

# Research Article

## The Truth About Honesty

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*This article examines the ethics of honesty and deception in public administration. Building on previous research showing that public administrators rank honesty as an essential public service value but also sometimes use deception while carrying out their duties, semi-structured interviews with public employees were conducted to explore this apparent tension. Specifically, this study asks: Why is honesty important for public administrators? What is honesty and dishonesty? Under what circumstances is the use of deception by public administrators legitimate? The American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) Code of Ethics is used as an analytical framework to assess the cases and examples provided by participants. The article concludes with a discussion of some important implications that this research has for public administration practice, teaching, and research.*

**Keywords:** Honesty, Public Administration Ethics, Public Service Values

Public administrators must hold themselves to a high standard of honesty. In this vein, Bok (1999) argues for a “principle of veracity” that respects human dignity and autonomy by emphasizing the centrality of honesty and truthfulness as the foundation of human relations. She points out that our choices, if they are to be free and rational, depend on our judgments about what is true and what is false. Because these judgments often rely on information that administrators obtain from others, including public officials, dishonesty has the effect of distorting the information on which they are based, and, consequently, our choices as well. Therefore, honest communication between individuals is essential for maintaining a society that recognizes human dignity and supports the ability of its members to make free and rational choices. Bok (1999) argues that this principle of veracity does not necessarily mean that all lies should be definitively ruled out. However, it does mean that, for dishonesty to be morally justified, administrators must first seek out truthful alternatives, and where none are available, it must clearly provide greater benefit than harm. Even in such rare instances, however, it should be recognized that dishonesty always creates at least some harm. This is because it imposes moral costs on the deceivers themselves and damages the credibility of administrators more broadly when revealed (della Porta & Vannucci, 2012).

There are many cases of lying for personal or agency benefit. In a specific case, a police officer in Sandusky, Ohio, was fired for fabricating reports of disabled vehicle complaints in order to avoid repercussions for arriving to work late. In his termination letter, the Erie County Sheriff wrote about the officer’s pattern of excessive tardiness and other violations but stressed, “However, the termination of your employment is not for these violations, but for your dishonest actions” (Astolfi, 2014, p. A7). The sheriff also added that “law enforcement officers are, and should be, held to a high standard of truthfulness” (Astolfi, 2014, p. A7).

In a high-profile case, public school employees in Atlanta were convicted of racketeering charges under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO). Administrators, principals, and teachers were convicted for their role in a cheating conspiracy that involved changing answers on test scores to inflate the performance of the students (McWhirther, 2015). Though not centrally about lying, this case illustrates how pressures to meet performance metrics and other factors associated with organizational life may lead public administrators to engage in unethical deceptive practices (Molina, 2016).

Wells, D. D., & Molina, A. D. (2017). The truth about honesty. *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs*, 3(3), 292-308. doi:10.20899/jpna.3.3.292-308

Ariely (2012) cautions that even minor instances of deception or dishonesty can quickly become a slippery slope leading to more serious instances. In effect, once someone has been dishonest about something, it becomes easier to be dishonest in subsequent situations. According to Ariely (2012), because these initial acts create a sort of “what-the-hell” effect, “a single act of dishonesty can change a person’s behavior from that point onward” (p. 135). Therefore, “the first dishonest act is the most important one to prevent” (p. 137). Furthermore, acts of dishonesty can assume a contagious nature that induces others to act dishonestly as well. According to Ariely,

As long as we see other members of our own social groups behaving in ways that are outside the acceptable range, it’s likely that we too will recalibrate our own moral compass and adopt their behavior as a model for our own. And if the member of our in-group happens to be an authority figure – a parent, boss, teacher, or someone else we respect – chances are even higher that we will be dragged along (p. 207).

There are circumstances, however, in which not telling the truth may be viewed as justifiable. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled in several cases that deception can be used by law enforcement as long as it is unlikely that it will provoke a person to confess to a crime that he or she did not commit or commit a crime that that person would otherwise not have committed. In such cases, the court has ruled that the use of deception is a necessary tool in law enforcement. An example of such a ruling is *U.S. v. Russell*, a case that involved undercover law enforcement gaining the confidence of suspects involved in a drug manufacturing operation, and offering them ingredients for manufacturing methamphetamine. Though the defense argued that they were victims of entrapment, the court ruled that the suspects were predisposed, and not pressured by the undercover officers, to commit the crime. Therefore, according to the court, it was not a case of entrapment, and the use of deception was legitimate (Rutledge, 2007).

The U.S. Supreme Court has also ruled that it is acceptable for law enforcement to pretend to have evidence against a suspect, as long as the deception being used is plausible given what is known about the crime and the suspect. For example, in *Oregon v. Mathiason* a suspect confessed to a crime after being deceived into thinking that officers had found his fingerprints at the scene of the crime. The court ruled that the confession was valid, even though it was obtained through deceptive practices (Rutledge, 2007). That which is legal, however, is not necessarily ethical. Therefore, in using deceptive or dishonest practices, public administrators must look beyond what is lawfully permissible to broader considerations about what can be morally justified.

Fortunately, research has shown that public employees consider honesty to be the among the most important values coming to bear on administrative practice (Molina & McKeown, 2012). On the other hand, it also has been argued that, once taken out of the abstract and faced with the difficulties of concrete situations, commitment to honesty among public administrators can deteriorate (De Vries, 2002). This exploratory research study aims to provide a better understanding of the conditions in which dishonesty and deception (following Bok [1999], the terms are used here synonymously) is an acceptable practice for public administrators. To that end, the views on honesty and deception of public employees working in or retired from police departments, fire departments, or public schools are compared and contrasted to determine when and why deception is considered acceptable in practice. Along these lines, this study employs an analytical framework based on the American Society for Public Administration’s (ASPA) Code of Ethics as a way of assessing the justifications for dishonesty and deception described by participants. This article concludes with a discussion of some important

implications that these findings have for how ethics training is provided to public officials, how ethics is taught in MPA programs, how public administrators communicate with the public, and how public administrators can better ensure the integrity of our public institutions.

### **Philosophical Approaches to Honesty and Deception**

As Svava (2015) has pointed out, ethical choices concerning right and wrong have traditionally been made through one of three philosophical approaches. These approaches include virtue (character-based), deontological (principle-based), and utilitarian (consequence-based) reasoning. The deontological approach is chiefly associated with the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1988) who argues that people should act only in accordance with those maxims that they could rationally will to be a universal rule for all to follow. In the deontological view, lying is never permissible, regardless of the consequences (Svava, 2015).

In contrast, the utilitarian approach associated with philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham (2001) and J. S. Mill (1993) argue that an action is judged to be acceptable depending on the consequences of the action, i.e., it is morally right to promote the greatest good for the greatest number. Thus, from a utilitarian perspective, a lie is justified if the good that comes from it outweighs the negative consequences. Virtue-based ethics, associated primarily with Aristotle (2004), maintains that specific qualities of personal character determine what makes for a “good person.” In this tradition, ethical decision-making consists of acting in accordance with virtues, i.e., dispositions toward certain attitudes and behaviors that are essential to living a life of excellence.

Whichever approach is adopted, however, public administrators may ultimately need to draw upon their own moral compass to resolve ethical problems (Cooper, 2012). As Stewart (1984) puts it, “most managers are neither pure deontologists, nor pure Utilitarians, but rather operate according to a kind of ethical pluralism” (p.20). Along these lines, Svava (2015) has proposed the “ethics triangle” framework in which administrators give due consideration to the principles, consequences, and character of their actions while maintaining a focus on their duties as public officials.

On the question of what type of circumstances might justify deception, Bok (1999) argues for a “principle of publicity,” which states that a lie is morally justifiable only if it can be defended before a community of reasonable persons. This raises an interesting question regarding who should make up such a community of reasonable persons in a democratic society. Tavaglione and Hurst (2012), for example, argue that, in certain instances, physicians may have a moral obligation to lie for their patients; particularly in “gaming” the system in order to acquire medically necessary treatment for patients who would otherwise be denied by third-party payers. Drawing on MacIntyre’s (1984) theory of virtue ethics, they argue that “physicians should obey the internal morality of medical practice, that the cornerstone of this internal morality is the duty of beneficence, and that such a duty, in certain cost-containment circumstances, implies the violation of the reimbursement rules” (Tavaglione & Hurst, 2012, p. 5).

The “principle of publicity” and circumstances where there is a moral obligation to lie contribute to the conditions that allow for the “just lie” theory. Pasquerella and Killilea (2005) argue that the “just lie” theory can be used to achieve middle-ground results that strike a balance between the philosophical approaches to ethics. Rather than provide an opportunity for self-serving excuses, the “just lie” theory allows public administrators to make ethical decisions in an

imperfect world by thinking in terms of justifications for deception that would be accepted by a reasonable community (Pasquerella & Killilea, 2005). This suggests that public administrators need to think about the ethical dimensions of honesty and deception from the standpoint of their professional obligations as public servants in a democratic community.

## Honesty and Deception in Public Administration

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term “honest” as “free of deceit; truthful and sincere; morally correct and virtuous.” In turn, the terms “dishonesty” or “deception” may be understood simply as the opposite of honesty. To put it in more precise terms, however, these terms involve statements or actions designed “to intentionally cause another person to have or continue to have a false belief that is known or truly believed to be false by bringing about evidence on the basis of which the person has or continues to have the false belief” (Mahon 2007, p. 189-190). Importantly, this study seeks to distinguish between cases involving the *legitimate* use of dishonesty or deception as appropriate and justified in the context of public administration, and cases involving the *illegitimate* use of dishonesty or deception for self-serving, inappropriate, and/or nefarious purposes.

This study utilizes the American Society for Public Administration’s (ASPA) Code of Ethics as an analytical framework for distinguishing between cases in which deception and dishonesty are ethically justified on the part of public administrators and cases in which it is not. Using the ASPA Code provides for a broadly accepted framework of ethics in public service but also for a more adequate definition of honesty *as a public service value*. Recently revised in 2013, the Code is comprised of eight core principles that serve as a statement of the ideals and aspirations intended to guide public administrators in carrying out their duties. In addition to these principles, a set of related practices relevant to each of the eight principles provide a set of more concrete guidelines for ethical administrative conduct.

A number of the principles and practices in the Code relate directly to issues involving honesty and deception in public administration. The most obvious of these is Principle 6, which calls upon public administrators to “demonstrate personal integrity” in order to “inspire public confidence and trust in public service.” Relatedly, Practice 6b advises, “Maintain truthfulness and honesty and do not compromise them for advancement, honor, or personal gain.” Similarly, Principle 5 requires public administrators to “fully inform and advise” key stakeholders by providing “accurate, honest, comprehensive, and timely information and advice.” In addition, Principle 3 stresses the importance of democratic participation by advising public administrators to “inform the public and encourage active engagement in governance. Be open, transparent and responsive, and respect and assist all persons in their dealings with public organizations.” The full list of ethical principles are as follows:<sup>1</sup>

1. Advance the Public Interest. Promote the interests of the public and put service to the public above service to oneself.
2. Uphold the Constitution and the Law. Respect and support government constitutions and laws, while seeking to improve laws and policies to promote the public good.
3. Promote Democratic Participation. Inform the public and encourage active engagement in governance. Be open, transparent, and responsive and respect and assist all persons in their dealings with public organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> Space limitations preclude listing the ASPA Code’s set of related practices here. However, they can be accessed electronically through the ASPA website (see Reference section for link).

4. **Strengthen Social Equity.** Treat all persons with fairness, justice, and equality and respect individual differences, rights, and freedoms. Promote affirmative action and other initiatives to reduce unfairness, injustice, and inequality in society.
5. **Fully Inform and Advise.** Provide accurate, honest, comprehensive, and timely information and advice to elected and appointed officials and governing board members, and to staff members in your organization.
6. **Demonstrate Personal Integrity.** Adhere to the highest standards of conduct to inspire public confidence and trust in public service.
7. **Promote Ethical Organizations.** Strive to attain the highest standards of ethics, stewardship, and public service in organizations that serve the public.
8. **Advance Professional Excellence.** Strengthen personal capabilities to act competently and ethically and encourage the professional development of others.

Crucially, a complete understanding of what honesty means in the context of public administration requires consideration of the full range of values, principles, and practices that are relevant to ethical public service. According to ASPA,

The Code and these practices are intended to be used as a whole and in conjunction with one another. An ethical public servant will consider the full range of standards and values that are relevant to handling a specific matter and be committed to upholding both the spirit and the letter of this code (2013, p. 1).

Of course, this is easier said than done because, in some cases at least, ethical principles and practices can come into tension with each other. For example, the Code holds that public administrators must be “open and transparent while protecting privacy rights and security” (Practice 3a). This suggests that honesty in the context of public administration cannot entail disclosing everything one knows in every situation. In some circumstances, non-deceptive responses such as “I cannot comment” or “we do not reveal that information” are appropriate. As Bok (1999) notes, however, communicating false or misleading information is only justified when other alternatives are unavailable, and where the benefit clearly outweighs the harm that might result. In other cases, acting in an honest manner may come into conflict with organizational expectations and interpersonal relations, such as collegiality or obedience to superiors, which are not ethical principles or practices. Public administrators must be prepared to ignore these pressures. As the Code points out, public administrators must be “prepared to provide information and recommendations that may not be popular or preferred by superiors or colleagues” (Practice 5b); they have the responsibility to support accountability “with clear reporting of activities and accomplishments” (Practice 7a) and “seek to correct instances of wrongdoing or report them to superiors” (Practice 7d). Leaders also should seek to reduce possible conflicts by encouraging the “open expression of views by staff members within the organization” by providing “administrative channels for dissent” and protecting the “whistleblowing rights of public employees” (Practice 7c).

In order to negotiate such tensions, administrators need to demonstrate ethical competence (Menzel, 2016). Ethical competence involves being able to assess competing values, understand principled moral reasoning, and recognize when they are confronted with an ethics-related conflict (Bowman, West, Berman, & Van Wart, 2004). Further, the ethically competent administrator must understand the public interest and have the skills needed to allow the public

**Table 1.** Research Participant Occupations

Education ( <i>n</i> =15)	Public Safety ( <i>n</i> =9)
Principal (4)	County Sheriff (1)
Assistant Principal (2)	Fire Chief (1)
Teacher (7)	Firefighter (1)
Coordinator of Advanced Academic Studies (1)	Police Chief (3)
Speech Pathologist (1)	Police Officer (2)
	Detective (1)

Note: 16 participants were men; eight participants were women; 17 participants were 40 years of age or older; seven participants were under the age of 40; all participants were white.

interest to prevail while at the same time respecting the law and their elected bosses (Menzel, 2011). As a way of increasing our understanding of how public administrators balance these considerations, this study aims to answer the following research questions: 1) Why is honesty important for public administrators? 2) What is honesty and dishonesty (deception)? 3) Under what circumstances is the use of deception by public administrators legitimate?

## Methodology

To answer the foregoing research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with public employees working in or retired from careers in police departments, fire departments, or public schools. Public safety and education were the chosen professions for this analysis for two major reasons. First, the focus on specific public sector professions allowed for data saturation. This allowed for fair comparisons to be made between interviewees. Second, these professions were chosen because the individuals working in them perform different public services. Administrators in education work mainly with children and parents, while administrators in public safety deal with dangerous situations more regularly, many of which involve criminals. Some of the interviewees were street-level bureaucrats, such as teachers and police officers. These perspectives were important to this analysis because these individuals work directly with the public.

The initial recruits were selected through a convenience sample consisting of public employees with an established relationship with one of the researchers because of the potentially sensitive topic of this research. The trust previously established between the interviewer and interviewee made the discussion about deception more likely to be an honest and open discussion. Snowball sampling was used to contact other potential participants for interviews. This is a common sampling method used in qualitative research (Weiss, 1994). At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked if they knew of anyone else who may be willing to participate. The suggested public employees were then contacted with the same recruitment letter as the original recruits. All participants were public employees in the state of Ohio. Table 1 shows a breakdown of participant occupations.

A total of 59 public employees were contacted, and 24 chose to participate. Of the 24 participants, 15 were employed in education, and nine were employed in public safety occupations. On average, interviews lasted a total of approximately 24 minutes. Interview responses were confidential, and no identifiers appear in this research. Public employees were contacted and interviews were conducted until a point of data saturation was reached. Initial recruits were contacted through a letter inviting them to participate.

The 24 public employees who chose to participate were asked several questions related to honesty and dishonesty within their organizations. First, they were asked to identify their job title and provide a brief description of their occupational role. Second, they were asked about the importance or unimportance of honesty in their work. Third, they were asked to tell at least one story about a time when they felt it was necessary to be dishonest or deceptive in their job. Finally, they were asked to discuss why they believed being dishonest or deceptive was necessary in their case. Stories from public employees can offer narratives that help to expand our knowledge of how meanings and norms are expressed (Hummel, 1991). Pertinent to this research, stories can reveal the moral reasoning of an individual by highlighting his or her understanding of the importance of honesty in public service and the circumstances in which that person considers deception justified (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Participants were not provided definitions of honesty or deception prior to or during the interview. Instead, they were given the freedom to conceptualize and define the terms as they understood them. The complete list of interview questions is available in the appendix.

Recordings of the first 15 interviews were transcribed. To be sure that the presence of a recording device was not influencing the responses of participants, the final nine interviews were not recorded but instead were conducted using field notes. Qualitative research software (NVivo 10) was used to analyze the data provided in transcripts and field notes. Themes within the data were then compared and contrasted across occupational settings. An open-coding system was used to analyze the data. Open-coding is a data-driven coding system where codes are created from the text itself. This allows for constant comparisons to be made within the data while limiting the influence of preconceived notions (Gibbs, 2007).

## **Results**

### *Honesty in Public Administration*

The first aim of this study was to explore the reasons public administrators give for why honesty is important in their work. Along these lines, a number of key themes emerged. First, many of the public administrators interviewed for this study equated honesty with integrity, claiming that the two were inseparable. It was perceived that, without honesty, it would be impossible to have strong moral principles and therefore impossible to have integrity. One former school principal began the conversation about honesty by stating, “I can’t zero in on honesty without talking about integrity and I believe, I know, I have always concerned myself with my personal integrity, and therefore I try to be as honest as I can” (personal communication, December 23, 2014).

Building respect, trust, and credibility with key stakeholders was a common concern among the public administrators interviewed, and honesty was seen as essential in this regard. Furthermore, participants viewed this as important for doing their jobs effectively. Interviewees working in education, for example, stressed the importance of parents, co-workers, superiors, and students respecting them, trusting them, and believing them to be credible. In this sense, honesty was viewed as an important tool for maintaining good relations with key stakeholders. Interviewees working in safety forces had a similar view. Though not working with the exact same groups of people, the value of maintaining positive relations by establishing respect, trust, and credibility was a common theme. As one police officer put it:

They respect me because I tell them straight up. I don’t try to trick them into anything and they like that about me. It’s important,

especially in a courtroom because if you lie on the stand, the judge will never believe you again. All of your credibility will be gone (police officer, personal communication, December 19, 2014).

Similarly, a high school teacher pointed out:

We are talking about high schoolers. We want them to respect us. You want to be honest with them, because they can pick up on that. If they don't think you are being honest, they are going to pick up on it. It is what it comes down to. But if we don't gain their respect they are less likely to learn from us, honestly. If they don't respect you and they don't care about you they are going to walk into your class and not care at all. They are not going to try. You have to give them that honesty. You have to gain their trust (high school teacher, personal communication, December 23, 2014).

Building trust, respect, and credibility was seen by public administrators as necessary for maintaining public support more generally as well. This finding echoes Principle 6 of the ASPA Code, cited above, which calls upon public administrators to “demonstrate personal integrity” in order to “inspire public confidence and trust in public service.” Participants acknowledged that the public expects police officers, firefighters, and educators to operate at a high level of honesty, integrity, and transparency. These values were not viewed as simply good in and of themselves. Rather, administrators saw honesty as important for performing the duties of their jobs and maintaining public support – not just symbolic support from the public but financial support, too. To that end, administrators stressed the importance of tax levies to their work. According to one police chief:

First, let me explain why I think it's so important to be truthful. Especially in my role, it's important. The entire department again—it's funded by taxpayer money. I want our taxpayers to continue to support us through this levy (police chief, personal communication, January 6, 2015).

Likewise, an assistant principal observed:

Everyone has to work hard to give the public a good value for their money. It's important to trust people to do their job and not micromanage. It's important to be honest with coworkers because to be honest to the workers means that hopefully in turn they will be honest with you (assistant principal, personal communication, January 14, 2015).

In sum, public administrators viewed honesty as an essential part of their character and important for building respect, trust, and credibility. They argued that this respect, trust, and credibility contributed to their ability to maintain good relationships with superiors, co-workers, and other key stakeholders. Moreover, it also was seen as being crucial for maintaining public support more generally, which, among other things, was linked to continued public financial support of schools, public safety forces, and other important resources. In short, participants consistently spoke of honesty as a *sine qua non* of effective public service.



The second aim of this study was to explore the circumstances in which the use of deception is legitimate in public administration. Though each of the participants acknowledged that there could be circumstances that would justify deception, these were generally rare and rooted in particular contextual factors. All the same, a few common themes do emerge in the stories provided by participants. These themes fall into three general categories: 1) withholding information; 2) justifiable dishonesty; and 3) unjustifiable dishonesty.

### *Withholding Information*

The necessity of following lawful orders and legal procedures was commonly cited as a justification for using deception. Interestingly, however, this rationale for deception was usually about the withholding of information and not necessarily about practices that would typically be considered dishonest or deceptive. As noted above, participants were asked to provide at least one story about a time when they felt it was necessary to be dishonest or deceptive in their job. It should be acknowledged that this may have pressured them to provide an example that they did not necessarily consider to be a case of deception or dishonesty. In such cases, complying with requirements to withhold information was understood by participants as a legitimate part of their professional responsibility as public administrators. According to a police chief:

It's OK that if, from my stand point, I'm directed by a higher authority, some township trustees, to do whatever it takes not to let information out. I have to not fully tell everything I know based on an inquiry. I feel that I'm following an order and I have to do that. Like I said if we are intentionally misleading somebody for a sinister motive, that's 100% wrong (police chief, personal communication, January 6, 2015).

In similar terms, a school principal explained:

As far as staff, the best answer I can give you, an example would be knowing that a layoff was coming. I knew I couldn't tell the person. The one person I'm thinking of actually, he got sick here at school. He had to go by ambulance to the hospital. He lives up in [city name] area. He had no family around, so I drove to the hospital. I was with him and we're like two weeks away from telling him because there are certain timelines we have to do for [the layoff] procedure. While we're sitting there he's telling me how much he likes it, it's so much better than his last job, he's glad he's staying at this job. I didn't tell him 'can't wait for next year and see you next year,' but I sort of deflected the conversation. I told him it was great to have him and things like that but I didn't...I didn't look to the future. I didn't comment on about him being here for the next 10, 15, 20 or 30 years. I really wanted to, but I knew that I couldn't tell him. I wasn't lying to him; I just wasn't talking about the future (school principal, personal communication, December 15, 2014).

These cases of deception by withholding information in order to comply with lawful orders and legal procedures appear to be ethically justified. This, of course, presupposes that the withholding of information is not designed to conceal instances of wrongdoing. Furthermore, it also assumes that the public should not have access to it or should be informed for purposes of

health or safety. Such commitments are consistent with Principle 2 of the ASPA Code, which calls for public administrators to uphold the Constitution and the law, and to “respect and safeguard protected and confidential information” (Practice 2d). The example provided by the school principal is also supported by Principle 4, which calls on administrators to strengthen social equity by acting with fairness, justice, and equality by providing “equal treatment, protection, and due process to all persons” (Practice 4b). Had the school principal informed the employee of his termination before the standard operating procedure allowed him to do so, the principal would be doing a disservice to any other employees receiving layoff notices without the benefit of advanced notice.

### *Justifiable Dishonesty*

In the stories provided by participants concerning the use of deception, ethically justifiable cases were comparatively rare. One theme that emerged, however, was the use of deception in order to prevent harm to individuals. In order to protect the life of an informant, for example, it may be necessary for undercover police officers to use deception with drug dealers or gang members who are suspicious of the informant. As one detective put it, there can be instances in which it is “way more ethical to lie than to be honest when we have a confidential informant.” According to the detective:

If confidential informants are found out then they may be killed by criminals, drug dealers. Drug dealers have said [to me] “It was so and so, wasn’t it?” I told a bold face lie “I have no idea who that is” (detective, personal communication, June 11, 2015).

Lying is ethically justified in such cases because simply stating, “We don’t reveal the names of informants,” would only confirm the suspicion of the drug dealer. Narrow instances such as these, where being dishonest prevents serious harm from coming to an individual, and alternatives are unavailable, would be accepted by a reasonable public (Bok, 1999). Additionally, this use of deception is supported by the ASPA Code because it ensures the protection of individuals (Practice 4b).

As a theme emerging in this research, however, the justifiable use of deception to prevent harm to individuals was relatively rare and narrowly circumscribed. On the other hand, a more common, and somewhat more ethically murky theme, involved the use of deception during investigations. In this vein, one police officer spoke of interviewing a suspect while having a blank CD sitting on the table that he claimed had video of the suspect committing a crime. This tactic was used to provoke the suspect into talking with police (police officer, personal communication, December 19, 2014). The reasoning behind this use of deception is that it leads to the successful prosecution of criminals, which, in turn, results in greater public safety.

Although this use of deception is fraught with the potential for abuse, there are circumstances in which its use could be supported by the ASPA Code. Importantly, the police officer did not put the suspect in a position to commit a crime they would otherwise not commit – nor did the police officer fabricate evidence against the suspect. After all, if the suspect did not commit the crime, then he or she would know that the CD used to provoke that person is blank and could call the police officer’s bluff. As noted above, the Supreme Court has upheld the constitutionality of using deception in defined circumstances such as these. In order for the deception to be ethically justified, however, the officers involved must ensure that they have recognized and understood the constitutional, legislative, and regulatory framework in which they are discharging their professional responsibilities (Practice 2a). Additionally, they must also ensure

that they are promoting principles of equality, fairness, and due process in order to protect the rights of those being investigated (Practice 2b). It is also worth noting the importance of a commitment to using the practice in a manner that is equitable, non-discriminatory, and avoids disparities across different groups are important considerations (Principle 4 and Practice 4c).

### *Unjustifiable Dishonesty*

Assuming the above conditions are met, the use of deception in investigations can be a valuable tool for improving public safety and advancing the public interest (Principle 1). All the same, practices that are permitted lawfully are not necessarily ethically justified, particularly where the potential for abuse is significant. For example, a former fire chief provided the following story:

I thought about this and the only one I could come up with is that it was during a fire investigation in a hotel where there were a couple of people injured. One was injured very seriously. She jumped from the third story window, and it was obviously an arson fire that had been set. We had some suspicions about who we thought did it, and we were doing an investigation. It would have been myself, the police department, and the state arson bureau. In our investigation, we determined that we did have sufficient evidence to charge a person, but we were afraid that if we let it be known, this person would run. In the meantime, the newspaper somehow got word that this person was going to be arrested. The newspaper called me and said, "Are you going to arrest so and so?" I said, "No" (fire chief, personal communication, December 17, 2014).

Although the fire chief's motives for lying to the reporter were well-intentioned, doing so was an unnecessary case of dishonesty. Instead, the chief could have explained that it would be inappropriate to reveal the name of a potential suspect. By doing so, the chief could have adhered to the ASPA Code's commitment to "be open and transparent while protecting privacy rights and security" (Practice 3a). Furthermore, lying to the reporter might have damaged the department's relationship with the media once the suspect was ultimately arrested. Among other things, this would have demonstrated a failure to "recognize and support the public's right to know the public's business" (Practice 3b).

Another example that highlights the potential for abuse in using deception during investigations was provided by an assistant principal. In this case, the school deceived students by telling them that a lockdown drill was occurring when, in fact, the purpose of the drill was to conduct a drug search. According to the assistant principal:

I honestly tried not to, but now that you mention it, we would have, for example, a lock down drill. What we would do, we had several levels of drills. One of the lock down drills was called a stay put drill. We would tell students that we were having this drill, and the teachers were to continue teaching, to lock the doors, not let anybody in or out for the safety of what may be going on in the halls. We brought drug dogs into the building. Of course, it didn't take long. One dog barking, they figured it out. The purpose was we didn't want them to concentrate on that. We wanted them to concentrate on what they were doing in their classrooms. I

suppose that's a way of being deceptive. I wasn't forthcoming with the fact that dogs were coming in. Obviously, because we wanted students to act normally. If they were a person who normally brought drugs to school, we didn't want them to say, "Uh oh. Better not bring them today." Our drills like that were usually unannounced, and especially if the dogs were coming into the building (assistant principal, personal communication, December 23, 2014).

The assistant principal's dishonest announcement to the students about the true nature of the drills represents a failure to "be open and transparent while protecting privacy rights and security" (Practice 3a). An approach more consistent with the ASPA Code, on the other hand, could have involved announcing to students at the beginning of the school year that periodic locker searches would be conducted by the police using drug dogs while the students were in class. This approach would have advanced the legitimate goal of keeping drugs out of the school in a more honest and transparent fashion. As it happens, the tactic used by the assistant principal seems better suited to catching unsuspecting students than to keeping drugs out of the school.

Interestingly, a number of the stories provided by teachers revolved around the theme of "sugar coating" in order to maintain positive relationships. One teacher explained that a tactic for telling parents something negative about their child was to "sandwich" the bad news by starting and ending the conversation with something positive about the child. The teacher said this was necessary to maintain a good relationship with the community (teacher, personal communication, December 23, 2014). These examples are interesting because the practice is really only deceptive or dishonest if the compliments made are untrue. While sandwiching criticism between positive (and true) comments about a student is a constructive way of providing feedback, cases of sugar coating that involve dishonest compliments are not consistent with the ethical principles contained in the ASPA Code. By failing to be genuine in their remarks, the school teacher fails to "serve all persons with courtesy, respect, and dedication to high standards" (Practice 1e). Additionally, this practice also would violate the duty to fully inform and advise by providing "accurate, honest, comprehensive, and timely information and advice" (Principle 5).

In a few rare instances, participants provided examples of dishonesty that were clearly not ethically justified. One public school teacher described a time when dishonest actions were taken in order to make it appear as if the school was in compliance with state law. The story told by the teacher involved students with individual education plans (IEP). The IEPs are tailored for individual students and, by law, require the student's parent(s)/guardian(s), teachers, and school administrators to meet together to discuss the plan. These meetings typically occur during the school day, but if a substitute is unable to cover the teacher's class, then they miss the meeting. The teacher, however, reported signing a document stating that he or she was present and agreed to the changes made in the student IEP meeting. When asked why the teacher signed the document even though he or she was not present, the teacher replied that state law required a teacher to be present and for the document to be signed (school teacher, personal communication, December 17, 2014). In other words, the teacher felt like signing the document was necessary in order to comply with a legal requirement, even though doing so was a misrepresentation of the facts.

Far from being a case of justified dishonesty, the foregoing story describes a situation wherein the teacher and administrators are complicit in acting dishonestly in order to appear to be

following the law. The teacher and administrators essentially chose to lie about being present at the meetings for the sake of administrative expediency. This violates several principles in the ASPA Code. First, the action is a violation of Principle 1 and its commitment to advance the public interest. The action is clearly self-serving and done out of loyalty to administrators in the institution. The teacher therefore fails to “subordinate personal interests and institutional loyalties to the public good” (Practice 1d). Because the action is done to appear to follow the law instead of actually upholding the law, signing the IEP also violates the commitment to upholding the Constitution and the law (Principle 2). By agreeing to lie and sign the IEP, the school teacher also fails to “resist political, organization, and personal pressures to compromise ethical integrity and principles and support others who are subject to these pressure” (Practice 6c). Moreover, the school administrators have failed in this instance to promote an ethical organization (Principle 7) as well as to advance professional excellence (Principle 8).

## **Discussion**

Consistent with previous research, the findings of this study indicate that honesty is indeed a critically important value in public administration (Molina & McKeown, 2012). According to our participants, honesty is essential in maintaining credibility and effective working relationships with colleagues, political superiors, and the public. In other words, honesty is good, not simply for its own sake, but for the role it plays in enabling public administrators to effectively carry out their work. Importantly, however, the stories that participants provided about the use of deception in public administration illustrate the moral complexity of the world in which they operate. Notwithstanding the fact that honesty is of paramount importance, public administrators do sometimes face situations in which they experience pressure to use deception. In some of these instances, the use of deception is appropriate and ethically justified. In other instances, however, its use amounts to nothing more than inappropriate and self-serving dishonesty. Of course, probably most instances fall somewhere in between.

The environment of public administration is characterized by tensions between competing values and ethical principles, each of which may be legitimate in their own right (Molina, 2009; Spicer, 2001). In part, this study has sought to make the case that the ASPA Code of Ethics can be a helpful analytical framework for sorting out these tensions. Public entities, however, also need to take careful steps in adapting the Code to their organizational context, or developing their own codes, in order to promote ethical conduct. Policies and procedures should promote honesty and transparency. Though it is not possible to create an environment entirely immune from unethical conduct, public entities should write policies and procedures that limit the ethical dilemmas that their administrators face.

This study also has important implications regarding the ethics training of public officials and the teaching of ethics in MPA programs. Although ethics training should promote honesty, it also should approach public administration ethics and values from a complex standpoint that reflects the difficult decisions made regularly by public administrators. Public administrators and students in MPA courses need to be prepared to face difficult decisions that require them to balance and compromise different values in service to the public. Along these lines, case-based ethics training is the best approach to ensuring that public administrators understand the role that honesty plays in public administration as well as the circumstances in which deception may be appropriate. In particular, cases should involve scenarios that trainees are likely to encounter in the course of their work. The best cases will be those that highlight the way in which honesty can come into conflict with other important public service values such as effectiveness, efficiency, humaneness, or benevolence. Discussion should focus on identifying the range of

values that are in play in a given scenario, and the way in which considerations of principles, consequences, character, and duty can inform ethical decision-making in the public sector.

Nontraditional sources, e.g., popular sitcoms, movies, and novels, can be useful training and classroom tools for demonstrating the ethical dilemmas faced by public administrators. For example, the 2015 film *The Martian* depicts an astronaut (portrayed by Matt Damon) who is presumed dead and stranded on Mars when his fellow crew members must evacuate for emergency reasons, and the mission undertaken by NASA to rescue him. Set in 2035, NASA, as a public agency, is subject to strict transparency laws that requires the agency to promptly inform the public about the progress of the mission, including embarrassing information about mistakes and errors in judgment. In one scene, NASA administrators debate whether or not Damon's fellow astronauts should be informed that he is still alive, or if that information should be withheld from them in order to help them focus on their mission. Entertaining examples from these types of sources can keep the attention of trainees and students while also teaching a valuable lesson about ethics and serving the public. Additionally, the use of case studies derived from studies such as this one could be a way of presenting students with real-world examples of the types of ethical situations they are likely to face.

The results of this study also suggest a number of directions for future research. For example, the number and range of interviews collected for this study limits its generalizability. It is possible that public administrators in other regions of the United States view and treat the value of honesty and the use of deception differently than those participants included in this research. Further, public administrators outside of public education and public safety may view and treat the value of honesty and the use of deception differently. Public administrators in other professional fields such as human resources, public works, city managers, or budget officers may have different perspectives than those interviewed here. Similarly, public administrators at the state and federal level, particularly those who have less direct contact with the public, may have distinct perspectives as well. Future research on honesty and the use of deception should build upon these preliminary findings by broadening the scope of analysis beyond public education and public safety at the local level by including a broader range of participants.

Future research also may use cases derived from studies such as this one to develop survey instruments that could be presented to respondents drawn from large probability samples. This would help to increase the generalizability of findings across a broader spectrum of professional contexts and levels of government. Along these lines, comparative research would help to increase our understanding of how national and cultural differences influence public administrators' perceptions of the ethics of honesty and deception. Additionally, relatively little is understood about the extent to which public administrators' perceptions about honesty and deception are congruent with the perceptions of citizens. Future research that includes citizens could help us to better understand which uses of deception are likely to meet with public support. Moreover, this type of research would help to connect the public administration ethics literature to other important bodies of literature in the discipline such as scholarship on representative bureaucracy, citizen engagement, and democratic accountability.

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined the ethics of honesty and deception in public administration. In particular, it explored the reasons why honesty is an important public service value as well as some of the circumstances in which the use of deception may or may not be justified. This study utilized the ASPA Code of Ethics as an analytical framework for assessing the cases of deception

provided by participants through their storytelling. Careful consideration of the full range of principles and practices found in the Code allowed for a nuanced approach to understanding the ethical tensions and moral complexities of public service. As one participant put it, “We need to work toward being honest 100 percent of the time, except when it’s permitted for us to use deception” (police chief, personal communication, January 6, 2015).

## **Disclosure Statement**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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**Appendix: Interview Questions**

1. Please describe your obligations as a public employee. What is your job title and what tasks do you perform in your role?
2. How important is honesty in your occupation? Why is it important or unimportant?
3. Please tell a story about a time when your job required that you to be dishonest (use deception). Why was the use of dishonesty (or deception) required to fulfill your obligations? This story does not necessarily have to be about you, it could be about a co-worker or acquaintance in the same profession.
4. What are other circumstances in which dishonesty (or deception) is acceptable in your profession? Why?
5. Is there any information that you believe would be beneficial to this research that you would like to add?