

Review of Research Methods in Public Administration and Public Management: An Introduction by S. Van Thiel (2014)

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Perry and Kramer's (1986) article 'Research Methodology in Public Administration' criticises the methodological aspect of empirical research in the context of public sector studies. The article accuses academics of over-reliance on familiar methodologies rather than devising new approaches to the subject, concluding with the advice that public administration needs greater variety in terms of analytical methodology. Almost 30 years later, Sandra van Thiel's book 'Research Methods in Public Administration and Public Management' published in 2014 shows how the field has transformed itself from that conservative approach over the intervening decades. The book's main claim is that public administration studies have applied various methodologies as the field have grown more complex in recent decades, because the area focuses on solving problems in a dynamic and changing world, and study methods need to change in order to keep up with, as opposed to simply following, standard methodologies.

The world of public administration has moved away from standardized research methods due to arguments about methodology that have lasted three decades. The book is an indispensable collection of these newer approaches and newer methodologies, and is an absolute must for those who want to follow the complex intricacies of change that have led to updated knowledge about the workings of the public administration and management domain.

The book consists of 12 chapters. The first five introduce the components of research design, while Chapters 6 to 9 examine various methods used in public administration, such as surveys, interviews and case studies. Chapters 10 and 11 show how to analyse quantitative and qualitative types of study, and the final chapter deals with reporting of study results.

Delving more deeply into the chapters will reveal many valuable comments and suggestions regarding empirical contributions to the field. It has been widely argued for many years that the identity crisis in public administration has created a non-paradigmatic area because of its interdisciplinary characteristics (Miller & Yang, 2007: 38). Within this context, the first striking feature of the book is the section in which van Thiel links public administration, management and even policy literatures and research methods with exceptional logical fluency. The chapters draw upon some of the most up to date examples of empirical research from the fields of public administration and management. Covering approaches to researching key public administration topics such as public service motivation, performance management, e-government and New Public Management reforms, the book is essential reading for inexperienced researchers and offers new insights for the more established scholar. It is noteworthy that the array of methodological approaches used within such a broad and complex field is succinctly covered in only 150 pages. The author has accomplished this by a concise blend of academic learning and empirical experience.

Raadschelders's (2011) article identifies the most common research problem in public administration studies which can be summarised in the old metaphor about putting the cart before horse. This means that researchers tend to identify methods before defining a clear and sharp epistemology and methodology. Raadschelders (2011) also claims that public administration studies are not able to reach logical and unbiased conclusions because of this process. Van Thiel's book falls into this category even as a summary of research method approaches for the studies in public administration. More precisely, chapters 6 to 9 identify surveys, case studies, experiments and desk research that are presented as research methods. However, the methodological foundation on which these methods can be based is explained in chapters 10 and 11 instead of being introduced prior to the methods. As such, although illustrations, explanations and statements are properly located, the order of the sections weakens the overall structure of the book.

Although it appears that the author preferred this approach in order to present the topic in the simplest terms available, it is surprising that the chapters of the book do not follow the stages of research design, which would enhance its value to postgraduate students and inexperienced researchers. This problem can be seen as the biggest drawback of the book as a research tool.

This methodological imbalance results from the emphasis placed on research methods in the book. More precisely, deductive quantitative methodology is stressed more in the book's general approach. Whilst research books and articles may specify or prefer certain methodology, giving more importance to one methodology over others in a book which purports to show all research methods in an unbiased way seems to conflict with the purpose of the genre. For instance, in the 4th chapter on operationalization, she demonstrates the components of deductive studies such as sampling, measurement and testing which do not actually form part of an inductive study. Also, orienting the book towards deductive methodology is justified by saying that deduc-

tive study materials and components are clearer and easy to present, compared to inductive study which is more complicated and has seamless sections. Perhaps the purpose of this approach has been taken to show how to use pragmatic methodologies when referring back to the main claim of the book, but this structure might lead to a lack of understanding the bigger range of research methodology, especially for inexperienced researchers.

Despite these limitations, the author brings to the field an important and timely book. The book overall is consistent with its main claim, which indicates that the scope of public administration studies has changed and widened in recent years and as such, the methods used in the area have become more diverse. The book is mainly a guide book for the beginner, however, in my opinion, it is also a good source of information for advanced researchers and academics who wish to refresh their methodological skills and knowledge. Recommended.

Reference

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