Publications and Research   John Jay College of Criminal Justice

2016

Changing the Narrative: The Difference Women Make in Public Administration

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract

The dominant narrative about women's progress in public administration focuses on identifying the obstacles to that progress and how to overcome them. But to make real progress toward gender equality and social justice, we must rethink our entire approach to research. Understanding the difference women make via narrative inquiry is a necessary change to the prevailing dialectic.

Introduction

In November 2014, a record 84 women were elected to the House of Representatives, becoming nearly 20% of its 435 members. Across Capitol Hill, women filled 20 of the Senate's 100 seats when the 114th Congress convened the following January. Just 20 years ago, there were only half as many women in the United States' legislative branch (Pew, 2015).

The level of education women have attained in the past 20 years has positioned them for successful careers as well as for leadership positions. Since the 1990s, women have outnumbered men in college enrollment; they are also more likely than men to graduate from college and to enroll in postgraduate programs. Women have also made inroads in the American workplace: in 2013, they held more than half of all managerial positions and comprised 52.2% of the white-collar workforce, up from just 30.6% in 1968.

Nonetheless, women continue to lag in senior management positions in both the public and private sector (Pew, 2015). Although women make up 51 percent of the world's population and account for 48 percent of the global public sector workforce, they hold just over 20 percent of cabinet positions worldwide. Even in countries that top the index of women in public sector leadership, a gender gap remains. In Canada, ranked first on the index, women account for only 45% of public sector leaders, followed by Australia (37%), United Kingdom (35%) and South Africa (33%). At the bottom of the list are Turkey (13.6%), China (11.5%), South Korea (8.6%), Japan (2.5%), and Saudi Arabia

(0%). Consequently, women are not adequately represented in the governmental decision-making that affects their lives and livelihoods (Ernst and Young, 2014).

The reasons behind this proportional inequity vary; researchers have most frequently cited political, organizational, and societal barriers (Alakadry & Tower, 2014). However, how society and work are organized is not separate from the perceptions of gender roles and the implicit bias that we have about gender roles (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Guy, 1992; Hale & Kelly, 1989;Stivers, 1993; 2000). For example, difficulty in separating societal expectations from organizational expectations is seen in work-life issues. Societal norms and expectations still place the larger burden of family responsibility on women, who are perceived as caring and nurturing (Alkadry & Tower, 2014; Newman, 2003; Noonan, 2001) while men are perceived as the breadwinners (Alkadry & Tower, 2014). This implicit bias contributes to negatively attributing the same behavior differently depending on whether a man or woman engages in it (Alkadry & Tower, 2014). For instance, if a woman takes on a leadership role there is a greater likelihood that she will be perceived more negatively and less effective than a man taking on the same role (Alkadry & Tower, 2014) simply because women's gender roles are incongruent with leadership roles (Stivers, 1993). As recently reported in Pew Research survey (2015), forty-three percent of the respondents to that survey reported that women are required to be more qualified than the men with whom they compete for top leadership positions. A similar percentage stated they are simply "not ready" to hire more

women for their top leadership positions[1]. The predominant reason for this disparity in perception was gender bias, that is the implicit bias we have about gender roles.

~~This attitude~~ These perceptions perpetuates the dominant narrative about women in public administration, which focuses on identifying the obstacles to women's progress and how to mitigate those challenges, often through policies and programs that lead to female "empowerment" (Burnier, 2003; Guy & McCandless, 2012). Given the underlying gender bias, such strategies for advancing in public service careers are not enough to ameliorate the problem (Stivers 2000), as they do not shift the perception of women in society or the workplace. Indeed, only a shift in both the perception of women's contributions—together with a holistic interpretation of the persistence of inequality—will challenge successfully longstanding, deeply ingrained attitudes and move the public sector workforce closer to gender equality and social justice (Leuenberger, 2011).

A narrative inquiry into the difference that women can make in public administration—via stories that delve into individual experiences and replace broad generalizations—will create the necessary space for social change by allowing the individual to step out of the "authoritative voice" and reestablish standards of truth and legitimacy (Chase 2000). The

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[1] The main survey was conducted November 12–21, 2014, among a sample of 1,835 adults 18 or older—921 women and 914 men.

knowledge thus obtained will yield a better understanding of the role of women in achieving gender equity and social justice. Without restricting research on women to the role they play in the workforce, the discussion of the difference women have made will, in turn, become part of the fabric of how research into the status of women in public administration is conducted.

This paper begins by exploring the link between social justice and public administration. An analysis of the literature on the difference women make in public administration is followed by a discussion of why the difference women make is relevant to social justice. The paper concludes with a discussion of the relevance of narrative inquiry to social justice in public administration.

Social justice and public administration

As illustrated via Hull House and the Progressive Era, social justice has always been a vital component of public administration (Schacter, 2011; McGuire, 2011; Burnier, 2008; Stivers, 1995). Prior to the professionalization of public administration, men and women worked together on issues of social justice (Schachter, 2011). During the Progressive Era, male and female reformers—concerned with both social justice and the rationalization of political and administrative authority—collaborated on social betterment and a commitment to functional efficiency. Indeed, there was no division between the two approaches, or "twin concerns"; they were considered and pursued concurrently (Stivers, 1995). Men and women attended the same conferences, published

in the same journals, and spoke out on the same issues. Books on municipal administration and urban reform prior to World War I demonstrate clearly women's involvement in the scientific management movement (Schacter, 2011).

As public administration was professionalized, reforms driven by the New York Bureau of Municipal Research led to the emergence of two distinct fields. Social work developed from a social justice (i.e., "female") perspective. Meanwhile, the orthodoxy of efficiency, effectiveness, and expertise, (i.e., the "male" perspective) came to dominate the field of public administration, and the contributions of women to that field were squelched (Stivers, 1995; Schachter, 2011; McGuire, 2011; Shields, 2011). An exception to that foundational narrative is Mary Parker Follet (Burnier, 2003), a trailblazer in modern management theory whose contributions can be found in most introductory textbooks on public administration.

Feminist scholarly research in public administration has uncovered female progenitors whose contributions emphasize a social justice perspective (Stivers, 1995, 2000; Schacter, 2011). As revealed by Stivers (2000), "[As] the bureau men…were tackling municipal reform, the settlement movement (mostly composed of women) also became a force for reform" (p. 34). These settlement women worked to improve living conditions, develop new social programs for the poor, and care for people and for whole neighborhoods. Stivers argues that the development of an administrative state was not the result of the bureau men's science but of social welfare programs based on the results of

practical experiments—pilot projects conducted by settlement house residents and clubmen. These programs offered modern public administration a substantive, rather than procedural, model of thinking and acting. As illustrated by Silverberg (1998), women subsequently reentered the public arena by arguing that cleaning up cities was a form of housekeeping.

Women in public administration

The difference women make in public administration is of growing concern to researchers. Several studies have examined how women impact legislation differently from men (Carroll 1985, 1994; Hale & Kelly, 1989; Saint-Germain, 1989; Dodson & Carroll, 1991; Tolleson-Rinehart, 1991; Duerst-Lahti & Johnson, 1992; Stivers, 1995; Tamerius, 1995; Saidel & Loscocco, 2005; Volden, Wiseman, & Witter, 2013); others have investigated the glass ceiling and governmental representation and leadership (Bowling & Wright, 1998; Bullard & Wright, 1993; Cornwell & Kellough, 1994; Fox & Schuhmann, 1999; Guy, 1992, 1994; Hsieh &Winslow 2006; Kelly et al., 1991; Miller, Kerr, & Reid, 1999; Naff & Thomas, 1994; Newman 1993, 1994, 1996; Riccuccu 2009; Riccucci & Saidel, 1997; Sabharwal 2015; Szymborski, 1996; Tolleson-Rinehart, 1991). The link between performance and gender in the public sector has also been studied (Meier et al., 2006; Meier, Mastracci & Wilson, 2006; Pitts, 2006; Wise & Tschirhart, 2000; D'Agostino, 2014).

Most of this research measures women's progress empirically or attempts to make sense of the challenges women face in the public sector, thus bolstering the dominant narrative. Shifting the discussion from what those barriers are and how to remove them requires an interpretative framework (Burnier, 2003) in order to refocus the narrative on the difference women's inclusion makes and the importance of their involvement to social justice.

Several research studies in public administration have, however, taken an interpretative approach, thereby revealing hidden voices by reexamining public administration history through a gendered lens (Burnier, 2003). Certain studies illuminate the difference individual women have made to the field of public administration. Guy (2000) pieced together a biography of Laverne Birchfield—a former managing editor of *Public Administration Review* and prominent public administrator—from archives, internet searches, emails, letters, and interviews with family and colleagues; it provides insight into her contributions to and passion for public service, which have remained largely unrecognized and are absent from textbooks in the field. Schachter's (2008) case study of Lillian Borrone, developed by interviewing her colleagues, provides a story of the women leaders who worked in a male-dominated organization and played a lead role in the revitalization of Port Authority. Stivers (2000) focuses on Julia Lathrop, the first woman to head a US federal bureau, to illustrate that public administration has much to gain by moving from stereotypes and abstractions to stories (Hummel 1991). Revealing

unexplored complexities of the Progressive Era, Stivers illuminates the contributions and relevance of the settlement women to public administration.

Other interpretative studies, while not focused on a specific woman, have shed light on the role of women in the development of the practice of public administration (Stivers, 1995, 2000; Hale & Kelly, 1989; Guy, 1992; Condit & Hutchinson, 1997). The interpretative approach of these studies has fleshed out the role of women in public administration by infusing the study of everyday practices with specific experiences (Stivers, 2000; Burnier, 2003).

Changing the narrative

Discussion about the quality of public administration research has suggested that interpretative forms of research do not meet positivist standards of rigor (Box, 1992; Houston & Delvan 1990; Stallings & Ferris 1988; White 1999). The explanatory method of research positivism corresponds to the traditional vision of science that has dominated empirical research in general, and in public administration is considered the best way to accumulate knowledge in the field (Ospina & Dodge 2005); whereas interpretive research is viewed as soft and not scientific (Shank 2002; White 1999). Although there is a broader acceptance of interpretive research, given the "narrative turn,"[2] it is still not widely understood (White 1999) and remains marginalized (Ospina & Dodge, 2005) One

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[2] A shift to questions about what is means to interpret and experience the world rather than explain or predict it (Ospina & Dodge, 2005).

implication is that interpretive research is more difficult to publish. Ospina and Dodge (2005) advocate for a pluralist approach to inquiry where interpretive methods support and complement more traditional research methods; embracing a multi-method approach would provide for a broader and richer depiction of problems and potential solutions. For example, documenting and mapping the dismantling of the roadblocks women encounter in the public sector has been an important focus of research, but the dominance of the positivist methods has also limited women's progress both by making generalizations about the obstacles to progress they encounter as well as the progress that they've made despite those obstacles, and by excluding the voices of those women leaders who have overcome such challenges. Changing the dominant narrative by understanding the difference women make can catalyze gender equity and social justice by creating a space for an alternative perspective. Narrative inquiry, a form of interpretative research, is of particular relevance to public administration because it links academic research with actual practitioners (see Ospina & Dodge, 2005) by providing insightful, uniquely situated stories:

> A narrative may be oral or written and may be elicited or heard during fieldwork, an interview, or a naturally occurring conversation. In any of these situations, a narrative may be (a) a short topical story about a particular even and specific characters such as an encounter with a friend, boss, or doctor; (b) an extended story about a significant aspect of one's life such as schooling, work, marriage, divorce, childbirth, an illness, a trauma (Chase, 2000).

What distinguishes narrative inquiry from other forms of interpretive research is its reliance on stories as primary sources. Storytelling is far more engaging than traditional academic research and discourse, and such stories allow listeners to become part of the storyteller's world, thus broadening their own world and intensifying it through the inclusion of the storyteller's experience (Hummel, 1991).

Narrative inquiry introduces marginalized voices and provides counter-narratives that dispute misleading generalizations and refute entrenched assertions (McLaughlin & Tierney, 1993; Personal Narratives Group, 1989), and they create the empathy essential to social change (Gamson, 2002; Frank, 2000). Beyond uncovering silenced voices, narrative inquiry reestablishes perspectives and truths that can stimulate change in the prevailing cultural and institutional norms. Unlike many positivist tools, narrative inquiry depends on the relationship that is cultivated between the practitioner and academic to carry out the research (Ospina & Dodge, 2005). Given that managers operate in a world of synthesis, preferring verbal channels (Aguiliar, 1967; Mintzberg, 1973) and face-to-face communications to analytical science (Hummel, 1991), the findings via narrative inquiry are more likely to be perceived as legitimate as they provide the knowledge they need to solve problems and engender social change (Hummel, 1991). For example, through the use of narrative inquiry, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) collect and analyze stories from teachers, police officers and counselors to challenge the dominant narrative that street level workers use discretionary decision making to ensure equal treatment of all clients and reveal that street level workers

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exercise power over their clients. It is very unlikely that such knowledge would have been revealed via traditional positivist research approaches and without an established relationship with the practitioners.

Conclusion

Women's progress in public administration has stagnated in part because the dominant narrative mainly focuses on gender equity as defined by the challenges and obstacles to entry into top leadership positions. In order to stimulate women's progress we need to facilitate change to broaden the scope of the dominant narrative. Understanding the difference women make in public administration, that is the contributions to public administration as defined by the voices of women who have navigated the challenges and obstacles and are currently in leadership positions, provides the possibility for changing the dominant narrative. The usual methods of research employed in understanding gender inequality that focus on counting how many women are in leadership positions or analyzing why women cannot obtain them are not alone sufficient to communicate the voices of women in understanding the difference women make in public administration. On the other hand, one of the primary goals of narrative inquiry is to give voice to marginalized groups (McLauglin p17) and facilitate positive change (Chase). By establishing a practitioner-academic relationship, researchers are able to collect, analyze and communicate, via stories, the other's perspective, create empathy which is a constructive step to social change and remove the oppression of the dominant narrative. Narrative inquiry provides a tool to change the dominant narrative about the progress of

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women from one solely focused on gender equity to a narrative where gender issues are public administration issues and women's progress in public administration is no longer perceived as a set of challenges and obstacles.

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