

Ritual, Memory and Oaths: A Mixed Method Approach to Building Capacity for Ethical Praxis

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Abstract

Building capacity for ethical praxis within the South Australian Public Service is vital to those who serve in the public interest as with the community it serves. The Mixed Method research results reported within this article seek to expose previously unknown knowledge about ritual, oaths, and building capacity for ethical praxis for those employed in administrative tiers of employment, ranging from ASO1 to ASO8, MAS1 to MAS3, PO1 to PO6, and SAES1 to SAES2 within the South Australian public sector. Finding existing ways of improving public sector ethics in South Australia through ritual, memory, and oaths was non-existent, given ethics sensitivity and employee scepticism. No researcher had previously investigated oaths and their impact on individual attitude within the Australian or South Australian Public Service. An outcome of this original research study was the composition of the Lewis Oath theory. The specifically designed hypothetical oath tested was one way of contributing to understanding and subsequently improving public sector ethics. Furthermore, other acknowledged methods for preventing unethical behaviour include, yet are not limited to, the improvement in organisational culture and ethos. Social science researchers and government must recognise the underlying sentiment and attitude of individuals and the collective society if ethical praxis is to be achieved within this context.

Keywords

Ethics, Ritual, Capacity, Oaths, Public Administration

*This original research study occurred during the author's Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) candidature at the Flinders University of South Australia. The candidature was attached to the College of Business, Government, and Law.

1. Introduction

The hypothesis for this original research study was the hypothetical oath brought about a change in participant *attitude* supporting ethical praxis. This specific oath was a healthy design of principles that were considered necessary to society as a whole; for the collective good. The hypothetical oath ultimately set out predetermined principles, a *priori*. Positive objectives were included in the dialogue of the hypothetical oath, such as being lawful, honorable, truthful, compassionate, respect for all sentient beings, equality, being gallant in reporting unethical actions, and providing support for those who come forward with honest disclosures. The ideals reflected what contemporary society expected, no less of its community. Higher public service has been described by Matheson (1998) at best, a “semi-profession” (p. 22). Although, despite this low level of status, there have been many widely publicised cases in which public employees have come forward with truthful disclosures that have uncovered unethical decision-making and, in some cases, corruption.

Furthermore, this is not to say that lower-level status employees are more truthful than those considered higher. It is recognised by Preston and Sampford (2002) that “human capital” can be significant “in smoothing over the areas where reform has been incomplete, imperfect or blocked” (p. 169). Preston and Sampford’s (2002) idea of human capital places intangible value on individual and collective resources. These intangible values are human characteristics, such as emotional intelligence, education, skills, or personality, to name a few. Further, Preston and Sampford (2002) argue that human capital educated on ethics within some of Queensland’s important institutions “allowed corruption to be identified and addressed in the 1980’s”. Aristotle (cited in Rist 2002: p. 84) argued, “the better our mind (and thus the better our moral decisions), the better or more valuable we are”. The author concurs with Aristotle. Developing the intangible assets that employees bring to an organisation which could change moral deliberation and ethical praxis, especially within cultures and environments that permit or encourage such dialogue.

Environmental factors, such as culture and ethos, were essential when discussing ethics and the public sector. Through customs, ideas, or social behaviour within society, cultural influences are determined. Whereby ethos is representative of aspirations and attitudes within the community. Pearson (2001) (cited in Larmour & Wolanin, 2001: pp. 42-43) argues that focusing on the actions of public officials “often obscures the underlying wider responsibility of the states to provide an environment in which corruption is not tolerated or condoned”. Policy, Code, and other documents reflect legislative requirements and govern the South Australian public sector’s objectives. Community expectations must be considered and upheld. Specifically, the document governing ethics in the South Australian public sector is the *Code of Ethics for the South Australian Public Sector* (Office for Ethical Standards & Professional Integrity 2010). The Code was established to reflect the *Public Sector Act 2009* (SA) (Attor-

ney-General's Department 2010). Codes are established methods of managing ethical praxis. Analysis of the *Code* document identifies that it was a definite course of action adopted for the sake of expediency, indicating a dedication to what (McIntyre-Mills, 2007) argues "a *priori*" (p. 461). McIntyre-Mills (2007) argues, a *priori*, also referred to as "Non-consequentialist or deontological duty-based approaches", are based on making decisions subject to the "moral law". Kantian moral law sets out one's duty based on prior decisions; it is a *priori* and, as such, provides normative guidelines (pp. 461-462).

Oaths, too, are a *priori* in nature. Geirsson and Holmgren (2010) explain that Oaths are also characteristic of "Deontology" (p. 147). Deontologists have an opposing view to the consequentialists that "hold the good is a more fundamental moral concept than the right". Instead, deontologists have the position that "right is a more fundamental concept than the good". Most deontological theories inform us that specific actions are correct or others are wrong (p. 147). Geirsson and Holmgren (2010) explain that generally, deontological theories "perform significantly better than consequentialist theories in accounting for our considered moral judgments". Deontological theories also acknowledge that things in the past are relevant morally when we consider our intuitions (p. 148). Further, Geirsson and Holmgren (2010) argue that intrinsically speaking, some actions are just merely wrong, and we must not engage in such acts "even in the pursuit of the noblest or outstanding consequences" (p. 147).

Parsons (1995) argues democratic societies believe that policy-making can and will make a difference (pp. 606-607). The counterargument observed by Harrop (cited in Parsons 1995) was "the impact of public policy is in reality far more limited than generally supposed" (p. 607). Notwithstanding, policy and other governance documents are essential to disseminate ethics in the public sector. The author concurs with Parsons. Governance is necessary. A society without policy and governance would be irresponsible ethics. Further, it would not achieve the basic paradigm of ethical philosophy, "idealism"¹ (Uhr 2005: p. 192). Without denying established limitations, the *Code of Ethics for the South Australian Public Sector 2009* is a mindful attempt to provide an authoritative document for communicating the importance and relevance of ethics in a contemporary public sector environment.

1.1. Historical Concepts of the Oath

For this research study, it was necessary to review the historical aspects of the oath because it is a symbol of ritual experience. The concept of the oath is associated with ancient Greek and Roman civilisations. Hirst (2012) explains that devotion to the republic was defined by putting "all personal and private ties aside and serve the public good". The Romans called "*virtus* republican virtue necessary if the republic was to survive without the tie of allegiance to a king" (p. 76).

¹To see the paradigm of ethical philosophy idealism in its entirety to include any limits (see Uhr 2005).

While fighting to the death is not characteristic of contemporary oaths, some common experiences are shared within the social practice. Collins's (2004) Interaction Ritual² theory argues that ritual creates individual emotional energy (pp. 48-49). Collins (2004) focuses on an object of symbolism and feelings of membership and group solidarity, which brings about within the individual a willingness within some social circumstances to take the initiative (p. 121). Best explained by a witnessed sense of occasion, oath-taking has been a significant part of human history and played social importance in the construct of its time. While oaths are not without their critics, this original research study confirmed that this specific witnessed hypothetical oath impacted the attitudes and emotions of the individuals who participated.

1.2. Creating Memories and Rituals to Build Capacity

For this concept to be understood, it is essential to discuss established research on memory, neuroscience, and ritualistic human experience. Most of us have cherished emotional memories that we hope are impossible to erase. Whether it be a cherished memory of a grandmother or a friend or a University graduation ceremony, these are the ones which we hope stay imprinted on our brain forever, that are immortalised forever in time and our thinking. Joint 2000, Nobel Prize winner in Physiology or Medicine, and Neuroscientist Dr. Kandel's (cited in Miller, 2010: pp. 39-43) found that after memory is constructed, it stabilises "and can't easily become undone, the memory is 'consolidated'". Although it was acknowledged that memories fade or appear less apparent to those trying to recall a memory, especially those suffering the debilitating effects of Alzheimer's Disease. Thought to be under normal circumstances, "the content of the memory stays the same, no matter how many times it's taken out and read". Thus, proponents of Nader's research argue, "a memory is re-formed in the process of calling it up". Further research is required to confirm Nader's unconventional hypothesis that distortions of long-term memory can occur when recalled. However, one thing that is clear and forms the basis of consensus is that "people tend to have accurate memories for the basic facts of a momentous event" (pp. 39-43).

Sprenger (1999) argues, "*emotional memory takes precedence over any other kind of memory*".³ With certainty, the brain will always give precedence to emotions. The hippocampus files information, while the amygdala stores emotional information. If the emotion processed has strength, "the amygdala takes over to prepare the body" (p. 54). This response; is explained by Goleman (cited Sprenger, 1999) as "neural hijacking". When the brain reached this state it was, reported: "no other memory lanes have a chance" (p. 54). Thus, recreating emotional attachment was essential for this original research study to explore the oath-taking ritual and its impact on individual attitudes.

Although this was a hypothetical oath-taking ceremony, the research setting

²To see the Interaction Ritual theory in its entirety to include any limits (see Collins, 2004).

³To see the concept of emotional memory in its entirety to include any limits (see Sprenger, 1999).

needed to replicate what takes place in real-world oath-taking traditions. Thus, the research environment was such that it could trigger emotion within participants. Many oath-taking traditions incorporate the relevant country's National Anthem. Thus, the National Anthem of Australia⁴ was played, signifying the experiment had commenced. Oath-taking practices in South Australia required the acknowledgement of the First Australians. This research was not based on Romm's (2018) paradigm indigenous⁵ (pp. 434-435). Although out of respect for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's deep attachment to the land and their cultural beliefs and heritage, the researcher acknowledged that the Flinders University of South Australia is situated on traditional Kurna land. Understanding that indigenous cultures pass down stories and information "[i]n non-literate contexts," Kelly (2016) argues, "the primary motivation is 'didactic'" (p. 41).⁶ Kelly (2016: p. 85) argues "monumental memory spaces"⁷ are:

With trees and journeys, stories and decks of cards, it seems that I am remembering far more than the information I want to memorise, which is true (p. 96). I am memorising in a way that is extremely efficient and, in effect, takes much less effort than more conventional study techniques. What's happening in my head is not a verbal narrative (p. 96). I see actions. I respond emotionally. And if I want to recall the information and verbalise it, then I always can (p. 97).

While we are a contemporary literate culture with an evolving dialogue, shared stories of ethical praxis or the counter could be recalled, shared, and passed down to promote moral attitude and praxis. Kelly (2016) explains Archaeologists at Poverty Point in Louisiana confirmed this site to be "the centre of a hunter-gatherer culture" (p. 241). Furthermore, Mound A at this site was found to have had numbers more significant than one hundred post holes, thought to have been "totem poles, offering a structured set of locations in the memory space" (pp. 244-245). Believed to be true because, as with modern society, so too did ancient civilisations use Collins's (2004) "symbolic objects" as a means of generating emotion and thus memory building (p. 210). Therefore, the author argues contemporary societies can draw upon similarities with ancient cultures, despite our progression as a species with dialogue.

From an established social science perspective, the social practice of the witnessed sense of occasion like oaths generate is best explicated by Professor Randal Collins's concept. Essentially, Collins (2004) argues, ritual is a physical process with the movement of humans into one place, precipitating the ritual practice (p. 53). Collins's (2004) Interaction Ritual (IR) theory "involves focusing attention on the same activity, and becoming aware of each other's involve-

⁴To see the National Anthem of Australia in its entirety to include any limits (see Australian Government, 2013).

⁵To see the indigenous approach in its entirety to include any limits (see Romm, 2018).

⁶Didactic, intended to teach, particularly in having moral instruction as an ulterior motive.

⁷To see the concept of monumental memory spaces in its entirety to include any limits (see Kelly, 2016).

ment; and it has a shared emotional focus, which builds up as the ritual successfully proceeds” (p. 112). Collins’s (2004) IR theory best describes the phenomena of what takes place as a collective group, subsequently witnessing each other in solidarity as they sang the National Anthem of Australia and said the exact words of the hypothetical oath.⁸ At the same time, a symbol—the Australian National Flag was displayed on the large lecture theatre screen. Collins (2004) argues that the historical nature of the oath involves symbolic objects. Collins (2004) argues that:

One said not merely “I swear,” but “I swear by ...” a god or religious object, one’s honor, or some other object held in high regard. The vocabulary of today’s exclamations carries over to some extent from historical oaths. The counterpart of the formal public oath, binding oneself in front of witnesses to a course of action, was, on the negative side, a formal cursing. This was a communal action not merely an individual one (p. 210).

2. Research Methodology

In this article, the researcher discusses ethics and oaths as options for ongoing moral (individual) deliberation and ethical (organisation) praxis in the South Australian Public Sector. This first research study has explored ethics and oaths in this context. This original study involved administering a hypothetical oath—the *Lewisēthikós Oath 2011*©Dr Natalie Lewis⁹ to a target group of South Australian (SA) public sector employees. The target group for both the Case Study¹⁰ and Randomized Control Trial (RCT)¹¹ included participants who occupied different administrative categories or tiers of employment, ranging from ASO1 to ASO8, MAS1 to MAS3, PO1 to PO6, and SAES1 to SAES2. These specific employment tiers were chosen because there was no such oath for administrative persons within the research context. Thus, researchers at the doctorate level had never accomplished inquiry into ethics in the South Australian Public Sector. Therefore, potential participants were recruited indirectly. Most South Australian Government Departments chose to participate in this research. Although, for both the Case study and Randomized Control Trial (RCT), employees from the following SA Government Departments were excluded from this research study at the request of their Chief Executive Officers (CEOs). These were the following: Department for Communities and Social Inclusion, Department for Education and Children’s Services, Department for Primary Industries and Regions, and the Department for Manufacturing, Innovation, Trade, Resources and Energy. In addition, SA Health was excluded by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (SBREC) to address any possible

⁸The hypothetical oath consisted of carefully designed principles that reflected the expectations and ideals of ethics in a contemporary society.

⁹Ēthikós, Greek word translated in English as ethics.

¹⁰To see the Case Study research approach in its entirety to include any limits (see Robson, 2002).

¹¹To see the Randomised Control Trial research approach in its entirety to include any limits (see Robson, 2002).

conflict of interest as the researcher was, employed with this Department.

Additionally, for the RCT, participants were, vetted to ensure that they had not taken any legal oath listed in the *Oaths Act 1936 (SA)*. Furthermore, they were, vetted to ensure that they had no prior experience with any non-legal oaths or pledges, such as Scouts who voluntarily take the Scout Promise.¹² The target group was composed of individuals who had no previous experience with oaths or pledges per se. It was a requirement for legal purposes and the Flinders University, SBREC approval; the specifically developed oath was hypothetical. Meaning the oath had no impact on individual participants outside of the trial or research environment. Therefore, participants had no legal or other requirements to comply with the oath outside the research setting. The research intended to discover if the administration of such an oath could strengthen the willingness of public servants to behave ethically. It was, reported that there was a direct link between the hypothetical oath and *attitude* regarding morality and ethical praxis. The research questions addressed participants' emotions and group cohesion when considering their attitudes toward oaths and their perceived outlook on individual morality. The approved research questions were as follows: "Does the hypothetical oath's ritual evoke emotional and bonding experiences?" Secondly, "does the ritual of the hypothetical oath change attitude and the perceived outlook on individual morality?" Therefore, this article aligns with the purpose of the journal.

2.1. Mixed Methods Research Design

This original research study in evaluation identifies with *Mertens's (2018)* Mixed Methods Research (MMR).¹³ This article represents the potential of incorporating multiple research methods to answer the hypothesis and research questions (pp. 3-4). Furthermore, this article describes a cautious association with *Auger's (1978)* anthropocentrism (p. 29).¹⁴ The concept of this traditional ideology lends itself to the sole belief that the perception and interpretation of everything think only in terms of the "human" existence, experience, and values. Its doctrine is in the belief "the creation of the universe was believed to be directly related to the human race, if not indeed at its service".

This article describes a strong association with *McIntyre-Mills's (2008)* non-anthropocentric¹⁵ approach. She argues that a systemic ethical approach requires us to "embrace complexity, diversity and freedom" to the extent that we do not undermine civil rights in this generation and those generations to follow. *McIntyre-Mills (2008)*, in her own words, reminds us that "fortunately today mapping can help us to make sense of more than a few variables simultaneously when we make decisions based on 'if then' scenarios within context" (p. 147). *West Churchman (1971, 1979a)* (cited in *McIntyre, 2005: pp. 173-174*) stresses the importance of systemic thinking through consideration of "social, political,

¹²To see Scout Promise in its entirety (see Club Scouts, Promise and Law, South Australia).

¹³To see Mixed Methods Research (MMR) in its entirety to include any limits (see *Mertens, 2018*).

¹⁴To see anthropocentrism in its entirety to include any limits (see *Auger, 1978*).

¹⁵To see non-anthropocentric concept in its entirety to include any limits (see *McIntyre-Mills, 2014*).

economic and environmental factors” when making connections. McIntyre (2004) argues that these challenges can be, counteracted through dialectical tools “‘unfolding’ and ‘sweeping in’”. Conceptually, we can create an outcome. McIntyre (2004) argues we must “co-create meanings from thesis and antithesis and then synthesise meaning”. This approach to social science supports “critique as change, a combination of factors, a result of circumstances in which humans are actors among others” (p. 50). Therefore, consideration was given to non-human animals, sentient beings within the dialogue of the hypothetical oath—the *Lewisēthikós Oath 2011*©Dr Natalie Lewis. Sociologist McIntyre-Mills (2017) argues for a “need to work together with many stakeholders who can contribute diverse ways of knowing, including non-anthropocentric approaches informed by and understanding of nature and other life forms” (p. 888). She further argues that “anthropocentric versus non-anthropocentric stewardship needs to be carefully considered to ensure that human consumption is not at the expense of environmental considerations and future generations of life (Parker, 2002) because we are interdependent and vulnerable” (pp. 889-890).

For researchers, one of the main aims of primary research is to influence policy and policy development. Therefore, one needs to incorporate Reynolds & Ulrich’s (2010) Critical Systems Heuristics (CSH).¹⁶ This approach considers the process of critiquing boundaries, involving thinking about what to include or exclude. Thus, concerning why and who will be included or excluded in the process of decision-making. Often with policy development or streamlining policy, the challenge is “what approaches need to be applied to the success of policy analysis?” If we incorporate a systems approach, we must be open to “handling systems boundaries critically” (p. 243). Ulrich (1983) (cited in Reynolds & Ulrich 2010) developed CSH to:

Support reflective practice. In its most simple formulation, CSH uses a set of 12 questions to make explicit the everyday judgements on which we rely (consciously or not) to understand situations and to design systems for improving them. The boundary questions try to make sense of a situation by making explicit the *boundaries* that circumscribe our understanding. Such boundaries inform all our thinking about situations and systems; they constitute what in CSH we call our “reference systems”. Broadly speaking the boundary questions may be understood to cultivate a more holistic awareness of situations (p. 243).

2.2. Research Approaches

It was necessary to incorporate multiple lenses into this research study. This mixed-method study identified Romm’s (2018) argument for a postpositivist¹⁷ and constructivist¹⁸ approach (pp. 451-452). This approach incorporates qualita-

¹⁶To see Critical Systems Heuristics concept in its entirety to include any limits (see Reynolds & Ulrich, 2010).

¹⁷To see the postpositivist approach in its entirety to include any limits (see Romm, 2018).

¹⁸To see the constructivist approach in its entirety to include any limits (see Romm, 2018).

tive and quantitative research for theory development and analysis to get closer to the truth and use different methods to bring about the constructs of reality, including stories. Although, this research study identified with [McIntyre-Mills's \(2014\)](#) argument for an interdisciplinary framework¹⁹ (p. 91).

The research design incorporated both flexible and fixed methods identified as Part 1: Case Study²⁰ and a two-group design, Part 2: Post-test-only Randomized Controlled Trial.²¹ Firstly, this research study, as explained in [Robson \(2002\)](#), carried out a prior “set of individual case studies” (p. 181). Hunter and Brewer (2015a, p. 621) (cited in [Romm, 2018: p. 421](#)) “consider that what is generally called mixed methods research (MMR) involves the use of ‘different types of data and modes of analysis’”. The sampling frame was, based on purposive sampling²² ([Robson, 2002: p. 265](#)). Therefore, this was applied to the research and subsequently developed over time to satisfy the research study’s specific requirements. The sample size ([Robson, 2002: p. 198](#)) for the Case Study, as explained by [Robson \(2002\)](#), was determined by “saturation”, whereby nothing could be found or learned from further data collection (p. 199). The focus of the prior Case Study by semi-structured interview, as [Robson \(2002\)](#) argues, was to essentially pilot and seek to tease out what people thought, felt, or what participants knew (p. 272).

As [Robson \(2002\)](#) argues, the Randomized Control Trial was chosen for its ability to “provide the best evidence for effectiveness, for whether something ‘works’”. The RCT is considered the pinnacle of quality research that provides highly reliable data (p. 116). In addition, the RCT makes for the best causal infe-

¹⁹To see the interdisciplinary framework approach in its entirety to include any limits (see [McIntyre-Mills, 2014](#)).

²⁰A total of 20 individual Case Studies were conducted. Potential participants were, recruited indirectly. Volunteering participants were, employed in administrative tiers of employment, ranging from ASO1 to ASO8, MAS1 to MAS3, PO1 to PO6 and SAES1 to SAES2 within the South Australian public sector. Interviews were, conducted face-to-face and following the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (SBREC) approval—Research Approval Number 5420. Participants were, given a copy of their interview transcripts, with the ability to review and make any modifications including omissions if requested.

²¹The Randomized Control Trial took place on 27 July 2013, at Flinders University of South Australia, South Theatre 2, Biology Road, following the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (SBREC) approval—Research Approval Number 5420. Potential participants were, recruited indirectly. Volunteering participants were, employed in administrative tiers of employment, ranging from ASO1 to ASO8, MAS1 to MAS3, PO1 to PO6 and SAES1 to SAES2 within the South Australian public sector. Random allocation to either the control or experimental groups had occurred previously on the 5 July 2013, at Flinders University of South Australia, conducted by Ms Natalie Lewis, PhD Candidate and witnessed by Dr Craig Matheson, Principle Supervisor. To ensure that governance was followed in conducting such research, the control group commenced at 10:00AM, and the experimental group commenced later on the same day at 13:00PM. It was carefully designed this way so that the two participant groups did not have the opportunity to contact each other and discuss the research. Dr Craig Matheson, Principal Supervisor, attended on the day to witness the dialogue between the researcher and participants and provide support. The control group composed of 15 participants, and the experimental group composed of 7 participants. Although some participants were *randomly assigned* to the experimental group, they did not attend on the day for reasons unknown. Therefore, they were excluded from the experimental group and subsequent data analysis.

²²To see purposive sampling method for Case Study research in its entirety to include any limits (see [Robson, 2002](#)).

rence. The RCT, as explained by Robson (2002), recruited participants that were “randomly assigned”²³ to either the control or experimental group (p. 116). To explain further, those assigned to the former control group did not receive the hypothetical oath. Instead, those assigned to the later intervention group followed the intervention, reading aloud the words of the hypothetical oath. Thus, the researcher developed the hypothetical oath, specifically, for this original research study. It is important to note that ethical oaths and other oaths or pledges must be carefully designed. In doing so, not honour an individual human being or ego that is vulnerable to the frailties of what it means to be human—the frailty of the human mind to think, the human body’s frailty to act, and the frailty of the human spirit to have faith. Although, instead, take on a healthy design of ethical awareness that ultimately sets out principles for the collective good or the whole of society. The hypothetical oath intervention—composed of positive moral and ethical ideals such as, yet not limited to being lawful, honourable, truthful, compassionate, respect for all sentient beings, equality, being gallant in reporting unethical actions, and provision of support for those who come forward with honest disclosures.

Both control and experimental groups were, requested to repeat the same post-test-only²⁴ (Robson, 2002) six months after their initial self-completion²⁵ post-test (p. 236). It was incorporated deliberately into the research design to draw on the *attitudes* conceptualised by participants in both groups. Firstly, determine if the witnessed ritual’s experience verbalising the hypothetical oath diminished over time for the experimental group. Secondly, to gather further research data.

2.3. Research Design of Enquiry

The design of enquiry was based on the works of West Churchman (see McIntyre, 2005). The Use Branch, Mixed Methods approach was applied to evaluate the research questions (see Mertens, 2018). Thus, qualitative and quantitative research and analysis were undertaken to evaluate the research intervention and answer the research questions. West Churchman’s (1979a, 1982) (cited in McIntyre-Mills, 2007: p. 461) Design of Inquiring Systems²⁶ engages with persons to achieve “best matches” and better decision making that incorporates perceptions, values, and emotions. McIntyre-Mills (2008) argues that “systemic approaches”²⁷ inclusive of West Churchman’s work make strenuous efforts to match areas of concern to that of policy and practice (p. 148). McIntyre-Mills (2007: p. 461) argues this is achieved with consideration of the following:

- 1) Subjective ideas that are brought into intersubjective processes;

²³To see random allocation for the Randomized Control research in its entirety to include any limits (see Robson, 2002).

²⁴To see post-test-only in its entirety to include any limits (see Robson, 2002).

²⁵To see self-completion test in its entirety to include any limits (see Robson, 2002).

²⁶To see West Churchman’s concept in its entirety to include any limits (see McIntyre-Mills, 2007; Reynolds & Ulrich, 2010).

²⁷To see systemic approaches in its entirety to include any limits (see McIntyre-Mills, 2008).

- 2) Logical relationships across ideas;
- 3) Empirical data for the big (broad) and small (detailed) picture;
- 4) Idealism (not thinking about the consequences), because the moral law states that we need to treat people as ends in themselves and not a means to an end;
- 5) Dialectical relationships that explore one argument versus another anti-theoretical argument and then co-create shared meaning based on dialogue within the context;
- 6) Pragmatic contextual considerations based on considering the consequences.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

Dr Shahid Ullah, Statistician Consultant, Flinders University of South Australia, determined which non-parametric tests²⁸ were performed, as Field (2009: p. 540) argued. These were, performed given the spread or skew of the data and indicated due to the small sample size of the RCT control and experimental groups (p. 19). As Gray and Kinnear (2009) concur, many non-parametric methods are “more resistant than their parametric counterparts to the influence of outliers and skewness” (p. 191). Pearson’s Chi-square test²⁹ (Field 2009) was performed to compare the percentages of each question between control and experimental groups. The chi-square test was used to “see whether there is a relationship between two categorical variables” when the dependent variable is measured at a nominal level and see the differences in each question’s proportion between control and experimental groups (pp. 688-689). Calculated for all individual questions (Table 1). The chi-square test was performed on each question to find p values ≤ 0.05 , based on the test statistic (X^2). Further, the Phi-coefficient³⁰ (Gingrich 1992) was measured for all questions found to have p values ≤ 0.05 to measure the degree of association between two binary variables. It “is a measure which adjusts the chi square statistic by the sample size”. The measure of the association was represented as *phi*, ϕ (p. 774).

Everyone in the target population had an equal opportunity to participate in the RCT. Despite inviting everyone to participate in the study, limitations attributed to a small sample size were preferred not to generalise to other populations. This small sample size was attributed to many possible factors. These were, yet not limited to, the sensitivity of the subject ethics and participant consent required by the Flinders University of South Australia, SBREC. Further participants raised concerns regarding anonymity, data access and storage. Thus, the fact that the study was required to be completed in the participant’s private time. With participants being randomly assigned to either the control or experimental groups, Robson (2002) argues the sample size of participants for the RCT used, the

²⁸To see non-parametric test in its entirety to include any limits (see Field, 2009).

²⁹To see Chi-square test in its entirety to include any limits (see Field, 2009).

³⁰To see Phi-coefficient measure in its entirety to include any limits (see Gingrich, 1992).

Table 1. Percentage of participants making their opinion to an ethical oath between two groups across July 2013 and January 2014.

Questions	July 2013 (n = 22)						P value	January 2014 (n = 22)						P value
	Control (n = 15)			Treatment (n = 7)				Control (n = 15)			Treatment (n = 7)			
	SD/D	SA/SD	SA/A	SD/D	SA/SD	SA/A		SD/D	SA/SD	SA/A	SD/D	SA/SD	SA/A	
Q8	33.3	33.3	33.4	42.9	-	57.1	0.21	26.7	33.3	40.0	14.3	14.3	71.4	0.39
Q11	93.3	6.7	-	85.7	-	14.3	0.27	73.3	20.0	6.7	85.7	14.3	-	0.72
Q15	26.7	33.3	40.0	14.3	28.6	57.1	0.72	26.7	26.7	46.6	-	28.6	71.4	0.30
Q23	100	-	-	100	-	-	-	93.3	6.7	-	85.7	-	14.3	0.27
Q31	20.0	46.7	33.3	14.3	42.9	42.8	0.90	13.3	40.0	46.7	-	57.1	42.9	0.53
Q32	-	20.0	80.0	14.3	28.6	57.1	0.27	-	20.0	80.0	14.3	14.3	71.4	0.32
Q35	26.7	33.3	40.0	28.6	14.3	57.1	0.62	20.0	40.0	40.0	14.3	42.9	42.8	0.95
Q37	20.0	53.3	26.7	-	14.3	85.7	*0.03	6.7	73.3	20.0	-	14.3	85.7	*0.01
Q39	33.3	26.7	40.0	42.8	28.6	28.6	0.86	13.3	46.7	40.0	71.4	28.6	-	*<0.02
Q43	6.7	33.3	60.0	-	14.3	85.7	0.46	-	46.7	53.3	-	14.3	85.7	0.14
Q44	-	6.7	93.3	-	-	100	0.48	-	13.3	86.7	-	-	100	0.31
Q53	-	40.0	60.0	-	42.9	57.1	0.90	13.3	40.0	46.7	-	85.7	14.3	0.13
Q54	6.7	40.0	53.3	14.3	14.3	71.4	0.46	-	53.3	46.7	-	28.6	71.4	0.28

Note: SD/D, Strongly disagree/Disagree; SA/SD, Somewhat agree/Somewhat disagree; SA/A, Strongly agree/Agree. P values are based on the Chi-square test. Note: Q37 was significant between control and treatment groups in July 2013 and January 2014. Q39 was significant between the two groups only in 2014. Q8 *Swearing* to an ethical oath increases your knowledge and awareness of ethics. Q11 You wouldn't report wrongdoing if you witnessed it when *sworn in* under an ethical oath. Q15 *Swearing* to an ethical oath in the company of others would encourage and inspire you to act ethically. Q23 You would take a bribe if *sworn in* under an ethical oath. Q31 You would prefer to *swear* to an ethical oath at an induction session into the public sector. Q32 *Sworn in* under an ethical oath, you would report wrongdoing if you witnessed it. Q35 All employees would know what is expected behaviour if *sworn in* under an ethical oath. Q37 Taking an oath in the company of others is an emotional and bonding experience. Q39 Saying an ethical oath in the company of others wouldn't increase your inspiration to act ethically. Q43 You would like to see a combination of an ethical oath and policy to address ethics. Q44 You would act ethically when *sworn in* under an ethical oath. Q53 An ethical oath of a legal nature has more strength and effect on behaviour. Q54 *Sworn in* under an ethical oath; the oath would remind you to act ethical.

probability sampling method³¹ (p. 261). Robson (2002) argues that using multiple research methods—Case Study and RCT for collecting data allows for a “reduction of *inappropriate certainty*” (p. 370). Robson (2002) argues that “using a single method and finding a pretty clear-cut result may delude investigators into believing that they have found the ‘right’ answer”. Furthermore, Robson (2002) argues that using multiple research methods permitted the research questions to be answered and enhanced the research rigour when used in a complementary fashion to improve interpretability (p. 174).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Building Capacity for Ethical Praxis

The findings from the interviews suggest that there was justifiable debate around recalled memory and whether people forget what they essentially swore to as

³¹To see probability sampling method for Randomized Control Trial research in its entirety to include any limits (see Robson, 2002).

time went by. Although fondly recounting the emotion and experience of having taken a witnessed legal oath to be, bound by the principles of the Supreme Court, the following statement rings true to the overall sentiment and memory built on that day in a single life. Inclusive of recounting the nature of the oath many years later.

One participant explained it:

“I can honestly say to you that without qualification, it is the second-best day of my life. It was a great day. It was better than a commencement thing at graduation at the University. It was great because look, it was the fulfilment of a whole lot of things that I have worked towards for; in my case, I’ve done two degrees for six years, and it was a fulfilment of arrival. Yes, I do [remember] largely because they contain a pledge of allegiance to Her Excellency, the Queen of Australia, which I remember thinking at the time was an unusual position to be in”. Source; Participant in the Case Study Research # CS04-4 (a).

In terms of building memory, later recalled moments of an ethical challenge were reported, with participants supporting an ethical oath. The following question captured the *attitude* of participants. Legally *sworn in* under an ethical oath, “do you think that the oath would remind and prompt you to act ethically”?

One participant explained it:

“Yes, definitely”. Source; Participant in the Case Study Research # CS16-4 (f).

As previously explained, [Sprengrer \(1999\)](#) argues that *emotional memory takes precedence over any other kind of memory* (p. 54). Thus, the first research question regarding oaths in this context asked participants about emotion and bonding experience; whether it could change *attitude* and their perceived outlook.

The following quantitative results were, reported. Question 37 ([Table 1](#)) addresses participant responses regarding whether taking an oath in the company of others was an emotional and bonding experience and the significance of the ethical oath between the two groups. There was a significant association between the control and experimental groups in 2013 and 2014. In 2013, $\chi^2(1) = 6.84$, $*p = 0.03$, $\phi = 0.557584$; of the 15 respondents in the control group SD/D $n = 3$, SA/SD $n = 8$, SA/A $n = 4$, and of the 7 respondents in the experimental group SD/D $n = 0$, SA/SD $n = 1$, SA/A $n = 6$. In 2014, $\chi^2(1) = 8.56$, $*p = 0.01$, $\phi = 0.623611$; of the 15 respondents in the control group SD/D $n = 1$, SA/AD $n = 11$, SA/A $n = 3$ and of the 7 respondents in the experimental group SD/D $n = 0$, SA/SD $n = 1$, SA/A $n = 6$. The significance did not diminish over time, with further significance, reported six (6) months after the initial experiment took place, which lasted beyond the initial experiment, and did not diminish over time, yet got stronger.

These quantitative results confirmed that partaking in this specific witnessed hypothetical oath-taking ceremony directly influenced participants' *attitudes* regarding emotions and bonding experience. Therefore, we need to replicate experiences such as these to build upon individual memory; emotional memory through the lived bonding experience. At this point in the article, the researcher will put forward a new theory in ethical philosophy and social science—the *Lewis Oath Theory*. The *Lewis Oath Theory* (developed from this original research study) argues the social practice through the lived experience of the witnessed oath builds memory and asserts a propensity of inspiration and desire within an individual to hold themselves faithful to the words of the taken oath.

While participants reportedly supported an ethical oath, counterargument reported some cynicism around implementing the commitment to an oath and its inclusion in training and development or its incorporation in the policy.

One participant explained it:

“No, because I don't think it's about, no I don't think, I think that would be met with a great deal of cynicism anyway, and it would be like, yeah [sic], I signed my oath, I'm ethical, I'm this, I'm that done, finished. I don't have to do it anymore”. Source; Participant in the Case Study Research # CS14-5 (a).

Can swearing to an ethical oath increase individual knowledge and awareness of ethics? Participants reported a positive attitude to the statement posed; swearing an ethical oath increases your knowledge and awareness of ethics. To reinforce in individual minds what was expected, placing the collective on even footing.

As one participant explained it:

“Yes, it would, because I'd want to know what were the foundations for swearing an oath. Yes, it would reinforce it, it would, and it would, I suppose it would reinforce, and it's a commitment to ethical behaviour and things”. Source; Participant in the Case Study Research # CS15-4 (a) & (b).

Or, as another participant put it:

“Well, I think if you have sworn an oath to yourself that you will act in a certain way or belief, then you're more likely to follow through with those actions”. Source; Participant in the Case Study Research # CS08-4 (a).

The second research question regarding oaths in this context asked participants about inspiration and ethical praxis and whether it could change *attitude* and their perceived outlook. The following quantitative results were reported. Question 39 (**Table 1**) addresses participant responses regarding whether saying an ethical oath in the company of others would not increase the inspiration to act ethically. Although not significant in 2013, there was a significant association between the control and experimental groups in 2014. In 2014, $X^2(1) = 8.24$, $*p \leq 0.02$, $\phi = 0.612171$; of the 15 respondents in the control group SD/D $n = 2$,

SA/SD $n = 7$, SA/A $n = 6$ and of the 7 respondents in the experimental group SD/D $n = 5$, SA/SD $n = 2$, SA/A $n = 0$. However, there was a big difference in responses in 2014. Almost three-quarters (71.4%) from the experimental group answered strongly disagree/disagree, whereas only 13.3% from the control group for the same code on the Likert Scale. The results indicated that significance did not diminish over time, with significance reported six (6) months after the initial experiment took place, which lasted beyond the initial experiment and did not diminish over time, yet got stronger.

With the higher public sector being described by Matheson (1998) at best a semi-profession, “would the formality of an oath restore self-respect and somewhat pride one should have when embarking on a career in the public sector?” Listening to one participant who recalled their individual experience of taking an oath upon graduating to the legal profession, the level of respect that one had for the construct of oath-taking, and its impact on professionalism was poignant.

One participant explained it:

“I think it’s a good idea, I do. I think it also reinforces that you’re a professional and you have responsibilities that are higher than a layperson. I’m a very strong believer in that, just from a legal perspective. We always said that here you were, a layperson. You might be able to get away with stuff because you don’t have that knowledge, but when you’re a government public service person, you should have that knowledge and understanding, yep [sic] definitely”.

Source; Participant in the Case Study Research # CS19-4 (a).

3.2. Failure of Oaths to Build Capacity

While most individuals take oaths seriously to follow the dialogue in the context of the oath to their actual ability, this is not to say that oaths cannot fail to build capacity in ethical praxis. Therefore, two critical questions were posed. Do oaths fail? Alternatively, “is it the failure on behalf of individuals to uphold the dialogue within the context of the taken oath?”

Historically, some people break their publicly witnessed oath, like those who commit perjury³² while giving evidence in a legal trial or a doctor who fails to commit to the dialogue of a modern version of the original Hippocratic Oath.³³ In terms of the legal statistics around perjury in the South Australian legal system, data was last gathered in 2007. Historical research whereby perjury was the most serious of the charges brought against an individual was explained by the Attorney-General’s Department (2007b), in a report titled Crime and Justice in South Australia 2007, Adult Courts and Corrections, 1 January-31 December 2007 (p. 107). This report suggests that while perjury is a known statistical factor, it is rare. In fact, in the Supreme and District Courts of South Australia, out

³²Perjury—the wilful giving of false testimony under oath or affirmation before a legal inquiry or tribunal.

³³To see Hippocratic Oath in its entirety to include any limits (see Fox, 2020).

of a total of “107 total charged”, “0” individuals accounted for being charged with the significant offence of perjury. In the same report, although for the Magistrates Courts of South Australia, published by the *Attorney-General’s Department (2007a)*, for the same time frame, statistics indicate that out of a total of “7602 cases by major offence charged” only “2” individuals were convicted with the penalty. Whereby perjury was the most serious of charges brought against an individual (p. 65). It is important to note that these statistics represent whereby perjury was the most significant offence. Therefore, only the most severe crime was recorded if a person was found guilty of perjury and that of a more severe crime. It is crucial to acknowledge perjury as a severe breach of not only the law, yet also ethical praxis and conduct. While it is unclear why persons commit perjury, it could be, based on constructs, such as self-preservation, egoism, or a win-at-all-cost mentality despite the ramifications for others or self-motivating agendas.

The significance poses further discussion on the following statement. The position regarding oaths within the community raises questions about under which circumstances oaths be taken in the public sector. For example, “do witnessed oaths taken under the law have more strength in accomplishing the words and objective of the oath?” Alternatively, “do voluntary witnessed oaths not taken under the law have more strength?” Participant’s attitudes reported for the public sector where witnessed oaths were taken under the law; a priori would have more impact on the individual to follow the words and objective of the oath.

One participant explained it:

“I don’t think it would have the same impact if it was not legal, but then even if it was legal, it’s up to the individual to abide by that oath and whether they can sleep at night from what they’ve observed or undertaken”. Source; Participant in the Case Study Research # CS08-4 (d).

Or, as another participant put it:

“Well, look, we come under a number of Acts, so it makes sense to put it as a legal oath. I would encourage it to be a legal oath because I think that then you would have, and this is a really sad thing to say because you really shouldn’t be like that with doctors; they have pride in their work. They’re really proud to be able to go out into the community and know that they’re seen in that light, but more and more, government workers are seen in such a negative light that this might help us to be seen in a much more positive light. That we actually do have a serious oath, that we do have serious business and that we have consequences to not doing the right thing for the public”. Source; Participant in the Case Study Research # CS19-4 (n).

The researcher argues that policy and governance cannot cover every conceivable moment or situation in which one is ethically challenged, especially those that fall outside the law. Therefore the researcher supports a systemic ap-

proach to ethics. However, we must have laws to guide us ethically as individuals and as a collective society, particularly in preparedness for experiences of ethical challenges. Rawls's (1999) (cited in McIntyre-Mills, 2007: p. 462) further argues for consequences concerning self and explains in "The Law of Peoples" that the "veil of ignorance approach is the basis for liberal democracy". While Ross (cited in Geirsson & Holmgren, 2010: p. 185) further argues for a "*prima facie* duties" based approach, Jones's (cited in Uhr, 2005: p. 192) concept of "idealism reminds us of the need for an ethos of civic virtue". This approach compliments Aristotle's *Virtue Theory*³⁴, whereby there needs to be an assurance that the virtuous public servant does not become misguided in their loyalty that could do wrong by the people it is supposed to serve. Aristotle, in his wisdom, did not support nihilism either regarding "what makes us good citizens?" Schofield (2006) explained this lies in Aristotle's dialogue "obedience to the laws". When Aristotle refers to the political scope of "laws", he means citizens need to employ the behaviour and attitude to bring about a virtuous and honourable life (p. 306).

Jones's (cited in Uhr 2005) concept of "idealism reminds us of the need for an ethos of civic virtue" (p. 192). Sterba (1998) reminds us that actions in other contexts, such as murder or stealing, are morally wrong. Then an applied "ethics of duty or principles does seem to have a comparable primacy over an ethics of virtue" (p. 12). Those who oppose Aristotle's *Virtue Theory*, such as Briggie and Mitcham (2012), argue that it provides a set of virtues yet "provides no action guidance" (p. 44). A majority of public sector decision-making requires discretion and indeed the prudence of public employees while acting as Uhr (2005) argues "consistently with the law but in areas where the law is either silent or at best vague" (p. 197). Subsequently, the researcher argues that public employees are left with no alternative than to apply discretion. In raising individual discretion, essentially, ethics laws end even moral laws fail because failure is a characteristic of the human condition; we suffer from human frailties, making us morally feeble.

One participant explained it:

"I'm a reader. I don't know if saying it out loud makes it any more binding. I think it depends on what your own morals are and if you're going to break it. You're going to break it whether you've said it or signed it or whatever. Again, I act ethically, and I want to act ethically. If I sign in under it or whatever, it won't make any difference". Source; Participant in Case Study Research # CS10-4 (a) and 4 (b).

This original research study has reported the qualitative typologies and quantitative statistical analysis and results reported by participants. In the preceding discussion, there were significant results reported for individual questions where the chi-square test was performed to find *p* values ≤ 0.05 based on the test statis-

³⁴To see Aristotle's *Virtue Theory* in its entirety to include any limits (see Schofield, 2006).

tic (χ^2) (Field, 2009) regarding this specific hypothetical oath (pp. 688-689). The statistical significance of these results must not be ignored as they provide truth or fact regarding participant *attitude*. It contributes to “evidence-based” (Robson, 2002) knowledge (p. 116). The qualitative findings and quantitative results reported give cause to an ethical oath to be taken seriously to reinforce the importance of ethics. It also ignites discussion about the current practices of governance over ethics. Is policy enough? It was, reported in this primary research study, not to be the case. Incorporating both an oath to guide public servants plus instruction in the capability to think through the implications and consequences of ethical options or choices is essential for a better public service. Ongoing monitoring could be required to reinforce compliance and praxis whereby there is no legal justification or jurisdiction.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

This article’s research findings and results signified the social importance of going beyond existing boundaries regarding ethical and moral reasoning and social science research. Participants delved into their thoughts and feelings and reflected on their individual experience of taking this specific witnessed hypothetical oath. Through the qualitative findings and quantitative results of this original research study, it became increasingly evident that this particular hypothetical oath impacted participants in the target group to hold themselves faithful to the words of the taken oath. It also evoked emotion that could be harnessed to increase moral and ethical dialogue and deliberation, increasing capacity for ethical praxis, thus, despite the hypothetical oath. This original research study provides the first account regarding the *attitude* for oaths and those employed in administrative tiers in the South Australian public sector. It adds new knowledge to the relevant fields of discourse. Therefore, it signifies the social importance of oaths, placing them in a prevailing position, moreover, providing evidence of the potential of mixed method research.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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