

Symposium Issue Public Integrity

‘Research Methods in Administrative Ethics: Perspectives and Techniques’

Introduction: The Need for Methodological Rigor and Diversity in Administrative Ethics

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The methodologies of Administrative Ethics

Research on ethics and integrity of governance is growing qualitatively and quantitatively, as Menzel (2005) argues. Yet, more empirical studies are needed to make progress toward building a body of knowledge on ethics and integrity in governance. After reviewing the literature on Administrative Ethics in respectively Europe and the United States, both Lawton and Doig (2006) and Menzel (2005) conclude that more empirical work needs to be done in the area of public integrity. It can be argued that obstacles towards more empirical research include uncertainties about the best *methodologies* in the academic field of Administrative Ethics. Such uncertainties are characteristic of all ethics subfields of academic disciplines: its basic concepts like integrity and values are highly abstract, essentially contested (cf. Gallie 1955), hard to define and even harder to operationalize and measure in empirical research. Furthermore, within practical philosophy, normative and non-normative approaches often strongly inform each other, leading to questions about reliability and validity of empirical research; descriptive and prescriptive ethics are often intertwined. This can also be said about the field of Administrative Ethics; there still is little theory building or testing based upon empirical research. Lawton and Doig (2006: 28): “there is little in the way of longitudinal studies and case study research needs to be developed. Much of the research tends to take a snapshot. A feature of much of the writings is a curious mix of normative and descriptive”.

When we look at the, relatively few, empirical studies that have been done, it is notable that many make use of quantitative (survey) methodology. Menzel concludes that “the research strategies for ethics scholars should include greater methodological rigor with

perhaps less reliance on survey research methods. Such rigor, of course, could include contextually rich case studies as well as trend or longitudinal analyses that were largely absent from the studies examined in this paper.”

Attention to methodologies in the field of Administrative Ethics is warranted; hence this Symposium of *Public Integrity*. Based on insights discussed above, we argue that for the field of Administrative Ethics to further grow as an academic discipline, and build a more integrated body of knowledge, the field needs more empirical studies and more methodological diversity, but also more rigor in the methods that are currently used. For such an endeavor, the right methodologies are of crucial importance. The goal of this Symposium Issue is to put the spotlight on methodology; it is time to reassess the research methodologies in the field. Questions addressed here are: what methodologies are currently used, should the current ontology's and epistemologies be reconsidered, what methodologies work and what not, and what alternatives should be considered in the future?

Contributions to this Issue

To get a good overview of the methodologies that are currently used in the field of Administrative Ethics, in the first article of this Symposium Patrick von Maravic presents an empirical assessment of the methodological diversity in recent Administrative Ethics studies. We stated above that much empirical research in Administrative Ethics is of quantitative nature, but exactly how much is that? By systematically analyzing 88 peer-reviewed empirical articles that were published between 1999 and 2007 in a number of prominent international journals, Von Maravic concludes that Administrative Ethics research has not yet unleashed its full methodological capacity for solving, describing, exploring, explaining and predicting the major problems of ethics and integrity research. Especially with regard to triangulation as well as mixed-methods approaches room for developments exists.

So, after the work Von Maravic we know what methodologies are actually used. Furthermore, just like after the review article of Doig, Lawton and Menzel in the field, we are left with a plea to look for, consider and adapt new methodological venues. But what exactly should we be thinking of? Exactly what new methodologies are a good fit in the field? What exciting methodological possibilities are there? The rest of this Symposium is devoted to answer precisely these questions: three concrete new methodological paths are examined. Each of these three article have a different starting point of the analysis: the first article, *Adapting the Moral Self*, examines the ontology of Administrative Ethics and concludes that knowledge gained in other academic subfields should influence the way we look at morality and thus the methodologies we use to study it. The second article, *Language of Ethics*, starts with an examination of our epistemological assumptions. To be more precise, it looks at the use of language and its influence on our methodologies. The third contribution, *Using Q-Methodology in Administrative Ethics*, is of a more pragmatic nature: it examines a new possible methodology that can be adapted by all researchers in the field of Administrative Ethics, irrespective of their ontological and epistemological standpoints.

In the second article of the Symposium, Michael Macauley studies the implications of new insights from evolutionary psychology and cognitive neuroscience for studying ethics, ethical decision making and moral development. This article challenges administrative ethics to interact with these emerging disciplines and adopt some of the methodological positions they currently utilize and it argues that administrative ethics needs to reach out towards these new sciences and embrace methodologies that will begin to unlock the secrets of our ‘hardwired’ morality.

In the third article of this Symposium, some epistemological assumptions of Administrative Ethics are examined. Alan Lawton discusses the argumentative turn in Administrative Ethics, and emphasizes the importance of language and discourse for studying

and understanding ethics. His article examines the contribution that discourse analysis could make to research into public service ethics. It explores the use of discourse analysis in organizational studies in general and argues that this approach may enable researchers to examine traditional issues in administrative ethics in new ways and to problematize new issues.

In the fourth and concluding article of this Symposium, Gjalt de Graaf and Job van Exel discuss the use of Q-methodology for Administrative Ethics. Q methodology is hardly ever used in Administrative Ethics. This study discusses the potential of the methodology for empirical studies in the field of public integrity and ethics. Q offers a procedure and conceptual framework to study subjectivity in the social context. One of its advantages is bringing marginalized viewpoints to the fore. The drawbacks of the method are also listed and discussed. For those unfamiliar with Q, an appendix provides a basic introduction and shows how research using Q can be done.

The future

After readings the contributions of this Symposium, a first conclusion is that the contention that several scholars expressed in the field of Administrative Ethics, namely that thus far the use of methodologies in our field is limited mostly to survey studies and anecdotal data, is confirmed. Furthermore, the belief is widespread among scholars in the field that this presents a problem because next to the strength on surveys, there are also limitations, such as the loss of context, which is crucial in the field of Administrative Ethics as De Graaf and Van Exel argue in this issue. In this field, contingencies play an important role and the researched concepts are socially constructed and often heavily debated – concepts like “public ethos,” or, even more problematic, “values.” Complex and normative issues cannot be fully grasped by quantitative and monomethodological approaches. Too much reliance on survey thus

unnecessarily limits the empirical research in the field of Administrative Ethics, new methodological paths need to be discovered.

Next to pinpointing the caveats in the field of Administrative Ethics, this symposium also offers much hope: precisely on the issue of new methodological possibilities, exciting new possibilities exist; so much is clear after the articles published here. Not only are the merits of new methodologies discussed, in each article it is made clear how actual and concrete research questions in the field can be answered with a new perspective. We hope and trust therefore that this Symposium will be an inspiration to future research in the field and that it helps overcoming its methodological obstacles, thus leading to more empirical contributions. Because much more empirical research is needed to build theory on the ethics in our administrative systems. Of course, the new venues should not be limited to those discussed here. We also hope therefore that this Symposium will be an inspiration to many other methodologies that are currently ignored and that the field of Administrative Ethics will benefit from better examination on and more creativity towards which methods serve which research issues and research questions.

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