

ESSENTIALS OF
Public
Administration

Iyabo OLOJEDE

Banji FAJONYOMI

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page	i
Acknowledgments	ii
Preface	iii
List of Contributors	vii
Chapter 1: The Concept of Public Administration	1
Chapter 2: Public Administration as an Academic Discipline	31
Chapter 3: Historical Development of Public Administration	54
Chapter 4: Approaches to the Study of Public Administration	76
Chapter 5: Ecology of Public Administration	96
Chapter 6: The Qualities, Functions and Constraints of the Public Administrator	114
Chapter 7: Public Administration and National Development	135
Chapter 8: The Changing Role of Public Administration	160
Chapter 9: Ombudsman in Public Administration	175
Chapter 10: Women and Public Administration	191

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CHAPTER FOUR

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

JACOB FATILE

INTRODUCTION

An approach to the study of Public Administration can be described as the general strategy for studying Public Administration. Vernon (1969) asserted that an approach consists of criteria to be employed in selecting the problems or questions to be considered and in selecting the data to bear on it. It consists of standards governing the inclusion or exclusion of questions and data. Thus, an approach to research leads the public administrationist to focus on specific aspects of administration and thereby conditions his study. It tells us how to frame our questions, that is the criteria to be employed in selecting a problem. Another word for approach is method. Every discipline has approach or approaches, which its practitioners use. Anybody who wants to understand the discipline has to be taught these approaches. It is pertinent to state that for a critical study of perceptiveness in Public Administration, how we select questions and deal with these questions is very important.

The study of Public Administration over the years has not been static and most students have come to recognize and accept it as a multi-disciplinary subject. Some of these approaches employed by public

administrationists are derived from other disciplines most especially social sciences. Its multi-disciplinary nature has led to the emergence of different approaches to the study of the subject matter and each of these approaches stresses different ideals and aspects of administration. It is instructive to note that none of the approaches can be adjudged to be right or wrong or even more useful than the other. Besides, there is some overlapping among these various approaches. When the approaches are mastered, anyone of it or combinations of them may be used to examine administrative issues. A student has the right to select the approach or combination of approaches that is suitable for his needs. In the subsequent section, we shall dwell on the various approaches to the study of Public Administration.

Historical Approach

The historical approach is one of the oldest approaches to the study of Public Administration. There is a popular saying which runs thus: "we have to reconstruct the past so as to understand the future." Thus, we are able to gain insights into the present by probing and digging into the past. The historical approach is characterised with trends and pattern of events in a given society and relies on the past to explain the present and probable future administrative development. For instance, to have a proper understanding of the administrative system in Nigeria after independence, it may be necessary to examine the pattern and characteristics of the British Colonial administration in the pre-independence era most especially from 1900 to 1960 when Nigeria gained independence from her former Colonial Lord. The political scientists have for a long time been employing this approach in their researches and it is gradually becoming popular among scholars in Public Administration. Moreover, in the United States, Tonwe (1999:99) claimed that L.D. White has given a boost to the historical approach through four of his remarkable studies entitled

The Federalists, Jeffersonians, Jacksonians and the Republican Era.

Legal Approach

Another approach to the study of Public Administration is the legal approach, which is considered to be one of the oldest approaches to the study of Public Administration. The Legal Approach according to Allenworth Don (1973:175-176) proved to be very useful in the study of Public Administration in that it illuminates the legal imperatives of administration by proving a clear idea as to what the drafter of the laws has in mind and the general constraints on administrators occasioned by judicial decisions and other legal constraints. The acceptance of legal training as the critical requirement for government officials is traceable to some countries in Europe such as Germany, France, Austria, Prussia, Belgium. In these countries, for a long time, Administrative Law has been considered to be part of public law. Adamolekun (1983:10) argued that the centre of the development of Administrative Law was post-revolutionary France. He claimed that:

With the 1789 revolution came an emphasis on the rights of individuals and obligations of the state to protect those rights. There was also an emphasis on the codification of laws, which included provisions relating to the will of the state. Under this arrangement, the interpretation and fair application of law assumed the utmost importance.

One major weakness of this approach is the neglect of the informal aspect of organisation, which constitutes the most vital aspect of any organisation. Dahl (1947:4) buttressed this argument when he observed that it is an inescapable fact that a science of public administration must be a study of certain aspects of human behaviour. He therefore criticized the prevalent tendency to treat organisation in formal and technical terms.

The Political Approach

The Political Approach can be regarded as a reaction to the debate on politics-administration dichotomy. However, scholars like Appleby (1949) argued that policy making could not be separated from policy execution. The implication of this is that many scholars still believe that Public Administration, as a field of study has to be approached through the study of politics. The implication of this is that Public Administration cannot be studied without reference to the science of politics and that attention must be paid to the consequences of different political philosophies for governmental administration and the study of the key governmental institutions: namely the legislature, the executive and the administrative machinery, the judiciary (Adamolekun 1983:12).

Tonwe (1999:102) identified the major strength and shortcoming of the political approach. He contended that good government cannot be substituted for self-government and if efficiency and economy cannot be obtained without sacrificing the democratic values, they are not worth having. On the other hand, he claimed that the inherent danger in the political approach is the possibility of an easy going relapse into the morass of graft and spoils from which democratic countries have barely managed to extricate themselves. Thus, democratic aspirations must increasingly endeavour to effect reconciliation between the requirements of good government and self-government. Notwithstanding the inherent weakness, it is important to emphasize the continuing importance of the politics and administration approach in the literature and public administration is still considered as a sub-field of politics.

Quantitative/Measurement Approach

This approach is of the opinion that some aspects of mathematics and statistical techniques, which have been applied to the study of

Economics, can also be useful in studying Public Administration. Without the application of mathematics to administration, the complex technological problems of resource extraction, construction, and distribution, which lie at the very basis of our society, could not be solved, nor would the administration of large social groupings be feasible. Such techniques are likely to be even more necessary as the worldwide demand for resources and their more equitable distributions and the ever-rising social expectations, which feed the world inflation, gather momentum. In the field of analysis, whether of the practices and procedures of organisations, or ranges of policy objectives, similar remarks can be made. The importance of the continued effort to desire mathematical and analytic procedures to further our understanding of complex human behaviour systems cannot be overstressed. Such efforts and the data bases, which they produce, form most secure foundation on which future institutional innovation can rest (Spiers, 1975:222).

The Quantitative Approach is useful to a certain point, but the value of human life, of freedom from sickness and pain, of safety on the streets, of clean air and of opportunity for achievement are hardly measurable in monetary terms. Public Administration has thus increasingly become concerned with developing better social indicators, quantitative and qualitative—that is, better indexes of the effects of public programmes and new techniques of social analysis. Not only that, the quantitative measurement of data and results in Quantitative Approach is a measuring yardstick of the extent of scientism of the study of Public Administration in particular, and the study of human behaviour in general.

The greatest weakness of Quantitative Approach to Public Administration lies in the difficulty of applying mathematical and analytical categories accurately to human behaviour. Most difficulties

in their application are traceable to philosophical source. Mathematical propositions, it has been argued, are not empirical, but one has to behave as if they were. Serious difficulties arise when categories become remote from actual behaviour. Thus, the application of the quantitative measurement to different aspects of the study of Public Administration remains elusive.

Institutional Approach

The Institutional Approach is another major approach to the study of Public Administration. According to Venon (1969) in *Political Science; A Philosophical Analysis*, Stanford University Press, an institution can be conceived as offices and agencies arranged in hierarchy, each agency having certain functions and powers. The approach focuses on specific structure and institution. It draws much from the legal aspect of government. Adamolekun (1983:17) posited that the formal structure of governmental administration as a significant feature that could be used is a focus of study.

This approach is mainly concerned with the relationship between the various organs of government, that is, it describes and classifies the branches of government such as legislature, executive and judicial agencies and the separation of power among these organs. Besides, it emphasizes philosophy, law, logic, norms, values and institutions. The institutionalists are interested in those who function within the institutions. They feel that the institutions shape and change individuals. The approach is a static rather than dynamic and it can be scientific when combined with another approach or when used comparatively through which conclusion based perhaps on observations or empirical data are made (Gafari, 1993:11). However, Enemu (1999:20) argued that the institutional approach has been criticized for the neglect of the informal aspects of politics, norms, beliefs, values, attitudes, personality and the processes. That

is to say that the approach does not pay attention to the process of administration most especially the critical factor of human relations.

Comparative Approach

Comparative Approach is one of the oldest approaches to the study of political science and Public Administration. This approach was stimulated as a result of an increasing feeling of inadequacy of traditional approaches to the study of politics and administration. The study of comparative government limited itself to Western European culture and political institutions or to areas affected by Western influences. Secondly, the framework of studying comparative government was legalistic and formalistic. It was paying much attention to the examination of documents, government institutions and being descriptive rather than problem solving. Thirdly, there were no techniques or concepts for determining similarities and differences when countries were studied and compared (Edigin, 1996:15).

Significant growth in the teaching and research in comparative approach did not actually start until 1950s and this was as a result of three developments which according to Gable (1976:3-5) include:

- i. United States' post-war foreign aid programme
- ii. The 1952 conference on Comparative Public Administration at Princeton University in USA
- iii. Emergence of Comparative Administration Group (CAG).

Adamolekun (1983:21) asserted that several American public administrators and some academic experts were sent to foreign countries in the 1950s either to assist in administering economic programmes as technical experts to strengthen the public administration institutions of some of the newly independent

countries. The 1952 Conference, which was held in Princeton was also a catalyst in promoting further growth of comparative approach. This conference led to the emergence of Comparative Administration Group. The group was interested in the whole world most especially the third world countries. Riggs' contributions in this regard cannot be over-emphasised. He was fully aware of major concepts in Sociology and Economics. Besides, Riggs had a special interest in the development of theoretical models towards the understanding of non-western administrative systems in particular. He articulated a theory of Prismatic Society, which represents transitional society being functionally diffused ("fused") and functionally specific ("diffracted") (Riggs and Weidner, 1968:12).

Riggs' model was used to examine the various structures and administrative behaviours in the public administration of the non-industrialised countries and comparing them with those of industrialised countries notwithstanding the similarities in the structures and functions to be performed. Comparative Approach is an approach that has been developed in order to increase our understanding of Public Administration, to reduce the difficulties of its study, and to go some way towards the provision of explanations of why administrative events occur, why administrative structures develop and change in specific ways, or why people behave as they do in certain administrative situations (Geoffrey K. Roberts, 1986:1). Comparative Approach is a close substitute in Public Administration for experimentation in the physical and natural sciences.

It is important, even at the most introductory phase of any national survey, to adopt a comparative framework and not simply to study the social arrangements for a specific nation. We cannot be said to fully understand the administrative structures of any particular country unless we have a knowledge and understanding of other

administrative systems. Thus, the Comparative Approach seeks to establish similarities and differences among administrative phenomena as a source of data for concept formation and classification. Apter (1965) observed that by comparing and contrasting events, institutions, processes, one get clearer image of things observed and a sharper understanding of the meanings of the symbols we employ". It is pertinent to state that we may know the basic structure of the institution of a country and how the various elements of this structure interrelate to establish and implement public policy, but we cannot appreciate whether institutions are particularly efficient, democratic and ethically sound without comparison with other countries.

Decision-Making Approach

This is another approach that has been widely employed in the study of Public Administration. Simon (1961:xiv) asserted that "if any 'theory' is involved, it is that decision making is the heart of administration and that the vocabulary of administrative theory must be derived from the logic and psychology of human choice, Simon selected what seemed to him relevant theories from psychology and various social sciences (Waldo, 1972: 149). According to Baridam (2002:107) decision-making could be defined as the act of choosing among alternatives. The foundations of modern decision-making approach lie in philosophy and economics. The utilitarian philosophers especially Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, during the eighteenth century, developed a model of "economic man" or perfect-rationality, to explain how people make decisions.

The approach is a rational attempt on the part of public administrator to achieve the goals of his organisation or unit. It is actually the core of organizational planning. Among the proponents of this approach we have Herbert Simon, who was popular for his Bounded Rationality

Model, Charles Lindblom who was the foremost proponent of decision making theory and was associated with Incremental Model otherwise known as Science of Muddling through. Others are Amitia Etzioni and David Daybroke known for the Mixed Scanning Model. Decision-making is essentially complex. A decision is not the province of any single individual, but the result of contributions of knowledge from both inside and outside the organisation being integrated, even though the final direction might emanate from a single person or group of individuals (Baridam, 2002)

Enemu (1999) argued that the forces, which make up the decision-making processes, are the organisational division of spheres of competence, the flow of communication and the motivation of decision makers. The motivational factors compose of the interests, which an official requires in the decision making organisation and personality traits acquired from childhood. It is the combined impact of these factors that influence decision makers and thereby their actions. It is important to state that there are no specific, universally accepted best way of making administrative decisions and to be an effective administrator, one must understand the characteristics that make each situation unique, so that one's decision may be adjusted accordingly (Ola and Oyibo, 2000:86).

The Decision Making Approach is subject to a number of constraints and limitations. Prominent among these problems is the time the decision maker can devote. Sometimes, the decision maker may not have the time to deal with all possibilities before making a choice. Equally important is the mental. Also, the approach can be faulted based on the fact that limited suitable information basic to the decision may be available. The decision maker may not even know all the relevant alternatives about which choice are to be made. Besides, there is the problem of prohibitive cost of procuring

additional information, which may be needed for decision-making. It has also been alleged that the approach emphasized the process of decision-making and not the outcome of the decision made.

Tonwe (1998:110) also claimed that the fluid and inexplicit disposition of organisational goals also present its peculiar problems in the decision making process. Since organisational goals are not static but dynamic in character, the task of decision-making become problematic as decision makers has to contend with a fluid organisational movement.

The limitations highlighted above notwithstanding, the Decision Making Approach is considered to be one of the major approaches to the study of Public Administration and it has helped to underline important variables in the analysis of administrative systems.

Scientific Approach

Prior to the 1950s, the application of Scientific Approach to the study of human behaviour has not gained currency. However, as from the 1950s, social scientists (including Public Administrationist) begin to emphasise the relevance of the scientific approach to social sciences.

Science is a systematic ways of organising information and analysing them to explain and predict phenomenon. Social science discipline is scientific to the extent to which we borrow scientific tools from pure science to analyse human behaviour. The following procedures are involved when Scientific Approach is adopted:

- (i) Statement of the problem to be investigated
- (ii) The formulation of hypotheses. Hypothesis is a tentative statement of relationship between two or more variables, i.e., Hypothesis must relate at least two variables for it to be a hypothesis.

- (iii) The collection of data to test the stated hypotheses. Data to be gathered to validate or invalidate the relationships, which are assumed to exist among variables.

Some people have argued that Social Science (including Public Administration) cannot be said to be scientific because human beings are unpredictable, i.e., they do act differently or in different ways or forms. The attitudes of human beings make it difficult for one to subject them to analysis like we can do to atom. Some scholars also argued that because experiment cannot be conducted in the manner that experiment is conducted in the pure sciences, Public Administration (like other Social Science) cannot be science. This explains why Adamolekun (1983) contended that control experiment and measured observation, which must be replicated and tested, are difficult in Public Administration because human behaviour is not predictable. It is important to point out here that the Scientific Approach grouped together several specific approaches like the behavioural and system approaches, which are considered below.

The Behavioural Approach

Behaviouralism is a movement in the social sciences aimed at higher level of achievement by more careful study of actual behaviour, using techniques whose value has been demonstrated in the physical sciences.

American scholars developed the behaviouralism as an alternative to the traditional approaches (most especially the historical and institutional approaches) in the 1940s and 1950s. Herbert A. Simon's *Administrative Behaviour* (1947) was probably the most important work of the 1940s which contained a searching critique of the older Public Administration, particularly of its use of "principles". These so

called principles are similar to maxims folk wisdom and, in fact, given loose unscientific way in which they have been derived and stated cannot be regarded as more than proverbs (Waldo Dwight, 1972:148).

According to Simon (1961), the founders of older Public Administration failed to appreciate many of the rigorous requirements of true scientific method, but their fundamental deficiency lay in their lack of understanding of the distinctions they had drawn. They failed to appreciate that their rough separation of politics from administration did not preclude a valuational component in many things they presumed they were treating scientifically. The behaviouralists borrow from other disciplines most especially sociology and social psychology. The Behaviouralists Approach is based on the notion that human behaviour can be subjected to systematic studies, which can help the public administrationists, and other social scientists to generalize on administrative behaviour which all things being equal are constant. Such generalization, according to Gafari (1993) arose from hypothesis or cause theories, which can be applied, to any administrative system. The Behavioural Approach insisted on the use of scientific methods and emphasized the systematic gathering and analysis of data to confirm or reject hypothesis.

Adamolekun (1983:14) also observed that the Behavioural Approach in Public Administration focused on the internal dynamics within administrative organisations: the behaviour of individuals within an organisation, the impact of the organisation on the individual and the overall internal environment. He argued further that the Behavioural Approach could be contrasted with Institutional Approach whose emphasis is on the formal structure of an organisation with virtually no interest in the internal environment and the behaviour of

individuals within it. Thus, any Public Administration system depends for its effectiveness on both organizational factors and behaviour within the structure. An administrative science can therefore be built on the behaviour of those who work within organisations rather than on structures. Also, Robert Dahl (1961:76) stated that the Behavioural Approach is an attempt to improve our understanding of Public Administration by seeking to explain the empirical aspects of administrative life by means of methods, theories, and criteria of proof that are accepted to be canons, conventions and assumptions of modern empirical science.

However, critics of this approach have argued that administrative phenomena may not be amenable to experimentation and that any law concerning administrative behaviour that may be formulated as Enemuo (1999) argued are certain to be vitiated by human ingenuity. Besides, the approach has limited applicability in Public Administration because there are limited ranges of issues that can actually be observed and quantified. In fact, the approach may be useful only where small groups are only involved and not in very large communities which Public Administration deals with (Tonwe, 1998:105). These limitations notwithstanding the approach has greatly encouraged the scientific study of administrative phenomena and we are of the opinion that efforts should be directed towards enhancing the utility of the approach as it applies to public administration since it is intended to make the study of Public Administration scientific. Behaviouralism is thus a scientific revolution in Public Administration. It is an attempt to move Public Administration from non-scientific condition to a scientific stage.

Systems Approach

System refers to a set of element or units which interact in some ways and distinct from the environment. Adamolekun (1983:15) defined the system approach as:

A system made up of interdependent parts, has permeable boundaries, interacts with its environment by importing inputs, while it exports outputs in order to maintain itself in a permanent state of equilibrium.

Thus, systems analysis as a concept basically implies an analysis of whole rather than parts. The System Approach treats an organisation as an example of a "system", i.e., a set of interdependent parts forming a whole with the objective of fulfilling some definable functions. A system can be closed or open. An open system interacts with its environment and closed systems do not. System transforms input from the environment and they affect the environment through input.

Borrowing heavily from the works of Max Weber, Talcott Parson, and David Easton, many public administration scholars have postulated about the System Approach. Using the experience of other disciplines like physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, communication etc, scholars have suggested what constitute a system in Public Administration.

The methodology of the System Approach as highlighted by Barber (1972) consists of the following steps:

- (a) Specifying objectives
- (b) Establishing sub-systems (main decision areas)
- (c) Analysing these decision area and their information needs

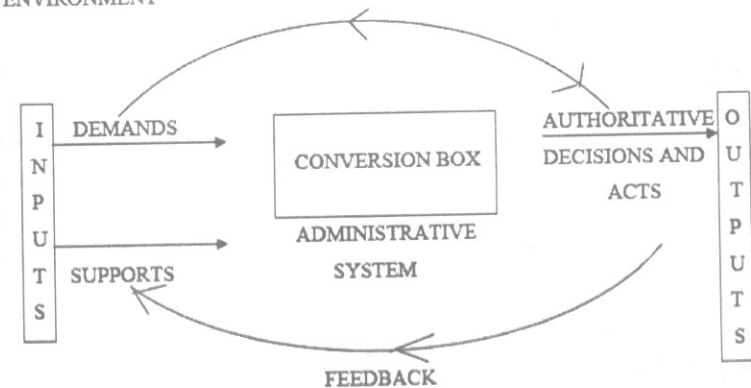
- (d) Designing the communication channels to facilitate information flow within the organization
- (e) Grouping decision areas to minimize communication problem

In practice, the approach illustrates the importance of organisation of information, the advantages of project rather than functional division and the need to centrally concentrate the information network.

Easton's systems analysis can be applied to Public Administration in the sense that from the environment demands are made on the system in the form of inputs, e.g., demands of the citizens for the maintenance of law and order and provision of infrastructural facilities. These demands are then processed into outputs, which are authoritative decisions within the governmental administration. The feedback corrects the actions of the administrative system. This is necessary for equilibrium.

The model is presented in Figure 1.

Fig. 1
ENVIRONMENT



On the application of the System Approach to Public Administration, Tonwe (1998) had earlier observed:

The Systems Approach to the study of Public Administration focuses on the external and internal factors and influences, which impinge either negatively or positively on administrative organisations and their component parts, the processes of policy-making and administrative decisions and actions. The external factors and influence cover the social, economic and political environment, which tend to condition the policy makers. Internal factors include formal structures, procedures and the mechanics of control, which administrators have to take cognizance of in policy-making. The nature of the internal and external influences and factors prevalent determines what the system would have as its input for conversion to output.

It is clear that the System Approach has many advantages. In fact, many human situations can be analysed in a rough and ready way as system. For instance, the flow of resources through organisations, geographical areas, micro-economic or macro-economics, industries, etc, can be seen as systems of inputs and outputs, and economic and analytic techniques adopt this approach. In particular, Spiers (1975:223) argued that the major advantage of an overt or tacit recognition of System Approach is that it focus attention towards processes in administration as opposed to institutions and groups, and encouraged the analysis of separate elements in these processes, and their contribution as importers of resources into the system and as users of resources as output from the system.

The Systems Approach is particularly useful in Public Administration in the sense that it gives us a comprehensive orientation about how public administrative system operates as against selective narrow or compartmentalizes exposition (Tonwe, 1998:112). However, the Systems Approach has some inherent weaknesses. It seems that the concept of "equilibrium", suggesting implicitly as it does an inherent tendency for systems to right themselves or to move on self-adjusting continua, may be of limited applicability in Public Administration. For example, the control mechanisms in human organisations cannot begin to match those of biological and other systems. Not only that, in biological systems, say plants or individual human beings considered from biological point of view, the boundaries of the system (environment) can be easily distinguished (Spiers, 1975:224). This is not so with public administrative system. Thus, the too rigid treatment of human groups as system might lead to practical difficulties, and techniques, which rely too heavily on this approach rendering it irrelevant. In fact, the approach is still considered as a useful tool of analysis in Public Administration just like in other social sciences discipline.

Conclusion

In this chapter, attempts have been made to consider the various approaches to the study of Public Administration. There is no doubt that there are numerous approaches and they differ in their focus. All these approaches have immense potentialities for the development of Public Administration. Since none of these approaches may be considered adequate by itself, a student of the subject is therefore expected to use combinations of approaches and methods in their research work.

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