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CRITICAL INQUIRIES IN LAW, PHILOSOPHY AND GLOBALIZATION

The Palgrave Handbook of the Public Servant

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly globalised world, the essential roles and functions that public servants perform are constantly evolving at various levels across different geographical and cultural contexts. This Handbook intends to foster an up-to-date understanding of the evolution of the public servant in different traditions and waves of reform. In particular, it navigates through the emerging actors and new terrains that public servants operate and translate public value into practice. This Handbook contributes to a closer understanding of identities, motivations, values, roles, skills, and positions. It also serves to chart the future courses of development for the public servant with practice-informed and evidence-based research with synthesised insights from practitioners and scholars.

Keywords: public service, value and motivation, government, globalisation, evidence-based policy making, co-production

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*“The best way to find yourself
is to lose yourself in the service of others.”*

Mahatma Gandhi

1. Introduction

Covid-19 has hugely impacted the way public services are delivered. It also left an indelible imprint on the perceptions of public servants in a technology-facilitated future. In the imminent future, governance is increasingly defined by global concerns, local considerations, and cross-national collaborations between the Global North and South, supported by social and technological innovations. This intensified trend requires public servants to learn and adapt to constantly evolving role responsibilities and navigate a plethora of boundary dilemmas with clarity.

However, a review of existing literature on public service and public servants reveals an individualistic case-by-case approach to local-first governance issues. The relational and communicative aspects of public services through the collaborative intermediary of public servants in social and technological innovations remain under-explored. In particular, sustainability literacy, fluidity of role boundaries, and cultural fluency in the technology-accelerated multicultural governance context need to be further discovered.

With a primary readership in the public service sector in mind, *The Palgrave Handbook of Public Servant* broadens our understanding of public duties and officialdom through thematic explorations of key concepts and issues that are central to governance decision-making, policy-making, and value- and impact-generating.

2. Key-concepts, Themes and the Structure

In this Handbook, the public servant is defined as follows:

[The public servants] are those working at all levels of government, in policy service organisations, professionals including diplomats and armed forces personnel, as well as those who work across the public/private divide, and those whose identities blurred the political/administrative boundary (p.1714).

These include policymakers, commissioners, service deliverers, and regulators. The public servant serves the public interest and value and works primarily in the public sector. The public sector is characterised by four elements: (1) state-owned, (2) under direct political authority, (3) operating in non-market environments, and (4) serving the public interest by producing non-market impacts.

Anchored in the public sector, this Handbook comprises thirteen parts, each addressing a specific topic of interest to the public servant. These topics are further clustered into thematic discussions: (1) a global perspective of public servants, (2) philosophical foundations and traditions, (3) values and motivations, (4) trajectories of reform, (5) elite public servants as policymakers and as regulators, (6) implementation of policies, (7) public servants in the wild, (8) public servants in technological innovations, (9) integrity and ethics, (10) representation, and (11) education.

Topics include (1) the composition of the public servant from socio-demographic and human resources perspectives across different geographic, cultural, and institutional contexts in Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America; (2) Confucian traditions on human relationships and Western philosophical perspectives on public administration; (3) common values and motivations for a career in the public service over time, across space, and under different governance systems; (4) waves of reform and the shifting roles, identities, values, and functions of public servants; (5) community-led co-production; (6) non-state actors in public policy; (7) collaborative and decentralised administration; (8) street-level and frontline public servants in regional and local governments; (9) e-governance, data security and privacy;

and (10) skills, abilities, traits, capabilities, and competencies of public servants in the era of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

3. Evaluation, Reflections and Take-home Messages

The public sector has been challenged on multiple fronts. Even before the pandemic, there has been a consistent call for austerity in public administration. This tendency is further manifested in the public service sector through cuts in budgets and costs. As a result, the public sector is increasingly stretched by limited resources and personnel that challenge the ability to optimise the use of tools and techniques in response to public emergencies. In the context of Europe, in order to face the pandemic and its economic impact, governments resorted to an unprecedented increase in public spending, both in the public sector and in terms of economic aids, compensations and subsidies for private citizens and enterprises. National Plans of Recovery and Resiliency are of course the main example.

Overall, this comprehensive Handbook on public servants provides a holistic overview of current trends and issues in global governance, with a particular focus on emerging themes, such as multiculturalism, localism, ethics and public integrity, and social and technological innovation. Its contributions to the existing literature are manifested in theoretical, methodological, and practical dimensions.

Theoretically, the discussions in this Handbook centre around four key notions: identity, authority, capability, and agency. Notably, the identity the public servant possesses is marked by its multiplicity and is increasingly challenged by globalisation and neoliberal government reforms. A signatory move towards collaboration and co-production has been evident in the existing literature on public administration. Scholarly attention has been thus directed towards the organisational culture and the institutional structure in support of the fluidity of the public servant identity in community-led co-production.

It is also important to point out that claims to authority seem to be rooted in expertise, position, and connections. These encompass organisational position, political influence, and credentials and capabilities. However, contributors to this Handbook elicit multiple tensions arising from negotiated authority and accountability issues in the practice of local governance and public-private partnership. These tensions require public servants to take proactive actions to learn and develop new skills. In many chapters, learning and knowledge management aspects of the public service work have been elaborated, highlighting the importance of boundary-spanning in the interface of digital and social innovation marked by big data and algorithmic applications.

Methodologically, this Handbook engages a practice-informed, evidence-based approach to address definitional and theoretical ambiguity. Contributors to this Handbook engage a context-, culture-, and case-specific approach to explore and interpret empirical data. In particular, the voices of people with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have been debated in the representation of collective bargaining on wages and job protection. In the future of public service, public servants are expected to be fair, just, and competent in fulfilling their public duties for a wide variety of people from diverse socio-economic, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds.

Practically, this Handbook illuminates the pragmatic understanding of public servants in a globalised world and leaves the readers with some practical knowledge. The knowledge can be useful for public servants to work across boundaries and strategically manage the relational and communicative challenges in cross-institutional and inter-cultural contexts. Many contributors highlight the importance of developing cultural awareness in translating institutional values into practices for multicultural citizens. With the increasing globalisation and migration, the promise of linguistic equity and social incorporation for migrants in host societies has caught scholarly attention in the intersection of law, sociology, and applied linguistics (Piller

1967; Yi 2023). The ability of the public servant to translate culture has become an essential soft skill in the future of public administration.

However, as stated in the opening remark, this Handbook privileges perspectives by contributors based in the Global North and enrich the debate based on institutions in the Global South, especially in our case from Africa, and the Middle East, for a pathway to publication for diverse voices to be heard. More cross-national and culture- and context-specific case studies can add to the strength of future volumes.

In summary, trust is of vital importance in the public sector. To be trustworthy and dependable, public servants face many role boundary dilemmas between the private and public self and between an amateur and a professional. A career in public service is by no means easy, which can be best illustrated by heavy responsibility and emotional labour, particularly in the constantly evolving globalised world marked by technological and social innovations. This Handbook updates our understanding of the public servant in a globalised world characterised by interconnectedness and unpredictability. With its strengths and limits being discussed, this comprehensive Handbook can be a valuable reference for public servants, policymakers, regulators, public managers, and scholars in governance and policy studies and beyond.

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