

LINEAR AND COMMUNITY-BASED PROCESSES OF ETHICAL DECISION MAKING FOR GRASSLAND WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

Grasslands are basic elements in sustainable development, but few grassland workers are familiar with concepts of ethical decision making useful in integrating ecological, economic, and sociological components of sustainability. Most published procedures for ethical decision making are based on linear models for individualized social systems with modern technologies. In the context of sustainable agriculture, nonlinear community-based procedures may be more appropriate. In this paper, a nonlinear model from the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Indians is compared to more conventional linear procedures. After identification of a problem, linear models often leave the solution of the ethical dilemma (ranking ethical goals when they conflict) to the individual. In the community-based model, responsibility to future generations is the goal of highest priority. This world view should appeal to all who seek a sustainable future, and grassland workers in community-based agricultural development may use the concept to bring their ecological knowledge to the human communities seeking that knowledge.

KEYWORDS

Decision models, First Americans, Haudenosaunee Indians, Iroquois Indians, social factors, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

A recent evaluation of the continuing and future role of grasslands in the USA focused on three interfaces: plant-animal, plant-environment, and plant-society (Wedin and Jones, 1995). The findings made it clear that grasslands are basic components of future development, touching all three elements of ecological, economic, and sociological sustainability (Fick, 1995). Integration across the interfaces is a major challenge for grassland workers, and there is a special need to develop tools that allow grassland agriculture to be studied in the context of the environment and social communities of which it is a part (Fick, 1995). Ethical decision making is a tool that links the process of development (change) to social goals. The purpose of this paper is to make tools of ethical decision making more available to grassland workers and especially to provide information on a nonlinear, community-based process that seems particularly relevant in the context of sustainability.

METHODS

To develop materials presented here, I attended an international workshop on teaching ethics in the professions (Fick, 1996) and conducted an electronic literature search of data bases widely used by grassland scientists, Agricola, BIOSIS, and CAB. Although there is now a substantial literature on the application of ethics to agriculture, the above sources included no readily identifiable information on nonlinear approaches for sustainable development. Requests from students had prompted the search for such material. Although it could not be found in the standard agricultural literature, I accidentally came across the paper by Lickers et al. (1995) in which the nonlinear, community-based method described below was applied to environmental assessment by Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) communities. Personal communications (E.D. and Pilar Ruddell, World Neighbors; E.C.M. Fernandes, Cornell Univ.) were then used to confirm the wider applicability of the community approach of First Americans.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ethical decision making proceeds in the context of societal values and goals. A summary list of such goals includes the following moral rules:

do not deceive, do not harm others, keep promises and act faithfully, permit and encourage others to act rationally, keep confidential information in proper circles (Pfeiffer and Forsberg, 1993),

and moral rights:

the right to know, to privacy, to free expression, to due process, to safety, to own property, to make a profit, and the rights of future generations (Pfeiffer and Forsberg, 1993).

The violation of one or more of these moral rules and rights constitutes an ethical problem which ought to be solved. The textbook approach is to solve the problem by applying a moral decision making procedure. The seven-step procedure I have used in my teaching is as follows (Fick, 1996): (1) Recognize and state the ethical problem. (2) Get the facts. (3) Identify the affected parties. (4) Formulate alternative solutions and continue to check the facts. (5) Assess the alternatives on the basis of morality and feasibility. (6) Construct desirable options and persuade or negotiate with others to implement options. (7) Take action and check to see that the problem is solved.

An ethical dilemma arises when all ethical goals cannot be achieved together in the same degree. A common example for agricultural sustainability is the conflict between the right to make a profit today and the rights of future generations to safety or to profit making from the same resources. With individualized social systems and modern technologies, societal consensus is often not reached by the method above because it is left to individuals or social subunits to assign priorities for goals in conflict. Some have suggested that such nonresolution is associated with Euro-centric, linear thinking.

In comparison, the community-based process of the Haudenosaunee is nonlinear in five phases (Lickers et al., 1993): (1) problem identification, (2) analysis of options, (3) approving a plan, (4) taking action, and (5) long term evaluation. Each phase has a question: (1) What needs to change? (2) How can it be done? (3) Is there community consensus? (4) Is the original problem being solved? (5) Are the responsibilities to the next seven generations protected? The fourth phase returns to the first and the fifth phase is simultaneous with all others (Fig. 1). In this process the emphasis is on the participation of the whole community. The leadership role of community leaders is to ascertain community consensus (phase 3). In this model, there can also be nonresolution through lack of consensus, which leads to no change. However, the dominant ethical goal is established in the model. It is the responsibility to future generations (phase 5), and it gives highest priority to community preservation. Although I have not made an adequate survey of development workers, those contacted indicated that this nonlinear model is representative of the community-based decision making processes they encounter in the field.

The community-based model is notable because it does not isolate ethical issues from general decision making. Where community-based models like that of the Haudenosaunee are used, ethical considerations are not and could not be left out of the decision making process. Such models should help workers in agricultural development

relate their knowledge to the ethical priorities of the communities where they work.

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Figure 1

The five-phase, nonlinear decision model of the Haudenosaunee Indians.

