

Value Conflicts in Public Organizations

Implications and Remedies

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13.1 Introduction: Values and Value Conflicts

The public sector is characterized by a plurality of values. Elected officials seek to advance the interests of their constituencies, unions and interest groups represent their members' preferences, service users voice their individual demands and desires, and service professionals orient themselves toward the norms and ethics of their profession. Taking inventory, Beck Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) identify no less than seventy-two different public values. This is important for two reasons.

First, a value is a “conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action” (Kluckhohn 1951, 395). In other words, values can be seen as informing and guiding behavior in public organizations. Values as drivers of behavior are also central in what March and Olsen (2011) call “the logic of appropriateness.” From this perspective, individual behavior and decision-making are shaped by institutions, which are assumed to play a key role in defining appropriate norms and values (see also Chapter 4). Yet, at the same time, Rutgers and Steen (2016) point out that there is not always a direct causal relation between values and behavior: Some values will result in (immediate) action, and others will not. If an individual holds certain values as internalized standards for judgment and guidelines for action, we still cannot directly conclude from this what behavior that individual will show.

Second, different values can be conflicting. We define value conflicts as confrontations between two or more values that cannot be realized at the same time as they have conflicting implications for behavior. Stimulated by the rise of managerialism (Frederickson 2005), economic individualism (Bozeman 2007), and privatization (De Bruijn and Dicke 2006), public organizations and their employees are increasingly challenged to balance “classic” public values, such as integrity, neutrality, and legality, on the one hand, with values usually associated with the private sector, such as efficiency, innovation, and effectiveness, on the other (Schott et al. 2015). Values might conflict, not only when these classic public values stand in tension with more

economic values but also within these clusters of values where tensions can exist (Hood 1991). Working in the specific context of government therefore inevitably entails a need to engage in behavior and make decisions in the face of dilemmas (De Graaf et al. 2016). This highlights the need to understand: (1) how values—and value conflicts—influence the attitudes and performance of public service professionals in various contexts (O’Toole and Meier 2015); (2) how employees attempt to resolve and deal with tensions between conflicting values; and (3) how leaders of public organizations can support their employees in reaching this aim and ensure a shared cognition among all organizational members through organizational socialization tactics.

Value conflicts can arise at both the individual and organizational level. At an individual level, public service professionals can face competing values in interactions with others, including service users, citizens, co-producers, co-workers, or public managers.¹ For instance, they may face value conflicts between responding to client preferences and norms embedded in professional codes of conduct (e.g. see Jensen and Andersen 2015). Value conflicts resulting from interactions with others have also been researched in the literature on co-production. Co-production provides opportunities to advance a sense of community between service professionals and users since it brings the professional in close contact with the public, the latter not only as clients receiving services but as citizens who have an interest in public services and actively participate in their provision. This involves not only “accountability and responsibility on the part of the professions. It also calls for active participation and public concern on the part of citizens whom the professions serve” (Sullivan 2005, 5). However, since the interests of the individual and the collective do not always coincide—as shown, for instance, by Brandsen and Helderma (2012) in their study of co-production in the area of housing—collaboration with citizens might add to rather than resolve some of the value conflicts experienced by professionals.

Conflicting values can also manifest at the organizational level. Mission statements represent organizational prioritizations of desirable end-states to be achieved for the collective. In public contexts, organizational missions are often framed in terms of both “classic” public values and more economic values (Schott et al. 2015). While multiple values may all be legitimate end-states for the members of the organization to pursue, multiple values risk undermining the extent to which expressions of image-based words, such as in organizational visions, foster a shared representation of an ultimate goal for the collective (Carton et al. 2014). Value conflicts at an organizational level are closely related to the challenge of goal ambiguity, which can be considered a defining characteristic of public sector organizations (Rainey 2009). As noted by Pandey and Wright (2006), goal ambiguity is an inevitable outcome of policy conflict and complexity caused by the lack of traditional market information prevalent in the public sphere.

¹ In addition, individuals can experience intra-organizational value conflicts arising from conflicting roles or identities (e.g. Schott et al. 2015). However, this chapter focuses on value conflicts in the interactions with others.

In this chapter, we outline theoretical perspectives on value conflicts in public organizations. To do so, we review empirical studies from public administration and related fields to illustrate the implications of value conflicts for professionals' attitudes, behavior, and performance. Second, we draw on recent studies on identity theory, leadership, and organizational socialization to discuss how individuals and management can deal with value conflicts arising in public organizations. Before concluding with the key insights of existing research on value conflicts, we outline a series of important but unanswered questions about the implications and remedies of value conflicts in public organizations.

13.2 Implications of Value Conflicts

13.2.1 Implications for Employee Attitudes

The notion of conflicting values has been studied using a variety of labels and terminologies inside and outside of public administration research. Common to these perspectives is an interest in how the compatibility, congruence, match, or fit between the values of individual professionals and those of their surrounding environment influence their attitudes to their job, work, and organization more broadly. Subsumed under the umbrella concept of “person–environment fit” (Kristof-Brown et al. 2005; see Chapter 12 in this volume), an array of empirical studies have, for example, demonstrated the positive implications of a fit between the values held by individuals and those embraced and promoted by their organization, and the negative consequences of situations in which values are not aligned. In their study of Egyptian public sector employees, for example, Gould-Williams et al. (2015) found negative correlations between perceived value congruence and self-reported job stress and intentions to quit the job. Relatedly, Kim (2012) reported stronger organizational commitment and higher job satisfaction among Korean civil servants with high levels of value fit. These findings align well with observations outside public organization contexts, with meta-analyses in industrial and organizational psychology linking value congruence to lower intentions to quit, higher job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Verquer et al. 2003). Central to these findings is the argument that individuals ascribe inherent importance to their work and to organizational outcomes when these fall within the realm of what the individuals perceive as desirable end-states.

The flipside of these findings and this argument is that individuals in situations of value conflict experience a disconnect between end-states promoted by their organization and end-states deemed desirable by the individuals themselves. Recent work on the “darker” sides of public service motivation offers illustrative examples of the implications of person–environment misfits. In these studies, it is argued that strong identification with public service values can become a source of frustration if the job or organization does not allow the individual service professional to pursue such

values, for instance, by doing good for user groups or advancing a broader collective interest (Steen and Rutgers 2011; Van Loon et al. 2015). Schott and Ritz (2018) went a step further and tried to explain the underlying mechanism of this relationship by combining public service motivation research with insights from identity theory. Central to identity theory is the idea that people constantly try to verify who they are by engaging in behavior that is consistent with their identity standard (Burke and Stets 2009). However, despite extra efforts, if individuals who are highly public service-motivated are prevented from engaging in this type of behavior due to a person–environment misfit, they are likely to become over-engaged and experience negative feelings in the long term (Schott and Ritz 2018). Consistent with this line of reasoning, public service motivation—which is otherwise perceived as a motivational resource in public organizations—has been linked to higher stress, feelings of resignation, burnout, and indirectly to sickness absenteeism (Giauque et al. 2012; 2013; Gould-Williams et al. 2015; Jensen et al. 2019; Van Loon et al. 2015; see also Chapter 12).

It is true that the majority of existing evidence from public management research and related fields such as organizational psychology and management rests on cross-sectional observational studies vulnerable to endogeneity concerns. However, they appear to speak with a fairly unified voice: Individuals experiencing incompatibility between values held by the individual service professional and those promoted by the organization are more likely to report negative attitudes, such as feelings of stress and quit intentions, and are less likely to report positive attitudes toward their job and organization, such as satisfaction with one’s job and commitment to one’s organization. Before we explore how individuals and managers can attempt to reconcile value conflicts in order to promote positive attitudes among public sector personnel, we first turn to the implications of value conflicts for professional behavior and performance.

13.2.2 Implications for Professional Behavior and Performance

Professionals’ behavior and decision-making directly influence citizens and society more broadly, and it is therefore critical to survey not only professionals’ attitudes but also their actual behaviors and performance. Performance is one of the key concepts in the public management literature (Andersen et al. 2016; see Chapter 2). Very broadly defined, the concept of performance can be viewed as actual achievements of an organization relative to its intended achievements, such as the attainment of goals, values, and objectives (Jung 2011, 195). Because of the ambiguity surrounding the goals of many public organizations and the fact that there is no “common scale” for ranking the importance and legitimacy of different values (Van der Wal et al. 2011), the question of what it means to perform well in the public sector is difficult to answer in situations where values are conflicting.

Fortunately, values are not always conflicting. Oftentimes, public service professionals face multiple values that are complementary in terms of service outcomes. Innovative teaching methods, for example, stimulate both individual student learning and contribute to society in general. Unless elements of the new teaching methods violate the professional norms or principles of teaching, it seems straightforward that values of service quality, public interest, and innovation all foster the implementation of new and creative teaching methods. Yet professionals may also find themselves in situations of value conflict. When multiple values collide and no one value is more important or “legitimate” than other values, it is not immediately clear that one course of action is more appropriate than another.

Hence, if clear goals are absent and different values are clashing, it becomes hard to define what good performance actually means. In this section, we discuss studies on the behavior of public servants in situations of conflicting values and link them to the challenge of performing well in public sector organizations. An empirical cross-country survey among a specific group of employees—i.e. public sector executives in Europe—showed different priorities put forward when these public servants were presented with trade-offs such as a choice between quality and efficiency, equity and efficiency, or following rules and achieving results (Steen and Weske 2016). While the study revealed an overall tendency toward prioritizing hierarchical rather than market values, it also found large differences between respondents from different countries, suggesting that conceptions of what constitutes “good” performance depend on cultural norms and prescriptions. A preference for “traditional” public values was also found in an all-Dutch study among public managers (Van der Wal et al. 2008). In contrast to private sector managers, public sector managers consider “lawfulness” and “impartially” to be more important than “profitability” and “innovativeness.” To our knowledge, no research addresses the question of whether similar value preferences can also be found among public servants without managing responsibilities.

Jensen and Andersen (2015) present one example of decision-making in the context of a social dilemma. Physicians can prescribe antibiotics whenever they will have the slightest chance of curing the patient of his or her illness. However, prescribing antibiotics also increases the likelihood of bacteria resistance, a state that eventually renders particular drugs ineffective for future treatment. Thus, responsiveness to the individual patient must be weighed against the public interest. The authors find that physicians who orient themselves strongly toward individual users prescribe more antibiotics while their public service-motivated peers prescribe fewer broad-spectrum antibiotics. This means that prosocial types of motivation (at least partly) determine which aspects of performance individual service professionals attempt to actualize.

In a study on the decision-making behavior of Dutch veterinary inspectors, Schott et al. (2018) draw on insights from identity theory and find that the concept of professional role identity—i.e. the way professionals view their professional role—is useful in order to uncover what drives public service professionals’ decision-making in situations of conflicting values. Individuals who see safeguarding public health as

a central aspect of their professional role were more likely to exclude any potential risk for public health than to make a decision that also included economic considerations. This means that identities which emerge out of the interaction with organizations and society also influence which aspects of performance public service professionals prioritize.

Following the line of research on person–organization fit referred to above, Jaspers and Steen’s (2017) research on the co-production of public services focuses on professionals experiencing tensions between different values that they aspire to actualize, as well as the value (in)congruence between public professionals and citizens, the latter being both the users and co-producers of the public services delivered. Their research shows that professionals adjust their behavior when they experience conflicts between the values they pursue through the co-production initiative and the concerns of citizens/co-producers. For example, in a project aimed at de-isolating elderly persons, professionals saw effectiveness, reciprocity, and the creation of social capital as ingrained values to pursue. Yet professionals also experienced that citizens/co-producers valued their individual freedom highly, namely the choice of when, how, and how much to co-produce. In order to attain the engagement of the co-producers, the public servants sought strategies that took into account this individual freedom. At the same time, the professionals’ willingness to bias in favor of co-producers’ individual freedom is limited as they found values such as effectiveness and reciprocity to be more dominant and in need of guarding. Jaspers and Steen (2017) further find that the type of coping strategies applied by professionals to deal with these value tensions impact the extent to which public value is being (co-)created or destroyed, for example as they bias in favor of some values.

In line with previous notions that employees only respond to policies that fall within their “zone of existing values” (Paarlberg and Perry 2007), the results of these different studies indicate that public service professionals’ decision-making and behavior, at least to some extent, are guided by values to which they ascribe personal importance when faced with conflicts or competition between multiple legitimate values. These values help identify which aspect of performance service professionals seek to actualize in their jobs.

13.3 Dealing with Value Conflicts in Organizations

Value conflicts are important for behaviors and decision-making as discussed above, and this begs the question: How can value conflicts in organizations be dealt with? Answers to this question necessitate a focus both on individual professionals who are trying to navigate and adapt to their organizational environments, and on the organizations in which public managers seek to ensure congruence between the values of individual professionals and those of their organization.

13.3.1 Individual Professionals Dealing with Value Conflicts

For individual service professionals, value conflicts can arise out of a mismatch between values ascribed inherent and personal importance and values deemed desirable by their surrounding environment (resulting in value conflict at a personal level). Professionals' values can conflict with values embedded in organizational mission statements and promoted by the management of the organization or with values promoted by other stakeholders (e.g. by citizens or users in co-production efforts). In situations of a mismatch between personal and organizational values, professionals will redirect their energy and work effort toward end-states they believe are the most desirable to achieve. This is apparent in research on public service motivation where individual providers of public services have been shown to pursue conceptions of what they believe it means to do good for other people and society (e.g. Andersen and Serritzlew 2012). However, if the meaning of "doing good" differs between professionals and management, there is little reason to expect that all employee inputs will be directed toward attainment of the organizational mission. In other words, motivated employees can be a double-edged sword (Gailmard 2010; Maesschalck et al. 2008; Steen and Rutgers 2011). In situations of conflicting values, public service professionals can be expected to redirect their effort and energy toward goals not necessarily embedded in the organizational mission (Jensen 2018). This can be negative for public organizations because dealing with value conflict by redirecting efforts can result in inconsistent treatment of similar cases and rule bending or even rule breaking. Alternatively, employees can also deal with value conflicts by reducing their levels of motivation. Giauque et al. (2012, 188) argue that when employees' expectations are incompatible with the working environment, they cope passively by reducing "their personal expectations in order to reach a new equilibrium in their employment relationship."

The impact of various types of coping strategies on the way public service professionals experience work-related tensions has been the focus of Schott et al.'s (2016) research on public professionalism. The authors found that employees who are primarily guided by organizational norms and who are able to integrate organizational and professional norms and values experience conflicting work forces as less stressful than individuals who are strongly oriented toward professional principles and individuals who combine but have not managed to integrate both types of work forces. This means that individuals who face conflicting values might benefit most from training and courses that stimulate the development of so-called organizing and connective capacities and the ability to be reflective (Noordegraaf 2016).

However, we know from identity theory that individuals possess many different identities, which together form an individual's self (Stets and Burke 2000). Next to having a professional and organizational identity, someone can, for example, be a friend, a parent, somebody's child, and/or a member of a team or organizational unit. This means that conflicts are not restricted to clashing organizational and

professional logics but may also be caused by conflicting logics and values associated with other identities. Experiences of conflict can be solved by the principle of identity salience, which addresses which identity a person will play out in a situation when behavior associated with more than one identity may be appropriate (Stryker 1968). In a study on nurses, Piliavin et al. (2002) describe the case of reporting healthcare errors and the identity conflicts associated with this deed. From an occupational point of view, “reporting errors” is essential as this is closely related to a key value of nursing: integrity. As a team member, however, reporting misconduct is seen as something negative as it potentially jeopardizes relationships with co-workers. How will a nurse behave in such a situation where different internal values are conflicting? The idea of an identity salience offers a line of explanation. The relative levels of an individual’s qualitative and quantitative commitment to different role identities determine which role identity is more salient, and consequently, more likely to be played out in situations of conflicting values (Stets and Burke 2000).

13.3.2 Leadership and Socialization as a Way to Deal with Value Conflicts in Organizations

Reconciling value conflicts is also a critical leadership task. Given that value conflicts risk imposing agency loss on public organizations, a central concern for public managers should be with questions of how dynamic professionals’ values are and how such values can come to be more aligned with the values of the organization. In the leadership literature, several concepts focus on the importance of values. Ethical leadership, for example, focuses on leaders as role models and individuals who demonstrate normatively appropriate behaviors and treat others with consideration and respect (Hassan et al. 2014, 334). This concept does not specify, however, how values are conveyed in organizations nor how managers appeal to the emotions and beliefs of their employees. These dynamics are captured in theories of charismatic and transformational leadership (e.g. Day and Antonakis 2012; Hoffman et al. 2011; see also Chapter 5). Transformational leaders, it is argued, “can increase value congruence by articulating, sharing, and sustaining attention to a vision that emphasizes collectivist norms such as social responsibility, service, and altruism, and infuse day-to-day work tasks with meaning and purpose, such as contributing to others and society” (Jensen 2018, 48–9). The assumptions of this argument are thus that: (1) service professionals’ values are dynamic and can—at least to some extent—be altered over time; and (2) visions emphasizing social responsibility and service can stimulate or amplify some internalization process whereby individuals come to ascribe personal importance to organizational values.

Despite the appealing logic of the argument, few studies have been able to test it empirically. First, to assess whether service professionals’ values change over time, researchers need repeated measures of the same individuals. Second, researchers ideally can identify exogenous variation in leadership to help isolate the effects of

leadership behaviors on value congruence. In a recent study, Jensen et al. (2018) offer some evidence of the temporal dynamics of value congruence and the role of transformational leadership behaviors. Using data over a period of one year, the authors show that employees became more attracted to the mission of their organization when their manager was perceived to increase his or her use of transformational leadership behaviors. This finding was amplified in conjunction with managers' use of face-to-face dialogue as a tool for communicating the vision to organizational members.

Using experimental variation in leadership, the few existing studies offer more mixed evidence on the effect of transformational leadership behaviors. In an experiment with 194 students, Jung and Avolio (2000) found an indirect effect of a transformational leadership manipulation via increased value congruence on students' performance in a brainstorming exercise. However, in a more recent study on actual workplace tasks and public sector workers, Jensen (2018) found only partial support for the effectiveness of transformational leadership behaviors. In a field experimental leadership training program, service professionals of managers exposed to the transformational leadership condition reported higher value congruence as compared to service professionals of managers receiving no training, but only when service professionals initially had a vivid understanding of the prosocial impact of their work (Jensen 2018, 53–4). While transformational leadership behaviors thus seem to hold some potential for managers to reconcile potential value conflicts, more research is needed to disentangle the various managerial practices that might help public sector managers promote the values embedded in the organizational mission and their alignment with professionals' values and higher performance among public sector personnel.

In addition to public leadership studies, research on organizational socialization provides insights into how managers attempt to ensure a shared cognition among organizational members. Organizational socialization refers to “the process through which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors required to adapt to their job and to the organization they work in” (Wanberg 2012, 17). For example, research by Van Kleef (2016) on inspectors working for food safety services shows that through consciously structuring the socialization processes of its employees, the management of the food safety services tries to influence inspectors' attitudes and behavior, especially when they are confronted with stressful situations and value dilemmas. Knowledge gained through training or information received from more experienced colleagues—for example, feedback and supervisory support—can stimulate both successful coping behavior as well as behavior that is seen as appropriate and consistent from an organizational point of view. Socialization research, however, also outlines limits to leaders' ability to socialize professionals in the organization. Next to formal or “institutionalized socialization” practices such as training programs, internships, or mentorships (Kaufman 1960; Oberfield 2014), informal socialization practices take place that “are spontaneous in nature and uncontrolled by the organization's management” (Van Kleef et al. 2019, 82), such as day-to-day contact with

colleagues and work-floor experiences. Such informal socialization can even take place outside the organization, for instance, in contact with clients, creating the risk of employees being “captured” by their clients’ interests (cf. Kaufman 1960) and acting against organizational interests in situations of value conflicts.

13.4 Unanswered Questions about Value Conflicts in Public Organizations

Our review of (empirical) studies on value conflicts, the implications of these conflicts for professionals’ attitudes and performance, and studies related to the question of how individuals and organizations deal with value conflicts arising in public organizations has shown that important questions have been answered. However, our review also raises many new questions.

As mentioned in Section 13.1, a value is “a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action” (Kluckhohn 1951, 395). It becomes clear from this definition that values are not necessarily explicit. Rather, people can hold and act in accordance with values without being fully conscious of them (Beck Jørgensen 2006). This adds an additional layer of complexity to the discussion of value conflicts, the implications hereof, and the question of how these conflicts can be resolved. For example, questions such as “are implicit value conflicts also associated with negative attitudes and experiences?” and “how can implicit conflicts be identified in the first place?” provide interesting avenues for future research.

Another interesting line of future research relates to the changeability of values. Panel research has shown that values seem to be fairly stable predispositions, which remain stable during a lifetime (e.g. Huesmann et al. 1984; Sears and Funk 1999). This raises the question of how much individuals’ values can be expected to change in order to reach, for example, more compatibility between personal and organizational values.

We would also like to raise the question whether some degree of heterogeneity might be a good thing. Based on insights from the attraction–selection–attrition model (ASA) and research on diversity, Schott and Ritz (2018) argue that not only person–environment incongruence but also person–environment congruence can lead to negative outcomes, such as problems related to less critical attitudes and the phenomenon of “groupthink.” Put differently, experiences of conflicting values may stimulate employees to uphold critical attitudes and to engage in a frequent dialogue, thereby increasing the possibility of detecting wrongs and initiating change. A critical note on the benefits of high levels of homogeneity and the idea of “fit” between personal and organizational values has also been offered by Van Loon et al. (2015). After finding that in certain organizations—i.e. organizations that offer the opportunity to become very involved with clients—highly motivated employees go over the

edge of their abilities, the authors raise the question of whether something like an “overfit” exists.

Next to this, it can be questioned whether organizational values should always be leading as there is no guarantee that they prioritize a healthy and productive work environment. This opens up space for more normative discussions pertaining to the emergence and consequences of value misfits in public organizations. If one accepts that officials elected in fair and democratic elections hold the ultimate power to define what is desirable to achieve for a given collective, and that such values and objectives are loyally and accurately represented by the management of agencies and service organizations, misfits can be seen as a democratic problem. For empirical research, however, this does not mean that we should always expect value incongruence to result in negative attitudes and outcomes among the people who staff those organizations. The ethics of dissent highlighted in other venues of research (e.g. O’Leary 2005) are therefore one area that could help nuance our understanding of the emergence and consequences of value conflicts in public organizations.

13.5 Conclusion

Studying values, and value conflicts more specifically, stands at the core of public administration research. Research provides insights into the values that public service professionals appraise, which value conflicts they experience, and how they cope with such conflicts. Likewise, research discusses how public organizations deal with value tensions experienced by professionals and how, through leadership and socialization tactics, they seek to align professionals’ behavior to organizational norms. Only to a lesser extent, however, does research lead to empirical understandings of the impact hereof on the individual, organizational, and societal level, and it is our hope that this chapter can help spur more research into these critical issues.

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