Ethics Training in Family Studies – Reinventing an Old Paradigm

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Introduction
When most people in the field of Family Studies think of the word “ethics,” they probably invoke visions of right and wrong, challenging situations that test one's honesty, and perhaps even legal or organizational sanctions. Ethical behavior, however, is much more than that. In fact, a strong ethical system is the very foundation, or should be, of any organization in the family profession and as such, should be a recurring theme in every training/teaching program. To this end, most professional groups or associations within the field have a standardized Code of Ethics or Code of Conduct that is used to codify acceptable and non-acceptable behaviors. Administrators, trainers, and teachers share these values with those under their care in an attempt to collectively align the ideological framework of all involved. While the content of these efforts to address ethical behavior may be quite good, there is one fundamental flaw that is continually present – a lack of the instructor’s or organization’s knowledge regarding the ethical ideologies of the individuals they are attempting to help. With that in mind, the intent of this article is to introduce four primary ethical orientations, explain why discovering these philosophies is important, and review how you, as an administrator or teacher, can identify these orientations among those you oversee so your ethics training can be fine-tuned to meet the specific needs of your group or class.

Ethical Ideologies
As any good Certified Family Life Educator will tell you, the first step in presenting an effective lesson or training program is to understand your audience. Unfortunately, the vast majority of ethics training in Family Studies today fails to meet this fundamental principle. The first step, therefore, to solving this dilemma is to gain a greater awareness of what the prevailing ethical ideologies are and why they’re important. In general, there are two dominant ethical frameworks from which four primary ideologies derive. The first of these is the concept of idealism. Those who hold an idealistic point of view believe that a desirable outcome can always be obtained by using the “right” or “correct” action. The challenge, of course, for this point of view is always finding the “right” or “correct” action for any given situation. On the other hand, the school of relativism acknowledges that while desirable outcomes are always preferable, everything is relative to a given circumstance and because of that, undesirable outcomes will also be a fact of life – regardless of what action is taken. Donelson Forsyth (1980) believes it is from these two ethical frameworks that four different approaches to making ethical decisions can be found. These approaches or ethical ideologies are:

1. **Situationists** – individuals who are closely aligned to this orientation believe that everything is relative and tend to reject any type of universal moral rule or code. Actions are often based upon an individual assessment of the situation.
2. **Subjectivist** – as with the situationists, the subjectivist supports the relative nature of events and as such, also rejects the concept of universal moral rules or codes. Unlike the situationist, however, subjectivists relate each event to a personal assessment that is based solely upon his or her own moral principles.
3. **Absolutists** – a strong supporter of idealism, the absolutist is grounded in the idea that the best possible outcome to *any* situation can be obtained by following absolute universal moral principles.
4. **Exceptionists** – like the absolutist, the exceptionist is also grounded in the idea that the best possible outcome to a situation can be obtained by following absolute universal moral principles.
The distinction, however, is that the exceptionist also acknowledges that certain situations may require a deviation or exception to those ideals.

**Ethical Ideologies and Your Organization**

While these ideological frameworks may sound a bit esoteric to some, there are very practical and applied aspects to understanding these belief systems. According to Joycelyn Pollock’s (2007) ethical pyramid (below), an individual’s or organization’s ethical system is the foundation for moral rules and behavior.

![Ethical Pyramid Diagram](image)

As mentioned previously, while most organizations in the family profession have in place a Code of Ethics or Code of Conduct, the question must now be asked, from which ethical system or ideology is the Code based upon? Without a firm grasp of this basic question, or even worse, a situation where there are competing or diametrically opposed ideologies in play, how can you truly have a firm sense of the moral rules that are used to guide the moral judgments of those involved? To assist in aligning or re-aligning the ethical system, moral rules, and moral judgments of your department or organization, ask yourself these fundamental questions:

1. What is the primary ethical ideology of our department/organization?
2. What is the primary ethical ideology of our staff?
3. Is the ethical system or ideology of our administration consistent with that of our staff?
4. Is the ethical system or ideology of our department/organization consistent with the legal expectations of our mission?
5. Is the ethical system or ideology of our department/organization consistent with the cultural values of those we serve?

**Ethical Ideologies and Your Classroom**

After several years of teaching ethics at both the university and organizational/departmental level, one thing has become abundantly clear – understanding the ethical ideologies of my students makes the presentation of ethical concepts easier and more productive. Traditionally, ethics is taught using a “cookie cutter” approach that assumes everyone will identify with the thoughts and ideas being presented. Following this paradigm, however, violates the first rule of effective teaching – that of understanding your audience. For example, if you tend to adhere to an Absolutist ideology (a conviction in absolute universal moral principles), but unknown to you, your class is more closely aligned to a Situationist perspective (those who tend to reject any type of universal moral rule or code), can this dynamic possibly lead to conflict in the classroom? Absolutely! As such, teachers should consider integrating the principles of a modified ethical pyramid (shown below) where the instructor blends his/her own ethical belief system with that of the students to form a more cohesive base from which an understanding of moral rules and judgments can be built. Following this new model for teaching ethics, educators will, in essence, be given a crystal ball into the thoughts and ideals of their students before instruction begins and
as such, be in a better position to present material in a fashion that is more suited to each individual classroom setting.

Assessing Ethical Ideologies
To assist instructors and departments in assessing the ethical orientations of their students or members, a simple, 5 minute on-line survey has been developed. Adapted from the work of Dr. Donelson Forsyth, questions in this confidential and anonymous survey are designed to identify which of the four ethical ideologies individuals are most closely aligned with, as well as their levels of Idealism, Relativism, and Self-Efficacy (included are brief narratives that explain each of the results). It’s important to note, however, the results of this questionnaire DO NOT determine whether or not the respondents act in an ethical or unethical manner. To date, this survey is being used to assist educators and administrators in a variety of family-related fields and should you desire, a dedicated survey and aggregate class report can be provided to you at no charge. To take this survey yourself, please go to the following URL and enter the Survey Code: WSUs2010 (code is case sensitive) -

http://weber-state-university1253302151.family-studies.sgizmo.com

Note: if clicking on the URL does not work, simply copy and paste the location into your browser.

Conclusion
Teaching ethics at the professional and university level is a constant and ever-changing process. To highlight these challenges, I like to quote an ancient warrior, Tsutomo Oshima, who said:

   In order to achieve victory, you must place yourself in your opponent’s skin. If you don’t understand yourself, you will lose 100% of the time. If you understand yourself, you will win 50% of the time. If you understand yourself and your opponent, you will win 100% of the time.

While hopefully we’re not battling our students or staff, the concepts he presented are readily applicable to those in the family studies profession today. In order to be successful as teachers or administrators, we must understand the ethical ideologies of those we are trying to help, as well as the ethical framework that guides our own actions. If we fail to do so, we not only run the risk of becoming ineffective teachers, but also producing ineffective students.

For more information on the survey, ethics training, or how to acquire dedicated survey and code for your class or department, contact the author, Dr. Bruce Bayley, at bbayley@weber.edu or by phone at 801-626-8134.

References