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The Multidisciplinarity of Ethics and Integrity of Governance

2.1 Introduction

To delve into the integrity of governance, this book considers several important questions related to both the bright and the dark side of ethics and integrity. Most especially, it asks which central moral public values are (to be) cherished, what can go wrong and why, and which policies and institutions help to curb corruption and safeguard integrity. To adequately address these questions, however, it must draw on relevant concepts, ideas, and insights from multiple disciplines, not only public administration (my own field), whose study of ethics, integrity, and corruption has offered valuable information and inspiration, but also philosophy, sociology and anthropology, history, criminology and law, psychology, biology and neurosciences, economics, business administration, and political science. Hence, although profiling the current state in all disciplines is a “mission impossible,” I will nevertheless try to give a first impression of the multitude of scientific disciplines and traditions that have contributed to my work and the work of our Integrity of Governance research group. That selection, however, neither strives nor pretends to be complete. What I will do, rather, is to point to a number of building blocks that are useful for understanding the development and content of the approach taken in this book to this important issue.

Although all the disciplines selected are engaged in studying ethics and integrity, each area of study is defined by its own set of paradigms, theoretical concepts, research methodologies, and scholarly journals and book series. Such diversity may lead some to question the use of an eclectic synthesis from many disciplines and theories rather than reliance on one vested framework such as rational choice theory. Is it
not naïve, they may ask, to believe that such “eclecticism” will lead to valid or useful insights, given the incommensurability of the building blocks used? I therefore begin with a paragraph on that topic, one whose conclusion will be optimistic despite my recognition that moving around in this epistemological and ontological maze may engender doubts among colleagues. The proof of the pudding, however, will be in the eating, so the remainder of the book will have to show that the combination of insights from different disciplines, at different analytical levels, can indeed bring our knowledge a step further forward.

2.2 Building theory: Between diversity and focus

How, then, can we get a grip on the diversity, complexity, comprehensiveness, and elusiveness of the community of ethics and integrity researchers, and their methods, approaches, theories, and results? Or should we not even try, simply because it is too much (Heywood, 1997; Caiden, 2001), or because paradigms have their own concepts and theories, which are by definition incommensurable?

2.2.1 Multidisciplinary incommensurability

Because public administration is a discipline that focuses on a specific object (i.e., public administration), it is almost by definition multidisciplinary in character. It is, therefore, not surprising that many public administration scholars use theories and approaches that stem from such other disciplines as psychology or economics or political science. This very multidisciplinarity of fields that concentrate on such objects as public administration itself leads to fundamental questions about the commensurability of theories and concepts (Rutgers, 1993; Raadschelders, 1999; Riccucci, 2010). It may thus generate pessimism about the probability of progress when researchers are seen as prisoners of their own perspectives. That is, when a psychologist, an economist, and a political scientist discuss “utility,” “power,” or “value” while holding very different views on these concepts, will it not lead to never-ending confusion?

I, however, am not among the supporters of that incommensurability thesis. Differences between disciplines should warn us, but need not paralyze us in our multidisciplinary endeavors. Rather, in this debate “the best is the enemy of the better.” When a coherent and consistent interdisciplinary framework is the inaccessible “best,” why settle for confinement within the boundaries of our own safe havens of theories, concepts, and methods? Why not read, discuss, understand, triangulate,