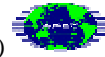


**THE ROLE OF ETHICAL DECISION MAKING STYLES IN  
JUDGMENTS OF ETHICAL O. D. CONSULTING BEHAVIOR**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study demonstrates that individuals classified in accordance, with Forsyth's (1980) four ethical decision making styles differentially evaluate the ethicality of fifteen of fifteen types of O.D. interactions. The differences between each of the four groups are shown to be related to two types of client-consultant interactions: (1) withholding of information and resources and (2) willful misrepresentation, manipulation and misuse of data. The findings shed light on an issue not previously addressed in the O.D. literature, yet considered critically important to the success of O.D. intervention efforts. Implications of the results of the results for the training of new O.D. practitioners and for resolution of client-consultant conflicts are discussed.

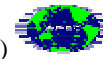


To what extent can ethical judgements of organizational development consulting behavior be explained by individual differences in ethical decision making styles? Unfortunately, the answer is not available in the existing Organization Development (O.D.) literature. O.D. scholars have contributed case studies and narrative descriptions of interactions leading to ethical dilemmas (e.g., French and Bell, 1984; Huse, 1980; Lippit and Lippit, 1978; Maidment and Losito, 1980; Miles, 1979; Pfeiffer and Jones, 1977; Shay, 1965; Walton and Warwick, 1973; Warwick and Kelman, 1973; Zaltman and Duncan, 1976). Further, they have produced empirical results indicating that ethicality rating depend upon the nature of the client-consultant interaction being evaluated (Rhodeback, Lai and White, 1990) and have shown that these ratings are culturally dependent (White and Rhodeback, 1992).

Whereas scholarly case studies and narrative descriptions facilitate a preliminary understanding of the ethical dilemmas confronting the change agent and client system, Rhodeback, et. al. (1990) and White and Rhodeback (1992) have demonstrated empirically that those outside the field can recognize and evaluate the ethicality of client-consultant interactions. Moreover, these studies have isolated two sources of judgements of variation: the nature of the behaviors being judged and the cultural membership of the rater. Extant cultural differences do suggest, among other possibilities, that variations in judgements of ethical behavior may be related to differences in ethical decision making styles; however, White and Rhodeback did not address why, within respective cultures, ethical judgments vary.

The conspicuous absence of attempts to empirically elaborate on the role of individual differences in judgements of ethical O.D. consulting behavior is critical for two reasons. First, a successful intervention effort involves a reciprocal relationship between the change agent and various members of a client system (White and Wooten, 1983). This indicates that at least two individuals will bring their respective, and potentially different, ethical decision making styles to the consulting table. Knowing how these styles differ should enhance the client and consultant's ability to recognize in themselves and each other, an antecedent condition for role conflict. Secondly, if two or more parties do exhibit different ethical decision making styles, and conflicts do emerge, an understanding of these stylistic differences may facilitate constructive approaches to conflict resolution congruent with each individual's ethical value system.

Fortunately, scholars outside the O.D. field have conducted extensive research relevant to an understanding of individual differences in ethical judgements, including Hogan (1970,1973); Kelman and Lawrence (1972); Kohlberg (1968, 1976); Rest, Cooper, Coder, Masanz and Anderson (1974) and Schlenker and Forsyth (1977). Perhaps the most parsimonious of these explanations has been proffered by Schlenker and Forsyth. They suggest that there are two important dimensions underlying these differences: (1) the extent to which the individual accepts or rejects universal moral rules when making judgements and (2) the extent to which the individual believe that desirable consequences are always achieved with the right action. The first dimension has been labeled "Relativism" and the second, "Idealism". Forsyth (1981, 1984) has demonstrated that crossing the Relativism and Idealism dimensions yields an elegant four-group typology which can be used to describe differences in ethical decision making styles. Forsyth



characterizes these four groups as Situationists, Absolutists, Subjectivists and Exceptionists. A brief description of these different decision making is provided below:

### **Situationists**

According to Forsyth (1980), Situationists are individuals who are highly Idealistic and highly Relativistic. These individuals reject moral absolutes when making ethical judgments and believe that desirable consequences always follow the right action. When evaluating the ethicality of a situation these individuals will carefully consider whether or not the right actions were taken. “Rightness” is purportedly based on an individual analysis of each situation’s consequences.

### **Absolutists**

Forsyth notes that Absolutists are similar to Situations in that both are highly Idealistic, i.e. both believe that describe consequences always follow the right action; however, unlike Situationists the Absolutists endorse the application of universal moral rules. Absolutists reject the Relativistic approach to ethical decision making exhibited by the Situationists. No exceptions are allowed to moral “truths.” Good is good and bad is bad.

### **Subjectivists**

Forsyth notes that subjectivists are similar to Situationists in that both are highly Relativistic. Like the Situationists, Subjectivists reject universal moral rules. However, unlike both the Situationists and Absolutists, Subjectivists are not high Idealists. They recognize that both good and bad consequences come from ethical decisions. As such the Subjectivist’s ethical decision making style reflects an emphasis on their individual values and perspectives rather than adherence to universal moral principles. According to Forsyth, these individuals are highly pragmatic. Judgments are not made out of concern for the extent to which they may harm others or whether or not the actions fit the context; instead, Subjectivists believe that every individual should make ethical decisions in keeping with one’s own perspective.

### **Exceptionists**

Exceptionists are described by Forsyth as utilitarian and pragmatic. They are neither highly Idealistic nor highly Relativistic. This group is said to evaluate the ethicality of a situation by determining whether or not the actions taken produce the greatest good for the greatest number. Potential benefits of an action are weighted against the potential costs when making judgment of ethical behavior. While they may invoke moral rules, they are just as likely to exclude these rules when and if the greatest numbers of people could benefit.

Considered collectively, Forsyth refers to these different ethical decision making styles as “Ethical Ideologies”. These different ideologies have been shown to be related to differences moral judgments of social science research (Forsyth and Pope, 1984), but have not been examined in the context of ethical judgments relevant to organizational



development practice. If it can be assumed that Forsyth's results are generalizable, then one may expect that individuals using these different ethical decision making styles will differentially evaluate the ethicality of organizational development consulting interactions.

Hypothesis: Ethicality ratings of O.D. consulting behaviors will differ according to the individual's ethical ideology.

Given evidence to support the preceding hypothesis, the remainder of the study was intended to focus on describing and interpreting the differences among the four groups.

Previous research has suggested that different consulting interactions elicit different judgments of ethicality (Rhodeback, et. al., 1990; White and Rhodeback, 1992); therefore, it was anticipated that more than one linear combination of situations subject to ethical judgments would be needed to characterize group differences. Given this expectation, the following exploratory research questions were posed:

1. How many of three possible functions are useful in describing the nature of the group differences?
2. In the event that multiple functions can be used to describe these group differences:
  - a. In what ways do the groups resemble one another and in what ways do the groups differ?
  - b. Which consulting interactions define these functions?

Whereas, the first research question was intended to determine if groups might differ in more than one way, the second set of questions was intended to illustrate the meaning of those differences.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Three hundred and twenty two (332) graduate business students enrolled in evening business courses at three universities completed two questionnaires, the White and Rhodeback Survey of Ethical Behavior in Organizational Development Consulting (White and Rhodeback, 1987) and Forsyth's (1978, 1980) Ethical Position Questionnaire. The age of the respondents ranged from 20 to 63, with a median age of 27. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of the respondents were male, thirty eight percent (38%) were female. The remaining subjects did not respond to this item. Most of the students (91%) were employed as managers, professionals or administrators. The remaining were full time students.

### **Measures**

The Survey of Ethical Behavior in Organizational Development Consulting



(Rhodeback and White, 1987) was created by sampling from the domain of change agent and client behaviors which may lead to role conflict or ambiguity and subsequently, may produce ethical dilemmas (White and Wooten, 1986). The instrument is composed of 38 items which were combined to form fifteen scales. Each scale reflects client-consultant interactions described by organizational development scholars and practitioners as behaviors leading to ethical dilemmas (Gellerman, Frankel, and Ladenson, 1990; Macy and Izumi, 1993). The fifteen scales were created by forming composites of items designed to measure the same types of interactions. Individual item scores were derived from respondent assessments of each situation's ethicality using a five point Likert-type scale ranging from Very Ethical (5) to Very Unethical (1).

The Ethical Position Questionnaire Forsyth's (1978, 1980) methodology was used to identify each individual's ethical decision making style. Scale scores obtained from Forsyth's Ethical Position Questionnaire, were used to classify individuals as Situationists, Subjectivists, Absolutists or Exceptionists. In keeping with Forsyth's methodology, individuals were assigned to these classes based in the relative magnitude of each individual's score on two scales, Relativism and Idealism. Each of these scales is composed of ten items with each item eliciting a response of Agree-Disagree on a nine point continuum.

## RESULTS

### Test of the hypothesis: ethical ratings depend upon ethical decision making style.

A four group multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was employed to test the global hypothesis that groups comprising the four ethical ideologies differ in their ethicality ratings of the fifteen consulting interactions. Group means and standard deviations for the fifteen scales are reported in table 1.

### TABLE 1

The results of the global test revealed that at least two of the groups differed in their ethicality ratings ( $F=2.37$ ,  $df=45,894$ ;  $p < .001$ ). pair-wise multivariate analyses of variance were employed to determine which of the four groups differed on the jointly considered scales. The experiment wise error rate was controlled by testing each at .034, in keeping with a Bonferroni approach. The results revealed that each group's ethicality ratings differed from every other group including: Subjectivists and Absolutists ( $F=3.04$ ,  $df=15,140$ ); Subjectivists and Situationists ( $F=2.99$ ,  $df=15,138$ ); Exceptionists and Situationists ( $F=2.77$ ,  $df=15,142$ ); Exceptionists and Absolutists ( $F=2.58$ ,  $df=15,144$ ); Exceptionists and Subjectivists ( $F=1.91$ ,  $df=15,142$ ); and Situationists and Absolutists ( $F=1.91$ ,  $df=15,140$ ). The results indicate that Subjectivists, Exceptionists and Absolutists to differ in their judgment of ethical consulting behavior.

### **Research question 1: the number of functions.**

A multiple discriminant function analysis (MDA) was employed to interpret groups differences in the ratings of the fifteen scales. Since the MANOVA results were statistically significant it was known that the first of the three possible functions would



significantly separate the four groups. Successive tests of the remaining functions, with the receding function removed from consideration, indicated that the second function was significantly separating the groups (Wilk's  $\lambda = .847$ ,  $X^2 = 150.07$ , 28df,  $p < .01$ ), but the third function was not (Wilk's  $\lambda = .93$ ,  $X^2 = 219.86$ , 13df,  $p = .09$ ). a canonical correlation of .40 was obtained for the first function and .31 for the second function. This indicates that the proportion of total variability explained by differences between ethical ideologies is 25%. The percentage of the total, explainable variance attributable to each function is 53% and 29% for the first and second functions, respectively. This indicates that the first function is more closely aligned with group differences in ethical judgments than the second function.

### **Research question2a: Group resemblance and differences.**

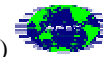
Figure 1 presents a graph of the group centroids for the two significant functions. The horizontal axis corresponds to the first discriminant function. The horizontal space between each group indicates how much the groups are distinguished from one another on this function. This first discriminant function separates the Low idealists (Exceptionists and Subjectivists) from the High Idealists (Absolutists and Situationists). Exceptionists and Subjectivists appear on the far right side of the graph, with the Absolutists and Situationists appearing on the far left side.

#### **FIGURE 1**

The graph indicates that individuals believing the right consequences will always follow the fight actions (Absolutists and Situationists) are more similar in their judgments of ethical organizational development consulting behaviors than those who recognize that good or bad consequences can occur (Exceptionists and Subjectivists). Further, those who recognize that good or bad consequences can occur from an otherwise ethical decision tended to rate consulting interactions as more ethical (Subjectivists and Exceptionists) than those who idealistically maintain that good outcomes are always a function of correct actions (Absolutists and Situationists).

The vertical dimension corresponds to the second discriminant function and illustrates which groups are distinguished in a way unrelated to the way they are separated on the first function. Whereas the first function clearly separated the High and Low Idealists, the second function is less effective in separating the High and Low Relativists. Exceptionists (Low Relativism) are clearly distinguishable from the Subjectivists and Situationists (Both High relativism) on this function; however, there is a greater resemblance between Absolutists (Low Relativists) and Situationists (High Relativism) than exists between the Absolutists and Exceptionists (both Low Relativism), or Subjectivists and Situationists (both High Relativism). This function most effectively separates the Exceptionists from the Subjectivists.

The graph makes clear the correspondence between ethical ideology and ethicality rating of OD. consultant and client behaviors. Despite the existence of significant multivariate differences between all groups, the Absolutists and Situationists closely resemble one another on the second function. The Exceptionists and Subjectivists, while



similar on the first function are clearly distinct on the second function. By contrast, the Absolutists and Situationists are more distinguishable on the first function. This suggests that the extent to which differential judgments are discernible is dependent upon the nature of the judgments being considered. In this case, two linear functions were required to distinguish the groups.

### **Research question 2b: The variables defining the functions.**

Table 2 presents the discriminant function-ethics scale correlations, rank ordered within each of the two significant functions. As the Table indicates, all fifteen of the ethics scales exceed a .20 function correlation, meeting a criterion typically used to determine if a variable is contributing to a linear function composed of several variables. In effect, all of scales contribute to at least one of the two functions. Nine of the ethics scales were used to interpret the first function, with the remaining six used to interpret the second function.

**TABLE 2**

#### **Function 1. Subjectivists and exceptionists distinguished from absolutists and situationists**

The scale with the highest function correlation is Scale 2: The consultant prevents the client from participating in intervention decisions. The relative magnitude of this correlation indicates that this is the largest contributor to the separation of Absolutists and Situationists from the Exceptionist and Subjectivists. That is, Absolutists and Situationists viewed this behavior on the part of the consultant very differently than did the Exceptionists and Subjectivists.

As indicated in Table 1, both the Subjectivists and Exceptionists provided more favorable ethicality ratings than the other groups. This suggests that both are more accepting of client exclusion than their High Idealist counterparts. Perhaps it is the Subjectivist's pragmatic perspective influencing their more favorable judgment of client exclusion than the judgments made by the Absolutists and the Situationists. They may believe that the consultant, as the expert, is exercising an individual value judgment which can only be made by an expert. The Exceptionists may be weighing the costs and benefits of exclusion, rather than attending to the goodness or badness of the action, as the Absolutists would; or its fit within the context of the situation, as the Situationists might.

The second, third, fourth and fifth largest correlations with the first function are contributing about equally to group differences, but less so than scale 2. This is indicated by a range in the scale-function correlations of .39 to .47. Three of the four scales are indicative of information or resource withholding (Scales 1, 13, and 10). The fourth scale involves the consultant's use of ingratiating behavior to improve status with the client. The results suggest that the Subjectivists and Exceptionists, as compared to Situationists and Absolutists, place differential ethical emphasis on the open exchange of information between the client and the consultant.

As indicated in Table 1, the Subjectivists and Exceptionists tended to provide more





favorable ethicality ratings than the other groups on these scales, indicating that withholding of information or resources at the expense of another party is generally viewed more favorably by pragmatic decision makers than idealistic decision makers. Further, the Subjectivists and Exceptionists tended to view ingratiating behavior more favorably than the other two groups, indicating that the pragmatic orientation of these groups identify them as less critical in their ethical judgments than the Absolutists or Situationists.

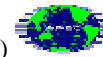
Four other scales provided modest contributions to the first function, as indicated by scale-function correlations ranging from .23 to .33. Three of the scales were designed to measure different facets of willful misrepresentation and misuse of information (scale 7,8 and 11). The fourth scale is another form of information manipulation, i.e., consultant failure to reveal errors made during the consulting engagement.

Considered collectively, the scales contributing the most to group separation on this first function are those indicative of failure to endorse an equal partnership in the client-consultant relationship, i.e., exclusion of the client from decisions effecting the consulting engagement, information and resource withholding. These situations have stronger function correlation than those scales depicting willful misrepresentation and misuse of data. This suggests that the separation of High Idealists from Low Idealists from Low Idealists may be attributed principally to their judgmental differences with respect to these types of interactions. More favorable judgments came from those pragmatic individuals who assess the costs versus the benefits of an action and from those who assume that any behavior is ethical, as long as it is congruent with one's personal philosophy. Less favorable ratings came from those who strictly apply universal moral rules when making ethical judgments and from those who evaluate the "fit" between the context and the action.

## **Function 2. exceptionists distinguished from subjectivists, absolutists and situationists**

Six scales define this function and distinguish the Exceptionists from the other groups. The scale with the highest function correlation is Scale 6, Management uses consultant-derived data in ways incongruent with the original intent. On this scale, the differences between the Subjectivists and Exceptionists are clear. Table 1 indicates that the Subjectivists provided a more favorable ethical judgment than the remaining groups whose mean ratings are very similar. Scale 6 is not, however, indicative of the general tendency for those situations defining this function.

Five of the six scales defining Function 2 contribute about equally to group separation, as indicated by function-variable correlations ranging from the Subjectivists (Scale 3,4 and 9). Further, the Exceptionists provided more favorable ratings on four of the scales when compared to the average of the remaining three groups. This is the reason the Exceptionist centroid, reported in Figure 1, is positive, while the remaining groups have negative centroids. The scales defining this second function include those indicative of manipulation/coercion (Scale 3 and 5), willful and deliberate information misrepresentation or misuse of data (scale 6,9 and 14) and withholding of services (scale 4).



Overall, the results suggest that individual differences in the judgments of what constitutes ethical organizational development consulting can be expected to vary according to ethical decision making styles. All four groups differed from one another when fifteen organizational development interactions were treated as jointly dependent. Nevertheless, the nature and extent of differences in judgments of O.D. interactions were not the same across all four groups as indicated by the existence of two significant discriminant functions. The placement of the groups in the discriminant planes suggests that while differences exist, some groups are more distinguishable from one another than others. These results suggest that it is naïve to ask which group will provide more lenient or harsh judgments of ethical organizational development consulting behaviors. A more sophisticated question would be: in what ways do individuals using different ethical styles similarly and differentially judge ethical behaviors?

These findings suggest that the pragmatic Exceptionists and Subjectivists similarly evaluate situations involving information and resource withholding, provide more favorable ethical judgments of these actions than those who are highly idealistic. However, they are polar opposites when evaluating instances of manipulation and willful misuse of data, with Exceptionists providing, in general, more favorable ethical ratings. Ethical judgments made by the idealistic Absolutists and Situations differ more when they are evaluating acts that involve information withholding than they do when evaluating deliberate manipulation or information misuse. Regardless of the type of situation they are judging, their ethical evaluations are decidedly harsher than the Exceptionists, and certainly harsher than Subjectivists in their evaluations of information and resource withholding.

These results suggest that decision making styles influence both the extent to which an action is regarded as ethical or unethical, and the nature of the issue viewed as ethical or unethical. Such findings have important implications for O.D. scholars and practitioners.

## **DISCUSSION**

White and Wooten (1984, 1986) have suggested that ethical dilemmas in organizational development consulting emerge from unresolved role ambiguity and conflict between the client and consultant. They have proffered a model suggesting that this ambiguity and conflict emerge if antecedent conditions are left unresolved. They have described these antecedent conditions as differences in change agent and client values, goals, resources, skills and abilities. The findings present here provide further elaboration of these antecedent conditions by illustrating that what is perceived as ethical or unethical is subject to the individual's decision making style and the type of interaction being judged. The results imply the possibility that clients and consultants relying on different ethical decision making styles may not even be aware that they have engaged in behaviors viewed as ethical violations by others. As such, ethical making style is an antecedent condition to the recognition of an emergent ethical dilemma not previously identified in the White and Wooten model, or for that matter, in the Organizational Development literature.



The information from this study having implication for trainers and educators, sheds light on which specific dilemmas create difficulties for a given 'ethical ideology'. By supplying awareness education as to the differential effects of a given dilemma (Rhodeback, Lai, and White, 1990; White and Rhodeback, 1992) relative to a given 'ethical ideology' (Forsyth, 1981, 1984) change agents and client systems will be better prepared to deal with the dynamic properties of an O.D. intervention. For example, training scenarios can be prepared illustrating specific dilemmas while correspondingly training practitioners as to the reaction propensities of each of the four categories of ethical ideologies. This would enable the change agent and client system to recognize the dilemma and the behavior of the role sender and the role receiver as a function of 'ethical ideology'.

For experienced practitioners as well as those organizations employing O. D. consultants, the findings provide a tool for understanding one's own and other's ethical decision making styles. While stylistic differences suggests the possibility of unresolvable impasses, knowledge of stylistic differences also provides a framework of departure for discussing ways to resolve conflict congruent with each individual's ethical value system. Thus boundarying the range of offensive behaviors either the change or client system have engaged in.

The results provide an incremental step in achieving a better understanding of individual variations in ethical judgements of O. D. consulting. Nevertheless, perceptions are not behaviors. Additional research is needed to determine the nature and extent to which ethical decision making styles are related to client-consultant engagement in the types of behaviors evaluated in this study. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to learn if, and in what ways, individuals with different ethical decision making styles also differ in their approaches to the resolution of ethical dilemmas in the O. D. arena. More modest requirements also exist. For example, replication of this study would be very useful given the need to cross validate the discriminant model. Further, the issue of cultural influences when dealing with the ethics of O. D. consulting behaviors needs to be investigated (Law, 1996). The subject to variable ratio of 20:1 implies that the results should be stable; nevertheless, replication would be particularly useful in ensuring that the weaker of the two functions reported was not an artifact of capitalizing on chance.



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