

ROBERT B. DENHARDT

THOMAS J. CATLAW

# Theories of Public Organization

7TH EDITION





# Theories of Public Organization

SEVENTH EDITION

**ROBERT B. DENHARDT**  
University of Southern California

**THOMAS J. CATLAW**  
Arizona State University



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Thomas J. Catlaw**

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Kopf, S4 Carlisle Publishing  
ServicesContent Coordinator: Jessica  
Wang

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# Preface

This seventh edition of *Theories of Public Organization* continues to advance the important themes of prior editions of this book but also offers significant enhancements and additions. The most notable and visible addition is Thomas Catlaw as a collaborator and coauthor for this book. Professor Catlaw is the Frank and June Sackton Professor of Public Administration in the School of Public Affairs at Arizona State University. He has made considerable contributions to the development of public administration theory and, in particular, to our understanding of difference and democratic practice in contemporary public organization. With Professor Catlaw's arrival, we have taken the opportunity to examine the book with fresh eyes and enthusiasm and to bring renewed clarity to the book's overarching concern for personal and organizational learning, democratic practice, and the need to reconsider the relationship between theory and practice in a more constructive fashion. We think that these themes are more important than ever for public organizations and the world we live in today. Yet, as we explore through updated considerations of contemporary theory, thinking about public organizations remains limited in ways that continue to constrain our practice and, by implication, our individual and shared well-being.

## **ONGOING CENTRAL THEMES AND PURPOSES**

Fundamentally, though, the additions and enhancements to this edition continue with the important themes established in earlier ones. This is a book about theory but also about practice. It is written to introduce theories of public organization to students of public administration and to those outside the field who wish to involve themselves in organizations committed to public purposes. More important, this book is an attempt to develop a critique of the mainstream literature in public administration theory based on its inability to connect with the real experiences of those working in and with public organizations.



In recent years, the traditional separation of theory and practice in the field of public administration has become even more pronounced. Academics and practitioners, who have always viewed each other with some skepticism, now seem even more divided. This is an extremely unfortunate situation, limiting both our understanding of public organizations and our actions within them. The primary intent of this book is to understand more clearly the separation of theory and practice and to begin to reconcile their differences through personal learning and action.

To achieve this purpose, we first review a number of past efforts in the field, not to present a comprehensive historical review of theories of public organization but to examine representative works that embody the commitments and views of various groups at various times. Based on this review, we then consider contemporary studies of public organizations and suggest ways in which we might better understand the world of public administration. Several more generic organization theorists, who have made sustained contributions to the field of public administration, are included as well.

In our engagement with these works, we have discovered more consistency exists among the various theorists than one might expect. This discovery has led to the following conclusions, which are implicit in all that follows:

1. Although there have been many diverse theories of public organization, the mainstream work in public administration theory has centered on elaborating a so-called rational model of administration and a view of democratic accountability implicitly based on the politics-administration dichotomy.
2. As a theory of learning, this approach has limited itself to a positivist understanding of knowledge acquisition, failing to acknowledge or to promote alternative ways of viewing public organizations. Specifically, this approach has failed to integrate explanation, understanding, and critique in theories of public organization.
3. As a theory of organization, this approach has limited itself to instrumental concerns expressed through hierarchical structures, failing to acknowledge or to promote the search for alternative organizational designs. Specifically, this approach has failed to integrate issues of control, consensus, and communication.
4. Theories of public organization have consequently appeared to practitioners to be unrelated to their concerns, failing especially to provide a moral context for personal action in the governance process.
5. Despite the dominance of the mainstream view, there have always been significant counterpoint arguments in the field.
6. These challenges become even more important as we move from an exclusive focus on government to a more embracing focus on governance, especially democratic network governance.

To fulfill the promise of public administration theory, we now require a shift in the way we view the field, a shift that will lead us to be concerned not merely with the government administration but also with the broader process of

governance, human relationships, and managing change in pursuit of publicly defined societal values. Following such a perspective, which is elaborated in Chapter 1, we are led to a broadened concern for the nature of administrative work in public organizations broadly defined—one that incorporates not only the requirements of efficiency and effectiveness but also the notion of democratic responsibility. This shift has implications for the field of governance and public administration and for the larger field of management as well. To the extent that various institutions of governance dominate the social and political landscape, it is appropriate to ask whether all such organizations should be governed in such a way as to seriously maintain our commitments to freedom, justice, and equality among persons. The question is not how we should view the operations of government agencies but rather how organizations—and relationships—of all sorts might be made more public, how they might aid in expressing the values of our society.

For nearly a century, private administration, or business administration, has stood as a model for public administration. We suggest in this book that public organizations—and the theories and approaches that support them—may become models for reconstructing organizations of all types along more democratic lines. The tradition of public administration contains elements of organizational reform that are important for all our institutions. If democracy is to survive in our society, it must not be overridden by the false promises of hierarchy and authoritarian rule. *Democratic outcomes require democratic processes.*

The connection between theory and practice will be very important in accomplishing this goal. A theory that stands apart from practice and from the values and meanings implicit in practice will never enable us to do more than modify our practice incrementally. It will not permit the kind of broad commitment to the notion of democratic governance that our society requires. In our view, however, the connection between theory and practice can occur only through the process of personal learning. Only as individuals reflect on their experiences and generalize from them will they develop theories of action. And only in this way will they be able to incorporate their ideas into a practical and personal philosophy of public administration.

Consistent with this view, the book incorporates several pedagogical features, including discussion questions and brief but pointed case studies after each chapter. Most important, however, is the appendix on keeping an administrative journal. The journal provides a way of connecting theory and practice by examining one's administrative experiences from four different perspectives. Careful use of the administrative journal will make the material in this text come to life for the reader. In a sense, the reader is asked to develop his or her own case studies through entries he or she makes in the administrative journal. Just reading or thinking about theories independent of practice will not substantially affect our actions. For truly significant learning to occur, we need to demonstrate to ourselves the relevance and meaning of theory in our everyday lives. Theory, we will find, is ultimately a very personal matter, and the administrative journal helps make this connection.

## CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER CHANGES

To advance the work of the book, new suggested readings and discussion questions have been added throughout. More substantively, we have made the following changes in this new edition:

Chapter 1 has been significantly restructured and revised in order to bring out more fully the unique approach to the question of the relationship of theory to practice and connections among various perspectives and approaches presented in this book. We urge both theorists and practitioners to consider alternatives to “applying” theory to practice and to think differently about the expectations and demands both have for one another.

In Chapter 2, we make important revisions to the sections on Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud to reaffirm and make more accessible their importance for contemporary public organization and, in particular, thinking critically about democratic public organization and possibilities for knowledge acquisition.

Chapter 3 includes a new introductory discussion that situates the development of theories of public organization in a more nuanced historical context. It also adds a new section on the pivotal role that gender played in the development of early theories of public administration and how gender conditioned and constrained the way in which scholars and practitioners came to think about “science.” This highlights the scholarship of Camilla Stivers and her analysis of the importance of the Settlement Movement (and settlement women) for public administration. The chapter now includes expanded discussion of early theorists in the field who offered alternatives to the scientific, rational approach, such as Mary Follett and Ordway Tead.

Chapter 4 includes an extensive new section on complex adaptive systems and new institutionalist theories. We focus, in particular, on the relationship of systems and institutionalist thinking to the underlying assumptions of the rationalist model.

Chapter 5 adds a new section on contemporary theories of motivation, including public service motivation, and their implication for the prospects of the organizational humanist perspective.

Chapter 6 has been entirely restructured and reoriented. The overall theme of this chapter is now to locate the emergence of the policy perspective and the new public management in the general search for new governmental theories and practices that emerged from the late twentieth century in the face of considerable political and social turmoil and, later, fiscal crises. The chapter includes new and updated sections on the literature on policy implementation and the new public management. These sections highlight both the intentions of these approaches but also some of the unexpected—and unfortunate—consequences—of these efforts.

Chapter 7 significantly expands its discussion of gender and public organization and adds important new material on race, sexual orientation, and able-bodiedness. It shows how feminist theories and queer theory, in particular, offer unique and useful lenses through which we understand how differences and identities matter in public-organizational life. The discussion of democratic network governance has been revised significantly to incorporate key ideas from Eva Sorensen and Jacob Torfing about how to democratically “anchor” these networks, and we advance the case for the necessity of making internal organizational

dynamics part of conversation about democratic governance and reconsideration of the relationship between politics and administration.

Finally Chapter 8, also considerably restructured and revised, brings together many of the major themes of the book to offer a different way to approach the theory–practice question. We highlight again how different forms of knowledge acquisition imply different kinds of relations of theory to practice and, thus, to key dimensions of public organizations. We suggest that the dominant approach to this question presents a misleading account of practice and thus what we can expect from theory and academic research. We show that there can be a place for all forms of knowledge acquisition, but only when personal learning and individual sense-making in particular organizational contexts are made our primary concern.

Throughout this work, we have come to believe more firmly that ideas do make a difference. Human action requires human thought, and without thought, our actions are blind. However, when we realize that thought leads to action, we must also recognize the responsibility of those who theorize. The connection between thought and action, theory and practice, demands that those who think and those who write share a moral obligation with those who act in public organizations. This responsibility, the responsibility of the theorist, has, for the most part, been underplayed in our field. A more thorough understanding of the vocation and the obligation of the theorists is very much needed in our discipline—and indeed in all the social sciences.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND APPRECIATION

A word about our own learning about public organizations and to those who have provided help and support during our work on this project, in both its original and revised versions. Foremost among them, we want to recognize colleagues—past and present—at the University of Missouri–Columbia, the University of Colorado–Denver, the University of Delaware, the University of Southern California, and Arizona State University. We have also benefited greatly from our association with a network of other public administration theorists around the world including friends such as John Nalbandian, Orion White, Cynthia McSwain, George Frederickson, Bob Backoff, Sloane Dugan, Barry Hammond, Astrid Merget, Larry Kirkhart, Michael Harmon, Naomi Lynn, Brint Milward, Frank Marini, Bayard Catron, Guy Adams, Jim Wolf, Frank Sherwood, George Frederickson, John Forester, Cam Stivers, Cheryl King, David Farmer, Ralph Hummel, Hugh Miller, Jos Raadschelders, Patricia Mooney Nickel, Angela Eikenberry, Jen Eagan, Louis Howe, Sandra Kensen, Peter Bogason, Eva Sorensen, Jacob Torfing, Richard Box, Kym Thorne, Alex Kouzmin, Margaret Stout, Richard Box, and Kelly Campbell Rawlings. We also want to thank the administrative practitioners and students who have been so helpful in focusing our work over the past years.

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# About the Authors

**Robert B. Denhardt** is Professor and Director of Leadership Development in the Sol Price School of Public Policy at the University of Southern California, Regents Professor Emeritus at Arizona State University, and Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the University of Delaware. A past president of the American Society for Public Administration and a member of the National Academy of Public Administration, Dr. Denhardt has published twenty-two books, including *The Dance of Leadership*, *The New Public Service*, *Managing Human Behavior in Public and Nonprofit Organizations*, *Theories of Public Organization*, *Public Administration: An Action Orientation*, *In the Shadow of Organization*, and *The Pursuit of Significance*.

**Thomas J. Catlaw** is the Frank and June Sackton Chair in Public Administration and an Associate Professor in the School of Public Affairs at Arizona State University on the Downtown Phoenix Campus. His research centers on the application of political and social theory to problems of governance and social change. He is the author of *Fabricating the People: Politics and Administration in the Biopolitical State* and has published widely on matters of public administration and democratic participation. Dr. Catlaw was editor of *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, an international journal dedicated to innovative and critical analysis of governmental practice, and has worked previously for the U.S. Office of Management and Budget in Washington, DC, on issues of federal audit policy.

*The welfare, happiness, and very lives of all of us rest in significant measure upon the performance of administrative mechanisms that surround and support us. From the central matters of food and shelter to the periphery of our intellectual activity, the quality of administration in modern society touches our daily lives. Today your life may depend upon the administration of purity controls in a pharmaceutical house, tomorrow it may depend upon the decisions of a state department of motor vehicles, next week it may rest with the administrative wisdom of an official in the Department of State. Willy-nilly, administration is everyone's concern. If we wish to survive, we had better be intelligent about it.*

—Dwight Waldo (1955, p. 70)

Source: Waldo, Dwight. (1955) *Public administration—study and teaching*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday

*Free and unfree, controlling and controlled, choosing and being chosen, inducing and unable to resist inducement, the source of authority and unable to deny it, independent and dependent, nourishing their personalities and yet depersonalized: forming purposes and being forced to change them, searching for limitations in order to make decisions, seeking the particular but concerned with the whole, finding leaders and denying their leadership, hoping to dominate the earth and being dominated by the unseen—this is the story of man and society told on these pages.*

—Chester Barnard (1948, p. 296)

Source: Barnard, C.I. (1948). *Organization and Management Selected Papers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.



# Learning and Public Organizations

**D**wight Waldo's appraisal of the importance of public organizations in our daily lives is even more relevant today than when it was written over fifty years ago (Waldo, 1955). During that time, public organizations at the federal, state, and local levels have grown tremendously, to the point that today over 22 million people are employed by government in this country. In addition, millions more are employed in businesses and nonprofit organizations that play an essential role in the governance process. More important, the range and complexity of the issues addressed by government and related agencies have been extended far beyond what we might have envisioned even a few years ago. Because of the serious impact public organizations have on our lives, when we talk about administration, as Waldo says, we had better be intelligent.

As Chester Barnard (1948) points out, however, we must also maintain a sense of the quality of organizational life. Although we often think of the public bureaucracy as an impersonal mechanism, behind each of our encounters with public organizations lies a lengthy and complex chain of human events, understandings, and behaviors developed in the everyday lives of people just like us. Organizations are indeed the products of individual human actions—actions with special meanings and significance to those who act. The allegedly impersonal organization is the backdrop for a very personal world.

For this reason, public organizations may look quite different depending on our particular perspective. As an example, we often talk about the endless maze of confusion and red tape that seems to characterize public organizations. Certain agencies, despite their alleged interest in efficiency and service, seem “designed” to prevent satisfactory solutions to our problems. On the one hand, the bureaucracy

may respond in such a routinized way as to appear uncaring; on the other, it may seem so arbitrary as to be cruel. Consequently, we should not be surprised that many Americans have a rather low opinion of public bureaucracy.

This picture changes as we become more familiar with the bureaucracy and the people who inhabit it. These individuals are, for the most part, highly concerned and competent, working to make a living and seeking to deal effectively with the complex issues they face. For most, the old notion of public service is not dead. Working for the government is not just another job; it is a chance to participate in solving difficult public problems. It is the “real world,” in which people experience pain and pride, joy and disappointment. It is a very personal place.

The relationship of the personal and impersonal in public organizations has a second and related aspect to the quality of organizational life. Often when people think about the relationship between politics and administration, it is in terms of ends and means. Public bureaucracy is thought to be the means or instrument for making public or policy goals a reality; administration is about implementation. But we cannot separate ends and means because the meaning and significance of *what* to do is substantively revealed to us in *how* we do it (Harmon, 2008). When we forget this, we run the risk of viewing the public servants who implement policies as mere instruments or tools rather than as full human beings. This degrades the quality of organizational life and threatens to turn bureaucracies into inhumane places for both citizens and employees. As Harmon (2008 p. 72) writes, “An uncritical acceptance of the ends/means dualism conceals an ideological bias that not only perpetuates disparities of political and organizational power but also precludes an alternative vision of personal development and social relationship upon which a more practical and humane conception of governance may be grounded.” The challenge and opportunity, then, for practitioners and theorists of public organization is to understand how the democratic advancement of broad public goals is bound up with the democratic administration of these organizations and the personal aspirations of those who work in them.

So, though this book is concerned with what it means to be intelligent about public organizations, it is also concerned with how our knowledge may be used to deal compassionately with human problems and the world around us. We will be concerned with a fairly basic set of questions: How can we develop a better and more systematic understanding of public organizations? What do we need to know in order to make public organizations more responsive and democratic? How can we make use of the knowledge we have gained so as to improve the well-being of both ourselves and the communities we serve?



## THE ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE

People gain knowledge in many ways. Our understanding of public organizations is clearly influenced by events that occur even before we regularly encounter those organizations. Our experiences in the family teach us much about power, authority, and communication, while our experiences in church and in school present us with information about more structured organizations. By the time we begin to deal with major public organizations, either as members or as clients, we have been thoroughly socialized in terms of some basic patterns of behavior and action. Nevertheless, there is still a great deal of information we must acquire and a number of different ways in which we can acquire it. We can depend on rumor or hearsay, we can investigate the organization's past practices, we can listen and learn from the advice of others in the organization, we can be open to the experience and knowledge of the public or stakeholders that we serve, or we can let ourselves be guided by efficiency experts and organization development specialists.

### Deriving Theory from Practice

In each of these ways, we are constructing our own personal approach to or theory of public organization; we are seeking explanations or understanding that will allow us systematically to view public organizations, their members, and their clients. The body of observations and evaluations we make may be said to constitute implicit theories of public organizations, in the sense that although they may rarely be articulated or even consciously considered, they constitute a set of propositions about the way in which public organizations work. Most important, these theories do not exist apart from practice; they are integrally related to the way we act as members or clients of public agencies. Our every action occurs within the framework of the theories we hold or, more precisely, as an expression of our theoretical positions. In the field of action, theory and practice are one. This statement seems simple enough, but exactly the opposite characterization, that theory and practice are disconnected, is in fact the one more frequently heard in contemporary discussions of public administration. Administrative practitioners often complain that theorists, from the Founding Fathers to present-day academics, live and work in ivory towers so distant from the world of practice that their principles and pronouncements hardly correspond to life in the real world. Meanwhile, academics, even those most concerned with the relevance of administrative studies, complain that practitioners in public agencies are so concerned with the nuts and bolts of administration that they fail to maintain a theoretical overview. The gulf between theory and practice seems too great to bridge.

However, like the relationship between ends and means, this way of framing the relationship between theory and practice is misleading. The reason it is misleading is that even academic theorists are, in a very real sense, practitioners. Just as public managers have implicit theories-in-use, theorists and other academic

researchers seek to hone their craft and strive to develop practical expertise in and understanding of the world that they live in. We will return to this theme in greater detail in Chapter 8.

For now, however, we can say that the particular *field of practice* (Bourdieu, 1994) that academic theorists work within is different than the field that managers and analysts in public organizations practice in. It is, typically, a university or other research setting. Working in different fields of practice means that the practical wisdom we develop in theorizing about public organizations is different than the practical wisdom other practitioners develop. This kind of reasoning can be extended, for example, to the many different professions that work in public organizations, such as law, engineering, medicine, social work, or accounting. These professions all have unique bodies of expertise associated with them and distinct ways of viewing the world and thinking about public problems. This approach also can help us to think in a new way about the distance that seems to separate public organizations from the clients they serve. All individuals, including citizens and clients, develop particular expertise and understanding in the fields of practice that they most commonly live and work within. Ordinary people are experts in their own lives, though this personal expertise is different from both the knowledge gleaned from academic research and professional experience.

When we recognize that different groups of people are engaged in different fields of practice and that there are different kinds of knowledge, we can chart a new direction across the “theory–practice” divide (Catlaw, 2008). The task becomes less how to *apply* theories to *practice* than to communicate and translate across fields and bodies of knowledge through a process of *personal reflection and mutual learning*. Our question becomes less a question of whether which academic theorist or practitioner has the ultimate and final account of the real world of public organizations but rather a matter of what we can learn from each other’s academic, professional, and personal knowledge and how this learning can help us to become more competent and compassionate actors in the fields we practice in. In this sense, the relationship between theory and practice can be reconstructed around the concept of *personal action*.

For this reason, the central aim of this book is to develop an understanding of public organizations that enables us to integrate theory and practice, reflection and action. To that end, subsequent chapters present an overview of those theories of the individual, the organization, and society that have been proposed as guidelines for making sense of the actions of public organizations; a specific question will be how those theories and the arguments on which they have been built inform our own processes of theory building—processes that lead to our implicit theories of administration.

*The central aim of this book is to develop an understanding of public organizations that enables us to integrate theory and practice, reflection and action.*

## DIFFERENT APPROACHES

As we have indicated, theorists and practitioners engage in both practice *and* theorizing. It is the case, though, that not only are their fields of practice different but the theories that they use and create are as well. To illustrate this, we consider two cases that illustrate some of the central topics in public organization theory but do so from the perspective of everyday organizational life. The next section considers the issue of the formal theories of public organization that try to systematically explain and make sense of that experience.

In each case, you might begin by asking how you as an observer would characterize the various actors and how you would analyze their relationships with one another. What kind of information—complete or incomplete, objective or subjective, and so on—do you have available? Does your asking for more information suggest that you hold a certain view of organizations that would be made more complete with the addition of this information? If your questions reflect a set of assumptions about life in public organizations, how would you characterize those assumptions?

Typically, students reviewing cases such as those in this chapter (and elsewhere in this book) comment that they need more information, that the case did not tell them enough. Of course, those involved in the cases would say the same thing—it just seems that there is never enough information. That said, you might consider any case from the standpoint of those involved. Try to understand, from their point of view, exactly what was taking place in their field of practice. Specifically, you might try to reconstruct their analysis of the situation. On what knowledge or understanding of organizational life did they act? What information did they have? What information did they lack? How would they have characterized their general approach to life in public organizations? What expectations about human behavior did they hold? How did they see the primary tasks of their organization? What was their understanding of the role of government agencies and those working in such agencies? What was the relationship between their frame of reference and their behavior?

### Case 1

Our first case illustrates the relationship between the way we view organizational life and the way we act in public organizations. Ken Welch was a summer intern in the management services division of a large federal installation. During his three-month assignment, Ken was to undertake a variety of projects related to management concerns in the various laboratories at the center. The management services division was part of the personnel department, but personnel in the division often acted as troubleshooters for top management, so Ken's unit enjoyed considerable prestige within the department and, correspondingly, received special attention from its director.

After a period of about two weeks, during which Ken was given a general introduction to the work of the division, the department, and the center, Rick Arnold, one of the permanent analysts, asked Ken to help him with a study of

the recruitment process in one of the computer laboratories. This was exactly the kind of project Ken had hoped would grow out of his summer experience, and he jumped at the opportunity to become involved. He was especially pleased that Rick, who was clearly one of the favorites of the division's chief and was jokingly but respectfully known as "Superanalyst," had asked for his help. In addition to gaining some experience himself, Ken would have the opportunity to watch a high-powered management analyst at work. Moreover, since it was clear that Rick had the ear of the division's chief, there were possibilities for at least observing some of the interactions at that level, perhaps even participating in meetings at the highest levels of the center's management. All in all, it was an attractive assignment, one on which Ken immediately began to work.

As it turned out, however, Ken could not do a great deal. Since Rick was the principal analyst, he clearly wanted to take the lead in this project, something that seemed perfectly appropriate to Ken. But because Rick had several other ongoing projects, there were considerable periods in which Ken found himself with little to do on the recruitment project. He was therefore more than happy to help out when Eddie Barth, one of the older members of the staff, asked if Ken would help him put together some organizational charts requested by top management. Eddie was one of a small group of technicians who had formed one of the two units brought together several years before to form the management services division. Ken soon discovered that the construction of an organizational chart, especially in the hands of these technicians, became a highly specialized process, involving not only endless approvals but also complicated problems of graphic design and reproduction far beyond what might be imagined. Ken was certainly less interested in this work than in the more human problems he encountered in the recruitment project, but Eddie had always been cordial and seemed to be happy to have some help. So Ken drew charts. After a couple of weeks of working on the two projects, Ken began to receive signals that all was not well with his work. Another intern in the office overheard a conversation in the halls about the overly energetic interns who had been hired. One of the secretaries commented that she hoped Ken could "stand the heat." Since Ken felt neither overly energetic nor under any heat, these comments were curious. Maybe they were talking about someone else, he thought.

A few days later, however, Ken was asked to come to Jim Pierson's office. Jim, another of the older members of the staff, who, Ken thought, had even headed the technical unit, had remained rather distant, although not unpleasant, during Ken's first weeks at the center. While others had been quite friendly, inviting Ken to parties and asking him to join the personnel department's softball team, Jim had seemed somewhat aloof. But then Ken and Jim had very little contact on the job, so maybe, Ken reasoned, it was not so strange after all. Ken saw the meeting as a friendly gesture on Jim's part and looked forward to getting better acquainted. Any hopes of a friendly conversation, however, were immediately dispelled; as soon as Ken arrived, Jim began a lecture on how to manage one's time, specifically pointing out that taking on too many projects meant that none would be well done. Although there were no specifics, Jim was clearly referring to the two projects on which Ken had been working.

Ken was stunned by the meeting. No one had in any way questioned the quality of his work. There were no time conflicts between the two projects. And even if there had been, Ken wondered why Jim would take it on himself to deliver such a reprimand. Later that afternoon, Ken shared his conversation with the other intern, who commented that Jim had always felt angered that, when the two units were brought together, he was not made director. Ken hinted at the controversy the next day in a conversation with Rick but received only a casual remark about the “out-of-date” members of the division. Ken began to feel that he was a pawn in some sort of office power struggle and immediately resolved to try to get out of the middle. As soon as he had an opportunity to see the division chief, he explained the whole situation, including his feeling that no real problems existed and that he was being used. The chief listened carefully but offered no real suggestions. He said he would keep an eye on the situation.

Later in the week, at a beer-drinking session after a softball game, the director of the department of personnel asked how the internship was going. In the ensuing conversation, Ken told him what had happened. The director launched into a long discourse on the difficulties he had experienced in reorganizing units within his department. But he also pointed out how the combination of the two units into the division had decreased his span of control and made the operation of the department considerably easier. It was clear that he preferred the more analytical approach to management services represented by the chief and by Superanalyst. In part, he said that the reorganization had buried one of his main problems, or, Ken thought later, maybe he said it would do so soon.

This case illustrates a wide range of issues confronting those who wish to know more about public organizations. What motivates people working in public organizations? How can we explain faulty patterns of communication in public agencies? How can we best understand the relationship between bureaucracies and bureaucrats? How can we cope with or, perhaps even direct, organizational change? Even more important for our purposes, this case indicates the central role of the acquisition of knowledge as the basis of our actions. Each of the persons involved here was faced with the problem of accumulating knowledge about the specific circumstances; then he had to determine how that information might fit into (or require him to modify) his own frame of reference, his own implicit theories about how people and organizations behave. Each of these persons had to resolve three basic questions about his understanding of public organizations: (1) What knowledge is needed as a basis for action? (2) What are the best possible sources of that knowledge? (3) How can that knowledge be applied to the situation at hand? Only after resolving these questions (at least implicitly) was each person able to act.

Take Ken Welch, the central character in this case, as an example. Among the many categories that Ken might have used to help him understand what was happening in this situation, Ken chose to emphasize those relating to power and authority. His concern (perhaps even obsession) with power and authority provided a special lens through which he viewed the world, a lens that highlighted some events and filtered out others. After obtaining a certain amount of

information, Ken concluded that he was a “pawn” in “an office power struggle” and tried to work things out by appealing to those who had authority in the organization. If, on the other hand, Ken had focused on other topics—for example, the breakdowns in communication that often occur in complex organizations despite attempts at cooperation—he would have acted quite differently, probably trying to discover the cause of the confusion and seeking to work out a more effective relationship with his fellow workers. In any case, it is clear that Ken’s own perspective on organizational life, his own implicit theory of organization, was crucial in directing his actions.

## Case 2

Let us examine another case, one that illustrates again the connection between the theories people hold and the actions they take, but one that also illustrates several other themes central to the study of public organizations. John Taylor and Carol Langley worked for a local community development agency. Following a rather massive reorganization of the agency, in which a number of new programs were taken on, John was asked to supervise a new housing loan program, and Carol was asked to assist him. The program was designed to provide low-interest loans to help people rehabilitate housing in certain parts of the city. Although John and Carol had experience in related areas, neither was familiar with this particular program. To make matters worse, seminars to provide help in establishing such programs had been held some months earlier. John and Carol were simply given a manual and told to begin.

The program involved a number of new activities and took considerable time to set up. For example, it was necessary to train new housing inspectors, who would coordinate their activities with those provided by the city, and relationships had to be established with many agencies that would provide information about the applicants being processed.

John soon began receiving considerable pressure to complete the processing of the first group of applications within a very short time. For one thing, the first group of applicants consisted of about forty people who had originally applied for other programs but had been turned down. Since their applications had been on file in the agency for as long as a year, they were eager to have their requests processed quickly. Initial visits and phone calls from several of the applicants made John quite aware of their feelings. In addition, however, John knew that this particular loan program would have a significant impact on the community and that, consequently, his doing an efficient job under these difficult circumstances would be important to the agency and in turn important to his own future in government service.

Carol recognized the necessity of doing the work as quickly as possible, but she also felt a special obligation to the applicants themselves. She took seriously the agency director’s comment that the agency could use this opportunity to help “educate” the applicants about the procedures involved in such projects. She felt that it was very important to contact the applicants periodically to let them know what was happening, for example, with the inspections, cost

estimates, loan amounts, financial information, and terms and conditions of the loans. Unlike John, who spent most of his time in the office, she talked frequently with the applicants, many of whom she knew personally from her previous position in the agency.

For each applicant, John and Carol were to accumulate a complete file of information about financial status and about the rehabilitation project the applicant had in mind. This file was to be received and signed by the applicant, then forwarded to the regional office of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for its action on the loan.

John felt that the process could be completed more quickly if Carol would simply get the applicants to sign a blank set of forms that could be kept at the office. When information was received regarding a loan, the appropriate items could be entered on the signed forms, thus saving the time that would be involved in reviewing each form with the applicant. Also, this procedure would eliminate the often lengthy process of coordinating several office visits to discuss the material.

When John asked Carol to obtain the signed forms, she refused. She not only felt that the applicants should see and understand the materials before signing, she was afraid that it might be illegal to have people sign blank forms. When she talked with John's supervisor about the request, she was told that the procedure was not illegal and had even been used before in the regional office.

John and Carol obviously had different orientations toward the role of public administration in modern society. Similarly, they had different understandings of how one might be effective as an administrator. Consequently, when they encountered this particular situation, they immediately fit the given circumstances into their administrative frames of reference, and these frameworks became the bases for their actions. John seemed most concerned with the efficient completion of the task with which he had been presented, while Carol seemed more concerned that she be immediately responsive to members of the client group and helping them to understand the loan process.

As we will see, the issues that seem to separate John and Carol are not unusual; indeed, they lie at the heart of public administration theory. On the one hand, government agencies are urged to attain the greatest possible efficiency in their delivery of services—to cut through red tape whenever possible. On the other hand, since public agencies should presumably operate in the public interest, they must be responsive to the needs and desires of those with whom they work. Moreover, one might argue that public agencies bear a special responsibility to help educate citizens to deal more effectively with social problems on their own.

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This case also provides an interesting commentary on another issue that we will encounter in our study of public organizations: Where we stand in our field of practice considerably influences what we see. Specifically, a person's actions often look quite different from the inside than from the outside. We might, for example, characterize John's behavior as self-serving, concerned only with impressing those who might influence his impending promotion; more charitably, however, we might characterize John as highly concerned for the agency's clients, anxious to help them receive their loan approvals as quickly as possible in order to ease their financial difficulties. John himself might describe his actions in either of these ways, or he might speak of the situation in completely different terms. For example, he might say that he felt tremendous pressure to get the job done, both from those inside and those outside the organization; consequently, he experienced this entire situation, especially the conflict with Carol, as a source of personal anguish. Although we can rather readily describe the behavior of individuals in organizations, it is much more difficult to assess the meaning that their activities have for them. Yet in seeking intelligence and compassion in our understanding of public organizations, both are necessary.

## FORMAL THEORIES OF PUBLIC ORGANIZATION

We mentioned earlier the academic, professional, and personal sources from which we derive our understanding of public organizations. Regardless of whether we consciously attempt to develop our perspectives, they do develop, and they guide us. If we wish to sharpen our ability to respond with greater intelligence and compassion to those situations we face as members or clients of public organizations, we need to consider more carefully the implicit theories we hold. One way to do that, of course, is to compare our own implicit theories of public organization with those more explicit theories developed by theorists and practitioners in an attempt to better understand the organizational world in which we live. Interestingly, often when we read formal theories we may learn for the first time that we actually have implicit theories that guide us and inform our actions. These theories may enable us in some ways, but they may limit our possibilities in others. In reading and reflecting on formal theories of public organization and comparing them with our own perspectives, we can make adjustments or refinements that would enable us to understand more clearly our own actions and the actions of others.

### Why Study Formal Theories?

There are clearly certain advantages to examining formal theories. Although those who construct such theories entertain essentially the same questions as others seeking a better understanding of organizational life, they do so with considerably more care, rigor, and sophistication. Not that they are any brighter or



more perceptive than others—they simply have more time to devote to the practice of theorizing. Because formal theories are more carefully developed, they reflect both a wider range of topics than we might ordinarily consider and an agenda emphasizing those items that seem most important. For this reason, formal theories provide a benchmark against which we may measure our own approaches to organizational life, and the rich plurality of formal theories, in turn, provide us with a variety of ways to reflect on and consider the actions we take. In seeking to improve our own understanding, we would be well advised to study the way in which other theorists and practitioners have attempted to construct their own theories. By doing so, we get an idea of the range of questions that we should consider, an overview of the issues that have been debated back and forth (and among which we will inevitably have to choose), and a sense of where we stand with respect to the central questions facing those in public organizations.

As we have suggested, theorists differ with respect to what constitutes an appropriate theoretical base for understanding public organizations; however, at a very broad level, most agree that the purpose of theory generally is to provide a more coherent and integrated understanding of our world than we might otherwise hold. Theory seeks to move beyond a simple observation of facts or a blind adherence to certain values to provide more general interpretations. It does not simply draw together facts, it draws from them; it does not simply recognize values, it reorders them. A theory is not simply an arrangement of facts or values but a thoughtful reconstruction of the way we see ourselves and the world around us. It is a way of making sense of a situation. Theories may then be evaluated in terms of their capacity to help us see our world more clearly and to act more effectively in that world.

As we have already seen, administrative practitioners have to make choices about the kind of knowledge they need, the ways in which it can be successfully acquired, and the ways in which it may be applied. Theorists must do the same—they must ask what kinds of knowledge they wish to produce, how they can ensure that their results will be complete and accurate, and how the newly acquired knowledge can be applied. Theorists must make certain choices about what to study and how to study it. And, once these choices have been made, theorists and their theories are bound by them.

For this reason, we should maintain some skepticism concerning theories of public organization (and concerning other theories as well). We must realize that these theories of public organization, like public organizations themselves, result from human activity undertaken in fields of practice—particular constructions that may be more or less appropriate for various purposes. All theories emphasize certain things and deemphasize others. Theories reflect both the personal history and field of practice of the theorist but also the historical context in which the theory was produced. For this reason, as we consider various theories, we will see life reflected—both personal and cultural life. However, we should realize that this reflection is, again, limited and partial, filtered as it is through the lens of history and the specific choices made by the theorist.