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Understanding renewed Public Service Ethos (PSE) in public management: policy, purpose, and pedagogy

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Abstract

Public service ethos (PSE) is traditionally associated with public administration, bureaucracy, and frontline response. Thinkers such as Aristotle and Weber embedded ideas of public virtue and vocation, yet new managerialism, as well as changes to public services management challenge traditional notions of PSE. Recent events such as the Covid – 19 pandemic, counter terrorism, and government austerity agendas have put PSE back into the public eye. In this chapter we examine the context for a renewed PSE as a crucial aspect of resilience for workers in public services and public management. We focus on three areas that we feel are important for PSE: policy, purpose and pedagogy., and how a renewed PSE can inform pedagogy in the discipline, renewing ideas of vocation in public administration training.

Keywords: PSE, policy, purpose, pedagogy

Introduction

Public Service Ethos (PSE) has traditionally been associated with the spirit experienced by public servants in large bureaucratic organisations. PSE describes the underpinning desire to serve the public, improve society and help communities (Nolan, 1995; Carr, 1999: Horton, 2006; John and Johnson, 2008; Lawton et al., 2013). PSE can be traced back to Aristotelian times, with notions of public virtue being placed higher than private virtue (Shand and Hyde, 2016; Liddle, 2016; Parker, 2015; Parker, 2016; Shand and Howell, 2015; Needham, 2007).

In this chapter, we argue for a renewed PSE of policy, purpose and pedagogy with a focus on the public interest expressed by managerial and frontline staff within public services (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003; Zacka, 2017). We examine PSE in light of current policy challenges, and by doing so interrogate the philosophical implications of its renewal (Plant, 2003). This is important, as mechanisms for public management delivery are now more complex than previous historical eras when the concept of PSE came to prominence (Hebson et al., 2003). Here, PSE is traditionally associated with older models of public administration and organisational structures, with loyal employees working selflessly within them. However, new managerialism - in particular, new public management (NPM) and new public governance (NPG) - have challenged accepted concepts of PSE and public service delivery (Liddle, 2018). Nonetheless, recent events including the Covid – 19 pandemic, counter-terrorism, and government austerity savings have brought PSE back into public consciousness. Our focus is the UK, but we anticipate that our observations will be relevant for an international audience.

In this chapter, we firstly consider 'policy' to build resilience in future public services and public management. We contend that PSE as policy can encompass the different agencies who deliver public services, and we conceptualise this as multi – levelled and context specific, and shaped by national norms and institutional practices. Our second focus of 'purpose' considers what PSE means in practice (McDonough, 2006), particularly for workers in public services

and public management, reinforced within the institutions that employ them. Our third area of 'pedagogy' explores how PSE must remain more than an abstract concept debated within the confines of academic debate and university courses. We consider what PSE might look like in future for public administration and public management provision in higher education institutions (HEIs). In particular, we explore how it can inform pedagogy in the discipline, by renewing ideas of vocation in public administration and management teaching and training. In the following sections, we set out our three themes of policy, purpose and pedagogy in more detail, and discuss how these underpin PSE. Before doing we briefly discuss PSE in the contemporary public management context.

PSE and contemporary public management in context

PSE describes how, and why, individuals are inspired to pursue careers in public services, typically in the public rather than the private sector. This is important given the increasing blurring of public sector and private sector actors engaged in public service delivery (Booth – Smith and Leigh, 2016). Public managers are now part of complex multi-sector partnerships incorporating a range of actors, but these forms of collaborative governance should not be viewed as distinct from a devotion to service.

Public services 'have a pressing series of challenges to respond to which, in part, stem from successive financial crises and the austerity drives and fiscal retrenchment that have followed' (Ashworth *et al.*, 2013: 2). PSE must undoubtedly include frontline staff in practice, but also embrace a commitment to public safety shown by public managers in crisis response such as counter – terrorism, the Covid – 19 pandemic, through to managing the public interest in terms of wellbeing, economic and wider public health and safety.

PSE is important for public management and frontline service delivery and pedagogy must be designed to support this (Ainsworth and Ghin, 2020). Public management has become increasingly connected with approaches such as NPM and related performance metrics, targets and league tables, and collaborative governance associated with NPG (Osborne, 2010; Osborne, 2006). Recently, co- production and public value have informed discussions of public service delivery (Parker et al., 2021; Hartley et al., 2019; Liddle, 2018; Hartley et al., 2017; Voorberg et al., 2015; Benington and Moore, 2011; Moore, 1995). We argue public service staff – frontline and managerial - must be integrated into conceptualisations of PSE, to situate them within Weberian institutional contexts (Pratchett and Wingfield, 1996), as well as the managerial and network contexts of NPM and NPG.

The PSE we conceptualise here is the contested product of new theories of public management, especially NPM, with its focus on performance management (Shand, 2018; West and Blackman, 2015; Hood, 2000) and NPG with a focus on collaborative delivery (Osborne, 2010). PSE challenges the idea of NPM as public mood seems to focus on delivery and contribution rather than costs. Moreover, the greater plurality of actors engaged in public service delivery means PSE is likely to be found in public, private and third sector staff, reflected in practice, and in public management pedagogy.

This is significant because as we argue later on, PSE must be adaptable to the changing pedagogical context for future public managers. This includes partnerships and organisations across the public, private and third sectors who increasingly deliver public services, and pedagogical requirements - such as developing effective partnership working as a competence in public management courses - need to fit with the changing role of future public managers.

Policy and PSE: public management and building resilience

For our first focus of policy, what does a renewed PSE (Maddocks and Myers, 2016; Rayner et al., 2011; Aldridge and Stoker, 2002) mean for building resilience in future public services and public management? Policy is key to renewing PSE and it essential to incorporate public values at local, regional and national levels. There are differing ideological conceptions of how to achieve this, including increased state intervention to reduce the delivery of public services by the private sector, or improved wages for public services staff. Policy therefore needs to reflect PSE, including the values and ideals that inspire people to join emergency services or aspire to improve society.

Historically, the underpinning concept of PSE focused on fostering state resilience, with an emotional commitment by state employees associated with Weberian ideas of public duty in delivering policy (Swedberg, 1998). Furthermore, delivering public services demonstrates the need for collaborative delivery, cross – sector working and public connection to the roles and duties of public services staff. The practical evidence of the emergence of a renewed PSE shows that service, vocation, and policy delivery which are meaningful for communities have not disappeared. The complexities of service delivery and the many actors engaged in public management do not seem to have diluted the ideals of PSE, but public managers need to reflect on how PSE links to national policy targets and performance management (Oh and Blanchard Bush, 2015).

A recent example is the discourse that emerged with regard to the UK Covid-19 pandemic response, which resulted in a PSE that was very much in the foreground. While it was inspiring to witness appreciation for frontline public services, debates around PPE equipment and resources, discussions ignored questions of the role of public service management. This also rekindles debates about the role of public and private sector actors in the management and

delivery of public services; the role of the third sector, and the function of wider governance networks and partnerships (Sørensen, 2013).

Purpose and PSE: Practical applications

The chapter now examines the idea of PSE and purpose, as PSE is more than an abstract concept debated within the confines of academic debate and university courses: it needs to be understood in practice, by public managers and frontline staff. In particular, the Covid-19 pandemic response demonstrated how PSE is felt among staff, especially among health and care sectors (Goodwin, 2013; Glasby, 2012).

PSE must be flexible enough to adapt to and resist theoretical and practical challenges. For example, theories of Public Service Motivation (PSM) and related ideas of calling to care (O'Leary, 2021; Ritz el al, 2020; Corduneanu et al., 2020; Perry, 1997) demonstrate an underpinning spirit of service, duty and contribution to the public good has not diminished from debate. However, we contend that PSE provides a different a different perspective to these approaches. PSE is a more normative and unmeasurable quality, whereas PSM is associated with quantifiable performance management (Gregg et al., 2011).

There are also first principles we need to introduce. Do we see PSE as a means of underpinning vital frontline services and the wider foundational economy? Do we place PSE at the heart of public management, or is it no more important than ideas of performance management or co – production (Brandsen and Honigh, 2018)? PSE in practice should be relevant to public servants on the frontline and public managers. There is a need for policy to understand the desire that pushes someone to run towards danger and help fellow citizens in a selfless act of bravery on a daily basis. Whether policy formulation focuses on increases in wages for public services

staff, improved equipment for emergency services or on better systems of communication in multi-agency response, the practical application and appreciation of PSE is key to its relevance.

Developing pedagogy for a renewed PSE

We now consider how the pedagogy of PSE can inform the theory and practice of public administration and public management education. As we argue, changes to public services provide both opportunities and challenges, and a renewed PSE provides an opportunity to imbue public values as a core part of the pedagogical offer. Providing spaces for public service staff and managers to reflect on values (Bryson, et al., 2017; O' Flynn, 2007), rather than viewing them as incompatible with managerialism, will enhance understanding.

For pedagogy and PSE, graduates of public management programmes, or across broader degree courses, need to understand the range of actors who deliver public services and how public managers operate within these contexts (Horner et al., 2006). Public management delivery is increasingly multi – levelled, and this pedagogy needs to reflect the different sectors delivering public services. These include private and third sectors organisations, health services, the police and local authorities (Osborne et al, 2012).

Discussions of the state of public management in HEIs has focused on public management degree programmes (Jones, 2012) and Weberian ideas of vocation, civil and public service (Chapman, 2010; O'Toole, 2006; Chapman, 1998; Chapman and O'Toole, 1995; Chapman, 1993). Moreover, frontline public services - particularly the armed forces and police – have a long tradition of training colleges. Pedagogy needs to consider how PSE informs the theory and practice of public administration and public management.

We need to set out a future research agenda to investigate PSE in both frontline and managerial roles, and with students on public administration and public management courses. Moreover, the comparative nature of PSE requires further interrogation. As we have noted, concepts such as NPM vary between different policy traditions, and in order to remain relevant PSE needs to adapt to the post – NPM world. Approaches such as co – production, co – creation and public value now dominate the public service delivery landscape. Pedagogy for public managers must include these methods, and equally PSE needs be adaptable to them.

The role of universities and training

By focusing on policy, purpose and pedagogy, we have set out our argument for a renewed PSE, and we now move on to examine the pedagogy to support this. We do this by focusing on public administration and public management provision in HEIs to explore how it informs pedagogy, including vocation in public administration training.

University teaching must incorporate conceptual challenges to PSE, particularly how NPM and NPG may inform future education and training for public managers. As Jones (2012) notes, public management pedagogy has tended to be an aspect of business politics and sociology programmes, especially at undergraduate level. In terms of taught public administration and public management courses in the UK, there is more choice at a postgraduate taught level. These include established courses in at the universities of Birmingham, York and Portsmouth

Moreover, theories of public administration and public management are context specific, such as NPM, and shaped by institutional practices, national norms and cultures (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011). We argue that pedagogical aspects of PSE are vital for passing these ideas to future public servants, with universities crucial to achieving this goal. Response to the Covid – 19 pandemic and attention to frontline public services has seen an increase in applications to

study subjects such as nursing (UCAS, 2021). However, as we write this chapter the UK Government has stated its focus to strengthen science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects, with proposed cuts to funding for arts subjects in 2021, with risks for the pedagogy of public managers.

For public administration and public management, the subject seems to be at a crossroads. Does it reside amongst business management, political science or social science courses? Moreover, does pedagogy connected with public administration and public management only matter if it is measurable? Are professional standards in the subject underdeveloped when compared to, for example, human resource management

These are important questions for PSE as it is difficult to measure and distinct from PSM. Importantly, the influence of NPM, NPG and co - production need to be reflected in the design of pedagogy for PSE to enhance the value of public administration and public management. As Shand and Howell (2014: 213) note:

> Public Administration, as noted earlier, is at something of a crossroads both as an academic discipline and in practice. The shifting role of (surviving) public institutions and the coalition focus on STEM subjects in terms of research funding shows the need for us to address some very big questions. Looking at other countries where the teaching of public administration is an important part of large university faculties (for example, prestigious schools and departments such as the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University), these nations and their governments evidently value the link between teaching and research in the discipline of public administration, and the subsequent recruitment into government and governance.

A decade after Jones (2012) asked 'where has all the public administration gone?' it seems we are no nearer to answering this question. PSE must be flexible enough to remain relevant, and consistent across policy, practice and pedagogy. Moreover, a renewed PSE must accommodate rapid advances in artificial intelligence, big data and algorithmic governance in public services

delivery. National governments and large corporate private sector providers delivering public services (Gritsenko and Wood, 2020) have employed these tools. Online developments include innovations in local public services delivery in social care, as well as access to other local services (Chen, 2020). However, the success of technologies hinges on how they improve service delivery, how inclusive they are, their contribution to public and social value, and how they link to multi-sector partnership delivery.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have argued that a renewed PSE must be composed of policy, purpose and pedagogy. This is key to understanding public administration and public management, and as we have witnessed in the 2020 Covid – 19 pandemic, there has been public attention and public sympathy towards concepts of PSE. As we have noted, those of us who value PSE and consider it a precious quality can take heart from its resilience as a concept, for the practice of public service delivery, as well as in pedagogy

However, a renewed PSE must also remain meaningful in practice for frontline staff and public managers. The actors that now deliver public services, from large private sector organisations to third sector partners means the need to reflect practical changes in the pedagogy of PSE is crucial. There are aspects of public administration and public management provision within undergraduate business management or politics and sociology programmes, and several postgraduate courses in the discipline.

The challenge for PSE is to remain relevant and visible, and we have argued that a renewed PSE is indeed achievable, and PSE has shown it is flexible enough to withstand the challenge of NPM, NPG and ideas of PSM. Essential parts of our everyday lives depend on PSE: not just the vital roles of frontline public service staff, such as in healthcare, education and policing but

additionally public managers who manage the pressures of service delivery targets amidst often-scarce resources. As we have argued, PSE must be agile enough to adapt to changing technologies and environments in public management. However, it also needs to be accessible and meaningful for all communities, just as the public services that PSE resides in should be.

Lastly, there are several challenges that confront PSE: the need to remain relevant; to become more inclusive; to adapt to evolving digital and data driven technologies; and be agile enough to adapt to new practical and philosophical disruptions. When mapping a future research agenda for PSE, there is much to gain from a comparative analysis of pedagogy in public administration and public management, particularly in different national contexts.

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