



Editorial

What makes practice-informing research in public administration?

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What actually makes research practice-informing? A useful starting point is that practice-informing research is not simply research with a short “evidence for practice” or “points for practitioners” section added at the end. Nor does it require every study to offer a ready-made solution to a policy problem. Public administration deals with situations in which goals conflict, resources are limited, institutions constrain action, and political judgment cannot be removed from the process. In that setting, research often contributes less by telling officials exactly what to do than by helping them see the problem more clearly.

Practice-informing research, then, is scholarship that begins with a recognizable problem of governing and produces knowledge that improves how public actors understand constraints, mechanisms, risks, or likely consequences of choices. That usefulness can take several forms. Some studies are diagnostic. Others are explanatory. Comparative work can show what lessons travel across settings. Evaluation can clarify the consequences. Design-oriented research can assess whether particular institutional arrangements are more workable than others. And sometimes the most valuable contribution is clarification itself.

Therefore, the ‘practical implication’ should be much wider than “what should managers do on Monday morning?” A study may be highly useful even when it offers no simple recommendation. Research that shows why a certain politically attractive reform is unlikely to work, or why the same intervention produces different results, can be just as valuable as research that identifies a promising course of action.

How that knowledge is produced also matters. Buick et al. (2016) show that scholar-practitioner coproduction can create stronger connections between research and practice. But such collaboration is not effortless. Coproduction in research depends on trust, a clear sense of purpose, and relationships strong enough to withstand differences in timelines and expectations. Practice-informed knowledge is therefore built through interaction.

Bushouse et al. (2011) suggested that bridging academia and practice needs more than individual goodwill. It also depends on professional exchange, engaged scholarship, teaching, and academic incentive structures. If universities reward only disciplinary publication while public organizations have little time or space for sustained engagement, institutions on both sides reproduce the gap.

In this sense, practice-informing research is also an orientation towards research design and contribution. That is also why practice-informing research should not be reduced to applied research.

Theoretical work can be practice-informing when it clarifies mechanisms. Comparative research can be practice-informing when it specifies conditions. Methodological work can be practice-informing when it improves diagnosis, measurement, or evaluation. The key is whether its contribution travels back into the world of administration with something useful to say.

Routes from Research to Practice

The five articles in this special issue come from different corners of public administration. They analyze disaster preparedness in Kansas, sustainability management in Thailand, workforce restructuring in New Zealand, pension reform in Latin America, and wage inequality in the United States. At first glance, they may look like a rather eclectic collection. What connects them is the way each article starts with a recognizable problem of governing and asks what research can add to the decisions that follow.

Krause, Wang, Khaleghinia, and Atakorah's study, *Accounting for vulnerable populations in local disaster preparations: an examination of policy choices*, begins with a familiar but difficult problem in local government: disasters do not affect everyone equally, yet emergency planning often starts from measures designed for the general population. Older people, low-income residents, people with mobility limitations, and residents with limited English proficiency may face additional barriers before, during, and after a disaster.

Using survey data from emergency managers across 48 counties in Kansas, Krause et al. distinguish between general preparedness measures and actions specifically directed towards vulnerable populations. General preparedness appears to have become a fairly established part of local administration, whereas targeted preparedness remains much more conditional. Vulnerability-focused action tends to occur where favorable combinations of financial health, workforce sufficiency, local vulnerability, and political leadership are present. Supportive local leadership is especially important because it can help compensate for otherwise limited local capacity.

Srichamroen's article, *Sustainability in the land of smiles: evaluating environment, social, and governance (ESG) alignment between strategies and practices of Thai government organizations*, suggests that governments are often much better at declaring priorities than embedding them into everyday organizational practice. Sustainability now appears across national plans, agency missions, public strategies, and international commitments. Thai government organizations are no exception. Yet adopting the language of sustainability does not necessarily mean that environmental, social, and governance principles become part of how public organizations themselves operate. Srichamroen analyses this distance between outward-facing commitment and internal practice across five national-level government organizations and one state enterprise.

The study finds a marked disconnect. Public institutions may promote sustainability externally while their internal management pays far less attention to comparable environmental, social, and governance practices. Public administration often evaluates commitment by asking whether a government has adopted a strategy, policy, or formal target. Srichamroen asks what happens after that. If the organizations responsible for promoting sustainability do not incorporate those principles into their own operations, the gap between policy language and administrative practice

can become institutionalized.

Naschitzki and Löfgren's article, *Public workforce expansion: how institutional restructuring embodies the new public bureaucracy*, analyses public-sector restructuring. Restructuring is often associated with contraction. Governments restructure to cut costs, remove duplication, consolidate units, or reduce staff. But restructuring can also be a mechanism for expansion. Restructuring can create new positions, move resources towards particular functions, and gradually alter the composition of public organizations. Drawing on hundreds of restructuring cases across the New Zealand public service, Naschitzki and Löfgren show where workforce growth actually occurs. Their findings point to disproportionate expansion in advisory, coordinating, managerial, and accountability-facing roles, while frontline growth is more limited.

Cardozo's article, *Knowledge, decision-making, and pension reform in Latin America: Comparative evidence from Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay*, compares pension reform in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay and identifies three distinct arrangements: an executive-decisionist model, an expert-commissioned model, and a dialogic-negotiated model. The three cases connect expertise and political authority differently, producing different balances among analytical coherence, speed, legitimacy, implementation feasibility, and policy stability. An executive-led process may move quickly but narrow the space for contestation. Expert commissions can strengthen diagnosis but still leave political actors to decide which recommendations survive. Social dialogue can widen participation and legitimacy but may generate more gradual change.

Girard's study, *The feminine gender role penalty: gender role expression, compensation, and sector differences in wage outcomes*, brings the discussion inside the employment relationship. Equal-pay legislation has existed for decades, yet wage gaps persist. Most explanations focus on familiar factors such as education, tenure, occupation, seniority, or hours worked. Girard asks whether part of the remaining difference may also be linked to gender-role expression: the extent to which individuals display behaviors conventionally regarded as more feminine or communal.

Using a matched sample of full-time employees in large US metropolitan areas, Girard finds that employees exhibiting a more feminine gender role earn, on average, less than otherwise comparable employees. Public organizations typically rely more heavily on formal classifications, standardized salary bands, explicit promotion procedures, and rule-bound compensation systems. These arrangements are often criticized for rigidity. Yet that same rigidity may also narrow the room through which informal expectations and behavioral stereotypes enter pay decisions.

The article therefore does more than identify another source of wage inequality. It points to the possibility that institutional design can moderate informal bias. That is a particularly useful contribution for public managers because it directs attention away from attitudes alone and towards the systems through which employment decisions are made. Their value lies in giving public actors a clearer view of the conditions, mechanisms, consequences, and choices that sit behind administrative action. Practice-informing research does not have to tell governments exactly what to do.

The “So What?” for the Field

The “so what?” question is easy to ask and easy to get wrong. In public administration, it should not become a demand that every article end with a neat set of instructions for practitioners. Governing rarely works that way. Public officials make decisions with incomplete information, competing goals, institutional constraints, political pressure, and legitimate disagreement about what ought to be done. Research cannot tidy all of that away.

Time and context further complicate translating research into practice. Both are critical to turning research findings into effective policy action (Im, T., 2025). Even the best recommendation today may become obsolete or irrelevant within five years as the conditions under which the original evidence was generated change. Similarly, policies that appear successful in one cultural or institutional context may generate unintended or adverse consequences when transferred to another. Experiences in many developing countries demonstrate the risks of adopting policy recommendations derived from different cultural and institutional settings without adequate contextual adaptation (Christensen, R. K. et al., 2022, Ho & Im, 2015). These limitations are not arguments against practical relevance. Rather, they caution against treating research findings as universally applicable prescriptions detached from the time and context in which they were produced.

The appropriate test, then, is not whether a study tells practitioners exactly what to do. It is whether it leaves them better placed to understand what matters, what is constrained, what may follow, and where the real choices lie. Research can inform judgment without replacing it. Indeed, acknowledging when, where, and under what conditions findings are likely to hold may be as practically valuable as offering a specific recommendation.

That is the “so what?” for the field. Public administration research does not need to become less theoretical or more narrowly applied. It needs to remain analytically strong while staying close enough to practice that its lessons can travel—not as fixed prescriptions, but as context-sensitive knowledge that can inform judgment across changing circumstances. Practical relevance is not a concession to scholarship. It is one way scholarship fulfills public administration’s longstanding purpose.

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