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# CO-DESIGN-ing a more context-based, pluralistic, and participatory future for public administration

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## Abstract

Public administration (PA) increasingly faces new and emerging challenges. To address such challenges, researchers can work collaboratively with practitioners to identify and tackle the most pressing issues. Yet, intentionally establishing an ongoing dialogue not only between researchers and practitioners but between researchers, practitioners, and the communities that PA scholarship and practice are intended to impact can enhance all stakeholders' understanding of complex social problems and improve solutions. Forms of participatory and context-based research such as this are called many things across disciplines, but PA has yet to embrace such approaches fully. Thus, we introduce a framework entitled CO-DESIGN, intended to illustrate the process of advancing PA research through the co-production of knowledge between researchers, practitioners, and communities. Additionally, it serves as an acronym outlining eight focal areas we argue the co-production of knowledge can help advance. We discuss the CO-DESIGN process and agenda, including its implications for the field.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Over the last century, the scholarship published in Public Administration has greatly shaped the field, helping to advance understanding of the challenges, goals, and values of public and nonprofit organizations (Busuioac, 2016; Flink & Molina, 2021; Kroll, 2017; McGuire & Agranoff, 2011; Raadschelders 2008; van der Wal et al., 2008; van Loon, 2017; Walker & Boyne, 2009), including important topics related to diversity and personnel management (Assadi & Lundin, 2018; Ballart & Rico, 2018; Humphrey, 2021; Schuster, 2017; Taylor, 2010), the impacts public service organizations and their personnel have on the public they are responsible for serving (Andrews et al., 2008;

James & Moseley, 2014; Morrell & Harrington-Buhay, 2012; Shybalkina, 2021; Sievert, 2021; van Ryzin & Charbonneau, 2010), and innovative (Houtgraaf et al., 2021) and effective organizational (Egeberg, 2020) and institutional design (Boin & Lodge, 2016; Skelcher et al., 2005). Since the journal's inception, it has focused primarily on publishing work that improves the efficiency and effectiveness of public service organizations and public servants (Institute of Public Administration, 1923; McDonald, 2021). Nonetheless, as four emerging scholars coming up in the field of public administration, we are tasked with looking to the future.

Public administration (PA) as both a study and a practice is continually confronted with pressing societal issues. New and emerging challenges facing scholars and practitioners alike include addressing the climate crisis (Sachs et al., 2019), administrative burdens (Chudnovsky & Peeters, 2021; Herd & Moynihan, 2019; Moynihan et al., 2015; Peeters, 2020), structural inequities (Blessett et al., 2016), and discrimination (Jilke et al., 2018), in addition to understanding how the public sector can adapt to the digital age (Braams et al., 2021; Hood & Margetts, 2007; Trischler & Westman Trischler, 2021), overcome talent shortages (Asseburg & Homberg, 2020; Keppeler & Papenfuß, 2020; Linos, 2018), and prioritize conflicting goals (Chen & Jia, 2021). To confront these challenges and others, scholars are prompted to put forth practical and accessible solutions (Barzelay & Thompson, 2011) and practitioners are encouraged to work collaboratively with communities to implement them (Knight, 2021).

At the same time, understanding the complexity of the problems and solutions at hand requires an ongoing dialogue not only between scholars and practitioners but also with the communities that PA research and practice are intended to impact. A productive dialogue between scholars, practitioners, and communities can offer benefits for research, practice, and community impact. Conversely, disconnection between and across the three groups of stakeholders can impede important advancements in the field and further gaps between knowing and doing (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). However, many important factors of the administrative or applied environment are unobservable by an outside researcher, and even the most robust research designs can prove difficult in identifying and assessing the key factors contributing to social problems and driving solutions. To make matters more difficult, much of the scientific literature remains hidden behind paywalls (Day et al., 2020) or is generally inaccessible to the public (Atchison & Bull, 2015; Hayes, 1992). Alas, the gaps between those experiencing problems firsthand (communities), those grappling with how best to solve them (practitioners), and the knowledge and expertise that can help (academic researchers) remain wide.

We contend that our place as emerging scholars, early in our academic careers, arms us with unique perspectives that can prove valuable in imagining the possibilities of the “next 100 years.” Our introduction to the field of PA coincides with the emergence of the behavioral public administration movement (Grimmelikhuisen et al., 2017; James et al., 2017), growing accessibility to big data and computational methods (Andrews, 2019; Lavertu, 2016; Mergel et al., 2016), greater use of critical theories (Blessett et al., 2016; Conyers & Wright Fields, 2020; Riccucci, 2021; Santis, 2021; Starke et al., 2018), and calls for more global perspectives (Ashley et al., 2021; Guy et al., 2019; Haque et al., 2021; Zahra & Bach, 2021). During a time of unprecedented global social, political, and cultural changes,<sup>1</sup> we have come to embrace and promote a wide range of methods as well as diverse and critical perspectives. Above all, in the wake of these changes, we recognize that the research generated in our field has the power to address some of the biggest challenges our world faces. This will demand us, as scholars, to not only be intentional in the research we conduct, but in how we work with practitioners and communities to develop and implement effective solutions based on the research. Therefore, in this article, we take the opportunity to imagine a PA that embraces the role of values and diverse contexts, and incorporates the perspectives of the individuals and communities our research is designed to impact. We ask modestly what approaching research in such an intentional, collaborative, and pluralistic manner might look like and what impact it could have on PA theory and practice, including the way we understand and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public service organizations and public servants (Institute of Public Administration, 1923).

We argue that PA can benefit greatly from participatory approaches in which academic researchers, practitioners, and community members work together to co-design and co-produce knowledge. Where, in practice, that knowledge can be used to address community problems with the help of those facing them. Put another way, a more participatory approach that involves researchers, practitioners, and communities can help to produce more

context-relevant and inclusive solutions to pressing problems faced by individuals, communities, and society, at large. To some, such an approach may sound too normative, overly idealistic, or maybe even radical. However, the notion that research can, or better yet should, consider the effect of contextual factors (O'Toole & Meijer, 2015) and embrace participatory approaches is not new (Kapucu, 2014). Today, fields adjacent to PA such as public health (Mckay, 2011; Sánchez et al., 2021; Wallerstein, 1999), community psychology (Wallerstein, 2021), management (Bapuji et al., 2020), and sustainability studies (Norström et al., 2020) consistently leverage participatory approaches to not only advance theoretical research but also work directly with communities in practice to solve real problems. Similarly, the principles of engaged scholarship (van de Ven, 2007; van de Ven, 2018) illustrate the ways in which researchers can (and do) engage diverse groups of stakeholders in the research process to better understand complex problems and their solutions.

In our exploration of the question posed above, we developed a framework that illustrates how a more context-based, pluralistic, and participatory approach can advance PA theory and practice. Using design science as the foundation, our framework, “CO-DESIGN,” integrates insights from human-centered design, sustainability studies, community-based participatory research, and engaged scholarship that we believe can guide academic researchers, practitioners, and members of the communities our work is designed to impact in a collaborative and participatory approach we refer to throughout as the *co-production of knowledge*. CO-DESIGN describes both the process of academic researchers, practitioners, and communities co-producing knowledge as well as the types of knowledge that can be co-produced when these three groups of stakeholders work together to design and conduct research. CO-DESIGN also functions as an acronym for eight particularly important areas that this approach we describe can help to advance in PA research and practice. The areas of focus we identify are: *Co-production of knowledge*; *Open science*; *Developmental and comparative perspectives*; *Equity and diversity*; *Social innovation*; *Inclusive participation*; *Goal-oriented research*; and finally, *New possibilities (for conducting research)*.

We gladly join other PA scholars advocating for more participatory forms of research (Bushouse et al., 2011; Kapucu, 2014; Orr & Bennett, 2012) and those promoting collaborative approaches including co-design and co-production (Bovaird, 2007; Osborne et al., 2021; Seravalli et al., 2017). As scholars have previously pointed out, we also recognize that it is important to take care not to get caught up in the idyllic promises of co-design, co-creation, and even co-production (Dudau et al., 2019; Osborne et al., 2021; Pollitt & Hupe, 2011) by explicitly acknowledging both the nuances and the general conceptual ambiguity of these ideas. Therefore, we recognize that the “magic” (Voorberg et al., 2015, p. 1334) of the concepts we highlight here is largely their normativeness. Nonetheless, as we will discuss, fields adjacent to PA provide evidence that the co-design and co-production of knowledge between academic researchers, practitioners, and the communities they serve can provide scholars with know-how, experience, and the opportunity to observe phenomena up close as well as from afar when put into practice (van de Ven, 2018). As these fields have shown, co-producing research and knowledge is not only an innovative way to address big societal challenges (Bapuji et al., 2020) but is also of major relevance for advancing theoretical understanding of important phenomena in the field (Norström et al., 2020).

The article proceeds as follows. We begin with a brief overview of public administration as a design science, focusing mostly on how it informs our conceptualization of “design” as both a process and a product. We then introduce the CO-DESIGN framework, beginning with an overview of the approach we are proposing, highlighting the existing streams of literature that the framework is inspired by. We then discuss one at a time, the eight areas that make up the CO-DESIGN acronym. Finally, we conclude with a short discussion of what we believe this approach can offer the field going forward, including recommendations for how public administration education can be used as a catalyst for bringing these ideas into practice.

## 2 | PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AS A DESIGN SCIENCE

Design science has a long intellectual history in the field of PA, led by Herbert Simon's idea of public administration as a design science (Simon, 1969), but design-oriented approaches are also attracting greater attention as of late

(Barzelay, 2019; Howlett, 2014; Lewis et al., 2020; McGann et al., 2018; van Buuren et al., 2020). Simon's argument was that PA, as opposed to the natural phenomena of the natural sciences, is a science that is primarily concerned with social (i.e., artificial) constructs. He posits design science is best thought of as a means of first identifying "what is" and then prompting designers to develop solutions ("what ought to be"), using an iterative process to discover the best possible solution before devising ways to bring it to fruition. Broadly speaking, design theory, as both a study and practice, has three fundamental principles. First, designers, or those at least engaged in the act of design in any capacity, must understand the context and how an artifact can assist in attaining a specific goal (Simon, 1969). Second, design does not consist of simply applying theory to practice to create a product; the process of designing and the product designed must be understood, developed, and reflective of the context (Schön, 1983; Visser, 2010) with theory and practice constantly informing one another throughout. Finally, the design process must be thoughtful and intentional (Jones, 1992).

Today, "design" in the PA context is often associated with policy labs and experimental approaches (van Buuren et al., 2020) which has led some to mistake design science, especially its emphasis on experimentation and the psychological mechanisms of human behavior, as a purely positivist approach. However, most contemporary theories of design embrace multiple research philosophies including a more positivist approach of systematically identifying problems (design process) and exploring potential solutions (design product) through interpretivism and pragmatism. In this way, design, as both a process and a product, is influenced by systems thinking, including iterative, often experimental, processes, but also human-centered, reflective approaches in order to understand and address complex problems.

Design-oriented perspectives are particularly useful for navigating the world we live in because they demand that we first acknowledge and seek to understand complexity. This includes the broader social context, the values and perspectives of both "users" and "designers," and the interactions that take place between them, using a multitude of tools and methods available. Design-oriented approaches in PA, more specifically, have been cited in recent years as means of identifying and strategically addressing public problems (Barzelay, 2019; Lewis et al., 2020; McGann et al., 2018; Rindova & Martins, 2021; Shangraw & Crow, 1998; van Buuren et al., 2020; Walker, 2011), emphasizing the critical role of context, complexity, and interactions across and between multiple governance, institutional, and organizational levels. In particular, Barzelay and Thompson (2011) address how best to apply a context-based design science approach to advance PA. Their argument is, in essence, that useful conceptual knowledge comes about in the study of specific events, the experiences within and between events, and the practices that they eventually inform. However, in order to realize that knowledge, there must be sufficient understanding of the historical context and how it comes to inform events, experiences, and practices. Doing so ultimately helps to understand and navigate the complexity inherent to the public sector and public service delivery.

Additionally, design principles have proven especially useful when applied to the policymaking context because they prompt policymakers to be intentional in their designs, taking care to understand the context and how it can shape outcomes, including the types of policy instruments that are most effective for particular contexts, and the ways that various mechanisms interact to produce the desired goal (Howlett, 2020; Howlett et al., 2015; Lasswell, 1932; Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016). Similarly, Lowe et al. (2021) introduce Human Learning Systems (HLSs), a concept that not only acknowledges the role of complexity in modern governance but also embraces it. Contrasted with results-based management approaches such as the New Public Management, HLS emphasizes that public sector outcomes are first and foremost products of the systems they are embedded in. In other words, outcomes are shaped heavily by contextual factors, including the values of those who are responsible for designing services, those delivering services, and those receiving services, and the many interactions between them.

In all, these relatively recent examples of design-based perspectives and inquiries in PA scholarship speak to the growing acknowledgment of how context shapes outcomes and a greater appreciation for investigating and understanding how mechanisms interact to produce certain outcomes. More importantly, though, they illustrate the promise of approaching social problems through a design lens—not solely as they are but how they could be—for

encouraging collaborative, iterative, and innovative approaches to the design and delivery of public services that more intentionally center the users of those services (Lowe et al., 2021) and the desired outcomes.

## 2.1 | Design as a process and a product

The idea of approaching social problems not solely as they are but how they could be has remained the same but the methods for doing so have evolved over time. As mentioned above, design is best thought of as both a process and a product. Although, it is important to note that this has been debated for some time as reflected by the tensions that continue to exist between “design-as-verb” and “design-as-noun” (Jackson & Aakhus, 2014).

Whether a process or a product, design involves a multitude of diverse disciplines, perspectives, and methods of inquiry. In the context of PA and other applied social science disciplines, it emphasizes systems thinking and human-centered approaches to understanding and addressing complex social problems. Design as a process, regardless of what context it is applied in, is inherently about understanding problems and investigating solutions in a systematic and iterative manner, providing an opportunity to continually link theory to practice (Cross, 2012; Papalambros, 2015).

It is important to recognize that this process of problem-solving places those affected by the problem, or those most likely to “use” the solution, at the center (Trischler et al., 2019). Human-centered design is popular in technology and information-systems but applying human-centered design principles in the public sector context is only beginning to catch on. One prominent example, again, is Lowe et al.'s (2021) HLSs approach which heavily emphasizes the human element of public service delivery. The authors use “VEST” to outline four fundamental components of HLS—variety, empathy, strengths, and trust—that emphasize the importance of (1) recognizing the variety of strengths, needs, and experiences of both service users and the practitioners tasked with providing services, (2) building empathy to center the emotional and physical needs of people, (3) strengths-based approaches that focus on assets rather than deficits, and (4) trust in public servants to act in the best interest of others, especially service users and vulnerable populations. As other scholars have argued, we can expect to see improvements in service delivery when the individuals and communities facing problems are at the center of solutions (Bovaird, 2007). For instance, Benjamin (2021) poignantly argues that putting beneficiaries of nonprofit programs at the center is critical when it comes to managing nonprofits. Although, it can be argued just the same for any organization aiming to serve communities and make a positive social impact. Additionally, new, improved, and more equitable programs and services can be developed when the communities that programs and services are designed to benefit are involved in identifying problems and developing optimal solutions. Ultimately, approaching the design of both research and public programs and services from this humanist perspective can be powerful for producing effective, efficient, and impactful solutions to complex problems.

Design as a product emphasizes that which is produced from the design process. In fields outside of PA such as engineering, the arts, and technology-based disciplines, design-led processes are most often used to produce artifacts that solve a predefined problem (Papalambros, 2015). There, we often see traditional design approaches employed in efforts to create tangible designs such as material objects, technological artifacts, or physical spaces and structures. However, it is not necessarily about creating artifacts in the physical sense as we argue here. Design just as often represents the intangible. In the context of PA, a design can be a policy instrument, program, plan, service, or a new and innovative approach (van Buuren et al., 2020) to management, service delivery, or theory.

## 3 | THE “CO-DESIGN” FRAMEWORK

Design science as an iterative, collaborative, and interactive process of identifying and pursuing optimal solutions based on the unique context, values, and perspectives of both designers and users serves as the foundation of our

CO-DESIGN framework. At the same time, CO-DESIGN serves as an acronym for eight important areas of PA research and practice that we believe this approach can help to advance. Before introducing the framework in its entirety, we must first acknowledge “co-design” and “co-production” as they are already conceptualized in the PA literature. Additionally, we provide a brief overview of the concepts of engaged scholarship and community-based participatory research which also informs this work. Finally, we wish to clearly define what we mean when we talk about *researchers*, *practitioners*, and *communities* as key stakeholders in the co-design and co-production of knowledge in PA.

### 3.1 | The “co-” paradigm in public administration research

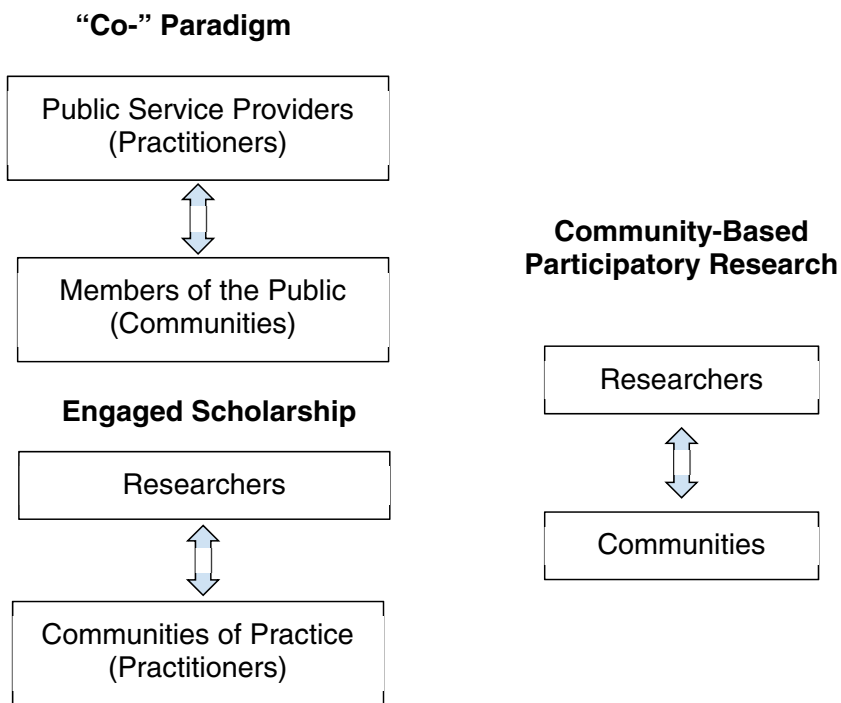
Co-design joins co-creation and co-production as part of the “co-” paradigm (Dudau et al., 2019). These terms are often used to denote collaborative approaches to public service delivery and have attracted a great deal of attention in recent years due to their emphasis on cooperative efforts to improve service delivery and emphasize public value. Co-design, more specifically, refers to the process of involving members of the public in planning or designing policies and programs (Voorberg et al., 2015). In PA-related studies, co-design tends to be much more human-centered and concerned with the value that is produced during and as a result of collaborative practices (Blomkamp, 2018). It often involves a more deliberate process of engaging specific individuals and groups most affected by a policy or service or involving actors with specific skills, expertise, and experiences that can contribute to the process of developing effective solutions (Blomkamp, 2018; Carey et al., 2018).

Voorberg et al. (2015) posit that co-design sets the stage for co-production, especially in terms of the value that is produced by involving stakeholders in the design and delivery of public policies and services. Co-production has suffered from conceptual ambiguity but has nonetheless become a prominent term used to describe the production of services that comes about from the collaboration between service providers and service users (Brandsen & Honingh, 2018; Dudau et al., 2019; Ostrom, 1996). The process and outcomes of co-production, for instance, are collaborative in nature and are thought to enhance democratic public sector values such as participation, transparency, and accountability (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; McMullin, 2021).

The interaction and cooperation between public service providers and the public are foundational to the “co-” paradigm in the PA literature. Not to mention, it has its roots in the New Public Governance which has been the focus of PA research in the last decade or so (Bryson et al., 2014; McMullin, 2021; Osborne et al., 2016). Involving the public in the process of developing solutions and producing outcomes is certainly relevant to what we envision here but we also argue that public value can be created by involving PA researchers in these processes as well.

### 3.2 | Participatory research outside of public administration

The idea of connecting scholars to communities of practice is the foundation of *engaged scholarship* (van de Ven, 2007, 2011, 2018). van de Ven (2007), a management scholar, proposed engaged scholarship as a means of more effectively studying complex social problems by involving multiple key stakeholders in the research process. Specifically, he argues that practitioners possess their own domain expertise that is crucial for generating relevant and useful knowledge of complex problems. Practitioner’s professional knowledge, while easily dismissed by researchers, is a “distinct mode of knowing in its own right” (van de Ven, 2007, p. 39). As such, practical knowledge should complement, not compete or substitute for, the scientific knowledge of academic researchers. Involving practitioners in designing and carrying out research is a promising way to advance science by strengthening the relationship between theory and practice vis-à-vis a close relationship between theorists and practitioners. van de Ven (2007) also argues that scholars can conduct more relevant and useful research this way by ensuring that the



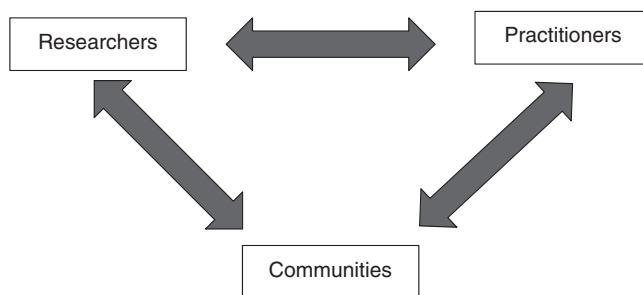
**FIGURE 1** Participatory approaches to advancing research and practice in the literature [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/padm.12828)]

questions they are asking reflect the experiences of those who know and actually experience the problems in question.

Another similar form of participatory research is that of *community-based participatory research (CBPR)* (Higgins & Metzler, 2001; Minkler et al., 2003; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; O'Toole et al., 2003). CBPR is much more focused on fostering relationships between academics and members of the community, whereas engaged scholarship places a greater emphasis on the collaboration between academics and practitioners. CBPR is a form of participatory action research (Kindon et al., 2007; McIntyre, 2008) widely used in research on public health (Brush et al., 2020; Coombe et al., 2020; Lantz et al., 2001) and environmental research (Cohen et al., 2016; Shepard et al., 2002; Symanski et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2020), especially when the two intersect in ways that directly (and negatively) impact communities (Carrera et al., 2019). CBPR is a method of addressing complex social problems by building equitable partnerships between researchers and communities (D'Alonzo, 2010). The approach is focused almost entirely on the role, and arguably the responsibility, of academic researchers in engaging directly with the populations they “study.” This is especially the case for researchers interested in addressing the problems faced by people and communities; problems that PA research is very much concerned with as well.

Our framework integrates the “co-” paradigm in PA research with insights from community-based participatory research (CBPR) and engaged scholarship to illustrate a participatory approach that we believe can guide academic researchers, practitioners, and community members in the co-production of highly relevant knowledge that can advance PA theory and practice. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between the three stakeholder groups according to the “co-” paradigm, engaged scholarship, and community-based participatory research. Figure 2, on the other hand, illustrates how we envision these three coming together into the co-production of knowledge between PA researchers, practitioners, and the communities PA research and practice are focused on. Thus, Figure 2 is the dynamic we are advocating for and the model our framework, CO-DESIGN, is based on.





**FIGURE 2** Co-production of knowledge between researchers (academics), practitioners, and communities to advance public administration research and practice

Much like engaged scholarship and CBPR, we focus on three groups of stakeholders—researchers, practitioners, and communities. However, we conceptualize the groups a bit differently so that they are better tailored to the PA context. We conceptualize researchers as scholars in the field of public administration and adjacent areas of study (i.e., public affairs, public policy, nonprofit management, etc.). Therefore, while we use “academic researchers” and “researchers” throughout this article, we are referring specifically to the academic researchers who are responsible for generating and contributing to the field’s intellectual development (Houston & Delevan, 1990) and the knowledge-based relevant and useful to public administration practitioners (Box, 1992; Streib et al., 2001; White, 1986).

We acknowledge that those with the skills and expertise necessary to conduct robust and informative PA research are not confined to academe, though. Indeed, relevant, systematic, and useful research is conducted routinely in government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and by outside evaluators. The last few decades have seen an overwhelming emphasis on the performance of public and nonprofit organizations which has lent itself to many of the same research methods of collecting and analyzing data in order to evaluate and improve public programs, services, and policies. Evaluations such as this surely produce new forms of knowledge but the primary purpose of pursuing such insights is to inform the design, implementation, and management of more efficient and effective programs, services, and policies in practice. Thus, we include this type of practice-based research and evaluation under the second group of stakeholders: *practitioners*. Practitioners in this context broadly encompasses those working in public service organizations responsible for administering programs and services to the public, including government agencies, nonprofits, and other public service providers. Whether they are on the frontlines, in managerial roles, or somewhere in between, practitioners play an integral role in providing value to local communities.

Arguably the most difficult to define is our third and perhaps most important stakeholder group: communities. Communities are an integral component of the participatory forms of research we draw on in this article but as Wallerstein (1999) points out, “communities are not monolithic.” Communities are diverse, multifaceted, and amorphous. As such, there is much debate about how community is defined across and within disciplines and approaches. For example, CBPR focuses on the involvement of residents of a neighborhood, city, or county. CBPR also tends to emphasize the importance of identifying and involving community leaders which often includes representatives from local agencies, nonprofits, and voluntary associations (Higgins & Metzler, 2001) as well as the creation of formal community advisory boards (Lantz et al., 2001). Similarly, participatory action research recognizes the role of community leaders in carrying out participatory research but it also highlights the importance of involving individual residents and beneficiaries of the program or service in question (Minkler et al., 2003; Wallerstein, 1999). Whereas, engaged scholarship focuses largely on communities of practice (van de Ven, 2007), which, as discussed above, we consider as its own group. In the context of CO-DESIGN, we conceptualize communities as the individuals and groups that public and nonprofit organizations are designed to serve. In other words, recipients of public services, beneficiaries of public programs and policies, or groups of residents in a defined area or geographic setting, as these populations make up the communities that the practitioners defined above are ultimately responsible for serving.

Below, we introduce and discuss the eight elements of “CO-DESIGN.” Each represents a salient “process” or “product” in PA research and/or practice that we believe that the design-led approach we advocate for can help to advance.

### 3.3 | C is for “Co-production of knowledge”

First and foremost, our model is centered on knowledge co-production as the main outcome. Generally speaking, knowledge co-production serves as a key concept and approach for enhancing research on global change and sustainability (Norström et al., 2020) as well as scholarship on science–policy interactions (Moser, 2016). It is a framework frequently used in environmental science and sustainability research and can be understood as “iterative and collaborative processes involving diverse types of expertise, knowledge, and actors to produce context-specific knowledge” (Norström et al., 2020, p. 183). Emphasizing the unique context of problems aides in developing context-relevant solutions using the resources, expertise, and knowledge unique to the individuals, groups, and geographic areas experiencing them. In the environmental and sustainability sciences, the notion of co-producing knowledge using participatory and transdisciplinary approaches has helped to address and develop effective solutions to complex problems including food and water scarcity and the growing impacts of climate change.

Integrating multiple stakeholders in the processes of knowledge co-production is essential as high levels of interaction throughout the process nurtures ongoing learning and dialogue among participants, fostering new ideas and innovative possibilities. Including multiple stakeholders is not only a source of innovation for public sector organizations (Voorberg et al., 2015), but can also help scholars and practitioners more effectively address complex societal problems in the public sector by working together to collaboratively design research questions, carry out research projects (Moser, 2016), and implement solutions. In some cases, such interactions have also been shown to help build public trust in public institutions (Nyden, 2003) as well as in science and the scientific process (Corbie-Smith et al., 2003; Norström et al., 2020).

We argue that the deliberate process of collaborating across stakeholder groups including scholars, practitioners, and communities to develop solutions to complex problems holds promise for PA, too. In PA, co-production is typically understood as the subject of research rather than a means of approaching or conducting research as we are promoting. However, the PA literature offers examples of knowledge co-production even without using the term explicitly (see Jacobsen et al., 2021; Mukherjee & Giest, 2020). Nonetheless, to enhance the consideration of the particular social, economic, and ecological contexts in which PA research is embedded, and to better understand the limits and opportunities of a particular context (Norström et al., 2020), we argue that a more context-based approach such as this is fruitful. Across several disciplines, scholars highlight that the engagement of scientists *and* users of scientific knowledge (i.e., researchers, citizens, communities, practitioners, etc.) is superior to research conducted independently (i.e., in the “ivory tower”). In this way, research should be solutions-focused but also context-based, pluralistic, and participatory in order to recognize the validity and importance of knowledge from outside academia (Lang et al., 2012; Moser, 2016; Polk, 2015).

### 3.4 | O is for “Open science”

A precondition to this multistakeholder collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and communities we propose is access to knowledge. There have been calls for open access to scientific research dating back to the 1960s (Suber, 2009) but the open science movement has grown substantially in recent years. Open science is best thought of as an umbrella term used to describe the ways that knowledge is created and disseminated (Fecher & Friesike, 2014), with an emphasis on greater access to data, code, preregistration reports, preprints, and published research articles. Calls for open science<sup>2</sup> typically focus on ways to democratize knowledge and enhance the

credibility of scientific research. Proponents also argue that open access can enhance transparency in the scientific process and increase trust in science.

It can be especially difficult to facilitate a fruitful collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and community members if research is not accessible to all stakeholders involved. Therefore, open science initiatives should be prioritized in order to make the co-production of knowledge possible. Organic movements to open science are growing but many barriers still exist to “opening” science, including political tensions and financial considerations (Delfanti, 2013; Mirowski, 2018). It may be the case that new forms of collaborations like those we are proposing can lead to a greater demand for access to science from new groups of stakeholders which ultimately pressures institutions to take the actions necessary to increase access to scientific research. More likely though, is that participatory forms of research may prompt the researchers working with practitioners and communities to take their own steps to make their data and code open access, to preregister research designs, and to publish preprints so that the stakeholders they are engaging with as well as the general public have access to advancements in research.

### 3.5 | D is for “Developmental and comparative perspectives”

Two decades ago, Riggs (1991) argued that knowledge generation for reliable PA and the development of robust administrative principles are inherently comparative processes. A wider-angle view of the world is essential for sound administrative theory in developed and developing contexts alike; pursuit of knowledge unencumbered by physical borders, political agenda, or ideological preferences; and expanding the horizons of choice for policymakers (Jreisat, 2005).

In many ways, the biggest challenges in comparative PA are the direct result of the absence of a context-based, pluralistic, and interactive approach, which we argue for here. This is largely attributed to two epistemological and ideational challenges. The first challenge lies in the pervasive intellectual framework deeply rooted in the Western administrative tradition. Secondly, the field's predilection for the positivist approach to the generation of knowledge often precludes the possibility of a contextualized scientific approach which often implies nongeneralizable, nonuniversal insights (Haque et al., 2021). This dominance of very specific ideas and approaches translates to structural issues with the way knowledge is disseminated and reproduced—English remains the main medium of publication (McDonald, 2021), while developed countries represent the majority of research contexts in PA journals (Gulrajani & Moloney, 2012; Ko & Prameswaren, 2010; Trochmann et al., 2021).

These challenges preclude the developing world from participating in the comparative PA conversation in a meaningful and inclusive way and from being guided in their pursuit of reforms by research, which is genuinely rooted in the local context. This problem is so pervasive that it has spurred a dedicated school of thought in development work—a domain that should directly benefit from academic research insights. According to this school of thought, due to New Public Management orthodoxy driven by inherently Western institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, OECD, and UNDP, among others, developing countries are under pressure to implement reforms that do not take into account the context or historical sensitivities of the local public administration tradition. This leads to empty reforms which resemble those insisted upon by donors in form but not in function (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2015).

To meet the demands of the growing audience in the developing settings, the co-production of knowledge between researchers, practitioners, and communities is urgently needed. To this end, three design-based building blocks need to be in place that address the main challenges in the field of comparative and developmental PA through the co-production of knowledge.

First, more bottom-up local research should be encouraged. Considering the dominance of the English-language publication outlets, these could partner with local institutions to produce the research in the national language in addition to English—a practice that has gained traction in some countries, such as France, China, and South Korea, but needs to expand to other geographical contexts. This, of course, requires close collaboration and communication

with publishing houses in order to signal demand from the non-English-speaking world. The goal here is to have the end-user in mind—the target audience of most publication outlets is not limited to developed countries only. The issue of access for audiences from developing countries also looms large, as discussed above. Publication outlets would do well to consider open access options based on the institution's country of origin or, more boldly, increasingly moving to a hybrid publication model.

On the other hand, researchers and academic institutions hailing from the West could contribute to the progress in developmental and comparative PA by moving away from ethnocentrism and parochialism and more toward a comparative approach in their study of PA including principles and frameworks beyond single-country case studies and more toward examining multiple countries at once. This is mutually beneficial for critical theory-building: developed countries cannot know what works if they restrict themselves to only the context they know.

Finally, there is a pressing need to remedy the lack of context-specific practical recommendations conscious of development challenges and differences in PA traditions in less-developed parts of the globe. In this regard, building policy solutions based on locally produced research is the end goal. However, before this is realistically attainable, the next steppingstone is achieving local ownership by encouraging reconceptualization of what is known from the developed contexts and adapting it to the unique circumstances in close collaboration with academia. An emerging method of “thinking and working politically” is specifically designed for developing countries and hails from the field of development aid. The idea of “thinking and working politically” rests on the assumption that developing landscapes are rocky and involve a large number of interacting factors in a complex political environment, making desirable outcomes both hard to achieve and difficult to predict using ideas imported from elsewhere. This volatility and uncertainty make blueprint-type plans largely susceptible to failure. “Thinking and working politically” requires practitioners to bring together key stakeholders, including academics, supporting them in identifying problems of endogenous origin, and encouraging them to work collaboratively in finding potential solutions (Rocha Menocal & O'Neil, 2012; Tavakoli et al., 2013). This approach is highly design-oriented and collaborative and practice suggests that strong collaborative networks play an integral part in facilitating desired behavioral and policy change (Faustino & Booth, 2014; Williamson, 2015).

### 3.6 | E is for “Equity and diversity”

The embodiment of public values within a larger constitutional framework (Cook, 2015) is fundamental to PA. The effective implementation of such values requires both context and a critical breadth of view to acknowledge the “complex array of historical, political, and social factors” (Gooden, 2015) that shape and inform our current socio-political and economic landscape. While PA is tasked with providing services to communities, it must also reckon with the inequity and burden it has been complicit in deploying (Moynihan et al., 2015; Peeters, 2020; Smith, 2002). With this in mind, the CO-DESIGN framework not only centers values of social equity and diversity to ensure that PA produces more just outcomes in practice, but also promotes a continual dialogue between researchers, practitioners, and communities to inform and support the development of institutional solutions to issues of disparate treatment and impact.

First, the development of historical consciousness and historical thinking in PA is central to building and optimizing capacity for concerted action. With historical inquiry and analysis as our starting point, scholars and practitioners can engage more honestly and thoughtfully with communities served, represented, and who are subjects of research. Stakeholders seeking to collaborate with community members should be prepared to navigate distrust and the perception of being on trial to prove sustained commitment to reducing disparities and enacting systemic changes (Clark, 2018; Soss & Jacobs, 2009). The reality of the public's eroded trust or willingness to cooperate (Ventriss et al., 2019) necessitates the examination of local history, conditions, cultural roots and heritage, traditions, values, norms, and priorities. This is key to visualizing communities as social systems with specific needs and also critical to understanding deep-rooted rifts and conflict between communities and public institutions.

This understanding of place-based history should be complemented with a keen awareness of the role PA has played in actively harming communities. The very systemic problems PA is responsible for addressing, it is also at

least partially responsible for creating or perpetuating (Gooden, 2015). For effective partnerships to take shape, stakeholders must first understand that public institutions themselves generate and sustain inequality (Williams & Duckett, 2020)—be it through policy design, implementation, service delivery, or inertia. Researchers theorizing and proposing solutions should advance the need for stakeholders to adopt a degree of humility, introspection, and accountability, especially with respect to the hierarchies of race, ethnicity, class, and other dimensions of identity (Loury, 2009) that PA has instigated. Such commitment from PA to engage in collective problem-solving for the purpose of advancing social equity and diversity is inextricably a matter of justice, responsibility, and function (Burke & Cleary, 1989; Gooden, 2015).

Future research should also consider that advancing the dynamics of equity and diversity requires that PA leverages its constitutive hallmark to meet the demands of equalizing processes and outcomes. Clarity concerning our “acceptability threshold” is a necessary component to answering Durant and Rosenbloom’s (2017) related questions concerning what gives PA the right to use its position to advance its commitments to social equity and how deeply we can reach to achieve it. To these questions, we respond that invoking corrective action to bring about equity should be the standard for public institutions entrusted with meeting community needs, especially in the context of correcting conditions planted by the administrative state. Therefore, the threshold that “satisfices” (Simon, 1956) in this regard, if reflective of the public will, is one where all levers available to the state are exhausted in an effort to produce equity of access, opportunity, conditions, and outcomes (Svara, 2021).

The role of PA, with respect to its relationship with politics, is another dimension that requires unraveling. Roberts (2009) alerts us that scholars have all but abandoned the tradition of studying macrodynamics, which limits the development of solutions that push necessary discretionary boundaries. We propose that the realization of social equity and diversity is possible, in part, to the extent that PA is willing to exercise its independence from politicians and defy them as necessary when electoral incentives are misaligned with public interest and needs.

Achieving social equity and diversity compels a need for setting new norms besides bureaucratic accountability to political figures (Miller & Whitford, 2016). Doing so would require expanding the bureaucratic scope and power and adopting alternative models for institutional or constitutional design (Cook, 2021; Koppell, 2005) where PA is considered foremost accountable to citizens before policymakers. Achieving buy-in for such a fundamental systemic change would require leaning into co-production by engaging in internal and external dialogue with stakeholders concerning the imperatives that inform such a proposal, and the feasibility for the bureaucracy to execute accordingly. It would require that stakeholders understand the history of bureaucratic reforms, the role of bureaucratic expertise and discretion via enabling legislation, existing or potential tools to evaluate and monitor government transparency (see Government in the Sunshine Act), and mechanisms for feedback and accountability. An understanding of these facets and the prospects for their continued development, particularly when framed as a response to the often perverse or incongruent political behavior of politicians, can help persuade stakeholders of the urgency behind increasing bureaucratic breadth to meet the demands of social equity and diversity.

This proposition may come across as bold and provocative, yet it is consistent with PA’s extant role in independently creating policy and exercising purview through implementation. PA scholars should engage more thoughtfully with this delicate balance and put forth models for reconciling social equity demands in the context of a “political moral hazard” (Miller & Whitford, 2016). The participatory approach we propose can prove useful in not only facilitating ongoing communication between scholars and practitioners that can inform the changes needed, but in turn, can also guide practitioners through the application of the models put forth by scholars.

Developing institutional solutions from a pluralistic, participatory, and context-based approach requires the involvement and management of a full range of stakeholders and their corresponding perspectives. Researchers must acknowledge and put forth strategies for how to syncretize differing and often conflicting approaches to collaborative proceedings, such as setting priorities, determining timelines, defining progress and success, and evaluating proposed solutions. Models for resolving macrolevel disagreements and perceived incompatibility within networks are also urgent given their potential to engender hostility, disengagement, and disenchantment. Where practitioners may be satisfied with reducing disparities in a certain context, for example, citizens may seek deeper systemic

changes that yield a greater shift of agency and power back to communities. These conflicts carry baked-in implications for social equity as they may arise due to imbalances in power and resources or divergent value orientations (Bryson et al., 2014). Proposed models for resolving these macrolevel tensions should also provide proactive theoretical and operational guidance for instituting fundamental structural changes while accounting for risk, limitations, and unintended consequences.

Additionally, future PA research should be pluralistic in its embrace of multiple epistemological and ontological traditions. Research that is guided by critical theories (race, feminist, etc.), queer theory, liberatory and resistance frameworks, and counternarratives (Berry-James et al., 2021; Blessett et al., 2016; Blessett & Gaynor, 2021; Matthews & Poyner, 2020; Riccucci, 2021) is integral to cultivating a pluralistic shift. Participatory approaches that center social equity inherently embrace funds of knowledge, cultural and communicative practices, and knowledge transmission and exchange processes that are not dominated by academics or practitioners (Ramos & Kiyama, 2021). This commitment to pluralism should also be reflected in data analysis, research methods, pedagogy, and citation practices (Schwartz-Shea, 2019; Whetsell, 2013).

### 3.7 | S is for “Social innovation”

Social innovation refers to the “diffusion of an outcome of purposeful and legitimized social actions” (Cajaiba-Santana, 2013, p. 42). While it is often used in conjunction with technological advancements, technology is not a necessity for social innovation. Ultimately, the goal of social innovation is to enact social change by understanding the impetus for social change and ways to diffuse positive change. While social innovation has received quite a bit of broad-level attention, especially as it relates to science, technology, and entrepreneurship, research is rather sparse and fragmented across multiple fields.

Despite PA's interest in social change and progress from a normative perspective, social innovation has not received much scholarly attention. On the other hand, social innovation, as both a phenomenon and a goal, receives a substantial amount of attention in communities and among policymakers, public administrators, and nonprofit leaders tasked with managing and encouraging positive social change (Brown & Wyatt, 2010; Mulgan, 2019). Therefore, it may be pertinent for PA scholars eager to understand social change to work in partnership with them. Additionally, collaborations between researchers, practitioners, and communities may help to drive social innovation. This can happen directly by way of the co-design and co-production of knowledge process or indirectly from the co-production of knowledge that advances the understanding of the mechanisms that affect social innovation.

### 3.8 | I is for “Inclusive participation”

Research suggests that under the right conditions, outcomes are enhanced by including various dimensions of diversity, such as gender, ethnicity, age, and nationality (Nielsen et al., 2017). As discussed above, design-oriented and participatory approaches such as the co-production of knowledge recognize the multiple ways of knowing and doing, bringing together academics (from different disciplines) and diverse groups of stakeholders including members of the public, policymakers, and public sector workers to generate new knowledge (Norström et al., 2020). This is because the inclusion of diverse individuals and groups can help to create a process of identifying and solving public problems that is informed by a number of diverse lived experiences and domain expertise that might not otherwise be involved in the process. For instance, researchers represent a skill set on theory and data analyses, which can help public service organizations to deal with data, design, and evaluation of services (Eden, 2017; Hauser et al., 2017), while citizens (as users) bring in new types of knowledge and expertise (i.e., experiential, local, traditional, cultural, etc.) and lived experiences that help researchers to better understand the context and modify theories. Inclusion of this type in the research process can help to address complex social and global problems (McKay, 2011; Wallerstein, 2021).

One example of this can be found in efforts to meet the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Scholars have argued that multistakeholder engagement is necessary to achieve both stable and effective public institutions (United Nations, 2019). Sachs et al. (2019) even go as far as calling for the scientific community to “take on the challenge of developing tools and methods for multistakeholder engagement and co-design that help identify perceived trade-offs, ensure technical feasibility of long term pathways and explain the urgency to act” in order to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. Sharing experiences, ideas, and values through frequent interactions among stakeholders can facilitate collective action and engagement (Norström et al., 2020). Therefore, we also recognize that more inclusive participation in this way can enhance democratic outcomes by intentionally engaging diverse groups and communities in collective action, deliberative democracy, and other important decision-making processes.

Additionally, representation of discursive, attitudinal, and ideological diversity is important for credibility and deliberative democracy (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008). As such, we cannot discount the role of diversity and representation among academic research teams and within public service organizations in encouraging the inclusion we are advocating for. The growing and evolving literature on representative bureaucracy is central to understanding the utility of demographic representation in enhancing citizens' trust, perceptions of legitimacy, and willingness to cooperate and co-produce (Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006; Riccucci et al., 2016; Roch et al., 2018). It is important to note that such representation is more effective when practitioners are positioned to exercise discretion (Sowa & Selden, 2003) and when representation is met with an organizational commitment to improving community conditions (Headley et al., 2021). Yet, this is an area of research that is in need of further development and of which, we argue, the co-design and co-production of knowledge can help to promote and advance.

### 3.9 | G is for “Goal-oriented research”

In the context of the design-oriented approach we propose, goal-oriented research holds importance in both the process of co-designing and co-producing knowledge and the type of knowledge produced. First, Simon's (1969) proposition that public administration is a science of design, concerned with “how things ought to be,” is useful for understanding the importance of goal-oriented research in this context. However, identifying and pursuing “how things ought to be” is a value-laden proposition. In other words, determining how things ought to be is dependent on the perspectives of those involved in determining the answer; as are the goals, decisions, and actions in pursuit of those goals. Therefore, it is critical that all stakeholders develop and agree on shared goals for the research process as well as the end-goal. Developing shared goals using an adaptive approach, revisiting research goals regularly, allows for iteration and reflexivity in the research process. It can also help to develop a shared understanding of the objectives, metrics for success, and expectations of the overall process to reduce conflict (Greer & Dannals, 2017) and generate benefits from clearly defined and meaningful goals (Norström et al., 2020).

A collaborative goal-oriented approach can also increase the likelihood of achieving the desired broad-scale outcomes, including innovative ways to address big societal challenges (Bapuji et al., 2020). From the perspective of knowledge co-production, especially one embedded in design science, goal-oriented research might mean centering communities and practitioners as human-centered design principles encourage. For academics, integrating citizens, community members, and practitioners in building out research designs and carrying out research projects can ensure that individuals, groups, and communities are at the heart of problem identification, solution building, and service delivery. It can also facilitate learning and enhance theoretical understanding by prompting academia with know-how, experience, and realities of the studied phenomena.

Working with communities and practitioners to develop shared goals for research projects can also help to generate shared benefits. The types of relationships and collaborations that we are discussing here should be mutually beneficial and create value for all groups involved, not just the researchers. Ultimately, this can enhance PA research and its

relevance to those who practice it (Bertelli & Riccucci, 2020; van Aken, 2004; van Aken & Romme, 2012) by learning *from* and researching *with* communities and PA practitioners, not just observing and analyzing them from a distance.

### 3.10 | N is for “New possibilities (for research)”

The “science” aspect of design science, especially its emphasis on the psychological mechanisms of human behavior, has led some to mistake design science as a purely positivist approach. However, contemporary theories of design such as the one we base our framework off of embrace multiple philosophies including positivism, interpretivism, and pragmatism to understand problems and explore potential solutions. Therefore, it is important to note that while design science, broadly speaking, does indeed emphasize the value of the scientific method for understanding problems and identifying solutions, that does not mean that there is no place for “art” (Papalambros, 2015). Indeed, “design,” as it is used here, sits at the intersection of art and science in that it describes both the act of designing and the design. As such, design-oriented approaches embrace a wide range of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches.

The aim of this section (and article more broadly) is not so much to debate methods as much as it is to discuss methods appropriate for a more design-oriented approach in PA, though we argue that the participatory approach we outline is conducive to specific methods currently underutilized in PA research. For instance, design thinking in and of itself can serve as a method of inquiry (Lewis et al., 2020; Liedtka et al., 2020; Romme & Meijer, 2020). Recently, this is evident by the growing number of policy labs (Lewis, 2021; McGann et al., 2018; van Buuren et al., 2020) and “living labs” (Fuglsang et al., 2021; Ruijter & Meijer, 2020) which embrace design thinking, design-based interventions, co-creation, and co-design approaches to innovative problem-solving in the public sector. These examples combined with recent studies illustrate how design thinking can be applied in a number of contexts to advance both theory and practice (Magistretti et al., 2021; Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016; Romme & Meijer, 2020).

The field of PA has the methodological toolbox to realize the vision and ideas we have outlined here. Field research such as field experiments (Hansen & Tummers, 2020) and qualitative research such as ethnographic approaches (Cappellaro, 2017) can support “by pulling academic researchers out of their traditional comfort zones [...] and into the real world” (Bhanot & Linos, 2019, p. 3). Behavioral insight units (Mukherjee & Giest, 2020) and digital government units (Clarke, 2020) can be valuable institutions to partner with in terms of bringing science and practice together. These methods not only enhance scientific progress but they can also help to drive policy changes that are well-aligned with the reality of practitioners’ behaviors and decision-making, thus resulting in a more harmonious approach to policymaking, public service delivery, and social progress.

The evolution of technology in recent decades has also provided access to new sources of data and tools for which to analyze it. Specifically, the advent of big data has meant that cities are collecting unprecedented amounts of data each day, with little to no capacity to analyze it (Okwechime et al., 2018). Whereas, researchers possess the methodological skills to assist nontechnical experts with managing and extracting insights from data, or are at least tapped into networks of individuals who do. Developing mutually beneficial collaborations can help organizations make sense of the troves of data public sector organizations are collecting while providing academics with access to data that can help advance their research. Furthermore, collaborative analysis of data helps extract richer insights that support decision-making and can help problematize dominant narratives by infusing justice-oriented perspectives. For example, Logan (2020) identifies racist ideologies undergirding economic policy. Research is plagued with narratives of what Logan refers to as “cultural deficit” and “subculture of violence” rationalizations for racial economic inequality. He asserts that part of the problem corresponds with a lack of inclusion, suggesting that “Blacks are excluded from too many policy discussions and research communities. Black people are the data but play no role in the analysis.”

It is worth noting that the field continues to grapple with what it means to advance theory while simultaneously providing knowledge that will guide practical interventions (Barzelay & Thompson, 2011; Van Ryzin, 2021). For



instance, tensions persist in scholarly discussions regarding the rise in experimental methods with little regard for theory (Bertelli & Riccucci, 2020) along with similar concerns of widening gaps between micro-perspectives and macro-perspectives (Jilke et al., 2019; Moynihan et al., 2015; Roberts, 2020). Furthermore, with respect to research methods, it is often true that the importance of generalizability is overstated as a criterion for quality and validity, but this can undermine social context. To this point, Lebovitz (2020) argues that “our focus on generalizability leads to erasure of elements that make communities unique,” and proposes the alternative for seeking “analytical generalizability” instead. These examples support the need for embedding equitable methodological approaches and establishing new norms in how we evaluate the quality and integrity of PA research, especially research that is conducted with community partners. Thus, it is important that, as academic researchers, we continuously think critically about how we conduct our research and the value it provides to both scholarship and communities of practice.

## 4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As emerging scholars coming up in the field at a time of social, political, and cultural shifts, we recognize that the research generated in our field has the power to address some of the biggest challenges our world faces. However, we also recognize that this potential can be sooner realized when we are intentional in how we combine our knowledge and expertise with that of the practical knowledge of PA practitioners and the lived experiences of those facing the challenges we hope to address. The purpose of this article is to consider what approaching research in such an intentional, collaborative, and pluralistic manner might look like, including the impact it could have on PA theory and practice. We imagine a design-oriented PA that embraces the role of values and diverse contexts and incorporates the perspectives of the individuals and communities our research is designed to impact. The result was CO-DESIGN, a framework for advancing a more context-based, pluralistic, and participatory approach to public administration research and practice through the co-production of knowledge.

The framework was inspired conceptually by participatory forms of research such as community-based participatory research (CBPR) and engaged scholarship which emphasize the importance of involving multiple stakeholders in the design and process of conducting research. We also hope to complement the emerging work of Lowe et al. (2021) who introduce Human Learning Systems, a framework for navigating the complexity of public service delivery by acknowledging that complexity but also, first and foremost, by acknowledging the “human” component of public services, programs, and interventions. The ultimate goal of what we propose is for academics, practitioners, and communities to co-produce context-relevant, human-centered, and useful research that can help solve complex problems with the help of those most likely to experience those problems.

Co-producing knowledge is not only an innovative way to address big societal challenges (Bapuji et al., 2020), but also of major relevance for enhancing the theoretical understanding by providing scholars with know-how, experience, and the opportunity to observe the phenomena we study up close (van de Ven, 2018). For PA practice, the co-production of knowledge between researchers and practitioners especially helps to mitigate the knowing-doing gap (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006) and improve public service provision. It can also help to drive policy changes that are well-aligned with the reality of public sector workers, their behavior, experiences, and decision-making processes, thus resulting in a more harmonious approach to policymaking and service delivery. The involvement of recipients and beneficiaries of public programs and services (i.e. communities) can help practitioners better understand their needs, thereby improving effectiveness and equity in public service delivery. Triangulated with the work of researchers, scholars can gain greater access to data and insights that help with theory development.

We recognize that much of what we propose and discuss here is largely normative. Some may be left asking how PA scholars even pursue what we are proposing. We believe that one of the most important steps in building the collaborations necessary to co-produce knowledge in the way we describe is through public administration education. Public administration degrees, especially at the graduate level, largely remain a professional degree path. As such, public administration education serves as an important means of professionalizing public sector workers

(Farrell et al., 2021). Thus, PA education can serve as a means of not just training public administrators and emerging scholars to conduct this type of participatory research, but also as a venue for building collaborative relationships with practitioners and communities, in addition to establishing and institutionalizing norms around how practitioners, communities, and researchers should interact and work together to solve public problems.

A unique advantage of PA programs, especially MPA programs, is the diversity of experiences among students, many of whom are already working in public and nonprofit organizations. Therefore, those who teach PA can do more to promote partnerships and collaborations between students, many of whom will be (if not already) working together to solve problems in their local community after they complete their degrees. Additionally, PA professors can share their knowledge and expertise while also empowering students to share their own experiences, whether as managers, providers, or beneficiaries of public programs and services. This can create a rich and dynamic environment where both professional and scientific knowledge are valued and complement one another. Perhaps this is also an opportunity to take the advice of Elliott et al. (2020) and introduce opportunities to co-design curricula and co-produce teaching tools with students who possess interests, skills, and domain expertise that can greatly enrich the learning environment if given the opportunity. Furthermore, highlighting real-world examples of collaborations among scholars, practitioners, and communities can provide students with new case studies to learn from, including ways to link theory to practice in an applied environment.

Those who teach in PA (and related) programs can indirectly promote a more participatory and pluralistic PA by being more intentional about the diversity of the speakers and resources they include in their courses. As James (1996) instructs us, the “intellectual interrogator” should not take precedence over the “activist intellectual.” This dynamic “creates myopic insularity and further detachment to the realities of our conditions.” Similarly, elevating the voices and work of local practitioners, community members, and leaders is important for introducing students to different perspectives and lived experiences. It is important to include activists, organizers, and community leaders whose work often compensates for failures of the state and who effect change outside of institutional boundaries. This is important not only for instruction but also for students to build their networks and spheres of influence.

Understanding the potential of the approach we advocate for, specifically, the potential for PA education to be a catalyst for its expansion, can motivate innovative and experiential approaches to teaching and learning. Calls for more community-engaged pedagogies in PA education are growing (Hung & McDougale, 2021) and access to tools and curricula to help implement them is more widely available than ever. For example, service-learning can bring researchers and students together to identify problems and work together with a diverse group of stakeholders to develop solutions to actual problems faced by their communities (Godfrey et al., 2005; Gonzales et al., 2020; Lambright, 2018; Lambright & Lu, 2009; Lebovits & Bharath, 2019) while connecting students to one another and the communities they are embedded within.

Another very important way that the field can move toward the context-based, pluralistic, and participatory future we advocate for is through individual and collective efforts to increase and amplify the diversity of voices in PA scholarship. One immediate step that PA scholars can take to become more pluralistic is to commit to engaged and equitable citation practices. Delgado (1984) famously posits that citations are political and closed circles of citation, thereby, reinforcing historical patterns of exclusion. Academics can commit to building a more diverse and representative body of scholarship by being deliberate with their decisions about who they cite and whose knowledge they thereby reproduce. This conscientious engagement (Mott & Cockayne, 2017) demonstrates an equitable approach to knowledge transfer in its amplification of critical, underrepresented voices and its defiance of hierarchies of knowledge.

Finally, it is key to acknowledge that PA theory, practice, and pedagogy in non-Western countries, both developing and developed, are still very much under the influence of the Western tradition (Hou et al., 2011; Welch and Wong, 1998). Pedagogy has not been able to escape this fate either. Because of the dominance of the English-language in research and world models largely informed by Western ideals, educators in the developing world continue to use them as the golden standard for teaching, largely ignoring the local models. For example, even in countries such as Singapore, where the local PA tradition has proved itself as one of the most efficient in the world,

universities continue to rely on Western PA works, such as Weber, Wilson, Waldo, and the Blackburg Manifesto, when discussing models of PA. Part of the issue lies in the preference for overseas PhD graduates, and another part of it is the academic system which uses only the English-language publication outlets as worthy of recognition. Therefore, when it comes to advancing PA research, practice, and pedagogy, one of the major steps that can be taken is to intentionally and purposefully invite and promote comparative perspectives. This has direct benefits on non-Western countries but it can also indirectly inform context-relevant theory development, more broadly. For instance, the PA literature on collaborative and participatory approaches such as the ones we describe here, tend to focus on Western contexts while neglecting the wide diversity of the political and cultural systems that exist. Generally speaking, PA research on co-production, co-design, and co-creation suffers from a lack of research outside of the dominant Western and democratic context. This makes it difficult to know the boundary conditions of the “co-” paradigm when this understanding can help tremendously with theory building.

In sum, for a professionalized field such as PA, scholars are ultimately responsible for not just developing new knowledge but articulating existing knowledge that can help current and future public administrators understand, navigate, and solve complex public problems. The design-led approach we advocate for not only helps PA researchers and practitioners take stock of pressing problems, what works, and what may be falling short, but also prompts them to be intentional and pluralistic in their quest for solutions; taking care to understand the ways that temporal, contextual, and cultural factors at multiple levels confound and interact with one another to produce outcomes. In this article, we highlight eight salient areas in PA that we believe this approach can help to advance, but we also acknowledge that this is in no way an exhaustive list. Indeed, the attractiveness of what we propose here is that, with the help of practitioners and communities in designing and carrying out research, PA scholars can discover new questions, new possibilities, and new solutions that exist outside of their own expertise and lived experiences. This is not to say that pursuing this path will be easy. Alongside new questions, solutions, opportunities, and realities come new challenges, of course. Though, our hope is that our peers, colleagues, and students are up for the challenge. We know we are.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This manuscript was written in the year 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic and during periods of civil unrest in the United States, especially.
- <sup>2</sup> The breadth of the arguments for and against open science is evident by the growing literature on the topic so an in-depth discussion of those arguments is not necessary here (see Fecher & Friesike, 2014; Vicente-Saez & Martinez-Fuentes, 2018).

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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