Received 17 January 2026
Revised 20 February 2026
12 March 2026
Accepted 17 March 2026

Ethics as a navigational practice under legitimacy pressure: moral plurality in organizational change

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to explain why and how ethics in public organizations become necessarily morally plural under conditions of external legitimacy pressure and ongoing organizational change. Rather than framing moral plurality as a normative problem or individual shortcoming, the article develops an organizational and process-oriented explanation of how professionals interpret, mobilize and legitimate different ethical logics in practice. By integrating institutional theory and social complexity perspectives, it shows how moral meaning emerges through four organizational mechanisms that structure professional action under legitimacy pressure.

Design/methodology/approach – This article is a conceptual–explanatory synthesis grounded in existing empirical research on organizational change. It does not present new primary data. Instead, it develops an analytical framework in which institutional theory and social complexity theory function as interpretive lenses through which prior empirical findings are re-examined. Four organizational mechanisms are constructed as analytical devices to interpret patterned dynamics in professional action under conditions of legitimacy pressure. The approach is interpretive and pattern-explanatory.

Findings – The findings show that ethics in public organizations takes shape as a situational and plural practice rather than as a coherent normative system. External legitimacy pressures are processed through recurring organizational mechanisms (organized hypocrisy, decoupling, institutional layering, and particularization), which jointly structure professional action. These mechanisms enable internal workability while simultaneously producing moral plurality. Professionals navigate this plurality by situationally activating different ethical repertoires depending on context, organizational level and accountability arena. Moral judgments therefore emerge dynamically in interaction, particularly during ongoing change processes.

Research limitations/implications – This article is conceptual and explanatory in nature and does not involve primary empirical data collection. The proposed framework is developed through the integration of theory and existing empirical research and is not intended to be statistically generalizable. Future research could empirically examine how professionals enact and reflect on ethical navigation practices over time, and how organizational conditions shape the activation of ethical repertoires across different public sector contexts.

Practical implications – Ethics in public organizations cannot be effectively addressed through uniform values, codes, or compliance frameworks alone. Ethical challenges arise from structural conditions of legitimacy pressure and continuous change, requiring organizational spaces for reflection, dialogue and sensemaking. Managers and change agents may benefit from recognizing moral plurality as a normal feature of professional practice and from facilitating conversations that support professionals in articulating, negotiating, and legitimating moral judgments *in situ*.

Social implications – Moral plurality in public organizations has broader societal implications for democratic legitimacy and public trust. Professional judgments made under legitimacy pressure shape how public values are enacted in practice. Conceptualizing ethics as a situated and relational practice helps explain why public decisions may appear inconsistent while remaining socially defensible. Making moral navigation more visible can contribute to more transparent accountability and a more nuanced public understanding of governance in complex institutional contexts.

Originality/value – This article conceptualizes ethics in public organizations as a navigational practice rather than a stable normative framework. By integrating institutional theory and social complexity perspectives, it provides an organizational explanation for moral plurality under conditions of external legitimacy pressure and ongoing change. The study shifts attention from individual moral deficits to structural and processual dynamics

Journal of Organizational Change Management
Vol. 39 No. 8, 2026
pp. 82-99
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1758-7816
p-ISSN: 0953-4814
DOI 10.1108/JOCM-01-2026-0028

and introduces a heuristic matrix that connects organizational mechanisms to the situational activation of ethical repertoires.

Keywords Institutional complexity, Legitimacy pressure, Ethics as practice, Moral plurality, Organizational change processes, Professional sensemaking

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

In public organizations, ethics is often presented as a coherent and guiding set of values and norms. Missions, visions, core values and ethical codes suggest that moral conduct can be steered through explicit articulation and formal norm-setting. Within this view, ethics appears as a stable frame of reference that provides professionals with guidance in making choices and rendering account.

In everyday practice, however, this assumption proves difficult to sustain. Professionals operate in contexts marked by diverse and often contradictory expectations. Political accountability arrangements, oversight regimes, audit requirements, media attention and societal sensitivities each define what counts as responsible and legitimate action. At the same time, work must remain practicable in concrete situations, under time pressure and limited resources. Moral deliberation thus unfolds within a structural field of tension in which unambiguous norms rarely provide sufficient guidance.

This article starts from the observation that ethics in public organizations is structurally plural. Ethics is not primarily understood here as a normative system of moral rules, but as the ways in which professionals, in concrete situations, make sense of what counts as responsible, appropriate or defensible action. Ethics is thus approached as a practice of moral interpretation and justification that emerges through interaction with others and in relation to organizational and institutional contexts.

Professionals do not reason from a single moral logic. They shift between different orientations: at times, compliance with rules is central; at other times, desired effects, care for concrete individuals, professional judgment or public justification take precedence. These orientations coexist in tension and are activated situationally, particularly during ongoing change processes in which moral assumptions become more explicit.

Such plurality is often interpreted normatively by scholars, who describe it as inconsistency, erosion or a lack of moral compass. In contrast, three recurring tendencies are problematized in this article. First, compliance-based conceptions are set aside in which researchers equate ethics with adherence to formal rules and procedures. Second, interpretations that attribute moral ambiguity to deficits in professional integrity or competence are critically examined. Third, linear and interventionist models of organizational change are questioned, particularly where researchers and practitioners assume that moral tensions can be resolved through clearer steering or more explicit value articulation. Instead, moral plurality is explained in organizational and processual terms as a structural outcome of legitimacy pressure and continuous change.

The central thesis is that moral plurality does not reflect moral deficiency but constitutes a patterned outcome of organizing under external legitimacy pressure. The research question therefore asks: why and how is ethics in public organizations necessarily constructed as plural by professionals operating in such conditions?

The article contributes to research on organizational change by conceptualizing ethics as a change-related practice emerging in and through legitimacy dynamics. By integrating institutional theory and social complexity theory, it shows how change processes do not resolve moral tension but actively produce and structure it. In doing so, it conceptualizes moral plurality as the patterned coexistence of differentiated decision premises under legitimacy pressure, thereby contributing to debates on the reprogramming of organizational decision-making in institutionally complex environments.

The analysis begins by examining how legitimacy pressure shapes the functioning of public organizations. Subsequently, four organizational mechanisms characteristic of such contexts are elaborated. Ethics is then conceptualized as an analytical repertoire of moral orientations, after which attention shifts to the situational activation of these orientations in practice. Finally, implications are discussed for understanding ethics, professionalism and accountability in public organizations.

2. Theoretical and epistemological positioning

This article combines two theoretical perspectives to explain ethics in public organizations under conditions of external legitimacy pressure: institutional theory and the social complexity approach. This combination enables an analysis of both the structural context in which public organizations operate and the dynamics of professional action in everyday practice.

2.1 Institutional theory: legitimacy and structural plurality

Institutional theory examines how organizations are shaped by their institutional environments, in which norms, expectations, rules and dominant rationalities define what counts as appropriate and legitimate (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2014). From this perspective, organizations are not primarily understood as rationally designed systems, but as actors that must continuously align their actions with external expectations in order to maintain legitimacy and room for maneuver (Scott, 2014; Suchman, 1995).

A central insight of this approach is that organizations develop formal structures, policy frameworks and programs that align with institutional demands, even when these contribute only marginally to the effectiveness of everyday practice. Such formal arrangements do not merely serve instrumental purposes; they perform a symbolic and legitimizing role vis-à-vis the institutional environment (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Suchman, 1995). It is through this dynamic that space emerges for a structural separation between formal ordering and actual practice.

This separation has been further elaborated in the work of Weick, who describes organizations as loosely coupled systems in which components are only partially connected (Weick, 1976). In such systems, decisions, policy changes or external signals can exist without being directly or fully translated into other parts of the organization. Decoupling enhances organizational resilience while simultaneously generating internal variation and plurality in action and meaning-making (Orton and Weick, 1990).

Brunsson deepens this institutional insight by showing how organizations cope structurally with contradictory expectations by allowing different logics to coexist. In his analysis of organized hypocrisy, talk, decisions and action may diverge functionally. Such inconsistency does not constitute a deviation, but a rational strategy for accommodating simultaneous and competing stakeholder demands (Brunsson, 1989).

Later institutional approaches extend these insights by highlighting multiple institutional logics and power relations. Organizations frequently operate in fields where partly conflicting rationalities remain simultaneously valid, producing enduring tensions between different forms of legitimacy (Thornton *et al*., 2012). Institutional environments are not merely reproduced but actively navigated by actors who position themselves strategically among these logics (Battilana *et al*., 2009).

Institutional theory thus explains why public organizations are structurally confronted with multiple and conflicting expectations, and why attempts at unambiguous steering come under strain under conditions of external legitimacy pressure (Scott, 2014; Thornton *et al*., 2012).

In this article, institutional theory primarily operates at the level of environmental structuring and legitimacy expectations. It provides a macro-structural account of how public organizations become embedded in fields characterized by heterogeneous rationalities and

how legitimacy pressures shape formal structures and discursive commitments. In doing so, it explains why plurality and tension emerge.

2.2 Social complexity approach: action, meaning-making and emergence

Social complexity approaches, by contrast, operate at the level of interactional emergence and local pattern formation. They focus on how meaning, coordination and order arise through ongoing interaction among organizational actors. Rather than explaining structural pressures, they illuminate how such pressures are processed, interpreted and stabilized in everyday practice.

From this perspective, organizations are understood as dynamic patterns of interaction among individuals in which meaning, power and identity are continuously in the making (Stacey, 2001, 2011). Stacey's work forms an important bridge between systems-oriented and processual perspectives on organizations. While many organizational theories build on systems thinking and conceptualize organizations as relatively coherent entities that can be designed and steered through formal structures, strategies and decision premises, Stacey (2001, 2011) argues that organizational dynamics primarily emerge through ongoing local interactions between actors. From this perspective of complex responsive processes, organizations are not stable systems but continuously evolving patterns of communication and interaction. This perspective challenges the functionalist assumption that ethical orientations can be stabilized through formal rules or organizational structures. Instead, ethical orientations arise through local processes of interpretation, justification and negotiation among organizational actors. The present framework builds on this insight by analyzing how ethical repertoires are shaped within concrete organizational practices under conditions of legitimacy pressure, thereby contributing to debates at the intersection of systems-theoretical and processual approaches to organizational dynamics.

Organizational behavior, in this view, does not primarily result from the implementation of plans or policy interventions; rather, it emerges through local interactions in which actors interpret situations, position themselves vis-à-vis others, and explore possible courses of action (Stacey, 2001; Weick, 1995). In this context, Weick's work can be seen as a conceptual bridge between structural coupling and interactional sensemaking. Within this approach, stability and change are understood as emergent outcomes of ongoing interaction processes rather than as the product of central steering, design or linear intervention (Stacey, 2011; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Change manifests as a gradual pattern formation in communication and action, with formal frameworks functioning as one reference point among several shaping ongoing interaction.

In the Dutch context, this perspective has been empirically developed by Homan, whose large-scale research on change processes in municipalities shows that organizational change emerges from local interaction, meaning-making and positioning rather than from the execution of predefined plans (Homan, 2019). In later work, Homan conceptualizes organizational change as a conversational power dynamic in which direction, legitimacy and influence take shape through ongoing interaction among organizational members (Homan, 2021).

The social complexity approach clarifies how professionals engage with structural tensions in concrete situations. External demands and formal frameworks do not directly determine action; they are interpreted, translated and sometimes neutralized in local practices (Weick, 1995; Stacey, 2011). This explains why action within the same organization may vary across individuals, contexts or moments without necessarily reflecting inconsistent steering or individual failure (Homan, 2019).

2.3 Combining perspectives: explaining without normative judgment

The combination of institutional theory and the social complexity approach constitutes the analytical framework of this article. Institutional theory clarifies why public organizations are

structurally confronted with plurality and legitimacy pressure, while the social complexity approach explains how these structural conditions are engaged, interpreted and enacted in everyday professional practice.

The integration proposed here is asymmetrical in the sense that each perspective addresses a different analytical problem. Institutional theory explains why public organizations are structurally confronted with legitimacy pressure and normative plurality at the field level. Social complexity theory, in contrast, explains how organizational actors interpret and negotiate these pressures in everyday interaction. The perspectives are therefore not merged into a single meta-theory, but remain analytically distinct and operate at different levels of observation. This combination avoids both structural determinism, in which action is fully explained by institutional environments, and micro-voluntarism, in which structural conditions disappear into local interaction.

Ethics is conceptualized as a practice emerging in the tension between structural pressure and locally emergent interaction. The term "mechanism" is used in a pattern-explanatory and heuristic sense rather than as a strictly causal generative mechanism in the analytical sociology tradition. It refers to recurring organizing processes through which legitimacy pressures are differentiated and temporarily stabilized in practice.

Epistemologically, this article aligns with interpretive and explanatory organizational research. Theories function as analytical lenses for identifying recurring patterns of action and meaning-making rather than as normative frameworks for prescribing morally right conduct. This positioning enables the analysis of moral plurality without framing it as a deficit or anomaly. In this respect, the article departs from approaches to organizational change that conceive change primarily as a process that can be planned, normatively prescribed or linearly steered.

The article should therefore be read as a conceptual–explanatory contribution rather than as an empirical case study. The proposed mechanisms and matrix do not represent positivist findings but analytical constructions derived from the integration of theory and prior empirical research. Their purpose is to clarify patterned tendencies in organizing under legitimacy pressure, not to establish causal relationships.

3. External legitimacy pressure as an empirical context

Public organizations operate in institutional environments in which legitimacy constitutes a central condition for organizational survival and room for action. They are continuously evaluated by a wide range of external actors, including political principals, oversight bodies, audit institutions, media and societal stakeholders, each applying different norms and evaluation criteria. Institutional theory shows that organizations acquire legitimacy by conforming to external norms and expectations (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2014), while legitimacy scholars emphasize that legitimacy emerges within a socially constructed system of judgments formed by multiple stakeholders (Suchman, 1995). For public organizations, this dynamic applies with particular intensity, as they operate in highly politicized and publicly visible contexts in which legitimacy is continuously contested.

Empirical research on change and development processes in Dutch municipalities shows that this legitimacy pressure manifests itself in practice primarily through a continuous stream of change and development initiatives (Homan, 2019). Change trajectories, policy programs and development initiatives are often initiated in response to external signals, such as political questions, oversight reports, societal incidents or public imagery. Such trajectories often do not function as instruments for internal improvement, but as visible responses to external demands for governability and accountability. Homan demonstrates that, in this context, demonstrating governability and responsibility often weighs more heavily than actually changing everyday practice (Homan, 2019). Formal plans and programs create visibility and legitimacy toward the external environment, while their effects on daily practice often remain limited, phased or selective. Public organizations

therefore develop ways of absorbing and filtering external demands without fundamentally disrupting internal functioning.

External legitimacy pressure thus functions as a dominant ordering force in public organizations. It shapes which issues are framed as urgent, which interventions are initiated, and which language is used to justify action. Change, in this context, is not an incidental activity, but a structural condition of organizing in the public sector.

This continuous change pressure increases the complexity of professionals' everyday work. In change contexts, professionals are confronted with shifting priorities, temporary uncertainty and competing interpretations of what constitutes responsible action. Change initiatives thus function not only as organizational interventions, but also as practices in which legitimacy, professionalism and workability are continuously reinterpreted. This empirical context forms the starting point for the analysis of the organizational mechanisms that public organizations develop to cope with these tensions.

4. Organizational mechanisms under external legitimacy pressure

Public organizations operating under external legitimacy pressure do not have access to unambiguous or linear courses of action. The multiple and partly contradictory demands to which they are exposed cannot be directly translated into everyday organizational functioning. As a result, specific organizational mechanisms emerge to deal with these tensions. These mechanisms should not be understood as exceptions or dysfunctions, but as functional and workable responses to institutional complexity.

The mechanisms described below are not sequential stages, independent variables or causal triggers. Rather, they operate at different analytical dimensions (discursive, structural, environmental and interactional) and describe interacting patterning processes through which professionals in organizations process and stabilize legitimacy pressures.

This section elaborates on four recurring mechanisms characteristic of public organizations under such conditions: organized hypocrisy, decoupling, institutional layering, and particularization (Kieft, 2026). Their analytical relevance becomes particularly visible where organizational change is not an incidental intervention, but a structural condition of organizing. Institutional layering increases normative density at the field level; organized hypocrisy differentiates justificatory registers across audiences; decoupling differentiates structural domains and limits transmission effects and particularization stabilizes local interactional patterns under conditions of under-determination. Together, they form a recursive configuration rather than a linear explanatory model.

The mechanisms are analyzed descriptively and from an organizational perspective, without normative evaluation. Taken together, they clarify why plurality, inconsistency and variation in action constitute structural features of public organizations.

4.1 Organized hypocrisy

Organized hypocrisy refers to the structural divergence between talk, decisions and action within organizations (Brunsson, 1989). Under conditions of contradictory or competing institutional expectations, sustained alignment between these domains becomes difficult to maintain. Rather than resolving such tensions, organizations allow multiple normative logics to coexist without fully integrating them. In public organizations, this configuration enables actors to align externally with dominant expectations while preserving internal room for workability. By accommodating diverse demands in language, policy documents and formal decision-making, legitimacy can be maintained without fully determining everyday practice. The resulting tension between talk, decisions and action should therefore not be interpreted as a deviation from rational organizing, but as a functional way of rendering institutional pressure manageable (Brunsson, 1989; Homan, 2019).

4.2 Decoupling

Decoupling concerns the loosely coupled functioning of organizational units, levels or processes. Weick describes organizations as loosely coupled systems in which connections are flexible, indirect and situational (Weick, 1976). Decisions, policy changes or external signals can therefore exist without automatically and fully permeating all parts of the organization.

In public organizations, decoupling manifests itself both vertically and horizontally. Vertical decoupling refers to the relatively autonomous functioning of governing, policy-making and operational layers. Horizontal decoupling concerns differences in how developments translate across departments, policy domains or organizational units. Decoupling enhances organizational resilience by enabling the absorption of external pressure, while simultaneously contributing to variation in action and meaning-making within the organization (Orton and Weick, 1990; Homan, 2019).

4.3 Institutional layering

Institutional layering refers to the cumulative character of external demands. New norms, policy priorities and accountability requirements rarely replace existing expectations entirely, but are added on top of them (Thornton *et al*., 2012). This results in layered institutional environments in which multiple rationalities remain simultaneously valid.

For public organizations, this means that they are addressed concurrently on diverse criteria, such as legality, efficiency, transparency and societal impact. Institutional layering explains the proliferation of policy layers, programs and accountability mechanisms, and contributes to structural priority conflicts in everyday functioning (Putters, 2009). This accumulation increases the complexity faced by organizations and professionals, without providing a clear or unifying ordering principle.

4.4 Particularization

Particularization refers to the emergence of locally coherent orders within organizations as an emergent outcome of ongoing interaction among organizational members. From a social complexity perspective, organizations are understood as dynamic patterns of relations among individuals, in which meaning and stability are generated through local interaction rather than through central control (Stacey, 2001, 2011).

Under conditions of decoupling and institutional layering, organizational members develop temporary local orders in conversations, collaboration, and coordination that are workable and meaningful to them. Shaw (2002) shows how such local conversations function as sites in which organizational meaning is constructed and stabilized. Stacey *et al*. (2000) describe these processes as complex responsive processes of relating, in which patterns emerge through mutual adjustment and repetition.

Empirical research on change processes in public organizations shows that professionals largely shape their actions within such locally emergent practices, in which it is determined what counts as workable and defensible in a specific context (Homan, 2019, 2021). These local orders are internally coherent, but may differ substantially across contexts.

From a social complexity perspective, particularization thus constitutes a functional organizational mechanism that explains why uniform steering and unambiguous implementation of formal frameworks are structurally under pressure in institutionally complex public contexts.

4.5 Mechanisms as a recursive configuration

The four mechanisms do not operate in isolation, nor do they represent alternative responses from which actors deliberately choose. Rather, they form an interconnected configuration through which legitimacy pressure is processed across different dimensions of organizing. Each mechanism primarily operates at a distinct analytical dimension: the environmental level

(institutional layering), the discursive level (organized hypocrisy), the structural level (decoupling) and the interactional level (particularization). In practice, these mechanisms reinforce one another.

Institutional layering increases the density and heterogeneity of normative expectations at the field level. Organized hypocrisy differentiates discursive registers across audiences, enabling the simultaneous articulation of competing demands. Decoupling separates structural domains and limits the direct transmission of formal decisions into everyday practice. Particularization generates locally coherent ways of working when formal programs leave room for interpretation.

The mechanisms continuously interact. Increased layering intensifies normative complexity, making differentiated forms of justification more likely. Discursive differentiation, in turn, renders structural separation workable and creates space for local stabilization. The mechanisms therefore operate recursively rather than sequentially. Plurality and inconsistency in professional action thus become intelligible as patterned outcomes of organizing under legitimacy pressure, rather than as deviations from rational or coherent organization.

5. Professional action under external legitimacy pressure

The organizational mechanisms described above not only structure how organizations function, but also shape the conditions under which professionals make choices, experience room for action, and legitimate their conduct. Professional action thus does not unfold in a neutral environment, but within an institutional and organizational force field that is both multiple and dynamic.

5.1 Multiple accountability contexts

Professionals operate within multiple accountability arenas. They are accountable to different actors, each applying their own evaluative criteria, including administrators, supervisors, managers, colleagues and citizens (Hupe and Hill, 2007; Bovens *et al*., 2014). These arenas are not hierarchically ordered, but coexist and may mutually reinforce or contradict one another.

Through organized hypocrisy and decoupling, these accountability arenas can coexist without being fully integrated. For professionals, this means that their actions must be justifiable in different ways, depending on the context and the audience to whom they are accountable. Accountability thus acquires a situational character.

5.2 Discretionary space and tensions in action

Decoupling and particularization create room for local tailoring and professional judgment, while institutional layering and external legitimacy pressure simultaneously constrain this space. Professionals therefore operate within a continuous tension between compliance and deviation, between formal expectations and practical feasibility (Lipsky, 2010; Noordegraaf, 2015).

In this context, professional action cannot be reduced to the execution of policies or rules. It requires ongoing judgment, in which professionals assess what is feasible, defensible and appropriate in a specific situation, given the diverse demands to which they are exposed.

5.3 Legitimation as part of the work

Under conditions of external legitimacy pressure, legitimation becomes an integral part of professional action. Professionals not only act, but must also be able to explain and defend their actions to different internal and external audiences. This legitimation does not focus exclusively on outcomes, but also on procedures, intentions and contextual circumstances (Bovens *et al*., 2014).

Formal language, policy frameworks and accountability formats provide vocabulary for external legitimation, while ongoing local interaction practices contribute to internal workability. Legitimation is therefore not an activity that takes place after the fact, but a continuous component of everyday work.

5.4 Professional action as navigation

The combination of multiple accountability demands, discretionary space and persistent legitimacy pressure turns professional action into a form of navigation. Professionals move between different expectations, rationalities and interpretive frames, without any single reference point providing direction in all situations (Schön, 1983; Noordegraaf, 2015).

This navigation becomes particularly intense in contexts of change. Change and development processes disrupt established routines, reorder responsibilities, and redefine what counts as "good work." As a result, professionals are confronted more explicitly with moral tension: existing justifications lose their taken-for-granted character, while new frameworks have not yet stabilized. In such situations, the need to legitimize action not only practically but also morally becomes more pronounced.

5.5 Transition to ethics as an analytical question

Professional action in public organizations is structurally characterized by plurality, context-dependence and ongoing legitimacy concerns. These characteristics call for an approach to ethics that does not assume a single coherent normative framework, but instead does justice to the shifting between different moral logics in concrete situations. In the next section, ethics is therefore approached as an analytical repertoire through which this moral dynamic can be systematically examined.

6. Ethics as an analytical repertoire

6.1 Ethics as a practice of moral sensemaking

In public organizations, ethics is often formalized in values, codes, and guidelines intended to provide direction for professional conduct. Research on public values, integrity and professionalism shows, however, that such normative frameworks only partially explain how professionals make moral judgments in practice, precisely because they operate in contexts characterized by multiple and often conflicting expectations (Van der Wal, 2011; Huberts, 2014; Organizational behavior, in this view, 2019).

Ethics is therefore approached here as a practice of moral sensemaking and justification. It refers to the ways in which professionals, in concrete situations, give meaning to what counts as responsible, right or defensible action, in relation to their organizational and institutional context (MacIntyre, 1981; Tronto, 1993). This process of moral sensemaking becomes particularly salient in situations of change, where taken-for-granted assumptions are destabilized and new justifications have to be developed.

6.2 Delimitation: why a repertoire of ethical approaches

The analysis of professional action under legitimacy pressure shows that professionals do not act from a single coherent moral logic. Instead, they shift between different moral perspectives depending on the situation, the organizational level, and the accountability arena in which they are operating (Hupe and Hill, 2007; Lipsky, 2010). To analyze this dynamic, this article works with a delimited ethical repertoire.

The selection of ethical approaches is based on three criteria. First, the approaches must be empirically recognizable in public organizations, as demonstrated by research on public values, professionalism and accountability (Huberts, 2014; De Graaf *et al*., 2014). Second, they must represent distinct moral rationalities, allowing different modes of justification to be

analytically distinguished. Third, they must be theoretically robust and rooted in established ethical traditions.

On the basis of these criteria, seven forms of ethics are distinguished. Together, these forms cover the main moral logics mobilized in public organizations, without aiming for exhaustive completeness.

6.3 Analytical status and differentiation

The seven ethical forms are treated as analytically distinguished, ideal-typical justificatory repertoires rather than as mutually exclusive moral systems. They are not presented as ontologically separate ethical domains, but as sensitizing categories that help to observe how moral communication unfolds in organizational practice.

Analytical differentiation relies on three criteria: (1) the primary normative anchoring (e.g. rule, consequence, character, relation, justice, dialogue), (2) the dominant justificatory grammar through which action is made defensible and (3) the evaluative reference point that structures moral assessment.

Overlap between ethical forms is both possible and empirically likely. For example, professional ethics may draw on virtue-ethical reasoning, and care ethics may intersect with relational ethics in practice. The distinctions proposed here are therefore analytical rather than empirical or normative boundaries. Their purpose is not to fix moral categories, but to make visible patterned differences in how professionals justify action under conditions of legitimacy pressure.

6.4 Seven forms of ethics

6.4.1 Duty ethics (rule- and responsibility-based ethics). Duty ethics focuses on compliance with rules, procedures, and formal responsibilities. This approach is classically elaborated by Kant, who links moral action to adherence to universally valid duties (Kant, 1997).

In public organizations, duty ethics is empirically dominant in contexts of legality, oversight, and political accountability. Research on integrity and public values shows that professionals frequently legitimate their actions by referring to rules, mandates and procedural correctness (Huberts, 2014). Street-level bureaucrats are also structurally held accountable for compliance with formal rules, particularly under public and political pressure (Lipsky, 2010).

6.4.2 Consequential ethics (utilitarian ethics). Consequential ethics evaluates actions based on their outcomes. In the utilitarian tradition, as formulated by Mill, maximizing overall welfare is central (Mill, 1861/2001). In public organizations, this approach manifests itself primarily in terms of efficiency, effectiveness and societal impact.

Empirical research on policy-making, performance management and public sector reform shows that professionals regularly reason in terms of cost–benefit assessments, risks and anticipated effects (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). This moral logic is recognizable in evaluations, indicator systems and accountability practices.

6.4.3 Virtue ethics and professional ethics. Virtue ethics focuses on character, practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and moral judgment (Aristotle, ca. 350 BCE/2000). In contemporary professional contexts, this approach is associated with craftsmanship, experience and reflective practice (MacIntyre, 1981; Schön, 1983).

Research on professionalism in public organizations shows that in situations of uncertainty and complexity, professionals often rely on experience, expertise and a sense of responsibility when rules or goals provide insufficient guidance (Noordegraaf, 2015). Virtue ethics functions here as a moral reference point for professional judgment.

6.4.4 Care ethics. Care ethics emphasizes relationality, dependency and responsibility for vulnerable others. Tronto elaborated this approach as an ethics of care practices (Tronto, 1993, 2013). Care ethics foregrounds responsibility within asymmetrical relations of dependency.

In public sectors such as healthcare, social work and welfare, extensive empirical research demonstrates that professionals make moral judgments based on attention to concrete relationships and needs (Tronto, 2013). Care ethics also becomes visible in broader public organizations when standard procedures fail to do justice to individual situations (Hupe and Hill, 2007).

6.4.5 Relational or practice-based ethics. Relational ethics assumes that moral meaning emerges through interaction and context. Relational ethics, by contrast, emphasizes the co-construction of moral meaning in interaction irrespective of dependency asymmetry. This approach is rooted in hermeneutic and pragmatic traditions, in which ethics is understood as something that develops within practices and relationships (Gadamer, 2004).

Organizational research shows that moral judgments in public organizations often emerge through consultation, coordination and collective reflection, rather than through the application of abstract norms (Weick, 1995; Homan, 2021). Relational ethics makes this interactive dimension of moral sensemaking explicit.

6.4.6 Justice ethics. Justice ethics focuses on fair distribution, equal treatment and recognition. Rawls emphasizes the importance of just institutions (Rawls, 1971), while Sen draws attention to actual capabilities and inequalities (Sen, 2009). Fraser adds a perspective on recognition and power relations (Fraser, 2009).

In public organizations, justice ethics is explicitly mobilized in discussions about the allocation of resources, access to services and inclusivity (De Graaf *et al*., 2014).

6.4.7 Discourse ethics. Discourse ethics holds that moral validity emerges through reasonable and inclusive dialogue. Habermas emphasizes that moral judgments are legitimate when they result from open argumentation among those affected (Habermas, 1991).

Empirical research on participation and deliberation shows that public legitimacy is related to the quality of decision-making processes and the extent to which stakeholders feel heard (Dryzek, 2000; Fung, 2006).

6.5 Ethics as a repertoire, not as a choice

Taken together, these seven approaches show that moral judgments in public organizations draw on diverse reference points: rules, outcomes, professional judgment, care relationships, justice, interaction and public justification. None of these approaches, on its own, can account for the moral complexity of professional action under legitimacy pressure. Together, however, they form an analytical repertoire that makes visible how professionals handle moral tension in institutionally complex and changing contexts. The situational mobilization of multiple ethical logics is not a sign of normative erosion, but a comprehensible consequence of organizing under conditions of multiple legitimacy demands (Homan, 2019).

7. Application: organizational mechanisms and the situational activation of ethics in practice

This section analyzes how specific organizational mechanisms are related to the situational activation of different forms of ethics in the practice of public organizations. The focus is not on causal relationships or fixed role allocations, but on recognizable patterns in which particular moral logics tend to come to the fore under specific organizational conditions.

From a change-oriented perspective, ethical sensemaking in this context can be understood as an integral part of change dynamics. In change processes, existing justifications shift, moral tensions become more explicit and new moral orientations emerge that professionals must engage with in their action and legitimation.

7.1 Organized hypocrisy

Organized hypocrisy refers to the structural separation of talk, decision-making and action within organizations (Brunsson, 1989). Under conditions of organizational change, this

separation often intensifies, as public organizations are expected to demonstrate responsiveness, transparency and learning in external arenas, while simultaneously preserving internal continuity and workability. Rather than resolving these tensions, organizations differentiate domains: external communication and formal decision-making become sites of explicit legitimation, whereas everyday practice remains partially buffered from these demands.

Empirical research demonstrates that when organizations are exposed to public scrutiny, actors in external arenas tend to mobilize procedural and rule-based vocabularies. Brunsson's (1989) analysis of public organizations shows how formal decisions and policy rhetoric function as instruments of legitimacy under conflicting expectations. Similarly, Meyer and Rowan (1977) describe how organizations adopt ceremonial structures and emphasize formal conformity in response to institutional pressure. Studies of CSR communication further illustrate how organizations rely on the language of compliance, transparency, and stakeholder dialogue when publicly accounting for their conduct (Christensen *et al*., 2013). Research on responses to institutional complexity likewise indicates that organizations strategically foreground conformity in external arenas in order to secure legitimacy (Pache and Santos, 2010; Deephouse, 1998). Across these studies, recurring justificatory patterns become visible: legitimacy is anchored in procedural correctness, formal accountability and publicly defensible reasoning.

Within the everyday practice of professionals, however, moral orientation frequently shifts. Research on street-level work and professional practice suggests that abstract norms and formal decisions rarely provide sufficient guidance for concrete situations, leading actors to rely on experience, relational judgment and situated responsibility (Schön, 1983; Tronto, 1993; Homan, 2019). Moral reasoning thus moves from rule compliance toward what is workable and appropriate in specific encounters. Taken together, these patterns suggest a structural affinity between organized hypocrisy and duty-oriented as well as deliberative ethical repertoires in external arenas, while simultaneously coexisting with care-oriented and professional vocabularies in practice. The resulting plurality is not accidental but patterned: it reflects how organizations render competing legitimacy demands manageable across differentiated domains.

7.2 Decoupling

Decoupling refers to the loosely coupled functioning of organizational units, levels or processes. Organizations operate as loosely coupled systems in which connections are flexible, indirect and situational (Weick, 1976; Orton and Weick, 1990). As a result, decisions, policy changes, or external signals do not automatically permeate all parts of the organization.

In public organizations, decoupling manifests both vertically between governing, policy-making and operational layers, and horizontally across departments and policy domains. While this structural looseness enhances organizational resilience by buffering external pressure, it simultaneously generates variation in action and meaning-making within the organization (Homan, 2019).

Empirical research on implementation processes, street-level bureaucracy and hybrid professionalism demonstrates that when formal structures are only loosely coupled to everyday practice, professionals frequently justify their actions in relational and context-sensitive terms (Lipsky, 2010; Hupe and Hill, 2007; Noordegraaf, 2015). Abstract norms, policy frameworks and managerial decisions rarely provide sufficient guidance for concrete situations. Instead, actors rely on experiential knowledge, situational judgment and attentiveness to the needs of specific others. Moral reasoning thus shifts from abstract rule compliance toward what is workable, appropriate and responsible in particular encounters. A study on selective coupling further shows that actors strategically align with certain institutional demands at the formal level, while prioritizing relational obligations and professional standards in practice (Pache and Santos, 2013).

At policy and management levels, moral justifications are more likely to be articulated in terms of legality, efficiency, performance and anticipated outcomes, reflecting institutionalized expectations of formal accountability and strategic conformity (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Hood, 1991; Deephouse, 1998). At the frontline, however, justification tends to draw more heavily on care-oriented and professional ethical repertoires, where customization, contextual sensitivity and responsibility for concrete situations are central (Lipsky, 2010; Noordegraaf, 2015; Tronto, 1993). Decoupling thus helps explain how different ethical logics can coexist within a single organization without necessarily collapsing into open conflict (Orton and Weick, 1990; Pache and Santos, 2013). The plurality of moral vocabularies emerges not from inconsistency alone, but from the differentiated structural positioning of actors within loosely coupled arrangements shaped by institutional complexity (Greenwood *et al*., 2011).

7.3 Institutional layering

Institutional layering refers to the cumulative accumulation of external demands confronting public organizations. Rather than replacing one another, moral claims related to legality, efficiency, justice, participation and societal impact are layered over time, increasing normative density and heterogeneity (Thornton *et al*., 2012; Scott, 2014; Putters, 2009; Pollitt *et al.*, 2007; Greenwood *et al*., 2011). As new governance models, accountability regimes and performance frameworks are added to existing arrangements, professionals become simultaneously accountable to multiple, partly conflicting criteria. This layering produces moral overload, as concurrent legal, financial, procedural, participatory and outcome-oriented obligations are difficult to reconcile within a single coherent line of action (Putters, 2009; Noordegraaf, 2015).

Empirical research on implementation and street-level work shows that under such conditions, actors do not strive for full consistency, but selectively prioritize, sequence and contextualize demands to preserve room for action (Hupe and Hill, 2007; Lipsky, 2010). Studies on institutional complexity similarly demonstrate strategic responses that combine accommodation and selective emphasis rather than integration (Pache and Santos, 2013). In this context, ethics can analytically be understood as a practice of selection: professionals temporarily order competing claims and render their choices defensible across accountability arenas. Empirical accounts of layered governance frequently highlight justificatory language centered on fairness, proportionality and anticipated consequences, indicating affinities with justice-oriented and consequentialist vocabularies when professionals weigh competing demands. Research on municipal change processes likewise shows how actors continuously recalibrate priorities to sustain both external legitimacy and internal workability (Homan, 2019). Institutional layering thus structures the conditions under which moral plurality becomes an ongoing navigational task rather than a resolvable normative conflict.

7.4 Particularization

Particularization refers to the emergence of locally coherent frameworks for action and interpretation among professionals within teams and departments, developing in response to specific contexts of work, responsibility and interaction (Stacey, 2011; Homan, 2019). In change contexts where formal frameworks are multiple, temporary or mutually tensioned, these local orders and interpretations function as important orientation points for professional action.

Empirical research on professional practice demonstrates that when formal rules and policy programs underdetermine action, actors rely heavily on experiential judgment, contextual interpretation and peer-based sensemaking (Schön, 1983; Weick, 1995). Studies of professional craftsmanship and hybrid professionalism show that practitioners often appeal to standards of good work, integrity and character when explaining their decisions, especially in contexts where outcomes cannot be fully specified in advance (Noordegraaf, 2015;

Flyvbjerg, 2001). Research on care practices similarly illustrates how moral reasoning becomes embedded in relational attentiveness and responsiveness to concrete others under conditions of uncertainty (Tronto, 1993; Mol, 2008). Across these empirical domains, justificatory language frequently centers on practical wisdom, responsibility in the moment, and what a "good professional" would do in the situation at hand.

These recurring patterns suggest that virtue-oriented, phronetic and care-based ethical vocabularies become particularly salient where action is locally negotiated and context-dependent. Particularization does not eliminate formal organizational values; rather, it translates and reinterprets them within specific interactional settings. As a result, moral judgments may legitimately differ across teams, domains or cases, even when formal ethical frameworks are uniform at the organizational level. Such variation contributes to professional stability and internal workability, while simultaneously rendering centralized ethical steering and unambiguous accountability structurally challenging. Ethics, in this configuration, appears less as a centrally imposed doctrine than as a locally constructed and continuously enacted repertoire that enables professionals to navigate complex and evolving conditions.

7.5 Summarizing matrix logic

The analysis developed in this section reconstructs patterned relationships between organizational conditions and moral justification in practice. Table 1 summarizes these relationships by indicating probabilistic structural affinities between organizational mechanisms and the ethical repertoires that tend to become salient in specific arenas of decision-making and accountability.

These associations are grounded in the empirical and theoretical insights discussed in the preceding sections. The literature on organized hypocrisy highlights how organizations rely on rule-based and procedural vocabularies in external arenas (Brunsson, 1989; Meyer and Rowan, 1977), while studies on decoupling and street-level practice show how professionals justify action through relational, professional and care-oriented reasoning (Lipsky, 2010; Noordegraaf, 2015; Tronto, 1993). Research on institutional complexity and layering demonstrates how actors prioritize competing claims using justice-oriented and consequentialist reasoning (Thornton *et al.*, 2012; Pache and Santos, 2013). Finally, studies on professional practice and local sensemaking highlight how context-dependent judgment and practical wisdom become central in locally negotiated practices (Schön, 1983; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Homan, 2019).

Under organized hypocrisy, the differentiation of discursive registers across audiences renders procedural and dialogical vocabularies especially prominent in external arenas. Under decoupling, the relative autonomy of structural domains enlarges the space for practice-based,

Table 1. Relationship between organizational mechanisms and the situational activation of ethical approaches

Organizational mechanism	Ethical approaches more frequently activated	Characteristic moral focus in practice
Organized hypocrisy	Duty ethics; discourse ethics	Procedural correctness, transparency and formal defensibility in external arenas
Decoupling	Care ethics; professional ethics; relational ethics	Workability, situational judgment and moral alignment in concrete practices
Institutional layering	Justice ethics; consequential ethics	Selection and prioritization under cumulative moral claims; weighing effects and distribution
Particularization	Virtue ethics; professional ethics	Craftsmanship, practical wisdom (phronesis) and context-bound responsibility

Note(s): The table indicates probabilistic structural affinities rather than fixed, exclusive or causal pairings. Ethical vocabularies may overlap and co-occur across mechanisms. The matrix functions as an analytical heuristic for observing patterned tendencies in moral justification under legitimacy pressure

Source(s): Authors' own work

professional and care-oriented reasoning. Institutional layering increases normative density and intensifies the need for prioritization and distributive reasoning across competing claims. Particularization stabilizes locally coherent moral repertoires where formal programs leave room for interpretation.

From a systems-theoretical viewpoint, these mechanisms can be understood as patterns through which internal decision premises are differentiated, accumulated, segmented and localized. Moral plurality thus appears as the patterned coexistence of multiple decision premises under conditions of functional differentiation and ongoing change.

The matrix therefore functions as an analytical heuristic for observing how moral communication becomes structured and temporarily stabilized in institutionally complex environments, while allowing for overlap, co-occurrence and situational shifts across ethical repertoires.

8. Conclusion and implications

This article addressed the question of why and how ethics in the practice of public organizations is necessarily constructed as plural under conditions of external legitimacy pressure. The analysis shows that moral plurality is not an individual deficiency, a normative failure or a lack of professional integrity, but a structural characteristic of professional action in institutionally complex public contexts. From a systems-theoretical perspective, this plurality can be understood as the ongoing reconfiguration of differentiated decision premises in response to legitimacy pressure. As a conceptual–explanatory synthesis, the article does not claim empirical generalization, but offers a theoretically integrated account of how moral plurality can be understood as a patterned outcome of organizing under institutional complexity.

Public organizations operate in environments in which they are simultaneously addressed by diverse and partly contradictory expectations, such as legality, efficiency, transparency, participation and societal impact. This plurality of legitimacy demands cannot be translated into unambiguous or linear guidelines for action. In response, specific organizational mechanisms develop within organizations, organized hypocrisy, decoupling, institutional layering and particularization, that enable internal workability while simultaneously placing consistent and uniform moral steering under structural pressure.

Within this context, professionals make sense of and legitimate their actions by situationally shifting between different ethical approaches. Depending on context, organizational level and accountability arena, different moral logics become activated. Ethics therefore does not function as a fixed normative framework, but as a practice in which professionals navigate between competing moral claims and weigh what counts as responsible, defensible and workable in a given situation.

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in providing an organizational explanation of moral plurality. By combining institutional theory with social complexity theory, the analysis shows how external legitimacy pressure operates through recognizable organizational mechanisms and shapes professional action. The resulting analytical framework offers an alternative to approaches that primarily problematize moral ambiguity normatively or reduce it to individual choice problems.

For the literature on organizational change, this article demonstrates that moral plurality is not a side effect of change, but a constitutive element of change processes in institutionally complex public contexts. Change not only reorders structures, processes and ways of working, but also redefines what counts as legitimate, responsible and defensible action. Ethics thus appears as a change-related practice that emerges in and through organizational change, rather than standing apart from it.

For practice, this implies that ethics policies, professional development and steering efforts benefit from recognizing moral plurality as a structural condition. Attempts to reduce ethics to uniform values, codes or principles fail to do justice to the moral complexity of everyday work in public organizations. More effective approaches create conditions in which professionals

can articulate, discuss and handle moral tensions, rather than attempting to resolve or normalize them in advance.

Finally, this article is conceptual and explanatory in nature. Future research should deepen the proposed framework empirically by examining how professionals themselves reflect on their ethical navigation practices and how organizations can create space for explicitly addressing moral plurality under conditions of ongoing change.

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