B.W. Carroll, “Is There a Gulf between Theory and Practice in Public Administration Journals? Can it be Overcome?” in D. Siegel and K. Rasmussen, eds., *Professionalism and the Public Service: Essays in Honour of Kenneth Kernaghan* (Toronto UTP, 2008)

**Overview:**

Article addresses the role of academic journals, and their role in bridging the gap between theory and practice. Carroll argues that increasingly, articles are being written by PhDs for PhDs. The relationships between theory and practice is one of the major preoccupations of public administration – there are wonderful theories, its just that they do not work.

**Analysis:**

* Less on who writes the articles, rather focuses on who reads them (or who should read them)
* Decreased readership could be a function of increased complexity of public administration, in conjunction with the increased pressure on academics to publish (and publish in high impact journals) - “The degree of difficulty in understanding an article is highly correlated with academic readers’ impressions of its profoundness and originality”
* How did we get here? (Part 1)
  + Disconnect occurs also at a practical level: academics strive to succeed in their careers, practitioners strive to solve practical problems – thus, the goals of the two groups have diverged
  + No longer are both groups engaged in a debate over the normative *and* empirical aspects of public administration
* How did we get here? (Part 2)
  + What is often meant by theory in PA has little to do with the true meaning of theory – that is, it does not help us understand relationships in the world, presumably in order to explain, predict or alter them
  + PA research is engaged in little theory testing

**Some observations:**

* Efforts to get practitioners to work on scholarly articles are probably doomed – one noted “even clinicians, who see themselves as part of the profession operate at work as clinicians, basing their decisions and actions on their actual experience. They do not engage in evidence-based decision making; they do not need to read any research”
  + DISAGREE with this characterization
* Carol Weiss – “for most people, social science reports seem to have very little effect on policy makers in and of themselves… policy makers are busy people, and reading is low on their list of activities”

**Conclusions:**

* Blaming the victim also not the answer – if academics are not producing and disseminating research that is read by, or of use to practitioners, then what are they doing?
* In the words of K. Kernaghan “if academics want their research and ideas to affect practice, they must write on matters of current or perennial concern to the profession. Moreover, they must use a vocabulary that is easily comprehensible and non-academic. The development of a common language of communication between the discipline and the profession is especially important for articulating shared values and assumptions”
* For understandable reasons, journals have migrated to the academic side so that there is little room for contribution by, or relevance to, practitioners. It is improbable that this trend will be reversed.
* Is there a gap between theory and practice? Yes, and it is widening. Can it be closed? Maybe - if academic journals can meld theory and practice in an accessible way.