

Publicness and Organizational Performance

Richard M. Walker*, **Barry Bozeman[†]**

**City University of Hong Kong; [†]University of Georgia*

The date was the November 4, 2008. A group of scholars gathered in the library of the Department of Public Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia. The global financial crisis was moving toward its peak and the final act in the US Presidential election was being played out. The subprime mortgage crisis, which would spill out into the global recession, was in the process of changing the boundaries of public policy making, public management, and business practice. Writing this introduction in 2010, the publicness map of much of the world is very different to that prior to the recession, and the first decade of the twentieth century, the “noughties,” that preceded it. Publicness is conceptualized variously as the influences of political authority (Bozeman 1987; Wamsley and Zald 1973), as organizational ownership (Rainey, Backoff, and Levine 1976), or as the relationship between the two (Dunsire et al. 1988; Rainey and Bozeman 2000). In the middle of 2010, patterns of publicness have changed in unanticipated ways as banks, the bastions of privateness, have been subjected to greatly increased external political control and publicness (Moulton 2009). Institutions of private financial might have become reliant on tax dollars and new forms of regulation are being developed to restrain the “pure privateness” of unfettered markets.

The perpetual interest in publicness and in comparing public and private sectors within the public administration discipline (Rainey, Backoff, and Levine 1976) together with the early inklings of change on the publicness horizon had spurred a group of scholars to meet 1 year earlier at the Kingfisher Restaurant in Tucson Arizona during the 9th Public Management Research Association Conference at the University of Arizona. Their discussion focused around the following research questions: “is management different in the public and private sectors, how does political authority affect management regardless of sector, and what are the implications of ownership and publicness for organizational performance?” Conversation started from the counterfactual assumption in the generic management literature that “management is management” and is likely to be the same in all sectors. Is this correct and, if so, is generic management more accurately portrayed by models in the public or private sectors? The characteristics of management that may vary across sectors include strategies, structures, processes and values, and functions such as finance and human resources management. Why do such variations occur? Are they attributable, for example, to differences in performance criteria and accountability requirements? How are the achievements of public and private organizations affected by these

All the authors published in this symposium are in debt to H. George Frederickson for his support for their scholarship and leadership in assisting and bringing this symposium to fruition. Address correspondence to the author at rwalker@hku.hk.

doi:10.1093/jopart/mur025

© The Author 2011. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Inc. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com

management differences? What contingencies moderate the impact of management on organizational performance and are these the same in both sectors?

These questions informed the workshop held at the University of Georgia. The aim of the workshop was to develop a systematic agenda on publicness and its management consequences. The agenda included questions of theory, methods, and empirical evidence based on the above questions. The articles in this symposium edition of *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* capture these key criteria of any academic debate and represent the culmination of work that day and much more labor. Meier and O'Toole's article is first up. O'Toole and Meier (1999) draw on their widely cited public management model and present a theoretical assessment of the consequences of management across the publicness spectrum. Their theoretical expectations are laid bare in seven well-specified hypotheses. Andrews, Boyne, and Walker next provide a review of the evidence on publicness and performance and argue that organizational and contextual characteristics are likely to dilute publicness differences. The evidence base they uncover is patchy at best. They call for research that clearly includes all dimensions of publicness, explores a range of performance measures, and fully takes account of the likely confounding effects of management, organization, and the external environment.

Rainey also tackles the evidence base from which existing knowledge on publicness is drawn. Rainey focuses on sampling designs and finding optimum ways to achieve valid affordable research design. Conclusions point toward combining, aggregating, and synthesizing the results of prior work to capture the range of variables necessary to develop a comprehensive understanding of differences between public and private organizations. Brewer Sr. and Brewer Jr. bring new evidence to bare on publicness and implement a methodology seen in many social science disciplines but little used in public administration: the experiment. Focusing on work motivation, they conclude that performance on work processes are higher in work funded by government than business. The symposium concludes with an article by Bozeman and Moulton. Bozeman and Moulton take on the challenge of blending empirical and normative publicness to provide a framework that contributes toward problem solving in relation to questions of strategic management and performance and contributing toward public organizational theory.

We hope that you will enjoy the articles in this symposium as much as we have enjoyed debating them and bringing them to fruition. We believe that the questions posed about the contingent nature of management, organization, and environment on publicness and performance drive forward this important arena and that theoretical and empirical research in public management in the coming years. Scholarly endeavor will assist in providing important insights to this critical area of social science research while providing understanding the consequences of the management of the global financial crisis and related topics of empirical and normative enquiry.

FUNDING

The workshop in Athens Georgia and this subsequent symposium of the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* were made possible by funding from the Department of Public Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia, United States, and the UK Economic and Social Research Council who funded a grant "How Public Management Matters: Strategy, Network and Local Service Performance" (RES-062-23-0039) (investigators: Walker, Boyne, Meier, and O'Toole).

REFERENCES

- Bozeman, Barry. 1987. *All organizations are public*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Dunsire, Andrew, Keith Hartley, David Parker, and Basil Dimitriou. 1988. Organizational status and performance: A conceptual framework for testing public choice theories. *Public Administration* 66:363–88.
- Moulton, Stephanie. 2009. Putting together the publicness puzzle: A framework for realized publicness. *Public Administration Review* 69:889–900.
- O'Toole, Laurence J, Jr., and Kenneth J. Meier. 1999. Modeling the impact of public management: The implications of structural context. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 9:505–26.
- Rainey, Hal G., and Barry Bozeman. 2000. Comparing public and private organizations: Empirical research and the power of the a priori. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 10:447–70.
- Rainey, Hal G., Robert W. Backoff, and Charles H. Levine. 1976. Comparing public and private organizations. *Public Administration Review* 36:233–44.
- Wamsley, Gary L., and Mayer N. Zald. 1973. *The political economy of public organizations*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.