

The Role of Culture in Public Administration Across Contexts

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By Daniel Hummel

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Monumen Nasional (Monas) in Jakarta, Indonesia
(photo belongs to the author)

The one-size fits all paradigm of public administration in the early stages of the development of public administration theory—embodied by the “science of administration” movement—has largely been replaced by more nuanced understandings of the field. This has been recognized within the borders of the United States between state and local governments for example. The recognition and study of differences in public administration between countries has also exemplified this trend through studies in comparative public administration.

The study of comparative public administration started in the United States during the Cold War when many former colonies had achieved independence and began to create their own states. This approach has widened the boundaries of public administration scholarship to understand the forms and functions of public administration in different contexts. It has helped in understanding the commonalities and the differences as well as the reasons for these differences.

In the wake of ensuing differences between nations and cultures and the failure of international development organizations to affect real and sustainable change in non-Western governments there has been an increased interest in comparative public administration. This is a further expression of a de-ethnocentrism in public administration that focuses on Western public administration; however, some have also felt that this has led to further fragmentation and the trivialization of best practices. In the field of public administration historically there has been a failure to appreciate non-Western contributions and an under-appreciation of local traditions. Despite the importance of local culture in developing the norms of administration, there is also the need for a more empirical assessment of global administrative practice and its application at the local level. It is not easy to define these boundaries. Rutgers called this dichotomy between a local and global perspective of public administration as the problem of sailing between Scylla and Charybdis in Greek mythology or a rock and a hard place.

Understanding of the role of culture in public administration is important to the purpose of research in comparative public administration. One of the goals of this research is to gain knowledge of others for a balanced perspective in which it focuses on the diversity and uniformity of administrative practice across different contexts. Hou et al. went a step further and advocated for a Public Administration with a Global Perspective (PAGP) paradigm in which the current focus on the United States would no longer be adequate. They note that public administration needs to expand to include cultural contexts and acceptance of inter-dependent problems across national boundaries.

The continued focus of recent research in comparative public administration on European or Western countries primarily by academics in these countries may be an indication of a subtle realization of the very real differences between cultures and their importance for how we govern. The continued lack of inclusion of culture in these studies as a factor may also be an indication of this realization. Those that have accepted the differences between cultures as a real and important aspect of public administration have increased research on non-Western public administration.

One area of interest to me is the development of public ethics and “regime values” across different cultural contexts. Public administration ethics encompass rights, obligations and principles which Rohr explained encompass the “regime values.” In his interpretation the values of freedom, property and equality are the ‘regime values’ of the United States, for example. These values conflict not only between systems, but within systems as well which is the subject of studies in value pluralism. Still, values are of intrinsic importance whether they conflict or not in public service and these values inform public administration ethics. It also highlights that understanding different value systems is critical in understanding how others govern and that societies are dynamic with complex interactions between their cultures and histories. This stresses the importance in approaching public administration from a comparative and global perspective.

These values are not constant albeit they have some anchors like in tradition and religion, for example. An understanding of these values and how they translate into methods of governing that decrease dissonance between the government and the governed seems to me to be a worthwhile research agenda not only internationally but within the United States as well. Inter-cultural awareness also seems to me to be an important aspect of a good education in public administration.

Authors note: Much of this article has been extracted from a forthcoming publication of the author in the journal Administrative Culture.

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