

The Credibility of Argumentative Scholarship

Scholarship as Argument

...Hood and Jackson (1991, especially ch. 2) characterize the literature of Public Administration as argumentative and rhetorical,^[4] a view they trace to Herbert Simon's classic *critique* of orthodoxy in "The Proverbs of Administration."^[5] The characterization of the field's literature as rhetorical and argumentative may seem harshly judgmental at first, and I have previously offered a serious *critique* of the field's scholarship (Dubnick 1999). There is growing acceptance, however, of the idea that most academic scholarship is in fact focused on efforts to persuade, and that rhetoric and argumentation play key roles in the conduct and presentation of research in all disciplines (Gross 1996; Edmondson 1984; Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey 1987; Patterson 1996; Mailloux 1989; Fish 1989, ch. 20; Gusfield 1976; Overington 1977). Among students of social scientific inquiry, attention has shifted from the search for universal or reconstructed "logics" of inquiry to an understanding of the dynamic "discursive cultures" of inquiry (Nagel 1961; Hall 1999; Kaplan 1964). For some, this view reinforces the postmodern *critique* of "scientism," especially in the social sciences (Rosenau 1992). For others, it supports a more realistic view of the imperfect world of scholarship found in all disciplines (Sokal and Bricmont 1998).

In this context, the characterization of UAE as a rhetorical work does little more than make explicit the argumentative form of inquiry used by the authors. They are in good company. Among the contemporary classics of Public Administration are works no less argumentative, from Hummel's *The Bureaucratic Experience* (1994) and Goodsell's *The Case for Bureaucracy* (1994) to Osborne and Gaebler's *Reinventing Government* (1992). Thus, the assessment of a work such as UAE depends on the standards we as a field accept for argumentative scholarship.

According to philosopher Stephen Toulmin, once we accept the legitimacy of rhetorical and argumentative inquiry, we face a choice between standards derived from idealized logic or "working" logic (1958, especially ch. IV). An idealized logic posits universal standards for an argument's claims, demanding conformity in both form and substance. Simon used such standards in his *critique* of orthodoxy's principles of administration, concluding they suffered two fatal flaws: they came in conflicting pairs and were grounded in "ordinary knowledge" rather than derived from scientific inquiry. In contrast, a working logic uses standards applied in "real life" conditions, and these are often radically different from idealized standards. Thus, in contrast to Simon, Hood and Jackson called for the assessment of "administrative arguments" on the basis of their credibility among practitioners who, in turn, rely on their working logic to determine what is acceptable or not acceptable. "Winning administrative ideas," they argue, "are rarely very profound. Often they are repackaged and relabeled [sic] versions of an idea which has been advanced many times before. Frequently their premises come down to some banal notion of 'human nature' coupled with a contestable view about links between cause and effect. 'Proof' typically consists of no more than a few colorful examples" (Hood and Jackson 1991, 10-11).

A similar distinction is useful in developing standards for assessing the credibility of argumentative scholarship. We can apply some idealized logic (such as, logical positivism) to claims made by our colleagues, but in the process we are likely to find ourselves reestablishing and reinforcing the same epistemological and methodological divisions that have plagued our

field for the past half-century. A more productive approach involves the application of standards derived from a working logic relevant to the scholarly functions of the field.

As a claim-asserting argument, UAE is subject to assessment on both idealized and practical grounds. Here I focus on the working logic approach, relying on the basic requirements for a justifiable or credible argument established by Toulmin in *The Uses of Argument*.^[6] Toulmin posits that support for the substance of any claim requires more than the data or evidence that generated it. The fact that the Coast Guard finds debris floating off the coast of Nantucket might lead to the claim that they had discovered the wreckage of an airliner crash, but more is required to establish the claim as justifiable. A credible claim calls for qualifiers and warrants.

Qualifiers are factors that, if true, would lead to a modification of the claim's reliance on the evidence. For example, a shipwreck in the same general area several days prior could be the source of the debris. While not necessarily proving the claim wrong, a qualifier raises issues about the degree of justifiability.

Warrants are an even more fundamental consideration. They provide the justifying link between facts and claims, and can be regarded as propositions offered to support a claim. In their simplest form, they are clear "if ... then" statements: If searchers find debris at a point where the aircraft was last tracked by radar, then the claim that it was from the missing airliner would be justified. If the debris consisted of items typically associated with the missing aircraft, then the claim's justification is even greater.

Toulmin also makes a critically important distinction between "warrant-using" and "warrant-establishing" arguments. Warrant-using arguments justify claims on the basis of propositions that are "taken for granted" or assumed to be valid. In the example of the aircraft disaster, the technical feasibility and reliability of radar scan data is assumed, and (at least initially) the claim maker does not have to provide support or "backing" for the warrant itself (Elgin 1996, 101-6). In contrast, a warrant-establishing argument will offer backing for the propositions used to link evidence to the claim maker's assertions.

The standards of scholarship in almost all disciplines require warrant-establishing arguments in cases where the claims or their assumptions are novel or controversial. To the degree that there are certain presuppositions that are widely accepted among the community of scholars within a field, a warrant need not require backing each time it is applied. However, one of the shared assumptions among members of an academic field is that the use of such warrants is subject to challenge--and thus the expectation that a scholar must be prepared to provide support for any warrant used in a particular claim (Chandler, Davidson, and Harootunian 1994).

This is a fundamental expectation in any academic effort that seeks legitimacy as scholarship---an expectation that is shared by the humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences...

[Extracts from a review of 'The Case for Administrative Evil'. The review was written by Dubnick, et al, and published in *Public Administrative Review*, Sept 2000, Vol.60(5)]

Notes

1. I am indebted to Jonathan Justice, Randa Dubnick, Larry Luton, and Jonathan Inz for their comments and reactions.

2. Here I follow the convention of capitalizing public administration when referring to the academic field-- and using lower case to refer to the practice.

3. The National Academy of Public Administration's 1998 Louis Brownlow Award and the 1998 Best Book Award from the Academy of Management's Public and Nonprofit Management Division.

4. Those who study classical rhetoric would quickly point out that rhetoric and argumentation cannot be used as synonyms. Here I accept the view of Chaim Perelman's "new rhetoric" approach that focuses on argumentation. See Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969.

5. Hood and Jackson 1991, especially, ch. 2; see Simon 1946. This reliance on argumentation and rhetoric can be attributed, in part, to the field's ongoing "identity crisis" that creates a schizophrenic life for academics constantly torn between the demands of professionalism and disciplinary scholarship. The professional commitments stress our roles as advocates, reformers, and the trainers of public service practitioners. Disciplinary obligations require adherence to the same standards of scholarship as our colleagues in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. The tension manifests itself in many different ways, including ambiguity when attempting to assess the published work of our peers. See Dubnick 1999.

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