

Assessing Gender-Influenced Group Decision-Making in a Course Simulation: Considering Possible Explanations and Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract. The business ethics education literature provides many in-depth explorations looking at the impact of ethics education and occasionally the influence of gender. Yet, research exploring decision making is primarily focused at the individual level, often omitting important influences that might occur when decision making occurs within a group setting. This paper utilizes a classroom simulation, the Corporate Policy Simulation, in a Business, Government and Society course to assess student group decision-making. We rely on theoretical principles found in Social Role Theory and two philosophical ethics of moral reasoning to assess the impact of gender within a group decision-making environment. Specifically, we assess if males in our study are better able to process financial decisions more effectively than females in our study, and if females in our study tend to process socially responsible or ethical decisions more effectively than males in our study. Our results support the expectations that all-female groups generally are able to make better socially responsible or ethical decisions, whereas there is no significant gender difference among any of the groups when focusing on financially orientated decisions. Possible explanations and the implications of this research on workplace practice and business ethics education are discussed.

Keywords: gender, decision making, neuroscientific perspective, moral reasoning.

1. Introduction

Business ethics research often assesses the impact of ethics education yet generally assumes that individuals act independently, and scholars assess decision-making at the micro level using individual subjects as the sample population, as indicated in numerous literature review surveys (Craft 2013; Ford & Richardson 1994; O’Fallon & Butterfield 2005).

Specifically, focusing on ethics education alone, Wilhelm (2008) conducted a series of research studies designed to identify classroom teaching practices to see if they enhanced reasoning or decision making, framed as the moral reasoning of undergraduate students in business foundational courses. Overall, he reported “increase levels of student moral reasoning as measured by the revised version of

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the Defining Issues Test” (2008, p. 5). Buchko and Buchko (2009) and Ritter (2006) also explored the impact of ethics instruction on students’ ethical decision making and reported that the level of moral development addressed in ethics instruction did affect students’ decisions. Yet, each of these explorations emphasized individual decision making.

Challenging this line of research, DeGrassi, Morgan, Walker, Wang, and Sabat (2012) noted that few studies had examined ethical reasoning or decision making at the group level. They investigated the role of diversity and time in individuals’ decision making in the context of groups and found “that heterogeneous groups were more likely to make ethical decisions than homogenous groups” (2012, p. 51). Similarly, Dunphy (2004) brought his research to the classroom and used the “wuzzle-puzzle” exercise to require small groups of individuals to solve a series of “wuzzle-puzzle” anagrams to explore the issue of diversity among the group. Dunphy found that diversity within the group may indeed improve decision making and further argued that his demonstration “may be of special interest to business educators and ethicists as they encourage group work” (2004, p. 325).

Incorporating these promising educational findings, we also targeted the positive discovers involving the use of course simulations. Fixen and Wald (2021) argued that active-learning exercises, which include simulations, “increases engagement, student motivation, and comprehension of material” (2021, p. 106). Bilgin and Gul (2020) investigated the effect of gamification (both online and face-to-face) on the attitudes of students towards group learning environments, their course, group cohesion, and their academic achievement. They found that “the gamified group outperformed the traditional group in terms of group cohesion scores and team member evaluation scores” (2020, p. 124).

As noted at the outset of this paper, we recognize that most business ethics and ethics educational research tends to emphasize individual decision making, whereas much of decision making in the classroom and in business practice involves groups. In fairness to our review of this literature, some research does explore decision-making in the context of groups (Clark, Quigley, & Stumpf 2014; O’Leary & Pangemanan 2007). Our research seek to build upon prior work that explores decision-making in an educational environment from the less frequent context: in a group setting.

In addition, this research seeks to contribute to our enhanced understanding of decision-making in an educational environment by exploring the role gender plays in a group decision-making process. Craft acknowledges the preponderance of the research focusing on gender as a decision-making influence when she notes, “Mirroring O’Fallon and Butterfield (2005), gender is reported frequently in the findings of ethical decision-making research” (2013, p. 230).

Some research has found that “gender appears to be the most important determinant of ethical judgments... and on average men¹ were stricter in their ethical judgements [that is, less relenting in their ethical positions] than women

were when making ethical decisions” (Marques & Azevedo-Pereira 2009, p. 236). However, Nguyen, Basuray, Smith, Kopka, and McCulloh (2008) found that “female students’ ratings of ethical judgment were consistently higher than that of male students across two out of three moral issues examined” (2008, p. 417). More often scholars report that on average women exhibit strong (ethical) decision-making skills, leaving reviewers of the literature to conclude that on average women generally demonstrated better ethical reasoning than men (Ford & Richardson 1994; Craft 2013). However, these mixed results leave scholars pondering the impact of multiple variables, including gender upon decision-making, and thus leads us to explore this impact further.

We utilize principles embedded in Social Role Theory and two ethics of moral reasoning, justice and care, to understand if gender can help explain differences in group decision-making in an educational environment. Specifically, we examine the potential trade-off between financial and social or ethical decisions that appears to be common among business managers’ decision-making, occasionally used in a classroom setting, yet rarely is the basis for scholarly research.

Clark, *et al.* “examined whether generally framing the business situation as one involving diverse [social] stakeholders versus a primarily profit-driven operation ... and whether specific suggestions that participants consider the concerns of stakeholders versus stockholders in maximizing the value of the firm ... would influence group choices and decision outcomes” (2014, p. 27). Similarly, Buchko and Buchko (2009) presented students with a series of moral choices in a simulated business situation involving a potential hostile takeover of a fictional company. The subjects in their study were asked to consider financial data as well as the social impact of the decision. Building on this work, we argue that decisions focusing on financially oriented variables, often understood as evoking logical, linear-processed decisions, may be seen as dissimilar from decisions involving socially responsible, stakeholder-engaging decisions that typically require integrative and creative reasoning meshed with inherent ethical principles at the core of these decisions.

An in-class decision-making simulation, the Corporate Policy Simulation (Weber 1997), was used in a Business, Government and Society course to explore the role of gender in group decision-making. If differences are found that align with our hypotheses, the implications of this discovery may have significant

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1. The authors acknowledge that there are generalized statement in this paper regarding men and women (or males and females) and their decision-making and behavior. We want to clearly state that these generalizations, while typically based on past research, does not presume that ALL men (males) or ALL women (females) have identical decision processes or behave identically. Moreover, we also acknowledge that there is more than a binary distinction regarding an individuals’ gender identity, but for the purposes of this research we primarily focus on predominantly male and predominantly female decision making and behavior. We hope that this research focus does not offend or marginalize anyone with a different gender identity.

ramifications for educators in business schools, particularly in business ethics or business and society courses, as well as a better understanding of decision-making and behavior in a business organization context.

2. Theoretical Foundation

As discussed earlier, this paper focuses on exploring the role of gender in group decision-making. Specifically, differences in predominant female and predominant male (acknowledging that only two of the multiple gender identities possible are selected here for this research) decision-making are identified from Social Role Theory and two philosophical ethics of moral reasoning: an ethic of justice and an ethic of care.

2.1. Social Role Theory

The distinction of possible gender differences in decision-making is noted in Social Role Theory (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann 2000) where stereotyped gender roles affecting the behavior of individuals, and the way these roles engage a team, are discussed. This theory “suggests that expected social roles affect behavior” (Beekun, Stedham, Westerman, & Yamamura 2010, p. 310). Eagly and Wood mention, “Social role theory offers a way to understand both stability and change in gender roles and associated behavioral sex differences. The recent social changes involved shifts in the roles of women as they moved into new educational and employment arenas” (2012, p. 471).

Numerous scholars have emphasized the key role performed by leaders in groups according to Social Role Theory tenants (Hoyt & Price 2015; Hoyt, Price, & Poatsy 2013). Citing work by prior scholars (Hogg 2001; Hoyt, Goethals, & Forsyth 2008; Messick & Kramer 2005), Hoyt and Price argue that “Leaders play a critical role in group life by holding a disproportionate responsibility in both setting goals and inspiring collective action to attain those goals” (2015, p. 531). Yet, they also caution that gender roles play a significant influence in group decision-making, along with leadership roles.

Looking at the domain of the political environment, Eagly and Diekmann (2006) argue that the basic premise of the imbalanced power of a social role explanation of the gender gap of political power is that political attitudes can be understood by attending to the social roles of men and women. Diekmann and Schneider extend this thought by acknowledging that Social Role Theory emphasizes, “Diffuse gender roles lead to certain expectations and norms related to societal conceptions of being male and female. Because these expectations are linked to broad gender roles, they can be applied to men or women across a range of different situations” (2010, p. 488.) Scholars are able to predict and observe variants in decisions and behavior based, generally, on gender-differentiated