Rethinking the boundaries of public administration: a conceptual exploration

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper attempts to demonstrate its strength by first accepting that the (p)ublic (a)dministration’s loci foci is within the jurisdiction of the executive branch amongst the two remaining branches of government, namely, the Legislature and the Judiciary. In the executive, the administration of the state is observed. Secondly, this paper argues that while p. a. may be with the executive arm, there is however its place beyond just the said administration of the executive arm. This paper employs the use of public-private partnerships that emanated from the New Public Management Paradigm as well as monitoring and evaluation theory and practice in the public sector to argue its assertion that public administration is being practiced beyond the executive branch. The development programs and projects initiated by the government and handed to the service providers need to be monitored and evaluated to ensure value for money and meet public expectations. As a result, the expectation of quality service from the service provider should be the norm of the day. It is therefore, through the cooperative trajectory between the government and the private sector, that this paper proposes that public administration can be associated with the executive branch but not necessarily limited to the said branch of government. This paper employed desktop research and the existing relevant literature to support its argument and contribution to the discipline of public administration.

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Introduction

This paper seeks to add rather a dissenting voice to the existing scholarly argument within the discipline of Public Administration about the operational jurisdiction of public administration, which in terms of its loci foci usually identifies as the public sector. As such, it will be argued through the paper that while p. a. maybe with the executive arm, there is however its place beyond just the said administration of the executive arm. As Hughes (2002: 2) expressively jotted, the traditional model of public administration was once a major reform movement. Where previously amateurs bound by personal loyalties to leaders carried out public administration, the task became a professional occupation which was carried out by a distinct merit-based public service. Serving the public at that time was a high calling. The traditional model of public administration, which pre-dominated for the most of twentieth century, has changed since the mid-1980s to a flexible, market-based form of public management known as the New Public Management (NPM). This is not simply a matter of reform or a minor change in management style, but a change in the role of government in society and the relationship between government and citizenry (Reiter & Klenk, 2018:12). Having noted that, the old model of public administration was also heavily criticized.

Klenk (2019:3) states that public sector reforms used to be easier to understand in the past – or so it appeared – especially during the heydays of NPM from the late 1980s to the late 1990s. Indeed, New Public Management* was a generalised reform programme that was implemented throughout the whole Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) world and beyond, at the supranational level as well as at the national and local levels. It is all about business-like changes in public sector organisations (e.g., corporatization), including the replacement of hierarchical coordination by competition, the market mechanism as possible
modus operandi for improving the efficiency of public services. NPM has been an umbrella concept covering various reform features. However, it was not until the early 2000s that a rising number of publications acknowledged the huge variety of reform paths at the national, regional and local levels, as well as across different service sectors.

The developmental duty for local government provided for in Section 153 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 is an important mandate to be acknowledged by every existing municipality (Phago & Malan, 2004:482). The White Paper on Municipal Service Partnerships, 2000, acknowledges the inability of many municipalities to render services effectively to their communities, hence the introduction of service delivery agreements between municipalities and service providers. The Local Government Municipal Systems Act, 2022 (Act 03 of 2022 as amended) states that a municipality may provide its services through either internal or external agreements undertaken within the periphery of the municipal authority. External agreements may be made with other municipalities or spheres of government, community-based organization’s (CBOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and any other institution, entity or person legally competent to operate a business activity (Phago & Malan, 2004).

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical Examination**

Most important is the use of related and grounding theory for a field of this nature. While many theory theories may compete within the framework of public administration scholarship, this paper deduced amongst many, the Post-New Public Management approach as its theoretical foundations.

**Post-New Public Management**

This article, by the nature of it being a subject of for contestation, does not fully exert its reliance to the post-NPM theory. In a sense, this alludes to the notion of the acceptance of pragmatic intervention due to the nature of the discourse that is in question. Therefore, because of paralleled and diverse fabric of scholars and researchers within the public administration fraternity, the post-NPM may not only been viewed as the singular and determine theory for a discourse of this nature. Therefore, for more than 30 years, NPM has been the most popular label for public sector reform. For more than 15 years, however, NPM has also been heavily criticized (Reiter & Klenk, 2018). There is a growing trend to consider New Public Management as ‘dead’ and claim the evolution of a new reform trend, called post-New Public Management. Like NPM, post-NPM is an umbrella term that is used to prescribe and/or describe different reform trends. But a common characteristic is that post-NPM reforms do not represent a break with the past, nor do they fundamentally transform public administration. Rather it is a question of rebalancing existing administrative systems without changing them in any fundamental way (Christensen, 2012). This entails that the public sector reforms that came with NPM can rather still assume their operational intentions while acknowledging the reforms of the post-NPM as a way of dealing with the anomalies of NPM. It is in milieu of this, that this article notices the contributions made by the NPM while allowing for continuity towards the post-NPM.

**Public Administration vs New Public Management**

To illustrate that PPPs and MSPs are used truly for the indication that public administration goes beyond public sector domain. It should not be forgotten that these service delivery approaches (PPPs and MSPs) came most notably with the NPM paradigm. NPM came because of paradigmatic trajectory from the ancient public administration to NPM and other involved paradigms. Public Administration has been a subject of debate in decades for many researchers and scholars within fraternity. Public Administration is universally recognized by means of its acronymization (PA) which denotes field of the study, while (pa) denotes operationalization of government (Thorhnill & Van Dijk, 2010). However, scholars like Pfiffner (2004) opines and agrees that the traditional model of public administration rests in important ways on the articulation by Max Weber of the nature of bureaucracy owes much to the administrative tradition of Germany and the articulation of the principles of bureaucracy by Max Weber.

Robinson (2015) in Molokwane (2019:50) laments that the traditional approach to public administration is built on a top-down and elitist approach. The product of Max Weber’s bureaucracy was a government with distinct ethos, impersonal but slow and inefficient. The key feature of this model is that in the modern governmental systems professional bureaucrats execute the tasks of public administration while insulated from the political mechanisms as well as citizenry (Molokwane, 2019). An important dimension to this classical model of the public administration was added by Woodrow Wilson, who introduced the politics-administration dichotomy in his writing - *The Study of Administration*, published in *Political Science Quarterly, 1887*. According to Zia and Khan (2014), public administration could be placed on the varying notions of, *inter alia*, bureaucracy, hierarchies, standardization, paternalism and strict compliance with procedures and processes. Old public administration is simply characterized and set by few features which after their considerations rendered the paradigm obsolete (Osborne, 2006, & Politt, 2007 in Vignieri, 2020). The features are depicted below.
Besides, a set of down-to-heart reasons (e.g., financial pressures, inefficiencies, the need of competition on public services, a quest for having a public sector more responsive and flexible to citizen’s needs), the development of new socio-economic theories have challenged fundamental principles of traditional public administration (Hughes, 2003).

New Public Management can thus be viewed as an alternative paradigm to traditional public administration. According to Vyas-Doorgapersad (2011), NPM represents a paradigmatic break from the traditional model of public administration. It is a reformed public sector transformation that breaks away from the repressive, autocratic and conservative paradigm of public administration that followed top-down hierarchies. NPM is thus seen as a body of managerial thought. Some of the reasons that propelled a move towards NPM, *inter alia*, includes fiscal crisis faced by governments; plethora of public institutions and agencies; inefficiencies, non-accountable systems; innovation in technology and information; globalization and market competition, lastly the demand for quality public service delivery (Vignieri, 2020).

In the language of Hood (1991) in Kalimullah, Alam & Nour (2012) NPM is conceived as ‘administrative argument’ and ‘administrative philosophy’ where these two concepts were fraternal rather than identical twins. The concept of administrative argument and administrative philosophy encompasses same concepts of doctrines and organizational design that are seamless twins (Barzelay, 2001; Kalimullah, Alam & Nour, 2012). In the words of Kalimullah, Alam & Nour, (2022) NPM can be classified in terms of its managerial or administrative responsibilities and functions in government and again, as a administrative philosophy that guides the rendering of its managerial and administrative roles. On the other hand, Louw (2012) and Maserumule (2013) further posits that, NPM emerged in the 1980s as new managerial approach to public administration. However, NPM became popular during 1979 when Margaret Thatcher came into power and with her macro-economic policy of reducing public expenditure with various public sector reforms (Frederickson 2005). Thatcher ushered in an administrative reform agenda that included privatisation, deregulation, and the re-conceptualisation of the appropriate role of a government in the economy and society (Louw, 2012). To detail these sentiments, NPM like traditional public administration has been characterized by several administrative functions and anatomies which pursued a propaganda that labelled NPM a reputable alternative paradigm to public administration.

**Public Private Partnerships/Municipal Service Partnerships**

The synergistic and inter-mutuality between the two approaches is quite crucial, and worth of their separational functional understanding within the public administration discourse. This suggests that the functional environments of two approaches can be easily classified by purpose and objective.

*Conceptual discourse on PPPs and MSPs*

The notion of ‘Public Private Partnerships’ (PPPs), also denoted in South African local government as Municipal Service Partnerships (MSP), has been accepted by public sector organizations as one of the alternative service delivery approaches. Ideologically, this approach emanates from the NPM which is described by many as efficiency-driven and an alternative mode of governance to the traditional state service provision or public administration (Breakfast, 2019). Accordingly, PPPs refers to cooperative institutional arrangements involving public and private sectors for efficient and effective goal realization. They are regarded are as one of the service delivery alternatives available to government for the service delivery and infrastructure development (Hodge & Greve 2005).

National Treasury of South Africa further conceptualized PPP as “a contract between public – sector institution and a private party, where the private party performs a function that is usually provided by the public sector and/or uses a state property in terms of the PPP agreement” (National Treasury: Budget Review, 2021:167). Some of the characters which could assist greatly in understanding the PPPs or MSPs are described below.
A long-term contract between the public and private sector for a clearly defined project, with contracts running for 5 to 30 years in duration.

Includes private sector involvement in design, construction financing and implementation.

The private party sources most and all of the finance required.

Payment to the private party occurs based on agreed upon outputs, related to the provision of services and or infrastructure.

It requires the transfer of risk from the public to the private sector.

**Source:** Own illustration, with inputs from the National Business Initiative Report (2019)

Contains in the box above includes crucial pieces of information that a PPP or MSP contractual agreement would ordinarily conjure. According to NBI (2019:06), PPPs are a “a procurement choice… and not a solution option”. In South Africa, the above sentiment featured strongly in the policy trajectory, and it seems was accepted by considerable number of scholars (White of Local Government 1998; White Paper on Municipal Service Partnerships 2000; Ribbons 2008; Mamabolo, 2013). The same was also featured in the National Treasury’s conceptualisation of PPP. There are many examples of services across government that have been and are still being delivered through PPP in South Africa. The successful national Roads Infrastructure Development which resulted in what is reportedly endowed not only outrightly so, but one can also argue that PPPs are not holistically different from privatization on the score that they are re-arranged as a ‘procurement option’ regardless how instrumental or helpful they can be in providing public services. In the same breath, others have characterized PPPs as that form of privatization that entails hybridization of state and private sector involvement in public service provision. Because of the contested shape and scope of privatization others have linked the PPP to a ‘quite privatization’ process which can potentially affect and/or change to a greater degree the operational calculus of service that is naturally a ‘public good’ into a ‘private profit’.
With this alteration in effect, fundamental changes in the managerial ethos of public service delivery institutions together with the nature of the politico-socio relations between citizens and the state, are relentless.

In closing this part of the section, a takeaway point from the above discussion firstly, points to government’s admission to incapacity and inherent skills limitations as reasons for seeking external backup from private sector, in the form of PPPs other means such as contracting out services and consulting. In other words, the inescapable fact from the notional PPP as practiced by most governments for public service provision lies in the governments’ inertia to deliver on its developmental and constitutional obligations. However, it also suffices to mention that PPPs are not a bad idea. Lastly, whilst private parties involved in PPPs or MSPs stands to benefit from the project implementation, it also suffices to mention that government is a dominating stakeholder due to authority it wields in drafting the agreement firstly, and secondly in monitoring and evaluating the contract and intended outcomes thereto. This, therefore, necessitates a critical question central the discussion in this paper on whether government’s role can stretch beyond its normal administrative scope as an executive arm of state. This question is explored in the section below.

The monitoring [and evaluation] role of government in the management of PPPs and MSPs

The first time South Africa moved to adopt ‘formal’ M&E framework was during President Thabo Mbeki’s tenure in 2007, named Government – Wide Monitoring and Evaluation System. We use the text ‘formal’ in recognition of the fact that monitoring and evaluating of government service delivery programmes was happening even before the GWMES could be introduced with the democratic dispensation. At the local level for instance, the 1995’s municipal integrated development planning (IDP), to a large extent, has continuous elements of M&E. The Service Delivery Budget and Implementation Plan (SDBIP) which came into effect in 2003, also entails to greater levels M&E features. Nevertheless, the GWMES itself was alive to the design of, and existing governance realities, each sphere of government is possibly faced with because it only served as a national guideline with the expectation that provincial and municipal administrations will draft their own best suited M&E systems for their specific context.

By enquiring on the monitoring role of government in the management PPPs or MSPs its an attempt by this paper to demonstrate the involvement of the executive arm of government into the space beyond its existential periphery, being the public sector. Governments practicing monitoring and evaluation are often guided by the quest to respond to the developmental needs of citizens but most crucially, to know if policies are correctly implemented, to measure and assess policy impact, to identify loopholes in a policy or programmes, and employee performance measurement. Indeed, even the internationally recognized policy processes models like Dunn’s process model (1994) and Wissink stage model (1991) support the need for policy evaluation, and generally argues that every government policy, programmes, or agreements ought to be monitored and evaluated to determine future worth, amongst others (Ille, Eresia-Eke & Allen-Ile, 2019:5-8). In practice, challenges on the rights of government to access the work of external entities like in the context of PPPs would always suffice but that does not mean M&E cannot happen. In the recorded interactions with two senior municipal officials from Polokwane Local Municipality and Capricorn District Municipality, the authors learnt that a frustrating part of South African experience on MSPs include issues of trust deficit and limited accountability on the part of the involved private sector (Personal Conversation, 2022/December/21). Thus, it can be said that contracts relating to PPPs or MSPs form part of government or municipal monitoring and evaluation process. Depending on the agreement and in the interest of accountability, the private party ought to open its books for this process to take place.

[Re]-Locating Public Administration: A Reconstructive Approach

The location of the P[ublic] A[administration] whether as a discipline or the activity of government lies within a myriad of contestations from the broader pool of scholars – whether of today or the old guards of the discipline. The paper acknowledges the general belief and acceptance that recognizes the location of public administration seated within the executive jurisdiction. Be that as it may, the modern public administration scholarship and the administration of the state in particular have taken a turn. With the so many and the forever changing nature of science itself, public administration cannot be left out of the opinions raised when embarking on the ‘revolution of science’ or ‘scientific revolution’. As a result of those changes in science, public administration has in both ways learnt and inherited new and different approaches or sciences to its pre-existing and accepted science and practice such as like – NPM, & post-NPM (Thornill & Van Dijk, 2010). Different and several paradigms and approaches have evolved overtime within the Public Administration scholarship which eventually necessitated the outlook of the discipline. The practice of public administration within the administration of the state has also saw new approaches. The old administration being replaced by most notably ‘New Public Management’ and other approaches such as New Public Service, Public management, etc. These paradigms, for instance the New Public Management brought with them the approaches and modes of service provision to the public, inter alia, approaches like PPPs, MSPs, Privatization, Corporatization to mention the few. Service provision, as the main constitutional mandate for the executive branch has thus experienced a new formula. The government providing services to its citizens thereby applying the use of the private sector companies as the last hands to deliver services. These are the inheritance of public administration scholarship as the main scientific advisor through the incurred scientific revolutions.

1 Recorded personal conversation between the second author and two senior officials in Capricorn District Municipality and Polokwane Local Municipality. The conversation was about a different topic, but this particular portion was extracted because of its relevance to this paper.
It is only fair to acknowledge the reality of timely service provision through MSPs, PPPs and Privatization. These approaches have necessitated so much scholarly debates within the public administration scholarship on the location of public administration – whether is government or where else? As it is reflected in the sections above. It is very clear and worthy of acknowledging that the perceptions around the assumption that public administration exist within the executive jurisdiction calls for much longer stretching and extension from both scholars and practitioners of public administration. Due to these scientific revolutions public administration as an activity should not be perceived only from the executive periphery, but rather noted that it extends its hand even into the private sector through the processes of Monitoring and Evaluation of the development programmes and projects initiated by the government.

Public administration scholarship and pedagogy should rather strengthen the insight on the politics brought by these new scientific frontiers and approaches bestowed to the practice of public administration. Such politics includes but not limited to the politics of Inequality in the South Africa. Inequality has been a nightmare in South Africa from since the time when the first piece of paper called the ‘constitution’ was conceived in 1910. Inequality was perpetual during the apartheid era and continues to be a challenge even in this post-apartheid regime. Therefore, it is worth whistleblowing the anomalies of the New Public Management that brought the PPPs and MSPs to the practice of public administration. The literature from many scholars and research attest that the procurement processes within the public sector and corruption are like ‘inseparable twins’. In attest to the latter, Munzhedzi (2016) concurs that, corruption in the procurement process is one of the biggest challenges facing the South Africa government. Procurement in the South African public sector through the tendering process has been used with a particular aim of addressing the past discriminatory practices and policies by empowering the previously disadvantaged majority. Therefore, it is commonly known that these PPPs and MSPs take place through the bidding of tenders to those ‘supposedly’ qualifying and experienced service providers.

Conclusions

This conceptual study aims to reexamine the longstanding public administration discourse regarding the functional boundaries of government in its role as the executive branch of the state, inside the orthodox literature, there exists a prevailing notion that the scope of government action is limited to its administrative responsibilities, often carried out inside a public sector setting. The act of extrapolating can potentially lead to erroneous conclusions, particularly when taking into account the discussions around purchasing power parity (PPP) or market-based state pricing (MSP). These discussions involve the government’s involvement in overseeing both the public and private sectors. It imperative to recognize that the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) or Market-Based Service Provision (MSP) represents a tangible and pragmatic extension of the New Public Management (NPM) and Post-NPM frameworks. These frameworks are fundamentally rooted in business-oriented approaches that public sector organizations have successfully integrated into their strategic planning and implementation of public policies. While the primary objective of this study was not to thoroughly examine the widespread influence of the New Public Management (NPM) in public sector organizations, it is worth noting that during discussions, one notable aspect emerged. It became apparent that multinational corporations from the private sector have significantly expanded their influence, to the extent that numerous governments find themselves susceptible to their costly solutions. Consequently, critics of the NPM argue that dismantling neoliberalism in its present form would pose considerable difficulties. However, the analysis presented in this paper led to several key findings, with one of the most significant being that if the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) or Market-Sounding Process (MSP) is implemented as a discretionary method of service delivery in accordance with government policies and legal frameworks in South Africa, it can be inferred that the structure of the executive branch of the government extends beyond the boundaries of the public sector, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

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