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Title	An optimistic state?: Pathways to positive public administration
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Publication Date	2024-08-09
Link	https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/482087
Citation	Lucas, P, Nabatchi, T, O'Flynn, J & 't Hart, P 2024, An optimistic state? Pathways to positive public administration. in P Lucas, T Nabatchi, J O'Flynn & P 't Hart (eds), Pathways to Positive Public Administration : An International Perspective. Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, pp. 1-22. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803929170
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1. An optimistic state? Pathways to positive public administration

Patrick Lucas, Tina Nabatchi, Janine O'Flynn and Paul 't Hart

TAKE A WALK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

> As a group of 15 scholars from different sub-fields, countries, and generations, we argue that public administration would benefit from launching a self-conscious and cohesive strand of 'positive' scholarship […] The core questions driving positive public administration should be: Why is it that in a universe of like cases, specific public policies, programs, organizations, networks, or partnerships manage to do much better than others to produce widely valued societal outcomes? And how can scholars analyze and understand exemplars of excellence in the public sphere in order to support and inform broader policy agendas while also contributing to the public understanding of government and politics? (Douglas et al., 2021: 442)

This was the clarion call of a group of established public administration scholars – including three editors of this volume – who argued the case for 'positive public administration' (PPA). Like the authors of the manifesto-style essay, we, the editors of this volume, situate our call in a zeitgeist in which public trust in government is fickle at best – and in many jurisdictions – disturbingly low. We observe a pervasive 'negativity bias' in the way in which media, scholars, and politicians tend to depict the performance of the public sector. We do not deny that studying the dark sides of public administration – maladministration, mismanagement, abuse of administrative power, institutional exclusion – is critically important. Doing so can teach us what to confront and repudiate in how governance institutions are set up and how they operate. Indeed, many of the manifesto authors have spent careers doing just this. Yet, while there is a perennial need for social learning on 'what to avoid' and 'what does not work' in government, there is an equally important need for evidence-informed learning about 'what to aspire to' and 'what works.' Thus, like the PPA manifesto authors, we make a case for paying more attention to the 'bright side' of what government does, how, and to what effect.

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But what does this call – this invitation to 'walk on the bright side' – really mean? What are the implications of PPA for the study and practice of public administration? What are the merits and demerits of a 'positive' approach to the field, and where can we find guidance on navigating its opportunities and obstacles? How can we ensure that 'positive' research is truly scholarly and amounts to more than simply being optimistic about the state? In the remainder of this chapter, we begin to address these and other questions. We first situate the PPA project in the study and practice of public administration, exploring what it means for both the academic and practical mindset. We then examine other 'positive' projects within the social sciences and identify some lessons for PPA. Finally, we foreshadow the volume's design and contents, and invite you to 'take a walk on the bright side.'

PPA AS AN ACADEMIC MINDSET

Within the academic enterprise of public administration, PPA refers to a scholarly mindset, role conception, and research program centered on what works in government and governance (see the overview in Douglas et al., 2021). It springs from one essential question: why is it that particular public policies, programs, organizations, networks, or partnerships manage to do much better than others to produce widely valued societal outcomes, and how might knowledge of this be used to advance institutional learning? More specifically, Douglas and colleagues (2021: 442) "call for a program of research devoted to uncovering the factors and mechanisms that enable high performing public problem-solving and public service delivery; procedurally and distributively fair processes of tackling societal conflicts; and robust and resilient ways of coping with threat and risks."

In answering this call, PPA scholars eschew a Pollyannaish stance: they see the need to pursue research that casts light on positives yet remains realistic about what that pursuit requires. Governing always shall be an activity steeped in endemic conflicts of values and interests, manifold claims and finite resources, evident inequalities of access to and representation in decision making, and unavoidable clashes between 'now' and 'later,' 'here' and 'there,' and 'us' and 'them.' Indeed, the activities of governing are performed by imperfect people working in imperfect organizations under imperfect conditions. They operate within institutional settings and traditions that have been shaped by historical forces and are not necessarily optimally suited for present-day conditions. Moreover, people think, observe, and talk about governing (successfully and otherwise) in terms of schemata and standards that themselves are socially constructed – products of positionalities, cultural

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milieus, and commitments. As Bovens and 't Hart (1996: 22) observe in their study on policy fiascos,

> the assessment of the outcomes of a certain policy episode presupposes many value judgments. The very decision of what effects to register, when to register them, and by what means reflects the analyst's implicit or explicit biases and strongly predisposes his or her final evaluation of these policies […] The problem is not merely one of research methodology; it is predominantly a problem of conceptualization and value selection. Standards of evaluation insensitive to, for example, time, institutional context, and local culture are not likely to come to be regarded as authoritative yardsticks by all stakeholders in the debate.

Thus, PPA scholars should not sidestep the question of what they take to be 'positive.' PPA scholars must

> develop conceptualizations of 'good governance' that are not just couched in procedural and process terms but also encompass its substantive, material, and psychological impacts. Notice the plural – conceptualisation*s*. Robust debate about 'good', 'successful', or otherwise putatively 'positive' governance is not just inevitable but also constitutive of its legitimacy. (Douglas et al., 2021: 443)

But, even when they practice transparency and self-reflexivity about the normative standards they adopt, PPA scholars cannot escape the fact that there is something profoundly counter-cultural about calling for a 'positive' perspective in any field that studies human behavior – but especially in the study of politics, governance, and public administration. Is it not the academic's role to be fundamentally agnostic, or even skeptical and critical, about an object of study that wields enormous power and often has been known to wield that power badly, with profoundly appalling consequences for countless people, not to mention flora, fauna, and natural systems? PPA scholars take a nuanced position on this question of scholarly role and positionality:

> The default criticality of scholars should never be lost or dulled. The new funding regimes, which increasingly require academics to demonstrate their non-academic impact, should not lead to what one of us has previously called a tyranny of relevance, in which academics trade an element of their independence for the chance to join generously funded and potentially high-impact projects. But that is not an argument for eschewing the analysis of success. Walking on the bright side has nothing to do with co-option, selling out or sidelining criticality. It simply seeks to explore what works, *alongside* what has failed. This is the only way to provide a sophisticated and balanced account of how society might better address the complex challenges on the horizon. (Flinders and 't Hart, 2021)

Despite this rationale, it remains a fact that the call for PPA triggers controversy in the academic community, with proponents regarding it as urgent in the

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current fraught context of politics and governance, and critics asserting it runs counter to the scholar's (and the public servant's) duty to speak truth about, to, and if needed, against power. For these very reasons, PPA as an academic endeavor requires more than simply being bold and casting light on what we believe are fundamentally benevolent institutions and practices. It also means employing our scientific toolkits (of whatever theoretical and methodological variety) to study them rigorously, and in doing so, both informing and inspiring the world of practice. In Chapter 2 of this volume, Matthew Flinders further elaborates on how PPA can be at once 'looking for positivity' and a rigorous scholarly enterprise.

PPA AS A PRACTICAL MINDSET

Within the professional practice of public administration, PPA may be used as a badge to identify ambitions, language, experiments, institutions, and rituals that embed and enact what could be referred to as a 'positive mindset' to the work of all those people and organizations that are involved in 'managing the public's business,' as Lawrence Lynn (1981) once described it. The essence of such a positive mindset might be summed up as the belief that it is both desirable and possible to strive for institutions and practices of governing that bring decency, fairness, efficiency, empowerment, and other positive qualities to the fore. Thus, this positive mindset has both normative and pragmatic features.

At a normative level, the positive mindset rests on an ingrained belief that when intelligently organized, executed, and held in check, government and its agents can be a force of good in society. Critics might view this normative stance as problematic, naive, or even (self-)deceptive. They might say it lacks awareness or purposefully denies the inherently conflicted work of deciding who gets what, when, and how in a society, whether done by politicians in legislatures or street level bureaucrats in public agencies. At worst, critics may claim we turn a blind eye to the harms that governments have produced, and will continue to produce, whether through purposeful action such as 'administrative evil' (Adams and Balfour, 2015), authoritarian hubris (Scott, 1995), or a chronic inability to 'deliver.' Problematic though some might consider it to be, people in or near governments have – for thousands of years (see Duncan, this volume) – embraced a version of the positive mindset and have taken that belief to work every day.

At a pragmatic level, a positive mindset centers on a 'modernist-empiricist' belief (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010): it is possible to gain systematic cause and effect knowledge about how public administration operates, and thus to apply 'evidence-based' formulas to how it can better achieve its aims. In other words, it is possible to achieve 'good government' wherever public officials set about to consistently 'learn what works' in how they do their business, and

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consistently apply those learnings to their specific jobs, as well as to the structures, cultures, and practices of their organization. In some eras, and in some places, such beliefs are espoused from the top down across the administrative system. Think, for example, of the 'New Labour' era in British government, when a high modernity technocracy of 'what works' initiatives, managerial inducements, and control systems descended upon Whitehall. Tellingly, one of its chief architects, the consultant Michael Barber (2016), wrote up the program in a book called *How to Run a Government*. Public administration as practice does not get more presumptuously modernist-empiricist than that.

Given the normative and pragmatic dimensions of PPA as practice, two sets of questions need to be asked continuously about it. First, the normative questions: is PPA appropriate and defensible as a public service project? If so, where and how? What does framing the fundamental ambition of public administration in positive terms draw our attention to, and what does it obscure? Implicit in this question are issues concerning the broader social contract and regime values in which public administration (roughly, the executive branch of government and its devolved and arms-length agents) is embedded.

John Keane (2019) wrote a disturbing book about what is happening to the social contract between governments and citizens today. In one camp are the old power-sharing democracies, whose messiness, compromises, follies, and imperfections are the devil we know and are forever trying to ameliorate. But a much larger portion of the world's population, Keane argues, lives in "phantom democracies" that go through the motions of having elections, parties, parliaments, courts, and constitutions, but that are in fact governed by suave operators wielding velvet fists. They concentrate enormous economic and executive power in the hands of their inner circles of submissive plutocrats and loyal technocrats and blanket the whole operation in appeals to the will of "the people" – often defined narrowly along religious, cultural, or regional lines – that are sophisticated and shameless in equal measure. These regimes offer their subjects a social contract that many of them are willing to sign. They provide a degree of material comfort, stable though impenetrable government, and some opportunities for citizens to inform or respond to its policies. In such regime contexts (never mind in more blatantly authoritarian regimes), pursuing and espousing PPA as a philosophy of running the public service amounts to legitimizing a political arrangement that should be scrutinized rather than enhanced.

Second, there are the strategic questions: when, where, and how is the PPA mindset performative? Imagine that PPA beliefs actually shape the ways in which government institutions are designed, government officials and agents are motivated, public programs are set up and rolled out, and encounters between citizens and public authorities are envisaged and managed. Imagine they inspire, enable, and empower movement in pursuit of commendable

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visions of 'goodness' in how public administration operates. On the surface, few would be against that. But it is not that simple. It raises the question of what particular visions of 'positivity' are being pursued in that manner, and how this pursuit has been discussed and decided upon. Is it essentially imposed – as has been the case in jurisdictions such as Singapore – or is it a product of democratic deliberation? Also, it raises the question to what extent such PPA-inspired institutional design principles and process management practices are evidence-informed. Thirdly, it is important to probe into the extent to which they and their application are, or ought to be, contingent upon socio-cultural contexts. These questions should be responded to in a robust manner before PPA can evolve from an intuitive enthusiasm into a responsible guide to action.

Clearly, PPA is still in its nascent stages. Scholars and practitioners only recently have begun to explore the landscape, let alone map the terrain. As we begin to chart a course for PPA, it is useful to look to other 'positive' academic approaches for counsel and caution.

LEARNING FROM OTHER 'POSITIVE' APPROACHES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

PPA is not the first among such 'positive' turns to emerge across the social sciences. It makes sense, therefore, to wonder what we might learn from the trajectory and impact of previous like-minded enterprises. We focus on three such movements: positive psychology, positive organizational scholarship, and appreciative inquiry. We identify factors that lead to their sustained relevance. These include ideational factors, such as how the movement frames and uses 'positivity' and where it sits in the broader research discipline or field; material factors, such as who does the research and what resources are available; and the mechanisms by which these movements manage to have impact on their larger field's research agendas as well as on professional practices. At the same time, it is also important to examine the recurrent criticisms that have been made of these positive movements, to assess their relevance to PPA and to reflect on how to avoid these pitfalls.

Positive Psychology

The positive psychology movement, a relatively recent development in psychology, emphasizes studying and promoting positive emotions, traits, and behaviors (van Zyl and Rothmann, 2022). Questioning the dominance of traditional psychology's focus on pathology, dysfunction, mental illness, and other negative aspects of human experience (Seligman, 2019), positive psychology encourages the field to also explore and understand the occurrence and impacts

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of positive emotions (e.g., happiness, joy, gratitude), positive traits (e.g., resilience, optimism, compassion), and positive behaviors (e.g., mindfulness, altruism, forgiveness). It also emphasizes the importance of subjective well-being and personal growth as fundamental aspects of psychological health.

The foundations of positive psychology were constructed during the first week of 1998 in the Grateful Dead house in the Yucatán Peninsula (Seligman, 2019). While there was agreement on many elements of this new, "secular, science-based endeavor," the idea of calling it 'positive' was not straightforward:

> Positive sounded too *amerikanisch* to Mike's [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi] coffee-house European ear. Psychology sounded too narrow for a field that might eventually supplement the dismal, remedial concerns of all modern social science. But we couldn't think of a better name. (Seligman, 2019: 3)

Positive psychology has contributed to a growing body of research on topics such as the benefits of positive emotions, the role of positive relationships and social connections, and the importance of finding meaning and purpose in life. It also has led to the development of interventions and techniques for promoting positive mental health, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction, positive self-talk, and gratitude exercises, and has been the focus of large-scale experiments with implementation in the US Army and schools across the world (Seligman, 2019). In its grandest ambitions, positive psychology seeks to reorient institutions from a focus on reducing misery, to encouraging well-being, especially through PERMA (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment) (Seligman, 2019).

While the positive psychology movement has achieved sustained relevance and success in both research and practice, it also has received several sustained critiques, including its lack of attention to cultural, social, and individual diversity. More specifically, some critics argue that positive psychology over-emphasizes positive thinking and optimism, focuses on a narrow range of experiences that may not be relevant or accessible to all people (van Zyl et al., 2023), and may lead to unrealistic or superficial approaches to life's challenges (Lazarus, 2003). Others suggest that the movement should acknowledge the value of negative emotions and experiences and help people develop healthy coping strategies to deal with them (Ehrenreich, 2010). Still others suggest that its emphasis on individualism and personal responsibility overlooks the role of social and cultural factors in shaping human experience, uncritically accepts the assumptions and values of mainstream society (Held, 2004), and may lead to blaming individuals for their problems rather than addressing systemic issues (Wong and Roy, 2017). Finally, critics like Ehrenreich (2010) express concern about the commercialization of positive psychology and its

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integration into the self-help industry, which can lead to oversimplification, superficiality, and exploitation of vulnerable individuals seeking quick fixes for complex problems.

Positive Organizational Scholarship

Positive organizational scholarship (POS) aims to shift the focus of organizational studies from a deficit-based approach to a strengths-based approach, with the goal of promoting positive outcomes for individuals, organizations, and society as a whole (Dutton, Glynn, and Spreitzer, 2008). It specifically aims to understand the conditions and practices that enable the achievement of positive outcomes, such as flourishing employees, engaged customers, and thriving communities (Cameron, 2021). POS originated in the early 2000s as a response to the discipline's self-limiting focus on organizational failure and dysfunction. POS emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and encompasses a wide range of topics, including leadership, organizational culture, employee engagement, and corporate social responsibility. One key feature of POS is the concept of "positive deviance," which refers to organizations (or individuals and teams within them) that achieve exceptional outcomes despite facing the same challenges as their peers. POS scholars study positive deviance to identify the practices and behaviors that contribute to success, with the goal of spreading these practices to other organizations.

Since its birth, POS had garnered considerable momentum, even generating a 1,000-plus page Oxford Handbook (Spreitzer and Cameron, 2011). But it also has faced headwinds. Critics argue that POS must not reject outright the examination of negative and problematic features of organizational life (Fineman, 2006). They argue that a rose-tinted view of organizational life is not only incomplete, but also can be misleading, leaving its adherents oblivious to the role of power structures, cultural biases, inequalities, conflicts, and pathologies that permeate many organizations (Fineman, 2006; cf., Cameron and Caza, 2004). Moreover, they assert that an exclusive focus on positives can be as limited in coverage and limiting in perspective as the pessimistic position POS critiques.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry (AI) represents a shift away from traditional problem-solving and change management approaches that focus on weaknesses and difficulties, toward more positive, strengths-based approaches (Bushe, 2011; Cooperrider, Whitney, and Yaeger, 2000). By focusing on an organization's positive qualities and experiences, AI aims to create and inspire

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action toward a more optimistic and energized vision for the future, which ultimately can lead to better outcomes.

One key principle of AI is the idea of 'positive framing': reframing problems or challenges as opportunities for growth and improvement, helping to shift the focus from a problem-oriented mindset to a solutions-oriented mindset. AI processes typically use a series of structured interviews or dialogues with key stakeholders in the organization who are asked to reflect on positive experiences and qualities that the organization possesses, such as successful projects, strong teams, and effective leadership. Based on these conversations, the organization develops a shared vision for the future and identifies strategies for achieving it.

AI is used often in organizational development, strategic planning, and team-building initiatives. It has been applied in a variety of organizational contexts, including healthcare, education, and business. It also has underpinned strengths-based approaches in community development, and has been adopted in policy and administration studies, for example, in arguments advocating for strength-based approaches to Indigenous policy (Blackman, Buick and O'Flynn, 2016). Despite its uptake, AI is not without critics and critiques. For example, some suggest that the focus on positive experiences and qualities can be manipulated by those in positions of power to further their own interests, without addressing broader organizational issues (e.g., Bushe, 2011). Others suggest that AI neglects important power dynamics within organizations, such as hierarchy, privilege, inequities, and power (e.g., Bushe, 2011).

Lessons on Building a Positive Movement

To varying extents, these three positive movements have established an enduring presence within their respective academic fields, perhaps most so for positive psychology and least so for appreciative inquiry. Moreover, positive psychology and AI have had considerable spillover into popular culture and professional practices, while POS is not yet well known beyond academia. Still, each movement has a clear home, adherents (and critics), and have become seen as legitimate endeavors in their respective fields, raising the question: what can we learn from these other positive movements and how do they inform efforts to advance PPA? A brief review of their histories suggests a combination of three mechanisms help drive meaningful impact: (1) framing and situating *ideas* within the broader field or discipline; (2) building *momentum* through investment in the research agenda; and (3) influencing change in professional *practice*.

First, ideas frame both research and how we see the world. So, what do 'positive' ideas and frames focus on? Obviously, attention to positive actions and/or positive outcomes is a distinctive feature of positive scholarship.

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For instance, Elinor Ostrom's (1990, 1999) Nobel-prize winning work on common pool resource arrangements identified a large number of cases where generally sustainable resource-sharing arrangements were achieved. From these cases, she developed theoretical explanations of successful commons governance that challenged the prevailing wisdom holding that the tragedy of the commons was inevitable if private property rights were not enacted. But not all positive research starts with a case of success – some grapples with and examines failures, reflecting the idea that a positive lens can be applied to any situation, regardless of whether it is 'good' or 'bad.' For example, some POS studies examine tragedies, such as the US airline industry's response to the September 11 attacks, and use them as a learning tool to understand resilience and recovery (e.g., Gittell et al., 2006). In both instances, scholars applied positive frames to social challenges and revealed examples of success that were hitherto ignored or devalued. In doing so, these scholars upended long-held assumptions on how to respond to social challenges.

Ideas also matter in terms of how they are situated within a field – whether they are syphoned off into an independent, isolated area of research or are integrated – or at least positioned adjacent to – other research concepts and themes. Here, we can learn from the Pockets of Effectiveness (POE) research stream in development studies (Kjaer, 2021; Roll, 2014). POEs are government agencies or arrangements that work reasonably effectively and are dedicated to an aspect of the collective good, despite operating within a broader governance system mired in inefficacy and corruption (Kjaer, 2021). The logic behind POE research is that 'success' will be extremely limited if the goal is to transform whole bureaucracies, but, the identification of smaller successes – POEs – within a broader system may help inform incremental changes and improvements.

Second, the exploration of new perspectives needs momentum. The social capital of lead proponents and the availability of resources to sustain the initial 'lift-off' are crucial to providing such momentum. Some might assert that the forging of new terrain in a field of study is best left to well-established and well-recognized scholars who can give the topic an air of legitimacy. But this is unlikely to generate momentum and drive new and innovative ways of thinking. Experienced academics often are overinvested in their way of doing things and fresh ideas may need to come from emerging academics (Seligman, 2019). Thus, in their effort to take positive psychology from an idea to legitimate movement, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi focused on involving young and talented researchers as "the fulcrum" of the field (Seligman, 2019).

Another way to build momentum for a new movement (positive or otherwise) is to draw on cases from across a range of countries and contexts around the world. This creates a rich cache of positive examples in different parts of the world and increases the ability to learn from and draw on the insights of

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researchers from a range of backgrounds and experiences. Doing so not only would have concrete benefits for PPA, but also would have more general benefits for public administration as a field, which is centered on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) jurisdictions (O'Flynn, 2022). In other words, a more global – indeed, inclusive – approach to scholars and contexts would help PPA, and public administration more broadly, learn from success in all parts of the world and learn about broader systemic ways of 'doing' government (Drechsler, 2015).

Third, positive movements that have garnered praise, relevance, and broad support within and beyond their academic fields have generally achieved practical impact. Indeed, it appears that positive movements in academia thrive when their research agendas and findings aim to improve practice for individuals, groups, organizations, and sometimes even society. Positive psychology has achieved this within specific domains, such as individual psychology (Rashid and Seligman, 2018) and practices within secondary education (Cameron, 2021). Appreciative inquiry also has generated various practices aimed at unleashing positive improvements in the organization (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Yaeger, 2000; Bushe and Avital, 2009). Both these movements have made demonstrable professional inroads, improving how people perceive and make sense of themselves and their organizations in the service of creating more meaningful and effective people and organizations (Carter et al., 2007; Hsieh et al., 2019; Johnson, 2014).

Surprisingly, it is less clear whether the positive movements discussed here have engaged effectively with the criticisms they have elicited. Have they learned how to avoid being typecast as naive and starry-eyed? Have they figured out how to present research in ways that do not seem narrow, unrealistic, or superficial? Have they found ways of engaging in good faith on questions of power, conflict, and bias? We are prone to believe that these issues are never resolved, but rather are continuously evolving. After all, living and organizing – like governing – are fundamentally precarious activities where the waves of evidence-inspired ambitions frequently crash on the rocks of larger social forces, contending idea(l)s, political realities, knowledge limitations, resource constraints, institutional rigidities, and organized resistance.

When we set out to produce this volume, we had one broad and general goal: to advance the research on several important questions and themes from the manifesto (Douglas et al., 2021). But, both by design and happenstance, we drew on the lessons from other positive movements and worked hard to proactively address potential critiques. As we explain in the next section, we were open to a wide variety of *ideas* about PPA. Thus, some entries focus on governance successes and others grapple with disappointments and challenges, but all of the entries cover issues central to public administration, which helps frame PPA not as a niche within the field, but rather as an approach that can

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span the field. We built *momentum* by engaging both emerging and established scholars from all parts of the world, and we sought to continue that momentum by making the volume open access, thereby ensuring widespread accessibility. We worked actively to ensure that the entries would speak to the world of professional *practice*, by looking at when, where, why, and how PPA was enacted as well as the degree to which its enactment influenced positive change. Finally, we sought to engage directly with potential critics and criticisms, urging our authors to address potentially problematic or negative features of public affairs, including for example, hierarchy, power structures, cultural biases, privileges, inequalities, and conflicts, among others.

WHAT'S IN THE VOLUME?

An edited volume does not magically appear, it results from a long – sometimes tantalizing, sometimes tedious – process that involves smart, dedicated, and thought-provoking authors. We purposefully set out to manage that process in an inclusive, participatory, and engaging manner. Through personal requests and widespread open calls, we invited colleagues from around the world to contribute to this volume, asking them to consider some of the big ideas of PPA and to offer empirical studies of it. In the commissioning process, we ensured that contributors to the volume represented the broadest possible group of authors, geographically and generationally. We wanted to hear new ideas, from people all over the world, so as to advance the PPA agenda in a progressive and inclusive way.

Our authors submitted an initial pitch setting out how they would contribute to moving the PPA agenda forward. Everyone developed extended abstracts that were shared among us. We worked together, through a series of online discussions, sharing ideas, encouraging the development of themes, and exploring what we meant by PPA. In June 2023, a subset of authors came together in Utrecht to meet in person, present and debate key ideas, and showcase contributions to a broader audience at the Public Management Research event. This allowed us to hear from colleagues outside the PPA 'bubble,' and to take on board their feedback, critiques, and encouragement. We purposefully took a longer time horizon to develop the ideas and the results of that work, which is now captured in 27 contributions presented in this volume, produced by 57 authors from across every continent (except Antarctica).

The volume is composed of three Parts: one that centers on PPA's *foundations*, a second that presents empirical accounts of positive *practices*, and a final that examines more specific *tools* policymakers and public managers may employ to achieve positive outcomes. In addition to chapters that explore issues in depth, the volume also includes a series of insights, short pieces meant to provoke and inspire.

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Foundations

In Part I of the volume, we elaborate on the *foundations of positive public administration*. The entries in this section lay the groundwork for PPA, exploring its historical roots, examining its politics, and offering frameworks for moving beyond success and failure, through to analytical and methodological means of identifying conditions and antecedents, or 'pathways' for PPA.

In Chapter 2, Grant Duncan explains why 'PPA is as old as the hills' and takes us on a journey through the enduring human project to improve the well-being of people and communities. In this sweeping and provocative account, Duncan demonstrates that while the PPA moniker may be new, its historical antecedents are not. The question of how to achieve collective aspirations, or the common good, has occupied us for millennia – antedating the rise of the West – and has produced a range of administrative traditions.

Expanding the foundations of PPA, Matt Flinders explores its politics in Chapter 3. He takes us for a walk on the 'bright side' and on the 'dark side' of government, pointing to potential blackspots and risks for those advancing the PPA agenda. He sets out some of the emerging critiques of the movement, drawing out some warnings for PPA. Emphasizing the need to not lock ourselves into a binary view of bright and dark, success and failure, good and bad, positive and negative, Flinders develops a framework for the multi-level interplay of critical factors. The framework enables a much more nuanced and sophisticated analytical stance and repertoire. The nesting and success-within-failure elements are important in this approach, showing how one can still be critical in pursuing positivity and success.

In Chapter 4, Fernando Nieto-Morales and Liesbet Heyse sketch a methodological and analytical approach for the multidimensional nature of positivity. Through adopting a configurational approach and embracing equifinality, they show how focusing attention on the 'causes of effects' can illuminate potential paths toward positivity. In doing so, they remind us that context always matters and that various configurations of factors may yield very different effects in different settings. Moreover, they take us beyond the binary, showing how 'positive' and 'negative' are different paths, not mirrors of each other.

Practices

Part II of the volume offers a large selection of studies that document *practices of positive public administration*. Here we essentially 'zoom out' and take a more expansive look at PPA examples in a variety of specific contexts. Traversing Burkina Faso, Canada, Puerto Rico, Germany, Kenya, Latin America, Aotearoa New Zealand, Pakistan, Bhutan, and a subset of Western democracies, our authors provide insights into how various combinations, con-

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figurations, and clusters of contextual, institutional, political, organizational, and leadership factors underpin and drive PPA in practice.

In Chapter 5, Susan Ostermann and Josephine Wouango show how a more facilitative approach to administration can overcome the limitations of seemingly weak states to deliver positive outcomes. Their study specifically focuses on approaches to reducing female genital mutilation and cutting, comparing villages in Burkina Faso and Mali. Ostermann and Wouango provide a compelling argument for developing approaches that match the attitudes of the population and the socio-cultural context and show how building on untapped strengths can open avenues for tackling complex social challenges.

In Chapter 6, Mason Ducharme, Susanne Thiessen, and Evert Lindquist showcase successful self-governance strategies of Indigenous Nations in Canada. They show how after many decades of colonial rule and oppression, Indigenous Nations have developed distinctive administrative approaches that reflect 'wise practice,' a notion that complements key aspects of PPA and expands them beyond the Euro-Western mindset. Through an exploration of wise practice, the authors draw out important aspects of Indigenous cultures and contexts that shape the way positivity is enacted, such as intergenerational leadership, thinking and decision making, and an ethos of community well-being. In doing so, the authors offer great insight into how public administration itself can benefit from listening to and learning from a fuller range of administrative traditions.

Chapter 7, by Omar Pérez Figueroa and Nicola Ulibarri, showcases independent community aqueducts in Puerto Rico and demonstrates how micro-level community approaches can deliver positive outcomes and how perspectives on what success is profoundly differ among stakeholders. They bring to the fore questions of colonialism, marginalization, and power. Zooming in on local community-led water providers, the authors identify success-enabling and success-constraining mechanisms, all the while reminding us that power dynamics shape our very notions of positivity.

In Chapter 8, Jonas J. Schoenefeld, Friederike Edel, Iris Behr, Birte Frommer, Michèle Bernhard, and Britta Stein explore how municipal governments can work with other societal actors to address wicked problems. Focusing on sustainable development initiatives in Germany, they draw out programmatic, process, and political factors of success, and also identify negative aspects. In doing so, they provide insights into the durability of these arrangements over time, and how the dynamics of relationships can change, as success continually develops and unfolds.

Participatory forms of decision making and collaborative governance are the focus of Chapter 9 by Nicholas Jager and Jens Newig. Here, the authors draw on a dataset of some 300 cases across 20-plus Western democracies. In analyzing these diverse cases, Jager and Newig highlight the trade-offs

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between ecological, social, and economic goals, and identify distinctive pathways to success. Cutting across these pathways, however, is a thread of consensus-oriented collaboration, characterized by meaningful interaction and consensual decision modes. The findings from this study show that committed public actors are central to PPA.

In Chapter 10, Gedion Onyango provides an overview of positivity in African public administration, drawing together decades of work traversing the transition from 'Afro-pessimism' to 'Afro-optimism.' While the positivity movement in Africa goes by other names – pockets of effectiveness and positive deviance – it has been a long-term project consistently centered on identifying and building on what works. In the case of the Kenyan Revenue Authority, Onyango shines a light on how robust, contextually informed policy solutions can be developed. From his perspective, the future of reform (and the future of PPA) hinges on how we build on success, rather than dwell on failure.

Eric Otenyo highlights important aspects of PPA through an exploration of Kenya's Department of Immigration Services in Chapter 11. By "looking for positivity in an unlikely place," Otenyo shows how reforms have produced a high performing government organization that is driving wide-ranging positive outcomes for society, including substantial unexpected benefits that have come from the broader issuing of passports for citizens. Drawing on the notion of pockets of effectiveness, Otenyo positions the case as an example of better than to be expected agency performance, and one which holds its own with those in nations around the world.

In Chapter 12, Pablo Sanabria-Pulido and Cristian Pliscoff stress that the experiences of underrepresented regions of the world often are subject to a negativity bias, with the global North positioned as having 'better-performing' administrative approaches. The authors argue against this view, asserting that far too much attention has been paid to dysfunctions and failures and more attention should be given to understanding of success in Latin American public administration. The authors then explore participatory budgeting and a novel poverty reduction program to demonstrate that PPA is alive and well in Latin America.

The next three contributions explore positive perspectives on government responses to crises, specifically to the COVID-19 global pandemic. In Chapter 13, Verna Smith, Lesley Middleton, Jocelyn Cranefield, and Lina Guo explore Aotearoa New Zealand's pandemic response, which was considered one of the leading nations in the COVID-19 crisis. The authors explain how able and empathetic leadership enabled the government to develop and nurture a range of partnerships that undergirded the positive outcomes during the pandemic.

Chapter 14 offers insights from the COVID-19 crisis in Pakistan. Specifically, Usman Chohan challenges the PPA agenda to speak to the developing world as well as the developed, and to look to situations of adversity

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for lessons. Chohan demonstrates how Pakistan out-performed nearby nations during the pandemic, despite seemingly having more limited baseline capacity to respond. Drawing out unique factors, he shines a light on the factors that shaped the Pakistani success story. By combining virtu (policy effectiveness) and fortuna (existing advantages), Pakistan demonstrated how developing nations can provide strong examples of PPA.

Sigay Dem explores the factors that contributed to Bhutanese success with rolling out the COVID-19 vaccine in Chapter 15. Specifically, Bhutan was heralded worldwide for its rapid deployment of the vaccine and its rate of coverage: the nation vaccinated 94 percent of its eligible population in just two weeks. By integrating cultural and religious practices into the vaccination campaign, and drawing on the reverence for the Bhutanese King, the response was able to achieve extraordinary outcomes. Dem explains how these factors combined to produce a story of PPA that sets Bhutan apart.

Tools

Part III of the volume delves into some of the *tools of positive public administration*. Here, we 'zoom in' to understand how specific tools, mechanisms, aspects, conditions, or characteristics, can enable more positivity in public administration. In these contributions, authors cover a variety of tools, including co-production, participation, partnerships, sensemaking, procurement, collaboration, parliamentary settlements, and cultural competency, among others. While not an exhaustive list, our authors help shed light on how various tools can animate PPA in practice.

Chapter 16, by Alex Ingrams, Suzanne Piotrowski, and Daniel Berliner, examines successful multi-stakeholder partnerships and the importance of participation. Specifically, the authors show how participation in the Open Government Partnership has catalyzed patterns of positivity that may not be so obvious. They explore how direct and indirect pathways interact, providing insight into the multi-level governance aspects of PPA. With the scale of their study, the authors uncover patterns of positivity in a way that single country or single policy examples may not. Their chapter demonstrates that what might look random and unrelated at the micro or meso level, can look quite different at the macro level, with positive outcomes developing over time from participatory learning and sharing, rather than from formal policy levers.

In Chapter 17, Scott Douglas delves into the local-level collaborations that have been deployed to tackle the increasingly complex global challenge of radicalization. Douglas zooms in on the Aarhus Model, widely viewed as a leading approach to identify and address radicalization, showing how the approach works. From the emphasis on multidisciplinary expertise and collaboration, through to persistence and iteration over time, Douglas shows

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how this success story is the product of long-term experimentation, short-term detours and dead ends, and adaptation. Local experts working together, over time, focused on an incredibly complex problem, are addressing a globally significant wicked problem from a micro stance. Despite the successes of the model, Douglas warns against the idea that this can be transplanted elsewhere, as history and context are critical to the pursuit of positivity.

Ambitious policy agendas and divergent interests collide in Chapter 18, Matt Wilder's exploration of the power of co-production in navigating complex policy settings. In pursuing an ambitious green energy agenda, political actors in the province of Ontario in Canada took several missteps. Following hasty policy announcements by political actors, bureaucratic actors were able to broker agreements during the policy implementation phase, using coproduction as a powerful tool to address a range of problems, thus avoiding a potential policy disaster. Wilder's contribution addresses the call for integrating micro, meso, and macro conditions, alongside the interplay of agents and their context. In doing so, he moves beyond the binary of success and failure, demonstrating how aspects such as foresight, proactivity, and consensus-building can position governments and communities for more positive outcomes.

Sensemaking techniques take center stage in Chapter 19 by Emamdeem Fohim, Adeela Kodabux, and Amar Kumar Seeam. In their study, the authors explain how public servants developed a unique 'cultural chameleonizing' strategy to manage stakeholders in the multicultural setting of Mauritius. Their contribution explains cultural chameleonizing as being receptive, adaptive, and unifying, and shows how it enabled a successful policy outcome: the creation of the Mauritius' light rail transit system. Going further, the authors make a compelling case seeing cultural chameleonizing not only as a management strategy, but also as a foundation for public service, where empathy, adaptability, and unity are core values.

In Chapter 20, Cynthia Barboza-Wilkes and Thai V. Le explore the topic of cultural competency in crafting effective public services. They extend the theme of engaging with diverse populations, focusing in on local government in Los Angeles, California in the United States. Their study highlights how attention at the micro level, the frontline of engagement, is essential to building positive societal outcomes. For Barboza-Wilkes and Le, cultural competency is a mechanism for fostering positivity through more inclusive decision making and nurturing interpersonal relationships and through exploring opportunities for new ways of thinking that abound in increasingly diverse settings.

While much of this volume focuses on the role of public organizations and public servants, Chapter 21 examines how politics shapes PPA. Specifically, Jostein Askim, Bjørn Mo Forum, and Bent Sofus Tranøy examine parliamentary settlements in Norway, demonstrating how political compromise provides

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a foundation for enduring commitment to common good policies. Despite contested social issues and the passing of time, these political settlements have largely held strong, providing certainty to the population and producing widely valued societal outcomes. Providing a tool for overcoming the short-term competition of politics, political settlements have proven to be an important tool of positivity in the Norwegian context.

In Chapter 22, Anna-Maria Dimand and Milena Neshkova explore the movement toward green purchasing and ask whether public procurement can be transformed from the "poster child of negativity bias" into a powerful tool for pursuing societal outcomes. They examine the activity of local governments in the United States and show how the tools used to do the work of government can be repurposed in pursuit of other goals. In doing so, they demonstrate the importance of trade-offs and time – what might not look like such a great idea in the short term, can have longer term positive payoffs.

Alejandra Medina and José Sánchez explore how cross-boundary collaboration can shape effective implementation in Chapter 23. The authors examine a solid waste management arrangement between multiple municipalities at the border of two states in Mexico. They demonstrate how shared definitions, collective action, and a commitment to providing services that contribute to a sustainable future, helped overcome social dilemmas and institutional barriers and advance implementation. Moreover, the development of shared rules and values, alongside an iterative and adaptable approach, emerged as central aspects of producing positive outcomes.

Insights

Throughout the volume we have also included short *insights* that offer provocations, applications, and inspiration for positive public administration. In the first insight, Susan Keim asks us to consider the role of benevolence, love, and citizen engagement in undergirding a more positive governance perspective and providing an "antidote to poor public administration."

Pamela Herd and Donald Moynihan, authors of the second insight, use the case of student loan forgiveness in the United States to illustrate how reducing administrative burdens can generate positivity. For them, the case offers a "proof of concept for a better approach to public service delivery," even if, in the final moment, it was killed off by the fractious nature of the US political system.

In the third insight, Richard Callahan and John Kirlin explain the dynamics of disruption and iteration in producing positive outcomes. Drawing on cases from the United States, they demonstrate success-enhancing strategies that span levels of government. They note that generating successful strategies

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requires the astute combination of craft, political work, and nested patterns of components, or what others might call pathways or configurations.

Finally, Ndangwa Noyoo and Minenhle Matela offer the fourth insight, which explores public-private partnerships (PPPs) and shows how these arrangements can be vehicles for PPA. They set out success stories of PPPs in South Africa and provide insights into how they have been used to raise the standard of living and well-being for communities. While Noyoo and Matela warn against positioning PPPs as a panacea, they make the case that in the South African context, PPPs have delivered positive outcomes in the past, and can be an important tool for doing so in the future.

By both design and content, the editors of this volume set out to advance the emerging study and practice of positive public administration. We hope the reader will feel we have done so in a helpful manner. At the very least, the 27 entries of this volume show that there are many pathways to positive public administration. Indeed, PPA does not require scholars to become cheerleaders for their objects of study, to be bound by any particular theoretical perspective, epistemological commitment, or methodological toolkit, or to be limited to 'WEIRD' contexts. Likewise, it does not require practitioners to be blind followers, ideologues, or adherents. Rather, PPA research and practice can be intellectually rigorous, diverse in context, scope, theory, and methods, and impactful for individuals, communities, and nations. We invite you to take a walk on the bright side and see how positive public administration is more than just an optimistic state.

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