

A Unified Public Administration? Revisiting the Prospects of Constructing a Grand Theory for the Field¹

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ABSTRACT Since the early origins of Public Administration, scholars bemoan the absence of a grand, unifying theory for this applied, social science as a discipline. From their arguments it seems that the absence of a unified theory is largely to be blamed for the identity, existential and academic crisis which the discipline arguably experiences. If such a unified theory does not exist, and there is a general consensus that it could add value by focusing research and generally facilitating a sharper demarcation of the study field, the appropriate question is: Why not simply attempt to construct one? The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the feasibility of designing a unified theory as a coherent framework for the study of Public Administration. The reflection will include a deliberation on the desirability of such a unifying theory, contemplation on the possible methodology to pursue such a theory, as well as an exploration of the potential challenges which theorists will face in their attempts to design such an integrated and comprehensive foundational framework.

INTRODUCTION

Staats (1991: 890) points out the fact that mature (“late-stage”) sciences are increasingly becoming more unified, whilst “early-stage” sciences continually are disunified. He further contends that all sciences begin in the “chaos of disunity” and only through long and arduous efforts do these disciplines move to a unified state. In the same vein, Fisher (1978: 37) states that the philosophy of science is not sufficient to understand the scientific theory of a given discipline until that discipline develops a rather substantial body of knowledge in the form of empirical generalisations and underlying principles. Placing these statements in the context of a particular discipline, Pollitt (2010: 292) maintains that Public Administration “suffers from multiple personality disorder.” Public Administration is characterised by diversity and “centerlessness” due to the fact that the discipline finds its origin in various schools of thought and also attempts to reach different outcomes. Similarly, Bourgon (2007: 7) argues that Classic Theory of Public Administration does not fully support the practice of public administration anymore. Hence a “new and unifying theory” is required to address contemporary governance realities. She proposes that such a unifying theory for Public Administration may help to re-establish trust in the executive branches of the government. A unifying theory, Bourgon further stipulates, should integrate past (the-

oretical) strengths, current knowledge and future challenges.

The question arises whether scholars in the study field can remain satisfied with the more classical assertions of the status of the discipline. These include opinions of Dwight Waldo (1985) that Public Administration can only aspire to be an “enterprise”; of Toraldo di Francia (1981) that administrators are only “technicians” in their field, but never true scientists; or Neumann’s (1996) view that the discipline lacks a unified central academic element. In light of this context, Raadschelders (1999: 281) poses a fundamental question: “Can we be content with the fact that Public Administration is essentially multidisciplinary and maybe interdisciplinary, or should we continue to strive for a comprehensive theory ... a unified, coherent study ...?”

The purpose of this paper is to expand on the above mentioned arguments and the fundamental question raised by Raadschelders. This is done by asking two follow-up questions, namely whether a unified theory is desirable, and if so, what the feasibility or prospects are for constructing such a comprehensive framework. In an attempt to answer these questions, additional sub-questions are posed, namely:

- ♦ What are the arguments for and against a unified theory?
- ♦ What should one consider when designing a comprehensive or grand unified theory?

- ♦ On which theoretical level should such an encompassing theory be pitched?

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The Theory of Unifying Theory

As a philosophy of science, unified positivism, or simply *unificationism*, draws on the elaborate history of science. Unified positivism generally takes the position that science is conceptually, as well as empirically and methodologically progressive and is sociologically in operation (Staats 1991: 899). In the words of Kuhn (1970: 13), such a situation creates the schools that are characteristic of the early stages of a science's development. Immature sciences are generally characterised by the unrelatedness of their bodies of knowledge, meaning that their theories, research and research methods are diverse in nature. In contrast, theories of more mature sciences are typically more unified, and its body of knowledge becomes closer related. Scholars of early-stage sciences generally study diverse phenomena through different conceptual and methodological orientations. Initially, these sciences only explore a variety of phenomena and are usually not concerned with finding relationships between these phenomena. Only after an extensive period do these sciences gradually absorb the different facets of knowledge and join it into a unified structure (cf. Staats 1991: 900). As sciences mature, however, they tend to become more focused and begin to conform to homogenous underlying principles and conventions. Knowledge construction furthermore becomes more directed and organised, and research findings more interrelated, hence more unified (Staats 1991: 900).

In line with unified positivism, efforts to reach unification in disciplines are typically aimed at finding interrelationships and to simplify and organise existing knowledge. Differences in method, theory, and the phenomena under observation are considered as problems of disjunction to be solved. A basic theoretical foundation and a common lexicon typically emerges to unify the various subfields in a discipline. The conception, according to Staats (1991: 900), is that the process of unification entails a fundamental dimension of progress in science. The unified framework in "late-stage" science is proposed as a model for less mature "early-stage" sciences to follow.

The shaping of a unified theory generally falls within the philosophical domains of structuralism and post-structuralism within the social sciences. So-called "deep structures" are contained in cultural models, in interpretive patterns and latent structures of meaning, and finally in those latent structures of which scientist are generally not cognisant. These deep underlying structures generally lay the philosophical underpinnings and theoretical foundations for less mature disciplines to develop more directed, interrelated and more unified research. Such endeavours could eventually lead to the establishment of a unified, inherently structured model for a discipline.

The quest for a unified theory to guide the study of phenomena is seemingly a universal endeavour across natural and social branches of science. However, an important observation should be made on the scope or degree of universality of such theories. Of these explorations there are numerous examples. Jones (1954) searched for a unifying theory of Political Geography; Tomic (2010) researched the philosophy of information as a unifying theory of Information Sciences; Henriques (2003) and Henriques and Cobb (2004) proposed a unifying theory for Psychology; and Baldwin (2002) provided a synthesis of Mead's work on a unifying theory for Sociology. From these examples it is apparent that the scholars concerned searched for an overarching theory to structure their entire discipline. Jasso (2008: 411-434), for example, developed a unified theory of socio-behavioural forces; Lau et al. (2008: 121-135) developed a unified theory on the effects of procedural fairness during performance evaluation; Singh and Smith (2006: 395-407) intended to contribute to a unified theory for the management of total quality; and Krupnick et al. (1982: 44-54) contributed to the design of a unified theory to guide regulatory decision-making at agencies.

The examples cited above, illustrate a rather limited scope. In other words, these scholars did not intend to design a unified theory for their respective disciplines, but rather to unite existing theories on issues of limited scope (that is, sub-foci) within their disciplines. From this brief orientation one could safely deduce that unified theories range from a grand overarching and coherent design to specific applications and foci within disciplines. In the vocabulary of Thomas Kuhn (1970) and Golembiewski (1977) one may refer to the grand design as a paradigm or theorem and the unified theories within limited focus as

miniparadigms. In this sense Golembiewski (1977) proposed that the discipline Public Administration ought to be developed by means of a “family of miniparadigms.”

According to Dubin (1969) and Tomic (2010: 714), a scientific theory should consist of a simple unifying idea that does not include unnecessary elements. A body of knowledge is usually only called a theory once it has a minimum empirical basis, according to certain criteria such as being consistent with a pre-existing theory. The pre-existing theory should be verified experimentally and supported by multiple strands of evidence (Jones 1954; Babbie and Mouton 2011: 10). Scientific observations are generally guided by pre-existing theories and only become “scientific” through the experimental testing of these theories (Tomic 2010: 714).

In the case of a unifying theory, the elements and principles of theory-building are generally combined through traditions of unified positivism built on a deep-set structure that provides the philosophical underpinning of a discipline. A literature review reveals that words often used to attach certain meaning to the concept of “unifying” theory include the following:

- ♦ “integrative theory” (Jasso 2008: 411);
- ♦ “single theoretical umbrella” (Staats 1991: 908; Törnblom et al. 2007: 264);
- ♦ “coherent, comprehensive conceptual framework” (Fisher 1978: 37);
- ♦ “defragmentation of disciplinary theory” (Lunca 2002);
- ♦ “common underlying theoretical model” (Lamont and Molnár 2002: 169); and
- ♦ “consistent scientific logic” (Gintis 2007: 16).

These concepts clearly illustrate the deep-lying structure and overarching nature of a unifying theory. According to Wagner and Berger (1985: 172), Törnblom et al. (2007: 264) and Jasso (2008: 411-413), a unified theory has the following characteristics and advantages:

- ♦ It integrates existing theories by joining them under a single theoretical umbrella.
- ♦ It enables systematic and parsimonious analysis.
- ♦ It provides a foundation for making explicit connections among the most important themes and insights of contemporary science.
- ♦ Models based on a unified theory yield a large number of testable predictions (both intuitive and counterintuitive, including

novel predictions) for a wide range of phenomena at both micro- and macro-levels across disparate topical domains.

- ♦ Seeking the “common core” makes it possible to build a new unified theory.
- ♦ It explores links across processes and their theories and seeks unification and integration.
- ♦ The component theories gain in the unification. These various theories achieve sharper definition by accentuating the contrasts between them. Theories can borrow and exchange aspects involving analytic structure, methods and imagery. Conjoined, these aspects shed new light on a wide range of phenomena and processes.

In terms of an operational definition for purposes of this paper, a unified or unifying theory can be regarded as the deep-lying structural, coherent, philosophical underpinning of a particular discipline that integrates all micro- or lower-level theories into a comprehensive conceptual framework. A unified theory for a discipline thus comprises a synthesis of theories, approaches, and models, or to paraphrase Samuel Smiles (1875, in Törnblom and Kazemi 2012: 215), there is “a place for everything, and a place for everyone”.

Forces and Challenges Associated with the Construction of Unified Theories

Scholars such as Staats (1991: 899) point out that attempts to construct unified theories are receiving increasing attention especially by social scientists. As a result, methods are being advanced by which to construct unified theory. The unification of entire domains of research is actively sought in most fields, as alluded to earlier. In this regard, Lunca (2002) concurs that unification has become a mainstream scientific endeavour since scientists increasingly acknowledge the need to counterbalance disciplinary fragmentation either by inter-, and trans-disciplinary approaches, or by unifying and integrating various strands of knowledge. She (Lunca) continues to argue that disciplinary fragmentation raises barriers that science attempts to overcome through the process of unification. As Friedman (2003: 507) puts it: “There comes a moment in the evolution of every field or discipline when central intellectual issues come into focus as the field and the discipline on which it rests shift from a rough, ambiguous territory to an arena of reasoned inquiry.” Scientists then usually begin to focus their

attention on issues such as research methods, methodology (the comparative study of methods), philosophy of science, and related matters in the meta-narrative through which a research field begins to take shape. This also includes the articulate study of theory construction. At least four major forces seem to be active in any attempt to construct unifying theory.

Fragmentation and Diversification

The first force is the fragmentation and diversification of disciplines. As additional dimensions, paradigms, and study fields are being added to the traditional study domain of a discipline's scientific inquiry, the sub-domains of the discipline become increasingly disjointed. In the process, the particular scientific focus of the discipline becomes increasingly muddled and vague and the unique contributions thereof become limited. Once there is an increase in the body of knowledge of a discipline, it becomes more difficult to attempt unification. According to Staats (1991: 900), unification in a fragmented discipline is "enormously difficult". Through a process of what Auriacombe and Schurink (2014: 145) calls "a spiral of knowledge production", over time a vast body of knowledge emerges, which keeps on diversifying and fragmenting individual study fields. This is a natural phenomenon akin to social sciences, unlike in the natural sciences where positivist empiricism may disprove a particular theoretical position.

Unification

The second force involves the unification of the social sciences. As disciplines within the domain of the social sciences expand and increase, their bodies of knowledge and study domains become closely interrelated. The result is the unification of social sciences, and disciplines within this branch of science become more integrated. The inter-, multi- and trans-disciplinary nature of social research is arguably the main driver behind this trend of unification.

Divergence

The third force entails the divergence between views of unity and that of pluralism within disciplines. Postmodernists may warn that unity could mean "totality" – a form of conceptual and theo-

retical hegemony. They would argue that unity should not mean domination by one particular theory stifling other important contributions. Feysabend (in Staats 1991: 904) strongly recommends unrestricted proliferation in science to guard against the stifling effect of the dominance of a grand theory. However, Staats (1991: 904) argues that this recommendation is misplaced. According to him it depends on which section of the disunity-unity trajectory of development a particular science or discipline finds itself. With respect to a science that is already characterised by high levels of diversity, a call for proliferation may be counterproductive, whereas it would be productive for an emerging, immature science to develop beyond its existing theoretical boundaries.

Reductionism and Exclusionism

Closely related to the unity-pluralism debate (that is, the third force) the fourth force involves *reductionism* and *exclusionism*. In line with the thinking of Complexity Theory, reductionist theorists hold that a complex system or phenomenon is the sum of its parts. Thus, in order to study such complex system or phenomenon, each individual part must be analysed. This implies the ability to understand those systems or phenomena fully in terms of the processes from which they are composed. Usually reductionism in the social sciences is based on the assumption that social systems can be studied by merely focusing on often single, basic elements: culture, politics, socio-economic conditions, and so forth. Hence complex phenomena are often reduced to more simple abstractions to ensure easier analyses. In this regard, Burgess and Molenaar (2007: 20) state that reductionism forms an intricate part of theory construction in science, in which one attempts to explain complex phenomena by deriving them from more general principles. This is intrinsically a reductionist process.

According to Van der Walt (2002: 37) one of the post-modern movement's intellectual attitudes in science is that they reject all universalistic and foundationalist theories. The ideal of unifying theories is often rejected on the grounds that they "dominate and are totalitarian". For the postmodernist a form of discontinuity is more acceptable. In their opinion no single approach or theory can be appropriate to cover all forms of science. Therefore they prefer more idiosyncratic approaches to scientific investigation. Unification efforts in

disciplines are often hampered by reductionism in the sense that theorists succeed in designing unified theories only for basic elements of a discipline's total knowledge domain. An early-stage discipline is generally characterised by a variety of study domains, research methods, theories and other phenomena. As such, reductionism does not make sense as a model for unification and may indeed rather hamper such a process.

By efforts to unify a discipline, theorists typically identify core functional areas or sub-domains within the discipline as fundamental study elements. In the process, however, related sub-domains are excluded. Unification in disciplines is challenged by reductionism in the sense that theorists are overwhelmed by the seemingly borderless demarcation of their disciplines and then tend to reduce the discipline. Thus the scientists only succeed in designing unified theories for single or a cluster of elements within a discipline. In the process they may exclude a significant study area that some scholars in the discipline may regard as indeed part of that discipline's study domain.

It seems that the four forces highlighted above pose an insurmountable problem for the construction of a unifying theory. If answers to these problems are not found, a viable road-map model for the construction of a comprehensive conceptual framework will remain an elusive exercise. However, this does not answer to Staats's (1991: 900) suggestion that unified frameworks in late-stage sciences could be used as models for less mature early-stage sciences. The appropriate question thus seems to be: Can solutions to the challenges posed by the four forces not be found by studying best practice examples of mature sciences that have unified theories? By applying the best practice principles, could early-stage, disunified disciplines maybe leapfrog into a late-stage, mature science? In other words, how did the present unified sciences advance from their original disunified state? Thus what is required is a best practice model or framework that could serve as a guide towards unification.

An analysis of unifying theory is thus required to determine the scientific principles associated with the construction of such grand designs. A literature study, however, soon revealed that such examples of best practice simply are not to be found – or at least are not well documented. Staats (1991: 900) himself in this regard argues that there is no systematic understanding in the traditional disciplines of what “disunified science” entails and how and by what means the advancement to

unification occurs. Therefore not much data is available to guide immature sciences in various theoretical matters. Nevertheless, it could be argued that theorists in immature disciplines may consider the attempts of more mature adjacent or reference disciplines towards unification, and model their best practice on these examples.

Regarding further operational challenges, there are certain complicating factors. These can be illuminated by questions such as: Who will design the unified theory in the discipline? How generally accepted and legitimate will the design be? Should the majority of scholars in the field be involved in the process? In his work *Science, Faith and Society* (1946), Michael Polanyi aptly remarks that there is “no Pope in science”. There is no “totalitarian regime” dictating which topic or field could and could not be studied. Scientist should accept plurality and various “centres of power”. Thomas Kuhn in his ground-breaking work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) points out that every period in history defines a predominant paradigm, which depicts the understanding and interpretation of reality by scholars. This may imply that the unifying theory will shift and adjust due to paradigmatic developments.

Furthermore, through interdisciplinary endeavours disciplines are enriched by borrowing theories, models and approaches from other reference disciplines (cf. Van der Waldt 2009: 15). Such an exchange facilitates the dynamic growth of disciplines. The question can be posed whether a unifying theory may inhibit such cooperation and integration. Moreover, could this not lead to the death of the discipline? Furthermore, disciplines in the social sciences are typically characterised by a plurality of paradigms that are often competing. Another factor to take into consideration is the issue of culture and conflicting perspectives such as East against West, as well as ideological differences. Scholars involved in the construction of a unifying theory should therefore not only consider disciplinary conventions, but also the broader ideological, administrative and governance setting of countries. In this sense, the interpretation, level of acceptance and the application of a unifying theory are dependent on the context or the setting.

Theoretical Levels for the Construction of a Unifying Theory

This brings the second research question to the fore: On what level should a unifying theory

be designed? To answer this question one should get clarity on the potential theoretical levels involved.

Basic research involves a search for general principles. These principles are abstracted and generalised to cover a variety of situations and cases. Basic research generates theory on several levels. This may involve macro-level theories covering wide areas or fields; midlevel theories covering specific ranges of issues or micro-level theories focusing on narrow, specific questions. Applied research, in turn, adapts the findings of basic research to classes of problems. This may involve developing and testing theories for these classes of problems. Applied research tends to be undertaken on midlevel or micro-level. At the same time, applied research may develop or generate questions that become the subject of basic research. In this regard Popper (1963: 246) distinguishes between strong, “thick” theories and weak, “thin” theories. Staats (1991: 908) in turn differentiates between framework theory and interlevel or interfield theory. Framework theory is generally used when the detailed treatment of all the knowledge elements is not possible, due to the large number of elements. This is why the traditional theorists attempted to simplify matters by exclusion. The method of framework theory is to develop a set of basic principles and extending them to selected (sampled) problems (phenomena) throughout the range of the different fields of that theory’s purview. Inter-level or inter-field theory in turn is aimed at constructing “bridging” theories in order to connect separated problem areas or fields. In the case of Public Administration, for example, the different major subject fields may be related in a hierarchical manner. One field may contain more elementary principles, whilst others may hold more advanced principles. Thus the bridge is called inter-level theory.

From a brief analysis of the arguments above, it seems that the absence of a unified theory is synonymous with the following situation:

- ♦ The identity crisis of the discipline (that is academic and existential);
- ♦ lack of focus in effort to construct research and knowledge;
- ♦ lack of rigorous methodology;
- ♦ disagreement about paradigms or theorems;
- ♦ general discontent among scholars;
- ♦ absence of stylised jargon (vocabulary and concepts) and symbols;
- ♦ insufficient administrative modelling and “adminimetrics” (Perry and Kraemer 1986: 221);

- ♦ significant philosophical speculation; and
- ♦ debates surrounding fundamental epistemological issues.

This raises the question whether it can be argued deductively that there should be a unified theory that will help eradicate the ills which ensue when such a theory is absent.

The (Theoretical) State of Public Administration

As societies evolve, the role of the government and its institutions also undergo structural and functional adjustments. This leads to changes in the practices of public administration, as well as the study thereof. Social sciences in general do not regard classical theories as redundant when exponents study social issues such as the state, government, and administrative theory. However, the Classical model of Public Administration as a study field, which emphasises control, bureaucracy, and organisational design, is arguably not as relevant in more recent conceptions of the state, government and governance. In this regard Jocelyne Bourgon (2007: 7,15) argues that Public Administration theory of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are not congruent with the realities faced by public servants in the twenty-first century; that there is a discernible gap growing between the reality of those serving in the public service and the theory that, in principle, needs to guide them.

Cognisance should also be taken of the more contemporary neo-bureaucratic models, which are built upon rational decision-making. These include the institutional model, which is rooted in behavioural sciences, as well as the public choice model, founded on the political economy. These models failed to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework (Denhardt 1990). Thus both, the practices of public administration and the discipline Public Administration are, as prominent scholars such as Hempel (1952), Greenwood and Eggins (1995:14), and Lynn (1996) point out, in a state of flux. It is argued that practice is not supported anymore due to outdated theory and the discipline is not (yet) supported by a new and unifying theory.

If the status of Public Administration as a science depends on the extent of its unification, then this topic should be in the centre of scholarly interest. Staats (1991: 910) makes it clear that chaotic knowledge – being inconsistent, non-consensual, disorganised, unrelated and redundant

– is not effective scientific knowledge. Toulmin (1972: 380) adds that the quality of experiments, refinement of theories, or the sophistication of knowledge generation will be to no avail. As long as a discipline's products are inconsistent, unrelated, and mutually discrediting, it will be considered a "would-be scientific discipline".

The crisis of disunity in Public Administration did not emerge abruptly, seeing that it was a unified science. This is rather a case of its disunity increasing due the proliferation of subfields. Disunification, according to Staats (1991: 899), tends to feed on itself; when left unchanged, it will continue to grow. When referring to this disunity and the proliferation of foci and methodology within Public Administration, Raadschelders (1999: 282) states that the lack of identity threatens the existential foundations of the field. According to him (1999: 284–285) debates about both the academic stature of this discipline and its relevance to society, led to an "identity crisis"¹. He (Raadschelders) is of the opinion that this identity crisis of Public Administration can be broken down mainly into two types of crises.

The first type is the theoretical or academic crisis, which includes the following facets: theoretical and methodological weaknesses, the controversy over the epistemological status of the discipline, and the vocational focus at the expense of theory development. The second type of crisis refers to its existential challenge. This crisis concerns the following impediments: lack of confidence, lack of legitimacy, ethics, and morale of the public service. This goes together with the lack of credibility of the discipline to make a significant contribution in this regard. It is evident that Public Administration is currently characterised by a number of crises: regarding its paradigm, identity, credibility, normative appeal and its inherent confidence.

The Status of Unification Debates and Endeavours

Searching questions are being asked about the status of the discipline as far as advancements towards a unifying theory are concerned. According to Rutgers (1998), Von Stein (1815–1890) was the last theorist who attempted to design a coherent and unified discipline in this field. However, Raadschelders (1999: 284) *Expand+ Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* part.oxfordjournals.org states that there

are indeed more recent attempts to construct a comprehensive theory that would unify the study.

Regarding the teaching of Public Administration, Abel (2009: 145) searched for a "signature pedagogy", but encountered the challenge that no comprehensive theoretical framework existed. The vast and heterogeneous range of paradigms, schools of thought, theories, narratives and ideas make it virtually impossible to establish a single common set of practices, purposes, values, and behaviours on which its scholars and practitioners can settle to teach. This state of affairs makes pedagogy an extremely complex discipline. Abel (2009: 148) suggests that a "singular nature" of Public Administration should be sought in the following foci: professional ethics (that is, first order normative theory); the consensus attitude; and the mind-set of practitioners and scholars in the field towards good governance.

A further query would be whether a unified theory is indeed desirable in the field of Public Administration. Rutgers (1998) argues that the identity crisis of the discipline to which White et al. (1996) refer, in fact constitutes the actual distinctive, defining characteristic of Public Administration. He continues by stating that it is undesirable to search for a unified theory in the sense that such a grand design could restrict both practice and scholarship. Raadschelders (1999: 298), in turn, expresses this fact in far stronger terms: A unified body of theory should be "prohibited". Bentley (in Gintis 2007: 19) argues that the complex social settings make the development of a unifying model in the behavioural sciences virtually impossible. He (Bentley) suggests: Rather than seeking to unify the study field under a single model, scientists could investigate when and why theoretical models generally can either be applicable, or fail to apply. Given the myriad of competing perspectives, this objective may just turn out to be fundamentally unattainable.

The main premise for these arguments seems to be the fact that the general acceptance of a particular unifying model may prevent new perspectives from being developed in this early-stage discipline. In this regard Kuhn (1970: 35–42) explains that researchers working in a unified discipline are severely discouraged from attempting to conduct tasks that threaten to undermine accepted assumptions. Given this state of affairs, it seems highly undesirable for social scientists to

conduct work only within the framework of a single theoretical model.

Complications for the Strive Towards Unification

The situation may be that scholars are not convinced by the arguments against unification raised above, and still wish to pursue this endeavour. Then a new question needs to be posed: Which factors may hamper their unification efforts? Below, a few issues are explored briefly.

The absence of disciplinary focus. Pollitt (2010: 292) argues that it seems that scholars of Public Administration generally are uncertain of the direction they need to pursue, due to lack of focus. The only unifying dimension of the discipline lies in its focus on the study or subject, namely the state, the public sector, and the public realm, and not on its aims, theories, or methods. Pollitt further postulates that scholars in the field are also characterised by diversity; some are “pure scholars” involved with the ontological and epistemological grand problems in the discipline, whilst others are pragmatist, prescriptive “how-to” and vocationally focused aimed at providing solutions for hands-on governance challenges. Vigoda (2003:4) supports this notion by arguing that Public Administration as “eclectic science in transition” should aspire to become a “better science” by improving measurement tools and adhering with positivism and empiricism. Vigoda (2003: 13) continues to argue that as far as disciplinary focus is concerned, it is “unfinished business”, mainly due to the demand to make the field a “harder” and more focused social science.

Scholars in the latter, more pragmatist category are generally positivistic in their approach and pursue contract research looking to obtain practical governance-related data. These scholars can become a mere extension of the public or civil service by trailing political, economic and developmental agendas and strategies of the government. As a result, the discipline has become increasingly reactive in nature. Basic research, fundamental meta-theoretical underpinnings and theory development are severely compromised. According to March (1997), Public Administration’s narrow concentration on administrative practices are divorced from intellectual (theoretical) concerns. One reason, according to Lynn (2008: 5) for this narrowness, is the anxiety to discover and describe new modes of governance practice

and new ways of knowing about them, which left an intellectual vacuum.

The nature of the study domain and subject content. As early as 1968 Dwight Waldo (1968: 5) argued that the nature and boundaries of the study domain of Public Administration are highly problematic. Modern Public Administration is currently characterised by diverse and complex subfields of the study that are emerging, as well as by concepts such as ‘governance,’ ‘entrepreneurship and innovation’, ‘Value-for-money’ ‘outcomes-based’, ‘networks,’ and ‘complexity’ (cf. Pollitt 2010: 292). Scholars generally agree that the present situation in Public Administration is one of fragmentation and, some may even term it “chaotic diversity”. It seems that fragmentation is rife in all three major areas used for disciplinary constructions, namely theoretical, methodological, and scholarly diversity.

To make matters worse, a strong separatist movement aims to develop Public Management as an exclusive, distinct discipline. A further stream would like to take Public Policy to the next level. Although this is part of the natural maturation and evolution of study fields into distinct disciplines, such fragmentation actually impoverishes and negates the collective efforts of scholars to develop Public Administration as a “mother” discipline. Kelman et al. (2003: 3) in this regard confirm that Public Management’s “declaration of independence from the traditions of Public Administration ... hurts our ability to produce good research.” These different perspectives, each strongly argued, illustrate the difficulty in constructing a unifying theory within this field. The question arises: From which “mother” disciplines should theory be extracted to be absorbed in such a comprehensive framework? The proliferation of subject content led to a situation in which the available literature is growing constantly and is in danger of diffusing into different subfields. In the process, core principles and ideas of Public Administration could be omitted across these different fields.

Divergent origins, approaches and theories. Despite its origins mainly in Political Science, Law and Organisation Studies, Public Administration also draws significantly from the knowledge domains of various other social sciences. McCurdy (1986) argues that the discipline of Public Administration rests mainly on three interdisciplinary foundations. These ontological foundations are derived from adjacent or reference disciplines such

as Sociology and (Social-)Psychology, Law and Political Science, as well as Economics, (Business) Administration, and Management Sciences. The discipline is characterised further by various approaches implemented to study the administration or the executive branch of government. These include the following approaches: conventional, business management, scientific, generic administrative, and so forth. As for divergent theories, scholars can approach the contents of the subject through the focus of empiricism, normatism or behaviourism. The problem that scholars have to confront therefore is how the diverging origins, as well as associated approaches and theories should be unified. The dividing lines seem to be impermeable.

Competing research traditions. Weber (1919) postulates that the task of science is to facilitate the “disenchantment of the world” by providing analysis and explanations through research. In line with this claim, Flick (2014: 11) argues that due to the development known as the “pluralization of life worlds”, qualitative research is of specific relevance to the study of social issues. As an applied social science discipline, Public Administration’s research can be described as “utilization” research (Flick 2014: 14). Two different research traditions are evident in the discipline. The one seems to follow a more positivist, rational logic, and applied tradition, whilst the other relies heavily on an interpretivist form of post-modernism. The more managerial stream seems to favour an applied vocational focus, whilst Public Administration desires a strong foundational basic and pure research (that is, theoretical grounding). Whetsell (2013: 602) in this regard postulates that “theory-pluralism” in Public Administration accentuates the need for an approach that harmonises these competing research traditions.

On a more fundamental level, the construction of a unifying theory is complicated by the fact that Public Administration deals with inherently ill-structured problems. The majority of research projects seem to be aimed at problems that are narrowly defined and follow pragmatic applied objectives, rather than pure heuristic objectives that are necessary to construct theory. An extreme position in this regard comes from Jones and Thompson’s (1999: 9) who state that pure research is “irrelevant” and that only applied research is “relevant.” According to them clients are much more interested in diagnosing and treating administrative problems than in pursuing the

Herbert Simon project of constructing an administrative science. This opinion goes directly against the Kantian philosophy according to which some form of the conceptual frame must be present to have formed the basis for data collection in the first place. Furthermore, data requires sense-making, a process of analysis which is only possible if the analyst has sound conceptual and theoretical foundations (Perry and Kraemer 1986: 216).

Pfiffner and Presthus (1967: 14) point out that there is little effort to develop a theory of (public) administration. It seems that the majority of scholars simply repeat earlier studies without a view to confirm the validity of the research. As a result, existing theory is merely “recycled.” This dramatically impoverishes the discipline further and may hold severe consequences for its status as a science and the construction of a unifying theory in this field (cf. Kelman et al. 2003: 4).

Potential Roadmap towards Unification

Researchers pose the question whether scholars lost interest in constructing a unified theory in favour of concentrating on empiricism and micro-theory because the grand theories failed to unify. This indeed seems to be the case. The author conducted a search for papers in the last decade represented by the key words “unified theory” and “Public Administration” on the research databases EbscoHost (including Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier and MasterFILE Premier), Scopus, Emerald, Proquest and Google Scholar. This search revealed only eleven papers. The number is virtually insignificant given the large volume of papers annually published in the field. The small number may also be indicative of the general lack of interest that scholars show in this area of research (cf. Kelman et al. 2003: 17).

In light of the context delineated above, the question remains: Where does this leave scholars who indeed are interested in pursuing a unifying theory? Franks (in Staats 1991: 902) states that he does not know whether unification can ever be achieved, but hastes to add: “... I do know that we must strive towards this goal in a systematic and planned fashion.” Lynn (2008: 8) in this regard reiterates this point: “Blessed are those theorists who work at all levels of abstraction that clarify the central intellectual and practical challenges of Public Administration.”

A roadmap towards a unified Public Administration generally presents a problem of theory construction. Chances of success is also limited if inappropriate theory construction methodology is utilized to facilitate unification. A more complex, but possibly more effective way to constitute a grand theory is to consider the various methods, findings, concepts, principles, and sub-theories that Public Administration has accumulated. The next step would be systematically selecting those elements that lend themselves to the construction task (cf. Staats 1991: 907). The problem of exclusion is, however, ever present since not all the elements of Public Administration will prove to be useful for such an undertaking. Furthermore, some elements may be useful to construct a theory, but may have little or no practical application and vocational value.

The methodology used to construct Public Administration theory could follow either an inductive or deductive logic. Inductive theory construction takes place during grounded theory research in which the researcher first observes aspects of social life and then seeks to discover patterns that may point to relatively universal principles. A more inductive logic will typically start off with foundational “big questions”, whilst deductive logic will take micro-theory as building blocks of the eventual grand design. Seemingly suggesting a more inductive approach Robert Behn (1995), proposed that researchers should pose “big questions” to the disciplines, in order to uncover the very foundations of their existence. In reaction, Neumann (1996: 410) suggests that the discipline’s “big questions” should be sought in terms of three tiers, similar to the “three-world view” of Babbie and Mouton (2011: 48), to establish its philosophical *raison d’etre*:

- ♦ A highest tier, where broad theories are formulated and basic research conducted to address the human philosophical need to understand surrounding phenomena.
- ♦ A mid-level tier, where basic data are gathered and specific hypotheses are formulated, tested, and either accepted or discarded; basic theories formulated in the highest tier are thus investigated against research observations in this tier.
- ♦ A lower tier, where basic research undergoes the transition to applied research. The accepted and proven theories are applied by posing solutions to concrete problems.

In this regard a relevant point of critique could be that Behn’s suggested three questions can

hardly be considered as “foundational”. These questions rather focus on operational/functional aspects of public administration. Therefore it cannot provide meaningful insight into the nature and philosophical foundations of the field. Neumann’s suggested big questions (1996: 412) in turn are too reductionist in nature by focusing on (public) organisational theory. Van der Waldt (2012) recaptured these “big” metatheoretical or foundational questions in an attempt to consider the core issues that should feature in the curriculum of educational programs for Public Administration. This attempt, however, only focused on the dynamics within a particular country, namely the South African context. Nevertheless, all of these authors contribute by pointing out that the formulation of the discipline’s unified theory should start off by asking the appropriate foundational questions.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to explore the prospects or feasibility of designing a grand unified theory for an emerging applied, social science such as Public Administration. Although a unifying theory is highly esteemed, it is currently not evident to researchers which characteristics such a grand design should manifest to be appropriate for the discipline of Public Administration. The construction of a grand theory for Public Administration requires an in-depth analysis of its nature as a modern, dynamic, interdisciplinary and typically disunified discipline. It is evident that Public Administration is not a discipline that has clear-set boundaries, which, in a unified way, would define its research questions, theories and methods. This ‘discipline’ is rather a complex, dynamic field that addresses many different research problems, which in turn is grounded in a variety of theories and methodologies. This results in a plurality of *theoretical and methodological sub-domains of applied sciences, social sciences, and humanities*. To develop a unifying theory would thus imply plotting the virtual endless relationships between the philosophical underpinnings and knowledge bases of these various sub-domains.

The search for a unified theory may indeed also turn out to be counterproductive. Due to the multitude of competing paradigms within reference disciplines it is highly unlikely that a unifying theory for Public Administration is attainable.

In all likelihood such an endeavour is also not advisable due to its potential limiting scope to address complex governance-related problems. One should therefore not attempt to assemble a unifying theory, but rather accept the discipline as an interdisciplinary study field. In this regard the researcher concurs with argument that exponents of Public Administration should not search for a unifying theory, but rather continually strive towards a quest for the relevance of this field of study. This relevance is based on questions on which aspects should be incorporated in educational programs, or should be researched to make governmental institutions more responsive, responsible, accountable and respectable in the eyes of the beholder.

Public Administration certainly has a significant potential to contribute to real-life challenges such as good governance, effective, economical and efficient utilisation of resources for service delivery, as well as to cope with socio-political challenges. However, it need also be added that this potential will only be realised by enhancing the dimensions of scientific sophistication for scholars' endeavours in this field. This can be accomplished by providing the appropriate theoretical architecture for studies that strive for unification of the diverse sub-foci on the variety of research problems.

NOTE

- 1 In his 2011 publication (Oxford UP, 2011), Raadschelders went beyond his 1999 article in arguing that the notion of an identity crisis only exists when a narrow definition of science is applied.

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