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# Impact of a program on ethics of public servants in the municipality of Rionegro in Colombia

Carolina Sanabria Palacio<sup>1</sup>, Orlando Carmelo Castellanos Polo<sup>2,\*</sup>, Nelvis Ester Navarro Charris<sup>3</sup>, Daniel Alberto Grajales Gaviria<sup>2</sup>, Enoc Barrientos Perez<sup>4</sup>, José Alexander Velásquez Ochoa<sup>1</sup>, Javier Eduardo Campo Escandon<sup>5</sup>, Olson Ortiz Tovar<sup>3</sup>, Jorge Eduardo Orozco Álvarez<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Corporación Universitaria Americana, Medellín 050001, Colombia

<sup>2</sup> Instituto Tecnológico Metropolitano (ITM), Medellín 050001, Colombia

<sup>3</sup> Universidad de la Costa-CUC, Barranquilla 08001, Colombia

<sup>4</sup> Corporación Universitaria Americana, Barranquilla 08001, Colombia

<sup>5</sup> Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia—UNAD, Popayán 19000, Colombia

<sup>6</sup> Corporación Universitaria Autónoma del Cauca, Popayán 19000, Colombia

\* **Corresponding author:** Orlando Carmelo Castellanos Polo, [orlandocastellanos0843@correo.itm.edu.co](mailto:orlandocastellanos0843@correo.itm.edu.co)

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**Abstract:** The research addresses the importance of ethics in public administration, focusing on public servants in the municipality of Rionegro, Colombia. Ethics is presented as an essential element to promote transparency and combat corruption in public management. Despite the fact that the 1991 Constitution establishes ethical principles, their application in practice remains a challenge, with a high level of immorality in public service. The study highlights the diversity of professional profiles in public servants, which hinders consistent ethical management. In addition, it mentions that many civil servants lack political training and understanding of the importance of their role, which contributes to corruption. Ethics, according to the authors, is a key tool for strengthening institutions and regaining public trust. The research evaluated the impact of a professional ethics training program on public servants, finding significant improvements in their ethical knowledge and behavior. It concludes that, although ethics will not solve all corruption problems, it is an indispensable component for strengthening accountability and justice in public administration. It underscores the need to implement continuous training programs that promote ethical values as part of a strategy to improve efficiency and transparency in public institutions.

**Keywords:** ethics; public servants; municipality; processes

## 1. Introduction

From the perspective of Häyry (2018), the culture of ethics in public management and transparency is part of the public service, it is fundamentally manifested in social groups or work teams. For this reason, human beings are organized, coordinated and directed by a leader towards a common objective that manifests itself in survival. This problem has gained interest in this last decade and is relevant to governments and international organizations, as well as to those who seek that public organizations in their functions be more ethical and transparent in their public management by public servants. Ethics, when referring to the public sphere, necessarily implies relating to politics and is not limited to public officials. Good government not only requires responsible officials but also responsible politicians, since it is the latter, mainly, who enjoy the maximum margin of autonomy in decisions and the action of the principles depends on these decisions. Public ethics is an important element to counterbalance

not only corruption but also various unethical attitudes by injecting a set of principles and values and thus revitalizing, on the one hand, public institutions and, on the other, public servants, understood as those people who hold a public office and serve the state, that is, politicians and officials. Acts of fraud have increased in the public sector where the administration of public resources is affected, regardless of its level of decentralization, which in a certain way alters the final benefit of social programs Castellanos et al. (2022).

Ethics is not intended to be the panacea for the problems faced by public administration or the magic wand to end corruption, but rather one more instrument in the “toolbox” to combat it. Without a doubt, it is the additional ingredient to make the dam that contains the sea of corruption more solid. The issue of ethics in public affairs is not a unilateral proposal, but is immersed, on the one hand, in the debate of the currents of contemporary political thought based on freedoms. Public management for politics and public servants is a social debt that the states of the world have with their citizens; because they have been inferior to social demands despite the implementation of mechanisms for the modernization of public management (Sulmasy, 2019).

In Colombia, through its 1991 constitution, the social, economic, cultural and collective rights of citizens are protected, always under principles of morality and ethics; but all this has remained in the socially approved theory, but without being executed at the level of public service. Despite the fact that one of the priorities of the state is to facilitate social control of public management, the percentage of public immorality is much higher than the isolated actions of public servants clothed with honesty and transparency (Cifuentes, 2019).

The main problem existing in public administrations, in this case in the municipality of Rionegro, is that the profile of the people who hold a public office is in a situation of heterogeneity; that is, there is a great diversity of professions among the people who apply to occupy an elected position. Thus, it is possible to find professionals from different disciplines: architects, engineers, teachers, accountants, lawyers, even people without academic training, but who have stood out in some activity: businessmen, union leaders, actors, singers and merchants, among others. Before the law, every individual has the right to occupy an elected position as long as they have the profile and capacity for the position, however, that capacity and that profile should be incorporated and required ethical criteria in public management (Palacio-Acosta, 2018). According to Polo (2023), It follows that we are what we express during our time in an entity, it is due to some norms acquired in daily life, these being a guide to carry out its work in a transparent manner.

In many cases, the position is occupied by people without the slightest political culture, ignoring the importance and responsibility that it implies. Any individual competes believing that he deserves such an honor from the state. The ethics applied to public servants implies an essential change in the attitudes of each individual that translates into concrete acts oriented towards the public interest. In other words, it implies the exercise of virtue as a conduct and determining factor from the individual or particular to the collective. The counterpart of the culture of transparency and ethics of public management is the culture of corruption of public servants, an evil that afflicts governments and has been suffered by citizens. The worst thing that can happen to a society is that those who commit crimes have the idea that they do nothing

wrong and this is even more serious when a significant part of those who find out about the crime, government or civil authorities, hold a similar idea and do not fight to counteract it, on the contrary, they encourage it. Given this circumstantial problem, it can be said that the culture of ethics and transparency in public service is facing a serious breakdown in management, that the threshold of immorality has been crossed, or more accurately, that morality has generated a lack of credibility in the eyes of those governed. It is undeniable that there is a crisis of values among rulers, officials and staff (Bai, 2017).

Statistics from the anti-corruption observatory of the presidency of the Republic of Colombia indicate that 50% of public officials have fallen into some criminal behavior or conduct, 50% of those convicted of corruption crimes do not serve a single day in jail and 25% receive the benefit of house arrest (Fajardo de la Espriella, 2017).

The inefficiency of many public servants is evident in state institutions because when there is no adequate attention to the public, the citizen feels like the creator of monetary incentives in exchange for obtaining the service so that the official gets involved in this type of transactions. Inefficiency is associated with the lack or poor functioning of planning and control systems, which makes it difficult to differentiate the effects of corrupt actions. In the past, the state assumed responsibilities for the provision of too large a number of goods and services that it could not fulfill in the appropriate manner. As a necessary result, these functions have been fulfilled with low levels of efficiency and effectiveness, both by the first-level officials in the entities and by the policies of the institutions, being unstable due to the frequent replacement of directors, which leads to the positions of greater responsibility being occupied by people they trust, truncating the possibilities of promotion of employees who have remained longer in the entities. This in turn leads to the widespread belief among middle and lower-level employees that the quality of management is not important, as the results have no chance of coming to light because they will be erased by a different administration that will necessarily arrive soon with new plans and priorities (Mackey, et al., 2017).

Another problem facing public entities is that they offer few incentives for the professional development of public officials in general. The primacy of political criteria in the selection of personnel and in the allocation of promotions reinforces the tendency. With some exceptions, the prestige associated with holding a public office has been dramatically reduced in Colombia in the last two decades. New graduates, particularly the brightest, show a decreasing interest in working for the state. The lure of money is great enough to make one forget any reservations about how it is obtained; from the point of view of a person's social activity, in Colombia not having money probably causes a greater social sanction than having obtained it through corruption. This is part of a general environment in which influence peddling is viewed with benevolence and the use of public resources for private purposes is considered a normal prerogative associated with achieving high management positions in the public sector (Mackey and Liang, 2012).

In Colombia, as in many Latin American countries, politicians are reluctant to make reforms that affect their income, status or influence. For this reason, although Congress is the central stage for issuing laws, the constitutions establish mechanisms for citizen participation to propose changes that have the massive support of the

population. Some time ago, the anti-corruption consultation was carried out, an initiative of some political leaders of the Green Alliance Party accompanied by social organizations. The Democratic Pole, Colombia Humana and decent congressmen soon joined their cause, as well as minority sectors of the Liberal, Conservative and Radical Change parties. The media, social networks and hundreds of people who joined the proposal were used. The consultation did not reach the threshold by less than 1%, despite the fact that a large majority of voters voted in favor of the consultation and as a whole, all the questions obtained more than 99% with very slight variations between questions (Bonilla and Rincón, 2004).

Despite the fact that there was a great deal of movement and circulation of messages through social networks, there were no institutional spaces for debate or dissemination and pedagogy about the consultation and access to commercial channels and stations was limited. Likewise, funding for the campaign was almost zero, there was no support from businessmen, nor resources to pay for the logistics of those who promoted it. It was a campaign based exclusively on volunteers and this substantially limited its scope (López de la Roche, 2000).

Another situation occurred when decentralization was proposed in order not to concentrate resources and to give autonomy to the regions. There are few local controls to verify the proper use of the treasury and the amount that reaches the territories was not small in 2015. For example, municipalities and departments received resources from the General Participation System equivalent to 4% of the GDP and between 2012 and 2015 the general royalty system transferred 18 billion pesos to them; the territorial entities also manage tax revenues of 3% of the GDP (Kaléko, 2010).

A specific problem is the politicization of territorial comptroller's offices, whose leaders are elected by municipal councils. Therefore, the control they exercise is highly questioned by citizens because they tend to favor interest groups; that is, the institutionality of territorial comptroller's offices has not been a solution, which would be if, when comparing figures for territorial comptroller's offices, general comptroller's office and prosecutor's office, there were no coordination failures (Quiroga, 2000).

It is important to understand why some officials develop these types of thoughts that drive them to act in this way, so it is important to design and establish strategies to promote ethical principles that operate from the inner being so that their actions correspond coherently with the purposes of the state and not with particular interests of the vice of consent that are considered crimes from the sphere of law and the legal system. If economic underdevelopment is a cause for concern, so should the absence of virtues in people, in particular, of those who hold public office. No government can operate optimally if it does not first educate its staff in honesty, ethics and values. Every act that man performs has its foundation or justification in ethics. When public men respond to an ethical philosophy, they control themselves by being responsible for their conduct and for each of their acts. In this way, ethics is the best instrument because it leads to self-control through the correct use of reason based on the idea of collective service, an important element in public servants (De Diego Romero, 2000).

The primary objective of this study was to explore the significant difference that knowing more about professional ethics makes in public servants in the municipality of Rionegro in Colombia, before and after training. Below is a theoretical contribution

to the professional ethics variable that is the focus of study in this project, and at the end, some recent research is reported in which some differences are mentioned.

According to various authors (Paulo, 2015; Singer, 1999; Spielthener, 2016; Zizzo et al., 2016), the importance of ethics in daily life is unquestionable, since one must act with principles essentially for oneself.

Soto Bañuelos and Capetillo Medrano (2020) consider ethics as something higher than morality. Ethics is the possibility of appropriating the information of the values that will allow correct or incorrect practices under certain circumstances, but the action itself will be determined by morality. Also adding that ethical behavior implies aspects such as interest in the professional activity, this interest leads him to do a little more than what is asked to help, really, those who come to receive a service from this professional, among whose actions are: willingness to safeguard the integrity of the other, maintain professional secrecy, not pressure to choose a certain option, support the client regardless of their age, sex, social status, religion, race and maintain a permanent update, which translates into keeping abreast of political, economic situations, labor market, labor laws, saturated or newly created careers and novel pedagogical methods.

Scalzo et al. (2019) mention that in the current business world for those who want to be successful, taking ethics seriously can be a disadvantage, but that is precisely the dilemma of ethical transformation. It is important to understand that to have a virtuous life, certain dispositions of character are required, which are strengthened by the development of virtue itself. People with a lack of character are, paradoxically, those who most need moral education, despite not being able to recognize it and are therefore usually those who benefit the least from ethics courses. This is why teaching ethics constitutes a real challenge.

Below are some approaches and theories of professional ethics.

Ethics is a prudential knowledge that has its roots in the beginnings of philosophical reflection. However, in modern times a large number of approaches and theories have proliferated, which could be classified into three fundamental currents: (a) those of a utilitarian type, (b) deontological ones and (c) those focused on virtue (Scalzo et al., 2019).

Deontological ethics consists of the ethical correction of an action given by a universal rule or standard of conduct that acts as a duty for human action, regardless of its results or consequences. Its banner is the Kantian categorical imperative, which acts in such a way that the maximum action can become a universal law, that is, it is only necessary to remember the rules and appeal to their compliance, with pre-established mechanisms of control and sanctions (Sison, 2012).

On the other hand, utilitarianism evaluates actions in light of their results, assuming as a rule the search for the greatest good for the greatest number of people through a quantitative cost-benefit calculation. For this reason, the focus is on the consequences of actions, analyzed from their contribution to a certain social utility, such as general well-being or a psychological vision of happiness (O'Boyle and Sandona, 2014).

Zwolinski and Schmitz (2013) mention that, with roots in several traditions, virtue ethics says that it is right to be a person of virtue: brave, modest, honest, even-tempered, hard-working, and prudent. A virtuous person will of course express his or

her virtue through action, but for virtue ethics, the specification of correct rules of action is a secondary matter that somehow presupposes the kind of practical wisdom that the virtuous person possesses.

Boria-Reverter et al. (2013) mention that values are beliefs that unite people and commit them. Therefore, it will be necessary to make a transition from beliefs to behaviors through values to achieve changes.

From a psychological perspective, values do not have the property of being rigid, but rather are flexible over time, otherwise change in societies would be very unlikely (Enríquez Martínez and Rentería Pérez, 2007). However, change requires a process of resocialization (García Anchorena et al., 2016).

In this era, interest and concern for the study of values has been revived. We are immersed in a series of paradigmatic changes of a social, cultural, economic, political and technological nature that are disrupting the values that seemed to be more or less assumed (Martínez-Martín et al., 2011).

Touriñán López (2006) points out that values and morals continue to be an inexorable necessity; human beings must orient themselves and learn to choose, they must be able to opt because the life project, individually and socially, is an open question and a commitment of wills.

According to Contreras-Ramírez (2004), values are consistent with individuals' conception of life and are linked to history, cultures, different human groups, individuals or the circumstances that surround them. They influence the way of thinking, feelings and behaviour, and are reflected in people's attitudes and actions in specific situations. They represent a real and profound commitment to the society in which one lives and to the person themselves. One aspect of values, relevant to education, refers to their relationship with attitudes. Attitudes express a person's values. Man tends to act in search of a value associated with human good.

For Pineda Ortega (2015), Russo and Pepe (2016), public administration requires authentic officials, capable of giving their all in order to serve society, to avoid unethical conduct and corrupt practices, and to achieve the credibility and support of citizens. In the theoretical review, a lot of information was found about the public service, but little about the work behavior of public officials, public administration systems, and the New Public Management (NPM) model in order to become more efficient and effective. In their results, they found that, in recent decades, the sciences of administration have transitioned from administration to management. The public management model describes a permanent change that introduces new requirements such as the development of a culture of cooperation and specific capacities oriented to management by results and in this aspect there is a transfer of ideology and practice of the state that must seek efficiency, administration, control, specificity of functions, the existence of a hierarchical authority, and the following of rules.

While it is true that NGP has achieved the dynamization of the administration of government institutions, it is still necessary to strengthen greater transparency in management and public policies, and to understand that the NGP model is not the definitive answer to the growing problems of public administration. In this order of ideas, what has achieved the success or failure of technological implementation in the state has depended on the good or bad management of the new tools. It should be noted that it is important that all state entities must have the online government strategy,

since it is one of the ways to guarantee citizen participation in public affairs. This is how state and local administrations are involved in reengineering, restructuring and change processes to adopt new patterns of action and behavior (García, 2019).

Public servants are defined as people who provide services to the state and to the public administration. According to Article 123 of the 1991 Constitution of Colombia, public servants are members of public corporations, employees and workers of the state and its territorially and service-based decentralized entities.

Throughout time, public servants have played a certain role in social changes, so much so that it is a seed that has remained linked to societies. Therefore, it must be made to flourish under the name of credibility. Being a public servant implies having a vocation to serve in the best way a community of which they are a part; it is being humble, honest and sincere; it is desiring the common good without pettiness, devoid of selfishness and resentment (Abbasi et al., 2018).

The ethics of the public servant responds to two fundamental aspects: A moral obligation that is specific to the individual, that is, the awareness that the servant must have that his actions must conform to standards of conduct identified with aspects of responsibility, compliance and honesty. The second aspect refers to the threat that the application of sanctions entails in the event that in the exercise of his position he violates or deviates from the constitutional, legal or regulatory provisions that make him liable to a sanction that can be of various types (García-Capilla et al., 2019).

According to Caro (2015), in compliance with their functions and duties, public servants are obliged to carry out their activities in accordance with the constitutional, legal, regulatory and statutory provisions; and in principle, they must guide their actions by applying principles of compliance, honesty and responsibility; exercising their position, functions or activities in strict adherence to the regulations that govern the Administration. The issue of ethics in public service is directly related to the conduct of officials who hold public office; such individuals must act according to an ethical standard, showing moral values such as good faith and other principles necessary for a healthy life in society.

When a person is elected to public office, society places its trust in him or her and expects him or her to meet an ethical standard. Thus, that person must be at the same level of that trust and perform his or her function following certain values, principles, ideals and norms. Likewise, the public servant must assume the commitment to promote social equality, to fight for the creation of jobs, to develop citizenship and to strengthen democracy. To do this, he or she must be prepared to implement policies that benefit the country and the community in the social, economic and political spheres. A professional who performs a public function must be able to think strategically, innovate, cooperate, learn and unlearn when necessary, and also develop more effective ways of working. Unfortunately, cases of corruption in the public service are the result of professionals who do not work in an ethical manner (Caro, 2015).

Although the authors differ on some elements, it can be said that corruption in general terms is due to cultural factors, economic factors (economic rationality of the agents involved) and/or systemic institutional factors.

Global experience has shown that the factors mentioned above often occur simultaneously, with greater or lesser intensity, depending on each case. Thus, the

causes are linked to the consequences, making it difficult to differentiate between the most frequently cited causes of corruption. The following stand out: According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2008), (a) absence of rules, regulations, policies and laws; (b) weakness of the application systems; (c) weakness of the control and supervision systems; (d) lack of accountability to the public; (e) lack of transparency; (f) lack of mechanisms to balance the powers of the state; (g) lack of integrity; (h) monopoly of power; (i) high degree of discretion; (j) low salaries; (k) high profits compared to the risks and (l) a low detection rate. The frame of reference used in this study takes up the tools of NPM, and rescues the proposal presented by Ramió (2016) regarding the classification of modernizing strategies and tools in which all those currents of NPM that adopt a neo-business approach and those that put special interest in repoliticization are grouped, called neo-public and the OECD model of ethical infrastructure. This model aims to be an example for the implementation of public ethics to combat corruption.

For Laporta San Miguel and Álvarez Medina (1997, p. 372) they say that:

The inevitable and, ultimately, irreducible cause of corruption is the dishonest conduct of the public actor. Corruption occurs solely and exclusively because an individual, whatever his environment, makes the decision to carry out a certain action, the corrupt action. And that is precisely the reason why corruption will always exist: there is no possible control system nor any antidote so effective as to totally prevent an individual choice of this type. In any case, this system or antidote will be much stronger if it is internal to the individual (principles and values) than if it is external (codes, laws).

The neglect of ethics in the public sphere is the result of various unethical attitudes of public servants. One of them is corruption, which appears as a feature in different governments and public administrations to the point that it is possible to affirm that today corruption is a worldwide phenomenon. Although corruption has accompanied man throughout history, it is in the last decades of the 20th century when known cases have been unprecedented. Currently, corruption is a disease within governments. However, it is important to point out that in recent years there has been an increasing interest in combating this evil through different means, one of which is public ethics.

In this regard, Meyer et al. (2009, p. 127) state that

The ultimate and most pernicious effect of corruption in the political field – bribery, graft, influence peddling, negligence or any other form of illegal and improper action or transaction – is the deterioration of public morality. It is true that cases of corruption have occurred in all countries at all times, but the extent and intensity varies from country to country and from time to time. All totalitarian and dictatorial systems of the twentieth century have been accused of large-scale corruption, the same as fascist Italy, National Socialist Germany, the Soviet Union, China and, of course, the dozens of dictatorships in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Sometimes in these systems corruption at intermediate and low levels was combated with harsh, even extreme measures, because it created problems of image and, above all, of control for the ruling group, but the result has never been permanent.



History shows that corruption is inherent to human beings, knows no boundaries and does not distinguish between eras, although it does not operate with equal ease and freedom in all political systems. However, it is also possible to affirm that in the history of humanity, from ancient civilizations in both the West and the East, there are repeated expressions of aversion and censure regarding corruption and dishonesty.

The mere request of one official to another to consider a candidate for a position does not constitute the crime of influence peddling, or any other crime, stated the Criminal Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice (Skalkoleid and Cherry, 2016). However, it clarified that the same does not occur when it is accompanied by pressure or clear favoritism towards someone who does not meet the requirements to occupy a position or who is in lesser conditions than the person who occupies it, since in that event it would be evident that the service to the community had yielded to reprehensible bureaucratic appetites (Leider et al., 2017).

The court indicated that the true essence of this conduct, which has to do with both the suitability of the action and the undue nature of the influence exerted, lies in the active subject imposing or making his position prevail over another public servant. This means that both by the way in which he makes the request, and by his superior rank, he has the authority to influence a matter of which he is aware or will be aware (Leider et al., 2017).

The court also specified the elements that constitute a criminal offense, which are: (a) that the agent is a public servant; (b) that said servant makes improper use of influence derived from the exercise of his or her position or function; (c) the improper use of influence may be for the benefit of the servant who exercises it or a third party; and (d) the improper use of influence must have the purpose of obtaining a benefit from another public servant on a matter that he or she knows or will know.

For the above reasons, the court insists that influence is considered suitable when it is certain and real, or what is the same, with sufficient entity and potential to influence the other, which transcends into a true abuse of power (Skalkoleid and Cherry, 2016).

As an example, corruption occurs when the active subject takes advantage of certain circumstances derived from the powers of the position or function, or from his hierarchical relationship with the influenced public servant, or from his personal relationships, including, among others, those of kinship, affection, friendship or pure companionship, recalls the high corporation (Hernández Barbosa, 2017).

Corruption has a high economic and social cost; experts point to it as a real obstacle to development; but the highest cost is the damage to the democratic system and institutional credibility in all countries. There are examples of this in Latin America, from Mexico to Argentina, passing through Brazil and all other Latin American countries (Grill and Dawson, 2017).

In Colombia, corruption has gained political and social relevance since the cases of the former presidents of the Republic in 2004, particularly with the approval of the Law Against Corruption and Illicit Enrichment in the Public Service that same year. It is important to note that there is no specific crime of corruption, but rather special crimes created by this law such as influence peddling linked to acts of public corruption (Sade, 2006).

It is not the only crime related to corruption because practically any crime can be linked to this conduct, but there are forms close to corruption such as embezzlement, prevarication, illicit enrichment and bribery, among others. That is why reporting and prosecuting these crimes is so important because a poor investigation means leaving corruption unpunished (Macklin, 2010).

Crimes such as influence peddling undermine values held dear by all of society, such as rectitude, objectivity, integrity, accountability and responsibility in the exercise of public office. To effectively protect these values, society uses the most extreme and strict means of formal control available to the rule of law: criminal law, which requires a judiciary, but above all, a strong, impartial and independent Public Prosecutor's Office. Otherwise, it would be, as they say, a justice system with a sword, but without an edge. However, the current complaints and the conclusions of the legislative assembly's investigative commission have generated two unprecedented effects; one is widespread social unrest and the other is a serious crisis in the credibility of the judiciary and the questioning of the hierarchies of public administration (Friesen, 2018).

Of these criminally protected values, perhaps the most relevant is the duty of probity of public officials. Probity becomes the basis for penalizing conduct such as influence peddling; it is, in criminal terms, the protected legal asset and is not an easily proven crime. The conduct must occur within the framework of acts of corruption, which is precisely why this crime is not in the criminal code, but in the aforementioned special law. The protection of the duty of probity is not something abstract or ethereal. On the contrary, it is a normative legal concept found in Article 3 of the Law against corruption and illicit enrichment in the public service. The central axis for verifying the breach of the duty of probity is to confront the conduct of the official with the satisfaction of public interests. To the extent that the conduct of the official deviates from that objective, we would be approaching a breach of the duty of probity (DuBois and Antes, 2018).

Influence peddling is not easy to prove. It involves fraudulent conduct and it must be proven that the other official was actually influenced in a real way, precisely by taking advantage of his or her position or hierarchy, all with the aim of generating economic benefits for oneself or for a third party. Although it is a crime that is difficult to prove and there are multiple escape routes, as it is linked to acts of corruption that perhaps cause the greatest social damage, it requires a priority, quality and error-free investigation in order to achieve effective convictions (Pratt et al., 2017).

Professional ethics is a modern human practice, since it has only been applied in recent decades to organizations and states, which makes it a concept in continuous evolution, growth and redefinition.

Hirsch-Adler (2005) validated an instrument to measure professional ethics in higher education teachers. The research was quasi-qualitative. In their results they found that the aspects to highlight when measuring professional ethics are the following four competencies: (a) cognitive: knowledge, training, preparation and professional competence; (b) social: camaraderie and relationships, communication, knowing how to work in a team and being a hard worker; (c) ethical: responsibility, honesty, professional and personal ethics, respect and acting in accordance with moral

principles and professional values and (d) emotional-affective: identification with the profession and emotional capacity.

Navia-Antezana and Hirsch-Adler (2015), in their research, presented the process and some of the results of research on professional ethics in two Mexican universities: the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) with the research project on professional ethics and the Autonomous University of the State of Morelos (UAEM) with the project on professional ethics in teacher training. In both investigations, a strong presence of cognitive competences was found (knowledge, training, preparation and professional competence) and ethical (responsibility, honesty, professional and personal ethics, respect and acting in accordance with moral principles and professional values), although one of the statements of the ethical traits was to provide the best service to society, it obtained a low percentage. Significant contradictions were found in relation to the traits of continuous training, being a hard worker and respect.

Cuevas-Moreno and Rodríguez-Minor (2017) studied the professional ethics and social responsibility on the part of business and government leaders. This was a qualitative approach to research that merges the analysis of ethics in its most philosophical and general concept, going through its derivation in capitalist justice and neoliberalism, to finally conclude with the concepts of professional ethics and social responsibility, understood from the shared perspective of public and business administrative management. The results found that the ethics or morals of the individual who works as an administrator, whether public or private, is when distributive policies are followed that are more closely tied to egalitarian justice. In other words, equality applies to treatment and access to essential life services such as education, health or work and would not be conditioned by the social class or state regime to which one belongs.

Scalzo et al. (2019), in their qualitative research, aimed to show the meanings and experiences of students in the areas of economic and business sciences regarding professional ethics, which, by its very nature, does not have mere knowledge as its purpose but its practical application where internalized learning acts as models for action. Among the most significant findings, it was found that students value the ethical training offered by the university as a complement to their technical training. However, they consider the use of innovative strategies necessary for their teaching. The meanings they show about ethics range from the personal to the professional through the social, highlighting its relational nature. The main meanings about ethics highlight that the common good is greater than the individual, that the technical aspect of every profession must be complemented with the ethical perspective, that values determine a person's identity, the importance of ethics in the field of ethics, and that the ethical aspect of the profession must be complemented with the ethical perspective, the exercise of virtues, as well as comprehensive training focused on the person.

There is undoubtedly a problem to be solved and that is why this research aims to provide a tool to help improve the professional ethics of public officials.

The research problem is presented below: is there a significant difference in the degree of knowledge of professional ethics that public servants of the municipality of Rionegro, Colombia, have based on the integrity code, before and after training?

## **2. Research methodology**

The main objective of this study was to explore the degree of knowledge that public servants in the municipality of Rionegro in Colombia have and to what extent they have developed it after training.

This chapter is composed of the description of the methodology used during the research and addresses the design of the study, which includes the type of research, the study population, the sample, the measurement instrument, the intervention program, the reliability of the instrument, the null hypothesis, data collection and data analysis.

This research was quasi-experimental, explanatory, cross-sectional, descriptive and field. According to Hernández Sampieri et al. (2014), research has a quasi-experimental approach when the subjects are not randomly assigned, but the groups are already formed before the experiment.

The research was cross-sectional, since data was collected at a single time, that is, in the month of November 2020. The research was also descriptive, because the variables and constructs were described before and after the training. In addition, the differences between the groups of demographic variables such as: gender, education and experience with respect to the competencies developed in knowledge, skills and attitudes were described.

The population or universe is a set of all cases that match certain specifications (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014). The population used in this research consisted of 35 trusted public servants in administrative positions in the municipality of Rionegro in Colombia.

Hernández Sampieri et al. (2014) state that the sample is a representative subset of the population and that there are two non-probabilistic ways of selecting it: (a) intentional sample, which is one that uses the judgment of a person with experience and knowledge regarding the population being studied and (b) convenience sample, which results from the selection of units or elements that are available. The type of sampling carried out in this research is non-probabilistic, directed, intentional and convenience, where public servants from the municipality of Rionegro, Colombia were selected. The sample was 20 public servants who attended the training and correctly filled out the questionnaire applied, representing 57.14% of the population.

This section presents the different variables used in the study, the development of the instrument, the content validity, the construct validity and the reliability of the instruments.

A variable is a property that can fluctuate and is susceptible to measurement or observation (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014). The variable used in this research was professional ethics.

### **2.1. Development of the instrument**

A measurement instrument, according to Hernández Sampieri et al. (2014), is any resource that the researcher uses to approach phenomena and extract information from them, since the instrument itself synthesizes all previous research work, as it summarizes the contributions of the theoretical market by selecting data that correspond to the indicators and the variables or concepts used.

Below is a description of the process of developing the instruments used in this study.

- (1) A conceptual definition of the professional ethics variable was made.
- (2) The professional ethics variable was sized and sub-sized.
- (3) Once the instrument was created, the help of writing experts was requested for its correction.
- (4) The content was validated in terms of relevance and clarity; it was sent electronically to three doctors. Each indicator or item had a five-point Likert scale to assess relevance and clarity.
- (5) After the relevance test, the instrument used in the present study was derived, which consists of three sections: (a) general instructions, (b) demographic questions and (c) professional ethics with 18 statements.

Once the instruments were approved by the advisor, the data from the public servants of Rionegro, Colombia, was collected.

Validity of the instrument.

In this section, the content and construct validity of the variable used in the research is presented.

#### **Content validity**

Peter and Churchill (1986) state that content validity is used to determine to what extent the items of the instrument are representative of the domain or whether the procedure followed for its development or scale has been adequate.

The content validation process of the instruments was as follows:

- (1) Several interviews were conducted with the advisors to find out their opinion on the measurement of the variables.
- (2) A literature review was conducted in different databases on the variables of competencies in knowledge, skills and attitudes.
- (3) Then, taking into account the list of dimensions, subdimensions and criteria of the instrument to be proposed, the advisor selected those that would be used in the instrument.
- (4) Consultations and reviews were carried out by the study advisors.
- (5) Clarity and relevance were evaluated with the help of three experts in the research topic.

This training experience is conceived as an intervention program based on new approaches to ethical practices, from the code of integrity, where the server is offered the opportunity for critical and collective reflection on the implications that values have on everything that is studied, aimed at the development of awareness; that is, being able to assume a committed position in the face of the reality that surrounds us.

The general objective of this study is to develop the capacity for critical reflection around one's own knowledge, actions and commitments as a social being, participating in the construction of ethical practices from the code of integrity and autonomous moral personality of professional development as a daily action of a public servant.

General objective of the ethics program for public officials:

Strengthen the professional ethics and commitment of Rionegro's public officials to the values of integrity, transparency and responsibility, contributing to the

development of an ethical culture that fosters citizen trust and quality in public management.

Specific objectives:

- (1) Develop knowledge and understanding of ethical principles and anti-corruption regulations among public officials, so that they understand and apply the norms and values of public administration in a consistent manner.
- (2) Promote a culture of transparency and accountability in each municipal department, motivating officials to be proactive in clear communication and in the disclosure of their administrative processes and results.
- (3) Identify and effectively manage conflicts of interest, providing practical tools to recognize, avoid and resolve situations in which personal interests may influence public decisions.
- (4) Promote social responsibility and commitment to community service, highlighting the value of empathy and a vocation for service in interactions with citizens and in daily decision-making.

These objectives will help to establish and maintain an ethical environment in public administration, benefiting both public officials and the citizens of Rionegro.

The intervention program was carried out from Monday to Friday for 10 days, 10 sessions lasting two hours each day.

**Table 1** presents the content of Unit 1, Topic 1. information on the following units and topics.

**Table 1.** Programming of the topic.

<b>Interpreting the world through culture</b>	
Learning Objective	Interpret the manifestations of culture, conduct and behaviors in light of the role played by professional ethics.
Learning strategies	Case study, videos, group work and review workshop.
Duration	Two hours
Teaching resources	Digital projector, audio system, personal computer, video camera. Previous knowledge and skills: Science, Technology and Society, Critical Thinking, Communication and Expression
Learning methodology	Analysis and synthesis to guide participants on performance and awareness in the personal, social and work sphere from a humanistic and principled perspective.
Learning outcomes	The subject contributes to the formation and development of interpersonal skills in students so that they learn to reflect, evaluate and generate new ways of acting in the personal, social and work environment from an ethical and civic perspective.

Source: Own elaboration.

The instrument was subjected to reliability analysis to determine its internal consistency by obtaining the Cronbach alpha coefficient for each scale. The Cronbach alpha coefficients obtained for the variable are the following: (a) professional ethics,

0.975. All Cronbach alpha values were considered to correspond to very acceptable reliability measures for each of the variables.

The **Table 2** presents, as an example, the operationalization of the variable knowledge competencies, which includes its conceptual, instrumental and operational definitions. The first column shows the name of the variable; the second column shows the conceptual definition; the third column shows the instrumental definition that specifies how the variable was observed; and the last column shows how the variable was coded.

**Table 2.** Operationalization of the knowledge competencies variable.

Variables	Definition conceptual	Definition Instrumental	Definition operational
Professional ethics	It is understood as the occupation that is carried out with the aim of collaborating with the well-being of a society. To carry out this work, it is necessary that the professional (person who carries out the work) acts responsibly, following the requirements that the current law sets forth for the development of this activity.	The degree of knowledge of professional ethics of public servants of the municipality of Rionegro in Colombia was determined through the following 18 items, under the scale: 1 = Nothing 5 = Totally	To measure the level of knowledge of professional ethics of public servants in the municipality of Rionegro in Colombia, the arithmetic mean of the 18 items was used.

Source: Own elaboration.

The null hypothesis for this research states: there is no significant difference in the degree of knowledge of professional ethics that public servants of the municipality of Rionegro, Colombia, have before and after training (see **Table 3**).

**Table 3.** Operationalization of the hypothesis.

Null hypothesis	Variables	Level of Measurement	Proof statistics
There is no significant difference in the degree of knowledge of professional ethics that public servants of the municipality of Rionegro in Colombia have before and after training.	A. Professional ethics	A. Metric	To test the hypotheses of differences for each item and construct, the nonparametric Wilcoxon test was used, since the variables and constructs were not normal. The criterion for rejecting the null hypothesis was for significance values $p \leq 0.05$ .

Source: Own elaboration.

Data collection was carried out as follows:

- (1) The training schedule was made for public servants of the municipality of Rionegro, Colombia.
- (2) A letter was issued to invite public servants from the municipality of Rionegro, Colombia, and preparations and invitations were made for the speakers.
- (3) Material was prepared to motivate public servants in the municipality of Rionegro, Colombia, and a reminder was sent to encourage attendance.
- (4) Training materials were prepared and arrangements were made to carry them out.
- (5) The days and dates of the training sessions were agreed upon.
- (6) Upon arriving at the training, they received an email with the link to answer the instrument. Next, the workshops were held with various practical examples.

- (7) After completing the training, the instrument was sent to them electronically to assess the degree of knowledge about professional ethics.

For the purposes of this research, the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software in version 25 for Windows was used, which allowed for reliable analysis of the data collected. The statistical test used in this research was the Wilcoxon test.

### 3. Results

The main objective of this study was to explore the degree of knowledge that public servants in the municipality of Rionegro, Colombia, have and to what extent they have developed it after training.

Professional ethics among public officials in Rionegro, Colombia, is a key concern due to the direct impact their practices have on the transparency and efficiency of the public sector. As in many municipalities, Rionegro faces ethical challenges related to responsibility, accountability and management of conflicts of interest, essential in the administration of resources and the relationship with citizens. frequent complaints to the authorities against some officials of the Undersecretariats for alleged acts of criminal responsibility, acts of offering to two users, to help with some valuation procedures, for which it is estimated 200 million pesos. From the Mayor's Office of Rionegro, they invite all people who have knowledge of acts of corruption, to make the respective complaints, only in this way, will they be able to combat this crime, which does so much damage to public entities.

The variable used in this research was professional ethics before and after training. The demographic variables were as follows: (a) place of residence, (b) gender, (c) level of education, and (d) years of service.

#### 3.1. Population and sample

The population used in this research was made up of public servants from the municipality of Rionegro, Colombia. The total number of trusted public servants in administrative positions in the municipality of Rionegro, Colombia, is 35. The sample consisted of 20 public servants, representing 57.14% of the population.

#### 3.2. Demographic description

This section contains the demographic description of the public servants of Rionegro, Colombia, research participants ().

#### 3.3. Level of study

**Table 4.** Distribution of participants by level of study.

	<i>n</i>	%
Postgraduate	13	65.0
Undergraduate	5	25.0
Secondary	2	10.0
Total	20	100.0

Source: Own elaboration.



In **Table 4** it is observed that the majority of the participants have a postgraduate degree, representing 65% ( $n = 13$ ), while 10% ( $n = 2$ ) have secondary education.

### 3.4. Years of service

**Table 5** shows the years of service of the surveyed participants; 30% of the population sample has 20 or more years working as a public servant, while 10% has between 16 and 20 years.

**Table 5.** Distribution of participants by years of service.

	n	%
1–5 years	5	25.0
6–10	4	20.0
11–15	3	15.0
16–20	2	10.0
20 or more	6	30.0
Total	20	100.0

Source: Own elaboration.

### 3.5. Gender

In the gender distribution of the participants it could be observed that 60% were women, while 40% were men.

### 3.6. Mean and medians

In this section, the results of the mean and median before (1) and after (2) the intervention are presented.

### 3.7. Professional ethics

It can be observed that the means and medians with the greatest difference before and after the intervention were the following statements: “Code of integrity in the municipality (P2)”, “The four agreements from the code of integrity (P9)”, “Conducts of ethical principles (P11)”, “Principles of public integrity (P15)” and “Praxis as a practice of social meritocracy (P18)”. It is observed that the total difference of the mean of professional ethics before and after the intervention is equal to 0.3 and the difference of the median is 0.4.

### 3.8. Cross tables

#### Level of study with years of service

In **Table 6**, the influence of the postgraduate level of study is observed in the years of service of 1 to 5 years, 6 to 10 years, 11 to 15 years and 20 or more years, contrary to what is observed in those of 16 to 20 years since there is no difference with the participants of undergraduate and postgraduate level of study.

**Table 6.** Level of education and years of service.

			Years					Total
			1–5 years	6–10	11–15	16–20	20 or more	
Studies	Postgraduate	Count	4	3	2	1	3	13
		% of total	20.0%	15.0%	10.0%	5.0%	15.0%	65.0%
	Undergraduate	Count	1	1	1	1	1	5
		% of total	5.0%	5.0%	5.0%	5.0%	5.0%	25.0%
	Secondary	Count	0	0	0	0	2	2
		% of total	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	10.0%	10.0%
Total	Count	5	4	3	2	6	20	
	% of total	25.0%	20.0%	15.0%	10.0%	30.0%	100.0%	

Source: Own elaboration.

In **Table 7**, the influence of the level of postgraduate study according to gender can be observed.

**Table 7.** Level of study and gender.

			Sex		Total
			Women	Man	
Studies	Postgraduate	Count	6	7	13
		% of total	30.0%	35.0%	65.0%
	Undergraduate	Count	4	1	5
		% of total	20.0%	5.0%	25.0%
	Secondary	Count	2	0	2
		% of total	10.0%	0.0%	10.0%
Total	Count	12	8	20	
	% of total	60.0%	40.0%	100.0%	

Source: Own elaboration.

The influence of the female gender is observed in the years of service from 1 to 5 years, from 11 to 15 years, from 16 to 20 years and from 20 or more, contrary to what was observed in those from 6 to 10 years since the greatest influence was of the male gender.

In **Table 8**, the normality test is found using the Kolmogorov statistic ( $p > 0.05$ ). For the analysis of demographic variables, the following variables were used: the following variables: (a) studies, (b) years of seniority and (c) gender. These demographic variables were compared with the degree of professional ethics developed in the training. The statistic used is also observed, depending on whether the distributions were normal or non-normal

**Table 8.** Gender and years of service.

			Years					Total
			1–5 years	6–10	11–15	16–20	20 or more	
Sex	Women	Count	3	1	2	2	4	12
		% of total	15.0%	5.0%	10.0%	10.0%	20.0%	60.0%
	Man	Count	2	3	1	0	2	8
		% of total	10.0%	15.0%	5.0%	0.0%	10.0%	40.0%
Total	Count	5	4	3	2	6	20	
	% of total	25.0%	20.0%	15.0%	10.0%	30.0%	100.0%	

Source: Own elaboration.

**Table 9.** Data normality table.

Variables	Kolmogorov test	Statistical
Level of study – ETI2	Not normal	Kruskal Wallis
Years of service – ETI2	Not normal	Kruskal Wallis
Gender – ETI2	Not normal	Mann-Whitney U

Source: Own elaboration.

The null hypothesis presents that there is no significant difference between gender and the degree of professional ethics knowledge developed after training.

Since the distribution is not normal, the Mann-Whitney statistic was used for independent samples. it was observed that  $U$  is equal to 47,500 and  $p$  equal to 0.970, so since the probability value was greater than 0.05 the null hypothesis is retained. This means there are no significant differences between men and women in the degree of knowledge developed in professional ethics after training. The average range for men was 10.56 and for women 10.46.

Level of study and degree of professional ethics developed.

The null hypothesis presents that there is no significant difference in the level of study and the degree of professional ethics developed after training.

Since the distribution is not normal, the Kruskal-Wallis statistic was used. it was observed that  $X^2$  is equal to 5.69 and  $p$  equal to 0.058, so since the probability value is greater than 0.05 the null hypothesis is retained. This means that there are no significant differences between the level of study and the degree of professional ethics developed after the training. The average rank of graduate was 9.38, undergraduate was 15.50 and high school was 5.25.

Years of service and degree of professional ethics developed

The null hypothesis presents that there is no significant difference in the years of service and the degree of professional ethics developed by the training.

Since the distribution is not normal, the Kruskal-Wallis statistic was used. It was observed that  $X^2$  is equal to 5.39 and  $p$  equal to 0.250, so since the probability value is greater than 0.05 the null hypothesis is retained. This means that there are no significant differences between the years of service and the degree of professional ethics developed after training. The average range from 1 to 5 years was 8.10, from 6 to 10 years was 13.50, from 11 to 15 years was 11.50, from 16 to 20 years was 16.75 and from 20 or more years was 7.92.

The main null hypothesis was as follows:

H0: There is no significant difference in the degree of knowledge of professional ethics that public servants of the municipality of Rionegro, Colombia have before and after training.

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was applied to calculate the normality of the variable formed before and after the training. It was observed in the results that in all the items and constructs measured before and after the probability was less than 0.05. Therefore, it is assumed that the variable does not present a normal distribution

Hernández Sampieri et al. (2014) explain that the effect size is the difference or relationship that will be of practical value. In other words, it is the measure of the strengths of the difference in means and these are measured in units of standard deviation called minimum difference ( $d$ ) using the  $t$  test. The effect size with  $d$  is interpreted as follows: ( $d = 0.2$ ) small effect size; ( $d = 0.5$ ) medium effect size and ( $d = 0.8$ ) large effect size.

**Table 10.** Comparison of knowledge competencies.

Items	Average range R1	Average R2 range	Next. $P$	Effect size $d$	Interpretation
P1–P1.1	4.00	4.57	0.035	0.521	Medium
P2–P2.1	5.50	7.27	0.011	0.680	Medium
P3–P3.1	4.00	4.00	0.257	0.170	Very Small
P4–P4.1	4.00	4.67	0.132	0.425	Little
P5–P5.1	5.38	6.36	0.297	0.168	Very Small
P6–P6.1	4.00	5.29	0.070	0.361	Little
P7–P7.1	3.50	4.38	0.527	0.139	Very Small
P8–P8.1	3.50	4.38	0.527	0.139	Very Small
P9–P9.1	7.00	6.33	0.138	0.338	Little
P10–P10.1	7.00	6.33	0.144	0.394	Little
P11–P11.1	5.00	6.22	0.029	0.545	Medium
P12–P12.1	6.50	7.22	0.134	0.347	Little
P13–P13.1	4.50	5.40	0.564	0.127	Very small
P14–P14.1	6.50	6.50	0.248	0.260	Little
P15–P15.1	4.50	6.33	0.026	0.562	Medium
P16–P16.1	3.00	5.40	0.194	0.274	Little
P17–P17.1	5.00	5.00	0.317	0.223	Little
P18–P18.1	4.50	7.21	0.003	0.860	Big
ETI1–ETI2	6.00	9.64	0.049	0.498	Medium

Source: Own elaboration.

In **Table 10**, the effect size of the professional ethics construct was observed, a medium and significant effect size was observed. The statement with the largest effect size was “The praxis as a practice of social meritocracy (P18)”. The statements with medium effect size were the following: “Ethical practices (P1)”, “Code of integrity in the municipality (P2)”, “Conducts of ethical principles (P11)” and “Principles of public integrity (P15)”. While the statements with small effect size were the following:

“Strengthening morale (P4)”, “Principles of commitment and justice (P6)”, “The four agreements from the code of integrity (P9)”, “Generating trust (P10)”, “Respect as a habit (P12)”, “Sense of effectiveness (P14)”, “Practices of responsibility (P16)” and “Sense of leadership (P17)”.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Inferences were made between demographic variables and the construct of professional ethics. It was concluded that there are no significant differences between demographic variables (level of education, years of service and gender) and the level of knowledge in professional ethics.

With respect to the main hypothesis, which sought differences in the level of knowledge of professional ethics before and after training, it is concluded that, in general, a medium effect size was observed in the degree of knowledge of professional ethics of public servants in the municipality of Rionegro, Colombia. Recommendations for the public entity: Continue promoting programs that help servants strengthen their morale, commitment, and sense of justice. Train employees on the four agreements of the integrity code, in order to provide customer service that generates trust, respect, efficiency, responsibility, and leadership. For future research, the training should have some face-to-face workshops and continue working on strategies for teaching professional ethics.

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