

Reporting Ethics Committee Approval in Public Administration Research

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Abstract While public administration research is thriving because of increased attention to social scientific rigor, lingering problems of methods and ethics remain. This article investigates the reporting of ethics approval within public administration publications. Beginning with an overview of ethics requirements regarding research with human participants, I turn to an examination of human participants protections for public administration research. Next, I present the findings of my analysis of articles published in the top five public administration journals over the period from 2000 to 2012, noting the incidences of ethics approval reporting as well as funding reporting. In explicating the importance of ethics reporting for public administration research, as it relates to replication, reputation, and vulnerable populations, I conclude with recommendations for increasing ethics approval reporting in public administration research.

Keywords Public administration · Ethics approval · Ethics reporting · Research ethics

Public administration research is thriving because of attention to innovation, sophistication, and rigor in the application of social scientific methods. Yet, there are lingering problems of methods and ethics in published public administration

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research. These problems prompt the editors of journals to devote increased concern and resources to vet the methods of submitted research. For example, the current editor of *Public Administration Review* suggests that, “We must look carefully at the quality of survey research in manuscripts that are submitted to PAR both before we decide to review them and before we accept manuscripts employing survey methods” (Lee et al. 2012, 87). Improving the methods used in public administration research is certainly valuable, but what about improving the ethical oversight and reporting of ethical considerations in public administration research?

Beginning with the work of McCurdy and Cleary, and continuing through to the recent research of Lee, Benoit Bryan and Johnson, scholars probed the literature to identify problems of quality in public administration research (Olson and Jobe 1996; Olde Rikkert et al. 1996; Amdur and Biddle 1997; Rennie 1997; Ruiz-Canela et al. 2001; Middle et al. 1995; Huston and Moher 1996; Tramèr et al. 1997; Matot et al. 1998). The concerns of these scholars regarding methodological sophistication in public administration research were echoed in part by Bailey (1992); Cleary (1992, 2000), and Perry and Kraemer (1986). While Box (1992) challenges the “gloomy” view of public administration research, the persistence of “methodological manifesto” type contributions to major public administration journals suggests that concerns with method endure throughout the discipline (Brower et al. 2000; Gill and Meier 2000; Lan and Anders 2000). Although the intent of these many authors (Bauchner and Sharfstein 2001) was to diagnose problems of method in public administration research, their work indirectly highlights the fact that research in public administration relies heavily on analysis of data gathered through methods that, directly or indirectly, use human participants (see also Enticott, Boyne and Walker 2009).

Abundant and often contentious concern over the scientific nature of political science and public administration scholarship has resulted in the proliferation of various public administration “methodological manifestos” addressing the place of more or less scientific methods in these fields. An ongoing conflict among scholars of politics and public administration is the scientific nature of their work, with some similarities to the internal debates of whether medicine is a science or an art. Often pitting researchers using methods from the humanities—such as philosophy and historiography—against those using the social scientific methods of empirical data collection and statistical analysis, the “science” debate began at the origins of political science and public administration as independent fields in the late nineteenth century, and accelerate in the period after the Second World War (Gunnell 1993). Particularly over the last 40 years, academic investigators in public administration have moved towards more rigorous and scientific forms of study in a conscious move away from anecdotal and descriptive types of research towards systematic data collection, rigorous statistical modeling, and reports created in a manner where replication by other scholars is possible.

If the quip has any truth—that our methods determine our ethics—then it is curious that, despite the concern with methods, to date there are no reviews that examine the ethical conduct and reporting of human subjects ethics in public administration reporting. While the pages of other social sciences’ journals include analyses of the application of human subjects research regulations to their fields, public administration scholars only rarely examine the applicability of human

subjects rules to their research (Jordan 2013; Levine and Skedsvold 2008; Seligson 2008; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2008).¹ Lacking a culture of reporting and disclosing human subjects protections within the field in general and at its journals specifically, the danger is that such reporting will only occur after some major incident involving research misconduct in a major public administration journal occurs and is publicized. It is my contention that, rather than being reactive, scholars of the empirical study of public administration should be proactive in moving towards review standards as observed in other fields.

This article examines the documentation of human participants in research protections and ethical review board clearance in public administration research. The pattern of examining research ethics through an analysis of the published literature is well known in the clinical sciences. Work by Yank and Rennie (2002), whose methods are a model for this article, showed that between 31 and 18 percent of articles reporting clinical trials research in top medical journals did not disclose their human subjects ethics clearances or the use of informed consent procedures. We also examine, per the suppositions of Yank and Rennie, the hypothesis that reporting ethics clearance will be correlated with authors reporting other materials of ethical concern, such as sponsorship (a.k.a. external funding) and conflict of interests for their research.

The sparse documentation of human research ethics concerns in the clinical research literature is particularly troubling as medical researchers are obligated to the terms of the Declaration of Helsinki, which mandates requirements of ethical conduct of research (Rennie 1997; Amdur and Biddle 1997). Further, medical research publishers are obligated to certain terms of this Declaration—“Publishers have ethical obligations... Reports of experimentation not in accordance with the principles laid down in this Declaration should not be accepted for publication” (World Medical Association 2000; quoted in Yank and Rennie 2002, 2835). While public administration researchers and editors do not directly share in the obligations of Helsinki, university-based researchers do share in the tradition of Helsinki through the language of the Belmont Report, and the obligation to comply with the Common Rule (The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1979).

Background

Human Participants Research Ethics

The phrases “research with human subjects” and “research with human participants” carries various connotations. Research with human subjects often connotes

¹ The idea of human participants in research protections was interpreted broadly to account for the multi-national nature of public administration research and publication. It was not expected that all authors would follow US specific legislation and wording (e.g., Common Rule and Institutional Review Board (IRB)). This broad interpretation was chosen to account for the “light-touch” model implemented by the United Kingdom, other European, and Asian nations. (Office for Human Research Protections 2012; Economic and Social Research Council 2010).

conventional clinical research, such as double blind, randomized, placebo- controlled clinical trials. Research with human participants may connote less “hard” research methods, such as conducting surveys, interviews, participant observation, use of visual methods, or cognitive experiments. In this article, the phrase “research with human participants” will mean a systematic gathering of knowledge through intervention or interaction with live and identifiable humans outside of a clinical setting (Van Den Hoonaard 2008). Importantly for public administration researchers, research with human participants also includes secondary use of data or analysis of data containing identifiable information about participants gathered by the primary research team or others that is used in secondary analyses and is used for a study purpose not in line with the original study purpose (Hinds et al. 1997; Law 2005).

Concern over the level and consistency of ethics reporting in the scientific literature is a feature of research on medical research. For example, Yank and Rennie (1999, 2002), Myles and Tan (2003), Bauchner and Sharfstein (2001) and Ruiz-Canela et al. (2001) each point out that authors do not consistently report ethical requirements for the conduct of medical research, such as informed consent giving by participants. These many authors and others not reviewed for this piece show that there is inconsistent concern shown for ethics documentation in published research. What these authors’ work does not show is whether this problem is generalizable beyond the confines of clinical research. This is lamentable as a number of fields, such as social scientific fields like political science, sociology, and public administration, all aspire to use data from intervention or interaction with human participants in order to produce generalizable knowledge of import to society. With the dearth of research on the consistency of inconsistent ethics reporting in non-clinical fields in mind, we sought to conduct a study that would replicate the effort of authors, like Yank and Rennie, to ascertain the extent of this phenomenon in public administration research.

Ethics review for social sciences is a controversial subject. Questions around the purpose of social research review, its risks, the role of the review committee in “normalizing” social science, foisting positivistic models of human behavior upon non-positivistic researchers, limiting academic freedom, and the difficulty of fitting social sciences research into a biomedical framework, pervade the discussion (Beauchamp et al. 1982; Haggerty 2004; Hammersley 2009; Porter 2008; Rasmussen 2008; Schrag 2010; Stanley and Wise 2010; Wiles et al. 2008). Further questions include the coverage and comparability of ethical standards internationally from the nation where researchers receive their funding, the national home of their participants, the laws of the area in which they conducted their research, and the home of the publisher of their journal (Zinter 2002). The controversies in social sciences research review stem largely from legal and procedural concerns for a review of social sciences research. Unfortunately, these legal and procedural concerns may only be indirectly related to analysis of the effects of and the coverage of ethics oversight in this interdisciplinary field.

The purpose of a prospective review of human participants research is to ensure that participants in the research will not come to harm as a direct consequence of their participation. This practice of review rests on the assumption, which has not been demonstrated to be valid, that participation in research is assumed to be an uncommon,

unnatural, and risky activity for individuals who are not the investigator ([Heise et al. 1996](#); [Orlowski and Christensen 2002](#)). Investigators are assumed to be in positions where they can coerce individuals into participation by offering individual therapeutic benefits (e.g., curative medication), direct benefits for participation (e.g., financial incentives), or indirect benefits for participation (e.g., access to university facilities). To minimize the vulnerability of participants vis-a-vis investigators, researchers must demonstrate to an independent group of qualified peers how they will mitigate the chance that the resource and power vulnerability between them and the participants will be minimized and will not cause the participants harm. This panel of peer-reviewers of the research assesses the design of the study and the techniques proposed by investigators to minimize the assumed vulnerabilities of participants, checking to ensure that potential harms are accounted for and minimized.

Review of possible harms from social sciences research is not limited to review of the physical and/or psychological risks of activities of participation. That is, review of social sciences research entails more than an assessment of the likelihood that a participant will become physically ill (e.g., vomiting due to vertigo caused by participation in an fMRI study) or mentally unstable (e.g., suffer an anxiety attack due to equivocation of a survey with a course test) due to participation in a research project. Evolving disciplinary and regulatory discussions suggest that complete review of research risk must assess “informational risks”, or those risks “resulting from the unauthorized release of information about subjects” (Office of the Secretary 2011, 44514). Informational risks may arise for subjects even after the research is complete, through publication or other dissemination of the research ([Denzin 2008](#); [Taylor and Fox 2008](#)). Researchers are asked to address the possibility that the publication and dissemination of their research results may stigmatize participants or the groups they associate with and to minimize possible stigmatizing work ([Lazzarini et al. 2009](#); [Wjst 2010](#)).²

The obligation to obtain an ethics review does not correlate perfectly with the conduct of institutionally approved research and the conduct of approved research is certainly not the same as conducting research ethically ([Gunsalus 2004](#); [Gunsalus et al. 2005](#)). There is little evidence that an ethics review correlates with effective risk minimization, benefits enhancement, ethical conduct of the research, or ethical reporting of the research ([Emanuel et al. 2000](#)). For the reader, there must be a considerable degree of trust placed in the authors, reviewers, and editors to certify the ethicality of the published research results. Although there are no universal, cross-disciplinary norms for certifying, guaranteeing, or accrediting the ethical conduct of research,³ authors’ demonstration of commitment to ethical conduct of human subjects

² To the best of our knowledge, there are no currently published studies comparing the likelihood and magnitude, and thus dimensions of comparability, between physical harms stemming from biomedical research and informational harms stemming from social scientific research. However, current work by [Jordan \(2013\)](#), is developing an evaluation scale and assessment tool for informational risks evaluation that is a corollary to the proposed “Systematic Evaluation of Research Risks” by [Rid et al. \(2010\)](#), which looked at physical risks from common medical research procedures (e.g., percutaneous biopsy).

³ Clinical scientists are moving towards models to do this, such as the use of the CONSORT statement rules. Public opinion researchers also seem to be moving this direction with the requirements of data reporting standards. .

research comes in three major forms in the present literature—(1) discussing openly how ethical concerns were addressed, (2) making direct statements about the review/approval of the research, and (3) certifying to editors that research submitted that uses data from human participants research was vetted. A fourth method-used by clinical scientists is documentation of registration of clinical trials with government monitoring organizations (e.g., www.clinicaltrials.gov) and declaration of adherence to other protocols for research reporting that include ethics coverage (CONSORT Group 2012).

Assumption and Suppositions

This analysis starts with an assumption often made by reviewers and readers of public administration research—if investigators report research based upon surveys, interviews, focus groups, participant observation or action methods, then they must have considered the ethical problems that may arise in their research, and, given their prior concern, they must have obtained ethics clearance prior to collecting the data upon which they base their reports. From this assumption, the suppositions follow that approved research is ethical and that published research is an emanation of that approved, ethical, research. These assumptions and suppositions are challenged by recent research and exposed in arguments presented in the recent literature. We review some of this research briefly in this section.

Based upon recently published research, where it was found that editors of journals in political and social sciences report requiring evidence of human subjects approval for publication, it seems reasonable to presume that public administration journals also require this evidence (Jordan and Hill 2012a, b).⁴ However, the number of political science journals requesting human subjects approval for publication is low; these authors found that only 12 % of the respondent editors claim to require submission of an assurance statement or other evidence of human subjects ethics approval. In this sample of journals, 4 public administration journal editors (out of 8), responded that they did not require documentation of human subjects approval. That only half the public administration journals queried (a small subset of the full discipline's outlets) responded, leaves open the possibility that public administration editors may require these approvals, as do the editors in other social and political science journals, where public administration researchers also publish their work. Whether researchers are compliant with this requirement is not something ascertainable from this study.

The most compelling basis for the supposition that public administration researchers themselves obtain human participants ethics review, even if they do not report it, comes from the published critique of Calista (2002) against the work of Brudney et al. (1999) and the subsequent reply of Brudney and Wright (2002). Calista charges Brudney, Hebert, and Wright with overlooking the anonymity and confidentiality issues, which he believes these authors should have attended to when gathering and reporting their data (349). Brudney and Wright fire back at Calista that they “strongly and categorically reject assertions that we ‘failed customary

⁴ As reported by these authors, the survey data presented here was gathered under a research project approved by the Institutional Review Board at Texas A and M University (Jordan and Hill 2012a, p. 727).

protocols”, were remiss in ‘ensuring anonymity and confidentiality’ and that we were cavalier ‘about the ethics involved’ (358). To support their argument, Brudney and Wright make the following points: (1) that there was a statement of confidentiality at the top of the ASAP questionnaire, (2) the ASAP surveys follow the criteria for review by an IRB, (3) that the letter to subjects included approval information and contact information for the IRB at the home institution of the lead investigator, (4) that the research fell into an “exempt category according to the US human subjects protections regulations (45CFR46.101(b)(3)”, and that “the premium on journal space normally precludes such complete exposition of methodology, and accordingly we followed the PAR convention of including only a brief ‘methodology box’ in our article” (2002, 358). This exchange lends some support to our presumption that public administration researchers engage in ethical conduct of human subjects research, but simply elect not to report their clearances or other ethical considerations due to disciplinary conventions governing brevity and economizing journal space.

Data and Methods

Following the example of Yank and Rennie (2002), and building upon the recent framework for analysis of the survey literature built by Lee et al. (2012), our initial data collection procedure included assessing ethics review and related statements, overall subject numbers, and external funding statements, gathered from articles in five public administration journals from the years 2000 to 2012. To gather these points of information from the relevant sample of articles, two coders worked in tandem on this project (the author and assistant). Using the functions provided in the Social Sciences Citation Index, five key publications were examined—*Administration and Society*, *American Review of Public Administration*, *Public Administration*, *Public Administration Review*, and *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*—querying as the “topic”: surveys, interviews, participant observation, focus groups, and experiments (Thomson Reuters 2012). As the resulting first sample of articles turned up what seemed to be remarkably few ($n = 142$), a second search was conducted using the archives for each journal, as available on the journal publishers’ pages. Using publisher archives, each article was examined in each issue (including special issues) for the period between 2000 and the first issue of each volume in 2012.⁵

⁵ The author and her assistant developed a standard workflow for data gathering. First, the abstract of the article was reviewed for an initial judgment of the empirical nature of the article. To do this, each abstract was read closely and if the abstract indicated that survey data, interviews, focus groups, participant observations, case-studies, or experiments were conducted, or if implicit indicator phrases, such as “respondents” or “we contacted” were mentioned, the full text of the article was downloaded in pdf format. With the full-text of the article, key word searches were conducted. First, a search for the terms “IRB”, “Institution”, “Review”, “Board”, “Committee”, “Human”, “Ethic”, “Compliance”, “Grant” and “Fund” was run. Second, if this key word query did not produce expected results, then the methods and or data collection sections (to the extent there was such a coherent section, a problem discussed in greater detail below), the acknowledgements section, and sidebars, boxes, footnotes or endnotes were read closely. In the close reading, mentions of analogous terms that were not initially included in the key words for the search, such as unusual names for an institutional ethics committee, were examined. Although time consuming, both the author of this paper and her assistant performed the same queries on the articles in order to ensure that the data was comprehensive and to reduce systematic errors of exclusion.

Based upon these queries, two databases were built. The first, for all articles, was composed of 5 cells: Title of the Piece, Volume/Issue and Date of Publication, Method (e.g., survey, interview, survey and interview), Primary or Secondary Data, Research Ethics Approval, and Funding Source. As the data use here is primarily descriptive and our variable of interest (research ethics approval) is dichotomous (approval reported (1) or no approval reported (0)), no tests for intercoder reliability were performed (e.g., Cohen's kappa). For articles with murky references to the type of data gathered (interview, focus group, e.g.), the nature of the data (e.g., primary or secondary), the coders consulted one another to determine the method of data gathering.

As (Lee et al. 2012) also found in their research, there were some articles in our sample for which identification of the method of data collection and type of data used was utterly unclear. Other than for instances of large, government sponsored data sets (e.g., Federal Merit Board Surveys) or other large pre-existing data sets (e.g., NASP II, III, and IV), it was assumed that in instances where authors stated "we gathered" or "we collected" that these were indicators of primary data collection. In many cases, however, these indicator words were not present, leading us to code the data as primary data based upon other indicators, such as inclusion of personal anecdotes about data collection in the article body or its notes, or references to data collection processes, such as "mail", "telephone" or "email". In almost all cases of interview-based research, and certainly in cases of "informal" interviews or interviews with named subjects, we assumed this to be research based on primary data. Methods were coded as "survey", "interview", "mixed method" (e.g., survey and interview, or interviews and focus groups), or "other" (e.g., focus groups, participant observation). Through the searches for use of human participants in research in these journals, 668 articles were collected: 84 from *Administration and Society*; 92 from *American Review of Public Administration*; 114 from *Public Administration*; 156 from *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory (JPART)*; and 224 from *Public Administration Review*.⁶

When beginning this project, we made the assumption that public administration research was not likely to include data from a large number of participants. Based on a cursory scan through the journals, we estimated that most public administration research, even large-N survey research, would be based on comparatively small numbers of participants, around 200. Although this estimate of the average number of participants in each project presented was approximately correct, though still conservative, the number of total projects (and thus the total number of participants) was far greater than we expected. In order to give the reader a better measure of human subjects research in public administration journals, below we present an

⁶ We did not obtain IRB approval for this study as no identifiable data on individual authors or editors was recorded in the composition of this database or reported in our analysis of this de-identified data set. As this material exists in the public domain with the data owners' voluntary consent, it does not violate the personal data protection laws of the territories from which the authors hail. Further, all of these editors' have self-identified in these public for a (academic journals) as the responsible authors of these articles.

assessment of the number of individuals whose data was included in the analysis for the articles, using journal articles published between 2000 and 2010.⁷

Attempts to gather participant figures, in particular, were thwarted by inconsistencies in methods reporting in each of these journals. In order to gather these numbers, the author and her assistant had to perform a close reading and interpretation of each text. Inconsistencies found in methods reporting that hindered our ability to gather this data include: lack of a definitive section on participant sampling or data gathering, no mention of sampling or data gathering techniques, reporting only estimated numbers of participants (e.g., 100 + interviewees), reports for subjects of one method but not others in multi-method studies (e.g., 575 surveys and many in-depth interviews), and failures to indicate what number of participants were included in which method of analysis in mixed methods studies, and whether there was overlap in participants for each method used. To navigate around this problem, the author and her assistant used the estimated numbers reported as final number of participants; reconstructed participant numbers using number of contacts, reported response rates, and reported “n”; examined tables for “n” reported when individuals were stated or implied to be the unit of analysis; and examined related articles using the same data from the same authors to assess numbers. In some articles, however, it was impossible to find a number of participants reported, thus we eliminated these from our sample.

Findings

Human Participants in Public Administration Research

In Table 1, we present raw figures of the estimated number of subjects included as well as adjusted figures of the estimated number of subjects included. There was a range of numbers of individuals whose data was used in the production of these pieces, in one instance as high as 216,852 (Yang and Kassekert 2010). In this instance and others, it was difficult to determine if the data were given to the researcher in an anonymous format, making the judgment whether this ought to be considered human subjects research with secondary use of data or not difficult.⁸

⁷ As mentioned above, we also gathered evidence on the number of individuals from whom the authors gathered data, as published in the pieces in these five public administration journals. We gathered numbers of participants in the articles from the articles of these five journals for the issues contained in the volumes identified as 2000 and 2010. A total of 176 articles (2000 n = 60, 2010 n = 116) were analyzed. In this sample, seven articles were not included as there was no indication of participant numbers that could be found or extrapolated based upon the information in the article (3.97 %). We counted as a participant in research the number of respondents whose data the authors report they used. For example, if an author reported contacting 1,000 managers, and received 249 responses, we counted 249 individuals as participants, not 1,000.

⁸ Yang and Kassekert use Federal Human Capital Survey 2006 data. On the Office of Personnel Management webpage describing this survey (<http://www.fedview.opm.gov/2006/What/>) we found no mention of the FHCS being conducted confidentially. The OPM is not listed as a federal agency that complies with the Common Rule. We include these figures here as we cannot be certain what the protections were, or whether the exemption for public benefits or program research and demonstration projects (Exemption 5) of the Common Rule was invoked here (46.101(a)(5)).

In other pieces, it was clear that the researchers were using data containing personal identifiers, for example, from records of 140,000 Danish school children (Andersen and Mortensen 2010). To reduce the effect of these extreme outliers, we present both raw and adjusted figures. For adjusted figures, we calculated the mean number of respondents for each journal for both 2000 and 2010 and calculated an average of those mean values. Numbers reported that were greater than this mean value (2,434) were excluded.

Careful readers may note that the number of participants in 2000 was markedly less than in 2010. In some cases, the raw number of participants increased by more than 1,000 % between 2000 and 2010. As extreme outliers influence these numbers, we calculated the percent change in the adjusted mean number of participants between 2000 and 2010. In one journal, the adjusted mean number decreased by 9 %, while in another the adjusted mean number increased by 268 %; the percent change in the adjusted mean was 39.41 %. The total adjusted mean participants for each journal in 2000 was 354.2, and was 493.8 in 2010.

Risks to Participants from Public Administration Research

The number of subjects enrolled in a study is a very crude proxy for the overall risk of the research. As noted by research ethics experts—as well as by public administrators in the debates between qualitative and quantitative researchers over the subjectivity/objectivity and narrative structure, resolution, and granularity of their data—some research methods present greater risks to subjects. To truly assess risk, analysts must evaluate how many subjects are included in studies of which type with an expected risk profile. Interviews, participant observations, and ethnographic methods often yield highly detailed data on the individual subjects that may present risks to them. When considering the overall risk to the subjects of public administration research, we ought to be concerned about the methods used to access and report their data. In Table 2, we present the number of articles by method in each journal.

Research Ethics Review in Public Administration Journals

It was expected that public administration researchers would report having obtained ethical clearance by the relevant committee at their institution within their research publications. However, only 19 articles out of the total 668 (2.84 %) included notice or statement of approval. The largest gross number appeared in *Public Administration Review* with six, followed by three in *Administration and Society*, three in *American Review of Public Administration*, five in *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, and none in *Public Administration* (0 %). We offer explanations for these differences, particularly the case of *Public Administration*, in the “[Discussion](#)” section below (Table 3).

Funding for Public Administration Research

We found the low number of ethical assurance statements notable given the number of articles that acknowledge funding from outside sources that make clear to

Table 1 Raw numbers and adjusted numbers of participants

Journal	Total participants (2000)	Total participants (2010)	Mean participants (2000) [adjusted mean participants] ^b	Mean participants (2010) [adjusted mean participants] ^b	Range of participant numbers (2000)	Range of participant numbers (2010)	Percent change in total participants (2000–2010) (mean participant percent change) [adjusted mean participant change]
Administration and Society	2,148	8,019	537 [537]	616.8 [483.7]	49–1,135	6–2,698	273 % (14.8 %) [-9.92 %]
American Review of Public Administration	1,972	22,783	281.7 [159.7]	1,627.3 [589.2]	6–631	5–15,123	1,055 % (477 %) [268.94 %]
Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory	17,446	383,254	1,246.1 [438.5]	11,976.6 [561.3]	29–2,474	26–216,852	2,096 % (861.1 %) [28.00 %]
Public Administration	2,732	16,596	161 [159.7]	593 [271.7]	8–1,211	2–4,093	507.4 % (268.3 %) [70.13 %]
Public Administration Review	11,528	166,857	918 [478]	6,952 [565.6]	30–6,748	16–150,000	1,347.4 % (657.2 %) [18.32 %]

Mean of means: 2000—628; 2010—4,241; average for 2000 and 2010—2,434.5

^a Means rounded to the nearest whole number

^b In 2000, two studies were excluded from *JPART* and one from *PAR*. In 2010, we excluded one study each from *A&S* and *ARPA*, four from *JPART*, and two each from *PA* and *PAR*

Table 2 Raw numbers of participants, by method

Journal	Survey (2000)	Survey (2010)	Interview (2000)	Interview (2010)	Mixed method ^a (2000)	Mixed method (2010)	Other ^b (2000)	Other (2010)
Administration and Society	2,369	7,692	49	267	n/a	n/a	n/a	60
American Review of Public Administration	1,086	20,171	702	2,200	n/a	226	n/a	36
Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory	16,917	227,702	367	316	n/a	11,504	162	143,732
Public Administration	602	15,156	672	230	358	1,180	100	n/a
Public Administration Review	4,029	165,987	282	240	6,917	630	'several hundred'	n/a

^a Mixed method denotes articles reporting a mix of interviews, surveys, focus groups, and case records research (e.g., social work case records)

^b Other includes participant observation, "discussion groups", and use of identified records not associated with a particular "case" (e.g., examination records)

recipients of their funding that they must obtain approval. In our sample, 218 articles or 32.6 % of our sample ($n = 668$) noted external funding by one or more sources. For instance, there are at least 25 instances of grants from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) of the United Kingdom, 16 grants from the US National Science Foundation (NSF), and 67 from universities (See Table 4). This does not include the numerous examples of funding from various national government departments (such as the UK Department of Communities and Local Governments, which funded 4) or non-profit organizations (such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which funded 12). We present our findings on the correlation between funding and human subjects approval in the tables below.

Discussion

Whether in the clinical or social sciences, most ethics clearance statements appear hidden away in footnotes or tossed in as part of a lengthy "Methods" section. This may lead readers of this article to wonder why are we making such a mountain out of a footnote? In this discussion section, we summarize the reasons for concern as stemming from concern for the scientific credibility and reputation of public administration research, the replication of public administration research, and the protection of vulnerable populations.

Table 3 Number of articles reporting ethics committee approval, funding, and both

Journal	Articles reporting ethics review (percent in each journal) [percent of total articles]	Funded research (% articles)	Funded research with review [% funded articles] [% articles with ethics review]
Administration and Society	3 (3.5) [0.44]	25 (29.7)	2 (8) [66]
American Review of Public Administration	3 (3.2) [0.44]	28 (30.4)	3 (10.7) [100]
Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory	5 (3.2) [0.74]	58 (37.1)	3 (5.1) [60]
Public Administration	0 (0) [0]	40 (38.8)	0 (0) [0]
Public Administration Review	6 (2.6) [0.89]	67 (30.0)	3 (4.4) [50]

Explaining Unusual Cases

We were particularly interested by the result that the many articles with Economic and Social Research Council funding (UK) do not report an ethical review, even though the ESRC, in their “Framework for Research Ethics (FRE)” makes it clear that “(1) research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity and quality; (3) confidentiality of the information supplied by subjects and the anonymity of subjects must be respected, and (6) the independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit” (Economic and Social Research Council 2010). Researchers with ESRC funding are responsible for ensuring an ethics review that is “proportionate to potential risk, whether this involves primary or secondary data” and addresses the particular risks of “novel use of existing data” and “primary data collection”, even though the ESRC does not impose a regulatory structure for this research review, as does the US (Economic and Social Research Council 2010).

While the UK has robust human protection legislation, comprehensive guidelines given by the ESRC and the National Health Service (NHS) and others, and is home to strong research ethics training traditions, a number of research ethics organizations, such as the Committee on Publication Ethics, the trend in reporting ethics approval in UK-based journals seems to be less robust in some cases than in US based journals. For example, Yank and Rennie (2002), 2837 found that the *British Medical Journal* had higher percentages of non-reporting of ethics

Table 4 Number of Articles Reporting Public Funding

Journal	Economic and Social Research Council (% of funded articles) ^a	National Science Foundation (% of funded articles)	University (% of funded articles)
Administration and Society	1 (4)	4 (16)	8 (32)
American Review of Public Administration	1 (3.6)	2 (7.1)	11 (39.3)
Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory	6 (10.3)	5 (8.6)	23 (39.7)
Public Administration	14 (35)	0 (0)	1 (2.5)
Public Administration Review	3 (4.4)	5 (7.5)	24 (35.8)
Totals	25	16	67
(% Total funded articles) ^b	(11.5)	(7.3)	(30.7)

^a Percent calculated based on number of funded articles in the journal

^b Percent calculated based on total number of funded articles in sample

committee approval in both years of their sample. Coincidentally, another UK based publication, *The Lancet* had a lower percentage of non-reporters than the other US based outlets Yank and Rennie surveyed. We suggest that further research must be undertaken to identify the factors that motivate approval reporting or non-reporting in UK and US based medical and social scientific journals.

Scientific Credibility

In their reply to Calista (2002); Brudney and Wright (2002) make the claim that it is a “circumstance that stretches credulity” for other researchers or journals to expect authors to report their methods with such refinement as to describe their procedures for protecting the confidentiality or anonymity of subjects. In our sample of articles, 97.46 % of authors seem to agree with Brudney and Wright, and do not report their methods to protect confidentiality or anonymity of subjects. While this may be unintentional oversight, this may be partly due to the wide variety of techniques available for researchers to use to anonymize, pseudonomize, or make confidential their research data. These include the use of tools such as algorithm driven anonymization such as k-anonymization, or simple pseudonomization such as changing context specifics such as name, gender, position, organization, time, or location of respondent reports (Samarati 2001; Sweeney 2002). The reluctance to report the use of these procedures may demonstrate lack of knowledge of relevant techniques, fear that not using high-tech tools renders one’s results “less scientific”, trepidation about the true level of anonymization or pseudonomization provided by these techniques (Wjst 2010), or, as Brudney and Wright suggest, simply a lack of

space to explain how the algorithms of data anonymization were deployed. Harkening to the role of research ethics boards in the protection of human subjects, perhaps social and behavioral research ethics boards are also not familiar enough with the relevant issues or techniques of data anonymization or pseudonomization to make adequate, clear, recommendations to authors (Zimmer 2010). Which of these reasons is most relevant for public administration researchers is a question that begs for additional research.

Even given these factors, it is important to note that, while it may be a disciplinary norm of public administration researchers to not report ethics clearance or participant protection methods, it would “stretch credulity” in the other human sciences, like clinical research, to not report these procedures. As Emanuel et al. (2000) make clear, presentation of methods and of the independent review of the ethics of these methods is one of the seven requirements for ethical research. Independent review promotes “public accountability” and minimizes potential conflicts of interest, including investigators’ “legitimate interests—interests to conduct high-quality research, complete the research expeditiously, protect research subjects, obtain funding, and advance their careers” (2706).

Particularly in a time when opponents to social sciences research funding, such as the “Flake Amendment” (H.AMDT.1094, H.R. 5326), are calling for defunding the research that appears in these journals, it is important to demonstrate that public administration scholars abide by standards of ethics and accountability (Jordan and Gray 2013). Failing to report the ethical considerations and the ethical clearances in public administration research challenges the credibility of public administration as a scientific discipline based upon the conventional standards of credibility in other human sciences. An example of the differences between public administration as a discipline and others, even when the researchers publish in the same journal may be helpful here: in a single volume (consecutive issues) of *Administration and Society*, researchers from the same institution, but from different departments, one more closely aligned with the social sciences and one more aligned with the clinical sciences, reported their ethics clearance differently. The authors from the more clinical sciences oriented discipline reported their ethics clearance directly in a section labeled “human subjects protections”, while those from the social sciences oriented discipline simply offered that “Each official was informed that his or her responses were to remain anonymous” (Caruson and MacManus 2011; Stiles et al. 2011).

If the reputation of an academic field rests on its appraisal by other scholars as conforming to the norms of good science, then evidence of insufficient attention to substance, methods, or ethics stand to damage the reputation of a field. Failing to report ethical clearances, consistently to report methods and participant numbers, and to report ethical considerations raises the possibility that researchers in public administration could be accused of questionable research practice. Questionable research practice, also known as “sloppy science”, is the confluence of “actions that violate traditional values of the research enterprise and that may be detrimental to the research process” but do not “directly damage the integrity of the research process” (Steneck 2006, 59). Failures to report ethics clearance fall into this category of undesirable practices, which may portend misrepresentation, inaccuracy, and bias in

published research. Bias is a particular concern as failing to report ethics clearance may signal that researchers' own biases, perhaps against the oversight of their research by an ethics review board, and preferences for publication or obedience of convention overrides their professional obligation to demonstrate evidence of protection of subjects ([Brudney and Wright 2002](#)). Interestingly, though, in our research, we found that authors were comprehensive in their statements of research funding from external sources which suggests researchers are aware of the need to report sources of bias. Whether researchers report funding sources as a matter of bias-mitigation, because journals compel this, because they wish to claim credit for external funding for their research, or because researchers addressing concerns of public administration are specifically attuned to issues of financial conflict of interest (e.g., bribery) cannot be established with the data in this project.

Replication

In his pieces "Replication, Replication" and "Publication, Publication", political scientist Gary King makes the case that more political science research should be replicated to demonstrate the validity of findings and to bring political science into alignment with the norms of the physical sciences ([King 2006, 1995](#)). Whether this is a desirable goal for the social sciences is beyond the ambit of this article: however, King's analysis is an important reminder for social scientists of the need for rigor in the requirements for methods reporting and the need for data sharing in political science. Importantly, one element that King cites is the need to ensure that the data one uses or gathers from colleagues could be shared under the terms of confidentiality guaranteed to the subjects ([1995, 448](#)). A complete report of the research, and one that could meet the standard of being replicable, includes information on the confidentiality implied by researchers as part of their ethical considerations in the research.

Reporting that research was reviewed by an ethics review board signals to future researchers that the study is able to be done ethically, and that tools used to conduct the original study (such as informed consent documents) were already vetted. In the event that later researchers hope to replicate a study, information on the ethical considerations about the research could assist them to design their later study in ways that saves them time and hassle with their own ethics committees.

Related to replication is the importance of conducting meta-analyses to confirm "how much of the variance in a set of studies is attributable to individual uncertainties such as sample variability and measurement, and how much variability is truly the result of some real effect" ([Gill 1999, 667](#)). To perform a meta-analysis, information on sampling, sample size, definitions of key variables, and methods for the conduct of the study, must be available to the researcher performing the meta-analysis. As we found in our research, methods reporting was plagued by inconsistencies that hindered collection of simple information, like the number of participants or the type of data gathered. These inconsistencies inhibit the use of a meta-analysis approach for public administration research, which limits the ability of researchers to come to reliable conclusions that provide clear social benefits from the research.

Vulnerable Populations

Achieving scientific credibility and the advancement of public administration research is less important ethically than protecting potentially vulnerable populations that could participate in public administration research. As social scientists committed to ferreting out structural injustices, racism and sexism, or misuse of public trust and public funds, demonstrating that we have addressed these problems within our own house show how we promote full accountability of powerful persons. As Brudney and Wright remind us, US federal regulations allow that research with competent adults that does not present grave risks and research with government officials may be exempt from full review. For much of the research we reviewed in our survey, these exemptions would apply as the data was gathered from competent adult participants who are (in many cases) employees of federal, state, and local government agencies (exemptions 45CFR46.101 (a)(3(i) and 5(i)) under the US Common Rule would apply most specifically here). For example, 26 pieces included in our sample use the NASP survey data which reports data from government employees (one article documents that the NASP-II surveys were approved by the IRB at Rutgers University (Welch and Pandey 2007)). For other research, using citizen surveys, utilization research using information gathered from individuals using social services, or minority individuals' perceptions of diversity programs reports of how the vulnerability of the individuals was considered is needed to show how researchers protected these vulnerable populations from potential stigma and harm. Finally, it is an important question to ask of this research whether all participants were given sufficient information to be informed about their participation in research, even if documentation of written informed consent was waived by an ethics review board. This level of analytical refinement was not possible in this study, but ought to be taken up in subsequent analyses.

Conclusion

The purpose of the above expository analysis was to describe how well scholars publishing in the top journals of academic public administration conform to the requirements to report review of their research with human participants, including primary data gathering and secondary data analysis. Evidence presented here suggests that readers cannot say with a high degree of certainty that the research was performed according to the standards of ethical conduct of research with human participations. For the vast majority of articles in our sample, it can only be assumed the data was gathered with approval by a research ethics review board. This leads to the tentative conclusion that readers cannot infer from the printed text that public administration research was conducted according to the same ethical standards as that in other human sciences disciplines. What can the discipline do to address the low level of ethics approval reporting?

The following recommendations ought to be taken up at the level of the classroom, the author's desk, and the editor's desk. At the level of the classroom, improving methods teaching should be coupled with instruction on optimal methods reporting. These should include training in the responsible conduct of public

administration research, such as reporting survey and interview sampling, conduct, and analysis completely and accurately. From the perspective of the author's desk, increased attention must be paid to reporting methods with an eye towards replication. Authors must describe their study in sufficient detail that readers can verify and/or generalize their work to other settings accurately. One area that authors might look to for advice on comprehensive methods reporting would be the work of Gary King (1995) and the CONSORT Group statement on methods reporting (CONSORT Group 2012). From the perspective of the editor's desk, echoing Yank and Rennie—"we recommend that journals publish in their instructions for authors the explicit requirement that all articles describe informed consent and ethics committee approval or why these were waived. Journals should also assess in-house practices for ways that might further improve reporting" (2002, 2838).

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