PERCEIVED RISK AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY: NEW DIRECTIONS IN MARKETING ETHICS STUDIES

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A sample of marketers was surveyed to examine the impact of risk perceptions on moral philosophy, ethical judgments, and intentions in a scenario involving bribery. Results indicate that those perceiving more risk assigned more importance to deontological and rule-oriented arguments, harsher ethical judgments, less intention to pay, and greater perceptions of an ethical issue. "Low-risk" subjects preferred act-based, situational reasoning. Implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

A significant body of theoretical and empirical research has emerged in recent years examining ethical decision making in marketing. While the studies have frequently concerned themselves with marketers' values (Singhapakdi and Vitell 1991, Vitell et al. 1993, Roozen et al. 2001), individual constructs such as Cognitive Moral Development (Goolsby and Hunt 1993, Cole et al. 2000), organizational factors (Zey-Ferrell and Ferrell 1983; Granitz and Ward 2001) and any number of demographic variables, a common element in many of these and other studies is the influence of formal moral philosophical reasoning in ethical decision making. Moral philosophy – whether explicitly considered or intuitively applied – lies at the heart of the best known theories of ethical decision making in marketing (Hunt and Vitell 1986; Ferrell and Gresham 1985; Ferrell, Gresham and Fraedrich 1989).

Two variants of moral philosophy – Teleology (sometimes referred to as *utilitarianism*) and Deontology – are featured prominently in the theoretical literature; their influence in decision making has been substantiated in direct tests of the theories and numerous other empirical studies. The apparent popularity of teleological and deontological accounts of moral reasoning may best be explained by Nozick (1981) who notes that all of substantive ethics has been fitted or poured into these two powerful and appealing molds (p. 494).

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Taken collectively, however, studies of moral philosophy and ethical decision making have yielded sometimes contradictory results. A preponderance of studies suggests that deontological reasoning contributes more heavily to ethical judgments and behaviors (Vitell and Hunt 1990; Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga 1993; Akaah 1997; DeConinck and Lewis 1997), but others find that teleological considerations strongly influence ethical judgments and intentions (Cole et al. 2000) or even dominate individuals' ethical judgments (Fritzsche and Becker 1984; Hegarty and Sims 1978, 1979; Dubinsky and Loken 1988; Thong and Yap 1998).

The primary objective of this study is to determine whether another previously unconsidered variable – perceived risk – affects both the content of moral reasoning, and individuals' ethical judgments and intentions. The significance of this approach is that it, in a departure from previous practice, treats moral philosophy itself as a dependent variable. Most existing studies of moral philosophy rely on a *post hoc* classification of individuals' moral philosophy (e.g., Fritzsche and Becker 1983, 1984, which classify managers as deontologists or rule-utilitarians), based on responses to dilemmas presented in vignettes. These classifications are in turn used as grouping variables, or some such predictor of judgments, intentions, and behaviors. As noted by Fraedrich and Ferrell (1992), however, individuals can and do change their moral philosophy, depending on circumstances. Following a brief review of moral philosophy and studies of risk perception, several hypotheses are presented. The results are analyzed, and the implications for marketing practice are discussed.

Moral Philosophy

Teleological theories are essentially concerned with the *outcomes* of behaviors. The goodness of any action is weighed solely by its consequences. Two variants within teleology are utilitarianism and egoism. Utilitarianism asks simply "what alternative will produce the greatest balance of good over evil," while egoism focuses on what actions will result in the greatest good for the individual. The well-known disclaimer that "the end justifies the means" is an appeal to utilitarian reasoning, demonstrating utilitarianism's preoccupation with outcomes.

Deontology – essentially a duty-based theory – stresses that the rightness of an act is not determined by any set of outcomes; certain actions are right because they uphold basic obligations of duty, justice, and fairness (Laczniak and Murphy 1993). Thus, deontological thought looks to the *intrinsic properties* of any action for its moral worth.

A fundamental distinction which cuts across both teleological and deontological thought is that of act and rule orientation. Act utilitarianism, for example, holds that while rules may be useful generally in determining how to bring about the greatest good, rules are fundamentally limited as well. Ultimately, the specific characteristics of an action, within a specific situation, are the only sufficient guidelines for moral reasoning. Rule utilitarianism, on the other hand, emphasizes the centrality of rules in determining what should be done. Rule deontology is perhaps best exemplified by familiar maxim "do unto others as you would have others do unto you." One need only to follow the imperatives of a finite set of such rules to ensure that his or her actions are intrinsically right. This emphasis on motives, as opposed to outcomes, neatly sidesteps the difficulty of calculating all the possible outcomes of any given action, which are after all, essentially "endless, like ripples in a pond" (Smart 1961).

Risk and Ethical Decision Making

Although the risk literature has not reached a consensus as to the antecedents to risk perception (Sitkin and Pablo 1992), the prevailing approach has been to operationalize perceived risk as some combination as perceived lack of time, information, and control among alternatives (MacCrimmon and Wehrung 1985). The propensity of managers to take risks and the cultural approval of risk-taking are well noted in the literature (Kogan and Wallach 1964; Rowe 1977; MacCrimmon and Wehrung 1985; March and Shapira 1987), however, the identification of a risk-taking propensity among managers has proved elusive. Personal and organizational characteristics such as mood (Wright and Bower 1992), problem framing (Tversky and Kahneman 1981), and monitoring, evaluating, and rewarding of outcomes may either encourage or discourage risky behaviors (Ouchi 1977; March and Shapira 1987; Beets and Killough 1990).

Although only a few studies actually model risk factors and their effects in ethical decision making, the findings seem to suggest that perceived risk does – not surprisingly – seem to decrease unethical behavior (Hegarty and Sims 1978, 1979; Song and Yarbrough 1978; Laczniak and Inderiedden 1987). Less is known, however, about the way that risk perceptions elicit deontological and teleological thinking about ethical issues. Because risk deals almost exclusively with outcomes and probabilities, it might seem reasonable, at first glance, to expect that deontological reasoning will fade into the background of the decision makers' thinking, with teleological calculations taking precedence.

Evidence to the contrary, however, comes from Janis and Mann (1977), who have demonstrated that decision makers, faced with immediate threats, exhibit varying levels of arousal, and rely more heavily on "simple-minded" decision rules, in preference to externally available information. This type of emotional arousal, in Janis and Mann's account, leads to errors in cognitive functioning, in interpreting new information, and a generalized "defensive avoidance" in business, career, and marital decisions. If this condition would tend to preclude the use of teleological calculation, Monat, et al. (1972) suggest that less risky decision situations elicit more coping responses, lower levels of arousal, and fuller use of available information. These findings, taken collectively, suggest that risk perception may influence the type and quality of marketers' moral reasoning. It is therefore expected that:

H_1: Subjects in the high risk group will ascribe greater importance to the deontology measures than subjects in the low risk group.

H_2: Subjects in the high risk group will ascribe greater importance to the rule orientation measures than subjects in the low risk group.

H_3: Subjects in the low risk group will ascribe greater importance to the teleology measures than subjects in the high risk group.

H_4: Subjects in the low risk group will ascribe greater importance to the act orientation measures than subjects in the high risk group.

Jones (1991) has suggested that characteristics of an ethical dilemma will cause it to be seen as "morally intensive." Jones' theory, supported by numerous investigations of moral intensity (e.g., Morris and McDonald 1995, Singhapakdi, et al. 1996; Frey 2000), holds that the magnitude of consequences, and probability and temporal immediacy of consequences, will cause individuals to experience heightened perceptions of the presence of an ethical issue, more severe ethical judgments of unethical behaviors, and less intention to engage in these behaviors. The strong conceptual overlap between Jones' theory and perceived risk as usually conceptualized lead to the following hypotheses:

H_5: Subjects in the high risk group will indicate significantly more severe ethical judgments of the unethical behavior than subjects in the low risk group.

H_6: Subjects in the high risk group will indicate significantly less intention to engage in the unethical behavior than subjects in the low risk group.

H_7: Subjects in the high risk group will indicate significantly greater perceptions of the presence of an ethical issue in the scenario than subjects in the low risk group.

RESEARCH METHOD

A national mailing list of marketing professionals was used to generate a random sample. Of 1,809 questionnaires delivered, 479 questionnaires were returned. Thirty-two questionnaires were discarded from the analysis because of incomplete/inconsistent responses, and an additional 38 subjects scored at the median for perceived risk. To examine the hypotheses, subjects were grouped using a median split procedure into "high"- and "low-perceived risk" groups. The resulting sample, 409 responses, represents a 23% response rate (409/1809).

The data depict the typical respondent as a married male, between 35 and 54 years of age, with a bachelors' degree, and approximately 27 years' work experience. Demographics for the sample are presented in Table 1, with a comparison of the high and low risk groups. For most demographic variables, no significant differences exist between the groups. The only observed differences between the groups are that the lower risk group had fewer years' job tenure, and a slightly higher level of education.

The data collection instrument for the study was a self-administered questionnaire, with a vignette describing a scenario in which the subject is to assume the position of a hypothetical marketing manager approached to pay a bribe in order to gain entry to a foreign country. Bribery was selected because of its importance as an issue among marketers (Hunt et al. 1984) and because of the significant level of attention to the issue at the regulatory level (Gordon and Miyake 2001). Immediately following the scenario, subjects are asked to indicate their intention to make the payment (four semantic differential items originally used in Fritzsche and Becker 1984), their ethical judgments of the requested payment (four semantic differential items used by Dabholkar and Kellaris 1992), a single measure of perceived ethical content, and a set of moral philosophy measures developed by Boyce and Jensen (1978). The Moral Philosophy measures ask respondents to indicate the importance of deontological reasoning, rule-based reasoning, etc. in making their decision. Responses range from "extremely important in my decision" to "extremely unimportant in my decision." Copies of the questionnaire, the vignette, and all measures are available from the author.

RESULTS

Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to test the seven hypotheses. For hypotheses one through four (reported in Table 2) – that risk will affect the importance of the various moral philosophies – Wilk's statistic indicates a significantly different pattern of responses across the high and low risk groups. Similarly, the multivariate statistics for the test of hypotheses five through seven (reported in Table 3) – that subjects in the two groups will exhibit significantly different ethical judgments, intentions, and perceptions of ethical content in the scenario – indicate a different response pattern between the high and low risk groups.

Univariate tests reveal that subjects who felt greater risk in the ethical dilemma ascribed greater importance to the deontology measure than subjects in the low risk group, in support of H1. Also, in support of H2, subjects in the high risk group apparently ascribe greater importance to rule-oriented moral reasoning than subjects in the low risk group. No support is found for H3, that subjects in the lower risk group would ascribe greater importance for the teleology measure than subjects in the high risk group. H4, that subjects in the lower risk group would ascribe more importance to act-oriented moral reasoning than subjects in the high risk group, is supported by the data.

Univariate analyses of hypotheses five through seven indicate support for all three hypotheses. Specifically, subjects in the high risk group demonstrate significantly more severe ethical judgments of the requested payment (H5), less intention to make the payment (H6), and higher perceptions of the presence of an ethical issue (H7).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first conclusion to be drawn is that the findings suggest strongly that moral reasoning itself may be seen as the product of personal and situational factors – in this case perceived risk – and that moral reasoning should not be construed as a static set of philosophical positions, as in previous studies which classify individuals as "rule-utilitarians" or "act deontologists."

In addition, it seems clear, based on these findings, that it is risk perception itself which leads marketing managers to sense the presence of an ethical issue, to condemn payments of bribes, and to decide against engaging in these questionable business practices. Many previous studies have established a link between deontological reasoning and more ethical behaviors (e.g. Vitell and Hunt 1990; Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga 1993; Harris and Sutton 1995; Akaah 1997). The conclusion is sometimes drawn that ethical training and organizational codes of ethics should strive to enhance employees' deontological perceptions about the intrinsic properties of behaviors, and that rule-based (as opposed to outcome- or act-based) evaluations of behaviors are generally preferable from the standpoint of organization-wide ethics (Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga 1993, Bellizzi 1996). The findings in this study, however, lead us to a fuller appreciation of the delicate interplay of moral reasoning and situational factors such as perceived risk in ethical decision making, beyond simply identifying individuals' propensity to be "deontological" and to

TABLE 1
Demographic Profile of the Sample

Variable	Grouping	All	High-Risk (n=217)	Low-Risk (n=192)	X^2	p
sex	male	374	196	178	.741	.389
	female	35	21	14		
marital status	single	22	8	14	4.243	.120
	married	362	192	170		
	divorced	24	16	8		
age	18 - 24	3	1	2	9.480	.091
	25 - 34	10	3	7		
	35 - 44	124	56	68		
	45 - 54	164	90	74		
	55 and over	91	56	35		
education	high school	31	21	10	18.01	.001
	some college	85	59	26		
	bachelor's degree	156	70	86		
	graduate school	137	67	70		
job tenure (yrs)		27.18	29.88	24.13	(t_{340} = 4.327; p=.000)	

TABLE 2
Multivariate Test of Significance: High and Low Risk Groups and Moral Philosophy Variables

Test	Value	F	Significance
Wilk's Lambda	.84	18.180	.000

Univariate Tests of Significance

Variable	F	Significance	Group	mean[a]	sd	n
Deontology	28.078	.000	high risk	5.01	1.184	215
			low risk	4.40	1.132	192
Rule Orientation	57.757	.000	high risk	5.03	1.162	215
			low risk	4.10	1.330	192
Teleology	.117	.732	high risk	3.36	.955	215
			low risk	3.33	1.015	192
Act Orientation	15.598	.000	high risk	3.10	1.137	215
			low risk	3.53	1.071	192

[a] scoring for all variables: 1 = "extremely unimportant in my decision"
6 = "extremely important in my decision"

TABLE 3
Multivariate Test of Significance: High vs. Low Risk and Ethical Judgments and Intentions

Test	Value	F	Significance
Wilk's Lambda	.728	49.609	.000

Univariate Tests of Significance

Variable	F	Significance	Group	Mean	sd	n
Ethical Judgment [a]	130.279	.000	high risk	6.66	.658	212
			low risk	5.24	1.673	190
Intention [b]	127.835	.000	high risk	6.90	.543	212
			low risk	5.32	1.957	190
Ethical Issue [c]	38.257	.000	high risk	1.28	1.078	212
			low risk	2.18	1.776	190

[a] 1 = "ethical" 7 = "unethical"
[b] 1 = "likely/possible/definitely would" 7 = "unlikely/impossible/definitely wouldn't"
[c] 1 = "ethical issue present" 7 = "no ethical issue present"

assume that our ethics training has achieved its objective.

From a qualitative standpoint, this study does not take exception to those who suggest that some moral philosophical positions are more desirable (e.g., deontology and rule-based reasoning). The results actually lend support to earlier findings linking deontology with more ethical decision making. Further, it seems reasonable to speculate that act-oriented reasoning, based on proximate characteristics of the decision situation as opposed to an established set of rules, may stimulate a kind of short-term thinking about immediate outcomes, at the expense of long term organizational goals (Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga 1993).

For designers of organizations' ethical codes, the challenge is to find the balance between the goals of developing employees' ethical reasoning and, at the same time, to preserve the element of risk. Song and Yarbrough (1978) report that the Internal Revenue Service makes it an explicit goal to preserve an element of uncertainty in auditing practices in order to reduce the incidence of unethical tax reporting practices. Organizational codes of ethics must stress heavily the importance of rule-based procedures, and the consequences of unethical behaviors (admittedly, and problematically, a teleological concern) in a way which does not somehow undermine employees' propensities to evaluate questionable behaviors from a deontological standpoint based on their intrinsic worth.

The account presented by Janis and Mann (1977) and Monat, et al. (1972), and supported by these findings, suggests strongly that perceived risk will cause individuals to be more deontological, and to use less information about outcomes in decision making, in preference to available decision rules. A strongly presented risk element in a well-designed organizational ethics code should effectively preclude marketers' propensities to search for exceptions, loopholes, or similar justifications for gratifying, but unethical behaviors. More simply, the risk element in an organization's ethical code, combined with consistent monitoring and enforcement, will encourage decision makers to pull out the rule book, and to look to the intrinsic properties of the action, as opposed to trying to total up the costs and benefits.

An important issue, somewhat beyond the scope of this study, is how best to understand the antecedents of risk perception, and how they impact marketers' ethical reasoning. The findings in this study do not establish a solid link between lower perceptions of risk and teleological reasoning. The limitations of cost/benefit analyses are increasingly apparent, however. As automakers come under fire for concluding that it is better to pay damages to plaintiffs than to make design changes in their products, when they are aware of what most observers would consider an ethical concern about the safety of their products, it is fair to wonder whether a "cool detachment" from the difficult moral, ethical, and public relations concerns leads marketers to overlook or underestimate these implications.

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