Comparative Public Administration

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**Summary/abstract**

The article gives an overview of the development and the ‘state of the art’ of the research on Comparative Public Administration (CPA). At first the history of the study of CPA is outlined with references to pertinent research and publications. Then, key conceptual and methodological problems of CPA research are discussed and different approaches to cope with them are expounded (such as conceptualizing and defining the relevant variables and factors under study and the adequate ‘comparative methods’). In conclusion, an outlook on the potential and limits of the further development of CPA is given.

**Keywords**

Comparative public administration

Dimensions (cross-country, cross-time etc.) of comparison

Analytical units of comparison

Comparative methods

“purposive selection” of countries/cases
0. Introduction

In order to characterize the profile of the research of Comparative Public Administration (CPA) the following article will proceed in the three steps.

At first, an overview of the development and state of CPA research will be given.

Second, in the main body of this chapter, the definitional, conceptual and methodological issues of CPA research and approaches to cope with them will be expounded.

Finally, a summary and concluding outlook will be put forward.

1. Development and state of research on CPA

When outlining the development of the study of CPA (for overviews see Farazmand 1996, Pollitt 2011, 116 et seq., Raadschelders and Vigoda-Gadot 2014, 446 et seq., Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, 3 et seq.) it may be intellectually worthwhile to call to mind that, in a historical perspective, academic dealing with public administration (PA) can meaningfully be traced back to the 18th century when the Prussian king established professorships in Cameralism (Kameralwissenschaften) at newly created universities (in 1723 in Halle and Frankfurt/Oder) with the aim to train a new breed of public administrators in the (then elementary) scientific knowledge of the administrative operation of the agricultural, manufactural etc. matters in the (then) mercantilist State. From this a ‘Science of the State’ (Staatswissenschaften) evolved (see Kickert and Stilman 1996, 66) whose most
prominent protagonist was Lorenz von Stein (1815-1890). In defining administration as the “working state” (arbeitender Staat) and in advocating that the study and teaching of public administration should constitute an “integrating science” by comprising, besides administrative law, sociology, political science and public finance, he can be considered a German forerunner of administrative science (see Sager et al. 2018, p. 101) and seen a harbinger of ‘policy science’. However, towards the end of the 19th century the academic treatment of public administration became dominated and overshadowed by legal positivism and lost the interdisciplinary, empirical and applied orientation of Staatswissenschaften. It became essentially identified with administrative law in a tradition which prevailed in Germany unto the mid-20th century.

In the mid-19th century numerous US American students visited German universities (Halle, Heidelberg and Berlin) and attended lectures on Staatswissenschaften. Among them were Herbert Adams and John Burgess who became teachers of Woodrow Wilson and Frank Goodnow (see Sager et al. 2018, 31 et seq.). Thus Germany’s Staatswissenschaften came to influence the then burgeoning academic study of public administration in the US.

Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) is regarded the intellectual founder of PA as an academic discipline. In his seminal article entitled "The Study of Administration"(Wilson 1887) he advocated four basic concepts, to wit, separation of politics and administration; comparative (sic!) analysis of political and private organizations (“nowhere else in the whole field of politics… can we make use of the historical, comparative method more safely than in this province of administration”); improving efficiency with business-like practices and attitudes toward daily operations and improving the effectiveness of public service through management and by training civil servants, merit-based
assessment. Besides his plea for comparison his call for the separation of politics and administration has become the subject of a lasting debate.

In the ensuing academic debate about the profile of PA the dominant doctrine of a dichotomy between politics and administration led at first to treating administration narrowly as an isolated sphere shaped by its own internal principles and immune to influences from the outside. Moreover, in its initial narrow understanding the study of US ‘Public Administration’ was perceived and conducted without almost any comparative look beyond.

As a comparative research field the study of PA took off in the US after World War II. The then pronounced focus on development administration was significantly prompted its programmatic goal to support developing countries in the then ongoing process of decolonization as well as by the funding from the Ford Foundation and. In 1954 the Comparative Administration Group (CAG) that was established within the American Society for Public Administration (the latter having been founded in 1939). CAG became a driving force in the evolution of CPA with Fred Riggs (1917-2008) and Ferrel Heady (1916-2006) as the two influential protagonists. In 1966 Heady published his pioneering book “Public Administration. A Comparative Perspective” (which reached its 6th ed. in 2001). While further emphasizing the practice-related ‘developmental’ orientation Riggs pleaded for the study of CPA to be „empirical, nomothetic and ecological“ and thus to shift from an ideographic (distinct cases-based) approach to a nomothetic orientation. He postulated that, by seeking to explicitly formulate and test propositions, CPA should aspire some ‘grand theory’ of public administration (see Riggs 1962, 116).

During the 1970s the CPA research declined as the Foundation funding petered out and the interest of the governmental development agencies in promoting
such research receded. Besides, “the strongest disenchantment derived from unfulfilled scientific promises or the failure to produce a general theory of administrative systems” (Brans 2003, 427, see also Farazmand 1996, 343).

Towards the end of the 1970s two publications stood out that focused on public bureaucracy as a prime target of CPA research. For one, in 1978 Peters published “Politics of Bureaucracy” (which reached its 6th ed. in 2010 indicatively with the additional subtitle “An Introduction into Comparative Public Administration”). Second, 1981 Aberbach et al. came out with their comparative opus on “bureaucrats and politicians in Western Democracies”. In comparatively studying the attitudes and behaviour of politico-administrative elites. Aberbach et al. fell in line with the ‘behavioural revolution’ which, including its quantitative methodological approach, social and political science experienced during the 1970s. Similarly the focus on the bureaucratic dimension of public administration was followed up by Rowat ed. 1988 (on “public administration in developed democracies”), by Pierre ed. 1995 (“bureaucrats and politicians” in: US, France, Germany, Japan, Sweden, Kenya and Tanzania) and by Page and Wright ed 1999 (on “bureaucratic elites” in: Western European countries). Thus CPA research on ‘Western’ countries and ‘developed democracies’ prevailed notwithstanding some noteworthy exceptions such as Dwivedi and Henderson ed. 1990 (“public administration in a world perspective”).and Farazmand ed. 1991 (“Handbook of Comparative and Development Public Administration”).

Since the early 1990s the pace of CPA research began to quicken (see Pollitt 2011, 118 et seq.) proceeding on various trajectories and driven by different factors. At this point reference should be made to an insightful review article by Fitzpatrick et al. 2011 (based on 151 articles published in 28 PA-relevant
journals between 2000 and 2009) as well as to an article by Pollitt 2011 (reviewing CPA-related books and journal of the last three decades).

After 1990, following the collapse of the Communist regimes the post-communist transformation in Central Eastern European (CEE) countries triggered an upsurge of CPA-related research which was significantly fostered by World Bank and European Union funding. It focused largely on the central government level: see Verheijen/ Coombes ed.1998 (on “innovation in public management. Perspectives from East and West”, in: 6 CEE countries and 4 West European countries), Nunberg et al.1999 (“on administrative transition in CEE countries”), Verheijen 1999 ed. (on “Civil Service Systems in Central and Eastern Europe”) as well as, mainly based on case studies, Dimitrov et al. 2006 (on the central government’s ‘core executive’ in: Hungary, Poland, CR, Bulgaria). For CPA relevant studies regarding the local level see the CEE-related chapters in Wollmann et al. ed 2016 and Kuhlmann and Bouckaert eds. 2016.

In the early 2000’s public personnel and civil service systems became a major target and area of CPA research with a remarkably wide regional outreach. It comprised (West) European (see Bekke and van der Meer eds.1999, 2000 and later Demmke/Moilanen 2013 - on 27 European countries!), Central Eastern European (see Verheijen ed 1999), Anglo-American (see Halligan ed.2004) as well as Asian countries (see Burns/ Bowornwathana 2001).

Since the 1990s still another stream of CPA-relevant research has been prompted by the New Public Management (NPM)-inspired public sector/administrative reforms. Supported in part by OECD initiatives and World Bank and EU funding CPA-related research was at first targeted mainly at the central government level in addressing various segments of public sector reforms, such as Peters et al. ed. 2000 (on core executive in: 12 countries),
Moreover the European Group for Public Administration (EGPA) should be highlighted as playing a pivotal part in the proliferation of CPA research in Europe and beyond (see Pollitt 2011, 123) which can be likened to the leverage which the Comparative Administration Group (CAG) exerted in the US during the 1950s and 1960s in the expansion of CPA. In 1975 EGPA was founded within the International Institute of Administrative Sciences in the wake of a conference that was held in 1968 at the Hochschule für Verwaltungswissenschaften (Academy now: University of Administrative Sciences) in Speyer, Germany. Fritz Morstein-Marx (1900-1969) who, after returning from the USA, became a protagonist of CPA in Germany (see Kuhlmann/Wollmann 2019, 4, Sager et al. 2018, 86) was also instrumental in initiating the 1968 Speyer conference as well as in founding EGPA.

Recently CPA-related research on subnational/local developments has been significantly propelled by the EU-funded COST programme on “local public sector reforms”. It inspired the formation of a major international research consortium which conducted extended collaborative research and resulted in a sequence of CPA-relevant publications, such as Kuhlmann/Bouckaert eds, 2016, Wollmann et al. eds. 2016 (on public and social service provision: in EU countries), Grossi/Reichard 2016 (on local level ‘corporatization’: in EU countries) and Lippi et al. eds. 2019 (on public service provision: in South European countries). Mention should also be made of the ‘global report’ commissioned and published by United Cities and Local Government (UCLG). In a global coverage that groups the countries in ‘global regions’ (such as Europe,
North America, Asia Pacific and the like), the ‘global report’ also provides CPA-relevant information on local administrative systems (see UCLG 2008).

Finally it should be pointed out that, because of the institutional and functions links and overlaps that exist between administrative core operations, on the one side, and evaluation and NPM-inspired performance measurement, on the other, conceptually related studies have significantly enriched CPA-relevant research. See Lankina et al. 2006 (on the administrative performance of local authorities, in: Poland, CR, Hungary, Russia) and the evaluation-relevant country reports in Kopric et al. 2018, for an overview of performance management and measurement see van Dooren and Hoffmann 2018.

**Rise of handbooks and textbooks**

published. No doubt, CPA has entered the limelight of international attention and visibility.

Data bases

At the same time, the expansion of CPA research has been supported by the increasing availability of academic data collections and the emergence of cross-national datasets created by the OECD and The World Bank. Exemplary is the OECD’s “Government at a Glance” which, published since 2009 and updated lately in 2017 (see OECD 2017), provides data and comparisons on the performance of public administration in 40 OECD countries and beyond (see Van de Walle/Brans 2018, 105, on related validity and reliability issues see Brans/Pattyn 2017).

In recent years efforts have been stepped in university-based CPA-relevant research facilities to collect their own data (see Verhoest et al 2018, van de Walle/Brans 2018, 109). Exemplary are the University Leuven-based) COBRA data base) (see Verhoest et al. 2012) and well as the EU-funded COCOPS consortium (see Hammerschmidt et al. 2016)

2. Definitions, research design and methodology in CPA research

As it applies to empirical social and political science research at large CPA-related research aims at exploring real world phenomena and at identifying the factors that have shaped them. Accordingly CPA-related research is faced with a threefold conceptual and methodological challenge and task. First, it is called upon to single out and define the subject matter under study, in other words, the ‘what’ to be investigated or, in methodological terms, the ‘dependent’ variable or explanandum. Second, it is held to explore the factors that have (causally) swayed the ‘dependent’ variable, in other words, the ‘why’ or, in methodological terms, the ‘independent’ variable or explanans. Third, it has to
seek a research method that is apt and adequate to validly identify (‘explain’) the (causal) relation between the dependent and independent variables in play.

2.1 Problem of ‘conceptual equivalence’

At the very outset, CPA research which typically addresses more than one country is faced with the crucial problem of “conceptual equivalence”, that is, with the challenge to make sure that the constructs and terms used in the research have the same meaning across different countries or even in different regions of the same country (see Fitzpatrick et al. 2011, 827), in other words, whether “phenomena in different countries that apparently go under the same label are actually the same thing” (Pollitt 2011, 121). Without such clarification the research runs the risk of going astray from the very beginning.

2.2 Conceptualizing and defining the ‘unit of analysis’ in comparative research

As the first step of setting up its research design CPA research needs to address the single out and define the ‘unit(s) of analysis’ as the ‘dependent variable(s)’ the investigation is directed at.

Basically three analytical dimensions can be discerned in CPA research which typically addresses more than one country.

For one, in territorial dimension, CPA research may be directed at different levels of the (typically multi-level) countries (see Raadschelders/ Vigoda-Gadod 2015, 461 et seq., Peters 1988, 3 et seq.), that is, at

- the central (government),
- the meso (regional) or
- the local (government) level.
Second, in the *substantive* dimension a broad differentiation of subject matters comes into sight, including

- the country’s entire administrative system;
- specific administrative components, such as public bureaucracy and public personnel etc. (which both prevailed in the early phase of CPA research);
- specific administrative branches (such as social administration, housing administration);
- specific administrative operations (such as delivery of public services);
- the politico-administrative relations and processes between the institutions and actors of administrative ‘core’ administration, on the one hand, and the political arena, policy making and policy makers, on the other (see Peters 1988, Pierre 1995);
- the (horizontal and vertical) administrative actors constellations and processes involved in the implementation of policies (see seminal Pressman/Wildavsky 1973, for overview see Saetren/Hupe 2018);
- the ‘fading’ and ‘thinning out’ of the institutional and functional distinction between ‘what is public and what is private’ (Peters 2010, 3) as a result of institutionally disaggregating, ‘hiving off’ and privatizing public functions;
- the changes in the “relations between administration and civil society” (see Pierre 1995, Brans 2012, Page 2003, 421) in reaction to a retreat of public sector and a (re-)emergence of ‘societal’ actors (see Wollmann 2016b, p 324 et seq.);
- the administrative actors and (monitoring etc.) processes involved in policy evaluation, ‘feedback’ (see Wollmann 2003, Jacob et al. 2015, Pattyn et al. 2018) and policy learning (for an overview see Dunlop and
Radaelli 2018), for the conceptual overlaps with public policy research see Van de Walle/Brans 2017, 105.

Third, in the across-time (longitudinal) dimension CPA research aims to find out whether changes of specific administrative phenomena (for instance the organizational, personnel or territorial etc. structure or the institutionalization of certain functions) have (or have not) taken place ‘over time’ (in methodological terms: as ‘dependent variables”) and to identify the factors (‘independent variables’) that have shaped (or not shaped) these changes (on ‘over time’ developmental approach see Wollmann 2016a, 5 et sequ.).

Thus, the three-dimensional and multi-faceted schemes of variables and their combinations opens the view to bewildering multitude of variables and ‘units of analysis’ as potential ‘candidates’ of CPA research. In order to conceptually structure and ‘discipline’ the research and to ‘narrow it’ down to a ‘researchable’ format the construction of ‘analytical building blocks’ has been proposed (see Aberbach and Rockman 1988, Brans 2003, 431) that should lend itself to reduce the complexity the real world phenomena of administration. For instance, Peters 1988 has put forward four such ‘building blocks’: “public employees, public organizations, bureaucratic behaviour and politico-administrative relations” while Pierre 1995 has suggested three: “intra-organizational dynamics of bureaucracy, politico-administrative relations and relations between administration and civil society”. While the concept of ‘building blocks’, no doubt, proves useful to focus the analytical lens on ‘researchable’ segments and ‘cut-outs’ of the complex reality it hardly solves the basic problem of pin-pointing and defining the “unit of analysis” as Pierre himself noted that “to be sure we do not have any analytically useful definitions of some of the key phenomena in this field” (Pierre 1995, 6).
Consequently, CPA research has, from the outset, to grapple with the crucial task to adequately define its “dependent variable” and “unit of analysis”. To achieve this CPA researchers are well advised to seek clues, depending on the targeted subject matter, in available pertinent research.

2.3 Identifying ‘independent’ (explanatory) variable(s) (explanans)

In order to identify possibly relevant ‘independent’ (explanatory) variable(s) CPA-related researcher may, in line with social science research at large, essentially embark upon two strategies. In case theoretically grounded hypotheses can be ascertained in which the hypothetically surmised causal factors (variables) are spelt out, the latter guide the choice of the (‘independent’) variables to be ‘tested’ in the investigation. In the discussion of case-study methodology this has been called the ‘crucial case’ approach (see Eckstein 1975). However, this variant seems rarely applicable in CPA research (probably, because of the particularities of its multifarious subject matters, probably more scarcely than in other fields of social science research). Instead CPA research is prone to settle with and turn to ‘heuristic’ or ‘exploratory’ strategies. The former can be seen as simply exploring the subject matter with the aim to make findings (not least by way of ‘serendipity’, Merton 1957, 103) that may be fed into formulating (‘generating’) new hypotheses. By contrast the ‘exploratory’ strategy may be characterized as drawing on and possibly applying conceptual frameworks and hypotheses that are available and current in the pertinent social and political science debate.

Under these auspices, for one, conceptual guidance may be gained from the debate on neo-institutionalism (for an overview see Peters 2011, Kuhlmann/Wollmann 2019, 58 et seq.). Among its variants actor-centred (or rational choice) institutionalism (see Scharpf 1997) emphasizes the influence
of decisions and interests of relevant political and economic actors on the institutional development. In historical institutionalism the influence of existing institutional structures and past traditions (and ensuing ‘path dependencies’, see Pierson 2000) on institutional change and choice is writ large. According to sociological institutionalism the institutional development may significantly hinge on the cognitive and socio-cultural acceptance, adaptation and translation by the actors involved. Finally, discursive institutionalism highlights the discourses and dominant ideas impinging on institution building (see Schmidt 2008). In a similar vein, normative isomorphism stresses the sway of ideas and concepts (see DiMaggio/Powell 1991).

Moreover, (political as well as ‘societal’) culture has been proposed as a key influential factor by Peters 2010 albeit with the caveat that “political culture is a difficult concept to isolate and measure precisely” (ibid. 35).

Furthermore, the ecology as the complex environment and contextuality has been highlighted as a determining set of variables by Caiden/Caiden 1990, following up on Riggs 1962 who was an early advocate of the ‘ecological’ emphasis.

Lastly, internationalization and globalization has been accentuated as driving factors that have come adding to if not overshadowing the traditionally dominant role of the national state in influencing the politico-administrative structures (see Farazmand 1999, Chandler 2014)

2.4. Comparative Methods

To identify the (causal) relations between dependent and independent variables CPA research disposes, as social science research at large, basically of two methods, to wit, the quantitative-statistical method based on aggregate
data and the qualitative method largely leaning on case-studies. While, as the well-known rule of thumb has it (see seminal Lijphart 1975, 686), the former hinges on the ‘few variables many cases (large N)’ constellation the latter is premised on the ‘many variables, few cases (small N)’ one.

**Quantitative-statistical approach**

In the past in CPA research the quantitative-statistical method has been employed preferably in the study of behaviour, attitudes, values etc. of administrative actors typically on the basis of surveys (see seminal Aberbach et al. 1981). Recently survey-based and hence quantitative-statistical research has been advancing in large-scale international comparisons (see Verhoest et al. 2012, Hammerschmid et al. 2016, for an overview see Verhoerst et al. 2018).

**Qualitative Approach**

In qualitative research which has so far prevailed in CPA research two different methods are in play.

For one, a comparative method as put forward by Przeworski/Teune 1970, (see also Lijphart 1975) is premised on the (basically quasi-experimental) logic that the selected cases should, in as many possible variables, be similar if not equal (*ceteris paribus*) so that the (‘causally’) relevant variables in question should, in the methodological parlance, be ‘controlled’ (for a detailed discussion of the two pertinent research strategies, i.e. the most similar systems design, MSSD, and the most different systems design, MDSD, see Raadschelders/ Vigoda-Gadot 2015, 460 et seq.). While the ‘quasi-experimental’ logic that underlies the MSSD and MDSD schemes appears theoretically compelling it has shown, in the practice of comparative research,
that it is virtually impossible to create the kind and degree of *ceteris paribus*-conditions which the rigorous application of the quasi-experimental logic would require (see Pollitt 2011, 121)

Second, comparative qualitative research may be pursued in a conceptually reflected ‘multi cases’ strategy (see Eckstein 1975). Based on case studies (and their typical research tools, such as interviews, site visits, document analysis etc.) it offers analyses of the ‘thick description’ kind (see Raadschelders 2011, p. 831 et seq.). Moreover in their ‘heuristic’ stance qualitative case research may lead to ‘unexpected findings’ (by way of ‘serendipity’, Merton 1957, 103 et seq.) that are apt to stimulate (generate) new hypotheses or to modify existing ones. Whereas the conduct of single case studies is bound to at best arrive at ‘adhoc explanations’ whose ‘internal validity’ cannot be ‘generalized’ beyond the single case at hand, the pursuit of a ‘multi-cases’ strategy holds the analytical potential of generating ‘generalized’ and ‘generalizable’ insights and statements particularly if based on ‘purposive sampling’ or ‘purposeful selection’ of the countries (cases etc.) in question (see Fitzpatrick et al. 2011, p. 823, van de Walle/Brans 2018,110: for a detailed discussion of “purposive sampling” in qualitative research see Patton 2002, Suri 2011). In contrast to the mere compilation of countries (or cases) by “convenience” and ‘practicality’ (such as easy and ‘handy’ accessibility in terms of data, language skills, networks etc.), if not by accident, purposive (or purposeful) sampling aims at selecting countries (or cases) that differ by certain criteria and features somewhat reminding of the ‘quasi-experimental’ logic.

Such conceptually reflected grouping of countries by way of juxta-posing and counter-posing them often guides the construction of typologies of countries and country ‘families’ (for an overview see Raadschelders and Vigoda-Gadot 2015. p. 432 et seq.. Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, p. 10 et seq., table 2.1.).
For instance Painter and Peters (2010) have put forward a typology which chooses the ‘legal tradition and state society relationship’ and ensuingly distinguishes nine country groups: Anglo-American, Napoleonic, Germanic, Scandinavian, Latin American, Postcolonial South Asian/African, East Asian, Soviet and Islamic. In addressing European administrative systems Kuhlmann and Wollmann (2019), in combining ‘administrative tradition’ and ‘political-institutional features of administrative structures’ as typology-building characteristics, arrive at five models of European administration: Continental European Napoleonic, Continental European federal model, Scandinavian Anglo-Saxon model and Central Eastern and South-Eastern European one. (For a slightly different typology of European administrative systems see Ongaro et al. 2018, p. 15 et seq.).

2.5. **Organizational variants of the conduct of CPA research**

The overview of CPA-related research (see above) indicates that it has been carried out basically in two organizational variants, to wit, either by a ‘standing alone’ researcher or through (research team or consortium-type) collaboration with others.

In the former variant the researchers usually deal with a limited number (say, up to 5) countries (or cases). Their work is typically based on a commonly agreed upon research scheme and mostly conducted as primary analyses. At the end, as a rule, stands a co-authored monograph. This organizational form appears to ensure conceptual consistence and collaborative discipline of research.

If directed at a larger number of countries (or cases) the research is mostly carried out in a collaborative effort with participant researchers from all countries under investigation. The results of such collaborative research is
usually published in edited volumes. In what has been dubbed a “sandwich” format (see Derlien 1992, 290), the main body of the book is made up of chapters written by the participating researchers on their respective country (or case), while the introductory and a concluding chapters, mostly (co-)authored by editor(s), spell out a common conceptual frame respectively summarize the findings of the collective research. However such edited volumes which make up the lion’s share of hitherto published CPA-related research have repeatedly been criticised for “rather than consisting of comparative chapters on selected topics they mostly consist of a series of country chapters” (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011, 826, see also van de Walle/ Brans 2018, 110), thus providing ‘descriptive’ or, in Derlien’s distinction (see Derlien 1992, 301), ‘comparable’ rather than ‘comparative’ results.

In order to enhance and ensure the comparative potential of ‘collaborative’ research two organizational variants come in sight. For one, besides committing the participant researchers from the outset to an agreed-upon research concept the research consortium should be set for an adequate period of time (of several years) and should periodically hold interim workshops in order to conceptually coordinate and ‘discipline’ the collaborative work and the formulation of the individual final chapters.

In another organizational variant of comparative research the participant researchers might, instead of each dealing individually with a single country or case, form ‘internationally mixed’ (cross-country) research teams on specific subject matters and topic and accordingly co-author their final findings and chapters (for examples of such internationally ‘teamed up’ research on specific topics see chapters in Wollmann and Marcou eds. 2010 as well as in Kuhlmann and Bouckaert eds. 2016).
3. Summarizing and concluding remarks

The subject matters of CPA research range widely reflecting the multifaceted and fragmented reality of public administration (as spelt out in chapter 2, for a thematic specification and classification of types of CPA research see Pollitt 2011, p. 120, table 1 and similarly Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, p.7, Table 1.1). Tellingly, the proposed schemes of ‘analytical building blocks’ (see Pierre 1995, Brans 2003) that are meant to usher in ‘researchable’ definitions of units of analysis have so far rarely borne fruition in terms of commonly agreed upon “analytically useful definitions of some of the key phenomena in this field” (Pierre 1995, 6).

In the country coverage of CPA research the above overview (see section 1) indicates a preponderance of European (particularly EU member) countries which has been fostered by EU research funding. At the same time CPA research has been extended to other OECD countries, especially Australia and New Zealand, which has been prompted by OECD initiatives and funding. CPA research on developing countries has remained scarce particularly on East Asian and Subsaharan African countries; this stands in stark contrast to CPA research in the Post WWII period that had a focus on developing countries (see Fitzpatrick et al. 2011, 824).

With regard to methods the above overview suggests that qualitative (case-study based) research has prevailed. Similarly Fitzpatrick et al. 2011 observed in their review of 151 journal articles (published between 2000 and 2009) that two thirds of the articles were based on qualitative research. However recently quantitative-statistical (particularly survey-based) CPA research has apparently
gained further traction (for an overview see Verhoest et al. 2018, for examples see Verhoest et al. 2012, Hammerschmid et al. 2016).

In the debate on the methodology of CPA research the ‘purposive selection’ of the countries (or cases) has been highlighted as being pivotal in the conduct of truly ‘comparative’ research. However in the practice of CPA research the methodologically rigorous application of ‘purposive selection’ (in terms of its underlying quasi-experimental logic) has proven to be hardly achievable in that, according to Pollitt’s sobering assessment, “most of CPA does not follow much of this formula” (Pollitt 2011, p 121). Yet, in embarking upon (across country etc.) comparative analyses, researchers have often settled with a methodologically less vigorous and, as it were, ‘softer’ application of the ‘purposive selection’ logic. Notwithstanding its methodological ‘handicaps’ the results of such research can often recognized and deemed to beyond merely ‘descriptive’ or (in Derlien’s apt distinction, see Derlien 1992) ‘comparable’ analyses and to approach ‘comparative’ quality in terms of (‘middle-range theory’-type) generalizability.

At this point it should be added that, like other fields of social and political science research, CPA-related research has moved towards methodological pluralism and ‘method mix’ in bridging and levelling the divide between qualitative and quantitative research (see Peters 2016, Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, p. 8). This development adds to enhance the potential of CPA research to generate empirically saturated and theoretically substantive findings..

In sum, in its current ‘state of the art’ CPA research presents an ambiguous and mixed picture.
On the one hand, in view of the complex and multifaceted reality of public administration CPA research has so far analytically captured only segments and ‘excerpts’ of the real world of public administration. So, not surprisingly it has so far yielded insights of a, as it were, ‘micro-theoretical’ or at best ‘middle-range theoretical’ profile while, no doubt, markedly falling short of putting forth any “grand theory” of the calibre which the early protagonists of CPA, such as Heady 1962, envisaged (see Jreisat 1975, Peters 1988, Brans 2003, 427). The conceptual, theoretical and methodological challenges are still enhanced by the inter- and transdisciplinary dimension and outreach of CPA research (see Raadschelders and Vigoda-Gadot 2015, 443, Pollitt 2011, 115, Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, 7) which, in drawing on several subdisciplines of the social sciences (political science, sociology, law, economics etc.), entails considering and integrating different disciplinary approaches and methods. In the face of these multiple challenges it has been observed that “there seems little prospect of convergence on any single theory or methodological approach” (Pollitt 2011, 114).

On the other hand, CPA research has in recent years moved towards and arrived at a phase of remarkable disciplinary (and interdisciplinary) consolidation and productivity. This development of CPA research is based on impressive growth of its infrastructure in terms of national and international professional and academic associations, related national and international research networks, multiple publication outlets, national and international funding sources, databases etc. Not least the recent boom of editions and re-editions of CPA-relevant handbooks and text books points at this progress. Notwithstanding its methodological, conceptual and theoretical shortcomings and handicaps and despite its still fragmented and segmented analytical capture of field of public administration CPA research has generated an
enormous and still expanding body of research findings and also research skills which hold the promise of also further theoretical advances. Thus, despite the limits and obstacles in faces CPA has attained a “considerable vitality” (Pollitt 2011, 114) and has become “quite competitive .... and mainstream” (Pollitt 2010, 763, see also Kuhlmann/Wollmann 2019, 6).

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