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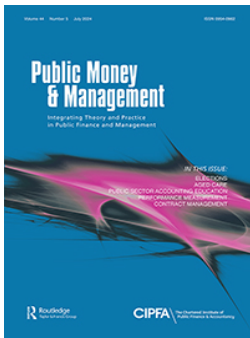
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New development: Is Nolan enough? Why senior officers need to understand public values at the street-level perspective

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IMPACT

Public values are stated as being central to the practice of senior public officials and policy-makers across the globe, but applying values in practice requires continual consideration and review. The application of values in state settings is not only about their application at senior levels, but how they infuse different levels of public organizations. Although much has been written about higher level values and standards, such as the UK Nolan principles, there is less consideration about how senior officers understand values at the levels of public sector practice. This article makes the case that, to produce a modern public service fit for purpose, senior public officials will benefit from understanding the application of public values at a variety of delivery levels.

ABSTRACT

Public values are now an established part of the skills and knowledge of senior public officials across the globe. Applying values in practice is considered to contribute to the effective delivery of public services, and reflect on wicked problems which continue to persist throughout the world. Senior officers at various levels of public sector organizations, and particularly senior managers, are expected to explain where value is being created. The authors contribute to the public management literature by arguing that, to produce a modern public service fit for purpose, senior public officials need training and educating to understand public values and ethics.

KEYWORDS

Emotions; front-line practice; government agencies; leadership; multi-level governance; public values; strategy; street-level bureaucrats

Introduction: What are public values?

Public values are upheld as being central to the design, implementation and evaluation of public management and administration (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Van der Wal, 2017; Liddle, 2022). Although there is ongoing debate about the meaning of values, in the public management context they are articulated as practising in an ethical and accountable manner (Chapman, 2003; Chapman & O'Toole, 2010; Parker, 2019). Furthermore, values are considered central to policy-making by providing ethical depth to improve social outcomes in society (Chapman & O'Toole, 2010; Liddle, 2022). In this article we primarily focus on state agencies, but acknowledge that new relational forms of governance are not only a challenge to the role of traditional hierarchical forms of government in advanced democracies, which raise questions on the types of institutions, organizations and capacities to synergize the state's own resources with those of market and civic institutions (Liddle, 2022).

A public values perspective is identified in the growth of organizational value statements in a variety of state organizations, including national principles for UK public servants (Nolan, 1995) and local government (Wartnaby, 2014; Shand et al., 2022); sometimes described as benchmarks for public servants and their institutions [PASC, 2002]. However, the relationship between published values statements and professional practice will require interpretation (Zonneveld et al., 2024), notwithstanding the links with ethical and philosophical virtue based perspectives (Macaulay & Lawton, 2006; Parker, 2019).

Officers at various levels of public sector organizations, and particularly senior managers, are expected to explain

where value is being created. Alongside public values, there is a growing interest in public and social value creation to mobilize and evaluate how state investment is contributing to society (O'Flynn, 2021; Liddle, 2022; Gilchrist & Jefferson, 2023). Although easy to voice, articulating the meaning of value in professional practice is challenging, because concepts like public value are contested concepts (Hartley et al., 2017). Linking value creation with public and professional values at various levels of seniority is likely to lead to more ambiguity.

In this article we argue that, to produce a modern public service fit for purpose, senior public officials need to understand the application of public values at a variety of delivery levels. Although praiseworthy that public organizations are value informed, there are questions about whether one set of values can be uniformly applied across an institution, as well as being inculcated by the breadth of staff employed within it. First, public values and senior leadership are discussed; second, we look at public values at the street level; third, attention is given to how senior public officials' understanding of values at different policy and decision-making levels might be enhanced.

Public values and senior public officials: What guides values at the central government level?

Renewed emphasis is being placed on authenticity, ethics and morality for senior state officials and civil servants (Needham et al., 2020; Shand et al., 2022). There is continuous focus on the public values of senior officials (Van der Wal, 2017) and how values are interpreted (Zonneveld et al., 2024): particularly at key points of

political and societal change. Examples of public values informed standards include the UK Nolan principles (Nolan, 1995), and similar principles such as the Ireland Standards in Public Office Commission (SIPO, 2023) and the Canadian Conflict of Interest Act (Office of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, 2023). As senior officials are expected to negotiate multiple and often competing values that guide their decision-making in the public interest (Massey, 2023), it is implied that these standards will provide ethical stability. Although their focus is often on the design of high-level policy and strategy (Parsons, 1996) at times the public values perspective will coincide with crises in the public domain. Recent examples in the UK include migration and asylum policy, education inspections and corporate injustices (such as the recent Post Office scandal—see Wallis, 2021).

The public values of senior public officials are typically embedded in strategy making, demonstrated by the UK Nolan Committee's 'seven principles of public life' of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership as foundational values and standards of behaviour for public staff (Nolan, 1995). Although designed initially for politicians and civil servants, over time the Nolan principles have come to exemplify the values required in a wide range of public organizations including local government. With their selective range of value perspectives, the Nolan principles reduce the public values universe to quintessential components, so they are easy to replicate in organizational constitutions like local government.

Furthermore, underpinning the practice of senior public officials is values-based leadership (VBL), argued as essential for endorsing the use of ethical practices in public organizations and the broader public realm (Copeland, 2014). VBL emerged from unethical practices in the public and private sectors, including corruption, corporate meltdowns, and financial scandals in prominent multi-national companies (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). While leaders in the commercial sector focus on shareholder value, public sector VBL is increasingly associated with creating public and social value to tackle wicked issues (Moore, 1995; Busch & Murdock, 2017; Liddle, 2022).

Public values at the street level

The majority of leaders of public sector services will have previously held professional roles before becoming a senior official in their organization. For instance, many directors of local government social work or chief constables in the police will have started their careers on the front line, with an expectation that they would apply certain professional values in their practice. This suggests they are likely to have an advanced understanding of public values in a variety of settings, informed by legislation, strategy and policy.

It is important to appreciate that senior leaders are not the only individuals negotiating multiple and competing values. There has been a tendency to consider values and ethics in public management as primarily the purview of officers in the higher organizational hierarchy. However, public sector staff engage with daily challenges requiring deep thinking about values and ethics, and these are equal to those of senior officials (Parker, 2019). Examples include applying public values in front-line crises where there is little time for reflection, or protecting and defending the rights of

vulnerable citizens. Value-based thinking may be case-based rather than strategic but, undoubtedly, each has important ramifications for citizens in society, particularly for access to resources and identifying the correct point to intervene in people's lives.

Although expressing the importance of a public value in an organizational values statement may be fairly straightforward, it is inevitable there will be variations when applying values in strategy or at the street level. For example, considering public interest at the strategic level might be more population-based, observed in Covid 19 crisis planning, whereas the street-level practitioner will take a person-centred approach when advocating for an individual case. Indeed, public values need to be flexible enough to accommodate a broad range of practices as identified in professional standards frameworks. Different understandings of what constitutes the public interest will be governed by statutory responsibilities (for example police and social care services) with values pertinent to wider professional cultures and standards of behaviour.

Bridging public values between senior leaders and the street level

The focus on training senior public officials has become an area of significance in recent years, including the call to ensure that values and ethics are integrated into training and strategic policy-making (Gerson, 2020; Massey, 2023). Training opportunities on values and ethics declined after the demise of the UK Civil Service Selection Board in the Civil Service College (the latter became known as the National School of Government; both bodies were partially privatized then abolished after 2010) and the subsequent increase in management consultancies, training organizations and universities providing contracted training, alongside civil servants studying for master's degree (MBA) or doctorate (DBA) in business administration. There is now less focus on the centrality of organizational and public service values (Cabinet Office, 2000) and, furthermore, the increase in organizational e-learning in public organizations may not always provide the opportunity to discuss and reflect on public values with other stakeholders.

The established view is that the Nolan values, including integrity, objectivity and accountability (Nolan, 1995; Plant, 2003) are focused on the level of the senior public official. Although we acknowledge the requirement for public values which surpass the values and goals of any broader specialisms, we also ask 'are the Nolan values enough?' in the training and practice of senior public officials. Although laudable that public sector organizations are value-informed, questions remain about the extent to which a single set of high-level values can be applied uniformly across one organization, or reflective of a multitude of competing societal values. Public management delivery is increasingly multi-levelled, and training of senior public managers needs to include consideration of the range of public values delivered by a range of actors as seen at all levels—from strategy to front-line practice.

Chapman and Cleaveland (1973), in a body of research on public ethics and civil service recruitment and promotion, noted public employees were becoming much more representative of the heterogeneity of society, and that this needed to inform the meaning of, and inculcation, of public

values. It is understandable how government administrations of all political hues find it difficult to manage policy programmes across departments and tiers of government (Institute for Government, 2024). The question is ‘how and where might these values be inculcated, and at what level of governance?’ Given the interaction between public values and professional training, we also acknowledge that it is unrealistic for senior public officials to comprehend public values across the whole organization or, indeed, across the whole of society. However, in the latter part of the 20th century a competitive Civil Service Exchange Programme in the UK provided opportunities for selected higher/senior civil servants to spend a period of time in commercial and business organizations, such as the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors and individual companies, or in voluntary and civic institutions such as Age UK or the NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations).

Moreover, courses held at the Civil Service College and its successor the National School of Government enabled senior officials to collaborate closely with visiting officials from other nations who came to learn from the experiences of UK officials (one of the current authors taught on such courses with South African, Caribbean and other country officials during the 1990s: Liddle, 2017). Both of these examples of successful and reciprocal knowledge exchange ceased to exist in the early 21st century (the latter example coincided with the closure of the National School of Government in 2012). Previous to this, the Joint University Council/Public Administration Committee regularly ensured a balanced audience of delegates, including academics and civil servants, to promote shared learning (Chapman, 2007). Despite the demise of opportunities for knowledge exchange since the early 2000s, we argue that the training of senior public officials should still involve an increased consideration of public values in a variety of contexts, organizational levels and professions.

Public values, senior officers and the street level: Future considerations

In this article, we identify three perspectives which can contribute to future training opportunities for senior public officials’ understanding of public values in different settings and levels. We believe these will be instrumental to the production of a modern public service more fit for purpose in the third decade of the 21st century.

Discussing and sharing values

In senior policy-making there is little opportunity for discussing public values in depth, particularly when senior staff meet in formal settings. Opportunities for senior public officials to discuss public values among themselves, and their application at level and profession, would assist them to develop improved understanding of how public values are interpreted and applied by street-level professionals. Although there are aspirations to bring the sharing of public values closer together (Goodwin, 2013; Zonneveld et al., 2024), the landscape is confused: including personal and professional values alongside public and social value at multiple levels of governance. Providing opportunities for public service staff and managers to reflect and discuss public values

would be beneficial. This approach could also include staff on the front line, so that senior public officials would understand the malleability of public values like accountability, trust, public interest and integrity across public sector organizations.

Furthermore, with increasing attention to social value public organizations are developing approaches to integrate social value into procurement, projects and grant management to strengthen the link between strategic vision and service delivery (East Riding of Yorkshire Council, u.d.). Other examples in the UK include local government pooling a variety of grants from a diversity of public sector functions to aid community wealth building, including rural and shared prosperity funding and community grants. As these programmes aim to increase the relationship between strategic regeneration and individual social mobility, this requires senior officers in local government to establish mechanisms by which both street-level staff can understand social outcomes and satisfying broader community objectives alongside citizens’ needs. Moreover, due to a reduction in the evaluation of national programmes to ascertain ‘what works’ since 2010, understanding links between policy-making at central government levels and how policies are implemented at street level has diminished.

Developing values: multiple levels and agencies

Wicked issues at street level necessitate statutory and non-statutory agents in continual and relational dialogue across organizational, geographical and jurisdictional boundaries. Each professional involved will have a differing set of values conditioning their behaviour and responses. A wide variety of institutions now occupies the public realm and governance space, both formally and informally, as there is no one best solution to managing social problems. Partner agencies bring their own models of the public good and social value, and must negotiate with others in voluntaristic and discretionary ways to co-create value, because formal authority is insufficient as the basis for action. Informal influence and power relationships may be more significant in achieving outcomes. Each partner will have a different understanding of what constitutes the public interest, with engagement governed by statutory responsibilities and public values pertinent to their own professional culture, standards of behaviour, and previous training. In any multi-agency response to social issues, the mobilization of a wide variety of people will lead to conflicting values and contestation of interests. Nevertheless, all actors must continually share tacit knowledge, read rapidly changing contexts, people and situations, and engage in new practices and dialogue to sense-make how others are interpreting, reading and framing situations differently. Often this requires new institutional forms to support agile and flexible working, but also acknowledgement about how institutional value systems can be merged with the value systems of partners.

A key consideration is how to overcome historical contestation and enmeshed agency relationships as locked-in features of existing processes and practices because they reveal significant constraints on how different agencies share different histories and cultures in response to altered contexts. Consequentially, these factors lead to varied social constructs, values and belief systems that govern behaviours, so different forms of engagement play out in varied ways in specific places. Within constellations of actors the need to

share knowledge and build intelligence is crucial and through relational and dialogic approaches to sharing and merging values, all can determine what is the common good, and build value that may be at variance with their own organizational values. By recognizing the values and cultures of other individual and agencies, all partners can co-produce possible solutions and better pool resources, knowledge, staff and information technology for common purpose and the common good. As spaces for policy intervention continue to be squeezed and public budgets face severe constraints, multi-agency actors need to work more collectively and more collaboratively than in the past to orchestrate combined strategies for adding social value and sustainable communities (Shutt & Liddle, 2019, p. 196–207; Brookes & Grint, 2010; O’Leary & Ospina, 2016).

Emotions and public values

An issue that is regularly discussed, but remains elusive, is the relationship between public values and emotion. Awasthi and Mastracci (2021) conclude that there are few effective tools to consider empathy, feelings and perceptions as part of the foundational knowledge required for public service work. Strengthening the connection between public values and emotions—not easy in bureaucratic organizations—would benefit the training of senior public officials. Furthermore, the emotional context is crucial for linking public and social value creation at the strategic and street-level perspectives, particularly in articulating personalized outcomes for individual citizens (Liddle, 2022). Emotions are an established feature of training in the caring professions which could, in future, provide a template to explore the interplay between public service and emotions to assist senior public officials to understand the street-level perspective.

The importance of public values for senior public officials: continuing the discussion

Wicked issues, like poverty, public health and climate change, are salient issues facing all nations globally, and problems vary according to time and place. These challenges are at the centre of strategic considerations by state and public sector organizations, often responsible for mobilizing responses and identifying resources. This article has discussed the continued importance of public values for senior public officials within this context.

Consideration is also needed about who public values belong to. They are not only relevant for senior public officials, but they infuse diverse levels of public sector organizations. It is important to remember that many professionals and individuals at the street level in public sector organizations negotiate multiple and competing values on a daily basis, alongside a plethora of collaborators.

Public servants need training and educating to understand ethics, the importance of public values, technical skills and the significance of good governance and accountability. The article identified that discussing and sharing values, developing values in multiple levels and agencies, and emotions and public values can, in future, contribute to senior public officials’ understanding of public values in different settings and levels, and better inform them of how policies are being implemented. We believe this will contribute to the production of a modern

public service more fit for purpose in the third decade of the 21st century.

Disclosure statement

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