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Confronting the big challenges of our time: making a difference during and after COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This article explores key challenges emanating from COVID-19 and how public management and administration research can contribute to addressing them. To do this I discuss the 'big questions' debate and then sketch two big thematic challenges. In articulating these, I point to interconnections across various levels of analysis and argue we need to work across a range of boundaries and get more comfortable with complexity. My key argument being that both during and in the aftermath of a catastrophic global pandemic, it is at the intersections, not in silos, that we are likely to move forward intellectually and practically.

KEYWORDS COVID-19; public management; public administration; research

Introduction

The Director-General of the United Nations (UN), António Guterres, declared COVID-19 a health crisis like we had never seen in our lifetimes; one that requires us to come together collectively to mount a war on the virus (Guterres 2020). By July 2020, the UN declared that COVID-19 was wiping out years of gains that had been made towards the Sustainable Development Goals; that more than half a billion people may move into poverty; and that intimate partner violence was increasing around the world (United Nations 2020; Patterson 2020). At the same time, some 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy, many in developing countries, looked likely to lose their livelihoods; poaching and deforestation have soared as people around the world try to make a living; 50 million Americans had applied for unemployment benefits; and the EU had agreed to a €750bn spending package in an attempt to rescue the European economies (Patterson 2020; Gowen 2020; Parliament 2020). By July 2020, almost 15 million people have been infected with COVID-19 and more than 600,000 thousand are dead.¹ The world has been shocked by images of mass graves being dug in many countries to cope with the dead including Brazil, Iran, Bolivia, South Africa, and the United States of America (USA).² Worse may still come (e.g. Will 2020).

The full scale and scope of COVID-19 is still unknown. At worst, COVID-19 may be something we need to live with, rather than something we beat and current experience is showing that waves keep coming in nations who thought they had the

virus under control (e.g. Beech and Doan 2020). This is a disruptive moment in history, with more questions than answers, but what is clear is that many complex, interconnected challenges lie ahead. Some of these are new, but others are old, like poverty and inequality. Here, COVID-19 is acting as a sort of accelerant. Facing up to these challenges will be complex, requiring integrated and interconnected responses that draw on diverse expertise, a range of actors and various disciplines. Public administration and management scholars can play a major role here, but recent commentary has questioned whether we are up to the task. Talbot (2020), for instance, argued that the public administration ecosystem in Britain is 'dead' and Perry (2016) discussed how public administration was 'vanishing'. Nabatchi and Carboni (2018) have questioned whether public administration scholars can respond to the grand challenges facing the world:

At precisely the moment in which we confront serious political, economic, social, cultural and environmental challenges on a truly grand scale, the field of public administration seems reluctant (and perhaps incapable) of responding in a meaningful way.

As COVID-19 morphs into one of the great disasters of our times, public administration and management scholars, can, indeed must, make a difference and show that the field is not incapable, vanishing or dead. As the United Nations (2020) has highlighted in its pleas for global collaboration during the pandemic: we cannot teach children remotely without technology, wash hands without water, or fight a pandemic without functioning health systems. We must work together. Scholars who want to be part of confronting the big issues that a post-COVID project will pose need to move across boundaries, work across disciplines, and move outside our comfort zones. Many will be primed for this, coming from different backgrounds and with existing interdisciplinary collaborations in place. The knowledge that has developed in our fields can inform others; but we also need to be ready to learn, to challenge some of our assumptions and to work in different ways. Our best shot to make a difference during and after the crisis is, in my view, at the intersections, not in silos. This is where we are likely to move forward intellectually and practically.

In this piece I want to set out some areas where we can focus our attention in a way that can do this. To do that I first look at the 'big questions' of the field, and I then go on to sketch out two big thematic challenges. I focus in particular on the role of government, trust, and the citizenry; and justice, inequality and entrenched disadvantage. I conclude the article by setting out several key points from the preceding discussion that focus on the future of our field.

A field of big questions: but what are they?

What the big questions and challenges will be as we move forward and how we can contribute to them is, of course, a prediction business. I will do a little of that in the next section, but first these need to be situated in a broader context. There have been long and protracted debates about the 'big questions' of public management and administration; what they are, but also what they should or might be. This debate has been very USA-centric (Mingus and Jing 2017) and in modern times has spun off of Behn's (1995) attempt to articulate the big questions (or types thereof). He articulated three: the *micromanagement question* – how to break the micromanagement cycle; the *motivation question* – how to encourage people to work towards achieving

public purpose; and the *measurement question* – measuring achievement. These have been critiqued for being too narrow, instrumental, and focused primarily at the organizational level (Kirlin 1996). Behn's (1995) questions were, in Kirlin's view, too much about 'doing' and not enough about 'consequences and value for the larger society in which public administration is embedded' (Kirlin 1996, 140). He argued that big questions needed to focus on 'how public administration affects society ... [on] understanding the role of public administration in influencing society historically and understanding its use to shape society in the future,' not on instrumental issues (Kirlin 1996, 140). This meant the big questions needed to be more about institutions than organizations and needed to have 'meaning'. In seeking to bridge these views, Callahan (2001) set out an integrative approach bringing together questions about institutions and organizations.

More recently, Haque (2019) has argued that both Behn and Kirlin missed the big paradigmatic questions of public administration, the former being too narrow, and the latter focused on mid-range questions. And Mingus and Jing (2017) have addressed the US-centricity of the debate somewhat by reflecting on Behn's questions and developing seven big questions for Chinese public administration. In recent years, the most comprehensive articulation has been by Sowa and Lu (2017) who point to three questions that have dominated the field in the 2000s: how do we deliver public services; how effective is public management; and, how do we understand public problems? Here the big questions were driven by what we were expending our energy on.

We are now 20 years on from the initial 'big debates' about the 'big questions' and we have seen some refinement of them. Reflecting on them in a time of the global pandemic, exploding social movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, and rising populism and authoritarianism, makes some of these 'big questions' seem not so big at all. Rather, many seem conservative and to be missing the big picture. We see in real time that COVID-19 is finding its way into every crack in society hitting the already worse off harder and faster than others and pouring accelerant on deeply divided and fractured communities. In this historic moment we see a range of big gnarly, wicked problems converging and demands for a remaking of institutions and societies. If ever there was a time to focus on what matters, as Kirlin (1996) challenged us to do, it is now. To do this we will need to challenge ourselves.

What matters is shaped by context and power – *where* we are in the world and *who* has the power to define the field. It is uncontroversial, I would think, to say that in our field that power has been narrowly held regardless of how we measure it – geography, race, culture or gender. The product of this has been that 'the field' has reflected the interests of few and been blinkered to other perspectives. While such tensions are inherent in any field, they have been coming to the fore in recent times in ours. Various aspects of this are explored by Alexander and Stivers (2010), Blessett et al. (2016), and Feeny, Carson, and Dickinson (2019). Carboni and Nabatchi (2019) recently reflected on how these tensions played out at the Minnowbrook 50 conference held in the USA. Debate was had on whether the field should be more normative or more instrumental and calls were made for a reckoning to acknowledge the role our field has played in 'initiating and perpetuating injustices and oppressions' (p.316). Some conference participants

... expressed alarm and anxiety about issues that were *not* being addressed: climate change, wealth and income inequality, social justice and human rights, and democratic roll backs, among many others. Many of these participants asserted that the field should advocate or take a stand on current issues. They decried the silence of the field's intellectual leaders and

professional associations on these and other important issues, and called for the assertion of our role as stewards of democracy and justice. Others argued that these issues are not within the purview of public administration, and are more appropriate for other disciplines such as political science, sociology, and philosophy. They felt that public administration should stay focused on the more conventional issues of management and policy analysis, and that our professional associations and representatives should remain objective and neutral (Carboni and Nabatchi 2019, 316).

Alongside these important debates, many scholars are deeply concerned about whether our work has impact where it is most needed; in other words, whether we are making a difference. AbouAssi et al. (2019, 240) have argued it is not clear if our work informs important decisions and actions, and lamented whether or not:

our voice is important in the public discourse surrounding today's critical public administration and governance issues, such as poverty, policing, racism, xenophobia, and immigration . . . concerns still persist that our academic focus is, at least in part, more of an intellectual and theoretical exercise than an attempt to produce a real change in societal structures and outcomes.

At this moment, space is opening up for a fundamental reshaping of the field, or even more radically, a rethinking of what our 'field' even is. 'What matters' and the 'big questions' are being shaped by new generations of scholars. The shifts we are seeing signal that the big questions might be less binary and more integrated, bridging levels of analysis and be much more embracing of complexity and controversy. This is a positive development and, in my view, we *must* engage with a much broader set of issues and challenges. We should not leave these concerns to others because they are 'too hard' or push them to the margins because they are not 'part of our field'. It is also time for a reckoning of sorts. We must look at the role that our field has played in creating these injustices and harms, many of which are now being amplified by COVID-19. Whilst these may have been at the margins, these themes are both broad and deep and run through the historical contours of our field, ranging from: moral inversion and administrative evil (Adams and Balfour 1998); race and police brutality (Menifield, Shin, and Strother 2018); administrative burdens and abortion access (Herd and Moynihan 2019); the oppression of Indigenous or First Nations peoples (Sunga 2017), to the warehousing and commodification of asylum seekers and prisoners (O'Flynn *forthcoming*). In these cases (and many more) public servants, public sector organizations, and political actors are central; and power is a critical dynamic we need to grapple with. Not only do we need to think about what a disruptive event like COVID-19 will mean to the field, we need to think about what 'the field' even is. The big questions are changing, and important issues *are* being addressed in our field. It is important to recognize that this (r)evolution is being led by our newest generations of scholars. COVID-19, in my view, will accelerate this transformation and I believe that our field will be all the better for it.

From big questions to big thematic challenges

In the previous section I examined the 'big questions' debate and I highlighted the importance of focusing on what matters. In this section I want to switch from big questions to big thematic challenges, because a focus on challenges draws attention to where we can have a substantial impact. It is also true that these big thematic challenges offer potential to work across disciplines, to do important bridging work (Moynihan

2018) and to incorporate a fuller range of topics so we can more fully grasp the complex, dynamic nature of various phenomena (O'Flynn 2015). Such an approach sits well with the current focus on 'grand challenges' (Gerton and Mitchell 2019) and the notion of integrative public administration which is more problem-oriented, contextually grounded, and interdisciplinary (Carboni and Nabatchi 2019, 273). In taking stock of the COVID-19 experience to date and reflecting on public administration and management I identified a series of potential big thematic challenges that cut across levels of analysis and disciplinary boundaries, and also where we can make a difference.³ Here I draw out two themes which offer substantial potential to do work that matters. I also make that point here that scholars in our field have not neglected these; indeed, many have dedicated their lives to these topics. The issue that is these have not necessarily been centrestage. In the coming years we need to redraw these boundaries and rethink what the big questions might be and then anchor them around what matters. It is at these intersections that we are able to move forward intellectually and make the most substantial impact practically. In this piece I will focus my attention on sketching out two big thematic challenges: (i) the role of government, trust and the citizenry; and (ii) justice, inequality and entrenched disadvantage. At this moment in time, these two in my view, are the most pressing.

The role of government, trust and the citizenry

As Moynihan has recently argued 'crises reveal government capacity' (2020, 21). They also draw into stark relief the role of government, which has always been a central question in public administration and management studies. For some decades now writers have stressed that we can expect a future filled with fast-moving, continually-morphing, cascading and cross-jurisdictional challenges or disturbances (Williams 2002; Fuerth and Faber 2012; OECD 2017). It is clear that as the COVID-19 pandemic has taken hold that people from every corner of the world expect government to be 'out front' battling the virus and providing services and support for citizens (Edelman 2020). The ability of governments to do so, however, has been mixed, despite years of warning that an unpredictable pandemic of this description was inevitable (Organization 2017, 2018). In the worst-case scenario these warnings were ignored (The Economist 2020a, 25 June).

These mixed results will not be a surprise to those that have been making the case over many years that governments have been faltering. It has been argued that our public administration systems are ill-equipped to confront these big complex challenges (Bourgon 2011). Many reasons have been put forward to explain this: everything from the disarticulated nature of the state (Frederickson 1999) to the skill mix of the public service workforce (OECD 2017; Chine et al. 2020). Others have focused on the role of so-called 'deep state' (Osnos 2018) or the end of expertise (Mishra 2020) as factors impeding government capacity. Capacity often rests on a 'cadre of experts who are thinking about low-visibility problems when few others are' (Kelman 2020) and success of government can often be hidden (see Lipton and Steinhauer 2020). For example, 'public health is an enterprise with an intrinsic problem: People can't see sicknesses avoided or deaths averted' (Achenbach et al. 2020). Commentary on the current crisis has revealed in some nations 'degraded administrative systems and capacities' and systems where 'public officials [have] career incentives to avoid risks, downplay long-terms threats and enact administrative burdens' (Deslatte 2020, 1).

As well as revealing the limits of our capacity, crises also reveal the limitations of political leadership as Moynihan (2020, 21) has argued:

[In the United States] COVID-19 brought to the fore many elements of democratic backsliding under Trump, while revealing the limits of his philosophy of governing. Career officials were sidelined. Trump repeated unproven theories about medical solutions while promising a crisis response that he proved unable to deliver. His political appointees had not prepared for pandemics despite warnings, and seemed asleep at the switch when the threat turned into reality.

Similar outcomes have been a long time in the making across many nations, a point Lewis (2018) made in *The Fifth Risk*. He laid bare what happens when those in charge don't understand how government actually works, or don't care to know. COVID-19 is reminding us that politics matters profoundly to public administration and management – shaping it in old and new ways. The COVID-19 experience will challenge many who see politics as being in a separate domain to the practice of public administration. It is becoming harder, if it was ever possible anyway, to draw hard boundaries that insulate public administration from politics in the way that many classical scholars suggested (Haque 2019). COVID-19 is showing us that politics matters across many aspects of the crisis. For example, emerging evidence from the study of the political determinants of health shows that the spread of COVID-19 is being fuelled by populism and also stoking it (McKee et al. 2020). In some of the worst-performing governments during the pandemic – United Kingdom (UK), India, USA, Brazil and Russia, for instance – leaders have ridden populist waves to power which bred contempt for institutions, denialism, suspicion of elites and embedded the practice of blaming victims and outsiders. In these places it has been much more difficult to put in place effective governmental responses (McKee et al. 2020). In the USA, for example, mask-wearing, social distancing and governmental responses have become an extraordinary political battleground. In Brazil, Russia, Iran and the USA, politicians have been comfortable 'contradicting their experts on basic facts about the pandemic, publishing implausible numbers on COVID deaths or propagating conspiracy theories' (The Economist 2020b, 4 July 2020). The pandemic has shown us that politics matters: from international cooperation, or the lack thereof, to the influence on individual behaviour, the nature of politics shapes responses and outcomes. This is happening as much through public administration systems, public services, and relationships with citizens, as it is through social media platforms. A challenge for public administration and management scholars will be to expand out what we mean by capacity and the factors that influence it.

Capacity is also shaped by relations with other parties, in some cases radically so. Public administration and management scholars have for many years been exploring these questions. There has been extensive work on the range of costs and benefits of engaging external parties and the types of value these relationships seek to create (Alford and O'Flynn 2012; O'Flynn 2019a). COVID-19 is showing both the power of these relationships as well as the fragility and burdensome nature of them. As will be discussed later in this section, government is relying heavily on service users and citizens to co-create value; we need to think in more depth about the nature and dynamic of this relationship and what factors impact on it (OECD 2017). Government has also become increasingly reliant on private sector firms to deliver on its objectives and must grapple with the tensions that occur in these attempts at value creation.

Experiences during COVID-19 have bought into stark relief the fragility and problematic nature of these relationships. In Britain, for example, test-and-trace services provided by the private firm Serco have been problematic, costly and ineffective (Mueller and Bradley 2020). In Australia, a major COVID-19 outbreak in the state of Victoria has been tracked to a hotel quarantine programme where a combination of poor governmental decision-making, reliance on private security firms, exploitative work practices, poor training and low wages have combined to help fuel the second wave of infections (Thorne 2020). In the same state, an explosion of cases in aged care facilities operated by private firms has shown up intergovernmental conflicts, lax compliance and enforcement of standards leading to out-of-control infections and deaths (Handley 2020). The ongoing tension between the pursuit of public and private value in these relationships has borne out in these examples, demonstrated how relationships have been poorly designed to create shared value, undermining governmental capacity to protect its citizens.

We have long known that the deep cuts under austerity have undermined public services across the world, but the true extent is now on display for all to see (Kim 2020; Thomas 2020). As Mazzucato and Quaggiotto (2020) have argued ‘effective government, as it turns out, cannot be conjured up at will, because it requires investment in state capacity.’ In Britain, for instance, austerity has left the health and care systems lacking the resources and resilience needed to confront the scale and scope of the pandemic (Thomas 2020). The state is now over reliant on the private sector to carry out what many see as core public service roles during a pandemic (Mueller and Bradley 2020). Thomas (2020, 7) argued that COVID-19 has shown that this was ‘neither productive, nor efficient ... [with] lost capacity in public health meaning poorer population health, creating unnecessary risk.’ Despite notions that public and private actors can work together to create public value (Moore 1995; O’Flynn 2007; Alford and O’Flynn 2012), the experience of recent times has questioned whether this promise has been realized. Mishra (2020) put it more brutally:

Over the last decade, successive Conservative governments have ruthlessly shredded what was left of the social safety net in the name of budgetary ‘austerity’, hastening Britain’s decline into a flailing – if not failed – state that can’t even secure supplies of gowns and masks for its hospital workers.

Alongside the increase complexity of challenges and questions of capacity has been increasing dismay at a parallel trend: the erosion of trust in government. Whilst declining trust calls into question the capacity of governments to act, it is also true that government competence, or a lack of it, undermines trust (OECD 2020). On the cusp of one of the most complex challenges to confront governments, the OECD reported that in 2019 only 45% of people trusted government (OECD 2020). However, as governments around the world have acted to respond to COVID-19, we have seen a rapid uptick in trust. The Edelman Trust Barometer, for example, saw an 11-point improvement for trust in government from January to May 2020 indicating that trust is back; at least for now.

Since 2011, government had languished in distrust globally, as gridlock in the EU over Greek debt and several corruption scandals in developing nations eroded trust. The [May 2020 results] shows a striking comeback for government: at 65 percent trust (+11 points since January), the public is relying on government to protect them in a manner not seen since

World War II. Trust in government is not only up by double digits in six of 11 markets surveyed, it is the only institution trusted by the mass population (62 percent).⁴

Across the world we have seen wildly differential responses to COVID-19.⁵ One area where public administration and management scholars can contribute will be to explore these links between levels of trust and the capacity to act, especially how this relates to whether government can connect with citizens in processes of value co-creation (Osborne 2018). COVID-19 has shown in detail just how reliant the implementation of government action is on a range of parties, including citizens who are being asked, or directed, to modify their behaviour – handwashing, mask-wearing, limiting movement, physically distancing (World Health Organization 2020). How we conceptualize, or reconceptualize these dynamics is important, as are notions of value – individual vs. collective, public vs. private; or personal well-being through to societal value (Strokosch and Osborne 2020). For example, Osborne's (2018) work encourages us look at notions of value co-creation, which depends on how individuals engage with the 'offering' of public sector organizations. Recent work by Strokosch and Osborne (2020) indicates the importance of goal congruence between actors and how this can constrain and enable value creation. Others such as Alford (2002, 2009), frame these interactions as various types of co-production in pursuit of public value and differentiate between the various client roles that can shape these dynamics.

Citizens are also bearing the ramifications of wide-spread unemployment as entire industries are shuttered to protect public health. And whilst currently citizens express a desire to save lives over jobs (Edelman 2020), such other-regarding attitudes may be difficult to sustain over time as the world enters a period of economic meltdown. As lockdowns continue around the world, we need to understand these links, but also how some sort of compliance fatigue may undermine even the best strategies that government develops to combat COVID-19. In other words, will some sort of 'goal congruence' hold or fall apart over time (Strokosch and Osborne 2020)? Will citizens continue to respond positively to calls on them, or will they refuse? The virus has:

... laid bare one of the gnarliest problems facing all governments. Convincing people to change their behaviour in the ways needed to prevent new waves of covid-19 will rely on people worrying about others as well as themselves. In most places the disease has become one that threatens the elderly, the poor and marginalised minorities. But beating back a virus that has spread around the world with such ferocity will be impossible unless most people play by the rules of the new normal (The Economist 2020b, 4 July).

In the most extreme lockdown cases the state is determining almost every aspect of our lives; how we work, who can enter our homes, and how we exercise. When the state of Victoria, Australia declared a 'state of disaster' in early August it deployed "the country's most intrusive bureaucracy since its days as a penal colony (Cave 2020) and handed control of the public service to the Police and Emergency Services Minister (Morton 2020). The Victorian lockdown has included the use of military personnel to enforce movement restrictions within the city of Melbourne and between the metropolitan centre and regional areas; permit systems now exist for border crossing, childcare and working on site. As Altshuler and Hershkovitz (2020, 2) have argued, such action would have been unimaginable in democratic nations prior to COVID-19:

This fear prompted citizens of all democratic countries to obey orders and voluntarily surrender some of their basic freedoms, in exchange for maintaining their health. In parallel, the very same fear has led democratic governments to place restrictions on freedom, demonstrating

their immense power and control, in ways which would have been deemed quite inconceivable before the pandemic.

Whether trust matters for citizen co-production or the co-creation of value and how this links to capacity is important to understand. For example, in New Zealand where the government implemented a hard lockdown and sought elimination of COVID-19 there were pre-existing high levels of trust in government (Macaulay 2018). Studies have shown that trust has remained high – 88% of New Zealanders trust government to make the right decisions regarding COVID-19 (compared to 59% across the G7), and there is renewed faith in public institutions (Shaw 2020). In contrast, in the US pre-COVID levels of trust in government were at historic lows (Pew Research Center 2019), in a nation shaped by ‘underlying anti-statist political culture ... [and a] pathological distrust of government’ (Fukuyama 2018). This has made coordinated governmental approaches extraordinarily challenging, with claims that communities are picking up much of the organizing work (Yong 2020). It has also turned state requests or demands of citizens for behavioural adaptation into a battleground.

As COVID-19 continues to challenge governments around the world, citizens turn to them to for solutions. Such solutions though are proving hard to find, especially given that the arrival of such a pandemic has been predicted for many years (World Health Organization 2017, 2018). So, as much as governments have been shocked, they should not be surprised. What is clear is that citizen behaviour will play a critical role in addressing the pandemic; here issues of co-production (Alford 2009) and/or co-creation of value (Osborne 2018) can help us to understand these dynamics. As can the emerging work on ecosystems of value creation which can cope with multiple actors, conflict, power and processes of value creation and destruction (Strokosch and Osborne 2020). How COVID-19 will shape our sense of the role of government moving forward is an area for attention – clearly big government is back in many nations – and the pandemic has shown us how much government does matter. Or more specifically, it has shown us how much government *capacity* matters. How capable governments are in dealing with the virus may well impact on trust with government; perceived failures are likely to burst the current ‘trust bubble’. And citizens who we are relying on to change behaviours and bear substantial burdens in doing so may well suffer fatigue and disillusionment, thus undermining the energy and engagement needed to fight the virus. How these patterns connect or lock together both now and post-COVID is an area that matters for public administration and management scholars. Here there is plenty of scope to contribute, learn, and build new knowledge with others.

Justice, inequality and entrenched disadvantage

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as an accelerant for many entrenched issues across the world, highlighting injustice, systemic inequality and entrenched disadvantage. Global evidence shows that a growing sense of unfairness negatively impacts on trust in institutions; recent data also shows that people believe that those with less are bearing more of a burden of suffering, illness, and sacrifice during the pandemic (Edelman 2020). These perceptions are playing out in real time, with the poorest and most vulnerable bearing the biggest burdens of the COVID-19 crisis. Those least able to cope and already in dire circumstances are suffering: ‘Without urgent socio-economic

responses, global suffering will escalate, jeopardizing lives and livelihoods for years to come' (Patterson 2020). The UN estimates that as many as 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy will lose their livelihoods, most in developing countries (Patterson 2020). In the UK, evidence is showing that those with the least are being impacted the most (Social Metrics Commission 2020). At the same time that COVID-19 is amplifying these issues, a mass social movement, Black Lives Matter, has taken hold around the world centring racial injustices and demanding transformational changes to society. Together these phenomena form the second big thematic challenge I want to emphasize as an area for public administration and management scholars to make a difference. In my view two areas in particular emerge.

The first area is an acknowledgement of the marginalization of these topics in the field itself and a commitment to change. Wicked problems related to justice, inequality and entrenched disadvantage have been important themes in public administration and management for many years, but it is fair to say that these have not been at the centre of the field. To be clear, many excellent scholars have focused on these issues for a long time, seeking to address them and improve the lives of communities through various means; they have made a profound difference. As a field, however, these issues have not been seen as foundational. Recent work, however, is challenging this. Blessett et al. (2019, 283 emphasis in original) recently argued: '*as a discipline and practice, we have not adequately anchored social equity to the foundation of public administration.*' They argued that within the public sector there existed numerous inequities, across myriad policy areas, and these 'result in detrimental harms for subjugated and marginalized communities' (p. 284). A key principle of their manifesto is for social equity to be positioned as a foundational anchor of public administration. Black Lives Matter, and the broader social movement it has inspired, also brings to light the limited attention that public administration has given to racial issues. Again, this is not to argue that excellent work has not been done; it has. Rather that these issues have not been seen as central which goes to my earlier points about who has had the power to define the field. A call to action has been made by Alexander and Stivers (2010, 578) who argued that public administration has given limited attention to:

... the dynamic of race as manifest in patterns of policy interpretation and discretionary judgements of individual administrators ... scholarship in the field has failed to come to terms with how this neglect has contributed to maintaining long-standing policies and practices with racist implications.

The intersection of a global pandemic with a global movement for change which directly challenges the role and operation of government is an area that public administration and management must confront. Now is the time for the debate about race in our field – how race matters, the injustices and subjugation that has been built into scholarship and practice, and how we must change this.

The second area of focus is on the intersection of issues of justice, inequality and disadvantage at this historic moment. What does it mean for how we think about the practice of public administration and how our research can drive social change. It is clear now that across the world the repercussions of COVID-19 will be catastrophic, plunging millions into unemployment and poverty and destroying livelihoods. Some 1.5 billion children have already been forced out of physical schooling – 700 million of them in developing countries. It is estimated that 10 million children may never return to school, with young girls primed to be the most impacted (The Economist 2020c,

18 July). It is also true that decades of economic, social and political change have come to a head during the crisis; in other words decades of policies founded on neoliberalism, individualism, and a market-based society (Sandel 2012). In the USA and UK, for instance, Mishra (2020) argued:

Anglo-America's dingy realities – deindustrialisation, low-wage work, underemployment, hyper-incarceration and enfeebled or exclusionary health systems – have long been evident. Nevertheless, the moral, political and material squalor of two of the wealthiest and most powerful societies still comes as a shock to some.

The links between poverty, race and COVID-19 are critical to understand. Evidence is emerging, for example, of a bi-directional relationship between poverty and COVID-19. In other words, poverty exacerbates the effects of COVID-19 and is also exacerbated by it. And despite many commentators arguing that COVID-19 does not discriminate, evidence is showing that clearly it does. In the USA, Black and Latino Americans are contracting and dying from COVID-19 more than White Americans (Board 2020). In Brazil, Black and Indigneous Brazilians are dying at higher rates, with predications that Indigneous tribes will lose a generation of leaders (Andreoni, Londoño, and Casado 2020; Phillips 2020; Ruball and Araujo Jnr. 2020). In the UK, those already overrepresented in poverty are being hit the hardest – Black and Asian groups have been more negatively than White groups; people with a disability are more likely to have negative labour market outcomes (Social Metrics Commission 2020). Predictions for the future are dire with those already in poverty expected to move more deeply into it, and those that were close to the poverty line will cross it. The study also showed that those in poverty reported higher, and increasing levels of loneliness, with around one-third fearing for their future. In the UK, a recent report laid out just how devastating COVID-19 has been to those who already experience disadvantage. Public health experts are showing that disadvantaged people are more vulnerable to infection because they are more likely to live in overcrowded accommodation, work in occupations where there aren't work from home options, are more likely to have unstable work and income, present later for health care services, and often have reduced access to health-care COVID-19 presents a much higher health risk for the already disadvantaged groups in society (Patel et al. 2020).

Getting help, however, has been challenging despite the action of many governments to provide stimulus and support. The capacity issue here has been critical, but so is the nature of burdens placed on those in need, and the philosophical and moral underpinnings of public service systems. The welfare system in the USA, for example, has crumpled under the pressure. By July, 50 million Americans had applied for unemployment claims which overwhelmed state-based systems. In Oklahoma for instance, hundreds of people camped out overnight to get the ticket needed for an appointment so they could submit their details (Gowen 2020). In that state 'mega-processing events' are being held at large sporting arenas. Even when people apply the backlogs are massive; social security and welfare systems have been overwhelmed around the world. In Washington D.C., the story is similar with people waiting months to have applications processed and falling into poverty and homelessness during the process. The complex intersections between state schemes and federal emergency coronavirus schemes makes the situation worse – applicants for the federal assistance scheme in the USA need to be rejected by their state scheme first before they can access the pandemic programme (Swenson 2020). The experience is

highlighting in many nations the underinvestment in systems and outdated processes, the administrative burdens (Herd and Moynihan 2019) in place, how difficult it remains for governments to work together, and also the degrading encounters that many citizens have with the state when they are at their most vulnerable. There are important areas where public administration and management scholars can make a difference.

Another area of global concern has been in aged care services, a magnet for COVID-19 the world over given the mix of high-risk residents, insecure workforces, and lax regulations in many countries. COVID-19 has torn through this vulnerable sector of the community: 'Runaway coronavirus infections, medical gear shortages and government inattention are woefully familiar stories in nursing homes around the world' (Stevis-Gridneff, Apuzzo, and Pronczuk 2020). Tens of thousands of elderly people have died due to a combination of warnings being ignored, a lack of preparedness, and neglect; in many nations aged care was not even included in preparedness plans. Elders have been warehoused away from sight, invisible. In some places it has been argued that elderly people were simply left to die – in Belgium, for instance, hospitals refused infected patients and denied them care and it took weeks to determine who was responsible for care as various parts of governments passed the buck (Stevis-Gridneff, Apuzzo, and Pronczuk 2020). The situation was so dire that Médecins Sans Frontières dispatched teams of experts into nursing homes to care for residents. Similarly, in Sweden emergency doctors turned away the elderly and in Spain investigations are under way to determine if aged care residents were abandoned and left to die (Stevis-Gridneff, Apuzzo, and Pronczuk 2020). In Australia, an outbreak in aged care facilities in Victoria has highlighted issues of responsibility between levels of government, with complex mixes of public and private providers and regulatory regimes administered by the federal government. A disaster that was entirely predictable given the many reviews and inquiries that have been done into this sector (Lucas and Cunningham 2020). This experience also raises questions of whether these complex hybridic models may have serious defects that only truly come to light in crisis, thus raising questions of how different governing models interact with vulnerability (O'Flynn 2019b, *forthcoming*).

Justice, inequality and entrenched disadvantage is a big thematic challenge that demands attention from public administration and management scholars. From our most vulnerable citizens, through to how we design public services and welfare systems, matters. Public administration and management scholars have wrestled with the boundaries of the field, as was discussed earlier – whether we should be normative or instrumental, and whether big social issues should be left to others or constitute central themes. COVID-19 has shown us that it is time for the multiple, complex, and uncomfortable issues that relate to justice, inequality and entrenched disadvantage to become critical to public administration and management. As Blessett et al. (2019, 296–297) argued recently:

... in light of the current state of affairs across the globe, those who constitute the field – both practitioners and scholars – must engage in intentional, active, and ethical efforts to serve and safeguard all people, especially the most vulnerable in our society. No longer can we engage in functional activities that do harm, nor can we passively stand on the sidelines. This is a defining moment that will reveal what we value.

COVID-19 has amplified this call. By design or default, in many countries we are returning to an era of big government. Mass unemployment, catastrophic health outcomes, decimated industries, exploding state debt, growing inequality, and extreme poverty are all likely effects of an unprecedented pandemic. Public administration and management must play a part in shaping the responses intellectually and practically. We can do this by working with others and also by acknowledging that our field needs to transform.

The future of our field

What comes post-COVID remains to be seen. What we do know is that the experience of a global disruption of this scale and scope raises a series of critical challenges for societies and for us as scholars. I have highlighted two big thematic challenges; areas where I think that public administration and management scholars can make a difference and where there are many interconnections to be made. In doing so I don't claim to define the field or to push other topics to the side, but rather to spotlight important areas for us to grapple with. In summing up there are several important points to emphasize.

Public administration and management matters; both as a field and as a craft. As a field we need to confront the big challenges of our times and develop and deploy knowledge that helps to address them. In this way I echo the call from Kirlin (1996, 142) more than two decades ago:

Public administration is a central part of the grandest of human endeavors – shaping a better future for ourselves and those yet unborn. The institutions crafted to achieve human aspirations require administration, including public agencies; however, the measure of success is not at the instrumental level, but in its enduring value not only to those in a particular nation, state, or city, but worldwide to all who aspire for improved lives . . . We should take our role in society very seriously – the big questions of public administration must address how we make society better or worse for citizens.

As a field this means we must also pay heed to the catastrophic effects that COVID-19 looks likely to have on the next generation of scholars and the big ideas that they are developing. For many entering into what is already a tough labour market, the coming years will be worse. For those in precarious positions which are likely to be cut as universities look to tighten their belts and reduce expenditure, this is dire. Our field will be all the poorer for it. Not just the scholarship that may never be done, but our gifted colleagues who won't be in classrooms with the next generation of people driven to serve the public. This will be an inter-generational disaster for us all. And we need to try and stop it.

COVID-19 has shown us that the craft of public administration and management also matters. The current situation demonstrates clearly the role that government plays and the value creation it can catalyse, often in conjunction with citizens. Citizens lean heavily on government, and vice versa, but without trust, redundancy, resilience and capacity the ability to confront these challenges is severely diminished. Indeed, these relationships can be as value destroying as they can be value creating (Flemig and Osborne 2019). The depletion and long-term deterioration of aspects of public sector systems has left us more vulnerable to complex challenges. This is a dynamic shown clearly in some of the public-private failures that have come centre stage during the crisis. Building in redundancy and adaptive capabilities is critical as we move forward.

In the UK calls for this are already being made: 'Now, the UK government should take the opportunity to create a system where resilience is considered efficient, where long-term thinking is encouraged, and where resources are allocated to delivery on it' (Thomas 2020, 3). It also means that this moment offers ample opportunity for deep learning and adaptation and for looking at how to rebuild many systems that have been shown to be problematic or which have themselves exacerbated the effects of the pandemic. For example, the heavy reliance on private actors to pursue public value has deep fault lines that must be explored in much more detail. Any short-term gain made in such relationships can be quickly overshadowed by big, catastrophic value destruction during crisis. It is likely that the wave of examples illustrating this will continue for some time to come.

What is happening under the cover of COVID-19 matters immensely. As the world grapples with the COVID-19 catastrophe, we need to keep an eye on the undercurrents; developments that will be out of the spotlight, but which need our continued attention. For instance, there has been increased violence against women across the world (UN Women 2020); harsher border action by the USA (The Economist 2020d, 30 July); increased surveillance of citizens in many nations (Altshuler and Hershkovitz 2020); and challenges to democracy in countries as diverse as Pakistan (Afzal 2020), Hong Kong (Yam 2020), the USA (Goldberg 2020), Bolivia (Pagliarini 2020), India (Raza 2020), and Australia (Kelly 2020; Murphy 2020). Each of these developments, and many more, happening under the cover of COVID has the potential for profound impact on public administration and management but is also demands input and guidance from our field.

COVID-19 has been a disruptive force in our field and much attention is turning to understanding the impacts. But we should also be mindful to connect up to pre-COVID developments that were already underway. Alongside big thematic challenges are shifts in the field that have already started, and which will lock in with these challenges in interesting ways. The emerging work by Mergel, Ganapati, and Whitford (2020), for example, on agile governance provides a new way of thinking about public administration and management and can be an important influence. Or the manifesto developed by Douglas et al. (2019) on positive public administration which focuses on success and positive contributions in the field rather than just failure. Also critical to the field moving forward is the notion of integrative public administration developed by Carboni and Nabatchi (2019, 268) which 'reframes and expands the role of public administration scholar as integrator and connector of research and practice.' This approach is anchored in:

... a strategic approach to improving the social contract, governance, and policy implementation that puts scholars at the nexus of scholarship and practice. Instead of emphasizing whether the scholarship-practice divide is abysmal or necessary, we call for public administration scholars to understand their unique position to help address complex puzzles related to public values and the administrative state." (Carboni and Nabatchi 2019, 268)

I began this piece with the notion that we have big thematic challenges to address during, and after, COVID-19. And I stressed that we need to move out of our silos to do this, to work at the intersections to make a difference. As Davis (2020) has argued: 'Pandemics and plagues have a way of shifting the course of history, and not always in a manner immediately evident to the survivors ... The COVID pandemic will be

remembered as such a moment in history, a seminal event whose significance will unfold only in the wake of the crisis.’

If ever there was a time for public administration and management scholars to make that difference, it is now.

Notes

1. Global data is available from the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Centre online at: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>. Accessed 21 July 2020.
2. On Brazil see Phillips and Maisonnave (2020), on Iran see Borger (2020), on Bolivia see ABC News (2020), on South Africa see Besent (2020) and on the United States see Samuels and Usero (2020).
3. The seven that I identified were: the role of government, trust and the citizenry; working together; justice, equity and entrenched disadvantage; leadership, workforce and service; the digital and data revolution; performance, innovation and reform; and, COVID undercurrents.
4. This quote from the Edelman launch site for the Spring Report (5 May 2020) online at: <https://www.edelman.com/research/trust-2020-spring-update> The full Spring Report on the Edelman Trust Barometer available online at: <https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2020-05/2020%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Spring%20Update.pdf>. Both accessed 21 July 2020.
5. For detailed cataloguing of government responses see the Blavatnik Coronavirus Response Tracker online at: <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/coronavirus-government-response-tracker>

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