

# **Public Administration Reform Research: A Perspective on Methodological Challenges**

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## **Abstract**

*Addressing the methodological issues is a thorny concern in public administration reform research. As a contribution to academic debate, this paper exhibits methodological challenges based on academic research experience thus an attempt is undertaken to highlight the methodological issues in the study of public administration reform in developing countries and recommend ethnography for future research in administrative science. Methodological challenges are varied. They include limited coverage of bibliography, confusion over and careless use of conceptual terms, diversity in the focus of studies, difficulty in recognizing historical inconsistency, problems of authenticity and integrity of research data, intrinsic value of focus group discussion, and appropriate research interviewees. The very nature of practicality of the discipline of public administration administrative reform necessitates a distinct way of study that identifies the real challenges and find out appropriate and concrete solutions. Thus, valid findings of research on the phenomena comes out. Hence, specific academic effort is the need of the hour to arrive at an appropriately useful methodological framework in the study of administrative reform.*

## **Key Words**

*Public Administration, Administrative Reform, Research Methodology, Methodological Challenge, Developing Country.*

## **Introduction**

The discipline of public administration is an applied field of politics and management, and by the very nature of its existence it is a practical art of governance

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with ‘contextual governance philosophy’ (Vartola, 2011). It is, functionally, ‘government in action’ (Richard and Baldwin, 1976) and administrative reform a crucial issue for governments worldwide. It has been considered as a ‘special public policy’ (Ciprian, Gabriela, and Dimbu, 2010) that aids government to adjust its actions to the changing socio-economic and political environment of a given country and thus ensure effective public service delivery to the people. As a policy of the government, the study of administrative reform deserves a systematic research approach in its theoretical configuration and methodological consideration and it has substantial importance as a subject of academic debate.

Public administration in developing countries needs to be modernized from the inherited traditional landscape. Research in administrative reform in developing countries plays a vital role for administrative modernization through investigating the traditional inherited system of public administration. There exists almost occasional systematic study and the studies so far have been, to most extent, lacking in sound methodological appropriateness. They are less analytical and mostly descriptive. Consequently, seldom come out with a concrete and practical findings as there has been an absence of universally valued systematic approach and methods of studying administrative reform (Kotchegura, 2008). There have been just the nods to methodological dearth, a detail with a constructive delineation is yet to be realized. Hence, no remarkable studies have been found so far. This research therefore is going to fill an important gap in the scholarship.

This paper aims at highlighting the methodological issues in the study of public administration reform and take part in the debate. More specifically, this is a study of methodological problems in administrative reform research within an institution-specific knowledge in the area of administrative science.

The objective is to identify challenges of methodology in the study of administrative reform in developing countries drawing on personal academic research experience with primary and secondary data and recommend ethnography for future research in administrative science.

The following section describes the research in the study of administrative reform, detailing the literature on methodological challenges in the study of public administration reform.

A discussion on current research method used in administrative reform has been presented in section three. Section four devotes to challenges and prospects of methodology in administrative reform research. Finally, conclusion and recommendations follow.

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## **Studies in Administrative Reform Research**

Public administration as an academic field of study is not a specific theory or model bound discipline (Olsen, 1991), rather it is a ground reality-oriented social and political studies. The system of public administration varies country to country and society to society depending on its socio-political and administrative tradition and culture (Azizuddin, 2014). Hence, the study of administrative reform differs in approach and methods. In order to inference a valid result administrative reform, as a sub-field of study under the broader umbrella of public administration, requires systematic research methodology. However, it has been facing methodological challenges in its systematic study (Vartola, 1976; Gill and Meier, 2000; Kotchgura, 2008). The studies so far been in this area are scattered and on a piecemeal basis. Lynn, Heinrich and Hill's (2000:233) study of 'Studying Governance and Public Management: Challenges and Prospects' presents a logic of governance, based on political economy literature that might be a first step toward framing theory-based governance research. According to Kohegura, "[T]here have been numerous attempts to develop a methodological and theoretical framework for public administration research. Some of these attempts are considered to have made notable advances in separate directions, but none is acknowledged as having a universal value. Diversity and pluralism of applied research concepts continues to be a typical feature of administrative science" (Kohegura, 2008:19). Gill and Meire (2000) signify the dearth of public administration research in methodological sophistication arguing to invest heavily in developing its own methodological path.

Vartola (1976) has, probably, initiated the debate in the early last quarter of the 20th century. He presented an EGPA (European Group of Public Administration) conference paper entitled 'Methodological Problems in the Study of Administration Reform' in 1976. He observed certain methodological issues regarding the problems of the study of administrative reform. The observation ranges from theoretical to empirical and the diffuseness of the concept to empirical study of administrative reform. It has been almost half a century, researchers have mentioned the problems and little has contributed to the debate. Therefore, debates on methodological issues in the study of public administration reform are there and a concrete solution to the problem is yet to be resolved.

## **Methodology in Administrative Reform Research**

Administrative reform studies usually go with qualitative approach, though the use of quantitative approach with statistical description is in practice. Qualitative

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research methods go by many 'brand names' in which various common elements are mixed and matched according to a particular researcher's predilections (Elliott and Timulak, 2005). It is a diverse set, encompassing approaches such as empirical phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, protocol analysis and discourse analysis in today's administrative reform studies. It has been resorted to a range of common research design and tools in its dealings utilizing both primary and secondary sources of information. Literature review, background and context, case studies, interviews, personal knowledge, and triangulation are the case in point. They substantiate and supplement the investigation towards an inferential analysis of administrative reform phenomena (Finnegan, 1996).

The literature review is for conceptual and theoretical focus, document search for historical analysis of the administrative reform issues. It shows whether in-depth and thorough academic studies have been done regarding the phenomena of administrative reform. They demonstrate the achievements of administrative reform scholars in various dimensions; for example: research focus, research findings, theoretical frameworks, research approaches, research methods and units of sampling (Pazirandeh, 2010). It benefits administration reform research for definitions, contexts, and how they are used in the literature from different contexts. The background and context is for a contextual description of the administrative reform phenomena visualizing the background information derived from documentary sources and expands upon the context of the phenomena under examination in administrative reform.

The case studies are for empirical inquiry of the administrative reform problems that gain intimate familiarity of the subject within its real life context. It enables the administrative reform researcher to understand a phenomenon under study as part of a larger picture to examine the administrative reform issues in the field of public administration in practice and enables one to develop an intimate familiarity of the subject and to collect rich data to facilitate better understanding about the ways in which different aspects of government work come to be interwoven and related (Becker, 1986). It serves the purpose of purposive sampling in administrative reform research.

The interviews in administrative reform research reflects the stakeholders' views on administrative reform and changes, which is treated as a distinct method located within the broader methodological category of surveys, case studies and life histories (Platt, 2002). It represents a meeting or dialogue between people where personal and social interaction occurred (Davies, 2006) and is used as a qualitative method for encouraging experts to share their opinion and experience in the

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phenomena under study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Personal interview- face-to-face approach with semi-structured and unstructured interview formats predominating, where research participants are the elites in their position and are asked to provide elaborate accounts about particular experiences of administrative reform. The focus group discussion are the ways of interviews in a group format popularly used in administrative reform research, which allows access to a large number of possible diverse views on administrative reform and a replication of naturalistic social influence and consensus processes. They can take place with an interview schedule designed for administrative reform research data collection.

The personal knowledge is also in use in administrative reform research. “The amount of knowledge which we can justify from evidence directly available to us can never be large. The overwhelming proportion of our factual beliefs continues, therefore, to be held at second hand through trusting others, and is the great majority of cases our trust is placed in the authority of comparatively few people of widely acknowledge standing” (Polanyi, 1964:3). Observation is also a tool of conducting research where administrative reform researcher takes on the role in the administrative situation in question. In administrative reform research, it is often referred to as ‘unstructured’ (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003: 3), which is sometimes described as 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973:1).

The administrative reform research uses triangulation approach to analyze the issues of government and administration with information from different sources of historical documents, case studies, and interviews to explore the dynamics of administrative reform phenomena. This is to “ensure variance reflected that of the trait and not of the method 'and enhances our belief that' the results are valid and not a methodological artifact” (Boucherd, 1976:268, as cited in Jick, 1979: 602).

## **Challenges in Administrative Reform Research**

Methodological challenges in administrative reform research are varied. A range of problems that have been faced by researchers include, confusion over and careless use of conceptual terms, diversity in the focus of studies, limited coverage of bibliography, difficulty in recognizing historical inconsistency, problems of authenticity and integrity of research data, intrinsic value of focus group discussion, and appropriate research interviewees.

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### **Confusion Over and Careless Use of Conceptual Terms Related to Administrative Reform**

There is a dearth of and no agreed-upon definition of administrative reform and consensus on an universally valued definition in the scholarly literature which is yet to be established. The process primarily refers to the transformation of or changes in existing administrative systems. Indeed, definitions tend to vary according to the goals, contents and strategies of administrative reform. For example, Caiden (1969:1) considers it an “artificial inducement of administrative transformation against resistance”. Lee (1970) defines it as “an effort to apply a new system with a conscious view to improving the system for positive goals of national development” (Lee, 1970: 177). Dror (1970-71) sees it as the “directed change of managing features of an administrative system” (Droor, 1970-71: 67), while Quah (1981) holds as “a deliberate attempt to change both the structure and procedures of the public institution, and the attitudes and behaviour of the public bureaucrats involved in order to promote organizational effectiveness” (Qua, 1981: 68) for public service delivery and to attain national developmental goals and quality public service delivery. Mosher (1967) goes further and defines the process broadly as “changes in purpose, procedure functions and relationship in organization” (Moshar, 1967:12). Anisuzzaman and Khan (1980) review the definitional issues of administrative reform following a descriptive method. They proceed in a generalized way, but do not give any comprehensive perspective of administrative reform. In addition, the discussion does not indicate the boundaries and coverage of the issue - the locus and focus of administrative reform.

The scope of administrative reform studies is vast and murky. Terms like, ‘public administration reform’, ‘public sector reform’, ‘civil service reform’ and ‘governance reform’ are often used interchangeably and to some extent, confused with ‘administrative reform’ (Kochegura, 2008). Definitions often differ according to the context, which makes the term difficult to conceptualize. Furthermore, an understanding of the terms also varies between countries and governments depending on the goal and purpose of reform initiatives (Ahmad and Azizuddin, 1995). There should be a general consensus about the administrative reform among the academics and practitioners.

### **Dilemmas in Constructing Research Approach and Theoretical Proposition**

Research and studies may be categorized in various ways in different dimensions. Qualitative, quantitative, positivist and so on. The pursuance of these in administrative reform research generates problems and the researchers became confused

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in appropriateness and suitability (Knox, 2004:121). Consequently, researchers of administrative reform keep themselves away from the theory and tend to carry out their research constructing a form or set of words and concepts that they think justifies the research they have carried out. This then creates a situation where the justification for carrying out the research becomes weak and highlights the fact that researchers do not really understand why they have done the research in the first place. Therefore, the credibility, accuracy, relevance and rigor of the research may become questionable. This inevitably detracts from the whole research process both in terms of the individual piece of research and within the research discipline.

### **Diversity in Focus of Studies**

Administrative reform as a field of academic study has weathered various identity crises in different phases of its development (Rutgers, 2010). These have also been interpreted as “cooperation, collaboration, and a share of information and knowledge” (Vigado, 2003:3), and seeing the issues of government and administration from different perspectives, using multiple theories and methods borrowed from different disciplines. “Interdisciplinarity is neither a subject matter nor a body of content. It has been a process to achieve an integrative synthesis, a process that usually begins with a problem, question, topic, or issue” (Klein (1990, cited in Rutgers, 2010:36). For Vigado (2003), “public administration in our time wields considerable power and influence in policy framing, policy making, and policy implementation. Hence, it is subject to growing pressures of political players, social actors, managerial professionals, and the overall economic market” (Vigado, 2003:04). Administrative reform research “is facing new challenges, new needs, and different demands with times” (Hossain and Others, 2012:3).

Since the middle of 20th century the (then) newly independent countries initiated a series of administrative reform, which were seen as an influential catchword for modernisation (Siffin, 1991). “[D]ecolonization after World War II and adoption of modernization as primary motive necessitated administrative reform in developing countries” (Rahman, Liberman, Giedraitis, and Akhter, 2013:299; Caiden, 2001). In developing countries, administrative reform has been pursued at both the national and local levels. Policymakers “have [been influenced by] Max Weber, Herbert Simon, the Washington Consensus, homo economicus, New Public Management, World Bank indicators, the rule of law, [and] many other [ideas]” with the intention of bringing about changes in policies, structure, and the functions of the institutions of public administration (Fuller, 2010:1).

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In the late 20th century, public management stood as a “non-integrated set of comments on theory and practical conditions of public administration indicating the existing problems in the domain of public administration and making practical measures to remove and modify these problems inevitable” (Nargesian, Esfahani, & Rajabzadeh, 2010:246). However, these theories, concepts, and models have so far been less able to meet the demands of growth, complexity and change in the field. Nevertheless, a “proliferation of alternative approaches to the study [continue]” (Rutgers, 2010:7). Inspired by administrative practice, Reinventing Government (RG), or New Public Management (NPM) became a core topic in the theoretical debates of the 1990s. Debates on the scientific status of the study of administrative reform have since resurfaced.

### **Limited Coverage of Bibliography and References**

The bibliography is a compilation of publications relating to the given subjects that offers an overview of a specific field or certain topics that can be utilized as a starting point for researchers in examining their research topics of interest and developing research hypothesis, assumptions and questions. Administrative science, especially administrative reform studies in developing country context faces a systematic bibliographical paucity. Published bibliographic information on administrative reform phenomena is rarely available. It is poorly sufficient compared to other sister disciplines. A small volume of annotated bibliography in administrative reform (TDRI, 1987) so far does not meet the thrust of researchers. No remarkable endeavor has been observed so far in an annotated bibliography on administrative reform in developing country context. Consequently, researchers waste their energy, time, and money and gain poor idealization of subject that leads to develop less appropriate research question and comparatively weak inferences.

### **Authenticity and Integrity of Research Data Problems**

Considerable difficulties to administrative reform studies are also generated by several authenticity factors. It is often difficult for those using published case studies on administrative reform to determine the amount of time and effort researchers have allocated to verifying, in the field, the findings they present. This is particularly the case with many studies that are compiled in countries from historical documents and interviews with key stakeholders. Evidently, urban-tarmac biases, transport communication problems, and other constraints make it difficult to get to more remote areas to measure the extent and variability of the administrative reform research in a given developing country. For this reason, findings in some

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studies are unreliable because a nationwide conclusion is deduced from the findings in readily accessible government units.

Authenticity problems also arise because it is often difficult for researchers to gain the data necessary to evaluate the degree to which administrative issues have been changed under an administrative reform intervention. Most governmental units and parastatals are secretive about revenue and budgetary matters. So too, many students of administrative reform are not trained or interested in local revenue and finance questions. As a result, in most studies one finds that this major indicator of administrative reform patterns is either missing or glossed.

### **Appropriate Interviewees and Case Problems**

Some difficulties regarding data generation are usually encountered by the public administration reform researcher. Generally, it is a fact that not all the targeted units/individuals are found to be cooperative. Considering the academic nature of administrative reform as a subject, it requires persons with an accepted level of knowledge and understanding of the phenomena to deal with. Usually, the suitable research participants are, mostly, unavailable, particularly in developing countries.

It is understood that interviewing elites potentially present some challenges, in as much as it might have been a challenge to speak to them in a way they understood and with which they feel comfortable. It is also expected that interviewees might be suspicious, given that the administrative reform researcher is “a stranger to them” (Oppenheim, 2000:141).

### **Intrinsic Value of Focus Group Discussion**

Usually, focus group discussion faces multifaceted challenges in administrative reform research. A real expert on the topic may be among novice participants, resulting in the intimidation of the novices. The researchers briefly should screen participants as they arrive to insure that each is appropriate for the group. The facilitator introduces bias by exhibiting body language that influences responses. The sampling frame is always not representative of the population under study. When more than one group is used to explore a topic, facilitators have difficulties in managing the discussion. The facilitator sometimes loses control of the discussion. Thus, the data drawn from both groups might vary in emphasis as well as content, making interpretation difficult. The wording may not be uniformly understood, subconscious reluctance of research participants to be engaged in discussion, and the leaders may not be adequately trained. As a result, as Jreisat states, “such information generated from interviews and discussions with many of

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these persons often dwindle from the level of authenticity and facts to a level of an oratorical match, in which responses are designed to impress, justify, or protect rather than to illuminate a problem or suggest a solution” (Jreiscat, 1995:225).

Apart from the usual shortcomings, focus group discussions are sometimes inappropriate for administrative reform research in a given country context for its administrative culture and ‘power distance’ among the discussants. The developing Bangladesh is a case in point. The focus group team, usually, comprises of functionaries from government offices and political parties. Because of their hierarchical relations in employment conditions and political party biases, their voices are not varied remarkably. They subconsciously support the senior and influential member of the focus group team. Further, they are not always well aware of necessary administrative pros and cons. Usually, they tend to know all but ‘master of none’. In a nutshell, informant opinions might not be absolutely relevant and free from individual reflection of the subjects, socio-political affiliation and bias.

Moreover, many bias factors that may originate from data collection, interviewing and interpreting data” (Alreck & Settle, 1995:80). Many things come out during interviews and discussions which do not fall within the purview of the interview questions and schedule. Sometimes these are additional facts related to the phenomenon under a study and sometimes they are not. The balance of both positive and negative comments by the research respondents and judgments are always not an easy task. So, making a conclusion is, somewhat, misleading.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The article highlighted the methodological issues in public administration reform research through which it takes part in the debate. The challenges besetting the methodology in this regard require more attention than simply maintain conventional approaches to social research. The more pertinent question relates not to how appropriate for the general thrust of reform that evaluate and enhance effectiveness and efficiency of public services, but what is the validity and appropriateness of reform research direction given prevailing public sector conditions and context.

Public administration reform research is not something that can be carried out in one go. There is no one best way of research method. As public administration is always different from private and business administration, as it relates to government and society with complexity and connectivity, as it corroborates with local context and circumstances, it takes time to find end results. Longitudinal study

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might be one option as it is observational and timelined (Farrington, 1991). It describes a variety of studies that are conducted over a period of time and able to establish causality and make inferences, combining numerical and qualitative data (Cohen, Manin, and Morrison, 2007).

Some factors like global and national contextual differences, natural calamities, availability of resource to implement, social, political and economic as well as changing technological environment cannot be isolated from the preview of administrative reform research. Defused problems affect the process of public administration reform from the initiation of reform and validation of findings to draw appropriate conclusions and recommendations.

Methodological drawbacks can hypnotize researchers in public administration reform. There should be a bibliographical reference bank or archive where almost all the administrative reform research work is stored and the researchers should have easy access to it. This would help to identify the real research gap without consuming much time, money and energy. This would also help a researcher to choose a suitable approach to administrative reform research to find out a valid result in an appropriate context.

Therefore, methodological challenges in public administration reform research are more practical than theoretical. The very nature of practicality of the discipline administrative reform necessitates systematic approach to study. In order to get rid of the methodological paucity, specific academic efforts towards appropriate research methodology for administrative reform studies is the need of the hour. This identifies real challenges of public administration reform research and finds out appropriate and concrete solutions in this regard. Thus, there would be opportunities to find out valid findings of studies on the phenomena in due course.

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