LASU International Journal of Arts and Social Science Education
Vol. 2, No. 2, Nov. 2024
http://www.lijassed.org
Print ISSN: 2992-4979
Online ISSN: 2992-4987

ETHICS AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: BRIDGING THE GAP

GIWA, Basiru Olalekan[1], Ulabor, Ehimen Abiodun (PhD, Wales) [2]

Department of Public Administration, Federal Polytechnic Ede[1]
Department of Business Administration and Management, Federal Polytechnic Ede[2]
Email: basiru.giwa@pgc.uniosun.edu.ng; +2347036497449[1]
Email: Ulabor.ehimen@federalpolyede.edu.ng; +2347056317025[2]

Abstract

Ethics and accountability are considered the irreducible minimum in the functioning of public administration which play an integral role in the building of trust between people and the government. This paper analyzed the ethical principles and mechanisms of accountability in relation to their potential roles for increasing public trust, preventing abuses of power, and ensuring good governance. The paper looked into theoretical viewpoints and case studies from selected countries. It demonstrates how these practices can enhance trust and improve public sector performance. It offered recommendations on the basis of strengthening ethical standards with concomitant accountability in public administration.

Keywords: Ethics, Accountability, Public, Administration, Government.

Introduction

Ethics and accountability in public administration stand as pillars on which the foundations of serving the best interests of society by public officials rest. They are the culture, processes, structures, and rules that ensure those in public office act in the wider public interest rather than their own self-interest. Public administration is tasked with managing government policies and programs in ways that benefit society. For these systems to function effectively, public trust is essential. However, widespread concerns about corruption, mismanagement, and abuse of power often erode this trust. As such, ethics and accountability are critical to rebuilding confidence in government institutions (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015).

The commitment of any nation to development aspiration is often determined by the extent of adherence to the principles of ethics and accountability in service delivery. Ethics means moral codes of conduct, while accountability implies answerability or responsibility and being liable for one's conduct, action, or inaction. Ethics, accountability, transparency, and trust, among others, are interrelated values that inform the nomenclature for public administration (Lyrio et al. 2018). These values serve as a solid foundation for governmental activities, including prescriptions for high standards of behaviour in formulating and implementing sound policies.

Ethics embody the rules that define the conduct of public officials in order to ensure that the public is treated fairly and equitably. It encompasses values such as honesty, fairness, and justice, which remain the backbone of gaining and retaining public trust and legitimacy. Ethics in public administration involves behaviour conducted in accordance with a code that generally ensures the common good rather than personal gain. Ethics help officials make better decisions in the public interest and help people to evaluate the decisions taken on their behalf by public officials.

Accountability, on the other hand, signifies that public officials are responsible to account for their actions and decisions before the public and other relevant stakeholders. Through various oversight mechanisms, such as audits, evaluations, and public reporting, accountability ensures that people in authority are responsible for their performance and conduct.

The interplay between ethics and accountability is very germane because they complement one another in their impact on good governance. Ethics in public administration encompasses compliance with the law, but it is also about a culture of integrity and responsibility (Ulabor, 2022). Accountability among public officials ensures higher ethical standards as persons in position understand that their actions and decisions are always under review and scrutiny.

The need for ethics and a call for accountability have emerged over the last two decades as a result of numerous scandals and corruption across the world in public administration. All these incidents have brought to light the essence of strong ethical structures and mechanisms of accountability that prevent abuse of authority and make sure that public resources are used effectively and justly.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, there has been growing concern over the breakdown of ethical standards and accountability in public administration across most countries of the world, Nigeria inclusive. Failures to follow ethical principles result in rampant corruption, inefficiency, and misuse of public resources, further denting public trust and weakening structures of governance. While various reforms and policies have been carried out with the aim of bringing about good conduct and accountability within public institutions, there remains a great gap between policy and actual practice.

Weak institutional frameworks, lack of enforcement mechanisms, political interference, and even a culture of impunity within the public service have been identified as contributing issues to this gap. These challenges render the effective implementation of ethical guidelines less attainable and water down the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms, which in turn has implications on how vulnerable the public sector is to mismanagement and maladministration.

Objectives of the study

In other to juxtapose the essence of this paper, three specific objectives were outlined:

1. To analyze the essence of ethics in public administration;
2. To find out the place of accountability of ethics in public administration; and
3. To assess public truth, ethics, and accountability in public administration.

This study sought to review the underlying factors that contribute to the gap in ethics and accountability in public administration, as well as strategies that may be suggested towards bridging this gap for good governance. More specifically, it explored how ethical violations affect the confidence of the public, the role of leadership in accountability, and how effective current reforms are in bringing transparency and integrity into the public sector.

Review the Literature

Ethics in Public Administration

Ulabor (2022) described ethics as the discipline that deal with what is good or bad with moral duty and obligation. It is concerned with truth and justice and has variety of aspect such as the expectations of the society among others. Ethics in public administration refers to the moral principles that guide the conduct of public officials. These principles include integrity, transparency, fairness, and a commitment to serve the public good (Frederickson, 2010). When public servants adhere to these ethical standards, it enhances the legitimacy of governmental actions and the trust of citizens in the system (Löffler, 2021). Ethical dilemmas, however, often arise when there is a conflict between personal values and public duty, or when pressures from political or organizational structures incentivize unethical behavior (Huberts, 2018).

Accountability in Public Administration

Accountability in public administration is usually understood as the obligation of government officials to answer for performance to some legitimate authority (e.g., Bovens, 2007; Dubnick, 1998; Gregory (2017); Mulgan, 2003). It refers to the requirement for public officials to be answerable for their actions and decisions. It is a cornerstone for democratic governance which ensures that officials uphold ethical standards and are responsible to the public (Bovens, 2010). Various accountability mechanisms, such as oversight bodies, audits, and judicial reviews, exist to monitor the actions of public servants. However, these mechanisms often vary in effectiveness depending on institutional strength and political will (Rothstein & Varraich, 2017).

Accountability involves a relationship between two parties, an accounter (the answering official) and an account-holder or forum (the authority), and typically involves three elements or stages: the giving of information (transparency); discussion or debate; and consequences, including rectification. Standard institutions of accountability include democratic elections, legislative scrutiny, judicial review, audit, ombudsmen, regulation, media inquiry, and so on, in which governments are held to account by, or on behalf, of the people.

Examining Roles of Accountability in Ethical Decision-Making

Accountability plays a crucial role in ensuring that ethical decision-making is upheld. Embracing accountability in ethical decision-making can help the nation build a culture of trust, transparency, and integrity. It also helps officials, individuals, and the citizens as a whole to make better decisions and avoid unethical behavior, which can make them to harm themselves and others. Some of the roles include:

1. Accountability promotes transparency: When public officials are accountable for their actions, they are more likely to be transparent about their decision-making process. This helps create a culture of openness, where office holders and citizens are encouraged to share their thought processes and are held responsible for their actions.
2. Accountability builds trust: Accountability is an essential component of building trust in any relationship, whether it is between the government and its citizens, employers

http://www.lijassed.org
Print ISSN: 2992-4979
Online ISSN: 2992-4987

and employees, clients and service providers, or within a team. When officials take responsibility for their actions, they are more likely to be trusted by the citizens.

3. Accountability encourages ethical behavior: When public administrator or public office holders are held accountable for their actions, they are more likely to behave ethically. This is because they know that their actions will have consequences, and they will be held responsible for any unethical behavior.

Major Scandals in Public Administration and its Impact on Public Trust: Case Studies

Scandals within public administration come with several impacts, most of which touch base with public trust. Often, such an event unravels unethical conduct, corruption, and abuse of authority that sees public confidence in government institutions and their officials take a nosedive.

Watergate Scandal: The early 1970s Watergate Scandal is the most popularly known political scandals in American history (Pew Research Center, 2024). Basically, it dealt with a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters and its subsequent cover-up by members of the Nixon administration. It results in a consequence after the scandal was that President Richard Nixon resigned and had an impact that dealt profoundly with public confidence in government. Then, in 1964, trust in government reached 77% and fell to 36% in 1974. "This was a scandal that underscored the perception that government should conduct much of its business in the open and be more accountable to citizens."

Enron Scandal: The Enron scandal in the year 2001 revealed a massive fraud resorted to in accounting by the Enron Corporation, which led to its bankruptcy and dissolution of Arthur Andersen, which is one of the five largest audit and accountancy partnerships in the world. This was a severe blow to public confidence in corporate governance and a financial system as a whole. The Enron scandal brought greater skepticism toward corporate ethics and saw the passage of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 to extend corporate responsibility and investors from fraudulent financial disclosure (Journal of Business Ethics, 2002).

2008 Financial Crisis: As stated in the Journal of Financial Stability (2012), the 2008 financial crisis - caused by the failure of systemically important financial institutions due to excessive mortgage lending and other financial products - led to a global economic contraction. The crisis exposed unprecedented regulatory failures and unethical practices in the financial industry. On the whole, research evidence shows that public confidence in financial institutions and government regulatory bodies sharply decreased during and after the crisis. The crisis resulted in demands for regulatory reform and more accountability of the financial industry.

Petrobras Scandal: The Guardian (2017) reported that the Petrobras scandal, also known as Operation Car Wash, was a massive corruption inquiry in Brazil, with investigations beginning in 2014. It unraveled one of the most significant bribery scandals that involved state-controlled oil company Petrobras, politicians, and construction companies. The case was absolutely disastrous for public confidence in the Brazilian institutions, with surveys showing that a huge loss of faith had been inflicted on the government and political classes. Afterwards, the scandal gave rise to various legal reforms; most of these were targeted at helping in battling corruption and increasing transparency.

Nigeria: Halliburton Bribery Scandal: One of the most prominent cases of corruption has been the Halliburton bribery scandal in Nigeria. The scandal accused Halliburton and its one-time subsidiary, Kellogg Brown & Root, of paying over $180 million bribes to Nigerian officials for a liquefied natural gas plant on Bonny Island from 1994 to 2004. Several high-ranking officials were implicated in this scandal, and public outcry and resultant litigation was immense. This had a very profound impact on the public's perception of the general effect of corruption within the Nigerian government and its partner multinational corporations in unethical practices (Journal of African Law, 2020).

Issues and Challenges of Ethics and Accountability in Public Administration

As identified by Menzel (2017), there are few core issues and challenges faced by public administrators with regard to ethics and accountability. These involve corruption, nepotism, favoritism, and conflicts of interests. These generally undermine public trust in decision-making capabilities and overall integrity of public institutions. As such, those challenges are exacerbated by limited oversight capacities, multiple accountability expectations, and the complexity of public accountability relationships.

Corruption

Corruption in public administration is generally marked by the misuse of public power for private gain. Very common manifestations include bribery, embezzlement, and fraud. Corruption undermines the effectiveness of public services, distorts public policies, and leads to misallocation of resources. This not only hampers economic development but also lessens public trust in government institutions.

Nepotism and Favoritism

Nepotism and favoritism involve granting relatives or friends special treatments in job opportunities and other benefits. This might also point to the inefficiency and lack of meritocracy within a public institution. As noted by Peters & Pierre (2019) such practices of nepotism and favoritism undermine the principles of fairness and equality which lead to a demoralized workforce and loss of public confidence in the administration.

Conflicts of Interest

Conflicts of interest arise where there are private interests of public officials that have the potential to unduly influence the performance of their official duties. Conflicts of interest are probably among the most common sources of bias in decision-making processes as officials prioritize their personal interests over the interests of the general public. The integrity and impartiality of the public administration depends on proper management of conflicts of interest.

Enhancing Public Trust through Ethics and Accountability

Trust in government works as a foundation of legitimate regime because in a system of circuitous democracy people delegate their sovereignty to the actors of public and political institutions, credentialing that such mandate will be operated in an exact way.

Public trust in government is closely linked to perceptions of ethical conduct and accountability. When citizens believe that government officials act in their best interest and are held accountable for misconduct, they are more likely to support public institutions (Bouckaert, 2012). In contrast, a lack of accountability can lead to scandals, corruption, and a general decline in governance quality (Johnston, 2014). Trust in public administration is essential for the smooth functioning of democratic systems, as it influences public participation, compliance with laws, and overall political stability (Yang, 2005).

Bridging the Gaps

To bridge the gap between ethical standards and public accountability, a comprehensive approach is required. Governments need to adopt clear codes of conduct for public officials, enforce these standards through independent oversight mechanisms, and engage civil society in monitoring governance (Huberts, 2018). Furthermore, promoting a culture of integrity within public institutions can help deter unethical behavior. Training programs and ethical leadership can also reinforce the importance of maintaining high ethical standards (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015).

Ways of improving Ethics and Accountability in Public Administration

There are various methods that can enhance ethics and accountability in public administration. These include the protection of the whistleblowers to encourage reporting of unethical behaviors through strongly established and enforced policies. In addition, the implementation of auditing and appropriate oversight processes is necessary, as well as mandatory recurring ethics training by agencies. According to GovExec (2021), t these include commitment to integrity and ethics values, establishment of responsibility, accountability and oversight, managing risk, communication and continuous improvement.

1. Protection of Whistleblowers: A climate should be instituted in which employees can report incidents involving unethical conduct with no fear of retaliation. Miceli and Near (2019) argued that effective whistleblower protection may facilitate the detection of misconduct and prevent further unethical behavior in the future.
2. Auditing and Oversight: Continuous audits and oversight mechanisms are helpful in detecting and preventing unethical practices. Independent auditing bodies are the very backbone of accountability and transparency in public administration.
3. Ethics Training: Regular ethics training is important to make public officials deeply understand and uphold ethical standards. In support, the program of training should be designed in such a way that it should focus on specific areas of ethical challenges faced by public administrators (Ethics Resource Center, 2021).

The Role of Leadership in Promoting Ethical Behaviour

Leaders are supposed to promote ethical behavior through establishing and modeling ethical standards. Their actions and attitudes will go a long way in shaping the organizational climate. An ethical leader would inspire those around him or her to behave well since he or she models a standard of behavior and gives direction in conducting business in an ethical manner.

1. Tone at the Top: Leaders and government officials should demonstrate ethical behavior through actions and decisions. Ethical leadership requires setting the standard for ethics and holding everyone to that standard (Trevino et al., 2018).
2. Creation of Ethical Culture: Leaders need to develop organizational culture with regard to ethics and integrity. Communication, reinforcement, and recognition are the three ways through which an ethical culture is developed (Schein, 2017).
3. Guiding to Ethics: Leaders need to guide and support officials and employees if they are faced with any ethical dilemma situations. Brown and Trevino, (2019), mentioned the aspect of opening up and making resources available for ethical decision-making.

International Perspectives: A comparison of ethics and accountability practices in different countries

1. Singapore: Singapore is often cited as a model for ethical governance and accountability. Through stringent anti-corruption laws and a culture of meritocracy, Singapore has created a highly ethical public administration system. The city-state's Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) is known for its independent and rigorous oversight of public officials (Quah, 2017).
2. Nigeria: In contrast, Nigeria has faced significant challenges in enforcing accountability in public administration. Despite the establishment of agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), corruption remains pervasive, largely due to weak institutional frameworks and political interference (Ogundiya, 2010). This undermines public trust and erodes governance quality.
3. Sweden: Sweden's public administration is characterized by transparency and accountability. The Swedish model emphasizes the role of civil society and media in holding government officials accountable, contributing to high levels of public trust (Lundquist, 2012). This participatory approach ensures that ethical standards are maintained across the board.

Conclusion

Ethics and accountability in public administration form an integral part of securing and sustaining citizens' confidence, coupled with the conduction of good governance. This identifies the role of ethics in guiding the actions and conduct of individual members of public services, whereas accountability functions to enforce responsibility on them. Major scandals related to the erosion of public trust-such as the Watergate scandal and Enron scandal-discussed, make the need for stronger ethical structures and mechanisms of accountability even more indispensable. Corruption, nepotism, and conflict of interest are some of the challenges to maintaining ethics. The study recommended ways to enhance ethics and accountability to include: protection of whistleblowers, auditing processes, and ethics training. It went further to make a comparison of how ethics and accountability are set up in countries such as Singapore, Nigeria, and Sweden. This study concluded that a comprehensive approach is needed in order to bridge the gap between ethical standards and public accountability.

Recommendations

The following suggestions are recommended:

1. Strengthening Oversight Mechanisms: Independent bodies, such as anti-corruption agencies and ombudsmen, should be empowered to investigate misconduct without political interference.
2. Promoting Ethical Leadership: Ethical leadership can shape organizational culture and set a tone of integrity, encouraging public officials to adhere to ethical principles (Frederickson, 2010).
3. Increasing Transparency: Government operations should be transparent, with public access to information, to ensure accountability (Bovens, 2010).

4. Civic Engagement: Engaging citizens and civil society organizations in governance processes can enhance accountability and foster trust (Löffler, 2021).

References

BetterUp (2023). "The Importance of Being an Ethical Leader and How to Become One." Available at: BetterUp.

Bouckaert, G. (2012). Trust and public administration. Administration, 60(1), 91-115.

Bovens, M. (2010). Two concepts of accountability: Accountability as a virtue and as a mechanism. West European Politics, 33(5), 946-967.

Business Ethics Network (2023). "Organizational Ethics: Building a Culture of Integrity and Responsibility." Available at: Business Ethics Network.

Denhardt, R. B., & Denhardt, J. V. (2015). The new public service: Serving, not steering (4th ed.). Routledge.

Ethics Resource Center (2021). "Ethics Training in Public Administration." Available at: Ethics Resource Center.

Frederickson, H. G. (2010). Public ethics and the new managerialism: An axiomatic theory. Springer.

GovExec (2021). "Reestablishing Integrity, Transparency and Accountability in Government." Available at: GovExec.

Huberts, L. W. J. C. (2018). Integrity: What it is and why it is important. Public Integrity, 20(sup1), S18-S32.

JETIR (2023). "Ethical Challenges in Public Administration: Examining Ethical Issues." Available at: JETIR.

Johnston, M. (2014). Corruption, contention, and reform: The power of deep democratization. Cambridge University Press.

Journal of African Law (2020). "Halliburton Bribery Scandal: A Case Study of Corruption in Nigeria." Available at: Cambridge University Press.

Journal of Business Ethics (2002). "The Enron Scandal and Its Impact on Corporate Governance." Available at: SpringerLink.

Journal of Financial Stability (2012). "The Financial Crisis and Public Trust in Financial Institutions." Available at: ScienceDirect.

Löffler, E. (2021). Co-production of public services and outcomes. In T. Bovaird & E. Löffler (Eds.), Public Management and Governance (3rd ed., pp. 159-174). Routledge.

Lundquist, L. (2012). Transparency, accountability, and trust. Public Management Review, 14(5), 625-635.

Menzel, D. (2017). "Ethics and Integrity in Public Service." Available at: Taylor & Francis.

Miceli, M. P., & Near, J. P. (2019). "Whistleblowing in Organizations." Available at: Routledge.

OECD (2020). "Managing Conflicts of Interest in the Public Sector." Available at: OECD.

Ogundiya, I. S. (2010). Corruption: The bane of democratic stability in Nigeria. Current Research Journal of Social Sciences, 2(4), 233-241.

Peters, B. G., & Pierre, J. (2019). "The Politics of Bureaucracy." Available at: Routledge.

Pew Research Center (2024). "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024." Available at: Pew Research.

Public ethics and accountability - bE-Open (beopen-congress.eu)

http://www.lijassed.org
Print ISSN: 2992-4979
Online ISSN: 2992-4987

Public Opinion Quarterly (2000). “Origins and Consequences of Public Trust in Government: A Time Series Analysis.” Available at: Oxford Academic.

Quah, J. S. T. (2017). Anti-corruption agencies in Asia Pacific countries: An evaluation of their performance and challenges. ISEAS Publishing.

Rothstein, B., & Varraich, A. (2017). Making Sense of Corruption. Cambridge University Press.

Schein, E. H. (2017). “Organizational Culture and Leadership.” Available at: [Wiley](https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Organizational+Culture+and+Leadership%2C+5th+Edition-p-

The Guardian (2017). “Operation Car Wash: The Biggest Corruption Scandal Ever?” Available at: The Guardian.

Transparency International (2022). “Corruption Perceptions Index 2022.” Available at: Transparency International.

Trevino, L. K., Hartman, L. P., & Brown, M. (2018). “Moral Person and Moral Manager: How Executives Develop a Reputation for Ethical Leadership.” Available at: Academy of Management Executive.

UTPB (2023). “Strategies for Improving Ethics and Accountability in Public Administration.” Available at: UTPB.

Ulabor, E.A. (2022). Business Policy and Strategy. Oshogbo. Soundminds Publishing.

Yang, K. (2005). Public administrators’ trust in citizens: A missing link in citizen involvement efforts. Public Administration Review, 65(3), 273-285.