



ETHICAL DILEMMA BOUNDED ETHICALITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Following brief review of the concept of ethical dilemma, a trend which emerged as a result of the gap existing between unethical direct and indirect managerial actions and dispositional factors is the construct of what the paper has postulated as bounded ethicality. Adopting the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS) approach the paper explored the relationships between dispositional attributes, organizational sustainability and ethical decision making as a measure of promoting diversification and sustainability of the Nigerian economy. It describes a number of alternative approaches to bounded ethicality, including conceptual issues relevant to calculating the construct and documentation of the measurement error embedded in the choice of its measures. The paper proposes a 2-digit ranking scheme of ED-ABE (7) major code to be used by scholars. The model had systematic element for enhancing organizational sustainability.

Keywords: *Ethical dilemma, dispositional attribute, bounded ethicality and organizational sustainability*

Background to the Study

It is a paradox of recent times that in a globalizing and “boundaryless” economy, factors associated with ethical behaviors are of central importance to understanding organizations and the behavior of organizational-member (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001; Diekmann, Tenbrunsel, & Galinsky, 2003). Recent studies have shown that ethics in the organization has an enduring influence on organizational behavior and there are a number of mechanisms that can enhance this relationship. For example with the research on behavioral forecasting (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001; Diekmann, Tenbrunsel, & Galinsky, 2003), temporal construal (Trope & Liberman, 2000, 2003), ethical fading (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004), and cognitive distortions (Mischel, Ebbesen, & Zeiss, 1976). Otherwise saying, companies must focus on the ethics of employees in order to create an ethical business. Organizations focusing on encouraging ethical practices are commonly viewed with respect by employees, the community, and corresponding industries. Ethical business practices of organizations has resulted in a solid financial bottom-line. This has been seen through greater sales and increased revenue by companies retaining talented personnel and attracting newly skilled employees. More

importantly, an ethical organization will have the ability to retain employees that are experienced and knowledgeable.

In the last couple of years, organizations world over have come under increasing pressure to change how they operate in an ever increasing dynamic environment. A lot of this pressure has emanated from the volatility in the external economic environment, and decisions must be made to suit this dynamism and the overall attainment of organizational goal. We argue here that most times, decisions are made through bounded ethicality in such a way that the organization-member does not realize that the decision being made has ethical implications and thus ethical benchmarks do not enter into such decision. Describing this situation and using the “want/should” theoretical framework, Tenbrunsel (2008) posit that the “should” self dominates during the prediction and recollection phases but that the “want” self is dominant during the critical action phase.

From our assessment of the impact of ethical worker behavior as an antecedent to sustainable development, it appears that it has given rise to unfettered choices made by the organization-member. Diekmann, Tenbrunsel, & Galinsky, (2003) argued that a lack of ethics has a negative effect on employee performance. A lack of ethical behavior can also cause tension among employees, with some employees resenting those who do not play by the rules and still manage to get ahead. Unethical behavior in the workplace also has the potential to lead to a lack of trust among employees, which is detrimental to a business that relies on collaboration and a sense of community. This diverse work suggests that even in spite of recent globalizing trends, there has been a revival of research accounting for the effect of organizational ethics on organizational performance. But there seem to be a dearth in theoretical and empirical synthesis that delineates the underlying processes that drive impromptu ethical decision making processes.

Our approach and review of the concept of how ethics influences organizational sustainability will focus on how the tools and mechanisms of dispositional factors through bounded ethicality can enhance our understanding of ethical decision making. The apparently incessant manifestation of instances of unethical behavior in both business and politics that has discouraged sustainable development has also elicited research consciousness about ethics in organizations (De Cremer, Mayer, and Schminke, 2010). No wonder Ross (2009) asserts that ethics is the cornerstone for performance and sustainability. This study is justified on the premise of the argument of De Cremer (2010) that, it becomes increasingly necessary to not only evaluate but also understand how and why unethical behavior and decision making can emerge so easily, despite the presence of multiple control and monitoring systems. An interesting and important underlying assumption of this approach is corroborated by Dun (1975) who asserts that it promotes the idea that individuals are rational purposive actors who act in accordance with theory intentions and understand the implications of their actions. Chen (2002) showed that increase in organizational performance were directly attributable to higher levels of applied corporate and individual ethics. Hence, we have developed the ED-ABE framework.

ED-ABE Framework for Analysis

It is expedient to develop a framework of ethical decision making that includes dispositional factors.

Figure I identifies five-item construct in the framework.

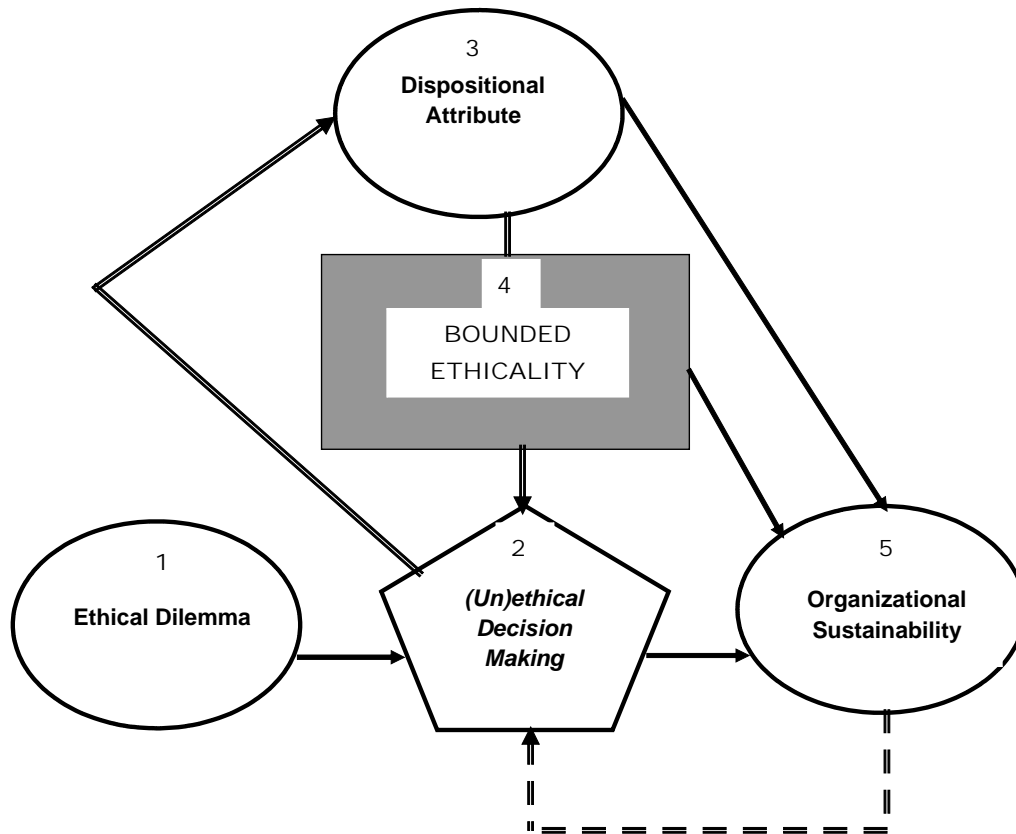


FIGURE I: Ethical Dilemma and Bounded Ethicality (ED-ABE) Framework for Organizational Sustainability

Figure I consist of ethical dilemma which gives rise to (un)ethical decision making, (un)ethical decision making is influenced by dispositional attributes either negatively or positively. Where this shaping influence is negative, the bounded ethicality comes into play. When it is properly injected into the system, organizational sustainability is achieved. Similarly, are shown in the framework where bounded ethicality is positive, it also gives rise to organizational sustainability which undoubtedly modifies the (un)ethical decision making and/or sustains decision making.

Ethical Dilemma

Organizational behavior since long observed certain behavioural antecedents that seem to integrate and trigger off un (ethical) decision making. Gini (2005) argued that even ordinary people are prone to shocking ethical lapses. Ethical dilemma refers to that which presents a

complex situation to an individual that involves an apparent mental conflict between moral imperatives. This behavior according to Pope et al (2009) is not an enforceable requirement of the ethical standards for decision making of the individual, that is, the nature of ethical dilemma is not clearly specified of the individual processes of decision making. In other words, the behavior toward ethical dilemma is a matter of personal choice. It therefore implies that ethical dilemma presents a situation in which an individual has to choose between two courses of action, both of which are morally correct but in conflict, in such a way that to obey one would result in contravening another.

Kidder (2005) opines that it may arise due to a conflict between two professional values, between a person's moral values and perceived role and due to unavoidable alternatives also. Furthermore, ethical dilemma triggers off a situation where the guiding principles of an individual's everyday life cannot determine whether a particular course of action is right or wrong (Paul and Elder, 2006). Research has identified personal values and social values; Self-interests and benefit to others; personal values and organizational rules; ethical codes and benefit to others; honesty and benefit to others and personal values and social norms (Jones, 1991; Bazerman, Tenbrunsel & Wade-Benzoni, 1998). Ethical dilemma can therefore breed situations of psycho-emotional distress to the individual which can serve as an indicator to (UN) ethical decision making and enhance or decrease organizational sustainability.

(UN) Ethical Decision Making

In their review of ethical decision making, Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe (2008) present a distinction between moral decision making and amoral decision making. Within each class of decisions, one can make ethical decision or unethical decisions. They further argue that the behaviorist should not be in the business of telling people what they should do, that is define what is ethical and what is not, but they do acknowledge the necessity to define the criteria by which decisions are placed into their typology for an analytical purpose. Schulman (2002) Describes ethical decision-making as an act rooted in empathy, moral affiliations and principles that is intended to produce kind and/or fair outcomes.

Taking a broader description of ethical decision, Jones (1991) argued that an ethical decision is a decision that is both legally and morally acceptable to the larger community. In undertaking ethical decisions therefore, the ethical behavior of the individual is usually taken into perspective. This inspired Nelson and Quick (2008) to assert that ethical behavior is acting in ways consistent with one's personal values and the commonly held values of the organization and society (Nelson and Quick, 2008). This invariably means a personal variable is a major criterion in ethical organizational decision making and behavioral choice decisions. This was confirmed earlier by Velasquez & Rostankowski (1985) when they affirm that ethical decision making is heralded when a moral issue is present where a person's action, when freely performed, may harm or benefit others.

Dispositional Attributes

Besides the traditional functions of and ways to change attitudes in the field of organizational behavior more recent and directly relevant is the attention being given to affective dispositions as antecedents in ethical decision making? Forgas (1998) argues that the dispositions of positive

affectivity have been found to be vital antecedents to attitudes about one's job. Corroborating this, Van et al (2004) asserts that negative affectivity reflects a personality disposition to experience negative states such as a feeling of nervousness, tension, anxiety, upset and distress. Accordingly, they are individuals who have a negative attitude toward themselves, others and the world around them. There are numerous researches supporting the negatives effect of negative affectivity towards decision making.

Similarly, those with positive affectivity tend to have an overall sense of wellbeing, to see them as pleasurable and effectively engaged and to experience self-confidence and positive attitudes (Deutsch & Strack, 2006). Research finds that individuals with positive affectivity tend to perform better, and can withstand stressful situations (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006). In other words, we argue that an organizational member's disposition may become a self-fulfilling prophecy as far as organizational sustainability is concerned. It was found that individuals who have high levels of positive affectivity make a thorough and efficient cognitive processing, and therefore their decision making process is more efficient, flexible, creative and innovative (Albarracin & Kumkale, 2003). It was also found that positive affectivity facilitate creativity, cognitive flexibility, novel responses, openness to new information and dealing with mental problems (Cohen & Pressman, 2006). This stems from the fact that positive affectivity encourages problem solving approach and searching for variety, in order to achieve a suitable result. It was also found to facilitate negotiation processes, and improves the results of face to face negotiation processes, in order to reach to agreement (Gonzalez, Thomas & Vanyukov, 2005). Another support for the findings presented above, showed that high levels of positive affectivity was related to willingness to compromise and give up, finding creative solutions, using cooperative strategies, less cheating and better results in negotiation processes (Barsade and Gibson, 2007). Another support for these finding showed that high levels of negative affectivity was related to competition, lower offers, rejecting ultimatums and lower combined gains, as a result of the negotiation process, and minimum willingness to continue the cooperation strategy in the future (Isen, 2004).

Bounded Ethicality:

Derelict Level of Analysis

The most prominent description of ethical behavior suggests reflection on the nature and justification of right actions. As Beauchamp & Bowie (2001) asserts, these words refer to attempts to introduce clarity, substance and precision of argument into the domain of ethicality. Bounded ethicality has variously been described as the systematic and predictable psychological processes that lead people to engage in ethically questionable behaviors that are inconsistent with their preferred choices (Banaji & Bhaskar, 2000). The authors went further to argue that ethical decisions are biased due to the desire of people to see themselves as moral, competent and deserving and thus they are not susceptible to conflicts of interest.

Although the topic of ethics initially did not have a very substantial impact on the field, interest in it and related concepts such as in the principal-agent model (Jensen & Meckling, 1967), normative or prescriptive approach (Jones 1991, Rest 1986), rational approach (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe 2008), ethical fading (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004), intuitionist framework (Hardt, 2001), psychology and business ethics (Dinehart et al, 2007), dominant

performance/mastery goal (Van et al, 2004) temporal trichotomy procedure (Bazerman et al, 1998), has increased dramatically during the past few years. Although the rapid growth in theory, research and practice undoubtedly have been gratifying to those interested in ethics in organizations. Hardt (2001) has noted that much of the empirical analysis on ethical behavior and related concepts has focused more on what Tenbrunsel et al (2000) called the biased perceptions that people hold of their own ethicality; rather than on construct validity. That is literature has focused more on understanding the ethics and other constructs rather than in addition, carefully defining the nature of ethics itself viz a viz individual attributes. In other word, they argue that people predict that they will believe more ethically than they actually do. Epley and Dunning (2000) assert further that people tend to mis-predict how they will behave in the future, often over estimating the extent to which they would engage in socially desirable behavior. Following this Troupe and Liberman (2003) warned that people misremember past experiences as more positive than they actually were.

Related to the above, the proliferation of research on ethics and other forms of actions has resulted in a lack of recognition of a salient dimension in these constructs. This salient dimension is what we have observed to be bounded ethicality. A careful reading of the literature on ethics (Peterson & Ferrel, 2005) and morality (Shu et al, 2009) suggest that the existence of this salient factor within each of these constructs that have been completely ignored. The danger in not recognizing this is that the same construct may have conflicting conceptual connotations for different people. Many sociological and anthropological definitions of the concept of ethics exist, and most emphasize some combination of codes of moral principles and values that govern the behaviors of a person or group with respect to what is right or wrong. These qualities enables ethics have standards of conduct based on shared principles and values about moral conduct that guide an individual or company from larger and more impersonal forms of relationship such as society.

Bounded ethicality describes the discrepancy between individuals internal set of ethical and their (un) ethical behavior (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). There is persuasive evidence that Bounded ethicality is an outcome where people unwittingly engage in behaviors that upon further reflection they would condemn (Diekmann, Tenbrunsel, & Galinsky, 2003). This perspective further describes the fact that in bounded ethicality, individual personal virtue ethics are tampered with. Bounded ethicality has been described years after Simon's (1983) introduced to the organizational behavior literature the importance of bounded rationality. Simon believed that it is 'a behavioral model in which human rationality is very limited and very much bounded by the situation and by human computational powers (p.34). His concept of bounded rationality was revisited and in 2005 Chugh et al distinguished between bounded ethicality and bounded rationality. It was the author's contention that organizations cannot function solely on the strength of prescribed ethics such as those explicitly states the rules and prescribed behaviors. Instead, Chugh et al elicited that bounded ethicality is the bounded limitation of the individual that lead people to engage in ethically questionable behaviors that are inconsistent with their own preferred ethics. Despite the critical importance to organizational sustainability, these ethical behaviors tend to be taken for granted since organization-member ethical decisions are biased due to the desire of people to see themselves

as moral, and competent and not susceptible to conflicts of interest. Since this pioneering work of Chugh et al, there has been a growing focus in Organizational behavior literature on bounded ethicality. Earlier, Greene and Hardt (2002) points directly to automaticity as a force of decision making. Peterson & Ferrel (2005) documents goal setting as a motivator of unethical behavior. Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe (2008) integrated the want/should framework with the temporal dimension of an ethical dilemma to explore the inherent discrepancies between perceptions and actions. De Trevino et al (2006) documents frames, biases and rational decision making in the human brain. Trevino et al (2006) demonstrated the importance of behavioral ethics in organizations. Wade-Benzioni (2008a) further showed several factors that affect ethical decision making which can negatively affect future generations. Furthermore, Bazerman and Banaji (2004) document the social psychological reasons for ethical failures.

Organizational Sustainability

The term “Organizational Sustainability” is a derivative of broader notion of “sustainability”, which is in hitherto continually shaped by the converses of political, public and scholarly discourses. This process rendered the definitions of “sustainability” sometimes confusing and complex; some postulated the term “sustainability” as a means for handling deteriorating relationship between our biosphere and ongoing economic development (Faber, Jorna & Engelen, 2005). Embedded within such sustainability discussions of finding common ground to eliminate discord between normative (e.g. ethical precondition) and scientific (operationalization) aspect of sustainability (Becker, 2006), though absence in much of the scholarly debate, is the behavioral element (Faber, Jorna & Engelen, 2005; Vlek & Steg, 2007).

Increasingly implicit discussions around behavioral attributions (Gomis et al, 2011) are sprinkled in many schools of thoughts and gaining traction. Linnenluecke & Griffiths (2010) add that sustainable organizations are capable and proactive and simultaneously flexible fostering a culture of sustainability through appropriate change management. According to Buchanan et al (2005), the concept 'Sustainability' could refer to an improvement trajectory, rather than to a particular organizational innovation. This would according to the authors imply a more dynamic perspective on sustaining organizational revolution.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Management Research and Practice

While ethical dilemma and bounded ethicality based view of (UN) ethical decision making may be of concern to theorists, is it a critical issue for practitioners? Why should manager's care about the invisible bounded ethicality construct of the individual? As research continues to demonstrate the link between ethics and organizational sustainability, the issue of the disposition of the organization-member to exhibit (UN) ethical decision making may be transparent to some managers. It is possible, however, that there are indirect outcomes of ethical decision-making that are related to the employees' motives. For example, if ethical decision making are exhibited for positive affectivity, supervisors may reinforce such behaviors with extrinsic rewards, promotions, or more visible assignments. Supervisors may be oblivious to such bounded ethicality, seeing only the observable behaviors. Colleagues, on the other hand, may see this from a different, more political viewpoint. As the positive affective individuals gain support for their ability to withstand ethical dilemma and make ethical

decisions, other employees can become discouraged and disengaged, not wanting to “play politics” to get ahead. The resulting outcome may be a culture of distrust, gossip, complaints, or subtle conflict, eroding cohesion and team building in the unit.

In the other hand, as the positive affective individual integrates bounded ethicality into everyday work performance, other employees may find themselves on the short end of the appraisal rod. These behaviors can blur the evaluation process, intensifying the performance requirements upwards so that management comes to expect more of such from all employees. Why don't all employees do these things? As the focus of management shifts towards the influence of dispositional factors on ethical decision making through the knowledge of bounded ethicality, the appraisal process becomes biased by these contextual behaviors. As these permeate into the appraisal process, employees will tend toward those behaviors that are rewarded. Thus, appropriate training of all staff is essential for the general understanding of the ethical dilemma-bounded ethicality framework, which result in the impression of the organization to prosper, then the social life within the organization will become pleasant, which at the end of the day will result in satisfied employees and may cause the employees to develop vigorous and frictionless relationships among themselves and at the long run encourage organizational sustainability.

Research and theoretical development in the study of ethical decision making has not been based on the influence of rational ethicality on (UN) ethical decision making. We have redirected theoretical and empirical attention back to the importance of the influence of dispositional attributes on (UN) ethical decision making via bounded ethicality. Given the extensive focus on diversification and sustainability, our approach thus runs counter to the dominant trends in the study of ethics and organizational sustainability. Our argument is that understanding the influence of bounded ethicality on (UN) ethical decision making will not only uncover nuances but also have a broader theoretical import as well. In revealing the rational ethicality concept, we have shown that with dispositional factors, not only has ethics in organization been highlighted, but in many ways the salient factor of rational ethicality has become more visible. We hope that by examining the interplay of the dispositional factor/ (UN) ethical decision making through the lens of bounded ethicality, we shed light on its ability to enhance and maintain organizational sustainability.

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