

## ***Dialogue: Knowledge and Research***

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**4/5/2000**

**Mel Dubnick**

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In September 1999 I presented a paper at the American Political Science Association meetings that drew both the attention and ire of my colleagues (I believe it was Curt Ventriss who said reading it was a “vein-popping” experience). It was explicitly a contentious paper, and in hindsight the “argument” took too many liberties with the literature I was critiquing. Were I revising the paper for publication today, several of my interpretations would be different. Nevertheless, I would still stick with the fundamental point of the paper: that the scholarly community of Public Administrationists must rethink its historical rejection of the field’s status as a social science.

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administration research from a multitude of epistemological and ontological perspectives. It is difficult to escape methodological monotheism in the mainstream literature and at mainstream conferences—we cannot assume that this “Dialogue” represents the end of this conversation.

Like to respond? Surf into the PAT-Net web site, [www.pat-net.org](http://www.pat-net.org), and click on the “Dialogue” link to contribute to this conversation, or e-mail me.

Have a non-refereed essay to submit for *Commentary* or a note for our *Briefly Noted* section? Please get in touch.

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To facilitate this dialogue, let me briefly summarize the content of that 51 page, 252 footnote, single-space paper (for those willing to tackle the details, downloadable versions of the original paper are found at <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~dubnick/papers/apsa99/spirits.html>). My focus in the paper is on the community of scholars who explicitly identify themselves as Public Administrationists. I did not note any specific characteristics of these scholars in the paper, but there are probably several that can be highlighted. Holding a position in an academic program that teaches public administration is one, and perhaps membership in the American Society for Public Administration or the PA section of APSA might be a second. [Editor's note: though Dubnick does not mention the Public Administration Theory Network here, several of the authors cited in his paper are Network scholars and regular contributors to *Administrative Theory & Praxis*. RB] Since the focus of my critique is those who engage in active scholarship, I would add that a member of the community actually attends scholarly meetings where they interact with other Public Administrationists, and every so often serves as a discussant or presents papers at those sessions. Perhaps the core test of membership in the community of Public Administration scholars is the priority one gives to publishing their work in any one of several journals published in the community, including: *Public Administration Review*, *Administration & Society*, *Journal of Public Administration Theory and Research*, *Public Productivity and Management Review*, *American Review of Public Administration*, *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, and *Administrative Theory & Praxis*.

A key point in my argument is that not all—or perhaps even most—scholars who study public administration are part of that Public Administrationist community. Although there are some notable overlaps, one can argue that there are many students of public administration (broadly defined) who identify themselves as members of other communities—as political scientists or sociologists who study bureaucracy, as public policy analysts, as public management scholars, as urban studies specialists, etc. They are more likely to teach in traditional political science or sociology departments, or in public affairs or public policy schools, and they typically attend meetings such as APPAM or the Urban Studies Association. Most significant, however, is that they are professionally averse to being identified as Public Administrationists and would not regard publication in any one of field's major journals as a high priority. Put bluntly, many scholars who study public administration hold the field of Public Administration in low regard.

Of course, it is difficult to provide any hard data to support this contention. Here I must rely on conversations with colleagues from those “mainstream” social sciences as well as my experiences trying to solicit quality social science submissions as managing editor of *PAR*. Others have examined this issue as

well, including a 1987 paper by Kenneth Meier and Joseph Stewart<sup>1</sup> with a title that may say it all: “Why Are People Saying All Those Nasty Things About Public Administration, And What Should Be Done About It? Or ‘Shoot Low, Boys. They’re Riding Shetland Ponies.’” Their essential argument is that Public Administrationist scholars try too hard to adopt the perspectives and serve the needs of the professionals we seek to serve. I agree, but would add that this effort reflects the outcome of the post-World War Two dispute between Dwight Waldo and Herbert Simon about the future direction of the field. Simon sought a future as a “true” social science, i.e., one pursued within the context of a logical positivist epistemology. Waldo, in contrast, feared the indifference to normative values implied in following such a path, and would ultimately (in the late 1960s) advocate the adoption of a professional field perspective. Within the Public Administrationist community, the Waldo position has carried the day, and Simon's place in the field has been that of an ever-threatening bogeyman. Outside our community, however, it is Simon's striving for a social science approach to public administration issues that has been “victorious.” From their perspective, there is no benefit—and often no desire—to be associated with our community.

At the heart of these attitudes among “mainstream” social scientists is the view that our field has lost whatever claims it had in the past to disciplinary status as a social science. Instead, we are collectively associated with “professional fields” such as law, medicine, journalism, social work, education and the like. While this is not an inherently “bad” condition, it has posed a difficult dilemma for those who begin their scholarly career with a strong interest in studying the broad area of public administration/affairs/management. Jonathan Bendor<sup>2</sup> has expressed it as a choice between becoming an applied or pure researcher, but there is more to it than that. Like it or not, the sociological reality in academia is that the status of the traditional disciplines—the humanities as well as the social and “hard” sciences—trumps the professional schools.

Most professional fields compensate for this relative lack of status with a strong sense of community self-identity and organizational autonomy within their university, sometimes reinforced with higher compensation and the application of “special” rules when it comes to determining professorial rank.

<sup>1</sup>Kenneth J. Meier and Joseph Stewart, Jr., “Why Are People Saying All Those Nasty Things About Public Administration, And What Should Be Done About It? Or Shoot Low, Boys, They're Riding Shetland Ponies,” paper read at American Political Science Association (September 1987), Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>2</sup>Jonathan Bendor, “The Fields of Bureaucracy and Public Administration: Basic and Applied Research,” *Journal of Public Administration Theory and Research* 4 (1994): 27–39.

This is especially true for most affiliated law and medical schools. Although the field of Public Administration has attempted to emulate those models, there is a long list of factors that keep pulling most emerging public administration scholars toward the standards of the traditional discipline standards. In some cases that pull is institutional, for many public administration scholars find themselves within traditional arts and sciences schools where the criteria for tenure and promotion make claims for special consideration of our unique form of profession-oriented scholarship extremely difficult to defend. In many other instances, it is our individual intellectual roots in the traditional discipline—as graduates of political science or economics or sociology programs—that wield a powerful influence on our personal decision whether to identify ourselves as part of the Public Administration community of scholars.

Our individual resolutions of this status-driven dilemma have varied, and I assume if you are reading this you have taken the option of accepting the field's identity as a profession. In recent years, however, the dilemma has taken on collective dimensions, particularly with the rise of Ph.D. programs specifically identified with the field. Are we educating Public Administrators in the professional field or academic discipline sense? Are we asking them to continue on in the tradition of Dwight Waldo, or should we reconsider our collective disdain for the positivist agenda of Herbert Simon?

I clearly fall into the positivist camp on this issue. I have colleagues who believe this is an unwise position, citing the pernicious arrogance of hardcore social scientists. I believe they misread recent developments in the social science disciplines where postmodernism has gained some respect and produced a greater openness to diverse perspectives and methods. In addition, this position implies that our own work cannot withstand scrutiny by colleagues who apply the scholarly standards of mainstream social science—a premise I do not accept.

There are others who believe salvation lies only in a segregation of the applied form the pure forms of public administration scholarship. The best public administration doctoral programs, a colleague once argued, would be located at least twenty-five miles from the nearest MPA program. From this perspective, one must take the differences between pure and applied public administration research very seriously, both institutionally and intellectually. My own inclinations reflect a bias toward schizophrenia. On the one hand, I believe we are correct to assume a professional field posture in our *professional* teaching missions, that is, when we are in our MPA classrooms dealing with practitioners. On the other hand, we have an obligation to use our doctoral classrooms and research activities to re-stake our long abandoned claim to standing as a social science discipline. We need to spend less time fending off mythical positivist barbarians at the gate, and more time seeking a seat at the table with our colleagues from political science, sociology, economics, and

anthropology that are engaged in public administration related research. At the same time, we need to invite those colleagues into our epistemological feast with open arms rather than a hypercritical coolness.

4/14/2000

Peter Bogason

The list is silent... So let the odd-man out begin. Read the last paragraph of this mail first. It is a note about how we should proceed. And then read the in-between as some sort of "hello, this is where I am" in non-academic jargon. Maybe then I will sharpen the pen for a more academic style. So here we go.

Let me first explain that in my country, Denmark (5 million inhabitants), there are no accreditation procedures for PA programs. They are all approved as state programs at state universities (no private universities in Denmark). We have links to the PA professions by using them as external examiners (but we also use faculty from other universities) and by having some of them on an advisory board for the social sciences in Denmark (which is heard in cases of great changes in the PA programs). There is no professional organization with standing such as that of ASPA, APPAM or whatever the American acronyms are, but there is a major interest organization for social science graduates, spanning everything from law to economics. It does not directly interfere with what we teach in PA. Another small organization for PA graduates works on a national basis, but it is linked to all the other Nordic countries, it runs a scientific journal on a Nordic basis and a practice-oriented journal on a national basis.

Let me then identify myself as one of those who is part of a public administration community in Mel's understanding—but the European rather than the American community of scholars in PA. I teach PA in an interdisciplinary department (Social Sciences at Roskilde University), the students graduate with a Master's in PA, and I am a deputy editor of the European journal *Public Administration* (Oxford), running the book review section which is growing and changing into a broader focus than before.

However, I am not sure why I have to have that status in order to be included in the group Mel wants to address. In my understanding of the development of a field, any one who addresses the topics of that field must be considered as a serious voice in the development of the field—even if, and maybe especially if, they call attention to the Emperor's new clothes (yes, I am a Dane, so I cherish Hans Christian Andersen's tales!). In other words, any critical voice should be lauded and not excluded on the basis of some more or less formalistic criteria.

I am one of those who found Mel's paper extremely interesting when I found it at the APSA meeting in August 1999. It is quite a tour de force. I understand it

as a plea to reconsider the stance of Herbert Simon in developing a science of administration, as opposed to the Waldo stance that one should pledge allegiance to the profession and its identity. I interpret this as asking us not to do research based on the premises set up by those who are active within the field as practitioners, but rather on those premises which researchers deem relevant.

Let me immediately draw my brief conclusion, and then qualify it. Basically, I concur that the activities of those practicing PA are not those that should delimit my research. I want to do this based on my ongoing activities as a researcher in perpetual dialogue with other researchers and occasional contact with practitioners. But to take Simon's understanding of "science" is problematic because the connotations of the concept science and its corollary—what constitutes scientific endeavors—may be dangerously limited if Simon's original ideas of it, namely positivist understanding and mainstream maintenance, are upheld.

In other words: True "scientists" work on their topics in their laboratory, and in the positivistic ideal world, they create theories that are valid across time and space. Recall what social science was about to become in the dreams of its strongest proponents in the 1940s and 1950s, for example by reading Talcott Parsons or the like: general propositions galore to be tested by statistical analysis, enabling us able to generalize about organizational behavior, politics, etc. Read for example the discussions about roll call analysis in the UN as an approach to an analysis of whether it was approaching the status of a parliament. Excuse the phrase, but it is a yawn. I am not saying that present-day social science is a yawn, though some of the more positivistic types of analysis are close. But they certainly perform the role of the outside analyst, the social scientist not attached to and bound by the profession.

You may argue that few social scientists today are positivists of the old school, and I would agree and thank some God for that. But many operate within the following general premises: only generalized knowledge is of interest; the analyst must refrain from affecting the object s/he is analyzing and consequently a host of measures are introduced to give the analyst some kind of objective, outside status; case studies are always discussed regarding their potential for generalizing; numerical, i.e. statistical information, is preferable to soft qualitative stories; the objective analyst has no stake in the outcome of the analysis; and so on.

Don't get me wrong. I am not saying that the analyst should become vividly engaged in some political battle; I am not saying that statistical information is useless; I am not saying that we should only do case studies and narrate stories. But I think that it is next to impossible to remain detached, and I think that such qualitative techniques I have mentioned are worthy research instruments. So "science" in my understanding is far away from the ideal I characterized—maybe somewhat unfairly—above. I cannot accept that an

analysis is excluded from the scientific community because it does not rigorously test hypotheses by statistical means. But this is what many of my colleagues tend to do in mainstream political science. Look at courses in research methodology: dominated by regression analysis and its derivatives. Look at what is being published in American mainstream political science journals.

Generalized knowledge helps us in many not-so-complicated settings. Group theory tells us much about interaction, but only to a point. Voting behavioral theory is helpful in some ways, but much of it is very common knowledge today. Organizational theory helps me understand my colleagues better—but other people may also come to the same conclusions without theoretical knowledge. So it does not help us much going on rotating some scores on a behavioral scale to get more information about this and that. We have reached the end of what is interesting, and further analysis must go along other lines. And this is what many of our colleagues do.

So at this point I feel the possibility for dialogue. What does Mel mean by falling "into the positivistic camp (of Herbert Simon) on this issue"? Is it the original positivist, is it some sort of mainstream positivist of the year 1999 (paper written), or do we have a Mel of this post-positivist camp? The APSA paper indicates that we are somewhere close to some "post", but it remains, at least to me, obscure what Mel would like us and himself to do. I suggest that we start from there, that is, the final section, section IV, pp. 40–42 in the paper.

All best

Peter

4/17/2000  
Mel Dubnick

In response to Peter's posting:

It is fitting that the first postings should involve a trans-Atlantic exchange. I've had several contacts about "the paper" from European colleagues, the most recent from Mark Rutgers who shared the work with his research group and noted "It is interesting to see that my younger European colleagues find it difficult to understand the US debate at all."

Upon reflection, I am not surprised, for one of the consequences of our efforts to "professionalize" ourselves has been the parochialization of the field. But that's another discussion....

Peter's effort to pinpoint my position on the nature of the field highlights one of the many ambiguities in my paper begging for clarity. Although it grates on some, I am assuming a sociological perspective of Public Administration, seeing it as a "community" of scholars. I stress the idea of "community" knowing full well that it is one of those amorphous concepts (like "society" or "state") that defies definition and yet seems to reflect a functioning reality. From the position of participant observer, my sense of being a member of that community is the only evidence I can offer that it really exists; I am counting on my colleagues to accept that premise on the basis of their own experience. But being part of that community doesn't mean I understand it, although I see my paper as an attempt to intellectually grasp the mysterious dynamics of our field.

By way of clarification, I am arguing that the most important dynamic in our community of scholars is an ideological commitment to the professional stance assumed most clearly (and reluctantly, I might add) by Dwight Waldo in 1968.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the impression Peter drew from my paper, I don't believe that our research agendas are actually driven by the expressed premises or desires of the practitioner community. Rather, I believe they are driven by the ideology of service to the profession sustained by the field's intellectual leaders. Do we really listen to practitioners? Not really—or perhaps only rarely—in the sense of seeking their explicit guidance about how we might use our skills to help improve their performance effectiveness. Yes, the ideology tells us to be more attentive and deferential to the practitioners; but we have been more likely to respond to our own community needs than to those of practitioners.

Like other academics, we Public Administrationists seek our status and psychic rewards within and among peer communities. The problem is that we are collectively uncertain of which peer communities to associate with. In the now distant past, Public Administration scholars were among the leading social scientists in academe AND played a central role in the world of practitioners. The formation of the American Society for Public Administration in 1939 was perhaps the most notable representation of that condition, at least according to Donald Stone's first-hand account<sup>4</sup> of the forces behind the organization's founding.

But for at least thirty years we have been turning our backs on the social sciences (as they have on us) and established only a nominal relationship with

<sup>3</sup>Dwight Waldo, "Scope and Theory of Public Administration," In *Theory and Practice of Public Administration: Scope, Objectives, and Methods*, ed. J. C. Charlesworth (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1968).

<sup>4</sup>Donald C. Stone, 1982/1975, "Birth of ASPA: A Collective Effort at Institution Building," in *American Public Administration: Patterns of the Past*, ed. J. W. Fester (Washington, DC: American Society for Public Administration, 1982/1975), 7.

the practitioner community. This is the worst of all possible situations. Our academic training as social scientists (for the most part) pulls us toward our home disciplines, while our ideological commitments push us toward a professional stance. For me, this purgatory is at the heart of our identity crisis—and not some missing conceptual core or epistemological foundation.

Given this "clarification" (I probably added to the confusion...), I would disclaim any intention to advocate a return to Simon's logical positivist view of the social sciences. My reference to Simon is to highlight two historical points. First, the debate surrounding his work represents the historical pivot point in the field's splitting away from the social sciences. Second, his particularly strong version of logical positivism has become THE dominant symbol of social science epistemology within the Public Administration community and the demon incarnate for those who seek a rationale for not permitting the valueless (read "godless") barbarians within our intellectual gates. In this regard, my intention was to bring attention to the reality of today's social sciences as a disciplinary arena openly engaged in constantly questioning and rethinking its assumptions and purposes.

[As an aside, the pursuit of a better understanding of Simon's commitment to logical positivism led to an interesting discovery—of my own ignorance and prejudices against that "school." In his autobiography, Simon talks of late night get-togethers with his fellow graduate students at the University of Chicago where heated debates would take place over the issues raised by logical positivist philosophers. I found the image a bit odd until I began to read recent works by a group of intellectual historians and philosophers who are throwing new light on the radical notions emanating from the work of Carnap and other members of the Vienna Circle. Could it be that the logical positivists were in fact the first postmodernists?]<sup>5</sup>

But to return to my point—what I am seeking is an explicit effort on the part of my Public Administration colleagues to re-embrace our identities as social scientists, not in the sense of adopting some stereotypical image of a methodologically fixated social science seeking to construct and test some grand social theory, but rather in the more realistic image of a group of disciplines engaged in the search for credible knowledge.

I can predict the obvious question: What is "credible knowledge"? And I can predict that my answer will once again cause some vein-popping reactions.

Positivism in its most basic and classical form—that is, any approach to knowledge that avoids metaphysical or theology assumptions—plays a key role in determining credible knowledge in the social sciences. Without such standards for credible knowledge, anything goes—and I mean anything.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Michael Friedman, *Reconsidering Logical Positivism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[That Public Administration lacks such standards is evidenced in at least one recent work that has received critical acclaim as well as awards. My critique of Adams and Balfour's *Unmasking Administrative Evil*<sup>6</sup> is going to appear in *PAR* in the near future, and there I elaborate a bit more on the idea of credible scholarship.]

So where does that place me—am I positivist or post-positivist? I think the answer lies in the fundamental goal of seeking to have Public Administration re-establish itself as a social science as the best available means for anchoring itself to some standards for generating credible knowledge. I regard Simon's efforts to reshape the field as an administrative science as the positivist path not followed. That particular road (i.e., logical positivism) closed years ago, and in its place are several positivist paths to credible scholarship. Those are the ones we need to explore along with our social science colleagues.

4/18/2000

**Jos Raadschelders**

#### The study of P.A.

Within the great bodies of learning of the natural, the social, and the humanist sciences most disciplines (i.e. identifiable bodies of knowledge) enjoy having a clearly demarcated community of scholars.

Quite frankly I have the hardest time coming up with an example besides P(ublic) A(d)ministration that does not have such a clear identity. Using capital and small capital indicates half of the problem. Certainly in the USA the study of PA has walked almost from the beginning—but not quite since the beginning—a fine line between theory and practice/applied research. For European PA-ists this is difficult to understand. They speak and think in terms of administrative science (e.g., Verwaltungswissenschaft, science administrative). The Dutch debate the distinction between *bestuurswetenschap* (science) and *bestuurskunde* (art/skill). However, the Dutch as well as other European PA-ists will identify the suffix 'science' with 'scholarship' rather than with a particular method of research. Many of the leading European scholars in PA combine their academic work with an active contribution to practice (as consultant, advisor to government, political or administrative officeholder). Science in Europe is thought of as 'scholarship'. In all the bodies of learning one is first and foremost a scholar who provides insight and understanding by whatever means possible and relevant to the object of

<sup>6</sup>Guy B. Adams and Danny L. Balfour, *Unmasking Administrative Evil* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998).

research. The concept of science in the USA is understood in a more limited positivist connotation. The other half of the problem is of course that PA and pa are engaged in a symbiotic relationship. Practitioners in public administration understandably identify 'usable knowledge' as 'knowledge applicable to reality', whereas I would see the concept of usable knowledge in the broader meaning of 'better understanding of reality'.

For clarity some biographical background might be useful. I have an MA-degree in history with minors in IR and PA. My first in-depth encounter with social science (the pa-classes I took) left me with a deep impression: I felt that for the first time I had something that provided a theoretical and conceptual foundation to the *histoire événementielle* I had grown accustomed to. In 1983 I started as a faculty member at the PA-section of the political science department at the University of Leiden (since 1984 PA has been a separate department). Part of my job was to write a dissertation. My PhD is in the social sciences, and while working on it I immersed more and more into PA- and political science literature. My first confrontation with a debate about the nature of the study of PA was when my dissertation chair wanted me to apply a statistical approach to explaining the development of local government in the Netherlands between 1600-1980. For one-and-a-half years I read on the possibilities and limitations of statistical research, on the philosophy of PA, and on different types of explanation. Following a small symposium on the philosophy of PA and two articles (co-authored with Mark Rutgers, 1989), respectively on methodological foundations of PA and on explanation in the social sciences, I had finally boiled my problem down to the basic distinction between understanding (Weber: *Verstehen*, the interpretative tradition) and explanation (*Erklären*, the positivist tradition). I convinced my chair that a systematic statistical cross-time analysis of 380 years could not be done given the lack of reliable data and consistent time-series. The only consistent time-series I had (that of the size of local government personnel in terms of functions) for the entire period had taken me four-and-a-half years to put together from primary sources. Anyway, since then I continued to have an interest in the nature of the study of PA. The department where I worked until 1998 was multidisciplinary in composition, probably of necessity, for once the PA-departments were created in the Netherlands, faculty had to be drawn from other disciplinary backgrounds. There were political scientists, lawyers, historians, a sociologist, a philosopher, a linguist, a social geographer, and an organizational theorist. I am probably forgetting some. It made for a vibrant and lively multidisciplinary perspective on PA that was beneficial both to faculty as well as students. The curriculum reflected that, since all PA students (enrollments increased from 60 in 1984 to a 1000 in 1990) had to take intro and in-depth classes in 'auxiliary disciplines' (economics, sociology, political

science and law; in-depth public budgeting, welfare state, comparative politics, administrative law).

When I think of PA as a community of scholars it is thus a community that consists of a core (i.e. those that identify themselves as PA) and a larger group of scholars from other disciplines whose main interest is with an aspect (relevant to their discipline) of the role and position of government in society. Public Administration is and should be a multidisciplinary community, not constituted on the basis of a particular epistemological and methodological unity but instead on the basis of a shared interest in the same phenomenon. Government-in-society is an extremely complex phenomenon and cannot possibly be understood, let alone explained, from one mono-disciplinary angle. PA can therefore also not claim knowledge of government necessarily superior to that of other disciplines. The study of PA can serve, though, as the core where various disciplinary insights on the structure and functioning of government are brought together, again not in the sense of epistemological unity (the positivist's position), but in the sense of differentiated integration that advocates cross-fertilization of knowledge. I agree with Mark Rutgers on the meaning of differentiated integration, but am perhaps a little more optimistic than he is about its realism. [Editor's note: see Raadschelder's article in this issue. RB] Yet another consideration would be that depriving the understanding of government of this multidisciplinary wealth would also deprive the citizenry at large of the richness provided by combined insights, angles etc.

These were general observations that came to mind after reading Mel's big paper and summary, and Peter's response. Some more specific comments/questions now:

- Why is it that psychologists (as far as I can tell) are a scientific community in the sense that Mel defines it while, like PA, the study of psychology has both strong theoretical and strong applied traditions in different schools?

- I wondered about Mel's observation that Waldo's professional field perspective carried the day since the 1960s in the PA community. In his *Administrative State*, after all, Waldo argued that the development of civilization at large is so closely connected to the emergence of government and bureaucracy that attention has to be paid to values, law, philosophy, culture, history, language, etc., i.e. the widest possible perspective on government and governance (which I obviously embrace). It seems that emphasizing the 'professional' nature of the study, is a retreat from this larger perspective. In a 1975 overview of political science Waldo referred to the emphasis in early PA (before scientific management set in and the 'efficiency' Progressivists had won the day) on research and teaching for better public service, more informed citizenry etc. It appears to me that the increased attention to

ethics, a historical perspective, language, public architecture and so forth indicate that the PA community is at least partly moving away from the more limited understanding of government generated by a positivist type of research.

- I am convinced that multidisciplinaryity is the great strength of PA. I am not sure if Mel is suggesting that our scholarship should be solely profession-oriented. I would argue that the unique challenge to PA is to walk the fine line between theory and practice. As an academic with a European background (hence why Peter felt it necessary to mention his Danish background, and why I put in that little biography) I would first and foremost emphasize the responsibility of scholars to enhance understanding. To put it in black and white terms I would not like the idea that the public servants we trained in administrative skills lack the ability to evaluate public policy in a normative context (which one can really only do when drawing from and combining different bodies of knowledge).

- Considering Simon's approach or Waldo's is not so much an either-or issue. We will continue to need both. I consider myself to be a traditional academic, working according to the rules of scholarship set under modernity. While I am open to postmodern approaches (is that what is meant by post-positivist?), I am also cautious for these can potentially be carried too far into nihilism. I simply do not see that 'my interpretation is as good as yours', for some studies are simply better argued than others.

- What can I say? Some of the more statistical work I started reading in the 1980s gave me a yawn too. Was this PA? The classes I had taken in PA were so much richer. Hence, I concur with Peter's idea about science, which I have also outlined above. 'Scholarship' with respect to PA is a better term than 'science', and there is a lot of good scholarship in PA and in studies auxiliary to the understanding of government.

This is it for the moment.

4/19/2000

Curt Ventriess

For what it is worth, I would like to add my viewpoint to what has already been stated. I agree with my colleagues from Europe—I think they raised some very interesting issues. Let me say—although this may come as a surprise to



Mel—that I believe he has done us a service in articulating his argument in pretty strong terms. It is an argument (or debate) that is hardly new to the field. And while I have some major reservations about this argument posed by Mel, I would to focus my attention on some of the larger issues that Mel's contentions (at least) infer.

First, I agree with Mel that the field's credibility is not in high regard (in the U.S., anyway) in the eyes of other social sciences. One knows that things are not going well for public administration when Alan Wolfe writes in *The New Republic* that the field has intellectually fallen on "bad times." And he is right. Is this a problem of the field lacking analytical rigor, thus its inability to build a knowledge base on empirical foundation? Perhaps, in part. But I would like to turn this assertion on its head: is part of our problem more of an issue concerning the kind of questions we think are central to the field's intellectual development? To use only one example to illustrate my point, what articles in public administration have we seen in our major journals that address the recent World Bank claim that free-market principles, coupled with reduced government involvement in the economy, is the most efficient way to increase living standards for workers and provide strong economic growth? Or, to take another example, what articles have been published in the field that have explored the issue of "public" versus "private" citizenship in regards to the roles administrators or analysts play in their communities, versus the organizations they work for? Are there any differences in citizenship here and what are the implications? The list can go on and on. My point is this: is the field, to a large extent, restricting itself increasingly to pedantic managerial issues that are, quite frankly, pretty boring? Would anybody researching the two questions I referred to earlier ever think of sending his/her analysis to *PAR*? I don't think so.

What Mel has overlooked (among other things which I won't get into now) is that methodology alone—regardless of the rigor involved—can never define what is scientifically worth exploring. I agree with Mel that we certainly need more empirical studies in our journals—no argument from me on this point. Yet, reclaiming credibility with others is not merely to display analytical virtuosity in our approaches to public affairs (if only it was that simple), but it is always the methodological pluralism we employ in addressing some rather interesting and provocative issues that may have little to do with managerial concerns. I will stop here even though I am tempted to go on....

Best Wishes,  
Curt Ventriess

4/19/2000  
Mel Dubnick

Greetings, again!  
I don't know whether this exchange has been helpful to anyone else thus far, but it certainly has given me second thoughts about how well I articulate my points.

I am obviously the victim of my own ambiguity or an inability to overcome the very prejudices against the social sciences my paper attempted to focus on. I am the first to acknowledge the complications of my presentation, but I also note Curt's admission that he is taking issue with positions inferred from my paper. He is not alone on at least one point. The idea that I am advocating greater methodological rigor is implied as well in the previous comments submitted by Peter and Jos.

To the contrary, I wouldn't even be arguing for a "return" to the social sciences if it meant nothing more than the adoption of "methodological rigor" in the usual "textbook" sense (i.e., the way it is taught in the typical "research methods" course). In fact, it was that very stereotypical view of the social sciences that has kept most of us attached to the professionalism view for decades. [As anyone who has worked with me will tell you, I am the last person they'd imagine as an advocate or defender of methodological rigor, and my publication record clearly supports that view.]

There are those who do accept such a position, however. No one active in the field has to be reminded about the extended debate focusing on the quality of doctoral research and the kind of research we publish in our major journals. And as recently as the latest issue of *J-PART* we have Jeff Gill and Ken Meier<sup>7</sup> offering us a "methodological manifesto" for the field.

As interesting as I find those articles and the debate surrounding them, I am definitely not assuming that position. In the APSA paper, I would classify those efforts as part of the "just do it" group that regards methodological rigor as the solution to our identity problem. I think this approach will prove too simple and vacuous in the long run.

I suspect the difficulty I'm having can be traced to my view of the social sciences, which seems quite different from most of my colleagues. The social sciences I have been working with in my "Logic of Inquiry" course are much broader than the statistically obsessed disciplines that comprise the stereotype. It seems I never quite got over the influence of Weberian and Parsonian social theory that was so prevalent when I was in graduate school. The Behaviorists—with their emphasis on quantitative methods—were beginning

<sup>7</sup>Jeff Gill and Kenneth J. Meier: 2000, "Public Administration Research and Practice: A Methodological Manifesto," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 10 (2000): 157-199.

to exercise hegemony in political science, but I never had the impression that they defined what it meant to be a social scientist. I think that behavioral view of the social sciences plays a major role in our field's ideology and prevents us from accepting the idea that we can re-establish ourselves in the social sciences without assuming the extremely narrow standard implied by "methodological rigor."

What would we have to surrender to regain our place among the social sciences? Probably nothing more than our overly lax attitude toward what constitutes "credible scholarship." What we require is greater rigor in applying some pretty basic standards that are commonplace throughout the major disciplines—not only in the social sciences, but in the sciences AND the humanities. This hardly requires the adoption of a particular set of methodological tools. What it does require is what sociologist John R. Hall<sup>8</sup> calls a critical "culture of inquiry" where any work, by any authors (no matter their status), on any topic (no matter how sensitive) is publicly scrutinized as to the credibility of its assumptions, methods and analysis. Such a culture would not only generate better scholarship, but would constitute a core energizing purpose for our scholarly community beyond that implied in our current stance as a profession-oriented field.

What I see when I look at the social sciences is, I believe, what Herbert Simon saw when he called for scholars of public administration to become part of the administrative sciences—not behavioralism, but a discipline engaged in an on-going search/debate over what constitutes credible research. It is a theory-building, theory-testing endeavor that is open to assumptions and methods that can withstand the scrutiny of critical assessment.

To be blunt, I don't think we as a field have developed that "disciplinary" attitude. We have from time to time engaged in such critical self-assessments, but most often we fall back into the defensive posture inherent in the "professional field" stance. The debate over methodological rigor in the field has intermittently reemerged, but it fails to overcome its overly narrow view of the social sciences. Larry Terry's initiation of the "spirited dialogue" approach in *PAR*'s book review section years ago (which Larry Lutton is continuing) has gotten us on the right track from time to time, as have critical exchanges in *AT&P* and other journals. But these seem more the exceptions than the rule. I guess my Pollyannaish wish is that we make the effort to achieve credible scholarship (rather than service to the profession) the core function in our field.

Regards,

Mel

<sup>8</sup>John R. Hall, *Cultures of Inquiry: From Epistemology to Discourse in Sociohistorical Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Greetings,

I am finding all of this discussion very interesting. I am also pleased that Mel has now classified me in the "just do it group" even though he now refers to the approach as "simple and vacuous in the long run."  
Let me add some thoughts.

4/19/2000  
Ken Meier

1. Just as country music is not simply bad rock and roll, public administration should not be considered bad social science. To be good at public administration requires a degree of rigor and understanding that exceeds that of most social sciences. I have long argued that public administration methods have to be superior to those in political science and economics simply because of the payoff. If a political scientist miscalculates an election result, what is the consequence? Who cares? But if we produce a bad policy analysis or a bad organizational design, there are serious and major consequences for individuals. I can provide lots of examples if anyone wants them. Our work is designed to affect the lives of citizens; that requires a bit more concern and more rigor, not all of which is statistical. In the real policy world, one has to meet the tools of the opposition with similar tools. I battle a lot of economists, I do it with their tools simply because it is the only language that they understand. Similarly while I do not believe in standardized tests to measure education performance, the governor of Texas does; therefore, to press my policy concerns about equity, I do lots of analysis on standardized tests. To be policy relevant, one needs to be fully armed.
2. Public administration is a design science and social sciences should be but usually are not. We are concerned with not just how things are but how they might be. I was pleased to see Mel has been reading more of Simon than *Administrative Behavior*. One cannot read *The Sciences of the Artificial* without concluding that it is driven by a different philosophy of science rather our caricatures of positivism. (For the record, I was a student of Waldo's but an admirer of Simon).
3. It is perfectly acceptable for some to convert public administration into a positivist enterprise. There is nothing wrong with seeking knowledge simply for the sake of seeking knowledge. Some people are good at the scientific study of things but pretty bad at translating them into useful recommendations. Someone needs to do the basic research on problems that we care about.

4. Lots of these movements are going on right now. At the Fifth National Public Management Research Conference, a subgroup on the scientific study of bureaucracy met for a set of panels. There were 12 extremely well trained, young scholars with normative orientations toward public administration. The methods were heavy (Bayesian hierarchical regression, new forms of mathematical simulation, maximum likelihood estimation of stopping processes), but the questions were traditional—why does the FDA approve a drug, when will people prefer decisions made by bureaucrats rather than politicians, how will an agency respond to competition, etc. At the same time there were people who read Simon, Waldo, Victor Thompson, James Thompson, etc. This group will do its thing either within public administration or outside of it. I like to think we would all be better off if they felt welcome and stayed.

Enough for now.

Ken

4/20/2000

Jan Foley Orosz

Having skipped the APSA meeting last year, I wasn't present for the initial reaction to Mel's statements about public administration theory. A few comments: First some ruminations on the community of public administration theorists, and how it is defined. Mel's initial statement in the paper addressed this by PA theory-related meeting attendance and participation. For whatever reason, in the summary statement Mel provides for this list, the definition of PA theory community shifts (appropriately, I think) from being defined for others and self as "participation in certain meetings" to one that accepts self-defined membership in the PA community. This definition is important for several reasons, because it does influence the scope of questions addressed and manuscripts received that might contribute to the development of public administration theory.

It is interesting to me that lived experience serves as the basis for the contributions of this dialogue. How can it not (if we are defining a community?) Mel writes: "From the position of participant observer, my sense of being a member of that community is the only evidence I can offer that it really exists; I am counting on my colleagues to accept that premise on the basis of their own experience." Peter writes of his experience in Denmark and inclusion of practitioners as external examiners. I take that to mean master's or PhD

dissertation/general exam committees, and I wonder if the role of external examiner is taken seriously.

Mel also relies on his experience as a gatekeeper with *PAR* to develop a theory about the type of submissions that he received while at *PAR*. Each of us, for practical and career-related reasons, submit to journals that are more likely to have editorial interests in line with a particular article—in my case this often means outside the so-called premier PA journals. I'll share a related e-mail exchange I had with an "established public administration theorist."

[I wrote] Wanted to ask you for any ideas for a journal outlet for another paper that I did with [a coauthor]. It started out as a "proposal for a human based policy perspective," then moved into autoethnographic/narrative format. Originally it was a straightforward policy piece about the Washington Mastectomy Services Bill that [the coauthor] testified against. Our new title became "Developing a human-based health care policy perspective: From policy to the personal and public." We were outraged with the technical-rational criteria established for mandated health care services in the state of WA and the limited value placed in public testimony—then got to thinking why we were so outraged by this. We drew a lot from Arthur Frank's (1995) *The Wounded Storyteller*. We started working on the project at the ASPA conference in Seattle a few years ago. So, from that description, any ideas?

[Reply of senior PA theorist] For the article, it sounds like a good fit for *Public Voices*. Otherwise, maybe *ATP*. There might be some appropriate policy journals, but I'm less familiar with them.

What does this say to me about what my relationship with public administration might be, when there isn't a fit with any of the mainstream PA journals. Instead I took the material to the meeting of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (a splinter group from the sociologists) last summer, where room was made for our narrative on the conference schedule. The only requirement was joining the group, and there was no conference fee at all. While I take issue with some of what Mel had to say in the initial piece, I oddly find myself in agreement with his statement (somewhere around footnote 134 in the APSA paper) that it is easier to present and publish one's work outside the field than it is to fight the powers that be. So perhaps it is that others are doing this too and that some of the interesting questions are being addressed elsewhere, outside of the "community of PA theorists" when it is narrowly defined.

If we define the public administration community, its domain, and its journals narrowly, we exclude the contributions of many. For this reason, I am opposed to self-defined and self-limiting groups—including quietly invited participants for symposia and collections of commissioned essays to be published in leading journals. The same is true for limited-participant conferences. So of course I would extend this to the question that Peter and Cheryl mentioned—that of “list lurkers.” At the least, I’d say sure, why not, and also let subscribers of *ATP* know about the “dialogue” that is happening, as well as use a message board if anyone else cares to comment and contribute to the discussion.

Along the same lines, I depart from those who consider contributions to public administration theory only from articles in a limited number of PA journals. Why should it matter? Interdisciplinarity is a strength of public administration, but this does require a wider journal search or commentary on “interesting and important” questions, which might be identified by each of us. I recently completed a chapter titled something like “The truth is out there: is postmodern budgeting the real deal?” and talked about this chapter at the ABFM (public budgeting) conference in October. Borrowing the terminology of “the conversational community of public administration” from Jay White’s new book, I wanted to use the time in the panel to extend White and Adams’ identified “narratives of public administration” into public budget theory. That is, to extend the public administration theory dialogue into the community of public budget theorists and advocate the usefulness of some of these alternative narratives to the development of budget theory.

It was obvious to me that there was a different language being spoken while I was presenting myself as a “PA theorist” (even though I haven’t attended any public administration conferences in 1999 or 2000).” Likewise at the PAT-Net meeting in Oregon, when a public-budgeting/economist had a paper included on a panel, a different language was contained within the paper.

Some on the list seem to agree that much of what appears in public administration journals is boring; I suspect we have many differing views about what those other interesting questions are and how we might approach them, and the usefulness (and whether we care if it is useful) to practitioners. Now, I’ll go read *The New Republic* essay that Curt mentioned.

[The CDC article citation is Ringle, Ken (April 29, 2000). “A Tax on Both Your Poxes: Feds’ Report is a Strange Brew. *Washington Post*, C01. The initial media-driven article can be found in *The Akron Beacon Journal*, 4/28/00, titled “Beer Tax would Curb Gonorrhea, Report Says.”]

Peace.

Jan Orosz

4/21/2000  
Curt Ventriess

My Colleagues,

I think we still have to confront a basic issue: that what distinguishes public administration from other social sciences is that it is inherently what I call a public social science. That is, the employment of a critical intellect to other social sciences in order that the public can better debate, discuss, and understand important policy issues (indeed, as Ken as articulated, public administration does have consequences for the public). A public social science would, among other things, “sort out misinformation and distortion of data, clarify the differing sources of potential and real conflict over policy choices, analyze trade-offs implied for each policy choice, and to examine the impact of past policy decisions.”

I think what we need to understand is that theory—as Robert Merton as reminded us—is not a functionalization of knowledge devoid of normative and philosophical concerns. I know this may sound strange, but I believe that if public administration embraces this perspective it will help accentuate a critical, interpretative, and empirical inquiry into public affairs—and, even maybe, start asking some interesting questions that are not necessarily managerial.

We do need to get over this Waldo vs. Simon influence issue—we can debate endlessly on this point and get nowhere. Where we go from here is the real question. Can the field confront the mechanization of theory that is occurring in some other fields (I would put rational-choice theory here) and still be taken seriously by other social sciences? How does the field, in other words, address Max Weber’s probing (and still relevant question): “What shall we do and how shall we live”? I will stop here....

Best Wishes,  
Curt Ventriess

5/11/2000

John Kirlin

Colleagues:

Joining the conversation before the first month closes, I must first observe that this serves as stimulus to more thinking about these issues than usual.

Some thoughts:

The debate about how to do work in our field should be more than Simon versus Waldo. Indeed, if one heard or reads Simon's comments on receiving the ASPA Waldo award in 1995, he downplayed their differences to identify a common enemy: economists and libertarians. In those remarks he praises the values of democratic institutions, quoting from his then recently written introduction to the text *Public Administration* (with Thompson): "No lesson needs so much to be taught today as the lesson that democracy requires politics, and that human society requires social programs and effective administration of those programs. Government cannot be successfully managed by cynics. It must be managed by people who believe in its purposes and possibilities and whose beliefs are supported by solid, realistic knowledge and understanding" (*PA Times*, 18:8 August 1, 1995).

Similarly, when James March read and elaborated on a statement for Simon at the 1997 (?) APSA meetings in DC, the same message of criticizing advocates of rational choice who too dramatically limit the field was heard. Simon, and March, are ultimately behaviorists deeply rooted in democratic values. March's classic piece in *American Political Science Review* on why we continue to seek to "reform" government despite failures is his voice, not Simon's, but I believe reflects the values of both.

However, Simon may not appreciate his impact in arguing that science cannot deal with values and shifting the focus of analysis to internal operations of organizations in *Administrative Behavior*. The legacy of large numbers of scholars writing with little or no attention to democratic values and/or focusing virtually exclusively on organizational/bureaucratic level phenomena is great. His advice to NSF in the early 1970s contributed to the demise of funding for analyses of actual governmental operations under the Research Applied to National Needs (RANN) program. This is a great loss in a field where support for research is limited.

Simon's impact has been felt in other ways too. His own work is not empirical in any quantitative sense, but synthetic, reflective and theoretical. I believe nothing teaches humility about one's theoretical powers more quickly than engaging a large, complex empirical problem.

Stimulated in part by Frank Sherwood's laudatory comments on Simon in a PAR piece on influential thinkers in the field, I searched Dissertation Abstracts to find dissertations of Simon's students. If memory serves me correctly, there were two or three over the data base of two or three decades. All were in psychology and on issues of perception, I believe. Odd for such a major figure and while partly attributable to being at Carnegie Mellon, I found myself wondering how Simon would have been affected by working with doctoral students.

Simon is complex. As also observed already, Simon wrote more than *Administrative Behavior*. In some of the first empirical work on how cities make choices about service delivery structures (funded by NSF in 1972-75 and published as *How Cities Deliver Services*, 1977, with Ries and Sonnenblum), I extended the March and Simon model of adaptive search from their book *Organizations* to analyze how city officials made decisions on service delivery. City decision makers were found to (a) begin the decision process embedded in a context of prior decisions, (b) to not search for alternatives unless dissatisfied, and (c) to limit the search and to be constrained among available options—all vintage March and Simon. More interestingly, though, the empirical evidence showed that they clearly ranked values for trade off, from least to most valuable, as "production" issues, "financing" issues, and "political" issues. This work, widely cited among those working on service delivery for many years, is now virtually invisible in the sea of devotees of public choice approaches to analyzing service choices and the fadism and ideology of "reinvention." Much of that work is not empirical or limits the empirical analyses far too much for my taste. When, incidentally, will we have a real empirical assessment of the effects of "reinvention," TQM, or other fads?

Simon's work, especially in *The Sciences of the Artificial*, influenced the "design" perspective, which I found appealing and incorporated occasionally in teaching, but which has not had major impact either intellectually or as a guide to action. I think much of the reason is the level of analysis and application, which was too focused on organizations. When Douglass North analyses the design of institutions at the nation state level, the results are more powerful. Incidentally, one of the best defenses of competent government is offered by the World Bank in its 1997 World Development Report, which presents very effectively the compelling empirical evidence that government performance is THE most important factor in the long term economic performance of nations. The dimensions of governmental performance that are important are in providing a functioning institutional context of social order/personal safety, markets with enforceable property rights and contracts, effective democratic political processes and basic social services (public health, education, a social safety net). A very good rationale for ensuring that the fundamentals of government work for society.

That brings me to my major complaint about elevating method to centrality in how we "do" public administration, whether in the name of Simon, rational choice, post-modernism, or whatever. We are, in my judgment, bound to a social enterprise of helping humans create valued futures. That task is inevitably large, messy, political and an act of creation in uncertain and changing circumstances. This human enterprise works out in specific geographical places and within specific institutional matrices. One can, and must "abstract up" to make this both intelligible and actionable. My 1996 *PART* and *J-PART* pieces provide a glimpse to how I think about the issues. Currently, I am working through (supported by a \$3.4 million grant of general support from the Lilly Endowment) how a team of colleagues and I can best understand contributions of all sectors (business, non profit/civic association and government), plus individual actions, to human life in a specific region, Central Indiana. We will be using multiple methods and many forms of data to create a mosaic that will have structure and meaning. When done we hope both to have the best understanding ever available to how a region works and to be able to contribute to discussions of how this (and other) regions may improve their prospects. I cannot imagine undertaking this enterprise with a limited intellectual framework, or a small set of methods.

How about bringing pragmatism back into favor as a way to talk about our work? I remain a fan of John Dewey and of Abraham Kaplan, who once observed something to the effect that he was trained as a behaviorist and became a pragmatist as he gained experience. There are still philosophers writing in this vein. Pragmatism has the great virtue to me of keeping value questions central, of requiring the best empirical evidence possible, and of forcing one to recognize that we are engaged in acts of social creation.

5/4/2000

Peter Bogason

John's comments about "bringing pragmatism back in favor" tickles my curiosity. I have read about pragmatism in several American pieces on PA, particularly by members of PAT-Net. Several have quoted Mary Parker Follett with some enthusiasm, many refer, as John does, to Dewey, and last January we had a whole session on pragmatism prompted by a speech by Susan Haack, who did not, I dare say, receive unlimited praise. One problem was what was "real" and "true", and of course any one familiar with the PAT-Net folks would have known that such a standing is to put one self before the firing squad.

But pragmatism, it seems to me, does not require that one has solved all the problems about what is true or not. On the contrary, one begs the question by taking a stance of crudely speaking, trial and error based on the knowledge and expertise-cum-daring that is present among those who will be affected by, say, a decision by an administrative agency. This is in contrast to the decision that is constructed by the agency on the basis of, among others, scientific knowledge or something that approaches that level of knowledge (in Simon's days, this was a level, the highest, which it may not be regarded as today, especially not by Haack's critics).

So far, so good. But then enter Rorty. Or some one else from a department of philosophy is quoted for something, and Hell breaks loose. Because suddenly the discussants become combatants who position one another as liberalist, ex-Marxist, (worse) still-Marxist, libertarian, probably-one-who-would-agree-with-XX-and-I-shall-come-and-get-you, etc. The battle now has become politics of science, and no mercy is allowed, whereas we could maintain peace as long as the disagreements were clad in Simon or Waldo.

This is a little amusing seen from the European scene, because the battle on Rorty or other philosophers is not quite so heated, at least not as long as they are Americans. We can also hide behind national or regional differences, so why should a Dane bother because some French philosopher discusses problems of the family in society, since all Danes know that the French are different....

Probably we should not be amused. We just don't get it. But let me push my American colleagues into some comments on the uses of pragmatism in PA. Is it only interesting in an understanding of low-level agencies that have the chores of actually dealing with citizens? I understand pragmatism as an attitude toward reality and human experience, concomitant to continuous experimentation in the understanding that reality is best apprehended through action. Fact/value, foundationalist/relativist and phenomenology/positivism dichotomies are all bypassed by the continuing testing of hypotheses by the pragmatist.

This is where an experimental spirit may be very productive and innovating—and some times probably conservative. In any case it would help creating diversity, I think, and thereby it should be close to the European discussions of reflexivity. Does that ring a bell among you?

But what more is there to using pragmatism as a basis for understanding PA? To get back to Mel: How does this square with leaning towards Simon? Is the understanding of today's science (your understanding) compatible with John's recommendations?

Peter B.

5/10/00

Jan Orosz

While I appreciate the extended period for discussion on this list, my computer operating system was shortly thereafter a casualty of the frenzy surrounding the love bug—or rather trying to upgrade my virus guard software. So now that I again have access to my e-mail records, I have a few remaining comments.

Prior to this software-related mistake, I intended to ask those of us participating on this list to consider the usefulness and process of our conversation (how pragmatic). I was feeling that with a few exceptions, it has been more individual musings and statements but that there is not much engagement. I wonder at the reasons for this lack of engagement beyond busy schedules around end-of-semester tasks, a religious holiday, and a worldwide computer virus.

Reviewing our on-line conversation, I identified the following threads that could be pursued (for brevity's sake, eliminating all the references to Simon, March, Waldo, and others before us; my apologies if I missed a post to the list, oversimplified and overlooked points, or that what I took from your post doesn't reflect your intent or interest):

- Cheryl King sends a summary of Dubnick's September 1999 APSA paper, the starting point of which is "that the scholarly community of Public Administrationists must rethink its historical rejection of the field's status as a social science."
- Peter Bogason follows up on the community of public administration, how it relates to practitioners, and what guides and advances research agendas and knowledge.
- The question of whether or not there would be spectators to the list was resolved by remaining unaddressed by the majority of the group—no action was made to allow spectators.
- Mel Dubnick advocated "credible scholarship or credible knowledge" as a useful means to create a culture of inquiry where public administration knowledge is scrutinized as a path to improving public administration's lack of respect. Credible scholarship would be the goal, rather than service to the profession, as a core scholarship issue for public administration. Mel clarified that he is not limiting credible scholarship to empirical, positivistic approaches as some readers assumed before clarification.

- The question of public administration community and its boundaries, with practitioners, other social sciences and professional fields was raised.
- Jos Raadschelders suggested the value of using the European term scholarship rather than Science when thinking about advancing knowledge in public administration. He advocated a multidisciplinary perspective in public administration, by including scholars from other disciplines whom study the role and position of government in society.
- Curt Ventriss remarks that public administration's hard times as a scholarly endeavor in part reflects choices by public administration scholars of what questions to study; the current interest in managerial concerns is limiting (and uninteresting and unimportant given the full range of relevant public policy questions).
- Mel Dubnick offered clarification about the degree to which positivism is implied by his argument; positivism is useful but not essential to the pursuit of credible knowledge in public administration and in the social sciences.
- Ken Meier: Public administration work is "designed to affect the lives of citizens"...it requires concern and rigor, because there are serious consequences to mistakes, consequences that may not be present in some social sciences. There is room for basic research on applied problems and theoretical knowledge within the public administration umbrella.
- Jan Orosz: Expresses concern about how the public administration community is defined, especially what voices in terms of different and new ideas are omitted by narrowed definitions of public administration. Advocates expanding boundaries, using own experiences as example.
- Curt Ventriss elaborates on a "public social science" that employs a critical intellect to policy concerns so that the public can better evaluate policy issues.
- John Kirlin: Opposes "elevating method to centrality in how we 'do' public administration." Kirlin writes that public administration is "pound to a social enterprise of helping humans create valued futures." He suggests that pragmatism is a useful means to view our work in public administration, offering the benefits of keeping value questions central, requiring the best empirical evidence possible, and recognizing that we engage in acts of social creation.

- Peter Bogason advocates further consideration of the uses and consequences of pragmatism in public administration.

So we are left with positions, articulated and not, on these queries/statements (among others):

- How much public administration scholarship should be focused toward knowledge for its own sake, for policy-relevance, toward value questions.
- Methods shouldn't determine who we are and what we do as a public administration community (but each of us has beliefs and actions in this regard and act accordingly in our professional lives, some having made public statements of these views, others not).

- Defining credible scholarship and how this relates to advancement of public administration remains a loaded gun. [Although, I suspect we all could agree that the recent headline study from the CDC—"raising taxes on beer linked to reduction in STD"<sup>9</sup> is outside the realm of credible scholarship—hope you saw this week's follow-up story in the Washington Post including comments from a CDC spokesperson].

- There is not a concrete definition of the public administration community, although it is enacted in many settings.

- Pragmatism offers possibilities for decision-making as we proceed with our own public administration scholarship.

Hope this summary is useful in some way.

Jan Orosz

5/10/2000

Mel Dubnick

From the deadline Cheryl gave, I assume this is my final opportunity to respond—so here it goes:

As this discussion winds down, I want to reassert the major theme I pursued in the paper that initiated this and related exchanges: the academic field of Public Administration needs to reclaim its identity as a social science discipline. As a community of scholars, we have organizationally and

ideologically isolated ourselves from our disciplinary colleagues in the social sciences by assuming an identity within the "professional" community.

Put another way, following Dwight Waldo's advice, we have selected the profession of public administration as an audience for our work while turning our backs on the alternative audience of disciplinary peers (just as they were turning their backs on us, I might add). The more I explore the consequences of that collective choice, the more I am convinced that the intellectual costs have been too high.

I'm looking forward to spending much of an upcoming sabbatical elaborating (and clarifying!) this argument. For now, however, I want to stress that mine is not a call to necessarily elevate positivist methods or empiricism as the standards for assessing our research. Such a position assumes the existence of "knowable truth" that I do not believe many of us are willing to accept. Instead, I think we need to accept the condition that we are scholars in search of knowledge that can be justified before an audience/community of our peers. As it happens, the standards of justification for the social science community became intertwined with a "methodism" that once dominated those disciplines.

But things are changing in the social sciences. Although there are many who cling to some singular (i.e. "truth-seeking") vision of what constitutes credible social science, the meta-logical stranglehold of positivist methodism is clearly broken. In its place has emerged a more open search for justifiable knowledge and "cultures of inquiry" where the standards for credible scholarship are constantly being discussed and challenged. Under those conditions, positivist approaches are several among many that can claim to generate justifiable knowledge, and there is no doubt they can make a powerful claim for their prominence in the social science community. But positivism no longer stands as THE standard against which all other knowledge-generating strategies are measured.

In that sense, my position is right in line with the pragmatist school, from Dewey to Rorty<sup>9</sup>. (Many thanks to John Kirlin for opening this door for discussion.) This is not the place to get into an extended discussion on the ins and outs of pragmatism as a guide to inquiry, but two features of the pragmatist position should be highlighted.

First, when it comes to standards of inquiry, pragmatists are not pure "anything goes" relativists. They believe since there is no essential "truth," each community sets its own standards of justifiable knowledge. Some have seen this as a license to declare that a community of scholars ought to tolerate any and all forms of knowledge—but that is not the case.

<sup>9</sup>See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999).



Standards are critical for pragmatists. By analogy, take Dewey's criticism of the "progressive education" movement that he helped found<sup>10</sup>. By the 1930s, progressive education had turned into an approach focused on being against the traditional forms of education. Dewey took the progressives to task for failing to establish a coherent theory or set of educational standards to fill the void. He argued that not all standards are equal—that some are more relevant and useful than others, and that the progressive education community should strive to meet those "higher" standards.

In the same way, our field became obsessed with its anti-positivism, and (through Waldo's 1968 prescriptive) sought intellectual shelter within the professional community where the standards for credible scholarship were not arbitrarily set by positivists, behaviorists or rational theorists. The standards would be set by us, but we never quite got around to filling the void other than to sustain the anti-positivist crusade (well beyond its relevance). What we've done instead is taken the position (like the progressive educators) that any and all forms of epistemological approaches should be attempted and tolerated. We are reaping the results of that approach today with examples of scholarship that borders on the "in-credible" if not the "un-credible." We may not need to return to a form of positivist foundationalism, but we certainly need to rethink our lack of standards for the scholarship we produce.

Which brings me to the second major feature of pragmatism helpful in this regard, the implication that we as scholars are defined by our actions and choices within the community we chose to be. Just as Waldo suggested that we choose to be a profession (as he understood it), so Simon was urging Public Administration to be an administrative science" (as he understood it). In my argument I have used the Waldo-Simon debate to highlight the fact that our field chose to pursue Waldo's path, and that it is time to reconsider that collective decision. My admiration for Simon does not extend to his past and continued adherence to logical positivism, but to his implied pleas for a scholarship adhering to social scientific standards of justification.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to take my remarks as anti-profession. The professional community is a major audience for Public Administration scholarship—and should remain so. But should we let that audience set the standards for credible scholarship? I would argue no, for their sake as well as our own. Whatever lessons we have to offer the practitioner community—as teachers, advisors and consultants—should be constructed out of scholarship driven by disciplinary standards. I believe that was the agenda Simon was urging on us from the outset. In his comments, John Kirlin implied

that recent remarks by Simon and March reflect a change of heart from the earlier days of the Waldo-Simon debate (admittedly, I could be reading too much into John's comments). But Simon is not reformed in this regard. Reading *Administrative Behavior* is important, but reading the opening pages of *Public Administration* (with Smithburg and Thompson) is crucial for understanding just how pragmatic his/their approach was, especially the final paragraph of the first chapter where they state that no amount of "knowledge" can alleviate the public administrator's "task of moral choice...." Producing credible scholarship based on the standards of social science can help inform that choice. To choose to provide anything less than credible scholarship—for whatever reason, and there are many—is less than admirable.

5/11/2000

Jos Raadschelders

I agree wholeheartedly with Mel's observations of May 10th. To me the two most important messages are that we should open our attention to what other social science disciplines have to offer toward the understanding of the role and position of government in society, and what the standards of credible scholarship are in academe.

5/13/2000

John Kirlin

I hope this stimulates continued dialogue. Good luck on your sabbatical, Mel. I'll look forward to where you end up. I am sympathetic to the fundamental position that you clarified as this progressed: the standards for scholarship are those of the academy, not the profession. Moreover, the standards for relevance should not be limited just to any narrow conception of the profession. As suggested by virtually all, but perhaps most explicitly by Peter, Jan, and Jos, we must find ways to communicate with audiences appropriate to our analyses and values.

<sup>10</sup>See John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 60th anniv. ed. (West Lafayette, Indiana: Kappa Delta Pi, 1998).