Fred W Riggs’ Ecological Approach to Administrative Theory

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Fred W Riggs (born on July 3rd 1917 and died on February 9th 2008) was one of the pioneers in developing administrative models and theory; and most represented administrative thinker in modern society. He was well known for his studies in Comparative Public Administration (CPA) specially Riggisan’s Model- ‘Fused-Prismatic-Diffracted models’. He was Professor Emeritus at Political Science Department of University of Hawaii, USA and received several awards from several institutions and countries in recognition of his knowledge to the understanding of Administrative Theory.

Introduction

F W Riggs made a great effort in searching for an objective and effective model for analyzing public administration in developing countries with ecological and comparative perspectives. With his background in sociological theory, he developed the ‘Fused-Prismatic-Diffracted models’ for understanding the administrative structures and organizational behavior. The main thrust of his model is that ‘Western Models are relatively less relevant to the developing countries, which have unique environment/contexts- social structures, economic life, cultural practices, political symbols, allocation of power, division of labour, etc. Unlike the developed nations, the administrative systems in these countries are considerably shaped by the ecology/context’.

Several scholars, world over, are influenced by his writings and models for understanding the theory of public administration, since 1960s. However, many scholars of CPA have not agreed with his ‘Fused-Prismatic-Diffracted models. Several Governments have introduced administrative reforms and modernized the organizations, during the four decades. This has necessitated the scholars to critically examining the relevance of these models to the developing nations, especially in the context of globalization.

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The present Scenario of public Administration

The landscape of public administration—both in theory and practice—has fundamentally changed in terms of unprecedented shifts in its ideological underpinning, structural configuration and normative inclination largely based on market-driven assumptions or principles. These paradigmatic changes are encapsulated often as New Public Management (NPM) continues to draw considerable attention, especially in the form of divergence-convergence debate, the world over. It represents a more drastic transition in the developing world where the post-colonial state-centric model of management known as ‘Development Administration’ and Riggs’s Ecology of Administration came under greater challenge posed by this newly emerging market-centered model. The emergence of other sets of context neutral propositions and/or models e.g. Good Governance, Public Private Partnership, Best Practices, etc, have worsened the level of ambiguity in public administration in developing world. The emergence and worldwide proliferation of neoliberal policies and reforms and the corresponding intellectual shifts towards businesslike analytical framework have led to the relative marginalization, if not total replacement of such a comparative research traditions.

Riggsian Models

The practical and academic atmospheres—such as Second World War; the Cold War; Ford Foundation Funding for training and undertaking research on administrative systems of developing countries; American scholars’ interest to study the administrative systems in non-American settings—has inspired Riggs to develop CPA based on a contextual/ ecological perspective and Structural-Functional approach. In the study of CPA Riggs identified three major trends, viz, (i) the shift form a **normative approach** emphasizing the ideal or desirable and universal principles of administrative behavior to a more **empirical approach** covering both ideographic and nomothetic studies based on analysis of actual administrative situations; (ii) the transformation from **ideographic approach**—as reflected in studies of a single agency or country—to a **nomothetic approach**—giving greater priority to generalizations, laws and theory building based on regular patterns of administrative behavior or institution; (iii) the shift from a **non-ecological approach**—study of formal administrative institutions without considering contextual influence—to a more **ecological approach**—that emphasis on interaction between institutions and their contextual factors such as social structure, tradition, culture, etc. Riggs
emphasized the need to study administrative systems in the ecological perspective so as to gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the administrative dynamics.

**Tools to understand the Administrative Theory**

In support of his propositions, Riggs borrowed the concepts, words from the subjects such as Sociology, Physics, and Biology to explain the Ecological approach to public administration. In this regard, he used two analytical tools, viz, ecological approach; and structural and functional approach.

**Ecological Approach**

The ecological approach to the study of public administration first initiated by JM Gaus, Robert Dhal and Robert A Merton and latter Riggs made distinctive contribution to this approach. Ecology of public administration, according to Gaus, includes the study of people place/property; physical and social technology; personality and aspirations of people; emergency conditions/catastrophes. Gaus argued that administrative systems are influenced by its surrounding factors. Furthering this concept, Riggs analyzed the relationship between administrative systems and ecological factors- history, social structures, traditions, customs, economic situation, political symbols, technology and communication, etc, in a larger perspective. On the basis of his studies in Thailand and Philippines, he illustratively explained how environmental conditions influence administrative systems.

**Structural- Functional Approach**

Riggs analysis of public administration primarily relies upon a structural- functional approach. He refers to structure as a society’s pattern of activity. This approach envisages that in every society certain important functions have to be carried out by a number of structures with the application of certain specified methods. Based on this, Riggs attempted to explain the various societies. The traditional agrarian societies, highly developed industrial societies, and developing societies are functionally and structurally distinct. He termed *functionally diffused societies* as ‘fused societies’ (in traditional societies various social functions and social structures are highly functionally diffuse, that is, there is no organized division of labour) and *functionally specific’s societies are ‘diffracted societies’* (as found with in an industrialized societies). In addition to
these two diametrically opposed extremes i.e. lack of division of labour society versus a highly specific’s society, there is a **third society called prismatic society**- Riggs’ most popular model. Riggs emphasized that ‘Fused-Prismatic-Diffracted models’ are designed to be ‘ideal’ types not to be found in any actual society. Nevertheless these models would help us to understand and analyze the societies and function of administrative systems.

**Fused model**

Based on the experience of imperial China and pre-revolutionary Siamese Thailand, Riggs proposed the concept and characteristics of fused societies. In these societies, a single structure carries out a number of functions. These societies heavily depend on agriculture with no industrialization and modernization. The economic system is based on law of exchange and barter system. The King and royal family members and officials nominated by the king carry out all administrative, economic and other activities by themselves.

The administrative systems in a fused societies, is based on the structure of family and strives to protect the special interests of the family and certain sects rather than aiming at universal happiness and development. These societies do not differentiate between justice and injustice; formal and informal setups and governmental and non-governmental activities. Ascriptive values play a dominant role in the society and the behaviour of people would be highly traditional. Age old customs, beliefs, faith and traditional ways of living enable people to live together and control their behavior.

**Diffracted model**

Riggs uses American society as model of diffracted society. A diffracted society will be dynamic with high degree of specialization and each structure carries out a specialized function. All organizations and structures in the society are created and based on scientific rational. Ascriptive values cease to exist, giving way to the attainment values in the society. Governments would be responsive to the needs of people and protect human rights. People would bring pressure on the government to get their demands fulfilled. There would be a general consensus among the people on all basic aspects of social life. Public pay attention and give respect to the laws of the nation on their own. This would enable the government to implement the laws and discharge its responsibilities without any difficulty. The economic system of
diffracted society is based on market mechanism. The influence of market has both direct and indirect effects on the other facets of the society. Riggs called it marketised society.

**Prismatic Model**

Riggs concentrated all his efforts on prismatic model to explain the nature and administration in the post-colonial developing nations. While doing his field work in Thailand (1957-58 and teaching in Philippines (1958-59), articulated prismatic model based on the metaphor of prism-as the fused while sunlight (which represents the fusion of several colours) passes through a prism, it becomes diffracted into several separate colours. Here the fused light signifies fused structures of a traditional society (single structure performing all necessary functions); the diffracted colours represent the specialized or diffracted structures of modern society (separate structures or institutions for major functions); and the situation with in the prism (which is transitional phase between the fused and diffracted stages) reflects the conditions in developing nations, which Riggs began to define as prismatic societies. In explaining the nature of administration in these transitional societies, Riggs systemically used an ecological approach to explore their non-administrative domains of society, politics, economy and culture.

According to Riggs prismatic society has three important characteristics features viz, (i) heterogeneity (co-existence of the traditional and the modern; the simultaneous presence of quite different kinds of systems, practices and viewpoints ); (ii) formalism ( the extent to which a discrepancy exists between the prescriptive and descriptive, between formal and effective power, between the impression given by the Constitution, laws and regulations, and actual practices and facts of government and society; gap between the stated objectives and real performance); and functional overlapping ( similar functions are performed by different institutions; the extent to which formally differentiated structures of a diffracted society co-exists with undifferentiated structures of a fused society). Due to these features, the social change in a prismatic society would be inconsistent, incomplete and irresponsive. Further these features are reflected in the prevalence of poly-communal society (where interaction among communities based on suspicion and distrust; different communities to try to pull the society in different directions in furtherance of their own sectional interests); the bazaar- canteen model economy and its price indeterminacy (caused by the influence of social status, bargaining capacity, and official position on economic behavior; both economic and non-economic factors interact and
influence the economic structures and finally reduce a state of ‘price indeterminacy’); and **poly-normativism** in decision process (representing the use of both rational and non-rational criteria).

**Sala model: Administrative Sub-system of a prismatic Society**

Riggs termed the administrative systems in prismatic societies as Sala Model, which has variety of meanings; in diffracted societies it is known as such as bureau or office and in fused society it is termed as, chamber. The Sala has certain features of diffracted bureau and fused chamber. The heterogeneous values system and the traditional and modern methods of the prismatic society reflect in administrative dealings and functional management. The administrative rationality and efficiency found in bureau are absent in Sala. In prismatic societies or Sala-model, family, community, nepotism, etc, play important role in the appointment to various administrative positions and in taking decisions or performing administrative functions. Universalization of laws/norms is disregarded. In a diffracted society, the considerations of kinship are kept away from the administrative behavior and apply the norms equally. In a fused society the politico-administrative system has a patrimonial character and therefore, provides dominant importance to Kinship or family.

**Critical Assessment of Riggsian model**

Several scholars, including Riggs examined and reexamined the relevance of Riggsian models’ in different countries, during the past several decades. It is not exaggeration to mention that there can not be any study of CPA and Development Administration without reference to the views of Riggs. Riggs theory is subjected to **criticism and appreciation**. Some of the observations of these are presented below.

Riggs refined “prismatic model,” suggested improvements or alterations to the model. The main reason for such improvements is to probe and question the unilinear model of thinking. In the “prismatic model,” “degree of differentiation” was considered to be the only standard against which prismatic societies were judged; that is, it was believed that the higher the degree of differentiation, the greater the degree of diffraction. However, this inferential relationship cannot adequately explain the following: when a social system is already differentiated/diffracted, and yet is mal-integrated as a whole, how can it remain stagnated in a prismatic social state.
Riggs himself admitted that the model’s reasoning was faulty and would lead to misguiding thinking; therefore, within the “unilinear path” concept Riggs added a “degree of conformity” axis. In contrast, the “bilinear path” proposes that a prismatic society is not determined by economic development, nor by achieving modernization alone; rather, it can be found in different societies in various degrees of differentiation. Consequently, prismatic societies are not limited to underdeveloped countries. More precisely, the more differentiated a society is, the greater the need for conformity in order to reach a state of diffraction; however, the social risk is also greater, as is the likelihood of disastrous consequences, including prismatic breakdowns. Riggs’ theory is based on nonconforming behavior as found in Western societies—including metropolitan crises, ethnic riots, student boycotts, social distancing, as well as “the hippy phenomenon”—characteristics particular to prismatic societies in highly developed countries.

Riggs’ critics are endless. Prethus, for instance, regards Riggs’ model as too broad and abstract. Arora, in a quite lengthy article, analyzes the “negative character” of the prismatic model. Specifically, he argues that the model holds a Western bias, and moreover, the terminology used to describe the particular characteristics of the prismatic model is value-laden, and consequently, tend to emphasize the negative characteristics of prismatic societies. Monroe also considers the prismatic model a reflection of Western standards, and urges Riggs to study prismatic phenomena within American society in order to improve his model. As to Riggs’ promotion of “formalism”, Valson and Milne raise several points of contention; namely, the terminology “formalism” constitutes the disparity between that which is “formally prescribed” and that which is “actually practiced.” It follows that the advantages and disadvantages of “formalism” cannot be broadly encapsulated, but rather are determined through context. Undoubtedly, these criticisms have contributed to the adjustments made in Riggs’ model, such that many points of contention have already been clarified within his book Reexamining Prismatic Societies.

Another critique of the “fused-prismatic-diffracted” model argues that while it is predicated on the notion of deduction, there is little empirical evidence to support it. Most sciences require empirical evidence so that results can be verified, not only repeatedly but also at any time and place. Moreover, objective comparisons would then likewise be possible. Riggs, however, endeavors to prescribe “formalism” as a given standard, and most scholars consider this concept as unsatisfactory. Moreover, when scholars attempt to use Riggs’ model to study the
administrative systems of foreign countries, they often encounter numerous difficulties. Scholars have also found that in some cases the “fused-prismatic-diffracted model” ignores certain variables, but in others it exaggerates them. For instance, as Riggs himself pointed out, aside from cultural factors there are others that should also be considered. These include historical background, the political structure of post-colonial countries, territorial size, the status of hierarchical power, and the role of the military, as well as social ideologies. Most importantly, the unique circumstances of each country will have a profound influence on administrative behavior. Yet, these are factors that Riggs seldom discusses.

There are some major critics who consider Riggs’ models too deductive and theoretical without adequate empirical basis; too static about the influence of external social forces; too indifferent towards social change; and too over-generalized on the basis of only few case studies. Although there could be some truths in these critical observations, Riggs often offered adequate responses to these critics: that his theory-building was based on in-depth case studies; that he maintained a balance between the ideographic and nomothetic approaches in his academic work; and that he was always against claiming the American administrative system as a universal model.

**Globalization- Reexamination of Riggs’ Theory**

In the context of Globalization and economic reforms, governments, the world over, adopted common practices and governance methods to address the problems of the societies. But these trends appear be quite disjointed, incoherent and thus uncertain in addressing societal concerns. Therefore there is a need to reexamine the Riggsian theory.

Shamsul Haque argues that, today, public administration in most developing countries has gone through drastic reforms based on the market-driven principles and governance models (e.g. NPM, Best Practices, and Good Governance) which are often empirical-reductionist, ideographic, and non-ecological. These contemporary administrative models highlight the importance of narrow empirical data, performance indicators, and results or outcomes; focus largely on empirical case studies without any grand nomothetic generalization; and claim universal applicability in different parts of the world without much concern for ecological or contextual diversity.
First, during the recent decades, too many drastic and intensive reforms in public sector management have been adopted in too many countries, which need to be compared, critically understood, and systematically generalized to make some theoretical sense. The nomothetic approach outlined by Riggs widely known article “Trends in the Comparative Publication” (published in 1962) and applied in most of his other work can provide a valuable lesson in this regard.

Second, the contemporary market-driven reform models have largely been based on a Universalist approach, which has been embraced in many developing nations often under the influence of international agencies, although such models may not be appropriate for these countries with weak private capital and entrepreneurship, less developed market forces and alarming levels of poverty requiring subsidized basic services. In this regard, the message inherent in the ecological approach suggested by Riggs needs to be taken seriously into account.

Third, in line with the common imitative nature of administrative reforms adopted in the past, many regimes in developing countries have recently introduced pro-market models originating and borrowed from the experience of developed nations. Riggs always opposed such context-less imitative reforms and emphasized the importance of building the nationally or domestically suitable models of public administration in these countries based on their own contexts and needs.

Finally, unlike advanced industrial nations where the major domains of society (e.g. politics, economy, business, religion, and administration) are relatively autonomous or mutually exclusive, these domains are deeply interconnected in developing societies, which requires a multi-dimensional approach and an interdisciplinary perspective practiced and underscored by Riggs. His multi-disciplinary scholarship is evident in the use of multiple sources of ideas and constructs (especially from sociology, comparative politics, economics, and public administration), the diversity in his research areas (administration, ethnicity, presidentialism, and globalization), and in the recognition of his work in major fields of study beyond public administration.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, an ecological public administration should improve upon its weaknesses in the following ways. First, in using ecological public administration as a research approach, the
notion that the environment alone can determine administrative behavior should be avoided. Riggs observes that, while it is important to describe the environment’s influence on other subjects, inversely, one should also acknowledge the influence individuals have on the environment. Only by taking into consideration the dual aspects of interacting influences can we hope to develop an authentic ecological model. Second, although the ecological approach attempts to explain the transformation process within an existing system or within the functioning of a peculiar environment, it still largely ignores the ultimate concern of public administration, namely, the evaluation of policies and the realization of intended goals. Milton J. Esman, a comparative public administration scholar, points out that in additional to traditional research, one should also pay more attention to those studies that make a direct contribution to the substance of public administration. These include studies on industrial development, education, public sanitary science, personnel administration, and financial-economic policies, among others. Thus, rather than pointing out behavioral limitations, the ecological approach should emphasize strengths in problem-solving instead. Lastly, public administrative models that build upon the foundation of the ecological approach are usually predicated on intuitive and a priori assumptions. The models are found to be inefficient and cumbersome due to their lack of empirical experience. John Forward thus proposes an ecological public administrative model that employs statistical analyses to study related ecological factors that are based on empirical experience.

The aforementioned criticisms of Riggs’ “fused-prismatic-diffracted” model are not, of course, without their own shortcomings. Some of them may have misrepresented and even distorted the essence of science, while others are derived from entirely different analytical approaches. In light of the fact that each scholar has his or her own interpretation and criticisms, one shouldn’t completely ignore the “fused-prismatic-diffracted” model’s contributions and strengths.
References


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