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Stephan Grimmelikhuijsen, Lars Tummers & Sanjay K. Pandey

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PROMOTING STATE-OF-THE-ART METHODS IN PUBLIC MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

STEPHAN GRIMMELIKHUIJSEN

UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

LARS TUMMERS

*ERASMUS UNIVERSITY ROTTERDAM, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY, AND
UTRECHT UNIVERSITY*

SANJAY K. PANDEY

GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT: *The field of public management is methodologically underdeveloped as compared to other disciplines. In order to derive the fullest benefits of methodological advancements, the field needs to invest in discussing and deliberating over the state of the art in methodological advances. Using state-of-the-art methods helps to produce knowledge that is useful for scholars and practitioners. This symposium aims to add to and improve the methodological toolkit available to public management scholars. We distinguish three categories that could strengthen the methodological toolkit:* underutilized methods *(such as ethnography)*, innovations in current methods *(such as the synthetic control method for comparative case studies), and* novel methods *(such as natural language processing for content analysis). We hope that this symposium encourages scholars to seek for novel and improved methods to produce research that lives up to scientific scrutiny and is valuable for practitioners.*

AN URGENT NEED: IMPROVING THE METHODOLOGICAL TOOLKIT OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT SCHOLARS

A number of scholars have argued that the field of public management is methodologically underdeveloped as compared to other disciplines (Gill and

Meier 2000; Raadschelders and Lee 2011). Recently, editors from leading public administration journals have offered ideas for improvement. Perry (2012), for example, in an editorial for *Public Administration Review*, argues that public administration scholars overuse surveys and case studies, and suggested that scholars use a more diversified approach, including increasing the use of experiments and meta-analyses. The editor-in-chief of this journal, Steve Kelman, has made the case that we need to focus on improving the way we employ currently used methods (Kelman 2015). More specifically, he highlights that scholars should be wary of the validity of research findings where both the dependent and independent variables are collected from the same source, typically a survey.

One explanation for the lack of attention to the state of the art in methods is the size of the public management scholarly community. Sister social science disciplines, such as psychology and economics, are much larger and can afford to have in their ranks dedicated methodologists who can focus on developing new techniques to improve the state of the art. Furthermore, public management as a field puts a premium on novelty in incremental theoretical development and it seems as if—or public management scholars believe that—scholarly journals in the field do not welcome methodological contributions with similar enthusiasm.

We believe that public management scholarship can benefit greatly from methodological innovations. In order to derive the fullest benefits of methodological advancements, the field needs to invest in discussing and deliberating over the state of the art in methodological advances. But what is the state of the art? We denote state of the art as either state of advancement with respect to current state of practice in public management, or state of advancement as compared with current state of practice in other relevant social science disciplines.

This symposium aims to add to and improve the methodological toolkit available for public management scholars. We, therefore, introduce underutilized and novel methods to public management research. We have two specific goals. The first is to broaden the awareness of public management scholars beyond the commonly employed methods. Whereas better alternatives to surveys, interviews, or vignette experiments may be available, lack of awareness can limit the use of these alternatives. Second, we aim to improve the rigor of public management scholarship.

We distinguish three categories of methods that could strengthen the state of the art of public management methods: *underutilized* methods (such as ethnography), *innovations in current methods* (such as the synthetic control method for comparative case studies), and *novel methods* (such as natural language processing for content analysis). This symposium consists of one example in each category. We encouraged symposium contributors to provide basic details that will be of use to new researchers and to also discuss the applicability of the method to other public management contexts.

PROMOTING UNDERUTILIZED METHODS

First, we aim to draw attention to underutilized methods. Various methods have been underutilized. However, this does not presuppose that times cannot change.

Public administration scholars are able to take up new methods. A clear example is the rise of experimental methods. Bozeman and Scott emphasized, over 20 years ago, that experiments could be very helpful in analyzing public management questions (Bozeman and Scott 1992). In the last few years, experiments are being used more and more often, as shown by overview articles (Bouwman and Grimmelikhuijsen 2016; Margetts 2011) and symposia (for instance, Blom-Hansen, Morton, and Serritzlew 2015).

In this symposium, we aim to highlight another ''overlooked'' methodology: ethnographic research (Groeneveld et al. 2015). We believe that this method has been overlooked (although some notable scholars, like Rod Rhodes, have used it extensively; see, for instance, Rhodes 2011), given the high impact that ethnographic research has had in the past. For instance, Mintzberg's (1973) *The Nature of Managerial Work* used structured observations to follow a handful of managers (only five) to show "what mangers do." In contrast with taken-for-granted assumptions at that time, he convincingly showed that managers are not busy with long-term and strategic planning, but work consistently at a relentless pace, with continuous interruptions and focusing often on day-to-day problems. Another prime example of influential ethnography is the work by Festinger, who infiltrated an "end-of-the-world" cult to observe what happened to the belief systems of cult members when the end-of-the-world prophecy failed. This study was the basis for one of the most influential theories in social psychology: cognitive dissonance (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956).

In this symposium, Cappellaro dusts off the method of ethnography by providing a systematic review of ethnographic literature in public management. Cappellaro shows that there has been an increase in the number of ethnographic publications in public management research, but that their number is still relatively low. Furthermore, the review shows that the time spent in the field for observations varies considerably, but the majority of studies spend between six months and two years in the field. This may be one of the reasons for its slow uptake: ethnographic research requires a substantial amount of time and dedication from the researcher. In a publish-or-perish culture where quantity often trumps quality in the short term, this is a serious downside. However, we do hope that both junior and senior scholars are willing to invest time to do such research. As the previously mentioned examples show, ethnographic research has the potential to make contributions that are likely to become influential and remain memorable in the long run.

Based on her findings, Cappellaro recommends various ways to improve and increase ethnographic scholarship in public management. One of the issues she identifies is that it is often argued that ethnographic research lacks internal and external validity. Cappellaro calls for more awareness amongst scholars about when ethnography is suitable and when it is not. Secondly, ethnographies can bring important added value in mixed-method studies, bringing depth and texture to other data. Thirdly, researchers are often very implicit about their research approach. Being transparent about the research design and quality criteria germane to interpretivist research (such as credibility, transferability, and authenticity) can be useful.

INNOVATING CURRENT METHODS

Next to promotion of underutilized methods, scholars can also innovate by employing methods currently used in other sister social science disciplines. Birdsall offers an excellent example of how we can improve the rigor of comparative case study research by using the synthetic control method for comparative case studies (SCM) developed in the field of economics by Abadie and Gardealzabal (2003) and Abadie, Diamond, and Hainmueller (2010). Comparing cases—next to experimentation—is a prime strategy to assess causal effects in a natural public management setting. However, a major issue is that cases are often hard to compare because they differ in so many different aspects. SCM uses a data-driven procedure for constructing a synthetic ''control case'' so that it more closely resembles the case of interest. This way, the effects of an intervention in the case of interest can be compared to a constructed control case that is, in many ways, comparable.

Birdsall applies SCM in a study on managerial discretion in performance management regimes. A performance regime with more managerial discretion has been introduced in several larger school districts, known as student-based budgeting. Student-based budgeting allocates dollars rather than staff positions to schools, providing principals considerable discretion over human resource and program spending decisions. Birdsall employs SCM to investigate whether implementing student-based budgeting in the Houston Independent School District improved student performance, and goes on to highlight potential for application in various other domains of public management research, such as network governance, results-based reforms, and international comparative public administration.

INTRODUCING NEW METHODS

Next to promoting underutilized methods and the innovation of current methods, scholars can also introduce new methods to analyze public management topics. Potential methods include neuro-imaging (Filler 2010), diary studies (Xanthopoulou et al. 2009), or implicit association tests (recently employed in public administration by Marvel (2016)).

In this symposium, Pandey, Pandey, and Miller introduce Natural Language Processing (NLP) as a new technique in automated content analysis. Automated content analysis is unfamiliar to our field, yet the increased computational capabilities of technology to store documents and extract and handle data make this an exciting new method for public management scholars. For instance, NLP can be used to analyze large numbers of administrative reports. Scholars in strategic management already use automated content analysis and are developing more sophisticated ways of analyzing content. Natural language processing software applications allow researchers to extract noun phrases and verb phrases instead of single words. In addition, Pandey et al. show that measures developed thus can meet rigorous tests of content validity, external validity, and predictive validity. The authors also make the case that this can be a promising technique for potential applications to other public management contexts, such as bureaucratic red tape and public sector leadership,

and provide a useful alternative and supplement to survey-based measures (Pandey and Marlowe 2015).

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT: STATE-OF-THE-ART METHODS FOR USEFUL KNOWLEDGE

The articles in this symposium provide a flavor of how we can be innovative in using new methods. And we should not do this just for the sake of being "state of the art." The goal of advancing the state of the art and innovating in methods should be to help produce knowledge that is useful for scholars *and* practitioners. For instance, SCM (Birdsall) may provide policymakers causal insights about policy interventions in cases where experiments are not possible or feasible. Reinvigorating and improving the use of ethnographic studies (Cappellaro) can provide an outsider's perspective about the internal workings of an organization. That this can result in controversial and important insights was shown by Luyendijk, a Dutch investigative journalist, who spent three years doing 200 interviews with bankers in London. Luyendijk concludes that bankers operate at such a high level of intensity and complexity that no one oversees this, which makes their work almost ungovernable. In the United States, Michael Lewis (2010) investigated of the credit bubble on Wall Street in a similar vein.

Natural language processing (Pandey, Pandey, and Miller) is completely new to public management research. First, it introduces automated content analysis; second, it shows that the latest developments in this area can be applied to important public management questions as well; in this case, measuring innovation. If important concepts like innovation can be measured in different ways, it may also help policymakers to assess the usefulness of their interventions.

We hope that this symposium encourages scholars to look beyond the horizons and seek for novel and improved methods to produce strong research that lives up to both the scrutiny of high-level scholarly work and provide useful insights for public administration practitioners and society. In that sense, this symposium is by no means an end station, but is meant to offer a starting point for this journey.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Stephan Grimmelikhuijsen (s.g.grimmelikhuijsen@uu.nl) is an assistant professor at the Utrecht University School of Governance, the Netherlands. He is interested in public sector transparency, citizen attitudes, legitimacy, behavioral public administration, and experimental methodology.

Lars Tummers (l.g.tummers@uu.nl) is an associate professor at the Utrecht University School of Governance, the Netherlands, and a Research Fellow at Arizona State University. His research interests are leadership in the public sector and behavioral public administration (policy alienation, coping, experimental designs).

Sanjay K. Pandey (sanjay.k.pandey@gmail.com or skpandey@gwu.edu) is Shapiro Professor of Public Policy and Public Administration at the Trachtenberg School, The George Washington University. He is a recipient of the NASPAA/ASPA Distinguished Research Award and an elected Fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration.