

IN PRAISE OF ADMINISTRATIVE THEORY

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INTRODUCTION

The very mention of theory to most practitioners in developing countries conjures the image of idle, speculative, and impractical suppositions associated with the so-called armchair critics in universities. Developing countries, it is often argued, are pressed with problems that require urgent practical solutions, and cannot afford to and should not support or even entertain theories propounded in ivory towers. Speaking at a graduation ceremony of the University of Zambia in July 1975, President Kaunda declared that:

We do not want armchair revolutionaries. We do not want abstract revolutionaries propounding their theories from the high ivory towers of academia. We have enough theoreticians on revolution. What this nation needs are committed practical scientists, engineers, architects, quantity surveyors, doctors, various technicians, physical planners, administrators, lawyers and writers and other patriotic workers imbued with the humanist revolutionary spirit and committed to hard work in nation-building (Kaunda, 1975: 27).

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the desire to produce experts who are committed to the task of national development. However, what is at issue is the evident attitude to treat theory as an antonym of fact or practice. This attitude is pervasive among development administrators who do not perceive any relevance of administrative theory to the resolution of their problems.

A constant feedback received by this author at various seminars and workshops for district council administrators in Zambia is unmistakably clear on the derogatory if not hostile attitude of practitioners towards administrative theory. One participant, expressing a common feeling among his colleagues, succinctly stated that:

These are just theories. They do not work in practice. It is well and good for you university people to toy with theoretical possibilities, but your theories can do little to help us. I regard such workshops as talking fora, and have nothing to contribute to the solution of administrative problems facing district councils (Participant X, 1985).

This mistaken view of theory and its relation to practice is hardly surprising for administrative practitioners have by and large been bred in an amateur tradition, and have delighted themselves in the pseudo-truth that their job is the art of the possible. Lacking a formal training background and therefore, deficient in theoretical grounding, many an administrator is ill-disposed to apprehend theory and its potential practical uses, and continues to pride in what Americans

term as the "sit-on-the-pants" knowledge accumulated from experience. Experience is exalted well above formal training, and is regarded as the best education from which ripe administrators must graduate. This attitude is reinforced by theorists themselves who do little to educate practitioners on the practical value of theories. Moreover, the mystery that surrounds many theories is exacerbated by complex models, and abstract language, and to this must be added the hypermania for middling quantification and statistical techniques that have characterized much of recent theory building in administrative or managerial sciences. Additionally, the administrative theory arena is a plethora of unsettled and often contradictory propositions supported by inconclusive research results. These attributes of the theoretical world do little to abate the hostility and indifference of practitioners, and instead reinforce their stereotypic images of theories and institutions that propounded them.

In this article, I wish to argue for a positive role of theory in administration. I will argue that far from being idle or impractical, theory as understood in the scientific sense is one of the most practical sides of administration. When adequately understood and appropriately applied, it has great potential for transforming practice. However, the value of theory is not limited to practical uses, for as all scientists are aware, it has its own dignity as an intellectual pursuit. For the purposes of an orderly discussion I will deal with the nature of administrative theory first, then I will proceed to address the purposes of theory and its potential for practical uses. I will conclude by attempting to explain the problems of relating administrative theory to practice.

THE NATURE OF ADMINISTRATIVE THEORY

Meanings and perspectives

Theory as a scientific concept is the very antithesis of popular interpretations. It is not idle speculation, day-dreaming or some set of ideals of what ought to happen, although some of these elements could be incorporated in the process of theory building. Certainly, some theories have room for speculation, and others do prescribe the state of affairs as they ought to be. However, these aspects of theory do not constitute its essential attributes. Neither is theory good common sense. Hoy and Miskel (1978) observe that administrators develop a set of common sense rules over time to guide their behaviour. Caiden (1971) argues that in administration all are theorists because through trial and error experience resembles unstructured research from which certain conclusions can be drawn. Ridley (1982) refers to common sense rules as implicit theory that needs to be made explicit. Surely, common sense is a good quality for administrators to acquire, and experience affords the practitioner the opportunity for exposure to reality, but, as this author once observed, for many administrators:

experience is a fortuitous process, marked by either randomness of the situation at hand, or repetitive patterns of activities and events. Such an experience is a mere record of quantitative changes, such as an increase in operational information, but does not lead to qualitative transformation in the structure of one's thinking or decision making patterns (Lungu, 1982: 343).

No matter how useful experience might be it cannot be a substitute for theory precisely because it lacks the rigour of scientific observation.

It is also useful to distinguish between theory and policy. A policy can be narrowly defined as a statement of intent designed to guide actors in a consistent fashion. It may or may not be based on theory, but is itself not part of theory. Finally, theory is not an antonym of fact, but many theories are fact-based (though some are not fact-based) and much of theory building is undertaken in fact-filled environs. Most scientific observations and experiments require materials with which to work, and scientific observation in administration takes place in contexts packed with live action. Therefore, to imagine that theory is divorced from practice or theory building from practical action is to misconstrue the nature of the theory-practice relationship.

A theory construed from a scientific viewpoint can be defined as a set of interrelated concepts, assumptions, and generalizations that systematically describes, explains, and sometimes predicts phenomena in administrative setting. This definition sounds abstract and nowhere does it make any explicit reference to fact. However, the terms 'concepts', 'assumptions' and 'generalizations' are often fact-related. A concept, for example, is an abstract generalised meaning agreed upon by researchers, theorists and practitioners. Concepts have constructs, and these have standard operational definitions, and may also have operational measures. Additionally constructs have variables or properties that change or take on different values. These can often be factually quantified. Similarly, it will be argued later on in this essay that assumptions when generalised at higher or wider levels are supported by facts.

Elements of theory

A scientific theory has three main attributes: namely

- a) it comprises of concepts, assumptions, and generalizations;
- b) it describes, explains and predicts behaviour of phenomena; and
- c) it is heuristic, that is: it stimulates and guides further knowledge development.

Perhaps the best way to explain (a) is to illustrate the various levels of assumptions and generalizations. Hoy and Miskel (1978: 18 - 28) suggest that there are four levels of generalizations. The first level of generalization is assumption. An assumption is a statement of cause-effect relationship between two or more concepts (variables) but without any empirical support. This does not mean that there is no support for such a statement whatsoever; there could be impressionistic or intuitive evidence to warrant the construction of an assumption, but such data is not empirical (i.e. not collected in a systematic manner, using scientific procedures and techniques). An assumption becomes an hypothesis when there is limited empirical support. Such support is localised to a particular context and cannot be generalised beyond it. For example, a research finding in one parastatal organisation that seems to support the assumption that formal training in administration leads to effective performance cannot be extended to cover other parastatals. Such a finding can only warrant a hypothetical statement. Usually, researchers take an hypothesis seriously in order to use it as a guide for scientific experimentation and observation. An hypothesis becomes a principle when it has substantial empirical backing. Generalization at this level is wider because there is enormous empirical evidence to support it. Finally, a principle becomes a law when it has overwhelming empirical support.

At this level, theory building reaches its peak, and theory turns into a scientific law, something that is more or less permanent, unless of course some evidence emerges to contradict it. If the latter happens, theory is revised, and sometimes it is discarded altogether (this happens also at other levels of generalization). It is thus self-evident that theory building is tied to facts, for levels of generalization are dependent upon the amount of factual support.

Most administrative theories range between assumptions and principles. It is not uncommon for practitioners and students of administration to come across textbooks on the 'principles' of administration or management. Such textbooks do not contain principles in the scientific sense of the term, but present what might be described as mere exhortations of correct action or behaviour. They scarcely describe and analyze, let alone predict administrative phenomena, and lack the backing of empirical evidence. Administrative theories are thus in their infancy, but continued and improved theory building and research are promising a bright future.

Functions of theory

The ultimate function of any scientific theory is to provide general explanations for phenomena. It does so by describing phenomena and their interrelationships, and sometimes the causes of such phenomena. But on the basis of description of the behaviour of some phenomena it is possible in several cases to predict the behaviour of such phenomena. These descriptive and predictive roles of theory have given rise to the classification of theories into descriptive and prescriptive categories, but many theories play both roles.

Specifically, theories (a) guide empirical research. Empirical research is a systematic, controlled, factual, and critical investigation of hypothetical propositions and presumed relationships among phenomena. Hypotheses help check the theoretical propositions against objective reality. (b) Theories provide for cumulative research. The process of reformulating and clarifying theories often leads to the discovery of new questions. (c) Theory may be used to guide action. Certain prescriptions can be made on the basis of research results to improve decision making, human relations or the design of organisational structures. Without useful theories practitioners flounder aimlessly with a random tide of events. Many administrative theorists attempt to draw together insights and validated propositions in order to employ them for improving practice. This is indeed a legitimate use of theory, but to argue that theory should exist solely to guide practice is to limit its growth, and to undermine its very capacity to guide and transform practice. Of what immediate practical use was Newton's contemplation of the force that compelled the apple to fall and land on his head? Yet who can doubt today about the utility of the Newton's laws of motion? Theory building must be permitted to transcend practical problems so that it can expand its capacity to explain and help resolve these problems.

ADMINISTRATIVE THEORY AND PRACTICE

Theory is related to practice at least in three possible ways. First, it provides a frame of reference for the practitioner; second, the process of theorizing provides a general mode of analysis of practical events; and third, it ultimately provides the knowledge upon which practical, rational decisions are made. On the other hand practice provides the basis for theory building and theory testing. However, this relationship has not been fully or even adequately realized in administration. Ridley (1982) observes that there has been a general influence of administrative theorists like Weber, Taylor, Gulick and other classic writers, but such influence has not been specific on reforms. It is

also possible to trace the general influence of theorists like Abraham Maslow, Rensis Likert and other 'humanistic' writers on the practice of management. However, the rate at which theory filters into practice is generally very slow, and practitioners have been victims of defunct theories. Additionally, as theories become diffuse or popularized, there tends to be an element of over-simplification, leading to omission of certain crucial variables, and this in turn may lead to inadequate or total failure in application. Apart from the gap between the presentation of theory and its reception by practitioners there is yet another critical variable in the transfer of theory to the practical world. This is the level of intellectualization of the administrative environment. This depends on:

- a) the general level of formal education and training of personnel,
- b) the extent to which they are involved as teachers and writers, and
- c) the membership of professional or learned societies in administration or management.

Condition (a) has been problematic in several developing countries. Although general levels of literacy and education have tremendously improved in the post-independence era, formal administrative training is still lagging behind. Moreover, in certain countries like Zambia many key administrative posts are held by a relatively aged, under-educated group (Lungu, 1983) so that the level of intellectualization at senior administrative and management levels in the public sector is relatively low. Condition (b) is still far from being realized. A negligible number of serving administrators in Africa have taught in colleges or universities, and the interaction between practitioners and theorists has not taken place to a sufficient degree. To be sure most developing countries generally, and African countries in particular have a negligible number of administrative theorists and these are literally confined to reaching in universities. Of these fewer still are active in the areas of research and publication. The overall picture that emerges is that of administrative illiteracy in most African public service systems, and the graduates from institutes and schools of public administration easily get absorbed into the norms of existing practices and offer little or no hope for improving the situation. Condition (c) is still underdeveloped. In Zambia, for example, there are only two administrative professional societies worth their name: the Institute of Local Government Administrators of Zambia (ILGAZ) and the Zambia Institute of Personnel Management (ZIPM). These bodies hold various seminars and workshops, but none of them publishes any serious journal. There has, within the past five years in Zambia, been a proliferation of administrative (management) seminars held by a host of both local and international organizations, but their overall impact on practice remains to be seen.

Even if the conditions above were to be mitigated, there would still remain some obstacles to the realization of the intimate relationship between theory and practice, and such obstacles are inherent in the orientation of the two camps. Practitioners are constrained by pressures of position, responsibility, authority, and immediacy of the problem. They have little time to wait for research results let alone an aptitude to comprehend them. It is no exaggeration to state that the nature of administrative work is potentially anti-intellectual, for it tends to socialize practitioners to narrow experiences which hinder critical reflection of broader reality. On the other hand, those who want to develop theory are generally unfamiliar with the environments they wish to describe, analyze, and explain. They

usually depend on second hand data to explain administrative phenomena. In addition, theorists have a tendency to couch their models in abstract language and sophisticated statistical techniques for the love of precision and accuracy. They generally tend to look down upon practitioners or men of affairs, and resist being pinned down to specific application of their theories. Moreover, theory building and application requires a longer time perspective, while the shorter time perspective of the practitioner leads him to resent the so-called arm-chair theorists from ivory towers.

In some developing countries administrative theories are unwelcome due to uncongenial political environments. In some cases suggestions to reform public administration along the lines of administrative theory is easily construed as political sabotage, and theorists as agents of imperialism. Alternatively, theories are regarded as too alien to be of practical relevance to the countries concerned. Both these attitudes are real enough to act as formidable obstacles to the adoption of theories. Thus, even when theories are potentially applicable they are not made to bear upon practice, thereby reinforcing the stereotype that theories are impractical.

CONCLUSION

The discussion has briefly dealt with the nature of theory as scientific concept and the problem of employing theory to transform administrative practice. It is evident from the discussion that many practitioners scarcely understand let alone appreciate the nature and potential uses of theory in administration. It is equally evident that theorists do little to educate consumers of theory. In most third world countries the theory - practice relationship is further rendered difficult by low levels of intellectualization of administrative systems, by unstable political leadership that is hostile to theory, and by the uncritical attitude that leads to summary dismissal of theories as foreign propositions which have no relevant bearing to local administrative environments. However, these observations point out the failure of administrators to apply theory, but not the failure of theory itself. Few appreciate the distinction between bad theory and poor application of theory. I am not suggesting here that administrative theory has been sound, and that problems exist only in its application. There surely are bad theories in administration, but even these can prove useful in the discovery of knowledge. Evident, too, in the discussion is the weakness of the charge that theory is impractical. It has been noted that theory is practical in two ways: first it can and has been applied to improve practice; and second, the process of theorization is itself practical. We may agree with John Dewey when he states that:

Theory is in the end ... the most practical of all things, because the widening of the range of attention beyond nearby purpose and desire eventually results in the creation of wider and farther-reaching purposes. and enables us to make use of a much wider and deeper range of conditions and means than were expressed in the observation of primitive practical purposes (Dewey, quoted in Walter, 1970: 77).

Explicit in this quotation is the rejection of the idea that theory is practical only when it serves immediate ends. Such a limited view of the uses of theory can only hamper the process of theory development.

The issue that has not been addressed in the discussion is the narrowing of the gap between theory and practice in administration. Given the prevailing attitudes of theorists and practitioners as well as the confounding effects of the administrative environment (especially in some third world countries), the only hope lies in increased interaction between the two sides.

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