

Positivist and Phenomenological Research In Public Administration

Wasim Ismail Al-Habil

Assistant Professor
College of Commerce
The Islamic University of Gaza
Palestine

Abstract:

The research discusses what are the major similarities and differences in how a public administrator committed to the positivist perspective and one committed to the interpretivist or phenomenological perspective would approach the task of understanding and acting in public organizations? This paper considers how the two different theories, positivism and interpretivism, influence the way of thinking and practicing in the field of public administration.

The research discusses the core concepts of positivism and interpretivism and presents the role of positivist research in public administration, which dominated the establishment of public administration during the Progressive era, as well as the limitations associated with it. In addition, the research provides a better understanding of the historical context in which other new alternative theories were presented in the field, including interpretivism. The article highlights their similarities and differences before it concludes with how these theories are related to the practice in public administration.

Introduction:

There are many theories of knowledge that have shaped study and practice in public administration. These theories have different approaches to generate knowledge in order to provide a better explanation or understanding of social phenomena. The quality of knowledge generation in public administration was the ultimate focus of many articles in the field (Adams, 1992; Bailey, 1992; Hummel, 1991; McCurdy and Cleary, 1984; Ventriss, 1991; White, 1999). Some questioned the rigor of research in public administration to produce knowledge because it lacks the use of positivist approach (McCurdy and Cleary, 1984). Others believed that alternative approaches, such as interpretive theory, provide deep contributions to the body of knowledge in the field (Hummel, 1991). In fact, there is a traditional tension between the normative and the factual dimensions of positivist and interpretivist theories of research.

This paper discusses how the two different theories, positivism and interpretivism, influence the way of thinking and practicing in the field of public administration. Before the discussion regarding the core concepts of positivism and interpretivism, the article presents the role of positivist research in public administration, which dominated the establishment of the field during the Progressive era, as well as the limitations associated with it. This introduction provides a better understanding of the historical context in which other new alternative theories

were presented in the field, including interpretivism. Then, it focuses on the main concepts of positivism and interpretivism. The article highlights their similarities and differences before it concludes with how these theories are related to the practice in public administration.

The Scientific Foundation of the Field:

Indeed, Jay White (1999) pointed out that public administration researchers, following mainstream research in social sciences, tend to study the field through explanatory research, which is “heavily influenced by the positivist tradition in the philosophy of science” (p.3). This tendency is rooted to the establishment of public administration as a self-conscious field of study by the end of the 19th century. Positivism came from the 18th century Enlightenment and emerged in the United States during the Progressive Era (Adams, 1994; Spicer 1995). Both Guy Adams (1994) and Michael Spicer (1995) argued that the foundation of public administration as a field of study was strongly influenced by instrumental rationality. Rationality, as Spicer (1995) argued, is a broad term that includes positivists who share “the faith in the power of reason and science” (p.25). Charles Fox and Hugh Miller (1998) also agreed that in “a truncated sense of the word, positivist were rationalists” (p.1720). Public administration was highly influenced by positivism as a way of thinking and producing knowledge since Woodrow Wilson wrote the first essay in the field in 1887. According to White (1999), many public administration scholars in the early 1900s “embraced positivism in the form of ‘scientific principles of administration’” (p.26). The faith in the power of science could be seen through the emphasis that many early public administration writers put on the science of administration as an effective means to study the field.

In *The Study of Administration*, Wilson (1887) called for using a scientific logic to study the field of public administration. He advocated a reinvention of public administration from the corrupting influences of the spoils system. He believed in the separation of administration from politics as a means to establish a science of administration that could lead public administration to be more efficient. This foundation of public administration based on the legacy of science prepared the field to accept the scientific perspectives in order to ensure the most efficient performance of public administration. Frank Goodnow, in his 1900 book *Politics and Administration*, supported the use of a science of administration to study public administration. Goodnow (2005) clearly articulated the politics-administration dichotomy as the basis to study the science of administration without political considerations. This dichotomy was always tied to the search of a science of administration in the field of public administration, according to Brian Fry and Lloyd Nigro (1998).

The influence of the scientific management school on public administration came in the same context. Fredrick Taylor argued in his 1911 book *The Principles of Scientific Management* that scientific management consists of certain broad general principles that lead to the one best method of achieving any task. This domination of the science of administration through positivist approach and instrumental rationality continued to influence the theory and practice in the field. This influence could be seen on the public administration practice through the Taft Commission (Uveges & Keller, 1998), the New York Bureau of Municipal Research (Stivers, 2000), and later the Brownlow Report (Lynn, 1996). The influence also could be seen on the theory of public administration through the work of Leonard White (1926), W. F. Willoughby (1927), Gulick and Urwick (1937), and many other writers in the

field. In general, Lynn (1996) pointed out that “scientific administration, which stressed the separation of administration from politics and efficiency as the goal of administration, became the dominant idea in public administration from roughly 1910 to 1940” (p.29). It should be made clear that the public administration writers who advocated the use of science to study administration were not necessary positivists, but they were influenced by its approach to produce knowledge in the field.

This domination had a very strong support, even though from a different perspective that criticized the traditional science of administration, to enhance positivism in the study of public administration. Herbert Simon (1946) in *The Administrative Behavior* argued that a true scientific method should be used in the study of administration because earlier public administration writers lacked the empirical basis to conduct a rigorous scientific research. Stivers (2001) pointed out that Simon shifted the attention from administrative principles, which he considered proverbs, to logic in the study of public administration. Positivist researchers emphasize objectivity and ignore human values because of the “strict separation between facts and values” (White, 1999, 24). This separation is exactly the fact-value dichotomy that Simon advocated (Fox & Miller, 1998; Fry, 1998; Stivers, 2001). Simon (1946) called for the use of empirical research and experiments to determine the appropriate administrative procedures that can assure efficiency in public administration.

After the Great Depression and World War II, many scholars in the field started to question the performance of public organizations. In fact, a new paradigm emerged in the field of public administration during the 1950s and rejected the traditional way of handling public administration by the Orthodoxy of scientific management (Henry, 2001; Stillman, 2000). According to Lynn (1996), Orthodoxy “was finished off in public administration after World War II in a series of articles and books” (p.31) including the works of Dahl, Appleby, Waldo, Long, and Marx. The theoretical basis of positivism was criticized for its deficiency in dealing with issues in public administration. Particularly, the tension between administration and politics, or bureaucracy and democracy, imposed this deficiency because the science of administration was not seen as the appropriate instrument to study public administration unless it considers the democratic values of American government.

For instance, Dwight Waldo attacked positivism through his critique to the logical positivism of Herbert Simon (Waugh, 1998). Waldo argued that whereas classical public administration disguised its values under the covering of the science of administration, logical positivism simply ignores these values (Fry & Nigro, 1998). He asserted that it is not appropriate to deal with values as mere data in causal relationships. Waldo (1955) rejected Simon’s fact-value dichotomy, especially in social sciences, because he believed that facts and values cannot be separated even in pure science. While this is an example of the criticism that positivism faced in the field, more problems associated with this approach will be discussed later. Robert Dahl (1947) in his article *The Science of Public Administration: Three Problems* also rejected the positivist approach and argued that value-free science is impossible. According to Dahl (2001), the “first difficulty of constructing a science of public administration stems from the frequent impossibility of excluding normative considerations from the problem of public administration” (p.61). Dahl (2001) asserted that by considering the interpersonal and organizational context, the study of human behavior cannot be experimental as positivists claimed. In general, the main problem with this scientific approach

is that it cannot be reconciled with democratic values.

The criticisms of positivism (or logical positivism) facilitated the path for alternative theories to contribute to the study and practice in the field of public administration. According to White (1999), “[i]n the late 1960s, some scholars in the field of public administration began to question some of the positivist assumptions” (p.26). White (1999) asserted that the break with positivism and the call for other normative theories were necessary during that time to deal with the problems of the 1970’s and 1980’s. This period witnessed the development of other alternative approaches to deal with the study and research in public administration such as interpretivism. Interpretivists, according to Stivers (2001), claimed that the “difficulties in applying scientific studies to actual situations stemmed from an inappropriate effort to study agencies objectively rather than bringing to light the learning gained from experience” (p.35). The main concepts of positivism and interpretivism will be presented in detail in the following sections in order to introduce how these different perspectives would approach the task of understanding and acting in public.

Positivism:

Positivism can be defined as “research approaches that employ empirical methods, make extensive use of quantitative analysis, or develop logical calculi to build formal explanatory theory” (Fox & Miller, 1998, 1718). Positivism as a philosophical framework is traced to the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857) who “rejected the theological and metaphysical explanations of human behavior in favor of scientific ones” (White, 1999, 13). White (1999) pointed out the positivism was established in the context of the Enlightenment era when the faith in rationally rigorous knowledge as a means to reach truth replaced the belief in mysticism, spiritualism, and traditionalism. The early positivism believed in three interrelated themes: the faith in science, the conception of progress driven by scientific advances, as well as the political and social vision that is consistent with the first two themes. According to Fox and Miller (1998), the early positivists believed that there is an objective reality that “can be completely described using denotative terms that correspond to facts” (p.1718). For early positivists, if social progress is driven by science, perfect knowledge would be produced about human affairs. However, the most influential form of positivism on contemporary social science in general and public administration in particular is not Comte’s early positivism, but the logical positivism of behaviorism.

Positivism in contemporary literature is seen in social sciences as an attempt to borrow the natural sciences’ methods to explain and predict social phenomena. Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that one of the basic elements of positivism is that social and natural sciences should have the same goals and use the same methodology. Brian Fay (1975) pointed out that positivism introduced the use of scientific methods of research to solve socio-economic problems as the only plausible method to eliminate arbitrary decision-making, which is based on values or selfish interests. Fay (1975) discussed how applying scientific approaches to social problems would lead to what he called “policy science” in which individuals use their technical knowledge to find the most efficient alternative to solve a particular problem. This most efficient alternative is what positivism thinks to be the “*correct* way of proceeding in human affairs” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 28). In this sense, positivism could be seen as the belief in the existence of objective reality, which could be explained and controlled through causal relations and testing hypotheses that establish statistical inferences.

The main purpose of the positivist approach is to explain the current conditions and predict any change of the future conditions to control them (Fay, 1975; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; White, 1999). Prediction is a very critical feature of this approach because “*explanation is not complete unless it could have functioned as a prediction*” (Fay, 1975: 34). Fay (1975) pointed out the main assumptions that positivism is based on such as, the distinction between validation and discovery, the belief in neutral observation as foundation of knowledge, value-free ideal for scientific knowledge, and the belief in the methodological unity of sciences. Lincoln and Guba (1985) agreed on the basic elements of positivism, the goal is to discover laws that lead to explanations and predictions, and that concepts should be defined by empirical categories.

White (1999) asserted that the theory building of positivism “requires the development of a collection of related and testable law-like statements that express causal relationships among relevant variables” (p44). White (1999) and Fay (1975) pointed out that the logic of positivist research uses two models to reach explanations and predictions, deductive and inductive. First, the deductive model which focuses on the causal relationship between variables, X and Y. When X causes Y under the assumption that X is a necessary condition of Y, the conclusion is that Y is likely to occur when X occurs. The deductive model, which “is the ideal model of explanatory social science” (White, 1999, 45), is conducted through experimental and quasi-experimental research designs.

Second, is the inductive model that employs laws of statistical probability? This model works “under certain conditions which constitute the performance of a random experiment, a certain kind of outcome will occur in a specific (usually high) percentage of cases” (Fay, 1975: 36). White (1999) pointed out that this model moves “from observations of actual events to inference about the probability that the same or similar events will occur in the future, given certain conditions” (p.45). Researchers under this approach have an objective role that detaches them from the subjects under study. The validity of both inductive and deductive models is determined by following acceptable methodological standards and rules. The validity of both positivist approaches should be approved by an evaluation of peers (White, 1999). This validity gives this scientific approach its ability to generalize the findings to other similar conditions.

In fact, because of the limitations of the mainstream research in public administration, which was discussed earlier, other alternative theories were introduced. These theories offer research in public administration a rich diversity of methods that help to reach deep understanding of social problems. These subjective theories believe human values cannot be detached from generating knowledge. Researchers in these theories “mix facts and values to establish theories, and those values can be just as rational as facts” (White, 1999: 25). Ralph Hammel (1991) argued that the research in public administration should pay more attention to the stories managers tell, which is a valid approach to produce knowledge, instead of maintaining the objectivity of hard sciences. For Hummel (1991), the use of scientific standards, which the positivist approach asserts, is not an appropriate research tool for studying this type of administrative practice. One of the theories that influence the research in public administration is interpretivism.

Interpretivism:

According to Jane Ritchie and Jane Lewis (2003), the development of the interpretive theory and qualitative research methods could be traced to the 19th century by a German scholar, Wilheme Dilthey. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) pointed out the Dilthey emphasized the significance of understanding and studying the lived experiences of people through their historical and social context. Dilthey believed that the research in social sciences should explore the lived experience in order to connect the particular actions under study to their social and historical aspects. This approach helps researchers to have better understanding to the social phenomenon (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). According to White (1999), interpretivism “stands in the philosophical traditions of the analytical philosophy of language, hermeneutics, and phenomenology” (p.47). Language has a considerable role in providing the basis of understanding social problems.

The aim of the interpretive research method is to ensure a clear understanding of the meaning of events and the intention of human actions. White (1999) pointed out that the common concern for interpretivists is not to explain human behavior, but to understand actions. White (1999) noted that “instead of seeking causal explanations of behavior, interpretive research enhances our understanding of, among other things, the beliefs, meanings, feelings and attitudes of actors in social situation” (p.48). Fay (1975) asserted that interpretivism aims “to discover the intentions which actors have in doing whatever it is they are doing” (p.73). Interpretivist researchers think there is no universal law or objective reality, but facts are to be reached through subjective understanding. Interpretivism does not rely on primary theories to build its view about the world, but this view comes through interpretation.

The goal of interpretive research, according to White (1999), is “to enhance mutual understanding between the researcher and the actors and self-understanding among the actors themselves” (p.49) Interpretivists believe that reality is not detached from research, but it is determined by the lived experiences and social values of both researchers and observed individuals. However, this does not mean that the researcher should impose any previous understanding of norms or values. Fay (1975) stressed that interpretive “scientist is not concerned with what would be the proper thing to do... but with understanding” (p.77). Thus, the role of interpretive research is to understand the beliefs and actions of actors rather than to direct them.

Based on this perspective, the role of the researcher in interpretivism is not to observe from outside, but to be involved within the research. For interpretivists, it is hard for researchers to have a clear understanding if they keep themselves distant from the background, the environment, and the social values of the actors under study. In other words, interpreting the world comes from the actors’ point of view through their explanation of the meanings attached to their actions. To reach a better interpretation, researchers should be involved in communication with the actors to reach a shared meaning and a common understanding (White, 1999). Fay (1975) also agreed that “interpretation requires communicative interaction: the achievement of successful dialogue between the researcher and the actors” (p.82). Interpretivist researchers should pass their interpretations to the actors again to ensure a common understanding of meanings. According to White (1999), the successful dialogue that reflects how the interpretation conforms to the intension of actors

gives the validity to the interpretive approach. The interpretation of this conversation leads the researchers to present their views “like good storytelling” which includes facts and values (White, 1999: 52).

Different Perspectives in Practice:

Even though there does not seem to be any major similarity between positivism and interpretivism, there are a lot of major differences that the two approaches have. These differences will be presented in summary as a basis for the discussion in regard to the impact of each view on thinking and practice of public administration. First of all, in terms of reality, while positivists believe that there is an objective reality, interpretivists believe that there is no universal reality. Reality for interpretivists is subjective. Second, in terms of objectivity, interpretivists think that it is hard for researchers to be objective, while positivists assert the researcher should be objective. While positivists advocate for the fact-value dichotomy, interpretivists reject this dichotomy because research is driven by values. Therefore, interpretivists are involved with their research subjects, whereas positivists keep a distance from the subjects under study.

In addition, positivists focus their research on causal explanation while interpretivists concentrate on descriptive understanding. Moreover, while interpretivism has a lingual basis and a hermeneutic method in understanding meanings, positivism does not. Interpretivists believe in the role of communication, while positivists reject this role. Finally, for interpretivists, generalization of universal laws is impossible because of the different values imposed on each specific social phenomenon, while generalization constructs the validity in positivism. These are some of the main differences between the two perspectives that could show how different views deal with the same problems in public administration.

Public administration under the domination of the positivist approach would seek to apply scientific procedures, standards, and principles on every step of the division making, for instance. Empirical evidence must be attached as a requirement to prove each executive function. Executives should be “policy scientists” in order to handle administrative problems efficiently. They should have a guide that includes universal principles that effectively worked in the past to be used in dealing with current and future problems. Policy outcomes should be always measurable and counted in order to be believed. (Fox & Miller, 1998). In fact, this is not a fictitious view to public administration under the positivist approach, but it represents in how the early writers in the field proposed governance to be.

Fay (1975) discussed the role of science in policy and how knowledge would provide policy scientists, who represent a minority, the power to dominate over the majority. Using the positivist approach would advocate the power of policy scientists who monopolize decision-making. He argued that the accountability of these policy scientists “would be far different from the sort of accountability envisioned in democratic theory” (Fay, 1975: 26). They would be accountable to the knowledge provided by empirical research that ordinary people do not know enough about. Therefore, Fay (1975) supposed that the decisions of policy scientists “would be immune to attack from the public at large, quite simply because of the public’s ignorance” (p.26).

Fay's discussion about the different type of accountability in public administration under the positivist approach reflects a similar perspective that was presented in the mid of the 20th century through the work of Carl Friedrich (1940): *The Nature of Administrative Responsibility*. Friedrich (1940) argued that the accountability of public officials in using their discretions should be maintained through internal checks. The internal checks are created based on dual standards of administrative responsibility: technical knowledge and the administrators' understanding of popular sentiment. Friedrich (1940) asserted that we could call government irresponsible "if it can be shown that it was adopted without proper regard to the existing sum of human knowledge concerning the technical issues involved" (p.403). The complexity of public administration requires professionals to handle decision-making because they are the only ones who have the ability and expertise to enclose the proper understanding of how to deal with public policy. Friedrich (1940) emphasized that public "officials seeking to apply scientific 'standards' have to account for their actions in terms of somewhat rationalized and previously established set of hypotheses. Any deviation from these hypotheses will be subjected to thorough scrutiny by their colleagues in what is known as the 'fellowship of science'" (p.403). Thus, the responsibility of professionals should be held to their peers who have the same technical knowledge and professional standards.

White (1999) gave an example of how the two different perspectives, positivist and interpretivist approach, deal with the same problem:

"in an attempt to explain why a particular job enrichment program is failing to provide expected improvements in productivity, someone doing explanatory research might enter the situation, examine established hypotheses about motivation and job design, test them using an experimental or quasi-experimental design, and arrive at conclusions about the causes of the program's failure. A researcher who is seeking understanding would enter the situation and ask the workers what they think about the program, what it means to them, what they are doing, and why they are doing it... The goals are to discover the meaning of the program: how it fits with prior norms, values, rules, and social practices... [this] interpretive research seek as enhanced understanding of social situations, not only for the researcher but also for those involved in the situation" (p.48-49)

Public administration was built on or, at least, highly shaped by the rational bureaucratic model of organization. Bureaucracy imposes a stable hierarchal system, which is run by firm rules and regulations that require administrators to follow. Certainly, the use of the alternative theories would, practically, give public administrators more flexibility to deal with problems and conflicting situations in their organizations. Alternative theories such as interpretivism would provide public administrators a better understanding of problems.

For instance, the interpretive approach helps to "describes the type of thought and action involved in understanding what means and ends are available to a decision maker" (White, 1999: 65). Public administrators need the interpretative approach when they encounter complex problems that they cannot understand or conflicting situations that imply right/wrong understanding. It will be hard to make decisions or it may lead to wrong decisions if administrators make their decisions without a full understanding to the surrounding conditions, supposed intentions, and actual meanings, which interpretive theory helps them to handle.

Hummel (1991) argues that problems in the social context happen as a result of interactions among people. These interactions may cause problems because various individuals within the same organization may have different interpretations of what is happening. Thus, active participation to determine problems and solutions as well as means and ends, rather than the scientific knowledge, is the appropriate instrument to solve problems. Based on this notion, inter-subjectivity, not objectivity, is the proper tool for public administrators to deal with problems in governance.

Conclusion:

To summarize, there are many different research theories in the field that seek a better understanding and explanation to problems in public administration. These approaches have different logics of inquiry to acquire knowledge, which may agree on many aspects. I think that there is no one appropriate approach that could be used in public administration. The nature and the conditions of every research question/ problem determine which research approach fits better. Each one of the approaches adds new elements to the theory and practice in public administration. A continuous discourse should be maintained to keep the canal opened among all the approaches of research in the field. I believe that we really “need to keep the conversations going within and across the existing and emerging narratives we weave to make sense of public administration for ourselves and for others. This is the only way in which research in public administration can remain relevant to scholars, professional administrators, and the public we serve” (White, 1999: 190).

Notes:

In the contemporary literature of public administration, the criticisms to the mainstream research method in social sciences are widely discussed from different perspectives (Fay, 1975; Waugh, 1998; Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995; White, 1999). For example, Fay (1975) asserted many technical criticisms that the procedures of positivist research in social sciences faces in terms of availability of information, ability to measure humanities, and the logic of causal relationship. Fay (1975) questioned the objectivity in the positivist research and considered the fact-value dichotomy untenable notion. Based on this rejection to this dichotomy, the whole claim that “scientist objectively choosing the best means to prescribe end” becomes an “incoherent” argument that cannot stand (Fay, 1975: 49). The positivist value-free approach was also criticized because values are infused in and expressed by the descriptions and explanations of any researcher. Thus, “the acceptance and rejection of his accounts is in part a function of one’s acceptance or rejection of these values” (Fay, 1975:65). Fay (1975) also attacked the agreement on efficiency as a critical target to the positivist research in policy science and implicitly in public administration. He asserted that even efficiency itself is a value. The position of values in positivist research was also criticized by Henwood & Pidgeon (1995) who asserted that positivism is a not value-free approach or “exclusively objective activity because the assumptions underlying science... are always set by the culture, politics, and values” (p.8). They also criticize the positivist approach for dealing with human beings as objects of knowledge rather than “human beings.”

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