

EXAMINING A CHAIN REACTION OF LIES: Using Chernobyl (Miniseries) to Teach Ethical Leadership

Abstract

Classroom leadership instruction can be monotonous at times, especially for undergraduate students, who may not have extensive experiences to connect course content to “real world” applications. A number of scholars have indicated that popular culture resources can be beneficial in fostering the active engagement of participants during the learning process. This article explains how the 2019 Chernobyl historical drama television miniseries can be used to illustrate ethical theories. In addition, the article offers discussion questions to guide the facilitators in classroom interaction.

“What is the cost of lies? It’s not that we will mistake them for the truth. The real danger is that, if we hear enough lies, then we no longer recognize the truth at all”- Valery Legasov, Chernobyl Miniseries (Mazin & Renck, 2019a).

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the ethical leadership topic. However, illustrating abstract ethical theories and their real-life applications may be challenging to facilitators. To overcome this issue, popular culture artifacts (PCAs) can be used. Doing so has several benefits, such as making the classroom material more fun for students, helping students to develop their critical thinking skills and aligning classroom materials with the real world (Centellas, 2010). PCAs are ideal for teaching leadership, because they enable learners to recognize current trends and understand concepts by using tools that pique their interest (Callahan et al., 2007).

Regarding which, this article explores how facilitators can utilize the Chernobyl miniseries to teach ethical leadership theories. In addition, even though there are differences between the scenario of the miniseries and what actually happened at Chernobyl (Shellenberger, 2019; Shramovych & Chornous, 2019; Conca, 2019; Gessen, 2019), the series is based on actual historical events and thus, this is not purely fiction. In sum, the unprecedented cleanup efforts after the nuclear disaster and ethical dilemmas faced by the main characters are likely to spark student interest in the topic.

To set the stage for the application of ethical theories to the Chernobyl miniseries, in the next section, I first examine the integration of PCAs into leadership education. After that, I present a review of the domains of ethical theories. Next, I explain the connection of ethical theories to the Chernobyl miniseries. Then, I provide discussion questions for classroom instruction along with the conclusion.

Using Popular Culture Artifacts (PCAs) in Leadership Education

Leadership educators have the challenging task of explaining abstract concepts and ideas to their students. Teachers of leadership have recognized the potential of popular media to illustrate abstract leadership concepts and have been utilizing PCAs (such as movies, newspapers, television, books, and social media) in classroom settings to pursue this goal (Callahan et al., 2007; Williams & McClure, 2010; Odom et al., 2013). There are several benefits of integrating PCAs into leadership education. First, as stated earlier, PCAs are ideal for teaching leadership, because they enable learning by using tools that spark student interest. Second, PCAs serve as practical examples for understanding leadership theories. For when deploying these, leader decisions can be seen in context, and connections can be made between leader beliefs, values, and actions (Callahan et al., 2007; English & Steffy, 1997). Furthermore, PCAs provide vicarious learning experiences, without the need to make mistakes personally to learn the leadership lessons (Callahan et al., 2007). Cummins (2007) also pointed out that many of the same leadership problems take place across organizations for most leaders. The author added that with a careful selection of PCAs, it is possible to help leadership students to comprehend the potential solutions without the related cost of time and effort to handle every issue as a unique situation. Moreover, PCAs teach students to recognize connections and make inferences on phenomena from everyday contexts. The presumption here is that, if students apply leadership theories to PCAs, they will be capable of applying and using these theories in everyday life (Callahan et al., 2007). Such benefits of integrating PCAs into the classroom are supported by research, such as that of Callahan and Rosser (2007), Williams and McClure (2010), Wimmer et al. (2012), and Odom et al. (2013). Acknowledging these benefits, in this article, how the Chernobyl miniseries can be used to illustrate ethical theories is explained. In the following section, I briefly discuss the main domains of ethical

theories.

Domains of Ethical Theories

Ethics is defined as “judgment about whether human behavior is right or wrong” (Johnson, 2018, p. xxii). Ethical theory provides a system of rules or principles that direct us when making decisions about what is right or wrong in a specific situation. We can divide ethical theories into two main domains: Theories about leaders’ Conduct and theories about leaders’ Character. Ethical theories that address the Conduct of the leaders are then divided into two types: Consequences (Teleological) and Duty (Deontological) theories (Northouse, 2013). In consequentialist theories, the rightness or wrongness of a decision is decided upon in regard to the action’s outcomes (Peach, 1995). When determining consequences, there are three different approaches to make decisions about moral conduct: Ethical Egoism, Utilitarianism, and Altruism (Northouse, 2013). While ethical egoism holds that people should pursue only their own wellbeing (Rachels, 2003), under utilitarianism, it is argued that one should attempt to create the greatest good for the greatest number of people (Johnson, 2018). Opposite to ethical egoism, under altruism, it is argued that our behaviors ought to be aimed at helping others, regardless of the personal cost (Johnson, 2018; Northouse, 2013).

Whilst Teleological theories focus on what actions will create which outcomes, Deontological ones consider whether the action itself is good. Actions such as telling the truth, being fair and keeping promises, are essentially good, regardless of the outcomes (Northouse, 2013). Deontological theories are also called duty ethics, because they emphasize ideas of obligation and duty (Banks, 2009). While Teleological and Deontological theories look at the behavior of the leader a second domain of ethical theories approach ethics from the perspective of leaders’ Character (Northouse, 2013). These virtue-based theories consider who leaders are and propose that these virtues can be learned with practice (Rowe,

2007). These theories emphasize the development and training of moral values. Virtue ethics is strongly influenced by Aristotle. According to his writings, a moral person demonstrates virtues, such as courage, fairness, justice, self-control, temperance and generosity (Velasquez, 1992; Northouse, 2013). Having outlined ethical theories, in the following section, I provide background information about the Chernobyl miniseries along with specific examples for each ethical theory covered.

Connecting Chernobyl (miniseries) to Ethics

Before discussing the examples from the miniseries, it is deemed beneficial to provide students some background information regarding the actual events in Chernobyl and the main characters of the series. Information about the Chernobyl accident can be provided by the facilitators, as outlined below, or they can ask their students to search for it.

About the Chernobyl Nuclear Accident. On April 25 and 26, 1986, the worst nuclear accident in history happened in Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the Soviet Union (in today's northern Ukraine). This incident was a turning point in both the Cold War and the history of nuclear power (Blakemore, n.d.). A safety test at the plant went quickly out of control and a series of explosions blew apart Chernobyl's reactor No. 4. The Soviet authorities initially denied the accident and acted slowly to control it (Greenspan, 2019; Taylor, 2011). The explosion initially caused about 30 deaths and millions of people were subjected to dangerous radiation levels (Guy, 2019). Determining the wider impact of the accident on human health proved to be a difficult task, with estimates of associated deaths from cancer ranging from 4,000 to more than 200,000 (Taylor, 2011).

About Chernobyl (miniseries). The Chernobyl TV series is a five-part miniseries that tells the story of the nuclear accident, including the events leading up to it and the cleanup efforts afterwards. In the series, we see how the Soviet State lies about the severity of the accident to protect the image of the Soviet

nuclear industry. Later, the State insists that the fault of the accident rests solely on the plant operators even though the reactor had system flaws (Mazin et al., 2019). We see from the series that one lie leads to others, creating a chain reaction of lies in the main.

Some of the main characters of the series are introduced below.

- Valery Legasov: A leading Soviet nuclear physicist. He was brought in to help with the cleanup efforts.
- Ulana Khomyuk: A Soviet nuclear physicist who investigates what caused to the Chernobyl disaster. Khomyuk is a fictional character based on the many nuclear scientists involved in the Chernobyl cleanup.
- Boris Shcherbina: The Soviet Deputy Prime Minister. He is assigned by the Kremlin to lead the government commission on Chernobyl.
- Anatoly Dyatlov: The deputy chief engineer at Chernobyl.
- Nikolai Fomin: The chief engineer at Chernobyl.
- Viktor Bryukhanov: The plant director at Chernobyl.
- Mikhail Gorbachev: The General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.
- Charkov: The first deputy chairman of the KGB (the internal security agency for the Soviet Union) (Mazin et al., 2019; About Chernobyl, n.d.).

Examples of Ethical Theories. Chernobyl miniseries provides several clear examples for teaching ethical theories. Video clips from it can be used illustrate ethical leadership theories such that students can connect their knowledge of these to real life ethical decisions. These examples given below can be shown in class, with students being asked to identify which of the ethical theories the video clips fit best. Table 1

lists the ethical theories and the related examples from the Chernobyl miniseries along with their explanations are given below.

The TV series has some harrowing scenes (e.g. the hospital scenes in Episode 3) that may be hard to watch for some students and thus, using the selection of video clips, as given below, is recommended. Whilst these example video clips are chosen to illustrate

the ethical theories, they are also provided to help students understand the main storyline of the series.

At the beginning of Episode 1, we see Legasov recording tapes, blaming engineer Dyatlov and others, hiding the tapes and eventually hanging himself (this scene is not shown directly). It would be beneficial to show about the first six minutes of Episode 1 to introduce the discussion of the examples below.

Table 1.
Ethical Theories and Examples from Chernobyl (miniseries).

Ethical Theory	Example
Ethical Egoism	Episode 5: Dyatlov says it is safe to conduct the test hoping to get promoted after it.
Utilitarianism	Episode 2: Gorbachev authorizes using the help of three plant employees (which will eventually cause their deaths) to prevent the risk of an explosion.
Altruism	Episode 2: Three plant employees volunteer for the mission.
Deontological	Episode 4: Khomyuk encourages Legasov to tell the truth, even though the consequences may be dire for him.
Character	Episode 4: Khomyuk is an example of a moral person, because she demonstrates good virtues, such as courage and honesty.

Ethical Egoism. Anatoly Dyatlov provides several clear examples of ethical egoism throughout the series. His personal ambition of getting promoted causes him to go on with the experiment. A video clip from Episode 5 (start time- 02:23, end time- 05:26) shows a flashback of a scene before the nuclear accident, where we see Dyatlov, Fomin, and Bryukhanov in a meeting. Bryukhanov explains that the safety test needs to be delayed and then asks Dyatlov whether the test can be conducted after a ten-hour delay. Eager to complete the test and get promotion, Dyatlov says it is safe to do so, even though this means conducting it with the night shift employees, who have not been trained to perform the experiment. We understand from the nuclear accident that it was actually not a suitable time for the safety test. This example shows Dyatlov's ethical egoism, whereby he is motivated to protect his own

wellbeing (Rachels, 2003).

Utilitarianism. In one scene from Episode 2 (scene start time- 48:03, end time- 53:40), we see a meeting scene that includes Mikhail Gorbachev. Legasov and Khomyuk explaining the calamitous situation to the meeting's attendees and they say that water should be drained from the plant basement to prevent a destructive thermal explosion. Legasov indicates that the help of three plant workers is necessary to pump out the water from the tanks. Khomyuk adds that it is likely that these employees will be dead in a week. Then, Legasov says the following to Gorbachev: "We are asking your permission to kill three men". In response, Gorbachev says that "all victories inevitably come at a cost" (Mazin & Renck, 2019b) and authorizes the mission. This situation is an example of utilitarianism, because Gorbachev approves

creating the greatest good for the greatest number of people (Johnson, 2018).

Altruism. In another scene from Episode 2 (start time- 54:33, end time- 57:18), we see Legasov in a meeting with plant workers, explaining the situation and asking for their help to drain the water from the plant basement. Following workers' objection to the deadly mission, Shcherbina steps in and addresses the workers. Among other points, he says that, "if you don't, millions will die" (Mazin & Renck, 2019b). After his inspiring talk, three plant workers courageously volunteer even though this mission means their inevitable death. The plant workers' selfless act is a great example of altruism, whereby they aim to help others, regardless of the personal cost to themselves (Johnson, 2018).

Deontological Theories. In one scene from Episode 4 (start time- 53:55, end time- 1:00:19), we see that Shcherbina, Legasov and Khomyuk meet secretly, away from the KGB's monitoring. During their discussion of the explosion, Legasov reveals that a similar accident happened in 1975 in another plant. He adds that an article explaining the cause of that accident was censored by the KGB to prevent the creation of any doubt on the supremacy of the Soviet nuclear industry. We are led to understanding that the State knew that there was a system error in both reactors and that the Chernobly accident was not only the plant operators' fault. Khomyuk says that to fix the remaining reactors with the same issue, the truth needs to be revealed when Legasov addresses the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna. Shcherbina then warns Legasov about telling this truth, by saying "when it is your life and the lives of everyone you love, your moral conviction does not mean anything" (Mazin & Renck, 2019c). On the other hand, Khomyuk encourages Legasov to speak the truth when she says, "someone has to start telling the truth" (Mazin & Renck, 2019c). Khomyuk's talk here is an example of Deontological theories, because it emphasizes ideas of obligation and duty (Banks, 2009) to tell the truth.

Character (Virtue based) Theories. The same video clip from Episode 4 can be used to illustrate character-

based theories. Khomyuk is an example of a moral person, because she demonstrates good virtues, such as courage and honesty, fairness and justice (Velasquez, 1992; Northouse, 2013). After discussing these examples, more detailed class discussions can be conducted.

Sample Questions for Classroom Discussion

Discussion Questions 1a and 1b: The objective in these questions (as set out below) is to apply the ethical theories to an individual dilemma. Before showing this clip, it would be beneficial to tell the students that Legasov did not tell the truth in Vienna. He is next scheduled to testify during the trial of Dyatlov, Fomin, and Bryukhanov regarding their involvement in the accident. Legasov will be awarded promotion, if he repeats the lie that the accident was solely the result of the operator error. In a clip from Episode 5 (start time- 08:40, end time- 13:08), we see that Khomyuk meets with Legasov in his apartment and this time tries to convince him to tell the truth at the trial. Khomyuk says that revealing the truth during the trial will force the State to fix the other reactors. Legasov objects to her and says that he has already given his life by willingly walking into an open reactor. Facilitators can stop the video at the end of this scene and ask students the following questions:

1a) What would you do if you were Legasov? Please explain your reasoning based on the ethical theories we have discussed.

1b) What would be the pros and cons of your decision? Please explain.

After students make their decisions, facilitators can show a portion of Legasov's testimony during the trial when he tells the truth (Episode 5, scene start time- 47:25, end time- 54:55). During his testimony, Legasov says the following: "When the truth offends, we lie and lie until we can no longer remember it is even there, but it is still there. Every lie we tell incurs a debt to the truth. Sooner or later, that debt is paid" (Mazin & Renck, 2019d).

Discussion Question 2: The objective here is to apply the ethical theories to a class debate on ethical leadership. In a scene from Episode 1 (start time- 37:50, end time- 42:56), we see an emergency meeting of the town's executive committee to discuss the situation. One attendee suggests the evacuation of the town, while Bryukhanov, Fomin, and Dyatlov claim that the accident is well under control and try to cover the truth of the calamity of the explosion. During the meeting, an elder statesman delivers a dramatic speech, encouraging those attending to have faith in the State. He says that "...when the people ask questions that are not in their own best interest, they should simply be told to keep their minds on their labor and leave matters of the State to the State" (Mazin & Renck, 2019a). Facilitators can show this video clip and then remind students about the leak of the Pentagon Papers in the US. Commissioned by the Department of Defense, Pentagon Papers provided a detailed history of the decision-making behind the U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. In 1971, The New York Times began publishing a series of articles based on this report. The U.S. Department of Justice obtained a temporary order to stop further publication of the classified material, claiming that further dissemination of it would result in "immediate and irreparable harm" to U.S. national defense interests (Pentagon Papers, n.d.). After this introduction, facilitators can ask students the following questions:

Is it ethical for government officials to hide the truth from the public? How about doing so for reasons such as protecting national security interests or preventing public panic? Please explain your reasoning based on the ethical theories discussed in class.

Discussion Question 3a and 3b: The objective for question 3a is to locate recent examples of unethical behavior by leaders, which can help students to connect the discussed topics to their own lives. Question 3b aims to help students in developing their own leadership ethics perspective. For these questions, facilitators can use the following prompt:

Whilst the events happened in Chernobyl may seem

merely to be something that happened in the past, we can see recent examples of hiding the truth from public. One example is Facebook's Cambridge Analytica scandal. The investigation by the U.K. Information Commissioner's Office found that Facebook failed to keep users' personal information secure and allowed Cambridge Analytica to access the data of up to 87 million people worldwide without their consent (Zialcita, 2019). Facebook was accused of concealing the truth from the public (Bowne, 2018). Please answer the following questions:

3a) Provide a recent example of unethical behavior by government officials or business leaders in which they hide the truth from the public.

3b) What ethical leadership lessons can you take away from these examples and from Chernobyl miniseries for your own leadership development?

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how a popular culture artifact (PCA) can be used to teach ethical leadership. As claimed earlier, PCAs are ideal for teaching leadership (Callahan et al., 2007) and the Chernobyl miniseries offers excellent examples for teaching ethical leadership theories. In addition, the Chernobyl miniseries provides insights into the ethical dilemmas of the main characters in the context of an unrepresented nuclear disaster, which it is anticipated will engender student interest in the topic. This article has provided examples and discussion questions that allow for students to apply ethical theories to specific situations, in addition to reflecting on their personal ethics. These activities can help students develop their personal ethical leadership perspectives and encourage them to be moral leaders. Plokhy (2018) stated, "The world has already been overwhelmed by one Chernobyl and one exclusion zone. It cannot afford any more. It must learn its lessons from what happened in and around Chernobyl on April 26, 1986" (p. 349), which underlines the importance of learning leadership lessons from the Chernobyl disaster for the development of such moral leaders.

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