortunately, as things are going now, the two tracks will end up missing each other by hundreds of kilometers. They are not aiming at the same destination. For one thing, the public management literature has taken the problem of the link between political structure and management as a normative, not a positive, problem.

Some of this literature has been quite thoughtful and intelligent, especially

given that its authors tend to use the conceptual framework of "accountability," which, I will argue below, is not very helpful. The controversies over NPM are a good place to see the range of attitudes in the literature. Some have sharply criticized NPM for undermining traditional modes of bureaucratic accountability. Thus Moe (1994, 118) asserts, "The net result of the Gore Report. . . will be a government much less accountable to the citizens for its performance."

Others have argued that accountability needs to be understood more broadly than in the traditional bureaucratic model. Barberis (1998) argues that New Public Management requires a "new accountability." Stone (1995) distinguishes among five forms of accountability, all of which, he argues, are relevant to Westminster-type governments today. DeLeon (1998) similarly attempts to develop a four-way typology of accountability, with contingent prescriptions: ". . . different accountability mechanisms are appropriate in different circumstances, depending on an organization's structure, which is in turn dependent (at least in part) on the type of problems it is designed to handle."

Public management theorists, then, have given thought to the articulation between political structures and administration. They do not necessarily confine themselves to traditional control mechanisms; for example, Stone (1995) discusses the market as an accountability mechanism.

But what is lacking here is consideration of the positive dimensions of political control.⁸ Oddly, it is public administration theorists, and not, say, rational-choice theorists in political science, who have implicitly adopted the "economic" assumption that the most efficient institutional form will be chosen.

Political scientists do not assume this. They see politicians as often having reelection interests that conflict with what informed voters would want, paying more attention to interest groups than to voters in general, and so on. Fiorina (1985), for example, argues that reelection-minded politicians will tend to dislike policies with hidden benefits and visible costs to constituents. He goes on to claim that if it is necessary to impose higher costs in such a situation, politicians will prefer to delegate. In such cases, will politicians want tight lines of accountability? Might they not prefer to be bypassed, and sacrifice accountability for deniability?

THE STANDPOINT PROBLEM

Contact between the political science literature and the public management literature, then, has been impeded by the fact that one is predominately positive and the other predominately normative. But the lack of interaction between the two is not just attributable to this. Perhaps the deepest and most important problem is what we might call *standpoint*. Public management researchers tend to look at issues from the standpoint of public managers. This is quite natural: most of us have worked in the public sector, have consulted for managers, or have at

least talked to a lot of managers, so we tend to look at problems from that point of view.

Political scientists, however, seem to have a natural tendency to look at problems from the standpoint of politicians. From this standpoint there is one dominant issue: getting reelected. This was a controversial idea in political science a few decades ago (Mayhew, 1974) but it is now the standard assumption in formal models. (I personally believe it to be one of the most realistic assumptions in the social sciences.) In making this assumption, we need not believe that politicians are particularly venal. Rather, politicians are concerned about reelection because the system is designed that way; those who have different motivations are not reelected and quickly disappear from the picture. This is in many ways a good thing, of course. But the social consequences may be unfortunate when there are severe asymmetries of information, i.e., when the public is unaware of the consequences of many decisions made by politicians.

This brings us to the one standpoint that is consistently missing from the literature: the public's. It is informative to look at things from their standpoint, both positively and normatively. Positively, it is clear that we of the public have many demands on our time—working, taking the kids to the dentist, and so on. It is therefore unlikely that we will be able to devote a lot of time to monitoring what the government does. Thus the importance of information asymmetries.

Normatively, taking the standpoint of the public would help clear up a lot of confusion around ideas like “control.” From a managerial standpoint, the problem of control reduces to a problem of accountability, an upward-looking concept. Or should it be outward-looking, or perhaps sideways-looking (Stone, 1995; DeLeon, 1998)?

For political scientists, who tend to use the standpoint of politicians, the problem of control looks different. The concept of control in the political science literature is downward-looking: how do politicians prevent bureaucrats from drifting away from what politicians want them to do?

Neither of these views captures the whole normative problem as seen from the citizen standpoint. From there, the problem is, how can citizens, who have the limitations we have just seen, get what they want out of government? With this perspective, we can start to think systematically about when accountability should go in which direction, understanding that citizen monitoring is the problem we are concerned about. If citizen monitoring is the problem, is better control by politicians the solution? Maybe and maybe not. Weak citizen monitoring and strong political control are often a bad combination (Frant, 1996).

MAKING PROGRESS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

The rather small act of changing the standpoint has dramatic effects on the way we think about PM research. First, it changes our whole conception of what a Big

Question is. We can justify Behn's selection of Big Questions from the manager standpoint. But these are not Big Questions from a citizen standpoint. Micromanagement, motivation, measurement—these questions concern the citizen only as means to an end.

From a citizen standpoint, there is only one real big question, and it is the question I have just raised: "*How do citizens get what they want out of government?*" This, of course, is not just a question about managers. Rather, it applies to the entire principal-agent chain, from the citizen to the politician to the manager to the front-line worker to the citizen.⁹ Each link in the chain matters. It probably did not occur to Gore (1993) at the time, though it may have since, that the phrase "good people trapped in bad systems" might also be applied to him.

Changing the standpoint thus implies a dramatic expansion of what we think of as "public management research," to a degree that may be a bit daunting. But I think it holds great promise for real progress in the field. How do Behn's physicists actually know that they are making progress? The major mileposts in physics have been *unifications*. The first big breakthrough in physics was Newton's theory of gravitation, a unification of the theory of falling bodies (Galileo) and the theory of planetary motion (Kepler). That was followed by the unification of electricity and magnetism, of the electromagnetic force with the weak and strong forces, of quantum dynamics with relativity, and so on.

Is unification possible in public management research? A consequence of changing the standpoint, and consequently the big question, is that it *pushes* us in the direction of unification. There is simply no way to answer the big question, "How do citizens get what they want out of government?" without looking at all the links in the chain. Seeing the links as part of a single system makes it clear that we need to understand the connections among them better. It leads, in short, toward a unified theory of politics and administration. I believe that this will become more apparent in the coming decades.

BUT IS IT USEFUL? AND TO WHOM?

When one looks at the conjecture I put forward above, one might wonder, if this is true, where are we? Will a movement toward unification be of practical, as opposed to intellectual, interest? Suppose that political institutions strongly influence the probability of successful management reform, and suppose a given manager learns he is in an environment where reform will be very difficult. Will knowing this help the manager, or just lead him to despair?

The first response is that managers as a group are not inclined to despair—they want a problem to solve, and need the tools to solve it. This means they need a full understanding of what political factors are relevant to getting change implemented. The best public managers have a sophistication about this that very few academics can equal—a breathtaking and almost instinctive ability to

integrate economic, political and managerial considerations. But this is not a widespread ability. Most managers could benefit from the ability to analyze systematically who are the winners and losers, who has power, and so on. How do we predict what position a politician will take on a particular issue? Knowing that, how do we get results? A unified theory will make more apparent what is now obvious only to a politically sophisticated minority—what the links are and where the levers are.

The second response is that once we change standpoint, we see that asking whether we are helping managers is the wrong question. If one accepts Hamilton's dictum in Federalist 70 that "a government ill executed, whatever it may be in theory, must be, in practice, a bad government" then, from a citizen standpoint, it is important to understand why some governments are better-executed than others. If administrative reform turns out to require political reform (Frant 1998), that does not imply that administrative reform is impossible. Political reform does happen.

When public management researchers are not wearing their consultants' hats, their goal should not be to help managers. Rather, their goal should be to improve management. And that means addressing the fundamental Big Question: "How do citizens get what they want out of government?"

NOTES

1. I thank Anna Gunnthorsdottir, Robert Schwartz, and participants in the 1999 Siena Workshop for helpful comments.
2. Emphasis in original.
3. But see, for example, Elling (1986).
4. Behn (1995, 315) notes that "these three big questions are consciously prescriptive," i.e., normative. Actually they are positive questions that are easily converted to normative statements. Once we know how managers *can* break the micromanagement cycle, for instance, it is not hard to see how they *should*.
5. See Menes (1998) for some results on the US in the early 20th century.
6. A reform of the Israeli electoral law in 1992, providing for direct election of the prime minister, had the unintended consequence of worsening the situation—as voters now have no incentive to vote strategically in choosing a party, the large parties have shrunk to the point where no party has as much as 25% of the seats in the current parliament. But the situation before the direct-election law was broadly similar—the very first Israeli parliament had 12 parties in it, and this has been the average since then.
7. Two interesting case studies might be Italy (strong PR system, laggard on NPM, recently changed to a district system) and New Zealand (Westminster system, pioneer in NPM, recently changed to a more proportional system).
8. Rosenbloom (1993) urges consideration of such aspects. But it seems to me that in his final paragraphs, he shies away from the normative implications of his argument.
9. Of course, considering the citizen as the endpoints, it is clear that at times not all the links in the chain may be required. We may, for instance, use private managers and workers. Or we may view citizens as customers and bypass politicians (Frant 1998).

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