Correlates of Salespeople's Ethical Conflict: An Exploratory Investigation*

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ABSTRACT. Much have been written about marketing ethics. Virtually no published research, however, has examined what factors are related to the ethical conflict of salespeople. Such research is important because it could have direct implications for the management of sales personnel. This paper presents the results of an exploratory study that examined selected correlates of salespeople's ethical conflict. Implications for practitioners and academic are also provided.

Marketing ethics has received increased research interest within the past fifteen years. Issues examined include potentially ethically troublesome situations faced by marketing managers (Ferrell and Weaver, 1978; Trawick and Darden, 1980), marketing researchers (Crawford, 1970), advertising personnel (Krugman and Ferrell, 1981), purchasing personnel (Rudelius and Bucholz, 1979), industrial salespeople (Dubinsky *et al.*, 1980), and retail store managers (Dornoff and Tankersley, 1975–1976); consumers' perceptions of various marketing practices (Dornoff and Tankersley, 1975); non-business professors' and marketing practitioners' belief about the appropriateness of applying marketing principles to social issues and ideas (Laczniak, *et al.*, 1979); Lusch *et al.*, 1980); perceptual differences between industrial sales and purchasing personnel's ethical beliefs (Dubinsky and Gwin, 1981); and college students' perceptions of potentially questionable marketing practices (Dubinsky and Rudelius, 1980; Goodman and Crawford, 1974; Hawkins and Cocanougher, 1972; Shuptrine, 1979). (For a critical review of marketing ethics literature, see Murphy and Laczniak (1981).) Notwithstanding previous marketing ethics research, virtually no published research has examined what factors are related to ethical conflict experienced by sales personnel – the topic discussed here.

Ethical sales behavior is obviously an important sales management responsibility. An equally critical sales management responsibility is assisting salespeople to address their ethical conflict. Ethical conflict is defined as occurring when an individual feels pressure to take actions that are inconsistent with what he or she feels to be right. Exploring salespeople's ethical conflict should be of particular importance to sales organizations because if correlates of ethical conflict can be identified, sales managers may be able to influence organizational climates in order to mitigate salespeople's ethical conflict. Developing an adequate organizational climate is crucial given that it affects salespeople's job

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satisfaction (Churchill *et al.*, 1976) which may subsequently impact their performance (Walker *et al.*, 1977). To examine potential correlates of ethical conflict, an exploratory study of salespeople's ethical conflict was conducted. Specifically, the objective of the research was to ascertain whether selected variables are related to salespeople's ethical conflict.

Salespeople were selected as an important frame or reference for several reasons. First, conventional wisdom and previous research has suggested that salespeople do ondeed experience ethical dilemmas (Dubinksy *et al.*, 1980). So it would be helpful to sales managers to know how such conflict may be reduced. Second, sales is an area in marketing that draws constant criticism from the public (Murphy and Laczniak, 1981) and contains many unanswered ethical questions (Murphy *et al.*, 1978). Third, the multifaceted nature of many sales jobs can create an environment conducive for development of ethical conflict (e.g., should the salesperson ignore a present customer's request for assistance so that time can be made to call on a potentially large account?). Last, given that salespeople are key links between their customers and company, ethical conflict, if not resolved, could conceivably lead to job stress, poor sales performance, job dissatisfaction, ridicule from management, unhappy customers, increased sales force turnover, and decreased sales and profits for the firm.

To explore potential correlates of ethical conflict experienced by sales personnel, the remainder of this paper will first briefly describe reasons why business people, irrespective of their positions, experience ethical conflict or engage in unethical conduct. Although this analysis will look at business people, in general (and not salespeople, in particular), the discussion should be instructive in terms of what business ethics researchers and writers have proposed as being rationale for ethical dilemmas in business. This discussion will be followed by a presentation of the research propositions, methodology, results, and implications of the study.

Potential reasons for ethical conflict

Why do business people act unethically? Few researchers have sought answers to this question, but those addressing the issue have asked respondents what *they feel* causes business people to act unethically. For example, Baumhart (1968) discovered that the two major influences leading to unethical behavior were business superiors and ethical climate of the industry. Brenner and Molander (1977) determined that the two main causes of unethical conduct were pressure imposed by superiors and absence of a corporate ethical policy. Bowman (1976) and Carroll 1975) ascertained that unethical behavior arises in business because people feel under pressure to compromise personal standards to achieve organizational objectives. Results of a study by Newstrom and Ruch (1975) suggested that business people have a propensity to behave unethically if it is to their advantage and if barriers to unethical conduct are reduced.

Some writers have posited what *they think* engenders ethical conflict or unethical behavior in business. For example, Carr (1968) proposed that people have two sets of ethical standards – standards for private life and for work life. Ethical standards in private life are on a higher plane than those in work life, as work life standards are predicated on the 'rules of the game' in business. Another possible reason for unethical business conduct may be that a kind of Gresham's Law of ethics operates in a business environment. That is, "the ethic of corporate advantage invariably silences and drives out the ethic of individual restraint" (Carr, 1970, p. 63). Also, unethical conduct may arise out of business tradition and be considered perfunctory. As one executive has said: "Everyone starts out in business with high scruples, and then they discover that there are certain things that they must do to compete, things that have been done for 100 years. A lot of it is illegal" (*Sales and Marketing Management*, 1982b, p. 20).

Several writers have proposed what *they think* produces ehtical conflict or unethical conduct in *marketing*. For example, Alderson (1964) believed that an individual's ethical standards could be impaired by organizational and ecological sanctions. Patterson (1966) attributed unethical practices in marketing to the absence of relevant guidelines for ethical decisions. When developing a model of ethical decision making in marketing, Bartels (1967) identified several factors that might affect an ethical decision. These factors are cultural influences, economic implications, organizational expectations, and effects upon the publics served. Pruden (1971) proffered that individuals have three sets of ethics – individual, organizational, and professional – and each of these sets of ethics interacts to affect a marketer's actions. Also, Farmer (1977) posited that unethical conduct in marketing occurs because of the nature of marketing itself. He claimed that marketing deals with greed, selfishness, and base human desires.

The above discussion suggests that business ethics literature presents what individuals – either respondents or ethics writers – *think* leads to ethical conflict or unethical conduct. The literature, however, does not contain statistical analyses that seek to identify correlates of ethical conflict. Such an analysis was deemed necessary in order to acquire a greater understanding of salespeople's ethical plight.

Research propositions

Ethical conflict, as defined earlier, occurs when an individual feels pressure to take action that is inconsistent with what he or she feels to be right. Six potential correlates of ethical conflict experienced by salespeople were selected for this study. The six are role conflict, role ambiguity, job tenure (length in present position and lenght in sales), educational level, major source of income (salary or commision), and intensity of competition. These variables were utilized for two reasons. First, traditional sales management thought has suggested that these factors may be related to ethical conflict. Second, these variables have been investigated in previous sales management research that has investigated such topics as salesperson performance (e.g., Cotham, 1969; Ghiselli, 1969). reward preferences (e.g., Churchill *et al.*, 1979; Ingram and Bellenger, 1982), recruiting (e.g., Lamont and Lundstrom, 1977; Perreault *et al.*, 1977), and role conflict and ambiguity (e.g., Teas, 1980; Walker *et al.*, 1975). These variables were selected for investigation in the present study because as in the above studies, some are controllable, to some extent, by sales management through recruiting and selection, supervision, compensation, or company policy. The research proposition for each potential correlate of ethical conflict is presented below.

Role Conflict

Role conflict occurs when a person experiences incompatible job demands or expectations from his or her role-set members. Potential reasons for salespeople's experiencing role conflict include their being in a boundary-spanning role that has a large number of role occupants and requires innovativeness (Walker *et al.*, 1972). Because salespeople interact with customers as well as with members from their own organizations, they are likely to encounter incompatible demands that cannot be simultaneously satisfied. Some of these demands may place a salesperson in an ethical conflict. For example, a salesperson may be below quota toward the end of the year and have several irate customers requiring 'troubleshooting' calls that entail extensive time and effort. This salesperson could conceivably be experiencing ethical conflict. He or she could service the irate customers and probably not achieve quota, thereby satisfying customer demands (providing service) but not management demands (attaining quota). Or the salesperson could ignore the irate customers' pleas and seek out additional sales to achieve quota, thus satisfying management's demands but not customers' demands.

Based upon the above discussion, the following proposition is offered:

PROPOSITION 1. The greater the level of role conflict experienced by salespeople, the higher their level of ethical conflict.

Role ambiguity

Role ambiguity occurs when an individual has inadequate knowledge about how to perform his or her job. Potential reasons for salespeople's experiencing role ambiguity include inadequate sales training, lack of close supervision, or inadequate performance feedback (Walker *et al.*, 1979). If salespeople lack sufficient knowledge about requisite job tasks and responsibilities, they probably will be uncertain about how to perform their jobs. Moreover, they may be unaware of whether their company has an ethical policy addressing a particular situation. If salespeople are unclear about what to do on their jobs, they may or may not experience ethical conflict. For example, a company may have a policy of not giving customers free gifts. If a salesperson is unaware of this policy, he may feel no ethical conflict exists if a buyer asks for a gift to close a sale. Conversely, the salesperson may personally feel that the request is inappropriate and, therefore, experience ethical conflict.

Thus, based on the preceding discussion, the following proposition is presented:

PROPOSITION 2. There is no relationship between the level of role ambiguity experienced by salespeople and their level of ethical conflict.

Job tenure

Salespeople's job tenure can be either total sales experience or length in their present position. Both of these dimensions are likely to be related to the level of ethical conflict experienced by salespeople for at least two reasons. First, the longer salespeople have been in their jobs, the more time they have had to learn how to address or reconcile ethical conflict. Consequently, the severity of their conflict should be reduced over time. Second, the more experienced salespeople have in their jobs, the more time they will have had to recognize that certain questionable business practices may simply be a way of doing business. That is, such practices may be either commonly accepted or necessary to remain competitive. If salespeople view questionable business behaviors in this fashion, their levels of ethical conflict should be reduced.

The preceding discussion suggests the following two propositions:

PROPOSITION 3. The longer salespeople have been in their present positions, the lower their level of ethical conflict.

PROPOSITION 4. The longer salespeople have been in sales, the lower their level of ethical conflict.

Level of education

Salespeople with higher levels of education are more likely to have been exposed to ethical issues during their formal education process than are those with lower levels of education. That is, their formal education may have made them cognizant of moral and ethical issues and what is considered to be acceptable and unacceptable business behavior. Salespeople with lower levels of formal education, though, may not have been exposed to, or thought about, moral and ethical issues during their formal education process. So they may be unaware of what business behavior is regarded as being appropriate or inappropriate. Salespeople with higher levels of education, then, may have acquired through their education a knowledge of what business practices are right and wrong. When placed in a selling environment that entails ethical dilemmas, these salespeople may be more likely to experience ethical conflict. Their less educated counterparts, however, may not view such situations as being inappropriate and, therefore, experience less ethical conflict.

Based on the prior discussion, the following proposition is posited:

PROPOSITION 5. The higher the level of education of salespeople, the higher their level of ethical conflict.

Major source of income

Salespeople generally are remunerated by one of three compensation plans: straight salary, straight commission, or combination salary plus incentive (Futrell, 1981). Today, combination compensation programs are the most popular of the three (*Sales and Marketing Management*, 1982a). With the combination plan, a salesperson's major source of income may be derived from either the salary or commission (incentive) component.

If salespeople's major source of income is salary, salespeople will have a relatively steady stream of income that will be less susceptible to fluctuations on their performance. When salespeople's major source of income is commission, their livelihoods depend upon the amount of commission earned via their performance. Under this compensation plan salespeople's commissions (and livelihoods) will suffer immediately if salespeople are not productive. Thus, salespeople whose livelihoods depend primarily on the amount of commission earned may tend to accept questionable business practices simply because they may regard them as being necessary to maintain a good standard of living. They are likely, therefore, not to experience ethical conflict. Salespeople whose livelihoods are dependent primarily on salary may consider questionable business behaviors as being unnecessary simply because each sale is not a 'must sale'. These individuals might experience ethical conflict given that their major source of income is salary.

Based on the above discussion, the following proposition is proffered:

PROPOSITION 6. Salespeople whose major source of income is commission are likely to have lower levels of ethical conflict than salespeople whose major source of income is salary.

Intensity of market competition

Intensity of market competition can have a decided impact on salespeople. For example, previous research has found that intensity of competition is inversely related to a salesperson's performance (e.g., Ryans and Weinberg, 1979). Moreover, Walker *et al.* (1979) have proposed that a firm's superiority of competitive position is inversely related to the amount of conflict a salesperson experiences in the job.

Intensity of market competition may also affect the level of ethical conflict experienced by salespeople. In fact, previous research has found that as competition increases, so does unethical business conduct (Baumhart, 1968). When salespeople are in territories that have relatively little competition, questionable business practices are likely to be frowned upon by sales personnel. That is, with little competition salespeople may view questionable business practices as an unnecessary modus operandi. If such practices are considered inappropriate, salespeople are likely to experience ethical conflict. When competition is intense, however, salespeople may feel that questionable behaviors are a necessary and normal way of doing business. Such behavior may be deemed appropriate because it might be seen as a requisite way to close a sale; otherwise, competition may get the sale. In this instance, salespeople may not experience ethical conflict.

Based upon the previous discussion, the following proposition is presented:

PROPOSTION 7. The greater the intensity of competition in salespeople' markets, the lower their level of ethical conflict.

Methodology

Sample

The sample consisted of 116 salespeople located throughout the United States. Products sold by the salespeople included industrial supplies, rubber products, packaging, electrical instruments, chemicals, and tubing, among others. Fifty-three percent of the sample were between 23 and 40 years old; 59 percent had at least a bachelor's degree; 56 percent had been in their present position for four or more years; and 45 percent had ten or more years of sales experience. Also, sales of respondent companies ranged between \$1 million and \$2.7 billion, with 50 percent of the firms having sales of \$100 million or more.

Questionnaire

Role conflict and ambiguity. Role conflict was measured by an eight-item scale developed by Rizzo *et al.* (1970). Role ambiguity was assessed with a six-item scale also developed by Rizzo *et al.* (1970). Both scales have demonstrated high levels of scale reliability and validity (e.g., Schuler *et al.*, 1977). In addition, versions of these scales have been employed in previous sales managment research (Chonko, 1982; Teas *et al.*, 1979; Teas. 1980). To arrive at a respondent's role conflict score, the items constituting the role conflict scale were summed. Items related to role ambiguity were summed to ascertain a respondent's role ambiguity score.

Ethical conflict. Ethical conflict was measured using ten items developed by Dubinsky *et al.* (1980). These ten items represent potential ethical dilemmas commonly encountered by salespeople. For each situation, respondents were asked, "Do you believe the situation or practice presents an ethical question?" An ethical question was defined as "one that arises when an individual feels pressure to take action that is inconsistent with what he or she feels to be right". An ethical question, therefore, is synonymous with an ethical conflict which was defined earlier. Respondents recorded their responses on a five-point scale where 1 = "definitely no" and 5 = "definitely yes". A respondent's ethical conflict score was arrived at by summing the respondent's responses to the ten items.

Job tenure. To assess job tenure, two open-end questions were used. One question was, "How long have you been in your *present* sales job?" The other question was, "How long have you been in a sales position?"

Income source, education, and competition. A multiple-choice question was used to measure a respondent's major source of income. The item was, "From which of the following sources does *most* of your income from your sales job come?" Possible responses were "salary" and "commission". Level of education was determined by asking respondents, "What is your educational level?" Possible answers were "high school degree", some college", "bachelor's degree", "some graduate work", and "graduate degree". Intensity of market competition was measured with the following item: "How competitive is the market for your products?" Possible responses were "highly competitive", "moderately competitive", and "virtually no competition".

Scale reliabilities. Coefficient alpha (Cronbach, 1951) was calculated to determine the internal consistency of the role conflict, role ambiguity, and ethical conflict scales. Internal consistency is an important indicator of scale reliability (Peter, 1979). Scale reliabilities for the role conflict, role ambiguity, and ethical conflict scales were 0.79, 0.83, and 0.60, respectively. Because the coefficients of the variables were at least 0.60, the variables appeared to be adequate for further analysis (Nunnally, 1978). The appendix presents the items used to measure role conflict, role ambiguity, and ethical conflict.

Data analysis

Two types of analyses were conducted. For interval-scaled variables (role conflict, role ambiguity, length in present position, and length in scales), Pearson product-moment, zero-order correlation coefficients were computed by correlating these varaibles with the ethical conflict scale. T-tests for differences between group means used to examine the relationship between ethical conflict and those variables that were categorical (level of education, major source of income, and intensity of market competition).

Results

Table I presents the results of the study. The table shows the mean and standard deviation of the seven correlates of ethical conflict, as well as each correlate's test statistic and significance level of the test. As displayed in Table I, none of the correlates examined appears to be related to ethical conflict experienced by salespeople ($p > 0.05$).

More specifically, role conflict and ambiguity are unrelated to ethical conflict ($r = 0.05$ and 0.01, respectively). It was proposed that role conflict would be directly related to ethical conflict and role ambiguity would be unrelated to ethical conflict. Thus, Proposition 1 is not supported, and Proposition 2 is supported.

It was conjectured that length in present position and length in sales would be negatively related to ethical conflict. Neither variable, though, appears to be related to ethical conflict ($r = 0.01$ and 0.10, respectively). Proposition 3 and 4 are not supported.

Proposition 5 stated that level of education would be positively related to ethical conflict. No relationship between the two variables was found ($t = -0.83$); consequently, Proposition 5 is not supported. Salespeople deriving the majority of income from commission were conjectured to experience less ethical conflict than salespeople deriving the majority of income from salary. No relationship was found, so Proposition 6 is not supported. Finally, the proposed negative relationship between intensity of competition and ethical conflict was not found. Proposition 7, therefore, is not supported.

TABLE I

Relationship between ethical conflict and correlates

Correlates	Mean	Standard deviation	Test statistic	Significance level of test
• Role conflict	24.1	5.02	$r =$ 0.05	0.29
• Role ambiguity	20.3	3.92	$r =$ 0.01	0.45
• Length in present position	8.0	7.36	$r =$ 0.01	0.45
• Length in sales	13.8	9.86	$r =$ 0.10	0.16
• Level of education	[a]	[a]	$t = -0.83$[b]	0.42
• Major source of income	[a]	[a]	$t = -0.43$[c]	0.67
• Intensity of market competition	[a]	[a]	$t = -1.60$[d]	0.12

[a] No meaningful mean or standard deviation could be calculated because variable is categorical.
[b] T-test was performed using the following two groups: 'some college education or less' and 'at least a bachelor's degree'.
[c] T-test was performed using the following two groups: 'salary' and 'commission'.
[d] T-test was performed using the following two groups: 'highly competitive market' and 'moderately competitive market or less'.

Discussions and implications

Results from this study should be viewed in light of some important limitations. First, although the relationship between selected variables and salespeople's ethical conflict was examined, other factors not investigated here may be related to ethical conflict. Second, because the questionnaire addressed a sensitive topic – ethics in sales – respondents may have shown socially desirable responses. Third, the ethical dilemmas used in the questionnaire do not constitute an exhaustive list of ethical questions that face sales personnel. They are, however, reasonably representative of a wide range of ethically-troubling situations confronting salespeople in the field. Despite these limitations, the study has implications for both sales practitioners and academics.

This study found that there is no relationship between the constructs of role conflict and ambiguity and ethical conflict. This findings suggests that if sales managers attempt to reduce salespeople's job conflict, they will not necessarily reduce the ethical conflict their salespeople experience. Also, this finding indicates that if sales managers seek to clarify for salespeople the role they perform, their level of ethical conflict will not be reduced. Thus, management's attempts at altering salespeople's role perceptions apparently will not ease salespeople's ethical conflict.

Length in present position was found to be unrelated to salespeople's ethical conflict. This suggests that sales practitioners should not think that their more experienced sales personnel are better able to address ethical conflict than are less experienced salespeople. Both groups may need assistance in resolving ethical conflict they experience.

The finding that length in sales and level of education is unrelated to salespeople's ethical conflict has direct implications for sales recruiting and supervision. When recruiting sales personnel, although these two biographical factors may be of importance from a sales performance perspective, they need not be considered in terms of hiring someone who will experience little ethical conflict. Moreover, sales managers must be equally concerned about the ethical conflict experienced by both their more educated and less educated salespeople and by their more experienced and less experienced sales personnel.

Salespeople's major source of income (salary or commission) was found to be unrelated to ethical conflict. When designing or redesigning sales compensation programs, then, sales practitioners apparently need not consider ethical conflict experienced by their salespeople. That is, because an emphasis on either pay component does not appear to lead to greater or lower levels of ethical conflict, concern should focus on achieving performance goals and not on ethical conflict when dealing with the compensation plan.

Intensity of market competition was found to be unrelated to salespeople's ethical conflict. Intensity of competition evidently does not serve to ease the ethical conflict of salespeople. This suggests that sales managers should be concerned with the ethical conflict of their salespeople regardless of the level of competition in the market.

The findings of this study also suggest that much additional research is needed to investigate ethical conflict experienced by salespeople. This study has found selected variables that are *unrelated* to ethical conflict. Additional variables that may be related to ethical conflict should be explored in future research. Variables could include those that are intrapersonal (e.g., sex, personality characteristics), interpersonal (e.g., kinds of customers contacted, power), organizational (e.g., span of control, closeness of supervision, quality of sales training program), and environmental (e.g., current economic conditions, primary demand for the product). Implicit in the present study is the notion that salespeople's ethical conflict increases job tension, frustration, and anxiety, reduces job satisfaction and performance, augments turnover, and decreases long-run customer satisfaction, goodwill, sales, and profits. Future research should also seek to determine whether ethical conflict does, indeed, lead to these and other deleterious consequences.

Appendix

Ethics Scale (1 = 'definitely no' and 5 = 'definitely yes')

	Mean	Standard deviation
1. Soliciting low priority or low volme business that the salesperson's firm won't deliver or service in an economic slowdown or periodes of resource shortages.	3.2	1.43
2. Seeking information from purchasers on competitors' quotations for the purpose of submitting another quotation.	2.9	1.41
3. Allowing personalities – liking for one purchaser and disliking for another – to affect price, delivery, or other decisions regarding the terms of sale.	3.1	1.64
4. Giving physical gifts such as free sales promotion prizes or 'purchase-volume incentive bonuses' to a purchaser.	2.4	1.44
5. Providing free trips, free luncheons or dinners, or other free entertainment to a purchaser.	2.4	1.28

6. Having less competitive prices or other terms for buyers who use your firm as the sole source of supply than for firms for which you are one of two or more suppliers.	2.9	1.51
7. Making statements to an existing purchaser that exaggerate the seriousness of his/her problem in order to obtain a bigger order or other concessions.	3.2	1.43
8. Attempting to reach and influence other departments (such as engineering) directly rather than go though the purchasing department increases the likelihood of a sale.	2.5	1.37
9. Giving preferential treatment to purchasers whom higher levels of the firms own management prefer or recommend.	2.7	1.24
10. Gaining information about competitors by asking purchasers for information.	2.5	1.51

Role Conflict Scale (1 = 'strongly disagree' and 5 = 'strongly agree')

	Mean	Standard deviation
1. I have to do things that should be done differently.	3.2	1.06
2. I have to buck a rule or policy in order to carry out an assignment.	2.7	1.13
3. I work with two or more groups who operate quite differently.	3.6	1.15
4. I receive incompatible requests from two or more people.	2.8	1.10
5. I do things that are apt to be accepted by one person and not accepted by others.	3.2	1.18
6. I receive an assignment without adequate resources and materials to execute it.	2.6	1.15
7. I work on unnecessary things.	2.6	1.11
8. I receive an assignment whithout the manpower to carry out an assignment.	2.7	1.08

Role Ambiguity Scale (1 = 'strongly disagree' and 5 = 'strongly agree')

	Mean	Standard deviation
1. I feel certain about how much authority I have.	3.4	1.04
2. Clear, planned goals and objectives exist for my job.	3.3	1.26
3. I know that I have divided my time properly.	3.3	0.94
4. I know what my responsibilities are.	3.9	0.89
5. I know exactly what is expected of me.	3.7	1.01
6. Explanation is clear of what has to be done.	3.4	1.01

Note

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Announcement

The Philosophy Department of the University of Guelph is pleased to announce that Professor Alex C. Michalos was awarded the Secretary of State's Prize for Excellence in Interdisciplinary Research in Canadian Studies for his *North American Social Report* (A comparative study of the Quality of Life in Canada and the USA from 1964 to 1974). The five volumes of the treatise were published by D. Reidel as *Foundations, Population and Health* (1980), *Crime, Justice and Politics* (1980), *Science, Education and Recreation* (1981), *Environment, Transportation and Housing* (1981), and *Economics, Religion and Morality* (1982).