What is the Nature of Public Administration?

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Abstract — The discipline of public administration has undergone three areas of thinking: Old Public Administration, New Public Management, and the New Public Service. A brief examination to this progression is addressed in the paper by comparing and contrasting the main tenants of each of the schools of thought.

What is the Nature of Public Administration?

“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them” (Albert Einstein). The nature of public administration has changed significantly over time. Numerous scholars have studied the transition from the Old Public Administration to New Public Management to today’s New Public Service. Each of these approaches is distinct. From a historical perspective, Old Public Administration was a top-down hierarchical approach in which public officials were appointed to implement policies rather than develop them. The foremost objectives were supporting the organizational structure and efficiency. New Public Management was based on public choice theory that focused on the individual and self-interest, and New Public Service is based on theories of democratic citizenship, emphasizing accountability through consideration of community/public values, professional standards, and citizen interests (Dehnahrdt and Denhardt, 2011).

There are two perspectives concerning the framework surrounding public administration as an area of business administration: integral and managerial. The integral perspective considers everyone in government, from clerical to managerial, a component of public administration. The managerial perspective focuses on the specific individuals at the top of the hierarchy who arrange, organize, coordinate, and control activities as public administration (Naidu, 2005).

These two perspectives indicate the multifaceted nature of public administration in its role of serving fellow citizens. The absolute centrality would rely on the relationship being established. Denhart and Denhart (2011) and Stillman (2010) state that an open study organization together looks at each bit of government’s attempts to offer impact to open framework; as a technique. Stillman (2010) identified four phases of public administration in the United States: PODSCORB Orthodoxy (1926-46), Social Science Heterodoxy (1947-67), Reassertion of Democratic Idealism (1968-88), and the Refounding Movement (1989-present). Stillman claims that “Antistatism” led to the late development of public administration study within the United States (p.18). Antistatism, as defined by Stillman (2010), is “ideas and doctrines expressly hostile to these central governing institutions in society, which argue for reducing, limiting, even eliminating their role(s) and activities” (p. 16).

Denhardt and Denhardt (2011) divide public administration into three eras, “Old Public Administration,” in which government focused on what they called rowing, or doing the work; “New Public Management,” where government’s job was more steering than rowing; and “New Public Service,” where government’s role is to serve the public.

In the Old Public Administration, the main focus was serving the client. On the other hand, the New Public Management focused on serving customers and is based on customer service and the marketplace. Denhardt and Denhardt (2011) contend that despite the fact that improving government service’s quality is important, using the customer service approach (customer-service orientation) would lead to “practical and theoretical difficulties” or dilemmas (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011, p. 60). One of the difficulties is that there are few choices in government. For instance, most of the time there is only one fire department or police department. Further, government provides many services the “customer” does not want, such as speeding tickets or being sentenced to jail. In addition, it is hard to know the customers of government because each customer has different interests. Finally, as Denhardt and Denhardt (2011), state, “Some government services—foreign policy or environmental protection, for example—do not connect with individual customers; once they are provided, they are provided for all, whether you like it or not.” (p. 60).

In the New Public Service, however, Denhardt and Denhardt (2011) think that a democratic government should serve citizens, not clients or customers. They refer to Schimudt and Stickland (1998) in arguing that knowing the differences between customers and citizens would lead to a service quality improvement (Schimudt & Stickland, 1998). “Citizens are described as bearers of rights and duties within the context of a wider community. Customers are different in that they do not share common purposes but rather seek to optimize their own individual benefits” (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011, p. 62).

Public interest has many different definitions that change over time. According to Denhardt and Denhardt (2011), “Attempting to define the ‘public interest’ is a little like trying to define ‘love.’ It is clear that love means different things to different people under varying circumstances. It can change over time in both form and substance” (pp. 67-68) Nevertheless, the public interest has four different dimensions: “normative, abolitionist, political process oriented, and shared value” (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011, p. 68). In the old public administration, elected officials and political leaders argued that the public interest is best achieved by “implementing laws in the most efficient, scientific, politically neutral manner possible” (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011, p. 76). In the New Public Management, public-choice theorists thought that the concept of public interest is meaningless because self-interest predominates, which is very different from the concept of shared values. Theorists’ now view public interest as explicitly abolitionist. They think that public interest is not “meaningful nor important” because public interest cannot be measured and is unnecessary (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011, p. 70).

On the other hand, Denhardt and Denhardt (2011) argue that public administrators in the New Public Service have a “central and important role in helping citizens to articulate the public interest, and, conversely, that shared values and collective citizen interests
should guide the behavior and decision making of public administrators” (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011, p. 78). Public administrators are being looked at as “a key actor within a larger system of governance including citizens, groups, elected representatives, as well as other institutions” (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011, p. 82) Therefore, it is essential that everyone should be given an equal chance to participate in the dialogue and deliberative process in public issues.

The role of the administrator in the Old Public Administration was mostly implementing the policy that the political leaders adopted because of the belief that policy and administration should be separate. Also, society’s direction was determined by elected political leaders alone, and the relationship between administrators and leaders was unclear (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011, p. 89). The administrators in the New Public Management were seen more as entrepreneurs. They were encouraged to take a role in making policies which they thought it would benefit society. They were also encouraged under public choice theory to provide choices to the “customers” in order to build “market incentives” (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011, pp. 91-92).

While the Old Public Administration focused on bureaucratic expertise and the New Public Management focused on entrepreneurial managers, the New Public Service suggests that administrators should help citizens articulate and express their interest in policymaking. According to Denhardt and Denhardt (2011), there are several reasons why administrators should encourage citizens theoretically and practically. Examples of theoretical reasons are the ethical requirement of administrators to care about citizens, the responsibility to educate and enlighten them, and the responsibility to listen to their voices. Some of the practical reasons for why administrators should help citizens engage in the policy process are the citizens’ expectations that they are being heard and understood, the quality improvement of policies, and the transparency and accountability resulting from such participation (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011, pp. 95-96).

Accountability is exceedingly complex and difficult for public administration, especially in the New Public Service (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011) because public administrators are responsible for so many different entities and norms including the public interest, professional standards, media, profit and non-profit sectors, and citizens (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011).

A far simpler view of accountability was held in the old public administration. Public administrators were responsible and accountable to political leaders and elected officials because of hierarchy and the lack of discretion on the part of administrators, who were merely responsible for implementing the laws, rules, and policies. Consequently, administrators’ responsibility to the public or citizens was not important (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011, pp. 129-130). In the New Public Management, the focus was on efficiency, effectiveness, and economy.

The paramount value in the Old Public Administration was efficiency, by using control, while the predominant value in the New Public Management was economic rationality, by using incentives and inducements (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011). As a result, the New Public Management does not address human behavior in the organization.

In the new public service, motivation involves respecting public service standards: “the idea that people act in response to shared values, loyalty, citizenship, and the public interest” (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011, p. 164) Denhardt and Denhardt (2011) suggest that New Public Service should be compatible with the humanistic values of human behavior within the organization, such as serving and caring for others. For instance, public managers should treat other public servants equitably and have concern for them because managers should not expect employees to treat and deal with citizens in a respectful way if employees are not also treated the same way (p.165).

Denhardt and Denhardt (2011), clearly imply that the new public service helps in creating a consistent democracy, trust, value, and citizen engagement. By adopting the New Public Service’s theory of democracy and citizenship, Denhardt and Denhardt (2011) anticipate a successful public administration.

References