Comparative Public Administration Is Back In, Prudently

Comparative public administration, in method and in content, has not successfully integrated with the main field of public administration, to the detriment of both. With globalization and changes in information technology, the current separation impairs public administration education. This assessment is based on a literature review and an appraisal of the contributions of comparative scholarship. Suggestions for future research strategies promote viable, integrative, and relevant cross-cultural studies. They emphasize (1) the utilization of cooperative teams of researchers instead of individual efforts; (2) the use of multi-case analysis instead of the traditional single-case approach; (3) improvement of the definition and verification of cultural influences on administration; and (4) expansion of middle-range analysis to examine specific administrative practices across national boundaries as a strategy for enhancing relevance.

During the past half-century comparative public administration has continued to evolve, but in tandem or parallel to the main field of public administration. Comparative public administration has practically evolved as a distinct topic of study rather than an integrated component. In most master of public administration programs in the United States, the extent of curriculum commitment to the comparative approach is either a stand-alone elective course or none at all. As Tummala reports, in 1996 “only 14 percent of NASPAA’s about 230 member schools offered an option” in comparative administration (1998, 21). In any case, an effective convergence of comparative public administration with the main field has not materialized, despite dynamic practical needs and global trends necessitating such a development.

Can theory and practice in U.S. public administration be adapted from the current mode to a genuine comparative and global perspective? This discussion attempts to deal with this question. Actually, over a decade ago, Fred Riggs (1991) argued that scholars can no longer afford to base their theories on the truly exceptional American experience, limiting comparative public administration to the study of “foreign” governments. Riggs concluded, then, that the processes of generating reliable administrative knowledge and developing trusted administrative principles are inherently comparative.

Regardless of whether U.S. public administration is to be transformed into a comparative field—or better integrated with the comparative perspective—its adaptation to a wider-angle view of the world is imperative. Global leadership requires global understanding, emanating from appropriate education that utilizes suitable methods and content. “Not to be comparative is to be naively parochial,” Riggs maintains (1998, 23). The comparative study of administration not only liberates us from parochialism, it is also compelling because, as Kettl concludes, “Government in the United States has … become increasingly intertwined in the world’s governance” (2000, 496).

Importantly, schools and institutes of public administration outside the United States are generally committed to the comparative approach in their research, publishing, and teaching (Riggs 1991, 475). For American public administration, the transition of scholarship to a genuine comparative perspective has to be preceded by a profound shift of views and attitudes within the field. This change has to include the development of scholarship that lends itself to integration with the larger field and, simultaneously, must reflect current global demands for more effective governance. Only then can comparative scholarship convincingly account for itself and offer more pertinent cross-cultural analysis.
In teaching and training, it must be widely acknowledged that cross-cultural comparisons profoundly add to students’ capacity to make better judgments about an increasingly shrinking global context. Such information elevates analysis and improves students’ knowledge and appraisal of world affairs. Having a sense of the space, time, size, and cultures of this world invariably stimulates a desire and capacity for exploration and reflection. Certainly, knowledge of other systems is the best way to achieve a balanced perspective and to reduce myopic views of others. The globalization of our world, Riggs notes, “compels us to rethink the context of what we call ‘Public Administration.’” (1991, 473).

Cross-cultural analysis is a commitment to human learning and discovery, unencumbered by geographical or political borders. It is compelling for many reasons: First, comparative public administration is a quest for patterns and regularities of administrative action and behavior. Through comparative analysis, we are able to show not only the diversity of human experience, but also the amazing uniformity within and among states. Comparison extends our knowledge of how to explore, reflect, and better understand universal administrative attributes, instead of being confined to ethnocentric views. Thus, comparative information and analysis have a balancing effect that reduces internalized biases and prejudices.

Second, the comparative method is essential for the development of administrative theory and improving its application (Heady 2001). “Comparison is so central to good analysis that the scientific method is unavoidably comparative” (Collier 1991, 7). Actually, most social scientists regard the comparative approach as “the methodological core of the humanistic and scientific methods” (Almond et al. 2000, 33). The importance of the comparative approach has been acknowledged as a requirement of the scientific investigative process in public administration literature since Woodrow Wilson’s famous article in 1887. Indeed, states, kingdoms, and municipal governments have been compared for approximately 2,500 years (Deutsch 1987, 5). Today, the comparative study, as Aberback and Rockman indicate, “propels us to a level of conceptual methodological self-consciousness and clarity rarely found in noncomparative studies of public administration” (1990, 437).

Third, the comparative study of institutions promotes an understanding of pervasive, global characteristics, induced by the still-unfolding scientific-technological revolution. Because the comparative perspective has the effect of “deprovincializing” public administration, it permits us to see a wider range of administrative actions, identifies a variety of problems, and, simultaneously, improves our understanding of the shortcomings and limitations of our own administrative context.

Fourth, comparative public administration scholarship emphasizes reform and development, and comparative research has centered on the characteristics and conditions of administrative systems that relate to “good” performance. A “constructive legacy” for the field of public administration, Lynn emphasizes, is “an international dialogue on and a stronger comparative dimension to the study of state design and administrative reform” (1998, 231). Learning about systems of administration and governance through comparative studies is a prelude to selecting and adopting best practices to improve performance in all government systems around the world (Liou 2000, 8). As comparative public policy studies have confirmed, “countries try to learn from one another” in designing and implementing public policies (Adolino and Blake 2001, 2).

Finally, administrative knowledge and information, generated through the comparative method, serves practitioners’ needs and expands their horizons of choice. Through comparison, practitioners improve their capacity to observe, learn, and improve managerial performance. When comparing experiences across national boundaries, practicing managers gain a deeper understanding of their institutions, the changing demographics of their communities, and “the different political contexts” they face (Khademian 1998, 273). At the same time, the information revolution, facilitated by modern communication tools that were not available a few years ago, makes the processes of cross-cultural learning and adaptation easier and more attainable.

Distinct Contributions of the Comparative Approach

“Interest in the comparative study of administration across national boundaries, which gained momentum in the middle of the century, soon made apparent the inadequacies of a narrow culture-bound definition of public administration” (Heady 2001, 3). Since the 1960s, comparative public administration has been instrumental in advancing knowledge in the following areas.

Construction of Typologies

A typology is an attempt to classify extensive data according to some basic criteria or distinctive feature of the systems under study. This practice is not new. In fact, one of the most famous and frequently discussed typologies in the literature is Max Weber’s ideal type, which organized certain elements of reality into a logically consistent conception. Weber used these generalized types of authority systems to understand society as subject to lawful regularities. Each of his three historical types of authority systems (traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational) has a distinct pattern of staffing and employment.
Types of administrative systems have always been influenced by earlier works in comparative politics that collected, classified, and correlated data involving a large number of variables in a large number of countries. Cross-national classification of polities, as in *A Cross-Polity Survey*, compiled by Banks and Textor (1963), includes 115 nation-states organized according to 57 characteristics such as area, size, population, urbanization, gross national product, literacy rate, freedom of the press, religious configuration, political modernization, and characteristics of bureaucracy.

Milton Esman’s (1966) classification scheme focuses on the ability of emerging countries to create and deploy a variety of instruments of action to carry out socioeconomic development. Esman’s typology consists of five types of political regimes with significant implications for public administration: (1) conservative oligarchies, (2) authoritarian military reformers, (3) competitive, interest-oriented party systems, (4) dominant mass-party systems, and (5) communist totalitarian systems. A particularly relevant typology focusing on the relationship between bureaucracy and political authority has been advanced by Merle Fainsod, who identifies five different types: (1) ruler-dominated bureaucracies, (2) military-dominated bureaucracies, (3) ruling bureaucracies, (4) representative bureaucracies, and (5) party-state bureaucracies (Heady 2001, 294–95).

As analytical constructs, the typologies of administrative systems serve the useful purposes of data gathering and analysis, as well as providing organizing frameworks for research. They also have a descriptive and explanatory force that underlines characteristics and interrelatedness among a number of features that constitute one type or another. But typologies have limitations, too. Any classification system, in its attempt to organize massive data, ends up sacrificing some particular detailed information in order to establish generalizations.

**Establishing Patterns of Administrative Functions and Processes**

Scholarly endeavors have focused on one or more aspects of management in several cultural settings. For instance, Aaron Wildavsky’s *Budgeting: A Comparative Theory of Budgetary Processes* (1985) explicitly utilizes a comparative perspective to examine the dominant variables that characterize forms of budgetary behavior in rich countries (Britain, France, Japan, and the United States) in contrast to poor countries. Similarly, A. Premchand and Jesse Burkhead’s study, *Comparative International Budgeting and Finance* (1984), compares financial management and budgeting in 13 developed and developing countries. Many other comparative works can be found in the journals: Allen Schick (1990) compares budget results in five industrialized countries. Richard Stillman and his European associates (Kickert et al. 1996), in a symposium on public administration in Europe, provide some common characteristics and unique attributes of influential European administrative systems. Many other illustrations are found in the related professional journals.

Among the administrative functions that have attracted the interest of comparative researchers at an early stage is civil service in all its phases and processes. Civil service systems, as Bekke, Perry, and Toonen (1996, vii) point out, play critical roles throughout the world, but our basic knowledge of civil service systems is woefully inadequate. They determine that much of the theory and empirical research on civil service systems dates from the comparative administration movement of the 1960s. Unfortunately, comparative knowledge about how civil service systems function or how any other particular administrative structure might be managed remains either unavailable or tentative.

**Articulating and Advancing Development Administration**

Comparative studies are credited with leading efforts to study the administrative problems and practices of developing societies in the post–World War II era. As Weidner notes, even as late as the 1960s, “development administration was an unfamiliar and awkward label” (1970, 3). Subsequently, a new focus, boosted by the experiences of field specialists in technical assistance as well as scholarship from within the old and the new nations, evolved into a compilation of concepts and applications that became known as development administration. Thus, knowledge of the administrative problems of developing countries is one of the most important achievements of comparative administration in the post–World War II era. To a large extent, and as an outcome of developmental pressures, administrative reform was forced to the top of the agenda for action in many countries. Breaking out of the parochial mode, gradually developing and sharing international administrative experiences, also resulted in a recognition of the significant role of developmental institutions.

Thus, initial efforts correctly distinguished between “change in the output of the system and change in the system itself” (Weidner 1970, 5). The first aims to create greater quantitative growth, while the second deals with qualitative factors that establish the capacity of the system to change. The choice rarely is one or the other, however, because both quantitative and qualitative factors have been essential for the modernization of administrative systems. From the start, modernization has been conceived to mean developing capacities for administrative systems to act and to be more attuned to the problems and needs of their societies, not simply imitating or applying practices of Western systems. Thus, beforehand, development administra-
tion recognized the influence of the setting within which administration takes place (Riggs 1961; Braibanti 1969).

In 1964, Fred W. Riggs published *Administration of Developing Countries*, which charted new directions for future scholarship in this area. He called for “a clear understanding of the forces which lead to administrative transformations” as a condition for change from traditional, status-oriented bureaucracies to “modern” patterns of governmental organization in which the ideals of efficiency and effectiveness are operating principles (Riggs 1964, 3). Today, with a fast-shifting conception of what constitutes, defines, or explains a genuine, sustainable national development, public administration remains a singular determinant factor.

In summary, comparative studies have been instrumental in improving our understanding of administrative systems across cultures and countries. The comparative approach has also helped the functional analysis of administration, delineated development administration, and refocused scholarly attention on the tumultuous relationships between administration and its context. Still, the literature of public administration, Barzelay (2001) points out, remains far short of exhausting the possibilities and potential of the comparative method.

**The Comparative Approach on Balance: Criticisms**

Comparativists are often reminded of their failures or poor record of accomplishments, particularly over the recent two decades. Three critical views are illustrative:

1. One type of dissatisfaction blames comparative public administration for failing to deliver the promised fruits: for lacking a “clear identity” and remaining “ambiguous” (Henry 1995, 32–33; Van Wart and Cayer 1990) or fumbling “in actual practice and as academic discipline” (Subramaniam 2000, 557).

2. A common critique of the comparativists is leveled against their attempts to create grand theories in comparative administration. Early models, such as Agraria-Industria by Fred Riggs, for example, are abstract models; they can capture only gross distinctions among societies and tend to assume ideal conditions that have little relevance to reality.

3. A related and persistent criticism is that comparative administration scholarship remains conceptually fragmented and lacks synthesis, even after many decades of broad scholarly interest. Also, in application, the relevance and utility of the scholarship have diminished (Jreisat 1975).

Whereas comparative public administration has made many solid contributions, it also has a record of missed opportunities. Critics see intellectual inactivity and ask, why has the scholarly productivity of comparative research declined in recent years? The immediate explanation, inescapably, has to do with the inability of the comparative perspective to overcome its conceptual diffusion, improve its utility, and secure more funding for conducting substantive field research. These factors alone have been sufficient to abort the developmental momentum of the 1960s and 1970s. Indirectly, the collapse of Communist systems and the failure of the Soviet bureaucratic edifice to produce promised outcomes deepened negative images of public bureaucracy as ineffective, corrupt, and self-serving. The autonomous development of comparative public administration—instead of its convergence with the larger field of public administration—furthered the presumed doldrums.

True, comparative administration scholarship has been in short supply in recent years, with a few exceptions (Rowat 1990; Heady 2001; Farazmand 2001; Jreisat 2002). Occasional contributions in professional journals remain a major source of continuity and change in the comparative enterprise. In the applied arena, students of comparative administration have now realized that national developmental plans of emerging countries have not performed as instructed by international consultants or in accordance with foreign aid blueprints. Despite the many findings—and the earnest efforts of comparativists—the literature on the subject of administrative reform remains intractable. Nor do we have an agreement, for example, on what constitutes successful leadership in any particular culture or context. Indeed, developing countries have not lumbered their way faithfully through Western-designed schemes of administrative reform, even when dynamic forces have been at work, affecting every aspect of life in these systems.

A particular challenge is how to utilize the wide-ranging human experience to advance knowledge about administrative reform and how to apply it to institutional capacity building. Progress will most likely depend on the ability to converge knowledge of context with insights about the operational functioning of organizations in order to infer relevant generalizations. Thus, comparative public administration research has to define links with the political order that matter, particularly those that reinforce or impede opportunities for reform. Managing within an “inhospitable” political context, such as an authoritarian or ideological regime, can be an arduous—if not stifling—undertaking for public managers everywhere.

**Globalism and Comparative Public Administration**

Globalism is perceived differently depending on its most outstanding features or impact at the time. In this analysis,
globalization is recognized as the “growing integration of the economic, financial, political, social and cultural lives of countries” (Thomas 1999, 5; Kettl 2000, 490). Globalization evokes processes of open communication, negotiation, persuasion, and free interactions among nations that seek to promote their self-interest within the rules of the game. It is not, however, empire building based on the brutal putdown of challenges to the imperial authority, as history amply illustrates. The advocates and critics of globalization trends are plenty; each camp is able to cite numerous positives or negatives of globalization in its modern form.

The positive effects of globalization appear overwhelming. Advocates emphasize that globalization is the rise of market capitalism around the world, which creates jobs, transfers money and investments, and makes products available to consumers who did not have them before. Voluntary universal dissemination of scientific and technological inventions has been facilitating and accelerating the processes of globalization. From this perspective, new technologies and current communication systems, especially the Internet, make it possible to disseminate information around the world easily, rapidly, and cheaply. Not only has the Internet “fueled the 24-hour financial markets, it has, just as importantly, transformed governance” (Kettl 2000, 491). As a result, free trade, increasing travel, internet information transmission, and cultural exchanges of various types are regularly cited as evidence of growing globalization. Moreover, “an increasing number of policy decisions are now being made by global institutions instead of individual countries” (Welch and Wong 1998, 45).

On the other hand, criticism of globalization is mounting, occasionally taking violent expressions. The stormy reactions that have exploded in cities around the world, wherever international meetings of the industrialized nations have been held, are only one indication of the dissatisfaction with the status quo. Typically, criticisms include the following:

1. Global capitalism, advanced by leaps in technology, the failure of Communism, and a few spectacular economic successes in East Asia, has not benefited everybody. In some cases, it has caused severe damages. Illustrative statistics supporting this contention indicate that 88 percent of the world’s internet users live in industrialized countries, while only 0.3 percent live in the poorest countries of the world.1

2. In some developing countries, “multinationals have contributed to labor, environmental, and human-rights abuses” (Business Week 2000, 74) and have caused damage to these societies far greater than the benefits. Thus, it is not surprising that many developing societies view the growth of globalization with concern, considering its links to the visible behavior of multinational corporations.

3. Poor countries find global capitalism disruptive to their lives and societies. Lacking effective systems of governance, they have been unable to enact safeguards and regulations to protect their environments and workers, as industrialized countries did decades ago.

4. Global capitalism and free trade have also stimulated free commerce in money. For small countries, this has often destabilized their economies and held them hostages to the whims of wealthy financial speculators.

5. Globalism serves the interests of the big industrialized nations, particularly the United States, in their search for new markets. But these powerful countries are able, at will, to restrict the freedoms of others in travel, trade, and the exchange of information.

Nevertheless, public administration today is at the center of the human endeavor to restructure and reshape societies from within, to be viable components of this still-unfolding but rapidly growing phenomenon known as globalism. We are not witnessing an old system passing away in its entirety and a new global system being born to replace it. Instead, it seems that we are heading into a profoundly changing order. The economic revolution remains in progress, and the world’s political boundaries are giving in to the free movement of people, goods, information, ideas, and even cultural values. Knowledge, too, regularly crosses cultural boundaries in important areas such as finance, technology, and management. To be sure, these changes and developments do not mean the traditional nation-state is dead, but they do underscore the magnitude of the problems facing the contemporary state. One such problem for modern states, particularly those of developing countries, is a growing concern about the capacity of public institutions to shoulder new responsibilities and to ensure fair dealings within the new global structure.

Whereas students of comparative administration realize what is changing in this transitional mode, they are not certain of what is emerging as the new global system. The change, however, is creating new opportunities while imposing formidable challenges for public administration. One such challenge is the trend toward allocating a greater role for the private sector in national development, which has shifted the responsibility of public administration from managing to facilitating economic activity (Kaboolian 1998; Pallot 1996). What is implied here is more than a need for “entrepreneurial qualities.” The public administration literature is full of propositions offering alternatives to the often-denounced traditional system of administration (bureaucracy). Space does not permit a full examination of these alternatives, but the New Public Management movement is representative. These alternatives, intended or not, are simply grounded in instrumental rationality, which ultimately would erode fundamental values—indeed, the foundations—of representative gover-
As Larry D. Terry, correctly points out, “public entrepreneurs of the neo-managerialist persuasion pose a threat to democratic governance” (1998, 194).

Certainly, one cannot neglect current global conditions that require particular institutional capacities in managing public affairs. Within the new context, however, there is a growing emphasis on improving the prevalent administrative knowledge, skills, and attitudes, not supplanting them with alternative notions often described as “more than a little vague” (Considine and Lewis 2003, 133) and as difficult to define. Public administration education is properly responding to distinct demands for managerial leadership and expertise, particularly in such areas as negotiations, mediation, sensitivity to human rights and diversity, managing conflict, contracting, and problem-solving techniques, beyond the usual, traditional public service activities.

At the same time, considerable adjustments are under way to handle a growing emphasis on organizational culture that values results-oriented management. “Governments around the globe adopted management reforms to squeeze extra efficiency out of the public sector” (Kettl 1997, 446). Consequently, the managerial skills of flexibility, adaptability, cooperation, and creativity are in great demand. The point is that public administration, aware of the proclivities of its traditional settings to drift toward hierarchical command and control and to produce rule-driven rigidities, has invariably emphasized performance and, thus has elevated reform objectives to high priority.

Moreover, globalism seems to have ushered in a growing emphasis on ethics, democratic governance, and accountability in managing the affairs of the state. An illustration of this growing pressure is the 2001 Anti-Corruption Symposium in Seoul, Korea, cosponsored by the U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs and attended by many Asian and European countries. The purpose was to explore the links among anti-corruption initiatives, particularly transparency, accountability, and e-government. In the “Joint Statement of Cooperation” issued at the end of the symposium, participants promised to work together to promote these notions among member states of the United Nations. The final statement also declares that “governments and their administrations, no matter what level, have an obligation to the taxpayers to make transparent and facilitate the understanding of their decision-making processes.” The introduction of e-government is also regarded as an opportunity to better achieve transparency and accountability.

To the same end, Gilman and Lewis (1996) point out that observable practice invalidates an approach to public service ethics that relies exclusively on cultural particulars. They conclude that “professional public administration must remain intellectually open to global dialogue on shared values, norms, and structures” (517). If so, comparative analysis is essential for exploring the implications of globalization (Farazmand 1999). And, “the art and science of global public administration can be advanced through increased comparative analysis of non-Western developing systems with the more developed Western administrative states” (Worthley and Tsao 1999, 571).

Thus, globalization has altered the context of public administration and necessitated a reexamination of many of its premises and tenets. A government that attempts to successfully implement its public policies in the global context has to apply information, use new technologies, recruit and develop the required managerial leadership, and build overall administrative competence and integrity. According to a study by the U.N. Public Administration Program, the relevant competencies of the manager of the future include integrity, vision and leadership, capacity for policy analysis, and the judgment and capacity for decision making, people empowerment, managing performance, building trust, and accountability.

Perhaps a lesson can be learned from business administration education. Business Week reported in 2002 that in France, Canada, Switzerland, Netherlands, and Britain, “global B-schools,” are impressive realities. One French global B-school, for example, epitomizes real diversity with a student population from 74 nationalities, “who have to leave many assumptions behind…. With no one culture dominant, ideas always get challenged—and sharpened.” It is this sort of cultural give and take that has propelled some of these global business schools to the top of Business Week’s rankings of MBA programs outside the United States.

Finally, in recent years, the failure of developing countries to attain sustainable development has reinforced skepticism about the role of administration in society, and it raises troubling questions about many assumptions that have failed to materialize. Poor performance by development institutions has been amply blamed. Many are looking into other governance-related factors to explain slow progress, such as the absence of the rule of law and failure to democratize. Certainly, comparative information is needed to better understand how to influence and induce national development (Jain 2001). At the end, building institutional capacities and reforming governance are central pieces of any far-reaching societal change in developing countries (Esman 1991; Mavima and Chackerian 2002).

Future Research and Development

A realistic assessment of where we are and where we want to be is necessary for comparative public administration to reach its potential. Such assessment has to produce a clearer vision and suggest how to improve integration.
with the main field. But, for a better understanding, there must be an awareness of how we got here. The early mission and priorities of the comparative movement were articulated by Fred Riggs and Ferrel Heady, as well as other scholars, including Dwight Waldo, Milton Esman, Frank Sherwood, Ralph Braibanti, John Montgomery, James Heaphey, and William Siffin. Their contributions underlined the need to conduct more empirical studies and to shift from ideographic (distinct cases) to nomothetic approaches (studies that seek explicitly to formulate and test propositions). One of the most significant early articulations was the accentuation of ecological influences on administrative functions (Riggs 1961). Another motivating concern of the comparative perspective was the search for theory and for reforming administrative practices (Heady and Stokes 1962, 3).

Many newly independent countries used early comparative administration scholarship primarily to build the necessary capabilities for external negotiations for foreign aid. Thus, the reform of administrative systems was mostly a stopgap or an opportunistic process rather than a well-thought-out plan with articulated objectives and methods. Administrative reform programs for developing countries have been criticized for ignoring the context of the tradition of democratic representation (Baaklini 2002) and for failing to develop institutions with operational capacities to improve prevailing low performance and accountability standards.

Yet, at the end of the 1970s, cross-cultural studies had achieved preeminence in university teaching and research, in both public and business administration curricula. Mark W. Huddleston (1984) accounted for 628 references in comparative public administration selected from a much larger pool of publications, which led him to conclude that those who ring the death knell of the comparative approach are misreading the evidence.

Looking ahead, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, comparative administration is in search of a new focus and a new momentum to meet current challenges. One major challenge to researchers in constructing comparative studies is “resolving issues of purpose and method,” Lynn (1998, 233) argues. “Properly construed, comparative research consists of the evaluation of competing explanatory frameworks, the testing of models across spatial structures/cultures/organizations/contexts, and the comparison of different instruments for achieving the same end” (Lynn 1998, 233). Resolution of these issues will be judged by their relevance to practice and their link to the main field of public administration.

Improving the relevance and integration of comparative studies depends on developing generalizations from aggregates of particular facts that have been reliably established, without ignoring the concreteness and distinctiveness of the cases being investigated (Jreisat 1997, 17). Whereas early comparative knowledge was derived mainly from single-case analysis, which often served as the empirical base for developing tentative generalizations, the current need is for multiple cases from different contexts. Knowledge of the operating attributes of the system subject of study is critical not only for developing generalizations, but also to ensure the relationship between the particular (the operating system) and the general (the context) is complementary and coherent (Jreisat 1997, 17).

Despite many pessimistic assessments, “the crisis of confidence” in comparative research is not unique. Current and future research has to respond to the need for more empirical, nomothetic studies while employing investigation tools that can accommodate ecological factors (Riggs 1989). We need to specify conditions and variables that determine relationships through empirical evidence gathered from case studies and refined middle-range propositions.

After establishing the overall objectives of future comparative research, there is a compelling need for an adaptable framework to reconcile systematic comparisons of different administrative systems. Such a framework has to manifest certain attributes:

- A wide range with the capacity to harmonize disparate existing research findings of previous comparative studies
- Flexibility to balance the conceptual and practical concerns of the field
- Adaptability in the face of contextual variations on the ground
- Openness to incorporate indigenous models and native patterns of study and application, along with Western concepts and models (Welch and Wong 1998; Henderson 1995).

Revitalizing comparative public administration scholarship requires clearer definition and more concurrence among scholars on two questions: First, what unit of analysis is most feasible in serving comparative research objectives? Second, what research instruments have superior promise for conducting future comparative research?

**Unit of Analysis**

The diffusion of comparative public administration literature underscores the significance of having a defined unit of analysis for determining administrative variables and for delineating the scope of a study. Directly or indirectly, defining the unit of analysis marks research boundaries, tools, and necessary data—all important functions in developing integrated conceptual schemes for cross-cultural analysis. The three most commonly employed units of analysis in comparative research are the individual, the organization, and the national bureaucracy (Jreisat 2002, 24).
The Individual and the Organization. No doubt, studies at either of these two levels have many advantages. They are manageable, specific, capture important administrative issues, and allow for adequate focus on the behavioral dimensions. Most meaningful administrative actions take place in the context of formal organizations. Organizations coordinate and facilitate individual efforts, converting them into sustained collective action for serving defined goals. From a methodological perspective, the organization is recognized as a superior unit for comparative analysis because of its durable and measurable characteristics. But, at this phase of comparative research, such focus is limiting when applied in the context of many developing countries. It is effective if it is continuously supplied with field data and regular statistical updates. Problematic, empirical comparative information on the organizational and managerial performance of developing countries is not easy to establish. Many other practical considerations confine comparisons at this level.

National Bureaucracy or National Administrative System. These nomenclatures are used interchangeably as the unit of analysis denoting agencies, organizations, departments, or bureaus of a country’s public sector. These public organizations collectively employ large numbers of employees who interpret and implement the authoritative policies of the state. Viewing bureaucracy as a system of interrelated units allows for definition and measurement of its input of resources, goals, and public demands as well as its output of goods, services, and regulatory decisions.

Bureaucracy received its early characterization from Max Weber (1864–1920). In Weber’s vision, bureaucracy mirrors core values such as specialization, hierarchy, impersonality, rules, rationality, predictability, written records, and a recruitment system based on merit (education, training, and skills). The bureaucratic model, however, proved to be a paradox to administrative theory and practice in many ways. Despite Weber’s dazzling description of the “ideal type” of bureaucratic organization, “the discussion about bureaucracy is still, to a large extent, the domain of the myths and pathos of ideology” (Crozier 1964, 175).

Nevertheless, Weber’s emphasis on the generalizable properties of bureaucracy and his drive for the universality of his bureaucratic theory dictated playing down cultural differences while stressing the process and its rationality. The authority system dictates fundamental properties of the administrative system. To examine Weber’s bureaucratic model only as an instrument of managerial efficiency and effectiveness, however, is to lose sight of its larger significance. As Brian Fry points out, Weber’s “particular genius was to place administration in a broad historical context and to associate the processes of bureaucratization with the processes of rationalization in the Western world” (1989, 42). The bureaucratic model emphasizes technical skills, knowledge, merit, justice, due process, and all of the values inherent in modern professional management.

But bureaucracy has been equated with big and rigid government. Fears of bureaucratic power and discretion in democratic societies are often magnified for reasons other than effective and efficient performance. Charges of bureaucratic overconformity to rules and regulations are often assumed or ideologically inspired rather than empirically established. Although “the old bureaucratic order is now creaking under the strain of a mighty assault being waged against it … no single, coherent alternative has been proposed” (Considine and Lewis 2003, 131).

Despite criticisms and reservations, bureaucracy remains a dominant and universal structure for performing the essential functions of modern society (Heady 2001, 75). The bureaucratic model (and its variations) has been among the most enduring analytical framework in the social sciences. It is still useful for conducting analysis and investigating administrative systems in developed and developing countries. It provides focus, specificity, and value neutrality—useful assets for researchers.

Future research has to utilize middle-range concepts to enhance the specificity and relevance of findings. Middle-range conceptualizations differ from grand theories and from summary statistical statements of empirically observed relationships. Middle-range models are efficient tools for applying evidence to a few administrative aspects at a time, for linking concepts to each other, and for providing balance to the abstract and the concrete in the formulation of hypotheses (Pinder and Moore 1980). Thus, relevance is improved and verified concepts can serve as the building blocks for models of greater utility and certainty. Whether research is slanted toward administrative structures and patterned behaviors or directed toward institutional functions and priorities, middle-range research can ensure the relevance of comparative analysis of national administrative systems.

Research Instruments

Comparative research and scholarship have to make hard choices in selecting research strategies and methods. These are some basic ones:

Collaboration. Scholars from various regions of the world, utilizing their competitive advantages and motivated by the desire to rationalize their own systems, can produce a better understanding of the transcendental administrative characteristics. Richard Stillman, along with five European colleagues, for example, provides insights into “changing European states” and “changing public administration” (Kickert et al. 1996). Monte Palmer and his associates from the Arab world collaborated on several studies of administration development in Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and other countries (Palmer, Leila, and Yassin 1988;
Palmer et al. 1989). Incremental, cooperative group research processes, therefore, offer excellent opportunities for developing analytic frameworks of greater reliability, which may provide better convergence and synthesis of perspectives.

**Cases.** A methodology of comparative administration, extended to the examination of a small number of cases instead of single-case analysis, produces more dependable results, better evaluation of hypotheses, and better verification of conclusions. By comparing a manageable number of administrative variables, researchers are able to have greater focus and provide an improved description and sharper definition of elements to be investigated. Information generated through case studies offers students and practitioners better evidence and more credible analysis and sharper definition of elements to be investigated. Additional capacity to act effectively. Certainly, the significance of these early case studies is compelling. But at this time, comparing a few cases instead of a single case is necessary to proceed to the next phase of knowledge consolidation and to achieve a true reflection of current societal and global conditions. At the same time, one has to recognize that a key factor for the advancement of future research is access to information and applications from a variety of sources and places.

**Governance.** The end of colonialism and the emergence of many independent countries after World War II brought forward issues and problems of management and nation building that previously had been ignored or were unfamiliar to Western comparative politics and administration. Today, the view is that “administration is only one aspect of the political system” (Heady 2001, 7). This expanded conception underscores the relations between administrative attributes and political authority.

Governance is a convenient concept, focusing on the big picture and encompassing entire structures and processes of public policy making. Its interrelation with the administrative structure is so crucial that, as Considine and Lewis (2003, 132) conclude, in practice, any one of many administrative models or ideals of organization they identify “would represent a significant change to the architecture of governance.” Although there is little agreement on what exactly governance means, comparative administration has to be mindful of the extensive web that connects administrative institutions to processes and activities of governance, however it is conceived (Hyden 2002; Heady 2001). Invariably, critical issues such as participation, transparency, accountability, ethics, and equity, as well as effectiveness and efficiency in public organizations, turn out to be inseparable from the overall governance process. Researchers of comparative administration have to look more closely at these links with the wider landscape of governance for a more realistic understanding of administrative characteristics.

**Culture.** Attempts by comparative national studies sought to determine how much of the variation in organizational management is caused by attributes of national culture. Findings of such research are often conveyed in terms of the impact of culture on managerial attitudes, beliefs, and behavior (Graves 1972; Hofstede 1980), with the other organizational variables either implied or neglected.

The notion of “civic culture” has been popularized by Almond and Verba (1965, 1989) in describing the levels of diffusion of democratic values in Germany, Italy, Mexico, Britain, and the United States. The civic culture is portrayed as a political culture that is participant and pluralistic, based on communication and persuasion, a culture of consensus and diversity, a culture that permits change but moderates it (Almond and Verba 1965). Comparative cultural studies of management are replete with variations on the importance and the method of measurement of cultural influences on administration. Practically, results have often been contradictory. One approach argues that culture determines managerial practices because culture is “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another” (Hofstede 1980, 25). A different perspective concludes that organizational variance is less dependent on culture than on other contingencies such as technological development, interdependence with other organizations, market considerations (Child and Tayeb 1983), or the type of political authority (Sorensen 1990). Yet, a “number of cross-national comparative analysis studies have been done . . . several of which show that structure differs across cultures regardless of technology” (Roberts and Grabowski 1996, 415). Still, we do not even have an adequate explanation of why people behave in one way with members of their own culture and differently with members of foreign cultures, as in international negotiation (Graham 1985).

A basic premise of the comparative perspective is that functional patterns of administration are determinable and transferable from one system to another. Research promoting multicultural experiences emerging from “institutional ethnicities” set off internationalization processes of far-reaching consequences. Defining common patterns of administration from multicultural experiences would improve applicability and temper the archaic “institutional ethnicities.”
Conclusion

Today’s public administration functions in a different time and faces different challenges, requiring new concepts and methods. Realizing the massive influence of unfolding globalism, comparative public administration opens the door for effective adjustment and transition from traditional, ethnocentric perspectives to a wider scope that integrates knowledge from various places and cultures. There is no one way to get to the place where public administration ought to be. However, clear objectives, refined application of theoretical perspectives, and updated research instruments would give the comparative approach a better chance of constructing frameworks and contributing to scholarship that enriches public administration and ensures its adaptability to current global conditions.

Notes

1. According to Germany’s minister of economic development and cooperation, Heide Wieczorek-Zeul, in his address the U.N. Summit Conference in June 2000.
4. This is a selected list to illustrate—not to exhaust—all such case studies: Braibanti (1966), Daland (1967), Riggs (1966), and Esman (1972).

References


