

ETHICS PROBLEMS...AND PROBLEMS IN POLLING ON ETHICS

By Everett Carl Ladd

The state of Americans' ethics is a subject of enormous concern and, seemingly, growing attention. In the first article which follows this introduction, Rushworth M. Kidder notes "the dozens of ethics organizations growing up around the nation, the hundreds of executive ethics seminars presented each year, and the thousands of students now sharing in the new 'character education' movement in schools...." Discussions of ethics issues figures prominently in press coverage. Kidder cites data showing, for example, that between 1969 and 1989, the number of stories indexed under "ethics" in the *New York Times* index jumped by 400%.

We also have survey data indicating that the proportion of the public troubled by what they perceive to be ethical deficiencies in our society is not only large but expanding. I'll discuss these findings, and speculate on their origins, later in this piece.

First, though, it's necessary to acknowledge that—while there are bright spots—extant polling information on ethics leaves much to be desired. Three times in the past, in the brief span in which we have been publishing this magazine, we made plans to present compilations of data on ethics. After conducting our searches and bringing together all the good material we could locate, each time we abandoned our plans. The findings just didn't seem to touch insightfully and persuasively on many key issues involving ethical standards and performance.

Now, on our fourth try, we have decided to go ahead and publish. We were persuaded to do so in part by the willingness of two thoughtful students of devel-

opments in public thinking and behavior in the area of ethics to provide commentary that helps guide our readers through the available data. Rushworth Kidder, who is president of the Institute for Global Ethics, and who has written extensively on the subject, gives us an overview of what's known from survey findings. Stephen Davis, professor of psychology at Emporia State University, who has done extensive research on the incidence and the sources of cheating in the nation's schools, summarizes his findings, and those of other researchers, in the article which follows Kidder's.

HELP!

By delving into nooks and crannies we overlooked previously, we have managed to accumulate a reasonably impressive body of information. Still, it's not enough. Our final reason for proceeding with the publication of these data, then, is to issue a call to organizations interested in charting ethical standards and performance, and to the survey research community. It can be simply stated: HELP!

Part of the problem stems from the fact that "ethics" covers a lot of ground. The subject is so multifaceted that polling on it easily becomes unfocused and diffuse. We conducted our data searches around a variety of topics and issues. We looked for survey work on sexual norms and conduct, honesty and lying, stealing, questions of insurance fraud, on acceptable and unacceptable conduct by employees toward their employer, and vice versa. We examined polling on business ethics and medical ethics.

We also reviewed survey information on problems in defining right and

wrong, on where people say they get their own guiding values and where they see cues coming from in the larger society. We paid special attention to surveys of young people and what they have to say about their own ethical judgments, the pressures they feel (or don't feel) in exercising these judgments, their professed conduct in areas from honesty to sex.

Good Questions, But Weak Methodology—And Vice-Versa

Often, we found, there is a mismatch between the questions asked and the methods used in asking them. On the one hand, there are plenty of methodologically sound surveys, with good samples, that ask questions on this subject which are simply not very penetrating. On the other hand, there are studies—often the ones most cited in the press—where certain questions are quite interesting, and hold promise of getting beneath the platitudinous surface of things, but where it's hard to know what credence to give the responses because of the absence of systematic sampling.

The latter deficiency characterizes the much-publicized "survey" work of the Joseph and Edna Josephson Institute of Ethics. The Institute developed a very interesting questionnaire for its 1991-92 study of "Ethics, Values, Attitudes and Behavior in American Schools," and we would have liked to be able to feature some of its findings in this issue. But while the project directors posed questions to a large number of people (about 9,000) and approached the subject thoughtfully, they didn't develop a proper sample. Those who answered the questionnaire seem to have been brought into the study

mostly as "targets of opportunity." Actually, we're told little about their selection, only what proportions came from what kinds of schools (public, private, high school, college), and how many were not in school. We're also shown the geographic distribution of the participants: e.g., 4 from New Mexico, 22 from Virginia, 25 from Connecticut, 439 from Minnesota, 550 from New York, and 1,994 from California.

The absence of systematic sampling is evident enough. The problem comes because the report doesn't warn readers—and media coverage of it has been heavy—of the implications of not drawing a proper sample of the student population—that as it is we just don't know what to make of the various percentages the study has yielded.

The object of a proper survey is, of course, to give us a measure of precision in charting attitudes or opinions that casual observation cannot provide. The authors of the Josephson Institute study conclude that it "reveals that a disturbingly high proportion of young people regularly engage in dishonest and irresponsible behavior..." (p. 17). I agree, but only because I would call it "disturbingly high" whether 20% or 40% or 60% engaged in the various forms of unethical action. Seriously now, it's a little late in human history to present as a finding that disturbingly high proportions of people variously err and sin. The Josephson Institute study is well-intentioned, but wholly lacking in the kind of precision a systematic survey would provide.

We Say Things Are Sliding, But Are They?

Ethics do matter, we are aware—matter deeply to the present and future of a society we love. What most people want to learn about ethics in contemporary America isn't whether there are areas where behavior is deficient—because

surely there are—but rather, which way, overall, are we trending. It's complex and hard to answer, at best—but are we losing ground, for all our wealth and material good fortune? It does matter which way the great engines of contemporary society are pulling us. Surely we should be reluctant to subject them to radical overhaul simply because the society manifests disturbingly high levels of imperfection.

There's a place for systematic survey research in helping us gauge the direction in which we are headed in the various

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areas where questions of ethical norms and conduct arise. And from this tracking, we can reach some overall judgments on firmer grounds than impulses like nostalgia.

What the Data Show

Examining the reliable survey data which are available to us, we see that in some important areas the big story is the absence of broad agreement as to what constitutes ethical behavior. But more often than not, the data indicate there is in fact considerable agreement on the norm. If we are going to Hell in a handbasket, it's not because the preponderance of Americans have abandoned their attachment to some older verities (p. 31 of this issue).

The survey data which we present below make clear that today a larger proportion of Americans express concern that we're losing ground in the area of "standards" than did so in earlier periods for which we have survey data (p. 30). But again, we have to ask what this finding means. Are more people more con-

cerned because there is in fact more to be concerned about? Or, is it that many Americans today have become more inclined than they used to be to look doubtfully on a broad sweep of social performance?

We explored this question in the July/August issue of *The Public Perspective*, in a long data essay on "Democracies' Discontents." I wrote in those pages that survey research shows that large and often growing proportions of Americans are offering negative assessments of many aspects of our social and political life, and I speculated—as others have—that changes in communications media structure and content may be importantly implicated.

Consideration of the latter arguments is beyond the reach of this brief introduction. What needs emphasis here is simply that the fact higher proportions of the public are now professing concern about a perceived decline in ethical standards, hardly constitutes proof standards are actually declining.

We say in our responses to survey questions that our own sense of right and wrong was shaped heavily by the family life in which we grew up. We say that we hold the same basic values our parents did on most matters of ethics—that we are on the whole very much "traditionalists"—and we think our children follow us in these beliefs.

But we express concern that, for young people in general, the old-time standards-setting to which we were exposed, and which we have passed on to our children, is being replaced by a new one—centered in remote and morally vacuous institutions, such as popular music, TV, and movies (p. 34). This concern has some foundation, I think, but is it in a larger sense valid? From a review of survey data, we just don't know.

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