What if Public Administration Had a Purpose?

Commentary by Mary Hamilton

July 25, 2014

PA Times Online

A Publication of the American Society for Public Administration

<http://patimes.org/public-administration-purpose/>

I ended [my June column](http://patimes.org/heart-soul-public-service/) with a quote from John Kirlin: “Public administration is a central part of the grandest of human endeavors--shaping a better future for ourselves and those yet unborn”.

Kirlin goes on to say: “The institutions crafted to achieve human aspirations require administration, including public agencies; however, the measure of success is *not at the instrumental level* [emphasis mine], but in its enduring value not only to those in a particular nation, state, or city but worldwide to all who aspire for improved lives.”

I begin this column with Kirlin because I want to talk about the purpose of public administration and I like where Kirlin takes us with this statement. This is the kind of inspiration that I’d like to see in ‘a purpose for public administration’. And it is the kind of inspiration the students I described in my June column were expecting and not getting from their MPA programs.

Last month I wrote about Richard Box’s new book *Public Service Values* and argued that we should use his book to “explicitly discuss public service values in all core MPA courses and thereby give voice to the soul” of public administration and help us focus more on the purpose of public administration.

[Paula Gordon](http://lifeboat.com/ex/bios.paula.d.gordon) responded to the June column saying that she took on the topic of public administration’s purpose in her [1975 dissertation](http://gordonpublicadministration.com/) at American University, entitled *Public Administration in the Public Interest*.  Her dissertation is a response in large part to one of her mentors, Dwight Waldo, who wrote in 1969 that he was concerned that “the field of public administration . . . is without a core focus, a core theory or philosophy, in effect, without a sense of direction.”

I read Dr. Gordon’s dissertation and kept saying to myself “of course” and “nothing has changed”!!  Her argument would resonate with many of us today.

**What Does it *Mean* to Do Public Administration in the Public Interest?**

Gordon defines “Acting in the public interest,” as “(acting in a way) that maximizes the values of life, health, and freedom” -- values that go back to the founders of our nation and of public administration. Her ideal manifestation of this approach would be a society where “an individual’s actions can be seen as simultaneously serving the best interests of the individual [me] and the best interests of the social whole [we].” Such a society would be characterized by individuals who were as concerned for the welfare of others as they were for their own welfare.

How could anyone argue with that? A purpose for public administration that “maximizes the values of life, health, and freedom”, that is concerned for the welfare of all? Or, in Kirlin’s words, that ‘shapes a better future for ourselves and those yet unborn’?

So why are those values not paramount in public administration classrooms and scholarly work today?

**What Hath Positivism Wrought?**

Gordon’s response is that the positivist view of the world (i.e., a view that the only real knowledge is obtained from empirical research; and that intuition, common sense, experience, humanity, and human values, as well as religious and transcendental values are lesser forms of knowledge) dominates public administration and is the major impediment to reclaiming *for the field the values present at the Founding*.  Positivism is so dominant in public administration and in our society that we have come to believe that values are suspect because they can’t be ‘proved’ by positivist methods.

Thus we are trained in public administration practice and scholarship to be ‘value-neutral’. It follows that being value-neutral would have us steering quite clear of soft, squishy ‘purposes’ such as concern for the welfare of others as well as ourselves, or promoting the values of life, health and freedom!

Gordon spends a chapter of her dissertation contrasting a democratic humanist set of values and assumptions (which she feels are in keeping with those of the founders) and a positivist set of values and assumptions. She makes the case that the major impediment to realigning public administration with the set of values, purposes, and assumptions present at the Founding and manifested in the lives and works of so many since – is the dominance of positivism.

Positivism dominates to the virtual exclusion of intuition, common sense, experience, humanity, wisdom, and a sense of responsibility, thereby fragmenting our psyches and incapacitating us as problem solvers. Gordon says “Not only are thinking and action being strait-jacketed by the tacit acceptance of the values, assumptions, and beliefs implicit in the positivist metaphysic, the character of thinking and action that is being done is being done in the service of values which fail to reflect a concern for human values or human freedom. The values reflected instead are concerned with empirical consistency, efficiency, material affluence, and technological progress, all of which presumably will allow man to control existence, but all of which actually are leading man … away from basic human values and human goals.”

In addition, Gordon says that, by buying into positivism, public administration has placed itself “in an instrumental, value neutral role, concerned with what in effect is the incremental, reactive manipulation or control of symptoms of problems.” Further, she says: “…theory seems to inform theory more often that it does practice and practice has come to be construed in exceedingly narrow terms, as routine operations, arrangements, and procedures.”

None of these observations, made almost 40 years ago, sound foreign today. The fact that we’ve been in this straight jacket for that many years and still exist is cause for some small celebration. The fact that we continue to worship at the altar of positivism doesn’t bode well for taking on the bizarrely complex problems that face governments today.

Regarding those complex problems, Gordon says, “The positivist has effectively attempted to force closure on the raising of larger questions by adopting a set of basic assumptions and values that rejects the raising of issues such as the value or meaning of life because no answer could possibly meet the standards of verifiability which adherence to positivistic methodology requires.”

She goes on to say that our choice to be value-neutral results in a “deeply ingrained cynicism about human nature and the possibilities of improving societies” and that this cynicism has “the most deadening effect” on humankind—on our hopes, ideals, our very humanity. “Such cynicism,” she says, “has the most serious implications for the future of mankind” because it militates “against the setting of idealistic or value-based goals and against the directing of efforts toward the sustenance and enhancement of life, health, and freedom.”

**Where do we go from here?**

To remedy this situation, Gordon insists that the human soul has to be factored back into political and social thought if the future of civilization is to be more than bleak. She argues that bleak is what it will be “…unless life and health become central values and unless the role that freedom plays in the realization of the individual and societal potential is understood and freedom itself becomes prized.” Further, Gordon argues that public administration and public service in the public interest must subordinate process to purpose and authority to service (instead of the reverse, which is the conventional approach now) if both are going to have a positive impact on the life, health and freedom of humankind.

So where do we go from here? Do we heed words written almost 40 years ago by Dr. Gordon (and by many public administration professionals and scholars since) and reclaim our humanity so we can use it to inspire our teaching and research and provide *purpose* for the field of public administration? Or do we continue to strive to be good value-neutral technocrats focused on producing more value-neutral technocrats?

What do you think?

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