

Building a Millennial Ethic:

The New Professional Generation and Morality in Public Administration

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Abstract

As a result of new developments in public administration practice that stem from changed relationships among the sectors and advancing technologies, public administrators face increasingly complex ethical challenges. This is particularly relevant for the Millennial generation, those born after 1980, which will be entering the profession and having increasing impact as Baby Boomer retirements accelerate. In this article, one young practitioner explores the implications of this convergence of trends for administrative ethics and the Millennial generation. Millennials face challenges particularly in light of their statistical likelihood to rely less on a religious framework, their declining loyalty to a single career trajectory or profession, and the technological tools that may increasingly influence their attitudes toward trust and personal responsibility. The article proscribes three courses of action for public administrators to take in assisting young professionals with overcoming these challenges and cultivating a strong ethical framework.

A new generation is entering the profession of public administration, and will have increasing impact in the field as Baby Boomer retirements peak (Kerrigan, 2012). Perhaps unfortunately for the profession, popular media informs us that this generation—my own—is comprised of lazy, narcissistic pseudo-adults, who are largely out of touch with reality (Stein, 2013). Alongside these less-than-desirable traits, there are compounding concerns: for the best and brightest of the Millennials, private sector positions are reportedly offering more tempting work environments and recruitment processes (Maciag, 2012). Together, this does not inspire confidence for an abundance of ethical, competent new professionals in public service. While there is always risk in taking generalizations about an entire generation at face value, an exploration of the future state of public ethics must consider this group of new professionals.

The role of ethics in public administration holds a long-standing place in the field's practical and theoretical dialogues. Thompson's landmark work breaks down a series of arguments against administrative ethics and ultimately indicates that ethics can and should exist for individuals within public organizations (Thompson, 1985). The American Society for Public Administration confirms this with its code of professional ethics, calling for personal integrity, ethical organizations, and professional excellence (2013). Personal morality captures attention in many of the field's academic works on ethics. Garofalo, for example, concludes that "ethical judgment and the responsible exercise of discretion are crucial for effective service; and that moral life is inseparable from the rest of what is thought, decided, and done." (2008, p. 352). These and other resources lay an intricate groundwork in support of public ethics, but new factors are at stake that further complicate the ethical challenges faced by public administrators.

The nature of the profession is itself in flux, with cross-sectoral relationships, changing technologies, and increased performance management and privatization pressures (Lawton,

2005). While they offer great benefits for the field, new and evolving service delivery models are likely to add to public administrators' ethical responsibilities. More than ever, relationships in public administration are built on the basis of trust, since management structures and hierarchy are flattened by increased public information and technological tools (Garafalo, 2008). With cross-cutting demands adding ethical conflict to public service, ethical public decision-making and accountable stewardship may become more difficult (Lawton, 2005; Lewis (ed.), Balia, Bertok, Turkama, & Van Delden, 2007). Theobald (1997) points out that the most subtle, ambiguous ethical problems can be equally egregious as more blatant forms of misconduct. When such ethical conflict occurs, public administrators are expected to act as moral agents with the ability to handle complex ethical inquiry (Garafalo, 2008). Recent additions to the literature build a picture of administrative ethics that relies heavily on strong personal ethical identity that is closely involved in moral decision-making (Quill, 2009).

In many ways, Millennials seem remarkably well-equipped for the changing public administration environment. Popular media aside, there are statistically-supported characterizations of Millennials, a generation defined by the Pew Forum as those born after 1980, that add value to the discussion of the field's ethical future (Pew Research Center, 2010, p.4). Professional changes and new tools are likely to appeal to this generation, with its positive attitudes, adaptability to change, and high education levels (Baranyi, 2011). Fine notes that Millennials "work collaboratively, believe that they can make a difference in the world and... are immersed in the causes they believe in" (as cited in Baranyi, 2011, p. 5). At face value, public administration is a perfect fit for Millennials, and vice-versa.

However, the profession also presents special challenges for Millennials, particularly in light of the literature's strong emphasis on personal ethical identity. Taken as a whole,

Millennials are approaching ethical frameworks differently, and perhaps more ambiguously, than prior generations. “This generation is open minded and socially conscious, but not overly religious” (Baranyi, 2011, p. 4). Millennials are described as placing more importance on “being successful in a high-paying career” than on factors like religion that have historically been associated with guiding ethical decisions (Pew Research Center, 2010, p. 18). While this does not necessarily preclude ethical inquiry or imply that this generation is less equipped to make ethical choices, religious and moral beliefs provide a point of reference or a stable horizon for weighing difficult ethical choices, particularly choices between conflicting principles (Fitzgerald, 1998). Without such a horizon, Millennials do not have an established framework toward which they look for shared or individual ethical guidance. This trend has not been fully explored, but since it may impact how Millennials approach ethical dilemmas as public administration professionals, further study of its practical and normative implications would be beneficial.

Secondly, Millennial concepts of loyalty are distinct from those of other generations, specifically in terms of their careers. “It is loyalty on the part of administrators to the processes of government and its institutions that gives public administration its legitimacy... The men and women who have chosen to work in public service; although their motivations are undoubtedly based on self-interest and material reward; are also bound by a loyalty to their profession, its ethical code, and a commitment to public service” (Quill, 2009, p. 217). Millennials have less job and career loyalty than other generations, with two-thirds saying they will switch careers at some point (Pew Research Center, 2008, p. 46). They may be deterred from holding to their original public service motivation by a challenging job market or difficulties in the hiring process that make it challenging to build a long-standing relationship with public service (Maciag, 2012).

Reduced career loyalty may diminish new professionals' opportunities to develop long-term, integrated professional and personal responsibility for their ethical decisions.

Finally, Millennials face special challenges in the form of the technological tools that have been available to them throughout much of their lives. Public administration is increasingly built on interpersonal trust, particularly due to the flattening of hierarchy discussed by Garofalo (2008). While Millennials do not differ dramatically from other generations in their limited ability to trust (Pew Research Center, 2010), they may be confronting added challenges in developing trust and personal responsibility. Communications theorists are currently exploring the identity crafting that can occur via social media, and they raise the concerning fact that technological tools can cause their users to shape and reshape their own personalities, influencing others' perceptions of them (Kietzmann, Silvestre, McCarthy, & Pitt, 2012). The impact of these tools on trust and personal responsibility is as yet unknown. With Millennials entering the professional, public administrators should explore the impact of identity-crafting technologies on the personal accountability required for moral competence.

Each of these brief assessments of Millennial characterizations has ended with a call for further empirical exploration. On the practical side, there are a few additional avenues by which the profession can mitigate these challenges. First and foremost, public administrators should work to avoid allowing an institutionalized code of ethics to supplant an individual code of ethics. Millennials have developed within a system that institutionalizes a code of ethics, and makes ethics a professional behavior, not a way of life (Lewis et al., 2007). By merit of their entrance into an institutionalized code of ethics, Millennials may be unconsciously misled to assume that their actions are only guided by that code. Practitioners indicate, however, that a professional code does not go far enough to equip professionals for way-of-being ethics (Lewis

et al., 2007). Alerting new professionals to the importance of a strong personal ethical framework is essential. Administrators should work to ensure that an institutional code of ethics does not supplant a personal one, and should encourage new professionals to invest in meaningful personal exploration of religious and ethical concepts.

The profession should also attract bright professionals to meaningful public administration careers by challenging those who stigmatize public service. To confront loyalty concerns and ensure that morally competent, thoughtful new professionals desire careers in public administration, continual efforts to promote public service and improve human resource management will be necessary. While any number of aspects of the governmental system may inspire cynicism, it is important to advocate for the profession in order to attract and retain young administrators desirous of a meaningful career. Finally, public administrators should work to ensure that young professionals' experiences allow and require real decision-making. Although entry-level positions and internships are a must, particularly in the present job market, they, like technological tools, can cultivate the sensation that there will be a "filter" for all actions. Having a filter in place in turn diminishes personal accountability. Regardless of their position or technological tools, the profession should work to encourage new professionals to face the reality of the impact of an administrator's choices.

At the very time when the profession is asking a new generation of public servants to meet fresh ethical challenges, their generational traits, which have been preliminarily explored in both popular media and academic research, suggest that they may be using a limited set of tools. The profession of public administration should work to understand the challenges they confront, and to use this understanding to attract and equip a cohort of strong new professionals that will be ethical servants and leaders in the future.

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