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**Symposium Issue Public Integrity**  
**‘Research Methods in Administrative Ethics: Perspectives and Techniques’**

**Introduction: The Need for Methodological Rigor and Diversity in Administrative Ethics**

Research on the ethics and integrity of governance is growing qualitatively and quantitatively, as Menzel (2005) argues. Yet, additional empirical studies are needed to make progress toward building an accumulative body of knowledge. Such a body of knowledge is not only relevant from an academic point of view; it is also a necessity to create more socially relevant knowledge for practitioners in the field. After reviewing the literature on administrative ethics in, respectively, Europe and the United States, both Lawton and Doig (2006) and Menzel (2005) conclude that much more empirical work is needed. The obstacles to further empirical research include uncertainties about the best *methodologies* in the domain. Uncertainty, of course, is characteristic of all ethics subfields of academic disciplines; basic concepts like integrity and values are highly abstract, essentially contested (cf. Gallie 1955), hard to define and even harder to operationalize and measure. Furthermore, within practical philosophy, normative and non-normative approaches often inform each other, leading to questions about the reliability and validity of empirical research; descriptive and prescriptive ethics are often intertwined. This can also be said about administrative ethics; there still is little theory building or testing based upon empirical research. As Lawton and Doig observe, “there is little in the way of longitudinal studies, and case study research needs to be developed. Much of the research tends to take a snapshot. A feature of much of the writings is a curious mix of normative and descriptive” (2006, 28).

Many of the relatively few empirical studies in the field make use of survey methodology. Menzel concludes that “the research strategies for ethics scholars should include greater rigor with perhaps less reliance on survey methods. Such rigor, of course, could include contextually rich case studies as well as trend or longitudinal analyses” (2005, 162). The field would benefit, it is argued here, from better examination a priori of which specific methods serve which specific research issues and research questions.

Attention to methodologies in the field, then, is warranted; hence this symposium. For the field to grow as an academic discipline and build a more integrated body of knowledge, it needs not only more empirical studies and more methodological diversity, but also more rigor in the methods currently used. The right methodologies are of crucial importance for such an endeavor. The goal of this symposium is to put the spotlight on methodology, for it is time to reassess our research methodologies. The questions addressed here are: What methodologies are currently used? Should current ontologies and epistemologies be reconsidered? Which methodologies work, and which do not? What alternatives should be considered in the future?

## CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS ISSUE

To provide an overview of the methodologies in current use, “Studying Methods, Not Ethics: Exploring the Methodological Character of Administrative Ethics Research,” by Patrick von Maraviæ, presents an empirical assessment of the methodological diversity in recent studies. As was stated above, much empirical research in the arena is of a quantitative nature, but exactly how much? Based on a systematic analysis of eighty-eight peer-reviewed empirical articles published between 1999 and 2007, von Maraviæ concludes that surveys and document analyses are indeed the methods most frequently used; therefore administrative ethics research has not yet unleashed its full capacity for solving, describing, exploring, explaining, and predicting the major problems of ethics research. Especially with regard to triangulation, as well as mixed-method approaches, there is room for development.

Von Maraviæ’s work makes it apparent what methodologies are actually used. Like the review articles by Doig and by Lawton and Menzel, his study suggests looking for, considering, and adapting new methodological venues. What should these venues be? Exactly what new methodologies are a good fit in the field? What exciting methodological possibilities are there? The rest of this issue is devoted to answering precisely these questions. Three concrete new methodological paths are examined. Each of these three articles has a different starting point of analysis. “Adapting the Moral Self: The Challenges of Evolutionary Psychology for Administrative Ethics,” by Michael Macauley, examines the ontology of administrative ethics and concludes that knowledge gained in other academic subfields should influence the way that morality is perceived and thus the methodologies employed to study it. “Language of Ethics: Understanding Public Service Ethics Through Discourse,” by Alan Lawton, starts with an examination of epistemological assumptions. To be more precise, it looks at the use of language and its influence on our methodologies. “Using Q Methodology in Administrative Ethics,” by Gjalt de Graaf and Job van Exel, is more pragmatic in nature. It examines a new methodology that can be adapted by all researchers, irrespective of their ontological and epistemological standpoints.

In his article, Michael Macauley explores the implications of new insights from evolutionary psychology and cognitive neuroscience for studying ethics, ethical decision-making, and moral development. He challenges administrative ethics to interact with these emerging disciplines and adopt some of their methodological positions, and he argues that administrative ethics needs to reach out to these sciences and embrace methodologies that will begin to unlock the secrets of morality. Macauley does not reject interpretive approaches, but he suggests that they need to be complemented by a more positivistic and deductive line of inquiry.

Alan Lawton’s contribution examines some epistemological assumptions of administrative ethics. Lawton emphasizes the importance of language and discourse for studying and understanding ethics. His article considers the contributions that discourse analysis could make to research into public service ethics and organizational studies. Lawton argues that it may enable researchers to examine traditional issues in new ways and to problematize new issues. Gjalt de Graaf and Job van Exel discuss the use of Q methodology for administrative ethics. Q methodology is seldom used in the field, but it has potential for empirical research. Q offers a procedure and conceptual framework to examine subjectivity in its social context. One of its advantages is that it brings marginalized viewpoints to the fore. Its drawbacks are also discussed. For those unfamiliar with Q, an appendix provides a basic introduction and shows how research using Q can be done.

## **THE FUTURE**

One might conclude from the contributions in this symposium that they confirm the contention that methodologies in the field are limited mostly to survey studies and anecdotal data. Many scholars in the field believe that this is problematic, because next to the strength of surveys, there are also limitations, such as the loss of context, so crucial in the field, as de Graaf and van Exel argue. Contingencies play an important role and the researched concepts, such as “public ethos” or, even more problematic, “values,” are socially constructed and often heavily debated. Complex and normative issues cannot be fully grasped by quantitative and mono-methodological approaches. Too much reliance on surveys thus unnecessarily limits the empirical research in the field, and the exploration of new methodological paths is paramount.

Next to pinpointing the caveats in the discipline, the symposium also offers hope: Exciting new possibilities exist, as the articles here suggest. Not only are the merits of new methodologies discussed, but it is also made clear how actual and concrete research questions in the field can be answered using a new methodological perspective. We hope and trust, therefore, that this symposium will be an inspiration to future research in the field and that it will help efforts to overcome methodological obstacles, thus leading to more empirical contributions. This is important, because more empirical research is needed to build theory on the ethics in administrative systems.

Building more coherent and accumulative theories on ethics, values, and ethical decision-making is also of key importance to the administrative field, the practitioners who operate daily in a complex public sector environment. Practitioners can benefit from the insights in this issue because they, too, must constantly find new ways to look at the issues confronting them. For instance, language and context are important for civil servants as well as for researchers, and civil servants practicing in the field must often unravel their personal morality and ethical decision-making. After reading this symposium, they will have a more informed perspective on these issues.

Of course, the new venues should not be limited to those discussed here; the guest editors hope that this symposium will be an inspiration to many other methodologies that are currently ignored. The field will benefit from better and more creative examination of which exact methods serve which research issues and research questions.

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