In this excellent and provocative book, Jos C. N. Raadschelders strives to explain what the academic study of public administration is. The problem, he notes, is that “[s]cholars of public


Conceptual Maps for a Complex Field

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Raadschelders argues that this perceived crisis endures because while “[w]hat public administration scholars implicitly agree upon, as many social scientists do, is that careful attention for methodology (i.e., the study of methods) and appropriate application of methods will result in better knowledge,” they put “much less effort … on developing an epistemology, that is, an inquiry into the nature and sources of knowledge, in the study of public administration.” This is going about determining the nature of the study of public administration backward. Epistemology and the ontology in which it is rooted should be developed first: “wondering whether the study is science, or craft/profession, or art, is really not the way toward determining the nature of the study.” It is like “spanning the cart before the horse” (v).

Raadschelders seeks to contribute to a reversal of this logical error by “developing conceptual maps of the study’s sources, topics, theories, and methods, and debates in all the richness and variety so evident in its many varied publications” (vi). These maps are a “bottom-up approach” to developing “building blocks” for inclusively understanding “the study’s diverse sources, concepts, methods, and debates” (vi). Chapter 3 begins this process by analyzing the “fragmentation of knowledge sources within public administration” (75). Chapter 4 focuses on mapping substantive topics such as organization theory, policy, personnel, and budgeting. Chapter 5 considers theory in the study of public administration that has “different origins” in art, craft, and science, as well as whether public administration, whose “material object of study is government, can … develop a theory of government” (128). Chapter 6 maps out four intellectual traditions in the study of public administration: study for the development of (1) practical wisdom, (2) practical experience, (3) scientific knowledge, and (4) relativist perspectives (postmodernism). Chapter 7 addresses the question, “Under what circumstances” can the study of public administration, which is “characterized by methodological pluralism and lack of boundaries,” connect its “theories and methods … without losing the interdisciplinary nature of its study?” (177). Raadschelders’s answer is that “[f]ull disciplinary integration … is inconceivable at the level of the study as a whole, but could perhaps be pursued at the level of its specializations” (202). The chapter “outlines the challenges of and opportunities for knowledge integration in the study, and, thus, provides an ontological and epistemological basis to the study that was lacking hitherto” (202). Chapter 8 serves as a conclusion that reminds the reader that “public administration is not the only study with an identity crisis,” “public administration’s nature is not easy to establish because its scholars have different substantive, organizational, and pedagogical agendas,” but nevertheless “it is possible to map the study’s nature and identity” (204).

Above all, public administration’s “nature and identity is interdisciplinary with its characteristic theoretical and methodological pluralism” (204).

Raadschelders’s analysis is sophisticated and complex. He avoids such simplifications as viewing the study as merely divided along lines established long ago by Herbert Simon and Dwight Waldo. He flat-out rejects natural science as a model for public administration, while embracing a “broader conception of knowledge and learning” that “encompasses ‘science’” but is inclusive of “other approaches to the acquisition of knowledge” (40). He draws on American and European public administration and, in the process, demonstrates encyclopedic knowledge of the literature and study of the field.

Raadschelders knows that “[i]t is very likely that many will disagree with those [conceptualizations] offered in [the book] and either advocate a different set of conceptualizations (within the notion of conceptual mapping) or simply say that the study was based upon the wrong premise (that of interdisciplinarity) and then continue to advocate rigor in a positivist sense” (215). He goes on to remind those who would do so that “[n]o one can claim to be omniscient. Developing public administration as a scientific enterprise in the narrow sense of science literally narrows our understanding of this most complex social phenomenon” (215).

However, Raadschelders does not fend off another line of critique: why does the so-called identity crisis, which he correctly points out is not singular by any means, matter? Leafing through the October 2012 PA Times “30th Annual Education Supplement,” one finds descriptions of MPA programs that purport to prepare students for public service in a global environment, making a difference, leadership, management, inspired action, promoting the common good of our constitutional republic, success, environmental leadership, connecting with what’s next in public administration, being on the cutting edge, engaging some of society’s most critical challenges, discovering their true potential, upper-level administration, and shaping one’s future and the world. To use the title of one of Waldo’s books, on one level, the “enterprise of public administration” seems to be doing well and
potentially working wonders. Raadschelders shows that there are identity crises of one degree and kind or another in anthropology, archaeology, business management, economics, English, history, history of art, international relations, medicine, physics, political science, psychology, and sociology. Apparently, such crises—if that is what they are—are normal. In the public square, we welcome vibrant discourse over ways of knowing and looking at things, theory, and substance. We salute the First Amendment for protecting this “free marketplace of ideas.” Why not in academe?

Given a choice between identity via orthodoxy, as in the 1930s, and crisis, which is preferable?

Fortunately, Raadschelders’s tour de force does not depend on what one may think of the identity crisis. It provides a major service to public administration scholars, researchers, and educators. It should be eagerly read by everyone who wants to know more about what public administration is and how its study may be advanced.