

Public Administration in Perspective: Theory and Practice through Multiple Lenses

By David John Farmer
Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2010

Reviewed by Breena E. Coates

This textbook, *Public Administration in Perspective: Theory and Practice Through Multiple Lenses*, written by David John Farmer (M.E. Sharpe, 2010) is an erudite and thoroughly readable text that will capture the interests of a broad audience of scholars, teachers, students and the general public. The book's scholarship is compelling and hard to resist. One is frequently inclined to pause and more slowly savor the richness of its contents. The author provides unique and, hitherto, unexplored perspectives from which to view the multiple faces of public administration. In this sense, within its pages lies a *Minnowbrook*-type discourse on the perennial question for the field: "*What is public administration?*"

Professor Farmer's phrase for the dialog he wishes to generate about public administration is "epistemic pluralism." In other words, he wants the reader to come to an understanding of Public Administration through a "*consilience*" (unity) of economic, political, psychological, ethical, feminist, and other structures of knowledge. Today, in our networked, globalized environment we are more than ever coming to the realization that there is an interdisciplinary basis for understanding truth, and that each discrete branch of knowledge studies is a merely a subset of a larger reality. To fully apprehend this reality depends on syntheses of particularized knowledge streams. Dr. Farmer argues that to study public administration from one, or just a few dimensions, produces a mere caricature of reality.

One of the most interesting, and unexpected, lenses that David Farmer uses to come to a "knowing" of public administration is neuroscience. Just as neural networks in the brain are essential to understanding how the brain manages the living human being in his/her ability to achieve specific goals within a very complex and diverse structure of strategies, so, too, Farmer's epistemic plural lens illustrates how discrete knowledge streams can coalesce into a holistic view of the discipline of public administration, even while appreciating how a specific set of circumstances are being simultaneously resolved in the public sector. Here David Farmer argues that "Reality" or "Truth" (within which all knowing resides) benefits from

“deterritorialization,” rather than balkanized (and hence modified, and perhaps distorted) modes of knowing. This is analogous to the metaphor of Indra’s Net—a Vedic model applicable to our globalized age. Within this infinite net, a pearl is said to be nested in each of the net’s multiple knots. Each separate pearl reflects every other pearl in the network.

The book is in three parts, and in all parts the reader is nudged toward the notion of epistemic pluralism and synthesis. The first part is an overview of strengths and weaknesses of selected perspectives as they relate to public administration theory and praxis. The second part synthesizes the assortment of perspectives. The third part concludes with ways that readers can think more synthetically and creatively about public administration. How does an instructor, or a curious reader, pull together a synthesis for himself or herself? Here Professor Farmer’s book thoughtfully provides us with a useful tool. He structures each chapter’s subsections as inquiry. Thus, the textbook does not become a lecture coming down from David Farmer to us, but a bottom-up inquiry that cajoles the reader to join the author in casting additional new lights onto administrative and managerial concepts. One might safely say that this unique book is really a public administration inquiry system. As such, it is an excellent tool for students and teachers inside and outside the classroom.

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