

1994

Understanding Ethical Dilemmas

and

Constructing Ethical Decisions

A Constructivist Approach to Ethical

Decision-making for

Helping Professionals

An Ethical Dilemma Exploration Learning Activity For Helping Professionals
[Based on Research by Susan Dempsey and consultation with Dr. Vance Peavy-- October, 1994]

Instructions

The purpose of this learning exercise is to provide an opportunity for participants to explore ethical dilemmas in-depth, examining five components: 1) the **various aspects of an ethical dilemma**, especially giving voice to ethical dilemmas, 2) a person's **personal reaction** when thinking about a specific ethical dilemma, 3) the use of **language and metaphorical meaning** in ethical decision-making, 4) the role of **care** and **justice** themes in thinking about ethical dilemmas and ethical decision-making, and 5) the role of **self** in ethical decision-making.

To start the learning activity, the group divides into 6-10 participants each, depending upon the large group size. The small groups should be located so that they do not interfere with one another when discussing. After explaining the purpose of the activity as outlined in the preceding paragraph, the group facilitator should then explain the following procedures:

. Each group member will have a specific task to perform, preferably arrived at in a voluntary manner. The role/tasks are:

1 **Narrator.** The task of the narrator is to narrate an ethical dilemma from his or her own experience. It is desirable to narrate an ethical dilemma from one's own experience as a helper and to give concrete details and descriptions of experience.

2 **Enabler.** The task of the enabler is to listen carefully to the narrator and to ask open-ended questions of the narrator in a manner which encourages and enables the narrator to tell her/his ethical story. The enabler does not offer any suggestions or pass any judgements but acts as an interviewer helping the narrator to feel free to express the ethical dilemma so as to find out what happened, who was involved, what feelings came up, what decision was made and how the narrator feels about the experience.

3 **Story Documentarist.** This person documents the story by taking notes on what the narrator says, documenting what happened, what the main aspects of the ethical dilemma are, what, if any decision resulted, and writes down all relevant details.

4 **Observer of the self.** This person attends to how the narrator's self is described within the dilemma situation, how the narrator describes choosing an action, what he or she describes giving voice, doing, thinking, reflecting, feeling and generally how she or he constructs self within the situation.

5 **Observer of relationships.** This persona looks at the organizing frame for relationships within the dilemma situation, noting such themes as attachment/detachment, fairness/inequity, individuality/communality, cooperative/competitive, and collaborative/coercive.

6. **Observer of language.** This person attends to use of metaphors, images, contradictions, recurring terms, paralanguage, etc., as well as moral language such as 'should', 'ought to', 'must', 'obey', 'rules', 'comply', 'follow the rules', 'morality', etc.

7 Observer of care. This person notes evidence of a care orientation such as attending to others, making the best decision for all concerned, inclusion of perspectives from all concerned, looking at context, recognition of emotional aspects, etc.

8 Observer of justice. This person looks for indications of a justice orientation such as issues of fairness, behaving according to rules, rights of the individual, universality, bottom lines, authoritative codes, appeal to expert and authority, etc.

9 Observer of ‘What is at stake?’. This person tries to determine answers to the question “What was at stake in this dilemma? For others? For the narrator? In general?”

If there are not enough members of the small group so that each person has a role, then the order of priority is: 1,2, 3,7,8,9,5,6,4. Alternatively, an observer may elect to combine several roles, for example, self and relationship. If there are more than nine group members, then observing roles may be duplicated along lines of personal interest.

After group members have chosen roles, then a brief discussion of confidentiality regarding the group’s discussion of the dilemma takes place. The narrator needs assurance that it is safe for her/him to reveal the dilemma, and generally there is agreement that no discussion of the dilemma and actors involved will take place outside of the small group and perhaps the larger group discussion. Narrators may elect to use fictitious names and may sometimes decide not to reveal a particular dilemma for reasons of safety or conflict of interest with other members of the discussion group.

Each member should read over their particular worksheet and understand the role they are to play and what they are watching for as observers. Stress should be made on the procedure that while the narrator is giving his/her dilemma story only the enabler asks questions and facilitates the telling of the story. All others listen carefully and make notes in keeping with their observation task.

About one hour should be allotted for the exploration of a dilemma. About half of the time can be spent telling the story, filling in gaps and note-taking. The rest of the time is to be spent giving observations and discussing aspects of the dilemma and observations.

After completing a dilemma discussion, either start another discussion with new roles in the small group or return to the large group for discussion of experiences.

What happens in the small groups is that the enabler asks the narrator a series of questions about his/her dilemma. These questions are designed to examine various aspects of ethical decision making that the individual went through. Some narrators give their story in detail while others need coaching to give voice to their story. The enabler can digress from these

ELICITING A REAL-LIFE MORAL CONFLICT: THE ENABLER'S TASK*

As the enabler, your job is to listen carefully and undistractedly to the Narrator and to ask questions such as those listed below in order to assist the Narrator in telling his/her story of moral conflict. The questions are a guideline only. Feel free to elaborate and examine any aspect of the Narrator's story that will illuminate the **process** by means of which the Narrator came to his or her ethical decision or conclusions.

- 1 Describe a situation when you were faced with an ethical dilemma and you weren't sure what you should do or think about it.
- 2 What were the main parts of the situation?
- 3 What was the conflict for you in that situation?
- 4 What part did you play? What did you decide to do?
- 5 Do you think that what you did was the right thing to do? Why/why not?
- 6 What was at stake for you in this situation?
What was at stake for others? Explain?
In general, what was at stake?
- 7 Describe how you were feeling in the situation at the time of the conflict?
What are your feelings now?
- 8 When you think back over the conflict you described, what do you think that you have learned from your experience? How has this experience equipped you to deal with similar moral conflicts in the future?

Note to enabler. Try to use questions in a follow-up manner. For example if the Narrator states, "Right then I felt confused and as though I had done something wrong". Then you might say, "What made you feel confused and in the wrong"? Try to enable the Narrator to voice his or her story, refrain from 'quizzing'—use questions to get more description.

*These questions have been adapted from Brown, L.M., Argyris, D., Atanucci, J., Bardige, B., Gilligan, C., Johnston, K., Miller, B., Osborne, D., Ward, J., Wiggins, G., and Wilcox, D. (1988). *A Guide to Narratives of Conflict and Choice for Self and Moral Voice*. Editor, Lyn Mikel Brown. Center for the Study of Gender, Education and Human Development, Harvard University Graduate School of Education, Monograph # 1.

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