

University of North Florida
Master of Public Administration program
PAD 6436 Ethics
Fall 2017

The social context
Public manager of the week



[Photo credit](#)

Dwight Waldo

Lecture goals: Look at the social context of ethics in public organizations.

At the risk of over-doing it with academics in these coveted ‘public manager of the week’ awards, I figured I’d introduce you to Dwight Waldo mostly because he is widely credited with pointing out that as a social science, public administration could not hope to be as value free and as purely scientific as the physical sciences (which themselves are far from value free). Instead (among other things) public administration is deeply embedded in its social context. Why, for instance, are we Americans cutting our governments across the board; while most other rich countries are at least maintaining levels of most public services? Why do we Americans spend less on social programs and more on defense than any other rich country? There is no science driving these decisions (by we Americans or these other countries), but rather values embedded in the social context.

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Thompson and Leidlein

Chapter 4, selected questions (p. 23):

- “Are city managers” (and public administrators) “true professionals in the strictest sense of the word?”
- “Is city management” (or public administration) “a profession akin to medicine, law, accounting, etc.?”
- “Did the ICMA...overreact by barring Nelson from membership?”
- “Is there a strategy that Nelson might have successfully used to keep his position with Cannon Edge?”
- “Does the nearly 18 years of city manager experience trump the fact that he held no college degrees?”

- Are Leidlein and Thompson piling on in then subsequently having this fictitious character get caught plagiarizing? After all, given that he showed he can do the job, shouldn't the past transgression be overlooked?

Waldo's competing ethical obligations

And so I might as well start with Dwight Waldo's competing ethical obligations, which I think is one of the more interesting insights in the field of public administration. These competing obligations include:

- Obligation to the Constitution,
- Obligation to law
- Obligation to nation or country
- Obligation to democracy
- Obligation to organization-bureaucratic norms
- Obligation to profession and professionalism
- Obligation to family and friends
- Obligation to self
- Obligation to middle-range objectives
- "party, class, race, union, church, interest group and others"
- Obligation to the public interest or general welfare
- Obligation to humanity or the world
- Obligation to religion, or to God.

Waldo's point was that ethical obligations become especially complex when these conflict. It is too easy to argue that the public administrator should remain consistent with organization-bureaucratic norms, and subordinate all else when on the job. But what to do when these conflict with the law, or the values of one's profession, or one's commitment to family, or one's professional judgment, or to one's professional judgment of the public interest, or to one's own professional interests, as anyone who has ever felt guilt about taking a better paying job knows?¹

Future generations

The George Frederickson² article is noteworthy for identifying another set of competing ethical obligations through introducing the concept of time. The question of obligation to future generations has generally been seen in terms of the environment: preserving this so that future generations have the same economic opportunities that we do.

The environment? Note that this is ignoring altogether whether the environment itself has rights of its own. An environmental policy text that I used years ago (when I taught this sort of thing) had a graphic that presented an ever-expanding realm of rights in modern society. It went something like this, with rights steadily being extended outward:

1. The Monarch: the beginning.

¹ To wit: when I accepted the job as MPA Director at UNF, I said "até à vista" – Portuguese for 'hasta la vista' – to my IUSB MPA students, dropping them like hot taters! More: I feel no remorse as I go for a walk on the beach most mornings.

² Frederickson, incidentally, is also credited with putting 'social equity' concerns on the agenda of academic public administration. See, for instance, Frederickson 1990. By social equity is meant essentially racial and gender inequality. For what it's worth, I (and co-authors) have argued that while Frederickson is to be applauded for this path-breaking observation, academic public administration was about two decades too late in realizing that racial and gender equality were central to the field (see Oldfield, Candler and Johnson 2006).

2. The nobility (think in terms of the pre-[Magna Carta](#) days).
3. Men of property.
4. All men (property qualifications removed).
5. Women ([19th Amendment](#)!).
6. Various excluded minorities ([Reconstruction Amendments](#)).
7. Animals (for example, [a video](#), and [long article](#)).
8. [Ecosystems](#).
9. (Etc.)

Inter-generational equity and deficits. But again, the focus in Frederickson's article is on inter-temporal equity. This is ostensibly the biggest issue in contemporary American politics. As is generally appreciated, the federal debt has grown steadily since the Reagan era revenue cuts, as revenues failed to cover expenditures (see the link to [macro-economic statistics](#) for an overview), a condition that has continued save for a brief period of bi-partisan cooperation leading to balanced budgets during the Clinton administration. Note that growing debt means that the generation accumulating the debt is essentially asking that its public services be paid for by the next generation, hence 'inter-generational' equity. I write 'ostensibly' because a good portion of the folks raising the alarm about the contribution of continued deficits in creating inter-generational equity problems, offer less revenue as solution for this problem. This makes about as much sense as an anorexic person offering to fast as a response to being unhealthily thin.

Investment v. consumption. Note that all deficit spending isn't bad. Just as in the business world, public borrowing to fund deficits can be good if this is being done to invest, in things like roads, scientific research, education and the like. Through this the next generation will have enhanced productive capabilities, and so be able to afford to pay off those loans and maybe even have a surplus left over. It is, though, hard to argue this when borrowing is done to fund personal income tax cuts used to fund personal consumption, as cheap junk from China and McMansions in the 'burbs raise American productivity little.

And so Frederickson's opening explanation of his article:

It seems that issues of intergenerational fairness are all around us. The current debate over the national deficit rings with charges that the debt was incurred by a profligate generation to be paid for by their children and their children's children. This debate is aside from the issue of which groups -- lower, middle, or upper classes -- benefitted most from the run-away federal borrowing of the 1980s. Proposed solutions turn entirely on the question of who will pay if much of the deficit is not passed on to coming generations. The health care finance issue is also mostly about fairness and equity between the insured and uninsured in present generations; the old and those not yet old; the medical and pharmaceutical professions; and the insurance companies. It is claimed with considerable evidence, that unless health care costs are contained the deficit cannot be reduced. Much of the essential thrust of the environmental movement is to preserve the earth's resources for coming generations. The Social Security system is by definition intergenerational. These are but a few of the more visible policy issues that have mostly to do with questions of fairness and equity both between groups in present generations and between present and future generation. (p. 457)

It seems to me, too, that the largest inter-generational issue here is that our kids can't vote. So when we (i.e. those of us here, voting today) make pension promises today that we then do not fund (or [delay funding until 2031](#)), this, surely, is unethical. It is even worse if we then fail to invest in the most (cost-effective) education our children can get: racking up debt and short-changing their education seems a double blow.

Block equality. Frederickson also introduces this concept, which we will return to when we discuss inequality later in the course. The idea here is to take inequality out of the individual realm, and instead apply it to groups. As an example: in an argument that many Americans have a hard time grasping, Québécois linguistic nationalists argue that [Québec's French language laws](#) (French was established as the 'national' language of the province, and restricted the use of English in myriad ways) are about *freedom*, rather than *restricting* freedom. The logic is that if an individual freely chooses to educate her child in English, rather than French, this reduces the viability of French in the province, and so reduces the freedom that Francophones have to live in a French speaking society. Très étrange, oui?

Cooper's chapter 3

Post-modernism. Perhaps this is just because I'm an unsophisticated truck driver's kid from Indiana, but I've never been a fan of post-modernism. Part of the reason is because of Cooper's definition for this:

... a term intended to characterize a world in which foundational assumptions are being discredited as final and absolute. Assumptions about some kind of objectively real and universal human nature, or natural law, or absolute values and ultimate truths, including those of science, no longer hold sway over the entire society. (p. 46)

Without dealing with some of these assertions point-by-point in these notes, note that post-modernism is generally associated with young hipster leftists, yet by this definition the contemporary Tea Party, with its denial of the science of global warming and evolution, would be considered post-modern. I doubt that either Cooper or his post-modern buddies would accept this 'block' within their *avant-garde* post-modern club.

Limits of science. Still, some of Cooper's points in this section are useful. Science, for instance, has its limits. Science on global climate change, for instance, reflects at best a good faith effort to understand a hideously complex and difficult to study phenomenon. As a result, yes, science has its limits here. Administrative science, too, over-reaches when it overlooks that humans occupy the various roles within an organizational chart.

Multiplicity of roles. This is Waldo's competing ethical obligations argument, above. Quoting Salman Rushdie, Cooper takes it a step further by pointing out that we all adopt different personalities for different roles: "principled when we instruct our children and corrupt when offered some secret temptation" (Rushdie, in Cooper, p. 49). This, too, is part of what Alberto Guerreiro Ramos was getting at in his *New Science of Organizations*, which Cooper refers to in last week's material. So beyond competing ethical obligations, Cooper and Ramos are raising the impact of these competing tensions of modern life on the human psyche. They probably overstate the issue, or so I (and co-authors) argue:

A critic might question... the tone of Alberto Guerreiro Ramos's take on cognitive politics (1981a, pp. 75-101), the degree to which instrumental (as opposed to substantive) rationality has come to dominate modern social science (pp. 3-4), the degree to which economic organizations "are free to shape the minds of their members and lives of their citizens in general" (p. 129), and his assertion that in "modern social science... the human being is nothing but a reckoning creature and the market the paradigm to which his associated life should be organized" (p. 22). (Salm, Candler and Ventriss 2006, p. 533)

Human multi-dimensionality. But outside the 'competing obligations' issue, this idea of human multi-dimensionality (we should work to live, not live to work) is important in public administration. Cooper similarly refers to blurred boundaries between work and private life.

I'll also point out that we often overlook the ultimate ends of human life. It is generally appreciated that a growing economy is good, but forget why this is good: it allows us more resources that we can invest in goods and services *that improve our lives*. That latter, italicized part is the ultimate purpose of a growing economy. As a result, if a growing economy results in less enjoyable lives, it is working at cross purposes. This is the point Cooper, Guerreiro Ramos and myriad others sought to make.

Implications for public administration.

- Politics matter! Though let's be careful not to jettison the Woodrow Wilson ideal of the 'politics/administration dichotomy'. As an ideal, even an ethical goal of public administrators, it still makes sense. Still, the administrator seeking to make a difference (an ethical imperative!) needs to be conscious of political realities.
 - Cooper goes beyond this topic, though. As an example of some of the broader issues he raises, many developing societies have struggled with the inconsistency of kinship obligations with the need for investment in modern society.
- "If the administrative role in postmodern society is inevitably political and heavily discretionary in nature, significant ethical considerations must be acknowledged. ...we can identify three types of ethical concerns...: corruption, loss of efficiency, and abuse of power. If we look at some typical external political transactions, we find these ethical concerns manifest in the following ways:" (p. 57)
 - Agency-political party. Think Rick Perry's late 2011 comments about Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke. ([click here](#))
 - Agency-agency. Beyond this: should the UNF-MPA program try to compete with the [UNF-MSJC](#) program, or work with it? How about the UCF-MPA program?³
 - Agency-government. Government using agencies to punish opponents of government; or agencies trying to manipulate government to benefit agency personnel.
 - This latter point is a special concern of Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira (who we read in week 7), whose Republican State is defined in large part as one able to defend itself against 'private capture of the public patrimony' (2004, p. 119). As indicated in the corruption perceptions data presented in Table 1, in lecture 1, this

³ The Jacksonville University MPP program is an easier call: as JU-MPP is an unaccredited program, to accept their credits would jeopardize our own accreditation.

is a problem that Bresser Pereira's Brazil faces far more than the US and most of the other more developed economies.

- Agency-interest groups. This, too, was part of the reason for Woodrow Wilson's famous 'politics/administration dichotomy': to prevent private groups from influencing public agencies to serve private interests.

Administrator and citizen role conflicts. I am both a citizen who pays taxes, and an employee who receives citizen tax dollars to provide educational services.

Public policy and ethics. This is from Cooper's 'political theory and administrative ethics' section. He identifies three related, important ethical aspects of the process of public policy in a democratic society:

- Representation: does the public manager simply
 - work as a cog for the political leadership, or
 - seek to represent the people
 - if so, how; and which people; and how to determine what 'the people' want, separate from the preferences expressed by elected political leaders (who would seem to have far more legitimacy than appointed public officials as spokespeople for the public interest)?
 - (or simply seek to be detached, Spock-like machines for providing the best policy analysis possible to political leaders and the public)?
 - if so, to what extent can squishy, unscientific personal experience be brought in to this analysis, especially when experience is often a criterion (as any young job seeker will attest) that organizations seek in employees?
 - and how to separate 'experience' from personal bias, or culturally specific experience.
- Education: when called on to speak publicly, to what extent should public managers present 'both' sides of the issue, rather than the side that her/his expertise indicates is more correct?
 - Are there 'two sides' to an issue and, if there are, what are they?
- Implementation: much of the above applies also to actually carrying out policy, as discretion is inevitably required.

Managers of diverse interests. In terms of George Frederickson's intergenerational equity concerns:

- Social Security recipients (projected to cost \$967b in 2017, see [Table S4](#), page 120) will vigorously protest cuts to their benefits ([keep your gov' mint hands off](#) of my Social Security!), even though the Trust Fund is inadequate, and most of this was borrowed back to fund tax cuts from the 1980s;
- Social Security Disability recipients have risen dramatically lately, suggesting either a [sudden epidemic of workplace injuries, or fraud](#) (so these folks aren't keen to make sacrifices, are instead putting self interest ahead that of the country);
- Medicare recipients (\$598b) will [vigorously protest cuts to their benefits](#) ("death panels!");
- Medicaid recipients (\$386b) are often too disorganized to protest cuts to their benefits, but advocacy groups will protest cuts to Medicare benefits;

- Military retirees will protest cuts to their benefits, and the pay of soldiers is almost the only thing that hasn't been cut in the past few years; and
- The Department of Defense (\$608b) and our creditors (\$303b) will not accept cuts.

These are the diverse interests that public managers are meant to 'manage', and if they fail, it is their fault (damn *guv'* mint!).

As well, some 'interests' have more influence than others. I like David Weimer and Aidan Vining's (1992, p. 407-8) approach to ethics, in their closing "Doing well and doing good," chapter in *Policy Analysis*:

"Your duties as a policy analyst go beyond responsibility for the personal success of your client. You have responsibilities to the integrity of your craft and to contributing to a better society. Thus our... exhortation: Do good!

"Doing good requires some basis for comparing alternative courses of action. At the most general level, promoting human dignity and freedom are values widely shared in Western societies...

"Throughout this book we have emphasized economic efficiency as an important goal in the evaluation of alternative policies...

"...you can contribute to the public good by identifying other values that receive too little attention in political arenas. Are there identifiable groups that consistently suffer losses from public policies? Is adequate consideration being given to the future and the interests of future generations? Are dangerous precedents being set...?"

"...Sometimes doing good simply requires analysts to advise their clients to forgo some current popularity or success to achieve some important value. You are doing exceptionally well when you convince your client to accept such advice!"

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