

Egoistic and Ethical Orientations of University Students Toward Work-Related Decisions*

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ABSTRACT. An onslaught of ethically questionable actions by top government, business, and religious leaders during the 1980s has brought the issue of ethics in decision making to the forefront of public consciousness. This study examines the ethical orientation of university students in four decision-making situations. The dependent variable — ethical orientation toward work-related decisions — is measured through student responses to questions following four work-related vignettes. Possible responses to each vignette are structured to permit categorization of respondents into two broad orientations: egoistic and ethical. Independent variables are academic major, “ethics in business orientation,” gender, and religiosity. Generally, students tended to choose an ethical orientation over an egoistic orientation in each vignette. Business majors were generally no less likely to choose an ethical orientation toward work-related decisions than nonbusiness majors. Respondents characterized by “moral unity” (belief in the consistency between general ethical principles and work-related ethical standards) were more likely to have an ethical orientation toward work-related decisions than those subscribing to the “amoral theory of business.” Females showed a consistent tendency to be more ethically oriented toward work-related decisions than males. Finally, respondents high on religiosity tended to be more ethically oriented.

Introduction

Work-related ethical conflicts are common at all levels of modern organizations (Mosher, 1988). Frequently, individuals at work must choose among alternatives which would be personally beneficial and those which would benefit the needs of other persons, the organization, or society at large. In the 1980s, the news was replete with examples of unethical behavior in higher circles of American society, including insider trading on Wall Street, Morton Thiokol's role in the Challenger disaster, financial and sexual scandal among televangelists, and rapaciousness at HUD. Some believe that an emphasis on profits, productivity, efficiency, and self-fulfillment in the 1980s replaced a concern for ethical standards (Boyd, 1987; Jones and Gautschi, 1988).

According to historian Arthur Schlesinger (1986), twentieth-century America has experienced cyclical swings between periods of “public purpose” (concern for the public good) and “private interest” (concern for self-interest and private gain). Coinciding with social influences and presidential attitudes and behavior, public purpose cycles have lasted approximately 20 years each. Driving forces behind public purpose cycles include negative reactions to the concentration of economic power in the trusts at the turn of the century, the Great Depression of the 1930s and 1940s, and perceptions of racial injustice during the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, private interest cycles, lasting 8 to 12 years, surfaced during 1921–1933, 1953–1961, and 1981–1989. If this pattern holds, America should presently be entering a fourth public purpose cycle. It would not seem accidental to Schlesinger that President George Bush speaks of a “kinder and gentler nation” and professes an ambition to be an environment and

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education President or that volunteerism is on the rise in the United States (Miller, 1989; Henkoff, 1989).

The purpose of this research is to examine the grounds for decision making (egoistic versus ethical) among university students at a time when a new public purpose cycle is allegedly about to be entered. Ideally, the basis for student decision making in 1989 should be compared to the basis for student decision making used earlier in this decade, a step we take using the research of Wood *et al.* (1988).

Major variables and hypotheses

Dependent variable: ethical orientation toward work-related decisions

At a minimum, most definitions of an ethical orientation would include “the effort to guide one’s conduct by reason — that is, to do what there are best reasons for doing — while giving equal weight to the interests of each individual who will be affected by one’s conduct” (Rachels, 1986, p. 11). Moral development begins at an early age and roughly corresponds to the biological developmental stages of adolescent and adult growth (Kohlberg, 1969). Transition through these stages corresponds to a shift from “self” (individual) to “shared” norms (group) to “universal” (societal) principles of morality. (Of course, not all individuals will proceed through these stages.)

In situations of uncertainty, or when formal or informal rules for decision making are either ignored or nonexistent, individuals may respond to moral issues based on a particular stage of moral development. Those who base their decisions on the egoistic grounds are more likely to be stuck in the “self” stage of moral development. Egoists believe individuals ought to seek their own long-term self-interest to the exclusion of the interests of others (Rachels, 1986, p. 66). On the other hand, individuals who consider the interests of others, along with their own, base their decisions on ethical grounds.

To ascertain if the students in our sample espouse egoism or have an ethical orientation, they were asked to read four vignettes of increasing moral complexity. These are the vignettes:

Vignette 1. You are an employee of Western Industries working in the assembly room where the guidance system is installed in nuclear missiles carrying multiple warheads aimed at targets in the Soviet Union (MX missiles). Some of the metals used are quite expensive but very useful for home repairs. Would you take some of the metal out of the plant for your personal use?

Vignette 2. As an employee of Western Industries, you know that the company is behind in its production deadlines for the MX missile. Certain employees are even working overtime in order to help the company minimize the time overrun. A friend of yours who works at another company invites you to take a four-day vacation at a mutual friend’s lakefront cottage. This means you would have to miss work on Thursday and Friday of this week. Would you call in sick and join the friend?

Vignette 3. The assembly room for the MX missile at Western Industries must be kept totally clean at all times. All persons entering the assembly room must wear masks, gloves, and a protective suit. All food and drink is strictly prohibited in the assembly room. Otherwise, tiny debris could find its way into the guidance systems being installed and cause the missiles to malfunction in the event of their launching in a nuclear war. If you were unable to leave the assembly room for lunch, would you eat your lunch later at your post in the assembly room?

Vignette 4. Western Industries is now so far behind in its production schedule that it is about to suffer crippling penalties from the federal government. This backup problem is largely due to the unavailability of properly inspected control mechanisms from the supplier. One way around this problem is to obtain uninspected control mechanisms from an unauthorized supplier. In fact, management has already arranged for these uninspected control mechanisms to be delivered to a post office near the plant. If these uninspected control mechanisms are installed, there is no way to know if fired missiles will hit Chicago or Moscow. Would you install the unauthorized guidance mechanisms in order to help the company avoid the crippling penalties?

Each of the four vignettes was followed by a series of questions. Students were first asked to read each vignette and choose one of these two alternatives:

- A. I would pursue my own long-term best interests to the exclusion of the interests of all others involved.
- B. It would be inappropriate for me to pursue my own long-term best interests to the exclusion of the interests of all others involved.

Students choosing alternative A were classified as having an *egoistic* orientation. Those students with an egoistic orientation were then asked to indicate whether or not they would engage in the unethical behavior described in each vignette.

Students who selected alternative B were asked to choose one of the following six alternatives (example based on vignette 4)

Deontological Orientation

1. Because I would not want everyone else to do the same thing, I would NOT install the unauthorized guidance mechanisms.
2. Because it would be okay with me if everyone else did the same thing, I would install the unauthorized guidance mechanisms.

Utilitarian orientation

3. If the benefits of my installing the unauthorized guidance mechanisms outweighed the costs to all concerned, I would do so.
4. If the costs to all concerned of my installing the unauthorized guidance mechanisms outweighed the benefits, I would NOT do so.

Virtue ethics orientation

5. It would be out of character for me in this situation to install the unauthorized guidance mechanism.
6. It would NOT be out of character for me in this situation to install the unauthorized guidance mechanism.

Students responding in terms of a deontological, utilitarian, or a virtue ethics orientation were classified as having an *ethical* orientation. (The three ethical traditions were not labelled as such on the questionnaire.)

Independent variables: academic major, ethics in business orientation, gender religiosity

Academic major. Academic interests may influence ethical orientation toward work-related decisions. It is hypothesized that nonbusiness majors will be more ethically oriented in work-related decisions than business majors.

Ethics in business orientation. There are two major orientations regarding ethics in business. Using class-

ical economic theory, some support the “theory of amorality” in business: “the common good is best achieved by the individual pursuit of self-interest and profits by those in business, rather than by activity based on conscious moral purpose” (Steiner and Steiner, 1988, p. 323). This orientation assumes that different moral standards exist for the business world than for society as a whole. The second major position — “the theory of moral unity” — contends that business actions can be judged by the general ethical standards of society. In other words, it is assumed that there is only one set of moral standards that are applicable to all members of society in all areas of institutional life. We hypothesize that students subscribing to the theory of moral unity (that is, who believe in the existence of one set of moral standards) will have an ethical orientation toward work-related decisions, while students advocating the theory of amorality in business will have an egoistic orientation.

Gender differences in moral reasoning. Gilligan (1982) has suggested that men and women differ in the way they consider moral dilemmas. Men, Gilligan contends, are more likely to consider moral dilemmas in terms of justice and individual rights; women will consider moral conflicts within the context of “care” and relations with others. Some research contradicts the idea of sex differences in moral reasoning (Walker, 1984; Lifton, 1985). In a test of this hypothesis, on the other hand, Rothbart *et al.* (1986) found that while both approaches are used by men and women, women were more likely to use the care orientation. Other research has also supported such gender differences (Baumrind, 1986; Rothbart *et al.*, 1986). Specifically, Jones and Gaultschi (1988) found that women are more concerned with ethical issues; Betz *et al.* (1989) reported that men are more likely than women to say they would engage in unethical actions. We hypothesize that females will be more ethically oriented regarding work-related decisions while males will have a more egoistic orientation.

Religiosity. The use of religious principles appears to be an important variable in ethical decision making. A breakdown in the traditional institutional support for moral teaching (religion and family life) has been blamed by students as a cause of lying (McLoughlin,

1987). We hypothesize that students who consider religious principles in work-related decision making will be more ethically oriented than those students who do not.¹

The research procedure

Following a brief introduction regarding the research purpose, upper-division business students ($n = 142$) and introductory sociology students ($n = 102$) voluntarily participated during class time. No extra credit was given for completing the questionnaire which required approximately 25 minutes to complete.

The research instrument included the following independent variables: ethics in business orientation (amorality – 5 items, Cronbach's alpha, 0.67; moral unity – 4 items, Cronbach's alpha, 0.57), religiosity (7 items, Cronbach's alpha, 0.87), and biographical data. The four vignettes presented earlier were used to measure ethical orientation toward work-related decisions, the dependent variable.

Findings

Overall

As shown in Table I, for each vignette, a significantly larger proportion of students expressed an ethical orientation toward work-related decisions than

chose an egoistic orientation. The existence of a general ethical orientation among these students is further reinforced by two additional findings. First, for three of the four vignettes (1, 3, and 4), even among those students with an egoistic orientation, the largest proportion indicated that they would not engage in the unethical behavior described. Second, although students initially choosing an ethical orientation were given the opportunity (through an "other" category response) to insert their own basis for making the required work-related decisions, virtually all of them chose one of the three major ethical frameworks (deontological, utilitarian, virtue ethics).

Some comparative baseline data comes from a recently published study by Wood *et al.*, in which they conclude that "Egoism and individualism are deeply ingrained in the psyche of the current [American] business student population" (1988, p. 256) and that for their respondents, like most Americans, "Awareness of the possibility of any fundamental [moral] principles involved [in work-related decision making] is lacking" (Wood *et al.*, 1988, p. 253).

While Wood and his associates do not reveal the date of their data collection, it is reasonable to conclude that it was in the mid-1980s, four to five years prior to our survey. Our general finding of an ethical rather than an egoistic orientation among college students may be due to the time difference between Wood's survey and ours. That is, by the time of our survey American society, including the

TABLE I
Egoistic and ethical orientations, by vignette

	Vignette 1	Vignette 2	Vignette 3	Vignette 4
Egoistic Orientation	14%(34)	23%(56)	17%(41)	31%(75)
Would engage in unethical behavior	35%(12)	61%(34)	24%(10)	7%(5)
Would not engage in unethical behavior	65%(22)	39%(22)	76%(31)	93%(70)
Ethical Orientation	86%(210)	77%(188)	83%(203)	69%(169)
Deontological response	21%(44)	25%(47)	34%(70)	30%(51)
Utilitarian response	27%(56)	28%(53)	25%(51)	21%(36)
Virtue ethics response	47%(98)	40%(75)	36%(72)	39%(66)
Other or no answer	5%(12)	70%(13)	5%(10)	10%(16)

students we surveyed, may have actually moved somewhat into Schlesinger's predicted period of public purpose.

In light of Wood's research indicating high egoism among business majors, we wanted to continue our analysis. We did so by examining student orientation toward work related decisions in terms of several major factors thought to influence subscription to egoistic and ethical orientations.

Multivariate analysis

The data were further analyzed using discriminant analysis. The independent variables were gender, major religiosity, theory of amorality, and theory of moral unity. The dependent variable was ethical orientation (egoistic versus ethical). All four canonical discriminant functions were significant ($p < 0.03$) (Table II) and were moderately successful (62% to 69%) in predicting classification.²

The contribution of each variable to the discriminant function is represented by the pooled within-groups correlations. These correlations are interpreted relative to group centroid values. In this study, group 1 (egoistic orientation) had a negative value; group 2 (ethical orientation) had a positive value. A positive pooled within-groups correlation suggests that a large function value (i.e., ethical orientation) is associated with high scores on that particular independent variable. A negative pooled within-groups correlation suggests that small function values (i.e., egoistic orientation) are associated with high scores of that particular variable. For example, in vignette 1, high values on gender (i.e., female), religiosity, and the belief that business actions can be judged by the general ethical standards for society are related to an ethical orientation. High values on academic major (i.e., sociology) and the belief that businesses operate under different moral standards than the rest of society are related to an egoistic orientation. The pooled within-groups correlations for the other vignettes are similarly interpreted.

A reasonably clear interpretation of the contribution of each independent variable to the discriminant functions is possible in this study because the independent variables are virtually uncorrelated. Across vignettes, most correlations between inde-

pendent variables were less than 0.10. Major, however, was more highly correlated with gender ($r \leq 0.17$) across vignettes, and with amorality in business ($r \leq 0.19$) in vignettes 2, 3, and 4. This is not particularly problematic, since these r 's are still relatively low.

Univariate analyses

Univariate F-ratios for each vignette were calculated (Table 2) to determine if significant differences existed for group means on the dependent variable. In vignette 1, individuals with an egoistic orientation were more likely to be female — $F(1,232) = 4.416$; $p = 0.0367$. Marginally significant differences existed for religiosity and amorality — these individuals scored low in religiosity — $F(1,232) = 3.359$; $p = 0.0681$ — and supported the belief that businesses operate under different moral standards than the rest of society (amorality in business) — $F(1,232) = 2.737$; $p = 0.0994$.

In vignette 2, individuals with an egoistic orientation were more likely to score low in religiosity — $F(1,230) = 6.771$; $p = 0.0099$, and support the belief that businesses operate under different moral standards than society (amorality in business) — $F(1,230) = 4.394$; $p = 0.0372$, and that business actions need not be judged according to societal ethics (moral unity in business) — $F(1,230) = 6.603$; $p = 0.0108$. Marginally significant differences on major suggest a tendency for these persons to be sociology majors — $F(1,230) = 3.539$; $p = 0.0612$.

In vignette 3, those with an egoistic orientation supported the theory of amorality — $F(1,230) = 12.57$; $p = 0.0005$, were sociology majors — $F(1,230) = 6.213$; $p = 0.0134$, scored low on religiosity — $F(1,230) = 5.797$; $p = 0.0168$, were male — $F(1,230) = 5.678$; $p = 0.0180$, and did not support the theory of moral unity — $F(1,230) = 4.634$; $p = 0.0324$.

In vignette 4, individuals with an egoistic orientation supported the theory of amorality — $F(1,232) = 6.920$; $p = 0.0091$. They also tended to score low on religiosity — $F(1,232) = 3.565$; $p = 0.0602$. Marginally significant differences for gender — $F(1,232) = 2.89$; $p = 0.0905$, and major — $F(1,232) = 2.825$; $p = 0.0942$ — also indicate a trend for males and sociology majors to be more egoistically oriented.

TABLE II
Summary statistics — discriminant analysis

Vignette	Significance Level of Function	Discriminant Analysis Statistics			Pooled Within-Groups Correl.
		Prediction Rate	Univariate <i>F</i> -Ratio	<i>P</i> -Level	
Situation 1	0.0319	62%			
False positives		36%			
False negatives		38%			
Gender			4.416	0.0367*	0.5899
Religiosity			3.359	0.0681 [#]	0.5144
Amorality			2.737	0.0994 [#]	-0.4644
Major			2.058	0.1528	-0.4027
Moral unity			1.839	0.1764	0.3807
Situation 2	0.0029	65%			
False positives		29%			
False negatives		37%			
Religiosity			6.771	0.0099**	0.5971
Moral unity			6.603	0.0108**	0.5896
Amorality			4.394	0.0372*	-0.4810
Major			3.539	0.0612 [#]	-0.4317
Gender			0.193	0.6611	0.1007
Situation 3	0.0000	69%			
False positives		25%			
False negatives		32%			
Amorality			12.57	0.0005**	-0.6362
Major			6.213	0.0134**	-0.4474
Religiosity			5.797	0.0168*	0.4321
Gender			5.678	0.0180*	0.4277
Moral unity			4.634	0.0324*	0.3864
Situation 4	0.0111	62%			
False positives		32%			
False negatives		41%			
Amorality			6.920	0.0091**	-0.6684
Religiosity			3.565	0.0602*	0.4798
Gender			2.890	0.0905 [#]	0.4319
Major			2.825	0.0942 [#]	-0.4271
Moral unity			2.087	0.1499	0.3671

** $p < 0.01$

* $p < 0.05$

[#] $p < 0.10$

Discussion and conclusions

Some support for the hypotheses was found. Students supporting the theory of amorality in business had an egoistic orientation in vignettes 2, 3, and 4. This same tendency was exhibited in vignette 1, although it was not statistically significant. Students

advocating the theory of moral unity tended to choose an ethical orientation in vignettes 2 and 3. Though not statistically significant, this trend was also apparent in vignette 1. These results are consistent with our hypothesis.

Consistent gender differences in egoistic versus ethical orientation were found. Significantly more

females than males chose an ethical orientation in vignettes 1 and 3. This same trend also occurred in vignette 4.

Statistically significant differences for religiosity were found in vignettes 2 and 3. And, the trend for ethically-oriented individuals to be high on religiosity was also found in vignettes 1 and 4.

Contrary to our expectations, sociology majors were more likely to have an egoistic orientation in vignette 3. In all other vignettes, business students were no less likely to choose an ethical orientation than non-business students. This contradicts the findings by Wood and his colleagues (1988), who, on the basis of data collected in the mid-1980s, concluded that business students would engage in more questionable behaviors than their professional counterparts.

Ethics in the 1980s seemed to be out of fashion. There appeared to be no limit to the greed of many business, governmental, and religious leaders. Our sample of university students approaching the 1990s, including those majoring in business, overwhelmingly indicated an ethical (as opposed to an egoistic) orientation toward work-related decisions. It may be, as historian Arthur Schlesinger hypothesizes, that the United States is moving into an era of public purpose in which a preoccupation with self-interest is subsiding. Like Wood and his fellow researchers, we agree that "A change in . . . [the emphasis on greed and egoism] would be most welcome" (Wood *et al.*, 1988, p. 256). At the very least, our findings, along with Wood's, provide some baseline data for further research.

Notes

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¹ The following questions, each with a seven-point scale ranging from very strongly disagree to very strongly agree, were used to measure religiosity: My ideas about religion are one of the most important parts of my philosophy of life; I find that my ideas on religion have a considerable influence on my views in other areas; Believing as I do about religion is very important to being the kind of person I want to be; If my ideas about religion were different, I believe that my way of life would be very different; Religion is a subject in which I am not particularly interested; I often think about matters

relating to religion; Although one is stronger than the other, there is part of me which believes in religion and part of me which does not. These religiosity items, developed by S. Putney and R. Middleton (1961), were used with permission from the publisher.

² By default, discriminant analysis treats the prior probability of an individual having an egoistic or ethical orientation as 50/50. In the current sample, more individuals tended to have an ethical orientation. Therefore, the data were also analyzed by changing prior probabilities to reflect actual distribution in the data sample.

The prediction rates improved dramatically (to 85% in most vignettes). This increase is mainly due to 100% correct classification of individuals with an ethical orientation. However, all individuals with an egoistic orientation were also classified as "ethical". This results in a 100% error rate for classification of individuals with an egoistic orientation. A false positive prediction error such as this is potentially more problematic than a false negative prediction. In other words, it might be more troublesome to identify individuals as "ethical" when in fact they are "egoistic"; it is not as troublesome to identify individuals as "egoistic" when they are "ethical."

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