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# Researching COVID-19: A Research Agenda for Public Policy and Administration Scholars

Claire A. Dunlop, Edoardo Ongaro, Keith Baker

## Abstract

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is one of the defining policy challenges of an era. In this article we sketch some possible ways in which the public policy and administration (PPA) scholarly community can make an enduring contribution about how to cope with this terrible crisis. We do so by offering some elements that to delineate a tentative research agenda for PPA scholars, to be pursued with epistemic humility. We outline the contours of seven analytical themes that are central to the challenges presented by COVID-19: policy design and instruments; policy learning; public service and its publics; organisational capacity; public governance; administrative traditions; and public sector reforms in multi-level governance (MLG). The list is neither exhaustive nor exclusive to COVID-19 only. The knowledge the PPA scholarly community can generate must speak not only to the daunting challenge of COVID-19 itself but also to policymakers, and indeed humankind, trying to cope with future unexpected but high impact threats ('black swans'), by leveraging better public policies and building administrative capacities to enable more resilient, equitable and effective public services.

## Keywords

Coronavirus, COVID-19, pandemic, public administration, public policy, relevance

## COVID-19 and an Appeal for Relevant and Robust Scholarship

Though the world is still in the middle of a crisis characterised by radical uncertainty, one thing is very clear: coronavirus (COVID-19) will be one of the defining policy challenges of an era. Not merely a human tragedy, this global pandemic has exposed across the world the fragile nature of some governance institutions, and the follies of denigrating and weakening the public sector. We use this article to sketch some possible ways in which public policy and administration research can and should proceed. The knowledge we generate must speak not only to the daunting challenge of COVID-19 itself but also to policymakers, and indeed humankind, trying to cope with future unexpected but high impact threats ('black swans'), by leveraging better public policies and building administrative capacities to enable more resilient, equitable and effective public services. This way, paraphrasing the adage, a terrible crisis will not go to waste, but rather will enable the public policy and administration (hereafter PPA) scholarly community to make an enduring contribution about how to cope with future high impact threats (by 'PPA scholarly community' we do not mean this journal specifically. Rather we mean whomever in the world identifies themselves as a scholar in the *field* of public policy and administration). Clearly the scope of the scholarly challenge is huge and the problems numerous.

What then can PPA scholars contribute? PPA is a fundamentally practical endeavour (Barberis 2012; Talbot and Talbot, 2018) and indeed a recent analysis demonstrates the wide range of policy impacts PPA work delivers (Dunlop 2019). Yet, we rarely address the big global challenges societies face (Milward et al 2016; Pollitt 2017; Potter 2012). What Pollitt (2016) called 'global megatrends' – and Roberts (2020) simply labels 'immense problems' – such as climate change, fiscal austerity, demographic changes or the education of young people are largely neglected by our field. Rather, we approach relevance through detailed policy analysis which examines performance of the bureau at a

granular level, but rarely scale this up to the grand challenges of our world. We stay behind the scenes and leave the main stage for other disciplines.

This dissonance between ‘small policy analysis facing big policy problems’ (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2021a) reveals the perennial challenge of matching rigour with relevance. In this instance, our scholarship must provide both. If public administration research is not useable on the ground, how can we hope to address the big problems faced by government? Yet, relevance is not enough: without methodological, conceptual, and theoretical rigor, our scholarship lacks authority and becomes journalistic.

Achieving this balance is easier said than done. One of the essential ingredients to achieving relevant and sound research is time. While identifying relevant big questions can be straightforward since they are often self-evident, producing the rigorous research to answer them takes time. The hallmark of high quality and robust scholarship are significant questions, original data, rigorous analysis and thorough review.

Expanded commercial opportunities in publishing coupled with higher education’s continual audit demands push for ever faster knowledge production across the academy, yet PPA research remains remarkably robust. It is unusual for PPA scholarship to become caught-up with a ‘fascination of the passing show’ (Johnson, 1989). Yet, the temptation to speed-up our work is particularly intense in these times of crisis where a sense of urgency and desire for a sense of control are pervasive (for an analysis of the vast and fast publication effort in the first few months of COVID-19 see Porter and Hook 2020). We are mindful of these pressures and want to give authors the time and space to produce truly impactful, original work of significance. And so, our journal has held back on commissioning any COVID-19 special issue in 2020. Addressing problems in ‘real time’ may offer exciting opportunities (Porter and Hook 2020) but it remains extremely difficult for academics – especially in the social sciences where real time data rarely guides analysis. More fundamentally, conclusions based on provisional and likely incomplete evidence rarely stand the test of time and have little use to policymakers.

Instead, at this juncture, we propose an initial set of research themes for PPA scholars. Our list is neither exhaustive nor exclusive to COVID-19. Rather, they are central parts of a wider agenda worth pursuing if we are to integrate our small policy analysis with the megatrends with which public administrations grapple.

Before we get started with our proposed topics for investigation, some important caveats are in order. The first concerns the nature and aim of this enterprise. We offer an early outline of some of the possible contours of the research agendas this current and ongoing crisis will provoke. This is neither a roadmap nor a set of prescriptions. Rather, it is an attempt to think out loud and give some form to the thoughts that many PPA scholars will be having as we watch and, indeed, experience the crisis unfolding in our lives and communities. We proceed with epistemic humility. This crisis has only just begun and we have yet to see, and even imagine, some of the consequences that will flow. Nonetheless, despite this being a moving target, public administration concepts are intended to illuminate the daily challenges of designing policies and making programmes perform and adapt as situations dictate. In short, it is a deeply pragmatic endeavour and if ever there was a need for practical insights it is now.

## What Themes Matter?

What are some of the major issues of policy and administration the COVID-19 crisis has thrown in the spotlight? Putting boundaries around PPA is notoriously difficult; its terrain is all-encompassing and diffuse (Dunsire 1973; Fredrickson 2007; Pierre and Peters 2006, 2012). Given this, it is easier to pin-down what we do not include in our sketch of the research agenda. Primarily, we do not focus on the conflicts between politicians and parties that in a number of instances are becoming ever more visible

as policy responses develop and seemingly fall short. These are of course important to the challenge of governing, but a public administration approach to COVID-19 is one that puts the spotlight on the bureau – at multiple levels (international, transnational, regional, national, local and neighbourhood) and across government sectors.

In addition to this spatial diversity, public administrative approaches also conceptualise the temporal dimension in broad terms. The work of a range of public administrators and the effects of that matter not simply during the crisis but before and after the pandemic (Pollitt 2008; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2009). And so, while public administration is often treated as concerned with the implementation moment, it covers much more terrain in the policy process. Of course, the translation of laws (often hastily passed in times of crisis) and policy into rules and actions on the ground is absolutely central as an object for enquiry, but the administrative endeavour covers many more policy stages and motivating factors.

With these broad guide rails in place, we focus on seven analytical themes that are central to the challenges presented by COVID-19: policy design and instruments; policy learning; public service and its publics; organisational capacity; public governance; administrative traditions; and public sector reforms in multi-level governance (MLG)<sup>1</sup>.

### Theme 1 Policy design and instruments

The policy design literature is mostly synonymous with instruments analysis (Hood 1983; Howlett 2005). Categorising and comparing the mix of policy tools deployed by governments in response to COVID-19 will be an important first step in assessing the effectiveness of different policy designs. Deeper analysis of instruments will explore the role instruments have in policy dynamics and the causal mechanisms that link tool selection, setting and implementation to policy outcomes down the line (Capano and Howlett 2019, 2020; Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007; Turnpenny et al 2009). Power-focussed analysis is offered by the instrument constituencies literature (Simons and Voß 2014, 2018) which critically examines the entrepreneurs within and beyond the bureau championing favoured solutions.

Beyond this mainstream approach, we can think of policy tool selection in relation to the state. The classic work on national policy styles (Richardson et al 1982) – currently enjoying a revival (Howlett and Tosun 2021; Richardson 2018) – offers a lens for us to consider the array of contrasting national responses to the pandemic and relative absence of global policy convergence in response. The styles approach also offers a way to explore government responses to COVID-19 as linked to wider administrative traditions (more on this in a later section).

Finally, in time, research into policy design and COVID-19 can usefully stand back and explore the broader socioeconomic implications of the choices made by governments in days of crisis. We might usefully attend to what Wildavsky (1979) called the ‘law of large solutions’: the idea that large-scale responses to policy problems – most obviously in this case the voluntary shut down of economies – carry far-reaching, unintended and often unwelcome consequences for society and future policymakers. Essentially, Wildavsky (1979) was interested in the interdependencies both between policies and but also between policies and politics, and the ability policy instruments to reshape the policy and political landscape in myriad and unexpected ways.

### Theme 2 Policy learning and evaluation

The literature on policy learning is vast and in the last three decades has generated a huge amount in terms of concepts and methods (Bennett and Hall 1992; May 1992; Dunlop and Radaelli 2013). The challenge for current scholarship is to show what learning analyses can offer policy-makers, citizens

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<sup>1</sup> Note, these themes are not numbered in a hierarchical way; one theme does not rank as more important or pressing than another.

and societies (and fulfil the ambition of the classic work of Hecló, 1974). So far, nearly one third of all policy learning studies provide practical advice for policymakers (Dunlop and Radaelli 2021b); learning analyses of COVID-19 should continue in this vein focussing not only on scientific rigour but also on useable takeaways. The scope for learning studies is truly huge. Here, we restrict discussion to three cutting edge areas (Dunlop and Radaelli 2021b; Vagionaki and Trein 2020).

First, while policy learning in conceptual terms is well-covered, we know far less about the micro-mechanisms of learning. Policy learning studies identify that learning occurs through the updating of policymakers' beliefs, but how does this happen? In her work on climate change, Rietig (2018) argues policy learning must involve reflection over time and active conscious engagement in thinking about the problem at hand. Dunlop's (2009) comparison of international differences in biotech regulation draws on education theory to specify the different learning processes in which adults engage. But, these are exceptions. Extending this vein of research into what constitutes learning and drawing on insights from education (for example, Dewey 1938; Kolb 1984) and organisational studies (for example, Argyris and Schön 1978) would yield important findings on the conditions needed for policymakers to truly learn from experience. Linked to this is the question of whether policy-makers can learn from others' experiences. It is clear that east Asian countries recent and direct experience of previous outbursts of contagious pathogens (for example Middle East respiratory syndrome-related coronavirus [MERS] and severe acute respiratory syndrome [SARS]) mediated their responses to COVID-19. With little direct or recent experience of a pandemic (the last global pandemic with such mortality rates to strike Europe was in 1918-19), the west struggled to act raising the possibility that for policy lessons to stick the experience must be hands on.

Second, we know policy learning is not always a good thing: policymakers' cognitive heuristics result in misunderstandings and outdated knowledge driving policies. The result are learning-resistant policy trajectories which repeatedly show up in policy failure studies (Dunlop 2017). As established modes of learning work to exclude key actors and as a result some (often politically weak minority) voices are silenced – for example, the disproportionately affected Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities. In the same vein, lessons from other places are ignored and policy transfers sub-optimal. COVID-19 offers a unique opportunity to conduct truly global large N comparative studies of the processes and forces that underpinned pathological policy responses. Most obviously, this links to questions concerning the limits and possibilities of learning as we compare cases of failure with success.

Finally, comes the temporal dimension of learning. Time in learning studies usually concerns the period of study. Yet, researchers need to move beyond these important but basic research design choices to explore how our understanding of time impacts the relationship between policy stability and change (Dunlop and Radaelli 2021b). For example, most commonly, policy learning is assumed to be linear and incremental. Yet, where they face a novel policy problem, policymakers' learning might be anything but linear. Where they do not understand the non-linear nature of knowledge development, policy advisers and policymakers risk following sub-optimal policy paths. Take for example the fate of ex ante policy appraisals and disaster planning. Full implementation of lessons before an actual crisis is hard to achieve since incremental learning is assumed to be happening in the bureau, but to be truly useful lessons from predictions and simulations need to be revisited and rehearsed consistently. The same is true at the other end of the policy cycle where post-crises public inquiries very rarely result in implemented lessons and institutionalised memory (Stark 2019). Again, they are treated as discrete learning episodes, disconnected from the problem they evaluate. The result is the dissent into blame game pathologies rather than reflective learning.

### Theme 3 Public service and its publics

The response to COVID-19 has been driven by those in public services – the essential or key workers on the front lines who continue to do their jobs at risk to themselves. These street-level bureaucrats

(SLBs) work in many different roles from high profile emergency and clinical services to less visible refuse collection and social care services. This will provoke increased interest in the classic works on top down-bottom up tensions in policy implantation, public service values and ethics. In particular, we hope to see much more original work on the figure of the 'existentialist public administrator' who cares for the other and the world (Zacka 2017: chp 3). Several important research agendas suggest themselves.

We know SLBs exercise discretion in how they respond to the demands of the public (Lipsky 1980, 2010; Maynard Moody and Musheno 2003). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought these discretion decisions, and their potential psychological impact, into sharp relief. For those hospitalised, access to scarce medical resources such as intensive care beds and ventilators may literally be a matter of life and death. For the SLBs, marshalling insufficient resources means exercising discretion in the context of an unprecedented situation where established rules, routines or peer expectations have been disrupted and in some cases suspended. The examination of how street level bureaucrats have made sense of and coped with the situation may offer interesting insights into the values and motivations of public servants.

Over the last forty years, great emphasis has been placed on the ideas of managerialism, performance measurement and approaches founded in economic analysis within the public sector (see Pollitt 2013). The effects of these regimes are well-documented. However, responses to COVID-19 requires a reconsideration of such approaches and an increased recognition of professionalism and expertise in decision-making rather than managerial or economic imperatives. Such a shift might be recognised or find an expression in the nature or clarity of the accountability systems that public sector organizations operate under (Romzek and Dubnick 1987). Modern public service takes place within the context of wide variety of hybrid organizations, public/private arrangements, or market-based forms of service delivery. Koppell (2010) has long advocated for an expansive definition of public administration that includes such institutional forms and attention should be paid to how public service professionals have responded to COVID-19 outside of the administrative bureaucracies of government. Crucially, this perspective entails paying attention to the public and communities at all levels and across all key profiles of society. We expect to see further exploration of the key interface between public service professionals and 'users' of all kinds of service involved in coping with the short and long-term impacts of the pandemic, also triggering forms of co-production and co-creation (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012, 2018; Huxham and Vangen 2013; Needham 2008; Osborne 2010; Torfing 2016).

A final area of research for public policy and administrative scholars is one that perhaps takes a darker turn. At the heart of the discipline is an assumption that the professionals and administrative bureaus of the state are benign, competent, and fundamentally committed to the public interest. These assumptions deserve scrutiny. Historical experience suggests that disasters and hurried government responses provide ample opportunities for corruption and misuse of public funds (Government Accountability Office 2006). COVID-19 will have created new opportunities for malfeasance.

Beyond blatant wrongdoing, the COVID-19 crisis raises the spectre of more subtle problems of administrative evil and public sector ethics. Administrative evil occurs when individuals fulfil their administrative roles and duties but do not question the wider [harmful] implications of their actions. There are widespread differences in how COVID-19 affects different demographic and social groups and the decisions of public officials will have different impacts on different groups. It may not be enough for public officials (or those in public service) to simply do their jobs by following the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law. Likewise, scholars need to consider the possibility that public officials have become too deferential to political principals and unwilling to challenge politically motivated misinformation. Whilst there is a well-established literature on whistleblowing and organizational dissent (see for example O'Leary 2020), such actions remain characterised by their infrequency.

#### Theme 4 Organizational capacity

The relationship between policy design and governance performance can be analysed by focussing on organisational capacity. To pinpoint the comparative success or failure of COVID-19 policy interventions we can cut governments' capacity challenges up four ways: listening (absorptive capacity), organising resources (administrative capacity), understanding information (analytical capacity), and enabling dialogue (communicative capacity, including policy narratives) (Borrás 2011; Dunlop 2015; Xu et al. 2015). We expect analytical capacity to dominate analysis. Specifically, the national differences in the design of advisory systems; balance of disciplines represented by experts are ripe for comparison; and blocks to transnational epistemic communities are all ripe for investigation.

Going beyond individual capacity challenges, policy failures often depend on the imbalance of these capacities in the bureau. We know far less about what mixes are most functional in moments of crisis and in particular, the extent to which there are different paths to positive policy results. For example, can policy results withstand poor communication if the administrative and analytical capacities are strong? The balance achieved between Gormley's (1986) 'hearing room' politics versus 'operating room' politics may carry important policy outcomes. Where political leaders privilege control of and setting the narrative truly science-based policy-making risks being compromised. Measuring and comparing countries' depth of capacity types against their policy outcomes on COVID-19 will provide insights into this question of equifinality. Crucially, this is not simply a matter of academic interest but will provide policy relevant insights on bureaucratic design and how to prioritise scarce resources in the future.

On organizational capacities are not simply static skills or resources. Rather, capacity building challenges – i.e. determining what capacities are required and whether or not they are successful in policy delivery – are mediated by a range of contextual factors. The impact of state structures and critically structure of government raises pertinent questions in the COVID-19 case. For example, to what extent has the administrative capacity to operationalise community-based test, track and trace systems of those who develop symptoms of coronavirus been adversely impacted by centralised jurisdictions which revolve around singular control systems (Game 2020)?

#### Theme 5 Public governance

'Public governance' has become a ubiquitous notion since at least the 1990s when Rhodes (1997) and Kickert, Klijn, Koppenian and colleagues (Kickert 1997; Kickert et al. 1997) elevated it to the status of an alternative to the then-dominant doctrines of the New Public Management (NPM) and 'Anglo-American managerialism'. The 'new' public governance refers to a variety of new emphases on: network-centred approaches, as opposed to both NPM market-driven approaches and 'antiquated' hierarchy-centred approaches; collaborations, especially between public sector and third sector organisations and more broadly at the state-society interface, rather than relying only on government-centred service delivery; and, clusters of actors becoming centre-stage. This gave rise to a range of 'governance quasi-paradigms' (Torfing et al. 2020) – forms of collaborative governance and new models in policy-making and service delivery centred on the co-production of public services, the co-design and co-implementation of public policies, and the co-creation of new solutions to public problems (Osborne 2010; Torfing et al. 2012).

These new connotations and denotations of the term 'public governance' have partly obfuscated the more traditional meaning of public governance as the principles, rules and conventions informing the

functioning of a political-institutional setting<sup>2</sup>. The PPA scholarly community might then benefit from going back to revisit this original and most basic meaning of governance and contrast it to the ‘new’ public governance approaches, in order to better be able to appraise the impacts of the epidemic on public governance. Therefore, a question, brutal and simplistic yet not irrelevant, is whether we need more or less of these novel approaches, in the face of multidimensional shocks such as COVID-19. For example, in moments of acute and existential crisis, do we need a return to more traditional governance styles, like hierarchical command-and-control – as in ‘the police must ensure full compliance with the letter of lockdown guidelines, full stop’? Or, is the opposite the case: we need more societal involvement throughout the policy cycle, since only through ‘covenants’ across the state-society divide can high-impact threats be coped with legitimacy. Empirically this means asking: in what ways is the COVID-19 shock reshaping public governance in the most basic sense? Will this new state of affairs be transient or long-lasting? What the implications for the bureaucratic apparatus and accountability of public administration?

Mirroring the academic trend towards collaborative governance and co-creation, in the field of public leadership parallel notions of collaborative, distributed and integrative leadership have gained traction and made strides into the mainstream over the past decades (Crosby and Bryson 2005; Hartley et al. 2019). Specular questions are worth investigating about whether forms of collaborative leadership, as contrasted to more old-fashioned forms of centralised/heroic leadership (which, it may be noticed, are often also wanting in terms of demographics and gender-balance [McTavish and Johnston 2009]), are more or less effective in addressing a multidimensional shock like COVID-19.

Another major area of inquiry in the public governance sphere is risk governance and blame shifting, notably at the interface between elected and tenured officials as well as more broadly across the divides of the political system (Hood 2002, 2011; Dixon and Hood 2020). COVID-19 is a potentially lethal disease and as such many policy responses are fundamentally concerned with questions of risk assessment, management and communication. For example, what are the levels of risk to different citizens stemming from the disease, what are the impacts of different policy tools on these risk levels, and how can these different risk scenarios be communicated to all citizens. Risk governance is fundamentally the business of anticipating and navigating the consequences of interventions (Graham and Wiener 1995). Where trade-offs are visible and potentially unpopular – for example, measures which protect health services but create economic uncertainty – political decisions are needed (with implicated issues of political leadership). This has posed a problem in some governments where the long-standing reflex is to shift difficult policy questions to technical experts.

## Theme 6 Administrative traditions and policy responses

To what extent have governmental responses to COVID-19 been shaped by administrative traditions? While it is premature to speak of policy success or failure, currently there is an anecdotal sense (but no robust analysis) that certain eastern Asian public systems (notably, South Korea and Taiwan, possibly Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, and others) responded better than western public systems to the pandemic. For PPA scholarship, one obvious place to start is in terms of learning from past experience (as already discussed). Another way to compare differential performance is in terms of the key characteristics of the governance and administrative system. The east Asian countries mentioned have been associated to the ‘Confucian administrative tradition’ and its possible influence and effects still linger in key traits of the bureaucracy, the state-society interface and how these features shape administrative action (Drechsler 2013, 2019; Painter and Peters 2010). Asking whether administrative systems shaped by the Confucian tradition may be inherently better equipped to deal with epidemics such as COVID-19 than western (or other) administrative systems raises questions about the drivers that would make these systems better ‘fit for purpose’. What are the impacts of traits such as: a

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<sup>2</sup> Etymologically, this is made problematic by the consideration that the word ‘governance’ itself is available only in the English language and a few others, and absent in many others (Ongaro and van Thiel 2018b).

population's allegiance to state authority; the hierarchical configuration of society; the conception of the 'mandate of heaven' and governmental performance as the overarching legitimacy criterion for the state and the bureaucratic apparatus?

The broader set of questions concerns whether there may be a differential capacity to cope with unexpected threats in public systems embedded in diverse administrative traditions. Painter and Peters (2010) identify at least five administrative traditions in Europe alone. By way of example, the tradition whose countries were initially the most affected by the outbreak in Europe, that is, the Napoleonic tradition encompassing Italy, Spain and France (Ongaro 2009; Peters 2008), the empirical question is whether public institutions in this tradition are better or worse equipped than others to cope with major external shocks, and if so, why?

Developing this research agenda would obviously entail appraising the relative influence of features of the administrative apparatus and the state-society interface associated to the administrative tradition versus the wider array of candidate explanatory factors. These factors encompass an array of variables: the fiscal leeway of the country and how well-resourced its healthcare system; its policy learning capacities (discussed in a previous section); the nature of the political regime (liberal-democratic or not) to the socio-demographic composition of society, and so forth.

#### Theme 7 Public sector in multi-level governance (MLG)

Finally, COVID-19 presents fundamental challenges to the delicate balance in MLG systems. Here, we illustrate the challenges to governance ecosystems with reference to the European Union (EU) and United States (US), but clearly scholars will go beyond these.

Taking the European Union (EU) first, significant changes in its governance have occurred since 2008 as an effect of the fiscal crisis. This carries implications for policy and administrative studies. At the policy level, the new architecture of policy conditionality has impacted at multiple levels: fiscal, economic and social policy of Member States (Crespy and Menz 2015; Henning 2017; Verdun and Zeitlin 2017). The politics and policy of fiscal consolidation has implications on public budgets and, ultimately, its impact in terms of reducing the administrative capacities of the affected countries (Kickert and Randma-Liiv 2015; Randma-Liiv and Kickert 2018; Kickert and Ongaro 2019; Spanou 2020) and hence, ultimately, possibly their capacity to cope with new and unexpected high-impact crises.

At the administrative level, this line of analysis has triggered investigation into the asymmetric influence that EU institutions that have been able to exert on the dynamics of administrative reforms of EU Member States operating under conditions of fiscal consolidation (Ongaro and Kickert 2020). This impact may be better appreciated when considering the new and pervasive EU influence on public sector reforms has occurred without alteration to the EU treaties, which assign the Member States, not the EU level, nearly exclusive competence in matter of organisation of the public sector. These dynamics have been labelled 'EU-Driven Public Sector Reforms' (Ongaro and Kickert, 2020). The COVID-19 epidemic may result in another major change in EU governance, embodied notably in the apparent establishment of a new mode of intervention by the EU whose first form is the *EU Recovery Fund*.

While this area of inquiry, with its regional focus on Europe (Ongaro and van Thiel 2018a; Ongaro et al. 2018; van Thiel and Ongaro, 2018), is of interest for a subset of scholars, this area promises to be a vibrant area of applied research. Indeed, EU studies have been an incredibly prolific area of inquiry whose findings have over time spilled over to other sub-fields of PPA, and to this regard the changes triggered by the COVID-19 epidemic might represent another episode in this story of European studies feeding into policy and administrative studies more widely. Polity configuration, the level of decentralisation/devolution in MLG settings, and their influence on COVID-19 policy responses, require being heeded to not just at EU but also at national and sub-national level across Europe, with

idiosyncratic foci where it interconnects with other ‘crises’, most obviously Brexit in the case of the UK (McTavish 2019).

The study of public sector reform and MLG structures must also pay particular attention to the dynamics of American politics. Although multilevel governance is not usually associated with the somewhat legalistic structure of American federalism (indeed in the United States [US] the notion more often used is ‘intergovernmental relations’ (IGR)<sup>3</sup> the notion of governance through ‘formally independent yet functionally interdependent governing entities’ (Piattoni 2009: 172) remains an accurate description of the relationships between the US federal government, the states and localities. However, these interdependent relationships have been tested by hollowing out (Zavattaro and McCandless 2020) and politicization of the US system of governance.

The response of federal bureaucracies to COVID 19 has been variously characterised by: manifest incompetence (Madrigal and Meyer 2020), a subordination of expertise to political narrative (Madrigal and Meyer 2020, Smith 2020), and the reckless spending of public funds with little oversight (Thompson, Rose and Benincasa 2020). This has encouraged individual states to develop their own independent responses often in opposition to the federal government. It is likely that future iterations of public sector reform in the US will seek to address these tensions through an increase in the power and capacity of federal agencies and a corresponding desire for independent capacity at the state level. As such, policy and administration scholars could usefully consider how such future reforms will impact of the current balance between federal and state power.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we offer some elements that may contribute to delineate a tentative research agenda, indeed a set of interconnected key themes for PPA scholars. As already noted, the list is neither exhaustive nor exclusive to COVID-19 only (most obviously, we could have expanded to themes of policy coordination, crisis management, emergency services, trust in government, teaching public administration and many more besides). Rather, we see these research themes as central parts of a wider agenda worth pursuing if we are to integrate what we labelled ‘our small policy analysis’ into the ‘big problems’ with which public administrations grapple.

Methodologically, outlining a research agenda raises at least two issues. First, we are led by the state of the art in our field. This is self-evident but it has an important limitation: traditionally PPA has offered little in terms of the possible interdisciplinary synergies that are so crucial when addressing big questions (see Ongaro 2017). Our hope is that policy and administration scholars will work with colleagues across the academy to produce unexpected disciplinary mixes which yield surprising results (often lacking in the social sciences – see Hirschman 1981). Such hopes are of course tempered both by the unfolding reality of COVID-19 research thus far which is dominated by nationally bound teams (Porter and Hook 2000) by a dose of realism given the historical trajectory and conventions of the field (Pollitt 2016), as the ancient Greeks said: ‘[H]ope is the last Goddess to abandon mankind’. We grab to it and join those who hope to see a step change in PPA research as an unexpected yet welcome outcome of this tragic crisis.

Second, the aim must be to identify scalable research questions amenable to being answered through research work using ordinary means available to researchers in this field. Such means could be even smaller than usual, at least in terms of funding, if the hit to the economies of many countries across the world induced by the COVID-19 crisis is as hard as we anticipate.

This is a call for scholars to act, and the reader might rightly query: what are you, editors of the so aptly titled journal *Public Policy and Administration*, going to do to advance this research agenda?

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<sup>3</sup> For a broad-scope comparative study of the concepts and the empirics of MLG and IGR in, respectively, Europe and the USA see Ongaro et al. 2010, 2011).

First, we plan a set of publications, stand alone articles and special issues, on the empirics of the intertwining of the COVID-19 pandemic and public policy and administration issues and themes. Second, we seek continue our work to bridge the public policy and the public administration literatures through specific initiatives supported and facilitated by the Public Administration Committee of the Joint University Council (PAC-JUC) and SAGE to exploring the integration of the two strands of literature much more closely (Baker et al. 2017).

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