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Keep walking on the bright side: criticality, credit and challenge

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ABSTRACT

In a recent article in this journal Mark van Ostaijen and Shivant Jhagroo (O&J) provided a highly critical analysis of Positive Public Administration (PPA). “[It] will not create a way out” they argued “but only a new way into traditional and intellectual problems that have haunted PA as a discipline” and was nothing more than “a rather romantic, nostalgic, and regressive turn to the past and the inability to actually innovate public administration as a field.” This response article argues that although O&J were correct to highlight the risk of co-option and the importance of criticality they are wrong to assume that PPA is for some reason unable to identify or cope with such pressures. By returning to PPA’s core emphasis on the interplay between levels of policy in the interpretation of policy success a multi-levelled framework is provided. This illustrates that the concurrent identification of “success-within-failure” (or vice versa) is possible and therefore identifying successful policy need not be *uncritical*. As such, PPA need not necessarily be associated with conservative, instrumental, system-affirming thinking in the way O&J assume. “Making public administration again” demands that its adherents hone the ability to range across different policy levels in ways that allow them to avoid the zero-sum trap that O&J identify (but then themselves fall into).

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In recent years a self-conscious, confident and increasingly cohesive strand of “positive” scholarship has emerged within the discipline of public administration, promoting an invitation to “walk on the bright side” (see Douglas et al. 2021). The recent critique of “positive public administration” (PPA) by Mark van Ostaijen and Shivant Jhagroo (2022) [hereafter O&J] in this journal was as strident as it was direct “PPA will not create a way out” O&J state “but only a new way into traditional and intellectual problems that have haunted PA as a discipline” (2022, 263). Their analysis claims to reveal the paradoxes that are “emblematic of what PPA really is about: a conservative plea and ‘inherent political act’ *toward more traditional, affirmative, and instrumental PA knowledge production*. We consider this as a *rather romantic,*

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nostalgic, and regressive turn to the past and the inability to actually innovate public administration as a field” [emphasis added] (2022, 268–269). These are strong claims: a whole and burgeoning sub-field of public administration defined as “strongly tending toward an affirmative and instrumental endeavor” (267) as if co-opted into a form of academic knowledge that lacks criticality and works only to sustain the *status quo*. As provocative as it is political, O&J offer their interpretation of PPA on the basis that “only a deliberative intellectual debate refines our thinking about core assumptions of the field and improves the practice of policy design and practitioners (262).”

This response continues the debate by offering both a critique and refinement of O&J’s position. The critique is simply that O&J insist on viewing PPA “through a glass darkly” on the basis of their implicit and fundamental assumption that the identification of “success” is *by definition* emblematic of a lack of criticality. It is this core assumption that forms the focus of this response. The interplay between research, relevance and deference is undoubtedly changing as new “impact incentives” (see Bandola-Gill, Flinders, and Anderson 2021) are introduced within the architecture of academe; the field of public administration, like many others, increasingly exists within “the shadow of the state,” as Eisfeld and Flinders has illustrated (2021). Co-option, control and criticality are therefore highly salient disciplinary concerns but not for the reason that O&J base their critique of PPA upon. Their implicit logic creates an intellectual cul-de-sac which risks leaving the discipline trapped within a story of its own making; the paradox being that O&J’s position is indicative of exactly the sort of negative black-or-white thinking that PPA seeks to move beyond. In order to demonstrate that *credit can be combined with criticality* the main contribution of this article to the broader debate is a multi-levelled analytical framework that demonstrates how and why *PPA need not necessarily be associated with conservative, instrumental, system-affirming thinking*.

Beyond the binary

This is an article about criticality, credit and challenge when it comes to the academic analysis of public governance. The core argument of O&J is that focusing on success is likely to lead to a lack of criticality. They are by no means alone in adopting this position. “[P]ositive public administration” Trommel (2019, 60) argues “remains trapped in a one-dimensional, quasi-neutral and instrumentalist spectrum with two extremes: success and failure.” Leong and Howlett (2022, 1381) provide a more measured but nevertheless related argument when they suggest that too much of the policy learning literature overlooks the “dark side” of policy-making and “that policy-makers are often driven by malicious or venal motivations rather than socially beneficial or disinterested ones.” But O&J go further. For them the identification and analysis of successful policy is assumed to be incompatible with the maintenance of criticality. It is this *core assumed tension between credit and criticality* that this article seeks to challenge on the basis that it is simply far too reductive, simplistic and one-dimensional. The aim of this section is therefore to challenge the “self-evident truth” that PPA should be dismissed as the “latest attempt to further instrumentalize public

administration as a field” (O&J 2022, 269). It achieves this through the adoption of a multi-levelled approach that creates both the intellectual and political space to accommodate both credit and criticality. It is, however, important to note that O&J are undoubtedly correct to highlight the risk of co-option and instrumentalisation, or what Flinders (2022a) has labeled “impotence through relevance.” Where they arguably overstate their case, however, is in *making assumptions of inevitability* which this section (and article) seek to contest.

There is a very clear and obvious link between O&J’s specific critique of PPA and Noam Chomsky’s 1967 celebrated essay in the *New York Review of Books* on the changing role of intellectuals in society. Put simply, Chomsky identified two types of intellectual: “technocratic and policy-orientated intellectuals” and “value-orientated intellectuals.” The former were “the good guys” in the eyes of the establishment who served the needs of the system through the provision of technocratic information that improved the performance of the machinery of governance, while also generally praising its achievements; while the latter were “the bad guys” from an establishment perspective who dared to speak “truth to power,” exposed lies and engaged in critical analysis. Chomsky’s distinction resonates with O&J’s critique of PPA as they seek to define those who study policy success as “technocratic and policy-orientated intellectuals” producing instrumental knowledge in a system-affirming manner, while those who resist such depoliticizing (“auto-immunizing”) forces retain an innately democratic critical morality as “value-orientated intellectuals.” Framing O&J in such neo-Chomskian terms is useful for three reasons: (i) it emphasizes the binary, (ii) it emphasizes binary assumptions and it (iii) underlines the urgent need to move “beyond the binary” if public administration, irrespective of sub-fields, is to reach its full potential in terms of both scholarly excellence and societal relevance.

It is this third final element that forms the focus of this section and that can be addressed through a focus on building blocks and analytical levels. O&J’s framing of PA appears unable to think “beyond the binary” and is therefore confined within a series of what might be termed “interpretations of opposition” (“bright” versus “dark,” “success” v. “failure,” “critical value” v. “use value,” “anti-state” v. “conformist,” “politicised” v. “depoliticised,” etc.) which arguably fails to capture PPA’s explicit emphasis on multiple and contested conceptions of what “good” or “bad” policy might be held to be. “Notice the plural” Douglas et al. (2021, 443) emphasize—“conceptualizations.” More specifically, PPA’s equally explicit emphasis on the identification of the “micro, meso and macro *conditions*, and the interplay between agent and institutional context at these levels” [emphasis in original] (Douglas et al. 2021, 443) creates space for criticality that O&J apparently overlook. Peter Hall’s (1993) influential dissection of levels of policy change provides a useful framework for exposing and exploring this “space” (see Table 1).

Table 1. Beyond the Binary: Nested Thinking about Success and Failure.

Level of Change	Political Level	Focus	Option #1	Option #2	Option #3	Option #4
First Order	Micro	Instruments, Settings and Tools	Failure	Success	Success	Success
Second Order	Meso	Policies, Procedures and Governance	Failure	Failure	Success	Success
Third Order	Macro	Goals, Values and Ideas	Failure	Failure	Failure	Success

What is [Table 1](#) trying to achieve? It is attempting to demonstrate (*cf.* O&J 2020) that students of *positive* public administration or policy “success” do not necessarily have to undertake their analysis in an instrumental or uncritical manner. Critical capacity, to put the same point slightly differently, *is* congruent with the distribution of credit. Whereas analyses of “success” and “failure” have often been framed through criteria that are mutually exclusive and zero-sum a multi-levelled approach facilitates more sophisticated and possibly even positive-sum analyses. The remainder of this section provides an empirical example of each of the options outlined in [Table 1](#).

Option #1: Example #1: British fiscal policy under Liz Truss

Peter Hall’s seminal analysis of policy paradigms, social learning and the state was empirically focused on macro-economic policy-making in Britain. It therefore seems fitting that this section’s first attempt to demonstrate how Hall’s multi-levelled framework is of relevance to debates concerning PPA should focus on British fiscal policy, this time under the premiership of Liz Truss in 2022. Put very simply, the shortest premiership in British political history was, at just 44 days, an abject example of policy failure that is unlikely to be contested. Her core macro-political ideas were incorporated in a “bold economic plan,” based on supply-side and trickle-down economics, that lacked a firm evidence base (see Hope and Limberg 2020), shocked the markets and damaged the Conservative Party’s reputation for fiscal competence. The (mid-level) policies of cutting business rates and removing the cap on bankers bonuses proved disastrous pledges to make in the middle of a cost of living crisis; and at a more micro-political level the way in which the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer initially attempted to avoid the scrutiny of the Office for Budget Responsibility simply added to a sense of governing incompetence.

What’s interesting about this example is that in “revisiting the study of policy failures” (2016) Bovens and t’Hart (2016) are undoubtedly correct to emphasize the subjective dimensions and normative characteristics of policy analysis there are examples where looking “on the bright side” is incredibly difficult. While relevant within the analytical landscape this article is seeking to map out, it is hard to find “shades of grey” (McConnell 2010) within this specific example which is, in turn, problematic in terms of this section’s ambition to move “beyond the binary.” The next sub-section’s focus on “success-within-failure” is more instructive.

Option #2: Example #2: Freshwater ecology and citizen science

This sub-section provides an example of what might be termed “*vertical nesting*” in the sense that it identifies elements of micro-political policy success while *at the same time* being critical of mid-level policy frameworks and dominant macro-political ideas. An environmental intervention, for example, that installed large wood and sediment berms to threatened chalk stream rivers could through geological mapping, water samples, fish life and other quality indicators be interpreted as a localized policy success (see England 2019). The comparative analyses of similar rivers might underline a positive causal relationship between intervention and nonintervention,

and innovations in participatory methods might also be used to enable “citizen scientists” to monitor and record water quality, river levels, species diversity, etc. (see Kelly-Quinn et al. 2022). The simple point being made is that the identification of some element of success—“to reveal [what] may not be perfect but still good” (Douglas et al. 2019, 10) – could have positive policy relevant insights that might be scaled-up, -out or -down to achieve broader public benefits.

The key point, however, is that to recognize some element of success at a local level does not in any way restrict a researcher’s capacity for adopting a highly critical stance on broader national river policies (mid-level) or more fundamental questions relating to economic growth and environmental sustainability. Contrary to O&J’s core assumptions the allocation of credit at the micro-political level is fully compatible with intense criticality. The identification of micro-level policy “wins” may in fact be used to inform, sustain and reframe wider (bottom-up) criticisms of dominant policy paradigms; success in this sense viewed as “acts of resistance” and contributions to anti-system thinking.

Option #3: Example #3: Riots, reform and penal policy

The central argument of this article is that O&J’s critique of PPA is far too simplistic. They equate the identification of any dimension of policy success as fundamentally incompatible with critical administrative analysis. This represents an unnecessarily reductionist trap, or an intellectual straightjacket, for the future of the discipline which this article seeks to escape from. A multi-levelled framework (Table 1) has been developed to demonstrate the compatibility and complementarity of narratives of “success-within-failure.” The aim of this sub-section is simply to illustrate the space that exists for interpretations of success at both the micro and mid-range level while still being highly critical of third-level paradigmatic considerations. Take, for example, Resodihardjo’s (2006) analysis of crisis and change in British and Dutch prisons. What Resodihardjo identifies in the case of the United Kingdom is less a form of *positive public administration* and more a case of *positive public scrutiny* in the sense that lessons were learned from failure and led to significant first and second order policy change.

In 1990 major riots broke out in more than twenty British prisons. This created operational challenges for governors and staff, and policy challenges for ministers, and an independent public inquiry was subsequently established to assess what had caused the riots and how the threat they represented had been handled. What’s interesting and of great relevance to the focus of this article is that, like O&J’s dismissal of PPA, public inquiries are also very often dismissed on the basis that they produce technocratic and instrumental knowledge which usually serves to distance politicians and policy makers from direct blame (see Stark 2018). But what Resodihardjo (2006, 2009) reveals is how and why the Woolf inquiry became, contrary to the dominant expectations and “self-evident truths” surrounding inquiry processes, a “catalytic inquiry” that led to far-reaching policy and operational reforms. What this analysis reveals is exactly the “interplay between agent and institutional context” (Douglas et al. 2021, 443) that PPA focuses attention on but more importantly it highlights

how the identification of successful policies or positive reforms need not reduce the space for broader criticality. Player and Jenkins' (1994) *Prisons After Woolf* therefore contains a subtle combination of specific praise *within* a continuing critique of neo-liberal assumptions about crime and criminal justice. This in itself stimulates a question as to whether an example of "successful policy" can be identified that might arguably stretch across all three levels of change. This is the topic of the next and final sub-section.

Option #4: Example #4: Progressive politics and the upswing

The inclusion of options 1 and 4 (Table 1) in a section that pertains to move "beyond the binary" is problematic for the simple reason that they are positioned at the extremes of the framework and therefore risk promoting a false sense of purity which PPA goes to great length to reject. However, as a thought experiment that theoretically pushes PPA to its limits the identification of a three-level interpretation of success is as challenging as it is potentially valuable. In this context Robert Putnam's analysis of *The Upswing* (2020) can arguably be located within the parameters of the PPA movement on the basis that: (i) it adopts a historical and evidence-based series of successful interventions and policies, (ii) that were operationalized within an explicitly positive set of values, ideas and goals, and (iii) the core hypothesis is that the existence of policy success in the past provides insights for achieving policy success today. "How America came together a century ago and how it can do it again" – the sub-title of Putnam's book, written with Shaylyn Romney Garrett – could itself be seen as something of a manifesto for positive public administration.

What Putnam reveals is the existence of a clear historical arc – the eponymous "upswing" – that starts from a very low level at the beginning of the twentieth century when individualism and social fragmentation was high and concern for community cohesion or collective endeavor was low. The ark slowly climbs through the first half of the century due to the achievements of the Progressive Era, peaking in the 1960s; and then falls back into the trough at the end of the century as a combination of factors shift the balance back away from the "we" to the "me." For Putnam the "arc of the twentieth century" tells a story not of disenchantment and decline but of recovery, revival and resurgence. "And finally we turn to the implications of our findings for reformers today" he concludes (2019, 19) "the single most important lesson we can hope to gain from this analysis is that in the past America has experienced a storm of unbridled individualism ... a national situation that few Americans found appealing. But we successfully weathered that storm once, and we can do it again." It would be interesting to know if O&J would dismiss Putnam's solution-orientated and design-led approach as archetypal of their critique of "traditional, affirmative, and instrumental PA knowledge production" (2022, 268). Putnam is – as Flinders (2022b) has argued – possibly over-optimistic; his emphasis on positive social achievements (in relation to health, education, etc.) too often overlooking the continuation of deep seated structural inequalities in American society. But this in itself highlights the potential for *credit and criticality*.

Walking on the wild side

O&J have made a major contribution to the field by highlighting the long-standing challenge that public administration faces by being required to walk a tightrope between, on the one hand, being relevant, engaged and linked to a clear community of practice, while on the other hand, retaining a strong sense of intellectual independence and criticality. PPA does not deny the inevitable existence of this tension but it does seek to focus attention on the scientific implications and social relevance of an arguably increasingly intense “negativity bias” that very often ensures that assessments of public governance are only made “through a glass darkly.” The assumption that O&J make, and that this response has attempted to question, is that by being willing to even entertain the idea that public policy can on occasion be successful *at some level* (Table 1) adherents of PPA have by definition fallen off the tightrope and become system-affirming, conservative, policy-focused technocrats, etc. The problem with such reductive logic is that it defines criticality solely as the preserve of those who refuse to walk on “the bright side.” The main contribution of this article has been to question this assumption and offer a multi-levelled framework that creates space for the concurrent identification of both *success and failure, credit and criticality*.

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