

# Introduction

## Stories as Knowledge Creation

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When we came up with the idea for this book during summer 2020, the world was gripped by some of the worst conditions of the still-ongoing (as of this writing) COVID-19 pandemic. In the United States, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), suddenly became a household name. Before his name and face became synonymous with the U.S. crisis response, Dr. Fauci was a known expert in infectious diseases, leading the way for more than four decades on HIV/AIDS research (Science Friday, 2021). Like the HIV/AIDS virus, COVID-19 at its initial arrival in the United States and throughout the world held many mysteries—where did this come from? How does it spread? How does it mutate?

Dr. Fauci is a longtime public servant who has dedicated his life to understanding infectious diseases with a goal of keeping people healthy. Dr. Fauci easily could have left the public service at many times during his career and indeed had been asked to join the private sector when he reached retirement age (Rubenstein, 2020). But he continued to serve, and in that role, he was—and is—the subject of intense bullying from political leaders turning a public health crisis into one of politics and morals (Korecki & Owerhohle, 2021). Seeing the immense pressure and bullying he experienced for his work, this led us to wonder why a public

servant who was largely serving behind the scenes before 2019 came to be the center of such intense scrutiny and attacks. We took that question and began reflecting on our own journeys into public service, knowing scholarship in our field also investigates the politicized nature of public service (Overeem, 2017; Spicer, 2010; Svava, 2001).

In our discussions, we went deeper into understanding what made us go into public service and what drives others to pursue these positions. We wanted others to understand the breadth and depth of what government is, does, and can be—thanks to the public employees serving in their roles, sometimes quietly behind the scenes. Research in public administration deftly details the functions of street-level bureaucrats interfacing with the public daily (Lipsky, 1980/2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), usually focusing on those with prominent and highly visible roles, such as police officers, teachers, firefighters, counselors, and so forth. Our aim with this book is to help broaden the understanding of public service and government by shining a light on those employees usually serving more behind-the-scenes roles but with great impact on people, policies, and public problems.

To do so, we wanted to share our own journeys into public service to situate the book within our field but also to showcase our belief in government's ability to be and do good even in the face of political, administrative, and social challenges.

*Staci: You might say my journey into public service began in fifth grade. When I was a kid, my elementary school had an essay contest where the winners would get to be elected officials for the day. Somehow, I won and was named kid mayor. We got to go to city hall and learn all about government. They also placed us into a small holding jail cell, and sadly that has stuck in my mind since! But something else must have stuck because when it came time to get a high school job, I went to work for my local government in Florida working on the teen website with my friend. We tried to write stories and cover topics that would engage teenagers with the city. That led to me serving on some of the city's volunteer boards as the teen representative.*

*After college, I came home to South Florida and applied to graduate school. I wanted to earn my MPA because I wanted to bridge my two degrees in political science and journalism. Instead, I ended up getting a PhD in public administration while working for the same local government that hired me as a teenager. During my doctoral studies, I worked for the communications and marketing department helping write press releases, compiling scripts for the radio and TV stations, and working with department members on their various*

projects like the magazine and website. It was while working there I got my inspiration for my research into public branding, which I have been doing for more than a decade. I work for a public institution in Florida now training the next generation of public sector leaders who love government like I do.

**Jessica:** Both of my parents served in the U.S. Navy, so I grew up with great admiration for those who choose to serve their country. My parents were always willing to step forward and fight for others, whether it was about busing for schoolchildren or running for school board. They taught me individuals could use their voice to make a difference. I grew up fascinated by government—but did not know exactly where I wanted to work (I definitely had a youthful dream to be the director of the Central Intelligence Agency). With a double-major in political science and English, when considering my next steps, one of my favorite (and toughest) professors, Dean Alfange, Jr., introduced me to the MPA. And the rest is history. I fell in love—public administration was the answer to a question haunting me but not yet fully formed in my mind. How do we take political and policy ideas and make them real, to actually make a difference in people’s lives? Public administration was the answer.

I was planning on working for local government, but I have always been academically inclined, and my professors encouraged me to go on for a PhD. I had my epiphany moment to continue on for my PhD while attending the Tennessee City Management Association Conference. I was listening to a panel on utility deregulation and the challenges for cities and realized I was thinking about how I would study the impact, in addition to the practice implications. A PhD in public administration was how I could wrestle with theory and practice—do exciting research, but research that can actually be relevant for public service. What I love about being a professor of public administration is I get to study public administration concepts and practices; interact with practitioners through consulting, training, and research; and train and guide future public servants in university classrooms—it is really the best of all worlds combined. Working in a public institution, training future public servants, I remain every day inspired by the stories and experiences of my students, and they are the best guides for whether I am asking important questions in my research.

**Alex:** The stories of public servants have always fascinated me. My introduction to public service came during my high school years when I worked as a photographer for a local newspaper in suburban Philadelphia. I often found myself photographing fires, car accidents, and other emergencies, trying to document challenging incidents and the lifesaving work of first responders.

*When I approached my local fire department offering to be their official photographer, they indicated they already had one, but noted they were always looking for volunteer firefighters and emergency medical technicians. That somewhat offhand comment from a fire chief has shaped my entire professional and academic career for the last quarter century. The nearly 12 years that I served as a firefighter, emergency medical technician, fire officer, and administrator were profoundly impactful, and have given me an appreciation for the virtuous, demanding, and important work that front-line public and nonprofit servants do every day in emergency services and beyond.*

*The narratives that emerge from public and nonprofit service are a key mechanism for understanding culture, rules, behavior, and outcomes. The telling (and retelling) of stories are how public servants reflect on and make sense of recent incidents, how coworkers highlight and reinforce the appropriateness of behavior, how critical and inquisitive personnel identify and solve problems, how new members or employees learn about their colleagues, and how employees cope with the emotional challenges of work. Though my doctoral studies briefly took me away from the world of emergency services, I was drawn back into stories and the work of emergency services personnel as I began to write my dissertation, which focused on paramedics and their views of and reactions to difficult, complex, or challenging incidents. This thread of research, and my substantive interactions with in-service graduate students over the last decade as a professor, have reinforced how much I value the work government and nonprofit workers engage in every day and how much we can learn from their narratives of action. This edited volume, then, is both a collection of artifacts of public service and a testament to their work. Though research foci and methods ebb and flow in academic public administration, the need for and interest in narrative research is enduring and will always capture our attention.*

**Lauren:** *In my final year of undergraduate work in church ministry and theology, I thought I was destined to teach New Testament studies. Really. However, I kept getting drawn back to sociology and social work. I decided to turn my minor in sociology into a second major to be safe. I am so glad that I did. My urban sociology professor wisely suggested that I interview the city manager of Abilene, Texas, for a class assignment. I thought I would be bored. Instead, the city manager and I had to be interrupted two hours later so that he could get to his next meeting. I was far more interested in city infrastructure than I realized!*

*But this was not the first time I had learned about public administration, even though I did not remember it at the time. In my second year of my MPA, I found the test results for a career test I took in the eighth grade. Low and*

*behold, the first suggestion was public administration. It was a 94% match. I was destined for public service even before I knew what “public administration” meant! Like Staci, I started early.*

*I admire public servants and all that they do. This love affair began as I worked in a mental health nonprofit during my first position and deepened when I worked for the city of Irving, Texas. My colleagues were committed to making the world around them better, whether through case management, water quality testing, or code enforcement. I also started my dissertation journey in the strategic planning department in Irving, seeing firsthand how thinking strategically can impact the inner workings of a city. I am currently a proud state employee in Maryland, as I am on faculty in a public institution. I am prouder to teach so many current and future public servants and to constantly learn from their stories.*

## Goal of the Book

We share our stories about journeying into public service to situate the book in a broader conversation about the citizen-state encounter (Guy, 2019; Nielsen et al., 2021). By citizen, we mean people receiving government services regardless of legal status. When public servants (whether in government or nonprofits, paid or volunteer) interact with citizens, that interaction creates meaning for both parties. That meaning is the state in action and contains multitudes in terms of understanding one’s value in relation to the state, what it means to be a citizen and a public servant, and how individuals matter. While the field of public administration is expanding its methodological toolkit to include more advanced statistical modeling and experiments, if we ignore this interaction and the sensemaking process that occurs in these encounters, we run the risk of losing the humanity at the center of our field (Ford, 2021; Weick, 1995). By no means are we advocating for decreasing quantitative rigor. Instead, what this volume shows is the breadth and depth of public service and why we need to understand lived experiences of public servants to illuminate for current and future generations of public administrators the complexities of good governance.

We do this through showing the power of stories and storytelling. Hummel (1991) reminds us that stories are critical ways managers develop and share knowledge about public service. Managers and scientists differ, Hummel (1991) argues, in the kinds of knowledge they need, when, and

how. While scientists are constructed to be dispassionate rational actors, managers are driven by “the present community of those involved in a problem who must be brought along to constitute a solution” (Hummel, 1991, p. 33).

Stories allow people to translate what they see, live, hear, feel, and experience into something workable and manageable (Feldman et al., 2004). For example, Boje (1991, p. 106) argues that organizations themselves are storytelling systems whereby “storytelling is the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders.” Stories are dynamic and living. Stone (1988) reminds us that stories can shape—for better or worse—policy and administrative outcomes because they are powerful ways of knowing. Therefore, the stories of public administrators are central to how we understand the field and public service in practice. and need to be captured.

Manoharan and Rangarajan (2022) introduce narrative competence into public administration, maintaining that public servants are themselves storytellers with important knowledge to share through their experiences. They argue that narrative moments and narrative capacities are how organizational change happens, and public servants need to be trained in storytelling similarly to any other competency. They identify some elements of a public administration storyteller, including drawing on experience, distinguishing between actors in the story, assessing story quality, and engaging in reflective practice (Manoharan & Rangarajan, 2022). Throughout our book, the authors have relied on public servants as storytellers, serving as the vehicle through which that lived experience is shared. Some authors use a first-person description to tell their own public service stories. Our book draws on this line of storytelling research to share lived experiences of public servants.

As researchers in public administration, we are not disconnected from the lives and processes we are studying. Reflexivity and interpretive research go hand in hand to deeply uncover the embedded knowledge practitioners have (Yanow, 2009). Our goal with this edited volume was to give researchers the space to tell their own stories, share their interpretive research, and derive lessons from both. We hope the volume benefits those wanting to learn more about the depth and breadth of public servants beyond highly visible frontline workers.

Our book builds on the work of other scholars who have taken a similar approach to shedding light on the lived experiences of public

servants. *Public Administration Review*, one of the leading journals in the field, routinely publishes administrative profiles of distinguished public servants to distill the lessons of their service for the field; see for example Donna Shalala (Radin, 2007), Viola Baskerville (Hutchinson and Condit, 2009), Randi Weingarten (Kearney, 2011), and the administrators of Challenge.gov (Mergel and Desouza, 2013). In terms of books, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) *Cops, Teachers and Counselors* is probably one of the most well-known volumes in public administration and management that uses stories to convey the complex decision-making process—and policy implementation powers—of street-level bureaucrats. Riccucci (1995) profiles people she calls “execucrats,” the appointed officials working in the U.S. federal government carrying out important policy and programmatic functions. She notes how these professionals often are the target of blame and ridicule to score political points—a trend that continues in contemporary political and administrative spheres.

Likewise, Riccucci, Cooper and Wright (1992) profile public servants making a difference, focusing on their leadership skills and characters. Doig and Hargrove (1990) take another biographical approach through profiling well-known public servants, again with the goal of drawing lessons about leadership and decision-making. O’Leary (2020) captures the stories of public servants who have disagreements with the work of their organizations and challenge this work and their supervisors through creative dissent techniques. Our book carries this tradition not by focusing on profiles exclusively but by sharing research from various scholars globally about public servants in broad positions. Some, as you will read in this book, have high-level positions, while others are community service workers on the ground trying to improve community health and well-being. Our book is an extension of this street-level bureaucracy work rather than a competition. Authors in this book also showcase the power of stories and storytelling for generating knowledge.

## Stories Throughout the Book

With this setting, the book presents stories in various formats. Some chapters are personal reflections from people in roles such as emergency management and tax assessment. Some chapters mirror what we have read in volumes such as *Cops, Teachers, and Counselors* (Maynard-Moody

& Musheno, 2003), with vignettes throughout sharing the lived experiences of public servants and considering the lessons of those vignettes for theory and practice. Others still reflect more academic writing, with findings from qualitative interviews presented. Another chapter reflects more of a profile of a public servant working for a U.S. federal agency.

We believe the chapters in the book do a nice job of presenting the various ways in which knowledge can be shared within our field. Stories from the first-person perspective shed light on what those people experience in their everyday jobs. The profile-style pieces can highlight this form of knowledge sharing in more descriptive work. More academic-style chapters present qualitative data analysis to find patterns that can apply to other fields. Readers ideally see a variety of methodological approaches where narratives and stories can be used as valid forms of knowledge (Hummel, 1991).

Stories are detailed and varied. They have plots. There is a beginning, middle, and end. There are characters in a place and space. Stories and narratives shape our realities—they socially construct our worlds (Jones, McBeth, & Shanahan, 2014). Stories from others—thinking about their lived experiences—are a powerful way of teaching and can help us practice empathy and understanding (Morgan & Dennehy, 2004). Our goal with each chapter is to have the public servants featured within share their stories and their lived experiences with readers.

The stories may take on different formats, yet each conveys lessons learned. Stories have themes such as fear, critical communication, heart-break, empathy, understanding, struggle, and triumph. The stories, whether presented as first-person accounts or as part of a qualitative interview study, help convey the vastness of public service. A reader might not think about how a camera is a policy instrument, how a meteorologist is both a science communicator and community member, or how a vaccine volunteer is treated by those they are meant to serve. We hope each chapter is thought-provoking for all readers. We hope students can see themselves in some chapters. We hope some read these stories and spark a research agenda. Stories are crucial in bringing out lived experiences (Hummel, 1991). These lived experiences bring the public service to life for students, scholars, and all those interested in public administration and management. It did for us compiling this volume, and we are eager to share these stories with readers.



## Plan of the Book

The volume is arranged into four parts, which evolved based on the themes in the narratives. In seeking chapters for this volume, we reached out to our colleagues in the United States and abroad—academics and practitioners—to solicit stories and examinations of public servants who may not regularly get attention in the literature. The resulting 15 chapters tell stories at different levels of governments, across different countries, and in many different settings. They illuminate that which makes public servants special in different contexts but also those characteristics and values that unite public servants across this multiplicity of settings.

Section 1 we have called Balancing Acts, reflecting the myriad roles public servants play—and how those roles sometimes affect their abilities to help stakeholders. For example, chapters shed light on the tension between oversight mechanisms versus using discretion to best help citizens. Sometimes this puts street-level bureaucrats into simultaneous roles of “good guys” versus “bad guys,” as discretion and multiple roles can both be helpful and harmful (Sager et al., 2014).

The second section, titled Life and Death Pressure, reflects how some public servants—even beyond traditional first responders—face and make life-and-death decisions. Chapters in this section highlight various public servants providing communication, direction, and policy implementation that can help or harm individuals and communities. Rule abidance or rule deviation can have serious consequences, especially when talking about emergency services (Henderson, 2013). Some themes in this section overlap with section 1, whereby competing roles intersect with life-and-death decisions (see also Edlins & Larrison, 2020). For example, Overly details his firsthand experiences providing emergency services during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the complexities of which forced him in many directions with myriad responsibilities.

Section 3 is called Possibly Misunderstood Roles and Responsibilities and brings to light parts of the public service that might not be clear to everyone. Chapters in this section reflect jobs and roles people *think* they know a lot about—public defenders, tax assessors—yet the realities of these jobs are more complex than meets the eye. Administrative systems are complex and dynamic (Klijn, 2008), and chapters in this section highlight that complexity through frontline workers’ stories and experiences handling those ever-moving challenges.

The final section of our book we called Unexpected Realms of Democracy because stories there bring to light public servants influencing democratic norms and participation through their unique roles. For example, a wildlife photographer shares his story of how photographs influence public opinion and policy. Arts and culture representatives are also highlighted regarding how their programming affects community cohesion. The chapters showcase the varieties of street-level bureaucrats and their influence on public administration and policy (see Hupe & Hill, 2007).

Our hope is that this book has something for everyone. When we decided to write this book, we were thinking of several audiences, including students in our classes. Master of public administration students, particularly those who are brand-new to the field, will get to read about the full breadth of the world of public service—the highs and lows of what makes these careers worth the stressors. Or those students who are more experienced career public servants might open their eyes to additional roles and responsibilities they might not see in their silos. Our students can think about what they would do in the shoes of these public servants and carry those lessons forward thoughtfully in their careers. We also see this book speaking to those outside the classroom, including practitioners and researchers alike, with the hope that it spurs more research and storytelling like the following chapters.

We hope readers not only learn but also leave with additional questions to research or lessons to bring into their practice. The conclusion draws some lessons we have learned from reading each chapter and putting them together to tell the larger story of public service. We welcome ongoing dialogue about these lessons learned and hope public administration scholars pick up and continue these important themes and dialogues.

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