

Unethical Actions of Public Servants: A Voyeur's View

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Success in the private sector does not necessarily guarantee success in the public sector. What differentiates government service is its scope, impact, accountability, and political nature. Public employees need to be able to deal with the wealthy and the powerful as well as the impoverished. Most important, they must be able to work within the framework of three goals: loyalty to the organization, responsiveness to the needs of the public, and consideration for the employees' own objectives and desires. These goals provide an environment that is rich in ethical dilemmas.

This article explores how public employees attempt to reconcile these diverse goals and the ethical dilemmas they create. To that end, extensive in-depth interviews have been performed with mid-level and senior public employees. The purpose of this study is to provide descriptive information on the unethical behaviors of public employees.

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country depict various public servants being investigated for unethical behaviors and conflicts of interest. The concern for unethical behavior is well warranted when one considers that behavior often has tangible and lasting effects. The most common consequences include poor-quality work, losses of office equipment and supplies, abuses of sick leave, false disability claims, and lower levels of productivity.

The subjects were employed in various aspects of the public sector, including law enforcement, higher education, public libraries, municipal management, and public health. The participants provided great insight into their ethical reasoning and subsequent actions. Before presenting the methodology for this study and the subsequent results, this article provides a brief overview of current ethics research and methodology in public administration. Last, a discussion that highlights some common themes found in these interviews concludes the article.

Current Ethics Research

Interest in public administration ethics has recently resurfaced. To date, three methods of inquiry have primarily been used to explore the phenomenon of ethical behavior in public administration: analogy/organizational case studies, comparative studies, and survey studies. All of these methods have been used with some degree of success, and yet each method also has its limitations.

In 1990, Frank Marini made interesting use of the analogy approach in ethics research when he used the play *Antigone* to illustrate the complicated twists of administrative ethics in his *Public Administration Review* article "The Uses of Literature in the Exploration of Public Administration Ethics." Analogies serve as metaphors and can be used as vehicles to explore relevant issues. Marini contends that a literary analogy approach is useful in understanding the variables that influence the ethical behavior of employees.

He believes that by studying works such as *Antigone*, researchers and practitioners can obtain an important and highly relevant tool that illustrates the dilemmas in administrative ethics. Marini provides a brief summary of the play in order to make his point and ties the actions of the characters to a variety of ethical issues such as: ethics and conscience, ethics and emotions, bribery and administrative responsibility. Marini asserts that many other plays and stories are capable of demonstrating the complicated ways in which ethics events occur in real life.

Organizational case studies, which are related to analogies, are in-depth examinations of actual situations within real organizations. Publications such as the *Business and Professional Ethics Journal* rely heavily on the case-study method of inquiry. Melville Cotrill's article "Academic Ethics Revisited" gives an example of the method in which he explores the ethics concerning the publication efforts of university faculty. In presenting his case, Cotrill is able to explore the perspectives of faculty and administrators as well as graduate research assistants. Both analogies and case studies are helpful in removing ethics discussions from high levels of abstraction and making ethics inquiries more interesting and accessible to practitioners and scholars alike. A case study provides a common starting point from which the analysis of an ethical dilemma can begin.

In contrast to analogies and case studies, comparative studies take a more objective look at the ethical behavior of employees. As the name implies, such studies explore the reasons for differences in ethical outcomes among similar units of analysis, such as organizations, departments, groups, or individuals.

As in comparative studies used in other disciplines, great care must be given to finding appropriate and relevant comparisons. When a means of comparison is provided, however, ethics practices and dilemmas can be placed in clearer perspective. Comparative analy-

ses, not unlike the telling of history itself, rely heavily on an accurate and unbiased interpretation.

John Rohr used the comparative approach to ethics in a *Public Administration Review* article comparing American ethical standards with the French approach to administrative ethics. Rohr states that the two countries are as one in the overall objective of discouraging conflicts of interest while in office. France and the United States differ sharply, however, in reference to matters of financial disclosure. Rohr believes that historical comparisons are of great utility in understanding the origins of these ethical differences between France and the United States, as well as many other units and levels of analysis.

Another example of a comparative study is Andrew Stark's work concerning public sector conflicts of interest in Canada and the United States. Stark's approach is similar to Rohr's. Specifically, Stark addressed the circumstances that lead to conflicts of interest in the public sector, such as post employment, the influence of private interests on professional decision making, and independence of judgment. Stark's study is an interesting contribution to comparative studies research.

He believes that Canadian ethics, which are largely influenced by British philosophy, are profoundly different from the ethics of public office in the United States. He notes that British and Canadian commissioners have never been seriously concerned with public officials' pursuing outside activities, while the United States has restricted private interests since the 19th century. Comparative studies such as Stark's and Rohr's provide a more objective look at organizational ethics than do case studies or analogies.

The third type of inquiry in ethics research is the survey method. Surprisingly, this technique is not used as often as case studies or comparative studies. The infrequent use of surveys is probably due to the compelling interest subjects have in keeping their activities and

Figure 1

SUBJECT	GENDER	AGE	AGENCY
1	Male	46	Military
2	Male	45	City administration
3	Female	47	City management
4	Male	46	Military
5	Female	39	City administration
6	Male	51	Higher education
7	Male	60	Higher education
8	Female	44	Public library
9	Male	45	Law enforcement
10	Female	40	Law enforcement
11	Female	36	Public health
12	Female	50	Public health

identities secret. Therefore, many subjects are wary of answering ethics surveys. In 1990, James Bowman presented a study in which he completed an ethics survey of public managers. He targeted three topic areas: ethics in government, ethics in public agencies, and ethics codes as moral standards.

A questionnaire consisting primarily of "agree" and "disagree" statements was mailed to a random sample of administrators who were members of the American Society of Public Administration. The respondents' answers make it clear that the research targeted attitudes about organizational ethics and not the actual practices or behaviors of the employees themselves. While the results are interesting, they do not provide information about how employees actually behave at work.

Despite the utility of the methods described above, there is a need to obtain more in-depth information about actual ethical practices and dilemmas that public employees encounter. Therefore, the present study has used a fourth method of inquiry: a structured interview format. This was chosen because of its ability to provide extensive descriptive information about the behavior of public employees. Because of the special in-depth nature of the interviews, the initial sample size was restricted. A description of these subjects, as well as an overview of the methodology, are provided below.

Methodology

To identify common ethical dilemmas that employees face and their responses to such dilemmas, 12 public employees were solicited to form the initial sample. The subjects were not volunteers but were solicited by this researcher and agreed to participate with the understanding that their identities would be kept confidential.

The subjects were employed in various aspects of the public sector, including federal, state, county, and city government agencies, such as public health, public libraries, law enforcement, and municipal management. Half of the subjects interviewed were male, and half of the subjects interviewed were female. The subjects ranged from 36 to 60 years of age. Figure 1 provides more specific demographic information on each subject.

Understandably, none of the interviewees wanted his or her real name used, and so they are referred to by their corresponding numbers, such as "Employee 6" or "Employee 12." The subjects were primarily from the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, and two-thirds were either mid-level or senior-level managers. For each subject, the interview lasted approximately two-and-a-half hours. All interviews were done on an individual basis and were conducted away from places of employment. To facilitate thoughtful and com-

prehensive responses, each subject was given the list of interview questions in advance. The questions were then discussed and answered in person during the interview session. All subjects were guaranteed absolute anonymity. Interviewees were asked to respond to the seven questions in Figure 2.

Results

The following paragraphs summarize the responses to the questions in numerical order.

Question One

Eight out of the 12 subjects stated that he or she was more concerned with his or her own ethical behavior than with the behavior of others. The reason most often given was that subjects believed their own actions should be above reproach. All eight wanted to be viewed as role models for their subordinates and as setting standards to which others could aspire. The other four subjects shared a different philosophy; they were unconcerned with their own ethical behavior, which they considered to be largely ethical, but found themselves curious and even anxious about the ethical behavior of their contemporaries and their subordinates.

The pivotal difference between these two groups appeared to be their perceived ability to influence employees. The eight subjects who were more concerned with their own behavior generally believed that their positive role modeling could influence others. In contrast, the four subjects who were more concerned about the ethical behavior of others believed that they were unable to influence the ethical behavior of their coworkers or subordinates.

Question Two

Surprisingly, the subjects were evenly divided on the issue of whether or not unethical behavior is increasing. Half of the subjects believed that overall ethical behavior has not changed significantly over time. That is to say, incidents of

corruption among managers and employees exist today as they did in yesteryear. These subjects contend that current professional ethics, while no better than in the past, are no worse. They also expressed the viewpoint that the media attention that public sector ethics have received in recent years has resulted in exaggerating the problems that do exist.

The other half of the informants firmly believed that ethics in the public sector are growing worse. They saw today's employees as having a poor work ethic that encourages them to come to work late and avoid doing an "honest day's work." They believed that a value shift has taken place in the United States that has resulted in an increased frequency of unethical behavior.

Question Three

The question of which variables contribute to unethical behavior brought an interesting mix of responses. Some of the variables mentioned included managers who send mixed messages, unions that place their own interests above the interests of the citizens, poor supervision, unreasonable workloads, and low pay. This last item frequently encouraged workers to practice what one subject referred to as the "debit and credit" system of ethics. Employees who believe that they are underpaid simply take what they feel is owed to them. Such compensation could be in the form of additional sick days, office supplies, or simply a decrease in the quantity or quality of work. Employee 1 stated that a lack of information concerning expected standards of conduct can contribute to unethical behavior. "Sometimes, just simple instructions can turn a marginal employee into a productive and reliable worker," he said.

Employee 2 believed that downsizing within his organization had resulted in a sympathetic atmosphere for an informal and unspoken work slowdown. He stated that the slowdown seems to perpetuate itself, with workers wanting to

Figure 2

Interview Questions

1. Are you more concerned about your own ethical behavior or the ethical behavior of your employees/coworkers?
2. Is it your perception that unethical behavior is becoming more of or less of a problem within your organization?
3. What would you identify as the variables or the causes that contribute to your unethical behavior or the unethical behavior of others?
4. Do you think that you could identify a group (by using such variables as age, gender, ethnic background, longevity, seniority, education, etc.) that you believe would be more likely to behave unethically?
5. What opportunities are present where you work that would encourage your own unethical behavior or the unethical behavior of others?
6. How do you think unethical behavior could best be controlled within your organization? For instance, through education, punishment, awards, modeling, etc.?
7. Can you relate an incident in which you engaged in an unethical action? What motivated you to engage in this action?

do less and less. Employee 6, who works in higher education, viewed the tenure system as a major contributor to unethical behavior within his university. Such unquestionable job security, he stated, leaves employees believing that they are unaccountable to others and above reproach.

Question Four

The subjects were in general agreement as to the groups or individuals who were most likely to engage in unethical behavior. All 12 subjects believed the single most meaningful predictor was age. Of the 12 subjects, 11 believed that younger employees were less ethical than older employees. Only one interviewee believed that older employees were less ethical than younger employees. The other 11 subjects expressed the view that many of the young (below the age of 35) employees simply had not learned appropriate behavior.

Overall, these interviewees believed that younger workers are more likely to call in sick when well, to do poor-quality work, to remove office supplies, and to abuse the privacy of personnel records.

Question Five

All participants viewed the opportunities for unethical behavior within the work environment as plentiful and frequent. Specific opportunities included: supervisors who neither practiced nor

required high-quality performances, programs such as workers' compensation that reward not working, liberal sick-leave policies, open access to information on computer databases, and wide authority to exercise individual discretion. Employee 3 cited the following example:

I think there are some public employees who are always looking to take advantage of the system. For instance, in our city, police and firefighters are entitled to permanent disability insurance if they can prove that the injuries took place while on the job. In other words, an injury that occurred while performing one's duties. We had a recent case where an officer requested disability retirement for a back injury that he had actually had for many years prior to his claim, but he tried to say that he incurred the injury while he was putting on his uniform in the locker room at work. Then, he tries to get the city to pay for disability retirement. The taxpayers are the ones who are ultimately ripped off.

Indeed, the issue was not a question of available opportunities, for they were always present; but more accurately, the relevant issue was why some employees chose to exploit these opportunities for unethical behavior while other employees did not.

Question Six

All 12 interviewees expressed skepticism in regard to successfully controlling unethical behavior within their work environments. Employee 1 ruled out the option of punishment as a means of controlling unethical behavior simply because he believed that it was "too little, too late." Instead, he felt that supervisors' modeling expected behavior would be more likely to influence employees. Five of the subjects supported quick and decisive punishment as a means of controlling unethical behavior, and two subjects believed that an educational approach would be most successful. Employee 2 stated that the only way to decrease unethical behavior was to allow employees greater input into decision-making processes so that they would not circumvent existing policies and procedures. Regardless of their suggestions, all said they were extremely skeptical that anything could be done to alter significantly the unethical practices on a permanent basis.

Question Seven

The interviewees were surprisingly candid when admitting to and describing their own unethical actions. One unethical action reported by almost all of the 12 subjects was the practice of using computers to access information about friends and other acquaintances. For instance, Employee 8 said personnel in her library often used the library's computer to find out what their neighbors and friends were reading. Employee 10, in law enforcement, was using the computer system to keep track of a woman with whom her husband had been having an affair, and Employee 3 used his organization's computer system to find out where his former wife was living.

Employee 2 confessed that he has attempted to coerce his coworkers and subordinates into doing what he believes is an honest day's work. He was frustrated with what he regarded as the "slack" practice of employees leaving part of their workload unfinished even though the normal workday provided

plenty of time to complete these routine tasks. The practice became so bothersome to him that he began to make misleading statements to his subordinates concerning what was actually expected of them. When one coerced worker remained past normal working hours to finish a project, Employee 2's misleading statements and coercion practices were revealed. He was later reprimanded by the senior supervisor for his tactics.

Employee 3 admitted that she has often used organization equipment and supplies not only for her own personal use but also for the personal use of her sons. These supplies have included software, word processors, paper, and other office supplies. She said she feels that she is owed such benefits because she works extremely long hours. Employee 3 plans to continue this behavior even though she realizes that her actions are not sanctioned by her organization. She asserts that when one "reviews both sides of the ledger," her organization still owes her.

Employee 6 reported that he commonly copies software that belongs to his agency and keeps the copies for his own personal use. He also makes additional copies of the software and distributes them among his friends. He said that he is not bothered by the computer screen message that says, "This software is the property of . . ." He stated that there are even days when he feels a secret satisfaction in taking software from an organization that he believes has treated its employees poorly.

Employee 9 is in law enforcement. The application and selection processes for police officers are extensive and exhausting. Law enforcement agencies are careful to screen out applicants who are considered poor risks for psychological, physical, or emotional reasons. Such procedures are necessary because of the considerable discretion each officer is given to perform his or her job. This wide latitude of individual discretion provides police officers with numerous opportunities for unethical behavior. As

a relatively new employee, Employee 9 approaches most problems and situations according to established police policy. Like the other subjects in this research, Employee 9 uses the computer system to obtain information on friends and acquaintances, as well as the occasional car that bears the license plate of his home state. He considers this behavior a victimless action because he feels it does not affect his ability to respond to calls for service.

Another example cited by Employee 9 is the processing of offenses according to when the offenses occurred during an eight-hour shift. A case in point is the handling of drunk drivers. Many states require that officers provide extensive documentation. Documenting and processing the drunk driver commonly takes between three and four hours. This is intended to protect the rights of drunk drivers, as well as to provide the prosecuting attorney with sufficient information for a conviction. If a drunk is stopped at the beginning of an officer's shift, the officer will spend the first half of the eight-hour shift processing the driver. On a busy night, this disruption can leave the number of officers on the streets dangerously low. If a drunk driver is encountered at the end of a shift, the police officer must work three to four hours of overtime to complete the necessary documentation. Often, these hours of overtime occur when the officer is already exhausted and looking forward to going home. Employee 9 made this comment:

I don't blame the cops who don't want to go through all of that at the end of a shift. Even if he decides to arrest the drunk driver and work the four hours of overtime, chances are the drunk driver is just going to hire a good lawyer and get off anyway. I think most cops would love to get more drunks off the road, but the present system makes you just want to close your eyes and look the other way. The other night, I stopped a guy who had too much to drink. I knew if I gave him sobriety tests, he'd fail, but I didn't

want to spend the four hours processing him. So I stayed with him until his friend arrived and drove him home. He was a decent guy. I suppose if he had given me a lot of lip, I would have arrested him, but he didn't. Basically, I just wanted to get him off the road for his sake and the sake of everybody else.

Employee 10 admitted that she regularly used the computer database to obtain personal information on a woman with whom her husband had been having an affair. For three years, she periodically checked on the "other woman" to find out where she was living and what kind of car she was driving. Employee 10 has also used the system to obtain information on other acquaintances. She said she believes most of her fellow workers also use the database for similar purposes. "It's practically a benefit of the job," she said.

Employee 11 described an unusual action that she knew her organization would regard as unethical. She provided services to a client free of charge. She said that in health care the working poor are often the ones who "need a break" the most. It's the people, she said, who are working in the low-paying jobs she wants to help the most, even if it means violating organizational policy to do so.

Common Themes

Despite the differences among the subjects, some common themes were found that encouraged unethical behavior: workload, pay, perceptions concerning groups who were likely to behave unethically, and conflicts between organizational policy and the public good.

The Workload Factor

Throughout the interviews, several subjects made frequent reference to workload and its influence on unethical behavior. Workloads that were perceived as being unreasonably heavy often made employees want to retaliate for what they viewed as an impossible situation.

Employee 3 voiced this concern when she alluded to the extra hours she devoted to solving problems at work. It was not unusual for her to work 12- to 14-hour days. Her long hours received no special recognition or compensation. Employee 2 was so distressed over his workload that he tried to intimidate other workers into assuming what he believed was their fair share.

Both of the subjects in higher education said they felt overwhelmed by the large number of students for whom they were responsible. These faculty members felt incapable of providing high-quality instruction to so many students and admitted they resorted to defensive strategies to cope with the large number of students. Employee 6 stated that he seldom read each student's research paper from start to finish. Employee 7 said he often finds himself hiding from his students in order to meet the other demands of his job.

Many of the respondents believed that office supplies were owed to them because of the heavy workloads they endured. In several instances, subjects indicated that they allowed the quality of their work to suffer because they viewed their workloads as insurmountable. In summary, whenever the workload seemed unreasonable, employees resorted to defensive strategies such as taking supplies, slowing down, or taking extra time off. When employees were unhappy with their workloads and considered their priorities, goals such as high-quality work and ethical behavior no longer appeared at the top of their agendas.

The Question of Pay

One of the most common themes found was the relationship of pay dissatisfaction and unethical behavior. Dissatisfaction with pay was frequently cited as a reason for unethical actions. The belief in some instances that cost-of-living increases were in danger of being eliminated brought great frustration and anger. This senti-

ment was especially felt by those in local government management, law enforcement, and public health. These interviewees felt cheated by their organizations when salary increases failed to meet expectations.

Common in these situations was what one city employee referred to as the "debit and credit" system of ethics. Workers simply take what they feel is owed to them until the ledger (at least in the eyes of the employees) is balanced. When salaries fall short of expectations, extra sick days, the use of office equipment, and illegitimate charges to expense accounts are taken to make up for the difference. In the long run, it may be more cost-efficient for organizations to provide pay raises than to alienate employees and lose both time and money in the end.

Groups Perceived as More Likely to Be Unethical

One variable cited by all of the subjects as a predictor of unethical behavior was age. Young employees (those below the age of 35) were consistently regarded as the group most likely to behave unethically. Nearly all of the subjects identified workers in their 20s and early 30s as high-risk groups. Only one employee believed that younger employees were more ethical than their "corrupt" older counterparts.

Virtually every subject believed that different ages resulted in different ethical standards. Eleven out of 12 employees regarded younger employees as being less reliable, more unscrupulous, and less dedicated to the organization. In comparison, older employees were viewed as being more concerned about the welfare of the organization and the quality of services they provided, attributes they believed were missing in younger employees. One plausible explanation for this perception is that younger employees may possess different interests and priorities from older employees. For instance, younger employees may view their current positions as stepping stones

to future, more lucrative positions. Such a view would result in different behaviors and ethical standards. Older employees, on the other hand, may be more entrenched in their positions and therefore more concerned with the overall success of the organization.

One disturbing and unexpected finding was that one-half of the interviewees believed that ethnic background was a factor in predicting unethical behavior. It is possible that some minority groups have different ethical priorities as a result of varying cultures or experiences within the existing hierarchical structure. Two subjects suggested that the perceived differences in ethical standards were the results of affirmative action programs that created ill will among employees who were not able to benefit from them. One must exercise extreme caution in accepting the statements and assumptions of these interviewees as evidence that such differences actually exist. It can only be said that one-half of the interview subjects shared the perception that value differences exist.

Conclusion

Public employees are often forced to choose between obeying policy and serving the needs of clients. For example, public health clinics exist to serve those who cannot otherwise afford care. Patients pay according to income. The working poor are caught in between: not qualifying for assistance and not able to afford to purchase health care. This same irony also exists in higher education for students who come from working families who cannot afford the steep tuition prices and yet do not qualify for tuition aid.

Law enforcement officers face a similar dilemma when they are required to spend half of their shifts doing paperwork at the expense of providing a rapid response to citizens. Employees who work for agencies with such incongruent policies are often placed in the uncomfortable position of trying to uphold

policy to the detriment of the very people the agencies are attempting to serve. In choosing to serve the needs of their clients, employees violate organizational policies and put themselves at risk. Policies of this nature need to be reviewed to eliminate this unnecessary ethical dilemma. Until then, choosing the client's interests over the interests of oneself or the organization may be the most ethical action of all.

In summary, these early findings should be viewed as preliminary, with their central accomplishments being the development of interview questions that targeted actual behaviors and an investigative system that cultivated trust and provided revealing responses. The candid observations of these early subjects provide researchers and practitioners with a richness of information not available in case studies, comparative studies, or survey research.

The honesty of the interviewees was impressive. It was obvious that ethics and a sense of fairness were major considerations in the daily execution of their responsibilities. The majority of these subjects expressed a desire to be the kind of employees and supervisors that their subordinates and coworkers could respect and emulate. Despite this, many were doubtful as to how much they could really influence the ethical behavior of others. Even those who aspired to be role models got lost at times in the conflicting expectations of the work environment. In-depth interviews give employees an opportunity to explain the thoughts and motivations that guide their actions.

Managers can benefit from the results of this research by keeping in mind the four recurring themes that, when present, often result in unethical behavior: unreasonable workload, frustration with pay, value differences among age groups, and organizational policies that conflict with the public good. The participants appeared to welcome an open dialogue on ethics in public administration. Such a dialogue always is a good place to begin.

Notes

1. The initial subjects were obtained using a convenience sample of potential respondents who were asked to participate in this study. An attempt was made to ensure that they came from diverse backgrounds in terms of their agencies and job responsibilities. In addition, it was deemed important that the initial sample contain an equal number of female and male subjects. The final sample will contain an assorted group of employees from various religious and ethnic backgrounds.

2. A follow-up study in 1995 was done to test the assertions of these 12 subjects, as outlined in this preliminary study. Specifically, the initial 12 subjects charged that male employees were less ethical than female employees, younger employees were less ethical than older employees, and new employees were less ethical than vested employees. Forty-five public employees participated in the follow-up study, which used a 20-question survey depicting the dilemmas described by the initial subjects.

The overall responses were then analyzed according to gender, age, and longevity. Interaction effects among the variables also were analyzed. Overall, significant differences were found according to age and longevity. Gender proved to be significant in only two scenarios described within the survey: discussing privileged information and favoring family members and friends. In both scenarios, men were more likely to engage in these behaviors. ■■■

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