Moral Choices and Their Outcomes

William R. Swinyard and Thomas J. DeLong

Karl G. Maeser, the first president of Brigham Young University, once said, "I have been asked what I mean by word of honor. I will tell you. Place me behind prison walls — walls of stone ever so high, ever so thick, reaching ever so far into the ground — there is a possibility that in some way or another I may be able to escape; but stand me on the floor and draw a chalk line around me and have me give my word of honor never to cross it. Can I get out of that circle? No, never! I'd die first!"[1]

President Maeser's chalk-line story is a well-known tradition at Brigham Young University, and its message about keeping one's word of honor is inspiring. But we might speculate about how the rest of us would respond to variations of Maeser's hypothetical situation. Suppose we could take a step outside our chalk line and save a child from being crushed by an oncoming truck? Would we do so? If we leave the circle, we will have broken our word. Have we also been unethical?

A vast range of circumstances underlie our moral decisions. Should we always tell the truth or not? What if people intend to do evil with the information? We know it is wrong to steal. But is it ethical to steal to save another's life? What if the theft victim would not be truly damaged? Or irreparably damaged? In short, do our decisions depend on who we believe will be helped and hurt or on an unequivocal application of a moral law?

Studies investigating these situational contingencies typically first present subjects with a moral dilemma (for example, in a lifeboat there is one more person than can be supported by the remaining food), then ask what they would do (for example, should they toss one person overboard or not?), and finally elicit through questions the subjects' moral reasoning. The focus of these studies

---

William R. Swinyard is a professor of business management at Brigham Young University and holder of the Fred G. Meyer Chair in Retailing. Thomas J. DeLong is a professor of education at Brigham Young University. The authors express thanks to Peng Sim Cheng of the National University of Singapore (currently on leave at UCLA) for her help in data collection and to BYU professors Dennis Packard and Margaret Wheatley for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

is on moral reasoning, not on the influence of the consequences or on the justification of the behavior.

Moral decisions are influenced by complex motivations, including the circumstances and the outcomes perceived for the moral choice. These perceptions are particularly influenced by our culture. During a year spent in Singapore, one of the authors noticed that the Chinese people base moral choices on cultural values that are quite different from those in the West. Yet the variable of culture has been neglected in studies of moral reasoning. For these reasons, in this study we compared the moral decision making of students from Brigham Young University with that of students from the National University of Singapore.

An investigation of multidimensional moral issues would ordinarily strain and complicate a research methodology. However, for our study we use trade-off analysis, which provides a relaxed fit in this research environment. Trade-off analysis, unique for a study of this type, is a powerful method of analysis gaining wide use in commercial business research. It is most often used to measure the relative importance of one product attribute (such as quality or durability) compared with another (such as price). Most often such attributes are interrelated — higher quality will usually be accompanied by a higher price. In a conventional research approach, subjects would simply be asked to indicate the importance of each attribute. Nothing would stop them from saying that *both* quality and price are important. For example, who would not be attracted to a car that gives terrific gas mileage, high performance, styling, exceptional quality, room for the whole family, and the maneuverability of a sports car — all at a low price?

Trade-off analysis restricts such outcomes. It requires that people ask themselves, "Are some attributes so important to me that I should sacrifice others to get them?" It takes into consideration context and situational contingencies. It also fits comfortably with the requirements of a circumstantial study of moral decision making. For example, suppose little Sally, having broken her smaller brother's toy, is confronted by her mother about the toy. She has some choices. Among them, she can tell the truth (and possibly get a spanking) or blame her brother (and maybe escape punishment). What should she do? This situation suggests the trade-off shown in table 1.

If we asked Sally to indicate which of these combinations would be her most and least preferred choices, she almost certainly would select the cells numbered 1 and 4. That is, she would *most* prefer to tell the truth and also escape punishment, and *least* prefer to lie and blame her brother while also getting punished.

TABLE 1. Sally's Trade-off Table

	OUTCOME	
DECISION	Escape Punishment	Get Punished
Tell the truth	1	
Blame brother		4

But once those two choices have been taken, she has some interesting intermediate choices. What about them? Would she prefer to tell the truth (and be punished) or to escape punishment (and lie)? By telling us the order of her preferences for these two intermediate combinations, Sally would also be telling us something about her view of the importance of telling the truth compared to the importance of escaping punishment. That is, if she preferred telling the truth and getting punished over blaming her brother and escaping punishment, we would know she values telling the truth over escaping punishment. She also would be telling us something about the value she places on obedience to rules or laws (since she has likely been taught to tell the truth) compared with the value placed on the outcome of punishment.

This is a simple situation. We could make it more complicated by expanding the range of her decision alternatives (she could replace the toy, she could humbly apologize, she could "make it up" to her brother, etc.). Or we could expand the range or change the outcomes (her mother could hug and congratulate her for telling the truth, ignore her, scold her, deny privileges, or spank her).

In a trade-off analysis, Sally's preferences would be processed by an algorithm that calculates values, or *utilities*, for both her *decision* variables (telling the truth or blaming her brother) and her *outcome* variables (getting punished or escaping it). These utilities would be expressed by a number. For example, if her decision value were .3 and her outcome value .6, we would know that the outcome was twice as important to her as her moral decision was.

As we indicated, in making her trade-off decisions, Sally would be telling us something about her value for obedience to rules compared with her value for outcomes. Will Sally show herself to be a utilitarian? Or a deontologist? Or a little of both? These are questions of moral philosophy — how one determines what is right.

The utilitarian view holds that a behavior is right if the general good that results is greater than the good that could result from any other behavior. Utilitarianism pays no attention to *rules* of behavior; it is anchored in the *outcomes* of the decision. Thus, the right decision has outcomes that maximize the general good. By contrast, the deontological view is that a behavior is right if it has met certain rules, standards, principles, or credos, generally regardless of outcome. This view is based on Kant's categorical imperative, that every moral decision should be based on a rule or reason which everyone can and should act on. The right decision reflects obedience to strict rules.[2]

Decisions such as the one Sally faced are routine in our moral life. We are regularly bombarded with competing information, values, teachings, and goals. Among the most fundamental of sources for such values is our culture. The Judeo-Christian ethic that predominates in the United States appears to emphasize compliance to moral principles of right and wrong. Its principal religions provide a structure that is relatively unequivocal and noncircumstantial in suggesting what is appropriate in moral choices; it has a deontological — or rule orientation — to moral conduct. Thus, in deciding what is right and what is wrong, we expect that Americans would turn to explicit precepts and let those precepts provide the guide for behavior.

The Singaporean culture is different. The predominant Buddhist, Hindu, and Moslem religions of Singapore appear to emphasize the 'greater good' — the utilitarian value of societal well-being. Singaporeans of Chinese descent (by far the largest cultural group in the country) embrace the cultural values of China. The concept of the family and society is deeply rooted, with the people culturally bound to give precedence in their decisions to family and societal preservation. Thus, in deciding what is right and what is wrong, we expect that Singaporeans would look first at the probable consequences of the moral decisions — particularly the consequences on family and society — and let those consequences guide the decision.

In an effort to test this expectation about cultural influences on moral decision making, we collected data using a pilot study based on a parallel samples design of 568 students — 415 students at Brigham Young University (BYU) and 153 students at the National University of Singapore (NUS).[3] An extensively pretested version of our questionnaire was given in classroom settings to students across both campuses. Fifteen undergraduate classes, chosen by judgment sampling methods, were selected from general education courses on each campus.[4] What we have, then, is not a

sample of Americans and Singaporeans, but an arguable representation of undergraduate students at BYU and NUS.

We presented the students with two scenarios. The first deals with a family business, the second with a real-estate sale. (These two scenarios were chosen after extensive pretesting of many alternative scenarios because the two appeared to best represent the moral issues we were interested in.) Using these scenarios, we collected measures of two fundamental concepts. The first, what we call *moral acceptability*, is evaluated with four measures of the acceptability of each moral-choice scenario. These measures are collected on a seven-point scale that goes from acceptable to unacceptable (seven = acceptable). The measures helped us understand the perceptions of the BYU and NUS students when they are making moral decisions in a vacuum — with no thought about the consequence or outcome of the decisions.

The second measure was of the trade-off preferences themselves. These trade-offs were presented in a two-way table much like the one we discussed in the example of Sally.

Instead of just describing our trade-off scenarios, however, let us reproduce them in full. The first is "The Family Business." Note that the columns in the trade-off table represent *rule-oriented* information while the rows represent *outcome-oriented* information.

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Suppose your father has been very successful in founding, developing, and nurturing a family-owned business into a prosperous enterprise. A short time ago, when his health began to fail, he passed the management of the business over to you, although it continues to be owned by the entire family.

When you took over the family business, it was extremely profitable. Currently the business is doing badly. You feel a great deal of pressure to make the company successful again. To do so, you immediately need a very large amount of temporary cash. You are absolutely confident that you would repay or return the money in only a month or two.

Sources for the money

Suppose you could get the money from one of the sources listed below. For each source, please check the space which best reflects your personal view of how acceptable or unacceptable you feel that source is. There are no right or wrong answers here — only your honest opinion is important. You could get the money:

Acceptable / Unacceptable

_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ A) From a legitimate loan from your bank.

_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ B) By quietly (without the family's knowledge) selling some assets of the family-owned business.

_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ C) Through a personal loan from a friend, even though you know your friend really can't afford to part with the money right now.

_ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ D) By temporarily using money that a friend has given you to invest in the stock market for them.

Outcomes for your decision

Suppose that if you get the needed money, the following four possibilities exist for you. The loan, and the success it would bring, would:

1) Be used to help thousands of other people in your community.
2) Be used to help hundreds of other people in your community.
3) Be used to help a few other people in your community.
4) Not affect your ability to help other people in your community.

Now please consider both the four sources for the needed money (A, B, C, and D) and the four personal outcomes (1, 2, 3, and 4) and indicate the order of your preference for each combination by numbering each box from 1 to 16:

Outcome for you	If you got the money from:			
	Loan from bank	Selling family assets	Loan from friend	"Using" friend's money
Help 1000s of people in your community				
Help 100s of people in your community				
Help a few people in your community				
Not affect your ability to help people				

Beside the community circumstances shown above, the students were asked to complete trade-off tables having two other sets of circumstances, one related to *family well-being* and one to *personal wealth and fame*.

The second scenario is "The Real-Estate Sale." Once again, note that the columns in the table represent rule-oriented information and the rows represent outcome-oriented information.

THE REAL-ESTATE SALE

Suppose you work for a small real-estate company. Your assignment has been to show and sell units in a new apartment and condominium (flats) development. Next to the development is a large tract of government-owned vacant land. The use for the land was decided during a private government meeting that was held last night. Earlier today you learned of the outcome of that meeting.

You are now showing the development to people representing a company that is ready to buy six of the condominium apartments, which will be a very large sale for you. You are walking back to your car to take them to your office, where they will sign the final sales contracts, when you are asked what the vacant land will be used for. You know that they might not buy the condominiums if they believe that use of the vacant land will reduce their value.

Although you actually do know what the land will be used for, you know they would be satisfied and would buy the condominiums if you said, "It will be used for a city park." Other answers you might give them could cause you to lose the entire sale.

Possible government decisions:

Some possible government decisions for the land are listed below. For each decision, please check the space that best reflects your personal view of how acceptable or unacceptable it would be for you to tell your clients, "It will be used for a city park." There are no right or wrong answers here — only your honest opinion is important. The government could have decided:

Acceptable						Unacceptable	
—	—	—	—	—	—	—	A) To convert the land to a beautiful city park.
—	—	—	—	—	—	—	B) To leave the land vacant for an indefinite number of years.
—	—	—	—	—	—	—	C) To use the land to build a detention or correctional center for youthful lawbreakers.
—	—	—	—	—	—	—	D) To convert the land into a much-needed city garbage dump — a refuse landfill.

Outcomes for you

Suppose that if you make the sale and get the money it will provide, the following four possibilities exist for you. The money you make from the sale would:

1) Be used to help thousands of other people in your community.
2) Be used to help hundreds of other people in your community.
3) Be used to help a few other people in your community.
4) Not affect your ability to help other people in your community.

Now please consider both the four sources for the needed money (A, B, C, and D) and the four personal outcomes (1, 2, 3, and 4) and indicate the order of your preference for each combination by numbering each box from 1 to 16:

Outcome for you	You say "it will be used for a park," but the actual decision is to:			
	Convert land to a park	Leave land vacant	Build a detention center	Convert land to a dump
Help 1000s of people in your community				
Help 100s of people in your community				
Help a few people in your community				
Not affect your ability to help people				

As with the first scenario, students again completed trade-off tables which include circumstances related to family well-being and to personal wealth and fame.

As mentioned, each scenario included four measures of moral acceptability — the questions rated acceptable or unacceptable. We found no differences whatever between the ratings of the BYU and NUS students on these measures of moral acceptability for either scenario. As shown in figure 1, the two groups are equivalent on these measures. This equivalence suggests that the trade-off results we are about to see are not a result of one group being more

"moral" than the other. At the same time, across all three sets of circumstances BYU students consistently had higher value for the decisions, while NUS students favored the outcomes.[5]

What do these results mean? Consider for example the community outcomes data for the family-business scenario. The average responses for each of the two groups were as shown in table 2 (in each cell, the BYU data is represented by the top number and the NUS data by the bottom).

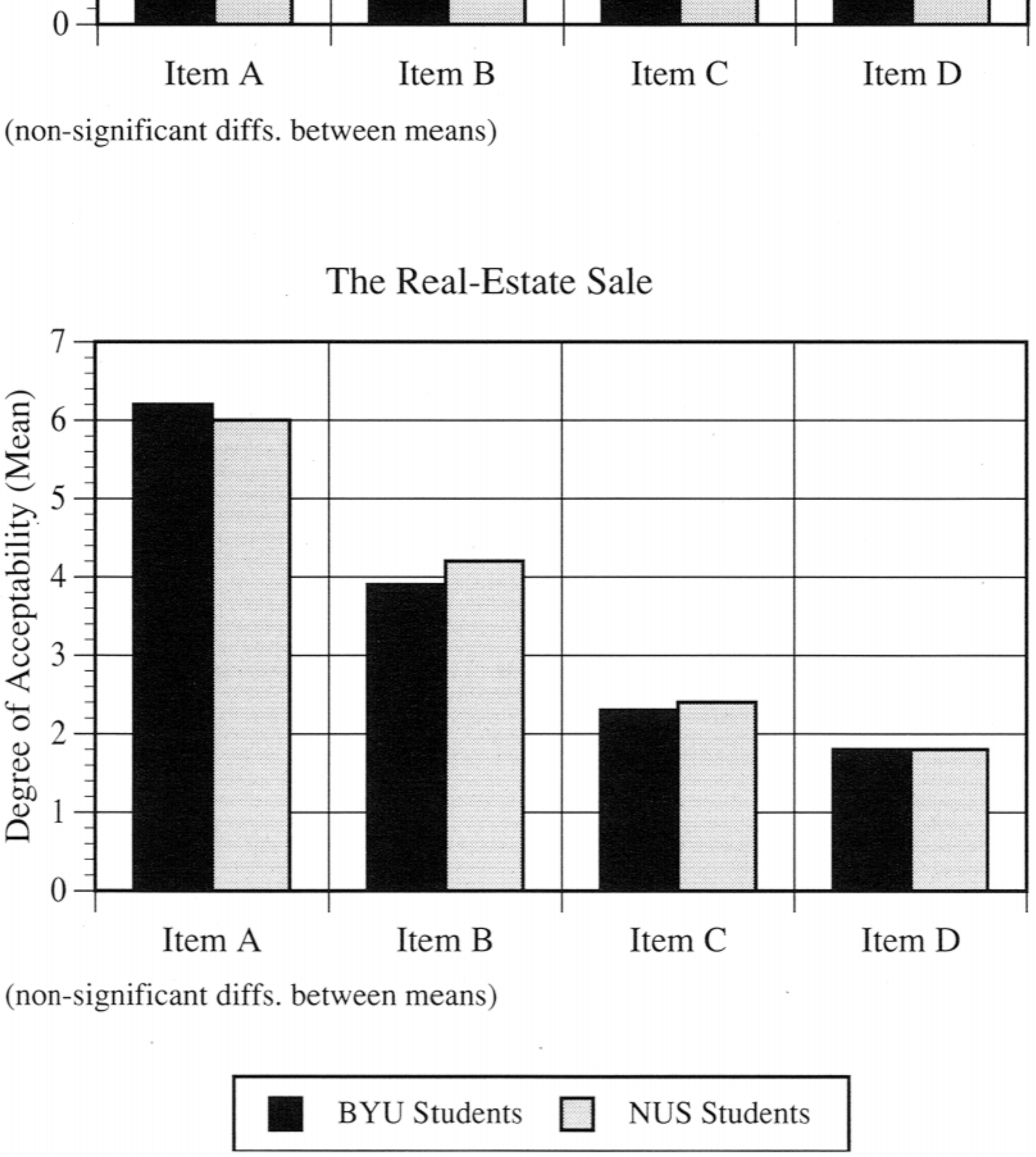
TABLE 2. Average Responses for Community Outcomes

Outcome for you	If you got the money from: Loan from bank	Selling family assets	Loan from friend	"Using" friend's money	
Help 1000s of people in your community	1	5	6	13	BYU
	1	2	4	8	NUS
Help 100s of people in your community	2	7	8	14	BYU
	3	5	7	11	NUS
Help a few people in your community	3	9	10	15	BYU
	6	9	10	13	NUS
Not affect your ability to help people	4	11	12	16	BYU
	12	14	15	16	NUS

We see that the BYU group tended to favor the columns in completing the trade-off tables. Since the columns represent *rules*, the decisions made by the BYU students were apparently most influenced by those students' internal rules of what was right. Thus the first four BYU preferences follow straight down the first column, indicating that these students were more concerned about the legitimacy of the loan than they were about the impact on people. In other words, they showed preference for their decisions over the outcomes.

The NUS students were different. They tended to favor the rows. Since the rows represent *outcomes*, we see that the NUS students' decisions were most influenced by who would be helped

FIGURE 1
MEASURES OF MORAL ACCEPTABILITY



or hurt by the decision. Thus, three of their first four preferences are in the first row, indicating that they were more concerned about helping people than they were about the legitimacy of the loan. In other words, the NUS students showed preference for the outcomes over the decisions.

The calculated utilities from our trade-off analysis (quantitative representations of these row-versus-column preferences) confirm this interpretation. The results are shown in figure 2. The community-outcomes utilities were as shown in table 3.

TABLE 3. Community Outcomes Utilities

	OUTCOMES	
STUDENTS	Family Business	Real-Estate Sale
BYU Students	0.882	0.681
NUS Students	1.271	1.152

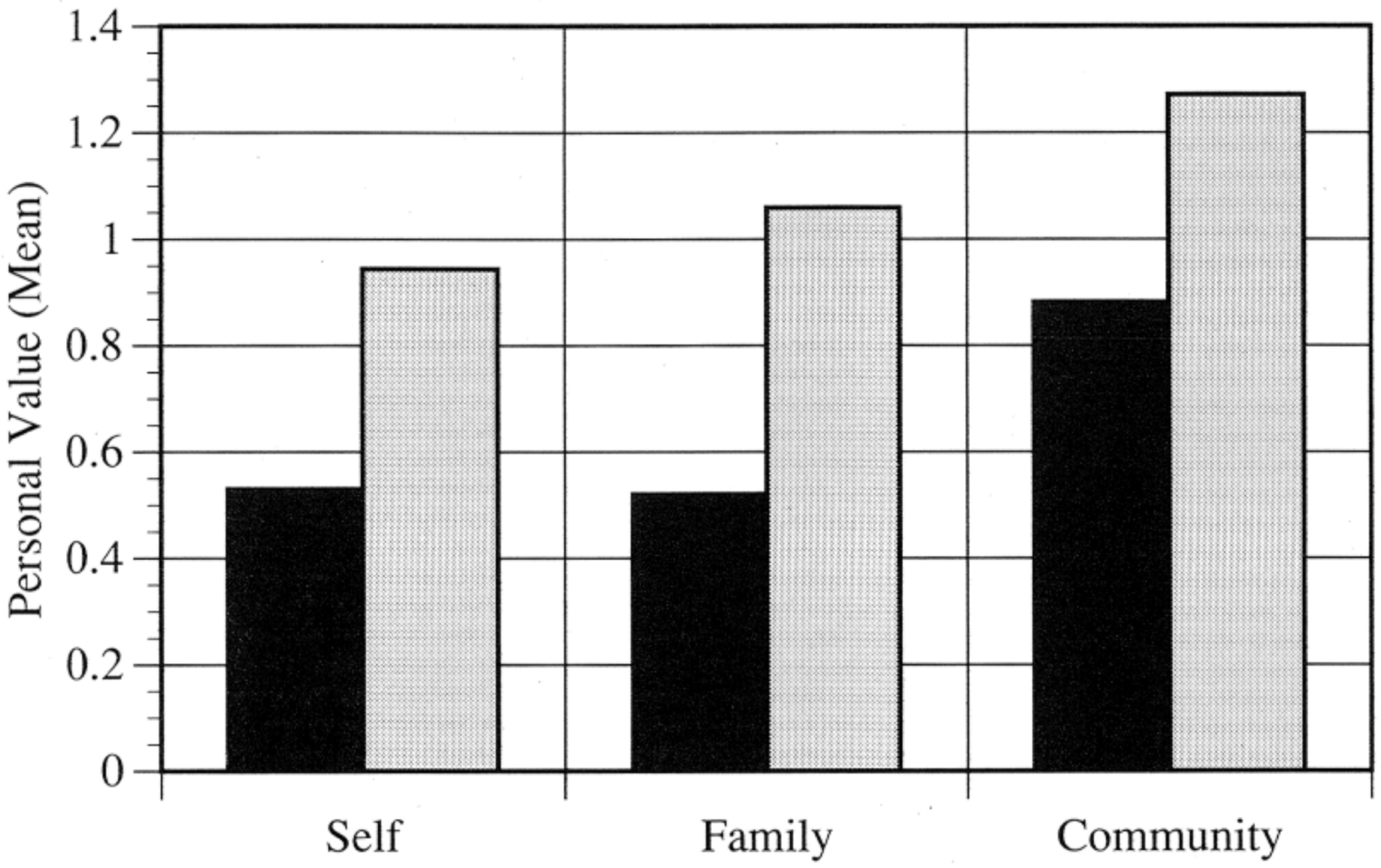
(Differences between the two groups were even greater for the family outcomes and the personal outcomes.) The higher numbers for NUS students show that they have a priority interest in the circumstances underlying their decisions. This finding again shows that, in making a moral decision, students at NUS are more influenced by the consequences of their actions than the BYU group are.

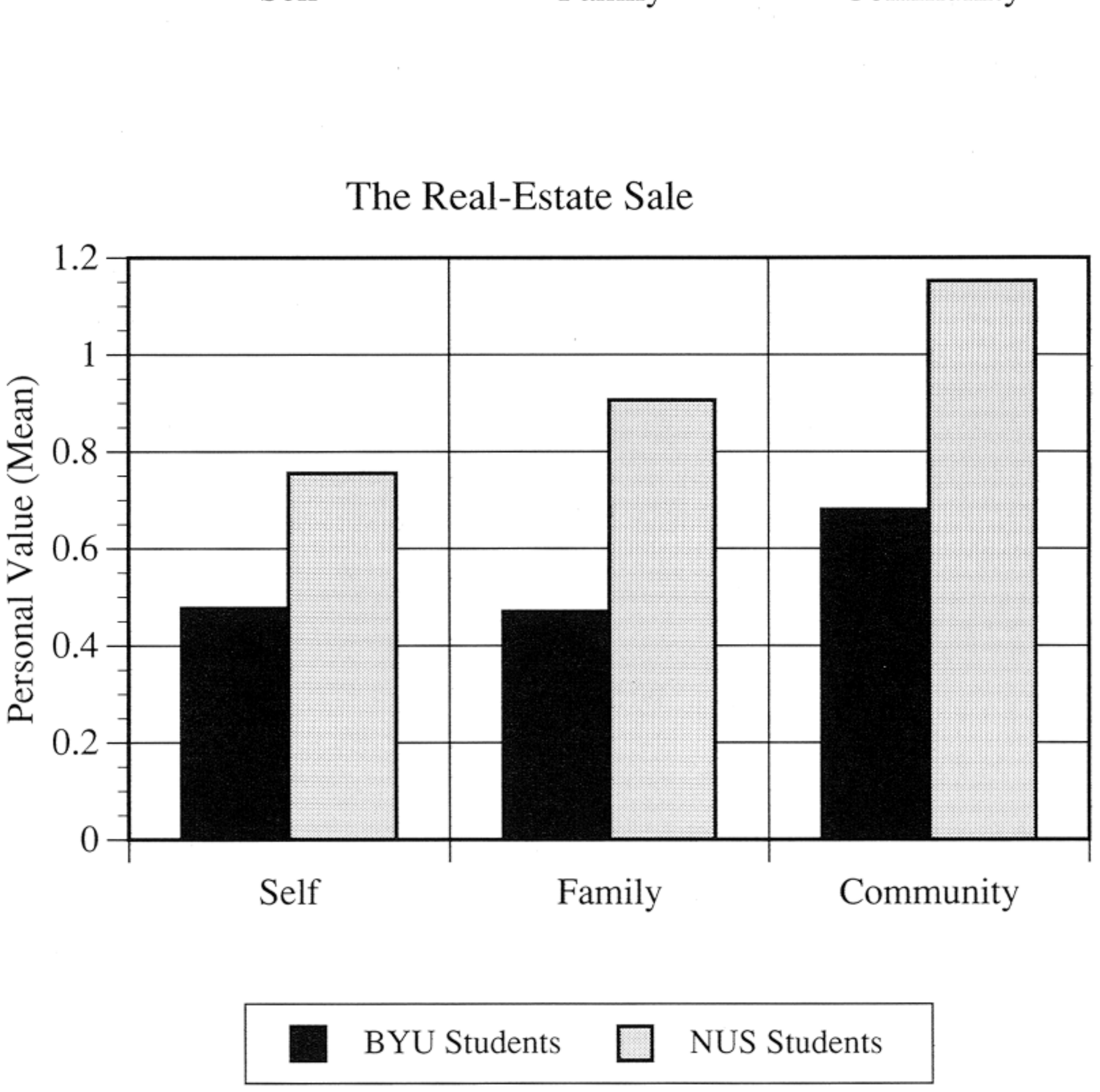
Correspondingly, the utilities for source of the money (in the first scenario) and use of the land (in the second scenario) are also different for the two groups. (See table 4 below.)

TABLE 4. Utilities for Source of Money and Land Use

	DECISIONS	
STUDENTS	Money Source	Land Use
BYU Students	1.332	1.317
NUS Students	0.940	1.020

FIGURE 2
MEASURES OF MORAL ACCEPTABILITY





The higher numbers here for BYU students show that they had a priority interest in the actual decision they were forced to make. That is, in making a moral decision, students at BYU are *less* influenced by the consequences of their action than the NUS group.

When one of the authors was sharing these results with a BYU class recently, the class members were especially intrigued to find that while the BYU students in our study were following moral rules, the NUS students were not. After a lively discussion, a class member voiced what may have been on the minds of many. He said, "Those Singapore students aren't very ethical are they?" To this question another student replied, "What would *they* think of us?"

Here we have members of two cultural groups who, when not considering outcomes, appear equivalent in their view of what is morally acceptable. Yet when outcomes are added, their *decisions* are very different. These differences do not seem to be due to differences in *application* of moral principles, for each group appears true to its own moral principles. The differences are in the principles themselves.

The BYU students seem to be making moral decisions based on fundamental value rules of right and wrong. They seem to be saying, "It is right to tell the truth; it is wrong to lie. Therefore, the moral thing to do is tell the truth and not lie." For example, their responses in the family-business scenario indicated they thought that it is right to get a legitimate loan and wrong to get the money some other way. They appear to see little relativity in their moral choices; what is moral in one situation is also moral in another. Thus, in this study, at least, the BYU group appears quite rule-oriented in its moral decisions.

By contrast, the NUS students seem to be basing moral decisions less on rules and more on the consequences of their moral behavior. They seem to be saying, "While it is generally right to tell the truth and wrong to lie, sometimes the greater good is served by not telling the truth rather than by telling it. In those cases, the more moral thing to do may be to lie." For example, their responses to the real-estate-sale scenario suggest their thinking was, I want to serve the greatest good; if to do this I must use unauthorized funds, then I will do so. Thus, the NUS group seems to be following a utilitarian ethic.

This NUS view is an unusual moral principle to those of us in the Western world and can be difficult for us to grasp. For us, the connection between obedience and morality is tightly woven — maybe more tightly in Utah than elsewhere and maybe still more at BYU. Perhaps we do not always *follow* our moral guides (parental training, interpretations of commandments and scriptures, Church

literature, time-honored precepts, etc.), but, we may argue, at least we know where to find them. We probably feel guilty if we do not follow them. And we might wonder, Can individuals truly be moral when they are not complying with "universal" moral laws?

But is it possible that we sometimes *fail* to act in ethical ways because we become paralyzed by the rightness or wrongness of our decisions rather than respond to the situation or to the consequences of our behavior? We cannot answer that question, of course. But our study implies that the NUS people are obedient to the moral principle of serving the greater good. And insofar as that is their moral principle, they have indeed behaved morally, even sometimes by not telling the truth. And possibly they might ask, Can Westerners truly be moral when they essentially ignore the consequences of their behavior?

Look at, for example, the current Wall Street takeover phenomenon. Most of these takeovers are probably quite legal and even in the best interests of stockholders. But (understandably) the Wall Street firms seem not to take into consideration the impact of their behavior on the general good. They explain their behavior by focusing on what is legally right or wrong, a rule-oriented justification. Amid legal takeovers beset with workers, families, companies, and entire communities thrown into economic chaos through plant closings, we read the comment of the surviving CEOs, who say, "I did nothing wrong." From a rule-oriented perspective they are probably behaving quite morally; from a consequence-oriented perspective they are not moral at all.

In practice, we suspect that many people who claim to act deontologically become more utilitarian in difficult moral dilemmas. When faced with complex moral decisions which have no clear black-and-white resolution — and therefore no right choice clearly guided by a corresponding rule or law — these people probably look to the expected outcomes before deciding what to do. For example, even a normally "obedient" person might reason, My husband will probably be deeply hurt if I tell him what my best friend said about him, so I will not tell him the complete truth if he asks. Or even, To pay my family's medical bills, I desperately need the three hundred dollars that this necessary software program costs, so I will pirate the software until I have the money for it.

Unfortunately, while people in a rule-oriented culture may *behave* as utilitarians, they will likely feel immoral and guilty in doing so: "Because it is for the greater good, I should withhold the truth . . . but that makes me not only dishonest but also untrustworthy. Can I live with myself?" We suspect that this reaction is a particularly strong tendency in our Latter-day Saint culture. Yet

while the Lord gave us rules to be followed, the scriptures reveal that serving the greater good often takes precedence. Serving the greater good, rather than obeying rules, may indeed be quite a moral way to live. This morality is, of course, what utilitarians strive to follow. Utilitarians look at moral dilemmas as problem-solving situations, realizing that their decision to serve the greater good is the moral one.

Stepping back from these data and subsequent results, we see more clearly how hard it can be for an observer to appropriately evaluate the morality of another person. This difficulty is even more evident when different values and cultures are involved. While each of us may operate consistently using a set of moral principles, those principles are not universally shared. Other principles guide other people or cultures, and we should wonder about the appropriateness of judging those principles as wrong just because they are different.

This study emphasizes that other cultures, with their attendant values and behavioral principles, can differ dramatically from our rule-oriented notion of ethics and ethical behavior. One person's moral decisions may be very different than another's. But both decisions can be "moral." Finally, the study suggests that we have much to learn from those individuals or cultures that maintain moral principles very different from our own.

NOTES

[1]Quoted in Emerson West, *Vital Quotations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 167.

[2]This is a simple — some may say simple-minded — view of these two moral philosophies. Volumes have been written on them, discussing their subtleties and variants. We wish merely to point out that two fundamentally different moral frameworks exist — one a rule orientation, the other an outcome orientation.

[3]The National University of Singapore was used (rather than Beijing University or some other) because a colleague there was available to help in the data collection.

[4]General education courses were used because they contain students of virtually all intended major fields of study. We wished to avoid having samples of only business or engineering, etc., students, and this approach minimized that possibility.

[5]Trade-off analysis provides no tests of statistical significance or difference, but we found the trade-off solutions to be stable, to have low "badness of fit" (no more than 6.5 out of 360 comparisons were inconsistent, with 93 percent of the comparisons correct). All in all, our results produced a very good trade-off solution.