Determining Educator Ethical Decision-Making Factors Using the Jones Model

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Abstract

Despite the presence of codes and laws, ethical decision-making by educators continues to elude understanding. The purpose of this descriptive study was to explore factors in education ethical decision-making that may influence teacher behaviors in order to develop training materials for future teachers. Previously vetted scenarios based on actual educator misconduct were presented online to preservice teachers to identify agreement with constructs and intensity of moral concern as proposed in the Jones Model of Ethical Decision-Making (1991). Codes and laws focused on the results of decision-making do not probe the reasons behind immoral actions. Based on current survey data, educators can identify situations of differing moral intensity, determine moral intensity quickly, and make decisions about moral intensity based on various factors from personal experience and backgrounds.

Introduction

Ethics matter. No one questions why educators should be ethical. There is a universal assumption that educators and teachers must be ethical. All states in the USA have some kind of guidelines for ethical behavior for teachers and Boards of Education to oversee and enforce those laws and codes of ethical behavior (Dawson, Hofland, Lynes, & Squire, 2018). However, in every state, educators exhibit behaviors that are not ethical and indeed sometimes illegal despite laws prohibiting such actions (Government Accountability Office, GAO-14-42).

Although written codes are important (McKinney, Emerson, & Neubert, 2010), research on ethical decision-making does not support that the existence of codes of ethics or laws is sufficient to curb misbehaviors (Cottone & Claus, 2000; Craft, 2013). There appears to be a disconnect between lawful compliance and ethical behaviors as evidenced by reoccurring actions of employed educators (Government Accountability Office 14-42, 2014). Ethical or moral behavior may be more complex than teachers simply not following rules. Codes and laws often focus on the results of decision-making but appear to lack concern with the reasons behind an action.

Educator decision-making appears to be influenced by legal presence, education, age, and other internalized factors. These internalized influences may include but are not limited to gender, culture, awareness of self-actions, intent when acting, personal philosophy, and moral judgment; in essence, the Śrāddha of the person. Śrāddha is a philosophical Sanskrit term that, for the purpose of this study, can be understood as the internalized factors from life's experience that predetermine or heavily influence a

choice of action or inaction. In this study, the term Śrāddha has a more complex meaning than terms such as habit or tendency. The term is inclusive of complex life events that consciously or unconsciously effect behaviors. According to Tejomayananda (2017), "It is a belief system, a value system, a way of looking at things, knowing and acting." In recent work on the connections between ethical and justice actions, Koopman, Scott, Matta, Conlon, and Dennerlein (2019) determined that perceptions of what is right are not solely reliant on adherence to justice. Instead, efficiency of automatic processing can override systematic processing (i.e., legal understanding) in determining what is ethical.

The belief that ethical growth is based on intellectual growth is not new. Rest's (1994) theory of moral development declared that increased education, not advancing age, was the greater influence in decision-making. Assumptions between ethical training and ethical behaviors, although not universal, is prevalent (Burant, Chubbuck, & Whipp, 2007; Kohlberg, 1984). Downs (2018) concluded that being educated brings about a greater sense of moral responsibility.

Another factor compounding the understanding of ethical decision-making is the influence of age. Coexisting with increasing age is usually an increase in experience. As age and professional experience increased, so did moral understanding of ethical dilemmas for pediatric nurses (Arslan & Calpbinici, 2018). Various researchers around the world have demonstrated the effect of age on factors associated with morals, ethics, or decision-making. Older law students in Thailand exhibited greater moral maturity (Mujtaba, Pattaratalwanich, & Chawavisit, 2009). Older adults in China were less likely to be influenced by their emotions when making decisions than younger adults (You, Ju, Way, Zhag, & Lui, 2017). Older adults in Hungary were less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors and more likely to engage in deliberate decision-making (Kardos et.al., 2016). In Turkey, older adult students were more realistic in ethical evaluations (Birel, 2019). Conversely, age did not significantly influence moral judgements in budget decisions of American government officials (Reck, 2000).

Our current intent is to continue to probe how educators make ethical decisions in order to create training materials for future teachers. Although other researchers have investigated a variety of approaches toward identifying factors influencing ethical values, we specifically chose to research pre-existing moral understanding using the Jones Model of Ethical Decision-Making (1991) because it considers multiple influences, has been widely researched, is validated in various settings over time, and continues as the foundation for current work (Craft, 2013).

Jones Model of Ethical Decision-Making

The Jones Model describes six validated constructs of moral intensity that influence adult behaviors. According to Jones (1991),

> Moral intensity is a construct that captures the extent of issue-related moral imperative in a situation. It is multidimensional, and its component parts are characteristics of the moral issue such as magnitude of consequences, social consensus, probability of effect, temporal immediacy, proximity, and concentration of effect. Moral intensity does not include traits of moral decision makers, such as moral development (Kohlberg, 1976); ego strength, field dependence, or locus of control (Trevino, 1986); or knowledge or values (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985). It also does not

include organizational factors, such as organizational culture (Trevino, 1986) or corporate policies (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985). In sum, moral intensity focuses on the moral issue, not on the moral agent or the organizational context (pp. 372-373).

The constructs identified by Jones (1991) are:

- Magnitude of Consequences: The magnitude of consequences of the moral issue is defined as the sum of the harms (or benefits) done to victims (or beneficiaries) of the moral act in question.

- Social Consensus: The social consensus of the moral issue is defined as the degree of social agreement that a proposed act is evil (or good).

- Probability of Effect: The probability of effect of the moral act in question is a joint function of the probability that the act in question will actually take place and the action will actually cause the harm (or benefit) predicted.

- Temporal Immediacy: The temporal immediacy of the moral issue is the length of time between the present and the onset of consequences of the moral act in question where a shorter length of time implies greater immediacy.

- Proximity: The proximity of the moral issue is the feeling of nearness such as existing social, cultural, psychological, or physical factors that the moral agent has for victims (or beneficiaries) of the evil (or beneficial) act in question.

- Concentration of Effect: The concentration of effect of the moral act is an inverse function of the number of people affected by an act of given magnitude.

Subsequent work by Rest (1994), McMahon and Harvey (2006), Brock et al., (2008), and Craft (2013) supported application of Jones' constructs in various professional fields. This study extends application into educational settings.

Purpose of our research

The overarching end goal was to develop targeted ethical training for preservice teachers. We previously reviewed existing studies of ethical decision-making to identify underlying factors influencing ethical decision-making in K-12 educational environments (Dawson & Napper, 2018) and found the Jones Moral Intensity Model (Jones, 1991) to be a seminal source for investigating constructs of ethical decision-making in professional fields. Finding no studies using ethical dilemmas from educational settings to probe ethical decision-making, we created and vetted scenarios based on actual educator misconducts referred for ethics board review or state licensing action (Dawson, Napper, & Alexander, 2018). The narrow purpose of the current work was to determine the applicability of the Jones Model to these realistic education scenarios. Specifically, we asked the following research questions.

1. Can teacher candidates identify moral intensity of presented scenarios based on actual events in educational settings?
2. How do time and age relate to the determination of moral intensity?
3. As represented by scenarios developed for educational settings which of the Jones' constructs, if any, have agreement for moral intensity?
4. Which of the Jones' constructs have the greatest variance in agreement for moral intensity?

Methods

The study used descriptive survey design to determine moral decision factors that previously has been unnoticed. Our intent was to describe previously unidentified factors influencing decision-making and not to manipulate the decision. In this study, moral concern is defined as a personal response to a possible action that may affect others as well as the person performing the action. A moral decision is about performing legal and morally acceptable actions or illegal and morally unacceptable actions. Moral intensity is the level of response of the respondent based on their past experience or understanding of the situation.

Participants

Elementary, secondary, special education, or early education teacher candidates enrolled as undergraduate and graduate students in a western North American university teacher preparation program were selected as participants. Initial participants numbered 29. Of these, 26 completed the survey and gave consent to participate in the study. Twenty-five were female, one was male, 10 were aged 20-35 years (young group), 14 were aged 36-50 years (middle group), and two were over age 51 (oldest group). Twenty-one participants were working in public schools as paraeducators, substitute teachers, or teachers while concurrently enrolled at the university.

Instrument

An online survey comprised of 54 scenarios and one participant demographic question was developed. A sense-making framework suggested by Brock et al., (2008) and grounded in work from Craft (2013), McMahon and Harvey (2006), and Rest (1994) facilitated best fit of 18 vetted realistic scenarios to the Jones' constructs (Dawson & Napper, 2018). These scenarios were then ranked by implied moral intensity level (low to very high) based on the disciplinary action meted (no action to license removal) by the state ethical licensing board for the original misbehavior. Each scenario was written to present three levels of increasing moral intensity for a total of 54 scenarios (see Appendix A for specific examples). The online survey platform (Chi Tester) was programmed to randomly choose six scenarios, one from each construct, with a variety of intensity levels to ensure an unbiased presentation of intensity rankings. Participants ranked the moral intensity of each presented scenario as low, medium, high or very high concern.

Procedures

Informed study consent was obtained when participants began the survey. If the participant chose not to participate, they were asked to exit the survey. The software did not have the capability to end the survey with a no-consent reply; however, if the no-consent option was selected and the participant responded to the scenarios, all responses from that participant were deleted. Data were collected over 10 academic months using Chi Tester and downloaded for initial analysis. Data analyses included SPSS, Excel, and visual inspection methods.

Results

All six moral intensity constructs were presented to each participant. Each of the 54 scenarios was

ranked by at least one participant. The total number of responses was 161. The number of responses to a particular scenario ranged from one to six. Results are organized by research question.

Moral Intensity Identification

Preservice teachers can identify variations in moral intensity of scenarios based on actual events in educational settings. All 54 scenarios were rated for a moral intensity ranking concern of low, medium, high, very high, or uncertain. There were no instances of participants replying with a singularity of intensity ratings across all scenarios. However, every construct except Social Consensus had one scenario with an uncertain concern response. Overall, participants ranked moral intensity of the scenarios (low concern for situations of low concern and very high concern for situations of very high concern) consistent with rankings of the original events reviewed by the state ethical board.

Time and Age

Time and age had some influence on determination of moral intensity by preservice teachers. Survey completion time for all participants averaged 8 minutes 18 seconds, with a maximum of 42 minutes 13 seconds and a median time of 5 minutes 18 seconds. There were three completion times (37, 41, and 42 minutes) substantially longer than the average duration. It is not known if these three lengthy completion times were the result of prolonged contemplation of the scenarios or interruption while taking the survey. Removing time outliers provides an average completion time of just under 5 minutes, similar to the median time.

Differences by age in completion time were discovered but were not found in moral intensity rankings or uncertainty ranking. The youngest participants took the longest to complete. The average completion time for the youngest participants was approximately 12 minutes. The middle group's time to complete averaged 7.5 minutes. The oldest participants had the shortest average completion time at approximately five minutes. There were time outliers in both the young and middle age groups. Caution is advised in the oldest group had just two participants. The level of moral intensity concern was similar across age groups. Variability emerged only in the frequency of uncertainty in the level of moral intensity. The oldest group identified only one uncertain response for the level of moral intensity whereas the youngest and middle group each had three uncertain responses.

Moral Intensity Agreement

Five constructs had multiple scenarios with unanimous moral intensity agreement: Social Consensus, Concentration of Effect, Proximity, Temporal Immediacy, and Magnitude of Consequences. The constructs with the highest degree of agreement were Social Consensus and Concentration of Effect. Construct agreement was determined by the number of scenarios in each of the six constructs with unanimous ranking marks. Moral intensity agreement was determined by the number of scenarios with unanimous agreement for moral intensity concern of low, medium, high, very high concern, or uncertain for each scenario. Twenty-three scenarios had unanimous consent for moral intensity concern. Of these scenarios 13 were ranked with very high concern, four with high, one with medium, and three with low concern. Of the 161 responses, 73% had agreement across all scenarios in all constructs.

Moral Intensity Variance

Variance construct was determined by absence of agreement. Probability of Effect was the only Jones' model construct without any scenario with unanimous agreement in moral intensity. Of non-concurring responses, rankings of medium concern had the highest numbers of intensity disagreement.

Discussion

The current research results indicate that preservice educators do indeed have an overall sense of moral intensity for any given situation, are able to discriminate different levels of concern across a spectrum of moral intensities, and the Jones Model of Moral Intensity is an appropriate fit for education professions. Regarding research question one about preservice teachers' ability to identify unethical situations and determine moral intensity, assurance is made because of general agreement (73% of responses) across all scenarios in all constructs implies a common ethical sense or a predisposed opinion about moral intensity that exists among teacher candidates in educational settings. Preservice teachers appear to have a pre-existing sense of wrongness about a situation as evidenced by the time to determine moral intensity, varied rankings of moral intensity, and general agreement regarding unethical actions presented in the scenarios.

Time and age were factors in research question two. The overall time for participants to judge moral intensity of a scenario was relatively short, less than one minute per scenario. This time length finding is supported in previous work and our suppositions; preservice educators do not ponder when making ethical decisions. This may indicate they have no explicit framework for decision making and so resort to automatic decision efficiency (Koopman et al., 2019). It could also be that teachers have no time at the decision moment to refer to an ethical code or consult law books so they must react based on individual experiences or values (Śrāddha) for solving morally intense situations. The short timeframe could also indicate that the content of the scenarios is familiar to the educators based on prior experiences and thus they did not struggle to respond (Arslan & Calpbinici, 2018). The expectation was that when presented with unfamiliar situations educators would require more time to deliberate before responding and would reply with more responses of uncertainty. Given that scenarios were taken from actual events occurring in an education setting, relevance to the events is supported by quick response time and lack of uncertain responses. Lastly, the quick decision time and high consensus in ranking for situations of very high concern for preservice teachers could indicate the establishment of an inner sense of what is appropriate and an idea of the degree of wrongness are the results of advanced education (Downs, 2018).

Age did not appear to be a major factor in speed or ability to determine moral intensity. Intensity distribution of responses among all age groups was similar for moral intensity despite age or construct. The data tended to support an understanding among all educators of a continuum of behaviors of wrongness or naughtiness. Lack of age correlations may indicate an inherent understanding of underlying factors in the internalized decision-making process (Śrāddha) or it may indicate that the training received by preservice teachers in credentialing programs allowed them to credibly judge appropriate or morally intense situations (Downs, 2018). The additional authentic classroom experiences of the preservice teachers may serve to solidify initial and trained understandings. Preservice participants who were older tended to answer more assuredly with only one "I'm not certain" response.

The results for research questions three and four support the use of Jones' model to assess types of moral intensity of actions presented in educational environment scenarios. Consistency in ranking within constructs and specific scenarios indicate affirmation for the various constructs of moral concern as identified in the Jones Model. The results also support the use of scenarios in educational environments with a range of moral intensity issues. The study provided valuable information regarding the 23 unanimously accepted scenarios as unethical behaviors valid for further use in continuing research and training.

Unanimity in scenario ranking could imply comfort with the construct or consensus in severity. Comfort with a construct implies the applicability of that factor to ethical decision-making of the teacher. The greatest agreement was for scenarios with very high intensity concerns. Such unanimity in construct ranking points to the relevance of the Jones' constructs for educators in making ethical decisions. The unanimity in severity ranking underscores the accepted rightness or wrongness of the action within the culture of education.

Conversely, disagreement within scenario intensity ranking could portend unease, unfamiliarity, or lack of relevance of the construct to events in an educational setting and assuredly points to areas where additional training is warranted. As the vetted scenarios emanated from actual ethical reviews, the scenarios with disagreement allow supervising faculty to hone training discussions to particularly confusing ethical terrain relating to those constructs. Participants had less response uniformity with scenarios related to results of actions across time (Proximity construct). Reduced consensus may be due to a lack of history or experience of preservice teacher to experience consequences over time, or a lack of nearness through continued classroom contact. The Probability of Effect construct did not have any scenario agreement and that may mean the construct, although valid in other settings, is not appropriate for education settings or that the scenarios for the construct were not appropriate.

Limitations and Implications

Study limitations include sample characteristics and narrowed focus. The limitation to this study was the small number of participants at a single institution in a single academic year. This study was qualitative and descriptive in order to determine important underlying pre-existing factors influencing ethical decision-making by people working in an educational environment. The narrow focus enabled answers to direct questions, yet exposed other questions needing to be explored.

The next step is to begin development of ethics training for preservice educators based on obtained data. The Jones Moral Intensity Model and the scenarios developed by the researchers appear to support the idea that preservice teachers can make determinations about ethical severity and that moral ideals influence their decision-making. Lack of consensus for intensity severity in a construct or particular scenario serves to direct attention to those areas where targeted training is warranted and needed.

Future Research

Based on the information gathered to date, potential areas have been identified for further research. The desire to guide preservice teachers from their pre-existing foundation of "gut reactions" to an internalized understanding of morally correct actions beneficial to their students and learning

environment is rooted in evolving ethical understanding. Individual internal ethics do not appear to have a black and white dichotomy but rather are an evolution based on a burgeoning understanding from experience. Individual ethical understanding may be changed from a previous level or built upon from scratch based on experiences in the classroom settings. It is not clear at this point if the growth of ethical understanding is from formal ethics training in education classes, or from experience in educational settings, or through observation of others as they react, or by assisting in decisions or simply from personal life experience and values.

What is clear is the need for ethics training. This study provides a starting direction for ethics training. The scenarios and constructs with a great range in moral intensity ranking or the great variance from board licensing determination of seriousness are those that should be discussed and reviewed by preservice teachers to guide ethical development. Based on survey data, it appears educators are inclined to see situations differently, make decisions quickly, and have an opinion based on various factors. A recommendation from this study is to develop scenarios across all constructs and concentrate on training in areas with the least consensus of opinion because those are areas of much needed experience.

A clear analysis of methods that may help accelerate modification of individual reactions for classroom settings is needed. How should we move preservice teachers toward internalizing ethical behavior rather than decision making based on external codes of ethics that may not be remembered? Also, there needs to be research on the factors that may predispose teachers to ethical behaviors in all areas of complex educational environments.

Summary

Relying on externalized codes of behavior or externalized laws has not heretofore been effective based on the continued evidence of reported misbehaviors among licensed educators. Codification of external behaviors through ethics testing, observable categories, or regulations create a behavioral basis for rating but not an internalized base for immediacy of action. Based on the experience of developing the scenarios and survey, the researchers find the Jones' Model approach to rank moral intensity to be valid in educational settings and that development of ethics scenarios from actual events provides realism and relevance for educators. Exposure to realistic scenarios, such as those provided in the study, may be useful in training to sensitize future teachers to possible outcomes. This study adds understanding of the influence of age, experience, and use of Jones Model of Moral Intensity constructs to educator ethical decision-making.

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Appendix A

Survey Example of Assigned Rank, Construct, Question, and Response Option

Reminder on all question: A moral decision is about performing legal and morally acceptable actions or illegal and morally unacceptable actions. In this study, moral concern is defined as a personal response to a possible action that may affect others as well as the person performing the action.			
Researcher Assigned Rank for Construct	Scenario	Question for participant to ponder before response choice	Response Options
Low level of concern for proximity	Mr. Hubbard, a high school substitute, assists a 17-year-old student at a high school event.	**Ask yourself: Did the proximity of the teacher to the student(s) in this situation cause any harm to anyone involved?** Definition of proximity: closeness that the actor feels for victims or beneficiaries of the act.	A. Your moral concern for this scenario is: LOW B. Your moral concern for this scenario is: MEDIUM C. Your moral concern for this scenario is: HIGH D. Your moral concern for this scenario is: VERY HIGH E. I'm uncertain if this is a concern.
Medium level of concern for proximity	Mr. Hubbard, a high school substitute, encourages a 17-year-old student to draw attention to himself.		
Very High level of concern for proximity	Mr. Hubbard, a high school substitute, entices a 17-year-old student he assists to streak naked across the football field during half time.		
Low level of concern for social consensus	Ms. Cole teaches in a private school. After work she sometimes has an alcoholic drink at home with her evening meal.	**Ask yourself: Would most people agree on the type of appropriateness of action in this scenario?** Definition of social consensus: The degree of social agreement that a proposed act is ethical or unethical.	Same as above
Medium level of concern for social consensus	Ms. Cole teaches in a private school. After work she sometimes has an alcoholic drink at home during dinner. One evening as she was driving around town after dinner, she was pulled over by traffic enforcement and ticketed for driving under the influence of alcohol.		
High level of concern for social consensus	Ms. Cole teaches private school. After work she sometimes has an alcoholic drink at home during dinner. She has begun drinking alcohol on the campus where she works before and during the school day.		
Low level of probability of effect	A first-year teacher, Ms. Swindle, uses marijuana and amphetamines	**Ask yourself: Will this action/decision cause harm to those involved?**	Same as above

	while on spring vacation in the mountains of Colorado.	Definition: Probability that both the act will take place and the act will cause harm or benefit.	
Medium level of probability of effect	A first-year teacher, Ms. Swindle tests positive for marijuana after returning to Utah following a vacation in Colorado.		
Very High level of probability of effect	A first-year teacher, Ms. Swindle often smokes pot during the school day and tests positive for amphetamine use.		
Low level of concern about temporal immediacy	An educator fails to hold a special education meeting within the required time frame because he forgot to contact the parents.	**Ask yourself: Is this decision likely to cause physical or psychological harm in the future to those involved?** Definition of temporal immediacy: The length of time between the act and onset of consequences due to the act.	Same as above
Medium level of concern about temporal immediacy	An educator fails to hold timely special education meetings for several students and leaves some items blank on the form because he didn't want to take time to contact the parents.		
Very High level of concern about temporal immediacy	An educator fails to hold timely special education meeting for several students and so backdates the meeting dates on the IEP form to make it appear as if the IEPs were held in a timely manner. He doesn't think any parents really care anyway.		
Low level of concern about magnitude of consequences	Mr. Barberis tells a parent there is a girl in her daughter's class who is failing.	**Ask yourself: Is there overall harm (if any) as a result of this decision?** Definition of magnitude of consequences: Sum of the harms (or benefits) resulting from the act.	Same as above
Medium level of concern about magnitude of consequences	Mr. Barberis compares the progress of his favorite student, Jim, with Mary so her mother will understand how poorly her daughter is doing.		
High level of concern about magnitude of consequences	Every quarter, Mr. Barberis tells multiple parents about Jeremy, who is failing in math and reading, so they will feel good about their students' progress.		
Low level of concern about concentration of effect	Mr. Hardly, a CTE teacher, demonstrates use of crimpers in an effort to teach a lesson about cutting school property	**Ask yourself: Will there be harmful consequences (if any) of this action on people?** Definition of concentration of effect: Impact of a given magnitude of harm (or	Same as above
Medium level of concern about concentration of effect	Mr. Hardly, a CTE teacher, puts a crimper tool on a student's fingers in an effort to teach him a		

	lesson about cutting school property	benefit) in relation to the number of people affected.	
High level of concern about concentration of effect	Mr. Hardly, a CTE teacher, puts a crimper on a student's fingers in an effort to teach him a lesson about cutting school property. The student's fingers were punctured and required bandages.		

Authors

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