
A Need to Know: An Ethical Decision-Making Model for Research Administrators

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Abstract

When faced with a morally charged situation, individuals engage in an ethical decision-making process to resolve the ethical dilemma. This paper outlines a model that describes the steps in the ethical decision-making process and identifies situational factors, collectively termed moral intensity, which may influence this process. The use of a case study, presenting an ethical dilemma relevant for professionals, offers an opportunity to apply the ethical decision-making model. This model can be used as a teaching and training tool to enhance research administrators' professional development in research ethics.

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

Introduction

The ability to work through and resolve ethical dilemmas is an important skill for any professional. The multi-faceted work of research administrators forces them to deal with a multiplicity of dilemmas related to research ethics. These dilemmas can arise in any of the areas or allied disciplines related to research administration, such as financial stewardship, operations, human resources management, sponsored projects oversight, strategic planning, research law,

development activities, standards for the responsible conduct of research, and human subjects protection. The ability to tackle ethical dilemmas to uphold the ethical integrity of research and ensure regulatory compliance is critical for professional research administrators on all levels, including executives, middle managers, and technical or support staff. Yet, as individuals join the research administration profession from diverse backgrounds and previous experiences, their exposure to research ethics also varies. Recognizing that each research administrator brings different perspectives and experiences to ethical situations, it is important that research administrators of all professional levels receive clear, effective training for dealing with ethical dilemmas.

Literature Review

Rushworth Kidder, founder of the Institute for Global Ethics, describes a true ethical dilemma as a conflict of right versus right. He claims that true ethical dilemmas fall within four right-versus-right categories; individuals so frequently encounter these four types of dilemmas that they can be considered paradigms (Kidder, 1995). These four fundamental ethical dilemmas are: truth versus loyalty, individual versus community, short term versus long term, and justice versus mercy. Kidder asserts that the ability to classify ethical dilemmas into one of these four categories allows individuals to reduce a complex and potentially anxiety-provoking dilemma into a more manageable and less threatening problem. However, the ability to identify and categorize the type of ethical dilemma does not resolve the conflict. Working through the dilemma is necessary to reach a decision.

Focusing on the process of understanding and resolving an ethical dilemma, James Rest (1994) developed a theoretical model of ethical decision making that involves four distinct psychological processes: moral awareness, moral judgment, moral intention, and moral action. Rest asserts that, when confronted with an ethical dilemma, individuals engage in a decision-making process that involves working through these four components. Individuals move from moral awareness, the recognition of a moral situation, to moral judgment, the evaluation of choices and outcomes, to moral intention, choosing how one intends to act, and lastly to moral action, the actual behavior in the situation. A failure at any step in the process could result in a failure to make an ethical decision (Rest, 1994).

Building on Rest's theory, Jones (1991) developed a theory of moral intensity, suggesting that specific characteristics of the moral situation -- what he collectively identified as moral intensity -- influence individuals' decision-making ability. Jones described six factors of moral intensity: Magnitude of Consequences, Social Consensus, Probability of Effect, Temporal Immediacy, Proximity, and Concentration of Effect. Magnitude of Consequences refers to the degree to which an individual may be harmed by or benefit from the decision maker's action. Social Consensus refers to the degree of agreement among a social group that an action is good or bad. This social group could be society as a whole (e.g., an illegal act is not morally acceptable by society because a law prohibits it) or a smaller social group, such as an individual's colleagues. Probability of Effect is described as the likelihood that the predicted outcomes and the expected level of harm/benefit will occur. Temporal Immediacy refers to the length of time between the action and its resolution. An action that results in immediate negative outcomes will cause a greater increase in moral intensity than an action for which the outcomes are

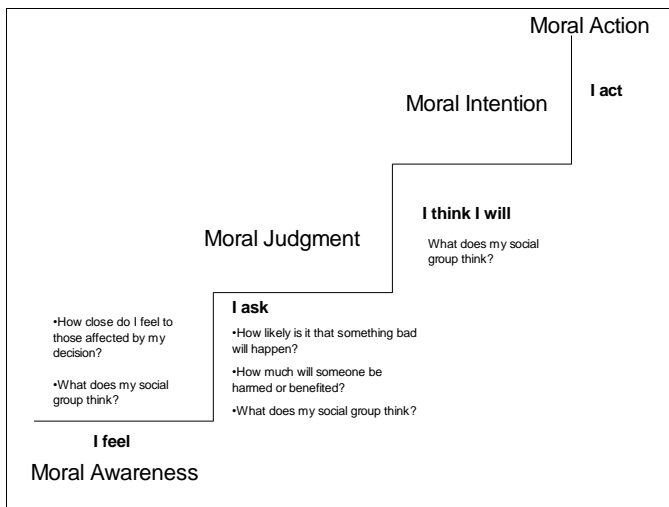
delayed. Proximity refers to the nearness of the decision maker to the individuals potentially affected by the results. Proximity can be a feeling of physical, cultural, social, or psychological nearness to the individuals involved in the situation. The final dimension, Concentration of Effect, refers to the relationship between the number of people affected and the magnitude of harm.

Holmes' Meta-Model

Both Rest and Jones offer important theoretical perspectives to the process of ethical-decision making. Each theory addresses a particular component of the overall ethical decision-making process; integrating the two theories to create a meta-model describing the process of ethical decision making and the factors that influence this process provides a much needed framework for individuals to understand and analyze how they resolve ethical dilemmas. Dr. Holmes conducted research on these two theories, exploring the decision-making process and the moral intensity factors related to that process. This research resulted in empirical support for both theories and the development of a meta-model for understanding and working through the ethical decision-making process. This model can be used in ethics education and training for professionals, allowing individuals to develop a better appreciation for and understanding of the way they approach ethical dilemmas.

The meta-model for ethical decision making describes a step-by-step process for making an ethical decision, taking into consideration Rest's four psychological processes and Jones's characteristics of the moral situation. The probability that individuals engage in a decision-making process as they confront ethically charged situations is high, as evidenced by this research. Used as a teaching tool, this meta-model, shown in Figure 1, can educate research administrators on their approach to moral dilemmas and what may influence their decision-making processes. Consciously aware of the steps of the process and potential influencing variables, research administrators will be better prepared to tackle the ethical dilemmas they confront in their professional lives.

Figure 1. Ethical decision-making model.



This ethical decision-making model proposes that individuals move through four steps to resolve an ethical dilemma. Research shows that several of the moral intensity factors are significantly related to the decisions made by individuals at each step in the process. Social Consensus, Proximity, Probability of Effect, and Magnitude of Consequences were found to be significant predictors of individuals' responses throughout the decision-making process, either positively or negatively influencing it. By enhancing the individual's sensitivity to the situation, these factors of moral intensity could aid in making an ethically sound decision; conversely, perhaps by distancing the individual from the situation, these factors of moral intensity may prevent the individual from effectively resolving a moral dilemma.

Case Study

Frequently used in training and teaching of professionals, case studies provide a concrete way of learning a new theory or skill that can later be applied to real-life situations. Case studies can be modified for use with different groups of people. Below is a case example, adapted from one written by Englehardt (2003), about an ethical dilemma that is relevant and realistic for research administrators.

The Glass Ceiling

Every research administration office in the history of this institution has had only white, male directors, who, until recently, have also been members of the same religion. A new search has been opened for the vacating director's job. The list of 50 candidates has been cut to five top choices. The candidates consist of two Caucasian women, one Asian male, and two Caucasian males. Only two of the candidates, one female and one male, are of the same religion as the majority of individuals working at the institution. The final selection committee for the director is a small group approved by the president of the institution. The majority of individuals in the final hiring group are white, male members of the same faith. The initial word within the department is that the candidate to be selected is the white male of the same faith. His credentials are slightly less than either of the women candidates. You are a research administrator in this research administration office and, while not directly involved in the selection of the new director, you were on the initial screening committee. Since the final selection has not yet been made, it is possible for you to make your insights and feelings known. Do you decide to keep silent and go along with what appears to be the end result? Or do you raise the wider issues in the interest of ensuring the best result? What, if anything, do you decide to do?

Below are explanations and questions to guide the decision maker, in this instance, the research administrator, through the ethical decision-making process. At each step in the decision-making model, the decision maker must think through two types of questions, which, while interrelated, are distinct components of the ethical decision-making process. The decision maker must ask questions related to each particular step, as well as think through factors that may influence his or her decision-making ability at that step.

Step 1: Moral Awareness

The first step, moral awareness or the "I feel" step, is the recognition that a situation contains a moral issue. This awareness may result from a "gut" feeling that something is wrong in a particular situation. Individuals may experience a strong

emotion, like disgust, and/or a physiological response to situations that contain ethical conflicts. Research suggests that the moral intensity factors of Proximity and Social Consensus are particularly important for an individual's ability to recognize a moral issue.

In this scenario the research administrator needs to answer the question, "Is there an ethical dilemma in this situation?" The research administrator must assess his or her own awareness of a potential problem as well as variables that may positively or negatively influence his or her awareness.

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?

Moral intensity questions related to moral awareness:

1. How close (physically, emotionally, culturally, socially) do I feel to the individuals affected by this hiring decision? How do my feelings of proximity to these individuals influence my moral awareness? (Proximity)
2. Would my peers (other research administrators) detect a moral dilemma in this situation? How would their opinions influence my moral awareness? (Social Consensus)

Step 2: Moral Judgment

The second step, "I ask," refers to Rest's component of moral judgment. At this point in the process, the decision maker formulates and evaluates potential choices and possible outcomes. Research suggests that the intensity factors of Social Consensus, Magnitude of Consequences, and Probability of Effect are particularly relevant for the decision maker at this stage of the process.

In this scenario, the research administrator must develop and critique the possible solutions and outcomes to the problem. In order to construct a morally sound judgment, the research administrator should ask questions that will help develop and clarify his or her judgment about those choices, as well as think through questions that may either positively or negatively influence that judgment.

Moral judgment questions:

1. Is the hiring committee's probable decision fair or unfair?
2. Is the hiring committee's probable decision just or unjust?
3. Was the selection process for the new director morally right or morally wrong?
4. Would this selection process and the probable decision made by the hiring committee be acceptable to my family and friends?
5. Would the search committee's probable decision be in line with the culture and traditions of the research administration profession?
6. Does the probable decision violate a promise or code that is important to the research administration profession?

Moral intensity questions related to moral judgment:

1. What would my peers (other research administrators) 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 of the hiring committee? 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 evaluating possible solutions and their consequences, the individual decides his or her intention to act. This third step, “I think I will,” refers to Rest’s component of moral intention. The research shows that the power of Social Consensus is significantly related to the individual’s intention to act.

At this point in the decision-making process, the research administrator needs to decide how he or she intends to act, remembering that choosing not to act may be a valid decision. The research administrator must deliberate on how he or she intends to deal with the hiring committee, as well as take into consideration factors that may influence his or her intention to act morally.

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. How would my peers (other research administrators) likely act? How does my perception of their intentions influence my moral intention? (Social Consensus)

Step 4: *Moral Action*

The final step, “I act,” indicates moral courage or moral action. This step refers to the decision maker’s behavior. Choosing to follow through on a morally right decision requires the individual to marshal the courage to act despite fear or adversity. Minimal research has been conducted on moral action and moral intensity factors due to the inherent difficulties in manipulating individuals’ decisions in ethically charged situations. However, the importance of the moral intensity factors in the previous three steps suggests that moral intensity should be considered in this last step. Specifically, the power of social influence, represented by Social Consensus, is significant in the three previous steps of the process and likely consistently important in the fourth step.

In this scenario, at the final step in the process, the research administrator must act. After having chosen an intended action, the research administrator must consider his or her final behavior and what has the potential to influence his or her 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 (other research administrators) act on their decision? How does their potential action influence my behavior? (Social Consensus)

Conclusion

The ethical decision-making model can be used as a framework for evaluating and working through ethical dilemmas. This teaching model describes a process of ethical decision making and characteristics of morally charged situations that may influence the decision-making process. Despite the breadth of potential ethical dilemmas research administrators may face, this meta-model can be used in any situation to highlight a step-by-step process for dealing with an ethical dilemma. This model sheds light on both the thought and affective processes involved in resolving an ethical dilemma, making what has typically been implicit, explicit. Understanding the model of ethical decision making and the factors that may influence the process will help research administrators evaluate how effectively they deal with ethical decisions and what may prevent them from making an appropriate and responsible ethical decision.

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