

METHODOLOGICAL CONSISTENCY FOR RELEVANT PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION RESEARCH

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Abstract

This article argues that the findings of South African research in Public Administration are often not relevant due to research purposes that imply a combination of predominantly descriptive research, textual data sources and reading as research method.

Against the background of the relevancy discourse in Public Administration, this article suggests methodological criteria for determining the relevance of research. Subsequently, scholarly articles in three peer-reviewed journals as well as doctoral theses in the period 2000–2005 were surveyed to assess the consistency between research topic, research purpose, units of observation and research methods. The current study found that thesis research is methodological consistent while articles lack consistency. Scholarly articles seem thus to lack relevancy to the needs of practice.

Keywords: Public Administration research, research methods, research topic, unit of observation, methodological consistency, relevant research

INTRODUCTION

It is not uncommon for practitioners to regard research by Public Administration scholars as useless (Bolton and Stolcis 2003, 627), irrelevant (Baehler et al 2005, 44) or not central or directly relevant to the policy debate (Edwards 2005, 68). Practitioners seem thus to question whether scholarly research on public administration does add value to the lives of citizens. For practitioners, valuable research seems to be equal to relevance to practice, and consequently added value to citizens. Scholars in Public Administration approach this research issue from a

quality perspective by arguing that good quality research usually pertains to research on topics central to the field. In this regard, Cleary (1992, 61) argues that research should “focus on important or even core issues” in the field of scholarship. Core issues in terms of scholarship and practice-related problems seem to be dissimilar, as two South African Public Administration scholars, Cameron and McLaverty (2008, 91), view articles that tend to solve practitioners’ day-to-day problems as examples of poor quality research. For them, practitioners’ day-to-day problems are not core issues. Earlier research on South African Public Administration research has shown that scholars and practitioners agree to a large extent on the broad categories for the researchers to focus on (Wessels 2005, 1513). The current article argues that, although South African research in Public Administration focuses on topics which are relevant to practice, the results thereof are often not relevant due to research methods which use a combination of predominantly descriptive research, textual data sources and reading.

As a point of departure, the way in which scholarly research is supposed to be characterised by its ability to use theoretical instruments to uncover the non-obvious solutions of core- and practice-related problems, is discussed. This will be followed by a brief review of the related discourse in order to identify criteria for assessing research for its relevancy. These criteria are subsequently applied to articles published in three South African peer-reviewed journals as well as doctoral theses in Public Administration. Based on the results of this study, this article will show that, although there are significant strong associations between the variables “research topics”, “research purpose”, “unit of observation” and “research method”, the research often lacks relevancy to practice as well as scholarship mainly due to researchers’ preference for an inappropriate research purpose for uncovering the non-obvious solutions for research problems.

THE VALUE OF THEORY FOR SCHOLARLY RESEARCH IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

As scholarly research distinguishes itself from other types of investigation by generating new and valid scientific knowledge (Wessels 1999, 364–365), it also can be expected from Public Administration research to look beyond the obvious for non-obvious solutions to research problems (Wessels 2007, 540). Essential to this ability is the application of theory, defined by Kerlinger (1973:9) as “a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations between variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena”. A long-standing concern among Public Administration scholars is the perceived absence of theory in the

field (Stallings 1986, 237; Streib, Slotkin and Rivera 2001, 515). This perception is confirmed by empirical research on South African Public Administration journals, leading Cameron and McLaverty (2008, 91) to conclude, “There has been little theory development in South African Public Administration ... Most of the research was atheoretical.”

This perceived lack of theory development through Public Administration research is indeed a reason for concern, bearing in mind that theory is valued for its “ability to help in both understanding and shaping real-world action ...” (Box 1992, 65; Box 2008, 114). Furthermore, Graffy (2008, 1098–1099) argues that a practice without theory leads to ad hoc action, while “theory without any connection to practice may fail to be relevant”. Bearing in mind the definition by Kerlinger, one can reason that theory without phenomena to view, explain and predict, will have limited relevance outside the world of thinking. On the other hand, one can also reason that research without theory as a thinking tool, will not be able to view, explain and predict public administration phenomena systematically. Therefore, it can be rightfully expected from Public Administration research to develop and apply theory in its deliberate search for the truth. If this search for the truth is connected to practice, the implication of the argument by Graffy (2008, 1098–1099) is that theory-supported research is per definition relevant.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION RESEARCH: UTILITY AND RELEVANCE

As Public Administration is a so-called applied subject field, it can rightfully be expected from the research in this discipline to be relevant to practice. What is the implication of relevance as an attribute for Public Administration research? The answer to this question is not as obvious as one would wish for, as a wide-ranging discourse on this issue has shown that a diversity of perspectives exists on relevance and utility of research in general and Public Administration research in particular (Weiss 1979; Streib et al 2001; Van der Merwe 2004; Edwards 2005; Graffy 2008). In an article written as far back as 1979, Weiss (1979, 427–239) identifies the following five models in the discourse on the utilisation of Public Administration research: the knowledge-driven model, the problem-solving model, the inter-active model, the political model and the tactical model. As these models are still useful for structuring the relevance discourse in Public Administration, we briefly discuss them.

The knowledge-driven model assumes that basic research will lead to applied research, which will stimulate development and culminate in application (Weiss 1979, 427). Van der Merwe (2004, 127) refers to this link between research and

application as “academic relevance”. The problem-solving model (Weiss 1979, 428; Stallings 1986, 237; Cameron and McLaverty 2008, 88) is founded on the expectation that scholarly research provides “empirical evidence and conclusions that help solve a policy problem” (Weiss 1979, 428). Edwards (2005, 73) asks with regard to this problem-solving type of research whether research, as it is generally organised and presented, “can be effectively used by policy advisers and decision-makers” and whether the policy process “as it is generally pursued can connect with researchers in a way that acknowledges and makes good use of their special skills, knowledge and perspectives”. Clearly, Edwards is sceptical with regard to the viability of a possible ongoing and sustained discourse between governments (who are responsible for identifying and generating problems) and researchers (who are expected to solve such problems) implied by this model.

The interactive model sees research as one element of a complex policy-making process applying political insight, experience, pressure, social technologies and judgement (Weiss 1979, 428–429). The link through which research is relevant for society and the job market (Van der Merwe 2004, 127; Wooden 2006, 1059; Edwards 2005, 73), is not of a linear order as the previous two models suggests, “but a disorderly set of interconnections and back-and-forthness that defies neat diagrams” (Weiss 1979, 428–429).

According to the political model (Weiss 1979, 429; Perry & Kraemer 1986, 221; Gaffey 2008, 1098–1099), a “constellation of interests around a policy issue predetermines the positions that decision-makers take” (Weiss 1979, 429). Decision-makers, thus, make up their minds without taking notice of any research on a specific issue. Research “becomes ammunition for the side that finds its conclusions congenial and supportive ...” even if they have to rip those conclusions out of context (*ibid*). This model illustrates what Edwards (2005, 68) referred to as “an uneasy relationship between researchers and policy practitioners” with different perspectives on what the problem is and “unrealistic expectations of each other”. Related to the political model is the tactical model for dealing with relevance of research. According to this model, decision-makers may use “research as a tactic for delaying action” to defer decisions as they “are waiting until the research is completed ...” (Weiss 1979, 429). By doing this, decision-makers use research “to deflect criticism” (*ibid*).

All five models explaining the relevancy of public administration research seem to assume that practitioners regard scholarly research in some or other way as valuable – even if it is for the wrong reasons. The reason is probably that scholarly research is regarded as giving objective and true answers to questions related to public administration or public policy – an indication of the relative relevancy of public administration research. Irrelevant Public Administration research will not be

able to serve as a foundation for applied research, to solve policy-problems, serve as an element of a complex policy-making process, change predetermined political inspired positions of decision-makers, or serve as a delaying tactic by decision-makers.

As it is expected from scholarly Public Administration research to serve as a foundation for applied research, to solve those policy problems that experienced practitioners cannot solve, and to be valued and respected by decision-makers, one can argue that the research needs to be relevant. For the purpose of this article, it is assumed that relevant Public Administration research meets certain criteria, namely:

- purpose (the epistemic imperative of addressing scholarly problems by generating truthful and certain knowledge) (Mouton 1996, 28; Mouton 1999, 270–271);
- topic (research focused on a core field of study) (Perry & Kraemer 1986, 217; Wessels, Pauw and Thani 2009, 9);
- unit of observation (the elements from which information is collected) (Babbie and Mouton 2001, 174; Wessels *et al* 2009, 12–13); and
- research methods (the application of appropriate methods and techniques to collect and interpret data) (Babbie and Mouton 2001, 103–104).

If Public Administration research is able to address difficult to solve problems (criterion of purpose) within the core field of Public Administration (criterion of topic) by utilising appropriate data sources (criterion of unit of observation) with applicable methods (criterion of research methods), one can expect that research to be relevant. Relevant research, thus, is supposed to be characterised by associations between research topic and research purpose, research topic and unit of observation, and unit of observation and research methods.

RELEVANCY OF SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION RESEARCH

This section of the article is crucial in showing that the overwhelming preference for descriptive purposes of South African research in Public Administration entails a combination of predominantly descriptive research, textual data sources and reading as research method culminating in results which are not relevant to scholarship or practice. For this purpose, statistical data obtained from surveys of South African Public Administration research output are used. This section will briefly describe the design of the surveys followed by a discussion and analysis of the data.

For the purpose of this article, research output is regarded as articles published in the three South African Public Administration peer-reviewed journals (*Journal of Public Administration*, *Politeia* and *Administratio Publica*), as well as doctoral theses in the subject field. Due to the unavailability of reliable data regarding doctoral theses when the study commenced in 2007 (the data was still cleaned by the National Research Foundation (NR)F at that stage), the study is confined within the period 2000 to 2005, which implies a six-year period. Although the results of this study are valid for this period only, they give a fair indication of the state of research in South African Public Administration.

Two data sets are used for this analysis. The first one is on doctoral theses (n=54) and the second on accredited articles (n=236). The data for the doctoral theses has been generated as part of a master's study by Thani (2009), while the data on scholarly articles has been generated by the author of this article, who also acted as Thani's supervisor for her master's studies. The definitions of the criteria as contained in the code list, which was developed for the study on doctoral theses, were slightly adapted and used for the study on journals. Each thesis and article was scrutinised by both researchers individually while they also assessed each other's assessment afterwards. Differences were discussed to ensure reliability of the data. The data for the theses and the articles was analysed by both researchers. In order to determine whether any associations exist between the variables, a Chi-square test (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2009, 588; Saunders and Lewis 2012, 180-181) was done on two data sets. For the purpose of this article, the two data sets will be used in comparative tables to describe the main characteristics of scholarly research in Public Administration in terms of the selected research topics, research purposes, and units of observation and research methods.

RESEARCH TOPIC

The choice of research topic is widely regarded as important in the relevance discourse (Box 1992, 69; Buckley 1998, 4; Bolton and Stolcis 2003, 627; Baehler et al 2005:44) as it is believed that "topics central to the field lead themselves to quality research ... even better than fringe topics" (Cleary 1992:61). A research topic, as an indicator of relevance, is used in the current research to determine whether there is a possible "overlap between the research preferences of scholars and the knowledge needs of practitioners and eventually of the relevance of scholarly research for the needs of practitioners" (Wessels 2005, 1512–1513; Wessels 2008, 285–286). As a variety of classifications of research topics exists, the research on which this paper is based used the categories of concept unit standards for Public Administration and Management (SGB 2005 [Online]; Wessels 2005, 1505) as a safe middle ground

for academics and practitioners in South Africa. Table 1 shows that the scholarly articles are more equally spread among the various categories of topics than theses. The four most popular categories of research topics for scholarly articles are:

1. Human Resources Management;
2. Managing Public Service Delivery;
3. Public Administration and Management History, Theory, Research and Learning; and
4. Public Organisational Development and Management.

These four categories constitute no less than 52, 8 percent of all articles. The preferences for doctoral theses seem to be slightly different, namely Public Organisational Development and Management, Human Resources Management, Managing Public Service Delivery and Policy Analysis and Management. These four categories constitute no less than 68, 52 percent of all theses. There is an overlap of three categories of topics between articles and theses. All these three categories as well as the category, Policy Analysis and Management, seem to overlap with “Practices for effective local government management” identified by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) (Streib *et al* 2001, 524–525) as well as with the South African government’s knowledge needs (Wessels 2005, 1508–1512). The data analysis confirms that the topics that were researched fall in the same categories of priorities for new knowledge identified by the South African government (Wessels 2008, 279) – a possible indication of the relevance of South African Public Administration research.

Table 1: Topics of scholarly articles and doctoral thesis

| | Articles (n=236) % | Theses (n=54) % |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Public Organisational Development and Management | 9.7 | 22.22 |
| Human Resources Management | 16.9 | 20.37 |
| Managing Public Service Delivery | 14.8 | 16.67 |
| Policy Analysis and Management | 8.1 | 9.26 |
| Inter-governmental Relations | 3.4 | 7.41 |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|--------|
| Public Administration and Management History, Theory, Research and Learning | 11,4 | 5,56 |
| Development Management | 3,8 | 3,70 |
| Financial Management and Procurement | 5,5 | 3,70 |
| Public Management Ethics | 7,6 | 3,70 |
| Information, Knowledge, Communication and Technology Management | 5,9 | 1,85 |
| Disaster Studies | 0,4 | 1,85 |
| Public Participation | 5,9 | 1,85 |
| Other | 3,8 | 1,85 |
| Not Public Administration | 2,5 | 0,00 |
| Total | 100,00 | 100,00 |

RESEARCH PURPOSE

Although the previous subsection suggests that the research topics of the majority of South African Public Administration research output may be relevant to the needs of practice, this article argues that South African research in Public Administration is not relevant due to the selection of inappropriate purposes for research projects. It implies that a research purpose is a significant indicator of the relevance of a research project. A review of the literature shows that a multiplicity of categories of research purposes can be applied in the assessment of research output. In a recent South African study, Cameron and McLaverty (2008, 84–85) used three conceptual categories, namely evaluational purposes (eg evaluation of policies or programmes), relational purposes (eg examination of causal relationships among variables) and conceptual (identification and conceptualisation of researchable problems) purposes. For developing this specific item in the code list, the classification by Babbie and Mouton (2001:79-81) was used as a point of departure. These authors have identified exploration, description and explanation as the most common and useful purposes.

Another four possible research purposes have been added to the code list (Thani 2009), namely empowering/improving/healing (Bless and Higson-Smith 1995, 55), reflection (Pauw 1999, 466), understanding (De Beer 1999, 436–437), and the developing or improving of administrative technology (Bolton and Stolcis 2003, 626–630). Table 2 shows that the purposes explanation and empowering/improving/healing were not used in the articles and theses evaluated.

Table 2: Research purpose of scholarly articles and doctoral thesis

| | Articles n=236 % | Theses n=54 % |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| Exploration | 8,50 | 0,00 |
| Description | 49,60 | 50,00 |
| Understanding | 13,10 | 14,81 |
| Reflecting | 11,40 | 5,56 |
| Developing/improving administrative technology | 17,40 | 29,63 |
| Total | 100,00 | 100,00 |

A valid point of concern is the absence of the explanatory research purpose in the investigated articles and theses. This purpose is supposed to indicate causality between variables or events (Babbie and Mouton 2001, 81). There is thus an absence of a research purpose that is supposed to apply a variety of theoretical instruments to explain phenomena. In both studies, more or less 50 percent of the research has been shown to be of a descriptive nature, while the second largest group of articles and theses aimed at the development or improvement of administrative technology. The latter purpose can be regarded as an indication of relevance. However, it is the appropriateness of the predominantly descriptive purpose to provide non-obvious solutions for especially practice-related problems that concern the author. As the lack of relevancy may be related to the selection of research purpose in combination with other variables, such as “units of observation”, it is thus appropriate to analyse the typical units of observation used in the investigated research.

UNITS OF OBSERVATION

“Units of observation” as a variable refer to the material or data sources utilised by the particular researcher (Babbie and Mouton 2001, 174) and is to be distinguished from the unit of analysis, namely the “what” of a study (ibid). For the purpose of this item in the code list, the following categories were used (Wessels et al 2009, 12–13): individuals, groups and collectives, official documents, scholarly literature, secondary data and statistics collections, decision-support technology, constructs and other texts (see table 3 below).

Table 3: A classification system for units of observation (Wessels et al 2009: 12–13)

| |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Individuals: This category includes individuals' verbal (including written responses to questions posed by a researcher) and observable behaviour and characteristics (Mouton 1996:142). |
| Groups and collectives: This category includes the observation of groups of people within organisations and institutions, eg focus groups. |
| Scholarly literature: This category includes the use of scholarly articles and books as primary source. |
| Official documents: This category includes all official documents such as Acts, policies, yearbooks and archival files. |
| Secondary data and statistics collections: This category includes data not collected by the researcher him- or herself, such as statistical yearbooks and textual data. |
| Decision-support technology: This category includes inter alia the observation of computer software packages, such as electronic decision-support software. |
| Constructs: This category includes all the so-called World 2 sources or material, which are used in the research process, although they are not directly or indirectly observed in the empirical sense of the word. |
| Other texts: This category has been created to include all texts that cannot be classified as scholarly, official or secondary data sets and includes speeches, newspaper reports and internet blogs |

Table 4 shows a considerable difference between articles and theses with regard to the units of observation consulted. Bearing in mind that 50 percent of doctoral studies and scholarly articles have descriptive purposes, one can expect researchers to select the units of observation that will provide the most applicable material or data for those descriptions. This expectation is met by the doctoral theses as the majority (53,70%) are shown to use individuals as their main source of data. However, only 11,4 percent of the articles were based on the study of individuals. The majority of articles (71,6%) were based on the study of texts, namely scholarly literature (41,1%) and official documents (30,5%). The data on the articles also show that 75 percent of the 49, 6 percent of the articles with a descriptive purpose, use texts such as scholarly literature (38,1%) and official sources (37,2%) as their unit of observation. This confirms conclusions by Cameron and McLaverty (2008, 69–96) that South African scholarly articles in Public Administration are largely based on desktop research. Doctoral research, however, is shown to differ substantially as the majority of the theses in the survey are based on the study of individuals as units of observation.

Table 4: Unit of observation of scholarly articles and doctoral thesis

| | Articles n=236 % | Theses n=54 % |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| Individuals | 11,40 | 53,70 |
| Groups & collectives | 2,10 | 3,70 |
| Official documents (Acts, policies and yearbooks) | 30,50 | 25,93 |
| Scholarly literature | 41,10 | 14,81 |
| Decision support technology | 2,10 | 1,85 |
| Secondary data & statistics | 3,00 | 0,00 |
| Constructs | 0,00 | 6,80 |
| Other texts | 0,00 | 3,00 |
| Total | 100,00 | 100,00 |

RESEARCH METHODS

A wide variety of research methods is used internationally in the field of Public Administration (Perry and Kraemer 1986, 216–220; 1990, 370; Stallings and Ferris 1988, 581; Cresswell 2003, 153–208; Cameron and McLaverty 2008, 69–96). For the purpose of this particular item in the code list, the following categories were included (Wessels et al 2009, 14–16): Quantitative 1 (eg surveys), quantitative 2 (eg secondary data analysis), qualitative 1 (eg participant observation), qualitative 2 (eg policy analysis and programme evaluation), participatory action research, historical and narrative studies, conceptual analysis, hermeneutics, comparison and content analysis (See table 5 for a full discussion of these categories).

Table 5: A classification system for research methods (Wessels et al 2009: 14–15)

| |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Quantitative 1: The primary characteristic of methods falling in this category is that they are used to do quantitative studies of people and their behaviour by means of inter alia surveys, interviews, experiments and field experiments (cf Mouton 2001: 152-153, 155-158). This category includes Perry and Kraemer’s (1990:370) category “recollected experience: descriptive”.</p> |
| <p>Quantitative 2: Where the methods in the previous category are used to study people directly in a quantitative way, methods in this category are used to study people indirectly by using (often sophisticated) statistical modelling and computer simulation studies (Mouton 2001:163) or secondary data analysis (Mouton 2001:164). This category includes Perry and Kraemer’s (1990:370) category “heuristic analogy (eg simulation)”</p> |

| |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Qualitative 1: This methodological category is characterised by research methods used to study people and their behaviour in a non-quantitative way by means of inter alia participant observation studies (Mouton 2001:148-149), case studies (Mouton 2001:149-150; Perry & Kraemer 1990:370) and unstructured interviews (ibid)“recollected experience: anthropology”).</p> |
| <p>Qualitative 2: Methods in this category include implementation and outcome evaluation research (Mouton 2001:158-160), programme evaluation and policy analysis.</p> |
| <p>Participatory action research: The main feature of this research method is that these studies involve the subjects of the research as an integral part of the design (Mouton 2001:150).</p> |
| <p>Historical/narrative studies: Methods in this category attempt to reconstruct the past and the chronology of events, and include historical case studies, narrative studies, event history analysis and life history analysis (Perry and Kraemer 1990:370; Craig 1999:417-435; Mouton 2001:170-173). The narrative method as an interpretive approach resonates with the “constructionist epistemology” that suggests that knowledge of the world is socially constructed (Dodge, Ospina & Foldy 2005:89).</p> |
| <p>Conceptual analysis: This category includes methods used for the analysis of the meaning of words or concepts through the clarification and elaboration of the different dimensions of meaning and use. It also includes philosophical studies aimed at analysing arguments in favour of or against a particular position (Pauw 1999:464-473; Mouton 2001:175-176).</p> |
| <p>Hermeneutics: This category includes methods such as hermeneutics, discourse analysis, literature review, ideological critical analysis, deconstructive research and critical reflexivity (Perry & Kraemer 1990:370; De Beer 1999:436-463; Mouton 2001:179-180; Cunliffe & Jun 2005:230-236;).</p> |
| <p>Comparison: Comparative studies focus on the similarities and differences between groups of units of analysis such as individual institutions, countries, public services, and individuals (Mouton 2001:154-155). Perry and Kraemer (1990:370) refer in this regard to “cross-sectional, correlational analysis”.</p> |
| <p>Content analysis: These studies analyse the content of documents (such as policy documents, annual reports and legislation) for any meanings, pictures, symbols, themes or messages that can be communicated (Mouton 2001:165).</p> |

Table 6 shows that at least 81 percent of the articles were primarily based on the application of reading as a method (hermeneutics, conceptual analysis, historical analysis, qualitative 2) while at least 44 percent of the theses used primarily reading as a method (hermeneutics, conceptual analysis). These preferences for reading as a method naturally relate to the units of observation (texts) as discussed in the previous section.

Table 6: Method of scholarly articles and doctoral thesis

| | Articles n=236 % | Theses n=54 % |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| Quantitative1 | 7,60 | 38,89 |
| Quantitative2 | 3,00 | 0,00 |
| Qualitative1 | 5,90 | 16,67 |
| Qualitative2 | 30,9 | 11,11 |
| Participatory Action | 0,40 | 0,00 |
| Historical/Narrative | 3,80 | 0,00 |
| Hermeneutics | 30,90 | 33,33 |
| Conceptual | 16,50 | 0,00 |
| Total | 100,00 | 100,00 |

Associations between variables

The previous sub-sections have gradually provided a profile of the typical Public Administration research output in South Africa. This is a profile of research addressing descriptive problems in the core field of Public Administration by applying mainly reading methods on mostly textual material as units of observation. The appropriate question to be answered is therefore whether there is any association between the variables. Moreover, if there are associations, what are the implications thereof for the relevance of the research? In order to determine the existence of any association between the different variables, a Chi-square test was done on the data and the results are summarised in table 7.

Table 7: Associations between variables

| Variables | Pearson Chi-square probability Articles n=236 | Pearson Chi-square probability Theses n=54 |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Research topic vs research purpose | 0.008 | 0.000 |
| Research topic vs unit of observation | 0.046 | 0.000 |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Research topic vs research method | 0.896 | 0.003 |
| Research purpose vs unit of observation | 0.000 | 0.000 |
| Research purpose vs research method | 0.000 | 0.000 |
| Unit of observation vs research method | 0.000 | 0.000 |

As all the variables listed in table 7 are dependent variables, one can assume that there is an absence of a one-directional flow of association as exists between dependent and independent variables. Table 7 shows a difference between the results for articles and theses. It confirms that there are significant associations between all the variables, except for “research topic” and “research methods” of the evaluated articles. Furthermore, the association between the variables “research topic” and “unit of observation” in the case of the evaluated articles is not as strong compared to the other.

Both articles and theses report research on topics which may be core-related or relevant to practice. The bulk of articles and theses comprise a preference for the descriptive research purpose. The first real difference between the two categories of research output show in the choice of unit of observation as the majority of theses (53, 7%) has shown to use individuals as units of observation where the bulk of articles (41%) use scholarly literature. Although there is a significant association between “unit of observation” and “research purpose” for articles and theses, table 7 shows that, in the case of the articles, the association between “research topic”, on the one hand, and “research purpose”, “unit of observation” and “research method”, on the other, gradually weakens. Descriptive research purposes for articles and theses are seemingly formulated differently resulting in the selection of predominantly empirical units of observation for theses and mainly textual units of observation for articles. The decisive choice leading to research lacking the expected relevancy seems to be the choice of unit of observation implied by the formulation of the research purpose.

CONCLUSION

It is expected from Public Administration research to distinguish itself from other types of investigation by generating new and valid scientific knowledge relevant to the needs of practice. The relevancy discourse has shown that Public Administration

research is expected to serve as a foundation for applied research, to solve policy problems, serve as an element of a complex policy-making process, change predetermined political inspired positions of decision-makers, or to serve as a delaying tactic by decision-makers. However, practitioners and scholars worldwide are disillusioned with Public Administration research because it seemingly does not live up to their expectations.

For the purpose of this article, it was assumed that relevant research will not only be that research on topics core to the subject field and practice-needs, but simultaneously those with appropriately formulated research purposes, applicable units of observation and related research methods. By analysing peer-reviewed articles in three different South African Public Administration journals as well as doctoral theses over a period of six years, the study on which this article is based has shown that, even though the majority of South African research in Public Administration focuses on topics that are relevant to practice, the research findings are not relevant.

Of major concern is the absence of research whose main purpose is to explain causality between variables or events – a purpose which presupposes the application of well-developed theoretical instruments. As current research has shown that 50 percent of scholarly articles and theses aimed at describing phenomena, it is expected that these descriptions will be based on the study of units of observation most applicable to the specific nature of public administration, such as official documents and people. This expectation is confirmed by the analysis of doctoral theses, as 53,7 percent of them used individuals and 25 percent used official documents as their units of observation. However, the results for scholarly articles have shown that 41,1 percent of the articles were based on an analysis of scholarly literature (existing knowledge) while only 11,4 percent was based on individuals. As expected, the majority of doctoral theses (55,56%) were based on typical empirical methods, such as qualitative 1 (38,89%) or quantitative 1 (16,67%) methods, while the majority of articles (81%) were based on reading methods. These expected and obvious associations are confirmed for the theses research by applying a Chi-square probability test on the data. However, the concern regarding the applicability of the preferred units of observation for the predominantly descriptive research purposes of articles is confirmed by the Chi-square analysis. It shows that, although there is an association between the research topic and the unit of analysis of articles, it is not as strong as in the case of theses. Although the selected research methods may still be appropriate for the specific units of observation, the application of the Chi-square tests shows that the methods used were inappropriate for the typical research topics. This inappropriateness of research methods can be explained by the unsuitable units of observations used in article research.

While thesis research seems to be methodologically consistent and meeting the relevancy requirements set in this article, article research has been shown to be methodologically inconsistent in terms of research topic, research purpose, units of observation and research methods, and not meeting these requirements. Methodological inconsistency can be rectified by not only improving the quality of methodological training at institutions of higher education, but also by raising the standard of peer-reviewing for scholarly journals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research contributed to an ongoing discourse on the quality and relevancy of research in Public Administration. Within the South African context, this research makes a unique contribution by applying an association test to identify the reason for the lack of relevancy of article research. The current article has thus confirmed that, even though South African research in Public Administration focuses on topics that are relevant to practice, article research may not be relevant due to methodological inconsistency of research purposes implying a combination of predominantly descriptive research, textual data sources and reading as research methods. In order to add value to the citizens of the country, it is necessary that Public Administration research reported in scholarly articles is methodological consistent and, by implication, relevant to the needs of practice. It is therefore recommended that follow-up research be done to –

1. determine the reasons for and appropriateness of the selection of specific research methods by Public Administration researchers;
2. enhance conceptual clarity in research designs; and
3. understand the appropriateness of Public Administration research methodology tuition at South African universities.

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