




Book Review: The Politics of the Public Encounter. What Happens When Citizens Meet the State, by Peter Hupe (Ed.)

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Introduction

The significance of public administration's interaction with citizens and the numerous ways it comes to express itself is substantial, and an area necessitating a continuous discussion – both within the academic realm and society at large. Guided by this overarching sentiment, the anthology titled “The Politics of the Public Encounter”, edited by Peter Hupe (2022b), elucidate the phenomenon of the encounter in a manner that undeniably leaves few uninspired.

The book makes it clear how, in an ideal scenario, the public sector's engagement can serve, among other things, as a reliable pillar of support for citizens seeking assistance and guidance. Through the encounter, much needed attention can be directed towards the administration's role and contribution in society by showcasing qualities such as responsiveness and professionalism. Demands are regularly placed upon public officials to adhere to economic, legal, and political frameworks, to act in a manner consonant with prevailing values, and that the encounters with citizens reflect the standards expected by the state. At the same time, it is often contended that public servants possess significant *latitude* and flexibility to shape and *interpret* their work based on distinct situations, which becomes particularly clear through their interactions with citizens. Critique may emerge when officials falter in their interactions and the way public administration is organized is not set in stone and may undergo changes. Given that many individuals' initial contact with the public administration occurs through embodied and tangible authorities and their employees, these public officials are imperative in the understanding and the shaping of the perception of how the encounters encompasses more than a mere convergence of individuals trying to address a specific issue.

Breadth, Curiosity and Classics Bingo: Combining the Old With the New

The concise introduction above describes the anthology's portrayal of public encounters. Early on, the book delves into the very issue of these encounters presented in the 1980s by Charles Goodsell (1981), employing it to more current circumstances to illuminate how it may be understood and discussed today. The interaction between public officials and citizens is not a trivial matter. With a total of 18 chapters, numerous relevant and enlightening perspectives are presented with authors contributing their distinct voices while the book simultaneously maintains a sharp unity. For the purpose of this review, it is not possible to describe and offer an exhaustive exploration of each chapter individually, although certain chapters will be highlighted as particularly good examples. Much like many other anthologies, the book is divided into different parts which, in this instance, address

various aspects related to the public encounter: its conceptual underpinnings, how it is demonstrated in empirical cases, diverse contexts and through the lens of ethical considerations. Reading this book, one gains a comprehensive grasp of the subject and its breadth. However, notwithstanding the book's extensive scope and varied entries, there are questions that the reader must find elsewhere. Even though the historical perspective may be partly found in, for example, van Eijk and Steen's (2022) chapter 4 on the role of citizens, this perspective and the development of the encounter over time could have been given more extensive treatment. Overall, I find the book, leaning, possibly a bit too much, on the Netherlands as an illustrative example, where many of the empirical case studies and examples included have focused on Dutch cases. Incorporating other countries would have enabled a broader perspective, but readers interested in the Scandinavian context will find pertinent and valuable insights in Liodden's (2022) chapter 7 on asylum management in Norway, and Zinck Pedersen's (2022) chapter 17 on ethical considerations among surgeons in Denmark.

The book is anything but thin. This said, the authors are successful in imbuing their chapters with momentum and clarity, rendering the chapters easy to digest. They are full of captivating examples, analytical models, tools, and scenario descriptions making the encounters with public officials both theoretically and empirically interesting. A few minutes may pass after I set the book aside, yet before long, I find myself growing curious about what the subsequent chapters might explore. Throughout the various chapters, the novel intertwines with the familiar. Concepts hitherto unfamiliar to me are juxtaposed or employed within contexts of clear societal significance. Simultaneously, much remains recognizable. The contextualization through the lenses of New Public Management and New Public Governance, and the interweaving with antecedent literature many consider classical benchmarks within the field of public administration, such as Lipsky's Street-level Bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010), which is given considerable intellectual space within the book, as well as references to the thoughts of Weber, Pressman & Wildavsky, Ostrom, and March & Simon – these enduringly influential ideas serve as a thematic thread throughout the book, grounding the endeavor in prior influences and contributions. The only discernible absence is a linkage to Lindblom's muddling through (Lindblom, 1959), which would have made the "classics bingo" complete.

The recurring emphasis made by the anthology's authors on the potential variations in different encounters amplify the importance of considering the mandates and roles of the respective organizations and their function. A more cross-sectoral public service, where the public officials are tasked with engaging with citizens across a spectrum of different issues and domains, may impact how these interactions unfold, particularly when employees find themselves needing to represent a range of different and divergent interests. Given this context, it would have been of interest, and I would have liked seeing the application of the discussion on public encounters to empirical cases involving authorities whose responsibilities largely rely on representing multiple and different authorities. For instance, in Sweden, we observe state authorities like Statens servicecenter, where officials at the so-called service offices dispersed around the country shall provide assistance to citizens seeking services from several different state authorities such as the Swedish Tax Agency, Pensions Agency and Social Insurance Agency (with continuous discussions about potential additions of other state agencies). Simultaneously, these public officials are also expected to offer guidance to citizens as they navigate the authorities' websites and apply digital tools needed for accessing the services provided by said authorities.

Speaking of governmental websites and digital spaces, the discussion on technological advancement and its influence on the interactions between officials and citizens is prominently featured in the book. Considering recent developments, this is not particularly surprising. Throughout the year of 2023, chatbots have filled many headlines, and even actors have expressed concerns about the impact of artificial intelligence on their work and have gone on strike. These significant technological strides will undeniably have an intense impact on many aspects of daily life and work practices. Surely this applies to much of public administration and the encounters as well. The advent of AI is reshaping the playing field, and through repeated discussions and in the more in-depth analysis in Chapter 11 by Hupe (2022a), I argue that one of the anthology's substantial contributions lies in the connection between technological

advancement and public encounters. This firmly situates the book within the contexts of the 2020s, illuminates the relevance of public administration during decisive societal changes, and is something that has encouraged many reflections. Despite quick changes and the fact that there is little that may be taken for granted, I would argue that this technological perspective can be seen as an important addendum (in addition to the book's self-proclaimed citizen perspective), to discussions regarding street-level bureaucrats as it is a perspective lacking in Lipsky's book.

Encounters Marked by Expectations

Through this structure and content, it becomes evident in my reading of the book how *expectations* serve as a cornerstone in the deciphering of public encounters. Expectations are something we all are accustomed to, whether they relate to something that cause uneasiness (such as notifications of decisions that may impact us poorly), or in eagerness of something more positive (like much-needed assistance propelling us forward). The human aspect of public encounters is considered a crucial entry point within the book, and as people, expectations are facets that we must manage and take into consideration. From the very beginning of the book, expectations are notably pronounced within this context of public encounters, with Chapter 4 by van Eijk and Steen (2022) particularly illuminating in this regard, and these expectations are subsequently applied to the various empirical cases discussed in the following chapters.

With a steadfast focus on individuals, the book highlights how interactions may look very different contingent upon influences such as the civil servant(s) involved, the citizen, and the specific nature of the engagement. The meaning of citizens' preconceptions and insights regarding the actual mandate, capabilities, and potential of the encountered public services cannot be overstated. A particularly informative quote in this regard is found in van Oenen's chapter 16 on civil disobedience, where it is explained that: "Somewhat paradoxically, the aim of government to move ever closer to the citizen and to become ever more 'accessible' requires more, rather than less, skills and knowledge on the part of citizens" (van Oenen, 2022:319). The book is perceived as true to reality, and those who work with public encounters will undoubtedly recognize many of the depictions presented in the book, particularly concerning the question of expectations.

This becomes clear to me as I am inevitably reminded of my own past experiences as a public official in various governmental state agencies with work that was in many ways characterized by external, direct contact with other people. I have also faced the differences in expectations towards the public administration and services which are often crystallized during the encounter. Some citizens possess comprehensive knowledge and familiarity with the agency they get in contact with, while others might mistake it for a different agency – or believe that it does not make a difference and presume the same assistance can be provided regardless. People might sometimes be pleasantly surprised when officials successfully manage what initially appeared to be a long shot. However, it is also not uncommon for disappointment, displeasure, and a sense of helplessness to arise among both citizens and officials when the public sector lacks the capability to correspond adequately and fully meet the prevailing expectations. Questions of morality, ethics and what is deemed "right" and befitting is actualized which is a topic that the book, on the whole, acknowledges in many chapters but perhaps becomes most explicit in Zinck Pedersen's (2022) chapter 17, which examines surgeons interactions with patients in risk of grievous illness, and in Loyens and Schott's (2022) Chapter 14, which direct focus on the public encounter in times of a crisis such as COVID-19.

Concluding Remarks

The way the book pedagogically captures diverse perspectives with important contributions to the discussion on public encounters, while also underscoring the utmost importance of the interactions for both public administration and individual lives, constitutes some of the book's foremost strengths. These qualities alone provide ample reason for readers interested in the development of society as a whole and researchers of public administration to immerse in the book. Public encounters come to pass in many different contexts, resulting in a book that resonates with many. Reading this book has been a pleasure, as it stands as an important addition

to how we within the sphere of public administration may grasp and recognize issues that has clear bearing to today's societal scene, with connections to issues such as technological advancement and pandemics. It is an anthology comprising numerous chapters that demonstrate how different inquiries of public administration can be formulated and stimulate interest. Furthermore, the integration of classic literature within the research field of public administration and the diverse theoretical displays, particularly evident in Hupe's own chapter 15 (2022c), makes the book a good academic starting block and source of inspiration for those interested in these types of issues, not least scholars and students of public administration. In line with the book's ambition to appeal to professionals, officials engaged in working with public encounters will also recognize the advantages of reading the anthology. The different chapters and inputs from researchers underscore a relatability by articulating situations related to, for example, expectations. I therefore see it as likely that those who work with these types of encounters will both feel strengthened and motivated to further develop their own work.

However, *The Politics of the Public Encounter* offers a greater value. The anthology manages to engage. With each chapter's excerpts and ideas regarding the interaction and how it might come to be, the soul of bureaucracy is fortified. It is an important read for those engaged in the analysis of public administration, but also for those who are, or intends to be, working as officials whose responsibilities entail extensive interaction with other parts of society. The emphasis placed on the importance of encounters within the public machinery, the validation of how every civil servant is of cardinal significance, and the encouragement of public officials to recognize and engage with this importance, are all crucial points that the book addresses. With a sturdier commitment and encouragement, both the encounter and the study of the encounter are refined. Similar to an opus to the field of public administration, the book exhibits an impetus to an issue that affects all, and it accentuates the profound relevance public administration has to offer.

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