

## **Ethische dilemma's van een promovendus**

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**Bijdrage aan het Colloquium Vervoersplanologisch Speurwerk  
20 en 21 november 2014, Eindhoven**

## **Samenvatting**

### *Ethische dilemma's van een promovendus*

Het vertrouwen in de wetenschap is de laatste jaren aangetast. Verschillende fraudezaken kwamen in het nieuws en universiteiten werden hier en daar neergezet als koekjesfabrieken. De commissie Levelt – die de fraude van Diederik Stapel onderzocht – adviseerde onder meer om ethische codes (VSNU code) breder bekend te maken onder wetenschappers, jonge wetenschappers beter te onderwijzen en data op te slaan om problemen in de wetenschap op te lossen. Hoewel ik deze adviezen ondersteun denk ik dat het veel belangrijker is om open discussies te voeren over dilemma's waar men tegenaan loopt bij het uitvoeren van wetenschappelijk onderzoek. Sessies waarin senior onderzoekers aan PhD's vertellen over hun dilemma's en keuzes die zij hebben gemaakt zouden van nut kunnen zijn. Belangrijker is het denk ik nog dat PhD's (verplicht) een sectie in hun dissertatie opnemen, waarin zij de dilemma's die zij tegenkwamen tijdens hun onderzoek bespreken. Ten eerste ontstaat een goede reden voor de PhD en zijn / haar begeleiders om ethische dilemma's along the way te bespreken. Ten tweede kunnen andere onderzoekers veel leren van deze sectie. In dit paper bespreek ik vier dilemma's die ik tijdens mijn onderzoek tegenkwam. Tijdens het CVS lijkt het mij interessant om met de deelnemers aan de sessie over deze – en ook andere dilemma's – van gedachten te wisselen.

## **1. Ethische dilemma's van een promovendus**

In dit paper bespreek ik vier dilemma's die ik tijdens mijn onderzoek tegenkwam. Tijdens het CVS lijkt het mij interessant om met de deelnemers aan de sessie over deze – en ook andere dilemma's – van gedachten te wisselen. De bespreking van mijn vier dilemma's is eerder verschenen in mijn proefschrift 'Cost-Benefit Analysis in Practice' (Mouter, 2014). Om deze reden staat de tekst schuingedrukt en tussen aanhalingstekens.

### ***“1 Which projects to use as an illustration?”***

*A few months ago, I was writing an article for a Dutch newspaper about the poor quality of problem analyses for spatial-infrastructure projects in the Netherlands. In the leader of the article I decided to mention five example projects with a poor problem analysis as an illustration for the reader. To select these five projects, I made a shortlist of ten projects. For two of the ten projects from this shortlist I knew in advance that mentioning the project in the newspaper might be disadvantageous for me. A few weeks before I decided to write a newspaper article a Government agency that co-financed one of these ten projects asked me if I could give a presentation about the findings of my research, amongst other things. For the second project I expected, a priori, that one of the financiers of my website might not like it if I mentioned the project in the article.*

*The dilemma was: should I mention these two projects in the newspaper article? A scientist with lots of integrity would mention both projects to make sure that his/her integrity could never be questioned. A scientist that did not care about integrity at all would not mention either of the two projects. Hindered by an approaching deadline for the article, I selected five projects, including one of the two projects discussed above. From these five projects, two were unambiguously failure projects, one of the projects was hotly debated in the media at the time I was writing the article, one of the projects was not an infrastructure project and could contribute to the argument 'poor problem analysis is not a problem specific for infrastructure projects' and for the fifth project I scrutinized the problem analysis in-depth. So there were good arguments for the selection I made. However, it was of course possible to make another defensible selection. I claim that, because I only included one of the two 'doubt' projects in the newspaper article, the integrity of my decision is mediocre. With hindsight I think maybe a better method for selecting the five projects would have been putting pieces of paper with the names of the projects in a basket and taking five out of the basket, letting chance decide which projects are noted down in the article.*

### ***2 Who should be the first author?***

*One of the findings of chapter 3 was that key individuals in the Dutch CBA practice for spatial-infrastructure projects disagree on the way the uncertainty of effect estimations should be communicated in (the summary of) the CBA report. Chapter 5 concludes that to understand and explain the controversy with regard to communicating uncertainties, cognitive psychological theory may provide the right perspectives. To get a feeling for the extent to which scrutinizing cognitive psychological literature would be a fruitful research project, I contacted two researchers from the faculty of social psychology at the University of Amsterdam and they provided me with relevant scientific literature. After reading some papers I concluded that this was an interesting avenue for further research.*

*Because I did not have sufficient time to study all the relevant social psychological literature, Jan Anne Annema (co-promotor) and I decided to recruit a Masters student to undertake this work. Marc Holleman was interested in carrying out this project for his Masters' thesis. I made an appointment with the two researchers from the University of Amsterdam to refine the*

research questions for the project. In the first few months Marc read an impressive number of social-psychological papers. Once or twice a month we had a meeting in which we discussed his findings and the next steps to take. Also, I considered the findings promising enough for a journal paper. My idea was to write a conference paper for the UNITE conference in Copenhagen in September 2013. I asked Marc and the other supervisors (Simeon Calvert and Jan Anne Annema) if they thought this was a good idea and they agreed.

However, the question was: who was going to be the first author of the paper? On the one hand the project was a spin-off of my Ph.D., I initiated the project and would take the lead in writing the paper. On the other hand, Marc spent more hours than I did on the project and developed conceptual ideas for the paper based on his literature review. I decided to discuss the issue with Marc. Marc said that he was already very pleased that I would write a paper for a conference and a journal. He would not have written a paper, based on his Master's thesis, on his own. Concluding, there were legitimate reasons to make Marc the first author and there were legitimate reasons to make myself the first author. I chose for the second option, whereas others might favour the first option. It is definitely valuable to discuss such choices openly with a Masters student: 'as Marc and I did'. Furthermore, I think it is valuable for the scientific community to make such important practical issues debatable.

### **3 To vote or not to vote?**

A project financed by the Knowledge Platform for Transport and Traffic (KPVV) to design a tool that makes Cost-Benefit Analysis methodology more applicable for decentralized Governments was started in January 2013. KPVV asked me to take a place on the supervising committee of the project. The first step of the project was the selection of a private consultant who would carry out the project. The selection was based on the votes of the members of the supervising committee, amongst other things. The dilemma was that the private consultants that financed my website all tendered for the project, which was an argument for abstaining from voting. On the other hand, the tool might be very important for informing decentralized Governments ex-ante about the welfare effects of their policy options and I had an opinion about which consultants were better-equipped to successfully carry out the project. I decided to abstain from voting because I thought that influencing which commercial entity should carry out a project was not a scientist's task.

### **4 Identifying the weaknesses in my research**

After I completed the content analysis of the interviews I discussed the idea about assessing the reliability through an intercoder reliability test with my supervisors. We were all very enthusiastic about this idea. However, I had one reservation. Would it be possible to publish the papers in a high-ranked journal if the reliability of my content analysis turned out to be low? After the intercoder reliability task was completed, the reliability of the number of times (dis)advantage categories were coded turned out to be unreliable and I concluded that it was not responsible to rank CBA (dis)advantages based on the data derived from the interviews. Hence, I reported the low intercoder reliability scores in the paper 'Attitudes towards the role of Cost-Benefit Analysis in the decision-making process for spatial-infrastructure projects: a Dutch case study' (chapter 3) hoping that the reviewers would not reject the paper based on the low scores. I expected that there was a substantial chance that reviewers would take the low scores as an argument to reject the paper because I had heard stories of other researchers whose papers were by and large always rejected if they honestly discussed the limitations of their data in their paper. Eventually, none of the reviewers did make a strong point about the low scores. One of the reviewers asked me to provide the reader with a short justification of the low intercoder reliability scores. In the end, I am sure that I made the right

*decision to carry out (and report the results of) the intercoder reliability test. However, to be honest, I am not sure whether I would have taken the same stand had all my papers been rejected, based on the reviewers' comment regarding the low scores of the intercoder reliability test."*