A Global Problem with Local Perspective

The novel coronavirus pandemic continues to rapidly reshape the role of government at all levels. Public managers have embraced new challenges, challenged accepted ways of doing things, and accepted that those strategies may be ineffective or unpopular. Tensions are high, tempers flare with little provocation, and public scrutiny of the government response has managers working under intense pressure. Understood and accepted roles for governments in federal systems like the United States have been questioned as the appropriate role for federal and state or provincial governments is sorted out. The European Union has seemingly taken a back seat while its constituent nations have led the response on that continent. Disinformation campaigns cloud the veracity of the problem’s extent as well as efforts to abate it in some parts of the world. As we explained in our introduction to the first installment of articles in our COVID-19 symposium (Hall et al. 2020), our effort with this collection of articles was to capture knowledge from all levels of government—including collaborative responses that include nonprofit organizations—and to document exemplary systems and experiences from around the world.

While the pandemic crisis is clearly global, the response is concertedly more local. The collection of essays in this second installment echo three themes that were pronounced among the essays we received for consideration. The first theme includes tangible management strategies that were being implemented and evaluated simultaneously in many cases. The importance of the second theme, social justice, equity and inclusion, became more pronounced as protests developed in major cities around the nation in response to a series of focusing events that rapidly mobilized the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. And finally, we received a number of essays that considered partnerships, co-production and collaboration in response to the pandemic.

In This Issue

Paired with the articles we presented in issue 80(4), the articles here offer perspective on the state of various theories and practices under the duress of global crisis. Following the themes outlined above, allow us to briefly walk through the contents of this second installment of the symposium.

Management Strategies

In his essay, van der Wal (2020) synthesizes existing literature to provide three critical competencies for public managers handling the crisis—stakeholder engagement and communication, political astuteness, and collaborative capacity. He offers practical suggestions, such as maintain network control and building social media skills, which are best practices in administrative structures and even more valuable in a crisis.

Taking a European view, Bouckaert et al. (2020) introduce the term “coronationalism” to explain the differences in response between Belgium, France, Germany, and Italy. A nationalistic approach pushed European Union ideals to the side as countries struggled with virus containment. They highlight the importance of institutional and cultural variance, points we argue are crucial for future studies about the virus response.

Christensen and Lægreid (2020) also focus on Europe, using Norway as an in-depth case study. Similarly to Bouckaert et al. (2020), these authors point out cultural and political wills that made strong response possible. They draw attention specifically to the relationship between democratic legitimacy and government capacity, noting perception is key when it comes to crisis response. This point meshes with van der Wal’s (2020) recommendations for engaging stakeholders to build trust prior to cataclysmic events.

Charbonneau and Doberstein (2020) consider work surveillance practices and their relationship to performance management. With so many public
servants being forced to shift to remote working from home in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such oversight is increasing in importance. Their article presents the results of three surveys conducted during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada that compare public servant and citizen attitudes to various cutting-edge digital surveillance tools that can be used to monitor employee work patterns. The resulting data can help governments navigate difficult questions of reasonable privacy intrusions in an increasing digitally connected workforce.

Schuster et al. (2020) introduce a survey instrument to study COVID-19 via the World Bank’s Bureaucracy Lab. The survey is already deployed in several countries, and the authors are open to collaboration with others as they argue survey data are important to gather during the ongoing situation that is testing administrative capacity.

In their study, Dai et al. (2020) take the China case and examine the crucial need for reliable, timely, and persuasive public information to gain compliance with prevention measures. Using survey data of citizens throughout China, the authors find detailed pandemic information, positive risk communication, rumor refutation, and adequate supplies combined to help people engage in protective behaviors. Future research could study this model in other contexts taking culture into account as Bouckaert et al. (2020) suggest.

One of the most widely used and scientifically backed measures to slow virus spread remains social distancing, and in their essay, Pedersen and Favero (2020) survey Americans to find what factors might influence compliance with social distancing. Their results highlight again the critical role of crisis communication and reliable public information, coupled with prosocial motivation. The study provides insights into behavioral adaptations similar to Dai et al. (2020), and both studies provide rich avenues for future research especially when it comes to the nudging behaviors crucial for crisis communication.

Taking a bit of a turn, Fay and Ghadimi (2020) examine labor relations and what changed during and because of COVID-19. Labor relations is a critical management strategy, and they outline evidence-based strategies for engaging in meaningful labor negotiations during crisis, focusing on emphasizing needs of the most vulnerable first, negotiating early and regularly with leaders, and securing protections for all members. Their essay brings to light additional streams of research regarding labor negotiations during times of social and economic crisis.

Social Justice, Equity, and Inclusion

Without question, the pandemic has exacerbated social inequalities and brought about what some are calling the dual pandemic of COVID-19 and systemic racism (McCandless and Zavattaro 2020). Wright II and Merritt (2020) explicitly link systemic racism and the COVID-19 response. Health inequities, segregation, food insecurity, underrepresentation in the medical profession, and exclusion from full participation in democratic ideas and ideals contribute to the inequitable response to COVID-19. In the end, the authors outline a path forward for practice and research, the latter of which outlines an agenda for better incorporating social equity meaningfully into administrative studies.

Similarly to Wright II and Merritt (2020), Gaynor and Wilson (2020) use the Social Vulnerability Index to examine the effects of racism on COVID-19 deaths. They argue Black people are historically segregated into vulnerable communities, and the pandemic is visibly highlighting these systemic inequities. As a path forward, they offer targeted universalism to develop inclusive policies—offering a lot of potential for future research.

Deslatte, Hatch, and Stokan (2020) explain the critical role local governments can play in addressing some of the inequalities. For instance, the Community Development Block Grant and Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant programs can be ways to equitably rebuild marginalized communities.

Also highlighting the health inequities, Martin-Howard and Farmbry (2020) use the social determinants of health theory to discuss strategies for mitigating these inherent inequities. Using the Bronx, New York as a case study, the authors examine the ways in which unequal access to adequate medical care increased community vulnerability and death among marginalized communities. Like Gaynor and Wilson (2020), they offer questions for future research aimed at mitigating these ingrained problems.

Using refugee migration as the object of performance, Schomaker and Bauer (2020) seek to understand patterns of administrative performance by examining networks and knowledge management within and between crises. Drawing from two German public administration surveys their results demonstrate that those administrations that were structurally prepared, those which learned during preceding crises, and those that displayed high quality network cooperation with other administrations and with society, more broadly performed significantly better in the respective crises.

Coproduction, Partnership, and Network Management under Duress

Rounding out the Viewpoint symposium are contributions centering on coproduction and partnership. Complex and wicked problems such as COVID-19 require collaboration and coordination, and these essays offer insights and paths for future research.

Steen and Brandsen (2020) note how the pandemic necessitated this kind of coordinated response, and they pose an important question that should guide research for years to come: will it last? They argue commitment to the partnerships, supportive regulatory frameworks, sustained funding, legal flexibility, and incentives should keep the collaborations moving forward, but that remains to be seen as the crisis still unfolds globally. The essay provides a clear path for examining their propositions in future research.

Using lessons learned from the Haiti earthquake, Entress, Tyler, and Sadiq (2020) provide practical steps for building community resilience related to mass fatality management (MFM). The COVID-19 pandemic showed the crippling holes in existing MFM plans, and the authors, using lessons learned from the earthquake, recommend increased collaboration, psychological support, and network leads when it comes to developing viable MFM plans going forward.

Similar to Deslatte, Hatch, and Stokan (2020), Wilson et al. (2020) look at the local government collective action and engaging in
economically focused partnerships to mitigate damaging effects from the pandemic. They offer economic development approaches requiring coordination, and like the other essays in this Viewpoint symposium offer a path for future research to see if these strategies work, such as active versus passive partnerships.

Cheng et al. (2020) explain the role that community-based organizations in Zhejiang Province in China played in responding to the pandemic. Looking at what worked in that province, the authors offer four points for future research and practice when it comes to community-based organizations: strategically leverage strengths of community-based organizations; incentive volunteers to participate in prevention and control; provide technology that can facilitate effective response; build trust and long-term capacity for response. Cultural contexts also can underlie these findings as well, so future research can examine that aspect of community-based organizations.

Shi et al. (2020) detail the role of nonprofit organizations in providing critical response, focusing specifically on the homeless population. Using interviews from four Dallas, Texas-area nonprofit leaders, they find each organization experienced disruptions to mission and service delivery. They also faced serious ambiguity that limited how staff could respond, forcing innovation and creativity. The authors introduce the Disruptions, Ambiguity, Innovation, and Challenges framework based on these interviews, giving practitioners immediate ideas and scholars a path forward for additional research.

In their article, van den Oord et al. (2020) use the case of the Antwerp Port Authority to showcase network governance’s strengths and limitations. When the pandemic hit, Port Authority leadership needed to change network structures to succeed. The dynamism of the network allowed for brokering to take place, bringing in experts who could round out the response. Network flexibility and dynamism seems to be an emerging theme ripe for future research.

Finally, Hu et al. (2020) look at paired assistance programs in China to show differences in hierarchical versus network approaches to emergency management response and coordination. The intricacies involved in their study highlight again the need for network flexibility to foster positive response to crises.

Conclusion
As you review these contributions, the next chapter in this pandemic will have already been written. Lives will have been lost. Elected officials will have been deeply criticized for their efforts. Public managers will have worked seemingly endless hours, with many wearing thin and others growing disenchanted as the end seems further and further from sight. Strategies will have been proven; others will have been disproven. The price of liberty and the value of security will have been weighed out more accurately in different ends of the Earth. Decisions will have been made with dire consequences to health or to the economy. The tradeoffs inherent in the rapid-fire nature of executive-driven policy decisions are real, and they are perceived more clearly by individuals than at any time in recent history. Elected officials’ choice of frames to describe and respond to the problems generate strategies and actions that will be more strongly influenced by their framing than by prevailing evidence. As the research articles appearing earlier in this issue demonstrate, elections have consequences, and the impact of this pandemic on the outcome of the 2020 U.S. general election may be its most significant enduring effect. Each party seems to have a dominant frame that will guide the policy responses to be advanced as they prepare to take office in 2021.

Our sincere hope is that the evidence presented here will be used to influence many of those decisions. We hope that it will stimulate research that will reshape the way we understand many of the core concepts of our discipline. As the response continues, we will continue to seek out work that makes ever increasing conceptual advancements.

While we saw many patterns across the articles in our two COVID-19 symposium issues, we also noticed some elements missing or needing stronger attention. For instance, while our contributors were intentionally global, voices from the Global South need amplification regarding pandemic response. Also, while some of the authors noted the cultural differences between countries and pandemic response, more could be done regarding administrative functions within those varied systems. Some of the pieces necessarily took a broad view, and future research can drill further down into the relationship between culture and administrative response.

Finally, a collection of articles in this issue focus on social justice—and rightly so—but broadening that lens to be more intersectional and inclusive would help spur additional research. Administrative burdens need to be better understood across subsets of the population as equality in the pandemic response is pursued.

Whether you have returned to some semblance of normalcy or continue to find yourselves bivouacked in the safety of your respective bunkers, our wishes are ever with your enduring health, safety, and happiness.

References
Bouckaert, Geert, Davide Galli, Sabine Kuhlmann, Renate Reiter, and Steven Van Hecke. 2020. European Coronationalism: A Hot Spot Governing a Pandemic Crisis. Public Administration Review 80(5): 765–73. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13242.
Charbonneau, Étienne, and Carey Doberstein. 2020. An Empirical Assessment of the Intrusiveness and Reasonableness of Emerging Work Surveillance Technologies in the Public Sector. Public Administration Review 80(5): 780–91. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13278.
Cheng, Yuan (Daniel), Jianxing Yu, Yongdong Shen, and Biao Huang. 2020. Coproducing Responses to COVID-19 with Community-Based Organizations: Lessons from Zhejiang Province, China. Public Administration Review 80(5): 866–73. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13244.
Christensen, Tom, and Per Lægreid. 2020. Balancing Governance Capacity and Legitimacy: How the Norwegian Government Handled the COVID-19 Crisis as a High Performer. Public Administration Review 80(5): 774–79. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13241.
Dai, Bibing, Di Fu, Guangteng Meng, Bingsheng Liu, Qi Li, and Xun Liu. 2020. The Effects of Governmental and Individual Predictors on COVID-19 Protective Behaviors in China: A Path Analysis Model. Public Administration Review 80(5): 797–804. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13236.
Deslatte, A., M.E. Hatch, and E. Stokan. 2020. How Can Local Governments Address Pandemic Inequities? Public Administration Review 80(5): 827–31. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13257.
