

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 17, 1990

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF ETHICAL DECISION MAKING PREDISPOSITIONS

Penny L. Wright and F. Neil Brady
San Diego State University

ABSTRACT

This teaching model is designed to help business students better understand the distinction between a utilitarian and a formalist ("deontological") approach to ethical decision making without going deeply into the theory of philosophy. Five vignettes are presented to students that illustrate general themes in the classic discussion of ethical theory (Brady, 1990). Analysis of the vignettes helps students identify themselves as a utilitarian or a formalist, assists in their exploring contradictions in their thinking, and helps students better understand individuals who think differently on ethical issues.

THE THEMES AND THEIR ANALYSIS

Nature of Deliberation. Utilitarians compare, weigh, and evaluate alternatives in a very practical mode, while formalists tend to generalize actions or apply rules, an interest that is more conceptual than practical.

Vignette 1. "Your department has recently received six desk top computers. There are 12 people in your department all of whom would like a new computer. What do you do? Why?"

A formalist would press for equality, while a utilitarian would make a choice that would increase productivity. Responses to the situation are analyzed in two parts: (1) What did you do? (2) Why? This two part analysis allows the student to assess his/her consistency in use of a formalist or utilitarian approach to decision making. Students were fairly consistent in their responses and rationales in this situation ($N=151$, $r=.75$, $p<.05$)

Nature of Action. According to utilitarians, actions are results oriented and they accept compromises in lieu of a consensus. Formalists, on the other hand, see actions connected to rules, as principled or unprincipled, and expect agreement in principle.

Vignette 2. "Should large, powerful, efficient organizations be restrained in order to allow opportunities for new, small organizations-yea or no?"

A formalist would choose to restrain large businesses in favor of small business development in the interest of general fairness or equal opportunity. A utilitarian would argue for no restraints on large business in the interest of general market efficiencies and the best overall results: 85 percent of our students chose the utilitarian response but half of these offered a formalist rationale ($r=.03$).

Nature of Prescriptivity. A sense of personal "rightness" accompanies deliberation or action. For the utilitarian, this tends to be a concern of compassion for others, the vindication of achieving good results, and the satisfaction of analytic rigor.

Vignette 3. "One of your co-workers has been making frequent phone calls to a personal friend in another state. It's against company policy to make unauthorized personal phone calls, but you are aware that many people in the organization do this anyway. Will you report the person or

not? Why or Why not?"

A formalist would report the infraction of the rule because it is a "rule," and employees share responsibility for the integrity of rules. A utilitarian would be less inclined to report the abuse of the rule because the offense is minor compared to possible disciplinary action or job loss.

Our correlation data between the decision type and the its rationale was $r=-.11$, n.s. More than 36 percent of the students who chose not to report the incident were unwilling to give either a utilitarian or a formalist reason. They chose instead to use a variety of stalling tactics.

Continuity of Choice. There is a tendency for utilitarians to think in situational terms, looking for degrees of responsibility and seeing answers in terms of "shades of grey." Formalists are generally more comfortable with polar thinking; their goal is itself, simple principles.

Vignette 4. "Your secretary, Joan, arrives at work early one morning wearing what appear to you to be a hideous-looking hat and says, 'Hi, How do you like my new hat?' To tell the truth would hurt her feelings, but to tell her you like it is to lie. Even though there are other alternatives, what are you most likely to do? (1) tell her you like it, or (2) tell her what you really think? Why?"

The formalist would tell the truth. A utilitarian would view this as an opportunity for a "white lie" since doing so circumvents almost certain offense and in itself causes no harm. Students were fairly consistent in their thinking here ($r=.54$, $p<.05$).

Institutional and Macro Applications. Utilitarians are interested in social progress and change, view government as a potential benefactor, and give priority to legislative functions. The formalist prefers social tradition and stability, views government as the source of fairness and law, and gives priority to judicial functions.

Vignette 5. "The Supreme Court is being asked to decide whether minority applicants can be preferred in hiring decisions over perhaps better qualified candidates in order to produce a better representation of discriminated minorities in the workplace. As a matter of national, organizational policy, should minorities be given such preferences? Yes or no? Why?"

A formalist would choose to support preferential hiring. A utilitarian would choose not to give preferential treatment because to do so would result in lesser qualified individuals taking jobs that may tend to less operational efficiency.

Almost 90 percent of our student's said no, they would not give minorities preference: 85 percent of these supported their decisions with a formalist rationale anticipating formalists' objections ($r=.28$, $p<.05$).

REFERENCES

Brady, F. Neil. Ethical Managing Rules and Results. London: Macmillan Publishers, 1990.