



State of research on public service management: Identifying scientific gaps from a bibliometric study



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ABSTRACT

Academic interest in aspects of the public sector has grown considerably, especially in the areas of social sciences, management and finance. In the studies that are specifically designed to public service management, this growth was herein observed and analyzed.

The current paper presents and analyses major publications involving public service management in the decade of 2004–2014, so as to identify scientific gaps to promote and guide new studies on the aforementioned subject. For this purpose, a bibliometric study of related scientific papers was carried out. The data was collected from the Scopus and Web of Science databases, enabling an analysis of the most cited articles, keywords and authors, and of the most recently published article on public service management by each of these cited authors. Based on this analysis, it was observed that the New Public Management model is the principal object of research on public service management, and that the scientific gaps mainly involve the public service motivation. In this way, the main scientific contribution of the present paper is to assist new studies on public service management, including the expansion of existing theory and innovative model proposals.

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1. Introduction

Globalization has had a great impact on public service management and compelled managers to be increasingly agile at adopting practical solutions to unforeseen problems, such as economic crises, epidemic diseases and environmental problems. These events coupled with domestic political issues like public transport, information management and security have generated demands for private sector solutions and originated global perspectives for building up knowledge in the public sector (Hou, Ni, Poocharoen, Yang, & Zhao, 2011).

A large part of public services is provided by local governments, and inefficiencies in the execution of these services can generate serious consequences for the social welfare of citizens (Cuadrado-Ballesteros, García-Sánchez, & Prado-Lorenzo, 2012). However, meeting the expectations about the services provided by a public organization does not only depend on the organization itself, but on multiple governmental and non-governmental actors (Hall, 2007).

The search for solutions to problems that are characteristic of the public sector has aroused great interest from researchers and managers in assessing the quality of public service and governance processes, and also the life quality of the people under the influence of such type of service (Gonzalez, Carcaba, Ventura, & Garcia, 2011). According to Hou et al. (2011), it is necessary that the knowledge about the activities of public management is spread throughout various contexts and that it is not restricted to the analysis of specific cases.

The number of studies aimed at the New Public Management model (NPM), public service motivation (PSM), public sector organizations, performance, governance, ethics, local governments, job satisfaction, public sector reform and innovation have increased considerably in the period analyzed in this work (2004–2014), encouraging discussions on the factors that interfere with the quality of services provided by public organizations. The knowledge generated by these studies enables the identification of scientific gaps and assists new researches covering both the expansion of existing theory and the proposition of innovative models related to public service improvement.

In light of the above, this bibliometric study presents and analyses major publications involving public service management in the decade of 2004–2014, so as to identify scientific gaps to promote and guide new studies on the subject, allowing and encouraging

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that its findings should be adopted by public service organizations worldwide.

The following section gives an overview over the theory on which this work was based. Subsequently, the research method used in this article is presented, covering the adopted research parameters, databases and computational tools used in its analysis. After that, the results obtained are described and analyzed in order to systematize the scenario of the publications on the topic and to identify gaps. In the last section, the findings of the study are presented, highlighting their scientific contribution and proposals for future studies.

2. Theoretical overview

Public service management comprises interdisciplinary knowledge of economics, sociology, organizational theory and law, which should be integrated with characteristic elements of the public sector as motivation, bureaucracy and governance (Voet, 2014). The study of public organizations encompasses academic disciplines such as political science, psychology and business management, which are aimed at understanding the structure, culture, processes, technologies, environments and change management of the sector (Soni, 2011).

According to Motta (2013), the concept of efficient public management has evolved with the Industrial Revolution and the weakening of the aristocratic and absolutist powers. In the early 20th century, there was a search for universal principles of public management that resulted in excessive focus on control mechanisms. In the second half of the century, it was sought to separate the political aspects of administration through the creation of the New Public Administration.

The idea of managing public organizations in an analogous way to private organizations was disseminated in the last decades of the 20th century with a promising management model, the NPM, which emerged with the main purpose of running public organizations as private companies that are aimed at generating profits, i.e. with process efficiency, cost reduction and efficiency in the provision of services (Motta, 2013). At the beginning of the 21st century, governments were more concerned about ensuring that public services were conducted effectively, and so began to delegate their authority to third parties, where governance became one of the most applied tools in public service management (Soni, 2011).

In the view of Peters, Pierre, and Randma-Liiv (2011), it has been part of the logic of governance to decompose the public sector into numerous organizations for specific purposes in order to increase efficiency in the provision of services. That logic, however, leads to a division of regulatory powers and information, thus limiting the ability of the public sector to improve its financial management, to innovate and to make systemic improvements. Furthermore, public organizations vary in function, structure and administrative level (Lindgren & Jansson, 2013) and have been under direct influence of the political system since the beginning of their history until the present day.

According to Conteh (2012), one of the greatest challenges of public sector is to institutionalize new mechanisms of political participation that support the practice of governance in its various organizational levels. Nevertheless, the public service management is conducted by order-oriented principles and practices, uniformity and fairness, which depend to a great extent on political consensus and support (Motta, 2013).

Therefore, there are specific constraints and pressures in the public sector that create a more complex context when compared to private companies' environment, thus increasing the number of related studies, such as the NPM model (Garrett & Sementelli, 2012), PSM (Wright, Christensen, & Isett, 2013), per-

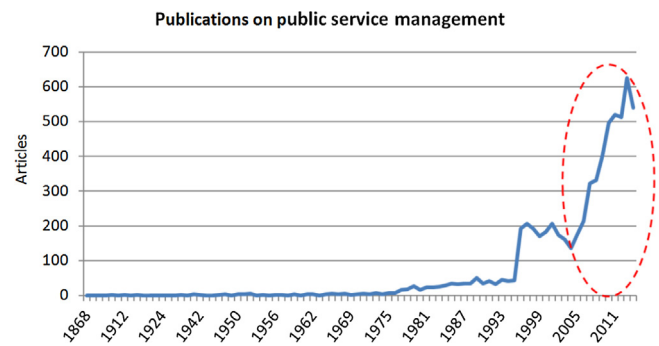


Fig. 1. Number of articles on public management published from 1868 to 2014, with emphasis on the evolution in the latest decade (data extracted from the Scopus database).

formance (Walker, Brewer, Boyne, & Avellaneda, 2011) and public service organizations (Rashman, Withers, & Hartley, 2009), as it is going to be addressed subsequently in this manuscript.

3. Research method

The present study was based on a bibliometric analysis of articles on public service management that were published and peer-reviewed between 2004 and 2014 in major scientific journals, in order to characterize and analyze their knowledge, and also to identify gaps so as to guide new scientific studies aimed at public management improvement.

The research was conducted by means of queries on the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases, which provide access to scientific articles published in the following journals, among other publishers: Elsevier (www.sciencedirect.com), Emerald (www.emeraldinsight.com), Springer (www.springerlink.com), Wiley (www.wiley.com). Items of information from both databases were used for different analyses in this study, as illustrated in Table 1.

The first search filter utilized in the research was regarding the articles' title, where terms that characterized the topic "public service management" were used. This filter was adopted to reduce search time and increase the results' accuracy.

It was considered that the study of articles published in 2004–2014 would enable the acquisition of knowledge about the stage of research on public service management and the identification of trends in a period in which a sharp growth in the number of articles published on the topic was observed, as illustrated in Fig. 1.

The search was restricted to documents named "articles" due to the understanding that they enable a better and more reliable identification of scientific gaps relating to the topic "public service management", than the analysis of "reviews", "chapters", "books" and "editorials". The search filters used in this research and the number of resulting articles respectively, are shown in Table 2.

At an initial search, it was observed that a large number of articles resulting from the search carried out on the databases of WoS (2628 articles, considering all areas) and Scopus (4280 articles, considering all areas) exceeded the scope of this work because they were related to areas such as social sciences, economics and medicine, as illustrated in Fig. 2. The search was limited to articles that were related only to the areas of management (public administration, business, management and accounting), which resulted in 1148 articles in WoS and 1706 in Scopus, as shown in Table 2. This difference in number of articles can be explained by the different classifications adopted in each of the databases, which is also observed in the works conducted by Abrizah, Zainab, Kiran, and Raj (2013) and Bartol, Budimir, Dekleva-Smrekar, Pusnik, and Juznic (2014).

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