

Rethinking Public Administration as an Interdisciplinary Field

Bradley E. Wright
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Public Administration as an Interdisciplinary Field: Assessing Its Relationship with the Fields of Law, Management, and Political Science

Bradley E. Wright is an associate professor of political science at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. His research focuses on how employee attitudes and behavior are influenced by the interaction between employee characteristics and the organizational work environment. His most recent research focuses on public service motivation, transformational leadership, and performance management. His work has been published in *Administration & Society*, *American Review of Public Administration*, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, and *Public Administration Review*.
E-mail: bwright@unc Charlotte.edu

Public administration is an interdisciplinary field, building on a variety of disciplinary approaches and values. But how well does the field of public administration reflect those values and processes? In contrast to previous arguments regarding the degree to which the field does or should incorporate values and lessons from other academic disciplines, this study provides a systematic assessment of the field's reliance on research and theory from the fields of law, management, and political science. An analysis of journal citations across these fields suggests that research in public administration is largely isolated from the three disciplines that are commonly believed to form its foundation.

Public administration is an interdisciplinary field that builds on a variety of disciplinary approaches and values (Kettl and Milward 1996; Rosenbloom 1983). Even so, there are three disciplines that form the underlying foundation of the field. In addition to the traditional managerial emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness, the field of public administration is heavily influenced by the representative and responsive nature of our political system, as well as our legal system's emphasis on individual rights and social equity. Thus, public administration is an interdisciplinary field, defined by the need to address conflicting political, legal, and managerial values and processes (Rosenbloom 1983).

But exactly how well does the field of public administration reflect those values and processes? Several scholars have suggested that the field has ignored key managerial (Kelman 2007), political (Appleby 1945; Box et al. 2001; Sayre 1958), or legal values and processes (Box et al.

2001; Moe and Gilmour 1995; Rosenbloom 2007). Others have criticized the field for failing to keep up with the theoretical (Rhodes 1991; Van Wart 2003; Wright 2001) and methodological (Brower, Abolafia, and Carr 2000; Cozetto 1994; Houston and Delavan 1990, 1994; Rhodes 1991; White, Adams, and Forrester 1996; Wright, Manigault, and Black 2004) approaches of relevant disciplines. While arguments about the relative importance or prevalence of these disciplines are useful in keeping the field balanced, such arguments are inevitably subjective and tend to begin with base assumptions that favor one set of disciplinary values over another. Arguments regarding the field's failure to keep up with the contemporary theory and research of relevant disciplines can be supported by data, but usually are made on a topic-by-topic basis and are prone to counterarguments regarding that topic's relative worth or applicability in the public administration context. The objective of either argument, however, is to redirect the efforts of the field.

The objective of this research note is not so ambitious.

In contrast to previous normative arguments regarding what the field should or should not do, the current study informs these prescriptions for the field by providing a broad but systematic assessment of the field's reliance on the fields of law, management, and political science. In other words, it describes the degree to which the interdisciplinary field of public administration imports lessons from (or exports lessons to) other key disciplines.

In contrast to previous normative arguments regarding what the field should or should not do, the current study informs these prescriptions for the field by providing a broad but systematic assessment of the field's reliance on the fields of law, management, and political science. In other words, it describes the degree to which the interdisciplinary field of public administration imports lessons from (or exports lessons to) other key disciplines. It is hoped that such a descriptive analysis can help inform and guide future discussions regarding the development of public administration as a field.

Data and Analysis

One way to assess the extent to which public administration is isolated from the legal, managerial, and political approaches is to look at the degree to which research published in public administration journals cites or is cited by research in these three fields. Admittedly, this is not a perfect measure, as it focuses on the use of theories or findings but not necessarily the underlying values. That said, classifying research or practice based on underlying values requires the researcher to make subjective judgments as to what values are represented and what single discipline a value best represents. In addition, public administration scholars could incorporate research from these three fields by referencing books published or even incorporating this disciplinary research by citing public administration articles that apply (and directly cite) this work. Even so, a journal citation analysis can be useful in providing some objective and systematic information about the degree to which public administration theory and research has relied on and even contributed to work in these other academic disciplines.

To conduct such an analysis, *Journal Citation Reports* (2007) was used to identify the top 15 most frequently cited journals in each of field (see appendix). While there were some minor differences in the top 15 journals for each field across the four years studied, 41 of these 45 journals (91.1 percent) were in the top 15 cited journals for all four years studied.¹ After the top journals in each of the three fields were identified, *Journal Citation Reports* for the years 1997 and 2004–7 were used to identify the frequency with which these top disciplinary journals cited or were cited by four of the top journals in public administration—*Administration & Society*, *American Review of Public Administration*, *Public Administration Review* (*PAR*), and *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (*JPART*).

The frequency with which public administration journals cite work published in the top journals of the three fields that make up its disciplinary foundation is reported in table 1. Overall, the rate at which public administration research incorporates the work of these fields is very low. While these four public administration journals average 52.28 citations per articles published during this four-year period, only 3.37 (6.4 percent) of these citations are from articles published in the top 15 journals of the three foundation disciplines. Substantial differences exist when looking at both the frequency with which each disciplinary field is cited and the citation patterns of each public administration journal. On average, each article published in these four public administration journals cites just under two articles from the top management journals and just over one from the top political science journals. In contrast, articles from the top law journals, on average, are cited only once for every four or five articles published in public administration. While articles published in *PAR* cite the top law, management, and political science journals most frequently, the average citation rate per article published suggests that articles published in *JPART* may do more to incorporate the work published in two of these three fields. In fact, the average article published in *JPART* cites work published in the top management and political science journals nearly twice as often

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as those published in the other three public administration journal studied.

To get a better understanding of the extent or origins of public administration's isolation from the fields of law, management, and political science, a similar citation analysis was conducted to look at how this pattern of isolation has changed over time. Given *PAR*'s association with the largest disciplinary association—the American Society for Public Administration—and its higher circulation, this analysis only looks at the frequency with which research in *PAR* cites prominent journals in each field four times over a 30-year period.² The results of this analysis (table 2) suggest that public administration research may be less isolated today than it was 20 or 30 years ago, as more recent articles published in *PAR* cite research in the top management or political science journals with greater frequency. This is especially

pronounced when looking at citations of management journals, confirming Kelman's claim that there is "an increasing number of citations to mainstream organization theory/behavior work in leading [public administration] journals" (2005, 967). Perhaps this should not be surprising given that the traditional managerial values of efficiency and effectiveness were a central focus of articles published in the field between 2004 and 2007, with organizational performance and effectiveness featured in nearly half of the articles published in *PAR* and *JPART* (Moynihan 2008). Nonetheless, these results are largely consistent with previous analysis of 2004–7 citations (table 1). Work published in the top management or political science journals is cited relatively infrequently, while citations of work published in the top legal journals are even less common.

A second way to gauge the potential isolation of public administration research is to look at the frequency with which the work published in the top legal, management, and political science journals cites the research published in public administration journals. Doing so makes the isolation seem even more striking. The results

Table 1 Frequency with Which Articles Published in Public Administration Journals Cite Articles from the Top 15 Journals in Each Field, 2004–7

	Law	Management	Political Science
<i>Administration & Society</i>			
Number of citations	42	206	133
Citation rate ^a	0.35	1.70	1.10
<i>American Review of Public Administration</i>			
Number of citations	5	134	108
Citation rate ^a	0.05	1.46	1.17
<i>Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory</i>			
Number of citations	25	365	257
Citation rate ^a	0.22	3.26	2.29
<i>Public Administration Review</i>			
Number of citations	50	436	285
Citation rate ^a	0.18	1.55	1.01
Citation total	122	1,141	783
Total citation rate ^a	0.20	1.88	1.29

a. Average number of citations of the top 15 field journals in each article published by these public administration journal(s) during 2004–7.

Table 2 Journals Cited in Public Administration Review, 1977–2007

	Frequency Cited in PAR			
	1977	1987	1997	2007
Law journals				
<i>Harvard Law Review</i>	3	6	3	0
<i>Yale Law Journal</i>	5	2	0	0
<i>Columbia Law Review</i>	1	0	0	0
<i>Journal of Law and Economics</i>	0	1	2	0
Total	9	9	5	0
Management journals				
<i>Academy of Management Journal</i>	0	5	3	16
<i>Academy of Management Review</i> ^a	1	4	5	25
<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i>	7	3	3	20
Total	8	12	11	61
Political science journals				
<i>American Political Science Review</i>	12	21	23	27
<i>American Journal of Political Science</i> ^b	4	3	11	10
<i>Journal of Politics</i>	1	5	2	0
Total	17	29	36	37

a. The journal was established in 1976.

b. Published as the *Midwest Journal of Political Science* from 1957 to 1972.

Table 3 Frequency with Which Articles from Public Administration Journals Are Cited in the Top 15 Journals in Each Field, 2004–7

	Law	Management	Political Science
<i>Administration & Society</i>	2	6	9
<i>American Review of Public Administration</i>	0	0	1
<i>Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory</i>	0	4	27
<i>Public Administration Review</i>	42	45	36
Citation total	44	55	73
Number of articles published, 2004–7	2,362	3,840	2,935
Average public administration citation per article published in each field	0.02	0.01	0.02

reported in table 3 clearly show that public administration research has been largely ignored by the top journals in law, management, and political science. During the four-year period from 2004 to 2007, articles from these four public administration journals are cited on average only once or twice for every 100 articles published by the top 15 journals in each of these disciplinary fields. Even so, articles published in *PAR* are clearly the most visible outside public administration, suggesting that it remains the primary vehicle by which public administration research is disseminated to these external disciplinary fields. Of the public administration articles cited by the top law, management, and political science journals during these four years, nearly three-quarters (71.5 percent) are from *PAR* (notably, 91.5 percent of the citations in the legal journals and 81.8 percent of the citations in the management journals are articles published in *PAR*).³

Looking at the frequency with which public administration research is cited by the three key disciplines over time also provides interesting information about the extent and origins of public administration's isolation from the fields of law, management, and political science. The results of this analysis are shown in table 4. While looking at how often *PAR* cites work published by these disciplinary

Table 4. Journals Citing Public Administration Review, 1977–2007

	Frequency Cited PAR			
	1977	1987	1997	2007
Law journals				
<i>Harvard Law Review</i>	1	0	0	0
<i>Yale Law Journal</i>	0	0	0	0
<i>Columbia Law Review</i>	0	0	3	0
<i>Journal of Law and Economics</i>	0	0	0	0
Total	1	0	3	0
Management journals				
<i>Academy of Management Journal</i>	1	3	2	0
<i>Academy of Management Review</i> ^a	17	5	3	3
<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i>	4	4	2	0
Total	22	12	7	3
Political science journals				
<i>American Political Science Review</i>	13	1	0	0
<i>American Journal of Political Science</i> ^b	15	8	7	7
<i>Journal of Politics</i>	4	10	5	0
Total	32	19	12	7

a. The journal was established in 1976.

b. Published as the *Midwest Journal of Political Science* from 1957 to 1972.

journals (table 2) suggests that public administration research is less isolated today than it was 20 or 30 years ago, the opposite conclusion can be reached when looking at the frequency with which these disciplinary journals cite research published in *PAR*. At least in terms of management and political science journals, there is a clear trend that the frequency with which *PAR* is cited has declined over time. This is true even though articles published 20 or 30 years ago had smaller bibliographies. Thus, while the visibility of management and political science research may have increased among public administration scholars, the visibility of the research published in public administration journals seems to have declined over the same time period. As with previous analyses, however, the pattern of legal journal citations of *PAR* research suggests that the lack of interaction between the legal and public administration literature has been fairly steady over the last 30 years.

Discussion

This analysis of journal citations across fields suggests that research in the interdisciplinary field of public administration is largely isolated from the three disciplines that are commonly believed to form its underlying foundation (Rosenbloom 1983). While public administration research only infrequently cites research published in the top law, management, and political science journals, these journals cite public administration research with far less frequency. Although there is some reason for optimism given that more recent public administration publications seem more likely to use (or at least cite) the research in management and political science, this is tempered by evidence that the visibility of public administration research in these two disciplines may have steadily declined over the last 30 years.

One explanation for these findings focuses on the study's limitations. By looking only at journal citations, for example, this study may not accurately reflect the use of disciplinary values, such as management's emphasis on effectiveness and efficiency. It also may

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fail to capture other ways in which public administration scholars (much less practitioners) incorporate the research of these disciplines. This criticism may be especially valid when applying the journal citation analysis to the legal field—the disciplinary journals that public administration journals cite the least.

Rosenbloom and Naff (2008) recently highlighted the difficulty of assessing the extent to which law is incorporated in the public administration literature. Rather than relying on law journals, public administration scholars may look to books or legal experts writing in public administration journals. Nonetheless, they report how studies using other measures have provided evidence that is consistent with the findings and concerns highlighted by this study's use of journal citations. Even if journal citations do not fully capture the degree to which public administration incorporates the lessons found in this field, it still might highlight important opportunities overlooked by the field. For example, if public administration scholars and practitioners are to look to U.S. Supreme Court decisions as a way to guide the ethical reflection and behavior (Rohr 1976), then the law journals can help identify and interpret important cases for public administration practitioners and scholars who have limited formal legal training.

If the existence of isolation is difficult to assess, identifying the origins of this isolation may be even more difficult. Why, for instance, has public administration research been ignored by the literature in these other fields? Admittedly, some of these reasons may suggest that the culpability lies outside the field of public administration—for example, mainstream management scholars' lack of interest in the legal and political context in which the management issues in public administration journals are framed. In fact, the findings of this study may highlight the insular and narrow focus of these other fields. The evidence to support such an interpretation, however, is mixed at best. For example, while one recent study found that the proportion of citations to mainstream management journals in at least one top management journal has steadily increased over the last 25 years, more than 40 percent of the articles cited were still published in journals outside the management field (Agarwal and Hoetker 2007). Another study found that although the proportion of research published in management journals studying public and nonprofit settings and occupations declined by 43 percent from the 1980s to the 1990s, nearly one-quarter of the management research published in the mid-1990s was still conducted using public and nonprofit samples (Scandura and Williams 2000).

A supplemental analysis of the data used in this study suggests the public administration isolation may not be attributable to the insular nature of these other fields. Looking at the citation patterns related to the top three generalist management journals (identified in table 2), we see that these journals combined cite each of the top four public administration journals just 2.75 times on average during a recent four-year period (2004–7). These same management journals, however, cite each the top four legal journals and top three political science journals (also listed on table 2) with much greater frequency during the same four-year period (21.5 and 13 times, respectively). During the same period, the top three management journals are also more frequently cited by the top law and political science journals than the top four public administration journals.⁴

Together, these findings suggest that management scholars find the work published in law and political science journals to be more relevant to their field than the work published in public administration journals. It also suggests that scholars in the fields of law and political science find the work published in mainstream management journals to be more applicable to their fields than the work published in the top public administration journals. This evidence illustrates that the top law, management, and political science journals are not particularly insular and do incorporate work published outside their own fields. In fact, of the four fields studied here—law, management, political science, and public administration—public administration may be the most insular, as it is the field least likely to cite and be cited by the others.

Other potential explanations for why public administration research is ignored by these three fields can be found in previous critiques of the public administration literature. In particular, the research in public administration may be less attractive to other disciplines because of its reliance on weaker research designs (Bozeman and Scott 1992; Kelman 2005; Perry and Kraemer 1986; Wright 2001; Wright and Grant 2010; Wright, Manigault, and Black 2004), lack of emphasis on hypothesis testing and theory development (Adams and White 1994; Houston and Delevan 1990, 1994; McCurdy and Cleary 1984; Perry and Kraemer 1986; Stallings and Ferris 1988; White, Adams, and Forrester 1996), or even its failure to test and build on the contemporary theories used by these fields (Rhodes 1991; Van Wart 2003; Wright 2001). While these are all legitimate issues that need to be addressed, the last reason is of special concern, as it suggests some of the isolation is at least partially self-imposed.

This raises a question as to why public administration scholars do not draw more on the research and theory published in the top journals of law, management, and political science. Unfortunately, the present study can provide only limited insight into this type of question. Although some of the isolation may be a result of the increasing specialization or insular focus of the research and journals in these other fields, previous assessments of public administration research (noted earlier) suggest that the isolation problem may also be attributable to characteristics of public administration research itself. While this research has identified characteristics that may make public administration research less attractive to scholars outside our field, other characteristics of public administration may help explain why our field does not draw more on the literature of other fields. For example, public administration's isolation from contemporary management literature may be attributable to a common belief in the uniqueness of public organizations and employees (Boyne 2002; Wright 2001).

Rather than seeing public administration as the intersection of management, political, and legal thought, for example, the legal and political contexts are often used to justify dismissing or redefining traditional management values and processes so fundamentally that little value is seen in attempting to learn how or even whether the lessons of the mainstream management literature can be applied (Allison 1979; Kouzes 1987).⁵ Such a view seems to persist even when faced with sparse, inconsistent, and even contradictory empirical evidence regarding the uniqueness of public organizations (Boyne 2002; Rainey and Bozeman 2000; Wright 2001) and strong

Appendix. Top 15 Cited Journals in Each Field, 2007

Law	Management	Political Science
<i>American Journal of International Law</i>	<i>Academy of Management Journal</i>	<i>American Journal of Political Science</i>
<i>California Law Review</i>	<i>Academy of Management Review</i>	<i>American Political Science Review</i>
<i>Columbia Law Review</i>	<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i>	<i>Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science</i>
<i>Georgetown Law Journal</i>	<i>Harvard Business Review</i>	<i>British Journal of Political Science</i>
<i>Harvard Law Review</i>	<i>Human Relations</i>	<i>Comparative Political Studies</i>
<i>Journal of Law and Economics</i>	<i>Journal of International Business Studies</i>	<i>European Journal of Political Research</i>
<i>Journal of Law, Economics and Organizations</i>	<i>Journal of Management</i>	<i>International Studies Quarterly</i>
<i>Law and Human Behavior</i>	<i>Journal of the Operational Research Society</i>	<i>Journal of Conflict Resolution</i>
<i>Michigan Law Review</i>	<i>Journal of Organizational Behavior</i>	<i>Journal of Democracy</i>
<i>Stanford Law Review</i>	<i>Management Science</i>	<i>Journal of Peace Research</i>
<i>Texas Law Review</i>	<i>MIS Quarterly</i>	<i>Journal of Politics</i>
<i>University of Chicago Law Review</i>	<i>Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes</i>	<i>Political Geography</i>
<i>University of Pennsylvania Law Review</i>	<i>Organization Science</i>	<i>Political Psychology</i>
<i>Virginia Law Review</i>	<i>Research Policy</i>	<i>Public Choice</i>
<i>Yale Law Review</i>	<i>Strategic Management Journal</i>	<i>Public Opinion Quarterly</i>

arguments that public administration should pay greater attention to managerial (Kelman 2007), political (Appleby 1945; Box et al. 2001; Sayre 1958), or legal values and processes (Box et al. 2001; Moe and Gilmour 1995; Rosenbloom 2007). In the case of management research, this belief in the uniqueness of public administration also ignores that a substantial percentage of the published research in mainstream management uses data from public and nonprofit samples to test their theories (Scandura and Williams 2000), and runs counter to recent literature reviews that highlight the application of current management theory and research to public administration (Fernandez and Rainey 2006; Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg 2006; Van Wart 2003; Wright 2001; Wright and Grant 2010).

Conclusion

This analysis of journal citations presented here suggests that public administration research is largely isolated from the three disciplines that are commonly believed to form its underlying foundation (Rosenbloom 1983). Regardless of its origins, this isolation poses a number of important and unique concerns for public administration as a field. If we assume that “the development of a more coherent body of public administration theory” is predicated on recognition of “the utility of each of these three [politics, law and management] approaches as they apply to various aspects of administration” (Rosenbloom 1983, 219), then one of the biggest challenges currently facing the field of public administration may be its isolation from these three disciplinary approaches. This does not mean that all mainstream theories and practices can or even should be implemented in public sector organizations—merely that public administration scholars need to do more to test whether (and how) such theories can be applied when managing in the legal and political context of public organizations.

In addition to ignoring valuable lessons that can inform public administration theory and practice (Kettl and Milward 1996; Moe and Gilmour 1995; Rhodes 1991; Rosenbloom and Naff 2008; Wright 2001), this isolation also detracts from the perceived importance and credibility of the field. Perhaps, as one prominent scholar noted nearly 20 years ago, the fact that the field of public administration

(and any of its contributions) are “nearly invisible to mainstream social scientists” is an indication that the field is still viewed as “an academic backwater” without “a real understanding of what research is all about, or of how to construct theoretical foundations for an applied field” (Simon 1991, 114). Thus, it could be argued that if the field of public administration hopes to develop a more coherent body of public administration theory, maximize its usefulness to government practitioners and gain credibility as a field of social science, then it must work to end its isolation from the politics, law, and management literature.

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Notes

1. In addition, 44 of these 45 journals (97.8 percent) were in the top 20 cited journals in all four years studied.
2. Such analysis was a bit more difficult, as *Journal Citation Reports* only began compiling information in 1997. This created two problems. First, *Journal Citation Reports* could be used to determine only the citations in 2007 and 1997. To establish the citations for 1987 and 1977, the author reviewed every article published during those two years for each of the 11 journals (*PAR* plus the four law, three management, and three political science journals) and counted the citations. Second, using the same top 15 journals in these fields (as identified in 2007) may not provide a fair comparison if the most cited journals changed dramatically over time. Thus, academic experts in each field were provided a list of the top 10 journals in their field in 2007 and asked to identify which of these journals have been consistently prominent over the last 40 years. While some differences existed, these expert opinions were used to identify three or four top journals in each field from which the citations in each article published every 10 years (2007, 1997, 1987 and 1977) were examined to identify the frequency with which research in *PAR* was cited.
3. To help put this into perspective, *PAR* articles represent nearly half (46.4 percent) of all of the journal articles published by these four public administration journals during the four-year period studied.
4. The top 15 law journals combined cite the top three management journals 60.67 times each (on average) during 2004–7, while they cite each of the top four public administration journals only 11 times. During the same four-year period, the top 15 political science journals combined cite each of the top 3 management journals 18.67 times on average, while they cited the top four public administration only 18.25 times each.

5. Similar views have also been offered regarding other disciplines. For example, contrary to Rhodes (1991), Weimer (1992) has argued that political science has very little to offer the field of public administration.

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