

The Psychology of Making Ethical Decisions: What Affects the Decision?

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Individuals engage in an ethical decision-making process to solve ethical dilemmas. This empirical study of Navy chaplains explored the process of ethical decision making and the extent to which the characteristics of the moral situation influence the decision-making process. The results of the study are visually displayed in a model that pictures the steps in ethical decision making, which could be used as a teaching and training tool for professionals.

Keywords: ethical decision making, moral intensity, chaplains, ethical professional development

The ethical principles and rules of professions may guide individuals in their choices and actions as they tackle challenging moral issues. Psychologists may face myriad ethical dilemmas throughout their professional careers, including, but not limited to, issues related to dual relationships, confidentiality, or legal or financial concerns. As any professional confronts ethical problems, he or she engages in a decision-making process that involves recognizing, evaluating, deciding on, and executing an action to resolve the dilemma. This empirical study explored the process of ethical decision making and the extent to which the characteristics of the moral situation influence the decision-making process.

A primary goal of this research was to contribute to the understanding of ethical decision making through exploring the decision-making process and its relationship with *moral intensity*, a term used to describe situational characteristics of a moral dilemma. The second aim of this research was to provide support for an ethical decision-making tool that professionals

can incorporate into their ethics training and education.

Ethical Decision Making

James Rest developed a model of ethical decision making, bringing together theoretical approaches from research in moral development and education. Rest (1994) proposed that the process of ethical decision making involves four distinct psychological steps: moral sensitivity/awareness, moral judgment, moral motivation/intention, and moral action/courage. *Moral awareness* is the recognition that a situation contains a moral dilemma. *Moral judgment* involves developing and considering choices and their consequences. *Moral intention* refers to the intention to choose the moral decision over another choice representing a different value. The final step in the decision-making process, *moral action*, requires that the individual carry out his or her decision.

Moral Intensity

Moral intensity refers to six characteristics of a moral issue as defined by Jones (1991): magnitude of consequences, temporal immediacy, social consensus, probability of effect, proximity, and concentration of effect. They are defined as the following: *magnitude of consequences*, the degree to which an individual may be harmed by or benefit from the decision maker's actions; *temporal immediacy*, the length of time between an action and the expected consequences; *social consensus*, the decision maker's perception

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of how his or her social group views a situation; *probability of effect*, the likelihood that the predicted consequences will occur and cause the expected level of harm or benefit; *proximity*, the physical, psychological, social, or cultural closeness of the decision maker to the affected individual(s); and *concentration of effect*, the relationship between the number of people affected by the decision and the magnitude of the harm. Collectively, these six characteristics of the moral situation make up the moral intensity model. Jones predicted that an increase in moral intensity will strongly affect the individual's decision-making process.

Empirical research validating Rest's (1994) model of ethical decision making and its relationship with moral intensity is limited. Jones (1991) believed that his model of moral intensity affected the decision-making process, and if this assertion is true, understanding the role of moral intensity may help individuals recognize what factors influence their decision-making process. Previous studies have focused on one or two aspects of each model, rarely taking on the challenge of examining multiple steps in the ethical decision-making process and several of the characteristics of the moral situation. However, when examined collectively, these past studies provide some insight into the process of ethical decision making and the effect of moral intensity on this process.

A majority of research suggests that social consensus is a strong predictor of moral awareness (Barnett, 2001; Butterfield, Trevino, & Weaver, 2000; Chia & Mee, 2000; Frey, 2000; Harrington, 1997; Singhapakdi, Vitell, & Kraft, 1996), moral judgment (Barnett, 2001; Harrington, 1997; Morris & McDonald, 1995; Singer, 1998), and moral intention (Barnett, 2001; Frey, 2000; Singhapakdi et al., 1996). Research also suggests that magnitude of consequences plays an important role in individuals' moral awareness (Butterfield et al., 2000; Chia & Mee, 2000; Frey, 2000; Singhapakdi et al., 1996), moral judgment (Barnett, 2001; Harrington, 1997; Morris & McDonald, 1995; Singer, 1998), and moral intention (Barnett, 2001; Frey, 2000; Singhapakdi et al., 1996). Research on the effects of proximity, probability of effect, temporal immediacy, and concentration of effect is less conclusive in identifying the role these characteristics play in the decision-making process, sometimes finding these

dimensions to have a moderate influence over decision making; at other times, they exert little to no influence (Barnett, 2001; Chia & Mee, 2000; Frey, 2000; Singer, 1998). Few studies have explored the relationship between moral action, the final step in the ethical decision-making model, and moral intensity because of the inherent difficulty of conducting an empirical study on moral action.

These studies suggest that an important relationship exists between ethical decision making and three of the four steps of the ethical decision-making model: moral awareness, moral judgment, and moral intention. Further research is needed to validate and more extensively explore this relationship; this study, incorporating five of the six dimensions of moral intensity and three steps in the ethical decision-making process, begins to fulfill that need.

Method

Participants

This study recruited 352 Navy chaplains (326 men, 26 women). A majority of the sample (81%) was affiliated with Protestant denominations, whereas 11.6% were affiliated with the Catholic Church, and 6.8% were affiliated with other Christian denominations, Judaism, or Eastern religions.

Measure

A two-part questionnaire was adapted from the Canadian Department of Defence's Ethics Survey. Part 1 focused on philosophical approaches to ethical decision making. Part 2, the focus of this study, was developed to assess three components of Rest's (1994) process of ethical decision making (moral awareness, moral judgment, and moral intention) and five of the six components of Jones's (1991) moral intensity construct: magnitude of consequences, temporal immediacy, social consensus, proximity, and probability of effect. The sixth dimension of moral intensity, concentration of effect, has failed to be empirically supported by other research and, therefore, was excluded from this study. Part 2 of the questionnaire consisted of five scenarios, varying in ethical intensity, each describing a moral dilemma and a subsequent action or decision. Participants were

asked 15 questions after each scenario to assess their moral awareness, moral judgment, moral intention, and perception of the five dimensions of moral intensity.

Participants' moral awareness was measured by the question, "Do you believe that there is a moral or ethical issue involved in the above action/decision?" This question used a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*completely agree*) to 7 (*completely disagree*). The responses were recoded so that a higher score reflected a higher level of moral awareness.

Moral judgment comprised seven items: just/unjust, fair/unfair, morally right/wrong, acceptable/unacceptable to family, acceptable/unacceptable in military culture, acceptable/unacceptable in military tradition, does not violate/violates an unspoken promise, and does not violate/violates an unwritten contract. Each item used a 7-point Likert scale, from 1 (*morally appropriate*) to 7 (*morally inappropriate*). An overall judgment score was computed by summing and averaging the ratings of each item. This moral judgment scale was originally developed by Reidenbach and Robin (1988, Reidenbach and Robin (1990), and its use in several empirical studies has shown reliability coefficients between .70 and .90 (Barnett, 2001).

Moral intention was measured by responses to the statement, "Please indicate the likelihood that you would make the same decision described in the scenario." The questions used a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*definitely would*) to 7 (*definitely would not*).

The participants were asked to rate the five dimensions of moral intensity on a 7-point Likert scale. Singhapakdi et al. (1996) developed the Perceived Moral Intensity Scale, which was adapted for use in this study. The following statements were repeated for each scenario: magnitude of consequences, "The possible harm resulting from the decision within the context of that situation would be [*minor to severe*]"; temporal immediacy, "Any negative consequences of that decision are likely to occur [*after a long time to immediately*]"; social consensus, "Most chaplains would consider that decision to be [*appropriate to inappropriate*]"; proximity, "The specific decision would negatively affect [*my command to people outside of my command*]"; and probability of effect, "The chances of any negative consequences occur-

ring as a result of that decision are [*not likely to very likely*]."

Results

The means and standard deviations were calculated for participants' responses to questions of moral awareness, moral judgment, and moral intention for all of the scenarios (see Table 1). Results from *t* tests revealed no significant differences in moral awareness, moral judgment, or moral intention for gender, religious affiliation, or number of years ordained.

Multiple regression analyses were used to investigate moral intensity's relationship with ethical decision making. A multiple regression was used for each scenario to examine the relationship among the five dimensions of moral intensity and moral awareness, the first step in the ethical decision-making process (see Table 2). The overall model was significant for two of the five scenarios. The moral intensity factors significantly accounted for 8% of the variance in Scenario 1 and 4% of the variance in Scenario 2. Looking at each moral intensity factor's predictive role in the model indicates that certain factors explained the variability of moral awareness among chaplains better than other factors. Social consensus acted as a moderate predictor of moral awareness, significantly associated with three of the five scenarios. The other moral intensity factors were found to be poor predictors of moral awareness.

The sequential nature of the steps of ethical decision making and the potential influence prior steps may have on a subsequent step support the use of a hierarchical regression to explore the relationship between moral judgment and moral awareness and moral intensity (see Table 3) as well as moral intention and moral judgment and moral intensity (see Table 4).

The overall model for the relationship between moral intensity and moral judgment

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations: Moral Awareness, Judgment, and Intention

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Moral awareness (recoded)	5.94	1.12
Moral judgment	5.56	0.69
Moral intention	5.65	0.84

Table 2
Multiple Regression Analyses: Moral Awareness and Moral Intensity

Variable	Scenario 1		Scenario 2		Scenario 3		Scenario 4		Scenario 5	
	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i> (350)								
Model 1										
Magnitude of consequences	.02	0.30	.10	1.56	.03	0.36	-.02	-0.20	.14	1.71
Temporal immediacy	.00	0.07	-.03	-0.48	-.03	-0.45	-.08	-1.18	.03	0.42
Social consensus	.24	4.15**	.14	2.41*	.13	2.02*	.01	0.25	-.08	-1.21
Proximity	-.11	-2.05*	.02	0.36	.00	-0.05	.01	0.09	.02	0.41
Probability of effect	.02	0.39	-.02	-0.25	.06	0.79	.00	0.03	.04	0.62
<i>F</i> (345)	6.15**	2.53*	2.08	0.48	1.68					
<i>R</i> ²	.08	.04	.03	.01	.02					

* *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01.

was significant for three of the five scenarios. Moral awareness was entered on the first step of the regression and found to be a significant predictor of variability in three of the five scenarios (see Table 3). A significant change in *R*² occurred for each scenario when the factors of moral intensity were added into the regression. The dimensions of moral intensity explained approximately 40–50% of the variance in each scenario. Social consensus and magnitude of consequences were strong predictors of moral judgment, each explaining a significant amount of variance in all five scenarios. Probability of effect was a moderate predictor of moral judgment and significantly related to three of the five scenarios (see Table 3).

Table 4 shows the results from the hierarchical regression of moral intention, moral judgment, and moral intensity. Entered on the first step of the regression, moral judgment was a significant predictor of moral intention for all

five scenarios. The moral intensity factors were entered on the second step and significantly increased the *R*² value for four of the five scenarios. Social consensus, significantly associated with all five scenarios, and probability of effect, significantly associated with four scenarios, were strong predictors of moral intention.

Discussion

In this study, we demonstrated that the dimensions of moral intensity have predictive value in explaining the choices an individual makes when making an ethical decision. Moral awareness, moral judgment, and moral intention can be explained in part by the moral intensity factors of an ethical dilemma.

Understanding the relationship between the process of ethical decision making and moral intensity provides individuals with greater insight into what affects their ability to make and

Table 3
Hierarchical Regression Analyses: Moral Judgment, Moral Intensity, and Moral Awareness

Variable	Scenario 1		Scenario 2		Scenario 3		Scenario 4		Scenario 5	
	<i>B</i>	<i>R</i> ²								
Model 1										
Moral awareness	.23**	.05**	.19**	.04**	.27**	.07**	.04	.00	.08	.01
Model 2										
Moral awareness	.08*		.06		.15**		.05		.02	
Magnitude of consequences	.18**		.21**		.21**		.22**		.29**	
Temporal immediacy	.01		-.02		.02		-.08		.03	
Social consensus	.47**		.57**		.55**		.49**		.46**	
Proximity	-.05		-.03		-.11**		-.07		.01	
Probability of effect	.17**	.45**	.05	.50**	.09	.61**	.15**	.45**	.12*	.60**
<i>R</i> ² Δ	.40		.46		.54		.44		.59	

* *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01.

Table 4
Hierarchical Regression Analyses: Moral Intention, Moral Intensity, and Moral Judgment

Variable	Scenario 1		Scenario 2		Scenario 3		Scenario 4		Scenario 5	
	B	R ²								
Model 1										
Moral judgment	.57**	.32**	.63**	.39**	.66**	.44**	.53**	.29**	.74**	.54**
Model 2										
Moral judgment	.39**		.50**		.53**		.39**		.41**	
Magnitude of consequences	.08		.08		.01		.13*		.28**	
Temporal immediacy	-.09		-.06		.04		.08		.02	
Social consensus	.25**		.14**		.17**		.14**		.19**	
Proximity	-.09*		-.04		.01		-.06		-.05	
Probability of effect	-.01	.38**	.02	.41*	-.02	.45	-.03	.33**	.00	.62**
R ^{2Δ}		.06		.02		.02		.04		.08

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

act on moral decisions. The results of this study can be visually conveyed in a model that pictures the steps of the process of ethical decision making and the moral intensity factors that are pertinent to each step. This ethical decision-making model described below could be used as a teaching and training tool for professional psychologists.

The findings from this research demonstrate that the first step, moral awareness, is significantly associated with social consensus. An individual's ability to recognize a moral dilemma is related to what he or she perceives his or her social group to believe about a particular situation. The relationship between moral awareness and social consensus has the potential to positively or negatively affect the decision maker's awareness of a morally charged situation. Peers who are highly attuned to moral situations may help an individual recognize a moral dilemma. However, if a social group fails to identify morally charged situations when they exist, the decision maker may also be less likely to recognize a moral issue.

Social consensus, magnitude of consequences, and probability of effect were found to be strong predictors of the second step of the model, moral judgment. As the decision maker evaluates the possible choices and their potential consequences, he or she takes into consideration what he or she perceives a social group would believe about the choices, the extent to which other individuals will be harmed by or benefit from his or her actions, and the likelihood that the consequences of the decision will actually occur.

The third step, moral intention, is significantly related to social consensus and probability of effect. These results suggest that as individuals form their intention to act, they consider what they believe their peers will think as well as the likelihood that the consequences of their actions will occur. An individual's intention to act may lead to the fourth step in the model of ethical decision making, moral action. Similar to the first three steps in the process, social consensus may play an important role in this fourth step, but further research is needed to determine the relationship between moral action and moral intensity.

Proximity and temporal immediacy were two factors of the moral intensity model that did not significantly influence any of the three steps in the process of ethical decision making. These findings suggest that perhaps proximity and temporal immediacy should be excluded from the model of moral intensity.

The findings from this research can be readily applied to case examples for the professional psychologist. Consider the following case study:

Based at al-Asad Air Base in western Iraq's al-Anbar Province, during the height of combat operations in 2004, military psychologist Dr. Davison felt as if she had been thrown in the deep end of the pool with few swimming lessons. Yet, as she mentally reviewed the last 5 months, she saw that she had adapted and managed pretty well. More than one Marine went above and beyond, often weeks later, to thank her for her help. In particular, she remembered one lance corporal's succinct way of putting it. In fact, he had written his thank you down, framed it, and requested that she hang it in her office. The lance corporal's message on

her wall read, "It's a goddamn relief to know that I'm normal, Doc."

Why did he write this? Because he had benefited from months of their meetings. Most of the injured Marines she saw were simultaneously afraid, ashamed, and angry: afraid to go back into the fray, ashamed to admit it, and angry at themselves because inside each one was a part that did not want to reenter the kinetics with their buddies.

As the corporal's quote makes clear, "Doc" found this to be a common, normal reaction to an extraordinary circumstance. She told the Marines that. "Just because you have these feelings doesn't mean you'll act on them," she said. "In fact, you'll find you won't. It also doesn't mean you're the first person in the world to have them. You are what you do, more than what you simply feel or think." Most of the Marines expressed great relief when they heard those words.

Recently, there had been a lull in the fighting, and Davison had seen a drop in the number of visitors. However, she still had a steady influx of Marines who needed to talk. One was Staff Sergeant Brooks. He had company-level responsibilities for several squad leaders, one of whom was becoming a concern. Several people had approached Brooks about Ward, his platoon sergeant.

Davison already knew all about Sergeant Ward; she had been counseling him for some time. He had been concerned enough about what he was feeling to approach her. He talked about a strained relationship at home. He believed his wife was cheating on him. Ward also complained that his anger was nearly overtaking his self-control. Davison realized that this too was a normal reaction to an extraordinary circumstance and told him that. She emphasized her message that Sergeant Ward as a whole was more about what he did than what he thought or felt.

Ward had assured her he would never act on his thoughts. But he was coming to her office more often, and now this visit from Brooks had set off alarm bells. Brooks wanted Davison's read on whether Ward should be taken out of combat and restricted from carrying weapons.

Davison knew that she was duty bound to answer this query honestly. On the other hand, she had a professional obligation to her patient. At the beginning, she had given Sergeant Ward the usual assurances of confidentiality, and had, over time, built up a level of trust. Ward seemed not only to appreciate the trust, but also to be coming to terms with his considerable anger. Davison felt his progress could be jeopardized if Brooks were to take action. Should she let Ward know about Brooks's request or keep that to herself? "Ward might lash out, he might sink into self-loathing, or he may simply think his superiors don't give a damn about him," she thought. "What to do?" she wondered, "What to do?"

The case study provides an opportunity to illustrate the metamodel for ethical decision making developed with the data from this study. The next section of this article explains the process of ethical decision making and introduces questions that

can be used to teach psychologists, as decision makers, about the ethical decision-making model and guide them through the decision-making process. At each step of the ethical decision-making model, the decision maker is confronted with two types of questions: questions directly related to each particular step, as well as questions that force the decision maker to think through situational factors.

Step 1: Moral Awareness

The first step, moral awareness, or the "I feel" step requires that the individual, in this case, Dr. Davison, recognize the presence of an ethical dilemma and realize that the situation warrants a problem-solving approach from a moral perspective. This recognition, often described as a "gut feeling" that something is wrong, may originate from a strong emotion, such as a feeling of disgust, or from a physiological response to the situation.

Moral awareness questions.

1. Is anything wrong here?
2. Is a person, community, or ideal at risk to lose dignity, respect, or liberty?
3. Might a moral principle be violated?
4. Are competing values at work? Individual versus community? Justice versus mercy? Truth versus loyalty? Short term versus long term?

In addition to a readiness to assess her awareness of the presence of an ethical dilemma, Davison must also recognize the situational characteristics that may either positively or negatively influence her ability to be aware.

Moral intensity questions related to moral awareness.

1. Would my peers (other military psychologists) detect a moral dilemma in this situation? How would their opinions influence my moral awareness? (Social consensus)

Step 2: Moral Judgment

The next step, the "I ask" step, refers to Rest's (1994) idea of moral judgment. In this second step of the ethical decision-making pro-

cess, Dr. Davison must formulate and evaluate potential choices and their consequences.

Moral judgment questions.

1. Is the probable decision fair or unfair?
2. Is the probable decision just or unjust?
3. Was the decision morally right or morally wrong?
4. Would the decision be acceptable to my family and friends?
5. Would the probable decision be in line with the culture and traditions of the military?
6. Does the decision violate a promise or code that is important to the military, to psychology?

Moral intensity questions related to moral judgment.

1. What would my peers think about the potential consequences? How would their opinions affect my moral judgment? (Social consensus)
2. What is the extent of the harm or benefit that could occur from the decision? How does the magnitude of the possible consequences influence my moral judgment? (Magnitude of consequences)
3. What is the likelihood that the possible outcomes and the harm or benefit from those outcomes will occur in this situation? How does this probability affect my moral judgment? (Probability of effect)

Step 3: Moral Intention

After considering the possible choices and outcomes, Davison must think through how she intends to behave. The third step, moral intention or the “I think I will” step, requires that Davison make a decision as to how she intends to act. The findings from this study indicate that social consensus and probability of effect play important roles in an individual’s determination of moral intention.

Moral intention questions.

1. What do I think I should do?
2. Do I intend to act on my decision?

Moral intensity questions related to moral intention.

1. What would my peers think about the potential consequences? How would their opinions affect my moral intention? (Social consensus)
2. What is the likelihood that the possible outcomes and the harm or benefit from those outcomes will occur in this situation? How does this probability affect my moral judgment? (Probability of effect)

Step 4: Moral Action

Moral action is the final step in the decision-making process. Named the “I act” step, this step refers to the decision maker’s behavior. Although this step was not examined in this study, previous research has consistently shown the importance of the relationship among the moral intensity factors and the first three steps of the decision-making model and therefore presupposes that these factors should be taken into consideration in this final step of moral action. In particular, social consensus’ significant influence on each of the first three steps suggests that it might also be a significant predictor of moral action.

Moral action questions.

1. Do I follow through on my intention?
2. What may prevent me from acting on my intention?
3. What may aid me in following through on my intention?

Moral intensity questions related to moral action.

1. Would my peers act on their decision? How does their potential action influence my behavior? (Social consensus)

The proposed model can be a helpful tool to professional ethics education and training. Un-

derstanding the steps involved in the process of ethical decision making can help individuals better evaluate their own decision-making process as well as provide professionals with a useful tool to help guide others in making an ethical decision. This model provides a framework through which individuals can evaluate a moral dilemma and their responses to it. In addition, this model may provide psychologists with insight into why they might fail to make an appropriate moral decision. Examining where a possible failure in one of the steps of the decision-making model may have occurred could be a retroactive means of evaluating or correcting a poor ethical decision. Incorporating moral intensity into the ethical decision-making model is necessary as a reminder that decision making does not occur in a vacuum and may be subject to external and internal influences. Although the characteristics of the moral situation can both positively and negatively affect the decision-making process, it is important to be aware of them so that individuals can use these factors to heighten their moral sensitivity, strengthen their moral judgment, increase the likelihood that they will intend to act morally, and strengthen their resolve to respond to a moral dilemma with moral courage.

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