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**AN EXPERIMENTAL ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC OWNERSHIP AND
PERFORMANCE: COMPARING PERCEPTIONS IN EAST ASIA AND THE USA**

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Abstract

An experimental research design is adopted to explore the potential impact of cultural differences in East Asia and the USA on perceptions of public ownership and governmental performance (efficiency, equity and probity). While passionate debate has influenced governments on the merits of public or private organizations' delivery of public services, the empirical evidence remains ambivalent. Similarly, argument on societal and regional cultures suggests differences within East Asia and as compared to the USA, but evidence is scant. Masters of Public Administration students in China, Hong Kong, South Korea and the USA rated vignettes of organizations classified as public, private or unknown ownership against key dimensions of performance. Findings indicate few public ownership and limited country differences but a consistency in the rating of vignettes, suggesting convergence. The implications of these findings for the study of public management are considered in conclusion.

East Asia, public ownership and performance are topics that have played an important role in international public policy debates over recent years (Boyne 2003; Hodge 2000; Walker et al. 2010; Yueh 2013). The rise of East Asia as an economic superpower with increasing political clout is widely noted (Walter and Zhang 2012). A characteristic of East Asia is its more proactive role of the public sector with higher levels of social reputation than that of the West and the USA. For example, structuralists often attribute the remarkable economic growth by four Asian tigers (Korean, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore) in the 1970s and 1980s to the role of strong state (government) and leadership in industrial policymaking processes by emphasizing institutional capacities and bureaucracy in correcting market failures and even enhancing market outcomes (Cheng et.al. 1998; Lall 2004). While civil service systems and current reform initiatives may be similar to other regions of the world, the state has played a fundamentally important role in the development of the economies of the countries of East Asia (Moon and Hwang 2012; Walker et al. forthcoming). East Asia and public ownership have also been important influences in the West—the rise of East Asia has changed the political and economic landscape of the world.

The financial crisis of the early Twenty-first Century also changed the political and economic landscape of the world (Blyth 2013). For example, it has blurred the distinction between public and private, as governments have had to rescue financial institutions and stabilize economies (McCann 2013). Prior to this the emphasis of reform movements has been to experiment with ownership, largely moving public organizations into the private realm, through contracting and privatization, with the presumption that improvements in performance would be achieved (Boyne et al. 2003; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011).

Privatization issues are of growing interest in East Asia among public administration scholars and practitioners alike (Berman et al. 2010; Su et al. 2013; Wu et al. 2013).

Privatization issues raise a variety of questions related to perceived sector roles and

judgments about performance. While many such questions have received attention in single-nation studies, there are few if any studies focusing on public-private sector differences that provide direct and systematic comparisons of Western and Asian nations' citizens (Boyne 1998; Hodge 2000). Thus, while we know from analyses of policies and governance indicators that East Asian nation's policies for economic development vary considerably in their reliance on government, we have no data comparing citizens views about government roles or about the public agencies activities in these countries. Does the same 'bureaucrat bashing' (Rainey 1989) one finds in the USA occur in comparable ways in Asia, or do Asians have a more benign or even supportive view of government agencies, their employees and activities?

This paper presents a preliminary examination of differences between Asian and USA citizens' perceptions of government vs. private sector performance. The study is exploratory because public-private and performance differences are typically not examined, theoretically or empirically, in cross-country settings. However, given that these issues could be sensitive to cultural differences and nuances and varying traditions of public administration, it is beneficial to employ a research design that consciously pares down contextual factors beyond the researchers' ability to model or control. Thus, we employ an experimental design—one using vignettes to elicit respondents' perceptions. The vignette experiment was implemented in China, Hong Kong, South Korea and the USA using groups of Masters of Public Administration (MPA) students. The researchers assumed that MPA students would provide a useful comparative base because they would likely be attentive to issues of government and administration and to have relatively informed opinions about performance.

In the next section we commence with a discussion of public ownership and performance, focusing on East-West or USA differences. This is followed by discussion of our methods and data. The findings of the study are then presented. These findings indicate

that public ownership did not influence perceptions of performance and that performance ratings varied relatively little on the basis of the respondents' national origin. The conclusion section discusses possible meanings and implications of these findings.

PUBLIC OWNERSHIP, PERFORMANCE AND EAST WEST DIFFERENCES

Public Ownership and Performance

Assessing the outcomes of public programmes is complex (McConnell 2010). Walker et al. (2010) identify three facets. Performance is multidimensional, and includes quality, efficiency, effectiveness, equity, probity and responsiveness. Second, there are many stakeholders who make judgments on the performance of agencies delivering public programmes. Stakeholders can be internal, and include staff at different levels within an organization. External stakeholders are more varied and include oversight bodies, users and citizens, businesses and so forth (Andrews et al. 2006). Different stakeholders are likely to prioritize different dimensions of performance: users may value responsiveness and while managers in welfare orientated services may focus their attention more on the equity and fairness of services, while businesses may seek efficiency in public service delivery (Amirkhanyan et al. 2013).

Last, performance can be operationalized or measured in one of two ways: as a perception or through secondary or archival records. It is often presumed that archival records offer a more valid record of performance achievements, yet archival records are open to gaming and not all dimensions of performance lend themselves to the use of secondary data (Walker et al. 2010). Perceptual measures, by contrast, can capture the full gambit of performance dimensions and can be used in a wider range of settings. Perceptual measurement of performance is particularly suited to a vignette or survey-experimental design. This is because we are dealing with normative assessments, or what should be the case i.e. better performance from a public or private organization delivering the same service.

The merits of public and private organizations delivering public services has informed global debates on public policy and management since the rise of the New Right in the 1970s and the subsequent New Public Management (NPM) movement. While the size of the public sector and the welfare state varies across Western nations, the core of the New Right agenda was to challenge this perceived unabated growth in the West following the Second World War (Esping-Andersen 1990; Flora and Heidenheimer 1982). The strategy of NPM, or Reinventing Government in the USA, also challenged the state and public services and sought to make government more business-like and introduce competitive market structures (Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Pollitt 1990). These reforms extended beyond their initial foray in the English-speaking world, and have been adopted with varying degrees internationally, and especially within East Asia (Common 1998; Mok et al. 2010).

Studying differences between public and private organizations is a longstanding tradition in the public administration literature (Boyne 2002; Rainey 2009; Wamsley and Zald 1973) and has been extensively used as a surrogate measure of publicness (Andrews et al. 2011; Bozeman 1987). Questions about the relative merits of public and private organizations in delivering services have been bound up with assumptions about performance outcomes. Property rights theories suggest that private organizations are more efficient than their public sector counterparts because there are financial incentives for owners to monitor and control managers, and that managers themselves will benefit from better performance through monetary rewards (Clarkson 1972; Demsetz, 1967; De Alessi 1983, 1987). The competitive market structures of the private sector are also argued to inculcate management practices associated with innovation, productivity, and the emulation of best practices (Box 1999). It is argued that the public sector, on the other hand, has some perverse incentives: since bureaucrats answer to multiple principals and receive their funding from the state treasury, they continually try to enlarge their budgets and staffs (Dunleavy 1985; Niskanen

1971).

The above arguments, emanating from public choice scholars, were embedded in the New Right agenda of the Reagan and Thatcher governments in the West. These governments sought to reduce the size of the public sector through privatization and the introduction of competitive market structures and the contracting out of services (Boyne et al. 2003). In the UK, for example, the Thatcher government sought to ‘roll back the welfare state’ and her policies were directly informed by public choice principles—Ingraham (1997) notes that Niskanen’s *Bureaucracy and Representative Government* was required reading for Thatcher’s first cabinet. The reform efforts initiated the 1980s that changed the face of public ownership were not isolated to the West. Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping launched what became a major programme of privatization in 1978. The programme of reform sought, like that of the West, to withdraw the state from key areas of public provision. This has seen privatization, marketization and commodification of key areas of the welfare state: housing, education and health services (Mok et al. 2010; Su et al. 2013). Similar practices are also evident in Hong Kong and South Korea. For example, in Hong Kong, privatization and contracting out took hold following the handover of the city back to Hong Kong (Scott 2010), and Walker and Li (2002) document the public choice origins of contracting out at the Hong Kong Housing Authority. As a part of NPM reforms, aggressive privatization initiatives were taken in South Korea in the late 1990s particularly to overcome the Asian financial crisis while contracting out was widely introduced to improve cost-efficiency and quality of services, particularly in local governments (Kim and Moon 2002).

Property rights and public choice theories imply that major differences may exist between public and private organizations in relation to key dimensions of performance:

efficiency, effectiveness, and equity.¹ The private sector is argued to be more efficient and cost conscious than public agencies. Indeed efficiency is often the sole criteria used to introduce contracting out or privatization (Boyne 1998). Effectiveness, that is mission accomplishment or meeting formal goals, is more readily achieved in the private sector because goals are clear and linked directly to a firm's profitability. Mission accomplishment is seen to be more complex in public agencies that have multiple and often ambiguous or even conflicting goals, and this characteristic of public organizations is often associated with low levels of performance (Jung 2011; Rainey 2009). The third performance variable of interest, equity is also seen to vary in different sectors. Some feel that compared to the private sector, public organizations are more sensitive to diverse needs and more often achieve organizational goals related to equity (Le Grand 1982).

Questions of probity and corruption are associated with equitable outcomes. Probity is a core outcome of the activity and behaviour of public organizations. Public organizations' responsiveness to political constituencies make them sensitive to the population's equity needs and more likely to uphold high standards of ethical and moral conduct when carrying out their official duty. A highly topical aspect of probity and ethical and moral conduct is corruption, or its expected absence in the processes of delivering public services (Cheung, 2008; Moon and Hwang, forthcoming).

A range of argument has been put to refute the public choice based assertions about the efficiency and effectiveness of public organizations (see for example Sharpe [1970] on political theories of closeness and responsiveness to citizen). A review of the academic evidence on the impact of public choice reforms and performance does not point to clear cut empirical support for these differences. Boyne and colleagues' (2003) review of studies on

¹ Property rights and public choice theory does not generally deal with equity. Evaluations of the reforms stemming from these frameworks typically include equity because it is a core concept in the public realm (Boyne et al. 2003; Warner and Hefetz, 2003).

the impact of competitive market structures, organizational size and performance indicators pointed toward neutral effects on efficiency, increases in responsiveness and reductions in equity in education, health and housing in the UK. Similarly, Warner and Hefetz (2003) suggest that competitive market structures do not lead to equitable outcomes and that there are limits to the competitive state. Concerns about analogous issues have been voiced in China, notably that reforms have results in social inequality in the ‘three mountains’ of education, health and housing (Mok et al. 2010). A number of studies in the East have gone further than the critiques of public choice noted above and suggested that public organizations can perform better than their private counterparts, particularly in relation to the provision of social infrastructure like water or sewage (Asian Development Bank 2004).

Andrews and colleagues (2011) review of statistical studies on publicness indicates, first, that the vast majority of studies operationalize publicness through ownership; 23 of the 31 studies examined used this measure alone. Second, statistical findings are more likely to be non-significant for efficiency and effectiveness. This was particularly true for effectiveness where 62 percent of the studies returned non-significant results. Third, the results from equity pointed toward a greater likelihood of positive relationships with performance for public organizations (see for example Amirkhanyan et al. 2008). However, the pool of studies undertaken on this dimension of performance is small and does not include probity as an outcome. Probity is a central element of organizational performance, because it is essential to ensure legitimacy and stability over time. It is also a critical issue in studies of East Asia, where corruption has been described as rampant and major lapses have occurred (Berman et al. 2010; Wu 2005).

Theoretical argument thus suggests marked ownership differences on efficiency and effectiveness, but weak empirical evidence makes it difficult to specify hypotheses. For equity, theory and evidence is a little clearer cut, suggesting positive relationships with public

ownership.

East West Differences

Prior studies of public and private organizations and performance have been undertaken using survey methods within a single country (Andrews et al. 2011; Greenwood et al. 2007; Rainey 1979). Where moderating variables are included, they tend to be associated with market concentration, size and national elections (Amirkhanyan et al. 2008; Micco et al 2007). This study departs from the traditional literature, which is characterized by single-country studies, and undertakes a comparative examination of differences between East Asia (both as a region and at the country level—China, Hong Kong, and South Korea) and the West, which is represented by the USA.

Large-scale empirical studies of different nations, countries and regions confirm that they have their own societal cultures (see Berman et al. 2013 in this special issue for a detailed discussion). Noteworthy is Hofstede's (2001) research of dimensions of culture, implemented in over 100 countries. Hofstede's (2001) analysis includes a number of variables that are pertinent to the study of comparative public management in East Asia and the USA. The core concepts advanced in these studies are individualism vs. collectivism, long-term orientation, power-distance, masculinity vs femininity and uncertainty avoidance.² Hofstede's (2012) analysis reveals strong differences between the East and USA. China,

² These definitions are paraphrased from Hofstede (2012): A individually orientated culture is a loosely knit social framework where people look after themselves, whereas a collectivist culture is tight-knit where families look after themselves with unquestioning loyalty. Long-term orientated societies search for virtue, where truth is dependent on context and time and are able to adapt traditions to changed conditions. Short-termism is the converse: a search for absolute truth, normative orientation and a focus on quick results. Power distance is concerned with inequality, as expressed by the extent to which less powerful members of society accept and expect that power is distributed equally. Masculinity refers to the factors that motivate people, with a masculine identify associated with wanting the best and being competitive and success orientated while a feminine identify is concerned with liking what you do, caring and the quality of life. Uncertainty avoidance societies seek to control the future and are threatened by ambiguity and unknown situations, and create beliefs, institutions and rules to address these concerns.

Hong Kong and South Korea are typified as collectivistic societies, whereas the USA is identified as a highly individualistic society. This pattern is also seen for long-term orientation with the three East Asian countries that embrace Confucian values having a 'pragmatic future-orientated perspective' as compared to the USA's short-termism. Hofstede's power distance analysis for China, Hong Kong and South Korea points towards the hierarchical nature of these societies whereas the USA is known for its focus on equal rights, justice and liberty. In relation to masculinity China, Hong Kong and the USA are characterized as success orientated. In China and Hong Kong this is expressed by a strong commitment to work over leisure time and family, and in the USA by a success orientation. South Korea is less masculine and is a consensus-based society where equality, solidarity and quality are cherished. Lastly, Hong Kong and China are pragmatic cultures, and people are comfortable with ambiguity. The USA is also somewhat accepting of uncertainty and willing to try new things, whereas South Korea uses many strategies (e.g. rules, precision, punctuality etc.) to reduce uncertainty. These cultural differences could result in differences between regions (East and West) and also perhaps between the countries of East Asia. For example, China has a stronger orientation towards the long-term than does South Korea, and China has a higher power distance score. Research evidence points towards high power distance and uncertainty avoidance being positively associated with corruption (Getz and Volkema 2011). However, China's more similar score for collectivism may temper these differences (also see Berman et al. 2013).

Literature in the area of comparative public administration also pays attention to different traditions of public administration, power, or state (Riggs, 1998; Stillman 1999). Recognizing the peculiarity of American public administration, Riggs (1998) argued that the American presidential system along with the separation of power does not enable a powerful bureaucracy and strong government. The tradition of strong civil society also facilitated the

‘stateless’ nature of American public administration, which is contrasted with the European tradition of centralized power and a strong state (Stillman, 1999). By contrast, East Asian public administration influenced by Confucianism is often characterized by a relatively strong state and weak political control over the bureaucracy (strong bureaucracy) (Berman 2010; Moon, 2013).

Differences in national cultures, and traditions in public administration might be expected to affect normative perceptions of public ownership and performance. For example, the strong tradition of public administration and state might help to shape a more positive view on governments and their performance than the stateless tradition. Similarly, experiences of changes in ownership, the different ways this plays out in different settings and the recurrent debates on these topics may also sway views. However, the evidence presented above on the performance dimensions of efficiency and effectiveness is equivocal. Furthermore, knowledge on the performance of public and private organizations has become more global—the tainted milk scandal in a state owned enterprise in China was widely reported, the global economic recession of the early twenty-first century emanated from private banks, some of which were taken into public ownership, and governments have failed to respond to natural disasters effectively, such as Katrina in the USA and Fukushima in Japan. Such factors could dilute country differences in relation to public ownership and perceptions of performance.

METHODS

This study adopts an experimental vignette design to examine public ownership and perceptions of governmental performance in East Asia and the USA. Experimental methods have played a limited role in public administration research (Bozeman 1992), with only around a dozen published studies over the past thirty years (Hicklin 2010). However, there is now a growing interest in experimental methods in public administration, and in the

associated field of public policy (James 2011; Jakobsen 2012; John et al. 2011).

Experimental studies offer great potential for the questions at the heart of this study: differences between countries and in public ownership and performance (Brewer and Brewer 2011). The promise of experiments is that they isolate cause and effect relationships by systematically eliminating rival causes (Campbell and Stanley 1969; Cook and Campbell 1979). A true experiment has three characteristics: the establishment of a control group and treatment group(s), random assignment of subjects to these groups, and controlled application of a treatment to at least one group. The anticipated result of the treatment is measured in all groups and any differences observed are attributed to the treatment, with the only rival explanation being random chance. Random assignment ensures that the groups are statistically equivalent at the beginning of the experiment. As stated above, this helps to isolate the treatment's effects. Having painted a glowing picture of experimental methods, words of caution are added because various threats to validity can arise if strict control is not maintained. These include researcher bias and diffusion effects; the likelihood of such threats are heightened in a survey-based vignette study (Cook and Campbell 1979).

Vignettes

The researchers developed five vignettes to operationalize the performance elements of efficiency, equity and probity. The tasks in the vignettes are sometimes provided in both the public and private sectors. The vignettes contrasted each dimension of performance with a topic such as probity and corruption or efficiency and responsiveness, suggesting a trade-off. Trade-offs are normal practice as managers seek to optimize performance (Selden et al. 1999). The trade-off also provided an anchor point for respondents to make an assessment of the vignette.

The dimensions of performance are anchored in the vignette, while the addition of sector-specific language developed three different groups of ownership vignettes. Two

treatment vignettes were developed, one calling the unit of analysis a ‘business firm’ (private) and the other calling it a ‘government agency’ (public). The control group vignette referred to the unit as an ‘organization,’ which was considered to be neutral on the issue of ownership. Table 1 lists the vignettes used and provides their ‘label’. Respondents were asked to rate each vignette on an 11-point Likert scale anchored by ‘Highly negative’ at -5 and ‘Highly positive’ at 5 (see Appendix).³

[insert Table 1 about here]

The research instrument was developed in English. To ensure that the topics of the vignettes would be understood in different locations a pilot was performed in China. Prior to piloting, the experimental instrument was translated from English to Chinese (using simplified Chinese characters) and then back to English to ensure that the translation was accurate. The pilot led to adjustments in language and consistency in the public ownership attributions of the vignettes. The same was done prior to implementation of the experimental instrument in South Korea. The vignettes were administered in English in Hong Kong.

Participants

Experiments were conducted in China (Department of Public Administration, Xi’an Jiaotong University), Hong Kong (Department of Public and Social Administration, City University of Hong Kong—renamed Department of Public Policy from July 2013), Seoul in South Korea (Department of Public Administration, Yonsei University), and Athens, Georgia in the USA (Department of Public Administration and Policy, University of Georgia). Data were collected from full-time and part-time MPA students in the autumn and winter of 2011.⁴

³ Public choice theorists would argue that there would be major differences in the performance of public and private organizations. However, the empirical evidence is equivocal and it is not clear that country differences will be uncovered; thus, we do not offer hypotheses.

⁴ It was assumed that MPA students would favour governmental provision of goods and services, but this would not matter in an experimental design comparing the attitudes of MPA cohorts, where the focus is on differences between the cohorts.

Students were randomly given the public, private and organizational vignettes. The research instrument was distributed by paper to students in East Asia in class and electronically in the USA out of class. In the class based experiments the professor leading the class handed out the survey instrument to student, and gave them around 30 minutes to complete the exercise. The instrument was self-explanatory and only took around 20 minutes to complete. The survey was anonymous (please see Appendix for further details).

Power analysis to determine sample size was conducted using a two-sample comparison of proportions. To test reject H_0 , 0.7 was assumed to be in population 1 and 0.3 in population 2 with a two-sided alpha of .05 and power of .80. This suggests the need for a sample size of 29 in each location to be studied. Response rates were above this in China (54), Hong Kong (42) and South Korea (57) but slightly below in the USA (26). The slightly lower response rate from the USA may weaken the regional comparisons somewhat.

FINDINGS

We present our findings in four parts. First, the sample is examined to ascertain if personal characteristics affected the findings. Second perceptions towards public ownership are analyzed, followed by country and lastly regional level analysis.

T-tests on gender, age or undergraduate major (arts, engineering and science and social sciences) and full-time and part-time status were performed to establish if any individual characteristics influenced the results. All independent sample t-tests returned statistically insignificant coefficients across all three types of vignette and the four personal characteristics studied (results available from the authors on request). For the equity (access) vignette statistically significant differences were noted with part-time students (2.07) offering a more positive assessment than full-time students (1.19) (t-score 2.303, p .023).⁵ These

⁵ Students in the USA were full-time and from the US. In China, Hong Kong and Korea there were a mix of full and part-time in service students, however there were not international studies in the programmes studied.

findings suggest that key personal characteristics did not overly affect the findings of the experiment.

To examine if differences in perceptions towards sector and performance existed in our samples of students from China, Hong Kong, South Korea and the USA, we examined means and computed difference of means tests (ANOVA and T-tests) to establish if noted differences are statistically significant. Table 2 provides descriptive data for all respondents. This indicates that the data range from a negative rating of -1.68 for the efficiency vignette to a positive assessment of 1.91 for equity (access). Standard deviations are closely grouped between 2.00 and 2.37. For the equity (income) and equity (access) vignettes respondents assessments are positive, and for the efficiency, probity and equity (mission) vignettes assessments are negative.

[insert Table 2 about here]

Table 2 also contains means and standard deviations together with variance of means analysis using ANOVA on public ownership. This data combines responses from different countries and across the East and USA. The assessment of the vignette as positive or negative by the respondents reflects the overall means in all cases except the vignette that examines equity (mission) where the response for the organization vignette is positive but very close to zero, and negative for private and public. The lack of variation across ownership categories means that none of the ANOVA F-scores are statistically significant. These findings suggest that respondents' assessments are driven by vignette topic irrespective of public ownership, and not by the arguments presented public choice scholars. Secondly, across different types of ownership, respondents rendered more positive perceptions towards trade-offs that maximize equity (especially on income and access to services), and more negative perceptions towards trade-offs that emphasize efficiency over customer service.

Table 3 presents means, standard deviations and the F-score from our ANOVA

analysis for each vignette by country. These results again show consistency across vignettes for the efficiency, equity (income) and equity (access) vignettes. Some variation is seen in the equity (mission) and probity vignettes, with positive assessments by respondents from the USA and China respectively. Differences between means are slight for the efficiency and equity (mission) vignettes and the F-score does not attain statistical significance. However, for equity (income), equity (access) and probity vignettes, the results are statistically significant. Tukey Honestly Significant Difference post-hoc analysis indicates that differences lay among vignettes within East Asia. More precisely they were found across the following countries: for Hong Kong and South Korea the difference was between equity (income), equity (access) in the case of China and South Korea, and probity for China and Hong Kong.

[insert Table 5 about here]

The final country-level analysis involved examining ownership (results available from the authors on request). As with the aggregate ownership analysis, the results were rather lackluster, with only 2 out of a possible 20 relationships achieving statistical significance. In China ownership differences were recorded for probity. Respondents assessed the private sector negatively (-.42), and both generic organizations (1.00) and the public sector (1.00) in a positive manner. The F-score was 3.45 (p .04), but post-hoc tests did not identify where differences lay.

In South Korea the F-score on the difference of means test for the equity (access) vignette was 3.65 (p .03), but again was too weak to detect post-hoc differences. Means, however, were .06 for organization, 1.47 for private and 1.50 for public, thus appearing to be substantively different. No differences were recorded by ownership in Hong Kong and the USA. In this latter case the mean for organization was nearer the predicted value of zero, however the government score was also positive even though it was anticipated to be

negative.

Finally, we amalgamated the East Asian responses and compared them with the USA. The independent T-test results were all statistically insignificant suggesting that there is little difference in MPA students' perceptions on ownership and performance in the two regions of the world (results available from the authors on request). These findings again further point to very limited differences.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has utilized experimental methods to examine perceptions towards public ownership and performance and East-USA differences thereon. Operationalizing publicness through ownership, the experimental vignette methodology provided two treatments (one public and one private) and used a control (neutral organization) and examined trade-offs across dimensions of performance—efficiency, equity and probity. The subjects in these experiments were MPA students in China, Hong Kong, South Korea and the USA. Differences were anticipated across ownership groups and across countries and regions. Somewhat unexpectedly, this study is one of limited findings. In saying this we mean that findings did not vary by ownership nor country or region but did vary some by vignette. While null findings are often not published, the null findings here offer some important insights into perceptions towards ownership, performance and country variations.

First, public choice predictions about ownership and performance mostly do not hold in our sample of MPA students. The experimental evidence garnered here reflects the largely non-significant research findings in Andrews et al.'s (2011) review of publicness and performance. Andrews et al.'s (2011) review of published empirical research did not include any experimental research designs, typically drawing upon studies using survey data and secondary sources in single countries. Studies undertaken in different settings and countries, on different topics, and using different research designs, but coming to similar conclusions

start to provide a strong evidence base (on a different topic see Berman 2013). This growing evidence base would appear to challenge the public choice school's critique of public organizations. For example, Brewer and Brewer (2011) found more vigilant task performance in public rather than private organizations using experimental methods. The major finding, again, is that this study did not detect sharp differences in ownership on any of the performance dimensions studied, which contradicts expectations set out in the public choice literature.

Second, while no differences were seen across public, private and neutral ownership the results reveal some variation across the vignettes and dimensions of performance, and the trade-offs therein. The value dimensions of efficiency, equity and probity thus explain more variation in respondents' assessments on the whole than does ownership. Linked to this, the trade-offs of equity raise more concern among respondents than trade-offs of efficiency versus customer service. One interpretation of these findings is that there is evidence of convergence within East Asia and between that region and the USA. In relation to this specific topic, perhaps the global knowledge on performance of public and private organizations has played an influential role in shaping respondents' assessment of the vignettes.

Third, in East Asia, some cross-country differences were detected but they are rather lackluster in size and effect. The differences found are worthy of brief mention. The probity versus corruption vignette drew out differences between Mainland Chinese students and the Chinese students in Hong Kong. The Chinese students were more favourably disposed to corrupt behaviour such as making illegal payments to secure economic growth. Corruption in Mainland China has become widespread and problematic, whereas in Hong Kong the Independent Commission Against Corruption was established in the 1970s and is backed up by an independent legal system (Gong and Wang 2012). This would suggest that societal

culture and legal/administrative practices matter in some cases. In a further study Gong and Wu (2012) conclude that corruption is prevalent in China because of the ongoing demand for corrupt services accompanied by weak legal institutions and lackluster oversight. Hong Kong showed differences with South Korea in relation to equity (income), and cultural aspects may help explain this. Two factors may account for these differences. First is the slightly higher level of individualism in Hong Kong versus South Korea, and less collectivism may lead to income disparities not being seen as problematic. Second, there are longstanding income inequalities in the city-state of Hong Kong, which have widened in recent years (Henrard 2011). A clear example of this is the Gini Coefficient in each jurisdiction. Hong Kong's coefficient is very high standing at 0.54 in 2011, whereas the score was 0.31 in South Korea in 2010. While protest against income inequality in Hong Kong has grown in recent years, its longstanding prevalence would appear to perhaps influence the perceptions of Hong Kong MPA students.

Finally, it is worth noting that some of our results could prove quite different in a study of the general populations of the respective nations. There are strong selection effects to becoming an MPA student and aiming for a public service career. It is possible that what we have discovered is a universality among MPA students (for example higher public service motivation), not an unimportant finding, and that the similarities in motives and outlooks of public administration students defeats any modest test of differences in ownership and performance perceptions. At least, we suggest, we have examined one of the tails of the population distribution. It seems unlikely that many students going into public administration would begin their careers with a strong expectation of inferior performance in the very public sector they are striving to join. Moreover, our findings strongly suggest that the next step is a comparison of these findings to the general populations of these nations. Such an examination might show differences indicating that perceptions of performance are culturally

embedded in MPA programmes.

A further alternative hypothesis for these findings can be postulated from the research findings on citizens experiences with public services (Brown, 2007; Van Ryzin and Charbonneau 2010; Van Slyke and Roch, 2004). These studies of citizen interaction with public organizations and contract services note that satisfaction with services is stronger when citizens have a more direct experience with the services, and that citizens who are less satisfied with services are likely to be unable to distinguish between public and nonprofit providers. While this study examines MPA students, rather than citizens, it is possible that the MPA student ratings are relatively neutral and do not distinguish between ownership because they do not have any attachment to the vignette services that they rate. These ratings may be more comparable to a citizen's rather than a user's assessment of services. These arguments need further exploration and empirical validation.

These few findings on East-USA differences, and interpretations thereof, have to be tempered by a number of limitations that possibly raise questions about the representativeness of our sample. First, the study includes a relatively small sample of MPA students from the USA which weakens some of the likely relationships discussed above. Second, as we discussed above, the use of MPA students might in itself be seen as a weakness because it would be expected that they would be biased towards public organizations, perhaps seeking to paint them in a positive light. Furthermore, perhaps MPA students everywhere study common curricula, thus homogenizing their views on these two important topics in the field of Public Administration, performance and publicness. The results reported here did not uncover this bias, but studies using students could in the future take samples from a wider pool. Third, while ownership is widely used to operationalize publicness, it does not capture the full gamut of the concept because it overlooks the aspects of funding and political control used in the dimensional approach to publicness (Bozeman

1987). These dimensions could usefully be drawn into future studies.⁶ Finally, we would encourage others to adopt experimental methods to examine questions of publicness, performance and country or regional differences as well as other important questions in public administration and management.

⁶ See Heinrich and Fournier (2004) and Moulton (2009) for illustrations of empirical public management studies that offer a comprehensive operationalization of publicness.

APPENDIX: RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Below are the instructions, response scale and vignettes taken from the government agency questionnaire (the term ‘government agency’ was replaced by the terms ‘organization’ and ‘business firm’ in the neutral organization and private sector vignettes).

Instructions

[Organization / Business Firm / Government Agency] Activity Questionnaire

Purpose and General Instructions. *The items below concern organizations’ performance of various activities. We would like to get your opinions about these agencies’ actions. Your opinion should be based only on the information provided. There is no right or wrong answer. After you fill out the opinion items, another section asks you a few questions about yourself.*

Your responses are entirely confidential. *Do not even provide your name on the questionnaire. While you will help us by responding to the questionnaire, your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to help with this research, please just turn in a blank questionnaire. If you do not wish to respond to any particular item, just leave it blank.*

Thank you!

Part I. Instructions *Please indicate, by putting an “X” at the appropriate **number** on the scale, the extent to which you have a highly positive or highly negative (or neutral) opinion of the business firm/ government agency organization in light of the information provided.*

Response scale

Following each vignette respondents were provided with the following scale to mark their “X”

As a result of the information provided above, my opinion of the government agency is:

Highly Positive	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Highly Negative
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[5	4	3	2	1	0	-1	-2	-3	-4	-5]
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Table 1. Vignettes

Efficiency vs. customer satisfaction

Label: efficiency

[Organization A / Private firm B / Government agency C], a services provider, has developed a reputation as being more interested in cost savings than in client service. Compared to other organizations/business firms/government agencies, Organization A/Private firm B/Agency C is quite efficient, providing their service at unit cost of \$2.50, compared to the average (for all organizations/firms/agencies in the region) of \$3.75. As a result, its budget has been growing each of the past several years. At the same time, organization/firm/agency C's client surveys show that 12% of their service recipients are "dissatisfied" or "highly dissatisfied," compared to the average of 6% for all organizations/firms/agencies. According to the head of the organizations/firms/agencies, 'There will always be some malcontents, we're proud of the fact we are a "lean" organization/business firm/government agency'.

Equity and income distribution

Label: equity (income)

Organization D / Private firm E / Government agency F provides housing in apartment complexes all around the city. These are clean, modern apartments in good neighborhoods. Organization D /Private firm E /Agency F rents most of the apartments at prevailing market rates but sets aside 15% of the apartments for lower-income residents, chiefly the working poor, charging them only about half the normal rent. While this policy is not widely publicized, neither is it secret. Sometimes apartment renters who are paying full price for the rent complain that they work hard for their money and see no reason why they should provide an indirect subsidy for others who happen to have less money. After learning of a complaint, the head of Organization D / Private firm E / Government agency F commented 'some people who work hard and make very little money have a hard time getting a decent apartment in this city. We are pleased to give these people a chance at decent housing, especially since we do this while keeping our normal rental rates near market prices'.

Equity and access to services

Label: equity (access)

Organization G / Private firm H / Government agency I operates an ambulance service in a rural county. Given the small, dispersed population and the fact that most county residents are relatively low income farmers, the ambulance service has never been able to make a profit. The price charged for ambulance service is about the same as nearby more prosperous areas, but given the greater costs of transportation and the lower incidence of service, the cost is much higher than for more populous areas. According the head of the organization/ business firm/ government agency, 'we aren't sure how long we can keep going given the level of cost for operating in this under-populated area. But we are very concerned. Without our organization's/business firm's/government agency's services, I don't know what these people would do for ambulance services'.

Equity and mission accomplishment

Label: equity (mission)

Organization J / Private firm K / Government agency L operates in a large city that has developed a citywide project to help the homeless and the jobless. In this project,

organizations/ business firms/ government agencies of all types are encouraged to contribute to programs to help the homeless, and to find ways to employ the unemployed through creating additional lower-level jobs and through other steps. Organization J / Private firm K / Agency L has declined to become involved in the project. The head of the organization/ business firm/ government agency explains that, 'We feel that we should concentrate on our primary mission and the main work that our organization/ business firm/ government agency does. That is the best way to serve our clients and the community, in our opinion'.

Corruption vs. probity

Label: probity

Organization M / Private firm N / Government agency O develops trade relations in foreign countries. In one of the nations it is dealing with it is apparent that trade relations will not be developed without some 'under the table' payments to that government's public officials. The director of Organization M / Private firm N / Government agency O has authorized the payments. According to the director, 'it is a well-recognized cost of doing business with that country. If we don't make the payments, we will lose the trade, and this will mean that both their citizens and ours will have less business'.

Table 2. Means for all vignettes and variance of means analysis of publicness

	All		Government		Organization		Business		F	<i>p.</i>
	m	sd	m	sd	m	sd	m	sd		
Efficiency	-1.68	2.16	-1.45	2.24	-1.75	1.97	-	2.27	.65	.52
Equity (income)	1.79	2.00	1.97	1.65	1.84	2.33	1.52	2.05	.81	.45
Equity (access)	1.91	2.21	1.98	2.12	1.57	2.43	2.16	2.07	1.05	.35
Equity (mission)	-.09	2.25	-.11	2.23	.04	2.30	-.19	2.25	.15	.86
Probity	-.29	2.37	-.38	2.49	-.13	2.37	-.35	2.26	.20	.82
N	179		65		56		58			

Table 3. Between country analysis of vignettes

	China		Hong Kong		South Korea		USA		F	<i>p</i>
	m	sd	m	sd	m	sd	m	sd		
Efficiency	-1.59	2.04	-1.79	2.44	-1.88	1.99	-1.27	2.34	.53	.66
Equity (income)	1.80	1.69	1.05	2.37	2.11	1.72	2.23	2.32	2.89	.04
Equity (access)	2.80	2.30	1.93	1.79	1.04	1.95	1.96	2.51	6.44	.00
Equity (mission)	-.13	2.17	-.12	2.19	-.21	2.23	.31	2.62	.33	.80
Probity	.52	2.03	-1.00	2.41	-.40	2.37	-.62	2.61	3.69	.01
N	54		42		57		26			