

Chapter XXX

Research Ethics in E–Public Administration

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INTRODUCTION

Public administration includes many professions and occupations, each with its own set of ethical guidelines. In addition, they have to follow the **code of professional ethics** for public sector workers. These professionals, including those whose main occupation is to do scientific research, face complex ethical problems. These problems relate, for example, to social responsibility and public interest; public participation; professional competence, honesty; conflicts of interest; respect of citizens rights, dignity and diversity; information security; long-range consequences of public administration decisions; respect of other species and the natural environment; informed consent, human dignity and other issues.

Empirical studies on research ethics in several countries (Khakee & Dahlgren, 1990), suggest that researchers have to make choices among conflicting values and, therefore, tend to act differently in face of specific problems, according to their values and ethical principles. Moreover, ethical dilemmas emerge in all stages of a research process. For example, during the formulation of the research study (e.g., to select certain themes, to

ignore others; to adopt qualitative or quantitative methodologies) or in the process of data collection (e.g., in interviews, especially if audio or video recorded, questionnaires, focus groups, access to a database on identifiable persons, fieldwork). Also, in the following stages, such as in the storage of primary data (e.g., control and use of data stored), in the analysis and interpretation (e.g., type of analysis and categories used), in the publication of findings and intellectual property, during the implementation, and in the critical issue of research funding.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss professional ethical issues in research activities conducted in **e-public administration**¹, most of which are common to the private and non-profit sectors. It offers an overview of key ethical issues in this field and identifies ethical challenges raised by the application of information and communications technologies (ICT)² in public administration research activities. The evidence available shows that ICT places new ethical challenges but does not change radically the nature of ethical problems characteristic of paper-based and face-to-face public administration.

BACKGROUND

In theory, it is possible to approach professional ethics in different ways. For example, if the researcher holds a **deontological** perspective of ethics (Darwall, 2003) the respect of key ethical principles in the research process is more important than to seek the greatest good for the greatest number. On the contrary, if he has a **consequentialist** perspective of ethics he will argue that the most important is to seek the greatest good for the greatest number in all options he might need to make in all stages of the research process (Darwall, 2003a). However, in practice, professionals tend to hold a mixed perspective of ethics.

The importance given to professional ethics issues and to research ethics in particular increased since the 1980s (Silva, 2005), with **virtual research** ethics issues becoming more visible since the late 1990s (Hinman, 2002). The ethical dimension in research work was further emphasised by post-positivist approaches and the related calls for new visions of social justice or for an ethic of care (Smith, 2005), as well as by the rise of environmental ethics. For example, post-modern thinking emphasizes difference and particularity, and challenges universal conceptions of ethics and post-structuralism (Popke, 2003) and feminism (Hendler, 1994), with its complex view of the social world, raises a wider range of ethical concerns, namely the issue of positionality, reflexivity and situated knowledge (Butler, 2001).

These are examples of factors that explain why professional organizations, governments, and international public organizations developed a strong commitment in recent years towards professional ethical issues, including ethical problems related to research activities. Most professional organizations encouraged ethical discussions among its members, adopting codes of ethical conduct³ and other measures (Anderson, Johnson, & Gotterbarn, 1993; Gotterbarn, 1996; Silva, 2005). Nonetheless, most of these codes of professional conduct have important shortcomings, as Lucy (1997) and Gotterbarn (1996) point out, not to mention the fact that most of them are silent about ethical challenges raised by e-government.

ETHICAL ISSUES IN E-PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Overview of Professional Ethics Issues

As mentioned before, professionals in e-public administration face complex ethical problems, addressed by professional organizations and governments in the form of codes of ethical conduct, and follow certain commonly agreed ethical principles of professional conduct⁴. They share ethical principles with professionals of private and non-profit sectors, but they also face ethical problems somehow specific of public sector concerns. In fact, governments, international institutions and professional organizations all seem to recognize that public administration have an overall duty for the promotion of the public interest, to balance the needs of individuals and communities and to seek social justice by expanding choice and opportunity for all persons.

They have, as any other professional, an ethical obligation of professional competence, honesty, integrity and responsibility, as stated in all codes of professional conduct⁵. First, regarding professional competence, those working in public administration shall use the appropriate scientific and technical means available, including information and communication technologies, in order to achieve excellence. They shall not harm other persons (e.g., intentional destruction or modification of files and software programs, etc.), shall consider the interrelations of decisions, and must avoid tasks for which they are not qualified. Second, in what respects professional integrity, they shall be fair and respectful of colleagues and other citizens, give proper credit for intellectual property (e.g., copyright and patents of software, etc.) and honor property rights. They shall avoid conclusions and decisions based on untrue evidence (e.g., avoid false claims about a system design, etc.). Third, in what regards professional responsibility, they must accept full responsibility for their work and must behave in a way that does not compromise public trust on e-public administration or on his professional group. Finally, they shall avoid con-

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