

Approaches to Ethics for Public Administrators

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Abstract

Ethics essential existence in Public Administration is described as the soul of public administration. Public services around the globe have increasingly placed ethics as the basis of actions in its administrations. Scholars emphasized on the promotion of ethical practice in the public service to support the ethical practitioners. With the public administrators are increasingly playing a key role in making and implementing policies hence there are high expectations on them to act with a higher moral character. This means that they will have to constantly obey stricter ethical standards. However, scandalous activities of some public administrators have placed the public service under intense public spotlight and opened to relentless criticisms by the media. The adage of 'living in a goldfish bowl' illustrates the pressure to conform ethically. Accordingly, this paper seeks to highlight some approaches relevant to the role that can be expected off a public administrator to practice.

Keywords: Ethics, Public Administrators, Public Service,

Introduction

The public service is the backbone of the government. It is responsible in formulating and implementing the policies and law of the government. It drives the growth and development of the country and the people (Hamid, 2005) and at a certain extent even 'run' the country (Heywood, 2007). So important are the public administrators that Terry (1995) described them as people responsible in preserving the integrity of the public bureaucracy. With such huge responsibility, the public expect a higher ethical standard from the public service (Lewis & Gilman, 2012). In order to ensure that their public officials are following the ethical standards, governments worldwide have been actively supporting the implementation of ethics management in their administration. Initiatives such as the ethics code, ethics committee, ethics ombudsman and integrity unit have been established to provide support and encourage ethical adherence in their administrations. However, ethics is still a challenge in public service around the world with many examples of unethical conduct and corruption that took place in the public service.

Public Administration and ethics

Public administration is both an academic field as well as a profession. It is referred to as public service when actions of delivering policies and laws are concerned. Public service refers to agencies and activities tending towards the public needs (Lewis & Gilman, 2012). Public service is a practice of responsibly delivering service and be accountable to the

consequences of the actions. The party responsible and accountable of the service are public administrators who are people working in the public bureaucracy structure at the national, state and local level. They are known as the public servants or civil servants.

Public administrator's function is to create or carry out publicly mandated policy that uses public resources that have an impact on individuals or groups of society (Gortner, 1991). Public administrators were once concerned only of the implementation of policy and the provision of services hence they are accountable only to the elected leaders and must be neutrally competent in their work (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007). However, contemporary public administrators endure weightier obligation as they are responsible in preserving the integrity of the public bureaucracy (Terry, 1995).

The word ethics came from the Greek word 'ethikos', meaning moral or showing moral character, rooting from the word ethos. Ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with how we ought to live, with the idea of good and bad and concepts such as 'right' and 'wrong' (Pojman & Fieser, 2012). The right and wrong concept in ethics can be evaluated using ethical theories. Since the public administration are mostly based on the normative ethics, the ethics of what ought to be, hence theories of deontology, teleology and virtue ethics are applicable to what ought the administrators to do as an administrator.

Deontology is concern with the action or motive of the administrators. The categorical imperative in Kant's moral theory is used to explain ethical actions. Categorical imperative explained that in order to be ethical, one must be able to do the same action consistently without any contradiction (Stewart, 2009). Only then an action can be accepted as morally right. This idea of right and wrong is called universalizability.

Teleology on the other hand is concerned with the consequences of the actions. One of the most common theory is Utilitarianism. Bentham's utilitarianism explained that in order for an action to be ethically acceptable it must adhere to the principle of utility. The principle requires that one's action should bring greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. This is a calculative way of knowing whether one is acting ethically or not, giving great consideration to the number of happiness or pain produced in the consequences of one's action.

Virtue ethics is concerned with the agent or person doing the action. In order to become ethical, an individual is evaluated through his traits and character. The actions are not as important as the character. This is because virtue ethics believes that getting the person right is important because then only good actions will follow (Stewart, 2009). This by itself has not only benefited the public service but also benefited the agent just by being virtuous.

All these theories supported the public service ethics. This is due to work in the public service involved the agent, his motive and the consequences resulted from his actions. What the public servants do is more than just thought and talk; it is converted into performance and action. It is more than just about technicality of procedures because ethics is considered as the soul of public administration (Frederickson, 1997).

Public service ethics is to promote ethical practice and supports ethical practitioners in the public service which eventually will affect the larger society (Lewis & Gilman, 2012). Consequently, public servants see themselves as having higher ethical standards than those

employed in the private sector due to non-profitable nature of work (Rayner, Williams, Lawton, & Allinson, 2010). There are three reasons of why public administrators need to be ethical (Lewis & Gilman, 2012). First, due to ethics is itself important. Secondly, the public service functions depend on trust and finally, the public is highly sceptical of the public administrators' ability to behave ethically.

With these reasons given, the public administrators cannot afford to act unethically. The old saying of 'living in a goldfish bowl' illustrated the exposure to ceaseless scrutiny on the conduct of the public servants. Every stake holders have the opportunity to check the behaviour of the public administrators. The media is attentive to any unethical conduct of the public administrators. Coverage on corrupt activities of public administrators always rouses huge interest amongst the public. The public using the social media platforms have since extensively contribute to the lively discussions on unethical behaviour of the public officials.

The great attention given to ethics in the public administration is because it personifies the government. Therefore, any unethical conduct may significantly affect the trust and confidence of the public onto the government. This possibly have been demonstrated by the worst performance of the ruling government in the 2008 election due to the growing perception that corruption has worsened in Malaysia since 2004 (ASLI, 2008).

In addition, the image of the country too depends on the conduct of the public officials. The Transparency International (TI) Corruption Perception Index (CPI) is becoming a very significant measure in exemplifying the integrity of the governments worldwide. The CPI measures the perceived level of public sector corruption on the scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Malaysia scored 52, 50 and 49 in year 2014, 2013 and 2012 respectively (TI, 2015).

The Global Corruption Barometer (GCB) on the other hand conducts a survey on perceptions of corruption by institution on the scale of 1 (not corrupt at all) to 5 (most corrupt). In 2013, the Malaysian public official or civil servants are found at the scale of 3.3 (TI, 2013). The Malaysian Corruption Barometer (MCB) conducted by the Transparency International (Malaysia) found that 50 percent of Malaysians still believe corruption is a serious problem in public sector regardless of the 2014 survey indicating an improvement of 18 percent from the 2013 survey (TI Malaysia, 2014).

The low ranking in both CPI and GCB can be illustrated by some examples of scandalous activities in recent years committed by public administrators. These cases have positioned the public service under intense public spotlight and opened to relentless criticisms by the media. The arrests of twenty eight Customs officers for their involvement in country's largest liquor and cigarettes smuggling syndicate (Tasnim, 2014), the paper leakage of the 2014 UPSR examination implicating officers of the Examination Board (Malay Mail, 2014), money laundering by higher public officials in Sabah Water Department (Taucan, 2016) and police taking bribe from illegal immigrants escaping arrests (Nazri, 2017). These examples are among many cases that illustrate the seriousness of the threat onto the ethical behaviour of public officials. It has been reported that the ethical behaviour of the public servants has turned to worse within the span of ten years (Ahmad, 2017). Subsequently the integrity of the whole public service is badly affected.

The surveys on perception of corruption are important as they served as the yardstick of the ethical health of the public service. Such surveys are being used by the external parties in evaluating countries with the right conditions for profitable investment opportunities. Foreign investment can contribute to the economic wellbeing of the country. Data from both CPI and the Malaysian Corruption Barometer (MCB), surveys conducted by Transparency International (TI), can be used by the government to supplement one of the National Integrity Plan's (NIP) agenda which is to effectively reduce corruption, malpractices and abuse of power. The NIP is a Malaysian initiative to materialise a moral and ethical society to prepare Malaysia in its quest for a status of a developed nation.

Approaches to ethics for public administrators

There are many available approaches in which a person with administrative roles could be guided into working ethically. Nevertheless this paper will only provide an overview of a few approaches that public administrators may adopt. The adoption of any of the following approaches by administrators may be influenced by the cultural practices of the society in which the administrator operates. There is a difference in how ethics is viewed and practiced in the Western and Eastern parts of the world. This paper offers both views but only limit the eastern view to Islam as it is the major religion in Malaysia. Western ethics is about using rational human reasoning in conducting actions and tackling ethical dilemmas. Islam based its ethics on the relationship of the believers and God henceforth applying both rational human reasoning and divine guidance in their daily actions.

Stewardship

The stewardship theory requires the public administrators to perform their duty ethically based on the premise of being a 'steward'. It is based on the image of a medieval steward of the lord where serving the interest of their principals is more pleasurable than serving their own (Schillemans, 2012). The contemporary steward would likely serve the collective goals of the administration. Unfortunately, stewardship is a forgotten tradition in public administration (Armstrong, 1997) and need a revival as it offers an alternative to the established principal-agent and market approach in offering efficient services.

A non-self-interested steward aimed at learning and growing to accomplish a higher level of achievement in the organization. A steward's motivation to serve is aligned to the goals and objectives of the organization (Armstrong, 1997). Hence, a public administrator is ethical when he works according to the goals of the collective rather than personal goals where the willingness to serve is intrinsically motivated (Puyvelde, Caers, Bois, & Jegers, 2012). However, the success of adopting the stewardship theory depends on the commitment of the principals to award the ethical actions of the stewards.

Stewards look forward to fulfil personal development, self-realisation and belonging rather than monetary rewards (Schillemans, 2012). The theory also works well in a low power distance hierarchical structure where stewards are given substantial responsibility and autonomy (Van Slyke, 2007). This may posed a difficulty in execution in country with a high power distance such as Malaysia.

Responsible administrator

Cooper (2012) put forward the concept of responsible administrator as an approach to ethics for public administrators. This is due to the complex nature of public administrators who have to deal with the political nature of public administration, the internal and external obligation that drives individual responsibility besides the tension between the public and private interests (Williams, 2000). Being a responsible administrator is more than just being ethical because it means one is accountable to his actions in relation to other people.

An administrator must be able to explain and justify the actions taken which resulted into particular consequences. Cooper (2012) also pointed out that being responsible means that the administrator must act consistently with their inner convictions and have sufficient clarity in their ethical stand to maintain their integrity and self-esteem. This is where a public administrator is not only aware of the ethical issues and conflict but is demanded to reflect on their ethical conduct (Williams, 2000). However, being ethical is still a huge challenge to a responsible administrator as he is 'a juggler dealing with multitude of competing obligations and interest' (Cooper, 2012).

Conservatorship

Larry D. (Terry, 1995) established a normative approach to ethics for public administrators by advocating the concept of administrator as a conservator. The conservator concept address the damaging effects of New Public Management (NPM) that isolate politics from administrative reforms and promote management as a one fits all solution. As a conservator, one seeks to reserve the capacity of bureaucracy to respond to public problems by emphasizing the importance of institutional functions O'toole.

A conservator is characterised by their ability to balance their responsiveness between the officials, the public and the institution's practices and traditions (Green, 2007). The bottom line in being ethical is the obligation to ensure the righteousness of the public service mission and service to the nation by conserving the law outlined by the constitution (McGovern, 2011). Following the law and constitution of the country would requires the administrators to adopt the 'regime values' as propagated by John Rohr.

Serving the regime values

'Regime values' is a concept propagated by John Rohr through his book *The Ethics for Bureaucrats*. He asserted that in order to become ethical, public servants must be 'expected to respond in the values of the people whose name they govern' (Rohr, 1988). Rohr an expert in constitutionalism refers to constitutional approach as a way of promoting good government (Uhr, 2014). Thus, he presented a normative approach of obligation to support the 'regime values' where. The concept of 'regime' is used as a method to analyse the nature of administrative responsibility and accountability (Uhr, 2014).

Regime values refer to values of a political entity that is authorized by the Constitution or collective benefits promoted by a given political order (Overeem, 2015). The public servants are guided by the regime values once they take the oath in upholding the nation's constitution. By understanding the constitutional principles and executing the

commands of the regime rulers according to the constitution means that an administrator has conducted themselves ethically. However, Rohr was only referring to the American constitution thus this concept will differ with how regime values are abide to in other countries. Nevertheless, studying the contrast will assist in clarifying one's virtues and vices in their own administration (Uhr, 2014).

Islamic ethics

As a Muslim majority country and a public service dominated by the Muslims, Malaysia has adopted Islamic values as one of its ethics approach. The administration had officially propagated the inculcation of Islamic values in administration in 1985 and introduced the Islamic Work Ethics in 1987. However, ethics in Islam is not only about values but it is viewed in a larger picture which goes beyond what is materially and physically exists.

Al-Ghazali defined ethics as the science of the way to the hereafter (Il Tariq al-akhira) or a path gone through by the prophets and righteous ancestors (As-Salaf as salih) (Quasem, 2011). This entails that administrators is to adopt the exemplary righteous actions of people who are truthful for a futuristic good placing in the hereafter. Therefore, ethics in Islam combined both the internal and external element of human existence. The physical action of a public administrator is very much influenced by a belief that is based on faith and *taqwa* to Allah (Sharifah Hayaati, 2010). Faith is something that is believed with strong conviction (Merriam-Webster, 2017) while *taqwa* is consciousness and fear of Allah that will shield human against wrongdoings (Karoli, 2003) .

Islamic ethics is the relationship between the Khaliq (Creator) and the Makhluq (creature) therefore to be ethical is to obey what has been commanded by the Creator (Rahim, 2013). Ethics is therefore epistemologically derived from the religion and the measure of what is right and wrong must fit into the contact of religion (Roslan, 2014). Accordingly, Islam becomes a personal ethics approach for any Muslim public administrators with the ultimate aim of doing well in the hereafter. Consequently it include how one conduct oneself, what is being practiced, what does one beliefs in and think of and what do one hold onto as a foundation of life must come from the religious point of view. The ultimate aim in everything done is to gain the pleasure of the Creator. There is no conduct, work or service that is worthy unless it is done in the values that please Allah s.w.t. In an administration, the ethics is illuminated by the first constitution in Islam which was the Madinah Charter that outlined ten values that represent the essence of administration in Islam.

Conclusion

The above approaches may possibly provide a guide for a public administrator to ethically conduct themselves. The approaches to the role of public administrators are indicating a specific expected conduct of public administrators. Ethics are not introduced to change the administration or to change the unethical to being ethical overnight. Ethics is there to support the ethics practitioners and to warn the unethical to guard their conduct. By having ethics, rules will be clearer to follow through therefore performing the role expected of a public administrator is guided.

The available ethics initiatives from the government such as ethics code and ethics training are to assist in supplementing the rules and strengthening the ethical conduct of the public administrators. Nevertheless, scholars agreed that the ultimate choice of being ethical falls on public administrator's responsibility and their moral qualities. There are three choices of being ethical according to Torp (1994). Firstly, is to act in accordance with the public ethics. Secondly, is to challenge the public ethics personally through an institution or as a public administrator within the public institution. Finally is to opt for a resignation when succumbing to personal values.

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