

HOW PUBLIC SERVICE LEADERSHIP IS STUDIED: AN EXAMINATION OF A QUARTER CENTURY OF SCHOLARSHIP

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This exploratory study surveys the public service leadership literature from a selection of leading public administration journals over a 25-year period (1987–2012). Patterns in methods used to study public leadership are explored, along with how those methods vary across settings within the public service sector and the treatment of leadership in the analysis. While the number of empirical studies of public service leadership has grown, the diversity of theoretical approaches, methods and measures challenges the ability to synthesize findings in order to advance the knowledge base on this topic. This article provides a map of leadership studies within the field of public administration over time and offers prescriptions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

In most fields of study there are core concepts that are both centrally important to the field and subject to continuing debate and controversy. In public administration (PA), the topic of leadership is such a concept, with discussions of the importance of and challenges associated with leadership in public service repeatedly surfacing throughout the development of the field (Getha-Taylor *et al.* 2011; Van Wart 2013a). While leadership in general has been difficult to study and measure, the increasingly complex scope of PA has made this more challenging, resulting in a fragmented approach to the study of public service leadership.

In decrying the challenges associated with leadership studies, Van Wart (2003, p. 225) called on PA scholars ‘to discipline ourselves to create models that are powerful enough to handle the complex leadership phenomenon and then to harness them in our research’ in order to ‘produce better science’ as well as provide useful insight to practitioners. While numerous studies recognize the importance of leadership in PA research and practice, many scholars acknowledge the continuing tensions and challenges associated with understanding leadership, both theoretically and empirically. This complexity raises questions as to how well scholars have answered Van Wart’s call (Van Wart 2003, 2013a, 2013b; Van Slyke and Alexander 2006).

The concept of public leadership raises many theoretical questions for scholars, including the difference in leadership across sectors (the perennial public/private debate), how leadership operates at different levels of administrative hierarchies, the appropriate values that should be embodied by public leaders and leadership in cross-jurisdictional settings, including public–private partnerships or networks (Vinzant and Crothers 1998; Terry 2003; Crosby and Bryson 2005; Anderson 2010; Crosby 2010; Ospina and Foldy 2010; Currie *et al.* 2011).

When considering how to evaluate and understand public service leadership, Getha-Taylor *et al.* (2011) provide three lenses to frame existing research. The first

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lens addresses the *character* of public leadership as it reflects the changing perceptions of governance itself. The second focuses on the *function* of public leadership, including the need for accountability, collaboration, entrepreneurial initiatives and strategic action. The third lens reflects the boundaries or *jurisdiction* of public leadership, expanding the focus of study. These three lenses highlight the multiple frames to understand the complexity associated with leadership, including the how, the what and the why of leadership scholarship. In addition to these theoretical differences that pervade the knowledge base, questions surrounding the empirical study of public leadership remain prominent, including challenges related to methodology and instrumentation (Van Slyke and Alexander 2006).

This article examines these continuing challenges through a study of leadership research in a selection of leading PA journals over a 25-year period (1987–2012). The focus of this article is public service leadership, a term that denotes a focus on leadership in and for public service. This term is used interchangeably with public leadership, which in some cases is inclusive of political leadership (the realm of elected officials and some high-level political appointees). Public leadership is examined broadly to include the exercise of leadership in, as well as across, organizations working together to address shared problems and produce public value. This is broader than administrative leadership, which focuses solely on the people and processes involved in leading, managing and guiding government and nonprofit agencies (Van Wart 2013b, p. 521). Thus our working definition of public leadership includes administrative leadership as well as collaborative (or what Van Wart terms ‘community’) leadership (Van Wart 2013b, p. 527), but not the realm of political officials.

Using a database of leading generalist PA journals, this article explores the overarching question of how public leadership is studied within the PA research community as guided by the following research questions:

1. The ‘how’ of studying public leadership: what are the patterns in methods used to study public leadership?
2. The ‘where’ of studying public leadership: what is the variation in methods across jurisdictions of public leadership (sector based, level of government and setting locus)?
3. The ‘what’ of studying public leadership: what is the extent to which leadership is the main focus of study?

This article is organized in four sections. A brief review of continuing theoretical questions associated with the study of public leadership is presented, with a particular focus on the larger methodological questions remaining. The data and methods are then presented. The two final sections present the findings from the analysis of the selected leadership journal articles, explore the implications of these findings for the continuing study of public leadership and raise questions concerning the nature of this research within the fields of PA and public management. The aim of this article is to provide a map of leadership studies over time to provide a strong grounding to assist in intentional and strategic future studies of public leadership.

PUBLIC LEADERSHIP – THE HOW, THE WHERE, AND THE WHAT

The how

The methodological challenges associated with the empirical assessment of public leadership have been a topic of consistent discussion in the literature (Van Slyke and

Alexander 2006). This is, of course, true in leadership studies in general (see Avolio *et al.* 2009). Research on public leadership is characterized by inconsistency and a lack of consensus on what to measure and how to measure it. Persistent challenges associated with measuring leadership reflect the ‘too many variables, too few cases problem that limits any hope for predictability and generalizability’ (Van Slyke and Alexander 2006, p. 369). For example, single case studies of leaders produce interesting stories and findings but lack a common method for assessing the leaders to generate shared theoretical understanding. Scholars evaluating public leadership have measured a variety of variables encompassing styles, behaviours and traits; however, there is a lack of convergence both theoretically and empirically that presents challenges to advancing an integrative theory or even fostering a more coherent dialogue around what is known about public leadership.

In addition to the challenges of individual case studies and too many variables, other methodological challenges associated with the measurement of public leadership include the time period used to assess the impact of leadership and determining the appropriate unit of analysis (Van Slyke and Alexander 2006). Leadership can be conceived as a set of practices or behaviours for which the full effect may become apparent only over time. Therefore, cross-sectional data may not capture the complete picture of the effect of leadership in a public organization or interorganizational setting (Van Slyke and Alexander 2006). Longitudinal data could improve these findings, but such data are difficult to obtain, with the exception of a few existing data sets such as the US Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (formerly called the Federal Human Capital Survey; see www.fedview.opm.gov). In addition, leadership can be conceptualized as operating across different levels of a hierarchy and institutions – both in terms of where leadership is exercised and where leadership effects are experienced. If measurement does not account for this with the use of appropriate methods, biases can be introduced (Lowe and Gardner 2001; Van Slyke and Alexander 2006). The empirical assessment must be clear and careful that the unit of analysis is appropriate when measuring leadership – whether the measurement is at the dyadic (leader–follower), group, individual or network level.

The where

In addition to the question of how public leadership is studied, questions remain as to where leadership is exercised. Specifically, what is the appropriate way to understand the jurisdiction of public leadership? The contemporary landscape of public leadership has become increasingly amorphous (Frederickson 2007). Implementation studies demonstrate that much of the administrative action that truly influences the public can occur at different levels of government and across multiple public organizations (not to mention nongovernmental authorities). For instance, the diffusion of authority to ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky 1983; Vinzant and Crothers 1998; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003), to all jurisdictions of government (local, state, federal, public authorities and other trans-jurisdictional entities) and beyond the boundaries of government institutions (non-profits, collective policy arrangements and private firms) requires greater attention to leadership across the entire spectrum of governance.

What is evident and important for this discussion is the extent to which studies of public leadership are rooted in jurisdiction. The concept of jurisdiction includes organizational boundaries (for public organizations, these boundaries include legal authority and often geographic boundaries) and political jurisdictions. Jurisdictional boundaries can provide both real and perceived barriers to public leadership (Kettl 2006). They may also shape

the application of specific leadership theories. While bounded jurisdictions are a critical component of understanding the context and constraints of leadership, the reality of what Frederickson (2007) has called 'bureaucrats without borders' needs to be acknowledged, and scholars need to recognize that public leadership is often exercised in the absence of jurisdictional authority (Gardner 1990). In this case, a growing body of scholarship examines public leadership in a networked setting (Ospina and Saz-Carranza 2010; O'Leary and Vij 2012).

Given the fragmented system of governance and evolving collaborative relationships, it is difficult to identify specific acts of public leadership and individual public leaders. Public leadership needs to be examined at all levels within PA (as defined by formal bureaucratic boundaries) as well as across sectors. The identification and investigation of leadership across policy fields and organizational levels is necessary to study and understand public leadership (Getha-Taylor *et al.* 2011).

The what

There are multiple reviews of the different theories used to understand public leadership (see Van Wart 2003, 2013a, 2013b; Van Slyke and Alexander 2006). However, big questions remain in understanding the intersection of public leadership and PA. One issue of primary importance is the degree to which theories of leadership developed for the private sector (or more general leadership theories) can be applied to public service organizations. Numerous instruments have been developed to assess leadership in private organizations, although the application of these instruments to the public sector and the public service is still in question (see Bass 2008; Avolio *et al.* 2009; Northouse 2012). There are examples of scholars applying general leadership theories to the public sector (such as transformational leadership) and finding positive results (see Wright and Pandey 2010; Moynihan *et al.* 2012a; Moynihan *et al.* 2012b).

However, while theories of leadership styles, traits and behaviours developed primarily within a business frame of reference can illuminate public leadership, some scholars argue that public leadership needs to be studied as distinct from general leadership studies in order to capture the particular challenges faced due to the institutional constraints and values of public service (Getha-Taylor *et al.* 2011). For example, administrative leaders are accountable to multiple political principals, often lack sufficient extrinsic rewards to motivate followers and operate within personnel system constraints.

Thus, more research has focused on connecting leadership to broader PA concepts, such as the impact of leadership on the implementation of administrative reforms, how leadership affects performance management in the public sector, how leadership operates within collaborative settings to foster network or collaborative effectiveness and the influence of leaders on public service motivation (Burke and Costello 2005; Kapucu and Van Wart 2008; Vigoda-Gadot *et al.* 2008; Wright *et al.* 2012).

Finally, scholars and practitioners are interested in the impact of leadership. A considerable body of research has focused on exceptional leaders, providing detailed, descriptive case studies of leaders and the positive changes they have produced in government or nonprofit organizations (e.g. Doig and Hargrove 1990; Ricucci 2012). While these kinds of studies provide valuable insight, there is a need to understand public leadership in a broader context (apart from exceptional cases) and how effective leadership may make a difference in public organizations, advancing public service and the principles of effective and equitable governance.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study come from articles spanning 25 years (1987–2012) published in eight leading, refereed PA journals. Journals that reflect both a national (US) and a global audience were explicitly identified: four journals with a US perspective and four journals drawn from a more global perspective. The methodology focuses explicitly on analysing journal articles because they represent a broad cross-section of studies on the topic of public leadership. Thus a limitation of the study is that it only analyses a sample of PA scholarship from select journals and excludes books and other journals published during this time period. However, given that the sample of journals includes respected generalist PA journals, we have confidence that the leadership-related research included offers a representative snapshot of how the field of PA is approaching the study of leadership. Furthermore, because the focus of this article is how leadership is studied within the field of PA, we have excluded relevant research published in general management journals.

The selection of articles for this exploratory analysis followed a three-stage process. The first stage of selection criteria included a search for the terms ‘leadership’ or ‘leader’ in the abstract, title or keywords, as these terms most effectively reflect the explicit concept of public leadership. Such terms as ‘lead’ or ‘leading’ created false positives in identifying articles that examined public leadership. The second stage included a review of each article to ensure that the article did indeed reflect an active treatment of the concept of public leadership. In empirical treatments, for example, the concept of leadership or leader must reflect a dependent variable, an independent variable with significant explanatory focus, or a measurable control variable.

Descriptive articles must articulate specific theories of leadership or leader characteristics. Articles with only a passing mention of leadership were removed from the sample. For example, articles that examine other conceptual frameworks but note in the conclusion the generic relevance of ‘improved leadership’ as an area for future research were excluded. Reflecting the logic employed by Van Slyke and Alexander (2006), articles on leadership in the nonprofit sector were included, as nonprofits have missions that are public service-focused and often are directly involved in the delivery of public services, making them a critical player in understanding public leadership.

The third stage reflected the explicit intent of this analysis, which is to assess research on public leadership as not necessarily a political process. To that end, articles were eliminated that focus exclusively on leadership of elected officials, including prime ministers, presidents and legislative representatives. Articles that examine a combination of elected and non-elected government officials, such as mayors and city managers (to reflect leadership within a local jurisdiction), remained in the sample. The selection process identified 129 articles that met the three criteria (see table 1).

The study established a priori codes to evaluate the focus, scope and contributions of the articles. To evaluate the identified codes, the team of six researchers coded five articles to determine inter-coder reliability. Codes were revised based on this process. The entire database of articles was subsequently reviewed by at least two researchers. As figure 1 illustrates, there has been a steady increase in scholarship on leadership, though it still represents a small sample of PA research. For example, in the past 25 years, approximately 1,918 articles have been published in *Public Administration Review* (PAR) and 553 in *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (JPART); of those, 44 and 22, respectively (fewer than 3 per cent), were on leadership.

TABLE 1 *Descriptive statistics of articles in sample*

Journal name	US or global perspective	Number of leadership articles identified	Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed	Theory
<i>Administration & Society (A&S)</i>	US	22	6	5	2	8
<i>American Review of Public Administration (ARPA)</i>	US	13	5	5	1	2
<i>Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory (JPART)</i>	US	22	12	5	1	4
<i>Public Administration Review (PAR)</i>	US	41	9	14	7	11
<i>Governance</i>	Global	5	0	4	0	1
<i>International Public Management Journal (IPMJ)</i>	Global	4	4	0	0	0
<i>Public Administration (PA)</i>	Global	15	2	9	2	2
<i>Public Management Review (PMR)</i>	Global	8	2	4	1	1
Total		129	40	46	14	29

To address the first research question, the analysis examined both descriptive and empirical studies of public leadership. In the empirical treatments the explicit focus is on examining data analysis methods, data collection methods and the unit of analysis of how leadership is studied. For understanding and classifying methods, the following definition was employed: 'method is research action ... research methods are the practical activities of research: sampling, data collection, data management, data analysis, and reporting' (Carter and Little 2007, p. 1318). For this article, the specific focus is on the data collection and data analysis components, including how jurisdiction shapes research methods.

To address the second research question, where public leadership is practised (and studied) was coded based on the sector addressed (public, nonprofit, multi-sector or without explicit acknowledgement of a sector), the level of government addressed (municipal, county, state, federal, multi-jurisdictional, other or no jurisdiction) and unit of analysis (individual, organization, comprehensive government, network, comparative, other or none). In exploring the third research question, focus was placed on whether leadership was addressed as the main focus of the study (as the dependent variable or as the main focus in a descriptive study) or whether leadership was the independent variable connected to some additional concept or question.

Descriptive treatments of leadership represent 22 per cent of the articles in this sample. Empirical treatments of leadership reflect all three classifications of methods. Based on the sample of articles, it is evident that PA scholars are increasingly engaging in the empirical assessment of public leadership. Empirical assessments apply qualitative and quantitative methodologies discretely but are less likely to apply mixed methodologies to study the outcome and impact of public leadership. Among the eight journals, 36 per cent of the

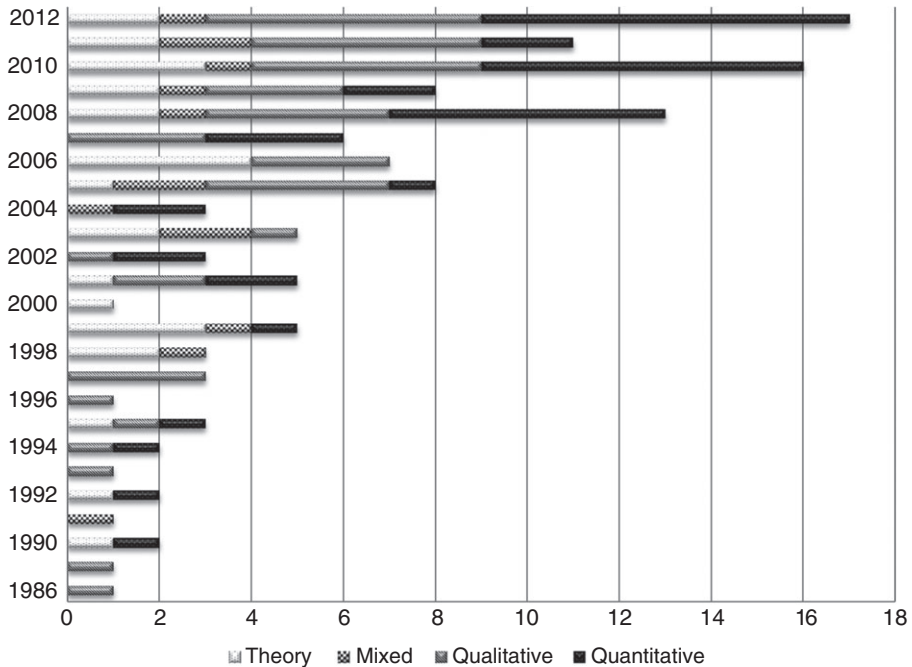


FIGURE 1 *Frequency of methodology applied in articles by year (1987-2012)*

articles apply a qualitative methodology, 31 per cent apply a quantitative methodology and 11 per cent apply a mixed (quantitative and qualitative) methodology.

The following section presents the findings from the analysis of the articles that examine how public leadership is studied. Results focus on several methodological categories to provide a comprehensive picture of how and where public leadership is studied.

FINDINGS

The overarching question of the analysis presented here is how PA scholars have studied public leadership over time. Specifically, we examined this sample of research articles to determine (1) patterns in methodological approaches over time, (2) variations in methodological approaches across different settings and (3) relationships between methods and the extent to which public leadership is the focus of study.

How leadership is studied: approaches over time

By exploring patterns over time (see figure 1), it becomes evident that there has been demonstrable growth over the past five years in the study of public leadership. In the sample of articles from 1987 to 2012, more than 50 per cent of the articles within the sample were published between 2008 and 2012. While the number of published articles that are primarily descriptive has remained consistent over time, there has been steady growth in empirical assessments of the outcome and impact of public leadership.

Most notably, the application of exclusively quantitative or qualitative methodologies (in contrast to mixed methodologies) has increased substantially. Within the sample, 62.5 per cent (25 articles) of the studies applying a quantitative analysis were published

between 2008 and 2012. In addition, 50 per cent (23 articles) of the sample applying a qualitative analysis were published between 2008 and 2012. This may reflect the overall increasing sophistication of PA research since the late 1990s in the application of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The application of mixed methodologies, however, has remained consistently low.

Among the articles in this sample, a variety of data analysis protocols were applied. For the quantitative studies, various forms of regression analysis were conducted, including OLS and logistical regressions. More recently, structural equation modelling has become more prevalent and is useful in modelling the complicated relationship between leadership and other variables, especially when the relationship may be indirect (e.g. Vigoda-Gadot *et al.* 2008; Moynihan *et al.* 2012a). 'Other' methods include factor analysis and correlations. Overall, in looking at the methods, paralleling similar growth in PA research generally, it appears that the use of more sophisticated methods of quantitative analysis has grown. Unfortunately, many of the qualitative studies in the sample are vague in terms of articulating methods, often providing little detail on the type of analysis used. The researchers presenting single or multiple case studies are not always explicit about how the data sources were coded. Articles that do not provide a discussion of data analysis were classified as descriptive case studies.

The findings presented here show the same concerns highlighted by Van Slyke and Alexander (2006). The quantitative studies, which by nature have much more specified measures of leadership, seem to make little use of existing instruments from the general leadership research base, with researchers operationalizing leadership in many different and highly individualized ways.

Given the increased globalization of the field, the state of public leadership scholarship from comparative perspectives was an important dimension of this analysis. Within the sample of journals, both US and internationally focused journals were included, even though three-quarters of the articles focusing on leadership were published in traditionally US-focused journals (*PAR*, *JPART*, *Administration & Society*, *American Review of Public Administration*). After considering the distribution of methods across the individual journals, only three journals revealed any discernible pattern. Overall, *JPART* and the *International Public Management Journal (IPMJ)* feature more articles that apply quantitative analysis (although *IPMJ* has published a total of only four such articles). In addition, *Public Administration (PA)* features more articles that apply qualitative methods for analysis of the outcome and impact of public leadership.

Where leadership is studied: variation across 'jurisdictions'

A major piece of the puzzle in examining public leadership is where it is studied. The where is particularly relevant in that PA is inherently fractured in terms of the various sectors, multiple levels of governments and units of analysis involved in delivering public services. The study of public leadership was examined across three distinct sectors – public, nonprofit and multi-sector. The vast majority of articles focus on studying leadership exclusively in the public sector (71.1 per cent), followed by multi-sector studies (11.7 per cent), which include treatments of leadership spanning public and private sectors and public and nonprofit sectors. The least studied sector among the articles in this sample was the nonprofit sector (3.9 per cent). The emphasis on studying leadership strictly within the boundaries of the public sector, however, contradicts the reality in practice that requires leaders that can successfully span the public, nonprofit and private sectors.

TABLE 2 *Distribution of articles by level of government*

		Municipal	County	State	Federal	Multi-level	Other	None/NA
Percentage of total articles		25.0	1.5	5.4	28.9	12.5	8.6	18.0
Methods (percentage of level of government)	Quantitative	50.0	0.0	42.8	24.3	43.7	18.2	4.3
	Qualitative	31.3	0.0	28.6	54.1	43.7	45.5	8.7
Data collection (percentage of level of government)	Mixed	15.6	100.0	28.6	10.8	6.3	9.1	4.3
	Theory	3.1	0.0	0.0	10.8	6.3	27.2	82.7
	Interviews	18.8	0.0	42.9	27	18.8	54.5	17.4
	Surveys	46.9	50	42.9	21.6	50	9.1	0.0
	Literature Review	3.1	0.0	0.0	5.4	25	18.2	43.5
	Secondary data	15.6	50	14.2	10.8	6.2	9.1	0.0
Variable (percentage of level of government)	Document analysis	9.4	0.0	0.0	27	0.0	0.0	0.0
	No data used – theory	6.2	0.0	0.0	8.2	0.0	9.1	39.1
	Dependent	28.1	50.0	0.0	18.9	25.0	18.2	8.7
	Independent	62.5	50.0	85.7	56.8	43.8	54.5	13
	Narrative/Process	9.4	0.0	14.3	24.3	31.2	27.3	78.3

Data collection methods, when reflected through the lens of jurisdiction, vary across journals and articles, but interesting patterns emerge when the examination is based on distinct sectors (see table 2). All of the articles that focused on the nonprofit sector used interviews as the method of data collection. Articles focusing on the public sector used more varied data collection methods, with survey data, interviews and document analysis identified as the most common. In addition, analyses of leadership within the public sector used secondary data sources (such as the US OPM's Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey data) more often than did analyses of other sectors. Articles that provide a multi-sector analysis of leadership favour surveys, literature reviews and interviews, with significantly less application of secondary data sources and no use of document analysis.

Research in the nonprofit setting balances examining leadership as an independent and dependent variable, whereas research in the public and multi-sector settings is dominated by examinations of leadership as an independent variable (see table 3).

Data availability, setting complexity and research focus all influence the current state of leadership research, as does the jurisdiction of the study. The nature of the quantity and orientation of the research within different jurisdictions has great potential to impact the scope and depth of knowledge creation. More heavily quantitative and large-N studies in the public sector provide more opportunities for testing theories and examining leadership's impact on the achievement of outcomes, whereas more qualitative studies in the nonprofit arena focus on rich data that help describe the importance of context.

While two-thirds of the articles focus exclusively on the public sector, the research reflects significant variation in terms of the level, unit and sample studied. The municipal and federal government context has dominated this scholarship for the past 25 years, with significantly less attention paid to county and state governments. This echoes a broader trend in PA scholarship (Rush and Kellough 2011), where there have been a few major research initiatives investigating state governments, such as the Government Performance Project; but more recent studies focusing on leadership and state governments are limited.

Analysis of leadership at the municipal level applies a range of data collection practices but relies most heavily on surveys. County-level studies rely exclusively on secondary data

TABLE 3 *Distribution of articles by unit setting*

		Compara- tive	Comprehen- sive	Individual	Network/ partnership	Organiza- tional	Other	None/ NA
Percentage of total articles		6.3	13.3	32.8	11.7	18.8	0.8	16.4
Methods (percentage of sample setting)	Quantitative	37.5	52.9	40.5	6.7	37.5	100.0	0.0
	Qualitative	50	23.6	38.1	86.6	33.3	0.0	4.8
	Mixed	0.0	7.6	16.7	0.0	16.7	0.0	0.0
Data collection (percentage of sample setting)	Theory	12.5	5.9	4.7	6.7	12.5	0.0	95.2
	Interviews	0.0	11.8	33.3	66.6	25	0.0	0.0
	Surveys	37.5	47.1	38.1	0	37.5	0.0	0.0
	Literature review	25	0.0	2.4	20	4.2	0.0	57.1
Variable (percentage of sample setting)	Secondary data	0.0	17.5	16.7	6.7	4.2	100.0	0.0
	Document analysis	25	11.8	7.1	0.0	20.8	0.0	4.8
	No data used – theory	12.5	11.8	2.4	6.7	8.3	0.0	38.1
Variable (percentage of sample setting)	Dependent	0.0	23.5	38.1	20.0	8.3	0.0	0.0
	Independent	87.5	58.9	54.8	46.7	66.7	100.0	0.0
	Narrative/ Process	12.5	17.6	7.1	33.3	25	0.0	100.0

and surveys. State-level assessments represent the most diverse data collection practices, including surveys, interviews, secondary data and document analysis. A range of data collection methods highlight assessments of leadership at the federal level, but interviews and document analysis are used most frequently. The exclusive reliance on interviews in the quasi-governmental domain (for example, public–private partnerships or regional councils of government) may reflect the absence of accessible data sources or a unifying cluster of jurisdictions. The ‘other’ category captures studies within the sample that examine leadership in multiple jurisdictions, in a network setting or in jurisdictions that do not fall directly within a distinct level of government, such as school districts.

From the perspective of various levels of government, articles in this sample overwhelmingly treat leadership as an independent variable. However, studies that focus on quasi-governmental organizations investigate leadership as a dependent variable. This sample of articles contains no studies at the county or state level that examine leadership as a dependent variable. Leadership is treated as a dependent variable in less than one fifth of the articles at the local and federal level (see table 3). This may mean that leadership itself is not seen as an outcome within county and state governments, but as a means of achieving other PA objectives. In studies focusing on local and federal governments, a greater emphasis is placed on leadership as an outcome. While leadership is studied in a range of settings, the current foundation of this research is clearly being driven by studies at the federal and municipal levels. The resulting challenge is to determine the extent to which lessons are being developed that apply – or that can at least be tested – across various levels of government and sectors.

Another lens critical to understanding how and where leadership is being studied is the unit of analysis. Leadership has been evaluated through a hierarchy of analytical scopes, ranging from the individual, the organization, a subunit or a comprehensive government (for example, all departments or agencies within the jurisdiction are included), a network

or partnership, to the comparative. The results reported here indicate that the most common unit of analysis is the individual (32.8 per cent), followed by the organization (18.8 per cent) and then government as a comprehensive unit (13.3 per cent).

This sample suggests that jurisdictional scope may well be driving methodological choices. Empirical research on networks and partnerships is qualitative in a majority of studies (86.76 per cent). In comparison, a study that aims to understand an entire unit government (i.e. a local government) is more commonly quantitative (52.9 per cent) in nature. The data collection methods also may be subject to jurisdictional limitations. Studies that assess leadership within comprehensive governments rely heavily on surveys (47.1 per cent) and secondary data (17.5 per cent). Studies that focus on the individual leader as a unit of analysis rely on surveys (38.1 per cent) and interviews (33.3 per cent). Studies that focus on network or partnership settings reflect a preference for interviews (66.6 per cent) and literature reviews (20.0 per cent). Among the articles focusing on leadership within organizations, the most common data collection approaches are surveys (37.5 per cent) and interviews (35.0 per cent).

While all the unit settings in the studies predominantly examine leadership as an independent variable, the studies that assess leadership at the individual level represent the highest proportion of studies that treat leadership as a dependent variable (38.1 per cent). This suggests that leadership is seen as an outcome from the individual level of analysis. When assessed at the organizational, subunit of government, comprehensive government, network/partnership or comparative setting, leadership is most often investigated in terms of how it drives other outcomes.

What is studied: leadership as research focus

The one unequivocal finding from this study is that there is no one dominant theoretical framework for defining and assessing public leadership. Within this sample of articles, more than 20 distinct theories frame how public leadership is studied. While a broad range of theories are employed, findings suggest a clustering around transformational and collaborative leadership. The focus, in both broad theoretical areas, is on leadership as a dependent variable. However, a more careful analysis of the identified articles indicates broad typologies of transformational and collaborative leadership rather than specific and repeated conceptualizations of these leadership theories. The result is that scholars are no closer to having a clearer understanding of transformational and collaborative leadership in a public service context. Future research should provide more specific analysis of what contributes to the outcomes of transformational and collaborative leadership. Moreover, the relationship between theory and methods is particularly diverse.

Turning to the question of leadership as the research focus, the majority of articles (50 per cent) study leadership as an independent variable, meaning that leadership, as a theoretical construct, is often used to explain other theoretical phenomena and identified as a factor that impacts other outcomes (e.g. organizational performance, performance measurement). In total 20 per cent of the articles study leadership as a dependent variable, in that leadership is the outcome of various factors, while 30 per cent of the articles examine leadership as either a narrative or a process rather than as discrete variables that influence outcomes and that are themselves outcomes. This represents alternative constructs of public leadership that include normative theories, integrative theories and assessments of the dynamic process of public leadership.

How we understand and interpret theoretical constructs of public leadership is closely tied to how the data are collected and analysed. Across these studies there was

a significant amount of independent data collection, including interviews, document analysis and surveys. For the studies using qualitative methods, sample sizes ranged from single case studies to studies including more than 100 data points. Sample sizes for the quantitative data sets varied more significantly. Some studies used surveys designed by an individual scholar, whereas others used large data sets, such as the Texas School Performance Data, the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey and Phase IV of the National Administrative Studies Project (NASP-IV).

DISCUSSION

There has been a steady drumbeat calling for greater attention to the role, impact and relevance of leadership in PA (Van Slyke and Alexander 2006; Morse *et al.* 2007; Holmes 2009; Getha-Taylor *et al.* 2011). However, the number of articles directly addressing public leadership still constitutes a relatively small proportion of the larger PA knowledge base. Several lessons are learned by evaluating the 129 articles published over the past 25 years. Contributions reflect the organizing framework of the *how*, *where* and *what* of leadership studies.

First, regarding the *how* of studying leadership, the findings suggest that scholars are increasingly answering the call for greater empirical testing of the impact of leadership and leadership as an outcome in and of itself. A small fraction of the articles focus on articulating theories of leadership or present biographical sketches of leadership in action, and almost 80 per cent report applying either a quantitative, qualitative or mixed method approach for assessing leadership. The empirical treatments of leadership represent a growing acknowledgement that leadership plays a critical role in effectively achieving PA outcomes. Specifically, the impact of leadership has been examined on performance management, organizational commitment, ethical decision-making, collaboration, crisis management and implementing change, ambitious goals and administrative reforms.

Second, regarding the *where* of studying leadership, this analysis reveals that the application of specific analytical and data collection methods coincides with distinct jurisdictional frames. The way leadership is operationalized varies greatly across these studies. The jurisdictional frame may well guide how leadership variables are operationalized and affect data collection methodologies. Studies of leadership within network contexts, for example, would be well served if consistent variables could be tested across different studies so that theorizing about collaborative leadership might stand upon a stronger empirical base.

Moreover, qualitative studies are applied most often in articles focusing on agencies at the federal level. When leadership is examined within the jurisdiction of a comprehensive government, surveys are the data collection method used most often, while studies of other government jurisdictions do not overwhelmingly favour one data collection method over others.

This may well be because of access and accessibility to data sources for respective jurisdictions. For example, studies within the nonprofit sector employ only interviews as their data collection method. The lack of large existing data sets on management practices in the nonprofit sector could account for this finding, as leadership is not addressed in the most readily available large-N data sets from the National Center on Charitable Statistics. Studies that focus on counties rely on secondary data and surveys for data collection. While the other levels of government reflect a more balanced mix of data collection methodologies, the challenge is that no data collection method applies across all levels of government. If

there is interest in a more generalizable assessment of leadership across various governance jurisdictions, future research should apply consistent data collection methods.

The findings also highlight the absence of a comprehensive theoretical approach to knowledge creation and empirical theory testing related to public leadership. This is reflected through the wide range of theoretical lenses applied in the literature. While it may well be appropriate for public leadership research to be more about *theorizing* than leading to the development of *a theory*, it is nevertheless reasonable to aspire to more integration and generalizable knowledge in this area of study.

Finally, regarding the *what* of studying leadership, the greatest opportunity for future research is reflected in the operationalization of public leadership theories. There is little consistency offered across the research regarding how leadership is operationalized. A significantly smaller portion of the empirical studies examine leadership as a dependent variable. In these articles, the conditions that influence leadership are explicitly examined. These may include the role of resource dependence, organizational and institutional context and individual attitudes and values. Given the limited attention paid to leadership as an outcome, future research should examine what factors, including jurisdictional context, influence the results.

An exception is studies using NASP-IV, which utilize a measure of transformational leadership developed in previous studies of leadership within the private sector (see Wright and Pandey 2010; Moynihan *et al.* 2012a; Moynihan *et al.* 2012b). This data set employs a group of measures that capture three dimensions of transformational leadership – inspirational motivation, idealized influence and intellectual stimulation. Vigoda-Gadot and Beerli (2012) also measure transformational leadership, along with transactional leadership and leader–member exchange, to explore the relationship between leadership and organizational citizenship behaviours, using different measures from those of the NASP-IV data but established measures from the broader leadership research.

Another general leadership theory (and associated instrument) used in the public leadership research is Quinn's Competing Values Framework (1988). Other established instruments and/or constructs used in the studies examined include the Five Practices model developed by Kouzes and Posner (2012), Bennis's (1989) Leadership Competencies and Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) scale for leader–member exchange (Hennessey 1998; Gabris *et al.* 2001; Jaskyte 2011; Ritz *et al.* 2012). However, few studies used established leadership instruments to empirically assess public leadership, highlighting the challenge of finding commonalities in how leadership is measured.

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Given these findings, we present the following research prescriptions. These prescriptions emerge from the existing body of literature and are offered to highlight gaps, opportunities and challenges associated with the continued scholarly examination of public leadership.

The how

Prescription 1: Expand the scope of leadership studies with the aim to confirm

We recommend large-N studies with the recognition that we need to allow for the research questions to dictate the methods employed. We have seen growth in the number of leadership studies and believe that it is valuable but only if the field continues to develop and

expand this research methodologically and conceptually. Greater cross-pollination and confirmation research conducted to further develop and refine these concepts is needed. Similarly, some form of larger qualitative study of the various individual single case studies or profiles of particular leaders would also be appropriate. We recommend that scholars examine a set of shared propositions applied across multiple studies – and with multiple samples – to generate empirical findings leading to more grounded and generalizable theories of leadership.

Prescription 2: Explore new methods and approaches to leadership inquiry

While the dominant approaches to studying leadership (surveys, interviews) offer valuable insights, we recommend that scholars also consider alternative research approaches that break the methodological mould. Experimental and quasi-experimental designs could offer avenues for examining leadership in groundbreaking ways. With the growth of experiments in PA research (Margetts 2011; Bellé 2013a, 2013b), the study of public leadership is prime for some work in this area. In addition, we recommend further work that models the complexity of the relationship between leadership and other key PA functions (e.g. Moynihan *et al.* 2012a).

Prescription 3: Prioritize platforms for sharing data and approaches to measurement

We recommend greater coordination and conceptual collaboration between scholars in developing measures, theories and models, and also in providing open source data. On a related note, we encourage scholars to be more explicit regarding measures used in their research to create shared conceptual models that can be advanced as a field. For example, public service motivation (PSM) measures have been shared, tested, replicated and refined, leading to a more integrated and accepted conceptual and empirical view of this construct within the field. Similarly, replication studies would provide for a more comprehensive and integrated dialogue, although they are not as readily accepted.

The where

Prescription 1: Build reliable 'data infrastructure' at the state and local levels

Advances in leadership studies depend on resources, including investments in data collection. Currently, federally sponsored surveys (e.g. the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey) provide reliable data for scholarly and practitioner use over time. Initiatives at the state and local levels could allow for similar longitudinal insights on leadership. We recommend that scholars (as well as universities and/or professional organizations) work to identify appropriate existing data sources and develop sustainable databases for future academic use.

Prescription 2: Apply concepts and theories at multiple levels for generalizability

We recommend a coordinated approach among scholars to examine leadership theories at the different jurisdictional levels. For example, how does the study and practice of agency leadership differ at the local, state and federal government levels?

Prescription 3: Consider the broad applicability of emergent leadership approaches

We recommend that leadership scholars examine the rise of such emergent leadership approaches as collaborative leadership by examining the role of governance structural changes on leadership. Drawing on Agranoff and McGuire (2004), for example, do local government jurisdictions with more structural collaboration reflect better collaborative

leadership competencies among public managers? Or is the change associated with the new governance only changing structure, but not necessarily behaviour, in terms of public leadership?

The what

Prescription 1: Reframe leadership as a dependent variable

We believe that leadership is important as both an independent and dependent variable. Still, greater emphasis on examining and understanding leadership as a dependent variable is needed to develop a strong conceptual understanding that can feed into both research and training. Many models of leadership are not prescriptive. Reframing leadership as a dependent variable could allow for testing and identification of concepts that could apply across contextual and individual characteristics.

Prescription 2: Embrace a more comprehensive dialogue and practise cross-talk with other disciplines

We recommend that scholars consider how we study leadership within PA as compared to how related fields are conceptualizing and investigating this concept. For example, a similar study to this one from the general management arena would offer complementary insights. It would also serve to break down silos between scholars working on similar questions. Similarly, we expect that gender studies and diversity research could help PA leadership scholars understand the range of factors that contribute to a model of leadership that accounts for contextual variables.

Prescription 3: Focus on opportunities for cross-study insights and meta-analysis

Given the fragmented approach to leadership studies revealed by this investigation, we suggest that scholars focus on two or three main theories for testing over a period of time (for example, transformational and collaborative). Over time, and by employing similar measurement approaches, these areas could offer meta-analytic insights. We are not suggesting that we constrain or limit the debate on public leadership; rather, we expect that such investigations will offer complementary value by allowing us to develop findings that are more comparable across settings.

CONCLUSION

Empirical studies of public leadership have become more common over time, with demonstrable growth during the final five years examined in this study. This is cause for great optimism about the attention being paid to this critical PA concept. However, there is a need to consider the methods and measurement of public leadership across the knowledge base, marshalling the empirical evidence produced so far about what is known and moving forward with carefully designed studies that can further illuminate public leadership.

As the findings here suggest, these articles reflect a range of jurisdictions in which leadership is studied. It is important to note that studies do cluster around several key jurisdictional boundaries. Specifically, public leadership is studied primarily within public organizations, within the context of local and federal government. Even though there has been an increase in scholarship on multi-sector, collaborative and network environments of public administration (Crosby and Bryson 2005; Bingham and O'Leary 2008; O'Leary

and Vij 2012), it has not translated to more published articles about leadership in these types of settings. As other public service actors, such as nonprofits, are increasingly used to deliver public services, more systematic research needs to be developed in order to discover how leadership differences across sectors can affect public service outcomes.

Analysis revealed that public leadership research utilizes various methodologies and employs various data collection methods. However, the application of specific methodologies and data collection methods coincides with distinct jurisdictional frames. For example, qualitative studies are applied at the highest rate in articles that focus on the federal government as a jurisdiction. When leadership is examined for a comprehensive government, surveys are most often employed, while studies of other government jurisdictions do not favour one data collection method. In other words, there is no consistent methodology applied across jurisdictions.

Finally, these findings suggest that PA lacks a comprehensive theoretical approach to knowledge creation and empirical theory testing of public leadership. This is evident in the wide range of theoretical lenses applied throughout the scholarship. While theoretical heterogeneity likely suits the topic and settings, the field could benefit from having multiple studies testing the same theoretical model with comparable operationalized variables across different jurisdictions, levels of government, and so on. With more explicit theory testing and development, the study of leadership within PA may at some point become more mature and nuanced.

The state of public leadership studies is rather fragmented. While varied methods, contexts and frameworks contribute to a robust body of work, the larger question is how these approaches advance the knowledge base and practice of public leadership. Does the variety of approaches serve to exacerbate – rather than resolve – enduring public leadership questions? In short, the answers to the questions ‘how is leadership studied?’, ‘where is leadership studied?’ and ‘what is studied when we study leadership?’ reflect multiple perspectives but little integration. As a result, our collective ability to address some key social science concerns, including replicability, is hampered.

Based on this analysis, we specifically recommend that leadership scholars in PA *think bigger*; both in terms of sample size and broader approaches to the study of leadership to develop lessons that apply across levels of government and sectors. At the same time, we recommend that scholars *look closer*; that is, that they utilize existing models and ways to operationalize leadership that contribute to more meta-analysis and integration overall. Our hope is that this investigation provides both a map of leadership studies over time and also a call for action to intentionally and strategically pave the road ahead.

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