Discuss the contribution that the Theory of Science can make to Public Administration

Taswell Solomons

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1. INTRODUCTION

In order to discuss how Theories of Science can contribute to Public Administration one first needs to identify what are Theories of Science and what is Public Administration. For the purpose of this essay Theories of Science will be considered to be the various theories within the various disciplines of science. In this paper, five different schools of theories will be focused on namely Political Theory, Philosophical/Ethical Theory, Scientific Theory, Sociological Theory and Ecological Theory.

According to Stortz (2009:44) the study of any discipline of science involves a subject matter and agent. For example, in Sociology the agent would be considered to be society itself and the subject matter would be considered how society interacts with itself and various environments. Therefore, by the same definition, in the discipline of Public Administration the subject matter would be public administration and the agent would be considered to be the entities carrying out public administration i.e. public officials.

By taking the above definition into account this essay will discuss how the Theory of Sciences can contribute to Public Administration by analysing theories from various disciplines of sciences and how it has contributed to develop the field of Public Administration thereby developing the study of public administration.

2. POLITICAL THEORY

One of the most important theoretical constructs in public administration is the politics-administration dichotomy. For more than a century, the politics-administration dichotomy has been one of the most disreputable issues in the field of public administration. Tahmasebi and Musavi (2011:131) explain that the politics-administration dichotomy was not current as a theoretical construct until the late 1940s when it first became an important issue in the literature of Public Administration. Donald Kettl (2000:2) notes that Woodrow Wilson’s article “The Study of Administration” (1887) sought to establish public administration as an important field in its own right. To make the point, he drew a clear line between administration and politics.
Wilson intended to shield administration from political interference, he wrote:

“The field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics.... Administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics. Administrative questions are not political questions. Although politics sets the tasks for administration, it should not be suffered to manipulate its offices (Wilson, 1887: 18).”

Wilson explained the division of functions of government as follows:

“Public administration is detailed and systematic execution of public law...but the general laws...are obviously outside of and above administration. The broad plans of governmental action are not administrative; the detailed execution of such plans is administrative (Wilson, 1887: 372).”

The table below clearly explains the difference between politics and administration which Wilson had in mind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politics</th>
<th>Administration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deals with the “expression of the will of the people “.</td>
<td>Deals with the “Execution of the will of the people”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deals with Politicians</td>
<td>Deals with Civil Servants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One becomes Politician by his popularity, either through positive or negative popularity</td>
<td>One becomes Civil servants by his intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One becomes Politics through election</td>
<td>One becomes civil servant through selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior training is not given to politicians</td>
<td>Civil servants are professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power is the Centre of study in politics i.e, process of capturing and retaining power</td>
<td>Running administration successfully is the central focus here</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This political debate in public administration is also heavily influenced by the sub-field of political economy. Eran Vigoda (2003:9) notes that questions of budgeting and financing the public sector as well as bringing more economical rationality to decision making processes usually conflict with political considerations. He however notes on the other hand that they also put them under economical restraints and enhance “checks and balances” to a system mostly
monitored and controlled by politicians, political parties, and other federal or national institutions, rather than professionals and practitioners (Vigoda, 2003:9).

Perhaps the most obvious linkage between politics and public administration stems from policy making and policy implementation processes. It is naive to distinguish political systems from professional administration systems in regard to public policy. As Rosenbloom (1998:13) suggested, public administrators’ involvement in the public policy cycle makes politics far more salient in the public sector than in private enterprise. Public administrators are perforce required to build and maintain political support for the policies and programs they implement. They must try to convince members of the legislature, chief executives, political appointees, interest groups, private individuals, and the public at large that their activities and policies are desirable and responsive.

The theoretical contribution of political science to the study of public administration is therefore multi-faceted. Vigoda (2003;10) also suggests that Public Administration employs a rather vast knowledge from economics and rational thinking. One can clearly see there is paramount importance in understanding the line between politics and public administration. Public Administration has evolved into a discipline of science by having the politics/administration dichotomy theory at the core of any theoretical construct within the field of public administration.

**Public Administration’s move to a science**

The debate whether Public Administration is an art or science has been profound and important in public administration discourse. The debate is still relevant in contemporary Public Administration and will enable scholars and practitioners in the field to ascertain what is ‘scientific and artistic’ about Public Administration. Science in this context, in Public Administration in particular, is associated with knowledge or acquired knowledge and art is associated with skill to perform administration tasks (Siswana, 2007:89).

The science of administration is the system of knowledge whereby people may understand relationship, predict results, and influence outcomes in any situation where people are organized at work together for a common purpose. Public administration is that part of the
science of administration that has to do with government, and thus concerns itself primarily with the executive branch, where the work of government is done.

It is stated that administration is a distinct activity calling for specialist knowledge and techniques, and to be brilliant in the art of administration, the administrator needs to acquire more and more knowledge. As indicated earlier, Public Administration as a science also assists decision-making so that managers are able to estimate or predict consequences for both the government and an organisation.

Some scholars also attest to the notion that scientific methods can be used in many management situations and can be useful in decision-making process because science as a method of inquiry and body of knowledge may be used to inform managers and estimate the possible consequences or actions (Siswana, 2007:89).

3. PHILOSOPHICAL/ETHICAL THEORY

Ethics in public administration

Lindsey Marie McDougle (2006:5) explains that ethics and public service are important elements in comprising the “body and soul” of public administration. Accordingly, several scholars and practitioners have sought to identify and understand the ethical responsibility of the public administrator and have also attempted to offer applied ethical guidance and structure. She describes ethics within the public service as an internal set of moral codes and reasoning based upon societal and prescriptive norms (McDougle, 2006:2). Essentially the ethics of public service is (or should be) based on five basic virtues: fairness, transparency, responsibility, efficiency and no conflict of interest (Amundsen, 2009:11).

Thus if one should assert ethical appropriateness in regard to behaviours of leaders within the public service there are three public sector obligations that can be determined: (1) respecting the processes that legitimate the actions of public officials, (2) serving the public interest, and (3) treating colleagues and subordinates with respect, honesty, and fairness. As such, within the public sector where leaders are called upon to uphold differing and even contradictory levels of ethical responsibility it has increasingly become expected that leaders meet many of the prototypical and idealized expectations of those in which they represent. This sort of rationale
stemming from ethical theory allows Public Administration to further ameliorate itself in terms of understanding the importance of leadership within the public sector.

**Bureaucratic theory – ethical considerations**

The traditional model of public administration is based on a bureaucratic approach to public administration. Mark Evans (2009:140) notes that the bureaucratic theory of public administration owes its existence to Max Weber’s *Magnus Opus* Economy and Society (1922). Max Weber was a German political economist, philosopher and a social scientist who based his theories on rationalization (the rational choice theory). Weber promulgated rationalisation in all areas of life such as in economy, politics, society, culture and even religion. He went on further to say that rationalisation was the basis of the modern western society.

Amundsen (2009:14) explains that meritocracy is at the core of the modern bureaucratic system. It is the principle wherein appointments are made and responsibilities are given based on demonstrated talent and ability (merit; usually education and acquired skills), rather than by wealth (plutocracy), family connections (nepotism), class privilege (nobility and oligarchy), friends (cronyism), or other historical determinants of social position and political power (Amundsen, 2009:14). It could thus be said that the theory of bureaucracy, specifically in terms of meritocracy has aided in the public sector becoming more ethically-orientated concerning the appointments of employees.

**4. SCIENTIFIC THEORY**

As discussed, Public Administration has become a discipline of science in itself and Jon R. Bond (2007:1) explains that it evolved into such, and continues to evolve, through a method of learning based on systematic observation using the scientific method. He furthermore asserts that Public Administration has become a science through the “scientification” of the study of public administration which refers to the process which Public Administration as an academic discipline has come to use the scientific method for the production and dissemination of knowledge of public administration (Bond, 2007:1).

Bond (2007:6) further explains that the beginning of scientific inquiry is the fact/value dichotomy. The scientist is concerned with the study of how and why things work as they do rather than with how they should work. Another feature of the scientific method is the
systematic observation of empirical facts with an eye toward reliability and replications. A closely related element of the scientific method is quantification which is useful for systematically recording observations and for checking reliability. The core goal of the scientific method is hypothesis testing and theory building with theory being concerned with how things work and why it works that way (Bond, 2007:7-8). Therefore one could assume that the scientific method involves observation of phenomena, recording the observations and assimilating how and why the phenomenon occurs in order to understand the phenomenon in its entirety.

Scientific theories have contributed to Public Administration especially in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. This could be seen in theories advocated by Frederick Taylor (Scientific Management theory). Frederick Taylor focused on measuring work (performance measurement), time and motion studies and cost accounting and contended that these activities contribute towards solving administrative problems. The origins of these activities can be traced back to the latter part of the nineteenth century when Frederick Taylor first began to determine the amount of time workers needed to produce and manufacture items. Thus the essence of Taylor and for that matter Taylorism was that of experimentation, evaluating problems and choosing an appropriate solution.

Taylor’s Principles of Scientific Management (1912) also deals with motivating workers. His theories also included Industrial (Organisational) Psychology which is the scientific study of the workplace, where rigor and methods of psychology are applied to issues involving personnel management, coaching, assessment, selection, training, organisational development and performance (Myrick, 2012:12). Taylor’s methods of empirical research have become a backdrop in how research is conducted in Public Administration and how theories are based. He showed how results of research could be expressed in quantitative variables but determined through qualitative findings.

5. SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

The voice of society has a special role in the study of Public Administration not only for democratic and political reasons but also because of its fundamental impact on informal
constructs of reality such as tradition, social norms and values, ethics, life style, work standards, and other human-cultural interactions that are not necessarily political.

The theoretical contribution of a sociological and cultural approach to public administration consists of several elements. Vigoda (2003: 10) explains that an essential distinction must be drawn between inside and outside cultural environments. An outside cultural sphere incorporates informal activities and behaviours of small groups as well as of larger social units which interact with the administrative system. Included in this category are customers’ groups, private organisations, not-for-profit volunteering organisations, and citizens at large. Considerable attention has been turned to communities and to the idea of communitarianism (Etzioni 1994:19) as well as to the emergence of the third sector as rapidly changing conventional structures and beliefs in modern societies. An inside cultural environment is related to internal organisational dynamics and to the behaviours of people as work groups. Thus, it is sometimes termed organisational culture, or organisational climate (Schein, 1985:6). Like the outside organisational environment, it has some observable constructs but it mostly expresses many covert phases. In many ways, “culture is to the organisation what personality is to the individual – a hidden, yet unifying theme that provides meaning, direction and mobilization” (Schein, 1985:11). It includes basic assumptions as to what is right and what is wrong for a certain organisational community, norms and beliefs of employees, unseen social rules and accepted codes of behaviour, as well as tradition, language, dress, and ceremonies with common meaning to all organisational members. All these distinguish “us” from “them”, promote group cohesiveness, and improve common interests.

Several sociological sources can be effective in analysing public administration dynamics. Vigoda (2003:13) notes that once such source is group theory, which is also closely related to the study of leaders and leadership. A second are ethnic studies, which concentrate on minorities and race questions such as equity, fair distribution of public goods, and integration in productive public activity. A third is communication and the technological information revolution, which have had a radical effect on society, public policy, and public administration units and structure. Information networks and communication has become an immanent feature of the cultural investigation of bureaucracies. For many years a plausible approach in management science and in the study of public administration called for the formulation of a
universal theory in the field, one that is culture-free and applicable across all nations. With the passage of time and with giant technological developments this perception became ever more anachronistic.

Today, the goal of a universal administrative paradigm is hardly achievable. Hofstede (1980:24) argues that an alternative viewpoint is more balanced and contingent. He argues that basic similarities do exist between public organisations and public administration mechanisms, but at the same time intra-organisational and extra-organisational culture fulfils a major mediating role. Culture in its broad context constantly affects the operation of bureaucracies as well as political systems that interact with them. Examples like Theory Z of W. Ouchi (1981) and lessons from a more recent Chinese and east European experiences stimulated the scientific community and initiated culture-oriented ventures in general management inquiry. They especially promoted the investigation of work values and culture-oriented management in private but also in public arenas. Many scholars became convinced of the necessity of incorporating social and cultural variables as core elements in the administrative analysis of public arenas. A sociological and cultural approach to public administration also made an important methodological contribution. It initiated culture-focused surveys of individuals and groups who work in the public sector or of citizens who receive services and goods. Culture-focused observations and analyses possess the merit of being sensitive to people’s norms, values, traditions, and dispositions, and sometimes they overlap other politics and policy-oriented studies the better to explore dynamics in public organisations.

6. ECOLOGICAL THEORY

Fred W. Riggs was a Professor Emeritus of Political Science who developed the ecological approach to public administration, or the Riggsian Model. Wen-shien Peng (2008:218) explains that the ecological approach, by definition, focuses upon the relationship between an organism and its environment. Factors that the ecological approach takes into consideration are numerous; they primarily include, however, the influence of recent developments in social sciences methodology, experience from technological aid to foreign developing countries, and the influence of social systems theory. Riggs’ ecological approach is predicated on the basic characteristics of ecology.
Ecology, in simple words, relates to ‘environment’; and public administration is a catalyst in both external and the internal environment. Siswana (2007:57) notes that with regard to the internal environment, public administration ensures that policies and legal frameworks are applied according to prescribed standards and those institutions supporting the government adhere to these policies. Externally, public administration has to respond to political, social and economic situations. Additionally, it has to respond and account to the public it serves. Public administration’s importance lies in its efficiency, effectiveness and the way it uses resources efficiently and economically (Siswana, 2007:57).

The way that Riggs’ ecological theory contributed to Public Administration lies in the understanding that public administration does not exist in a vacuum but is in fact interrelated to its internal and external environment.

7. CONCLUSION

This essay has shown how Theories of Sciences can contribute to Public Administration. It has done so by explaining how Public Administration as a field of science has evolved from being a sub-discipline of Political Science to a discipline of science in itself. This occurred through the build-up of theoretical literature involving the dichotomy of politics and public administration.

This essay also showed that theories relevant in other disciplines of science such as philosophy, sociology and ecology have contributed to Public Administration in understanding how public administration interacts with its interrelated environments. This essay also showed that Public Administration has developed through the form of research brought through the study of scientific theories. Thus showing that the Theories of Sciences have and can contribute to Public Administration in terms of research, understanding, becoming more rational and being focused on knowledge and wisdom factors.

Public Administration as a science is constantly evolving due to the fact that its subject matter (i.e. public administration) is ever-changing and is constantly adapting to societal norms. Therefore the theories within various scientific disciplines have contributed to the growth of Public Administration as a science as it constantly adapts to remain relevant in pursuing its functions in contemporary society.
8. LIST OF SOURCES


