
Spangler Ethical Reasoning Assessment (SERA)

How Do You Make Decisions?

Instructions: Consider situations in which you must choose between two or more different courses of action. This survey contains statements that describe different ways of making decisions. For each statement, please circle the number that represents how strongly you agree or disagree with the statement.

1. I believe my primary obligation to other people is to avoid interfering with their pursuit of what they see as their own good.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

2. The only thing I expect from other people is that they respect my freedom to pursue what I see as my own good.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

3. There are no absolute "dos" and "don'ts." What counts as a "do" or "don't" depends on the situation.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

4. When I face a decision, I believe I should conform to customs or societal expectations that bear on that decision.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

5. When I am facing a choice, I pay most attention to the ways my decision will influence the relationships of the people affected by my decision.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

6. The best way to choose a course of action is to gather facts and to predict the best- and worst-case scenarios for each possible course of action.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

7. I believe trying to achieve the overall good of a group is not as important as paying attention to the needs and interests of each individual in the group.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

8. I believe certain actions are always wrong, and everyone should always avoid them.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

9. There are no rules or principles that are always binding in every situation.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

10. When I am making a choice, I want to make sure my action upholds family or community traditions.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

11. The way to make a sound decision is to focus on the interpersonal dynamics of the people affected by that decision.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

12. A sound decision must involve computing the probability of success of each possible course of action.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

13. I believe each person is free to make his or her own choices, and my choices must respect that freedom.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

14. I believe certain actions are always right, and everyone, everywhere, is bound to pursue those actions.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

15. I believe there are no absolute rights or wrongs.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

16. A sound decision promotes the greatest good for the greatest number of people. It's OK if particular individuals have to sacrifice their desired outcomes in order to benefit a group as a whole.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

17. A decision is right if it strengthens the relationships of the people affected by that decision.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

18. A sound decision must involve analysis, such as listing costs and benefits.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

19. I believe I have a duty not to interfere with other people's choices.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

20. My decision in a specific situation is right only if every other person in a similar situation could have decided exactly what I decided.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

21. There are no actions that are simply right or wrong. Whether actions count as right or wrong depends on the consequences of those actions.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

22. When I face a decision, I believe I should try to conform to the expectations of the people affected by the decision.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

23. A decision is wrong if it undermines the relationships of the people effected by that decision.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

24. When considering different plans of action, I list all the possible positive and negative effects of each plan.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

25. I believe I am free to make my own choices in a given situation, and other people have a duty not to interfere with my choices.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

26. Sound decisions are based on absolute rules that are binding no matter what the situation.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

27. I cannot evaluate another person's decision by comparing it to what I would have done if I had been in that person's shoes.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

28. When I make a choice, I feel I must comply with the expectations or traditions of the different communities I inhabit, such as family, friends, and neighbors.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

29. Paying attention to interpersonal dynamics is more important than measuring costs and benefits.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

30. A sound decision must be based on as many facts as possible, to predict the likelihood of the decision's success.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

Know Your Preferences

Your highest scores indicate your strongest preferences.

Strong: 30–35

Moderate: 20–29

Weak: 10–19

Dislike: 6–9

Applier (A)			Situationalist (S)	
Question #	Your #		Question #	Your #
2.	_____		3.	_____
8.	_____		9.	_____
14.	_____		15.	_____
20.	_____		21.	_____
26.	_____		27.	_____
Your total _____			Your total _____	

Individualist (I)			Communitarian (C)	
Question #	Your #		Question #	Your #
1.	_____		4.	_____
7.	_____		10.	_____
13.	_____		16.	_____
19.	_____		22.	_____
25.	_____		28.	_____
Your total _____			Your total _____	

Calculator (C)			Relationalist (R)	
Question #	Your #		Question #	Your #
6.	_____		5.	_____
12.	_____		11.	_____
18.	_____		17.	_____
24.	_____		23.	_____
30.	_____		29.	_____
Your total _____			Your total _____	

Ethical Reasoning and Decision-Making Approaches

Decision Scale 1: Universal ↔ Situational	
Characteristic	Approach to Decision Making
Applier/ Universalist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Tends to believe that there are universal guidelines, rules, or principles that are always binding for all people ○ For example, an Applier might say, "Lying is always wrong, no matter what."
Situationalist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Tries to "read" a situation in order to determine what guidelines, rules, or principles are appropriate ○ For example, a Situationalist might say, "Lying is sometimes wrong, depending on the circumstances."
Decision Scale 2: Individual ↔ Community	
Characteristic	Approach to Decision Making
Individualist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Often concerned with rights and duties—people have rights to certain things and the right to be free from other things; these rights imply duties not to harm or to help ○ Believes the good of a group is not more important than the good of each group member
Communitarian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Mainly concerned with achieving the greatest good for the greatest number ○ May focus on following community traditions and expectations—the good of a group involves adhering to its traditions
Decision Scale 3: Calculations ↔ Relationships	
Characteristic	Approach to Decision Making
Calculator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Performs some sort of calculation to predict the best possible outcome ○ Calculations may be as simple as how to avoid the worst case, or making a list of costs and benefits ○ Calculations may literally involve using math to determine the probability of success (metrics)
Relationalist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pays attention to dynamics between people, such as maintaining trust among those affected by a decision ○ Believes that a decision cannot be effective if it does not respect or strengthen relationships

Ethical Reasoning Types

Applier/Universalist

Strength: Consistency; works for like treatment of like situations; can anticipate and therefore prevent problems associated with inconsistency; identifies long-term implications of a decision

Challenges: May be (or be perceived as) inflexible, detached from the particular concerns of the people involved in a specific situation; may be overly concerned with hypothetical situations

Example: Consider a supervisor, board member, or case worker who is an Applier and in a position to allocate funds to a series of individuals or groups. As an Applier, this person may prefer to use the same criteria to set an amount for each group and, as such, may not be as willing to consider an individual's or group's specific needs or special requests. As an Applier, this person may be most concerned about demonstrating that each case receives the same treatment.

Situationalist

Strength: Grounded in the particulars of a specific situation; aware of the concerns of the people involved in that situation; can quickly resolve an immediate crisis

Challenges: May be (or be perceived as) unfair or indecisive because like situations are not approached in like ways over a period of time; may not give enough thought to consistency and anticipating future problems

Example: Consider a supervisor, board member, or case worker who is a Situationalist and in a position to allocate funds to a series of individuals or groups. As a Situationalist, this person may be most concerned about the specific needs and special requests of each individual or group and, as such, may not be very concerned about using the same criteria in every case. As a Situationalist, this person may be more concerned with meeting the perceived greatest need than treating each case the same way.

Individualist

Strength: Considers each person affected by a decision; making sure valid minority views are not obscured by “the majority”; can help a group avoid “groupthink”

Challenges: May be indecisive—so concerned with “honoring” all the perspectives in a group that he/she does not try to achieve compromise or build a consensus needed to make a decision

Example: Consider a supervisor who is an Individualist and must decide how to approach a work team member who is not as productive as the other members. As an Individualist, this supervisor may be most concerned with the needs of the underperforming team member. As such, this supervisor might ask, “Does the underperformer need more training, or are some personal issues involved?”

Communitarian

Strength: Can stay focused on “the big picture”; is able to ground decisions in community traditions and norms, which can help everyone affected by a decision embrace it; decisions do not seem arbitrary but appear to come organically from values shared by a group

Challenges: May not be open to new ideas or innovation; may give in to “majority rule” and not listen to important minority points of view; may succumb to “groupthink”

Example: Consider a supervisor who is a Communitarian and must decide how to approach a work team member who is not as productive as the other members. As a Communitarian, this supervisor may be most concerned with meeting the needs of the team as a whole, such as by removing the underperforming member to help the team be more effective.

Calculator

Strength: Grasps details; may try to keep people “objective” and to help a group avoid getting bogged down in personality issues or personal attachments to specific outcomes

Challenges: Ignores the reality that decisions affect interpersonal dynamics and interpersonal dynamics affect the way people embrace and carry out decisions

Example: Consider a board member or administrator who is a Calculator and in a position to make decisions about the populations an agency will serve. As a Calculator, this individual will want to identify all of the costs and benefits associated with serving or not serving particular populations. As such, this person might ask, “Is there a formula we can use to measure what populations we serve most effectively and least effectively?”

Relationalist

Strength: Recognizes the importance of dynamics, such as the need for a group to have trust in order to have cohesion and to carry out decisions; has a realistic view of what motivates and demotivates people

Challenges: May be (or be perceived as) unfair because of a focus on particular relationships and not others, or a lack of “objective” criteria for decisions made

Example: Consider a board member or administrator who is a Relationalist and in a position to make decisions about the populations an agency will serve. As a Relationalist, this individual will want to consider how changes in service affect different groups of people. As such, this person might ask, “Will changes hurt staff cohesion, diminish community trust, or affect the specific people served?”

Strength of Preference and Ethical Reasoning Types

There is no necessary relation among preferences for the six aspects, or characteristics.

A preference of any degree (i.e., strong, moderate, averse) for one aspect does not necessitate a preference in any degree (i.e., strong, moderate, averse) for any other aspect.

For example, if you are a strong Applier, you will not necessarily also be a strong Individualist or a strong Calculator. You could be a strong Applier and have an aversion to calculations.

Strong Preferences

- From the six aspects of decision making, you may have only one **STRONG** preference. This means you usually approach decision making from this aspect.
- From the six aspects, you may have several **STRONG** preferences. This means you usually approach decision making from a combination of these aspects.
- **Dynamic:** You may disagree with or not understand someone else who has a **STRONG** or **MODERATE** preference for other aspects.

For example, if you are a strong Calculator and a strong Applier, you may not communicate well with a strong Situationalist or Relationalist.

Moderate and Weak Preferences

- From the six aspects of decision making, you may have several or nearly all moderate scores. In other words, you may not express any strong preferences or aversions.
- However, you may slightly prefer one approach to the others.
- You may also have one or more weak preferences.
- **Dynamic:** If you do have multiple moderate/weak preferences, you are probably comfortable hearing ideas based on any of the six decision-making aspects. You may be more inclined to propose compromises or to take on a mediating role in a group.

Aversions

- From the six aspects of decision making, you may dislike, or have an aversion to, one or more aspects.
- Dynamic: You may have trouble communicating with someone who has ANY preference for the aspects to which you are averse.

For example, if you have an aversion to calculation, you may not accept any decision-making approach that involves calculating.

