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2. Title of presentation

Using a Grounded Theory Approach to Explore Moral Imagination with Leadership Students

3. Presentation track

Research

4. 50-word description

Moral imagination is described as the ability to challenge operative mental models in order to discover new ways of framing ethical problems and providing resolutions. This presentation will present findings from a qualitative research project exploring moral imagination with students enrolled in a graduate level organizational leadership program.

5. We decline the poster session in the event the proposal is not accepted

6. Biographical profile of the presenter(s)

Barbra K. Enlow, M.A.

Barbra Enlow, a Partner/Owner of Kleimann Communication Group (KCG), has over 10 years experience working with government organizations to improve the way they work and communicate. She specializes in linking communication process and information design to organizational development strategies. Her work focuses on one primary goal: simplifying the complex nature of government information. To do this, she has developed comprehensive training curricula and has directed large-scale, national usability projects. She has also developed a collaborative work-group model to allow the Internal Revenue Service to create clear, award-winning notices. Ms. Enlow has a Masters in Organizational Leadership from Gonzaga University and is currently a doctoral candidate in Leadership Studies at Gonzaga.

Adrian B. Popa, Ph.D., M.P.A.

Dr. Adrian B. Popa joined the Department of Organizational Leadership at Gonzaga University as an assistant professor. Dr. Popa received his Ph.D. and a Master of Public Administration from University of Utah, where he also worked as a research analyst involved in grassroots community leadership development, international student exchange programs, program

evaluation, teaching, and consulting with state and federal public agencies. His research interests and specializations center on leadership in public organizations, efficacious methods of online education, and leadership ethics. Dr. Popa is also Principal Investigator on several research projects that focus on moral imagination, online leadership education, and leadership in film. He currently teaches Organizational Research and Organizational Ethics at Gonzaga University.

7. Paper for ALE Conference Proceedings

Introduction

Moral imagination is described as the ability to challenge operative mental models in order to discover new ways of framing ethical problems and providing resolutions (Werhane, 1999). This presentation provides qualitative results from a qualitative longitudinal study of moral imagination with students enrolled in a graduate leadership program. The course curriculum is grounded in the construct of moral imagination with the objective of cultivating moral imagination in leadership students. This qualitative study gathered 100 narrative responses from students as part of their course reflections. Narrative questions explored various facets of moral imagination that pertain to consciousness of moral identity, ways of knowing and identifying creative solutions, and balancing personal and organizational obligations. Qualitative content analysis revealed three emerging factors that contribute to moral imagination: Value of personal understanding; Ethical decision making as a social process; and Negotiation of the Personal-social link. Results indicate that the course is contributing to their increased awareness of ethical dimension in organizations, understanding of how ethical decisions are made, and creativity of developing ethically viable solutions. Participants in this research session will learn not only about study findings but also about future implications of leadership ethics curriculum.

Literature Review

Though moral imagination is not a new philosophical concept, it has been the subject of renewed scholarly interest as philosophers and organizational theorists alike have looked at moral imagination in leaders. Werhane's (1999) groundbreaking research on moral imagination explored why ordinarily decent managers and or reputable companies get in [ethical] trouble and why they occasionally repeat past mistakes. Werhane found that some of the rationale is rooted in the fact that individuals form narrow mental models in how they view the world. These models are usually unconscious and implicit; both individuals and organizations make poor decisions by not consciously identifying the limitations of existing mental models. Moral imagination, on the other hand, is the ability to challenge mental models in order to reframe ethical problems and discover new solutions. It is the capacity to imagine something new that diverges from existing ways of thinking and operating.

Moral imagination as an ethical decision-making construct provides a compelling foundation for the ethical training required for leaders. Typically, ethical training has focused on teaching a range of moral theories such as utilitarian, rule based, rights approach, and social contract theory. Knowledge of these theories, however, does not ensure ethical action. Solberg, Strong, and McGuire (1995) explain the need for new ethical training that moves beyond simply being exposed to various ethical theories: "[training] must provide a rigorous and well-developed system in which students can 'live ethics' instead of merely learn ethics. A system must be devised to allow students to discover and refine their own values rather than simply learning

ethical theories from an intellectual point of view” (p. 71). Training in moral imagination allows students to go beyond applying moral theories and, instead, focus on the both the limitations in their own thinking *and* the capacity for imagining new solutions when encountering ethical problems.

An organizational ethics course was designed with the primary goal and purpose of fostering moral imagination. The course is divided into four phases that focus on specific competencies tied to varying dimensions of moral imagination. The course begins by challenging students to explore and identify their worldview and work towards developing an appreciation for diverse worldviews. Students have the opportunity to explore their lifespan development and identify how situations, circumstances, culture, family, and other influential milestones that contributed to their construction of a worldview. Students learn skills to identify their responses to ethical problems. The course is designed to help students monitor their growth and progress in transitioning from expressive responses to responses grounded in deductive reasoning, critical thinking and logic that lead to creative and viable solutions. A goal of this course is to achieve a balance in philosophical thought, introspection, and contemplation to help students organize their future responses to ethical problems. In addition, students learn to focus on the values of constituents to appreciate their diversity, and learn to balance personal virtues with values of constituents.

In the second phase of the course, emphasis is placed on methods to develop the competency of identifying personal values and virtues that inform leadership and conduct within the organizational setting. Module video clips present content of how life experiences impacted the worldviews of C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud. Discussions allow opportunity for self-reflection and clarification of wavering and/or constant worldviews. Course readings complement dialogue and charter a path for self-reflection. Emphasis is placed on gaining competency to balance personal virtues with values of constituents and allow that symbiotic relationship to inform leadership practice. Video clips describing life events that impacted Lewis and Freud serve as a case study example for students to introspectively reflect and discuss events that have confirmed or changed their worldview.

The third phase of the course challenges students to reflect on and consider the construct of community as a new metaphor for the organizational setting. Students gain the capacity to identify how personal worldviews impact or dictate professional relationships, recognize development of personal attitudes and behaviors, identify the impact of personal views on forgiveness and reconciliation, and develop strategies that contribute to a sense of community in organizations. Video clips provide a background for discussions relating to the role of worldviews in decision making. Course readings introduce students to methods and practices of cultivating shared values and to strategies of maintaining community cohesiveness.

In the final phase of the class energy is devoted to opportunities for students to reflect on morality in the organizational setting and to practice techniques for solving ethical dilemmas. Students learn to identify the presence and role of morality in the organizational setting and recognize how pluralism impacts interpretation of organizational ethics. Students develop a strategy to solve ethical problems and recommend a course of action. Module video clips encourage dialogue about the significance of morality and ethical standards in organizations and the impact of worldviews on interpreting ethical problems. Lastly, course readings in the latter part of the course introduce Coopers (1998) ethical decision-making model to equip students with techniques for identifying and resolving ethical dilemmas.

Theoretical Assumptions and Hypothesis

An organizational ethics course that engages students in studying and analyzing two juxtaposing worldviews may contribute to awareness of their own personal worldview, appreciation for other worldviews, creating a sense of community as a metaphor for organizations, and collaboration with others to create morally viable solutions to ethical dilemmas. The lives of Lewis and Freud as presented by Nicholi (...) serve as two juxtaposing worldviews that not only provide a platform for openly identifying with and discussing varying worldviews but also models for understanding how moral living is constructed by various events experienced throughout life. The lives of Lewis and Freud are not presented as mere models for adaptation rather as timeless worldviews to identify with in discussing difficult moral choices experienced in organizational settings. Students learn about life events, relationships and other psychosocial factors that contributed to moral reasoning and cognitive development in both Lewis and Freud.

The assumption that leadership students can learn organizational ethics by studying other worldviews is grounded in the theoretical foundation of social learning or modeling theory (Bandura, 1977) that emphasizes the importance of the relationship between the observer (student) and the model (e.g., C.S. Lewis or Sigmund Freud) in developing certain imitative behaviors. In addition to learning moral behavior through observation of others, the course is also grounded in a theoretical assumption that graduate students experience variant stage of moral reasoning based on opportunities to develop and challenge cognitive schemas constructed throughout life that lead to narratives and our sense of morality in the world (Kohlberg, 1981)

Given these theoretical assumptions and context of moral development, both social and cognitive learning theories have various implications for organizational leaders. Trevino, Hartman, and Brown (2000) found that being perceived as an ethical leader contributes to organizational practices and ethical principles that guide the behavior of employees. In addition to this social learning implication, Kouzes and Posner (2002) found that sharing personal values and moral dimensions with constituents contributes to both credibility and increased moral reasoning capacity of followers. Both social and cognitive learning theory contribute to the design of course curriculum that contributes to competencies of challenging operative mental models in order to discover and apply new ways of framing and creatively thinking and making decision. Werhane (1999) describes the moral imaginative process as an “ability to envision and evaluate new mental models that create new possibilities, and the capability to reframe the dilemmas and create new solutions in ways that are novel, economically viable, and morally justifiable” (p.93).

Purpose of Study

It is pertinent to explore and study the role of ethics and moral imagination in leadership as evidence indicates that morality of leaders influence how we form decision, responses to colleagues, and commitments to personal and organizational goals (Ciulla, 1995; Trevino et al., 2000; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Organizational values promoted by ethical leadership serve as a credible compass to inform decision-making and empower employees as they encounter ethical decisions. Developing moral imagination expands understanding of self, others, institutions and organizational culture. Being imaginative enlarges the capacity to challenge mental models in order to reframe ethical problems as a means for discovering new solutions. Overall, the

imaginative process leads to innovative ways of thinking that steers students away from existing and habitual ways of thinking and operating. Our purpose in this study was twofold: (a) to evaluate whether the use of social and cognitive theoretical assumptions in teaching organizational ethics impacted moral imagination of leadership students, and (b) to develop a greater understanding of moral imagination. Given what is known about moral imagination, we hypothesized that students would become more aware of their worldviews and dominant cognitive operating models, but wanted to explore through open-ended narratives their active role in scaffolding and applying the moral imaginative process in organizational settings. The overarching goal was to test theoretical assumption of moral imagination as well as attempt to contribute and perhaps discover exclusive factors that further refine understanding of moral imagination.

Methodology

Design

A qualitative research method was used to examine the perceived impact of ethics curriculum on moral imagination and the utility of moral imagination. A grounded theory (Straus & Corbin, 1998) approach is the underpinning paradigm and appropriate method for studying and contributing to theoretical understanding of moral imagination. The focus in the grounded theory approach is placed on the process of integrating interactions of various variables related to a construct in order to contribute to a theory about that process.

Participants and Instrumentation

Secondary data from graduate organizational ethics courses was used. A purposive sample of 4 ethics courses provided 60 narrative reflections to summative questions. Four open ended questions focused on theoretical content related to moral imagination. Using secondary data analysis fits the purpose of our study given the iterative nature of grounded theory, goals of the study, and theoretical objectives of the ethics curriculum that are grounded in moral imagination. Although the four ethics courses were taught by different instructors, design and curriculum content was identical across all courses. The sample represented a heterogeneous group of graduate students enrolled in a leadership and communications programs. Graduate students in these two programs are middle age adults, mid-career, and represent a wide range of positions and industries.

Narrative questions were integrated in a blackboard discussion thread at the end of the course as a final process for reflection and mutual interaction. The goal of these summative reflections was to provide an opportunity for students to reflect on competencies gained throughout the course that contribute to moral imagination. Questions were informed by early theoretical writings on moral imagination by Werhane (1999) and Yurtsever's moral imagination scale (2006). Questions focused on consciousness of ethical identity, decision making, balancing personal and organizational values, and self-sufficiency in making ethical decisions (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Narrative Questions

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- Briefly explain whether you have become more fully conscious of personal values and personal identity

- How is awareness contributing to your responses and ethical decision making in the organizational setting
- How do you ensure that you have made a good ethical decision while balancing personal and organizational values
- How have you become more aware, self-sufficient, and more willing to act from personal values in support of organizational vitality, progression, or change

Procedures and Analysis

As noted above, this study employed an inductive methodology, grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), to analyze narrative responses. Grounded theory involves comparative analysis of data as well as continuous gathering additional data through iterative rounds of data collection and analysis. The purpose of such an iterative approach is to allow for ongoing data analysis, comparison, and triangulation. As data were compared and analyzed, themes emerge and are used to construct theory concerning the phenomenon in question; “In discovering theory, one generates conceptual categories or their properties from evidence, then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 23). The overall goal of the chosen methodology is to clarify emerging theoretical relationships and meaningful themes within the data (Abrahamson, 1983).

The study used three levels of coding as outlined by Strauss & Corbin (1998): 1) Open coding; 2) Axial coding; 3) Selective coding. Data sets were open coded at the conclusion of each course. Two raters coded responses independently using memos to denote impressions, thoughts, and self-instructions for inquiry (p. 223). As raters came together to compare and discuss findings, the data was translated into more coherent and comprehensive analytical narrative. The codes are, thus, woven together into an integrated whole representing the theory which has emerged through the process of data collection and analysis (pp. 240-241).

Results

Qualitative content analysis revealed the following three major themes:

- Value of personal understanding in approaching ethical decision making.
- Ethical decision making as a reflection of social process.
- Negotiating the personal-social link in ethical decision making.

Value of personal understanding in approaching ethical decision making.

Overall the course elicited a strong examination of roots, values, and identity. By analyzing their own worldviews as well as reflecting on the lives of Lewis and Freud, students began to see the way that personal development informs personal values and ethical approaches. Their narrative responses reflected our theoretical assumption that moral living is constructed by various events experienced throughout life.

I have come to understand myself better in that I know why I make the decisions I make. The decisions I make are based upon a set of standards and values that have evolved and developed throughout my life. (Summer 07, B, R2)

I am more cognizant of the way values are formed by society and imprinted upon us via family and peers during our early years. (Spring 07, B, R9)

Through personal understanding, students were more able to cogently describe their own worldview in order to better understand the personal virtues and values they bring to their work as organizational leaders. Students reported that a key outcome of the course was an ability to better articulate and express their worldview and values.

Having to state and verbalize our personal identity has been empowering. (Spring 07, B, R15)

This course has done a great service by helping me put words to the thoughts and emotions generated in discussions and experiences related to ethical decision making (Summer 07, B, R13)

Potentially related to better articulation of values is the development of higher levels of confidence and courage in dealing with ethical issues. Students reflected positively on their ability to apply personal values within an organizational setting toward positive ethical outcomes.

By being aware of why I have the personal values that I have, it makes it that much easier to stand up and defend something. (Spring 07, A, R8)

What I am most proud of is the fact that I am no longer willing to just accept something 'because' I am not willing to give in simply because it's a decision from upper management. (Spring 07, B, R6)

I think I am braver...because of this class and the awareness I feel, I think I am now ready to take even more chances morally in an organizational setting. (Spring 07, B, R16)

Another outcome of personal understanding was the ability to define personal methods of decision making and move beyond purely 'habitual response.' In this way, students expressed a transition from purely expressive responses to ethical situations to more conscious, deliberative responses. In particular, students articulated the need for intentionality and deliberation in order to make sound ethical decisions.

I find myself being more intentional in developing and practicing decision making as stepping stones to responding versus reacting. (Spring 07, B, R5)

I have become more aware but slower to act. (Spring 07, B, R2)

Like any heightened sensitivity, it has already caused me to pause prior to acting. To consider the ramification of my responses and to more fully consider the various perspectives in play. (Spring 07, B, R9)

Ethical decision making as a reflection of social process.

Although most students saw within themselves an “ethical perspective” – or a dominant, personal method of viewing and evaluating ethical dilemmas – the course offered a chance to see and value *other* perspectives. By experiencing this broad mix of perspectives within the course setting, many students expressed a shift in consciousness towards understanding others. At the same time, by opening to other ways of addressing ethical issues, students challenged their own cognitive schemas constructed throughout life leading to a broader understanding of ethics within a community setting.

It has opened my eyes to different avenues when making decisions (Spring 07, A, R6)

It has re-energized me in thinking about the ways in which my personal views impact my responses and my decision making...Having this awareness has helped me to seek more to understand other viewpoints, to ask questions, and to ensure I understand why decisions are made or why someone reacted the way they did (Summer 07, A, R4)

Students also expressed a heightened awareness of and ability to engage in constructive dialogue with constituents when making ethical decisions. In this way, student responses reflected ethical decision making as more than simply a personal choice but rather an outcome of social meaning and negotiation.

By understanding myself better, I can listen to others with conflicting views...I am able to find more common ground with others, working with what we have in common instead of what separates us. (Summer 07, B, R11)

If we seek counsel in the process of decision making and are ‘vulnerable’ enough to share the personal values that motivate our desire to see one outcome over another then I feel open debate of the issues can occur...being heard and having a voice while being honored in that process is key, whether your view prevails or not. (Spring 07, B, R11)

Finally, students reported an increasing ability to ‘reframe’ ethical decisions. In particular, students reported using a model of ethical decision making that incorporated the use of other perspectives and/or mental models to reframe the existing situation and produce a creative response.

Reaching beyond my own thoughts and perspective helps me to see situations in a different light and helps me to understand decisions in a broader context (Summer 07, B, R4)

I try to view problems and decisions from multiple vantage points, including from a point in time years after the decision is made. I've always tried out of habit to imagine varying outcomes when making big decisions, but now I recognize the importance of doing so in a methodical and thorough fashion. (Spring 07, B, R9)

Negotiation of the personal-social link in ethical decision making.

As students expressed ethics in terms of a social process, certain tensions inherent in this process were also uncovered. In particular, student responses demonstrated that ethics is more than purely internal reasoning, and therefore, involves necessary negotiation with others within a larger social system.

A notable subset expressed both concern and caution in making personal ethical choices that may diverge from prevailing social expectations. These responses emphasize 'yielding' personal values to that of the larger organizational culture. Such responses demonstrate the role of ego strength in ethical dilemmas – or how much a person can or will support personal values in the face of conflicting responses. They also demonstrate the importance of locus of control in ethical decision making – or how much internal control a person believes he/she has on outcomes (Rotter, 1966).

I believe that I must yield my personal values and ascribe to corporate shared values...so when making ethical decisions, the first place to ensure that my decisions are ethical is to our corporate values. (Spring 07, A, R13)

I am able to balance the personal views because when I am at work, it does not matter what I think, it matters what the organization tells me to think. (Summer 07, A, R3)

When working for an organization whose values were not always consistent with mine...I have sometimes felt that I needed to compromise my own values for the benefit of the organization. (Summer 07, B, R5)

Another issue raised frequently by students regarded the role of "Goodness of fit" between organization and person in terms of expression of core values. Students emphasized the necessary alignment of organizational values and personal behavior. Such attitudes further solidify a connection between person and environment in ethical decision making.

If the organizational values did not run parallel to mine, I would not be working here today (Spring 07, B, R7)

Understanding what my personal views are will help to ensure that my decisions are not made solely on my personal values but the values of the company (Spring 07, B, R15).

If I have chosen my job wisely, then my personal and organizational values hopefully are in alignment with one another. If they are in continual conflict, then perhaps I need to look for work elsewhere. (Summer 07, B, R15)

Such responses demonstrate that for personal values to be effective, they must reflect the larger social and organizational goals and purposes.

Discussion

In this exploration of student narratives, three dominant themes emerged – each of which furthers our understanding of the construct of moral imagination.

Value of personal understanding.

Johnson (1993), in his exploration of moral imagination, noted that a moral decision making is an imaginative process that requires reflection on personal worldviews (p. 2). This process brings a person in contact with their own frames of a given situation, other possible framings of the situation, and their own traditionally-forged definitions of moral concepts. This constructive imaginative activity is based on perception, personal experience, and individual understanding of dominant moral concepts (p. 2). Students in this study emphasized the critical nature of both examining and understanding their personal worldview in making ethical decision making. Through this understanding, students expressed a better ability to articulate and express values and represent them in decision making. At the same time, personal understanding led to higher reported levels of competency in ethical decision making.

Ethical decision making as a social process.

In contrast to ethical frameworks that emphasize personal ethical agency at the expense of social relationships, our analysis found that the social process forms the core of ethical decision making. Students emphasized the need to draw from multiple perspectives in order to inform sound ethical decisions. They also affirmed the role of dialogue to elicit and uncover alternative outcomes. Such strategies affirm Werhane's (1999) theory that ethical decisionmaking must challenge personal operating models, identify the limitations of existing schemes, and construct a new reality that has alternative outcomes (p. 404). Through the combination of social connection and imaginative thought, an individual can connect with other possible mental models and create new ones. Bohm (1996) called this type of dialogue "the continual emergence of a new content that is common to both participants...two people are making something in common, i.e. creating something new together" (p. 3). Students reflected such an understanding, emphasizing again and again the way that connecting to others offers an opportunity to 'reframe' decisions and create alternative visions of the future.

Negotiation of the personal-social link in ethical decision making.

The connection of personal worldview to the surrounding social culture creates a 'tension' expressed by many students in terms of how personal values can or should be expressed within a larger social environment. While some students emphasized yielding to larger organizational values, others focused on the requirement of fit between person and social environment. Such responses reflect a contention that a person's values "is interwoven with one's cultural horizon, a set of 'symbol systems, values, beliefs, and histories which define a

community” (Fesmire, 2003, p. 12). These responses also demonstrate the constant personal negotiation of values within a larger social setting. As Wenger (1998) noted that: “by living in the world, we do not just make meanings up independently of the world, but neither does the world simply impose meanings on us. The negotiation of meaning is a productive process” (Wenger, 1998, p. 54). Values and ethical norms, therefore, are constantly negotiated on the basis of personal engagement within a larger social environment.

Conclusion

This presentation will describe results from a qualitative longitudinal study of moral imagination with students enrolled in a graduate leadership program. The course curriculum is grounded in the construct of moral imagination with the objective of cultivating moral imagination in leadership students. Through 60 narrative responses from students as part of their course reflections, we derived information to inform a construct of moral imagination that pertain to consciousness of moral identity, ways of knowing and identifying creative solutions, and balancing personal and organizational obligations. Using a grounded theory approach, we uncovered three overarching themes from student narratives: Value of personal understanding; Ethical decision making as a social process; and Negotiation of the Personal-social link. These themes inform the ongoing development of theory around the construct of moral imagination and provide narrative data to articulate the role of moral imagination in the lives of organizational leaders. Our results also demonstrate that core course goals are, indeed, being met. Students are gaining an increased awareness of their own personal values while also gaining competency in applied ethical decision making. At the same time, they are recognizing the necessary link of personal ethical decision making to the larger social community in which they live and work. Overall, our findings reinforce earlier models such as those created by Trevino (1986) that found individual variables such of ego strength and locus of control to impact and constrain ethical decision-making. By connecting to personal values while also remaining open to other perspectives allows for effective social negotiation – and for the creation of morally authentic imaginative responses.

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