

# Measuring the Various Ethical Frameworks in Organizations

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## Abstract

Understanding ethics is important because people must have a capacity to act in the changing environments they are evolving in and people in organizations must adapt in order to reach a high level of autonomy in regards to moral reasoning to be skillful in analyzing situations that occur in our changing environments.

This paper grounds itself in the assumption that we can understand better ethical representation of employees and managers in public and private organizations through the use of a questionnaire built through a rational process. We humbly take the risk to identify one or many ethical principles or, even better, ethical frameworks, present in an organization, whether public or private. To validate this bridge between theory and practice, we use a methodological position that favors knowledge emergence through the design of a questionnaire and the use of exploratory factor analysis.

## Introduction and Research Aim

The literature in business ethics is full of researches devoted to studying different types of moral frameworks (Coulombe & Tornikoski, 2009; Frederiksen, 2010: 358) defined as “values or beliefs prevailing in particular contexts attributing specific meanings to universal principles or moral rules” (Napal, 2005: 29). The philosophical literature offers dozen of principles based ethical frameworks, and the business ethics literature recognizes this plurality. Yet, most business ethics papers are normative, and few discuss more than three frameworks (Coulombe & Tornikoski, 2009).

A systematic search has produced only a handful of empirical papers attempting to measure this plurality, among which few are in accordance with methodological conventions. The first phase of this research thus consisted in a review of two important academic databases (Proquest and Emerald) in order to choose in a systematic fashion the top ten ethical frameworks that would be part of the questionnaire. Using ten ethical frameworks in one study is found only in one theoretical article and, therefore, assessing plurality through ten frameworks is advancing the ethical literature and filling an important gap.

The second phase of this research consisted in extensive readings describing each ethical framework in order to synthesize the essence of it through 5 ethical principles. Coulombe and Tornikosky presented their results in RESADDERSE International (2009).

The third phase was to build an ethical questionnaire and assess the ethical principles used in organizations. It is the objective of this paper to present that methodological step and its results.

The aim of this paper is to explore how individuals in various organizations give sense to business ethical issues. We seek to verify empirically whether the assumptions of ethical frameworks can be a bridge to understand the filter organizations use when considering ethical issues. To validate this bridge between theory and practice, we use a methodological position that favors knowledge emergence through the design of a questionnaire and the run of an exploratory factor analysis.

## Methodology

The questionnaire developed through this research has three parts. The first one is a two-page text stating the aim of the survey, the method used and specifying the necessity of total liberty to answer this questionnaire. The second part consists of a list of 50 questions/items that participants had to rate on a scale from 1 to 6. These fifty items all belong to one of the ten moral frameworks previously selected on the basis of their repetition in the literature (more than 1500 articles analyzed). The third part of the questionnaire ask certain information to gather demographic information regarding the participants. The choice of incorporating any type of employee into the sample is done in order to take a different track from those followed by many researchers whose interest is focused mainly or exclusively on managers in organizations.

A sample of two hundred and fourteen employees from six organizations mainly coming from the education and health sectors in Quebec City, Canada fill out the questionnaire.

## Results

An exploratory factor analysis resulted in five emerging factors. DeVillis (2003: 93) mentions “[...] that the primary function of factor analysis is to help investigator determine how many latent variables underlie a set of items”. These new factor (set of items) could be used for a future questionnaire elaboration as suggested by DeVillis (2003). This study is coherent with the one proposed by Reidenbach and Robin (1990) concerning the assessment of ethical plurality in organizations as it does not confirm the standards moral frameworks found in the literature such as for example “Plato moral framework” or even “the care moral framework from Gilligan”. Instead, even though we got some decent Cronbach alphas within initial pure ethical frameworks, the factor analysis completely rearranged the ethical items creating new factors that we discuss below.

According to Nunnally (1967), Cronbach alphas above 0,50 in the specific case of questionnaire construction such as this research are more than acceptable. Following this idea, we get ‘*Corporate social responsibility*’, ‘*Values*’ and ‘*Compassion*’ with respective Cronbach alpha results of 0,60, 0,53 and 0,53. As Rauzy in Canto-Sperber (1996: 359) mentions “[...] the abstract character of moral philosophies is well recognized and their heritage comes from disparate philosophical frameworks”.

Therefore, it is positively surprising that we got three moral frameworks out of the ten original we can keep integrally. We then run a factor analysis and five factors that have emerged from the data analysis done with SAS. We obtained composite factors that do not carry canonical ethical frameworks. However, these results seem to indicate that employees and managers in

Quebec City carry ethical principles that can be analyzed and discussed. The first one represents the 'Ideal organization' dimension. The second factor is 'Respect' dimension. The third factor is 'Interest in stakeholders' dimension. The fourth factor is 'Claimed neoliberalism'. The fifth factor is 'Liberal dimension'.

## Discussion

Rosebeth Moss Kanter once mentioned (1996) that it is time that researchers start looking at what is really going on in business and corporations in order to provide a contribution that is meaningful. Furthermore, like most literature global topic, ethics might be at a turning point of its evolution. Strategy reached that turning point in the 80'S when Mintzberg declared that researchers needed to go out there and observed strategy in the field as the pure models presented in the literature seem not totally appropriate for daily business life. Organizational culture literature got to the same conclusion with Frost (1991) that offered a reorganization of organizational culture according to what he observed in the field.

These five emerging factors demonstrate the need to reformulate ethical frameworks when we wish to study what really happens in organizations in terms of representations about ethics. There is not a direct adequacy between pure canonical ethical frameworks found in the academic literature and real business life organizations. The results of this research tell us that we cannot prove pure adequacy.

### Factor 1: 'Ideal organization dimension'

According to Ralston (2006: 1023) "[...] business ideology depends on the interrelation between the economic development level, the level of technological development and the political systems, creating the paradigms in place in organizations and institutions". Our sample is located in Quebec City and comes from a quite homogeneous background.

Also, they are mostly coming from hospitals and school boards which are civil society organizations. Their mission is offering services to people. The organizational values are especially strong: contributing to society's development and well-being. Participants are mostly member of a union and have job security.

Considering the protected employment environment, they evolve into, participants have individual space to entertain idealism in regards to what an organization is and should be. It is therefore not surprising to find, as the first emerging factor of the analysis, ethical principles giving a sense of idealism, a dream about an ideal organization.

- Q33: *"While pursuing its economic growth your organization contributes to the diminishing of social inequalities and poverty."*
- Q43: *"Your organization combines economic efficiency, social justice and environmental protection."*
- Q11: *"Your organization considers the quality of life of the current and future populations in its decision making."*
- Q28: *"Your organization keeps on improving its economic growth only if there are positive consequences for the people and the environment."*
- Q20: *"My organization helps people through a program of education and development to discover for themselves the reality of good, beauty and truth"*
- Q18: *"The intentions of the people are more important than the consequences of their actions"*

Participants have as representations of their organization ethical principles that it is and it should perpetuate values that grow beyond the legal and beyond the standards of basic economic principles as sustainable living does. These values are very much present in Quebecois society discourse. The province has been especially involved in the various environment worldwide debates even taking an opposite position than Canada, the official guests in such platforms. Companies look for answering the expectations rationalized by the Quebecer's society which promotes in particular the protection of the environment (Pasquero, 1997).

More and more companies do not simply do what is prescribed by law but they wonder about the organizational values which have to exist within their company to face the transformations of environment (Isaac, 2000; Pruzan, 1998). Jean Pasquero (1997: 632) writes "[...] the nature of business ethics is deeply rooted in the national identity of the community [...]". Business ethics in Quebec is thus strongly influenced by these socio-political processes (Pasquero, 1997).

This new paradigm implies that an ethical decision must be made with flexibility and sacrifice. This fits pretty well the value oriented public organization of Quebec but also the industry sector of this research, education and health (Dion, 1997). As Pava (2008: 205) puts it, "corporate social responsibility is itself an extremely valuable and hard won social asset as it is a vehicle for promoting transparency, nuanced accountability, integrity, better communication and sensible development" essential elements to modern capitalism". Accountability sharing requires compromise between a firm and its stakeholders. Open channels of communication with information flowing back and forth are needed for that to happen (Pava, 2008). Social responsibility in an organization can also be thought of as a place where individuals can pursue friendships, solidarity, spirituality, purpose and life meaning (Pava, 2008). It calls for a change of consciousness on the part of organization and society.

## **Factor 2: 'Respect dimension'**

This second factor present clearly *Respect* as being a strong value for the participants. Both items Q37, "*In my organization, the golden rule maker is to treat people like themselves would be treated*", and Q38, "*In my organization, ethics is nothing else than respecting the natural rights of people*", explicitly include this value in their terms. Q46, "*My organization has a space for deliberation and discussion between those affected by a decision*", refers to deliberation and discussion, two actions that cannot occur without the strong respect of each stakeholder participating in these dialogue. As for Q22, "*My organization ensures the ethical conduct of its employees by providing them with moral rules of formal and informal*", the literature concerning codes of ethics and codes of values, the usual first step for an organization on the path to share ethical principles throughout the structure, displays respect as number one value in most cases.

The firm does not respond only to each stakeholder individually but to an interaction of influences from an entire stakeholder group (Garriga, 2009). The cooperation process between a firm and all of its stakeholders is important to take in account but this can be modified by the political opportunity structure existing in the process (Garriga, 2009).

Barnard (1938), Gibbs and Singer (1993), and Powell (1990) have recognized that cooperation and respect are key components of organizational success. O'Fallon & Butterfield (2005) have analyzed that 'formation factors', 'motivating factors', and 'operating factors' are all part of the internal cooperation process which in fact supports the presence of item Q38, "*In my organization, ethics is nothing else than respecting the natural rights of people*", in this factor.

Bragues (2010: 447) affirms “Smith’s moral writings actually contain the fundamentals of a business ethics teaching for managers who necessarily work within a variety of networks”. Moral imperatives were prior to self-interest in business. His assertion consists in saying that Smith considered human beings able to attain moral status only through networks of individuals, therefore the organization. Social network is at the core of morality for individuals. These assumptions seem to be supported by Q22, “*My organization ensures the ethical conduct of its employees by providing them with moral rules of formal and informal*”. The root of connectivity infuses social networks with morality (Bragues, 2010). Jones (2010) calls this phenomenon conscious cooperation; respect being the founding ground of such a process.

### **Factor 3: ‘Interest for stakeholders’**

This ethical dimension is another composite breaking down pure ethical frameworks as proposed in our initial methodology. However, Q16 “*In my organization, ethics requires that conversations and compromises concerning various interests happen between itself and its stakeholders to ensure its sustainability*”, Q13 “*In my organization, employees’ behaviours, ethical or not, are influenced by organizational culture and values conveyed*”, Q12, “*My organization is responsible beyond its economic and legal obligations. It meets the needs and expectations of society*”, and Q4, “*Consensus on ethical standards to be established in a community such as my organization is determined by the force of better arguments, not by coercion or deception*”, have all four an important element in common: they all refer to ‘stakeholders’. Indeed, if we focus on the words, Q13 uses the word ‘employees’ in the phrasing. Then we have Q12 that mentions ‘society’. Furthermore, Q16 explicitly mentions ‘stakeholders’, whereas Q4 proposes ‘community’. Like Mitchell et al. (1997), stakeholders are considered in their broadest sense in this dissertation.

Stakeholders’ theory is a new theorization of the organization that applies well to the analysis of this factor. Indeed, the personal perspective, experiences and selective perceptions unite to define the events eventually modulate the actions taken by people and organisations to these events (Strauss, 1993: 259). We take the perspective offered by Beaulieu and Pasquero (2002) who suggest widening the theory of the stakeholders with the theory of the negotiated order to better understand organizational dynamics regarding the environment.

An organization possesses a myriad of stakeholders that have conflicting interests and different expectations (Trevino and Nelson, 2007). One of the organizational challenges is to know how to manage these various actors. Indeed, the legitimacy of the relation with such or such stakeholder as well as the relation of power between these stakeholders are two tensions conveyed by the administrators (Jones, Fleps, and Bigley, 2007). Selznick would underline the need to accommodate to internal interests and to adapt to the external strengths to the organization to assure its continuity, minimize the risks and reach the short and long-term objectives (Selznick, 1957: 21).

For a better organizational commitment, two main elements are to be considered: the implication of the leaders (Trevino and al., 1999; Carlson and Perrewé, 1997) and the mobilization of the employees on the basis of common values (Hornett and Fredericks, 2005; Simard, Doucet and Bernard, 2005; Tremblay and Simard, 2005; Pruzan, 1998). Studies show that with a committed leadership organizational culture, the organizational structure is more productive (Pruzan, 1998) and that employees make a commitment to organizational ethical position (Trevino, and al., 1999; Paine, 1997).

The interest for stakeholders is strongly represented by our participants. In this regards, literature and organizations seem to be aligned. Both promote the importance of stakeholders and dialogue between the organization and its internal and external stakeholders.

#### **Factor 4: ‘Claimed neoliberalism’**

This factor indicates a very strong presence in the mind of the participants of the neoliberalism ideology. Q30, “*In ethics, the State must have a minimum role*”, and Q5, “*In order to avoid that people do revolt, it is ethical to provide a minimum for the poor*”, comes from the initial ethical framework ‘Neoliberalism’. Interestingly, these two items stick together whatever the statistical test we perform. We did numerous runs of factor analysis and these two are consistently together in the same factor. Sometimes, like it is the case actually, a third item joins in. Another interesting element is that we have statistical differences for this specific factor depending of the hierarchical rank the participant is working in.

The higher individuals are in hierarchy, the higher they rate neoliberalism as a principle representing ethics in their organization.

As for the third item, Q45 “*In my organization, the ethics of individuals depends on the social group they belong to*”, we reverse it: what if I inverse the meaning, will it have the same impact? What if we take this item off, will it have an impact. It seems that the impact of this item is less relevant and lead us to conclude that we cannot ignore the legitimacy of neoliberalism, the dominant paradigm of our economies (Freeman and Hasnaoui, 2011).

Neoliberalism is especially present for management as proposed by the hierarchical ranks results. This is not surprising as we live in a neoliberal society and managers are much closer to the shareholders and financial imperatives an organization faces. What is surprising is the fact that these two factors Q30, “*In ethics, the State must have a minimum role*”, and Q5, “*In order to avoid that people do revolt, it is ethical to provide a minimum for the poor*”, have been consistently emerging together throughout the various steps of statistical cleaning.

This brings us to the conclusion that neoliberalism is not of interest for participants even though they belong to societal oriented organization. Being raised and educated in such an ideology, we just cannot put that in question. Neoliberalism in that sense is claimed. Participants assert that it exists and therefore is part of their ethical principles filter. They also realize that organization have a strong economical stance. Education and Health organization have been quite at the core of important societal discussion on performance and accountability to not indebted society through their activity. The double challenge to serve society but to be profitable has been an important subject in the past 20 years in Quebec and is still today at the core of societal debates. It is therefore not surprising to find a claimed and clear statement of this ethical principle.

#### **Factor 5: ‘Liberal dimension’**

A first important element to underline is the very low Cronbach alpha of this factor. It is 0,38. It is therefore less obvious to link these two items. We get the feel it goes together as listening, sharing and participating (Robinson, 1996) can be carried on only by two (or more) equal-status parties. Both Q31, “*An ethical standard can become universal for a community if those involved collectively decide to adopt it*”, and Q41, “*The balance of market forces naturally leads to activities that are ethical*”, propose in their own discourse the same idea that the greater processes, the society process, has predominance over individual ethical representation.

Deliberative democracy is a form of governance proposed by Barnajee that seems to be aligned with this dimension. The neo-institutional theory is the founding grounds of the argument that organizations need to engage in deliberative democracy to create a kind of discursive corporate rationality (Barnajee, 2010). Power between players in that reflection needs to be considered as being intrinsically part of the actors' network. Multi-stakeholder dialogue (Barnajee, 2010: 271) taking into consideration power and discourse will help people answer organizational questions in a different way as proposed by Q31, "*An ethical standard can become universal for a community if those involved collectively decide to adopt it.*" A liberal standpoint is obvious from these two items. It is important to stay cautious with this last factor as mentioned at the beginning of this analysis.

## **Contributions**

This paper contributes to the improvement of the literature in three specific ways. First, we contribute to the maturation of business ethics literature as we go through fulfilling the numerous methodological gaps in order to bridge pure canonical ethical framework to individuals' perception of ethics in organization. We transcend the use of scenarios and also the use of students sample composition by using employees and managers to really gather the existing representations in their organizations.

The second contribution consists in having a first tool that certainly needs to be refined but also is a solid basis for other empirical studies in this research field.

The third contribution consists in a turning point in the ethical literature by leaving moral frameworks behind and using ethical principle as the measuring unit.

It is important to insist that the ethical principles that became the questionnaire items are used as indicators of the presence or absence of certain ethical principles and or frameworks. We acknowledge it is a first step. However, the field is left with a very large spectrum of research possibilities.

We therefore propose a first version of a tool to measure ethical principles in organization. We contribute to add maturity to the ethical literature through the idea that we should leave behind pure ethical frameworks and really listen to the reality of organizations and especially the representation individuals have of ethics. We even proposed some improvements for the phrasing of items that could be retested in another research.

From a practical perspective, this study is useful to managers in providing insights in the different approaches to organizational ethical tendency. It breaks with the perception of promoting a universal ethical framework; doing so, could be counterproductive. Notwithstanding the limitations of this research, the results contribute to the ethics literature by pointing to the complexity and plurality of ethical decision making and by enhancing the difference between public and private organisations even in fields considered humanitarian. Further research needs to focus on the influence of culture.

What is important is therefore not to figure out the ethical frameworks present integrally in an organization but rather to discover how individual through their filters and considering their corporative social context think, analyze and decide in regards to ethics and the variety of situations that is included in this very broad term. In that regards, Trevino et al. (1999) were proposing to create solid ethical culture baked for the specific organizational context in order to stay consistent and responsible. This study has demonstrated indirectly and partially that the organizational filter is an important one.

## Conclusion and Further Research

Our results confirm the coexistence of a plurality of ethical frameworks in the representations of managers. They also show that managers tend to use frameworks based on a recombination of principles sometimes pertaining to more than one of the canonical moral frameworks discussed in the literature.

The results of this research tell us that we cannot prove pure adequacy. Ethics might be at a turning point of its evolution. We believe we should be approaching organization with ethical principles instead of ethical frameworks. It seems also that we cannot apply one unique ethical model but that emerging factors depend of organizational context. In our specific case, public and parapublic organizations display a very specific trend towards the importance of dialogue and involvement of stakeholders.

We need to get out there and let ethical principles emerge. We also need to be able to discover the impact of culture, contextual elements of society as well as the impact of organizational culture on these ethical principles.

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