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Accountability and Ethics Education: Using friendships as models for broader social processes

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Abstract

This paper describes a relational approach to ethics education and highlights the value of students' own experiences in friendships as a tool for understanding ethical dilemmas that arise in varied social systems. The paper argues that friendship dilemmas may arise as a result of conflicting sources of social accountability, a construct that has been linked empirically to problem-solving, negotiation, and decision-making processes. To explore the connection between these studies of accountability and friendship problems, this paper defines a typology of friendship conflicts derived from interview and questionnaire data provided by college students. This typology is then linked to sources and conflicts in social accountability, in order to test its potential utility for ethics education and further empirical research.

Ethical decision-making embraces values of fairness, trust, loyalty, consistency, and accountability, factors which are critical to effective leadership and social participation. Although ethical practice is most often taught during graduate training (e.g. science programs, law school, and medical school), the subject is also introduced in many undergraduate programs, though often in the context of philosophy, religion, or psychology. Most courses emphasize mastery of abstract philosophical concepts and moral principles derived from utilitarian and Kantian approaches. These traditional frameworks usually omit immediate relational transactions from ethical consideration, focusing instead on broader social contracts and moral principles. This is especially true in medical or legal training programs where questions of individual versus collective rights are addressed at a high level of abstraction (Held, 2009).

Over the past 50 years, theorists have proposed an alternative approach to teaching ethics, one which emphasizes a relational framework for understanding and processing ethical issues at multiple levels (Oakley and Cocking, 2001). This approach highlights interpersonal communication as the basis for understanding social contracts and the broader contexts in which ethical conflicts arise (Boszmenyi-Nagy, Grunebaum, & Ulrich, 1991; Grames, Miller, Robinson, Higgins, & Hinton, 2008). When teaching ethics from a relational standpoint, students are encouraged to identify, analyze and share their experiences with ethical conflicts that occur in familiar contexts such as friendships, social groups, work, and family. From the problems students generate, the relational approach uses an interactive method for deriving solutions, an approach that explores the complexities and challenges

inherent to ethical thinking and practice. A phenomenological approach is used for developing the theoretical framework, one that relies on a consensual process of validating ideas of the “greater good” as it is defined from various perspectives. Students are encouraged to grapple with the puzzling issues that emerge through discussion, dialogue, role-playing and informal writing (Wood, 2009).

Several theorists have developed philosophical models based in relationships, including the foundational work developed by Boszmenyi-Nagy (1987) as part of his contextual family therapy model. This approach emphasizes the relational process underlying social conflicts and the importance of communication between all members of a given system as a means of developing a full understanding of problems. Solutions are derived with the experience and phenomenology of all participants in mind. Boszmenyi-Nagy’s inclusive approach is particularly useful to ethics education at the undergraduate level because it clarifies several dimensions of relational accountability, all of which are central to the development of balanced, fair, and trusting relationships, where individual actions are weighed within the broader systemic context. According to Boszmenyi-Nagy, accountability across systemic levels plays a key role in ethical analysis, fair decisions, and healthy relationships.

Although Boszmenyi-Nagy’s model was developed originally for family systems work, the classroom is an excellent laboratory for investigating the utility of relational ethics, especially with regard to accountability. For example, problems with testing, grading, academic honesty, and inclusiveness in the classroom, occur frequently at all levels of the educational system. When teaching ethics from a relational vantage point, these topics provide opportunities for critical thinking as well as broader analysis of social systems. A key assumption of teaching from the relational approach rests in the belief that conflicts that students encounter regularly will mirror the ethical and moral conflicts which arise in most social systems and that the inductive pedagogy will lead to the identification of important and central ethical themes, those which are present in most social systems and moral frameworks. The purpose of this paper is to examine the assumption that friendship issues generalize to broader systems and to explore ways to use ethical decisions in friendships as models in a relational ethics curriculum.

Why Friendships?

Given the option to explore a variety of ethical problems that emerge in the college setting, it is important to clarify the choice of friendships as a topic. Beyond its appeal to students, (an important consideration), friendships are critical components of social life, as they provide avenues for learning the cognitive-behavioral repertoires linked to important social roles (Gottman and Parker, 1986; Rawlins, 1994). Although friendships may vary in commitment level, time spent together, intensity, and intimacy, the exchange of social information is a key component of interactions between friends. Recent psychological research provides ample evidence that this is the case, and also for the importance of friendship for social development (Doll, 1996). Over the past two decades in particular, lifespan researchers have

increasingly recognized that friendships provide important emotional and social resources for individuals as they adapt to the broader social environment, and navigate through varied social roles and groups (Kyratzis, 2000). Developmental research examines this process from multiple perspectives, indicating that some friendships may serve a positive function in social adaptation, while others may lead to maladaptive behaviors (Vitaro, Brendgen & Tremblay, 2000). Moreover, recent research evidence on high-risk adolescents identifies the role of peer conversations in the social and cognitive mechanisms that influence moral decision-making (Shortt, Capaldi, Dishion, Bank, & Owen, 2003). Because friendship problems link to multiple aspects of adaptive social development, they are presumed to have relevance for ethical investigation and education. For the purposes of this investigation, we explored this assumption by organizing problems that occur in friendships into a typology.

In order to classify friendship problems, examples were developed through content analysis of written protocols. Questionnaires from three separate studies were used, one on friendship maintenance (n=68), one on friendship demise (n=213), and another on perceptions of loyalty in friendship (n=32). In the study on friendship demise, respondents included college students and adults from the community, all of whom responded to a questionnaire that asked specifically about the ending one friendship and the problems that led to the demise of that relationship (Wood & Pannen, 1996). A second sample of 68 college students filled out a questionnaire describing factors that led to reduction in closeness of one friend selected from three that were identified during the first year of college (Weisz and Wood, 2003, 2005). Finally, first-year college students in two ethics courses (n=32) filled out an open-ended questionnaire on loyalty in friendships and were asked to provide detailed descriptions of two situations where loyalty was tested. The three sets of questionnaires were content analyzed and the following typology was developed that identified key elements of the conflicts.

Problems in Friendships

1. *Conflicting motivation to maintain friendship:* (e.g. degree of motivation to spend time together; having to choose between spending time with a friend and engaging in another activity such as work, sports, spending time with family, another friend(s) or acquaintance(s))
2. *Independence/Conformity:*
 - a. (*Support/Approval*) Expected to conform to a friend's attitude toward another individual or group based on friend's experience, prejudice, and values, even though inconsistent with his/her own experience.
 - b. (*Specific Act/Participation/Risk*) This may take the form of overt pressure to side with friend against other friends, demonstrate loyalty to one friend's point of view through actions by showing loyalty to friend's attitude or behavior toward an individual group, school, work, sports, or other shared activities)
3.
 - a. *Confidentiality/Protection from Harm:* Friend's problem is considered to be so severe that the commitment to keep information confidential comes in conflict with

responsibility to protect the friend from harm (e.g. eating disorder, substance abuse, being in an abusive relationship).

b. *Confidentiality/Social Participation*: Revealing confidential information to other friends because that is expected in some social relationships (gossiping, entertaining with stories, demonstrating greater loyalty or commitment, being part of the group).

4. a. *Values Conflict (Support/Approval)* Friends behavior came in conflict with the respondent's own values a. Intentional coping behaviors (studying a lot, attending support groups, therapy.) b. Neutral Behaviors (varied social activities) c. High risk or controversial behaviors (using drugs, unprotected sexual activity, abortion, academic cheating, criminal behavior, aggression).

b. *Values Conflict (Specific Act/Participation/Risk)* Friend was asked/urged by a friend to participate in a situation or behavior that went against his/her own values a. Intentional coping behaviors (studying a lot, attending support groups, therapy.) b. Neutral Behaviors (varied social activities) c. High risk or controversial behaviors (asked to help with cheating, obtaining illegal substances, criminal behavior, aggression, pay for an abortion, attend an event that would harm/upset others).

5. *Resource/Power/Relational Competition and Conflict*: Conflict over power, resources, and/ or relationships (e.g. wanting to date the same person, wanting to run for the same office in an organization, wanting to be best friends with the same person, wanting to buy the same car, etc.)

These problems and categories were presented to students in the ethics courses as a stimulus for discussion about inter-personal conflicts and the impact of context on relational problem-solving. Conflicting loyalties and the problem of accountability emerged as a recurrent themes in these informal discussions. These discussions sparked an investigation of laboratory research on accountability in relation to problem-solving, ethics, and decision-making. In recent studies, the construct of accountability has been linked empirically to outcomes in problem-solving, and has been shown to influence cognitive processes during decision tasks. Accountability exists when individuals anticipate having to justify or explain their actions to others within and outside the given context. Studies demonstrate two potential impacts of accountability. On one hand, accountability may lead to higher levels of conformity to outside influence (especially authority figures), more limited exploration of critical information, and shifts in potential solutions dependent on perceptions of the audience, (Pennington and Schlenker, 1999). In contrast, accountability has also been shown to increase efforts to challenge perceptions, uncover relevant data, explore potential solutions, and formulate decisions in an independent manner (De Dreu, Weingart & Kwon, 2000; De Dreu, C., Nijstad & van Knippenberg (2008). When individuals believe that they will have to explain a decision to someone outside a given situation they tend to be more thorough in consideration of information, use more extensive processing, and are likely to consider multiple perspectives (Lerner and Tetlock, 1999). More relevant to the academic setting, recent studies on cheating behavior in college indicate that students are less likely to condone cheating when they perceive the teacher to be accountable, fair, caring, and

competent (Murdock, Miller and Kohlhardt, 2004). In contrast, when students themselves feel less accountable, (i.e. are anonymous on a task where they must report their own scores or findings), cheating frequencies rise significantly (Nogami, 2009).

Studies of negotiation and accountability reveal interesting caveats with regard to the impact of social alliances on problem-solving and decision-making. De Dreu, Weingart & Kwon (2000) have shown that factors that increase the social connection between participants (increased liking, greater cooperation) also increase concessions during negotiation. Concessions may be helpful, but sometimes come at a cost with regard to the depth, thoroughness, and accuracy of problem analysis by participants. Although pro-social factors may enhance cooperation, they do not appear to increase depth of information processing and may in fact bias recollection of factors toward the positive or irrelevant. While this finding may indicate a greater capacity of friendship dyads to find a solution to problems, it may also indicate a potential for lower quality and less integrated decisions. It follows from this work that motivation to clearly understand issues is more likely to increase the amount and depth of information processing, leading to sounder resolution of problems. It is possible that relationship preservation motives may inhibit processing that goes beyond achievement of a relationship-based goal. These findings have implications for future research on friendship problems and also for ethics education. Empirical study with friends as opposed to strangers may shed light on some of these issues.

Some of these findings may link to informal observations made by students who responded to questions about loyalty in friendships. Students in the ethics courses reported that conflicts involving accountability to individuals outside of the immediate context (e.g. teachers, parents, or legal authorities) impacted resolution of conflicts between friends. For example, when a student believed that he or she would have to account to the teacher or another authority figure about a situation with a friend, she felt it was more difficult to come to a decision about a course of action. This led to fuller consideration of broader issues and values such as the school honor code, sense of integrity, relationships with family and participation in social group. It was interesting to note in this example that as the field of consideration broadened to encompass people and issues beyond the immediate circumstances, decisions and courses of action emerged that jeopardized or tested the friendship. Still, once a decision was reached, the individual felt more satisfied after considering a variety of perspectives. Although this is a single case example, it indicates the complexity and emotional investment inherent in such problems. The role of process in ensuring a successful outcome is an area for future study.

To take an alternative example, several students reported that they compromised their individual values (ignored important factors in their own value system) in service of a friendship. These concessions led to a sense of internal conflict and remorse about how the issue was resolved. These students reported dissatisfaction with the outcome, a reduced likelihood of problem resolution in the future, and higher levels of distress. In addition, they offered fewer solutions to the problem during brainstorming sessions.

These examples were the impetus for developing a structured classification system for understanding types of accountability. For example, the issue of a friend who cheats on a test and asks a friend to support this action, highlights the conflicts between accountability to keep a friend's secret and accountability to self, teacher, other students, the broader educational system. Ethical problems may be construed in terms of the number and types of accountability involved. In turn, the sources of accountability identified by an individual in response to a specific problem may predict sophistication of problem solving.

Accountability Typology

1. *Accountability to Self:* This concept refers to an internal working model of fairness, loyalty, moral behavior, social appropriateness, and values. One may become aware of self-accountability when an action feels unsettling and the prospect or actual implementation of that action leads to negative emotions (e.g. guilt, anxiety, regret, sadness, conflict). For example, when asked to go to the movies even though one has a paper to write, one may feel guilt or anxiety due to the prospect of not meeting personal standards for performance or self-restraint. That aspect of guilt would be based on sampling personal standards for performance. This idea relates to notions of conscience, guilt, and self-regulation.

2. *Dyadic Accountability:* This concept refers to accountability between two individuals. Accountability to a friend, spouse, co-worker, leader etc. falls into this category. It is meant to be specific to one individual rather than general accountability to the group. Issues of power, reciprocity, indebtedness, continuity, influence the degree to which an individual may feel obliged to account for his/her behaviors to another person.

3. *Group Level Accountability:* This refers to small group identities and the anticipation of having to account for behavior to the group rather than to specific individuals. When an individual references group accountability, he/she imagines having to report or being subject to evaluation by more than one person, or an individual who represents the group.

4. *Systemic Accountability:* Refers to accountability to the broader community as in the workplace as a whole rather than your own work group, the neighborhood rather than your own household. Systemic accountability often references legal and government factors as well.

The typology above appears to be a useful organizational structure for the development of research materials and for assessment of individual differences in awareness of accountability and sources of conflict. It also may be used for educational purposes and the development of training materials and case examples.

Implications for Further Research

At this point, the frameworks presented above lay the groundwork for further research on accountability as it influences problem-solving and negotiations in friendship. One area of inquiry should be the use of problems that occur in friendships as topic areas, rather than more abstract or objective issues that tend to be used in laboratory research. Although the alliances between friends may limit objective problem analysis and lead to more concessions, such behaviors may be productive in the context of interpersonal problem solving. Thus, an expansion into the interpersonal realm would make an interesting test of the findings presented above on negotiation and decision-making.

In addition, the role of accountability in fostering deeper processing of issues has implications for ethical training and may foster strategies for counteracting the influence of personal alliances and authoritarian control when making decisions. Because there are many instances where personal and professional relationships overlap in education, business, as well as other social systems, strategies for reducing bias and increasing attention to data and relevant issues are valuable tools for training purposes. At a broader level, the structure and function of larger social systems depends on individual awareness of ethical conflicts and multiple sources of accountability. Training in this area has great potential for expanding the relational ethics framework, especially with regard to conflicting roles and arenas of accountability. This model for ethics training should be compared to more traditional approaches as a further step in assessing methods for increasing ethical understanding and behavior.

In sum, the role of friendships in ethics education is worthy of further investigation because it is evident that the complexities inherent in social problem-solving at a broader level are to a significant degree evidenced in problems that occur in friendships. One can see the value of further investigation using both theoretical and empirical investigations as models for study in this area.

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