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ETHICS, PUBLIC POLICY AND CIVIC EDUCATION

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This paper addresses current issues in ethics, public policy and public policy education. I have written about ethical issues in public policy research (Ballard and James) and I have developed codes of ethics in two organizational settings. Yet, this topic is a difficult one. To most public servants, "ethics" is either an abstract topic or one familiar to us only because of highly visible events, such as scandals or obviously immoral behavior. Ethical issues are not, typically, part of our routine professional lives. Yet, it can be argued that unethical behavior, both in larger society and in the public service, has contributed to widespread disillusionment with our fundamental political institutions and threatens to erode the American spirit. One of our greatest challenges of the 1990s and beyond will be to reform our institutions and our own behavior to more closely reflect our fundamental ideals and values.

To better understand the relationship between ethics and public policy, this paper will take a broad approach. It will examine traditional sources of ethical standards and current causes of ethical conflicts. It will be suggested that ethical concerns are inherent in our political processes, which provide easy access to groups reflecting value differences in our society. However, it is also suggested that the causes of ethical problems are primarily situational, making them difficult to resolve by legal or uniform approaches.

What solutions exist to these increasing pressures for unethical behavior? It will be argued that the solution most capable of addressing our institutional decline is "civic education." Civic education is consistent with emerging paradigms of leadership and organizational development that reject the scientific, rational management paradigm. Civic education is, instead, participatory, interactive, nonhierarchical, and long-term.

Definitions and Key Terms

Four concepts are central to this analysis: (1) public policy education; (2) policy issues; (3) ethics and ethical dilemmas; and (4) civic education. It is useful to briefly define each.

We accept Hahn's definition of *public policy education* as "education about public issues, policy-making processes, and opportunities for effective participation" (Hahn). Its objectives are to both increase understanding of public policy and to contribute to the resolution of important issues. *Policy issues* are "questions about the desirability of enacting new public policies or changing existing ones" (Hahn). The critical feature of American policy issues, to be elaborated in this paper, is that they nearly always reflect understandable and recognizable value conflicts in our society. Therefore, a key question is whether such value differences can be resolved or whether our attention should be placed on constructive management of them.

While differences exist in the literature regarding the definition of *ethics*, for our purposes it is useful to think about ethics as the behavioral extension of morals. Morals are beliefs about right versus wrong. Ethics, then, are the behavioral practices which put morals into action. Fundamentally, public policy ethics is the question of how individuals should behave in organizational and social settings.

Since ethics are practices which are related to larger belief systems (morals), education is necessary to learn these practices or behaviors. *Civic education* is learning to think about one's life as a citizen in a community (Strom and Stoskopf). As we will see, civic education is closely related to public policy education and is particularly significant for addressing ethical dilemmas of modern society.

Ethics and Public Policy

Why is ethics an important topic for public policy educators? It is important because the last two decades have seen a continuous decline in the faith of the American public in its fundamental political institutions. The current question of limiting terms of office is just the most recent manifestation of declining trust of our institutions by the public. Undoubtedly, some of this decline has been for "good" or understandable reasons. That is, public institutions have been faced with significant new challenges, in some cases they have been underfunded, and in others they have been unjustly blamed for problems not of their doing. Unfortunately, public distrust and even cynicism is also caused by what might appear to be endemic episodes of scandal, deception, duplicity and hypocrisy in the public sector. For example :

- Electoral campaigns, at virtually all levels of government, challenge even the most generous observer to find civic virtue among the characteristics of elected representatives. We, as a society, spend billions of dollars convincing the public that the other candidate is no good. The evidence is convincing that the public links these negative images to the processes of representative government. Thus, one of the most fundamental elements of our political culture is at risk.
- The "art" of public service now appears to be permeated by and perhaps controlled by professionals skilled in duplicity and obfusca-

tion. We can't even talk about taxes — they are “revenue enhancers.” And, a leading candidate for elected office from the District of Columbia who had failed to file a tax return for seven years explained it was just “one of those things which we intended to get to tomorrow.”

- Corruption and scandal have become commonplace across public institutions, private organizations and religious organizations. From contract researchers for the military to the U.S. Department of Justice to Wall Street, our institutions seem to be easy targets for corruption. An interesting question is, where do we look for models of institutional integrity?
- Scapegoatism and hypocrisy appear to be accepted public behaviors. One of my own professional organizations, the American Society of Public Administration (ASPA), places considerable emphasis on the role of women in public administration. This is entirely appropriate. Yet, over the past fifteen years, the evidence is pervasive that occupational segregation has worsened considerably in the public sector. Professional women trained to be public administrators are highly cynical about their career opportunities or chances of success in the public sector.

These problems will continue to be among the most significant facing our society over the next several decades because they suggest that we, as a society, have lost faith in our problem-solving processes. However, the good news is that such problems have caused a reawakening of interest in ethics in public service, personal integrity and civic education. This reawakening will take time, and the evidence about its initial impacts is very mixed. For example, in a recent national survey of public administrators (Bowman), it was found, on the positive side, that:

- Nearly 70 percent of public administrators think an interest in ethics is steadily growing over time; and
- Two out of three respondents believe ethical concerns to be an “empowering influence” on the public organization.

However, this survey also presents some very disquieting evidence:

- More than 60 percent of public administrators believe society suffers from a “moral numbness”;
- More than half of the administrators are uncertain about whether anything will ever get done about ethical problems; it is like the weather — something to talk about but not actionable;
- Seventy-five percent reject the idea that government or business represent a standard for ethical practices;
- Within public organizations, nearly two-thirds think most organizations have no consistent approach to ethical concerns; and

- Two-thirds of administrators under thirty believe ethics is meaningless because of the Machiavellian culture of public organizations.

Why do we recognize ethical dilemmas, yet believe they may be irresolvable? To understand this better, it is useful to examine sources of ethical behavior and the context of ethical dilemmas.

Joseph Fletcher at Harvard has identified three moral sources of ethical behavior. Legalistic approaches are based on external sources of morality or omnipotent law (e.g., the Bible); such approaches lead to systematic orthodoxy. A second source is called "antinomian" in which ethical behavior is defined by community consensus without explicit moral guidelines. A third approach is situationalist, a pragmatic approach in which laws or moral guidelines must be applied according to the nature of the situation. It is interesting that there appears to have been an erosion in legalistic and even antinomian sources of ethical behavior in our society; indeed, it can be argued that most professional and organizational approaches to ethics are situational. The difficulty with situational ethics is that there are so many sources of variation in each situation, including individual, organizational and societal values. For example, individual belief systems are often in conflict with organizational cultures or the type and structure of the community (e.g., the religious culture, wealth, degree of participation, homogeneity, etc.).

Sources of Ethical Conflicts

What can be said about current and future ethical conflicts? Evidence suggests that *sources* of ethical dilemmas will continue to increase. To understand this assessment, it will be useful to look at four categories of conditions influencing ethical behavior: global, social, organizational and individual.

Global

A variety of global conditions affect our lives and our society; many are well-known to all of us. They include the increasing influence of cultural values substantially different from those of our Anglo-Saxon heritage; impacts of a complex global economy on local economic structures; and our rapidly increasing technological capacity to communicate and interact with the global community. Within the past few years we have watched the beginning of the development of a new world order that will be substantially different from our sense of world order developed over the last half century. Among the implications resulting from this picture, two are especially important: (1) we as a people no longer have a secure sense of our role in the world or our control over it; and (2) it has become increasingly acceptable, and even logical, to admit that we simply "don't know what the appropriate response is." This era of rapid change has an indirect but important influence on our sense of ethical appropriateness.

Social

A more direct source of ethical conflicts is social change. Change has been so rapid that some have argued that we have lost our sense of values or that we must seek better mechanisms to resolve value conflicts. This line of reasoning is incorrect for several reasons. First, value conflicts (and, therefore, ethical dilemmas) reflect our social and cultural fabric. Second, “stakeholders” have a relatively easy time gaining access to our policy making system; therefore, value conflicts are very visible and, frequently, cause our problem-solving process to forge slow, painful compromises. These processes continue to represent one of the great comparative advantages of our society and should not be changed without sober reflection.

Further, we should not assume that value conflicts are inherently resolvable. Rather, we should recognize that several factors help to make value conflicts and differences more visible. Such conditions include:

- *Ideological Pluralism*: The declining influence of traditional belief systems such as liberalism and conservatism and separation of public and private sectors.
- *Continuous decline of behavioral guidelines*: Within one or possibly two generations, two institutions — the church and the school system — have become much less influential in interpreting social conditions and transferring social values.
- *The decline of local (or community) cultures*: Fifty years ago, our standards of behavior were largely influenced by cultural values of our immediate surroundings. Today, local cultures are much more uniform in response to social mobility, more egalitarian educational systems, and the pervasive influence of telecommunications.

Such factors are not inherently good or bad. Rather, they reflect fundamental change and, specifically, a decline (or loss) of authoritative sources of ethical behavior. We have much more complex and contradictory environments for making judgments about right versus wrong. Thus, individual choices within given situations have become mandatory.

Organizational

Thirdly, we are witnessing rapid change in the nature and role of the public organization and concepts about administrative behavior. Organizational values are an important influence on most of us, yet our organizational lives are becoming increasingly participatory, open, communicative and interactive. While I believe that the decline of organization hierarchy is among the more positive aspects of our society, it also signals a decline in another source of behavioral guidelines. Individual judgment, group dynamics and social interactions are replacing traditional rules of behavior dictated by the organization.

We are also facing increasing conflicts between the “bureaucratic ethos” and the “democratic ethos” (Hejka-Ekins, p. 886). The bureaucratic ethos includes such traditional organizational standards as efficiency, competence, loyalty and accountability. The democratic ethos includes ethical standards such as the public interest, social equity, regime values and citizenship. Several healthy tensions can emerge from this conflict, and I am not one who would say that the term “bureaucratic ethics” is one of the great oxymorons of our times. Yet, the democratic ethos must assume an increasingly important role in the future if we are to address declining confidence in the our public institutions.

Individual

Fourthly, ethical concerns are caused by changes at the individual level. Specifically, individualism and materialism are now celebrated within major social institutions and have become a dominate ethos of the “baby bust generation.” Self-indulgence, greed, self-interest, and privatism are accepted components of the ethos of this generation (Bailey; Frederickson). Even worse, such values have become pervasive within some of the dominant “educational” systems of our day — i.e., movies, television, video games, etc. In some respects, our schools have divested themselves of the responsibility for transferring a sense of community to our children. So, our children have a declining sense of personal integrity (Dobel), less understanding of “first principles” of ethical behavior and little appreciation for the larger community impacts of individualism and self-indulgence.

Creating Ethical Awareness

What solutions exist to the increasing trends toward ethical conflict? What are the implications for education? First, it should be recognized that some approaches are not likely to help. Returning to the good old days, even if it were possible, would not be appropriate. Hierarchical organizations, uniform community standards and simple value systems are part of our historical perspective. Secondly, our society has a great inclination to try to solve such problems through legal codes. Yet, conceptually, uniform legal approaches ignore the fundamental point about future ethical concerns — they are largely situational or driven by contextual influences. Thirdly, codes of ethics are necessary but not sufficient. Codes of ethics are useful because they help to establish “first principles” or initial standards. But, codes of ethics apply to only a relatively small percentage of situational ethical conflicts and seldom help resolve competing ethical standards, such as those associated with the bureaucratic versus democratic ethos. Further, codes of ethics are easily ignored; forty percent of public administrators admit to having no acquaintance with the ASPA ethics document five years after its passage (Bowman, p. 349).

Primary sources of ethical problems, such as global and social change and the gradual decline of behavioral guidelines from family, church,

school and organization, suggest the answer will be long-term and difficult. Education can and should play a central role in reestablishing ethical practices in public policy. This includes both public education and "civic education," in which this audience can play an important part.

The most important approach to public education is to recognize that we cannot leave ethical education to the primary pedagogues for the baby bust generation — television, advertising and movies. Our society is paying considerable attention to education reform or "restructuring." Yet, for K-12 school, reform is being driven by job market considerations. While this reform movement has important contributions to make, it is also missing a critical component which, if ignored for long, will be much more significant than the emerging demands of the labor market.

The missing component is that of political values and political philosophy. While some significant exceptions can be found, a majority of public school systems pay inadequate attention to our political heritage, how our political institutions work, how to participate effectively in democratic society, or concepts of citizenship. It is a mistake for our children to be computer experts upon graduation from high school, but know virtually nothing about the political values which shape our institutions or how to participate in order to make our institutions responsive. Our news media would have us believe that effective participation is to chain ourselves to the Exxon Valdez. In contrast, I would suggest that effective political participation requires a sense of history, a knowledge of political philosophy, and clinical experiences in which we learn how our participation affects others.

Thus, public education needs to rediscover and redefine our heritage of liberal arts education, rather than emphasize the technocratic imperatives of tomorrow's labor market. The critical element of liberal arts education is to teach students *how to learn*. It is remarkable to consider the number of courses in our public schools which are based on memorization of "facts." It is difficult to conceive of the potential value of this approach for either employment in tomorrow's job market or participation in tomorrow's society.

In addition to addressing how we learn, liberal arts education should address *ideas* about morality and ethics and how to *think critically* about our attitudes and behavior. For example, Rest's (1982) model of moral behavior, which stresses moral sensitivity, reasoning and commitment, is a useful starting point. This type of education will be increasingly important because it allows us to begin to take ownership of our own participation in complex situations characterized by competing value structures.

A broader approach involving more educators and public servants will be required to supplement reform of public education. This approach can be labeled "civic education." This means both cognitive and experiential training in effective citizenship in a democratic society, in-

cluding practice and experience in social relationships. Effective civic education will require attention to both *how we learn* (Duckett, et al.) and the *substantive topics* which will help us to develop a better sense of community.

By discussing “how we learn,” two points deserve emphasis: (1) the importance of experience; and (2) broadening our concept of knowledge considerably beyond the scientific positivist paradigm which permeates our society. Thus, civic education should be interactive, participatory and experiential in order to, for example, begin to address the complexities of situational ethics. Secondly, it should improve skills related to critical reflection, listening and thinking. Thirdly, it should recognize the importance of nonscientific forms of knowledge, ranging from case-studies to story-telling, about how individuals have been productive, effective citizens.

As a beginning, civic education should include the following characteristics or components:

- Rediscovering *accountability*: This will require the development of a new ethos of shared responsibility and the community ownership of our public decisions, building a spirit of cooperation, and interaction with others of diverse viewpoints;
- Rediscovering *justice*: Civic justice will be a different concept than political equity, which tries to impose uniform standards, rewards and punishments. Civic justice means fairness and appropriateness, but it recognizes tremendous variation across given situations;
- Rediscovering *public dialogue*: In contrast to our interest-group, advocacy-based political culture, public dialogue stresses the importance of the honest expression of difference as the beginning point in policy formation. It stresses critical review and thinking without demanding absolute adherence to single-issue positions;
- Promoting *value expression*: Value differences reflect our society. We must reject the “value neutral” ethos of science and understand the constructive tensions existing within our varied perspectives and beliefs. Conflict resolution will be much less important than conflict management.

Conclusion: The Role of Public Educators

All public policy educators should be challenged to take personal ownership of ethical conflict inherent in our society, but also realize that we can make a difference. Personal accountability, responsibility and integrity will be increasingly needed in the public sector — this is the reality of new organizational forms, the complexity of our world, new leadership paradigms and the demands of situational ethics. Since public life will be characterized by immense personal discretion, our unofficial and informal behavior as well as our formal duties can be critical social influences.

Ethical behavior in complex situations will require an unwillingness to blame our colleagues or our organization. Taking ownership of our situations means that praise, blame, guilt and satisfaction are all common and normal elements of public service. Yet, our reward systems in traditional organizations make it extraordinarily difficult to effectively communicate such evaluative information. Thus, a starting point in developing the capacity for improved ethical behavior will be to recognize and aggressively develop new paradigms for leadership and organizational development. Hierarchy, rational decision making, and the technocratic ethos are fundamentally unable to respond to situational ethics. Decentralization, participation and empowerment will be the models that will be necessary.

Finally, each of us can begin to develop the concepts of civic education. This can be helped by developing expertise in areas related to ethics—philosophy, moral behavior and ethical guidelines. We each need to recognize that personal integrity is the building block for ethics in public policy education. In addition to personal integrity, we must be careful to consider the concept of the public interest as being more important than personal interest. We can each start to build civic education through participatory processes, both within organizations and with citizens and community groups.

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