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Writing impactful reviews to rejuvenate public administration: A framework and recommendations

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[Correction added on 16 December 2023, after first online publication: The copyright line was changed.]

Abstract

Literature reviews have become widespread in public administration, especially in the past decade. These reviews typically adopt widely-accepted approaches with many drawing upon systematized approaches to review in fields like medicine and psychology. Public administration, however, is a professional, design-oriented discipline, focused on enhancing theory to solve real-life policy, administrative, and managerial challenges. Recognizing the unique traditions and purposes in public administration scholarship, it is important to take stock of how public administration scholars “do” reviews, with the aim of providing recommendations to rejuvenate the state of the art in reviewing. We present a framework to guide review efforts in public administration centered on *purpose* (why?), *object* (what?), *subject* (who?), *community* (for whom?) and *practices* (how?). Next, we present different approaches to doing reviews and how those approaches present different answers to the questions raised above. Finally, we discuss examples of public administration reviews within each approach and conclude with specific recommendations for researchers and practitioners who want to use reviews to rejuvenate public administration.

Over a decade ago, an editorial appearing in *Public Administration Review* called for more effort to systematize research findings in the field of public administration (Perry, 2012). That call did not go unanswered. Over the past decade, we have seen an increase in the number of reviews and meta-analyses aimed specifically at systematizing research findings on specific public administration themes. Between January 2013 and July 2023, *PAR* published 26 review articles that included the term “review” or “meta-analysis” in the title. In addition to these 26 articles, several *PAR* articles employ literature review methods without including the term review in the title (Battaglio Jr et al., 2019; Bozeman & Su, 2015; Bryson et al., 2013; Walker, Brewer, et al., 2019; Walker, Chandra, et al., 2019). Review articles can have significant academic and/or practical impact. Indeed, reviews in public administration are among *PAR*’s most cited articles (Bozeman & Su, 2015; Ritz et al., 2016), have been awarded best article prizes from the American Society for Public Administration (Tang et al., 2018), and have even been picked-up in influential policy reports and initiatives such as the US White House Budget Guidance (George et al., 2019).

Yet, despite the increased popularity of reviews in public administration, little effort has been invested

in investigating how we “do” reviews in our field. Indeed, public administration (and the social sciences more broadly) is lacking so-called meta-science research (Schooler, 2014), which is research centered on how scholars “do” research. Some interesting recent exceptions include George and Pandey (2017), Hendren et al. (2023), Walker, Brewer, et al. (2019), and Walker, Chandra, et al. (2019). The lack of meta-science studies of public administration makes it highly relevant to ask whether we blindly follow approaches or methods developed in other fields like medicine or psychology that may not fit the varied and numerous purposes of reviews in public administration. For example, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines are typically used in many recently published systematic reviews in public administration, but find their origins in medicine (Page et al., 2021), which is a vastly different field compared with the design-oriented, professional, social science discipline of public administration (Barzelay, 2019; Simon, 1996). Of course, we can learn a great deal from review approaches and methods from other fields, but we also need to consider the unique identity of our discipline and the role of reviews therein.

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Additionally, one might question the reasons underlying reviews' popularity in our field: Is this about rejuvenating public administration? Or are there institutional pressures explaining why reviews have become somewhat of a fad or fashion (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991)? Are scholars engaging in reviews because they see some highly successful examples and seek to mimic them? Are expectations of impact on tenure track pushing scholars to do reviews in the hope of garnering many citations for tenure portfolios? Given the increasingly competitive academic environment, public administration scholars are likely to engage in this type of behavior – which might fuel interest in doing reviews, but also raises a different set of concerns regarding the usefulness of reviews as tools to rejuvenate public administration. Reviews written for instrumental reasons might not be done as innovatively as reviews motivated by relevance and theoretical interest.

There is thus a clear need to look back on how public administration scholars “do” literature reviews, and how that “doing” can be advanced with the aim of rejuvenating the field. That is exactly the purpose of this *PAR* symposium and of this introductory paper. To do so, we first present a framework that can help scholars understand the “doing” of reviews in public administration based on activity theory. Next, we discuss different approaches to reviews often observed in public administration (and other fields) and relate these approaches back to our framework. We then give examples of reviews published in *PAR* to substantiate our framework, which also includes the reviews published in the special issue. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for researchers and practitioners wanting to engage in reviews aimed at rejuvenating public administration.

THE “DOING” OF REVIEWS: A FRAMEWORK BASED ON ACTIVITY THEORY

From a meta-science perspective, we are especially interested in the “doing” of reviews by public administration scholars, which makes activity theory a particularly useful framework. The origins of activity theory date back to the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1980), and it was further adapted to investigate specific activities in organizations by Engeström et al. (2002). At the heart of activity theory lies the notion of “practices”— how people do something. To understand how people do something, we need to understand who is actually doing it, in which context, and on which object, the how (i.e., practices) then connects all three (Jarzabkowski & Wolf, 2015). Moreover, all activity is embedded in a broader purpose, being the “why”—why people engage in specific activity (Hansen et al., 2022). Activity theory argues that if one wants to understand the “doing” of something, five interrelated questions need to be asked, namely: Why are they doing it (*purpose*)? Who is doing it (*subject*)? For whom are they

doing it (*community*)? Which topic are they focusing on (*object*)? And how are they doing it (*practices*)?

Activity theory can thus not only help researchers understand why people engage in specific activities, but can also help practitioners themselves – who in the case of meta-science are us, the scholars – make sense of what they are doing and how that “doing” can be advanced (Weick, 1995). Applied to reviews, Figure 1 presents an activity theory-inspired framework that can help researchers (and perhaps also practitioners) make sense of how they can go about doing a review. The five above-mentioned questions are adapted to the context of doing a review, and, importantly, all five questions are clearly interrelated.

The starting point is typically the *purpose* – why are you doing a review, from there the *object* of the review, who will do it (*subject*), for which *community* and using which methods (*practices*) can be selected, which might sometimes also imply that the initial *purpose* needs to be sharpened. There are, thus, feedback loops between all aspects of the model to emphasize the importance of learning during the review process. Indeed, these questions are interrelated, fluid, dynamic, and sometimes overlapping. Any review in public administration needs to answer these five questions carefully, and make sure the answers are clearly connected to each other. Reflecting and deliberating with these questions carefully – and not merely embracing either the orthodox or latest and most fashionable review methodologies – holds the key to rejuvenating public administration. In what follows, we link the questions posed in Figure 1 to some especially relevant approaches to literature reviews.

There are several purposes that can underlie a review. These typically include wanting to explore topics and trends in the literature, trying to take stock of empirical research on a subject to identify gaps in the literature and thus elucidate new research avenues, linking different perspectives from different fields or traditions about the same or similar topic(s), building new theories and ways of thinking about a certain concept, or testing a specific relationship and conditions influencing that relationship. All of these purposes relate to who is actually doing the review. Are the authors just starting their academic career – PhDs or graduate students – who want to learn more about the literature? Or are they seasoned scholars who want to reshape the way research looks at a concept? Or, are they potentially practitioners trying to find answers to practical problems? Similarly, what is the community they want to reach? Is the review aimed at research communities within specific or even multiple disciplines? Or is it especially geared toward practitioners needing evidence-based recommendations? Logically, the object is normally linked to public administration, unless the authors want to introduce a concept from a different field into the public administration lexicon. As Rodgers and Rodgers (2000) note, some public administration scholars might be characterized as undisciplined

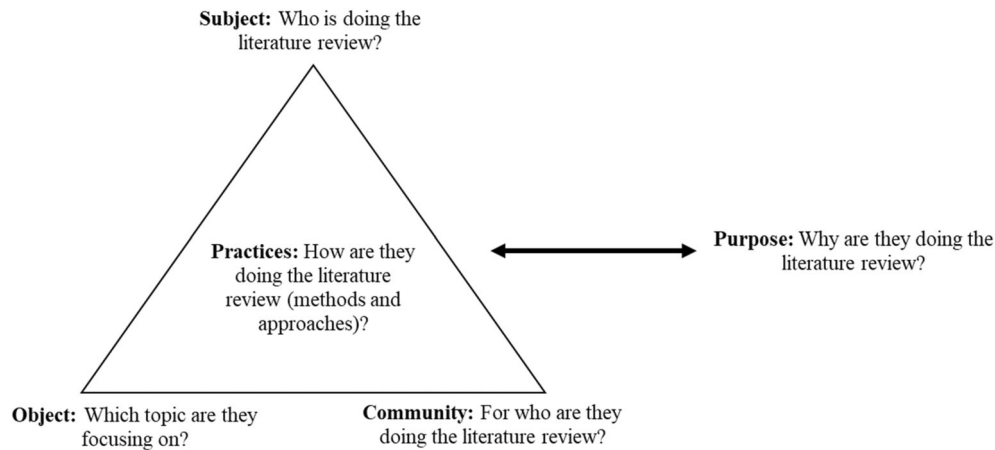


FIGURE 1 An activity theory perspective on literature reviews (inspired by Hansen et al., 2022).

mongrels, publishing and asking questions outside the boundaries respected by the more disciplined purists among our ranks. The object can be very broad – a big concept or practice – or very specific like a relationship between two variables. All of this shapes the particular practices used by the authors. Is it efficient to use machine learning tools, build extensive codebooks to go through articles, engage in qualitative research syntheses, and/or use statistical analysis for quantitative integration?

These choices in the review toolbox of public administration require careful reflection and need to be considered together to generate impactful reviews. Impact, in a way, can be thought of in a similar manner as the concept of public value (Moore, 1995), meaning that the subjects doing the review need to carefully consider the community they want to reach with their review and whether the purpose of their review (as well as the object and practices) creates value for that community. To conclude, the framework presented in Figure 1 reminds review authors to think carefully about impact – the value they seek to create for a community – throughout the review process and act accordingly.

THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF REVIEWS AND PURPOSES THEY SERVE

There is a lot of conceptual ambiguity and terminological inexactitude in relation to reviews, and also between fields, which makes it hard to navigate the review jungle and answer/reflect on the questions raised above. For this reason, we present Table 1, which draws on a range of articles about different types of reviews (including Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020; Asmussen & Møller, 2019; Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020; Greenhalgh et al., 2005; Pawson et al., 2005; Ringquist, 2013; Voils et al., 2008), as well as our own experience, insights, and understanding of reviews in/for public administration.

Table 1 presents an overview of some typical types of reviews and the purposes they serve as well as the underlying objects, subjects, communities, and practices (see Figure 1). Importantly, this table offers a starting-point, but is neither exhaustive nor conclusive. Many different types of reviews exist (and may emerge in the future), and we present those we consider particularly relevant for public administration. Moreover, hybrid forms of reviews and review processes can also exist, indicating that the categories presented in Table 1 should not be considered as “fixed points” but, rather, “points for orientation” taking into account that boundaries between categories can be permeable and blurry (though reviewers and readers seldom appreciate ambiguity). Yet, Table 1 can be useful for anyone wanting to engage in a review in public administration and better reflect on the connections to be made between the type of review, its purpose, its object, its subject, its community, and its practices.

An important reflection across all types of reviews is that there is no substitute for transparency. No matter which type of review one selects – including the problematizing review – it is crucial to explain how literature was collected and analyzed. While such a process may be more incremental and learning-driven than one would find in PRISMA, it still needs to be thoroughly and carefully elucidated, potentially through the use of supplemental online appendices (Bryson et al., 2022; Campbell et al., 2023; Pandey et al., 2023; Strader et al., 2023).

Many of the recent literature reviews in public administration are integrative reviews (often referred to as systematic reviews, though any type of review can be systematic) which take stock of empirical research on a specific subject, and try to lay the jigsaw puzzle in terms of what is known (or not known) about the subject and its relationship to outcomes and antecedents. Interestingly enough, the lead authors of such reviews have included many PhD or graduate students, postdocs, and early-career scholars, indicating their applicability as a starting point in graduate studies about a subject or

TABLE 1 Different types of reviews.

Review type	Purpose	Object	Subject	Community	Practices
Scoping or exploratory review	Understanding topics and trends in a large body of research on a specific subject	A broad concept or research topic, but can also be a concrete variable	Combination between human researcher and artificial intelligence, need content expertise to make sense of results and methodological expertise to do machine learning	Can be both within and between disciplines Audiences are typically academic (identifying topics and trends in research)	Text mining based on machine learning techniques or superficial scanning of literature
Systematic or integrative review	In-depth analysis of a specific subject to understand what has been written about it and what is lacking (jigsaw puzzle)	A specific concept, which can be defined and linked to antecedents and outcomes	Human researcher, not necessarily with extensive experience or expertise in a subject (starter)	Typically within a specific discipline Audiences tend to be academic (identifying gaps in research), though some sense-making benefits for practice	Systematic literature review of empirical studies based on an extensive coding scheme
Meta-narrative review	In-depth, contextual understanding of a specific subject in distinct but related research programs	A broad overarching question about the object of inquiry	Human researcher, extensive experience and expertise to make sense of overlapping research programs	Audiences can be academic as well as practitioner, depending on the communities being brought together	Meta-narrative review of empirical studies based on extensive coding and extensive qualitative analysis
Problematizing or critical review	Linking a specific subject to theories, models, variables, fields that have not yet been used in studies on the subject, proposing new ways of thinking about subject	A specific concept, which can be defined and linked to antecedents and outcomes, sometimes also a broad concept or research topic	Human researcher, extensive experience on subject typically required to make broader links and connections	Typically between disciplines Audiences tend to be academic (with testable theories, propositions, etc.), though developed theories can help practitioners make sense of specific phenomena where there is little evidence to draw on	Systematic and incremental literature review of a broad range of studies and other sources based on a broader framework for analysis and continuous learning throughout the review process
Meta-analysis	Identifying a specific population effect size in a specific relationship between two (or more) variables	A concrete, quantitative relationship between two (or more) variables	Human researcher, not necessarily with extensive experience or expertise in a subject (starter) but with strong quantitative skills	Typically within a specific discipline Audiences typically include practitioners (linked to evidence-based policymaking and management) and academia (in terms of gaps in the literature)	Systematic literature review of quantitative empirical studies on a relationship, quantitative integration across studies
Meta-regression	Identifying boundary conditions influencing effect sizes in a specific relationship between two (or more) variables	A concrete, quantitative relationship between two (or more) variables	Human researcher, not necessarily with extensive experience or expertise in a subject (starter) but with strong quantitative skills though content expertise needed to identify relevant boundary conditions	Typically within a specific discipline Audiences typically include practice (linked to evidence-based policymaking and management) and academia (in terms of gaps in the literature)	Systematic literature review of quantitative empirical studies on a relationship, and its boundary conditions, quantitative integration across boundary conditions

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Review type	Purpose	Object	Subject	Community	Practices
Mixed research synthesis	Identifying a specific population effect size in a specific relationship between two (or more) variables, boundary conditions, and explaining underlying causal mechanisms behind the relationship or boundary conditions	A concrete, quantitative relationship between two (or more) variables	Extensive experience typically needed to identify causal mechanisms in qualitative phase (next to same skills as for meta-analysis and regression)	Typically within a specific discipline (but can be between when qualitative phase is more problematizing) Audiences typically include practice (linked to evidence-based policymaking and management) and academia (gaps in research, further testing of proposed causal mechanisms)	Combining meta-analysis and/or regression with a review of qualitative studies (or potentially other types of sources if more problematizing)

Note: This table draws on Alvesson and Sandberg (2020), Asmussen and Møller (2019), Elsbach and van Knippenberg (2020), Greenhalgh et al. (2005), Ringquist (2013), and Voils et al. (2008).

when starting up a research line (de Geus et al., 2020; Huijbregts et al., 2022; Netra et al., 2022). Whereas integrative reviews focus on providing a “picture” of empirical research on a specific subject, meta-narrative reviews employ qualitative research synthesis techniques to offer a more in-depth understanding of underlying research traditions and research programs. Campbell et al. (2023: 298–299) describe meta-narrative review thus:

The [meta-narrative] approach assumes that multiple narratives about a topic exist simultaneously and that each has a level of internal consistency and researcher consensus about concepts, theories, methods, and themes. ... Taking the research tradition as the unit of analysis, meta-narrative reviews produce a narrative of narratives, identifying, describing, analyzing, comparing, and synthesizing cross-narrative insights to build a multi-dimensional understanding of the research topic, surface points of inter-narrative contact, and facilitate collaboration.

Problematizing reviews (sometimes also called critical reviews) seek to challenge dominant perspectives. Problematizing reviews do so by connecting subjects with theories, frameworks, ideas from other fields that have typically not been embedded in empirical research on the subject; that is, more theory or proposition-building, new ways of thinking about a subject – one finds that such endeavors are often led by more senior scholars (Bozeman & Su, 2015; Bryson et al., 2006; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Provan & Milward, 2001; Strader et al., 2023). Of course, there are many exceptions to these observations and one needs to be careful not

to generalize too broadly. It is also important to emphasize that many of the problematizing reviews were not framed as such, and often lacked an explicit discussion of the data collection and analysis procedure – though they did clearly rely on a review of literature to ground their findings, frameworks, and propositions. Similar to meta-narrative reviews, meta-analyses have joined the pack more recently than problematizing and integrative reviews, and have a relatively diverse authorship. Most include meta-regression. In terms of exploratory reviews (also called scoping reviews) and mixed-method research syntheses, we find few reviews in public administration engaging with these approaches, especially compared with the others.

As a design-oriented, professional, social-science discipline one would expect practitioner relevance to be at the forefront of reviews, whether directly or indirectly. Apart from, perhaps, the scoping or exploratory review, this is often the case. More direct practitioner relevance is especially found in meta-analyses, meta-regressions, and mixed research syntheses, because these review approaches deliver specific evidence on the existence of a relationship. More indirect practitioner relevance is found in integrative reviews, which typically center more on identifying research gaps though often summarize evidence on outcomes, antecedents, and characteristics of specific concepts that can help practitioners make sense of that concept. Meta-narrative reviews surface key assumptions, clarify etiological commitments, and bring into clear relief the bases on which different communities of practice make practical policy recommendations (see Campbell et al., 2023: 301). Problematizing reviews tend to develop specific propositions – theoretical perspectives that challenge received understanding in the literature. Further empirical research can better elucidate these alternative perspectives. A key benefit of problematizing

(or critical) reviews is offering help to practitioners on how to make sense of a specific phenomenon for which the evidence is weak or conflicting. Again, this is a rather crude assessment; the degree of practitioner relevance can greatly vary among all of these approaches, and is often also driven by how well the review's findings are disseminated to their community. For instance, by publishing in open access, embedding reviews in teaching, and using social media and blogs, the practitioner audience can become better engaged in the research findings for their practical relevance.

It is important to emphasize that Table 1 does not indicate that one type of review is optimal or superior. Each serves a distinct purpose. To engage in a review that can rejuvenate public administration, authors should carefully reflect on the questions posed in Figure 1 and balance the different options presented in Table 1. We thus encourage a *strategic approach* to conducting a review, one where the persons doing the review carefully tailor the review approach – including subject, object, community, and practices – to meet specific purposes that create value for their community. Indeed, all sorts of reviews have been very impactful in our field, which is no surprise as public administration is known for being pluralistic in terms of methods as long as these fit the question at hand. Similarly for reviews, the starting point should always be the purpose. Objects, subjects, communities, and practices should be selected according to their fit for that purpose. Hence, introduction sections in literature reviews should clearly spell out that purpose, how it creates value for the community they seek to reach, and how it influences other choices in the chosen review approach.

EXAMPLES FROM PAR

In what follows, we discuss specific examples of reviews published in *PAR* that fit with a specific approach mentioned in Table 1. First, the scoping or exploratory review aims at understanding topics and trends in a large body of research on a specific concept. As indicated in Table 1, advances in data science have helped to mine a vast body of text using machine learning techniques. While scoping or exploratory reviews need not always be done with these techniques, the amount of text needing to be scanned often makes manual intervention inefficient or unfeasible (Asmussen & Møller, 2019). In general, these types of reviews remain rare in public administration but are likely to increase with the prevalence of machine-learning (and specifically text mining) techniques in conjunction with the continuously expanding body of knowledge in our field.

Walker, Brewer, et al. (2019) and Walker, Chandra, et al. (2019) present an interesting example of such a review approach. Their purpose is to identify topics studied in two bodies of literature – namely in *Public Administration Review* and in *PA Times*. Interestingly enough, the authors go beyond identifying topics and trends to

compare the two studied bodies. They argue one represents academia and the other practice, allowing them to compare topics between academia and practice and model the academia–practice gap. In terms of object, they are broad. Instead of focusing on a specific variable, they analyze research in the journals in general, which means that they include a vast number of articles (3796). The subjects, that is, authors, include both well-established public administration scholars and experts in machine learning. Both are needed to do the analysis and make sense of the findings. In terms of community, this review is published as a Viewpoint article. This type of article is typically more geared toward practice, but it is also academically relevant to elucidate which topics have been the focus of articles in *PAR* and *PA Times*, and to clarify points of convergence and divergence between academia and practice.

While there are few examples of scoping or exploratory reviews using machine learning, numerous integrative or systematic reviews have been published in *PAR* over the past years. A recent example comes from de Geus et al. (2020), which reports using PRISMA to do a systematic literature review on Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) in the public sector. In terms of purpose, the review's questions make it clear what it wants to achieve: identify how OCB has been conceptualized in the public sector, what its antecedents and outcomes are, and which moderators and mediators influence it. In essence, the review lays the jigsaw puzzle about what research has said on OCB in the public sector. The object is very clear and specific, a measurable variable labeled OCB in a specific setting, namely, the public sector. In terms of community, the review makes it clear that it seeks to contribute to the literature and stipulate a future research agenda – thus targeting a largely academic audience within public administration.

Meta-narrative and realist review approaches, in part, were a response to integrative or systematic reviews that typically focused at the concept level and failed to provide a deeper and broader understanding of the intellectual and practice context (Greenhalgh et al., 2005; Pawson et al., 2005). Campbell et al. (2023: 297) characterize meta-narrative reviews as seeking to “combine the systematicity of the traditional review with the goals of rich description and theory construction” and offer insights on the overlap and interconnections between two related and distinct research programs on red tape and administrative burden. The meta-narrative review approach used by Campbell et al. (2023) provides a broader and deeper understanding of red tape research traditions, highlighting five different kinds of core questions, identifying different mechanisms through which red tape and administrative burden are experienced, and offering a clear understanding of rule ontology, and implications for public values.

As indicated before, the term problematizing or critical review has only recently found its way to public administration, which means that examples of

problematizing reviews in *PAR* typically would not have labeled themselves as such. Yet, many such reviews have been published in *PAR* (a recent example is Strader et al., 2023). The highly-cited and influential Bryson et al. (2006) article aims to provide a framework and propositions based on an extensive review of literature about collaborations in general to better understand cross-sector collaboration specifically. In other words, the core contribution is new frameworks and propositions to be tested by future research. The authors do not review all existing empirical research about cross-sector collaborations to “lay” the jigsaw puzzle, but look at a much broader literature set about collaborations in general to derive new ideas and propositions about cross-sector collaborations. Compared to the very concrete OCB in the public sector, the object (cross-sector collaboration) is broad, but still clear. The authors include renowned experts on collaboration with extensive content expertise in the subject. In terms of community, by stipulating propositions the academic community is clearly targeted, and the review has accordingly resulted in a vast amount of empirical research testing and building on its propositions. Yet, the authors also clearly indicate practical difficulties in “doing” cross-sector collaborations and how their article can help make sense of those difficulties.

George et al.’s (2021) red tape review uses meta-analysis and meta-regression. Its purpose is centered on identifying the relationship between red tape on the one hand, and employee outcomes and organizational performance on the other. Through the meta-regression, the purpose is to also identify boundary conditions for these relationships. The object centers on specific, measurable variables (red tape, employee outcomes, and organizational performance), and the relationships between them. The team consists of both experts in quantitative research in public administration and red tape content experts, and it is a mix of junior and senior scholars. The paper starts from a very practical problem – namely red tape and its detrimental impact on public organizations. While the review also indicates implications for theory and research, it seeks to answer questions pertinent to practice – is red tape so bad and under which conditions? The combination of meta-analysis and meta-regression helps the review answer both questions, which is typical for other meta-analyses in public administration (Ding et al., 2021; Gerrish, 2016).

For mixed-research syntheses, we do not find clear examples of such reviews in *PAR* nor public administration in general. Despite the promise of mixed-methods for public administration research (Hendren et al., 2018; Mele & Belardinelli, 2019), reviews in our field have not yet picked up on this approach. This is a missed opportunity, and we encourage authors to consider this approach if/when relevant for their purpose. Indeed, a mixed-research synthesis can integrate quantitative evidence to derive population effect sizes for a specific relationship and combine that with an integration of qualitative

evidence about the subject to identify causal mechanisms that could help to explain why the relationships does or does not occur. The qualitative phase could also focus more on problematizing, by looking at a broader range of literature and using that to stipulate frameworks, ideas, propositions about relationships and their boundary conditions. In other words, a mixed-research synthesis is an example of a hybrid approach to reviews which combines elements of other approaches.

ARTICLES INCLUDED IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The special issue set out with a specific call to publish reviews that can rejuvenate public administration. Based on all of the above, we would thus clearly expect that the reviews published in this special issue answer all of the five questions indicated in Figure 1 and fit with the approaches presented in Table 1. Indeed, that is the case, and these reviews thus provide excellent examples that one can draw on when seeking a specific review approach and reflecting on its underlying purpose, object, subject, community, and practices.

The first review (Ho et al., 2023) examines the role of public values in shaping performance budgeting. Using a bibliometric analysis of past studies, the authors show that over time, the performance budgeting literature is linked to more diverse values beyond efficiency and effectiveness concerns. Public sector values such as transparency, democracy, participation, inclusiveness, and other political, legal, social and sustainability values have been gaining attention among public administration, accounting and budgeting journals. A second piece takes a broader look at public administration theories. Hattke and Vogel (2023) analyze PA scholarship by using a novel combination of bibliometrics and natural language processing to reveal a “tree of theories” that shows how 150 theories merge into one body of scholarship, with 15 theories at the core. Their results raise concerns about the foundations of our research in that some core theories show limited geographical dispersion and low societal relevance, accompanied by a schism between micro and macro theories. Our third review, by van den Oord et al. (2023), provides a systematic literature review that takes stock of the empirical literature on the governance of organizational networks. They synthesize key findings on the modes of network governance, contingency factors, and network-level tensions to show how the contingency theory of network governance has developed into an established and recognized research agenda over the last 15 years. Network governance has been adopted into the management and organization sciences vocabulary in explaining development, functioning, and effectiveness of organizational networks.

Walker et al. (2023) scientifically explore one of the more enduring concerns in our discipline’s history: the relevance of research to practice. Walker et al. (2023)

investigate the “academic–practitioner divide” using computational social science techniques to identify the topics of “academic,” “academic–practitioner,” and practitioner corpora over a 25-year period. Topic modeling of 50 topics identified suggests that the topical focus of academics and practitioners are divergent, with 70% of the identified topics differing between the practice corpus and the academic and academic–practice corpora. Corpus linguistics analysis confirms the stark differences in the agendas of the corpora with some noted convergence around governance and outcomes. As you might have guessed, their results suggest academic research lacks relevance to practice agendas. Huang and Villadsen (2023) offer a systematic review of studies focused on public sector top managers published between 2005 and 2020. Their descriptive results suggest that the empirical focus on top managers in the public sector is increasing, though limited in comparison to their counterparts in private firms. They next develop a “systems” model to illustrate the role and function of top managers in public organizations; their results suggest that the components of top management are interdependent, adaptive, and embedded in complex relationships in the system.

We offer two studies that are directly within the human resource management paradigm. Jakobsen et al. (2023) provide insight into the current human capital crisis with their review of 59 studies to systematize and reorient research on recruitment and selection. They find a strong focus on individual-level research of attraction, revealing several blind spots of research on other levels and process stages of hiring. They then provide a research agenda that extends the predominant focus on attraction by bridging public administration concepts with generic recruitment and selection research, to advance research on public sector hiring. Next, a systematic review by Mele et al. (2023) considers telework in public organizations – a topic that received heightened urgency in the throes of the pandemic. They explored the topic by reviewing 120 studies across disciplines to reveal a few established antecedents of telework, including individual characteristics like family responsibilities and expected productivity, but also organizational aspects like supportive leadership, and contextual features like natural disasters. Evidence is often conflicting regarding the effects of telework. Their results, importantly, distinguish between pre- and post-pandemic findings. To complement the systematic review, they engage in a generative exercise by identifying emerging debates on telework in public bureaucracies.

Cantarelli et al. (2023) synthesize 162 studies focusing on information use for decision-making in public administration, management, and policy. They find that a significant proportion of work is centered around performance management and policy implementation. Importantly, they observe that approximately one-third of the reviewed studies adopt a behavioral science perspective. They identify three distinct components to aid in our

understanding of information use: the objective features of information architecture; the subjective mechanisms involving cognitive biases (i.e., over/under-reaction to irrelevant information features) and decision noise (i.e., heterogeneity); and the moderating role of information user typology. The article explores how these findings relate to current societal challenges and emphasizes the potential of mixed-methods, multi-sample, and/or multi-site research in advancing knowledge in this area, as well as the importance of context.

Strader et al. (2023) provide an epistemic reflexive examination of race in representative bureaucracy theory, responding to the criticism that its conceptualization has been overly narrow. They utilize a problematizing review method to read broadly and selectively, by reviewing a sample of articles published in public administration (*immediate* research domain); political science (*neighboring* domain); sociology and Asian/cultural/ethnic studies (*indirectly relevant* domains) between 2017 and 2021. Paying attention to social constructionism, they examined how race and ethnicity are conceptualized. While the articles in public administration focused on a binary conception of race, treating differential outcomes as natural, articles sampled from other domains explained how ethnoracial categories were constructed, highlighted the contextual nature of differential outcomes, and engaged with the issue of racialization. They conclude with the suggestion that, to expand the conception of race in public administration, we must explore the process in which racial constructs became associated with unequal outcomes.

Weißmüller and Zuber (2023) tackle the complex and ever-salient topic of public sector corruption. Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior, they examine the psychological and contextual mechanisms that allow individuals to rationalize their engagement in administrative corruption. From their systematic literature review of 93 studies, 241 cases of empirical evidence on the relationships between micro, meso, and macro-level factors are synthesized to reveal seven dimensions which influence civil servants’ corruptibility. The moral justification for administrative corruption is the outcome of a multi-layered and dynamic process of social cognition. They conclude that various processes of rationalization beyond greed, including accountability conflicts, social obligations, and culturally reinforced norms (mis-)guide behavior in the context of socially varying psychological reference points of accountability and legitimacy that lead to essential value conflicts between self-serving behavior and integrity.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a tendency to think of reviews as simply an adjunct to empirical inquiry with all research papers including a mandatory literature review section. But

reviews can stand on their own and be much more than an obligatory adjunct. We believe review articles can serve bigger purposes in advancing public administration scholarship, and conclude by providing seven recommendations for conceptualizing and executing impactful review.

Prioritize the art and craft of conducting reviews

The starting point for impactful reviews that rejuvenate scholarship is a consideration of review purpose. Public administration scholars need to pay more attention to the art and craft of conducting reviews and how different review practices serve different purposes. Clear thinking and institutional support are necessary for using reviews to advance knowledge. If we can elevate the art and craft of conducting review studies, it will open up new ways of conceptualizing and thinking and thus increase the relevance and theoretical value of public administration research.

Think strategically about literature reviews

We urge public administration scholars to see reviews as ways to create value for their community rather than tools to meet institutional pressures. There is no “one” best way to do a review to have impact in our field as demonstrated by the discussed reviews. Yet, all these impactful reviews have one thing in common: the authors strategically thought about how to do the review for optimal value creation in their respective communities. Using activity theory, we proposed that such strategic thinking entails answering questions in relation to the purpose of the review, the subjects doing the review, the object of the review, the community one wants to reach with the review, and the practices used to do the review; and the interconnections between all of these. The actual approaches used are secondary to these questions and follow from the identified answers. They can include scoping or exploratory reviews, integrative or systematic reviews, meta-narratives, problematizing or critical reviews, meta-analyses, meta-regressions, mixed research syntheses, or some hybrid combination between these approaches.

Tailor your review to fit the public administration field

Pretty much all of the literature review practices used in public administration come from other fields. This is hardly surprising in an applied discipline, but still comes at a challenge. Blindly following what other fields do without reflecting on the nature of public administration is unlikely to result in very impactful reviews. There is nothing wrong with using methods from elsewhere, but we

should never put on methodological blinders that neglect the reality of public administration as a practice and discipline. Having shown the diversity of review approaches one can use in public administration, we argue against the emergence of one “favored” approach, keeping Kaplan’s (1964) proverbial hammer strongly in the back of our mind. We do not want only integrative or systematic reviews using PRISMA to become the hammer that makes us treat all public administration questions as the same nails.

Consider: Why do review of what object? Who will do it for which community using which methods?

We recommend those embarking on the journey of doing a review in our field to first answer all questions in Figure 1. Next, the approaches in Table 1 can be considered, balanced, and optimized to meet the purposes of the review team at hand. All of this provides crucial information for the front end of the emergent paper, and can help to explain its purpose and the value it is expected to create (which will help reviewers and other readers understand why you are doing the review).

Be transparent

Whichever approach is selected, transparency remains crucial, and careful attention needs to be paid to explaining the adopted practices. Similarly, transparency also implies acknowledging limitations of a chosen approach – no one method is “perfect” and acknowledging limitations is crucial for knowledge accumulation.

Communicate the findings

It is not necessarily enough to formulate and implement a value statement of the review for a specific community. The authors might also need to proactively encourage the dissemination of the review. Many of the impactful *PAR* reviews have been embedded in social media posts, blogs, videos, and other digital tools. They have also been presented at practitioner and academic communities across the globe and/or made available in open access. Many reviews’ findings have been incorporated into textbooks and teaching material at different levels of education. Research has become increasingly like a marketplace of good ideas, and just doing a “good” review is not enough for it to have the intended impact (Warren et al., 2021).

Experiment and diversify

We have come a long way since Perry’s (2012) call for more systematizing of research knowledge in public

administration. Public administration scholars have experimented with different types of reviews for different purposes, and many impactful reviews show the benefits of systematizing existing research. Specific approaches and practices for doing reviews are now also embedded in public administration education. All these desirable changes help move the field of public administration forward. Our article embraces these changes but also asks us to reflect, look at these changes at the meta-level, and ask how we can learn from them and improve our review practices. Experimenting with and diversifying in different review approaches can facilitate this learning process. Our purpose with this symposium, and this editorial, is to inspire new and creative approaches to rejuvenate public administration theory, and hopefully, practice; our hope is that the tools we offer, and the studies we present, will motivate scholars to step into the breach and extend our knowledge in new and meaningful ways.

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