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## **On Value Differences Experienced by Sector Switchers**

### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines experienced differences in values between employees in the public and private sector. To elucidate them, the authors interviewed 30 employees of the public sector previously employed in the private sector and 30 employees of the private sector previously employed in the public sector, all of them in the Netherlands. The major conclusion is that the values of profitability, competitiveness, and customer orientation have a greater influence on business decisions; in public organizations, values such as legitimacy, lawfulness, accountability, and impartiality play a larger role. However, great differences exist among the organizations within each sector.

### **KEYWORDS**

values; public sector; private sector; ethics

## INTRODUCTION

The number of studies on organizational ethics and values in both public (Bowman & Williams, 1997; Bowman, 1990; Goss, 2003; Kernaghan, 2003; Kim, 2001) and private sector settings (Agle & Caldwell, 1999; Posner & Schmidt, 1993; Schmidt & Posner, 1984; Watson, Papamarcos, Teague, & Bean, 2004) has been growing rapidly over the last two decades. There is also increasing attention for the ethical differences and similarities between government and business (Posner & Schmidt, 1996; Schultz, 2004). However, few *empirical* studies exist on what the experienced moral differences between public and private sector values constitute. The need for such studies has been heightened by recent debates on public-private value convergence or intermixing, in which the dominant sentiment seems to be that “the public sector has increasingly adopted the methods and values of the market to guide policy and creation and marketing” (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004, p. 132). At the same time, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a buzzword. Many private organizations claim to have adopted values such as accountability, empathy, and sustainability, which were previously perceived as typical public sector values (cf. Kaptein & Wempe, 2002).

Because confusion exists in the literature on the value differences between the public and private sectors (as we will shortly make clear), we tried to empirically detect these potential differences. Our study addressed public-private sector value differences by using an empirical, comparative research design in which an identical set of questions was presented to 30 public sector and 30 private sector employees within the Netherlands, all of whom had previously worked in the opposite sector. The main research question of this article is, “Do the values of the public and the private sector differ and, if so, in what ways?”

## DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE SECTORS’ ORGANIZATIONS

In general, two types of debates on the differences and similarities between public and private sector organizations can be distinguished. First, there is a (more or less neutral) *technical* debate on distinctions between public and private sector organizations in general (Coursey & Bozeman, 1990; Perry & Rainey, 1988; Rainey & Bozeman, 2000; Ross, 1988; Scott & Falcone, 1988), and between public and private sector management in particular (Allison, 1992; Boyne, 2002; Noordegraaf & Abma, 2003; Noordegraaf & Stewart, 2000). Important differences include (a) media relations and the extent to which actions and policy are subject to public scrutiny; (b) the role of rationality (facts and figures) and emotions in decision-making processes; (c) measurability of performance and effectiveness; (d) time perspective of policy development (Allison, 1992; Ross, 1988); and (e) the mode of finance, political control, and organizational ownership (Coursey & Bozeman, 1990; Perry & Rainey, 1988). Looking at the literature, Rainey and Bozeman (2000, p. 450) conclude, “Over the last thirty years, a systematic empirical research began to accumulate that compares public and private organizations and examines the ‘publicness’ of organizations” (p. 450).

Second, there is a *normative* debate in which, interestingly enough, government and business are often portrayed in negative terms and in which both bureaucracy and profit maximizing are seen as undesirable. This debate has a strong “ideological twist” (Noordegraaf & Abma, 2003, p. 857); overstatements and exaggeration prevail. Questions about what government and business are (not) and

should (not) be intertwined, and topics of discussion mostly concern the differences in values and morality between public and private sector organizations and the undesirability of intermixing or convergence between the two systems of values (Bovens, 1996; Frederickson, 1993, 1997, 2005; Jacobs, 1992; Lane, 1994; Schultz, 2004).

### **DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE SECTORS' ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES**

Some scholars emphasize differences between public and private sector values. Their most prominent representative is anthropologist Jane Jacobs. She distinguishes between two moral syndromes: the commercial moral syndrome and the guardian moral syndrome (“a pair of contradictions”). Jacobs (1992) states that: “Behavior that (randomly) picks and chooses precepts from both syndromes creates monstrous moral hybrids; you can’t mix up such contradictory moral syndromes without opening up moral abysses and producing all kinds of functional messes” (pp. xi/xii).

Most other scholars who emphasize moral differences between the public and private sector are not as pessimistic as Jacobs. Yet, some are frightened by the thought of a businesslike government or a government-like business. Public administration scholars often assume a relationship between new public management (NPM) and unethical behavior or integrity violations by public servants (Bovens, 1996; Frederickson, 1993, 2005; Lane, 1994, 1995), even though substantial empirical evidence for this relationship is absent (Kolthoff, Huberts, & Heuvel, 2006; Lawton, 1998). It is argued that the public administrative framework cannot easily be replaced by the “new” management approach, as the former has qualities not embraced by the latter: “The notion of justice looms in the public sector, but where does it fit into the internal market framework?” (Lane, 1995, p. 200). Frederickson (2005, p. 178) emphasizes conflicts between crucial values such as fairness and efficiency: “The private market is designed to be efficient but not to be fair; democratic self-government is designed to at least try to be fair, and hope to be efficient” (p. 178). He fears that corruption and unethical behavior in government are on the rise because we are trying to run government organizations as if they were businesses. Although discussions on problematic aspects of intermingling are almost exclusively about the concern that the blurring of sectoral lines implies an increased appeal to market values in the public sector, according to Schultz (2004), the reverse is also true:

Although many would laud the move to encourage corporate social responsibility and ethical behavior, especially in light of the recent Wall Street scandals, the intermixing of public and private functions raises vexing ethical questions similar to those when governmental or nonprofit entities intermix. The result may be that no clear set of ethical rules dominates. (p. 292)

There are also scholars who emphasize *similarities* between public and private sector values, and state that the same moral dimensions and criteria *can* (Kaptein, 1998, p. 9), or even *should* be applied to all kinds of organizations (Caiden, 1999, p. 26). Voth (1999) recognizes differences, but has a more positive view on intermingling and hybridism:

When the public and private sectors collaborate and partner, an exhilarating challenge of cultural “clash” comes into play. The two sectors build bridges to

meet their collaborative needs and the specific needs of their clients, both find harmony in the empathetic application of fundamental human behavioral values. (56)

Examples of other scholars who are optimistic about the consequences of more interaction between the market sector and the state include Lawton (1998; 1999) and Taylor (1999). Their main point is: Do not assume that the public sector is more ethically aware than the private sector.

## **EMPIRICAL STUDIES**

As stated in the introduction, integrity and value-based perspectives occupy an increasingly prominent place in organizational studies within both public and business administration, and many authors have tried to differentiate the core values of each sector's organizations or functionaries (e.g., Agle & Caldwell, 1999; Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Bowman, 1990; Goss, 2003; Kaptein & Wempe, 2002; Kim, 2001; Posner & Schmidt, 1993; Schmidt & Posner, 1984; Watson et al., 2004). However, little *comparative* empirical research has been done on the prominence and content of organizational values in public and private sector organizations. Posner and Schmidt (1996) compare the organizational goals, stakeholders, and personal traits adapted from the England Personal Values Questionnaire and conclude that the differences between the public and private sector executives seem to outweigh the similarities. These differences, however, are slight, sometimes even marginal. Only when it comes to the differences in how they regard the importance of various organizational goals can relevant significance be seen. Business executives place greater emphasis on morale, productivity, stability, efficiency, and growth. Government executives place more importance on equality, effectiveness, public service, and value to community. Customer service, leadership, and innovativeness are rated with similar importance by both groups. An interesting point mentioned by the authors, however, is that they do not know whether the differences and similarities relate mostly to individual or organizational differences.

The few comparative empirical studies that have been conducted do not use comparable concepts and result from both business administration and public administration theory, making it difficult to integrate them into an accumulative body of knowledge. Administrative ethics and business ethics appear to be two separate worlds: Interdisciplinary and comparative research attempts are scarce (Huberts & van den Heuvel, 1999) and in discussions about the differences between government and business, normative arguments prevail. Cooper (1994) has stated in this context that "Reference has been made to the largely normative work that has dominated administrative ethics, and the need to move 'beyond' that concern with prescription to a more systematic empirical approach" (p. 2).

We know of two empirical studies that looked at the *moral perceptions* of public sector employees toward the private sector. In a survey and its follow-up among civil servants in the United States, nearly 90% rejected the claim that "government morality in America is lower than business morality" (Bowman, 1990, p. 346; Bowman & Williams, 1997, p. 518). According to Bowman, civil servants clearly do not consider private enterprise a standard for behavior in public organizations. Van den Heuvel, Huberts, and Verberk (2002) have addressed the same question in an empirical study on the morals of politicians and civil servants in the Netherlands. They conclude that 75% of the politicians and civil servants disagree

with the thesis that the morals in the private sector are better (“higher values and norms”) than the public sector (almost a third of the respondents *strongly* disagreed). It is surprising that the thesis was based on respondents with all kinds of political preferences but leaned toward those with a conservative signature (p. 93). We know, however, of no empirical study that has compared the values as they are experienced by employees who worked in *both* sectors and whose perceptions of the other sector therefore have an empirical base.

## **THE CONCEPT OF VALUE**

Values are “essentially contested concepts”: The proper use of these concepts and concrete values (such as honesty) is never agreed upon (de Graaf, 2003). Not wanting to dwell on definition, let the following be a guide for this article: Values are hard to define *and* hard to locate; they are neither here nor there. The best we can say is that values never come just by themselves; they never appear unaccompanied. Values are always attached to a value manifestation and express a quality. In this article, by values we mean “qualities that are appreciated for contributing to or constituting what is good, right, beautiful, or worthy of praise and admiration” (p. 22). *Norms* are then regulations prescribing what we are supposed to do or not to do in certain situations. *Morals* (morality) are values and norms taken together. Last, *ethics* denotes the systematic reflection on morality.

## **RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHOD**

The units of analysis in this study are the 60 persons who were interviewed. The objects of this research are their values. With our broad definition of values, the question is what, exactly, are we comparing when comparing the values of the public and private sector? After all, every aspect of human experience is pervaded with value (Johnson, 1993). The lists of values proposed by various scholars as being authentically public or private differ (Goss, 2003; Kernaghan, 2003; Merton, 1967; Tait, 1997; Van Wart, 1998). Many values can be considered competing or contradictory.

So choices need to be made with regard to which value aspects this study focuses on. According to Lyons Duxbury, and Higgins (2005), the extensive literature on public ethos and public values has focused on three themes: traditional ethical public values such as integrity, honesty, impartiality, and public trust (Dobel, 1990; Plant, 2003; Tait, 1997); professional values aligned with service and excellence and the so-called NPM values like quality and efficiency (Tait, 1997; Van Wart & Berman, 1999); and individual work values that guide individual career decisions (Frank & Lewis, 2004; Lewis & Frank, 2002). Based on these three themes and on the three-way distinction in value clashes that Jackall (1988, p. 195-199) distinguishes in his classic work *Moral Mazes*, we decided to distinguish three value clusters to guide and structure our empirical research on values: values concerning the relationship between the organization and society (here called societal values), values concerning the relationship between the organization and its direct stakeholders (organizational values) and values concerning the individual employee-organization relationship (individual values).

To detect value differences, we interviewed sector switchers, the subjects of our study. Often, when organizations from two sectors are compared, private and public sector employees are surveyed independently and then the results are compared

(Rainey & Bozeman, 2000). Because of the contextuality of values (the exact meaning of every value statement differs from person to person and from context to context; cf. de Graaf, 2003) however, such a method introduces validity threats: We cannot know whether employees who *speak* of the same value *mean* the same value in both sectors (cf. van der Wal, Huberts, van den Heuvel, & Kolthoff, 2006). That is why we decided to only interview employees who had worked in both the public and private sector and to ask for their experienced differences. We allowed our respondents to explain in their own words the differences in values they *actually* experienced while working in both sectors. With “values experienced,” we mean values observed as manifesting themselves.

It has to be noted that persons who have significant and comparable public and private jobs are not likely to be the same as persons who have worked in one sector only. This has possible selection effects in our study. It is possible that employees who, for example, rejected private sector employment are more pro public sector than those employees who initially opted to join the public sector and stayed there. However, because we interviewed a considerable number of sector switchers, who all had their different reasons for switching, and because we interviewed switchers both ways, we do not expect these potentially confounding effects to be very large in our study.

We conducted 60 interviews to generate theory in the shape of propositions (cf. Gersick, 1988; Harris & Sutton, 1986). This method is fitting when not much is known about the phenomenon that is researched, or when the phenomenon is so complex that neither the variables nor the exact relationship between the variables is fully definable (Hoesel, 1985). This last aspect is of specific importance in our research on the differences between the values of government and business. Our research method was the *standardized open-ended* interview, which “consists of a set of questions carefully worded and arranged for the purpose of taking each respondent through the same sequence, and asking each respondent the same questions with essentially the same words” (Patton, 1987, p. 112).

After asking details on the current and previous jobs, the first question was basic: What differences in values did you experience between the public and private sector? The other 10 questions were similar, but each focused on selected issues (selected from the literature as possible interesting dimensions of difference in values between the public and private sector), divided into the three value clusters we introduced earlier (see the Appendix).

To avoid confounding factors related to occupational type (cf. Lyons et al., 2005), we restricted our interviews to employees in the middle of the hierarchy. These employees can be expected to have more influence on the workings of public and private organizations than, for example, the average street-level bureaucrat. Therefore, this group is of particular interest with regard to our research question. It was also made sure that none of the jobs were at the top of the hierarchy.

All the data come from the Netherlands. This means that this study on experienced value differences is first of all about that country. The case of the Netherlands is seen as exemplar of high-income, for example, western Europe or Westminster countries (cf. Kernaghan, 2003); the data coming out of the study will be compared with the relevant international literature on value differences between both sectors in high-income countries. Of course, we are aware that this is still a large group. It should be noted that the Dutch government is even within this group relatively clean and transparent. On the 2006 Transparency International Corruption

Perception Index of least corrupt countries, the Netherlands ranked 10th. Italy, also a high-income country, ranked 45th.

Sixty respondents were interviewed within their current work environment. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 to 90 min. As explained earlier, the objective was to find the difference between public and private sector values by asking persons who had experienced both: 30 employees who work in the private sector and previously worked in the public sector and 30 employees who experienced the reverse route. Several methods were used to contact respondents. The first few respondents were selected through informants who had worked in both sectors. Next, we requested an interview with persons meeting our criteria by writing to about a hundred different organizations. We made sure that 20 of the 60 respondents were human resource management (HRM) advisors by sending a substantive number of letters to HRM managers of public and private organizations, as they were likely to have good knowledge of many moral issues in any organization (cf. Berman and West 1994, 188). For the rest, the respondents differed in many respects (see Table 1). It can be expected that people who deliver services, as an example, differ in their value orientations from, let's say, information technology managers<sup>1</sup>. Making sure all the relevant points of view were taken into account was most important for our explorative study, which is why we decided to do a relatively large number of interviews. This clearly differs from random sampling theory; rather than pursuing interest in the distribution of value differences, we were seeking to detect and understand them. The interviews were conducted between November 2004 and August 2005.<sup>2</sup> The answers of the respondents were transcribed literally.

**Table 1.** Respondent characteristics

	<b>From public to private</b>		<b>From private to public</b>		<b>Average</b>
<b>Moment of sector switch</b>	< 1 year ago:	14%	< 1 year ago:	10%	12%
	1-3 years ago:	20%	1-3 years ago:	30%	25%
	4-6 years ago:	30%	4-6 years ago:	33%	32%
	7-10 years ago:	23%	7-10 years ago:	17%	20%
	> 10 years ago:	13%	> 10 years ago:	10%	11%
<b>Type of Organization (present)</b>	Industry:	13%	Federal Department:	43%	
	Finance/Insurance:	7%	Regional:	3%	
	Consultancy:	43%	Local:	20%	
	IT/Telecom:	20%	Agency:	7%	
	Other:	17%	Other:	27%	
<b>Type of function (present)</b>	Management:	57%	Management:	30%	43%
	Staff:	30%	Staff:	57%	44%
	Other:	13%	Other:	13%	13%
<b>Gender</b>	Male:	63%	Male:	63%	63%
	Female:	37%	Female:	37%	37%

Note: IT = information technology.

## PROCESS OF CODING

Empirical observations were used to develop propositions through induction (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In many ways, the logic of multiple case study analysis was followed. According to Eisenhardt the multiple case study design offers the researcher the opportunity for more accurate formulation of concepts than single case studies. To be more specific, the logic of our data analysis is the “retrospective comparison of cases” (Den Hertog & Wielinga, 1992, p. 104): an in-depth analysis of a large set of aspects (the themes that were discussed earlier) in a number of cases (the 60 respondents). According to Eisenhardt (1989), the advantage of this design is that it allows the researcher to recognize general patterns in different settings. The disadvantage of this design is, however, that every case, with its own context and contingencies, has to be reduced to a more abstract level in order to make between-case comparisons possible (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991).

Because of the described research strategy, we faced immense quantities of data. To code all the literal transcriptions of the interviews, we followed the suggestion of Miles and Huberman (1994) to use a monster grid, a data matrix. On one axis of the grid were the respondents; on the other were the 11 questions, “themes,” instead of variables (Bijlsma-Frankema & Drooglever Fortuijn, 1997). Consistent with explorative research, however, the option of insights and novel findings based on other variables emerging from the data was left wide open<sup>3</sup>.

The next step was to take a certain theme and read all the respondents’ answers on it. From this overview, first impressions of overall patterns were derived, which were then juxtaposed with the empirical data. This inductive process is clearly not a matter of counting. Besides the fact that we did not randomly select our respondents and that 60 interviews are, for quantitative purposes, too small a number, the idea of our explorative study is to consider the nuances and context of every case.<sup>4</sup> Thus it is not just important *that* a respondent experienced a value difference between the sectors, but what and how strong that value difference was; how it was worded. The inductive analysis process was repeated many times before the final analysis was written. This approach can be compared with the case study method as described by Eisenhardt (1989):

From the within-site analysis plus various cross-site tactics and overall impressions, tentative themes, concepts, and possibly even relationships emerge. The next step of this highly iterative process is to compare systematically the emergent frame with the evidence from each case in order to assess how well or poorly it fits with case data. The central idea is that researchers constantly compare theory with data-iterating toward a theory which closely fits the data. A close fit is important to building good theory because it takes advantage of the new insights possible from the data and yields an empirically valid theory. (p. 541)

## THE RESULTS

Given the diversity of the interviewees (organization, background, and so on), it came as no surprise that many of the answers differed. In this explorative research, however, we were looking for patterns that emerged when the 60 interviews were compared. Here and there, we will present some numbers on responses; as explained, however, our respondents are not randomly selected, and we are presenting the results

of *qualitative* research. Thus, these numbers should not be seen as indicators of percentages of distribution in the general population. Also, as mentioned, the questions were not “yes” or “no” questions; the respondents were asked to word the experienced differences in values, making it hard to quantify the data. Next to the *number* of respondents who indicated a particular thing, the *content* of their arguments was important information for data interpretation.

Very notable is that the perceived differences in the values under discussion did not depend on whether the respondent migrated from the private to the public sector or vice versa. No pattern was detected on any of the questions. As stated, most studies on the public-private differences are in the form of questionnaires, methods which run a high risk of obtaining socially desirable responses in this particular field (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000, p. 464). Because we did not find significant differences between the experiences of the respondents who currently work in the public sector and those currently working in the private sector, we accounted for this potential validity threat.

Before we discuss the experienced value differences, we would like to mention that one of the main conclusions of our study is that many respondents pointed out that the organization has more influence on values than its respective sector. For example, a small business is more like a small government organization than like a large business. Now, we will discuss the main differences in values on the three value clusters: individual, organizational, and societal.

## **Individual Values**

### *Contribution to Society*

As we have seen in the literature, some authors emphasize similarities between the public and the private sector, others the differences. Because we asked explicitly for the experienced *differences*, we cannot infer whether the public and private sector are more different than alike (Posner & Schmidt, 1996). Notable, however, is that the question that evoked the least experienced difference was “What value differences did you experience between the public and private sector in personal satisfaction of contributing to society?” Ten respondents (5 from public to private and 5 from private to public) said that because they highly value their contribution to society, they get more satisfaction from working in the private sector because, as most claimed, they considered themselves too small a cog in the machine to get the feeling of contributing in the public sector: “If you make policy, but it isn’t passed by the politicians, you contribute nothing.” Others (22 respondents, equally divided between work paths) claimed the opposite: that working in the public sector is more satisfying because of the feeling of contributing to the common good: “The work I did in the private sector didn’t appear on the first pages of the newspapers, here it does.” On the other hand, almost half of the respondents claimed that they experienced no difference at all. The personal enjoyment and satisfaction of a job depends on its specific characteristics and related responsibilities, that is, the *contents* of the specific job rather than the sector the job happens to be in: “I believe in my job my personal goals are much more important to me than societal goals in general.”

This leads us to formulating the following proposition:

Proposition 1: The job characteristics and related responsibilities far outweigh the job sector in determining whether employees perceive that their activities result in a contribution to society.

Lane (1994, p. 144) argued that public personnel should feel a duty to serve the common good; a so-called public ethos. In their literature review of empirical studies, Rainey and Bozeman (2000, p. 460) claim that

These studies have consistently found that public-sector respondents, particularly those at higher professional and managerial levels, place higher value than do their private-sector counterparts, on the rewards and motives that one would predict they would emphasize. Public managers place higher value on public service; on work that is beneficial to others and society; on involvement with important public policies; and on self-sacrifice, responsibility, and integrity. Especially at the upper management and professional levels, public sector respondents place lower value on money and high income as ultimate ends in work and in life.

The claims of Lane and Rainey and Bozeman are not necessarily at odds with our proposition. Indeed, even though we did not ask for the specific work motivation or other psychological categories in our study, many respondents indicated that they experienced money to be a more important motivator in the private sector than in the public sector, and that in the public sector many employees adhere to something that might be called a public ethos. However, what we found was that such a detected difference in motivation does not necessarily lead to a difference in experienced contribution to society. Some of the quotes given earlier indicate a discrepancy between the motivation and expectations of the job in the public sector, on one hand, and actual contribution on the other. This leads to our proposition that expresses that

Proposition 2: The expectations of the particular job combined with contingencies of that particular job determine, in the end, whether a positive contribution to society is experienced.

### *Conflict with Personal Values*

The question on the experienced differences in clashes between personal and job values, and whether personal principles had to be sacrificed, also resulted in many different answers. Some claim never to have sacrificed personal principles: "I do not have many principles"; others seem more principled. Many respondents (24, evenly divided between the two groups) did not experience any difference in conflicts of values at the job; most said this is the case because they claim never to have had to sacrifice moral values in their job, irrespective of sector. Many of these respondents stated that the demands of the job are always more important than their personal values: "I always do what the job asks of me. Dependability, to be able to count on each other, both among colleagues as well as with external partners, is very important to me."

Of those who did experience value clashes in the private sector, most had to do with the value "honesty." They claimed that making money is all that counts in the private sector. Because of the pressures resulting from strong competition, they sometimes had the feeling of "*not being objective*," or even lying to customers in

order to sell a product: “Private business is not very decent.” “We always have to make more money; there’s no limit to that.” Most of the respondents who experienced value clashes within the public sector felt “impatience” with their jobs; several respondents experienced too much formalization and too little emphasis on results, thwarting efficiency and effectiveness. And that can lead to frustration: “You’re in public administration within a political system with all its wheeling and dealing—such a system can never have a high integrity level.” “All those rules in public administration irritate me; they clash with my personal values.”

Supporting Jackall’s conclusions (1988), most respondents indicated that when conflicts arose, they felt inclined to be loyal to the organization and sacrifice their own values. Even though we found no difference in the volume of conflict that exists in either sector, it seems to be of a different nature. In the private sector, pressure to perform financially sometimes leads to conflicts with personal values such as honesty. The public sector has more of a tension between personal values and the organization’s formal structure (more formal rules and procedures). This leads to the following:

Proposition 3: Conflicts between personal and organizational values are often rooted in the pressure to perform financially in the private sector and politically in the public sector.

## **Organizational Values**

### *Colleagues*

Fifteen informants (8 had routes from public to private, 7 the opposite) experienced no difference because contacts with colleagues were consistent: casual and informal in both sectors or formal, businesslike, and serious in both sectors. Several respondents commented that in their experience, the size of the organization was more important for informal contacts with colleagues than its sector.

Yet, a clear pattern emerged from this question: most respondents experienced a difference. The majority commented that in the business sector, collegial contact differed: “Social ties are looser” and “People work more with their elbows.” Values such as “businesslike” and “profitability” played a much more important role in the daily contact with colleagues in the private sector. It became clear that in the private sector, the atmosphere among colleagues is more competitive. Furthermore, informal rules such as dress codes play a more important role. In general, there is more attention to appearances; materialism is valued as more important. Compared to the public sector, a colleague’s social status is established more by their cars, clothes, watches, and the like. The atmosphere was often described as “working closer together towards a clear common goal, but also more competitively.” Being a team player seems more important: “In the private sector, once we go in a certain direction, everyone supports that direction. One is very eager to please and achieve in the private sector.” In the public sector, colleagues experienced being “less direct” toward each other “also because of possible political consequences.” At the same time, they experienced more collegiality and loyalty. The latter, however, was not shared by those who work or worked close to the political arena or in the decision-making process, especially those in a department of the central government. A typical response on this was “The closer you are to power, the less willing people are to share information; information is power.” This leads us to the following proposition:

Proposition 4: Contacts with colleagues in the private sector are more competitive than those in the public sector.

Solomon (1986) and Cullen (2004) reached similar conclusions in their studies.

### *Direct Superior*

On the value differences in the way the organization treats its employees, the question turned out to be too broad. The responses were filled with too many issues to be able to paint an overall picture. Often mentioned in this area, though, was that the organization was much more important than the organization's sector.

With respect to the value differences in direct contact with the boss, many respondents stated that much depends on the size of the organization and the particularities of the superior. However, a pattern emerged on this aspect: Only 12 respondents, evenly divided between sectors, saw little or no difference; if they did, their bosses caused it.

Many of the other respondents, though, described the contact with direct superiors as "more hierarchical": They do not go above the level of their superiors without consulting them. The public organization is seen as more top-down than the private one, with emphasis on official rules and formal, authorized decision making. In the private sector, contact with one's superior is more direct, more "businesslike." There is more room for "negotiating" with the boss; the experience is that contact is more result oriented: "The rules are more functional." "There is more room to maneuver." "In dealing with the boss, common sense plays a more important role in the private sector." Because they experience that formal rules "plus more top down, more paper" play a more important role in the public sector, most think that bosses in the private sector entrust subordinates with more responsibility. Many respondents pointed out that there is a bigger risk of losing a job in the private sector if the boss does not like the employee, regardless of reason. The formal, legal position of the employee is more important in government than in business.

### *External Parties*

The issue of the organization dealing with external parties garnered most agreement among the 60 respondents. Only 1 (who currently works in the private sector) saw no difference, and 3 mentioned (apart from the differences) that they expect that "big banks are just as bad as government in treating clients." But the overall image is clearly that in the private sector, much more attention is given to what the customer wants: "If you're not customer-oriented in the private sector, you're soon out of business" and "The public sector is more inward-oriented." A few called the way civil servants treat customers "arrogant . . . like, 'we know what is good for you.'"

Most respondents, however, were more understanding and explained the experienced difference by the emphasis on the "lawfulness" and "legitimacy" that has to play a role in the public sector: "In government, employees are mostly looking at what customers are entitled to. Civil servants try to optimize that. In the private sector there's more attention to what customers need. They're also more prone to seducing customers." The service in the public sector has to be more meticulous. The way customers are treated in the private sector was often described as "professional, the

customer is king.” “Personal contact with the customer is a critical success factor in the private sector.” “In the private sector, I experienced there to be much more freedom of action towards external parties.”

Just as customers in the private sector get more attention to their wants, so do its suppliers. Typical responses in this regard included “Government organizations are more bureaucratic; they have more formal rules toward their suppliers. In the end, they select on price, not on quality, as most private sector organizations do.”

Proposition 5: In the public sector, morality concerning relationships with external contacts (customers and suppliers) is dominated by formal rules and procedures; values such as “lawfulness” and “accountability” are important. In the private sector, “profitability” is the more important value.

In the field of quality management, Lagrosen and Lagrosen (2003) had emphasized these differences in customer perspectives between public and private organizations. Rainey and Bozeman (2000) also found sharp differences in survey responses between public and business managers to questions on constraints in purchasing rules.

#### *Rules and Procedures*

On the issue of the role of moral norms, rules, and procedures, almost all respondents agreed that they play a much more important role in the public sector (only six saw no difference, five of them now private sector). In the public sector, workers abide more strictly by the existing rules, which, furthermore, are executed more strictly “because otherwise in the public sector you throw tax money away, which is unacceptable. In the private sector there are other goals.” The private sector lends more freedom to act. Whether that was considered good or bad varied. Some stated that rules in the public sector are “followed no matter what.” “The goal or the purpose of the rules is never discussed.” In this view, rules in the private sector are experienced as more “functional.” Others stated that following formal rules is a necessity for the public sector to safeguard “lawfulness, carefulness and integrity.” This leads us to formulating the following proposition:

Proposition 6: In the public sector, rules and explicit moral norms play a larger role than in the private sector, characterized by values like legitimacy, lawfulness, accountability, and responsiveness.

Even though this proposition finds much support in the literature—Perry & Rainey (1988), for example, state that public organizations have more formal rules than private organizations and more obligations to account for their actions—evidence that points in another direction also exists. Rainey and Bozeman (2000, p. 453) concluded after a literature review that some researchers found little evidence that public organizations showed higher levels of formalization (extensiveness and enforcement of rules and formal procedures) than private firms. This does not apply to the rules for governing personnel and purchasing procedures, which, according to the authors, may imply excessive and burdensome formalization. These findings may seem to partly contrast with ours. One explanation might be that the level of (excessive) formalization is usually measured in *perceptions*; public employees,

accustomed to the political context of their organizations, would be less apt to perceive rules as “red tape.” In other words, public employees might have a higher tolerance for excessive or burdensome formalization (i.e., red tape).

## **Societal Values**

### *Organizational Goals*

Only five respondents saw no difference between the public and the private sector on the issue of contributing to the common weal (three of those were now private workers). Most respondents acknowledged that the *raison d’être* of the public organization is its contribution to the common good. Therefore, the priority toward societal goals is simply part of the organization; it is the “core business” of public organizations. Respondents experienced this attention to societal goals in public sector organizations. On whether public organizations reevaluate their goals critically, experiences differed. Some felt that government organizations should be more critical, claiming that *because* the public interest plays a role in public organizations by definition, many forget to pay attention to “how they can best serve the public interest.” Almost all respondents agreed that the attention private organizations pay to societal goals under the umbrella of CSR is some form of “window dressing” or “marketing tool.” Stated societal goals by private organizations are subservient to the goal of making money; commercial interests always go before social interests: “Stating a CSR as a business enhances your image and the motivation of employees.” Some respondents agreed that private organizations are “only after money,” but they valued that as a good thing: “That way, they contribute as much to society as public organizations. It’s their role and purpose.” The data lead us to the following proposition:

Proposition 7: In public organizations, employees experience more goal complexity and ambiguity than in the private sector.

This proposition is no surprise. Public sector organizations often have many, and sometimes conflicting, goals. Several empirical studies that focused on the overall differences (not just value differences) between public and private management arrived at similar conclusions (e.g., Allison, 1992; Cullen, 2004; Khojasteh, 1993; Posner & Schmidt, 1996; Ross, 1988; Solomon, 1986). The “virtually universal agreement among scholars that public organizations have more goal complexity and ambiguity” (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000, p. 447) can be supported by our research. It has to be noted, however, that Rainey and Bozeman (2000, p. 452) mention that public managers who responded to surveys did not report on this goal complexity and ambiguity. As in previous cases, this might be explained by different perceptions and expectations by public managers in such surveys.

### *Accountability*

On the issue of being accountable to society, no clear pattern emerged. It is noticeable, though—especially for those who now work in the public sector—that the latter has more accountability to society.

For the rest, the picture is blurry. Some felt strongly that public organizations are more transparent, open, pro-active, explanatory, and controlled, whereas private

organizations are only responsible to shareholders, who in turn are only interested in money. In this view, any activity that is employed by a private organization is done solely out of egoistic motives and image building. Others stated, however, that because the goal of private sector organizations is clearer (making money), they could do a better job in terms of responsibility. In addition, they claimed: “Within public organizations people are very good in hiding. In the private sector, this is less the case. People are controlled better. In the public sector, the civil servant can crawl into anonymity.”

## CONCLUSION

With the discussion and propositions above, we have an answer to our main question: Do the values of the public and the private sector differ, and if so, in what ways? The overall conclusion is that value differences exist between the sectors. In general, when compared to public organizations, attention to the “bottom line” generates values such as profitability, competitiveness, and customer orientation that have a greater influence on organizational actions in business organizations. In public organizations, values such as legitimacy, lawfulness, accountability, and impartiality play a larger role. Very notable in our study was that the perceived differences in the values under discussion did not depend on whether the respondent migrated from the private to the public sector or vice versa.

Next to empirical grounding of earlier results, this study also adds context to values. Contrary to many large value surveys, for example, in our study we were able to put the values in context. By using a qualitative design, we can be more confident about what respondents exactly *mean* when they say that in public organizations, the value “legitimacy” is more important. As we mentioned, unfortunately much of the particular context gets lost when going from the within-case analysis to looking for general patterns, but in the results section, quotes helped to further explicate what the respondents meant with values differences, thus adding context.

Given the fact that this specific study was conducted in the Netherlands only, generalizability of the results to other countries and cultural spheres is limited. It would be interesting to conduct a cross-country value comparison. Given the culturally relative nature of values, and the specific cultural meaning and context of specific value statements, such a comparison should limit itself to high-income, for instance, western Europe or Westminster countries (cf. Kernaghan, 2003).

Because the experiences differ so much, it would be interesting to find out whether there are certain “types” of different experiences in the public and the private sector. Earlier, the differing answers of the 60 respondents were discussed. When analyzing the interviews for each respondent—the “within-case analysis”—we noticed that it appears that there are certain clusters on the experienced differences in values between the private and the public sector. For example, some respondents’ answers evolved around a perceived difference in formalization of both sectors, whereas others viewed the differences more in terms of experienced differences with the direct boss. Because we concentrated here on the overall picture, a more detailed analysis of these differences is not included. In future research, it would be interesting to see whether certain clusters among the experienced differences can be detected, and to relate them to factors such as the size of the organization (using different categories of private and public organizations, e.g. Blau & Scott, 1962), the positions in the hierarchy, or staff responsibilities. Q methodology (cf. Brown, 1980; de Graaf,

2005; Stephenson, 1953) seems an appropriate research methodology for such a study, precisely because of its ability to cluster subjectivity.

Having stated an overall conclusion, it must be noted that an overall image of both sectors always involves gross oversimplifications. It is clear from our data that there are great differences among the organizations within the sectors. Within the differing constraints between both sectors, there is much variety in the experienced value differences. Respondents especially mentioned organizational size and type as an important factor with regard to important values within the organization. The content of the moral issues employees are confronted with is related to the specific organization and its context, rather than to sector alone. In the interviews, much evidence was found for the following claim by Jackall (1988):

What matters on a day to day basis are the moral rules-in-use fashioned within the personal and structural constraints of one's organization. As it happens, these rules may vary sharply depending on various factors, such as proximity to the market, line or staff responsibilities, or one's position within a hierarchy. Actual organizational moralities are thus contextual, situational, highly specific, and, most often, unarticulated. (p. 6)

## **Appendix: Interview questions for all respondents**

### **General questions**

1. When did you switch from the public (respectively private) sector to the private (respectively public)?
2. What is your current job and how long have you had your current job?
3. What was your job in the other sector you worked in?

### **General question**

4. What value differences did you experience between the public and private sector?

### **Differences on individual values**

5. What value differences did you experience between the public and private sector in personal satisfaction of contributing to society?
6. What differences did you experience between the public and private sector in conflicts between your personal values and values of your job? Do you or did you, for example, have to sacrifice personal principles?

### **Differences in organizational values**

7. What value differences did you experience between the public and private sector in contacts with your colleagues?
8. What value differences did you experience between the public and private sector in the way employees are treated by their organization?
9. What value differences did you experience between the public and private sector in contacts with your direct superior?
10. What value differences did you experience between the public and private sector in dealing with external stakeholders?
11. What value differences did you experience between the public and private sector in dealing with competitors?
12. What value differences did you experience between the public and private sector in maintaining formal rules and procedures?

### **Differences in societal values**

13. What value differences did you experience between the public and private sector in the way the organization values contributing to societal goals?
14. What value differences did you experience between the public and private sector in the organization's methods of accountability to society?

### **Final question**

On the topic we discussed, is there anything you would like to add?

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Purposely, the time of the sector switch varied among the respondents. On the one hand, the longer the respondent works in the current job, the better because his or her knowledge of the values of the current organization is better; on the other hand, the longer he or she works in the current sector, knowledge of the previous sector had more time to fade away. On average, the switch took place a little less than 4 years ago. The jobs before and after the switch were more or less comparable in responsibilities and contents of the job (which is often the case of course: someone's education and work experience often match the new job, especially in the case of employees with higher education). In many cases however, during or after the switch there was a promotion, but never to completely different job contents or responsibilities. There was a great variety of organizational context the respondents worked in; current government employees work in ministries, municipalities, but also hospitals and a state-university. The variety of private organizations was even wider: consultancies, construction companies, IT companies, banks, a pharmaceutical company, an oil company, insurance companies and a communication company. Table 1 shows the most relevant respondent characteristics.

<sup>2</sup> The interviewers were drs. Judith Williams, drs. Michiel Damoiseaux and drs. Marcel van der Vaart.

<sup>3</sup> According to Bijlsma-Frankema and Drooglever Fortuijn (1997, p. 456), the data-matrix is particular important in the first phases of data analysis, not just for getting an overview of the data, but especially for developing propositions and the search for coherence in the vast amount of qualitative data, because the data is not yet reduced to theoretical terms and the perspective of the researcher(s). They mention the following five functions of the matrix: (1) getting a first impression of the most important findings of the research by reducing complex and detailed data to their essence; (2) getting a first impression of the completeness of the data; (3) getting a first impression of the variance of answers on every theme; (4) generating of propositions on and between themes; and (5) localizing deviating cases. The cells of the grid were not filled with numbers, but with various verbal comments and citations (Swanborn, 2003, p. 16) from the interviews. Following Bijlsma-Frankema and Drooglever Fortuijn (1997, 455), we used either telling citations, a given enumeration of the answer by the respondent, or a written summary by the researchers of the answer on that particular theme. In the last case, we staid as close as possible to the words as used by the respondents (Bijlsma-Frankema & Drooglever Fortuijn, 1997, p. 455).

<sup>44</sup> This also means that we cannot say anything about the distribution of the values that we found within any of the sectors. It is clear that some public organizations have more similarities with private organizations than others.

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