

# Value Contextuality in Public Service Delivery. An Analysis of Street-Level Craftsmanship and Public–Private Partnerships

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This contribution questions the idea of value universalism and demonstrates that the actual meaning of good or ethical governance is context dependent—as are its constitutive values. To illustrate this point, Huberts’ value framework on integrity and quality of governance is contrasted to two empirical case studies that demonstrate the contextuality of values in two specific settings of public service delivery: street-level craftsmanship and public–private partnerships (PPPs). Findings show that values do not work along the lines of the systematic frameworks public administration scholars come up with. They work along the lines of personal interpretative repertoires, and, on an aggregate level, along the lines of the confined and decisive professional logics of bounded policy domains.

**Keywords:** good governance, public service delivery, public values, value contextuality, value universalism

## INTRODUCTION

Some suggest that the values that constitute good or ethical governance are universal (Grindle, 2004; Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2006). This contribution questions this assumption and empirically demonstrates that the actual meaning of good or ethical governance is context dependent—as are its constitutive values. Although many acknowledge the contextuality of values and value attainment (Andersen, Beck Jørgensen, Kjeldsen, Pedersen, & Vrangbaek, 2012; Rutgers, 2015; West & Davis, 2011), only a handful of contributions on public governance examined this empirically (Paanakker, Masters, & Huberts, 2020). Some comparative

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studies address value contextuality in relation to cross cultural values among administrators (Van der Wal & Yang, 2015; Yang, 2016), whereas other consider it while scrutinizing value attainment and value dilemmas in specific sectors (De Graaf, Huberts, & Smulders, 2016; Jaspers & Steen, 2019; Oldenhof, Postma, & Putters, 2014; Reynaers & Paanakker, 2016; Steenhuisen, 2009). These studies demonstrate that the importance of values differs per profession and that the general meaning of values is adjusted to the context of each profession. It has been demonstrated, for example, that role differences determine the way in which values are understood. Public procurers and private contract managers cooperating within the same project adhere different understandings to the same value (Reynaers & Paanakker, 2016).

The observation that only a small portion of public values research empirically examines value contextuality forms the starting point of this contribution. Whereas public values research tends to pay limited attention to concrete street-level practices, research on professionalism often neglects the role of values as well as the way in which values are given meaning in practice (for instance by means of learning on the job and tacit knowledge) (Paanakker, 2019). In this article, we therefore scrutinize what constitutes good governance for different types of professionals and how they act upon this notion in two specific settings of public service delivery, namely, street-level craftsmanship and public-private partnerships (PPPs).

## GOOD GOVERNANCE IN TERMS OF VALUES

Over the last few decades the concept of *good governance* has permeated public sector theory and practice around the globe (Huberts, Maesschalck, & Jurkiewicz, 2008). Achieving and safeguarding a certain standard of quality of governance is increasingly emphasized (Paanakker, Masters, & Huberts, 2020).

Scholars adhere different meanings to the concept of quality of governance. To some, it is about impartial government (Holmberg, Rothstein, & Nasiritousi, 2009; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). Others conceptualize it as the integrity of governance (Evans, 2012; Huberts, 2014). To Woods (2000) quality of governance implies that a minimum of public services should be provided, and yet to others it refers to various complementary values (Bovens, 't Hart, & van Twist, 2007/2012; Perry, de Graaf, van der Wal, & van Montfort, 2014). What all contributions on the nature of good governance have in common is that they implicitly or explicitly relate it to the concept of values. Since the year 2000, scholarly attention to the role of values has considerably increased in the public administration field (Van der Wal, Nabatchi, & De Graaf, 2015), for example in meta studies on the diversity and scope of public values (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Wang & Wang, 2019), in the specific examination of public service motivation (Jensen, Andersen, & Jacobsen, 2019; Perry, 2000; Witesman & Walters, 2014), or in public-private debates (Reynaers, 2014b; Van der Wal, 2008).

Since the mid 1990s, the work and inspiration of Huberts spurred and deepened the development of this body of literature (Fijnaut & Huberts, 2002; Huberts, 1998, 2007, 2014; Huberts et al., 2008; Lawton, Huberts, & van Der Wal, 2016). Huberts has a very prominent and distinct focus, which culminates in the self-declared mission of his book entitled *The Integrity of Governance*: “[W]e should take integrity of governance more seriously in governance practice and theory” (2014, p. 198). He argues there is no more important topic in

the study of public administration than “to position integrity (higher) on our agendas” (2014, p. 198). His scholarly record is a living illustration of this conviction, and the many scientific and applied studies he conducted, by himself or with others, the many academic courses he taught, to students and practitioners, and his comprehensive involvement in policy debates and development has resulted in an intellectual debate and administrative practice on the integrity and quality in governance that is rich and continues to expand.

Many will recall one of his favourite quotes—“It’s all about integrity, stupid”—cited in scholarly work, but also frequently referred to at conferences, during presentations for policy practitioners, and in classrooms. He understands integrity as an umbrella theme of essential importance, irrespective of the type, stage or process of good governance that is under scrutiny. Nevertheless, Huberts has always emphasized that integrity forms an integral part of, and is irrefutably connected to, a wider conception of the quality of governance and the many values it harbours.

This is exemplified by the definitions he puts forward. He defines integrity as “a characteristic or a quality that refers to accordance with the relevant moral values and norms” (2014, p. 203). Likewise, quality of governance refers to conformance with values, albeit also those with a perhaps less explicit moral dimension (2014, p. 223). Huberts characterizes this as a close and complex relationship, and stresses that, most of all, it depends on the context (place, time and person) which values are deemed morally important and which ones are not (2014, pp. 223–226).

According to Huberts (2014, p. 204), “Moral values, norms, laws, and rules lie at the heart of integrity analysis.” In this definition, a value is understood to constitute “a belief or quality that contributes to judgments about what is good, right, beautiful, or admirable and thus has weight in the choice of action by individuals and collectives.” By contrast, the “more specific norm” tells us whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly.” Combined these parameters “answer the question what is the right thing to do?” and, importantly, specifically do so for types of behaviour (2014, p. 204).

When extending this focus on behaviours to his broader conception of governance processes, Huberts explains how studies on values in the public sector often focus on two phases: the input phase on the one hand, and the output phase on the other (2014, pp. 201–203). Studies on the role of values in the outcome phase are scarcer, but, as Huberts argues, studies that focus on the throughput phase demand our specific attention (2014, pp. 201–203). Therefore, he favours a perspective that builds on a “system model of governance” that incorporates these four phases (input, throughput, output and outcome) altogether (2014, p. 202). The procedural aspects of governance processes are just as important, if not more, to the safeguarding of values and its concomitant achievement of quality of governance (2014, pp. 201–203). Procedural integrity that pays due regard to other, related values of governance might be a core ingredient to the successful recipe of good governance. Here, Huberts acknowledges that integrity co-exists and interacts with a variety of other values (and, likewise, integrity violations may come at the expense of a variety of values), that together constitute a central framework of the quality of governance. He considers the following seven values to be central values of governance (2014, p. 213):

1. *“democracy with responsiveness and participation”—paying attention to social preferences and with the involvement of actors having an interest (including citizens);*
2. *“accountability and transparency”—being open, honest, and willing to account for behaviour;*

3. *“lawfulness”—respecting laws and rules;*
4. *“incorruptibility and impartiality”—acting in the public interest instead of self-interest or other inappropriate partial interests;*
5. *“effectiveness and efficiency of process”—acting capably in agenda-building and preparing, taking, and implementing decisions;*
6. *“professionalism and civility”—acting in line with professional standards and standards for (inter)personal behaviour; skilfulness (expertise), civility and respect, neutrality and loyalty (including confidentiality), and serviceability for civil servants; and reliability, civility, and trustworthiness for politicians; and*
7. *“robustness”—being stable and reliable but also able to adapt and innovate.*

### VALUE UNIVERSALITY OR CONTEXTUALITY IN GOVERNANCE

Given that these values are identified to pertain to governance processes in a broad sense, it is no surprise they constitute rather broad and generic categories. This triggers the questions of (1) how such generic values apply to concrete organizational settings, (2) to what extent the same set of values applies across a sector as varied as the public sector and, (3) whether individual values or value clusters differ among different domains, occupations, level of decision-making responsibility or specific type of public service delivery.

In addressing this important question of value uniformity, Huberts touches upon the major philosophical debates of value relativism, universalism and pluralism (2014, p. 214). In essence, they represent the following different viewpoints respectively: (1) values only acquire their worth in the specific context they are viewed and used in (relativism); (2) values are, at least to some extent, characterized by a universal validity, irrespective of time, place, person and circumstances (universalism); and (3) values are not only co-existent and co-dependant but also incommensurable—that is, they inherently conflict and the pursuit of the one always is at expense of the pursuit of the other, which makes the management of conflicting values a key characteristic of governing (pluralism). This line of reasoning applies well to public administration contexts. In public governance, a wide range of values, such as honesty, effectiveness, efficiency, integrity and lawfulness are intrinsically valued (De Graaf, 2015). Therefore, in theory, each and every one of them deserves to be pursued to its full capacity. However, in administrative reality this is a sheer impossible task, and every time the right balance between values needs to be struck, it is contingent on the specific situation (De Graaf, 2015). Huberts settles his position in between a pluralist and a universalist point of view, and states to be “sceptical of value relativism” (2014, p. 214). In explaining his position on the tenability of the value panorama he identified, his position tends to lean more towards a universalistic point of view:

To put it simply, values, as well as their prioritization in relation to each other, are, of course, constructed in context, so the meaning of incorruptibility and efficiency and their importance among other values will differ between, for example, governance in an Indian village and governance in the wealthy metropolitan areas of the world. To use or even prescribe the same criteria and policies in both contexts would thus be unrealistic and counterproductive. Yet I nevertheless doubt whether a poor Indian villager and a New York yuppie differ that much in

their views on a governance system in which the private profit of their “governor” dominates over public interest. Hence, universalistic values on governance do seem to exist. The poor farmer and the yuppie prefer incorruptibility above corruptibility, even though they are part of systems and contexts that will—understandably—lead to very different types of behaviour. (Huberts, 2014, p. 214)

Despite the acknowledgement of contextual differences on how values are enacted or prioritized, Huberts seems to appeal to a certain global commonality in value comprehension and value understanding. Perhaps not of the type of behaviour and the substance of the policies to enact them, and perhaps not of the extent to which they are prioritized over others. But, at the very least, his explanation discerns that the importance of the values he propagates, and to a lesser extent their foundational meanings, will be globally recognized and aspired to.

Analysing two different case studies, this study reflects on the tenability of Huberts’ value panorama of seven central governance values and will examine this position for two different types of public contexts. These two case studies will put values in context along the lines of two specific administrative types of public service delivery: street-level craftsmanship and PPPs.

## CASE STUDY I: PUBLIC CRAFTSMANSHIP AT STREET LEVEL

Lately, viewing the public office as a craft has gained renewed attention, both in the Dutch context (‘t Hart, 2014; Paanakker, 2020) and beyond (Kunneman, 2012; Rhodes, 2016). In his sociological exploration of the concept, Sennett defines craftsmanship as an internalized motivation and competence for quality-driven work: the desire, skill and commitment “to do a job well for its own sake” (Sennett, 2008, p. 9). Translating this conception to the public domain of governance, Paanakker conceptualizes public craftsmanship at street level as the by public professionals internalized skills, practices and values to deliver good work (Paanakker, forthcoming, 2019), and that reflect the tangible nature of the tasks they perform, their experiential knowledge, and the malleable nature of their service delivery (Lipsky, 1980; Polanyi, 2009; Rhodes, 2016).

To gain insight into the street-level application of public values to real life practices, Paanakker examines *street-level craftsmanship* by assessing how public values matter to public professionals in the context of, and towards the object of, their work (i.e., the concrete public service they deliver). From a range of studies in the Dutch prison sector, three points that provide further insight into the contextuality of public values at street level can be highlighted.

First, research into street-level craftsmanship signals how public professionals identify core values that differ significantly from the generic values that public value literature often puts forward. Values that are traditionally attributed to officials in the public sector at large, such as lawfulness, accountability, loyalty and efficiency, do not recur in professionals’ conceptions of good work at street level. In the case of prison officers for instance, respondents idiosyncratically emphasized humanity, security, reintegration and task effectiveness as key values (Paanakker, 2019, 2020). Although these values may be transferable to other street-level professions that balance care tasks and maintaining order and/or safety, such as police officers and ground military personnel, or perhaps even paramedics, the concrete practices

and skills associated with the enactment of such values are likely to be very different. Craftsmanship values are argued to be unique to the professional logics, realities and beneficiaries of the street-level context in question—as is the interpretation of the associated necessary skills (Paanakker, 2019). This shows how the street-level context determines the identification of highly contextual values of what it means to deliver good work, but also how, *within* professions, this goes hand in hand with a remarkably high commonality in value understanding and interpretation-informally among street-level professionals themselves.

Second, the comparison of how different staff levels understand craftsmanship values portrays a further refutation of value universality. Interestingly, policy makers, prison directors, prison middle managers and street-level prison officers qualify good work at street level rather convergently. However, research among 55 respondents of different penal staff levels indicates that, regardless of the hierarchical layer they occupy, public officials “are consistently biased to believe that management above them prioritizes targets over content” (Paanakker, *forthcoming*, p. 1). Managers were perceived to impose a craftsmanship framework that interprets values solely in terms of the performance culture of unwavering neoliberal and numeric managerial rhetoric. This toxic stereotyping between staff levels was even shown to overshadow positive value convergence on account of socialization processes (Paanakker, *forthcoming*). Here, the mutual perceptions staff levels have of each other paint a rather grim picture that underlines the complexity of value interpretation—and perhaps the impossibility of conceiving values at street level as fixed qualities with a common meaning and understanding.

Finally, the study into craftsmanship shows how value alignment is very much dependant on a range of practical constraints at organizational level. Administrative realities can be thorny and counterproductive to the realization of public values. In the prison context, austerity and reform measures were shown to severely hamper the potential of craftsmanship values at street level. They create a gap between the lifeworld of intrinsic moral values of good craftsmanship and the systemic world of instrumental values, administrative constraints and numerical control (Paanakker, 2019). Implementation problems include time constraints, lack of personnel, the inaptitude of policy paradigms, and of the concrete policy tools and instruments that ought to safeguard values of good craftsmanship. Problems of implementation also includes the omission to adequately equip professionals to “voice their concerns, to understand how policy programs and tools (set out to) tie in with their craftsmanship values, and to learn how they can mold their professional practice to uphold craftsmanship values as well as possible” (Paanakker, 2019, p. 894). They pinpoint a mismatch between the values, ideals and motivations of street-level professionals and a contrarian institutional facilitation of such ideals in the organization. Such facilitation problems explicate how contextuality is not only a key determinant in terms of value interpretation, but also of value enactment—a perhaps obvious observation that is still limitedly taken into account in debates on public value scope and solidity.

## CASE STUDY II: PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

Value contextuality not only implies that the meaning or importance of specific values is context dependent, it also suggests, as the analysis of PPPs will demonstrate, that the

strategies adopted by professionals to promote or safeguard values that are considered important in terms of good governance are context dependent.

PPPs that combine public and private actors, form a peculiar context in which public and private values or moral standards meet and, supposedly, sometimes clash. Several scholars suggest that private sector values and moral standards are different from public sector values and moral standards.

As a result, some consider the cooperation between the public and private sector or the incorporation of private sector management techniques, problematic. Box (1999, p. 19), for example, argues: “[T]here remains a sense that something is wrong [...] something about running government like a business does not feel right.” Others wonder whether public values are at stake in the “public-private equation” (Bevir, 2010; Frederickson, Smith, Larimer, & Licari, 2012; Rhodes, 1996) and stress the importance, following contractual governance principles and agency theory, of strict control from the public principal of the private agent (Zheng, Roehrich, & Lewis, 2008).

In an attempt to assure that private actors behave in accordance to values and norms considered important by public procurers, traditionally, attention has gone out to formal control mechanisms such as legal binding contracts, performance monitoring, and the use of economic incentives or penalties. Several studies (Reynaers, 2014b; Reynaers & Parrado, 2017) demonstrate, however, that the actual use of such mechanisms help but certainly not guarantee value alignment. In that respect, a project member of a Dutch PPP argued:

I can guarantee you, the contract doesn't matter. You can have a very bad contract and great people and your project becomes a success. Or you can have a perfect contract with terrible people and your project will be a disaster. (interviewee cited in Reynaers (2014a)).

Aware of the limitations of formal control mechanisms, many, following relational governance, suggest that, in order to align values and behaviour, and to avoid opportunism from either side, attention should be paid to informal, relational aspects of the long-term cooperation too and that, trust, rather than distrust, should guide public-private interactions (Granovetter, 1985). In relation, and because of sometimes conflictive and opportunistic behaviour, the Dutch government recently developed a “market vision” entitled “Together with the Market.” This document describes a shared vision of the relationship between market and procurer based on “open and transparent communication between parties without opportunistic behaviour” (Dutch Ministry of Finances, 2016/2017, p. 15).

So, what can one do to safeguard values and to understand value contextuality in the specific context of PPPs? Assuring value alignment, it seems, goes further than simply writing, signing and monitoring legal contracts. Complementing contractual and relational governance (Poppo & Zenger, 2002), hence, seems fundamental. Public procurers should pay attention to the “soft,” relational or informal aspects of the collaboration as they seem equally important when it comes to safeguarding values. Furthermore, it takes two to safeguard values and to promote good governance. Public procurers and private market parties should cooperate in that sense just as they do with respect to the technical or quantitative project output. Finally, safeguarding values and quality of governance, requires attention from the very beginning to the very end of the contractual cooperation.



Apart from the contextuality of the strategies adopted by professionals to promote good governance, the meaning of the values that constitute good governance in PPPs is context dependent too. The traditional meaning of important values such as accountability, for example, changes in the context of PPPs. Some argue, for example, that traditional conceptualizations of accountability cannot be used as a measure for evaluating accountability in a non-traditional context (Bovaird, 2004; Bovens, Schillemans, & 't Hart, 2008; Rhodes, 1997). Likewise, Elliott and Salamon (2002, p. 38) argue that traditional definitions of accountability ought to be replaced by pluralistic understandings of the concept of accountability. Empirical contributions indeed demonstrate that accountability and transparency mean something different in the context of PPPs when compared to traditional bureaucratic organizations. For example, hierarchical accountability is replaced by horizontal accountability and input transparency is replaced or accompanied by output and outcome transparency (Reynaers, 2014a; Reynaers & Grimmelikhuijsen, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

The case studies demonstrate that values do not—at least not by definition, if at all—work along the lines of the systematic frameworks we as public administration scholars come up with. They work along the lines of personal interpretative repertoires, and, on an aggregate level, along the lines of the confined and decisive professional logics of bounded policy domains.

In relation to the question of to what extent Huberts' value framework relates to specific types of administrative service delivery, our case studies on the identification and attainment of values in street-level craftsmanship and in PPPs function as brief but clear illustrations of how values only acquire meaning in the specific context they are used in, and stress how value frameworks are only useful when their universality is not overestimated.

For example, in the context of PPPs, the questions of accountability, lawfulness, incorruptibility and effectiveness and efficiency, seem highly important. Professionalism, robustness and democracy, however, seem to be of less importance. In the context of public craftsmanship at the frontline, professionalism, expertise and effectiveness are of special importance, but only from the translation to specific profession-bound values that describe the nature of the concrete service delivery on the work floor. A sub-value like loyalty remains unmentioned, as do the other values of democracy, accountability, lawfulness, incorruptibility, efficiency and robustness. Hence, it can be concluded that the values of Huberts' value framework are neither universal nor completely relativistic. Depending on the specific governance setting and type of service delivery, some values seem to be highly important, whereas other values are hardly considered or completely ignored. This implies that, to define what values are considered important in specific contexts and practices, Huberts' generic value framework, might require adaptation. While some of the values put forward by Huberts may still be relevant for a specific context, others might disappear and be replaced by new values.

In this context, Huberts' claims that *what* values are important, and *how* they matter, depends to a large extent on who is governed: "Managing the values in context in accordance with what the public considers good governance is, in the end, the proof of the pudding for



actual [good or bad] governance” (2014, pp. 225–226). In addition, it is not only about who is governed, but principally also about *who governs* and the *how of governing*.

In order to create good governance, in the public-private context as well as in the street-level context, one needs formal as well as informal mechanisms that address those values that are considered important. Value contextuality can be visible in interpretation differences between different types of actors, or in practical facilitation problems in sometimes-thorny administrative contexts. Underacknowledging this complexity and failing to address it adequately by means of open and transparent communication cripples governance processes and outcomes. In the end, value management is about the quality of the interaction between those who govern, and, in addition, about how they structure governance processes to pay tribute to central public values in context.

## NOTE

1. This article appeared in a different form in a *liber amicorum* for Leo Huberts (De Graaf, G. (ed.). 2019. *It is all about integrity, stupid*. Eleven International Publishing: The Hague).

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