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Editorial

The response of the Brazilian public administration to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic

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This special call for papers of the Brazilian Journal of Public Administration (RAP) reflects on the responses of the Brazilian public administration to the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of submissions showed an unprecedented mobilization of scholars: we received 211 papers from 613 researchers representing 185 research institutions. Female academics were responsible for 289 submissions. This call for papers counted on the collaboration of a network of 104 reviewers working together with the editorial board. After a thorough review, 17% of the papers submitted were accepted, authored by 105 researchers from 41 institutions. Women were responsible for only 39 accepted submissions, suggesting obstacles in female academic productivity in the face of COVID-19, as indicated by the recent report of Parent in Science (2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic is defined as an extreme crisis, threatening core values and life-sustaining functions, demanding urgent solutions in uncertain circumstances (Rosenthal, Charles, & Hart, 1989) – as observed in the debate “lives vs. economy.” The situation’s complexity and the pressure to cope with the pandemic impose challenges for any government, requiring firm political leadership (Christensen, Lægheid, & Rykkja, 2016). Early research on COVID-19 acknowledges that existing state capacities, such as the structure of health systems, shape governmental responses to the pandemic (Capano et al., 2020; Weible et al., 2020).

From a comparative perspective, the existence of the Brazilian national healthcare system (SUS) created the expectation that the country would be well-positioned in terms of addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. SUS had already built coordination and learning capacity in previous epidemic outbreaks such as H1N1 and the Zika virus (Croda et al., 2020). However, coordination and learning capacities did not play the role they were expected to. The COVID-19 infection rates skyrocketed, and the number of deaths exceeded 94 thousand (August 3, 2020). The harsh reality demands further investigation in order to understand the Brazilian public management responses to the pandemic.

This issue presents 35 papers, organized around six cross-cutting themes addressing the public management responses to the challenges imposed by the pandemic. In these works, public management emerges not just as a locus of decision-making related to COVID-19, but also as a space of distributive and moral conflicts that reflect the pandemic’s nature and uniqueness.

The first theme reflects on the current state capacities and their potential in pandemic management, focusing not only on healthcare but also on the state apparatus as a whole. The papers help to identify

vulnerabilities in the state capacities at the same time as pointing to ways of mobilizing the state apparatus to address the challenges posed by COVID-19.

The second theme focuses on behavioral responses to the pandemic and explores the Brazilian context, particularly in terms of political leadership and its behavioral effects. The papers indicate that factors such as political polarization or subjective norms influence individuals' support for social isolation. In addition, political leadership is a key factor in crisis management (Boin et al., 2010; Boin, 't Hart, McConnell, & Preston, 2010; Kapucu, 2006). In Brazil, however, such leadership is presented as a problematic case, particularly in a context of excessive political polarization. Overall, the studies highlight the importance of leaders' communication strategies in influencing the public's emotional responses and perceptions of government effectiveness in dealing with the crisis.

A third theme focuses on the governments' strategies to cope with the pandemic. The papers identify the contextual factors and governmental actions adopted by municipalities to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 during its critical early stage. They also reveal how administrative functions and public organizations, such as regulatory agencies or the police forces, are mobilized in the context of the pandemic. Recognizing the key-role of coordination in crisis management (Christensen, Lægreid & Rykkja, 2016), the authors discuss several coordination failures and press for correcting measures. Finally, a paper in this third theme analyzes the public organizations' strategies to cope with the pandemic from the perspective of the public managers' moral dilemmas. This point of view suggests the new forms of moral reasoning, particularly regarding governments' social and moral obligations and the limits of governmental impact on citizens' individual rights in a period of crisis.

The Civil Society Organizations' (CSOs) mobilization in response to COVID-19, is discussed in the fourth theme of this special issue. The researchers examine the CSOs' characteristics that enable them to contribute to the governments' emergency measures, as well as the possibility to expand the collaborative arrangements between governments and CSOs. The studies provide a panorama of these "invisible networks" of collaboration, discussing the impacts of the CSOs' actions and their challenges when coping with the pandemic.

The effects of the pandemic are not limited to the area of public healthcare, as demonstrated by the fifth theme of this special issue. The papers discuss the crisis' impacts on politics, the labor market, basic education, public services (such as sanitation and public transportation), and micro and small enterprises.

Finally, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are different according to the social strata, as discussed in the last theme, dedicated to socio-economic vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities require sophisticated public strategies to prevent the increase in poverty and social inequality rates. The studies diagnose the socio-economic fragilities and analyze how concrete measures such as the 'emergency aid' – created by Law 13982 (2020) –, programs such as the conditional cash transfer program (Bolsa Família), or digital complementary currencies might work to alleviate the crisis effects on vulnerable populations. Researchers also use systems dynamics modeling to support the policymaking process to avert the adverse effects of the virus' dissemination in the *favelas*.

This issue concludes with a reflection on the economic, technological, social, and geopolitical challenges in the post-COVID-19 scenario, inviting the academic community to work on long-term strategies, which will require reviewing the current educational, social, and political paradigms.

The COVID-19 crisis highlights the centrality of the state's role in managing the pandemic. The studies collected in this issue of the Brazilian Journal of Public Administration detect vulnerabilities

in state capacities, such as in the case of the Brazilian health system (SUS), but also identify strengths in other areas of public policies. We hope that these contributions will encourage evidence-based decision-making in the context of the pandemic and will emphasize the contribution of academic research to managing the crisis and its consequences.

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