

Relational public services—reform and research agenda

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IMPACT

The authors put forward a relational public service agenda which involves investing in infrastructure, focusing on appropriate scaling of change, balancing specialism and generalism in public service roles and functions, and pursuing improvement through engaged research endeavours. This shift requires new thinking and research in terms of measurement, learning and evaluation practice in public service. The authors argue this constitutes a basis for academic public administration to prospectively engage in scholarship which addresses the complex challenges confronting society in coming years.

ABSTRACT

Governments face increasing calls to radically reform public services around human relationships. The authors describe how New Public Management’s (NPM) legacy of transactionalism has denatured waves of public service reforms, making them unfit for contemporary governance. Contrasting academic and practitioner perspectives on public service reform, the authors describe a burgeoning movement towards relational ways of conceptualizing and enacting the management and delivery of public services. Taking stock of this, the authors put forward a broad research agenda into relational public services.

Academics must play a much more active role in this movement than they did during the NPM era—not merely describing and classifying change, but actively and directly shaping a future-focused prospective public service reform agenda.

Keywords:

public service reform; relational public administration; relational public service management; **organisational learning; public services data; information sharing;** new public management; performance management;

Transactionalism: the legacy of New Public Management?

The crisis [of authority] consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear. (Gramsci, 2005, p. 276.)

Public administration is often said to have undergone two great transitions in modern times from a traditional bureaucratic public administration to a marketized New Public Management before finally settling into a ‘plural and pluralist’ New Public Governance (NPG) model with public service mediated through decentralized networks. The transition to NPM was inspired by a zeitgeist managerial agenda and spurred into action by influential think tanks and policy institutes. However, academics have been convinced that structural factors would lead to its transcendence. Dunleavy et al. (2006) argued that the demands of digitalization would spur reintegration and holism and lead to NPM’s usurpation by ‘Digital Era Governance’. For others, NPM seeded its own undoing. NPM reforms over decades created a fragmented, over-specialized and atomized public administration complex incapable of meeting modern expectations of quality and efficiency. Osborne (2010) argued NPM would therefore prove a transitional governance logic, giving way to a NPG as the key means of progress. However, despite these attempts at innovation and transition a sense of pessimism on the persistence and virus-like mutability of NPM remains (Lapsley and Miller 2024).

Academics have duly shifted their focus from management to governance. Concepts like network and collaborative governance, co-production and co-creation now occupy leading journals and conferences in academic public administration. Even NPM mainstay subjects like performance management (French & Mollinger-Sahba, 2021) and contracting (Bertelli & Smith, 2010) have been reappraised to suit a dispersed governance context. But speak to policy-makers and practitioners and attempts to pronounce NPM dead seem quite premature. In the UK, a range of practitioner-oriented reform agendas target NPM as the prevailing orthodoxy (Cooke & Muir, 2012; Cottam, 2018; Glover, 2023; Lowe, et al., 2021a).

So why is it then that, to many including esteemed public servants, it appears a ‘zombified’ NPM continues to reanimate the governance and management models of public services long after the ideology, according to public administration scholarship, should have been laid to rest? Some authors have claimed NPM left an imprint not just on the governance landscape, but on the governance mindset. Osborne (2020) locates the problem with the mechanistic logic deriving from a product-dominant logic with proposed solutions couched in production efficiency and transactional dynamics with service users. French et al. (2023) target a ‘rationalist’ logic, combining a faith in technocratic solutions with a pessimistic view of public service professionals as rationally self-interested or incapable of relational working (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020). In this view, the legacy of NPM has been a ‘transactional gaze’: perceiving the relational problems of a NPG context through the prism of the values and behavioural assumptions of NPM. The solutions proposed therefore continue to reduce public service interactions to a strategic transaction.

This manifests in practice when we see NPG problems met with NPM solutions. The fragmentation of governance can be mediated through more and better contracting between partners (Heinrich & Kabourek, 2019), rather than alternative relational dynamics of trust, deliberation and negotiation (French, Kimmitt et al., 2023). The breakdown in trust between citizens and government is to be resolved not through better relationships, but tighter accountability and performance measurement: providing objective, clear performance measures to appeal to the public’s rational decision-making. Policy is to be improved through better supply and demand of evidence—invariably implicitly adopting a scientific hierarchy—rather than engaging with divergent values and principles. Rather than a neat transition between governance models, public service reform has been partial and paradoxical, leaving an intellectual legacy which has proved hard to dislodge. The

transactional legacy of NPM means that tools like marketization, contracts and extrinsic incentives continue to limit the horizon and scope of possible solutions.

Pinched between tightening budgets and redoubling demand, modern public management has become an increasingly complex task in an ever more trying climate. The structural forces foretold to deliver us from NPM should be firing. But what we observe, instead, from the UK state is a strategic vacuum. From Major's Public Service Charter to Blair's Modernization Agenda to Cameron–Clegg's *Open Public Services White Paper* (HM Government, 2011), UK governments have enacted some strategic approach to public service reform. But, beyond a contested commitment to regional devolution, the UK government has lacked a coherent approach to public service reform arguably since the white paper in 2011. Further, the solutions proposed within the white paper—from increasing adoption of IT and performance-based contracts—show a policy complex armed only with NPM solutions. In the time since, policy responses, through programmes aimed at the modernization or improvement of services, rarely persist more than one policy cycle, or even shorter periods such as the terms of an incumbent government minister or policy-maker. Like a sandcastle on a beach, flagship policy programmes like Cameron–Clegg's 'Big Society' are washed away by the next policy tide or kicked over by the next administration (Baines et al., 2024).

In this policy vacuum, think tanks, research institutes and public intellectuals have responded with proposals for what they often claim to be radical change in the form and function of public administration. Each of these contains a narrative and a broadly shared diagnosis of the underlying malaise: a transactional stance on public service reform which proliferated in the NPM era and has also outlasted it. What these practice-oriented narratives tell us is that the transition out of NPM is not an innate structural process as academics and policy-makers have presumed, but an uphill battle, requiring new ideas, lobbying and change agency. In the next section, we explore the narratives created by these proposals and ask where they may lead the future of public service reform.

Relationality in public service reform thinking: the practice perspective

In the absence of a strategic approach to public service reform from the UK state in a time of unprecedented fiscal pressure, a range of change-focused policy narratives has been developed by think tanks, policy institutes, public intellectuals and coalitions. We term these

‘practice narratives’ since they are oriented toward policy-makers and public service professionals and adopt a common narrative framing consisting of a problem diagnosis and a proposed solution.

Practice narratives are a naturalistic dataset expressing identified problems and proposed solutions, expressed by change agents working closely with public administration decision-makers. By studying these narratives we can solicit an impression of the direction in which public service reform is being directed. In this sense, we explore public service reform not as a structural inevitability, but as a social phenomena which is actively shaped and reconstituted by change agents. In Table 1 we summarise eight of the most prominent to emerge since the 2011 Open Public Service White Paper.

Academics may critique the internal consistency of the models, or their lack of engagement with mainstream academic sources. However, each one actively engaged communities of sponsors, policy-makers and public service professionals, and all have been far more widely read and, arguably, directly influential than most academic articles. Above all, such policy and practice narratives tell us what resonates most for those directly engaged in designing and delivering the work of public services.

Table 1. Review of practice narratives of public service reform.

Practice narrative	Issuing body	Summary of the problem	Summary of the solution
Community Paradigm (Lent & Studdert, 2021)	New Local (network, think tank)	State and market paradigms have failed to address rising demand and call for increased agency from public	Increased devolution, localized decision-making and co-production processes to recentre public resources on prevention
Enabling State (Elvidge, 2013)	Carnegie UK Trust (policy institute)	Welfare state is passive ‘safety net’ which fails to improve citizens prospects	State should enable citizen competencies by shifting culture, power and finance to deliver proactive welfare system

<i>Radical Help</i> (Cottam, 2018)	Author, social entrepreneur	Complicated needs-based and risk-averse models of managing state resources has failed	Build capacity via co-design processes with citizens and communities create solutions to problems
Human Learning Systems (Lowe, et al., 2021a)	Human Learning Systems Collaborative (coalition)	Current system approach of 'markets, managers and metrics' does not support services to address complex problems of human relationships.	Learning relationships/partnerships at every level supports the emergence needed to improve
Relational State (Cooke & Muir, 2012)	IPPR (policy institute)	Bureaucratic and market-based approaches have failed to deal with long term complex issues	State should move to decentralized systems to promote improved relationships and place-based approaches that enable citizens
New System Alliance	Coalition	Current deficit-based model of state provision is service-centred and detached from the lived reality of social problems	Strength-based working where communities hold power and resources within a wider whole systems approach to service provision
Level Measures	Localis (think tank)	Place-making agenda for local government is inadequately resourced and structured for sustainable change	Integration and broader capacity building beyond just data systems
Future Public Services Taskforce (Glover, 2023)	Coalition, led by Demos (think tank)	Network seeking bring together a coalition of stakeholders around a relational agenda to services for the public	Public services should shift upstream and recognize the value of human relationships, including seeing citizens as active partners in service design and delivery, and building on strengths rather than responding to needs

While differing slightly, there is much alignment in the change narratives reviewed. In all, it is the transactional nature of the state which is positioned as the problem, and relationality proposed as the solution. This the explicit framing taken by The IPPR's relational state (Muir and Parker, 2014), Cottam's (2018) radical help and Demos' future of public services taskforce (Glover, 2023). In the other narratives, relationships are foregrounded as a central organizing principle of reform. Counter to academic claims, the narratives all claim that NPM

or a 'market-based' service model still characterise the dynamics of contemporary governance and set their programmes of reform against this.

Relationality in some is juxtaposed with the absence of relationships: detachment and passivity are targeted in the community paradigm, the enabling state and radical help. While such a critique is perhaps more redolent of traditional public administration, all see this matter as worsened, rather than improved, by the transition to a market or NPM model. NPM solutions like customer-orientation and accountability are eschewed in favour of active engagement and preventative investment in self-sufficiency amongst communities and citizens.

Relationships between the state and citizens (enabling state, radical help, community paradigm) which need empowered, active citizens capable of preventing problems, often foregrounding strengths-based solutions. In others (human learning systems), there is perhaps more emphasis on equitable horizontal relationships and the mechanics of partnership working. Across all, however, the focus is investment in the quality of relationships: equity, strengths-based working, and active co-creation are common solutions proposed across the whole range of practitioner narratives.

Relationality seems a malleable and compatible concept, often combined with other pillars of reform in narratives. Human learning systems proposes a learning-orientation as a key branch of its reform agenda, though this is mediated through equitable relationships spanning service and agencies. The shift from transactionalism to relationality is set alongside one from reactive to preventative spending in the case of the future of public services taskforce and the enabling state.

This brief overview of practitioner narratives reveals two things:

- First, if academics have largely entered a post-NPM universe, practitioners appear to view their world very differently. While the structural characteristics of public administration may have evolved, the transactional legacy of NPM remains well entrenched in the lived experience of public service work.
- Second, while academics considered that a natural, inevitable and structural force would deliver us from NPM, the narratives reveal this remains an active ongoing struggle, requiring

the agency of hundreds or even thousands of actors, operating largely independently, if not in opposition, to a central government narrative of public service reform.

While both academic and policy/practitioner-oriented research communities are advocating centring and investing in the relational capabilities of public service systems, the questions of how and where this might lead is not settled.

A relational future for public service?

Academic public administration and public administration practice have long been characterised as being divided. This seems particularly the case with public service reform. Where the transition from NPM has seemed an inevitability for academics and policy-makers, for change agents and engaged scholars it has felt like an ongoing battle where every inch of territory is hard won (and then lost) against the backdrop of a failed national agenda. Bartels and Turnbull (2019) have elaborated a corresponding ‘relational turn’ in public administration scholarship as a post-NPM trajectory and noted its connection to several developments including relational marketing and relational contracting. While both the world of policy and academic research are progressing broadly in this relational direction (albeit with a strong gravitational pull to ‘rationalist’ approaches) they, too, rarely intersect—resulting in a fragmented analytical field and lost opportunities for knowledge creation and mobilization.

It seems clear we have reached the outer limits of the ‘transactionalization’ of services in the name of efficiency. It is clear, for example, in the failure of enforced channel shifts such as the ‘digital first’ approach to welfare exemplified in Universal Credit. Transactions remain crucial supporting the delivery of an efficient service—for instance the timely delivery, fitting, connection and maintenance and of telecare equipment—yet it requires us to think beyond simplistic individuated citizen-consumer dichotomies and acknowledge the plurality of interactions and intersections that service co-ordination needs to respond to. The truth is human relationships are always unfinished, untidy and always under construction (Clarke, 2022).

As discussed, NPM’s entrenchment of transactionalism has left a cultural legacy which is embodied in ‘rationalist’ ways of thinking and doing (French et al., 2023; Lowe & Wilson,

2017). Unsurprisingly then core features of public service, particularly in its approach to people management and inter-agency relationships, have made relational working seem like a risk often not worth taking (Baines et al., 2024).

The performativity this produces means the potential of evidence to manage performance or innovate improvement is subject to technocratic concerns where issues such as sampling, measurement error, precision and lack of bias are foregrounded as the important problems to reinforce ‘metrological centres’ (where measures are controlled and meanings fixed). It is not perhaps surprising that such an approach was adopted by governments seeking to account for policy funding demonstrating the relationship to the ‘quality’ of services (for instance New Labour’s target-based performance management approach put in place to justify their administration’s investment in public services). This approach to measurement has come to dominate our understandings what counts as good quality public service: what Porter (1995) has called ‘trust in numbers’. Such approaches rely on a restricted epistemology where what counts as knowledge (or outcome) is a given and the means by which statistics are applied as generalizations or forecasts for future activity. The information systems become the machines by which data and information are collected, collated, compared and presented and therefore create social reality (see for instance Jamieson et al., 2020).

A relational alternative to NPM would take a different tack to scaling and measurement from the industrialized version we currently see in public services (Pfothenauer et al., 2022). Current framings of ‘scalability’ for instance fail to account for ‘transformative relationships’ necessary for local adaptation and sustainability (Tsing 2012). The argument we make here is not for non-scaling but to understand the necessary relational scale at which public services maintain requisite diversity and support contextualized decision-making. Allied to this is a need to move away from the belief that resourcing structural investments on their own are going to solve our problems—we are suffering from chronic under-infrastructuralization in the public realm and need to invest and cultivate social and technical (including digital) infrastructures that support these activities in the long term (McLoughlin and Wilson 2013, Baines et al., 2024). An alternative would be a ‘conventional realist’ stance where measurement instead involves the negotiation of conventions and social construction of phenomena. In this light, knowledge conventions can also be interpreted in the context of social relations and community-based interpretations (Cornford et al., 2013). This signals the potential for an approach that adopts a mensurative (measurement making, applying and re-

making) approach (Power, 2004) through collaborative learning and improvement (Jakobsen et al., 2018; Lowe et al., 2021b, Hesselgreaves et al 2021, Wilson et al., 2023).

Governability is potentially then achieved through local governance, negotiation and trust in relationships to establish measures/value(s) of the ‘somewhere’ with implications for learning and accountability thereby delivering social function (with potential for improved social capital), cultural/historical function (drawing on a sense of shared history, identity and agency), as well as addressing economic functions (resources can be negotiated as the situation changes). For instance, in this way, data is not collected to evaluate outcomes in the normative metrological realist sense but is rooted in the learning processes of practice communities with a key role of civic engagement (on the part of organizations, communities and individuals) in interpretative communities to access a broader base of ‘data’ in order to deliberate and govern conventions of a ‘view from somewhere’ (Wilson et al., 2011; Cornford et al., 2013).

We suggest that there could be two major breakthroughs which would emerge from this approach: a better service ecology and improved local governance environment. While a ‘relational turn’ is not as evident in academic public administration as it has been in disciplines like sociology for instance, Bartels & Turnbull (2020) find that a relational lens reveals a broad landscape of potential operational practices. We have clear examples of relational alternatives in models like the Buurtzorg approach to community care (Monsen & De Blok, 2013) or the emerging ‘liberating public services’ approach (Smith, 2020). Relational planning and evaluative tools like the ‘outcomes star’ (Mackeith, 2014) and ‘poverty stoplight’ (Burt and Sanabria, 2019) also exist to facilitate practice and applied research. For these forms of relational practices to thrive and persist they require a context where issues of management practice and motivation are acknowledged (Honig 2021) including a better balance between specialist and generalist roles ensuring equity of resources in the system (Needham and Mangan, 2016). Further, relationality has resonance as a central organizing principle for public service as demonstrated in our analysis of the corpus of practitioner narratives.

But none of this is inevitable (Lapsley and Miller 2024). A final implication of a relational approach might be our own relationships with practitioners, policy-makers and change-makers in public service reform. Academics playing the role of detached analysts in the NPM

transition, including notably coining the term and describing its core elements (Hood, 1991). This was a significant role, since in effect NPM was described into being by academics and given sharper contours, which perhaps facilitated its spread. But our sense is, to play a useful role, a stronger and more direct model of engagement is needed, perhaps operating as engaged scholars (Van de Ven, 2007, Pell et al. 2016, Pell et al 2020) or learning partners (Hesselgreaves et al., 2021). Academic public administration has been criticised for its detached scholasticism and its concern with decontextualized evidence or, worse, extractive opportunism to meet research goals and short-term impacts. As university-based researchers this should prompt us to move beyond our traditional philosophical stance of outsider-critical evaluators into the space where, for example, co-production and co-creation activities are part of a wider systemic approach to capacity building and public service reform within a wider ecology where the diversity of visions from practice ('views from somewhere') can be enacted, evolve and be sustained. To do this relationally, we will also need to develop emerging evaluation cues from the experienced-based education and systems thinking fields (Urban et al., 2021) and innovate methodologically to develop and hone evaluative and learning practices that cover the variety, complexity, and relationality of future public administration, and narrated by our practitioner, change-agent partners, communities and citizens.

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