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Revisiting the academic–practitioner divide: Evidence from computational social science and corpus linguistics

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Abstract

As a design science, public administration is focused on addressing real-world problems. However, within public administration argument and evidence on the relevance of academic research to practice agendas is equivocal. We 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 results of the 50 topics identified in each of these corpora suggest that the topics of academics and practitioners have more differences than similarities: nearly seven-tenths of the identified topics differ between the practice corpus and the academic and academic–practice corpora. Corpus linguistics analysis is applied to contrast the keyness of topics over time, and the results confirm the largely different agendas of the corpora albeit with some convergence on governance and outcomes. Corpora examined in this article is largely suggestive of a lack of relevance of academic research to practice agendas.

Evidence for practice

- We present evidence on the topics that academics and practitioners write about over a quarter-century that raises ongoing concerns about the relevance of academic research for the practice of public administration.
- Contrary to expectations, we do not uncover evidence of a growing divide between the topics of academics and practitioners over time, as differences between the groups’ topical foci differed from the beginning of the studied period.
- The focus of both academics and practitioners moved in a similar direction from narrowly defined topics at the beginning of the study period (1991–1995) to more complex topics, for example governance, in the later period (2012–2016).

INTRODUCTION

Public administration has been characterized as a design science focused on solving real-world problems that are complex, human-related, and involve value judgments (Shangraw Jr. & Crow, 1989; Simon, 1996). Accordingly, the design science of public administration is expected to connect theory with practice, thus linking administrations, management, and organizations with practice of the

delivery of public services and policies. It has long been argued that these design science goals are not attained and that there is an academic–practitioner divide because public administration scholarship is not relevant to practice, and that the divide has increased over time (Newland, 2000; Pollitt, 2017; Roberts, 2018).

However, the evidence brought to bear on the scope and duration of the divide is equivocal. It has been argued that the reasons for this divide, and estimation of its changing magnitude, are because of differences between the practice of public administration and academic research (Newland, 2000; Pollitt, 2017; Roberts,

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2018). Conversely, several case studies have empirically demonstrated that academic research is utilized in practice (Jennings Jr. & Hall, 2012; Newman et al., 2016). However, content analysis of public administration scholarship and practice literature provide mixed results (Gibson & Deadrick, 2010; Kaufmann & Haans, 2021). In this article, we synthesize large corpora of academic literature and contrast it with practitioner literature to examine the extent and magnitude of the divide. We ask: are the topics of public administration scholarship relevant to practitioners? And within and between academia and practice have the topics changed over time?

Our contribution to this debate is twofold. First, we apply computational social science methodology (Hollibaugh Jr., 2019), namely topic modeling, to inductively identify the focal topics of public administration research and practice over a 25-year period. Our academic corpus is taken from the Public Administration section of the Journal Citation Reports (JCR) published by Clarivate Analytics. We divide the academic corpus into two corpora, one we refer to as “academic” because these journals do not refer to practice in their aims and scope and a second of group of journals labeled “academic–practice” that explicitly refer to practice. Our practitioner corpus is derived from the Public Affairs Information Service (PAIS). We identify 50 topics in each of these corpora and compare their occurrences, ranks, and weights. To the best of our knowledge, this analysis is the first systematic attempt to examine international corpora of academic and practitioner literature in public administration.

Second, we examine the evolution of these topics over time to identify changes and visualize topics graphically before using corpus linguistics methods to contrast the keyness of each identified topic in the early and late periods of the corpora. This contribution is important because it addresses the presumption of a growing divide between research and practice over time (e.g., Newland, 2000; Pollitt, 2017).

THE ACADEMIC–PRACTITIONER DIVIDE

Public administration is an interdisciplinary form of design science (Simon, 1996). An interdisciplinary enquiry involves the intersection of theories, methods, and knowledge from two or more disciplines. Interdisciplinary characteristics include problem orientation, contextuality, multiple methods, and an overriding concern for human values (Brewer Garry, 1999). The concerns of public administration for solving problems of administration, policy, and the delivery of public values signal interdisciplinarity. Design science is focused on solving real-world problems that are complex, human-related, and involve value judgments (Shangraw Jr. & Crow, 1989; Simon, 1996). Accordingly, the interdisciplinary design science of public administration is expected to connect theory with practice, thus linking administrations, management, and organizations in the delivery of public policies (Raadschelders, 2011).

However, scholars have long noted that public administration has not realized its design science mission and that related academic research is irrelevant and neglects to address the big questions in the field (Argyris, 1991; Dahl, 1947; Gibson & Deadrick, 2010; Roberts, 2018). Leading public administration scholars have argued that the focus of the discipline is now on abstract concepts, highly specific relationships, and sophisticated research methods that offer few insights relevant to policy and practice (e.g., Moynihan, 2017; Newland, 2000; Raadschelders & Lee, 2011; Roberts, 2018). Pollitt (2017, 9) suggested that the consequence of this shift has resulted in the demise of well-rounded professors who publish on multiple topics across the whole field of public administration, such that these changing practices “increasingly ... distance the academic community from the immediate concerns of most practitioners.” In short, public administration research is seen as not relevant to practice, and its concerns of context and real life-specific problems (Armstrong & Alsop, 2010; Buick et al., 2015).¹

Pollitt (2017) attributed the lack of practice relevance to the “managerialization” of higher education since the 1980s. Managerialization led to academics being professionalized and extensively measured resulting in a focus on faculty productivity and the extent to which journal articles are cited by other academics. Comparisons of productivity between faculty (see for example Corley & Sabharwal, 2010; Metz & Jackle, 2017), disciplines, and institutions are abundant (e.g., the various university and subject rankings run by Academic Ranking of World Universities, QS, Times Higher Education, and US News and World Report), and the resulting competition reinforces the importance of measurement. The pressures arising from measurement and professionalization have resulted in the specialization of theories, topics, and methods and a “publish or perish” culture. As such “managerialization” is reinforced as scholars publish literature on novel topics, using increasingly sophisticated research designs with the aim of increasing citation (within academia) (Van Witteloostuijn, 2016) rather than speaking to the wider concerns of practice. Roberts (2018) echoes these sentiments, citing the disincentives of exploring broad questions within public administration, particularly for early career scholars. Research supports these views: Neely and Cogburn (2017) concluded that practice-based research was considered among the least important factors influencing faculty tenure and promotion criteria (Neely & Cogburn, 2017). Seeking to redress the lack of relevance of academic research to practice, scholars have published case studies of coproduction partnerships to provide effective solutions to the academic–practitioner divide (Buick et al., 2015; Orr & Bennett, 2012).

While academic reviews of the changing field of higher education in public administration describe a lack of relevance, evidence on the utilization of academic research by practitioners provides a somewhat mixed perspective. Howlett and Newman (2010) painted a picture

of a growing divide between the two communities, noting that practitioners do not use or value academic research because of different contextual demands and work focus. However, other studies have taken a more contingent view, suggesting that the nature of the research question and the level of risk involved can lead to utilization of the results in policy development and decision-making. This perspective led Jennings Jr. and Hall (2012) to conclude that the difference between the two communities is a continuum rather than a divide: a divide implies a lack of utilization whereas a continuum is suggestive of the use of academic research by some practitioners. This continuum view is supported by evidence from a large survey of Australian civil servants wherein some public servants utilize academic research; these practitioners were characterized as having postgraduate degrees and experience in higher education (Newman, 2014).

Analysis of academic and practitioner writings cast similar doubt on the extent of the academic–practitioner divide. Contrasting *Public Administration Review* and *Administration & Society* with the US practice journals *Public Manager* and *Public Management Magazine*, Gibson and Deadrick (2010, 161) concluded that “Although differences in interest areas between academics and practitioners were found, those differences were not as pronounced as expected.” Streib et al. (2001) found that around 30 percent of articles in *Public Administration Review* covered topics that match the competencies of the International City/County Managers Association. However, not all analysis of the writings of academics and practitioners suggests that the divide is limited. Kaufmann and Haans (2021) applied collocation analysis, a linguistics method, to identify and compare the domain-specific meanings of central concepts. Their collocation analysis of the homegrown concept of *red tape* in academia, government, and the media led them to conclude “that the fundamental mental maps of scientists and other stakeholders ... are different” (Kaufmann & Haans, 2021, 229). Using topic modeling, Walker et al. (2019) examined *Public Administration Review* and *PA Times* and found that academics and practitioners focused on different topics and differed significantly in the weighting of prominent topics.

These reviews of changes in academia, research utilization, and the topics examined by researchers and practitioners provide important insights into the academic–practitioner divide. Yet studies examining the relevance of academic research to practice produce mixed results, and the scope of these studies is often focused on one concept, a limited range of publications, case studies (typically in the United States) and does not examine changes over time. Accordingly, a systematic review of a larger corpus of academic and practitioner literature is needed to gauge the extent of the suggested academic–practitioner divide, estimate whether this gap has increased over time, understand if public administration research is meeting its design science aspirations.

METHODS

Data

The academic corpus is derived from the 47 journals included in the Public Administration category of the Social Sciences Citation Index published by Clarivate’s JCR. When identifying journals for analysis, we first excluded three non-English language journals. As the focus of our study is the academic–practitioner divide in public administration, we also excluded 27 journals that do not mention “administration” or “public management” in their aims and scope. We identified nine journals with a “purely academic focus” making no reference to practice – labeled “academic journals” – and 11 journals whose statements of scope included terms such as “practice,” “practitioner,” “policy makers,” and “public officials” – labeled “academic–practice journals” (see Table 1). We downloaded research articles and excluded book reviews and editorials to ensure that the focus of our analysis was on peer-reviewed scholarship.

While the identification of a wide-ranging academic corpus is relatively straightforward, it is not so for practice corpora. Extant studies have typically focused on practice journals in one country (Gibson & Deadrick, 2010; Walker et al., 2019) reflecting the contextual nature of the practice of public administration. We were able to identify only one international practice corpus derived from the Public Affairs Information Service Index (<https://proquest.libguides.com/pais/content>). The PAIS is a comprehensive policy literature resource provided since 1972

TABLE 1 Journals.

| Academic journals | Academic–practice journals |
|--|---|
| Administration & Society | Australian Journal of Public Administration |
| American Review of Public Administration | Canadian Public Administration |
| Governance | International Review of Administrative Sciences |
| International Public Management Journal | Journal of Policy Analysis and Management |
| Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory | Local Government Studies |
| Public Administration | Public Administration Review |
| Public Management Review | Public Money and Management |
| Social Policy & Administration | Public Performance and Management Review |
| Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences | Public Personnel Management |
| | Public Policy and Administration |
| | Review of Public Personnel Administration |

by Cambridge Scientific Abstracts (part of ProQuest since 2007). It collates English-language government documents, gray literature, research reports, hearings, and Internet resources containing information on public affairs from a wide variety of international sources. To identify relevant practice literature, we used the advanced search function and the keyword “government” and set the default search scope as “ANYWHERE.”² We set the document type as “Government & Official Document” and obtained 15,992 documents published by 931 entities including 111 governments, and 63 intergovernmental organizations, such as UN-based organizations (e.g. the International Court of Justice, United Nations Children’s Fund), the World Health Organization, regional intergovernmental organizations (e.g. the European Commission), and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. To accommodate the longer time to publication of academic versus practice literature, the academic corpus ranged from 1991 to 2016 and the practice corpora from 1990 to 2016.

Topic modeling

Latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) is a machine-learning technique used to infer observed meanings (or “topics”) from a large body of textual data, such as journal articles, newspaper articles, and books (Blei, 2012; Blei et al., 2003). LDA is a relatively new computer algorithm-based technique that enables researchers to transform large-scale textual data into several topics. LDA is an unsupervised learning algorithm, so it is blind to a researcher’s hypothesis or personal bias. However, LDA requires human interpreter to read the output it generates, understand the meaning of the topics, and then label the topics manually. This technique facilitates the probabilistic synthesis of a massive number of documents, allowing them to be understood, shared, and evaluated (Quinn et al., 2010). LDA has been applied to research topics in scientific articles and used to facilitate the understanding of patent data (Blei & Lafferty, 2007; Kaplan & Vakili, 2014).

LDA is a form of topic modeling in which each document is assumed to contain a mixture of topics, and the topics that act as a link between documents, and terms (i.e., words) are assumed to be usually unobservable or latent (Blei, 2012; Paul & Dredze, 2014). By clarifying which terms (observable micro-level data) exist among the documents of interest (i.e. observable macro-level data), LDA enables researchers to probabilistically identify which topics (i.e. meso-level data) exist in the documents (Chandra, 2016a; Landauer et al., 2013). From the distribution of terms throughout the documents (i.e. document-term matrix or DTM), LDA can probabilistically estimate term–topic relationships and document–topic relationships. This is possible because while some terms (e.g. red, blue, yellow; tiger, lion, cheetah) will define topics

(e.g. color; big cats), and each document can be associated with several topics (e.g. pets, bacteria, fungi), each document has a primary topic with the highest topic–document probability.

Our analysis consisted of three major steps. The first step was data preprocessing. For this step, we saved the abstract of each article into a single document and created corpora of 5070 text files from the academic journals, 6438 text files from academic–practice journals, and 15,992 text files from the PAIS. We then removed stop words (e.g. the articles “a,” “an,” and “the”; prepositions such as “of,” “by,” and “from”), numbers, and punctuation from the corpora and converted all of the text to lowercase.³ Because some general words such as “article,” “find,” “effect,” and “discuss” appear in most scholarly articles, we constructed a list of additional stop words and removed them from the corpora.

The second step of the analysis was model fitting. For this step, we used the *tm* package (Feinerer, 2015) in R programming language to convert the articles into a DTM to facilitate topic modeling. We first captured the *journal* names and *author* information (e.g., name, country of origin, department, and university) and used “abstract” as the raw data for topic modeling analysis. Therefore, the topic modeling analysis is conducted at the “abstract” unit level. We followed the best practices in LDA that requires us to specify the number of topics before fitting the model. Different metrics to choose the optimal topic numbers (Cao et al. 2009; Griffiths & Steyvers, 2004) were used as benchmarks, and the results revealed that the optimal number of topics in this study was 50 for each of the three groups of publications, academic, academic–practice, and PAIS. We used the *topicmodels* package in R language to fit the LDA model (Grun & Bettina, 2011). The total topic weight of all topics identified in the corpus was calculated to probabilistically estimate the primary topic to which each article belonged. Thus, the total topic weight is a proxy for the popularity of a topic among all other topics. Third, as LDA is a purely unsupervised learning method (Chandra, 2016b; Quinn et al., 2010), after fitting the LDA model we manually validated and labeled the topics. Topic labeling involved two rounds of topic naming by the authors until a consensus was reached.

Corpus linguistics

To complement the topic modeling analysis, we used *corpus linguistics*, also known as computational linguistics, to analyze the characteristics of the corpus of articles (Baker and McEnery 2005; Chandra, 2016a, 2016b; Rayson, 2008). Corpus linguistics allows us to more deeply explore certain terms (or keywords) alone or in combination to understand the prevalence and importance of their use in the corpora. We used WordSmith software (Scott, 2008) to conduct the analysis and to preprocess the corpus into a suitable format for analysis. The academic and practice

corpora were divided into sub-sections: early period (operationalized as articles published between 1991 and 1995) and late period (operationalized as articles published between 2012 and 2016). Although multiple corpus linguistics analysis methods are available (e.g., keyness, semantic categorization, collocation, and concordance; see Chandra, 2016a, 2016b), we explored keyness as the main analysis because, like topic modeling, keyness relies on a probabilistic approach to inferring the aboutness (which is essentially the “main topics”) of a corpus. One advantage of a keyness analysis is that it allows researchers to analyze a corpus in its entirety (i.e., total accountability principles, Leech, 1992), thus avoiding cherry picking when reporting the analysis of a corpus. The keyness analysis was conducted by calculating the log likelihood ratio (LLR) of a target corpus (e.g., early period) against a reference corpus (e.g., late period), and vice versa. The analysis produced a list of terms or words with high to low LLR and their *p*-values across the target and reference corpus. These results comprised probabilistic information on the aboutness of each corpus across time.

FINDINGS

We first present the findings from our topic modeling analysis of corpora of academic journals, academic-practice journals, and the PAIS. We then graphically examine the evolution of topics in the three corpora. Finally, we present the findings from our corpus linguistics analysis of early and late keyness across the topics to provide a more fine-grained analysis of changes in aboutness over time.

Topic modeling

The full list of 50 topics for each corpus can be found in the Tables S1–S3. Here, we present three tables to contrast the topics between the academic and practice corpora. Table 2 presents topics with the same names in the three corpora and Table 3 those with similar names. Across the academic, academic-practice and PAIS corpora pairs of topics with the same names are shown in Table 4 and similar names in Table 5. Table 6 presents topics with distinct names in all corpora. In each table, the left- and middle-hand panels present the topics from the two academic corpora and the right-hand panel the practice corpus, respectively. The topics are presented by rank, topic weight (TW), and the extracted topic labels.

The four *same topics* in Table 2 encompass topics related to the policy domain of health, the management of public organizations (contracting and strategic planning) and the financing of public organizations (budgeting). Healthcare is an important topic, ranking second, fifth, and ninth in importance among academic, practice, and academic-practice corpora, respectively. However,

TABLE 2 Same topics with top five terms, topic weight from academic journals, academic-practice journals, and PAIS.

| Academic journals | | Academic-practice journals | | | PAIS | | |
|--------------------|------|----------------------------|---|--------------------|------|------------------|---|
| Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic | Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic |
| Same topics | | | | | | | |
| Healthcare | 2 | 3.57 | Care, nhs, older, healthcare, medical | Healthcare | 9 | 2.78 | Health, care, nhs, insurance, healthcare |
| Contracting | 13 | 2.49 | Contracting, competition, contract, cost, contracts | Contracting | 15 | 2.1 | Contracting, choice, competition, contract, contracts |
| Strategic planning | 20 | 2.07 | Strategic, planning, city, involvement, cities | Strategic planning | 27 | 1.8 | Strategic, planning, plans, hrn, plan |
| Budgeting | 25 | 1.74 | Fiscal, budget, expenditure, spending, budgetary | Budgeting | 6 | 3.21 | Fiscal, budget, tax, crisis, spending |
| Total topic weight | | 9.87 | | Total topic weight | | 9.89 | |
| | | | | Total topic weight | | 8.07 | |

TABLE 3 Similar topics with top five terms, topic weight from academic journals, academic-practice journals, and PAIS.

| Academic journals | | | | | Academic-practice journals | | | | | PAIS | | | | |
|--------------------------|------|------------------|--|------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|------|------------------|---|--------------------------|------|------------------|---|--|
| Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic | Topic weight (%) | Rank | Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic | Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic | |
| Similar topics | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Performance management | 3 | 3.43 | Performance, measurement, indicators, expectations, bias | 4.04 | 2 | Performance measurement | 2 | 4.04 | Performance, measurement, indicators, appraisal, monitoring | Performance management | 49 | 0.83 | Performance, improve, measures, quality, accountability | |
| Environmental regulation | 9 | 2.98 | Regulatory, environmental regulation, compliance, water | 1.71 | 31 | Environmental regulation | 31 | 1.71 | Environmental, firms, voluntary, water, compliance | Environmental protection | 30 | 1.66 | Environmental, agency, risk, protection, risks | |
| Law | 12 | 2.54 | Law, legal, rights, legislation, legislative | 1.44 | 38 | Law enforcement | 38 | 1.44 | Law, legislation, rules, enforcement, laws | Law enforcement | 28 | 1.81 | Law, enforcement, drug, justice, control | |
| Education | 30 | 1.64 | School, schools, students, Dutch, University | 3.26 | 4 | Schools | 4 | 3.26 | School welfare, students, schools, income | Education | 19 | 2.06 | Education, schools, school, students, student | |
| | | | | | | Universities | 17 | 2.03 | University, science, concepts, century, universities | Total topic weight | | | 6.36 | |
| | | | | | | Total topic weight | | 12.48 | | | | | | |

TABLE 4 Same topics with top five terms, topic weight shared by two corpora.

| Academic-practice journals | | | | | | PAIS | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|------|------------------|--|----------------------|------|------------------|---|--------------------|------|------------------|---|
| Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic | Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic | Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic |
| Same topics across two corpora | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Networks | 4 | 3.31 | Network, networks, coordination, networking, formation | European Union | 12 | 2.30 | European, risk, commission, audit, union | European Union | 1 | 4.88 | English, European, French, summary, union |
| Innovation | 5 | 3.29 | Innovation, adoption, citizen, capital, communication | Networks | 5 | 3.21 | Networks, network, collaborative, collaboration, regional | | | | |
| Civil servants | 6 | 3.08 | Civil servants, executive office senior | Civil servants | 11 | 2.36 | Civil, values, servants, senior, career | | | | |
| Emergency management | 10 | 2.64 | Crisis, privatization, emergency, crises, disaster | Emergency management | 24 | 1.88 | security, failure emergency, aid, events | | | | |
| Nonprofits | 11 | 2.54 | Nonprofit, funding, engagement, equity, nonprofits | Nonprofits | 18 | 2.00 | Nonprofit, funding, nonprofits, grant, foundation | | | | |
| Bureaucracy | 14 | 2.45 | Bureaucratic, bureaucracy, bureaucrats, representation, discretion | Bureaucracy | 37 | 1.52 | Bureaucracy bureaucratic justice conflict bureaucrats | | | | |
| Gender | 19 | 2.09 | Accountability, women, gender, positions, men | Gender | 3 | 3.32 | Women, gender, court workplace men | | | | |
| Taxation | 37 | 1.50 | Tax, incentives, investment, production, revenue | | | | | Taxation | 13 | 2.31 | Tax, revenue, service, income, its |
| Leadership | 42 | 1.26 | Leadership, leaders, behavior, style, frameworks | Leadership | 29 | 1.77 | Leadership, trust, leaders skills emotional | | | | |
| Transparency | 44 | 1.20 | Transparency, legitimacy, standards, governmental, accounting | Transparency | 33 | 1.66 | Transparency transition administrations open domestic | | | | |
| China | 47 | 1.14 | China, section, Chinese, natural, typology | China | 21 | 1.96 | Accountability, China, Chinese governing, accountable | | | | |
| Total topic weight | | 24.50 | | Total topic weight | | 23.84 | | Total topic weight | | 7.19 | |

TABLE 5 Similar topics with top five terms, topic weight shared by two corpora.

| Academic journals | | | Academic-practice journals | | | PAIS | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|------|------------------|--|----------------------------|------|------------------|---|---------------------------|------|------------------|--|
| Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic | Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic | Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic |
| Similar topics across two corpora | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Public service motivation | 1 | 4.10 | Employees, job, satisfaction, motivation, psm | Job satisfaction | 1 | 4.49 | Employees, job, satisfaction, employee, motivation | | | | |
| Collaboration | 8 | 2.30 | Trust, collaborative, collaboration, cooperation, partnerships | Partnership | 8 | 3.00 | Partnerships, partnership, projects, project, public, private | | | | |
| Values and ethics | 17 | 2.13 | Values, ethical, ethics, normative, moral | Ethics | 42 | 1.34 | Ethical, principles, ethics, behavior, conduct | | | | |
| Employment policy | 18 | 2.11 | Employment, programs, program, training, assistance | | | | | Employment | 31 | 1.66 | Employment, labor, workers, training, work |
| Municipalities | 27 | 1.72 | Municipalities, evaluation, municipal, per, ireland | Councils | 6 | 3.08 | Authorities, council, councils, elected england | | | | |
| Corruption | 34 | 1.58 | Behavior, corruption, identity, empowerment, logic | City-county administration | 30 | 1.75 | City, cities, administrators, county, jurisdictions | Fraud | 46 | 1.00 | Program, payments, fraud, improper, programs |
| Family policy | 38 | 1.50 | Family, children, families, australia, child | | | | | Children | 35 | 1.52 | Children, people, population, poor, child |
| Federal programs | 39 | 1.48 | Federal, programs, program, goal, housing | | | | | Federal agencies | 15 | 2.22 | Federal, agencies, activities, selected, actions |
| Conflict management | 43 | 1.20 | Conflict, informal, governing, board, conflicts | | | | | Conflicts | 4 | 4.04 | International, documents, domestic, conflict, violations |
| Professionalism | 50 | 1.05 | Workers, professionals, labor, frontline, professionalism | Professionals | 46 | 1.10 | Professional, autonomy, decentralization, professionals, task | | | | |
| Total topic weight | | 19.17 | | Total topic weight | | 14.76 | | Total topic weight | | | 10.44 |

TABLE 6 Distinct topics with top five terms, topic weight from academic journals, academic–practice journals, and PAIS.

| Academic journals | | | | Academic–practice journals | | | | PAIS | | | |
|-------------------------|------|------------------|---|----------------------------|------|------------------|---|-----------------------------|------|------------------|--|
| Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic | Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic | Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic |
| Distinct topics | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Welfare regimes | 7 | 3.06 | Welfare, regime, regimes, Korea, Sweden | Citizen participation | 10 | 2.50 | Participation, citizen, engagement, democracy, involvement | Defense | 2 | 4.40 | Dod, defense military, dods, army |
| New public management | 15 | 2.39 | Npm, regional, voluntary, instruments, decentralization | E-government | 13 | 2.27 | Technology, communication, egovernment, media, application | Human rights | 3 | 4.28 | Human, rights, elections, political, party |
| Integration | 16 | 2.23 | Domestic, integration, convergence, Germany, member | Executive boards | 14 | 2.16 | Executive, board, legislative, constitutional, bodies | PES statistics | 6 | 2.96 | Economic, social, statistics, political, covers |
| Poverty | 21 | 1.97 | Poverty, income, rural, poor, exclusion | Accounting | 16 | 2.10 | Financial, accounting, reporting, standards, report | Trade | 7 | 2.93 | Trade, food, production, products, prices |
| Audit | 22 | 1.83 | Commission, projects, report, funds, audit | Privatization | 19 | 1.99 | Costs, cost privatization industry, savings | Financial institutions | 8 | 2.61 | Financial, housing, institutions, credit, loan |
| Discourse | 23 | 1.79 | Meaning, transformation, reality, themes, discourses | Elections | 20 | 1.97 | Politicians, councillors, party, parties, election | Homeland security | 9 | 2.60 | Security, dhs, homeland, border, efforts |
| (Social) security | 24 | 1.78 | Security, pension, schemes, scheme, insurance | Personnel | 22 | 1.96 | Employment, pay, personnel workers, labor | OECD policy | 10 | 2.48 | Policy, countries, oecd, policies, change |
| Knowledge transfer | 26 | 1.72 | Knowledge, transfer, technical, scientific, middle | Municipal size | 23 | 1.88 | Municipalities, municipal, size scale, economies | Development aid | 11 | 2.41 | Development, world, countries, aid developing |
| Food safety/police | 28 | 1.68 | Learning, police, food, safety, officers | Police | 26 | 1.82 | Police, diversity officers, representation, rates | International organizations | 12 | 2.36 | International, organizations, development, cooperation, organization |
| Intergovernmental admin | 29 | 1.66 | Administrators, users, user, intergovernmental, motivations | Australia | 28 | 1.80 | Australian, intergovernmental federalism, big, commonwealth | Energy | 14 | 2.24 | Energy, nuclear power, doe, electricity |
| Culture | 31 | 1.62 | Culture, risk, cultural, autonomy, risks | Business | 32 | 1.69 | Business, south improvement special, corporate | President | 16 | 2.13 | National, committee, president, house, office |
| Sustainability | 32 | 1.60 | Global, economy, Romania, transition, sustainability | Evaluation | 34 | 1.60 | Evaluation, assessment, criteria evaluations, procedures | Safety administration | 18 | 2.06 | Safety, air, administration national, system |

(Continues)

TABLE 6 (Continued)

| Academic journals | | | Academic–practice journals | | | PAIS | | | | | |
|-------------------------|------|------------------|--|-------------------------|------|------------------|---|------------------------|------|------------------|---|
| Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic | Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic | Topic name | Rank | Topic weight (%) | Top five terms in the topic |
| Entrepreneurship | 33 | 1.58 | Diversity, science, voice, entrepreneurial, entrepreneurship | Canada | 35 | 1.58 | Canada, Canadian provincial, Quebec, Ontario | Small business | 20 | 2.05 | Business, small acquisition, cost, businesses |
| Participatory democracy | 35 | 1.50 | Democracy, paradigm, progress, participatory, managed | Learning | 36 | 1.57 | Learning, training corruption, learn feedback | Economic development | 21 | 2.01 | Growth, economic, development, policy, policies |
| Traditional inquiry | 36 | 1.50 | Traditions, tradition, inquiry, definition, pragmatism | Government departments | 39 | 1.43 | Staff, department, organizational, ministers, advice | Terrorism | 22 | 1.96 | National, efforts, support terrorist, attacks |
| Red tape | 40 | 1.46 | Rules, red, tape, rule, scale | Behavior | 40 | 1.37 | Behavior, incentives, mission mixed, behavioral | Benefit plans | 23 | 1.94 | Benefits, plans benefit, pension, employees |
| Advocacy coalitions | 41 | 1.32 | Forces, movement, advocacy, interactions, coalitions | Housing | 41 | 1.35 | Urban, housing metropolitan, rural property | Resource management | 24 | 1.91 | Resources, management, land, oil, service |
| Rational choice | 45 | 1.18 | Choice, pay, collective, rational, selection | Experimental design | 43 | 1.30 | Group, selection, testing, treatment, tests | Debt | 25 | 1.87 | Debt, rates, rate, levels crisis |
| Politicians | 46 | 1.18 | Politicians, elected, attitudes, preferences, parties | Regulation | 44 | 1.30 | Regulatory, regulation, sustainability, activity, regulations | Regional issues | 26 | 1.86 | Countries, region, regional, africa, south |
| Complexity | 48 | 1.08 | Complexity, task, county, hypothesis, determinants | Knowledge sharing | 45 | 1.26 | Knowledge, capital, complexity, gap, sharing | Labor conditions | 27 | 1.83 | American, relations, focuses, conditions, labor |
| Media | 49 | 1.05 | Media, fields, content, coverage, sharing | Productivity | 47 | 1.04 | Growth, life productivity, term, limitations | State-local government | 29 | 1.74 | State, local governments, officials, legislative |
| | | | | Coproduction | 48 | 1.04 | Polymaking, coproduction, users, instruments, whole | Project funding | 32 | 1.61 | Projects, transportation, project, funding, fund |
| | | | | Organizational identity | 49 | 1.01 | External, organizations, identity, hand, movement | Foreign regulations | 33 | 1.59 | Foreign, regulatory, regulations, competition, investment |
| | | | | Analytical tools | 50 | 1.01 | Tools, technical, definition, techniques, analytical | Public-private reforms | 34 | 1.56 | Public, sector, private, reform, reforms |
| | | | | | | | | Water services | 36 | 1.49 | Water, access, services, rural, areas |
| | | | | | | | | Information systems | 38 | 1.44 | Information, systems, technology, veterans, affairs |

TABLE 6 (Continued)

| Academic journals | | | Academic-practice journals | | | PAIS | | |
|--------------------|----------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|----------|-----------------------------|--------------------|----------|-----------------------------|
| Topic name | Rank (%) | Topic weight | Topic name | Rank (%) | Topic weight | Topic name | Rank (%) | Topic weight |
| | | Top five terms in the topic | | | Top five terms in the topic | | | Top five terms in the topic |
| | | | Funding | 39 | 1.37 | Oversight | 40 | 1.35 |
| | | | | | | Religious policies | 42 | 1.29 |
| | | | Assistance programs | 43 | 1.16 | | | |
| | | | Facilities management | 44 | 1.08 | | | |
| | | | Congress | 45 | 1.03 | | | |
| | | | Decision-making | 47 | 0.84 | | | |
| | | | Costs | 48 | 0.83 | | | |
| | | | Future problems | 50 | 0.74 | | | |
| Total topic weight | 35.18 | | Total topic weight | | 39.00 | Total topic weight | | 68.01 |

the other topics varied in importance between the corpora, with the ranking for the academic and academic–practice topics higher than that of the practice topics. For example, strategic planning was ranked 21 spots higher in the academic corpus and 14 higher in the academic–practice corpus than in the practice corpus.

Table 3 lists a further four topics with *similar topic names*. Notable among these topics are their dissimilar ranks. For example, performance management was the second-ranked in the academic–practice corpus (TW 4.04), third-ranked topic in the academic corpus (TW 3.43) but was ranked next to last in the practice corpus (TW 0.83). Tables 2 and 3 indicate that 16 percent of the topics were shared across the three corpora, accounting for 20.46 percent of total topic weight for the academic corpus, 22.37 percent for the academic–practice corpus, and 14.43 percent for the PAIS corpus, indicating that the same and shared topics were more important among the academic corpora than the practice corpus.

Tables 4 presents the same topic shared among two of the three corpora (academic and academic–practice, academic and PAIS, academic–practice and PAIS), and Table 5 similar topic names. In the two academic corpora, 10 topics are the same and 6 similar accounting for a total topic weight 43.67 percent for the academic corpus and 38.60 percent academic–practice corpus. Of the 16 topics with the same or similar names, except for public service motivation/job satisfaction (ranked 1st in both corpora), networks (ranked 4 in the academic and 5 in the academic–practice corpus) and collaboration/partnership (ranked 8th in each corpus), they are accorded different priorities in the two corpora. For example, innovation is ranked 5 in the academic corpus and 25 in the academic–practice corpus and gender 3 in the academic–practice corpus and 19 in the academic corpus. This is suggestive of different priorities among the two corpora of academic journals.

Seven topics are shared between the academic corpora and PAIS: 2 for the same topic (1 for each academic corpus) and 5 for the similar topics (all for the academic corpus) accounting for a total topic weighting of 17.63 percent. Again, differing rank and topic weight is noted. For example, the topic labeled as “conflict management” in the academic corpus and “conflicts” in the practice corpus was ranked 43rd and 4th in those two corpora, respectively. Although the names of this topic share the lexical item “conflict,” the topic terms (Table 3 columns 4 and 12) suggest that academics and practitioners focus on different aspects of the question of conflict: the former group examines it within an organizational setting, while the latter group takes a more international perspective.

Dissimilar topics accounted for the largest group of topics. Table 6 lists 80 topics with no commonality in names between the corpora, accounting for 53.3 percent of the 150 topics identified in total. This is made up of

21 for academic journals, 24 for academic–practice journals, and 35 in the PAIS corpus. The topic names in this group suggest that the academic corpus is focused more on abstract concepts (e.g., public service motivation, welfare regimes, participatory democracy, rational choice), the academic–practice corpus on more tangible public administration topics (e.g., job satisfaction, e-government, privatization, personnel) whereas the practice corpus is often focused on many topics related to policy areas (e.g., defense, energy, trade, water).⁴ Six of the dissimilar topics in the PAIS corpus were among the top 10 ranked topics, and dissimilar total topic weights amounted to 68.01 percent contrasted to 39.00 percent for the academic–practice corpus and 35.18 percent for the academic corpus.

In summary, only four (8 percent) of the 50 topics shared the same name in both corpora, and four (8 percent) additional topics had similar names in the three corpora. When we compared shared pairs of topics, the greatest similarity was found in the two academic corpora. Across the three corpora, a very large proportion of topics had distinctly different names. This analysis of the topics in two corpora over a period of 25 years suggests a substantial gap, or even a gulf, between the interests of academics and practitioners. However, this analysis is static and may hide variations in topic weights over time. We next examine this possibility.

The evolution of topics over time

A full analysis of the evolution of topics in each corpus is presented in the Figures S1–S3. Notably, our findings from the practice corpus show only minor fluctuations in most of the topics over time, suggesting a stable level of government attention directed toward many policy issues, such as assistance programs, budgeting, trade, taxation, and oversight. Beyond these minor fluctuations, we observe small or large peaks in many topics in some years. For example, (1) a slight increase in governments’ attention to terrorism issues occurred shortly after September 11, 2001; (2) increased attention was given to healthcare after the introduction of the Affordable Care Act in the United States in 2008; and (3) a moderate increase in attention to PES statistical topics occurred around 1997 in response to a global financial crisis. Compared with the topic evolution observed in the practice corpus, we observed a greater amount of fluctuation in attention to public administration issues in the academic corpora. Most of these fluctuations exhibited a steady pattern, with increases and decreases of similar levels over time. Some topics, such as public service motivation and innovation in the academic corpus and analytical tools and contracting, however, have rapidly attracted academic attention.

Next, we explore these data and present our findings on the evolution of topics with the same name in the

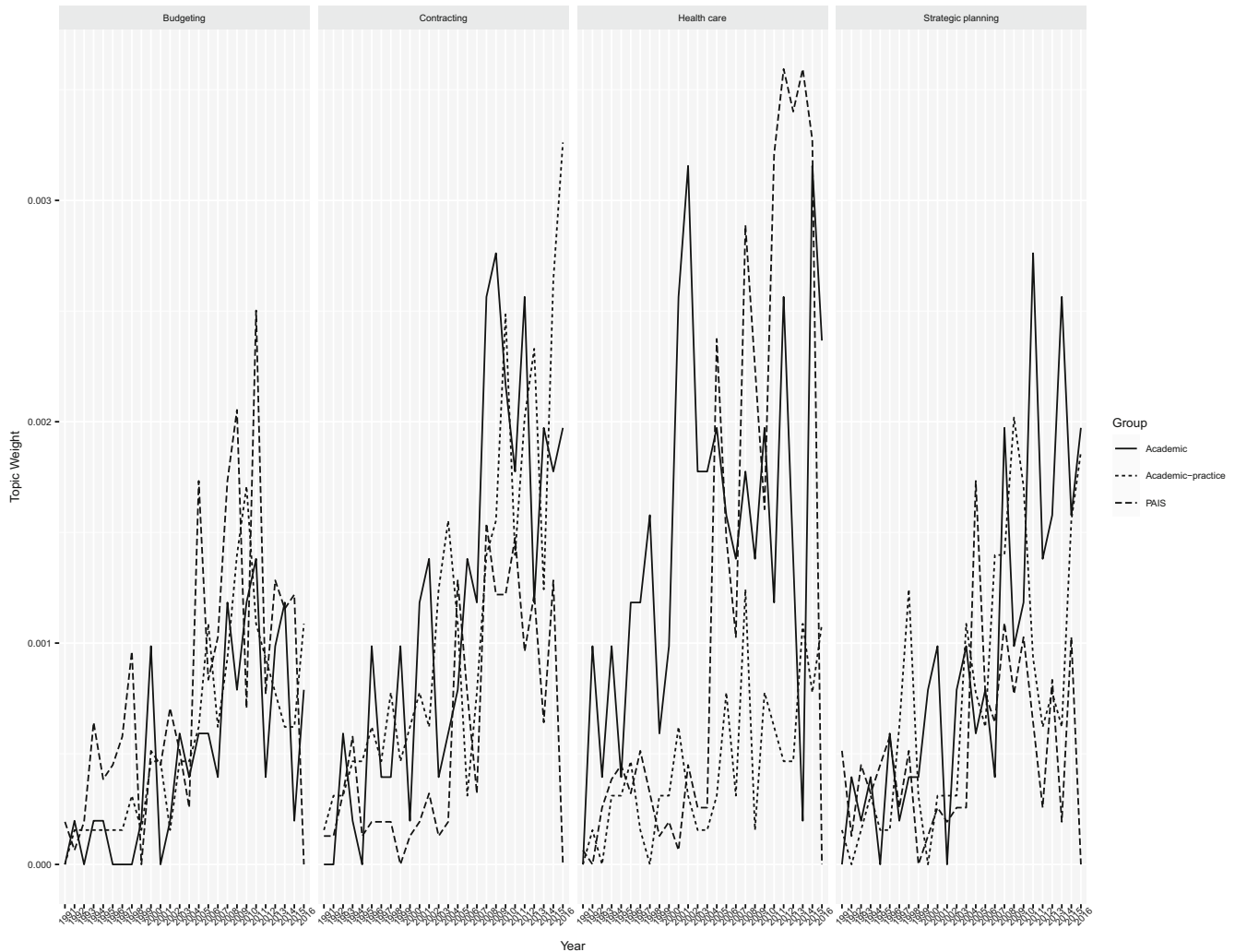


FIGURE 1 Evolution of the same topics across three corpora.

three corpora in Figure 1 and topics with similar names in Figure 2. The topics with the same name typically showed an increase in topic weight over time, except for budgeting, for which a slight decrease was observed after 2011, and notably for the PAIS corpus. Other notable variations include healthcare featuring strongly in the practice corpus after 2011, and strategic planning fading off after 2008. Of the topics with similar names, education schools/universities, environmental regulation/practice/policy, law/law enforcement, and performance management/measurement tended in the same direction, with year-on-year fluctuations, but with some notable differences. We observed divergence in the topic of environmental regulation/environmental protection, which was found to have peaked in 2004 in the practice corpus and 2013 in the academic-practice corpus but continued to be of growing interest in the academic corpus. This difference is particularly evident for the topic of performance management/measurement, which showed an increase in weight in the academic and academic-practice corpus beginning in the late 1990s but tapered off after 2013 in

the practice corpus. It is, however, possible that some of these variations, especially in the academic corpora, could be a product of publication processes.

Corpus linguistics analysis of keyness

In our corpus linguistics analysis, we first calculated the LLR of keywords to identify words at a p -level $< .001$ with a critical value of 15.13 (Rayson, 2008). We used WordSmith software to examine the keywords with an unusually high log likelihood in the early (1991–1995) and late periods (2012–2016) in the three corpora.

As shown in Table 7, during the early period, the academic corpus discussed different programs, systems, policies, services, and issues in the context of the United Kingdom, as well as the reforms and contracting arrangements of the UK National Health Service (NHS). Another key aspect of this corpus concerns various types of government expenditures. Recent academic discussions have revolved around issues of

governance (e.g., cross-sector collaboration and policy complexity) and crises related to, for example, economics, financial resources, and emergencies. The literature in the academic corpus also pays a great deal of attention to the performance, outcomes, and accountability of public policies and public services and how

to improve the supervisor-supervisee relationship and motivate public servants. Compared with the early period, during which the literature was focused mainly on a specific context, the literature in the later period reflects a broader range of issues across different settings.

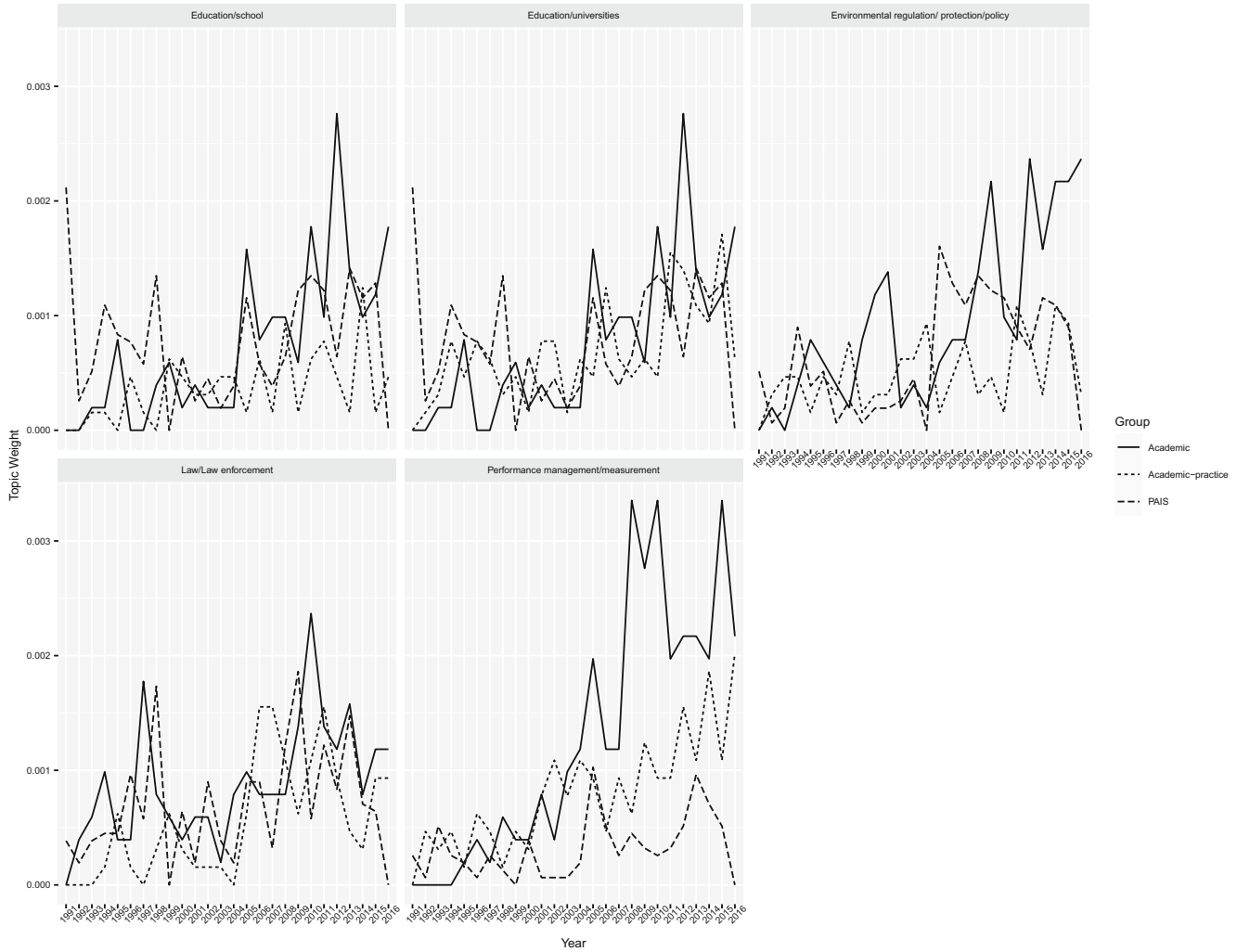


FIGURE 2 Evolution of the similar topics across three corpora.

TABLE 7 Keyness comparison between (1991–1995) and (2012–2016) in academic journal articles.

| Academic journal articles (1991–1995) | | | | Academic journal articles (2012–2016) | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|------------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------------|-------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| Keyword | Freq. | Reference corpus Freq (2012–2016). | Log-likelihood | Keyword | Freq. | Reference corpus Freq (1991 = 1995). | Log-likelihood |
| NHS | 36 | 28 | 73.08 | Governance | 500 | 10 | 70.05 |
| British | 36 | 36 | 63.00 | Performance | 745 | 31 | 59.41 |
| Expenditure | 34 | 45 | 48.55 | Crisis | 231 | 3 | 38.82 |
| Britain | 21 | 19 | 39.12 | Accountability | 237 | 4 | 35.98 |
| | | | | Motivation | 189 | 2 | 33.87 |
| | | | | Outcomes | 225 | 5 | 29.78 |

Note: The ranking is based on log likelihood scores and all the scores are significant at $p < .001$.

TABLE 8 Keyness comparison between (1991–1995) and (2012–2016) in academic–practice journal articles.

| Academic–practice journal articles (1991–1995) | | | | Academic–practice journal articles (2012–2016) | | | |
|--|-------|---------------------------------------|----------------|--|-------|---------------------------------------|----------------|
| Keyword | Freq. | Reference corpus Freq (2012–2016). | Log-likelihood | Keyword | Freq. | Reference corpus Freq (1991–1995). | Log-likelihood |
| Planning | 63 | 68 | 62.14 | Governance | 469 | 13 | 110.21 |
| Personnel | 44 | 60 | 33.34 | Countries | 257 | 9 | 53.73 |
| | | | | Citizens | 252 | 10 | 48.92 |
| | | | | Municipalities | 163 | 5 | 36.53 |
| | | | | Participation | 239 | 14 | 34.22 |
| | | | | Motivation | 180 | 8 | 32.38 |
| | | | | Actors | 131 | 3 | 33.29 |
| | | | | Financial | 286 | 21 | 31.91 |

Note: The ranking is based on log likelihood scores and all the scores are significant at $p < .001$.

TABLE 9 Keyness comparison between (1991–1995) and (2012–2016) in PAIS.

| PAIS (1991–1995) | | | | PAIS (2012–2016) | | | |
|------------------|-------|---------------------------------------|----------------|------------------|-------|---------------------------------------|----------------|
| Keyword | Freq. | Reference corpus Freq (2012–2016). | Log-likelihood | Keyword | Freq. | Reference corpus Freq (1991–1995). | Log-likelihood |
| Relations | 167 | 25 | 474.16 | GAO | 1745 | 5 | 554.46 |
| Labor | 252 | 153 | 442.56 | Challenges | 780 | 7 | 215.96 |
| Political | 234 | 203 | 327.10 | DOD | 604 | 2 | 189.79 |
| Economic | 334 | 599 | 218.50 | Dollars | 505 | 1 | 164.21 |
| International | 224 | 378 | 159.86 | Risk | 390 | 9 | 82.18 |
| Local | 196 | 356 | 125.82 | GAO's | 245 | 1 | 75.56 |
| Role | 163 | 294 | 105.73 | Governance | 312 | 13 | 46.74 |
| | | | | Oversight | 271 | 11 | 41.41 |
| | | | | Progress | 331 | 17 | 41.40 |
| | | | | Effective | 288 | 16 | 33.26 |

Note: The ranking is based on log likelihood scores and all the scores are significant at $p < .001$.

Personnel and planning were the two key words for the early period in the academic–practice corpus (Table 8). Like the academic corpus, in the recent period, the keyness analysis identified governance as the most frequent topic and the key word of motivation was shared with the academic corpus. This corpus included countries (e.g., country studies) and scholarship on citizens and participation, municipalities, actors, and finance. While there were no shared key words between the two time periods, the literature in the later period reflects a broader range of issues across different settings, as was the case with the academic journals corpus. The two academic corpora shared the common keywords of governance and motivation.

As shown in Table 9, the early-period literature in the practice corpus is focused mainly on the relations between different countries, sectors, parties, and branches of government; labor issues; political and economic conditions and/or crises; international perspectives/comparisons; organizations; and agreements. Many texts also discuss the roles of different stakeholders, such

as governments and the voluntary sector. Hierarchically, the roles of local governments and administrations are emphasized. The keywords that emerged from the later period of the practice corpus differed from those that emerged from the early period. There is reference to two US government departments, the US General Accountability Office (GAO), and US Department of Defense (DOD) highlighting the importance of oversight and accountability in government agencies and issues related to defense finances, organizational structure, and service provisions to veterans. The texts discuss the challenges and risks faced by different actors, such as states, government agencies, and markets, and in different issue areas, such as the environment, public health, and economics. The texts also indicate the amount of dollars that have been provided in the domestic government programs, global development, and international collaborations. Aspects of governance, progress, and effectiveness, such as how to align with rules, incentives, and practices, are also frequently discussed. Overall, compared with the literature from the early period, the literature from the later

period of the practice corpus processes increasingly emphasizes specific government agencies alongside governance, outcomes, and associated processes.

Two points emerged from our comparison of the evolution of keyness between the corpora. First, corpora focus on a specific context in a certain period, as exemplified by the focus on the United States in the practice corpus during the later period and on the United Kingdom in the academic corpus in the early period. Second, we observed a transformation in the three corpora from discussion specific policy agendas of and relative narrow topics to more broader processes associated with governance and outcomes. This transformation is highlighted by the small number of reference corpus frequency counts in both corpora in the later period compared with the early period (see column 3 of the 2012–2016 period in Tables 7–9).

DISCUSSION

In this article, we argue that while extensive literature has yielded invaluable evidence on the relevance of public administration scholarship to practice evidence on the scope and duration of the academic–practice divide is equivocal. With this article, we aim to address this by demonstrating the application of inductive computational and linguistic techniques to corpora of academic and practice literature to examine changes over time. Our analysis of articles from academic and academic–practice journals included in the JCR and government reports in the PAIS provides international evidence on the relevance of academic research to practice in the field of public administration. We identified 50 topics each in the two academic and the practice corpora during the 1990–2016 period, of which 16 percent were the same or similar across the three corpora, and around 40 percent were distinct in the two academic corpora, and 68 percent in the practice corpus. The results of further analysis of the weights attached to each of these topics indicate the varying importance attached to academic and practice literature, with few examples of congruence. The findings of a deeper analysis of the eight topics that were the same or similar in both corpora typically showed similar trajectories, but with important variations in the attention to topics over time. From the perspective of corpus linguistics, the results of our keyness analysis indicate strong differences between the early and later periods in all corpora. We can observe a shift from precise topics in the early period to broader concepts of governance, motivation, and outcomes in the late period. However, overlaps of similar keywords in each corpus are limited. The keyness analysis thus reinforces the findings of our topic modeling analysis. This leads us to conclude that an academic–practice divide exists and that the language and topics used by these two groups are somewhat distinct. Our findings suggest a negative answer to our research question regarding whether

public administration research reflects real-world problems and, thus, that it is of limited relevance to practice.

It is, however, important to note that while we conclude that academic research is not relevant to practice there is variation within the academic literature reviewed. Fourteen topics shared the same name among the academic (TW 32.89) and academic–practice (TW 31.43) corpora. Of the similar named topics, 9 were from academic journals (TW 21.89) and 10 from the academic–practice journals (TW 26.74).⁵ In total, just over half of the topics shared the same or similar names in the two academic corpora: 23 topics with a 54.78 topic weight in the academic corpus and 24 topics with a topic weight of 58.17 in the academic–practice corpus. The preponderance of these topics was in the bottom half of the ranking, but include some topics perceived to be of importance in the literature including coproduction, new public management, privatization, and red tape. While there is around 40 percent of difference in the topics of the two academic corpora, the difference to the practice corpora remains where 35, or 70 percent, of the topics were distinct from the academic corpora.

We took the example of Pollitt's (2017) forcible argument that the differences between academics and practitioners had increased since the 1980s, largely because of the managerialization of higher education. Our evidence supports Pollitt's assertion of difference – our analysis of topics during 1990–2016 indicates substantial differences between the academic corpora and the practice corpus – but offers a different interpretation of this change over time. Although the literature provides extensive evidence in support of shifts in academic priorities (e.g., Van Wittleloostuijn, 2016), our analysis of topic weights over time and the evidence from our keyness analysis suggests that there was very little similarity in the topics studied by academics and practitioners in the early 1990s and that this difference persists. Pollitt argued that these changes had emerged since the 1980s; as our data commence in 1990, it is possible that the divergence had occurred prior to that year.

Content analysis that relies upon scholars identifying categories or topics for analysis (Gibson & Deadrick, 2010; Streib et al., 2001), and which are usually drawn from United States settings, has provided equivocal results. The inductive method of topic modeling – unstructured machine learning – in the context of international corpora of academic and practitioner literature suggests differences between these two groups and a focus on very different topics. For example, of the 21 topics identified by Gibson and Deadrick (2010), the top five topics among academic journals were organizational theory, public policy analysis, environment, international, and personnel/human resources; among practice journals, the top five topics were personnel/human resources, public policy analysis, ethics, organizational theory, and information technology. These topics are both different and more generic than those identified in our topic modeling analysis: the top five topics in our academic corpus are public

service motivation, healthcare, performance management, networks, and innovation, in the academic–practice corpus job satisfaction, performance measurement, gender, schools, and networks and the top five topics in our practice corpora are the European Union, defense, human rights, conflicts, and healthcare. Our topic modeling approach indicates a lack of congruence between corpora for nearly seven-tens of the topics identified in the practice corpus; in contrast, the deductive content analysis presented by Gibson and Dadrick (2010) matched nearly all their identified topics to academic or practitioner interests.

Our article represents an examination of the academic–practitioner divide from only one perspective. To the best of our knowledge, this article presents the first attempt to examine the academic–practitioner divide using international corpora of literature. Alternative practitioner venues, such as professional journals or the media, could be used to provide an account of practice topics. However, in our searches for practice literature, we struggled to identify international literature comparable to that found in the PAIS because most professional associations, such as the US International City/County Managers Association or the Institute of Public Administration Australia, are in their countries of focus. Similarly, analyses of different time periods may yield alternative findings. Furthermore, the use of computational methods requires digitized corpora, and thus their application is limited by the scarcity of digital data prior to the 1990s. Alternatively, other corpus linguistics methods could be used to analyze and interrogate the academic and practice literature on public administration. For example, collocation analysis may yield a potentially rich avenue for exploration. This technique enables qualitative analysis of how each target word is used with other words. In future research, collocation analysis might enable the probing of individual words to identify differences between the academic and practice corpora (e.g., Kaufmann & Haans, 2021) thereby deriving different findings.

CONCLUSION

The design science of public administration has long been affected by concerns about its relevance to practice. Scholars have investigated the academic–practice divide using a wide range of social science research methods to examine the applicability and extent of this divide and have sought to present solutions (Buick et al., 2015; Newland, 2000; Newman et al., 2016). Our research and findings presented in this article break new ground. First, our application of computational social science to identify topics and corpus linguistics methods detects key words to corpora of academic and practice literature in the field of public administration and yielded results suggesting that the agendas of authors in these bodies of literature are more

different than similar. Second, we examined the academic–practitioner divide empirically over time but found no evidence of increasing divergence, as the lack of relevant topics was present at the beginning of the studied period. However, we note the similarity in the trends of the identified topics in the academic, academic–practice, and practice corpora, which shifted from policy arenas and specific public administration key words discussion to broader topics, with governance highlighted in all corpora. Although our analysis adds to the body of knowledge on the relevance of academic research for practice rather than providing solutions, we believe that we offer novel insights in this article, and we encourage scholars in our field to use these techniques to further elucidate and understand the relevance of academic literature to the practice of public administration.

FUNDING INFORMATION

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ This phenomenon is not unique to public administration and is widely discussed across the social sciences. For example, in the field of management, Aguinis et al. (2012) found an inverse relationship between the most cited authors within and outside academia and minimal overlap between academics with high scholarly impact and those with high real-world impact. Similar arguments have been made in many other social science disciplines, including political science (Del Rosso 2015), and in business disciplines such as accounting (Ferry et al., 2019).
- ² We selected “government” as the search term because it epitomizes the practice of public administration. To test this, we undertook some small intra-corpus comparisons with other keywords (e.g. “public admin*”; “administration”) before data scraping. The results showed that the word “government” captured a wider array of documents in PAIS.
- ³ The removal of these stop or “noise” words, which were not the focus of the study, yielded cleaner text files and improved the quality of the analysis.
- ⁴ We note that because topic modeling is an unsupervised machine learning that there could be potential similarity in some of these topics. For example, we identify New Public Management as a topic in the academic corpus, and public–private reforms in the practice corpus. This latter topic could be a subset of NPM. This could be examined in new analysis that would be beyond the scope of this article by using collocation analysis (please see the discussion section).
- ⁵ Municipalities in the academic corpus mapped onto councils and city-county administration in the academic–practice corpus.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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