Critiquing scientific writing for knowledge development in South African public administration scholarship: Selected reviews in South African articles and books

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**ABSTRACT**

As qualitative research, this article aims to critically engage on the level of scholarship by modern scholars for pursuing knowledge development in South African public administration. The article also concludes that the purpose of peer review is to evaluate and improve the text and that if scholars perceive their purpose in review as to criticize and not to critique the scientific work for areas of improvement, they expose their weaknesses and biases, which does not contribute to knowledge development and improvement in the scholarship debates.

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**Introduction**

Knowledge development in scholarship has been evolving since time immemorial. Since the beginning of time, humanity has been enquiring to know more about nature and humanity to improve their knowledge from one era to the other. Like as many scholars attest to their theories, the field of public administration is as old as humanity itself (Thorhill & Van Dyk, 2013; Sebola, 2018), and from time-to-time previous scholars starting from ancient scholars such as Plato, Aristotle and Machiavelli, the generation that followed them have to a particular extent build knowledge from them to improve on the then existing knowledge base. Those are second-generation scholars such as Woodrow Wilson and Lorenz Von Stein and other Management Scholars like Gullick, Max Webber, Herbert Simon and others who have played a significant role in critiquing previous scholars for future improvement of the public administration environment.

In arguing the point that South African scholars have neglected this vital area of scholarship, we intend to keep the relevance of our argument to the following: Literacy Criticism Theory, Conceptualizing Critiquing and Criticism of scholarship work, Previous scholarship on the improvement of knowledge in public administration, the current state of Scholarship publications in public administration, selected critiqued work in journals of public administration and whether there is any contribution derived for knowledge development? The author has randomly selected the cases of critiqued and criticised work in journals of public administration and whether there is any contribution derived for knowledge development? The author has randomly selected the cases of critiqued and criticised work in the South African public administration environment. This intends to include Prof Hendrick Kanyane’s critique of the article published by Dr. Emmanuel Tshikwatamba in 2007 and the Book reviews by Abel Joe Diale on Prof MD Mello’s book(2021) and the criticism of the book edited by Prof MP Sebola by Benjamin Rapanyane(2018).

The purpose of this article is to critically engage on the level of scholarship by modern scholars for pursuing knowledge development in South African public administration. Critiquing scholarship for knowledge development is one of the elements ignored in social

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science scholarship, especially from the perspective of improving knowledge. The approach to scholarship is mainly based on one angle of criticism than critiquing to increase the knowledge base for the discipline. Such contributes to weaknesses not worth scientific referencing in texts. This article adopts a qualitative research methodology in which secondary literature sources are used scientifically to support the argument raised in the article. The article shall argue from the perspective of both reviews of published articles and books in some public administration publications.

**Literacy Criticism Theory**

For the lack of a better theory to ground this article, I have decided to select the Literary Criticism Theory as relevant to the argument of this article. Literary Criticism Theory is defined as "an exceptionally focussed critique of a piece of literature. Cultural texts, appreciations, literary theories, psychology, linguistics and many more (Rao, 2020:1). Literary Criticism Theory is applicable to this article in the sense that it is a critique of any texts of literature in different fields of study. It is based on extensive critique of a written text than criticising only. There are various types of literary Criticism Theory such as Cultural Criticism, Archetypical Criticism, Marxist Criticism, Feminist Criticism, Historical Criticism and Reader Response Criticism Theories. Among these Literary Criticism Theory, I have chosen the Reader Response Criticism Theory to argue the relevance of this article. My assumption in critical review of public administration literature by scholars in the field is the fact that such scholars are entitled to their own opinion and interpretations of the text they interact with. According to Lobo (2015:13) “the Reader Response Theory focuses on the readers and their relationship with the text to create or generate meaning”. Reader Response Theory is therefore based on three assumptions; Firstly, that when encountering the text, the reader does not only seek the meaning that inherently lies within the text, but also creates meaning from a personal interaction with the text. Secondly, to take into consideration the readers as well as the reading environment and finally, to take note that readers formulate different acceptable interpretations because texts allow for a range of acceptable interpretations for which textual support is available.

Fawler (1979) also notes that those textual writings do not come with a meaning except the meaning that the reader create from the text itself. Whether the text is well interpreted or misinterpreted, the determination of the meaning of the text lies with the reader. While proponents of the Reader Response Theory accords the right to interpretation of the text to the reader rather than the text itself, the author question is whether we should allow in our scientific discipline for such misinterpretations to guide our knowledge base? However, Mart (2019) maintains that the both the meanings and interpretations created by the reader are a reflection of both the reader and the text. It can also be argued that both the meaning and interpretations are important to generate further knowledge. Ningrum (2015) asserts that the theory is one of the Literary Criticism Theory in which readers can involve their personal opinions, feelings and background knowledge to create meanings of the texts.

**Conceptualizing critiquing and criticism of scholarship work**

Within the scholarship paradigm, not many can differentiate between critiquing scholarship work and criticizing the same. Many ignorant scholars pursuing similar goal are of opinion that such concepts are one or having mutual implications to one another. From a scholarship perspective, the two concepts are neither one nor having mutual implications. Seagar (2018) defines criticism as personal, destructive, vague, inexpert ignorant and selfish, which is opposed to critique, which is impersonal, constructive, specific, expert, informed and selfless. The different between the two concepts lies mostly in character and purpose of reviewer’s contribution to the reviewed knowledge. Indeed, the similarity between the two concepts is that they both provides feedback of a read text. However, critique provides a better learning environment, while criticism provides no opportunity for a previous contributor to learn anything from the author concerned. On other hand, a critique is defined as “a careful, complete examination of study to judge its strengths, weaknesses, logical, links, meaning and significance (Childnursepractice development, 2009:1). Student Learning Centre Registry (2012:1) view it as “a systematic way of objectively reviewing a piece of research to highlight both its strengths and weaknesses, and its applicability to practice”. It entails a detailed analysis of a written texts in a scientific manner (Leap Online, 2021:1).

Indeed, the major difference between criticism and critiquing lies in the fact that criticism looks for flaws in the writer as well as the writing when critiquing looks at what is in the page to identify what lacks in the script and to provide feedback for improvement. The purpose of critiquing a scientific text is to demonstrate if the results of the study are indeed useful for scholarship reading and application. Scientific critiquing of published work is useful because not all published works within the science fraternity are scientifically sound (Boswell & Cannon, n.d:291) and many are published with flawed methodologies while others are pursuing a dogma which could be misleading. Scientific critiquing of published scientific work is not only important for the academic community to benefit from, but also helps scientist to improve their knowledge and ideas when they are either negatively or positively critiqued. Important to note on critiquing is that the primary purpose could not be a personal attack, but instead a mechanism to increase the quality of the thesis by showing areas that need clarification, improvement and in depth (University of Ottawa, n.d :3). Immediately it demonstrates elements of personal attacks, it reveals nothing other than the myopic of the author in question. I do however acknowledge that objectivity in Science is limited by factors beyond the ability of the researchers.

While objectivity versus subjectivity is a critical issue in Science, many have argued that Scientific writing is about being “Free from or independent of personal feeling, opinions, prejudice, detached or an unbiased”(Van Heertum, 2005:1), which are character that should give integrity to researchers and their writing. But taking into consideration the political biasness and corrupt relation
between and among scholars and politicians, objectivity in the public administration science may be difficult to emerge. Marshall (2007: 1), however views critical evaluation of scientific work as a “manner of considering the truthfulness of a piece of research, the results and how relevant and applicable they are”. Of utmost important in the critiquing of a scientific piece is the authors ability to understand the work critiqued, analysis of evidence, evaluating and making judgement based on evidence.

**Previous scholarship on improvement of knowledge in public administration**

Numerous works exist in the scholarship of public administration where new knowledge emerged by challenging previous perspectives. One of such is an understanding of the four generations of public administration which is known among the scholars of the discipline and role played by founders and fathers of the discipline. With the disciplines familiarity which grew in the American scholarship, many became familiar with the work of classical scholars such as Frank Goodnow, Leonard White, W F Willoughby, Luther Gullick and Lindal Urwick (Cruise, 1997), however it should not be ignored that it was indeed European scholars who influenced the American scholars on this discussion. The foundation of its origin in Germany should also not be ignored through the roles played by Lorenz von Stein whose role was limited by poor influence because of the German language he used to pursue the knowledge in the discipline (Thornhill, 2008). Woodrow Wilson’s critique of the previous scholars reliance on business management principles which were not in congruent with public affairs laid a foundation of a new discipline which earned him the name as the father of the discipline. Woodrow Wilson was also not spurred the brand of criticism for uttering unscientific and controversial statements in his article “The Science of Administration” published in *Political Science Quarterly* in 1887. Herbert Simon, himself in critiquing the previous management scholars about the reliance on scientific management principles, did not just provide a criticism of such assertion without alternative suggestion, because for every principle he opposed there was a counter principle (Simon, 1946:53-67).

**The South African public administration and reviewed works**

Very few South African scholars if any ever came with a perspective that have either revolutionised or influence the perspective of public administration discipline. Only Cloete is credited with the generic functions of public administration, which are claimed to have influenced the South African public administration and its academia. Some public administration critics, however, dispute such assertion and credit that to some international scholars in which Cloete can only be credited to have popularised such in the South African public administration scholarship. Cameron (2008) notes that indeed the dominant academic feature of the apartheid public administration was the administrative process approach which ignored the governance problem of the apartheid regime. According to Koma and Madumo (2015:482-486), “the philosophy underpinning the discipline was basically to equip students with administrative and financial knowledge and skills tailored to serve their respective governments in the former Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei and the homelands of Lebowa, Gazankulu, Qwaqwa and Ka-Ngwane”.

Generally there is little scholarship to support the influence of academic writing by numerous South Africans on the discipline itself, except for what modern critics may term “Cloete’s public administration”. However, Cameron and Milne (2009), mentioned Mount Grace 1 and Mount Grace II as a scientific conference which once influenced the refocus of public administration curricula in South Africa. Important to note is also the fact that it was concluded to be scholarly less profile and less influential. It is also notable that in similar discussions of both Mount Grace 1 and Mount Grace II, only the ideas of prominent white scholars such as Schwella, Theron and Cloete were dominant with less existence of ideas from South African black academics at the time. It may, however, suffice to conclude that black intelligentsia in the field could have been less by the time. In his analysis of Masters and Doctoral Thesis contribution to knowledge, Wessels (2008) finds out that “researchers in Public Administration may not be busy with activities of science and that they may not be contributing to scientific knowledge”. Candler, Azavedo and Albernaz (2010), also quoted a similar study by Adams and White (1994), which analysed the Doctoral dissertations and assessed the state of research in the discipline as characterised by “mindless empiricism” and declared the field a “Theoretical wasteland”.

Kuye (2014:182) argues that the discipline may still produce “half-baked graduates who are mere repeaters of theories to which no conceptual and practical understanding is grounded.” Indeed in the South African public administration discipline, there is currently a serious lack of leadership in scholarship to produce a cohort of scholars that will carry genuine knowledge generation to the future. Thus far numerous current scholars of public administration have neglected their role and selfstyled themselves as Political Scientists and joined the bandwagon of criticising the failure of public administration, while they are indeed responsible for such failure which either emanate from their poor teaching or innovation. In this discussion, I look at few counter reviews of published work by some public administration scholars on their colleagues work mostly to look at the purpose which we should all agree that it should be based on intention to increase to knowledge. Significantly and selectively in this article I am going to look into some selected critical reviews such as Professor Hendrick Kanyane, Joe Abel Diale and the less unknown Benjamin Rapanyane in the discipline of Public Administration.

**Professor Hendrick Kanyane on Dr. Emmanuel Tshikwatambas article**

Dr. Emmanuel Tshikwatamba then attached to the University of Limpopo published an article titled “A critical and inter-disciplinary analyses of selected criticisms levelled against public administration” published in the Journal of Public Administration, 42(8):749-764. According to Tshikwatamba (2007) in this piece of scientific attempt, he was revisiting the criticisms levelled against the theory
and practice of (P) public (A)administration. In the article, Tshikwatamba himself pronounced that the contemporary criticism of public administration are merely a continuation of previous arguments. However, one can argue that it would have been better to conclude that they are a mere replication of previous metaphors about the study and practice of the discipline. A written response by Professor Hendrick Kanyane titled “A critique of article by Dr. NE Tshikwatamba” published in the Journal of Public Administration, 43(3):414-417, provides an insightful critique of scholarly work for improvement of text to the author.

Although Kanyane (2008) claimed that the work is a collective response with his Master of Public Administration (MPA) students registered for the Administrative Theory Module in that academic year he claims to pursue, the claim sounds too good to be true considering how most MPA students in his class could not have been coming from the discipline to present such a high novel critical review. Sufficient to conclude that a fair and direct critical review of colleagues’ work might be viewed as a direct confrontation with academic colleagues and hence nameless students joined the bandwagon to an unknown destination. Important to note in this scientific piece of work is Kanyane’s approach which is both scholarly and critical which adopted a scientific critique approach and avoided a criticism approach. Firstly, he acknowledges the contribution of the author into this scientific arguments, and went further to demonstrate the areas of weakness by the article such as the author reproducing the known and its problems without making an own contributions to the debate he claims to pursue.

Kanyane’s critique of Dr. Tshikwatamba’s article demonstrate scholarship of progress and if objectively viewed by the author, a further publication would have continued and helped to improve the South African public administration scholarship. Especially that the content is deeply rooted in South African public administration through the Mount Grace conferences. To demonstrate how useful Kanyane’s contribution was to the debate raised by Dr. Tshikwatamba (2007), Cameroon (2009) took the debate further which emanated from the two scholars. In his introduction, Cameroon (2009) made it clear that he moves from the perspective that Kanyane (2008) argues that Tshikwatamba articulates different views of various authors, but fails to offer a clear theoretical position and went further to clearly state his position of his intent to add to the debate, without comprehensively looking into all Public Administration topics raised in the exchange between Kanyane and Tshikwatamba. Such insightful debates are key for editors to take pride having presided over on their editorial tenure. Prof Chris Thornhill, who presided over such editorial tenure remain a recognised scholar of Public Administration and the most cited in most South African public administration theses and articles.

Abel Joe Diale Critical review on Prof MD Mello’s edited book

Abel Joe Diale is an avid reader of public administration scholarship materials. Although not a senior academic in terms of academic institutional ranks, but can be accorded the rank of senior public administration scholar in terms of both his post graduate academic qualifications in the discipline and recognition as both a Senior Lecturer at the Tshwane University of Technology and a published scholar of about 21 publications under his belt and three Book Reviews.

His previous book reviews includes “The Zuma Administration: Critical Challenges” edited by Prof MH Maserumule and Prof K Kondlo, published by the Journal of Public Administration, 45(2):396-399 and “ Local Government Elections, Politics and Administration edited by Prof MP Sebola published in the Journal of Public Administration and Development Alternatives, 2(2):133-137. In the said reviews which are not really part of this article, the author had shown to be an objective reader determined to make contribution to written texts. For the purpose of this article, the focus is on the critical review Abel Joe Diale made on the edited book by Prof MD Mello titled: Ethics in the Public Sector, published in the Journal of Public Administration and Development Alternatives, 6 (1):67-72 in the 2021 July issue. While the author praised the editor and authors for work well done on the book project, but he identified that “ the title caption of this book is too generic for its contents in that it makes reference to ethics in the Public Sector, whereas contents narrow the topic down to three African countries, which are not necessarily entirely reflective of the ethics and moral dynamics of the Public Sector globally nor in Africa as a whole”(Diale, 2021). Such a critique is important for authors to make thorough revision and edition to the future revised edition of the book.

Critiquing rather than criticism is about the desire of the author to help in improvement of the text to those critiqued. Sufficient to conclude that even journal editors publishing such work may be proud to produce such information to the scientific community. The responsibility to ensure the palatability of information shared to the academic community should be a joint ethical responsibility between the Editors and the authors. The capacity to produce gobbledygook materials under the disclaimer of not being responsible for the content is sheer academic hogwash by editors of South African journals. The publication of an article in a particular journal reflects both the attitude of the author and the editor.

Benjamin Rapanyane’s criticism of the book edited by Prof MP Sebola

Benjamin Rapanyane published a criticism text in the journal called Strategic Review for Southern Africa, Volume 41(1):124 -124. The Journal is published by the Department of Political Science of the University of Pretoria and edited by Professor Siphamandla Zondi, a political scientist attached to the University of Johannesburg as the Director of the Institute for Pan African Thought and Conversation (IPATC). The rule of critiquing and criticising a written material rests on the authors ability to “ read the selected text in detail and also to read other related texts so that the author can present a fair and reasonable evaluation of the selected text (Higher Education Language and Presentation Support, 2020:1). The author ignored such important rules and committed five unforgivable errors which dominate his criticism. The first being the wrong caption of the title of the book, negligent assumption that chapters published in the edited book were previously published elsewhere, the false assumption that there could be spelling mistakes and
missing sources in the reference list, failure to understand content and contexts of published book as well as use of unprofessional language in text. Its common logic that the author intending to critique a text need to read the text fully and carefully to avoid everlasting academic embarrassment.

Academic Writing Centre (2022:3) notes that “Efficient reviewing, or evaluating requires an awareness of the gist (central idea), the purpose and intended audience of the text” and indeed texts do not have to be criticised because they are written. A valid and transparent rationale is required with the intent to demonstrate the weaknesses of the text. Criticism naturally intent to prove to a person that did something wrong by either being irresponsible or negligent (Fisch, 2010:4). On the case of Benjamin Rapanyane’s criticism of the book, one could pick up from the first caption of the title of the book that emotion rather than objective criticism informed the whole writing of the book review.

The title of the book edited by Prof MP Sebola is wrongfully captured as “Local Government: Elections, Politics and Administration by the Reviewer. The wrong caption by the reviewer demonstrates his entire misconception and understanding of the whole intent and purpose of the book. The title of the book edited by Prof MP Sebola and published by Batalea Publishers is “Local Government Elections, Politics and Administration”. Symantically, the book reviewed by Rapanyane is different from the book edited by Prof MP Sebola in this context. In the final analysis, the author conclude that and made a dilusional conclusion that “the book is composed of previously published articles by Prof MP Sebola or other contributors (Rapanyane, 2019:127). Nevidmind the use of unscientific language in the text by the emerging scientist, the author’s assumptions are based on unscientific illusions and did not deserve print by any editor of good standing and professional integrity. A mere google scholar check will demonstrate that none of the chapters published in the book edited by Prof MP Sebola has ever been published anywhere else either as book chapters or articles or policy briefs.

The dilusional conclusion by the author only reveals shortcomings in the ability of South African reviewers and editors to confirm the authenticity of unscientific statements before publication. As indicated in my work earlier (Sebola, 2018:13) “The inaccurate dissemination of unscientific information by authors through any editorial publication does not safeguard the Editor from the bad work produced by the author through their publication”. Like all emerging researchers, Rapanyane’s scientific profile is compromised by his google scholar citation of 234 at the time of this article, where between 95 and 98 percent of each citation on each of his article is self-cited.

God should forgive academic mentors for such failures and creation of academic misfortunes in the Political Science discipline. It is indeed the Editors responsibility to ensure that correct information is passed on to the scientific community, and that the scientific community does not deserve to consume bogus science. The falsification of information, whether intended or not is unethical in the editorial arena. The author further concede that “there are spelling mistakes and sources missed in the reference list”. Such sweeping statement is informed by the authors lack of knowledge about the rigorous review process followed in producing a book project by Batalea Publishers. There is indeed a closer to zero possibility of a spelling mistake or missed source in the publication. Such sweeping and unscientific statements are pronounced by reviewers to editors who do not read or edit materials being passed on to their desk. As attested by Bunge (2020), criticism in the scientific community mostly serve the destructive purpose in scholarship than constructive. The Reviewer also made an ignorant assumption that “Chapter 14” which deals with training in Local Government is purely Human Resource and does not serve purpose in the Book. Suffices to say “Where ignorance is bliss, Tis folly to be wise”. Otherwise the reviewer himself have received no training in either public administration or local government, neither as a student or a practitioner at the time of writing the review. As attested by Public Administration scholars, such as “Zia and Khan (n.d:429)” the discipline have always rested upon the three pillars such as Managerial, Political and Legal approaches and each arising in particular political context and emphasizing different values”. And therefore even if Public Administration is an eclectic science, a bit of its theory is required by a neighbouring scholar with less grounding entering into its scholarship discourse.

Conclusion

This article was used as a case of argument the article of Dr. Emmanuel Tshikwatanmba critiqued by Prof Hendrick Kanyane (2008) and the two cases of Public Administration books reviews, selectively by Abel Joe Diale (2021) and Benjamin Rapanyane (2018). The intention and purpose of the article were to demonstrate the extent to which the critique of certain materials in public administration has the potential to contribute to knowledge generation and influence the status of public administration discipline and practice. In contrast, criticism of the same contributes insignificantly to developing knowledge and discipline. Although the author selectively did the reviews, it became apparent that Kanyane (2008) and Diale’s work (2021) contribute positively to the discipline because authors can learn and improve from their written texts. Rapanyane’s criticism, despite its lack of academic acumen and maturity, is also flawed in terms of failing to understand the content he is criticising through the wrong caption of the book title, falsifying the contexts and content of the book he reviewed. The article concludes that both critique and criticism of scholarly work are the building blocks of the quality of knowledge we consume, as they help improve the quality of scholarly ideas. However, Icontend that falsifying the contexts and contents of the material read threatens the scholarship of integrity.

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