

Pragmatism: Exploring Public Administration's Policy Imprint

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Public administrators are often described as pragmatic. Yet few scholars have investigated what this might mean. This article introduces the notion of policy imprint—the impact professional groups have on policy. Pragmatism is championed as an organizing principle which explains the public administration policy imprint. The pragmatism of William James and John Dewey is described and applied to public administration. Since PA leaves its imprint where theory and practice meet, the article examines the theory practice nexus through the lenses of pragmatism. Finally, pragmatism's link to democracy is developed.

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"the eminently practical science of administration"

– Woodrow Wilson , 1887

In the first two sentences of Wilson's "The Study of Administration," he refers to administration as a "practical science." The perception that public administrators are practical and pragmatic is widespread. Yet, few scholars have investigated what practical might mean.

Public policy is shaped by events, theories, values and actions. It is also shaped by groups of professionals. These professionals leave an imprint on policy. Their influence is observed and often easily recognized. The pragmatic imprint of the public administrator is examined here.

### Policy Imprints

This article introduces the notion of policy imprint—the impact professional groups have on policy. A cubist painting is a useful metaphor to visualize the notion of policy imprint. What is observed/experienced is a synthesis of many perspectives. Viewed from different angles a variety of perspectives take form.

It is possible to summarize the imprint of professional groups that shape policy using terms like “efficiency” for the economists<sup>1</sup>, “warrior spirit” for the soldier, “power” for the politician, and “profit” for the business community. Engineers, medical doctors, scientists etc., bring their special technical expertise. Each group has an organizing principle that explains its imprint.

Public administrators are among the professionals that participate in the policy mosaic. Their actions (non-actions) leave a de-facto imprint on policy. This article examines the ubiquitous policy imprint of the public administrator. These are the professionals that usually work in a public bureaucracy. They serve the public interest by translating mandates (and the theories imbedded in the mandates) into public goods and services. As other professionals, they leave their imprint.

Public administrators practice in a world of paradox and contradiction, disorder and pattern. They may be required to narrow their focus and concentrate on rules and regulations. On the other hand, public administrators may need bargaining skills to ensure that organizational conflict is resolved. Public administrators also work in a turbulent world where politics matters, be it office politics, bureaucratic politics or battles between Congress and the Administration.

Public administrators operate in a pragmatic, action oriented world. It differs markedly from the abstract and theoretical world of policy theorists such as economists. "Policies imply theories. Whether stated implicitly or not, policies point to a chain of causation between initial conditions and future consequences" (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1979, p. xxi).

The efficacy of these theories is tested in the messy laboratory of the bureaucracy by public administrators. The roles and experiences of theorist and implementor are very different.

Theorists are thinkers, implementors are craftsmen. The theorist operates in a pristine place free of noise, of vibration, of dirt. The implementor develops an intimacy with matter as a sculptor does with clay, battling it, shaping it, engaging it. The theorist invents his companions, as a naive Romeo imagined his ideal Juliet. The implementor's lovers sweat, complain, and fart. (Gleick, 1987, p. 125) <sup>2</sup>

Given this messy world of action, just what organizing principle does the public administrator bring to policy? What explains our imprint? Any individual can be a member of more than one professional group. This is just saying that people can wear more than one hat. The point here is that I am looking for an organizing principle that explains and prescribes Public Administration's unique imprint. <sup>3</sup>

The imprint public administration leaves on policy is independent of any theoretical explanation which accounts for the imprint. My search is, thus, for an explanation of the imprint. This is something a kin to “neoclassical economics” for the economists. Note that the explanation is useful not because it provides truth but because it provides an “ideal” (e.g., efficiency, the market) and a generalizable approach for analyzing problems. The formal world of public administration, which is easiest to observe in academia, has not yet found a powerful explanation for the PA policy imprint. I am looking for an explanatory framework that rings true and has depth and flexibility.

It seemed logical that PA’s policy imprint occurs when public administrators take mandates and translated them into working programs. Hence, policy implementation appeared a likely candidate. After months of reading and writing, I concluded that policy implementation was close but missed the mark. The field of policy implementation added much to PA. It described a process. It had explanatory theories. Yet, it failed to speak to the people themselves or provide a coherent organizing principle. <sup>4</sup>

After long deliberation, “pragmatic” seemed to be the term I most often returned to when considering public administrators. Public administrators are charged with carrying out public policy directives. They are thus concerned with the practical problems of making public programs work. It was a small jump from “practicality” to the philosophy of pragmatism. Could pragmatism be the explanatory for the PA imprint? I concluded that pragmatism was a good candidate because as one of the world’s leading philosophies it is tied to a body of literature that is both wide spread and comprehensive. With its focus on experience, consequences, context and problems, the philosophy of Pragmatism seemed to capture the essence of what I was searching for.

While it is easy to get consensus among practicing administrators that they are pragmatic, the Public Administration literature seldom makes this connection. In addition, pragmatism has an undeserved popular reputation. It is often viewed as a crass, anti-intellectual and unethical philosophy. A philosophy of expediency seen as the embodiment

of American aggressiveness, competitiveness and materialism (Suckiel, 1982, p. 7). Given this widely held perspective, perhaps it is not surprising that the public administration literature has left the connection obscure.<sup>5</sup>

I want to emphasize that pragmatism, as defined by its originators, is wholly unlike this popular image. Pragmatism, the “philosophy of common sense” was formulated during the turn of the last century by Americans--notably, William James and John Dewey. <sup>6</sup> Pragmatism as defined by its authors is far from the crass, anti-intellectual and unethical philosophy depicted by its critics. It is this early definition of pragmatism which is applied to PA.

On the one hand, describing public administrators as “pragmatic” adds nothing new. It is just a way to describe “what is.” For some practicing administrators, however, a close look at pragmatism brings a sense of relief. “Yes--that is me.” “That is what I do.” “Putting it all together--making it work.” In addition, practitioners are often unaware of the rich philosophical tradition that underscored their pragmatic outlook. Careful explication of the link between administration and pragmatism is worth while just for the relief and the clarity.

On the other hand, pragmatism also offers something new. Because it has never been formally viewed as a public administration organizing principle its value has not been fully exploited. For example, it offers a helpful way to bridge PA theory and practice. This will be more fully developed in a later section.

I am not trying to promote pragmatism as perfect. It is not the Roseta Stone of public administration. It does not give public administration a Cart Blanche to do anything that works. It does not deny that individual public administrators might be incompetent, self-interested, prejudiced or immoral. It is not a panacea that solves problems. It gives practicing public administrators an organizing principle—a way to approach problems that bridges organizational and policy scale. And, it explains our imprint, something unique that we bring to public policy.

In addition, I am not implying that economists, politicians, soldiers, etc., are never pragmatic. The world of power politics as well as office politics, often calls for pragmatic compromises. Nevertheless, pragmatism is principally the imprint of the public administrator. It occurs as they deal with the practical problems of carrying out public policy directives. These practical problems are diverse. They might include defining or refining policy directives, dealing with organizational politics, initiating a task force, communicating in an intergovernmental context, etc.

Within the world of public administration, the politics/administration or policy/administration dichotomy has been recognized as artificial. It should be noted, however that the dichotomy continues to influence policy because it is assumed by some of the other groups of professionals that shape policy. For example, if a policy (deregulation) is driven by an idea-ideology then those responsible for the idea-mandate expect that it will be carried out according to their vision. If everything worked according to their design, the administrative structure would operate something akin to machine producing appropriate policy outcomes.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, this ideal is never achieved, yet it often constrains the actions and impact of public administrators. Hence, public administrators often work in an environment where others assume their policy and/or political influence should be minimal.

The policy imprint/cubist painting metaphor addresses issues raised by the policy administration dichotomy. The imprint/cubist painting metaphor looks beyond the dichotomy. This metaphor connects policy and administration, the actions and perspectives of administrators are part of the policy process —making it what it is. Pragmatism is useful because it provides an organizing principle. When administration is understood in this light the ubiquitous imprint is easier to decipher.

#### Pragmatism: the American Philosophy

Pragmatism is one of the major philosophies of the 20th century. In addition, it is “America’s one original contribution to the world of philosophy” (Diggins, 1994, p. 2).<sup>8</sup>

To see the public administrators policy imprint as pragmatic, let us first step aside and examine two complementary visions of policymaking in the United States. James Q. Wilson (1989, pp.299-300) in Bureaucracy describes US policy as a bar room brawl. He compares policy making in the United States and Europe.

Policy making in Europe is like a prizefight: Two contenders, having earned the right to enter the ring, square off against each other for a prescribed number of rounds; when one fighter knocks the other one out, he is declared the winner and the fight is over. Policy making in the United States is more like a bar room brawl: Anybody can join in, the combatants fight all comers and sometimes change sides, no referee is in charge, and the fight lasts not for a fixed number of rounds but indefinitely or until everybody drops from exhaustion.

Within this context, the public administrator must make the program work. The mail is delivered, the forest fire put out, the trash collected, the welfare client eligibility determined, the taxes collected, etc. Many public administrators attend to the practical details of program implementation. They do it, however, in a fluid, often, volatile environment. We will see that the people charged with carrying out public policy directives in this environment would find pragmatic logic useful.

Aaron Wildavsky (1979), in Speaking Truth to Power, posits a complementary vision of public policymaking in the US. He describes public policy as a continuum. When approaching a policy problem it is important to realize there is no permanent solution, no end-of-quest. Each policy solution creates consequences which foster new problems. Hence, policies are ongoing and successive rather than definitive. Aaron Wildavsky (1979, pp. 4-5) is eloquent in his description:

The reforms of the past lay like benign booby traps, which could make one stumble even if they did not explode... More and more public

policy is about coping with consequences of past policies...The more we do, therefore, the more there is for us to do, as each program bumps into others and sets off consequences all down the line. In this way past solutions, if they are large enough, turn into future problems....Instead of thinking of permanent solutions we should think of permanent problems in the sense that one problem always succeeds and replaces another (italics added).

In the messy world of the bureaucracy, public administrators carry out mandates which address contemporary policy problems. Given Wildavsky's premise (problem succession), they are also creating consequences that become future problems. In a way, policy evolves through problem succession. If policy implies theory (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1979), the public administrator test those theories in the laboratory of the bureaucracy. Pragmatism is a philosophy which fits this version of reality. It incorporates the notion of evolution and focuses on problems, consequences, experience and context.

Pragmatists view and judge theories as instruments in problem solving. They are particularly concerned with the consequences associated with problem solving. "Reality begins with a problematic situation which stimulates" action (Patterson, 1953, p. 467 ).<sup>9</sup> The action is then judged considering consequences. Since experience reveals the best procedures through consequences, pragmatism is also characterized by instrumental reasoning. Pragmatism is married to the concrete, chaotic, messy world of experience. A place where public administration practitioners work and solve problems.

#### Pragmatism: A Method of Learning

The American pragmatism of William James and John Dewey was influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution. Hence, the stability of change is a theme within pragmatism. This theme dovetails well with a policy world where problems succeed themselves and the bar room brawl atmosphere prevents clear winners from taking command (in the long run).

Given its links to evolution theory, it is not surprising that pragmatism is a method of learning that focuses on process. It posits that individual learning evolves through experience. Particularly, people learn by using experience in combination with a loosely defined experimental model. It uses a naturalistic logic<sup>10</sup> to develop and test ongoing working hypotheses. Problems are important because they help to generate experiences, contexts and working hypotheses.<sup>11</sup> The working hypotheses are generated through theory and experience. Theory is important because it helps to organize experience. It provides categories and explanations which can be tested by their usefulness in resolving real world problems. Further, the evidence used to verify the hypotheses can be drawn from a variety of experiences.<sup>12</sup> Theory and experience are tied together through the practical consequences associated with the experiences. Without an awareness of consequences, that which is distinctive about human learning could not take place.

This method-of-learning philosophy draws from the scientific method but not in a reductionist manner. It allows for a rich set of experiences (or data) to test naturalistic, working hypotheses. Learning and knowing are connected. Knowing becomes a part of the natural process of adjustment. The working hypotheses are tested through action. Experiences and consequences that flow from the action become part of knowing. In this natural process environment, knowledge and action cannot be divided. (Flower and Murphy, 1977, p. 813) Hence, learning and action are connected.

### Pragmatism: A Theory of Truth

Pragmatism emerged at the turn of the century. The United States was dealing with both industrialization and an influx of immigrants. Industrialization and its concomitant changes/problems challenged more traditional, fixed or rigid assumptions about the human condition. For example, factors outside an individuals control might lead to unemployment and poverty. In addition, the immigrants brought with them different experiences or realities.

Hence, the pragmatic philosophy posits a definition of truth which is less rigid than classical philosophy. The pragmatic truth of a notion is traced by its "respective practical consequences. ... What difference would it practically make if this notion rather than that notion were true" (James, 1907, p. 45). "True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. ...The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process" (James, 1907, p. 201).

Truth helps us sort between working hypotheses carrying us from one experience to another (Flower and Murphy, 1977, p. 676). Effective truth is associated with a plan of action. It mediates between experiences. It connects the old to the new, it welds theory and fact. In addition, it is provisional, just the starting point used to address the next day's problem (Flower and Murphy, 1977, p. 681).

Pragmatism is also, holistic, the whole puzzle, the entire experience, including novelty, is faced. None of the concrete facts denied. By focusing on the totality of experience, pragmatism incorporates dualisms such as politics/administration, fact/value, theory/practice. It focuses on making a "positive connection with the actual world of finite human lives" (James, 1907, p. 20). It dwells in the world of tangled, muddy, painful, and perplexing, concrete experience (James, 1907, p. 21).

The pragmatist asks about practical differences when settling disputes. "If no practical difference whatever can be traced then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle." (James, 1907, p. 45). Hence, pragmatists look for what works when settling disputes or solving problems. In the chaotic policymaking process the administrator must continually ask "what works." The actions taken to address the question "what works" leaves an imprint. The question of "what works" is most relevant when administrators have discretion.

"What works" is a useful organizing principle because it can be applied to so many diverse administrative contexts. For example, asking "what works" is helpful when

implementing a vague rule or resolving a conflict between employees. The budget is a mechanism which ensures programs 'work.' A program/policy that isn't paid for doesn't happen. Hence, practicing public administrators often leave their imprint through the everyday details of budgeting and financial management.

## Theory and Practice

The marriage of theory and practice is endlessly fertile.

James, 1907

Earlier I made the analogy that the public administrator is like an experimenter carrying out or testing policy theory. Hence, PA leaves its imprint where theory and practice meet. This section examines the theory practice nexus through the lenses of pragmatism.

There are two sources of tension in public administration around the theory/practice connection. First, it is often difficult for practitioners to see the value of theory. From their perspective, theory seldom mirrors experience/reality. It seems removed from the world of practice. On the other hand, academics are unhappy with the lack of a core explanatory, verifiable theory. They are uncomfortable with the ad-hoc nature of PA theory (Mainzer, 1994).

The pragmatic philosophy addresses the concerns of the practitioner most fully. Keep in mind the fundamental elements of pragmatism are "context," "the problem," "experience," and "consequences." Theory is useful because it can connect all four. Theory helps one make sense out of the world. It helps one to interpret the context, problem and experience.

James (1959, p. 4) has a practical justification for theory. People who use theory work smart because it takes "far less mental effort" to understand the complexity of the world. It is a "labor saving contrivance."

The facts of the world in their sensible diversity are always before us, but our theoretic need is that they should be conceived in a way that reduces their manifoldness to simplicity. Our pleasure at finding that a chaos of facts is the expression of a single underlying fact is like the relief of the musician at resolving a confused mass of sound into melodic or harmonic order. The simplified result is handled with far less mental effort than the original data; and a philosophic conception of nature is thus in no metaphorical sense a labor-saving contrivance (italics added).

Two major types of theory are descriptive categories and explanations which depict relationships between concepts. James also discussed classification and the ultimate explanation—"laws."

The only way to mediate between diversity and unity is to class the diverse items as cases of a common essence which you discover in them.

Classification of things into extensive 'kinds' is thus the first step; and classification of their relations and conduct into extensive 'laws' is the last step, in their philosophic unification (James, 1959, p. 6).

The notion of working hypothesis is derived from these elements of theory. This is because theory is tested through action and consequences. Theory is posited in the form of working hypotheses. The term 'working' is used because any explanation is incomplete since it ignores (or abstracts from) some facts. Hence, "every way of classifying a thing is but a way of handling it for some particular purpose" (James, 1959, p. 8). Given this characteristic of theory, it may or may not be useful in solving problems. The chief value of theory for the pragmatist is that it can be used as an organizing device to help solve real world problems. <sup>13</sup>

Pragmatists use their notion of truth as a criterion to judge theories. Theories are true if they "work" or have practical value. A pragmatist would assert that PA problems produce

PA experiences/consequences and these in turn are understood and addressed by PA theory. PA experiences are the instruments which link problem and theory.<sup>14</sup> PA theory suggests action which also produces consequences and experiences. These consequences and experiences are used to verify the theory (test the working hypotheses). Thus, PA theory itself is forged and evolves through practice using the pragmatic criterion of truth.

### Theory/Practice: The Hotel Metaphor

The theory-practice debate can be examined using the hotel corridor metaphor introduced by William James. Pragmatism lies in the midst of theories like a hotel corridor. All the rooms open out to it and all the rooms can be entered. Pragmatism owns the corridor and the right to move freely from room to room (James, 1907, p. 54).

Using pragmatic logic, one would not expect a unifying PA theory. Rather PA is organized around the principle that theories are useful and should be judged by their usefulness in solving problems. The theories of politics, psychology, sociology, economics etc., are in the rooms. Unity is achieved because the pragmatic administrator owns the corridor, walking from room to room using the theories that address ongoing problems. Ownership of the corridor joins theory and practice. Public Administration can find unity in the ownership. It is the sense of ownership that provides an organizing principle.

Critics challenge pragmatism and the hotel metaphor because it does not say what should be in the “rooms or wings of the hotel.” In other words, pragmatism is flawed because it does not provide guidance about larger issues, values, norms, institutions and goals.

Dewey's (1954) The Public and its Problems most directly addresses these larger issues applicable to Public Administration. Dewey was in his late 60s when he wrote this book. It was the roaring 20s; a time when laissez faire ruled. Individualism and

utilitarianism were dominant social theories. Stimulated by prohibition, public corruption on the local level was rampant. When local revenues were declining, the automobile confronted local governments with big new infrastructure expenditures. Dewey was also personally frustrated with the inability of the national government to deal with something he believed as morally right as child labor laws. From his perspective, it was gridlock 1920s style.

In The Public and its Problems, Dewey examines basic concepts relevant to public administration (items that should be in the PA hotel) such as "public," "state," "community," "democracy," "organizations," "technological change," and the "rule of law." He also addresses "the importance of finding experts and of entrusting administration to them" (Dewey 1954, p. 124). He was clearly frustrated by the influence of "individualism" and utilitarian economic theory in shaping debate and policy in the United States. He showed how democracy in the United States was tied to the philosophy of individualism. He proposed a view of democracy which incorporated the notion of community.

His holistic philosophy was at odds with the individualistic, reductionistic theories popular at the time. He had problems with the dominance of a theoretical framework which produced the law of "supply and demand." Further, he was concerned with policies that held in check the dreaded "interference of government" (p.92).

Dewey proposed a theory of the democratic state that included both the individual "I" and the community "we" (p. 151). He did not view the individual and community as a duality. Rather he stresses their interconnectedness. They are like a tree rooted in soil; "it lives or dies in the mode of its connections with sunlight, air and water. Then too the tree is a collection of interacting parts; is the tree more a single whole than its cells?" (p. 186).

In a 1993, Administration and Society article, James Stever draws heavily from The Public and its Problems to articulate "The Organization Theory of John Dewey." In this article he forges a connection between Dewey's pragmatism and organization theory.

Steuer maintains that Dewey's organization theory has much to offer Public Administration. Ultimately Dewey had faith in organizations. They played a "pivotal role in correcting and solving some of modernism's most pressing problems. Vital organizations allow modernism's quest for freedom to continue" (Steuer, 1993, p. 439).<sup>15</sup> Undoubtedly, the authors of pragmatism provide guidance and a sense of direction around the question: "What belongs in the hotel rooms?"

The hotel metaphor can be applied in the case of fees in human services (Shields, 1989). In the 1960s, the human service administrators used a Freudian theory to administer fees for psychotherapy. Freud maintained that fees helped people get better faster or had a therapeutic value. The fee was an instrument which fell within the domain of the therapist. As a result, neither the revenue nor the allocative efficiency potential of fees were seriously considered by administration. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, the fiscal crunch hit. The "therapeutic value theory" lost its usefulness to administrators as fee practices and policies were reviewed. It was more "practical" and useful to also view fees as a revenue source. Hence, the PA experience (declining revenue) or context changed and the relevant theory that worked changed.

### Theory/Practice: A Method of Inquiry

When pragmatism is viewed as a method of inquiry it also addresses the theory-practice connection. Pragmatism joins theory and practice. Through action--pragmatic administrators learn by experience. All kinds of experiences are relevant. When a manager mediates a conflict between employees, both cognitive arguments and affective considerations produce dimensions of an experience. A tension-filled meeting is a consequence of the conflict and a concrete fact (experience). Theories about personality types or conflict resolution may help resolve the immediate problem (form the working hypothesis). Actions test the theory (how was the

conflict resolved). Hence, different problems use different facts and are simplified by different theories. <sup>16</sup> The pragmatist uses a multiplicity of theories to sort out and make sense of experience.

### Theory Practice: The Mediator Role

The theory practice debate can also be examined through James' tough-minded/tender-minded dichotomy. James describes pragmatism as a method to mediate between the tough-minded empiricist and the tender-minded rationalist. The empiricist is a "lover of facts in all their crude variety." The rationalist is a "devotee to the abstract and eternal principle" (James 1908, p. 9). Most theories are traced to the rationalist tradition; neo-classical economics is a good example.

The "operators" of the bureaucracy are at the other end of the spectrum (Wilson, 1989). These are people steeped in the experience and context of the bureaucracy. They are the prison guard, the case worker, the foot soldier, the meat inspector. They live in the tough-minded world of the empiricist. The pragmatic administrator mediates between the two blending theory and fact. Theory is "unstiffened" and made to "work" for the operators. The imprint on policy is found in the mediation, in the "making it work" (or making it useful).<sup>17</sup>

John Nalbandian (1994, p. 534) articulates the mediator role. He extends the mediation role to the gulf between operators (empiricists) such as traffic engineers and politicians (rationalists) such as city council members.

..... the importance of a bridge between professional staff and the governing body will increase. And this is the role of the chief administrative officer will occupy. I see the governing body and professional staff speaking different languages and the city manager or the chief administrative officer acting as translator.

He gives an example of an intersection where a group of elderly constituents ask for a traffic light. The engineering report reveals placement of a traffic light to be inefficient. The politicians sided with the seniors request because they saw the light as a way for the elderly to maintain “independence and dignity.” The administrator/mediator chief executive officer was able to understand and communicate to the traffic staff that in this instance, the values of “independence and dignity” overrode “efficiency” as a criterion for action. The language of the traffic engineer and the politician reflect different theoretical frameworks. By understanding each, the administrator can facilitate communication (and solve a problem—dispelling a conflict). It is in the mediation, in understanding the dual realities (and dual conceptual frameworks) that the public administrator makes the system work and leaves an imprint.

The introduction of Planning Programming Budgeting Systems (PPBS) into the Defense Department in the mid 1960s is an example of how a theory based policy innovation was imprinted by the pragmatic considerations of the public administrator. PPBS was a budget reform steeped in economic theory (Hitch and Mckeen, 1978). PPBS required the military community to make a conceptual shift (use a new classification system). According to economic theory, military budgets should be organized by programs which corresponded to objectives. (Three early programs were Strategic Retaliatory Forces, Airlift/Sealift Forces and Continental Air and Missile Defense Force.) Programs such as Strategic Retaliatory Forces cut across branch of service lines. Hence, distinctions (classification) such as Army, Navy, Air Force were subsumed under “programs.” This set up a conflict between the rationalist-economists and the empirists-tradition bound warriors.

In spite of the conflict, DODs financial-budget system had to continue working. There had to be a system which planned, developed and paid for new weapons, cut paychecks, trained soldiers and fought wars. The PA imprint can be seen in “making PPBS

work,” mediating between the two. Thirty years later, the form of PPBS used by the Defense Department is a blend. It incorporates the needs of the warrior (keeping branch of service distinct and central) while including many of the key concepts of the economists (Odeen, 1985; Wildavsky, 1992).

### Policy and Organizational Scale

One source of confusion in Public Administration discourse is the policy or organizational scale which is used as a referent. I believe that issues relevant to public administration cross a wide spectrum. Large issues dealing with the constitution, the nature of the state, definitions of equity and international relations all fit within the umbrella of public administration. Small, pesky mundane, everyday issues are also there. How to settle a squabble between employees, how to ensure that the snow plows are maintained, how to make sure that the disability determination is accurate. Public administration needs theories that help address concerns that cross all of these organizational and policy scales. Meta and mid-level theory are both needed.

This is one reason that I am attracted to pragmatism. It is an approach that is applicable at all levels—it crosses organizational and policy scale. At all places in the process there are “problems.” “Experience” is used to define and specify the “context.” The emphasis on context takes into account most fully the vast territory relevant to public administration. Finally, an action is taken and the “consequences” observed and integrated into the experiential referent.

Pragmatism is useful in the every day life of the practitioner because it is so germane to the mid and low-level theoretical problems they face daily. The pragmatic approach as well as the theoretical and conceptual skills emphasized by the approach are invaluable here. Pragmatism does not guarantee that the method taken (the working hypothesis) <sup>18</sup> will work. It calls for action and then reflection about that action.

Pragmatism has also been applied at the broad meta or societal level. Since it assumes the constancy of change and it is basically optimistic that problems can be addressed through action, it is most often associated with liberal ideology.<sup>19</sup> John Dewey's public-oriented philosophy sought to bring reflective-intelligence to society's problems "to help define ends and select the means to meet them" (Diggins, 1994, p.2). To this purpose, he worked tirelessly for policy reforms "that worked" such as women's right to vote and child labor laws. He also took unpopular stands such as questioning our support for World War II and expanding socialism.<sup>20</sup> His activism represents an example of pragmatism applied to "meta level" policy issues. It should be noted that pragmatism does not guarantee that an action "will work." It is not a crystal ball that sees the future. Rather, it maintains that what works is revealed through action and consequences.

#### Pragmatism and Democracy: A Tie to Public Administration

There is yet a nagging question. Pragmatism is a holistic philosophy with applications to all walks of life. Why connect it to public administration and not administration in general. Clearly, General Motors must have pragmatic managers. Although pragmatism is applicable to administration in general, I believe it has special significance for "public" administration.

Remember, it is the pragmatism of James and Dewey and their contemporaries (Holmes and Cardozo) which I am applying. Through Dewey, pragmatism is intimately tied to democracy and associated concepts (freedom, equality of opportunity, community and the public). Dewey treated democracy as an ethical ideal (Westbrook, 1991).

Public administrators implement programs which flow from the democratic process. The polis is at the center of this process. Winners and losers in the polis use strategically crafted arguments to argue (and win) their policy positions. Debora Stone (1988) maintains that the strategically crafted arguments are buoyed by ideals and goals such as efficiency, equity, liberty and security. One key to understand how a democratic

polis works is to understand that these ideals are bounded by a different classification system depending upon who is in power. Policies designed to enhance equality of result or equality of opportunity use different notions of *equity*. Public administrators will be charged with carrying out the policies which ever underlying notion of equity prevails. Hence, pragmatism, which draws from multiple theoretical frameworks, is well suited to be used as an organizing principle by the organizations that implement public policy.

When an organization's goal is "profit," and the market is the decision arena, utilitarian philosophies may provide the best theories for organizational adaptation and survival. They serve the business administrator. Alternatively, managers of organizations that depend on the polis and democratic structures for guidance would find pragmatism a better organizing principle.

Finally, critics ask — what is "what works?" One might argue that the concentration camps of Nazi Germany "worked." This would be soundly rejected by the founders of American pragmatism.<sup>21</sup> Dewey maintained that actions and their consequences should be guided and assessed by ends or "ends-in-view." He came to see democratic values as critical to defining these ends-in-view. These are obviously relevant to public administration. Hence, the pragmatic approach suggests that PA's working hypotheses and PA's assessment of consequences should to be grounded in democratic values and the public interest. Clearly this is a prescription that applies at all levels of policy and organizational scale.

## Conclusion

This article argues that pragmatism is the organizing principle that provides an explanation for public administration's imprint on public policy. This imprint is clearly found in the actions of practicing administrators as they carry out and refine policy directives. Hence, any organizing principle must embrace the "world of tangled, muddy, painful, and perplexing, concrete experience" (James, 1907. p. 21). It must also be

applicable to broad public policy concerns as well as mundane problems. Pragmatism meets both of these conditions.

Unfortunately, experience and consequences can teach that nothing new works. One of the key insights of James Q. Wilson's Bureaucracy (1989) was that public administrators are faced with more constraints than private administrators. Any change can upset powerful interest groups, employees, clients, politicians etc. As a result, administrators in American bureaucracy are more likely to get in trouble if they instigate change than to be rewarded. Instead of learning to act, experience and consequences may teach administrators to duck. This view represents applied pragmatism. It is, however, a fragmented pragmatism. It does not provide the administrator with the tools of pragmatism nor its commitment to ethics. PA should investigate pragmatism in its wholeness. It is a philosophy equipped to deal with action, change and ethics (Dewey and Tufts, 1926).

Hence, the study of pragmatism offers timely approaches to current policy dilemmas. In addition, the links between pragmatism and public administration have yet to be really developed. It is a vast unexplored territory. I see implications for teaching, theory building, PA ethics, and research methods. I see new ways of asking questions? How do we connect to the daily experiences of public administrators? How do we use experience/theory to develop working hypotheses? How do we understand the PA context and problem? How do leaders define our ends-in-view? How do we maintain the ends-in-view as organizational scale and context change? Let us heed Woodrow Wilson's call and study the "eminently practical science of administration."

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The formal world of policy analysis has focused on developing and using theoretical frameworks to shape policy. Economic theory has perhaps been most successful here. Many of the economists' ideas have had profound influence on public policy and policy debate over the last 40 years (Markoff and Montecinos, 1993). Policies such as deregulation, NAFTA, GATT, privatization of prisons, tax cuts, enterprise zones, many elements of military policy, and school choice are illustrative. The major organizing principle that shapes these policy prescriptions is allocative efficiency.

Several years ago I began to study how economics influenced certain aspects of military policy. Planning Programming Budgeting Systems (PPBS), the All-Volunteer Force, weapon systems procurement, and service contracting have all been heavily influenced by the men and ideas of economics. The economists policy imprint was easy to find (Shields, 1993). For example, formal economic analysis was used to justify the end of the draft. It is also seen in the vocabulary of the rules and regulations and in the criteria used for evaluation and assessment. These policies, however, evolved into something both like and unlike the vision of the economists. The soldier, the politician, the private sector and the public administrator have all shaped (left their imprint on) these policies. It was in the context of military policy, that I first began to investigate how multiple and divergent paradigms (theoretical frameworks) could influence policy. Because the observed policies appeared to be a disjointed synthesis of these perspectives the cubist painting emerged as a useful metaphor.

<sup>2</sup> This quote was adapted and modified. The word implementor was substituted for experimenter.

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<sup>3</sup> Public Administration as a field of study is “generalist” by design. Although there are now many undergraduate Public Administration programs the mainstay Public Administration “degree” is the Masters of Public Administration (MPA). Often MPA students are currently working in public service and have backgrounds in technical/speciality fields such as engineering, the military, health, social work or an academic discipline like economics, sociology or political science. They bring with them the imprint of their background. Many are in school because they recognize that the challenges of their job extend beyond their former training. One would expect that individuals with formal PA training would be more likely to define themselves as public administrators and to see the unique contribution of PA vis a vis their former training.

Most individuals who have jobs one would classify as “public administration,” however, have not received formal graduate (or undergraduate) Public Administration education. They may or may not have a bigger more generalist view. This makes the search for an organizing principle no less useful. It does, unfortunately, make it difficult to disentangle.

<sup>4</sup> For useful references on implementation see Bardach (1977), Goggin (1986), Ingram (1990), Montjoy and O’Toole (1979), Nakamura and Smallwood (1980), Pressman and Wildavsky (1979) and Rippley and Franklin (1982). Emmette Redford was instrumental in my move away from implementation. From his over 60 years as a leader in the field, he saw policy implementation as a fad that would last only a decade or two.

<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to find references to James and Dewey in public administration sources. One noted exception is Herbert Simon’s (1957) pivotal Administrative Behavior. In the introduction of the second edition, Simon indicates that Chapters 4 (Rationality in Administrative Behavior) and 5 (The Psychology of Administrative Decisions) were the core

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of the book (1957, p. xi). The psychologists, Dewey and James are cited extensively in chapter 5. Simon indicates in a footnote that "most of the references here (ch. 5) are to William James, The Principles of Psychology ...and John Dewey, Human Nature and Conduct" (Simon, 1957, p. 80). One surprising aspect of Simon's book is that it is poorly indexed. Even though he cites three of Dewey's books in nine footnotes, Dewey is not in the index.

In Administrative Behavior Simon's contributed to the understanding of administration by focusing on individual purposeful behavior and the decision/action. The decision is a pivotal action used to anchor experience and consequences. Simon uses the decision premise as the focus for context. These ideas ties to James's psychology which showed how the decision determined our actions (Flower and Murphy, 1977, pp. 644-645). In addition, James maintained that people "pursued ends preferentially and behave purposively" (Flower and Murphy, 1977, 640). Simon also uses the language of pragmatism. In the "Rationality" chapter he uses pragmatic concepts when replacing the means-ends notion with alternative-consequences. In addition, the psychology chapter uses concepts such as "practical decision-making," "consequences," "experience" and "practical problems" to make arguments. (Simon, 1957, pp. 82-83). Finally, Simon cites Dewey and James extensively when he discusses habit.

6 Charles Sanders Peirce , Oliver Wendel Holmes, Benjamin Cardozo and C.I. Lewis are also important early pragmatists.

7 This is exactly the dysfunctional "rationalism" described by Phillip Howard (1994) in The Death of Common Sense.

8 Why would pragmatism originate in the USA? First, it is linked historically with the birth of democracy as well as the interplay between the market and democracy (Ehrenberg, 1957). The USA represents the culmination of these forces. Secondly, democracy, unlike an authoritarian system, allows for multiple realities and conflict. It sets the stage for dispute resolution which asks "What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion

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rather than that notion were true?" (James, 1907, p. 45). Democracy unstiffens policy debate as pragmatism unstiffens theory. Thirdly, pragmatism is modeled after Darwin's theory of evolution. A theory which, compared to Europe, was much more quickly accepted by the US public and scholars.

According to George Novack (1975, p.19) "The pragmatic viewpoint emerged organically from the special conditions of American historical development. It came to flourish as a normal mode of approaching the world and reacting to its problems because the same social environment that shaped the American people likewise created an atmosphere favoring the growth of pragmatism. It permeated the habits, sentiments, and psychology of the American people and their component classes long before receiving systematic formulation by professional philosophers. In fact these philosophers were as much influenced by those surrounding conditions of life which gave rise to pragmatism as the fellow citizens they thought and spoke for."

<sup>9</sup>In his discussion of pragmatism, Patterson (1951, pp. 467-469) discusses "problematicism" as a defining characteristic of the philosophy.

<sup>10</sup> Naturalistic logic deliberately uses the interplay between inductive and deductive reasoning to make sense out of the world. It is a logic of inquiry. See Dewey's (1938) Logic: the Theory of Inquiry for a detailed explanation.

<sup>11</sup> Problems generate experience. We learn by experience when we act and try out solutions to the problem. Dewey uses cooking as an example, to deal with the problem of hunger one might fry an egg. How best to fry the egg (how hot the skillet, how much grease, how long to cook etc.) can be viewed as working hypotheses. Try and teach a child to fry an egg. What seems natural to an adult is an unknown to a child. Experience is a critical component. Dewey's How we Think (1910) is one of the clearest presentations of these points

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12        Aside from measurable, scientific facts, pragmatism embraces the affective. It is, for example, inclusive of religious experiences, art as experience and nature as experience. See James (1902) The Varieties of Religious Experience. And see Dewey, (1958) Art as Experience and Dewey (1925) Experience and Nature.

13        After having supervised well over one hundred formal Applied Research Projects written by practitioner MPA students, I have an appreciation for the struggle practitioners have with theory. Once, they understand how conceptual frameworks, (formal models, hypotheses, classification schemes or loosely defined working hypotheses) help them organize their project, theory is less of an obstacle. It becomes James' labor saving device. If nothing else, they see its use, because it helps them organize their empirical results. Many also make the conceptual leap and understand how theory can be applied to their everyday life as practicing administrators.

14        It should be noted that these experiences are inclusive of bureaucratic politics, relationships between and among co-workers, citizen expectations, limited resources, interpreting rules, meeting deadlines etc.

15 In The Public and Its Problems Dewey defines Public. "All those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions" (p. 15). The state is defined as "the organization of the public effected through officials for the protection of the interests shared by its members" (p. 33). The state establishes agencies to "care for and regulate the consequences" (p.39). Dewey believed that the rule of law controlled behavior by issuing consequences for transgressions associated with behavior. (p. 55) He also addressed community and association, as well as the role of technology in "altering the modes of associated behavior" (p.30).

16        For example a superintendent of schools may deal with the problem of overcrowding. Documents may reveal that school enrollments have dropped in one area of town and have

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dramatically risen in another. These are concrete facts. Economic theory might help develop a plan of action to redirect budget dollars between districts. Of course the pragmatic administrator would also be aware of the political context-experience and probable consequences of any redirection.

17 Note that this mediating role would not be limited to theory/practice. It could extend to mediation between stake holders, clients and taxpayers, clients and operators, politicians and citizens, etc.

18 An example of a mid-level working hypothesis might be: If I organize the committee and the report this way(classification scheme), I will meet the deadline and adequately address the issues.

19 From a PA perspective, pragmatism is consistent with both liberalism and conservatism if one takes into account Wildavsky's problem succession argument. Clearly, the conservative "Contract with America" calls for many changes and actions. Take for example social welfare policy. In the 1930s the financial problems of widows led to the creation of Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). It was argued that instead of orphanages children should stay with their mothers. In the 1990s, conservatives argue that AFDC creates incentives for unwed teenagers to have children. The program supports a culture of dependence on government support while the dependent teenage mother does an inadequate job of raising her children. Group homes and orphanages are offered as a policy alternative. The problem of poor children remain, the context has changed and the actions taken to address the problems change. In both cases the details of implementing the policy change is left to an administrative structure. The practical details of implementation are left to the administrator. This is where the PA imprint is seen.

20 Dewey supported WWI and felt that that was a mistake. He was also concerned about the consequences of modern war on democracy. He was concerned that the United States would lose its democratic character and become more militaristic (Westbrook, 1991, pp. 511-512). His

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support for socialism stemmed from his concerns about unfettered capitalism and his belief that “community” was central to democracy (Dewey, 1954).

<sup>21</sup> James focused on morality more from the individual perspective. He believed that the moral question of how to live the good life was the most basic practical issue facing human beings. His morality was not confined to abstract rules or questions of duty. Rather, it was a series, of never-ending live choices —choices that made a practical difference. He wanted people to take moral choices seriously. The conflict between good and evil was real. Consequently, we need a moral direction (Soccio, 1992, p. 491). Hence, James’ pragmatism, incorporates ethics and ethical considerations.

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