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## **What do we mean when we talk about ‘hybrids’ and ‘hybridity’ in public management and governance?**

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# **What do we mean when we talk about ‘hybrids’ and ‘hybridity’ in public management and governance?**

## **Abstract**

The public administration literature uses the concept of hybridity to describe situations where policy designs involve the interaction of government, business, civil society, and not-for-profits. Yet the concept lacks a theoretical context and poses the empirical problem of distinguishing between hybrid and non-hybrid forms. This paradox – a concept that is widely used but seems to play no useful function in theory building or advice to policy-makers – is explored through a discussion of five theories. Transaction cost economics, management theory, archetype theory, and institutional theory begin to resolve the theoretical and empirical problems, but significant difficulties remain. Cultural theory offers a productive solution to the paradox by understanding hybridity as a process through which new possibilities for public administration and governance can emerge within a diverse and plural society.

## **HYBRIDITY – CHALLENGES FOR THE FIELD**

Hybridity is an often used but little discussed term in the public administration literature. It symbolises how policy questions involve the interpenetration of different spheres of activity – government, business, civil society, not-for-profits – and how these interconnections are structured through parastatal organizations such as public-private partnerships, collaborative management, and governance or policy networks. Yet the concept has little theoretical or empirical purchase beyond this generic notion, and only a few scholars have attempted to fill this gap (e.g. Brandsen, van de Donk and Putters 2005; Joldersma and Winter 2002; Koppell 2003; Skelcher 2005; Smith 2010). Thus hybridity presents a paradox: it is a term in good currency, but seems unable to fulfil accepted functions of scholarship and policy advice. Important questions follow: does hybridity as a concept has a useful place in the lexicon of public administration? Is it just a generic, symbolic term or can it help scholars understand and explain the nature of contemporary public governance and provide a basis for policy advice? For the paradox is to be resolved in a way that takes the field forward, the concept must be firmly connected to theoretical perspectives, be able to guide empirical research, and be of use to those involved in improving the design and delivery of public programmes. This paper advances the debate by critically analyzing the main theories of hybridity in fields cognate to public administration, and then showing how insights from cultural theory – to date little used in our discipline – opens up a fruitful new line of investigation.

The concept of hybridity commonly accepted in public administration has a strong association with forms of organization, management and governance. One of the

more frequently cited sources, Borys and Jemison, writing from a business management perspective, argue that hybrids are “organizational arrangements that use resources and/or governance structures from more than one existing organization” (Borys and Jemison 1989, 235). They emphasise the coming together of two or more sovereign organizations to pursue common interests that would be more difficult to achieve because of the limitations of unitary organizations, examples being mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures, license agreements, and partnering. Borys and Jemison’s definition is broadly reflective of usage in public administration. Our field views the hybrid organization as an instrument of public policy design based on the expectation that such corporate forms will improve performance relative to the traditional model of politically-controlled departments and ministries (Skelcher 2008). As a result, there has been widespread adoption of contractually-based relationships (as in public-private partnerships created around infrastructure developments), strategic partnering through which organizations to some extent merge resources and identity, and joint ventures or multi-organizational partnerships constituted as new corporate entities. So, hybrids are “expected to function like businesses: to be efficient, customer driven, and client oriented. Yet, they perform tasks that are inherently public” (Kickert 2001, 136).

Yet if we take Borys and Jemison’s definition into the mainstream structures of public administration, things are not quite so clear. What, for example, are we to make of the archetypal government department headed by an elected official, which combines bureaucratic and political templates? Or the school as a professionally structured organization that also has a consumerist component through the formal incorporation of students’ and parents’ views via school councils and parent associations? This

introduces the question of the limits to hybridity in public administration – or, indeed, whether there are any limits. And as Minkoff (2002) points out, the way in which the concept of hybrid is typically used in public administration, as combining features from distinct organizational forms, is different to the usage in the not-for-profit literature, where it refers to an organizational subsidiary operating on a different governance or business model to the parent. Changes in the relationship between not-for-profits and government, especially in response to turbulence arising from the global financial crisis and government austerity measures, have led Smith (2010) to adopt a definition of hybridity that comes close to Brandsen, van de Donk and Putters's (2005) view that it is an inevitable and permanent characteristic of the not-for-profit sector. If this is the case, then the inability to distinguish between 'hybrid' and 'not hybrid' poses a major challenge for the value of the concept.

The public administration community has paid little attention to the scientific analysis of the concept of hybridity, or to explanatory or normative theory building in which this concept has a central role. This article moves the debate on by injecting explicitly theoretical considerations, complementing the strategy adopted in a recent discussion of hybridity in the accounting field (Miller, Kurunmäki and O'Leary 2008). It looks beyond the public administration literature to consider other ways in which hybridity has been conceptualised in economic, managerial, archetype, and institutional theory, and draws out the implications for public administration scholars. The paper then examines cultural theory, and argues that this provides a valuable way forward for scholarship and policy advice by analysing and explaining the processes of argumentation and negotiation that take place around policy designs in specific social contexts.

## **HYBRIDITY BETWEEN MARKET AND HIERARCHY**

Our discussion starts with the theory of transaction cost economics (TCE) since – like much public administration literature – this positions hybridity in relation to market and hierarchy. TCE explains the choice of governance structure as a function of an actor’s intention to minimise the incidence of transaction costs in relation to a given type of exchange. Williamson (1996) discusses three governance structures – market, hierarchy and hybrid, the latter being an intermediate mode of governance between the polar opposites of market and hierarchy. Hybrids trade off some of the price incentives and actor autonomy found in market governance for a degree of the administrative control and coordination provided by hierarchy. If hybrids occupy this uncomfortable middle ground between market and hierarchy, what are their features?

Ménard’s discussion of this question starts with the observation that the vocabulary has not stabilised. He refers to hybrid forms as a “collection of weirdos”: “From loose clusters of firms to quasi-integrated partners, the set of arrangements that rely neither on markets nor hierarchies for organising transactions is broad and potentially confusing” (Ménard 2004, 3). This breadth is reflected in the various hybrid forms he identifies in the literature: subcontracting, networks of firms, franchising, collective trademarks, partnership, cooperatives, and alliances. So while market and hierarchy are the limiting cases, hybridity does not form a discrete third category. Instead, hybridity manifests itself at various points on a continuum between market and hierarchy. Consequently we can separate the concepts at a theoretical level, but an

empirical problem remains – namely, how can we delimit where hybridity ends and market or hierarchy starts? This is a problem for the empirical analysis of hybridity in contemporary forms of public organization. It leads to the question of whether hybridity is the norm, while market and hierarchy are the exception, an issue considered in more detail below.

Notwithstanding the variety of empirical types, Ménard identifies three regularities common to hybrid forms of governance. First, resources are pooled between the participating actors. This occurs because the fragmentation in markets reduces the capacity to bundle resources in a way that facilitates the necessary collective investment desired by the parties, while hierarchy reduces the adaptability and flexibility offered by retaining decentralised decision-making. Resource pooling creates the possibility of opportunistic behaviour by one of the parties, and thus appropriate mechanisms need to be created to protect actors' collective and individual interests. This leads to the second feature of hybridity, which is contracting. Ménard argues that contracts help to create a reciprocal relationship between legally independent parties. But because contracts are incomplete, the core feature of hybrids is the creation of forms of institutional arrangements that reduce the need for continual and costly negotiation and renegotiation over time. The final feature of hybridity is competitive pressure. In comparison to firms, the competitive pressures in hybrids operate in two ways. First, the partners remain independent actors and thus have the capacity to make autonomous decisions. Thus there is a potential for competition between partners. Second, hybridity tend to develop in highly competitive markets where resource pooling is a preferred strategy for gaining advantage. Consequently, any given hybrid will be competing against other hybrids,

possibly of a different form, and thus there is the risk that one or more parties may switch allegiance. This means that hybrids as corporate entities have to design ways to establish areas where decisions must be taken jointly, and inappropriate autonomous behaviour constrained. Ménard concludes: “Aspects of these regularities are present in markets and hierarchies. But what distinguishes (and plagues) hybrid arrangements is that these regularities are rooted in a mix of competition and cooperation that subordinates the key role played by prices in markets and by command in hierarchies..... Thus the workability of this mix depends on specific mechanisms capable of reconciling legal autonomy and interdependence” (2002, 9).

It is precisely this issue that is explored in Koppell’s analysis of Fannie Mae, Fannie Mac and other part-public, part-private agencies operating at arm’s-length to government, each “created by ... government ... to address a specific public policy purpose [and]... owned in whole or in part by private individuals or corporations and/or generat[ing] revenue to cover its operating costs” (2003, 12). Thus such hybrids deliver public policy, but have a corporate status that gives them greater autonomy than would be possible if they were constituted within a government bureaucracy. And although they are creatures of government, they also lobby politicians and civil servants as if they were private companies. In TCE terms therefore, these hybrid forms locate between the limiting cases of market and hierarchy. Koppell argues that their quasi-governmental status provides a solution to the problem of credible commitment, by insulating them from short term political pressures and special interests. However it is also clear that their quasi-market orientation facilitates programme delivery through the use of a variety of financial policy instruments more akin to those of a purely commercial organization.



Overall, TCE takes us some way towards explaining hybridity as a solution to public policy problems where there is a likelihood both of market failure and government (that is, hierarchical) failure. However, at a conceptual level, the multiple possible manifestations of hybridity sit uneasily against the unitary definitions of market and hierarchy. If hybridity is everything except market and hierarchy, and these two concepts themselves are the limiting (and perhaps purely theoretical) points for a continuum of hybrid types, then the conclusion is that the majority of empirical case will *de facto* be hybrids. This rather reduces the conceptual and empirical power of the term in terms of its usefulness in distinguishing governance forms other than in purely theoretical TCE analysis.

## **HYBRIDITY AS PRAGMATIC ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN**

A solution to the problem of how to define and explain hybrids in a way that is more specific than that offered by TCE comes from Mintzberg's (1993) work on the design of organizations. In broad terms, Mintzberg argues that there are five ideal-typical organizational designs:

1. Simple structure – coordination is achieved through direct supervision by the strategic apex, resulting in a highly centralised organization with limited formalization or standardization
2. Machine bureaucracy – here there is a high degree of specialization, formalization and standardization, with a strong emphasis on achieving predictability and controllability of organizational activity and outputs,

delivered through an information rich technostructure and delegated authority to line managers

3. Professional bureaucracy – in this design the complexity of the tasks undertaken by the organization are such that it requires delegation to skilled front-line workers operating within a common procedural framework, the conformance to which may be subject to a degree of external regulation
4. Divisionalised form – this organizational design is characterised by multi-functional and semi-autonomous operating units whose performance is subject to supervision by a central headquarters function
5. Adhocracy - in this form, there is a flat structure in which teams form and reform in order to solve problems that arise from a complex and dynamic task environment, and where coordination takes place through a process of mutual adjustment between actors.

He argues that the organizational forms that can be identified empirically typically exhibit various combinations of these ideal types, thus constituting a class of structural hybrids. These combinations arise from the relative attractiveness exerted by each of the ideal types. For example, a strong pull by simple structure and adhocracy will produce an entrepreneurial adhocracy in which small self-organising teams are coordinated by an overall manager. Such pushes and pulls are evident in the public administration field as ideas about the optimal organizational form come and go.

This approach overcomes the problem TCE faces in defining hybridity as a distinct category at the empirical level. However in moving from the view that the number

(N) of possible type of hybrid (h) is everything except the two limiting pure cases of market and hierarchy, the Mintzberg solution still leaves a large number since in this case  $N_h = 5! = 120$ . What Mintzberg's approach does not provide is a theoretical explanation for the resultant hybrids. While TCE explains hybrid form as a function of actors' desire to minimise transaction costs, the management approach set out above presents a hybrid as a result of the relative "pull" (as Mintzberg describes it) exerted by each of the five basic types. This perspective lacks a theory of agency. It is not clear how or why such a pull arises, what it is that exerts the pull, nor how this relates to actors either as originators, instruments, or recipients of the pull. We need to look to organizational and institutional theory in order to begin to address this question.

## **HYBRIDITY AS PATH BREAKING BEHAVIOUR**

A theoretical perspective on hybrid creation is offered by archetype theory within the field of organizational sociology. Archetype theory posits that institutionally legitimated interpretive schemes, or set of beliefs and values, operate within organizational fields, and shape the orientation of actors towards particular conceptions of organizational design, practice and task. An archetype is "a set of structures and systems that consistently embodies a single interpretive scheme" (Greenwood and Hinings 1993, 1055). Greenwood and Hinings argue that these interpretive schemes arise through dialogue between actors in the field, such as professional associations, government, and major business organizations. The interpretive schemes may be reinforced by normative accreditation frameworks (for

example, through professional recognition) in ways that promote coherence around the archetype, which in turn are incentivised by the economic benefits they produce (for example, a flow of customers or preferred supplier status).

From the perspective of archetype theory, organizational redesign may occur as a result of changes in the environment affecting that organizational field, mediated by key field-level actors and intra-organizational processes. For example, professional associations are identified as institutional entrepreneurs who may promote new practices. However new designs will tend to remain in a “design track” or path such that they evolve within the broad parameters of the prevailing archetype.

Exceptionally, there may be “design excursions” outside the track, including hybrid forms that emerge between archetypes, but these are regarded as unlikely to survive the normative and functional imperatives operating in the field.

Despite the conservative and functionalist orientation of archetype theory (Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd 2003), there is more that can be done with this theory in terms of explaining hybrid creation. The theory was developed from empirical research in UK local government in the 1970s and subsequently in the legal and accountancy professions. The norms applying in these three organizational fields may be expected to accord with an institutional logic of proceduralism and regularity, because of the professional and public interest nature of their activities and the potential for harm as a result of poor decisions. Under different conditions, the theory has less explanatory power. Continuing with the example of UK local government, analysis of developments in the past decade and a half show considerable experimentation and change (Stewart 2003). Some of this is within the design track, but much is beyond it

– in areas that archetype theory would see as random excursions and unstable hybrids.

In particular, there has been widespread adoption of collaborative management or partnership processes. These are novel forms of organizational design that significantly alter public policy relationships by bringing public managers, business representatives and citizens together in order to shape and oversee the delivery of public policy at the neighbourhood, city and sub-regional level, operating at arm's length from elected officials.

There are two ways of explaining the widespread emergence of hybridity, and thus refining archetype theory. One explanation is that the development of this trans-archetype form was functional for the professional groups involved. Despite Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd's view that the traditional values of public service professionals remained robust, and by implication would continue support for intra-archetype change, there is evidence that the partnership hybrid was very appealing. It extended the professional and managerial discretion available under new public management, reduced the level of political oversight of professional activity, and increased contact between professionals and citizen-consumers. The second explanation is that at certain moments the legitimization of an interpretive scheme is more compelling than the pressure for coherence around an existing archetype. The partnership discourse was expressed through a grand coalition of state, civil society and business actors. In the face of such compelling voices, existing archetypes tracks for local government ended at the buffers and new hybrid tracks took over (Clarke and Newman 2007).

## **HYBRIDITY AS INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURIALISM**

Archetype theory, with its emphasis on the normalcy of path dependent behaviour, has a close association with historical institutionalism. It struggles to reconcile this propensity to privilege the dominant force of sunk investment with its awareness of the possibilities of agency being exercised through path-breaking excursions producing a potential for hybridity. In contrast, recent developments in sociological institutionalism provide a more fruitful way forward. The work of Crouch (2005) is particularly important. He argues that hybrid governance is the norm rather than the exception in advanced capitalist economies, echoing the conclusions reached in the earlier discussion of TCE. Having examined different types of state (e.g. Rechtsstaat, unitary), economic institution (e.g. market, corporate hierarchy), and societal organization (e.g. association, community), he concludes that “hardly any of them is likely to be fully autonomous.... In fact, in anything beyond a very primitive system, what is called a free market economy is always really a hybrid between the pure market and the procedural state” (2005, 120). Crouch warns of the danger, noted earlier, of confusing ideal types with empirically observable institutions, and thus cautions against regarding variations from the ideal type as exceptional deviations: “It is important to give these forms of variation an important role in analysis, in order to avoid a determinism that asserts that actors within particular forms of governance simply cannot engage in certain forms of behaviour.... When practice is seen to deviate from a well-established pattern in a systematic way, there must be an explanation. Possibly the theory was always wrong to have asserted the previous regularity, and possibly had ignored certain characteristics not given by the logic of the ideal type; these types are after all only constructed, they have no necessary place

in reality” (2005, 123). The argument, then, is that at an empirical level, hybrid entities are the norm and ideal types the exception. This may seem a fairly obvious conclusion, but it does not accord with the way in which public administration often addresses the question. The discipline is wedded to an analytic distinction between market, hierarchy, and network and treats that distinction as if it were an empirically observable phenomenon.

If it is correct that hybrid forms are the norm, how can this be explained? This takes us to the role of institutional entrepreneurs, actors who utilise moments where change is possible to bring into play new sets of norms, rules, practices and potentially organizational forms. Hajer (2003) presents these moments as institutional voids, where “there are no clear rules and norms according to which politics is to be conducted and policy measures are to be agreed upon” (2003, 175). Institutional voids appear more commonly as society increases in complexity and diversity, and old structures fragment, offering multiple points where agency can be exercised. For Crouch (2005), the key actors in this process are institutional entrepreneurs who “will not be content with the overall structure of governance institutions they find around them, but will try to borrow and adapt components from a variety of them in a kind of institutional *bricolage* to produce new combinations that bring together apparently incompatible functions” (2005: 154). Such actors can include public administrators operating across organizational boundaries to build new institutions (Box 2001; Feldman and Khamedian 2007), and civic activists such as the every-day makers described by Bang and Sørensen (2001). The process is one of recombinant governance – in other words, hybridization – in which actors utilise those elements of different governance mode that offer the best prospect of achieving desired outcomes

(Crouch 2005). Legitimacy for such hybrid forms comes from the legacies that are brought into play, a process of “remembering” (realising the potential of forgotten institutional alternatives) “borrowing” (the transfer of institutional resources from adjacent arenas) and “sharing” (extending existing forms within the same action space) (Lowndes 2005).

## **HYBRIDITY AS A CULTURAL PROCESS**

Notions of recombinant governance and *bricolage* – which in its French usage means assembly from available parts, do-it-yourself, or creating something new from whatever is to hand - lead inevitably to a consideration of cultural theory. This is a field with which public administration scholars have made little connection but which offers considerable potential for rethinking and reimagining the fundamental problems of policy and practice with which we are concerned. Cultural theory has a number of distinct schools, and it is Mary Douglas’s work on grid-group theory that has been most utilised in public administration scholarship. But it is another strand, that deriving from cultural studies, that is explored here. This branch of cultural theory sets out to challenge ideas that espouse an essentialist and unproblematic view of the world (for example: globalization, nationalism, community) and which are rooted in a singular causation (which, in the above cases, would be: neo-liberalism, ethnic purity, common interest) (Brah and Coombes 2000). It does this by proposing a more diverse, complex, and socially constructed world in which analysis should be focused on the way in which identities are produced and change, how the boundaries



between identities are constructed and understood, and how these affect the way in which the claims of different groups are valued and negotiated.

Within such cultural theory, hybridization expresses three ideas of relevance to our discussion (Bhabha 1994). First, that essentialist propositions conceal a more complex reality. For example, colonialism's claim to white European superiority is made despite evidence of considerable merging of white and indigenous cultures and populations. Second, new possibilities may be created at those points where there is an articulation of cultural difference. So, in the case of colonization, the mixing of ethnicities, nations and cultures itself created hybrids - new identities forged across and in opposition to apparently clearly defined and impermeable boundaries (Berger and Huntington 2002). More contemporaneously, the creative possibilities of hybridity are vividly demonstrated in the artistic sphere where, as a result of the Internet's global reach, styles of music, dress, and language constantly interact, combine and recombine into new identities. Third, and unlike TCE, management and archetype theories, the form hybridity takes is not directly traceable back to the components of the cultures from which it arises. Instead, it emerges in a new creative space in which there is ambivalence, ambiguity, and indeterminacy, and in which there is a struggle for recognition or social validation (Nederveen Pieterse 2009).

When translated into a public administration context, this theory counteracts the idea of uniformity of policy design by recognising that local resistance is a positive force for the negotiation of contextually appropriate settlements in a plural and diverse society. Hybridity, then, arises from the agency of actors creatively resisting the imposition of a singular, unmediated approach. So rather than *incorporate* the

community into policing policies, educational provision, or forms of community empowerment pre-determined by government, an awareness of cultural theory enables public administrators to understand resistance, contestation and argument as a natural part of a process in which such policy designs can *grow out from* such interaction between the various parties, and as a result be generative of a new possibility that may not previously have been imagined. This cultural conception of hybridity offers a perspective that boundaries are malleable and capable of being transgressed, despite pressures for uniformity and rigidity. This is somewhat different to the theories discussed earlier, locating the concept of hybridity in the context of a political struggle over questions of identity, boundaries, and legitimacy. It takes us away from economic and organizational theory, and towards questions of governmentality.

For Nederveen Pieterse, this understanding of hybridity opens up the possibilities for a radical critique of institutional arrangements. Returning to an earlier theme, he argues: "... the real problem is not hybridity – which is common throughout history – but boundaries and the social proclivity to boundary fetishism. Hybridity is unremarkable and is noteworthy only from the point of view of boundaries that have been essentialized.... The importance of hybridity is that it problematizes boundaries" (2001, 220). Pieterse's observation is particularly pertinent to public administration, with its primary orientation to rule-bound behaviour and distinctions between roles of administrators, elected officials and citizens, and to defining which citizens are and are not to be included in participation initiatives. It suggests that these principles of public administration, based in nineteenth century Progressive Era reforms, constrain governmental actors' capacity to develop imaginative approaches for the more complex twenty first century environment, especially in a knowledge rich world

where the certainties of professional and administrative expertise are open to challenge in new ways. This is an issue that Pieterse does not explicitly follow through. For the boundaries that he discusses rest on a knowledge regime in which rational scientific knowledge (a mainstay of public administration practice) is privileged over local knowledge created at the peripheries of existing structures, yet which by virtue of its contextually-specific and often experiential and subjective character is less amenable to codification and summation by managers and professionals (Yanow 2003). Hybridity as a transgression of institutional boundaries is thus also intimately connected with hybridity as the construction of a knowledge regime in which every-day, personal and experiential data is valued as much as that collected through quantitative surveys.

How might this perspective be utilised in the public administration context? It offers a more actor and action-centred view of governance than is typically found in the public administration literature. The field has a strong orientation to structural analysis and prescription, and downplays questions of agency. The cultural theory of hybridity suggests that structures are contingent on the agency generated through countless day-to-day practices in a specific context. In other words, hybridity expresses a process of contestation and argumentation when “local” actors meet “wider” forces. This might take the form of resistance or adaptation to these external pressures, in a way that is dynamic and evolving. Thus, the points at which civil society organizations and citizens are brought into contact with government and business in contracting-out, governance networks, or collaborative management become an important focus for investigation because it is here that national and global forces intersect with local identities and cultures of governance. The difficulties

politicians and public administrators report in engaging with citizens (for example, because citizens fail to appreciate the rules of the game in participation exercises) are precisely indicative of a struggle over the colonization of local practices by externally-mandated and essentialist models of governance. Cultural theory points to a need to recognise difference and the way in which the meanings of boundaries are constructed in order for those boundaries to be transgressed. As public administration works more frequently with and through communities, citizens, not for profits and business, so consciousness of these issues is essential if these positions are to be hybridized to create new possibilities for progressive public policy.

The cultural theory of hybridity has immediate implications for the analysis of settings in which definitions of boundaries are central to the authority and legitimation of claims. Studies of citizen participation show that politicians and public administrators mediate the claims of citizens with reference to judgements about their position relative to accepted boundaries, for example in relation to norms of engagement covering mode of address, emotionality of expression, reasonableness of demands, and so on (Barnes, Newman, Knops and Sullivan 2003). This reflects a wider problem, demonstrated most vividly in the environmental field, in which scientific knowledge offers possibilities and potentialities, while social and cultural knowledge identifies problems and constraints (Eden and Tunstall 2006; Leach 2006). Hybridity, therefore, can be understood as a process of “becoming” that takes place in a site of contestation – a space of institutional transition in which meaning, identity and rules are negotiated and renegotiated and as a result enable the emergence of new possibilities for public administration. The point is developed by Fischer (2006) who argues for attention to be devoted to the microcultural politics of social space – in

other words, the analysis of intersubjective aspects of political spaces beyond the established structures of the state and of the institutions of governance that emerge in them. He connects with the cultural theory of hybridity when he states that “political space, from this perspective, is not just filled up with competing interests but rather is understood as something that is created, opened, and shaped by social understandings” (2006, 25).

## **BRINGING HYBRIDITY INTO PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION SCHOLARSHIP AND PRACTICE**

Cultural theory offers a productive solution to the paradox of hybridity. It takes an empirically problematic and theoretically rootless concept and grounds it in an explanatory theory that also offers the promise of developing normative policy design. It provides an important opportunity for public administration scholars to develop new understandings of the processes of governance and administrative transitions, and is an antidote to the essentialist prescriptions that have predominated through the recent decades of new public management dominance. In particular, it draws our attention to the importance of plural understandings of identities and boundaries, contrasting with the somewhat simplified distinctions that predominate in our field – for example: market-hierarchy-network; politician-administrator-citizen; and references to “the public” as a generic group. The understanding of “local” identities is essential because even the most democratically progressive prescriptions, for example on user and citizen participation, often arrive ready formed from a governmental source external to a local context.

The cultural perspective on hybridity requires an analytical strategy that builds on the traditions of interpretive research into local knowledge. This is essential in order to reframe analysis away from the concerns of state actors and towards the governmental norms and identities of local actors in their specific context. Such a refocusing does not to ignore the demands of politicians and public administrators for research-based advice on how to proceed, but aims to provide such advice by modelling strategies they might use in order to better engage with hybridity as a normal part of everyday practice, rather than to see it as a problem to be overcome.

The analytical strategy proposed here has a number of basic principles. It places emphasis on meaning making by actors; that is, the sense that individual and collective actors make of an institutional transformation. Thus, analysis should reveal the object of contestation. This is at the heart of the analysis of hybridity, since it is here that citizens, technical experts, politicians, public administrators, business leaders, and others interact – each drawing on their own forms of knowledge and authority. Points of contestation will be subject to argument between actors. Analysis, therefore, should investigate the argumentation strategies that are deployed by actors – claim making, the propositions that are adduced, the knowledge that is utilised, and so on – and the way this impacts on the generation and legitimation of knowledge in relation to the policies and practices of public administration. Analysis of argumentation positions should seek to establish what meta-arguments or higher level discourses hold the actors together. In other words, what enables the conversation to continue despite the differences between actors? Here there is an important place for the study of agreement and ambiguity. Drawing from the study of

argumentation, for example in international relations and diplomacy as well as in citizen-government forums, analysis should consider the process through which agreements-to-agree and agreements-to-disagree are reached, as well as the way in which open political discussion can develop new understanding and greater tolerance of diversity (Pattie and Johnston 2008; Risse 2000). It also helps us understand the role of ambiguity in enabling actors to maintain a relationship despite the differences between them.

This analytical strategy overcomes current limitations in our field, including the difficulty of delimiting hybrids in terms of governance or organizational boundaries and the problem of giving this concept empirical purchase. Moving the unit of analysis away from organizations and forms of governance and towards cultures and arguments enables us to develop a theoretical position that offers useful possibilities for the public administration community. Mapping the terrain of argumentation will help us to overcome the current tendency to assume that an individual's position in relation to a policy debate is defined by organizational or sector membership. The emphasis on argumentation also enables us to consider hybridity as a moment of partial settlement, reflecting more accurately the empirical conditions of flux and transformation found in contemporary Western societies and governmental systems. Analysing the negotiation of different knowledge claims across these cultural boundaries provides an important task for the researcher, both theoretically in terms of explaining the incidence and form of hybridity but also normatively in identifying the conditions under which dialogue can be maintained despite the differences between actors. The communicative ontology that underpins the case for a cultural analysis of hybridity gives primacy to the articulation of and contestation over

meanings as the medium through which politics takes place, and thus through which actors are enabled or constrained to exercise agency in hybridizing new possibilities. In conclusion, the cultural theory of hybridity offers a constructive project to guide scholarship and policy advice for the twenty first century.

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