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ABSTRACT: An emphasis on business and professional ethics is increasing. Higher education has been targeted by many studies as a place where work ethics are to be taught. However, one's family environment during early childhood has been identified as the most important influence on one's moral and ethical make up. This paper argues that ethical and moral behavior is not only important for the workplace but also for personal and family life. Hence the teaching of ethical concepts should not be limited to vocational and business courses and/or to practicum or internship experiences. This education must start at early stages and should be part of all courses.

A n essential component of a clear self concept is a coherent set of ethics and values; a clear sense of what's right and wrong, what's good and bad. Ethics are needed because they act as guides for our behavior as we work our way through life often encountering confusing situations and disorienting dilemmas (Sanford & Donovan, 1984).

The word ethics itself is used to refer to a set of rules, principles, or a way of thinking that claims authority to guide the actions of a particular group. Sometimes it stands for the systematic study of reasoning about how we ought to act. Some writers use the term "morality" for the first descriptive sense and others may use the term "ethics" (Singer, 1994). Discussing ethics involves thinking hard about our values and everyday life. The pivotal moral imperative is not to do the right thing, but to be the right thing. Ethics is about integrity, honesty and compassion. We learn these values, first, foremost and often at home (Haberstram, 1993). Kant (1949) saw moral law as a law of reason, based on his own peculiar metaphysics. He saw human nature as eternally divided. On one side is our natural or physical self, trapped in the world of desires; on the other side is our intellectual or spiritual self which partakes of the world of reason from which the moral law derives. If knowing what is right did not carry with it a tendency to motivate us to do what is right, ethics would seem to have lost its point. Ethics would then be a system of conduct, rather like etiquette is for most people today.

There are many ways in which one could divide the immense amount that has been written in this area, but perhaps the most fundamental division consists of answers to two different questions. The first question is what kinds of things are ultimately good? The second question is how do we decide what actions are right (Singer, 1994)? There have been attempts to bridge the gap between those who judge right and wrong on the basis of rules, and those who pay attention only to the consequences of actions. Thus, some defenders of an ethics based on rules have acknowledged the need for exceptions when following the rules would lead to catastrophic consequences. Others are prepared to go further still, and regard rules or principles as carrying some weight, but not necessarily an overriding weight, so that consideration of the consequences of acts is always part of the process of forming an ethical judgment (Velasquez & Rostankowski, 1985).

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Three definitions are central to the issue of ethics.

- First, a moral issue is present where a person’s actions, when freely performed, may harm or benefit others. Decisions frequently have some consequences for others and volition is almost always present.

- Second, a moral agent is a person who makes a moral decision, even though he or she may not recognize that moral issues are at stake — and central to decision making is recognizing moral issues. Moral judgment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for moral behavior such as honesty, altruism, and resistance to temptation. The details of moral decision making and behavior processes become irrelevant if the person does not recognize that he or she is dealing with a moral issue.

- Third, an ethical decision is defined as a decision that is both legal and morally acceptable to the larger community. This sense of larger social contact (community) takes us to human ecology. In writing on the ecology of human development, Bronfenbrenner (1979) indicates as the “highest expression of development” the person’s capacity to re-fashions the environment to be “more compatible with his abilities, needs, and desires.”

To achieve the goal of human ecology concerned with a more humane and more rational world requires continuous attention to identify areas where human consciousness needs to be transformed since humans direct their efforts according to the conceptual patterns they hold and to which they are motivationally committed. The human ecologies point to the role of abstractions or concepts, including concepts of the right and the good, in human interaction with the environment. It is in this sense of the conceptual environment that the purpose of human ecology is considered to be more rational and more humane through changing beliefs and cultural patterns. Human ecology provides a global view for education in developing among people in every day consciousness that is capable of synthesizing knowledge of the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

### Previous Studies

According to Veit and Murphy (1992), an individual’s home environment ranks as potentially the most effective source of learning ethical behavior by a considerable margin as compared to educational programs offered by schools, religious organizations, and training programs of employing firms. An individual’s moral growth results from exposure to more advanced forms of moral reasoning. The ensuing cognitive conflicts or disequilibrium produces tension in the individual attempting to reconcile the contradiction (Kohlberg, 1969).

Opinions differ about how people learn ethical behavior. Dunfee and Robertson (1988) provide evidence in support of including ethics as part of the college curriculum. Andrews (1989) argues that colleges and schools are less effective in teaching ethics than are employing firms, because people are continuously exposed to their employers during the course of their business lives. The employing organization is a place that can make an immediate change in ethical behavior and that the greatest influence on employees is the behavior of the organization’s senior management (Belleville, 1990).

According to the reinforcement theory, individual behavior is a result of its consequences. Hence, an organization can influence the ethical behavior of its members through specific rewards and punishments (Kohlberg & Candee, 1984). It is argued that personal costs and other pressures will have an impact on individual moral behavior. For example, where the personal costs of moral behavior are high, subjects are more likely to defensively reappraise the situation. (Rest, 1984). However, as discussed earlier, implementation of this ethos must begin at the top since an organization’s top management sets the ethical tone for its employees. It is from the observation of how these individuals handle ethically-charged decisions that other members of the organization learn practical ethics. Leadership sends a message to the effect that there are no simple solutions to ethically-charged decisions and that practically every decision that is made has an ethical dimension. In such an environment, ethics becomes an object rather than a constraint.

Most organizations provide the social context within which behavior takes place. Moral atmosphere, or the collective values of an organization, serves to limit or to enhance ethical cognition (Bolig, 1978; Colby et al., 1983). Two characteristics of the work environment that may contribute to continuing adult moral development are opportunities for role taking and responsibility for the...
resolution of moral dilemmas (Colby, et al., 1983) However, it is unlikely that all adults can be moved to principled stages of moral reasoning where consistency is expected between ethical cognition and actions (Kohlberg, 1959).

Employers and professional organizations adopt a code of ethics to communicate the nature of ethos to its members at all levels. A code of ethics is a reflection and manifestation of the existing organizational culture; it is effective in guiding behavior if it is not only distributed but enforced. A code of ethics will affect behavior only if it is consistent with the organizational culture and is enforced (Trevino, 1986). Hence, it is essential to have a system of teaching and enforcing the code of conduct in place when adoption of a comprehensive code does not ensure that employees or members of a professional organization will adhere to it (Manley, 1992).

Implications

We need to talk and think more and more candidly and more intelligently about our personal morality. Morality is concerned not only with good and bad, right and wrong, virtues and vices, but also with voluntary actions, intentions, and responsibilities. Lucas (1993) believes that one must always consider the consequences of one's actions. He dismisses the idea that actions are only reactions or stimuli which would imply the doer was not responsible. Similarly, Velasquez and Rostankowski (1985) suggest consideration of the consequences of acts is always part of the process of forming an ethical judgment.

Ethical concepts are teachable topics: People continuously learn and develop moral and ethical aspects of their personality. Researchers have shown that years in school indirectly represent some psychological process, some conditions of experience, that is strongly correlated with an individual's moral stage of development (Rest & Thoma, 1985; Rest, 1986). However, it is not specific moral experiences as much as growing awareness of the social world and one's place in it that seems to foster development in moral judgment. Environmental factors, including role models and opportunity to have responsibility to make decisions, play an important role in this learning (Rest, 1986). Similar to senior management in a firm or organization, teachers of all courses, and at all levels, are role models for their students.

They create an ethical culture in class and communicate certain expectations about student behavior.

The importance of teaching ethics as a part of formal curriculum has been shown by Dunfee and Robertson (1988). Leone and Howell (1995) state that students should be provided an opportunity to solve problems, practice solutions, change their attitudes and, accordingly, the outcome. Knauf, Weber and Ross (1994) emphasize the flow of higher education in preparing students to be effective practitioners in dealing with dilemmas to be faced in the workplace. All of these studies emphasize the importance of teaching work ethics. However, an ethical and moral and responsible person is not only desirable for work place but is also desirable as a member of family, community and society. Responsible children and students are more likely to grow into responsible adults, friends, fathers, mothers, and employees. The concern about college graduates needing adequate ethical education when they enter the workplace assumes that quantity and complexity of moral dilemmas is limited only to the workplace.

Furthermore, family and consumer sciences (FCS) education is not limited to preparing students as practitioners for the workplace only. Several aspects of FCS programs focus on child development, family studies and human development. Ethics education must be incorporated in all courses and early on (middle and high school), because ethics guides children's behavior as they encounter confusing situations and disorienting dilemmas, both personal and financial.

Teaching of ethics should not be reserved for business courses, professional ethics, or vocational education courses. Topics related to ethical dilemmas and moral responsibility should also be, for example, part of laboratory schools programs where young children learn to interact with others, their role and responsibility as a member of a group. Similarly there should be an emphasis on ethics in family studies classes where the individual and family are the focus.

Knauf, Weber and Ross (1994) recommend that educators incorporate case studies of ethical dilemmas in small group discussions to challenge students to become ethically mature. Because dilemmas often do not have clearly defined solutions, they suggest that students must justify their solutions. The question is, "If the concepts are not taught very early on, on what basis will these adult students justify their solutions?" when authors, themselves, conclude that "most individuals have a less than adequate ethical education when they enter the workforce."

Elsewhere in this paper it was argued that the family is the most important source of learning ethical and moral principles. But some studies have shown that formal education also plays an important role in teaching these principles. Educators must reaffirm the importance of basic values such as responsibility, honesty, promise keeping, free expression, and nonviolence, for these are not only principles essential to civilized society, they are values on which all learning and discovery ultimately depend. Regardless of the content of the course, or area of specialization, educators at all levels can evaluate the culture of their
own classroom. Are students expected to behave in a responsible fashion? Is it emphasized that ignorance and abdication of responsibility is not accepted behavior? A high level of a responsible behavior regarding class attendance, completion of assignments can become a part of course requirement. Students are expected, encouraged and rewarded for their professional and responsible behavior. And, of course, when requiring students to comply, the instructor would have to model a highly responsible and ethical behavior as well.

In addition, educators may review the content of their own courses to evaluate how topics and reading assignments on ethics can be incorporated into their course content. Case studies involving role plays and discussion of scenarios with ethical dilemmas may be used to help students recognize the importance of basic values and find answers to questions regarding what kinds of things are ultimately good and how to decide what actions are right. But these scenarios and case studies must include ethical and moral dilemmas for both the personal and professional aspects of one's life. Life skills courses even at elementary or middle school levels are an equally appropriate place to teach ethical concepts as is a practicum course for graduating seniors at college level.

As educators, we must recognize it is the ability to reason that is essential to help our students make their way through all the confusing dilemmas and conflicting arguments that abound in the complexities of modern life. As Montaigne stated, “Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately” (Bok, 1988, p. 50).

References


