

## Ethical Issues in Public Administration: A Thematic Analysis Based on Participant Perspectives

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### Abstract

This study aims to examine ethical issues in public administration through participants' perspectives. Conducted within a qualitative research framework, the study explored the views of 25 students enrolled at Tarsus University regarding ethical principles in public administration. In addition, data were collected on prevalent ethical problems and analyzed using thematic analysis based on participants' responses. The findings, categorized under the main theme of 'Ethical Issues in Public Administration,' revealed six sub-themes: corruption and bribery; favoritism and lack of merit; injustice and discrimination; lack of transparency and accountability; insufficient oversight and weak ethical culture; and conflict of interest and prioritization of personal gain. Participants emphasized that bribery and favoritism undermine trust in public services, while deficiencies in oversight and an underdeveloped ethical culture contribute to the persistence of unethical practices. Moreover, corruption was noted to erode public trust; favoritism in place of merit was found to reduce institutional efficiency; and lack of transparency was observed to weaken accountability. The results indicate that ethical issues in public administration should be addressed not only at the individual level but also in structural and cultural dimensions. The study offers potential solutions such as the establishment of effective oversight mechanisms, the provision of ethics training, merit-based appointments, and transparent governance. The findings are intended to inform policies and practices aimed at strengthening the culture of ethics in public administration.

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## Introduction

Public administration requires a governance approach that prioritizes public interest and is based on transparency, accountability, and ethical principles. Ethics is a fundamental element that reinforces citizens' trust in public services and contributes to ensuring justice in governance processes (Eryılmaz & Biricikoğlu, 2011). However, both national and international literature indicate that ethical issues are widespread in public administration, causing serious disruptions in management processes (Park University, 2025; Doğan, 2021). This situation undermines the efficiency of public institutions, erodes social trust, and negatively affects the quality of public services. Especially, conflicts of interest, corruption, nepotism, political pressures, and the inadequate implementation of ethical standards are among the main causes of ethical erosion in public administration. Therefore, institutionalizing ethical principles in public administration not only increases the accountability of public officials but also strengthens public trust in the state.

Among unethical practices, corruption, bribery, favoritism, and lack of meritocracy stand out. Corruption, defined as the misuse of public resources for personal gain, leads to the erosion of trust in public services (Ribeiro et al., 2018). Favoritism and meritless appointments reduce internal motivation within institutions and diminish the effectiveness of public services (Özdemir, 2008). Moreover, the lack of transparency and accountability causes ethical issues to become chronic, further weakening public trust in the state (Eryılmaz & Biricikoğlu, 2011). To prevent unethical practices in public administration, it is essential to strengthen institutional ethical culture, implement effective transparency mechanisms, and guarantee accountability within a legal framework. Additionally, to raise ethical awareness among public officials, continuous training programs must be implemented, and deterrent sanctions against ethical violations must be enforced. These measures are critical to reestablishing trust and legitimacy in public administration.

In recent years, awareness of ethical issues in public administration has increased; however, these issues persist due to structural, cultural, and individual factors (Bozoğlu, 2022). The lack of oversight mechanisms, weak ethical culture, and prioritization of personal interests over public good are fundamental causes of ethical violations (Treviño et al., 1998: 447-448). Accordingly, identifying ethical issues accurately and developing comprehensive strategies to solve them is of critical importance. For these strategies to be successful, not only legal and administrative regulations

but also the strengthening of institutional ethical culture, increasing the ethics education of public officials, and ensuring the active participation of society in governance processes are necessary. Furthermore, adopting international good governance standards and promoting transparency through technological innovations may help reduce ethical issues in public administration (OECD, 2025: 221-223; Porumbescu, 2015: 205). This study aims to identify individuals' thoughts on ethical issues in public administration and to examine the root causes of these issues through thematic analysis based on participant perspectives. The study seeks to contribute to understanding the dimensions of ethical problems in public administration and offer a new perspective in addressing unethical practices.

## 1. Literature Review

Ethics in public administration refers to a set of fundamental principles that ensure administrative practices are conducted fairly, transparently, and accountably. Ethical principles require public officials to act impartially, honestly, without conflicts of interest, and with a commitment to the public good (Eryılmaz & Biricikoğlu, 2011; Svava, 2015). The institutionalization of ethical behavior should not be left solely to individual conscience; it must be supported through administrative structures, legal regulations, and organizational culture.

In Türkiye, the most important institutional body that defines the ethical behavior framework for public officials is the Council of Ethics for Public Officials, established in 2004. However, many academic studies argue that due to its limited sanctioning power, the council remains largely symbolic and fails to effectively establish a strong ethical culture within public institutions (Usta & Arslan, 2020; Akcagündüz & Eken, 2022; Eryılmaz, 2010; Akdeniz, 2016). These findings indicate a need for comprehensive reforms both legally and institutionally to enhance the council's functionality. Ethical principles must be supported not only through legal regulations but also through internal training, robust oversight mechanisms, and incentivizing practices (Menzel, 2005: 9-10). Otherwise, the existence of ethics boards risks being limited to providing "ethical visibility" rather than raising ethical standards in public administration, and thus fails to meet public expectations. Establishing an institutional ethical culture requires not only strong leadership commitment but also the internalization of ethical values by public employees.

Among unethical behaviors, corruption and bribery are the most frequently encountered and most criticized problems in the literature. A study

by Park University (2025) reveals that corruption not only has economic consequences but also undermines the reputation of public institutions and weakens the relationship between citizens and the state. Ribeiro et al. (2018) state that corruption networks are often structurally embedded within institutions and perpetuated through these structures. This indicates that corruption arises not only from individual weaknesses but also from institutional loopholes and a lack of oversight.

Another major ethical violation is favoritism, patronage, and meritless appointments. In institutions where the merit system is weak, decision-makers often base their choices on familial, personal, or political ties, resulting in decreased employee motivation and reduced service quality (Özdemir, 2008; Usta & Kocaoğlu, 2015). Consequently, this undermines core democratic and constitutional principles such as justice, equality, representation, and participation in public administration (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000: 550). These dynamics directly influence institutional performance either positively or negatively (Greenberg, 1990). In environments where favoritism is prevalent, personal loyalty is prioritized over competence, which eventually weakens the professionalism of public institutions and the effectiveness of services provided to society. Additionally, the continued practice of meritless appointments disrupts trust and sense of belonging among public employees, weakens organizational commitment, and increases the risk of institutional decay. Therefore, strengthening merit-based human resources policies and implementing objective evaluation systems are vital for ensuring efficiency in public services and restoring public trust.

Another commonly cited ethical problem in the literature is the lack of transparency and accountability. Eryılmaz and Biricikoğlu (2011) define accountability as a form of administrative responsibility, emphasizing that public administrators must conduct decision-making and implementation processes in a manner open to administrative and legal scrutiny. Bozoğlu (2022) shows that the low level of transparency in public institutions in Türkiye provides fertile ground for unethical practices.

The spread of ethical issues is also driven by structural weaknesses in oversight mechanisms and an insufficient organizational ethical culture. Ateş and Oral (2003) argue that ethical culture in institutions should be reinforced not only by written rules but also through the attitudes of managers, employee participation, and internal training. Taş and Korkmaz (2023) demonstrate that ethical leadership among public administrators has a direct impact on the development of institutional ethical culture.

In the international literature, the principles of good governance are considered foundational references for defining the ethical framework in public administration (Altan & Tülüceoglu, 2016). The Nolan Principles, developed in the UK by the Committee on Standards in Public Life—selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership—form the basis of ethical codes in many countries (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 1995). Furthermore, Wachs et al. (2019) argue that in environments with closed social networks, nepotism and conflict of interest are more prevalent, whereas unethical practices are less frequent in open and monitored networks.

Overall, the literature on public administration ethics emphasizes the need for institutionalizing ethics education, establishing effective oversight mechanisms, strengthening transparency and accountability, and implementing merit-based personnel policies to resolve ethical issues.

## 2. Method

In this study, thematic analysis was adopted as the primary method of data analysis. Thematic analysis is a widely used and flexible qualitative approach that enables researchers to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is particularly suitable for exploring participants' experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes. For this reason, thematic analysis was considered appropriate to systematically examine perceptions of ethical issues in public administration. Moreover, its flexibility, which does not require adherence to a specific theoretical framework, allows for the integration of diverse perspectives in a structured manner (Nowell et al., 2017). As emphasized by Çarıkçı et al. (2024), thematic analysis provides a systematic procedure for organizing and interpreting qualitative data, thereby enhancing the rigor of the research process.

The analysis followed the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarization with the data. Second, significant statements regarding ethical problems in public administration were systematically coded. Third, similar codes were grouped together to form potential themes. Fourth, these themes were reviewed to ensure coherence and consistency with the data. Fifth, themes were refined, clearly defined, and named to reflect their core meanings. Finally, themes were reported and illustrated with direct quotations from participants.

Through this systematic process, six overarching themes concerning ethical issues in public administration were identified: corruption and bribery, nepotism and lack of merit, injustice and discrimination, lack of transparency and accountability, insufficient oversight and weak ethical culture, and conflicts of interest. Thematic analysis thus provided a robust methodological framework that allowed the study to capture participants' shared perceptions of ethical problems and contributed significantly to achieving the research objectives.

### **2.1. Population and Sample**

The population of this research consists of 25 undergraduate students enrolled at Tarsus University who have taken either the course "Professional Ethics" or "Ethics in Public Administration." Since it was not feasible to reach the entire population due to constraints of time, cost, and accessibility, the criterion sampling technique, one of the purposive sampling methods, was employed. Participants included in the sample group were selected among students who had successfully completed or were currently enrolled in the aforementioned courses and who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. As the study employed a semi-structured interview technique, the number of participants was determined until data saturation was reached. Accordingly, interviews were conducted with 25 students.

In qualitative research, the adequacy of the sample size is not determined by statistical representativeness but rather by the attainment of data saturation. Data saturation refers to the point at which additional interviews no longer yield new insights or themes (Guest et al., 2006). In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached, which occurred at the 25th participant. Therefore, the number of participants was deemed sufficient to capture the diversity of perspectives within the research scope. Comparable qualitative studies in the fields of public administration and ethics have employed sample sizes ranging between 15 and 30 participants, which supports the adequacy of the current sample (Creswell and Poth, 2024; Patton, 2002).

### **2.2. Data Collection Process**

A semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher was used for data collection. The form was prepared in line with the literature and research objectives and consisted of 5-8 open-ended questions. The questions focused on enabling students to interpret real-world ethical issues based on the knowledge and awareness they acquired from the ethics course. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, online, or in written form

at times and places convenient for the participants. Each face-to-face or online interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality principles were strictly observed. Data were collected through the following open-ended question posed to participants:

*“What are your thoughts on ethical issues in public administration? In your opinion, what are the most common ethical issues, and how do these issues emerge?”* The open-ended format allowed participants to express their views in their own words (Polat, 2022: 170). The data collection process lasted approximately two months, and all responses were obtained on a voluntary basis.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

The responses were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006):

- i. Reading the data repeatedly to gain a sense of the whole,
- ii. Generating initial codes (identifying key expressions related to ethical issues),
- iii. Comparing similarities and differences between codes,
- iv. Developing main themes and sub-themes,
- v. Reviewing and integrating themes with the entire dataset,
- vi. Writing the report and supporting the findings with direct quotations from participants.

During the analysis, comparisons were made between participants to ensure the reliability of the themes. In semi-structured interviews, comparing participants' statements is not just an option but a necessity (Dömbekci & Erişen, 2022: 144). To ensure the consistency of the findings, identified themes were supported with direct quotations. Moreover, reflective notes were taken throughout the process to minimize researcher bias, and the entire analysis procedure was documented transparently.

### 2.4. Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with the principles of voluntariness, confidentiality, and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their responses were not associated with any identifying information. The research process adhered to ethical guidelines, and participants were informed that their data would be used

solely for scientific purposes. Ethics approval for this research was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Social and Human Sciences Research of Tarsus University, dated 04 September 2025 and numbered 2025/123.

3. Findings

As a result of the thematic analysis conducted based on participant views, six main sub-themes were identified under the overarching theme of “Ethical Issues in Public Administration.” These sub-themes are: corruption and bribery; favoritism, nepotism, and lack of meritocracy; injustice and discrimination; lack of transparency and accountability; inadequate oversight and weak ethical culture; and conflict of interest and prioritization of personal gain.

Table 1. Findings Derived from Semi-Structured Interviews

| Main Theme                              | Sub-themes                                               | Examples from Participant Responses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ethical Issues in Public Administration | Corruption and Bribery                                   | P2: “In particular, bribery is one of the most prominent issues... When someone needs something done in the public sector, they offer money or gifts to the employee to expedite the process.” P5: “The most common ethical issues include corruption, bribery, and favoritism...” P16: “Corruption emerges due to the absence of an effective and supervisory audit mechanism.” |
|                                         | Favoritism, Nepotism, and Lack of Meritocracy            | P17: “Favoritism... managers prioritize hiring their relatives or acquaintances.” P3: “Recruitments are often based on loyalty rather than merit.” P14: “The most prevalent issues are favoritism, corruption, and bribery.”                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                         | Injustice and Discrimination                             | P1: “Public officials are not impartial; they treat people differently and do not act fairly.” P9: “Discrimination and injustice occur when people are not treated equally and fairly, based on differences in language, religion, or ethnicity.” P17: “The most common ethical problems are injustice and discrimination.”                                                      |
|                                         | Lack of Transparency and Accountability                  | P3: “The most common issues include abuse of public authority, favoritism, corruption, and lack of transparency...” P11: “Corruption, favoritism, and conflicts of interest arise due to a lack of oversight, a weak ethical culture, and political pressure.” P20: “The most common ethical problems are conflicts of interest, lack of transparency, and corruption...”        |
|                                         | Lack of Oversight and Weak Ethical Culture               | P18: “I believe these issues can only be addressed through proper public oversight...” P4: “The most common ethical problems are injustice and lack of oversight.” P7: “In my opinion, these problems arise from weak supervision, insufficient adoption of institutional culture, and inadequate ethics training.”                                                              |
|                                         | Conflict of Interest and Prioritization of Personal Gain | P20: “Instead of acting fairly and equally, people tend to place their personal interests above their professional ethics.” P21: “Such problems may arise when managers or employees prioritize their personal benefits over the public good.” P13: “The most common ethical problems can include selfishness, verbal abuse, corruption, and discrimination.”                    |

Participants emphasized that corruption and bribery are among the most prevalent ethical problems, significantly undermining the credibility of public services. One participant expressed this concern as follows: *“Bribery is particularly one of the most striking issues... People who need something done in the public sector offer money or gifts to the employee to have their work processed immediately”* (P2). Similarly, another participant pointed to the weakness of oversight mechanisms, stating: *“Corruption emerges due to the absence of an effective and supervisory audit mechanism”* (P16).

According to Park University (2025), corruption damages justice, transparency, and public trust in the public sector. As highlighted by P7 and P20, corruption and bribery are seen as major ethical threats to the integrity of public service. P2 provided concrete examples of bribery, such as individuals offering money or gifts to public officials to accelerate bureaucratic procedures, or students giving expensive gifts to teachers in order to pass a course.

Moreover, P15 considered the misuse of public resources for personal purposes as a form of corruption. P16, P3, and P12 also identified corruption as a widespread ethical issue, while P18, P19, and P22 listed bribery among the most common ethical problems encountered in public administration.

In addition, Ribeiro et al. (2018) argued that political corruption networks exacerbate social inequalities, further emphasizing the societal impact of these unethical practices.

The sub-theme of favoritism, nepotism, and lack of meritocracy was frequently emphasized by participants. They reported that recruitment processes in the public sector often prioritize personal connections over qualifications and merit. For example, P2 noted: *“Favoritism... managers prioritize hiring their relatives or acquaintances.”* Similarly, P3 stated: *“Recruitments are often based on loyalty rather than merit.”* These statements reflect widespread concerns about the prevalence of non-merit-based employment practices.

A commonly mentioned issue is the lack of impartiality among public officials, who are perceived to treat individuals differently based on personal relationships rather than objective criteria. P2 described a common scenario in which influential managers favor their relatives or acquaintances during recruitment processes. P3 emphasized that valuing loyalty over competence lies at the core of this ethical issue.

P6 expressed the view that the prevalence of informal hiring quotas or “connections” makes it difficult for qualified individuals to find employment.

P14 cited unfair distribution of ranks and promotions as an example of unethical behavior. Similarly, P21 shared a case where a candidate with the highest exam score was overlooked in favor of someone with personal ties to a senior manager, facilitated through external influence.

P24 directly identified favoritism (referred to as *torpil* in Turkish) as an ethical problem. Additionally, P16 and 19 also considered favoritism to be a significant ethical issue in public administration. In the literature, these phenomena are discussed under the concepts of nepotism and cronyism (Ribeiro et al., 2018; Huberts & van Montfort, 2021).

Another prominent dimension of ethical issues identified by participants is injustice and discrimination. Participants reported that public officials often fail to act impartially, and that deviations from the principles of equality and justice are commonly observed. As P1 stated: *“Public officials are not impartial; they treat people differently and do not act fairly.”* Discriminatory practices, particularly based on language, religion, and ethnicity, were also frequently mentioned (P9). Participants emphasized that impartiality is often not upheld in public service delivery and that such discrimination undermines ethical governance.

The lack of fairness and impartiality in public administration is considered a serious ethical concern. P2 noted that individuals who prepare extensively for competitive exams are often treated unfairly, suggesting a breach of procedural justice. P13 warned that repeated experiences of injustice may lead to a loss of public trust in the sense of justice. Similarly, P4 suggested that injustice and lack of oversight may lead to a breakdown in social order.

P17 and 21 also identified injustice as one of the most prevalent ethical issues. P23 emphasized that discriminatory behavior based on religion, language, or ethnicity during public service delivery constitutes a clear ethical violation. Likewise, P19 stressed the importance of avoiding unequal treatment based on race, family background, or similar personal factors. P15 pointed to public employees' negative attitudes toward citizens and the failure to deliver services fairly as further examples of unethical behavior.

This issue is also widely recognized in the literature as a fundamental violation of core ethical principles, particularly impartiality and equal treatment in public service delivery (Öztürk, 1998; Doğan, 2021).

The lack of transparency and accountability emerges as a key factor facilitating the spread of ethical problems in public administration. Participants frequently noted that insufficient oversight and vague responsibilities contribute to unethical behaviors. As P11 stated: *“Corruption, favoritism, and*

*conflicts of interest emerge due to the lack of oversight, a weak ethical culture, and political pressure.*” P3 emphasized that ethical issues become more visible and addressable when public institutions are properly audited and monitored.

Several participants (P12, P16, P19, P20, and P21) identified the lack of transparency as a widespread ethical issue. P16 pointed out that a lack of accountability-stemming from the absence of effective auditing mechanisms-constitutes an ethical concern in itself. Furthermore, P16 argued that ethical problems in public administration often result from a misalignment between the personal values of public managers and the expectations of society. According to the same participant, the prevalence of corruption is closely linked to the lack of effective oversight and the ease of access to public resources.

P22 emphasized that efforts to prevent unethical conduct must be transparent and free from political interference. Similarly, P15 cited negative attitudes of public employees toward citizens and the lack of fair internal management as common ethical issues.

The misalignment between administrators’ individual values and societal expectations, as highlighted by P16, reveals a deeper ethical tension in governance. In the literature, transparency and accountability are seen as critical components for restoring public trust, particularly in the context of ethical governance (Eryılmaz & Biricikoğlu, 2011).

Participants also emphasized that a lack of oversight and a weak ethical culture play a decisive role in the emergence of ethical problems in public administration. P4 stated: *“The most common ethical problems are injustice and lack of oversight,”* highlighting how inadequate auditing mechanisms contribute to the spread of ethical violations in the public sector. Similarly, P3 expressed the belief that such problems can only be revealed through effective public auditing.

P4 identified the insufficiency of oversight as one of the fundamental ethical issues, while P7 pointed to weak supervision as a core cause of these problems. P12 attributed the emergence of ethical issues to poor supervision and a lack of discipline within institutions. P16 further emphasized that the absence of an effective and regulatory oversight mechanism plays a significant role in the persistence of corruption in public administration. Likewise, P23 noted that the lack of regular audits may lead to the emergence of ethical misconduct.

In addition to weak oversight, several participants also drew attention to the lack of ethical education and insufficient institutionalization of ethical

norms. P3 suggested that public employees' unethical behavior is often a result of limited ethics training. P25 shared a similar view, stating that ethical issues frequently arise from problems such as lack of education. P20 listed the absence of meritocracy as a commonly encountered ethical issue.

P9 pointed out that legal gaps and deficiencies may also contribute to the persistence of unethical practices. P22 underlined that failures in adopting and internalizing a strong institutional culture are among the underlying causes of ethical violations in the public sector.

These findings are supported by Zeren and Bilken (2021) and Gölbaşı (2009), who emphasize the critical importance of institutionalizing mechanisms to combat unethical behavior in public administration.

Finally, the theme of conflict of interest and prioritization of personal gain was frequently highlighted by participants as a critical ethical issue in public administration. One participant explained the problem as follows: *"Rather than acting fairly and equally, people tend to place their personal interests above professional ethics"* (P5). Similarly, P20 stated: *"This issue arises when managers or employees prioritize their personal benefits over the public interest."*

P1 pointed out that public officials often focus on personal gain rather than serving the public good, suggesting that some individuals are willing to do anything for status or position. P11 regarded the abuse of public authority as one of the most widespread ethical problems in the public sector. In the same vein, P17 described the prioritization of self-interest over ethical duty as the primary reason behind the emergence of unethical behavior.

Several other participants (P12, P13, P16, P20, and P23) also identified conflicts of interest as one of the most common ethical issues faced in public administration. These views reflect a broader concern that public servants sometimes exploit their positions for personal advantage, thereby undermining the principles of impartiality, responsibility, and the primacy of the public good.

Overall, participants' perspectives reveal that ethical problems in public administration are multidimensional and composed of interconnected elements that reinforce one another. The persistence of these issues is often attributed to the lack of effective oversight mechanisms and a weak ethical culture within institutions. The combination of the identified sub-themes reflects what the literature defines as a misalignment between ethical values and actual administrative practices (Huberts & van Montfort, 2021; Özdemir, 2008).

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that ethical problems in public administration primarily stem from both structural and individual-level factors, such as insufficient oversight mechanisms, a weak ethical culture, and the prioritization of personal interests over the public good. Participants emphasized that widespread issues like corruption, bribery, nepotism, and lack of meritocracy severely undermine social trust in public services and erode the sense of justice among citizens. Furthermore, the lack of transparency and accountability mechanisms contributes to the persistence and normalization of unethical practices within the public sector. Based on the empirical data, the following recommendations are proposed to mitigate ethical issues in public administration:

*Strengthening effective oversight mechanisms:* The evolving paradigm of public governance highlights the increasing importance and functionality of performance-based audits. Effective oversight now plays a central role in ensuring accountability, transparency, and ethical governance. Institutional networks must be established and coordinated efficiently to maximize inter-agency synergy and ensure organizational alignment. In this context, oversight serves not only as a monitoring tool but also as a mechanism to foster participatory, rational, and ethical administration. As Akyel and Köse (2010) argue, in a public sector where competitive pressure is often minimal or nonexistent, oversight becomes a critical tool for introducing the dynamism typically associated with the private sector-focusing on quality, participation, citizen satisfaction, and a deeper sense of responsibility and accountability. Furthermore, effective oversight mechanisms have the potential to enhance public trust and contribute to the establishment of good governance, where fundamental human rights are safeguarded (Çamurtaş & Gelmez, 2023). In this regard, the establishment of independent, regular, and effective oversight units is essential for detecting and preventing ethical violations. As Eryılmaz and Biricikoğlu (2011) emphasize, these units play a crucial role in ensuring the integrity and legitimacy of public institutions.

*Expanding ethics training programs:* It is essential to implement continuous and comprehensive ethics training programs for public officials in order to raise awareness of ethical principles and promote ethical behavior in the public sector. Continuous training contributes significantly to the development of both individual and institutional ethical culture (Findik, 2025, p. 36). These programs serve not only as educational tools but also as strategic instruments for enhancing the ethical sensitivity of civil servants, strengthening their problem-solving capacities, and enabling them to integrate independent

judgment and normative reasoning into decision-making processes (OECD, 1996, pp. 36-37). In this context, the implementation of mandatory in-service training programs and professional development courses for public employees on an annual basis has been institutionalized in Türkiye. These programs offer systematic guidance to ensure that employees carry out their duties in compliance with current legal and procedural frameworks. Such regulations represent an important institutionalized practice of lifelong professional training for public servants and aim to reinforce ethical competence at all levels of public administration (Yatkin, 2015).

*Merit-based human resource management:* Merit-based human resource (HR) management requires a management system that is structured in accordance with legal and ethical principles. It includes the use of objective criteria in job design, job analysis, recruitment, and selection processes; ensures fair access to professional development and career advancement opportunities; guarantees the equitable distribution of benefits; and promotes employee motivation and incentive mechanisms based on merit and competence. Furthermore, it calls for transparent and balanced negotiations with organized labor, fair treatment in dismissal processes, and the alignment of strategic HR planning with the organization's overall vision.

Indeed, research conducted in high-income countries reveals that integrated merit-based HR practices aligned with an organization's mission and strategy play a critical role in enhancing both employee performance and institutional effectiveness (Dieleman et al., 2009, p. 8; Bejtkovský, 2017, p. 1834). Implementing meritocratic criteria in recruitment and promotion decisions also helps reduce favoritism and patronage. When performance and competence-based measures are prioritized in hiring and promotion, nepotism and unfair advantages can be significantly minimized (Park University, 2025).

*Enhancing transparency and accountability:* Nowadays, the increasing specialization and professionalization of public services necessitate that citizens be able to monitor public service providers through effective and transparent accountability mechanisms. Within the framework of the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm, accountability is positioned as a core governance instrument aimed at preventing the misuse and abuse of public authority, ensuring that public resources are managed in accordance with legal norms and the principle of efficiency, and maintaining institutional learning within public organizations (Balci, 2003, pp. 115-117). Public institutions must establish transparent, accessible, and accountable decision-

making and implementation mechanisms. Policies that promote open data, practices subject to citizen oversight, and process transparency are essential to rebuilding public trust (Eroğlu, 2025; Karaca & Özsalmanlı, 2022, p. 133).

*Institutionalizing an ethical culture:* The development of an ethical culture in public administration is essential, as corruption and unethical behavior represent complex, multidimensional problems that undermine public trust at both national and global levels. An ethical culture must be constructed upon core values such as accountability, transparency, meritocracy, and the public interest. Corruption may lead to a crisis of confidence in the fields of public administration, politics, and the judiciary, as well as to inefficiency and broader societal disintegration. Promoting ethical awareness at both institutional and societal levels requires education, legal frameworks, effective oversight mechanisms, and active civil society participation. Moreover, the internalization of ethical values through national and international ethical codes and regulatory frameworks as well as the continuous implementation of reforms under initiatives such as the Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO) is a fundamental prerequisite for fostering ethical conduct in public administration (Eryılmaz, 2008, p. 7). Establishing a strong organizational culture that supports ethical behavior within institutions can significantly reduce ethical violations in the long term. To this end, it is crucial to ensure the ongoing monitoring and improvement of ethical management practices through ethics committees, ethical codes, and sanctions (Özdemir, 2008; Bozoğlu, 2022).

These findings reveal that ethical issues in public administration must be addressed not only at the individual level but also at the systemic and institutional levels. A comprehensive and sustainable approach is essential for resolving such problems. Moreover, this study provides significant insights into the identification and resolution of ethical challenges in public administration. It emphasizes the need to develop holistic and long-term strategies to strengthen ethical governance within public institutions. The results serve as a reference point for future research, particularly encouraging further exploration of the effectiveness of ethics training programs, the performance of oversight mechanisms, and the institutionalization of ethical culture.

## Conclusion

This study was conducted within the framework of a qualitative thematic analysis to reveal how ethical issues in public administration are perceived

from the perspective of students. The findings obtained from participant views clearly indicate that ethical problems in public administration stem not only from individual attitudes and behaviors but also from structural, managerial, and cultural dynamics. As a result of the research, key areas of ethical concern commonly observed in public institutions were identified, including corruption and bribery, favoritism and lack of meritocracy, injustice and discrimination, lack of transparency and accountability, weak oversight mechanisms and insufficient institutional ethical culture, as well as conflicts of interest and prioritization of personal gain.

The majority of participants emphasized that corruption and bribery undermine the legitimacy and reliability of public services, and that such practices often stem from ineffective oversight processes and self-serving attitudes among administrators. In particular, favoritism, nepotism, and the lack of meritocracy lead to unfairness in recruitment and promotion processes within public institutions. This, in turn, weakens the sense of organizational belonging among civil servants and erodes citizens' trust in the state.

Moreover, participants identified injustice and discrimination as critical areas that perpetuate unethical behavior. Public officials' biased and discriminatory actions, based on personal judgments, violate the principle of equality and hinder the realization of justice in public services. Participants noted that such behavior often occurs based on factors such as language, religion, sect, and ethnicity, emphasizing the necessity of internalizing impartiality in public service delivery.

The lack of transparency and accountability emerges as one of the primary factors that facilitate the institutional entrenchment of unethical practices. Participants emphasized that the absence of public oversight in decision-making and implementation processes within public institutions eliminates the accountability of public officials, thereby contributing to the proliferation of unethical behaviors.

The weakness of oversight mechanisms and the insufficient institutionalization of an ethical culture play a decisive role in the systematic nature of these issues. Most participants stated that ethical violations can only be prevented through effective, independent, and continuous monitoring processes. They also emphasized the necessity of enhancing public officials' ethical awareness. In particular, the inadequacy of ethics education leads to a lack of internalization of ethical rules and their disregard in practice.

Conflict of interest and prioritization of personal gain have been identified as common issues that undermine professional ethics in public service. Participants' statements revealed that many public administrators and employees prioritize their individual interests over the public good, which, in turn, hinders the impartial, equitable, and effective delivery of public services.

The scope of this study is limited to identifying ethical issues in public administration from the perspectives of students. However, the multidimensional nature of ethical problems necessitates further research that incorporates diverse perspectives. In this regard, several recommendations can be made for future researchers in the field.

First and foremost, future studies should include not only students but also public employees, administrators, and citizens in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of ethical challenges in public administration. Additionally, research supported by both qualitative and quantitative data will allow for a more detailed and accurate analysis of the depth and prevalence of ethical issues.

Studies conducted in different cities or institutions can also provide insight into how geographical and structural differences influence perceptions of ethics. Furthermore, examining specific cases of ethical violations in particular institutions through case study methods may offer clearer insights into real-world problems and possible solutions.

In summary, the effectiveness of ethics training programs in public institutions should be evaluated, and the impact of administrators' ethical leadership on employee behavior should be explored. Such studies will not only contribute to the academic literature but also support the development of a more ethical structure within public administration.

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