

Teaching Moral Theories Using *Lone Survivor*

Barry L. Boyd  
Associate Professor  
Department of Agricultural Leadership,  
Education, & Communications  
Texas A&M University  
222 AGLS  
College Station, TX 77843-2116  
b-boyd@tamu.edu

## Abstract

Four members of SEAL Team 10 faced a moral dilemma during Operation Redwings in 2005. Their mission was compromised when three goat herders discovered their position. They had to decide if they should kill the herders and continue their mission or release them, thus terminating their mission unsuccessfully. Students in an applied ethics class were asked which moral theories applied to their eventual decision.

## Introduction

In an applied ethics in leadership course, the key word is applied. Helping students see the application of moral theories in real-life situations is critical to their understanding, but many case studies from the business world can be boring because most students are not yet connected to the business world. Even though authentic cases may be used, they have the same impact as contrived cases. Students also have difficulty connecting to contrived cases. However, students are surrounded by and connected to pop culture and as such, pop culture can be used to gain their interest and help them see connections between moral theory and real-life moral dilemmas.

## Literature Review

Williams and McClure note that “leadership educators have established the use of popular media in the classroom in an effort to assist students’ in learning complex concepts such as leadership theory” (2010, p. 86). Many educators have described their use of popular media to teach leadership concepts and to help students apply leadership theories (Abbott, 2010; Bogarosh & Andenoro, 2009; Boyd, 2013; Graham, Ackermann, & Maxwell, 2004; Hall, 2010; Loughman & Finley, 2010). In fact, Williams and McClure (2010) found that the use of popular media, or public pedagogy, to be a more effective teaching strategy for teaching leadership theory over traditional lecture.

Movies, television shows, art, and literature are all mediums used in leadership classrooms. Non-fiction literature can be especially effective in teaching leadership theories because it allows students to empathize with those affected, analyze a situation, and solve the problem by applying classroom theory. Burnette, Pollack, and Forsyth (2011) used this type of literature to demonstrate the dangers of groupthink.

Case studies are just one tool in the educator's toolbox. Case studies have been used to encourage student reflection, improve understanding of complex theories, and practice problem-solving skills (Keyton & Shockley-Zalabak, 2006). They allow students to analyze critical incidents, apply theories and strategies to real-life situations, and utilize best practices. "Cases provide contextualized learning, as contrasted with learning disassociated from meaningful contexts" (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006, p. 223). However, case studies do not appear to be used as extensively in leadership education as one might expect. Jenkins (2012) examined the preferred teaching methods of leadership educators. According to Jenkins, case studies are only "occasionally" used by leadership educators.

Case studies can be an effective way to teach moral theories. Enlow and Popa (2008) built a case around the fictitious film, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, to foster moral imagination, but moral development and decisions can also be demonstrated through actual accounts of moral decision making. Marcus Luttrell (Luttrell & Robinson, 2007) describes such an account where his moral fortitude was tested in a way most students will never experience.

### Program Description

In a senior-level applied ethics in leadership class, the instructor used a moral dilemma from the book *Lone Survivor: The Eyewitness Account of Operation Red Wing and the Lost Heroes of SEAL Team 10* (Luttrell & Robinson, 2007). Most students in the class had seen the movie by the same title that was released in 2013. Some had even read Luttrell's book. Luttrell presents a real-life moral dilemma faced by the four members of SEAL team 10 when they were discovered by three goat herders while on a mission deep in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, in 2005 (Luttrell & Robinson, 2007). Students were asked to read an excerpt from the book describing the team's dilemma and then apply the appropriate moral theories to the case.

### Background

In 2005, four members of Seal Team 10 (Lt. Mike Murphy; Sonar Technician, Matt Axelson; Gunners Mate, Danny Dietz; and Hospital Corpsman, Marcus Luttrell) were on a reconnaissance mission in the mountainous region of the Kunar Province in Afghanistan. Their mission was to locate Ahmad Shah, the leader of a large Taliban force known to occupy that area. After hiking more than four miles, most of it vertically, the men arrived on the cliffs above the village where the leader was suspected to be hiding. As the team observed the village below them from concealed positions, a local goat herder walked right into their position. He was soon followed by another, younger man and a young boy with about 100 goats. The team had been discovered (Luttrell & Robinson, 2007).

### Moral Dilemma#1

The SEAL team members were faced with the decision of what to do with the three goat herders who had stumbled upon the team during their reconnaissance mission. Their decision was complicated by the fact that the three goat herders were unarmed and one of the herders was a boy of about 14 years. The military option would be to kill the goat herders to protect the mission and the team's own lives. But the Geneva Convention clearly states that unarmed civilians are to be spared. To further complicate their decision, they knew that if they killed the goat herders, their bodies would be found and the Taliban would use the herders' deaths to

condemn the American military in the press. The team feared that they could be brought up on murder charges upon returning to the United States and be sent to a civilian prison. They had seen this very scenario unfold for several of their fellow soldiers. The team each gave input to Lt. Murphy who made the decision to let the herders go free.

In the assignment, students were asked to read the account from the book and determine which moral theory the team used in making their decision and to ascertain each team member's stage of moral development using Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development (Cain, 1999).

## Moral Dilemma#2

The book contains another moral dilemma that the students were not asked to address, but offers a different cultural perspective on ethics. After crawling down the mountain about 7 miles, a severely wounded Luttrell was eventually found by a group of men from a nearby village. They took Luttrell to their village, treated his injuries, and sent a runner to the nearest U.S. military post for help. In the meantime, U.S. forces searched for survivors from the ambush. Simultaneously, the Taliban found out that Luttrell was in the village and demanded that the village leader, Mohammad Gulab, hand him over to the Taliban. Gulab refused to turn the American over to them, despite the Taliban's threats to himself and the village. What moral theory describes Gulab's decision and why?

## Student Results

Students were able to justify the application of several moral theories to the SEAL team's dilemma. Altruism states that we do that action that is in the best interests of others, even if there is a cost to us (Pojman & Fieser, 2009). While it may appear that the team was altruistic in their decision to set the unarmed goat herders free, a case may be made that their decision was egoistic. Egoism states that we do that action which is in our own self-interest. During the SEAL's discussion over what to do, it was mentioned several times that if they were to kill the goat herders, their bodies would soon be found and the Taliban would go to the media with the discovery. The media storm might lead to the team members being charged with murder. It was in their own self-interest to release the herders. Other theories that could be applied include Social Contract Theory, Moral Objectivism, and Moral Relativism (Pojman & Fieser, 2009). The students were also able to assign a stage of moral development using Kohlberg's six stages of moral development (Pojman & Fieser, 2009). They were able to see that members of a group who are approximately the same age and with similar experiences can be at different stages of moral development.

Gulab's decision to not turn Luttrell over to the Taliban was altruistic. He was following an ages-old ethnic-Pashtun tradition known as Pashtunwali. Pashtunwali obliges Pashtuns to help and protect anyone in need, friend or enemy. This is also an example of moral objectivism. Moral objectivism states that there are moral rules that apply to everyone, regardless of the circumstance (Pojman & Fieser, 2009). Gulab was honoring the Pashtunwali tradition, even though his life and his village were threatened. Because of his action, several attempts have been made on Gulab's life. While these attempts have been unsuccessful, the Taliban has killed several of his relatives. Gulab refuses to leave his village.

### Conclusions/Recommendations

The use of cases from the popular media that are actual cases of moral decision-making engages students in the analysis of those decisions. Such case studies provide a greater level of engagement from the students while helping them see moral theories in action. What may appear to be an altruistic act (letting the herders go free) turns out to be an act of egoism when the decision-making process is examined. Students also gained a better understanding of the stages of moral development and how people of similar ages and experience can be at different stages of development.

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### Author Biography

Barry Boyd is an Associate Professor in Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications at Texas A&M University. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in personal leadership development, ethics in leadership, leadership theory, leadership of volunteers, and youth leadership programs.