

Dynamics in Responsible Behaviour
In Search of Mechanisms for Coping with Responsibility

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Introduction

Modern management theories and practices have an increasing focus on process approaches for stimulating desired behaviour. For example total quality methods, Business Process Redesign and Supply Chain Management stress the importance of detection and design of business processes for control and improvement. Literature on strategic decision-making emphasizes that, nevertheless, a more radical process orientation is needed (Hitt and Tyler, 1991; Forbes and Milliken, 1999). This means that the social dynamic processes of action and interaction should also be taken into account when designing and steering business. These processes are seen as dominant in influencing the effectiveness of stimulating certain behaviour, reaching the goals of change management, and ultimately business success.

In this article we focus on the emergence, or disappearance, of notions of responsibility in these social dynamic processes. Hence, the starting point in this article is concrete behaviour within organisational settings. Responsible behaviour, both of individuals and of organisations, is highly influenced by processes of decision-making, of operational control, of task execution, and of justification. In the ethical theory of business, as well as in business practice, this process orientation seems to be underestimated (Fisscher and de Weerd-Nederhof, 2000). In this article, we present a systematic overview of mechanisms related to acting upon a sense of moral responsibility. Some of these mechanisms are based on individual characteristics like ego-strength and the justification variables in the model of Rest (1994). However, most of the mechanisms are embedded in the social context wherein responsible behaviour emerges or disappears. In this article, various mechanisms are identified and labelled in order to analyse what types of process are behind the mechanisms. In this way, the article yields important understandings for the conscious use of these mechanisms to strengthen responsible behaviour within organisations.

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Responsibility reconsidered

A central concept in this study is ‘responsible behaviour’. This concept is often used with different meanings and therefore it is necessary to define our understanding of responsibility and responsible behaviour. The literature in the field of business ethics has a long-standing tradition with the conceptualisation of moral responsibility. This highlights, from a philosophical point of view, the possible responsibilities of different moral actors. This conceptualisation is a necessary precondition before one can even speak of responsibility. However, from an empirical point of view, this conceptualisation by itself does not explain the actual notions of responsibility. For this, it is necessary to develop an understanding of how concepts of responsibility emerge and disappear within the actual context of organisational settings (Adams and Balfour, 1998). This section conceptualises such understanding of responsibility.

The etymological origin of ‘responsibility’ refers to the willingness, or necessity, to answer certain questions. With such a description a lack of clarity remains. What questions need to be answered, and what suffices as an answer? Further clarification of the concept of responsibility can be obtained through a distinction between descriptive and normative, or moral, responsibility (Bovens, 1990; Lenk, 1992). Descriptive responsibility refers to the factual causing of something. The question “Who is responsible?” can be converted into “Who has caused this?”

Moral responsibility on the other hand, refers to a certain expectation to act. The question “Who is responsible?” can be converted into “Who ought to take care of this?” The validity of moral responsibility is not based on a causal relationship but on an imputation and a judgmental criterion. This is why Lenk (1992) stresses that moral responsibility should be seen as an attributive concept (‘zuschreibungsbegriff’). Responsibility always bears on a relationship between two parties, where one party attributes to another party an expectation to act in a certain way. One possibility is that someone attributes responsibility to themselves. Lenk discerns six elements of moral responsibility:

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1. The subject of responsibility (Who is responsible?)
2. The object of responsibility (For what is one responsible?)
3. The others involved (For whom is one responsible?)
4. The judgemental party (Who judges the responsibility?)
5. An imposing criterion (On what ground is one responsible?)
6. The domain of acting (What actions are expected?)

In this sense, moral responsibility is a concept expressed in the judgement of a certain expectation to act. This expectation is not without obligations, unlike expectations based on taste, preferences, or opinions (Callahan, 1988). The actions that are expected on the basis of moral responsibility have an authoritative and binding character, at least in the view of the attributing and judgmental party.

When responsibility is seen as an attributive concept it gains meaning in the interactive process between an actor and those people influenced by the action. Then, moral responsibility can be expressed in the judgement of a certain expectation to act. This judgement is made both by the actor and by the other persons involved. Responsible behaviour amounts to fulfilling justified expectations. In this sense, moral responsibility gains meaning by the recognition of moral appeals. As stressed earlier, this recognition is determined in the concrete context, by the people involved. This implies that in this view the answer to what expectations are justified can not be found in normative philosophy. Instead this answer is given in the social interaction between the people involved. In addition, we would stress that responsibility should not be confused with responsiveness. Responsiveness alone implies that the actor is some kind of machine with no opinion of their own. Our notion of responsibility is broader than responsiveness: it encompasses it but adds a personal judgement.

Methodology

In this research project we aim to identify mechanisms behind the emergence or disappearance of notions of responsibility. There are different options for identifying those mechanisms. A study of

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existing literature has provided some relevant work in this field. There is the famous cognitive-developmental approach of Lawrence Kohlberg and his associates, based on the assumption that the determination of what is morally just is realized by applying logical rules that develop more or less naturally (Kohlberg, Levine, and Hower, 1983). Their method involves presenting hypothetical stories describing moral dilemmas, and analysing the reasoning offered by interviewees about why they made a particular choice. However, their “standard” dilemmas were developed especially to study the development of six universal moral stages, and they are less applicable to real life organizational problems. To date, the resulting insights into mechanisms of responsible behaviour in organizations should be seen as incomplete. Therefore, we have chosen a qualitative research design, to detect mechanisms, on the basis of stories of actual behaviour by our research subjects themselves, in situations where different responsibilities resulted in dilemmas.

In the design of the study we have followed as far as possible the methodology for qualitative research proposed by Eisenhardt (1989). In this methodology, several methods are used to improve the reliability and quality of the research. In the design of this study; explaining one’s starting point and a priori constructs, overlaps in data collection and analysis, presenting a chain of evidence, a comparison with similar and conflicting literature, and theoretical saturation, are especially important methods used to improve the quality of the research. Methods such as theoretical sampling, multiple data collection methods, and combining qualitative and quantitative data, have yet to be used. This raises important pointers for future research and these topics are addressed in the discussion section later in this article.

For this study, we collected empirical data from students. The use of students as research subjects is often criticized. Especially for research on ethical sensitivity it is questionable if the data gathered can be extended to real-life situations. Our research is not focussing on moral viewpoints of students. Instead, we focused on actual dilemma situations in order to analyse what kind of mechanisms strengthened or diminished notions of responsibility.

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As part of the 'Technology and Management' curriculum, undergraduate students participate in a two-day workshop on business ethics. In total there were ten groups of about 25 students each. We challenged them to systematically explicate some of their own moral dilemmas and experiences in work situations. Next the students discussed these experiences in subgroups of five people in order to explore some of the mechanisms strengthening or diminishing responsible behaviour. The subgroup discussions were followed by a plenary discussion in search of processes and mechanisms.

During the sessions, the students reported many experiences and ethical incidents in which they had been involved. In total we collected more than 80 cases in two years time. Common examples were students working as waiters who had drunken customers who intended to drive home, and students working in the construction industry where black money and ignoring safety rules were more or less common occurrences. We did put no restrictions on what kind of issues the students raised, as long as the students had been personally involved, and the issue has some moral aspect to it.

The first step in our analysis was an attempt to categorise and to label the social dynamic mechanisms represented in these cases. For this we used the method of pattern matching by searching for similar characteristics in the eighty gathered cases (Yin, 1986). As a result of this categorisation phase, we established twelve mechanisms. This number need not be exhaustive; we stopped at this point because we believed that we had identified the most relevant ones.

As a second step in the analysis we attempted to detect some of the key processes underpinning these mechanisms. The combination of these key processes is represented in a so-called frame of reference. In the next section this frame of reference is developed, based on the mechanisms reported by the students and on process-oriented literature about responsible behaviour.

As a third step we describe the twelve mechanisms, illustrated by concrete examples from the students and explicated within the frame of reference. This presents an overview of relevant mechanisms for the emergence or disappearance of responsible behaviour.

As a final step, we will discuss whether it is possible to use these mechanisms to strengthen the

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responsible behaviour of individuals as well as organisations in a business environment. An important element in this discussion is that the mechanisms can also be misused by consciously pushing, on to others, all responsibility for one's actions and deeds.

Frame of reference

In order to develop the frame of reference we will turn to one of the cases raised by the students. It is a case representative for many of the stories. Although it may seem a simple situation, students can become very emotionally involved in such cases.

In order to support his studies, a student worked, together with some of his friends, for a few hours a week in a supermarket. Their main task was filling shelves. One day the student witnessed one of his friends surreptitiously taking some goods home. The student who saw this viewed it as theft and did not approve. What should he do?

Several alternative behaviours were possible:

- I have not seen it
- It is not my responsibility
- When it happens again, I will take some action
- I will discuss the issue in general terms with all my friends
- I will discuss it with my friend openly
- I clearly condemn his action and will press him to make restoration
- I will report him to the manager

In most cases, the specific characteristics of the situation are experienced as relevant. So, the reaction may depend on the quality of the friendship, on the assessment of the reaction of 'the thief', on the value of the stolen goods, on the likely behaviour of the manager, the wage levels, and so on. So far,

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the case described above can be seen as a choice the student has to make, or a decision he has to take, with respect to his own position and reaction. Alongside these cognitive considerations, and the need to control one's own situation, the case also reflects emotional involvement, interactive aspects, and time as relevant dimensions. In most cases, there is no time to carefully weigh up all the aspects and behavioural alternatives. This means that the course of the incident in essence can be defined as a social dynamic process.

For analysing social dynamic processes it is important to take several attributional phenomena into account. The actor-observer effect, for example, states that observers interpret behaviour differently to the actors involved. Actors pay more attention to the characteristics of the situation, whereas observers are inclined to "see" personal dispositions as the real causes of the behaviour of actors (Jones and Nisbett, 1971). Also, attributional processes are moderated by a self-serving bias: people deny responsibility for negative events but love to take responsibility for having "caused" positive events (Bem, 1972). Self-serving biases have been observed at the aggregate level of group characteristics (Forsyth and Schlenker, 1977). Individual differences also affect or moderate attributions. These are of two kinds: (i) characteristics of the person perceived (e.g., age and race of actor); (ii) characteristics of the observer. In considering the observers, not only are external, visible, characteristics important, but also their invisible personality characteristics – beliefs, norms, and values, play a role. A very important factor is the locus-of-control orientation. People may perceive their outcomes as caused by their own behaviour (internal control) or as a function of luck, chance, fate, powerful others, or complex environmental factors (an external locus of control; see Rotter, 1966). Whether one is "internal" or "external" seems to be a fairly stable personality characteristic. People with a high internal locus of control tend to allocate responsibility for effects and outcomes to people, and not to situational factors (Steensma, Den Hartigh & Lucardie, 1994)

The attributional effects demonstrated in social psychology research can be deduced to some key processes for coping with responsibility. First of all the process of *weighting values and norms* will be part of one's reaction. In the case described above, the values 'friendship' and 'theft' have to be

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weighted. These values are specified by content. Alongside this, some procedural values can be distinguished, such as ‘a clear expression of one’s own values and judgement’ and ‘creating room for explanation and defence in the case of suspicion’. In the process of weighting, conflicting values usually lead to a less than fully satisfactory result. In terms coined by Wempe (1998), we can define such situations as a ‘dirty hands’ dilemma. Whatever we decide, we will end up making a choice that is contradictory to our own values, or those of relevant people in our business environment.

A second key process (or category of key processes) concerns taking *distance*. Sometimes it is better to acquire some distance, either physically or in terms of time or emotions. With distance, a more objective description may be realised (Schön, 1987). Distance creates room for weighing carefully all the relevant values, facts, and viewpoints. Conversely, too much distance can also take away an essential starting point of moral behaviour, namely a moral appeal based on the visibility and proximity of the other people involved (Ten Bos, 2000; Gilligan, 1982; Lübbe; 1982). Balancing proximity with distance is an important process in living up to certain responsibilities, and in practical situations there is not always room. Sometimes it may be necessary or even inevitable to react immediately. If, for instance, the student realises that the thief knows he has been observed, then the student has to react immediately in one way or another. Likewise, the thief will also react in some way. This leads to action and reaction on the spot. One could react along the lines of ‘let’s talk about this later, not here and now’. Such a reaction is a good example of distance-taking in order to relax a situation that seems to be highly interactive and emotionally very intense.

Comment [GS1]: I prefer acquiring distance

A third key process, embedded in social-dynamic mechanisms for coping with ethical issues in business, is *analysing the situation*. What are facts and what are only impressions, interpretations, or suppositions? What motives and intentions may people have for their behaviour? What circumstances are relevant? What could be the effect of our decision or action? Can we anticipate the reactions of all the stakeholders we have distinguished? These kinds of questions are, together with the attempts to answer them, part of the key process of analysing the situation. This process implies a clear rational distinction between observation, interpretation, judgement and action (Rest, 1994). In business

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practice, this kind of analysis is very difficult. After analysing the situation, the student could come to the conclusion that his friend had probably made a bet with another friend that he had the guts to carry out this theft. Alternatively, it was maybe because of the boss refusing to pay his salary in full, the theft of goods was intended to compensate for “the theft” by the boss.

The fourth key process in the mechanisms of responsible behaviour, found in many of the student stories about their own experiences, is the process of *addressing responsibility*. Business situations are often very complex: cause-effect relationships are difficult to detect; many people (individuals as well as groups) are involved in a chain of responsibility (Thomson, 1988; Werhane, 1985). Wempe (1998) refers to this as the ‘many hands’ dilemma. In such complex cases; facts, impressions, and interpretations are blended, and it is difficult to clearly address responsibility. Responsibilities can be offloaded onto different moral actors such as other individuals, organisational entities, or even the political system (Steinman and Lohr, 1996). Moreover, in such situations, there is plenty of space to move and remove responsibility from one to another, and to withdraw one’s own moral involvement. However, this process of addressing responsibility can also lead to a clear attribution of responsibility. It depends on the people involved, and the way they address and acknowledge responsibility (French, 1984). For example, in our case, the student could argue that he is neither responsible for the theft by his friend, nor for his moral education. In his opinion, the local manager should check and supervise his staff in a way that would prevent temptation.

Along with the concrete ethical issue we identified a number of mechanisms, covering the four distinct key processes in specific combinations, that constitute the process of dealing with these issues. For both individuals and groups of people, a decision or behavioural choice will have certain effects. Such effects will contribute to the decision-making process, in the current case (by anticipation) as well as in future cases (by learning) (Argyris and Schon, 1978).

Figure 1 represents the four key processes as mentioned above, together with the processes of anticipation and learning in business ethics. As such it forms our frame of reference and will be used

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in the explication of the mechanisms that are reported in the next section.

figure 1 about here

Mechanisms in dealing with responsibility

1. Unjust loyalty

The student who told us the story mentioned earlier decided to do nothing. Although it was difficult for him to cope with the situation (and afterwards also with his decision), he declined to act on his observation of theft and hoped that it was a one-off incident. Friendship or good-fellowship can dominate other values and lead to potential conflicts with a broader set of values. Sometimes ‘thieves’ anticipate such a feeling of fellowship, or friendship-based loyalty, and use it to avoid any disapproval or condemnation.

2. The naughty third.

A student worked at a petrol station, and went along with regular attempts by employees of a large client organisation to put some private expenses on the company account in such a way that it was invisible and impossible to check by the client’s administration. When the boss of the client organisation heard rumours about this, he agreed with the boss of the filling station that this behaviour was not acceptable and would not be tolerated. The filling-station boss informed the student about this agreement in an apparently very serious way, but at the same time winked. This ambiguous behaviour implied encouragement to continue the existing practices. The filling-station manager was afraid to lose some employees of the client organisation given that these employees

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were allowed to choose where to buy their petrol.

In practice, the student acted as a “naughty” third. If detected, the student would be accused of this continued behaviour towards individual client employees in the face of the prohibition imposed by the client organisation and his own boss. The student who told this story *weighted the different values* influencing this situation. He *analysed alternative behavioural choices* and, finally, accepted his position as a naughty third. He realised that if difficulties arose *his boss would distance himself from him* and would deny any encouragement to behave in this way. It was *difficult to clearly attribute responsibility* to the several actors. Everyone seems to be responsible for the situation: the client employees who forced him to cooperate in a way that was not acceptable, his boss, he himself, and also the manager of the client organisation who was responsible, at the very least for a shortcoming in the administrative control system.

3. Functional naivety

For his final assignment a student was asked by a company to execute a marketing research project. As a part of this project he had to do some ‘intelligence work’. In practice, the company expected the student to contact some of their main competitors in order to find out their strategic plans and to get some key figures with respect to market shares and customer relations. His company coach suggested that he use his identity as a student, rather than as a representative of the firm. It would be easier to get access to information as a student preparing a thesis. When he discussed this issue with his university tutor, the tutor suggested he accepted the assignment but at the same time stressed the need to be honest and open if he was asked about any relationship with a competing firm.

While he was executing his task, it became very clear that the assignment was based on the knowledge that the required information could not be gathered by a representative of the company itself. It was

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necessary to involve a third party. So far this story could illustrate the previous mechanism of ‘the naughty third’. This story is however different in so far as there was no “wink”. The serious political aspects remained explicit. In reality, the company anticipated an intelligent but at the same time naïve student. When competitors did discover the real background, the student was initially able to genuinely excuse himself; he could argue he was unaware of the secrecy of his job. The company in fact exploited his naivety. During the work placement the student felt increasingly uncomfortable. He became aware of the real delicate relationships, and his role in all of this. As he, *from a certain distance*, observed and *analysed* his situation it became more and more difficult to decide what to do since there were conflicting *values to weigh up*. On the one hand, he wanted to be honest and open, and not behave in a sneaky way. On the other hand, he wanted to continue his study and to make a success of his assignment. His decision was to continue, but at the same time avoid sensitive information being transferred to the company where he was doing his assignment. So in fact his naivety disappeared, and he *accepted his part of the responsibility*.

Comment [GS2]: Did not understand original

4. Drifting perspective

Regularly on Saturdays, and occasionally during the week, a student assisted as a salesman at a car dealer. When he started, he was very astonished with some of the sales practices he met. Although the salesmen were very friendly and helpful towards the customers they did not inform them about all the problems and bad aspects of the second hand cars. Regularly they tried to realise profits that he experienced as unacceptable given the state of the cars, and the fact that the customer was not fully informed about this. After his initial astonishment, he became used to the sales practices of his colleagues and some weeks later he adopted the same habits. In the end, his astonishment was no longer about the behaviour of his colleagues but about his own drifting behaviour and attitude. He became part of the scene but at the same time he did not feel comfortable.

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When the student became a member of the group of salesmen, he took over the set of values and related practices of the group. In the social sciences this phenomenon is known as conformity. Conformity can be defined as a change in behaviour or belief towards that of a group as a result of real or imagined group pressure (Kiesler & Kiesler, 1970; Janis, 1982). Groups exert pressure. Group goals function as a frame of reference. To ensure both the achieving of goals, and the continuation of the group, groups exert pressure on their members. There are several reasons why people conform to norms, values, and behaviours of other people. Most people want to be liked by others, and most people have a need to be correct, to make no mistakes, and to receive positive feedback. In other words, there are aspects of social exchange, social pressure, and informational value. Groups serve both normative and informational functions. As a result, group members vary in the strength of their acceptance of, and commitment to, information, and the norms and values presented to them by other group members. There are, for example, compliant sceptics, who only comply with norms, values, and behaviours for tactical reasons; and reinforcement, versus true, believers who have completely internalised the overt norms and values. It would seem that this student belongs to the category of sceptics. He could have chosen to deviate from the group's norms, but would have risked negative reinforcement by the salesmen. Often, people start as compliant sceptics, but quickly turn into true believers, through a process of reduction of cognitive dissonance between overt behaviours (here: withholding information) and private beliefs (here: one should inform customers). Our student however did not solve this dissonance. Initially his observations and feelings provided reasons to *keep some distance* and to ask questions and to suggest, tactfully, to take into account the interests of the customer. During the first few weeks he found some arguments that helped him to cope with the situation. It also became clear that the only substantial alternative was to leave his job. Alongside this rational, *analytical*, side he was in fact astonished and perhaps even shocked by his emotional reaction. He experienced a kind of drifting perspective. Step by step, he became familiar with the values of the group, and the way they *weighted conflicting values*. With respect to the *attribution of responsibility*, he did not try to hide behind the boss, his colleagues or the company as such. He saw it as his own behaviour, rooted in a set of values that he himself had acquired. When the student told his

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story he was again challenged to take some distance. His problem was no longer his situation as a salesman, but the experience of a drifting perspective. It shows that sometimes one can be unaware of the development of one's own identity.

Recently, many researchers have focused on the use of influence tactics in organizations. Influence tactics are specific types of behaviour designed to exercise influence such as: assertiveness, rationality, ingratiation, exchange, coalition, upward appeal, blocking, use of sanctions, inspirational appeals, and consultation (Kipnis, Schmidt & Wilkinson, 1980; Yukl & Falbe, 1990). Influence tactics have also been studied within the theoretical framework of social power. The best-known typology of bases of social power was developed some four decades ago by French and Raven (1959). They distinguished between reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power. The first three of these are forms of *positional* power (Atwater & Yammarino, 1996; Bass, 1990). Referent and expert power are forms of *personal* power, which stem from the personal attributes of the actor trying to exercise influence. Referent power results from admiration. Targets often seem to internalise the norms and values of actors that have referent and/or expert power. These actors are admired and they are seen to be able to fulfil both informational needs and social needs. The professional authority of an expert who is admired for his knowledge is apparently easily generalized into moral authority. Attempts to influence by people in positions of power, however, often only result in temporary compliance. A reduction of dissonance may sometimes also result in a slow process of gradual internalisation of the norms of others in powerful positions. Finally, there is also the possibility of another, more active, way of adopting a position: careful reflection on observations and actions. This process of reflection may lead to the acceptance of group norms, but it can also result in reconstruction and the creation of a new, authentic, norm (Schön, 1987).

5. Prison of secrecy.

A student worked half time as an office manager in an IT company. Several employees were fellow students and he knew them very well. Some of them had even been invited by him to join

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the company. For all the employees, including the student who told the story, their work was very important to them because of the salary and the good working climate. One day the student was, in strict confidence, informed about the planned closure of his department. They promised him another job and continuity of his salary. In order to avoid anyone leaving or reduced motivation by the other employees, he had to keep the plans secret until the last moment, four weeks later. The student was pressured to promise to maintain secrecy.

Immediately afterwards he regretted that he had given his word to maintain confidentiality. He felt uncomfortable towards his fellow students. He could no longer be open and honest, and was afraid that they would blame him afterwards. By promising secrecy he had surrendered alternative options such as informing his fellow employees or starting initiatives with his people to try to avoid the closure of his department. The student who told the story found it *difficult to weight values* such as “keeping a promise”, “loyalty to employees”, and “openness about plans that really concern the interests of many people”. He regretted that he had reacted immediately when he promised secrecy. In fact, he *needed some distance* to be able to analyse the alternative reactions with respect to his own position and even with respect to the issue of closure. He felt it was impossible to cope with the situation by *attributing responsibility* to the boss. On the contrary, he kept feeling fully responsible for what was going to happen to his people. After some days of thinking and reflection, of analysing and weighting alternatives, he decided to take some of his people into his confidence. Some days later the information leaked out but nobody could trace the source of the leak.

6. Partial involvement

During a summer vacation, a student was employed as a municipality worker in the department that collects waste from companies. Together with a driver, he followed a regular route calling on certain companies. Some of these companies used to put waste in the truck that was not in conformity with the law or local regulations. Nevertheless, the municipal workers tolerated this. Some companies disposed of more waste than was registered, and, in some cases, the waste was

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dangerous in the sense that it was a threat to human health. In exchange for their “tolerance”, the workers would receive some goods produced by the companies.

The student did not feel comfortable with this situation. His colleagues expected him to co-operate in the existing practice and to keep it quiet. He understood their behaviour in as far as they were receiving substantial gifts. But what about the unregistered waste, both quantitatively and qualitatively? He tried to discover the seriousness of the offence. How dangerous was that extra waste? What could happen in the case of exposure? Other questions also arose in trying to *analyse his situation*. What could he do? He *weighed* several behavioural alternatives, and related *values* such as ‘loyalty to colleagues’, ‘behaviour according to the law and regulations’, ‘care for human health’, ‘avoidance of bribery’. Eventually he accepted that he was part of the scene. He could do this because he felt a huge *distance from the situation* because he was only partially (part time and temporary) involved. The question “Who am I to say something about this?” is illustrative in this respect. So, in practice, he *attributed responsibility* predominantly to his fellow-workers, the companies who broke the rules, and the management of his department who allowed room for these practices to occur.

7. Pleasure of the rogue

A student was working in a food producing company. Sometimes, immediately after the periodic inspection, the workers would use up some rotten ingredients that were stored in a secret place. In fact they did this in a roguish atmosphere. It was very unpleasant to see and to smell these rotten ingredients, but at the same time, there was no real danger to human health because of the high temperatures reached during the production process. Thinking of the consumers who would not know what they were eating, and thinking of the inspectors they had fooled by the secret storage place, gave the workers a lot of pleasure. The student felt the same way in so far as he was one of the workers. However, alongside this, he also felt uncomfortable thinking about the inspectors, the meaning of law, and the reliable food he wanted as a consumer.

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The case told by this student illustrates very well how, in social situations, people may be challenged to participate in roguish behaviour. Sharing the pleasurable feeling of the rogue, simply by doing things that are forbidden, can stimulate people to go beyond their normal limits. In this case, the student was challenged during the course to *analyse* what had happened. He argued that the consequences of his behaviour were not really so bad. So, by *weighing different values*, he had accepted that the ‘shared pleasure’ could dominate. In observing the situation, he *adopted some distance*; but, when accepting the common behaviour, he was a full member of the group and also *accepted full responsibility*.

8. Untouchable spectator

One of the students had worked as a volunteer for a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that was trying to do something about the aids problems in Africa. This student felt that it was important work, but at the same time felt that the possibilities for the NGO to really change anything were so small compared to the impact of the problem. He mentioned the difficulty in changing local sexual habits, a lack of cooperation by the pharmaceutical industry, and the low priority aids has in some governments’ decision-making. In addition, the huge number of victims, amongst them many children, made it difficult to know where to begin. He began to doubt if he should continue this work. Increasingly he was aware of the views of many friends who admired him for his work, but at the same time, he was saying to himself “I can’t solve this problem and it is not my responsibility to do something about this”.

In many situations, people seem to behave as untouched spectators even though we would anticipate a strong involvement and a more adequate reaction. It may be that someone, like our student, gets the feeling of being overwhelmed by the situation. The original emotional commitment changes into a process of *distance taking*. The set of values has not changed but, *by weighing them*, the priority moves away from helping others towards assessing the effectiveness of one’s efforts and taking care of one’s own existence. *Analysing the situation*, and the effects of contributions, one may come to the

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conclusion that all help is useless. The main responsibility is *attributed to others*, such as the people themselves or governmental decision-makers. Finally, people may even give the impression that they are untouched by the sadness of others. In our case, after weighing all the values and alternatives, the student withdrew from the NGO.

The mechanism of the untouchable spectator has roots in several phenomena that are studied in social psychology. The diffusion of perceived personal responsibility can affect our willingness to help others, and to behave in accordance with high moral standards. This was the mental mechanism proposed by Latane and Darley (1970) to explain the fact that a young woman, Kitty Genovese, was stabbed to death while the many eyewitnesses did not even call the police. Bystanders often demonstrate such “buck passing” behaviour, especially when there are many other bystanders present. Unresponsive bystanders often “explain” their apathy by claiming that they thought others had already tried to help, or that other persons were in a far better position to offer help. This “explanation”, just like the diffusion of responsibility, functions as a mechanism to reduce the cognitive dissonance between the norm "I should help" and the perception of the actual non-helping behaviour. The theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) argues that cognitive dissonance, i.e. the existence of “non-fitting” relationships among cognitive elements, creates pressures to reduce dissonance. Dissonance reduction may be achieved by changes in cognitions, behaviours, or by selective exposure to new information.

“Blaming the victim” is another frequently observed reaction to the “bad luck” and misery of others. Many people believe that they live in a “just world”, where the fate of people matches what they deserve. People with a strong “just world” belief, who witness an injustice and cannot re-establish justice, are inclined to believe that the victims must have done something which merits their sad fate (Lerner, Miller, & Holmes, 1976).

Sometimes people behave as “untouchables” because they are unable to cope with the immense problems faced. People differ in self-efficacy, the belief that one has the knowledge and skills to do

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certain tasks (Bandura, 1986). Sometimes, the perceived lack of self-efficacy is rather rational and realistic.

Finally, undoubtedly, some people are untouchable simply because of a dominant egoism. A “big five” model of personality is accepted by nearly all personality psychologists, and according to this model, five “major” universal factors or dimensions characterize personality. One of these factors is the altruism-egoism dimension, measuring differences in concern for others versus concern for self (Goldberg, 1981; Carver & Scheier, 1995).

9. Narrative facade¹

One of the students was working in a café. He was faced with a boss who was not used to organising employment and working conditions in a legal and regular way. For example, working hours exceeded legal maxima, overtime was not paid correctly, and money disappeared from the box where all the tips given by clients were collected. Towards his workers, he always presented the most promising plans and stories, but behind this narrative facade, initiatives were never taken to change the situation. This boss always seemed to be helpful and willing to answer questions, but answers were neither precise nor consequent. Despite warnings by fellow students, who had earlier similar experiences, the student initially accepted all the promises. After a time he decided he had to either warn the local authorities, inform future workers, and/or look for another job.

Human nature has a tendency to prefer the principle of ‘believe what people say unless the contrary is incontrovertible’ above ‘do not trust one another unless honesty is proven’. In practice, narratives sometimes replace factual behaviour. In our case, the student did not want to believe the reports he heard in the beginning. Despite these warnings, he was still shocked by the truth. How is it possible

¹ This example is based on a combination of several stories by students in the hotel and catering industry where students have a lot of experience (and not only as consumers!)

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that people, even in face-to-face contacts, again and again are let down over promises without doing anything about it? When *analysing the situation*, by comparing stories and factual behaviour, the student came to the conclusion that he had to *weigh values* like ‘trust’ and ‘distrust’ differently. He also thought about his reaction and the potential effects. In time, he decided to *take some distance, both physically and emotionally*, and to look for a better place to work. He concluded that the character of his boss would not change. He did not *acknowledge any responsibility* for improving the working conditions of the other workers. He argued that it was not his duty to inform local authorities, and he did not feel comfortable about the idea of behaving as a policeman.

Some additional mechanisms

As mentioned earlier, this overview of mechanisms is not exhaustive. The examples were selected to illustrate some of the mechanisms. In practice, in most of the cases, other mechanisms can also be identified. The following mechanisms also refer to examples already discussed.

10. What about you?

Often when a student enters a working situation and tries to question or criticise the ethical content of certain behaviour he is confronted with the question “what about you?” The other people involved try to stress the fact that he himself is no saint. They try to find and refer to situations where he behaved in exactly the same way. Although these comparisons may not fit completely, they contribute to a pressure for the student to accept existing or proposed practices. This mechanism illustrates that, until a certain point in time is reached, individuals have an opportunity to question behaviour, but as soon as they have collaborated, even to the smallest extent, this places them in a position where it is almost impossible to say something about the behaviour of others. In several of the examples this mechanism is visible, especially the cases of the student as a municipal worker (partial involvement) and as a market researcher (functional naivety).

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11. *Deliberate time pressure*

In social situations, time is a relevant variable. We saw it for instance in the example of the student as an office manager (prisoner of secrecy) and with the student who identified his friend as a thief (mistaken loyalty). Sometimes time pressure is unavoidable and sometimes it is deliberately created to force people to cross their own moral thresholds. Conversely, sometimes an immediately stated and clear moral standpoint can be very helpful in setting limits and avoiding future difficulties.

12. *Empty marketplace*

Many of the stories told by students illustrate the mechanism of the empty marketplace. For instance, if in the case of the filling station the boss of the client organisation discovered the continuity of the unacceptable practices the petrol station boss would refer to the student. In the case of the transgressing of the rules with respect to the waste, the student, as a municipal worker, would point to his colleagues. In both cases we see a mechanism of pushing off responsibility. People try to hide behind other people, rules, agreements, promises, or apparent unawareness. As a result, responsibility is difficult or even impossible to address. In terms of responsibility, a vacuum arises: at decisive moments the marketplace of responsibility is empty.

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Use of the mechanisms

The exploration of patterns in social dynamics with respect to responsible behaviour has resulted in twelve identifiable mechanisms. All of these mechanisms have been labelled to assist in developing a narrative tool. Once such a narrative tool has been studied and adopted by someone, it is possible to refer to a complex and dynamic process using only two or three words. This makes it possible to recognise these processes in practice, and to discuss them with others. In our view, this overview and analysis of mechanisms results in a powerful narrative tool that can be used in several settings.

Use of the narrative tool in decision-making

Alongside the theoretical interest, there is a practical interest in improving responsible behaviour of individuals and organisations' level of morality. Distinguishing the twelve mechanisms, analysing and illustrating them, that this will support people in developing their own moral standards and lines of argument. At the same time we are aware that the outcomes of this research could be misused. The mechanisms can be used to strengthen responsible behaviour, but at the same time, they can also be used to avoid and withdraw from responsibilities. It depends on the way the people involved use the different mechanisms, and the opportunities given by the organisational context.

Despite all the good intentions of many people, it seems part of human nature to use these mechanisms, not for strengthening responsible behaviour, but for avoiding bearing any responsibility. If you have no responsibilities, you cannot be blamed. From a Machiavellian point of view, these mechanisms can be used to achieve personal goals without any necessity for consensual justification or taking into account the consequences on others. In the light of the present developments towards the need for transparency and corporate social responsibility, this is a worrying situation.

However, some measures can be taken to encourage the behaviour of individuals and groups in line with shared values and responsibilities. Especially the literature on the development of ethics

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programs renders some important insights for this (Cochran, Trevino and Weaver, 1999; Jones, 1991; Nijhof, Fisscher and Looise, 2000). The narrative tool can be used in the different parts of these processes, for example in dilemma training sessions and the communication with ethical officers.

Use of the narrative tool in educational programmes

In many educational programmes, in public and business administration, there is a distinct lecture course on professional and business ethics. This research can contribute to the design of these courses in so far as they strive to develop student competencies in dealing with dilemmas. If students are aware of the functioning of the different mechanisms, this knowledge can function as anchors in future decision-making. In concrete situations, certain pitfalls can be avoided and problems anticipated. Studying the social dynamic side of responsible behaviour is a valuable addition to the more rational parts of the courses such as stakeholder analysis.

Use of the narrative tool in policy making and deployment

Insights into mechanisms can be used in policy development. What can be done from an organizational point of view to strengthen behaviour that takes into account certain values and responsibilities? Having knowledge of the mechanisms enables management to formulate, implement, and stimulate good practices. Management should create conditions which enhance moral behaviour. Employees need to know that ethical behaviour is required, and desired, by their organization. The formal policy needs to be clear, and the narrative tool can be used to formulate a clear ethical policy. Clarity is achieved by short labels and by vivid examples. However, there is more that should be done. An organization should also offer its employees the resources necessary to demonstrate the ethical behaviour. Reinforcement may also help in stimulating an increased frequency of the desired behaviours. Managers themselves also need to consistently behave according to the ethical norms and standards that they claim to be desirable: observation can be a very effective method for learning new

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behaviours (Bandura, 1965). Especially the observation of the behaviour of high status people leads to imitation of these desired behaviours.

Use of the narrative tool for collective action

All of the mechanisms describe the behaviour of individuals, interacting with their environment in the case of concrete incidents in concrete situations. In fact, it is a categorisation of critical incidents on the level of individual behaviour. One important question that arises concerns the applicability of the mechanisms at the collective level of an organisation, which, just like an individual, will in practice be challenged to take responsibility.

The previous paragraph raises the question whether the same mechanisms can be helpful in understanding, analysing and even organising responsible behaviour of organisational entities such as corporations, business units, departments, and teams. The question as to whether organisations can bear moral responsibility is extensively discussed in literature. Werhane (1985) presented an overview of this discussion and concluded that organisations can be moral actors, but only in a secondary sense. This means that it is always human beings who decide and act as the primary actors. Given that the primary actions emerge in a historical context, influenced by organisational constraints and through interaction with a group of people, makes it possible and necessary to identify organisations as moral actors. Collective actions can often be explained by social identity, and social identity varies with self-categorization. Group behaviour follows from acts of categorization, specifically from self-categorization. As a group member, or an organizational member, “who one is” (the self) is defined in terms of attributes that are shared with other persons, who are perceived to be members of the same social category (group, organization). Social identity salience is enhanced by intergroup contexts, which leads to the perception of a homogeneous ingroup, and a homogeneous outgroup, i.e. the minimizing of intra-category differences, and simultaneously the exaggeration of differences between the two groups (maximizing inter-category differences). In inter-group contexts, the phenomenon of

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ingroup favouritism is a consequence of the striving for a positive social identity (Haslam, 2001). So, as the saying goes, charity begins at home, not only for individuals but also at the aggregate level of groups and organizations. Apparently, ethical, responsible behaviour may diminish in salient inter-category contexts.

Fisscher and De Weerd (2000) highlight the question as to what kind of competencies are needed on an organisational level in order to be able to behave as a responsible actor. This requires eccentricity on a collective level, including a combination of responsibility, intelligence, and identity. Specifically this issue of identity requires more attention. Both in literature, and in the practice of ethical behaviour, identity seems to be a somewhat neglected issue. Identity implies a clear demarcation of organisational units in a formal sense, as well as in the sense of a unit that is recognizable as such and which invites identification by its members (Hekman, 1995). Identity also implies clear expressions of the character and the image of the respective organisational entities.

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Discussion and conclusions

The issue of responsibility is often seen as a relevant, but at the same time a very difficult, one for people in their social or business environment. We have collected many stories about the experiences of students in worrying situations. Based on this empirical assessment, we have tried to develop a number of identifiable mechanisms. All the mechanisms have in common that four key processes can be distinguished: distance taking, analysing the situation, weighting values, and attributing responsibility. The overview of twelve mechanisms need not be exhaustive; saturation was only reached in the sense that new student stories did not result in new mechanisms. Future research can build upon this and maybe identify some additional mechanisms.

We have illustrated each mechanism by a concrete story about responsibility as experienced by students. By developing this typology of mechanisms, we hope *to contribute* to the understanding of the social dynamic side of responsible behaviour. This understanding can be used in educational programmes to make students aware of the different mechanisms, interactions, and the choices they can make. Furthermore, the understanding gained can also be used directly in the management of change processes and improvement methods within companies. This research can contribute to a more conscious use of the different mechanisms in the social interactions among all the people involved.

The fact that we focussed on students in our research could have biased the results. Clearly, research among advocates, CEOs, nurses, or any other grouping, would result in different examples of ethical issues. This would certainly change the illustrations of the mechanisms. The central question is, however, whether this would also change the mechanisms identified. In our view, the same mechanisms would be identified, although the magnitude of the impacts would differ tremendously. The student examples were often presented in an atmosphere of “naughtiness”. However, depending on the power and influence of the decision-makers, the impact of the use or misuse of the mechanisms could take more serious forms (Dunbar and Ahlstrom, 1995). For example, organisations can use the mechanism of ‘the naughty third’ when they outsource high-risk activities so that a third party gets the

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blame for any incidents. It would be a valuable topic for further research to study the use and completeness of the overview of mechanisms in other settings.

The research presented in this article is to a limited extent compared with insights obtained from various social science streams. Embedding the mechanisms in the existing literature increases the understanding of the social dynamic side of responsible behaviour. Insights from the fields of social psychology and other behavioural sciences can be especially explored further to enhance one's understanding of how the different mechanisms work.

The empirical basis of this research provided the foundation for the identification and conceptualisation of the different mechanisms. However, the extent to which these mechanisms are deliberately used in practice, and what effects result, remain unanswered. A more quantitative research design could generate important insights into the actual use of the mechanisms in real organisational settings.

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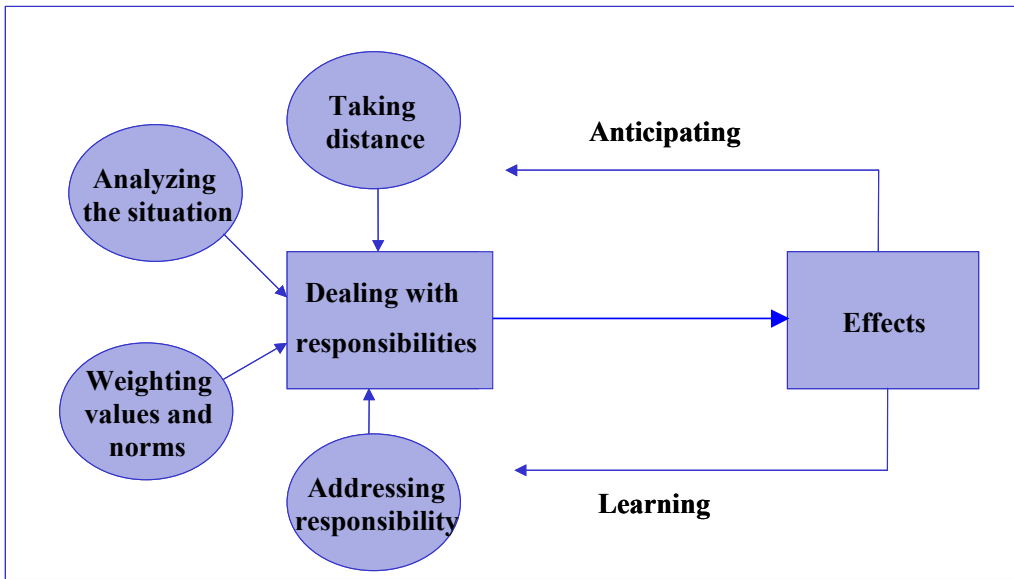


Figure 1: Frame of reference: key processes in dealing with ethical issues.

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