Chapter 4

Utilitarian Ethics and Counselor Decision-Making

Utilitarianism is a Western theory that has a history dating back to the late 1700s (Harris, 2002; Shanahan & Wang, 2003). It has influenced the ethical decision-making in many facets of our lives including state and federal laws as well as professional codes of ethics. Harris stated that "utilitarianism is one of the most powerful and persuasive traditions of moral thought in our culture" (p. 119). Quinton (1973) suggested that "Utilitarianism can be understood as a movement for legal, political and social reform that flourished in the first half of the nine-teenth century" (p. 1). Rachels (1998) described utilitarian theory as based in social reform in human behavior, offering an alternative to natural law.

The earliest proponent of utilitarian theory was David Hume in the mid-1700s (Rachels, 1998). Hume introduced many of the basic concepts of utilitarian theory and he believed morals guided human behavior (Quinton, 1973). Hume's basic beliefs included a perception that humans are naturally kind (Quinton). According to Quinton, a second belief proposed by Hume was that humans sympathize with others and seek common ground.

Jeremy Bentham followed Hume and was the first to formally write down ideas about utilitarian theory (Shanahan & Wang, 2003). Bentham's original views were influenced by his background in economics and government. Several key assumptions are characteristic of Bentham's views. First, he believed that pleasure and pain influenced human behavior and human decision-making. Consequently, what is good or bad is related to what is pleasurable or painful, the hedonist principle (Quinton, 1973). His simple view of ethics was that good or bad is a function of

differences in the amount of pleasure or pain between courses of action for all individuals involved (Shanahan & Wang). Second, Bentham believed that good or pleasure as an outcome for all affected by a circumstance could be quantified. Specific amounts of pleasure could be attached to an action for an individual affected by the decision, and a total amount of pleasure could be calculated by summing values attached to everyone affected (Shanahan & Wang). Bentham proposed the *principle of utility,* which states that whenever there is a choice between several options the ethical choice is the one that has the best overall outcome for all involved (Rachels, 1998).

John Stuart Mill was a second proponent of utilitarian theory and studied Bentham's views. Mill received only informal training at home but studied Greek and Latin. He additionally studied logic and read Bentham's work at an early age. Mill wrote in the same vein as Bentham on such topics as government, economics, and ethics (Shanahan & Wang, 2003).

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Mill expanded Bentham's views, going beyond the simple concept of pleasure versus pain to introduce the idea that certain pleasures are higher than others. A criticism of utilitarianism was that there was no difference morally between animals and humans if an ethical decision was based upon simply identifying pleasure versus pain. Mill proposed that some human pleasures could be categorized as higher pleasures than others. An example of a higher pleasure is the intellect. Therefore, taking a stimulating class that benefits individuals and enlightens them, and that then may result in distribution of this new knowledge, would be more ethical than the satisfaction of sexual or physical desires that benefit only a few.

The ultimate decision as to whether *an action is ethical is determined by the outcome;* this is the *consequentialist principle* (Quinton, 1973). Intentions are not considered important in the ethical decision-making in utilitarian theory (Knapp, 1999). Rachels (1998) noted that Bentham and Mill believed there are *basic propositions* in utilitarian theory. "First, actions are to be judged right or wrong solely by virtue of their consequences, nothing else matters" (p. 102). He further stated, "In assessing consequences, the only thing that matters is the amount of happiness or unhappiness that is created; everything else is irrelevant" (p. 102). Moldoveanu and Stevenson (1998) noted one of the most important characteristics of utilitarian theory is the *greatest happiness principle,* or GHP. Knapp best described the ultimate goal of utilitarian theory thus: "The purpose of ethics is to engender the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. The

sole moral duty is to produce as much pleasure as possible (positive utilitarianism) or to decrease as much pain as possible (negative utilitarianism)" (p. 11). Finally, Rachels stated, "Each person's happiness counts the same" (p. 102). Curiously, utilitarian theory also holds that the needs of nonhumans or animals are relevant in considering ethical decisions.

Harris (2002) noted that utility may be associated with happiness. Utility is defined as "preference or desire satisfaction" (p. 121). He further proposed that preferences or desires can be arranged hierarchically. For example, the hierarchy may include the following: "1) preferences whose satisfaction contributes to the preferences of others; 2) preferences whose satisfaction is neutral with respect to the preference satisfaction of others; 3) preferences whose satisfaction decreases the preference satisfaction of others." In other words, utilitarian theory holds that promoting the happiness of others is most important, while at the same time promoting the satisfaction or happiness of the self. Next is happiness for the self that has no impact on others. Finally, happiness for the self that decreases the satisfaction of others has the least utility.

Harris (2002) has suggested an approach to quantifying the utility of an act. In this model Harris suggests assigning values to, first, the number of persons affected by an act. Second, values are assigned to units of utility per person. Table 4.1 is an example.

Harris (2002) explains the distribution of units of utility as the amount of happiness that does not affect the happiness of others in a negative way. In the example above, Act 1 has one hundred units of utility per person, whereas Act 2 has only two units of utility per person because Act 2 decreases the happiness of others. Consequently, the more ethical choice is Act 1, even though Act 2 affects more people.

Utilitarian theorists have differentiated between two types of utilitarian theory: *act utilitarianism* and *rule utilitarianism* (Harris, 2002). *Act utilitarianism is based solely on evaluation of the specific circumstance(s).* The above example from Harris is consistent with act utilitarianism. The determination of the more ethical action is based solely on the circumstances of the two acts considered. The *outcome has little impact on future ethical decisions.* Moldoveanu and Stevenson

Table 4.1   A Method for Calculating Utility

Action	Number of people affected	Units of utility per person	Total
Act 1	2	100	200
Act 2	50	2	100

Source: Harris, C. (2002). *Applying moral theories.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

(1998), in referring to act utilitarianism and the GHP, stated, "The Greatest Happiness Principle focuses on individual actions, and considers them independently of any rules that may be embodied in them" (p. 723).

Rule utilitarianism is founded on the belief that general rules govern ethical behavior. There are choices of actions that in general produce the most utility across many circumstances. Harris (2002), in describing rule utilitarianism, stated: "*Rules or actions are right insofar as they promote utility and wrong insofar as they promote disutility*" (p. 126). Moldoveanu and Stevenson (1998) wrote that rule utilitarianism based upon GHP is "the rule embodied by an action, and asks about the global utility consequences of acting in accordance with that rule, given what we know about how everyone else usually acts" (p. 723). Knapp (1999) described a benefit of rule utilitarianism being that rules for protection of minorities can be developed; this contrasts with an assessment based upon act utilitarianism, which may conclude that protecting minorities in a particular situation does not represent benefiting the greatest number with the most good. Another indication of the utility of a rule is whether others obey the rule.

There are circumstances under which act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism would come to different ethical conclusions about the same situation. Colby, Gibbs, Kohlberg, Speicher-Dubin, and Candee (1979) developed methods of assessing moral development. One dilemma they used in their assessment may illustrate the possible different outcomes with act versus rule utilitarianism. The dilemma is described thus:

> In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid $200 for the radium and charged $2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about $1,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying, and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and considered breaking into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife. (p. 1)

Based upon the act utilitarianism, one would calculate the utility of Heinz's two choices: (a) stealing the drug and saving his wife's life, or (b) not stealing the drug and having his spouse die of cancer. The first step is the identification of those affected by the decision. Three individuals are immediately identified: Heinz, his

Table 4.2   Example of Calculation of Utility

Action	Number affected	Units of utility	Total
Act 1: steal drug	Heinz	100	100
	Heinz's spouse	100	100
	Druggist	1	1
		Total	201
Act 2: do not steal drug and let spouse die	Heinz	1	1
	Heinz's spouse	1	1
	Druggist	1	1
		(does not know Heinz's spouse)	
		Total	3

Source: Adapted from Harris, C. (2002). *Applying moral theories*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

spouse, and the druggist. So, based upon Harris's (2002) format the calculations shown in Table 4.2 would be made.

If Heinz steals the drug, as in Act 1, the act will have high utility for both him and his spouse. The druggist will experience low utility and even possibly be harmed, to the degree that he is affected by losing $200. Act 2 results in minimal happiness and utility. Thus the person using act utilitarianism would choose Act 1; Heinz would be acting ethically to steal the drug for his ill spouse and save her life based upon utilitarian theory and the greatest good.

Rule utilitarianism would involve a review of general principles surrounding stealing. Would most people benefit and experience high utility if it is okay to steal when the situation warrants it? An answer to how rule utilitarianism would interpret the situation may be found in state and federal laws, which frequently are based upon utilitarian principles. There are no exceptions to laws against stealing. If people do steal under unique circumstances such as those described in the Heinz dilemma, they may receive reduced sentences, but their thefts are still considered illegal. Under rule utilitarianism it would be determined to be unethical to steal the drug from the druggist. So the ethical decision using rule utilitarianism is to choose Act 2, not steal the drug.

The common use of utilitarian ethics is noted by Knapp (1999), who stated, "On one level, many lay persons and psychologists are more or less utilitarian, although they might not have reflected in depth as to the foundations of their ethical beliefs" (p. 383). Utilitarian ethics has permeated much of our thinking and societal practices (De Keijser, Van der lendeen, & Jackson, 2002).

ADDITIONAL READINGS: UTILITARIAN ETHICS

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