**Don't Exclude Real Practitioners with the Imaginary Ones:
A Comment on Nisar's "Practitioner as the Imaginary Father of Public Administration"**

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Nisar (2020) asserts that the public administration research community is obsessed with serving an idealized image of public administration practitioners. He describes this imaginary practitioner as purely motivated to serve the public, and capable of solving the public's problems. Nisar concludes that focus on the imaginary public administrator constrains the relevance and utility of public administration research. He suggests that public administration researchers should stop trying to serve the imaginary practitioner, and instead engage directly with the public.

I have a different suggestion; that public administration researchers in academia should engage with real practitioners, rather than imaginary ones. The public administration research community frequently expresses a desire to engage with practitioners but rarely does so.

For example, the most prominent forum for discussing the gap between public administration researchers and practitioners has been the series of Minnowbrook conferences. These conferences are invitation-only. The first one, in 1968, consisted entirely of White men. The most recent, in 2018, had an almost equal number of women and men, and "significant representation from people of color". (Nabatchi & Carboni, 2019, p. 18) Despite that improvement, the most recent Minnowbrook still virtually excluded practitioners. It consisted of 39 academics, two employees of public administration associations, one representative of a sponsor, and only one public administration practitioner. (Nabatchi & Carboni, 2019, p. 31) Some of the participants had been practitioners before becoming career academics, but as Miles (1978) said, "where you stand depends on where you sit", not where you used to sit years ago. The conference could have produced better solutions for making research relevant to practice if they let more than one practitioner participate.

Nisar's most specific allegation of obsession with practitioners is the requirement by Public Administration Review that all articles must include several bullet points of "Evidence for Practice". He is correct that the Evidence for Practice serves practitioners as academics imagine them. But that is because the points are written and edited by academics, not practitioners. They would not need to rely on imaginings if real practitioners were involved in selecting the Evidence for Practice.

Bringing practitioners into engagement with the research community takes some outreach effort. When I was practitioner co-chair of the 2015 Northeast Conference on Public Administration, I

recruited several excellent presentations by practitioners. (NECOPA, 2015) I searched for practitioners who had created innovative solutions to public administration problems, and helped them navigate the process of translating their experience into an accepted conference presentation. This required advocacy because conference program committees, composed of academics, make the implicit assumption that a proper presentation is from the perspective of an outside observer who analyses the actions of others, rather than the perspective of an involved actor who reports her own actions and results. The only kind of “practitioner” presentation that conferences commonly accept are studies by outside observers who are employed by contractors rather than universities, such as program evaluations. Unfortunately, no current public administration conference that I am aware of uses a practitioner co-chair or any other mechanism for outreach to practitioners as potential presenters of their own innovations and experience.

For the public administration research community to engage with real practitioners, rather than imaginary practitioners as described by Nisar, it should:

- Expand the concept of public administration literature to include case reports by practitioners, which have long been an important part of medical literature. A case report is a description by a practitioner of a situation she encountered, what she did about it, and the results. It brings “knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place” which has not yet been incorporated into theory. (Hayek, 1945) For example, AIDS research started with case reports by doctors treating patients for inexplicable infections. (Gottlieb et al., 1981) Case reports in public administration could have artifacts the practitioner created to deal with the case—policy documents, spreadsheets, etc.—attached as appendices. This would allow public administrators to copy and improve each other’s innovations, just as open source software allows programmers to do. (Reed, 2017)
- Develop norms that reduce the risk to a practitioner’s career from sharing her innovations and experience. As Posner (2009) wrote, “publication of articles on issues encountered in the workplace is often viewed as a risk, not an asset, to the agency by top officials.” To legitimize such sharing, the public administration community should promote an ethical obligation of practitioners to communicate observations that advance the art of public administration. (Reed, 2012)
- Include practitioners in gatekeeping institutions, such as conference program committees, journal editorial boards, and peer reviewers.

The onus is not only on academics. Practitioners should embrace opportunities to engage with public administration research. More of us will do so if the opportunities are created with the participation of real practitioners.

Keywords: public administration; practitioner; pracademic

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