

# ETHICAL DEFINITIONS AND CONTINUA

Gerri Perreault, Ph.D., Leadership Studies Program - University of Northern Iowa

## DEFINITIONS

### *ETHICS AND ETHICAL BEHAVIOR*

- o Has to do with judgments of right and wrong, and acting on that judgment.  
Such behavior is concerned with benefiting another person (or group, nation, etc.).

### *MORAL*

- o Often used interchangeably with ethics.
- o In common usage, often refers to religious or sexual matters.  
Example: Someone who is married and has an affair is referred to as "immoral" but a corporate leader whose organization makes a defective product that can kill people is not referred to as "immoral."

### *VALUES*

- o Items, etc. to which you assign worth (value) and priorities.  
Some values are ethical and some are neutral on ethics.
- o Serve as guide to choices, consciously or unconsciously.  
Examples: --Having a job that pays a lot vs. having a job that allows autonomy.  
--Spending time with friends and family.

### *ETHICAL vs. NEUTRAL VALUES*

- o "Ethical values" are one type of value--concerns choices of right and wrong.  
Examples of Ethical Values: Honesty, fairness, equality, caring, respect, promise-keeping
- o A "neutral value" is one that is neither ethical nor unethical.  
Examples of Neutral Values: Wealth, prestige, nice home, security, approval, autonomy at work.  
Note: Loyalty is commonly thought to be an ethical value, but it really depends upon the situation. It is not, for ex., ethical to be loyal to a supervisor or an institution that is behaving unethically. Also, a neutral value can lead to unethical behavior; for ex., if someone wants approval so much that she or he goes along with the others who are doing unethical things.

### *ETHICAL RELATIVISM vs. SITUATIONAL ETHICS*

- ER: There is no way to determine right vs wrong across individuals or cultures.  
What is right is determined by one's culture, what an individual believes in right, etc.  
Example: Clitoridectomies are OK if the culture says so."
- SE: Right vs wrong can be determined across cultures, even if it is a choice of the lesser evil.  
What is right depends upon an analysis of the situation. Ex: On an ethical and human rights basis, clitoridectomies are unethical. Ex: Lying is almost always wrong, but could be justified to save a life, as in Nazi Germany.

## LEGAL

- o Has to do with a rule or law that has been passed by an institution or government.  
Usually rules and laws set minimal standards of ethics but even this is not always the case. For example, if a law is unjust (example: racial segregation), being ethical would require you to disobey the law.
- o Not the same as ethical. May or may not be ethical.

## ETHICAL COURAGE

- o Standing up for something/someone that (1) concerns a matter of right or wrong (or for something that will benefit someone else, group, nation, etc.) and (2) involves some risk.
- o Risks can be physical, social, intellectual, economic, and/or political.

## ETHICAL HERO

Doing the right thing when the action involves extreme risk to oneself.

Examples: Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights workers, Karen Silkwood (environmentalist), the helicopter pilot who rescued villagers during the My Lai massacre in Vietnam.

## COURAGEOUS vs. STUPID

Ex: Two cars playing chicken on the highway--Stupid, reckless, NOT courageous!

## ETHICAL COURAGE

Ethical courage involves risk that will benefit someone. Examples:

- o Risk one's life saving someone from a burning building.
- o Refusing to seat pregnant woman in smoking section.
- o A senator voting against her/his constituents' wishes for a policy that will benefit the common good.
- o Publishing an article on an unpopular view, for ex., questioning a society's unethical practice.  
2000: Disc. against gays. 1900's: Disc. ag. Afro Americans.
- o Refusing to participate in producing an unsafe product.  
Ex.: Employees are rushed and are sending out RVs (recreational vehicles) with loose seat belt bolts. You are the only one who raises a concern.
- o Refusing to use herbicide on one's lawn.
- o Serving in VISTA for a year.
- o Standing up against a bully
- o Asking an unpopular person to dance
- o Becoming friends with an unpopular person).  
(Note: This assumes you are doing this because you genuinely respect the person, not because you feel sorry for the person.)

## CONTINUA

### CONTINUUM OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOR

It is not realistic to ask, "Is so and so an ethical person?" It is more realistic to ask, "How ethical is so and so?" Even Hitler probably behaved ethically in some areas of his life.

Very unethical \_\_\_\_\_ Very ethical

### CONTINUUM OF SERIOUSNESS OF AN ETHICAL ISSUE

In deciding on behaving ethically, one of the considerations is, "How serious is the issue?" On one end is genocide and on the other is saying "Fine" in response to the question "How are you?" when you have just lost your father and your cat is dying of cancer.

Very serious \_\_\_\_\_ Not too serious