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Lutonism or Scientific Realism?

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In **"Deconstructing Public Administration Empiricism,"** Larry S. Luton (2007) presents a critique of three influential streams of work in empirical public administration and makes a number of assertions about the foundational claims of what he terms *public administration empiricism*. In particular, he argues that it is the contention of empiricists that the variables used in their research "correspond to specific parts of objective reality" (p. 529). Meier and O'Toole (2007)—coauthors of one of the studies that Luton criticizes (i.e., Andrews, Boyne, Meier, O'Toole, & Walker, 2005)—have already published an incisive refutation of this argument. Although we concur with their response, we have chosen to take the opportunity to pay closer attention to Luton's notion that it is somehow possible to be agnostic about the epistemological foundations of the study of public administration. To do so, we draw on our work on public service performance. The reasons for such an approach are threefold.

Organizational performance is, we believe, a topic of vital concern to all public administration scholars and one that is undoubtedly at the heart of government reform worldwide. In elucidating the multiple-stakeholder perspective on performance to which we adhere, we are able to highlight the inclusiveness of our empirical research and illustrate the incoherence of the "epistemic abstinence" (Raz, 1990) that Luton (2007) espouses in the face of competing and contested claims about organizational behavior and outcomes. By exploring the issue of multiple organizational stakeholders, we are able to reflect deeply on the type of methodological approaches to

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which empirical social scientists of all hues can give their support. In doing so, we conclude by presenting a case for undertaking empirical studies of public administration within a scientific realist framework.

Public Service Performance and the Incoherence of Epistemic Abstinence

The measurement of organizational performance is a longstanding issue within public administration. For example, in the 1970s, Ostrom (1973) argued for the need to collect multiple indicators of performance, and in the 1980s, Parks (1984) discussed alternative sources of performance data. Moreover, in the wake of new public management, governments across the globe have sought to increase the accountability and responsiveness of public service providers by collecting, auditing, and publishing data on their performance. A consensus has slowly emerged among public administration scholars that public service performance is a multidimensional construct (Carter, Klein, & Day, 1992; Kelly & Swindell, 2002). This is at least partly an inevitable by-product of the multiple and frequently ambiguous and conflicting goals that public organizations have to achieve (Chun & Rainey, 2005), but it is also a reflection of the nature of the public sector as a contested site of political struggle among myriad internal and external stakeholders.

For most public organizations, internal stakeholders include staff at different levels, professional groups, and elected representatives charged with an oversight role. External stakeholders range from service users, taxpayers, and local citizens to contractors, oversight bodies, and national-level politicians. Different stakeholders value different dimensions of performance more highly than others and will use the performance information that is available in distinctive ways. The salience, legitimacy, and interests of each stakeholder group are contingent on the prevailing norms, values, and beliefs in different localities at different times (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997), and are reflected in the types of data that they seek to collect on the achievements of public organizations.

We have argued elsewhere (Andrews, Boyne, & Walker, 2006) that it is necessary to draw on as many sources of information on organizational outcomes as are available. In the work that Luton (2007) selects as an example of the "best empiricist" work (Andrews, Boyne, Meier, O'Toole, & Walker, 2005), we use measures assessing the perspectives of two major stakeholders on local government performance: central government inspectors and local citizens.

Luton (2007) argues that these measures are irredeemably flawed, especially, the core service performance measure used by the Audit Commission (2003) to classify local governments on the basis of their service achievements. Luton's bone of contention is "whether this measure can be considered an objective reflection of reality, because it begins with respondents' judgements (not observable behaviour) and then is converted, weighted and converted again" (p. 537). Aside from the fact that neither we nor the Audit Commission has ever claimed that this measure is the only true representation of reality, it actually includes perceptual judgments on the observable behavior of public managers, through such means as on-site inspections. In a similar vein, the customer satisfaction data that we use are based on a survey that asks local citizens to rate their satisfaction with "the way the authority runs things" as a whole (Department of the Environment, Transport, and the Regions, 1999, p. 110). Clearly, such data give only a partial indication of citizens' perspectives on the performance of their local authority rather than an in-depth examination of their most deeply held grievances. Nowhere do we claim that these data represent anything other than one (amongst a number of possible) indicator of performance.

Ultimately, Luton (2007) argues that the quantitative measures and methods that we use are compromised because they (a) incorrectly aspire to measure an objective reality that cannot be said (by him) to exist or not exist and (b) even if it were possible to say with confidence that such a reality exists, our variables do not accurately reflect it in a meaningful manner, given that they are imperfect. This vexed ruminating about the aims and purposes of measurement in social science is an understandable response to its many limitations, but such epistemic abstinence is also antithetical to the development of knowledge. Moreover, contrary to Luton's assertions, our work can contribute to the understanding of organizational behavior and so lead to important social and political change. For example, research that suggested that core service performance judgments did not adequately consider the degree of difficulty faced by English local authorities (Andrews, Boyne, Law, & Walker, 2005) was instrumental in causing the Audit Commission (2003) to reconsider its performance assessment framework. Extensive debates about this in the local government practitioner press (see *Local Government Chronicle*, December 13, 2002) were further testament to the connection between empirical public administration and significant social issues.

In seeking to expose lacunae in the narratives associated with empirical studies of public administration, Luton (2007) ironically becomes lost in questions of measurement validity. Although he acknowledges that his "short stories" do not "add up to a definitive grand narrative" (p. 541), the irony of his position becomes even starker when one considers his stated agnostic position on the question of an objective reality. How is it even possible to comment on whether measures accurately reflect objective reality if you do not know whether it exists?

One way to avoid this kind of epistemological incoherence is to accept, as we do, that there are multiple perspectives on social phenomena and that one's data are likely to provide only a partial (though potentially important) approximation of those perspectives. In striving to avoid Luton's epistemic abstinence, public administration researchers of all methodological hues are right to seek out whatever data and methods are available to provide alternative and illuminating perspectives on their subject matter (see O'Toole, 1995). In short, although there are, inevitably, material restrictions on the quantitative and qualitative data that can be used to carry out careful and systematic observation, it is surely better for empirical public administration scholars to utilize available sources of data in a spirit of critical engagement than to simply refuse to commit to saying anything.

Toward Scientific Realism

Although Luton's critique (2007) of recent empirical research is flawed and wrongheaded, it nevertheless raises a number of important epistemological issues for public administration researchers: Is there an objective reality? Are the types of measures that are typically used in empirical public administration related to that reality? and Do the statistical methods that are usually employed help us to understand the connections between elements of reality? It might be interesting to engage Luton in a debate on these questions, but this is difficult because his article comprises a series of ad hoc criticisms of specific measures and pieces of work rather than a coherent epistemological statement. We have noted above that he is agnostic about the existence of an objective reality, but he also appears to be certain that some of the measures used in the published work that he discusses fail to accurately represent reality. Thus, Luton's epistemological position is difficult to map onto established postpositivist paradigms such as critical realism (which holds that somewhere beneath the surface of empirical indicators a real, knowable, but unmeasurable set of structures and mechanisms exists) and constructionism (i.e., everything is relative and no objective reality exists that can be established intersubjectively). Because we are unable to enter a meaningful debate with a position that we must, by default, describe as *Lutonism* (i.e., objective reality exists and does not exist simultaneously), we instead describe the positive (but not positivist) epistemological position of scientific realism and summarize its strengths as a basis for empirical research in public administration.

Scientific realism developed as a reaction to problems in positivist accounts of the development of the so-called natural sciences and is based on how research is actually conducted rather than on idealized hypothetico-deductive and falsificationist models (Hunt, 1994). This epistemological position has influenced work in a number of fields adjacent to public administration, including political science (Lane, 1996) and organizational science (McKelvey, 1997). Most important for the issues raised by Luton (2007), scientific realists accept that measures may be theory laden but reject the notion that they are theory determined. In other words, the social, political, and organizational reality that exists is perceivable from different theoretical perspectives. The parts that are observed and the measures that are used are to some extent theory dependent, so it cannot be claimed that a single, objective theory-neutral reality is simply out there waiting to be investigated. Nevertheless, all is not perception, and measures can be constructed that are sufficiently independent to be used to discriminate the validity of rival theories.

This is entirely consistent with our view, outlined above, that organizational performance is in the eye of the beholder. This does not mean that it cannot be measured but that the validity of the measures depends on the theory (or theories) under investigation, just as practical judgments about whether performance is high or low depend on the values of different stakeholders. Thus, for the researcher, two questions arise in measuring performance: Do the indicators capture the concept of performance (equity, effectiveness, etc.) in the theory that is being tested? and Are they likely to bias the results for or against the theory? Moreover, when rival theories are being tested, are the indicators sufficiently comprehensive to give each theory a fair run for its money? As yet, these questions have not featured prominently in the burgeoning literature on the determinants of public service performance. They are, we believe, far more important for scientific progress than are the ad hoc questions raised by Luton (2007), who at no point engages with the serious issue of how our measures might have biased our results.

In sum, our simple point is that if knowledge in public administration is to continue to grow, then we as an academic community must pay heed to myriad stakeholder viewpoints on public organizations. Equally, as scientists, we must ensure that the debate about measures be soundly based on explicit theoretical premises (substantively and epistemologically) and not consist of a list of ad hoc criticisms.

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