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Beyond Empiricists Versus Postmodernists

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In their response to my “Deconstructing Public Administration Empiricism” article in the July 2007 issue of *Administration & Society*, Meier and O’Toole described it as an aggressive attack. Even though I recognize my approach was unusually specific for a discussion of research approaches, I consider it a pointed but respectful analysis of the practice of public administration empiricism. Disputes regarding my interpretations of their work should be expected, but I think that a fair reading of my article would conclude that I took their work seriously and analyzed it carefully.

I wish that they had shown me the same courtesy. Instead of taking my work seriously, Meier and O’Toole’s response is an attempt to distract and mislead readers in a way that never engages the main point of my essay—even the best public administration empiricist research finds it difficult if not impossible to measure objective reality. That observation is important because measuring objective reality in an objective fashion is the foundation of their claims to having a superior research approach. Without that foundation, their research approach is just one among many ways to interpret the worlds of public administration. It is also important because it may say something about how little objective reality exists in administrative reality.

Meier and O’Toole (2007) however refused even to admit that empiricists claim their approach is superior, describing them as “alleged—claims” (p. 786). Clearly not every researcher who utilizes empiricist approaches has made these claims. O’Toole (1995) appears to be open to nonempiricist approaches: “Explanatory, interpretive, and critical forms of scholarship have all contributed to what we have collectively learned; let many, many

Editor’s Note: This is the latest contribution to *Disputatio Sine Fine* and the argument that began with the July 2007 issue and has been running ever since. It comes from Professor Larry Luton of Eastern Washington University, who began the argument with an essay critical of what he felt were excessive “truth claims” of empiricists. (I hope I am characterizing it correctly—but even that may be arguable.) In this DSF he responds to the first of his critics: Professor Ken Meier of Texas A&M and Professor Laurence O’Toole of the University of Georgia. Other persons are queued up to enter the argument. If anyone else wishes to join in, please contact the editor.

research designs bloom!” (p. 294). However, anyone who has read much of Meier’s theoretical publications would be hard pressed to reach any other conclusion than that he considers his empiricist approach superior. Moreover, he has on occasion published rather clear statements to that effect—for example, “I am pretty sure that my approach on average works best” (Meier, 2005, p. 665). That statement is a modestly phrased but unambiguous superiority claim. In a publication labeled by its authors a *manifesto* (Gill & Meier, 2000), he and his coauthor less modestly called for “more rigorous mathematical, statistical, and formal theoretic applications to questions in public administration to be published in public administration journals” (p. 193); described public administration research as “far behind with regard to analyzing data in meaningful ways;” and encouraged “a greatly enhanced focus on empiricism and rigorous quantitative approaches” (p. 195). Still, I did not simply criticize him (or any other public administration empiricist) for making that claim; I also challenged the foundation of that claim—something I think is a proper task for a public administration theorist.

I am pleased that Meier and O’Toole (2007) responded to my examination of their work by engaging directly with the arguments I made. Unfortunately, their response also contained misleading statements, deflections, and an attempt to “refocus the debate” (p. 787) to the issue of whether there is an objective reality. In this essay, I address their response in two parts. First, I address some of their direct disputes with my analysis, describing how key parts of their response are accurately characterized as deflections and misleading statements. Second, I address their suggestion to refocus the debate. I see that suggestion as a distraction from the main point of my essay—that they should not be so confident about their ability to objectively measure objective reality. I also suggest that their section on “the objective reality question” evidences an unseemly collegial intolerance and is based on a surprisingly obvious misinterpretation of my agnostic position regarding the existence of an objective reality. My conclusion offers suggestions regarding how the conversation about public administration research methods might be changed to better serve both practice and research.

Disputes and Deflections

In their overview of my argument Meier and O’Toole (2007) described it as illogical and claimed that it focused on minor side issues. The first characterization appears to derive from our fundamental dispute regarding research approaches. The second derives from the different frameworks we use in interpreting their research.

My use in the “Deconstructing” essay of a quote from Meier about the 30 years of progress made in research on representative bureaucracy was intended to provide evidence that the current state of empiricist research on that topic is considered to be an area of excellence. Meier and O’Toole would have me independently review those 30 years of research to analyze its current state. Instead of that approach, I chose to use a case study approach. I accepted their description of this research stream as an area of exemplary progress. I did not wish to “counter” their claim (Meier & O’Toole, 2007, p. 787). I examined some of their recent work to evaluate the current condition of empiricist research on representative bureaucracy. In claims about making progress in our understanding, it is often said that empiricist research builds a body of knowledge. If that is the case, it stands to reason that a recent article would benefit from and add to that body of knowledge. Otherwise there is no progress, no body of knowledge being built. They were correct that my selection of the Andrews, Boyne, Meier, O’Toole, and Walker (2005) article was purposeful. Purposive selection is a common aspect of qualitative research approaches (cf. Berg, 2004, p. 36; Rubin & Rubin, 2005, pp. 64-70). My selection was based on the premise that it is fair to examine a recent example of a successful and progressing research stream to judge the value of that progress. It may not be the research approach they would have utilized, but it is quite logical.

Regarding my utilization of their 2004 article on contracting, Meier and O’Toole seem to want to deflect the readers’ attention from the purpose of my analysis.¹ I was not examining their work to test their conclusions but to analyze their research approach. They agreed that they were measuring performance to test their research question about contracting. I have no quibble with that. I think the policy question involved in their research is a good one: Why contract? One reason to contract might be because it improves performance. If research indicates that it does not result in improved performance, that finding undermines the case for contracting. My concern focused on their use of a performance measure many had questioned as a reasonable measure of performance. As it turns out, Texas has since dropped that measure (TAAS) in favor of another one (TAKS) (Pitts, 2007, p. 522, note 3). My point was that their use of TAAS scores was a specific example of empiricists’ failure to use indicators that objectively measure administrative reality.

On a related point, in one of their responses to my specific critiques, Meier and O’Toole (2007, p. 789) suggested that I might be questioning the value of perceptual data. I was not. I was pointing out that much empiricist work addresses social constructions, not objective reality. Because the

foundation of their claim to utilize a superior research approach is its ability to measure objective reality, the use of empiricist approaches to measure socially constructed realities fails to support that claim. It also raises a question about which research approaches are better ways of studying interpretive realities. Or in a less competitive frame, what are the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to researching interpretive realities?

On that same page they addressed my complaint about their use of a Herfindahl index. They seem to consider my expectation that they explain the appropriateness of their use of this statistic to be beneath their professional dignity. Prior to reducing their own arguments to a rather personalized suggestion that I might lack mathematical literacy, they responded by saying "We explain precisely the mathematics" (Meier & O'Toole, 2007, p. 789). Explaining the mathematics, however, is not the same as explaining why the Herfindahl index is an appropriate mathematical computation for the purpose for which they used it. They also said in their response that the Herfindahl index is "commonly used," but that is still not an explanation of its appropriateness. I do, however, appreciate their referencing a literature source to support that characterization.

At another point where they came very close to a personal attack, they characterized as a snide comment my concern about whether the data they used from the Texas school system was generalizable. Apparently I did not make myself clear, because they mistook my concern about the generalizability of the data for an insult to Texas. Because generalizability is an important part of the case for doing empiricist research, their cryptic dismissal of that concern is unfortunate. Had they understood my concern, they might have pointed out that they too had recognized that the Texas data were not a good foundation for generalization (O'Toole & Meier, 2004, p. 349).

With regard to my complaint that the Andrews et al. (2005) article used ordinal numbers as if they were interval, I will accept their statement that the index does not contain ordinal numbers. Based on their original description of the index, that seemed inevitable to me, but it was an interpretation and they are in a better position to make that assessment. Moreover, in their response they also suggested that there is reason to question the use of that index. They said that they "have concerns about the ability to measure a multidimensional concept such as deprivation as a single indicator and have expressed these concerns in public forums" (Meier & O'Toole, 2007, p. 789). I wonder why those concerns were not shared in conjunction with their use of such an index. That kind of omission might be expected in a partisan attempt at persuasion. It is not helpful in an academic search for knowledge.

I cannot be so generous with Meier and O'Toole on several other points. First, they attempted to deflect attention from my critique of their empiricist analysis in their Parkinson's law article (O'Toole & Meier, 2004) by suggesting that their use of qualitative interviews somehow corrected the problem (Meier & O'Toole, 2007, p. 791). Again, I was not attempting to reassess their conclusions. I was examining their use of empiricist research approaches. Second, in the same paragraph they mischaracterized my suggestion that organizational growth might have been a factor as a suggestion that organization size should be considered; then they pointed out that they did analyze the impact of organizational size. If you do as they suggested and check this out, pay attention to the sleight of hand—size is not the same thing as growth. Third, in the next paragraph they characterized as my “bottom line” something that I considered a rather limited point: Their use of TAAS as a performance measurement without any discussion of the political controversy surrounding it might be an example of a phenomenon that Stivers (2008) expressed concern about—closing off political debate by treating something as settled when it is not. One problem with this part of their response is that I did not say that they contended the TAAS scores indicator was the final answer, just that they treated it as if it were. Another problem with that part of their response is that they appear, once again, to have mistaken my concern with their measures for a concern with their conclusions.

Finally, I want to address what I consider to be the most egregious instance of their deflecting and misleading responses. Meier and O'Toole (2007) tried to frame Meier's coauthoring of an article raising concern about the reliability of Texas school system data bases as evidence of the unfairness of my complaint that they failed to reference that research in their article utilizing those databases (p. 789). My point was that the Bohte and Meier (2000) article raised a concern about the reliability of Texas school system data that the O'Toole and Meier (2004) article ignored. Even though Meier was a coauthor on both articles, the 2004 publication presented its research as if the 2000 publication either did not exist or was not relevant. Because O'Toole and Meier used data from the source that Bohte and Meier raised concerns about, O'Toole and Meier should have at least referenced Bohte and Meier. Because such a citation would undermine confidence in their data, O'Toole and Meier's failure to cite the earlier work could be interpreted as a convenient omission. Meier and O'Toole's attempt to present Meier's participation in the 2000 article as if it were incorporated into their 2004 article is misleading. My reference to the Bohte and Meier article was not a concession that Meier & O'Toole “actually raise concerns about this” (Meier & O'Toole, 2007, p. 789). It was evidence that their failure to mention it was not a failure born of ignorance. It was a knowing omission.

Misinterpretation and Intolerance

Meier and O'Toole's response to my decision not to focus on whether an objective reality exists appears intended to distract readers from the main point of my analysis—they are not measuring objective reality. I deliberately passed on the objective reality question to focus on their attempts to measure it.

Taking an agnostic position on that question means that one is content to say (or at least resigned to acknowledge) "I don't know" whether an objective reality exists. Even though they clearly understood this when they expressed frustration in trying to argue with someone who says "I don't know" (Meier & O'Toole, 2007, p. 793), to make the argument they seemed intent on making in the section on "The Objective Reality Question" they mischaracterized an agnostic position as one where a person "rejects the idea of an objective reality" (p. 792). This is another sleight-of-hand move, and they should not be allowed to divert our attention from questions about the objectivity of their measurements. As my "Deconstructing" essay made very clear, I was not disputing the existence of infant deaths. More generally, I was not disputing the existence of objective reality. I was examining their attempts to measure an objective administrative reality.

In another mischaracterization, they described an agnostic as someone who "doubts the existence of an objective reality" (Meier & O'Toole, 2007, p. 793). Doubting claims to knowledge about such a reality and doubting its existence are different. After mischaracterizing the agnostic position, they suggested that it is not possible to have doubt about objective reality and teach or do public administration—"agnosticism on this issue has little place in public administration" (p. 793). In other words, it appears that they would excommunicate people who admit to having doubt. Under these rules of association, Mother Theresa would have been cast out of the Roman Catholic Church.

As their argument toned down to raise practical questions, they wondered how a public administrator who does not know whether objective reality exists can make judgments and take action. After reading my "Deconstructing" essay, they should not have had any worry about whether an agnostic can make judgments. Agnosticism on the objective reality question allows one to accept the possibility of an objective reality without claiming to know that it exists. In choosing to live with the question, rather than claiming to have an answer to it, an agnostic is in a position to judge actions tentatively, remaining open (but not necessarily deferring) to the views of persons who have a different perspective. This stance may make it easier to work with

people who have differing views of reality—for example, people from different cultures. In an increasingly interdependent world, the ability to work with people who do not share one's view of reality may be a benefit for public administrators and public administration teachers and scholars. Living with the question does not prevent an agnostic from taking a position on important issues—as my examination of public administration empiricism demonstrates. Tentative judgments do not have to be timid ones.

Conclusion

Let me begin my conclusion by saying that I tentatively and partially (but not timidly) accept Meier and O'Toole's (2007) suggestion that we all "continue to do what we have been doing" (p. 794). My acceptance is partial and tentative because I do not share their confidence that the public administration intellectual community will be able to reach agreement about who is more correct. Moreover, if all we do is continue as we have, there is little hope for progress.

As is clear from Meier and O'Toole's response to my article, interpreting someone else's work is a difficult task that is not always done very well. It can be improved by two-way communication, but even then, agreement on the meaning is not necessarily forthcoming. For me, this interchange has reinforced the notion that public administration and public administration research mostly deal with socially constructed realities, not objective reality. Our research approaches should be designed to fit that situation and reported in a way that reflects the uncertainty inherent in it. As Bozeman (2007) suggested, we need to be humble about the value of our research.

If we are going to improve the research in public administration, we might begin by admitting when we have made a mistake or when someone else has a good point. We also need to retain and defend our positions when we think we are right. Being better able both to concede to good points and to sharpen and refine our differences in a civil manner is something I hope we can agree on as a common goal. So far, we have shown ourselves to be better at defending than at conceding. At a panel session on research at the October 2007 NASPAA conference, Richard Stillman expressed a concern that empiricists and postmodernists were not taking ideas seriously. I followed up by suggesting that we were taking ideas seriously but we were not taking each other seriously enough. Perhaps it is time to behave less as competitors in the marketplace of ideas and more as fellow citizens in a scholarly community.

In that spirit, I would like to suggest that instead of refocusing the debate, Meier, O'Toole, Luton, and others should return to a suggestion that O'Toole (1995) made more than a decade ago that "groups of researchers drawn from different perspectives" come together "in the admittedly difficult task of cross-methodological and epistemological exchange" (p. 296). Together, we should seek funding for a regular series of conferences focused on facilitating that exchange. Creating a vehicle for civil, but not timid, exchanges about what we think we have learned and how we might do better would be a good way for us to get beyond the empiricists versus postmodernists situation we seem to be in today.

Note

1. They also appeared quite upset that this portion of my "Deconstructing" article did not include a proper citation of Miller and Fox (2007). I am not happy with that omission either. It appears to have derived from an editorial error—deleting that citation from my reference list along with another citation from Miller that was not utilized in the final manuscript. I apologize to Miller and Fox for that omission.

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