PUBLIC VALUES IN DENMARK

THEIR NATURE, STABILITY AND CHANGE

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The notion of values has been increasingly important in public sector reform and public management in Denmark. The reasons vary. Political-administrative scandals promoted an interest in codes of ethics for civil servants since the beginning of 1990ies. Years of New Public Management oriented reforms have caused a need in many Western countries for considering values other than efficiency and more generally a need for re-thinking the normative basis of the public sector. This is important since high levels of corruption seem to be associated with political instability, poverty and social and economic inequalities. And not the least has the emergence of a European administrative space made it relevant to identify and contrast European and national administrative values.

Let us first approach a basic question. But what is a value?

Broadly speaking, a value associates to a principle that must be followed or a standard that must be met by public organizations while they regulate or produce service.

The American antropologist Clyde Kluckhohn offers a useful and precise definition:

> "A value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action." (Kluckhohn, 1962:395)

The definition has four important elements. First, values are a conception, i.e. a mental construction, not an artefact. Moreover, as a conception there is a cognitive element to it, a value is not just a spontaneous unreflective feeling.

Second, values are not necessarily explicit. Values bear on deeper layers of human experience and identity and it is perfectly possible to act in accordance with values without being fully conscious about these values.

Third, values must be acted upon. Mere talk about values does not prove their existence. A value must have practical significance; otherwise “it is not there”. Thus, despite values being mental conceptions we have to study behaviour also.

Fourth, what is characteristic of values is the notion of “the desirable” (e.g. a virtuous life) in contrast to “desired” (e.g. a cold beer). The notion of “the desirable” – what is socially approved – is of course the core of the definition.

If we, nevertheless, construct a values scale from the desirable to the desired we get an array of values, which are grounded in significantly different ways.

$$$ Insert figure 1 here $$$

Although “serious” values according to Cluckhohn are only type I – the principles – this typology allow us to see some important nuances. First, it is easier to grasp the meaning of type I values, when we have contrasting types. Type I values are tough values. They

are driving forces for members of resistance, loyal civil servants, dedicated scientists, missionaries and terrorists. Second, we must acknowledge that the world is flooded with values of lower types. Values of type IIA (reason) and IIB (consensus) are central to Western democratic ideologies, while market institutions (and New Public Management) build on and foster values of type III. Third, in a dynamic perspective we can see values change grounding over time, e.g. starting as a principle (type I) and degenerating to a preference (type III). Finally, it is perfectly possible that people in behaviour are driven by type III values while they at the same time verbally legitimize their behaviour by referring to values of type II or type I, i.e. socially approved values can be used as window dressing.

Let me give you an example to illustrate why type I values – the principles - are located in the top of the value hierarchy. Consider the important value of political loyalty. You may choose to serve your minister well today simply because you like it. It makes you "feel good" (type III). You may serve your minister well because the calculated consequences of doing so are positive (type IIA), or because the general opinion in the ministry is that political loyalty is important (type IIB). Or you may serve your minister well because you are obliged to do so (type III). To put it stronger, if and only if you serve your minister well, despite you don't like it, despite the consequences are nasty for your self and despite most of your colleagues question your behaviour, only then you are loyal in the true sense of the word.

It follows that values are a highly intangible phenomenon and a challenge for the empirical researcher. A simple but costly consequence is that one must be prepared to

adopt a number of different empirical methods. The methods adopted in the Danish study were the following:

- A systematic investigation of values mentioned in the *research literature* as important to the public sector in general or public organizations. The purpose was the identification of an overall value universe: what values can we talk about?
- Identification of the long-term development of values embedded in the *formal rules* guiding the functioning of the public sector in Denmark. Besides the identification of the values that could be sanctioned formally this analysis could be made historic because data can be found in documents.
- A questionnaire was sent to the top management in all types of public organisations (e.g. regulatory agencies, museums, schools, public transports, libraries, hospitals, courts, central ministries, town halls etc.) at all politico-administrative levels (state, counties, and municipalities). The respondents were asked to rank given values and to reflect on value changes in the last decade. 1.985 public employees responded positively to our questionnaire, giving a response rate on app. 60%.
- We collected formal value statements from public organisations. This made it possible to study values as expressed and formulated by public organizations themselves as a contrast to the highly structured questionnaire with given items and response alternatives. The sample consists of 110 value statements, comprising all types of public organizations, from ministries to day care institutions.

- Case studies were carried out in four typical public organisations in direct contact with users (a library, a church, a hospital and a prison). By using the case method it was made possible to observe behaviour and how organizations organize themselves physically, interview street level bureaucrats and do document analysis.
- Case studies were also carried out in five regulating organisations, each being the guardian angel of a specific value (The Ombudsman, The General Audit Bureau, The Ministry of Finance, The Office of Equal Treatment, and The Office of IT-implementation). The idea was to study the interpretation and dynamics of specific values (Palmhøj Nielsen, 2003).
- We did content analysis of public debates on outsourcing in two Danish municipalities and The City of Atlanta, USA. The reason was that outsourcing is a critical event, which tends to make core values much more explicit. We chose one American case to get an idea of cultural variation (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2002).

The expectation clearly was that a diversity of methods used and data collected, by triangulation would give us a unique possibility to identify core public values and – on the other hand – to explore systematic variation.

I will now present the main results.

One of the questions in the mailed questionnaire focused on the values that were particularly important for the organisation when carrying out their daily activities in the

production core. The respondents were presented a number of values to choose from in a random order. The values were chosen by us to catch various ideals of public administration: hierarchical loyalty, independent professionalism and legality, market like structures, communitarian like user democracy and citizen involvement, and network management.

We expected somewhat dispersed answers because of sector, administrative level, formal status and so forth. Besides this variety we also expected that New Public Management values would be highly important because of many years of neo-liberalistic reform recipes from OECD, The Ministry of Finance, The National Association of Municipalities, consultants and elsewhere.

Both expectations were turned down. Although some value variety was present, clear value profiles could not be found. Further, New Public Management values did not sneak in at any convincing magnitude. On the contrary, the values held in general were at least from a NPM-perspective quite old fashioned. Admittedly, renewal and innovation was the most important value but this value is not necessarily linked to NPM.

Besides renewal and innovation, the four most important value conceptions are:

- One must work according to independent professional standards
- The public sector should be accountable to society as such
- There must be insight for the public into public organisations

- Judicial values like legality and due process should be guarded

Especially the three first listed values were found across the board. They seem to be important everywhere. But certain nuances could also be detected. At departmental levels judicial values, efficiency and political accountability were considered more important than on agency level, which on their hand held users´ needs and user democracy more important. All in all, variations were quite moderate and natural. What was striking was that the four classic values were so widespread against all odds.

Taken together, the four values may form what we will label a general public ethos. This ethos is not formally stated anywhere as *the* public ethos. Nevertheless, it apparently exists in the mind of public managers. It is likely that this ethos has some strength. Not only are the values widespread, to some extent they may even reinforce each other. Legality and due process may be said to be a special case of independent professional standards, public insight may reinforce legality and due process, and the notion of both accountability to society as such and public insight adds a public interest orientation to the overall picture. As a result, serving special interests must be considered illegitimate.

Furthermore, the general public ethos is more important than values such as political accountability, users´ influence and the balancing of interests. This may indicate that the public sector first and foremost orients itself to its own internal values and towards society as such – more than to users, politicians and interest groups. Note also that on

the one hand public insight is considered important but on the other hand listening to the public opinion is considered the least important value.

We can find support to this interpretation when looking at answers to other questions in the same questionnaire. We asked the top managers to consider what factors would motivate their core employees the most. Factors related to work itself had the highest score. The far most important factor of motivation was *professional commitment*. Other factors include *personal development on the job*, a *good working environment*, and *good relations to users*. Factors related to hierarchy/system such as *commitment to organisational mission*, *good relations to superior authorities* and *acknowledgement of economic constraints* got medium scores. Lowest score had two Rational Choice favourites: *carrier opportunities* and a *good payment*. The conclusion is obvious: public employees are primarily devoted to doing a good job, looking at their job as something like a cause. One may argue that respondents to some extent may have chosen socially approved answers. Against this it may be noted that we did not ask the respondents to rank their own factors of motivation but those of the personnel.

We then asked the respondents to consider which qualities of the core personnel they found to be the most important in their organisation. The three most important qualities were *professionalism*, *personal integrity* and a capacity to *cooperate* with others. To our surprise the qualities that had the lowest score were an *understanding of politics* and *flair for economizing*. We could find some variation. An understanding of politics was important in core departments in central government and a flair for economizing was

important in public enterprises. But we had to go to the extremes so to speak before these personal qualities were considered important.

In a way one may say that public management perceives the public sector as a societal actor that is expected to serve others but not to please others. In short, we may have identified a classic civil-servant-public-authority-ethos based on type I values. Provocatively formulated and in shorthand:

One is superior to others in order to serve others

Stated in this way it is made clear that the general public ethos implies a subtle balance. If we attach most importance to “in order to serve others” the ethos may give associations to values like public interest, altruism, and dignity. If we however stress, “one is superior to others” we may on the contrary associate to arrogance, pride, and self-complacency.

How can we explain the existence of the ethos? From where do these values emerge? A survey cannot give us any answers to this question. We can offer but a few speculations instead. One hypothesis is that these values are dealt with and discussed during the formal training and education of public managers prior to getting a job in the public sector. Probably, this is not a very good answer. The educational background of public managers is very heterogeneous. It includes degrees within law, economy, political science, a high number of specialised degrees, bachelor degrees plus master degrees etc. A more convincing hypothesis would be that these values are part of the informal

socialisation in public organisations and that they are reinforced by selection and recruitment of managers.

However, this is merely a mechanism of diffusion and does not explain the original roots of the values in question. Again, we can only point to a few hypotheses, worth of further investigation. First, the broad diffusion of the general ethos makes it likely that the values are part of the general Danish political culture. Therefore we should look for historic explanations. Second, the content or character of values in the general ethos can give us some hints on where in history to look. The analysis of the formal rules guiding the Danish public sector suggests that legality and due process are the heritage from the Rechtsstaat that was established in Denmark during the eighteenth and nineteenth century and that independent professional standards have its roots in the general professionalisation of public services during the twentieth century and earlier. In Denmark public insight is most likely an aspect of the Rechtsstaat also but could as well also be part of Danish democratic culture. It is tempting to link a commitment to a society as such to both the Rechtsstaat and professionalisation but this explanation is not entirely satisfying since these two traditions are also oriented towards the individual: they inhibit the protection of the citizen and service to the client respectively. Rather one could turn to such diverse sources as the enlightened absolute monarchy and the development of welfare economics. Finally, the devotion of public employees to a cause may have its roots in the notion of vocation in Protestantism.

Still, the ethos may remain an airy construction unless we can trace some effects. If the general ethos do have deep roots in history and is capable of regulating the behaviour of

civil servants, we would expect high ethical standards. We have two possible measures on that. First, we should be able to find high levels of confidence and trust in Danish governmental institutions and second a low level of corruption.

In a number of surveys published by the Ministry of Finance in 1998 the public sector is doing quite well. The surveys show 1) that confidence in public institutions are higher than in private institutions, 2) that confidence in public institutions are higher than confidence in unions, the Parliament and the media, and 3) that confidence is especially high in the classic parts of the public sector, i.e. schools, the church, the defence, judicial institutions, and police. In international comparisons Denmark is also doing well. In Gallup's European index from 2002, Denmark is the country with the highest level of confidence in society's institutions. This holds true both in general and on a concrete level when asking to confidence in the government, the health sector, and the police. Finally, Denmark is among the top three on the world-ranking list of corruption published by Transparency International (no. 1 in 1998, no. 3 in 2004).

Whether or not public values are linked to, not to say responsible for this state of affairs cannot be concluded. We need more data and especially cross country studies. On the other hand it should be noted that if we found low level of trust and a high level of corruption, we possibly would question the importance of an ethos and characterize it as composed of words – not action.

I will now turn to a second type of public ethos: A workplace ethos: "Zeitgeist Light".

Our questionnaire stipulated 15 public values that should be evaluated by the respondents. As an important supplement, we analysed value statements produced by public organisations themselves because these value statements were not restricted to present values stipulated by the researcher. On the contrary, we assumed the value statements to be organisational self-representations and therefore likely to be more authentic expressions of values held in the public sector.

Like in the survey we found astonishing value homogeneity. Though more than 100 value expressions can be found, many of these are clearly synonyms or at least very close to each other. When we have taken this into account about 15 values are prominent and can be found in many statements across sectors and administrative level. Most popular values are *accountability*, *respect*, *development*, *cooperation*, *quality*, *openness*, *trust*, *commitment* and *professionalism*.

To some extent these values reflect the values in the general public ethos. Openness reflects public insight and professionalism is more or less synonym with independent professional standards. If we add accountability, commitment and quality we may again see a devotion to a cause or a vocational approach to the job. Thus, the general public ethos is confirmed.

On the other hand this is not an entirely satisfying interpretation. First, judicial values and accountability to society as such are rare guests in value statements. Second, many of the most popular values – respect, openness, trust, cooperation, dialogue – are probably there only to tell us how we should treat other people. In some cases it is made

clear that e.g. openness should be understood as openness towards users or politicians. But often it is unspecified and leaves other interpretations open.

Actually, an alternative interpretation is that value statements mostly reflect the values that are supposed to guide people's behaviour on *a working place*. There are good arguments for that interpretation. All the mentioned values fit well into that context. Also, the management *and* the staff have drafted many of the statements through more or less complicated processes, in some cases monitored by external consultants. Finally, we find the same values in value statements from private companies, in textbooks on human resource management and in reform prescriptions from the department in central government responsible for personnel policies in the public sector. The central union for public employees has also drafted a recipe with suggestions for the substance of value statements.

Thus, the best guess is that these value statements reflect a "zeitgeist light", i.e. a fashion: this is – for the time being - the way we should behave and treat each other on the job: be responsible, be open, cooperate with your colleagues, and even be oriented towards your own personal development. Mechanisms of diffusion are probably (as implicitly suggested) consultants, personnel and organisation departments, business schools, unions, meeting places for public managers and the like, i.e. highly institutionalised circles. It fits into this picture that the values are mostly type II-values. They are explicitly justified by referring to their positive *consequences* or *agreement* of a group. Whether this zeitgeist has deeper roots is an open question.

I will now turn to a third type of public ethos

A clear differentiation of public values can be seen only when we investigate concrete organisations on the spot, observe the encounter between staff and users, how it is organised and physically arranged, and talk with the core professionals who are in charge of the direct contact with users: in our cases the librarian, the vicar, the prison guard, and the doctor.

The public library had an explicit professional ethos with values like *equality*, *democracy*, *reason* and *enlightenment*. Interviews with the librarians were dense with explicit references to these values and the library in question also demonstrated in policy, behaviour and the placement of walls, furniture, books etc. the importance of service values such as *user integrity* and *openness towards the users*. All in all, the library seemed to be a harmonious organization.

Not surprisingly also the church had a strong professional ethos. Part of the ethos is oriented towards the individual with values like *benevolence*, *solicitude*, *confidence*, and *protection*, and part of it is oriented towards a collective with values like *community*, and *solidarity*. The latter part may reflect that the church in contrast to the library has a territory, the parish, and a “herd of users”, the congregation. Further, the parochial church council governs the parish. The values are not as harmonious as in the library. Above all, the buildings, the organization of the interior, the rituals and the priests´ uniform signals *continuity*, *hierarchy*, *social control and integration*, in contrast with values mentioned in the interviews.

One would probably expect a rather strong public ethos in the prison, an expression of the Rechtsstaat, of the belief in law and order, punishment, atonement or rehabilitation. That was not what we found. Nor did we find any strong professional ethos. What we did find was a fairly strong service ethos. This service ethos emphasized that the prisoners had a right to *a decent life* within the institution, as close to the life outside as possible. One could perhaps say that *normality* was the basic value. This value was implemented to the extent that one of the inmates after serving the sentence tried to escape back *into* the prison. The guard had to call the police to bring the former inmate out of prison. Like the church, the values of the prison could not be harmonious. Clearly, all physical arrangements signalled *a-normality*.

The hospital is first and foremost a professional world. Observing the building, the internal signposting, all the physical arrangements, and dress codes of both doctors and patients gives a first hint of being in a world with strong *professional standards* and high *specialization*. Even a doctor, approached at the main entrance, was not able to decode the signposts assumed to guide the visitor to the relevant parts of the hospital! Talking to the doctors and observing encounters with patients, though, left a different impression, an impression of a service ethos, a strong dedication to the patients, i.e. a strong *user orientation*. Like the church and the prison, the hospital clearly showed a split ethos.

The professional ethoses are presumably based on type I values. But on the other hand for example doctors (experts, professions) are often accused of hiding selfishness

(preferences, values of type III) behind the professional codex. In other words, values in the medical world may have degenerated from value of type I to values of type III.

A final question is how these three public ethoses relate to each other. A number of models can be suggested. The most popular model is undoubtedly that new values crowd out old values, e.g. New Public Management values crowd out classic values. We did not find much support to that model. So, I will present my favourite right away.

One may argue, that time has a different meaning in the three ethoses presented, i.e. they have a different pulsation. If we are correct in stipulating that the general public ethos has historic roots it presumably has a very slow pulse and changes are likely to be path dependent. The value statements represent an opposite case. To speak bluntly, the workplace values are ephemeral values. They may be popular today and die over night. They have a much higher pulsation. In between comes the professional ethos. Professional ethoses are primarily linked to education and formal training, not to internal socialisation in public organizations or reform initiatives from the Ministry of Finance or elsewhere.

Actually, we may perceive the three types of ethos as related to each other as layers in an onion. Innermost we have the general public ethos as a value core. Then follows layers of relatively stable professional ethoses and finally layers with trendy values concerning human resource management. The three layers can be in harmony or conflict; they may in the long run affect each other, but they have separate dynamic

forces, they are safeguarded by different actors and develop unsynchronised with different pulsation like systems governed by specific “genetic” logics.

Other models are conceivable but this is my favourite.

Thank you for your attention.