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ETHICAL CONCERNS IN THE BUSINESS OF RECREATION AND LEISURE

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ABSTRACT

Recreation professionals entering the world of business confront value conflicts and ethical dilemmas. Ethical decision-making traditionally has been guided by philosophical principles briefly outlined in this article. Some professionals find the classical approaches too abstract for dealing with the very concrete situations of the business world. Others accuse classical ethical theory of a utopian, even anticapitalistic, bias. A number of business situations with potential value conflicts are described, including competition, truth in advertising, relations with employees, and relation with clients/customers. An anticipatory ethical approach is recommended, with business administrators providing ethical leadership at the policy level, and the individual recreation entrepreneur recognizing the responsibility to develop a personal framework for resolving ethical dilemmas in a reasoned and consistent way.

ETHICAL CONCERNS IN THE BUSINESS OF RECREATION AND LEISURE

Recreation professionals are becoming increasingly involved in the world of business. Over the past few years, academic programs in recreation have begun to include such courses as commercial recreation, hospitality, and travel and tourism. Students, perceiving these options as offering more lucrative employment opportunities than either therapeutic or community recreation, are frequently electing the business of recreation.

This trend is seen by some as a departure from traditional values. The history of recreation in America has been closely bound up with altruistic service to the needy, whether as a therapeutic intervention with special populations, or as a community service to deprived persons.⁽⁹⁾ Indeed, the philosophy of recreation in the past has included the notion that people without special limitations are capable

of meeting their own recreation needs, with very little assistance from recreation professionals.

The world of business, however, distinguishing between needs and wants, has recognized that the most sophisticated wants of an affluent American society are currently creating a vast leisure market. U.S. spending on leisure for 1983-84 has been estimated at 262 billion dollars, of which less than one per cent is attributed to public recreation programs. It seems that almost any recreational activity can be part of this growing leisure business, if it can be presented appropriately, i.e., as a quality product, in a professional manner, targeted for a specific audience.(10)

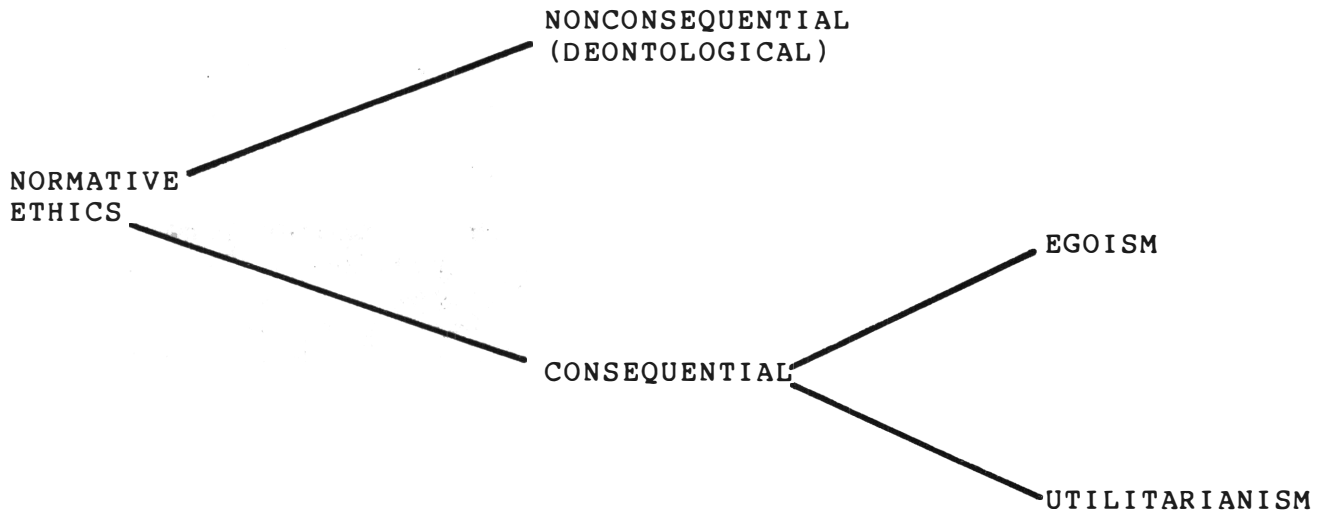
This almost limitless possibility for marketing one's skills and training offers an exciting employment perspective to the recreation professional; yet, moving into the new role of entrepreneur entails a host of value conflicts and ethical dilemmas. The intent of this article is to help clarify some of these dilemmas and their implications.

Callahan lists as the first aim of training in professional ethics, the stimulation of the moral imagination.(3) Recreation professionals as a group are woefully in need of such stimulation. They rarely reflect upon the ethical foundations of their profession. When pressed towards such reflection, they tend to see themselves as ethically neutral, to be puzzled that ethics should be an issue for them. For example, at a recent annual conference of a state Recreation and Parks Society attended by almost two thousand members, only six showed up for a panel discussion on ethical issues. The profession itself seems to resist value reflection, as if fearing the generation of an exaggerated ethical sensitivity, or the development of inflexible whistleblowers in its ranks.

Yet, recreation professionals in the business world require a thorough orientation in ethics and values. In the first place, professional competence demands that they have the knowledge and analytical ability to discern the roots of ethical dilemmas in the market-place. Secondly, in order to deal with a broad spectrum of competitors, clients, and employees, they need to recognize the diversity of value prioritization without being thrown into confusion. Furthermore, such orientation can help to prevent stress, cynicism, and burn-out which may come to the professional whose value approach remains primitive, rigid and intolerant of ambiguity.

When recreation enters the world of business, ambiguity increases dramatically. The question of recreation as end versus recreation as means can give rise to a primary value conflict centering on the basic issue of fees for fun.(14) Many recreation professionals are uneasy about the marriage of leisure and business, asking whether it undermines the central philosophy of recreation. Is it possible to sell the leisure experience? Is something being promised which cannot, in fact, be delivered? For those who accept the premise that leisure and business can be happily matched, concern can develop about the influence of the profit motive on the standards of professional practice in recreation.(7)

In order to explore, clarify, and analyze ethical dilemmas which arise with the selling of recreation services, a set of ethical principles is required. What ethical principles can guide professional decision-making when it must satisfy the demands of the business world and the world of recreation? Classical discussion of normative ethics includes two broad categories consequential, which as the name suggests, is concerned with the results of behavior, and non-consequential, sometimes called deontological (from the Greek word meaning duty) which is concerned with principles which rule behavior, regardless of consequences. Consequential theory is further broken down into egoism and utilitarianism. (See diagram)



Perhaps some examples will help clarify these different approaches:

a) the caricature of the business person illustrates the egoistic consequential approach to ethical decision-making. The basic or, more appropriately, the bottom-line question is "which action will bring the most benefit to me, my company, my stockholders?"

b) the utilitarian consequential approach asks "what action will provide the greatest good for the greatest number of people?" This approach is quite familiar to community and therapeutic recreators, who must serve large groups with limited budgets and small staffs.

c) a nonconsequential, or deontological approach will be guided by a sense of duty or obligation. This sense can be informed by divine laws, the "maximin" principle of liberty, categorical imperatives, or overriding obligations inherent in the circumstances. This approach asks "what is my duty, in principle (i.e., regardless of the consequences) to my neighbor, my client, my customer, my competitor, my employee, my stockholders?"

These distinctions are theoretical, not experiential. Ethical theorists tend to argue consistently within one framework, but professionals who confront ethical problems as they arise in working

situations shift from one approach to another, without realizing what is going on. Becoming familiar with ethical thought can help to clarify such shifting, but, as Barry points out, the value of such familiarity is not so much in having a definitive guide for moral conduct, as to develop a framework for the pursuit of moral inquiry.(1)

Some ethical theorists prefer a simpler approach. Peter Drucker, for example, bases his business ethics on the Confucian ideal of interdependence, and sees professional life as grounded in the interdependence between the profession and society.(6) When a society is clear on its values and ethical principles, it provides clear norms for moral conduct. At present American society seems to be conflicted in many value areas. Powers and Vogel attribute the recent concern over ethics in business to a series of social transformations which have broken down the connections between business and society.(12) The explosion of the leisure business can be seen as part of such social transformation, and as such suffers from lack of guidelines to direct its relationship with society.

The business of recreation interfaces with society in a number of ways. One series of interactions is with fellow professionals who may be seen as competitors. Competition is immediately inherent in many recreational activities. Society likes to perceive recreation competition as good, clean fun, but it does not expect business competition to be quite as clean. Intercollegiate sport can serve as an example of the moral complexities which are raised by such contradictory societal attitudes. Many colleges in desperate financial straits have turned to sport as a money-making venture. The resulting competition for first-rate players leads to very aggressive recruitment of high school students. Reports of covert payments to influential parties, such as coaches, permit a glimpse of a kind of exploitation of the young players involved, who may be carried academically at the colleges for four years, finally to leave, without a degree, and in many cases, without a future. John Smith, for example, a talented football player, in his senior year of high school is offered a "scholarship" to a prestigious college, all fees paid. The "scholarship" makes no academic demands of him; there is, however, a clause stating that if he should be injured and unable to play, the "scholarship" will be withdrawn.(13)

Reactions to such stories vary from outrage to indifference. "It's the name of the game," some might comment. "It's a gamble those players take. If they win, it's wonderful; if not, they lose." The metaphor of game is one which can be helpful in discussing business ethics. Is business a game with rules which are different from those in the game of personal life? of professional life? Carr answers these questions with a strong affirmative. "Just as the game of poker poses its own brand of ethics--which can be far different from the ethical ideals of human relationships--so does business. And no one should think any the worse of business because its standards of right and wrong may differ markedly from prevailing traditions of morality." (4, p. 70) Carr uses bluffing in poker to illustrate how it is quite acceptable, even admired, among serious poker players to deceive their opponents. Yet, poker is not without rules. Cheating is not allowed, nor are other unethical means of winning, such as conspiring with an accomplice. The rules of poker are

not the same as the golden rule, however, and Carr's thesis is that business resembles poker in this respect. Decisions regarding competition are decisions of strategy, not of ethics, and the business person who stays within the law is practicing business ethically.

At the personal level, values acceptable in the business world may be in conflict with values at home. "Perks" such as expense accounts, special bonuses, or other privileges may be seen by the business world as part of the game; but, what if the special privileges include call girls, if the special bonus is a kind of bribe or pay-off? If business is a game with different rules of conduct from those in every day life, what happens to the individual who must live in both worlds? Dealing with competitors in business can be ruthless. If a recreation professional has spent years in an altruistic concern for the welfare of clients, will s/he be able to shift gears in such a radical way? The angelism expected of human service professionals represents the opposite value pole from cut-throat competition. An identity crisis will almost surely result if one attempts to leap from one pole to the other, for human beings tend to integrate their value systems very firmly into their sense of identity.

Besides the question of perks and payoffs, competition in business at times resorts to industrial espionage. Spying on competitors in order to copy their programs, beat their prices, or even to steal their mailing lists, has become almost common in the marketplace, considered a little naughty, perhaps, but not really wrong. Since the world of business sees the government as the primary rule maker, if there is no law against a practice, it is permitted. Preserving one's personal ethical standards in such situations can demand a kind of heroism, and may bring defeat on either level, perhaps on both.(5)

In addition to interacting with colleague/competitors, the recreation professional in business must relate to two other groups of people--employees and clients/customers. A major source of tension in the relationship with employees is the shifting balance between the loyalty expected of them and their right to blow the whistle on the firm, or on fellow employees. Whistleblowing can be public, i.e., leaking stories to the press, or internal, as in informing. By some standards the revealing of immoral, illegal, or inefficient actions of the firm or of a co-worker might appear courageous. From other vantage points such acts may be judged disloyal and treacherous. Given these conflicting evaluations, the prospect of a whistle-blowing situation, however it may be resolved, will inevitably involve moral conflict and turmoil.(2)

Their positions of relative power vis-a-vis employees provide recreation employers with a number of occasions for ethical decision-making. Hiring and firing include a host of opportunities to be just or unjust, and they are far from clear-cut. There are situations, for example, in which women and minority group job candidates may be given preferential treatment. Is this to be regarded as just, in the sense of balancing long years of injustice to these groups, or unjust in the light of other candidates? Once an employee is hired, there are many decisions to be made regarding safety, insurance, orientation to the job, and beyond these, achievement, recognition, sense of accomplishment, autonomy, use of talents and skills. While such issues as health and

safety are covered by government regulation, some of the other issues are less tangible. What obligation in justice does the entrepreneur have to employees? What benefits can be anticipated from treating employees fairly? In the long run, such treatment may result in improved morale, loyalty, and higher productivity, and so turn out to be a good business. There may be temptations to press for quick profits, however, and so to reduce costs by hiring those who will accept the least salaries and poorest working conditions.

Their interaction with clients/customers is perhaps seen by recreators in business as the most important relationship of all, and it is surely the most rife with potential value conflicts. A major issue here is truth telling in promotion.(15) Just as industrial espionage has come to be accepted in some sectors of the business world, so deceit in advertising is almost taken for granted. On one level, of course, the public is accustomed to the hyperbole in advertising. The pretense, the illusion, the mythic and fictional quality of advertising is practically read out by the public, but only partially. The advertisement's fantasy is connected with a real product, and the product itself should be distinctly and discernably offered, not swamped in the surrounding illusion. To the extent that more fantasy than product is offered, advertising runs the risk of duplicity. The health club may play on the fantasy of the young, slim, tanned body, but if it cannot deliver this illusion to all of its customers, then the real product which it offers ought to be clearly defined. Not only must advertising avoid deceit, but a further host of ethical issues arise from attempting to sell the leisure of the haves to the have-nots, where conspicuous consumption is a major selling factor.

In addition to the marketing of the program, the manner of presenting it must be ethically sound. This includes such issues as professional competence--is the entrepreneur professionally capable of delivering the quality of service which the advertising promises? Also, is the program consistent with underlying philosophies, whether stated or implied? For instance, an outdoor recreation agency which is having financial difficulties, decides to increase revenues by the sale of alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, and empty-calorie snacks, strategically placed so as to entice customers. The profits may well increase, but what of the inconsistency between selling the idea of health, on the one hand, and on the other hand, selling items which are clearly not in the interests of customer's health?

Just as employees have rights vis-a-vis safety and health and confidentiality, so do clients. Cutting corners in these areas is not just unethical, it is illegal, and very bad business. For good business is built on relationships of trust between customers and entrepreneurs, and any taint of illegal or unethical behavior in business will be long remembered. The question of client autonomy is also part of a good business reputation. Professionals are called to be enablers, not to keep clients dependent. Client autonomy is just as complex in the business of recreation as it is in therapeutic recreation.(11)

These suggestions indicate potential ethical problems which may confront the recreation professional in business. Jones describes an

ethical problem as 1) a conflict among values, 2) a conflict among duties, 3) a conflict among desired outcomes, or some combination of all three.(8) Resolving such problems involves applying a set of principles to concrete situations. But, whose principles will be applied? Some business persons accuse classical ethical theory of utopian, even anti-capitalist bias. American individualism tends to rest on ethical decision-making on the individual conscience, but this is not always a reliable guide. In some cases there is little moral development. Others, with rigid consciences, tend to see all situations as black or white. More often, the professional must sift through very complex shades of gray in dealing with value conflict.

Anticipatory ethics is probably the wisest recommendation. The best time and place to handle ethical issues is at the policy level. This calls for sound administration, administration which is aware of potential value conflicts in the work situation. Where such administration is lacking, the individual recreator in business needs to develop a professional attitude towards practice which includes broader and more basic decision-making standards and the ability to resolve ethical dilemmas in a reasoned and consistent way.

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