

2011

## Ethical Decision-making: Special or No Different?

Dawn R. Elm Ph.D.

*University of St. Thomas, Minnesota*, [drelm@stthomas.edu](mailto:drelm@stthomas.edu)

Tara J. Radin J.D.,Ph.D.

*University of Pennsylvania*, [tara.j.radin@cox.net](mailto:tara.j.radin@cox.net)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.stthomas.edu/ocbeblpub>



Part of the [Business Law, Public Responsibility, and Ethics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Elm, Dawn R. Ph.D. and Radin, Tara J. J.D.,Ph.D., "Ethical Decision-making: Special or No Different?" (2011). *Ethics and Business Law Faculty Publications*. 38.

<http://ir.stthomas.edu/ocbeblpub/38>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Ethics and Business Law at UST Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ethics and Business Law Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UST Research Online. For more information, please contact [libroadmin@stthomas.edu](mailto:libroadmin@stthomas.edu).

## Ethical Decision Making: Special or No Different?

Dawn R. Elm · Tara J. Radin

Received: 9 February 2011 / Accepted: 5 September 2011  
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2011

**Abstract** Theories of ethical decision making assume it is a process that is special, or different in some regard, from typical individual decision making. Empirical results of the most widely known theories in the field of business ethics contain numerous inconsistencies and contradictions. In an attempt to assess why we continue to lack understanding of how individuals make ethical decisions at work, an inductive study of ethical decision making was conducted. The results of this preliminary study suggest that ethical decision making might not be meaningfully “special” or different from other decision making processes. The implications of this research are potentially significant in that they challenge the fundamental assumption of existing ethical decision making research. This research could serve as an impetus for further examination of whether ethical decision making is meaningfully different from other decision making processes. Such studies could create new directions for the field of business ethics.

**Keywords** Business ethics · Ethical decision making · Decision making · Inductive study · Qualitative research

Ethical decision making is an important field of study that—for more than two decades—has captured the interest of many prominent scholars at the intersection of social

issues, business ethics, psychology, and philosophy. Separately and together they have struggled to advance our understanding of human decision making and behavior. Why do people make the choices they do? How do they reason through challenging ethical decisions? Are they influenced by identifiable internal or external factors? Answers to such questions are viewed as important because, the more we learn about ethical decision making, the more we are potentially able to influence positive ethical behavior and assist in restoring the “public trust” (Abdolmohammadi and Baker 2008, p. 58). The need to influence responsible behavior has becoming increasingly critical to deal with “knotty ethical challenges” (Weber and Wasieleski 2001, p. 79) and “high impact scandals” (Treviño et al. 2006, p. 951) that have tainted the early years of this millennium. Perhaps most notable among these remains the recent sub-prime mortgage and related financial crisis; although, it began in the United States, it has caused a ripple effect across the entire globe.

The presence of repeated incidents of such egregious behavior continues to call into question what we really know about ethical decision making, particularly in the absence of clear scholarly consensus. While good deductive theories have been developed, existing models are somewhat limited and concepts have been operationalized differently by scholars. This has led to empirical results that are mixed—leading to the possible conclusion that we do not have a consistent intellectual perspective about how people make ethical decisions. We suggest that this could result from a flawed assumption that ethical decision making is different from other types of decision making. Maybe it is not.

The purpose of this article is to examine that assumption as it frames existing empirical research in the field of ethical decision making. We are not, in this article, addressing the normative philosophical scholarship on this

---

D. R. Elm (✉)  
Opus College of Business, University of St. Thomas, Mail #  
TMH447, 1000 LaSalle Avenue, Minneapolis, MN 55403, USA  
e-mail: drelm@stthomas.edu

T. J. Radin  
The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania,  
Philadelphia, PA, USA  
e-mail: Tara.J.Radin@cox.net

issue; our focus lies on the empirical studies designed to test existing theories. As different as they are, most existing theories posit that ethical decision making involves a process that is special—or different, in some regard—from typical individual decision making. We did not set out to challenge this, but, simply, to ask the question: Do individuals make ethical decisions differently from other decisions they make? If there is something meaningfully different about ethical decision making—if it is “special”—then the research in the field of ethical decision making needs to be fortified. If, however, there is not a meaningful difference, by treating it as special, we may be impoverishing our understanding of ethical decision making of knowledge gained from studying individual decision making in general.

### Research Question

Research on ethical decision making primarily focuses on wrongdoing in the form of deviance (Warren 2003), counterproductive behavior (Martinko et al. 2002), and misconduct (Vardi 2001). The implicit correlative of the *presence* of this sort of behavior is its *absence*. The research therefore considers negative and not negative behavior, but leaves a hole with regard to proactively positive behavior. Other scholars have similarly noted the glaring absence of this sort, particularly in the field of positive psychology.

For example, Cameron et al. (2003) suggested that virtues that have value in organizations can often lead to proactively positive behavior, such as gratitude, resiliency, authenticity, and courage. And, while emphasizing the value of positive behavior versus negative, most of this work has been theoretical in nature. This area of study nevertheless “has much to offer the study of ethical decision making and ethical behavior” (Treviño et al. 2006, p. 975). It is possible that not addressing this category of behavior has contributed toward distorting findings and perpetuating potentially flawed assumptions in ethical decision making.

Discussions of ethical decision making involve both descriptive ethics and normative ethics (e.g., O’Fallon and Butterfield 2005). Where social scientists describe how people *do* behave, philosophers articulate how they *ought* to behave, and both approaches are integral to the field. In a recent review of the field, Treviño et al. (2006) refer to ethical decision making as “behavioral ethics,” which they describe as “being primarily concerned with explaining individual behavior that occurs in the context of larger social prescriptions” (p. 952). While their focus lies on describing behavior, it is important to keep in mind that behavior is influenced by social *and moral* prescriptions. The two “realms” of business ethics—descriptive ethics

and normative ethics—thus apply in tandem (e.g., O’Fallon and Butterfield 2005).

In a related perspective regarding this connectedness Freeman (1994) asserts that one of the fundamental handicaps of business is its misguided tendency to view ethics and business *as if* they can be treated as separate or separate-able. He argues that business cannot and should not be disentangled from ethics and viewed in isolation any more than operations or marketing can or should be considered without regard for the products or services being inventoried or sold. Paine (2004) argued along similar lines in suggesting the economics should not be paramount to ethics in business; if anything, ethics should be paramount to economics. These scholars do not treat ethical decision making as different, but provide guidance for all types of decision making. Their assumption is that *all* types of decisions have moral dimensions and moral consequences. This perspective has more recently been argued by Crary (2007) as she suggests that all language is moral language.

Similar logic can be applied to the field of ethical decision making or behavioral ethics: the empirical and philosophical streams of research are—or should be—intertwined. As Treviño and Weaver (1994) pointed out, numerous points of “collision” exist. The answer lies not in ignoring these collisions, but in confronting them head on.

The consequence of viewing descriptive and normative ethics as separate is that empirical studies have moved forward with the assumption that ethical decision making is different—i.e., separate—from other types of decision making without being compelled to challenge that assumption.

Our argument is not that existing research is incorrect, but that in focusing on narrow subsets (i.e., wrongdoing, unethical decisions), we have impoverished our understanding of ethical decision making and possibly distorted it. Our purpose is to challenge us to think more critically about the field of ethical decision making as it exists and how it can and should move forward. Instead merely of building upon what we have started perhaps it is time to take a step back to ask questions that we assumed in the beginning, for the answers to such questions might hold the key to why various inconsistencies and contradictions appear to exist. It could be that we have been asking the wrong question. The question we have been asking is, “*How* is ethical decision making different?” Perhaps the more appropriate research question is, “*Is* ethical decision making different?”

### Ethical Decision Making

The field of ethical decision making is currently characterized by thousands of articles in journals spanning

multiple disciplines, including psychology, sociology, philosophy, economics, and management. Scholars are constantly pushing the limits of our understanding by overcoming traditional barriers. Recent research has even included partnerships with scientists and medical scholars. Robertson and colleagues, for example, have experimented with magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) technology in search of visible indicators of ethical decision making (Robertson et al. 2007).

The field of ethical decision making continues to evolve. While the sheer number of relevant publications renders any examination of the field of ethical decision making very difficult, it is helpful to identify specific areas of study within the general category of ethical decision making before describing our study. Below, we will briefly summarize some of the more notable areas of research in the field. The review is not intended to be comprehensive, rather to highlight the major developments in business ethics research.

### Moral Reasoning

Moral reasoning refers to the cognitive process of determining how a person reasons about ethical situations. The theory of cognitive moral judgment initiated by Kohlberg (1969) has been widely adopted in the field of ethical decision making. Kohlberg's model suggested that individuals progress through certain stages of moral development regarding how they reason through moral problems using a cognitive framework that develops as the individual matures (Kohlberg 1969, 1981; Colby and Kohlberg 1987). He relied on Rawls' (1971) theory of justice for the normative philosophical grounding for the validity of the later stages of reasoning in his framework. Justice, defined by Rawls as "fairness," was the central moral principle of higher levels of moral reasoning according to Kohlberg.

Rest followed the work of Kohlberg, and is one of the most prominent scholars associated with study of moral reasoning. Like Kohlberg, Rest used Rawls' principles of justice as the basis for the normative foundation of his model, but he developed a slightly different conceptualization of the stage progression for an individual's cognitive moral development. As a result, he developed a widely used instrument, called the Defining Issues Test (known as the DIT) to measure the moral reasoning of individuals (Rest 1979). In later study, Rest and his colleagues expanded on their study in moral reasoning to develop a model of moral or ethical decision making that links moral reasoning with moral behavior (Rest et al. 1986). The model consists of four stages: moral awareness (recognizing the moral/ethical issue); moral evaluation (reasoning or analyzing through the dilemma or issue); moral intention (deciding to act on the decision); and moral behavior (the act itself). This research

has led to numerous examinations of linkages between the different stages, including the investigation of ethical sensitivity, a concept suggested to represent an individual's ability to recognize an issue or situation as having moral content (Bebeau et al. 1985; Sparks and Hunt 1998).

The prominent study of Gilligan (1982) exemplifies another significant evolution in moral reasoning research. She objected specifically to Kohlberg's reliance on Rawls' principles of justice, which she posited caused females to be evaluated as morally inferior to males since many females do not rely on those principles in making decisions. She identified what she called an "ethic of care," capturing moral reasoning based on relationships, in contrast with the more hierarchical "ethic of justice," traditionally assumed to ground moral reasoning. Although, Gilligan initially correlated ethics with gender, subsequent research has challenged this hypothesis and now suggests that, while different types of moral reasoning exist, they are not gender dependent (Derry 1989; Ambrose and Schminke 1999; Weber and Wasieleski 2001).

The study of Treviño helped move the examination of moral reasoning into the context of business. Treviño (1986) proposed a person-situation interactionist model that suggested that ethical decision making is a function of the moral reasoning level of an individual moderated by the immediate job context and the individual's locus of control. Empirical research stemming from this theoretical perspective has incorporated a variety of individual and situational factors. Results are nevertheless mixed regarding the exact effect of these factors on how individuals reason about moral problems (Weber 1990; Elm and Nichols 1993; Weber and Wasieleski 2001). Weber and Wasieleski (2001), for example, found that only "some" situation factors might influence moral reasoning.

Individual demographic ("identity") factors have also been considered in terms of moral reasoning. Such studies have also produced somewhat contradictory results. Contrary to previous research, Elm and Nichols (1993) found a negative correlation between age and moral reasoning in the organizations they studied. Weber and Wasieleski (2001) and Glover et al. (1997) found that no correlation existed between age and moral reasoning.

The field of study is much larger than the handful of articles named here; but the selection of articles reflects the sorts of existing contradictions that generally populate the study of moral reasoning and ethical decision making.

### Social Intuitionist Moral Reasoning

Recent study in cognitive psychology on moral judgment has shifted perspectives on how individuals make ethical or moral decisions. For example, the influential study of Haidt in developing an opposing view of the typical rationalist

model of moral reasoning has suggested significantly different directions for the field of ethical decision making. His model of social intuitionist moral judgment suggests that ethical decisions are made primarily by rapid intuitions rather than by reasoning through to a solution. In fact, he argues that reasoning about the moral choice takes place after the decision has already been made by using moral intuitions (Haidt 2001). This suggests that individuals may make choices about ethical issues in a more unconscious manner than the more conscious, controlled steps of moral reasoning presented in Kohlberg's more rationalist model of moral judgment. This model also posits that emotions and social interactions play a role in the process of reaching an ethical choice.

Interestingly, it is now widely accepted in cognitive psychology that two processing systems are used when individuals make judgments or solve problems. The use of these dual process models suggest that reasoning and intuition are both at play in the process (Chaiken and Trope 1999), and that moral judgments are similar to other types of judgments in which much of the process is intuitive (Haidt 2001; Gibbs 1991).

### Moral Intensity

Another area of study within ethical decision making is moral intensity. Moral intensity refers to “*characteristics of the ethical issue that compel the decision maker to employ ethical reasoning [emphasis added]*” (McMahon and Harvey 2006, p. 337). Rest's and Treviño's study provided a foundation for Jones' (1991) framework for moral intensity, which targets characteristics of the ethical issue rather than the individual or situational characteristics. According to Jones' model, moral intensity is comprised of six dimensions: magnitude of consequences, social consensus, proximity, probability of effect, concentration of effect, and temporal immediacy (Jones 1991). He argued that moral intensity is issue-specific and is not dependent on the characteristics of the individual (such as moral reasoning level) or the context (such as organizational culture or codes of conduct).

Jones (1991) spurred considerable additional empirical research that has investigated the relative impact of the dimensions of moral intensity on ethical decision making (Weber 1996; Singhapadki et al. 1996; Marshall and Dewe 1997; Frey 2000; Chia and Mee 2000; Harrington 1997) as well as the impact of moral intensity in the ethical decision making process (Barnett and Valentine 2004; Carlson et al. 2002; Davis et al. 1998; Flannery and May 2000; Frey 2000; May and Pauli 2002; Morris and McDonald 1995; Singer 1996), and the influence of individual and contextual factors on moral intensity (Kelley and Elm 2003; Lietsch 2004; Shaub 1997).

The results of this research have been informative, but still somewhat inconsistent. Although, most of the studies have found some relationship between moral intensity and ethical decision making, Marshall and Dewe (1997) determined that moral intensity does not have an impact on ethical decision making. Even where other studies have found a relationship between moral intensity and ethical decision making, they have varied with regard to which dimensions they have found significant and to what degree (Singhapadki et al. 1996; Frey 2000; Barnett and Valentine 2004; May and Pauli 2002). May and Pauli (2002), for example, determined that social consensus influences ethical decision making, while Harrington (1997) determined that it does not.

Contradictions can be attributed, at least in part, the varying approaches adopted to addressing moral intensity. The majority of studies have considered different combinations of the six dimensions, with few studies considering them all together.

### Ethical Decision Frameworks

Normative studies of how moral frameworks influence decision making comprise another stream of research within the field of ethical decision making (i.e., Forsyth 1985; Brady and Wheeler 1996; Schminke et al. 1997; Davis et al. 2001; Reynolds and Ceranic 2006). The results are yet again mixed and somewhat inconsistent. Whereas, DeConinck and Lewis (1997) found a preference for deontological thinking, Rallapalli et al. (1998) and Kujala (2001) found a preference for teleology. These sorts of contradictions and differences can also be attributed to a variety of differences in conceptualization of philosophical theories and different empirical assessment techniques.

### Physiological Models

Additional recent research has focused on the physiological components of ethical decision making. For example, Robertson et al. (2007) examined potentially different neurological indicators of sensitivity to ethics of care and justice using MRI technology. Haidt (2001) has suggested that there is a moral center of the brain that engages when individuals are faced with ethical issues based on the study of Damasio and his colleagues. Damasio et al. (1990) conducted a study on patients' moral choices with damaged sections of the ventromedial area of the prefrontal cortex. Subjects with such damage demonstrated a loss of emotional responsiveness to certain socially unacceptable pictures (mutilation, death, etc.) versus subjects who did not have such damage to that area of the brain. This study has suggested that there are specific linkages between brain function and the existence of or lack of certain emotional



responses that are encountered when faced with an ethical issue.

Greene and colleagues have also explored neurological implications of individuals' responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas. They utilized fMRI technology to assess brain activity when subjects were given different types of moral dilemmas. They found that individuals faced with situations involving personal harm (close proximity to the decision maker) produced greater activity in the emotion related areas of the brain—the posterior cingulate cortex, the amygdala, and the medial prefrontal cortex—than with situations involving impersonal harm (great proximity from the decision maker). They also suggest that individual response to the dilemma is primarily emotional versus reasoned (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, and Cohen 2001). In support of this, they found that individuals' reaction times for responding to the dilemmas varied if an emotional response had to be over-ridden to make a certain choice in cases of personal harm (cognitive reasoning must overcome initial emotional response resulting in a longer response time). This premise is consistent with the social intuitionist model of moral judgment (Haidt 2001) which suggests reasoning is preceded by an intuitive emotional response to ethical issues.

#### Meta-Analyses and Reviews

An additional category of research consists meta-analyses and reviews—articles that endeavor to evaluate and organize existing research. Within business ethics, meta-analysis is generally promoted as an important technique (Robertson 1993). There are nevertheless comparably few meta-analyses (Brierley and Cowton 2000; Borkowski and Ugras 1998; Franke et al. 1997) and literature reviews (Moe et al. 2000; O'Fallon and Butterfield 2005; Treviño et al. 2006) regarding ethical decision making.

A difficulty with such meta-analyses and reviews in ethical decision making is that they compound the masking of potentially flawed assumptions. By their nature, they report inconsistent findings and emphasize different approaches to the study of ethical decision making instead of providing critical examinations of the field. For example, O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005) circumvented a portion of the variability by limiting consideration of studies by publication, keyword, and instrument. The result is that their detailed, comprehensive analysis may not accurately reflect the breadth of the field. On the other hand, Treviño et al. (2006) provide an extremely comprehensive review, and attempt to suggest critical areas needing attention. Their demarcation of the field of is considerably broader than most prior understandings. Instead of naming journals or keywords, they limited their research simply to “social

scientific works whose contributions to the field we perceive to be substantial” (p. 952).

The magnitude of the field of ethical decision making practically demands these sorts of meta-analyses and literature reviews. At this juncture, though, it is important to consider not only what the field captures, but perhaps also what is missing. In what is missing, we might find answers to why certain inconsistencies and contradictions exist.

#### Research Design

To examine whether individuals make ethical decisions differently than other types of decisions, we employed a qualitative interview approach to identifying and analyzing managers' perceptions of difficult decisions. Each manager identified characteristics of their decision making process in four different types of situations:

- (a) general decision making;
- (b) difficult work-related decision making;
- (c) difficult decision making related to ethics at work; and
- (d) difficult decision making not related to work.

From this data, grounded in managers' actual experiences and perceptions, new insights emerged regarding decision making.

This study involved a sample of nine managers in the Midwest from different work organizations. Examination of their decision making processes resulted in approximately 100 data points for analysis. Potential subjects were contacted through their enrollment in a part-time MBA program. They were given a questionnaire to assess their willingness to participate in the study, as well as to confirm they currently held middle management positions at their place of employment. Participants were chosen randomly from the pool of MBA students who completed the initial questionnaire. Participants were not notified in advance regarding the true nature of the study to avoid potential social desirability bias (Fernandes and Randall 1992; Randall and Fernandes 1991).

Seven of the subjects were male, two were female. All were middle managers at various business organizations. The organizations ranged in size and industry from a nursing home to a large financial institution. The average age of manager was 31 years (range was 27–39); five individuals had worked at their organization for more than 5 years. One researcher interviewed all nine subjects.

The interview protocol was designed to encourage subjects to begin with basic background information. They were then asked to provide information about their general, every-day decision making processes at work. The interview then progressed through separate questions about

difficult decisions at work and ethical decisions at work. The interview concluded with questions about the subject's process of making decisions not related to work. Subjects were asked to compare how they made decisions at work versus not at work (see Appendix Table 6 for description of interview questions). The interview questions were not varied to provide a continuous stream of description of the process used to make decisions; from daily or less significant, to potentially larger, more difficult decisions, and finally to decisions about an ethical issue. The logic was that keeping the ethical decision process description near the end of the interview would minimize the potential for self-improvement social desirability bias (Fernandes and Randall 1992). Our objective was to support prior research while allowing room for new issues to emerge. This sort of interplay among experience, induction, and deduction plays an important role in this type of research according to Glazer and Strauss (1967).

Recordings of the interviews were then developed into transcripts which constituted the data for the study. The transcripts were randomized and subsequently identified only by subject number during the coding process. Data analysis was conducted through an inductive research design (Glazer and Strauss 1967; Boyatzis 1998; Locke 2001). In such a design, researchers gather data and examine it to determine theoretical patterns and themes. While we were not specifically looking to create new theory, but to examine the information obtained about the subjects decision making processes, we utilized thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998) in the evaluation of the interview transcripts.

### Step 1

We analyzed data through a three-phase content analysis procedure (e.g., Glazer and Strauss 1967) (as described in part in Appendix Table 7). The first step was the most intensive portion of this process. It involved reading transcripts and outlining their content to isolate themes. As part of this phase, the transcripts were broken down into "thought units" which ranged from words to phrases to complete sentences. The goal was to identify and capture entire thoughts. The only material excluded was that which translated into "small talk," such as discussion of family circumstances. Virtually all statements were therefore integrated into the coding scheme.

The coding scheme was developed according to Boyatzis (1998) by sampling the thought units in the transcripts and conducting thematic analysis. Through thematic analysis, a small sample of the transcripts was examined for potential sub-samples of responses (for example, those who used one process to make decisions vs. those who used another) and to identify general themes that consistently appeared throughout the subject responses. For this study,

since the study sample size was not large, the small sample was four transcripts. This represents the recommended percentage of subjects necessary for initial theme development (Boyatzis 1998). After refining the definitions and labels of the sub-samples and themes that consistently appeared for clarity and parsimony, a coding scheme was created that integrated the themes. The code was comprised predominantly of themes with category items that demanded binary responses to show clear presence or absence in a subject's response. Appendix Table 8 contains the coding scheme used in this study.

### Step 2

The second step involved coding the data according to the identified categories. Two researchers independently coded the data and then compared results to determine inter-rater reliability. Before measuring agreement, however, we identified areas of agreement and disagreement. Because, we believed that this phase had the greatest impact on our findings, we discussed differences, which we resolved through a repetitive iterative process that involved reaffirming that the data corresponded to the categories, debate, and reformulation. Once satisfied that our coding scheme captured reflected the data, we then revised the categorization and recoded. We calculated inter-rater agreement according to the relatively conservative *P* statistic. This technique entailed dividing the total number of coded items for which the two raters agreed by the total number of coded items, which resulted in overall inter-rater agreement of 83.3%. Such high inter-rater agreement suggests that the emergent categories fit the data.

### Step 3

In the third phase, the coded data was reviewed and analyzed to determine patterns among the subjects in the context of the identified categories. Responses by the primary researcher were used where there was disagreement between the researchers. Comments by individual subjects were compared both within and across categories. We looked for similarities in how different subjects treated the same types of decisions and in how single subjects treated different types of decisions. We then compared answers to the short answer evaluations obtained during the coding process to distinguish between elements of the decision making process and key drivers.

## Results

The key question driving this research was, "Is there a meaningful distinction in how individuals make ethical

decisions versus other types of decisions?” Analysis of the interviews yielded 103 pieces of nominal data for each subject, which all contained binary (yes/no) responses. The data was organized into four themes for each type of decision, and the categories that represented those themes.

The categories of data pertained to the nature of the information were collected. Of the questions, 19 had to do with specific influences on the decision making process; 3 had to do with the method of communicating some of that information; and 5 had to do with the nature of the decisions. The primary focus of the research had to do with the information relating to specific influences on the decision making process. That data was organized thematically according to the type of influence:

- (a) objective information;
- (b) subjective information;
- (c) information about consequences; and
- (d) information about motivation.

Any relationship between these themes and moral philosophy was unanticipated and resulted from the subjects' own responses, not by our design. Whereas, other researchers have intentionally sought out a relationship between decision making and moral philosophy (i.e., DeConinck and Lewis 1997; Rallapalli et al. 1998; Kujala 2001; Douglas et al. 2001; Reynolds 2006), this was not our intent. Our discussion of themes and categories is intended to underscore key findings, particularly as they pertain to existing ethical decision making research and theoretical assumptions.

Table 1 includes theme names, category names, and examples from subject responses of each category; while Table 2 includes the frequencies with which the categories were present across all subjects' responses.

This significance is not in the categories themselves but in the frequency of the categories as they appeared in the decision making of the subjects.

#### Types of Decision Making Across Subjects

An analysis of the frequencies reveals the presence—and the absence—of certain patterns. If ethical decision making is meaningful different from other types of decision making, we might expect that a pattern would have emerged showing different types of factors influencing ethical decision making as compared with other types of decision making. What is missing in the data is such a clear, discernible, pattern that distinguishes ethical decision making from other types of decision making.

Table 2 shows the frequency at which particular factors influenced decision making by the subjects. The subjects employed a variety of factors and methods of communication during the decision making process. In fact,

objective information such as data affected decision making comparably in all types of decision making. The boxed frequencies are those that fell outside of one standard deviation of the average number of times a factor was influential for each separate type of decision making. With regard to the rest of the data, each type of decision making varied significantly with regard to different factors, with daily decision making appearing somewhat neutral. This appears to show that the specific factors vary by decision, not necessarily decision type. It is possible, if not likely, that some of the differences can also be explained by how we separated the data. The decision maker and his or her family could be considered stakeholders. The organization and finances could also similarly be considered together. Such changes have an effect on the frequencies.

Another way to consider the data is by thematic category. Table 3 shows the number of times any sort of data within a thematic category affected decision making, regardless of how many different types were used. The boxed entries represent frequencies outside one standard deviation of the average of times a category was used for decision making. This reveals predominant consistency among the different types of decision making with only a handful of exceptions. Many of these exceptions are logical. For example, when talking about daily decision making, it seems likely that consequences were not discussed more consistently because of the more incidental nature of the decision and the potential lack of relevant stakeholders.

While analyzing frequencies by type of decision does not provide conclusive information, it does suggest that ethical decision making might not be different from other types of decision making. At the very least, there is cause to question that assumption.

#### Decisions Within Subjects

Analysis of frequencies indicates that greater consistency exists in how a single individual makes decisions than in how different individuals make the same sorts of decisions. Table 4 contains the frequencies of how often a particular factor influenced a subject making each of the 4 types of decisions. Patterns emerge within the decision making of individual subjects. The data suggests that a relationship exists within a single individual in his or her decision making without regard to different types of decisions (i.e., daily, difficult, ethical, and not related to work). All of the subjects displayed some degree of consistency in their behavior irrespective of the type of the decision being confronted. Consistency, for our purposes, was defined as a frequency of 3 or greater with regard to a particular category. In other words, if the data supports a subject having been influenced by a particular factor in at least 3 of the 4 types of decisions, he or she was considered consistent with regard to that category.



**Table 1** Themes and categories derived from interviews

Theme/categories	Subject	Example
<b>Objective information</b>		
Data/facts/research/information gathering	# 8	“Just gathering all your information so that you can decide how to resolve something”
Past experience	# 3	“It’s always based for me on what’s happened in the past”
Regulations/rules/policies/laws	# 3	“Make that one of our criteria? That’s kind of where we’re leaning at this point”
<b>Subjective information</b>		
Gut feel/intuition/personal preferences/emotions	# 6	“My decisions, typically, I just have to make them. If I want to do something, I just have to make that decision happen”
Concern for personal relationships	# 1	“I felt like a mentor to this person. And I had wanted her to succeed and it may have been that she was giving up on me as she was leaving as opposed to was this right for her in her life right now”
Input from family/friends	# 5	“I relied a lot on my wife, even ... I think that we serve as a good sounding board for each other”
Input from supervisors	# 1	“Right after I had the first conversation with her, I emailed my boss”
Input from peers/colleagues	# 2	“I’ll consult with other professionals—my peers”
Input from subordinates	# 7	“I always like to go last because I don’t want any of my opinions to influence anyone else in the room”
Input from involved parties	# 4	“I would go and talk to the different people involved”
<b>Consequences</b>		
Impact on self/family	# 8	“Whereas I could make it a little more difficult on myself and the people that are actually here and either maintain or cut back and help out everyone else”
Impact on stakeholders	# 9	“I won’t ever cross the line based on the severity of what could happen to the patient—that’s where I don’t cross the line”
Impact on finances	# 6	“We had to go back to the sister company say, ‘Listen, we can’t eat this bill of \$120,000. We have to figure out a different way to go about this,’ knowing, on the flip-side that they had to make money—they’re judged on profitability as well”
Impact on organization	# 4	“You have to help people come to an agreement that they are working for the good of the team, because there’s optimization only at the highest level and at lower levels they need to be aware of what other design teams are doing so that they’re working together”
General costs/benefits/risks	# 7	“It’s difficult for me then to make the decision and say, ‘No we’re going to keep looking.’ You see lost profits, you see unhappy customers, you see work that’s piling up—you want make a decision. The decision not to decide was the challenging portion of this for me”
<b>Motivation</b>		
Consistency (procedural)	# 3	“That’s where it goes back to; I do the same for anybody”
Resolve	# 2	“I need to stay hard and fast because I knew what I needed to make this office successful”
Productivity	# 9	“Albeit we identified a technology, we weren’t too quick in saying it was successful”
Fairness (substantive)	# 5	“I need to allow her that time to take care of what I view as what is important to her health and happiness and working for the company”
<b>Communication</b>		
Impersonal	# 1	“I emailed Debbie (my boss) and said, ‘Here’s what I’ve got going on’”
Personal	# 2	“I would rather talk face-to-face, one-on-one”
Group	# 9	“So we had the meeting””

Although, none of the subjects were completely consistent, all were consistent with regard to at least one factor. The factors considered consistent according to our criterion are boxed on Table 4. For example, 5 of the subjects (#2, #4, #7, #8, and #9) demonstrated consistency (frequency of at least 3) in their reliance on data, research and information gathering. Similarly, subject #3 was consistent with regard to his consideration of consequences such as impact on finances and the organization, as subject #8 was

consistent with regard to consideration of impact on self and family, consequences to the organization, and general costs and benefits analysis.

Consideration of thematic groups, as presented in Table 5, provides even stronger indications of the consistencies that characterize individual decision making. In this table, “1” was noted every time a decision maker was affected by any of the specific categories within the broad thematic category, without regard for how many categories

**Table 2** Frequencies by decision type

	Frequencies by Decision Type			
	Daily Decision Making	Difficult Decisions	Ethical Decisions	Decisions Not Work-Related
<b>OBJECTIVE</b>				
Data	7	6	6	7
Past experience	2	3	1	4
Regulations	1	7	4	0
<b>SUBJECTIVE</b>				
Gut feel	3	2	4	6
Personal Relationships	0	1	0	2
Opinions - Family / friends	0	1	0	3
Opinions - Supervisors	0	3	1	0
Opinions - Peers / colleagues	2	6	1	1
Opinions - Subordinates	0	2	1	0
Opinions - Involved parties	2	6	2	1
<b>CONSEQUENCES</b>				
Self / family	1	4	3	6
Stakeholders	2	3	6	0
Finances	1	3	1	1
Organization	3	7	6	0
Costs / benefits	1	7	3	2
<b>MOTIVATION</b>				
Consistency (Procedural)	2	3	2	0
Resolve	0	1	2	0
Productivity	2	6	4	1
Fairness (Substantive)	0	1	6	0
<b>COMMUNICATION</b>				
Impersonal	1	5	2	4
Personal (face-to-face)	5	7	6	4
Group (i.e., meetings)	3	4	1	0

were considered. The results show that, while decision makers are somewhat consistent with regard to specific factors, they are more consistent with regard to broader thematic categories. The boxed values in Table 5 represent the total number of times the thematic category was used across all 4 decision types. Subjects #1 and #4, for example, consistently rely on both subjective and objective information and are motivated by consideration of principles, but do not tend to rely on consideration of consequences. Subjects #5, #7, #8, and #9, on the other hand, consistently integrate all types of factors in their decision making.

#### Qualitative Analysis

The numerical analysis of the data represents a starting point—only one dimension of the results—also compli-

mented by significant qualitative analysis. While the coding meaningfully identifies themes that spanned the decision making of the subjects, it does not capture the degree to which the subjects relied on those factors. Subject #1 is someone who relies heavily on intuition in all types of decisions more than on anything else. With regard to daily decision making, for example, she stated, “I go based on my knowledge, gut feeling, kind of what I feel the situation is like, and I make the decision.” As she recalled the difficult and ethical decisions she confronted, she similarly responded similarly by intuition and gut feel. While she ended up incorporating other information as well, it appeared from the conversation that she was merely confirming the decisions she was already prepared to make.

Subject #2, on the other hand, relies heavily on the subjective information she receives from other people. She

**Table 3** Frequencies by decision type

	Frequencies by Decision Type			
	Daily Decision Making	Difficult Decisions	Ethical Decisions	Decisions Not Work-Related
OBJECTIVE	8	8	8	8
SUBJECTIVE	5	9	5	8
CONSEQUENCES	4	9	8	8
MOTIVATION	3	8	8	1
COMMUNICATION	6	9	6	5

states from the outset with regard to daily decision making, “What I’ll do is send an email or a voice message to whomever I need to get more information from.” She reiterates the importance of communication when discussing the difficult decision she confronted. “I’d rather have the verbal connection because there’s so much that’s said verbally and non-verbally when I’m meeting with somebody one-on-one,” she explained. And when confronting the ethical issue, the first thing she did was to talk to her manager.

This sort of consistency also presented itself with subject #4. From the start he emphasizes “the” answer—as if there is “a” right answer for any decision that needs to be made. In reference to a difficult decision, he called his process “systematic” because it is “more if you ask the right people and if you ask the right questions, the decision pretty much is an analytical decision, black and white.” He said that he did not confront ethical decisions, apparently because ethics involves the absence of “right” answers and he sees the world as if there always is a “right” answer.

These are merely some of the examples that emerged from evaluation of our sample. While the numerical analysis reveals some consistency, qualitative analysis reveals even more. The point, however, is not to show conclusively that decision making varies by individual and not by type of decision, but to provoke further examination of the research question: “Does decision making vary by type?” “Is there anything special or different about *ethical* decision making?”

The consequences of the answering these sorts of questions should not be under valued. If decision making does vary by type and ethical decision making can be viewed separately, then considerable support is given for existing research. If, however, that assumption is invalid, it suggests a reason for inconsistencies and contradictions in the existing research and opens up a new area to study.

### Limitations

Although, researchers continue to debate the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative research, the popularity of inductive research continues to increase (Scott 2000). This does not negate the limitations of the methodology. Even with high inter-rater agreement, there remains a large degree of bias inherent in the process. All conclusions are filtered through the subjectivity of the researchers. Data is also potentially distorted by factors such as information recall and attributional bias. Such information is actually relevant to our findings in that we are measuring not only reality but also perceptions of that reality.

The small size and relative homogeneity of the sample is an obvious and significant limitation to the study in that it restricts the types of conclusions we are able to make. For this study, however, we intentionally traded quantity for quality, for our objective was not necessarily to draw conclusions about decision making. Instead of conducting broad analysis, our focus lay on conducting deeper analysis to determine if there are initial indications that can be used to further our study of decision making about ethical issues. Our analyses did not note any significant differences between the men and women in the study, but the results we obtained must be examined through that lens. However, although there are only nine participants, the amount of analyzable data is more than one per subject. Each single subject resulted in more than a hundred pieces of data for us to analyze.

The nature of the coding process itself proved to be a limitation of this research for it caused us to organize data quantitatively without regard for qualitative differences. We responded to this limitation by including an additional set of short answer questions that assisted us in making qualitative distinctions. The coding scheme enabled us to evaluate the types of information that influence decision making; the short answer questions enabled us to evaluate

**Table 4** Frequencies by subject

1 = Daily Process (at work)  
 2 = Difficult Decision (at work)  
 3 = Ethical Decision (at work)  
 4 = Decision not at work

**Frequencies by Subject**

	Subject #1					Subject #2					Subject #3					Subject #4					Subject #5								
	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4					
<b>OBJECTIVE</b>					0					0					0					0					0				
Data	1	1			2	1	1	1	1	4					2	1	1	1	1	3				1	1	1	2		
Past experience					0					0	1	1		1	3	1		1		2				1	1		2		
Regulations		1	1		2		1	1		2	1	1	1		3		1			3				1	1	1	2		
<b>SUBJECTIVE</b>					0					0					0					0					0				
Gut feel	1		1		2		1			1					0			1		1				1		1	1		
Personal relationships					0					0	1				1					0			1		1		1		
Family / friends				1	1					0					0			1		1			1	1	1	1	2		
Supervisors		1			1		1	1		2					0					0							0		
Peers / colleagues	1		1		2		1			1			1		1	1	1			1		1	1		1		1		
Subordinates					0					0					0					0				1			1		
Involved parties			1		1					0					0	1	1			2		1	1	1	1		3		
<b>CONSEQUENCES</b>					0					0					0					0					0				
Self / family		1			1		1			1	1	1			2			1		1				1		1	1		
Stakeholders					0		1			1	1	1	1		3		1			1			1		1		1		
Finances					0					0	1	1	1	1	4					0							0		
Organization		1	1		2	1	1	1		3					0					0			1	1			2		
Costs / benefits					0		1	1	1	2					0	1				1			1	1			1		
<b>MOTIVATION</b>					0					0					0					0					0				
Consistency (Procedural)				1	1					0					0			1		1		1	1	1	1	1	2		
Resolve		1			1		1	1		2					0					0							0		
Productivity	1		1		2		1			1			1		1	1	1			1		1	1		1		1		
Fairness (Substantive)					0					0					0					0			1				1		
<b>COMMUNICATION</b>					0					0					0					0					0				
Impersonal		1	1	1	3	1	1	1	1	3	1	1			2			1		1				1		1	1		
Personal (face-to-face)	1	1	1		3	1	1	1	1	4		1	1	1	3	1	1	1		3			1	1	1	1	3		
Group (i.e., meetings)			1		1					0					0	1	1			2							0		

  

	Subject #6					Subject #7					Subject #8					Subject #9													
	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4					
<b>OBJECTIVE</b>					0					0					0					0					0				
Data					0	1	1	1	1	4	1	1	1	1	4	1	1	1	1	4				1	1	1	1	4	
Past experience			1	1	2	1				1					0	1				1				1					
Regulations					0					0		1			1					1				1					
<b>SUBJECTIVE</b>					0					0					0					0					0				
Gut feel	1	1	1	1	4	1	1	1	1	3			1		1	1	1	1		2			1	1	1	2			
Personal relationships				1	1					0					0					0							0		
Family / friends					0					0					0					0							0		
Supervisors					0	1				1					0					0							0		
Peers / colleagues					0		1			1		1			1		1			1		1		1			1		
Subordinates					0		1	1		2					0					0							0		
Involved parties	1	1			2		1			1					0					1				1			1		
<b>CONSEQUENCES</b>					0					0					0					0					0				
Self / family				1	1		1	1		2	1	1	1		3		1	1		2			1	1	1	2			
Stakeholders					0	1	1			2					0			1		1							1		
Finances		1			1		1			1					0					0							0		
Organization		1	1		2	1				1	1	1	1		3		1			1			1	1	1	1	1		
Costs / benefits		1			1	1	1			2	1	1	1		3	1	1	1	1	3			1	1	1	1	3		
<b>MOTIVATION</b>					0					0					0					0					0				
Consistency (Procedural)					0					0					0					0							0		
Resolve					0	1				1					0					0							0		
Productivity					0		1			1		1			1		1			1		1		1			1		
Fairness (Substantive)					0		1	1		2					0					0							0		
<b>COMMUNICATION</b>					0					0					0					0					0				
Impersonal		1			1					0		1			1					1							0		
Personal (face-to-face)		1	1		2	1	1	1		3		1			1	1	1			2			1	1	1	2			
Group (i.e., meetings)		1			1	1				1	1				1	1				1			1				1		

**Table 5** Frequencies by Subject by thematic category

**Frequencies by Subject by Thematic Category**

1 = Daily Process (at work)  
 2 = Difficult Decision (at work)  
 3 = Ethical Decision (at work)  
 4 = Decision not at work

	Subject #1					Subject #2					Subject #3				
	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	
<b>OBJECTIVE</b>	1	1	1		<b>3</b>	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>
<b>SUBJECTIVE</b>	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>		1	1		2		1		1	2
<b>CONSEQUENCES</b>		1	1		2	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>
<b>MOTIVATION</b>	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>		1	1		2				1	1
<b>COMMUNICATION</b>	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>		1	1	1	<b>3</b>
	Subject #4					Subject #5					Subject #6				
	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	
<b>OBJECTIVE</b>	1	1		1	<b>3</b>	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>			1	1	2
<b>SUBJECTIVE</b>	1	1		1	<b>3</b>		1	1	1	<b>3</b>	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>
<b>CONSEQUENCES</b>		1		1	2		1	1	1	<b>3</b>		1	1	1	<b>3</b>
<b>MOTIVATION</b>	1	1		1	<b>3</b>		1	1	1	<b>3</b>		1	1		2
<b>COMMUNICATION</b>	1	1		1	<b>3</b>		1	1	1	<b>3</b>		1	1		2
	Subject #7					Subject #8					Subject #9				
	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	
<b>OBJECTIVE</b>	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>
<b>SUBJECTIVE</b>	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>	1	1		1	<b>3</b>	1	1		1	<b>3</b>
<b>CONSEQUENCES</b>		1	1	1	<b>3</b>	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>		1	1	1	<b>3</b>
<b>MOTIVATION</b>	1	1	1		<b>3</b>	1	1	1		<b>3</b>	1	1	1		<b>3</b>
<b>COMMUNICATION</b>	1	1	1		<b>3</b>	1	1			2	1	1			2

the types of information that are most influential to particular decision makers.

The types of decisions the subjects discussed and the degree to which they were willing to discuss them (particularly with regard to the decisions not related to work) also served as an inherent limitation. In particular, we allowed the subjects to define an ethical decision rather than provide guidelines regarding what that type of decision might entail. While there are advantages to having subjects discuss actual situations (as opposed to hypothetical scenarios), it is possible that additional guidelines could assist respondents in providing more useful responses and clearer distinctions between ethical and difficult decisions.

A final limitation of the study is that the interviews of subjects were conducted by one researcher. Although, this could be considered a bias inherent in the accumulation of the data, it also provides a consistency that might not have been possible with multiple researchers conducting the interviews—even with structured questions.

**Discussion**

By gathering data without any sort of a prior theoretical framework, we undertook this study to help us understand why inconsistencies and contradictions exist throughout



existing ethical decision making research. Our results suggest, contrary to common assumptions, that there may be no real distinction between ethical decision making processes and other types of decision making.

This perspective—that ethical decision making is not special—has been argued in both moral philosophy and social science. Messick and Bazerman (1996) asserted that the decision making psychology of Kahneman and Tversky (Kahneman 2003; Tversky and Kahneman 1986) regarding risk aversion and gain seeking behavior was applicable to ethical decisions made by executives. They argued that unethical decisions are essentially “bad” decisions, since they do not take into account the typical decision making biases that tend to affect all humans. More recently, Gino et al. (2008) conducted two studies examining the application of outcome bias in decision making psychology for ethical decisions. Outcome bias in decision making psychology suggests that the quality of a decision will be determined, *cetibus paribus*, by the consequences of the decision. Gino et al. found that outcome bias does apply to ethical decisions as it applies to other types of decision making. Their studies demonstrate that the judgment of the ethicality of questionable actions is based on whether the action is followed by negative or positive consequences; that is, a decision maker is judged to be more ethical if the consequences that follow the decision are positive and judged to be less ethical if the consequences are negative, *regardless of whether the consequences are within the control of the decision maker*. They suggest that their findings present a potential challenge to teleological moral theories since consequences can affect the determination of whether or not a judgment is ethical.

Haidt’s study in moral psychology also lends itself to a consideration that while moral judgments might be more intuitively driven than rationally driven, such judgments are not different from other types of judgments (Haidt 2001, 2007). In addition, the recent study of Greene (2011) has suggested that there are particular areas of brain activity that could be linked to teleological or deontological moral reasoning processes. Our results demonstrate consistency within individuals regarding how they make decisions—ethical or not—but this could be linked to a particular brain activity that supports a preference for reasoning type. More research in this area could be beneficial to the examination of how individuals make complex decisions, including ethical ones.

In the field of philosophy, Crary (2007) has recently argued that an individual’s thinking expresses his or her moral outlook, and that such thinking will be central to all topics—not only to those we might consider moral. She suggests that moral thinking is indifferent to subject matter, but is a thought process that must engage the entire person’s thinking and reasoning. There is, therefore, *no* separation between moral reasoning and other types of reasoning. She

goes further to argue that there is no separate moral language, but that, in fact, all language is moral language:

Since, on the terms of this view, all moral thought without regard to form is essentially concerned with expressing individual moral outlooks, and since on its terms, a person’s moral outlook is taken to be by a sensibility internal to all of her linguistic capacities, it follows that the view might be described as one on which ethics is concerned as distinguished by a pre-occupation not with judgments in one region of language but with a dimension of *all* language [emphasis added] (Crary 2007, pp. 46–47).

Hauser (2006) echoes this perspective in his argument that all humans share a sort of “moral grammar,” an ethical equivalent to the basic grasp of speech that most linguists believe is with us from birth. This reference to a connection between morality and language exists in the ethical decision making literature as well (i.e., Butterfield et al. 2000). The presence of a shared “moral grammar” indicates that moral language and decision processes cross topics and issues such that there is no meaningful distinction between ethical decision making and other types of decision making.

In business ethics, Palazzo et al. (2008) have connected ethical decision making to an examination of the use of decision making schema. This research suggests that the widely held perspective that ethical decision making is a rational process is incorrect, and that, in fact, individuals make ethical decisions according to a combination of their cognitive schema and the situation in which they are immersed. By matching certain strong or weak schema with strong or weak situations, different ethical decisions result. They argue that “ethical blindness” occurs when there is a mismatch between an individual’s schema and the situation. Ethical blindness is, therefore, the absence of a perception of the moral dimension of an issue.

Other studies by Treviño et al. (1998) and Bird (1996) have examined the influence of linguistic practices on ethical decision making in organizations. Treviño noted that more openness in discussing ethical issues was related to more ethical behavior; and Bird found that lack of ethical language, or “moral muteness” in organizations contributed to more instances of unethical behavior. Treviño et al. (2006) suggest that this may be related to the role of language in creating cognitive schemas that affect moral awareness and moral decision making.

Our results, although clearly preliminary, support the view that there may not be a separation between ethical decision making and other types of decision making. This means that the field of ethical decision making as it exists among the social scientists may be impoverished by not being connected to research on decision making in general. This realization could account for many of the

inconsistencies and contradictions in existing research since that research is incomplete—it is possibly distorted by its focus on one type of decision making.

It is also possible that our study has elucidated another potential avenue for research in ethical decision making—that individuals do not *perceive* that ethical decision making is different from other types of decision making. It is possible that we actually accumulated data on how these individuals perceive their own decision making, since the study involved self reporting and we allowed the subjects to decide what an ethical decision was. If this is the case, further research would be useful to determine if the perception is related to the actual process. Some of the more recent studies of the potential relationship between physiological brain activity and decision making processes could be helpful here, since, we want to understand how people make decisions with ethical implications.

Our research is a beginning, not an end. Our findings are not intended as conclusive, but as an impetus for more quantitative and qualitative inquiries into the question of whether or not *ethical* decision making is different from other types of decision making.

## Appendix

See Tables 6, 7, and 8.

**Table 6** Interview question format

1.	Please tell me a little bit about your background: Age Education How long you have been with this company Other employment experience
2.	Could you tell me about the steps or process you typically use to make decisions on a daily basis?
3.	Let's talk about a specific decision in some depth. Can you tell me about a decision that was particularly difficult for you to make at work in the past year? Describe the issue
4.	What made this decision difficult for you?
5.	What did you do to make the decision?
6.	Can you describe the steps you took?
7.	What most influenced or helped you to make this decision? Did you talk with others about this or use other resources?
8.	How long did this process take?
9.	Would you do anything differently if this came up again?
10.	Have you had to make any difficult ethical decisions? Can you tell me about the process you used for that? Questions 4–9 again
11.	Do you use the same process/steps to make decisions when you are not at work (not in your professional role)?

**Table 7** Inductive coding scheme development (thematic analysis, Boyatzis 1998)

1. Randomly number subjects and remove names from transcripts. Record pertinent information in records. Make transcripts blind
2. Read through transcripts and create outline for each subject on each question. Create sub-samples here (e.g., those who recognized ethical decision and those who did not)
3. Use outlines to identify themes in each sub-group of subject responses. Specific definition isn't necessary here, just any glimmer of themes
4. Re-write themes that are consistent across subjects in sub-sample; possible labels may come up here
5. Themes that show distinctions between sub-samples are re-written again for clarity and parsimony. Re-read original transcripts—each theme should clearly be either present or absent
6. Develop the code: Assign a label to each theme; define it clearly; record indicators “Coded when subject stated abc...” or “xyz...”; note differentiation in each subject (NOT sub-sample, but all subjects)—i.e., subjects 1 and 5 showed theme, subjects 2, 3, 4, 8 did not show theme
7. Technically, the sub-samples should not be the whole sample, because then after the code is developed, return to the original sample and code remaining subjects blind
8. Have a colleague code the sample and compare code differences for reliability

**Table 8** Coding scheme

Pieces of information that influenced the decision making process was treated as <i>data</i> . Three types of data were collected. (1) Data about the type or nature of the decision; (2) data about information that influenced the decision; and (3) data about the manner in which information influential to the decision was communicated by others	
(1) Type of decision	
“Type of decision” refers to the nature of the decision—i.e., to the functional area of the business to which the decision pertains	
Financial decision/ business challenge	Primarily financial in nature, where the focus lies on cost-related issues
Human decision	Linked to individuals in their work capacity—i.e., hiring, firing, and transfers
Conflict of stakeholder interests	Pertains to situations linked to direct stakeholder conflicts
Operations/systems/ technology	Deals with choices about infrastructure or technological offerings
Policy implementation/ enforcement	Concerns situations where the emphasis is on systemization and standardization not necessarily linked to core products or services
(2a) Objective information	
“Objective information” refers to information that, regardless of the sources, is perceived as unbiased and factual in nature	
Data/facts/research/ information gathering	Specific references to data, facts, and so on; a number of respondents emphasized actively seeking out information

Table 8 continued

Past experiences	References to memories and personal histories
Regulations/rules/policies/laws	Anything considered standard, such as law, ethics codes, and human resources policies
(2b) Subjective information	
"Subjective information" refers to information that is perceptual in nature and based on the opinions of yourself or others	
Gut feel/intuition/personal preferences/emotions	Personal opinions; personal likes/dislikes
Concern for personal relationships	Situation where a personal relationship with a work-related acquaintance is influential
Opinions from family/friends	People outside of work affect the decision
Opinions from supervisors	Supervision offers opinion or support, not specific mandated direction
Opinions from peers/colleagues	Vicarious experience of similarly situated work-related acquaintances who have dealt with similar situations
Opinions from subordinates	Upward feedback
Opinions from involved parties	Direct input from people who will be directly affected by the decision
(2c) Consequences	
"Consequences" refer to teleological evaluations, to situations where decision makers consider possible outcomes before choosing a course of action	
Impact on self/family	Personal consequences
Impact on stakeholders	Impact on people not directly involved in the situation
Impact on finances	Budget or cost considerations
Impact on organization	Impact on division, department, or organization as a whole
General costs/benefits/risks	Overall costs/benefits analysis or consideration of financial or other risk
(2d) Motivation	
"Motivation" refers to deontological evaluation, to situations where decision makers are influenced by specific principles and values	
Consistency (procedural justice/fairness)	Respect for even-handed administration of policies and procedures
Resolve	Adhering to values, principles, and goals
Productivity	Success; emphasis on accomplishing goals
Fairness (substantive justice)	Treating people and situations in ways that respect their individual dignity
(3a) Communication	
"Communication" refers to the method by which the decision maker receives opinions and research information from other people; refers to both solicited and unsolicited communication	
Impersonal (electronic, phone, etc.)	
Personal (face-to-face)	
Group (i.e., meeting)	

## References

- Abdolmohammadi, M. J., & Baker, C. R. (2008). Moral reasoning and questionable behavior: A study of extensive copying from the Internet by accounting students. *CPA Journal*, *58*(11), 58–61.
- Ambrose, M. L., & Schminke, M. (1999). Sex differences in business ethics: The importance of perceptions. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, *11*(4), 454–474.
- Barnett, T., & Valentine, S. (2004). Issue contingencies and marketers' recognition of ethical issues, ethical judgments and behavioral intentions. *Journal of Business Research*, *57*(4), 338–346.
- Bebeau, M. J., Rest, J. R., & Yamoore, C. M. (1985). Measuring dental students ethical sensitivity. *Journal of Dental Education*, *49*, 225–235.
- Bird, F. (1996). *The muted conscience: Moral silence and the practice of ethics in business*. Westport, CT: Quorum Books.
- Borkowski, S. C., & Ugras, T. J. (1998). Business students and ethics: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *17*(11), 1117–1127.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Brady, F., & Wheeler, G. (1996). An empirical study of ethical predispositions. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *16*, 927–940.
- Brierley, J. A., & Cowton, C. J. (2000). Putting meta-analysis to work: Accountants' organizational professional conflict. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *4*(2), 343–353.
- Butterfield, K. D., Trevino, L. K., & Weaver, G. R. (2000). Moral awareness in business organizations: Influences of issue-related and social context factors. *Human Relations*, *53*, 981–1018.
- Cameron, K., Dutton, J. E., & Quinn, R. (2003). *Positive organizational scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Kohler.
- Carlson, D. S., Kacmar, K. M., & Wadsworth, L. L. (2002). The impact of moral intensity dimensions on ethical-decision-making: Assessing the relevance of orientation. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, *14*(1), 15–30.
- Chaiken, S., & Trope, Y. (1999). *Dual process theories in social psychology*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Chia, A., & Mee, L. S. (2000). The effects of issue characteristics on the recognition of moral issues. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *27*(3), 255–269.
- Colby, A., & Kohlberg, L. (1987). *The measurement of moral judgment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crary, A. (2007). *Beyond moral judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Damasio, A., Tranel, D., & Damasio, H. (1990). Individuals with sociopathic behavior caused by frontal damage fail to respond automatically to social stimuli. *Behavioral Brain Research*, *41*, 81–94.
- Davis, M. A., Andersen, M. G., & Curtis, M. B. (2001). Measuring ethical ideology in business ethics: A critical analysis of the ethics position questionnaire. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *32*(1), 35–53.
- Davis, M., Johnson, N., & Ohmer, D. (1998). Issue contingent effects on ethical decision-making: A cross cultural comparison. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *17*(4), 373–389.
- DeConinck, J. B., & Lewis, W. F. (1997). The influence of deontological and teleological considerations and ethical climate on sales managers' intentions to reward or punish sales force behavior. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *16*(5), 497–506.
- Derry, R. (1989). An empirical study of moral reasoning among managers. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *8*(11), 855–862.

- Douglas, P. C., Davidson, R. A., & Schwartz, B. N. (2001). The effect of organizational culture and ethical orientation on accountants' ethical judgments. *Journal of Business Ethics, 34*(2), 101–121.
- Elm, D. R., & Nichols, M. L. (1993). An investigation of the moral reasoning of managers. *Journal of Business Ethics, 13*, 817–873.
- Fernandes, M. F., & Randall, D. M. (1992). The nature of social desirability response effects in ethics research. *Business Ethics Quarterly, 2*(2), 183–205.
- Flannery, B. L., & May, D. R. (2000). Environmental ethical decision-making in the U. S. metal-finishing industry. *Academy of Management Journal, 43*(4), 642–662.
- Forsyth, D. R. (1985). Individual differences in information integration during moral judgment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 49*, 264–272.
- Franke, G. R., Crown, D. F., & Spake, D. F. (1997). Gender differences in ethical perceptions of business practices: A social role theory perspective. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 82*(6), 920–934.
- Freeman, R. E. (1994). The politics of stakeholder theory: Some future directions. *Business Ethics Quarterly, 4*(4), 409–421.
- Frey, B. F. (2000). The impact of moral intensity on decision-making in a business context. *Journal of Business Ethics, 26*(3), 181–195.
- Gibbs, J. C. (1991). Toward an integration of Kohlberg's and Hoffman's theories of morality. In W. M. Kurtines & J. L. Gerwitz (Eds.), *Handbook of moral behavior and development: Volume I, advances in theory, research and applications* (pp. 183–222). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gino, F., Moore, D. A., & Bazerman, M. (2008). *No harm, no foul: The outcome bias in ethical judgments*. Carnegie Mellon University Working Paper Series, Philadelphia, PA.
- Glazer, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Glover, S. H., Bumpus, M. A., Logan, J. E., & Ciesla, J. R. (1997). Re-examining the influence of individual values on ethical decision making. *Journal of Business Ethics, 16*(12/13), 1319–1329.
- Greene, J. D. (2011). *The moral brain and how to use it*. New York: Penguin.
- Greene, J. D., Sommerville, R. B., Nystrom, L. E., Darley, J. M., & Cohen, J. D. (2001). An fMRI investigation of emotional engagement in moral judgment. *Science, 293*, 2105–2108.
- Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review, 108*, 814–834.
- Haidt, J. (2007). The new synthesis in moral psychology. *Science, 316*(5827), 998–1002.
- Harrington, S. J. (1997). A test of person-issue contingent model of ethical decision-making in organizations. *Journal of Business Ethics, 16*(4), 363–375.
- Hauser, M. (2006). *Moral minds: How nature designed our universal sense of right and wrong*. New York: Ecco/HarperCollins.
- Jones, T. (1991). Ethical decision-making by individuals in organizations: An issue contingent model. *Academy of Management Review, 16*(12), 366–395.
- Kahneman, D. (2003). Maps of bounded rationality: Psychology for behavioral economics. *American Economic Review, 93*(5), 1449–1475.
- Kelley, P. C., & Elm, D. R. (2003). The effect of context on moral intensity of ethical issues: Revising Jones' issue-contingent model. *Journal of Business Ethics, 48*(2), 139–154.
- Kohlberg, L. (1969). Stage and sequence. The cognitive developmental approach to socialization. In D. A. Goslin (Ed.), *Handbook of socialization theory* (pp. 347–480). Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Kohlberg, L. (1981). *The meaning & measurement of moral development*. Worcester, MA: Clark University Press.
- Kujala, J. (2001). A multidimensional approach to Finnish managers' moral decision-making. *Journal of Business Ethics, 34*(3/4), 231–254.
- Lietsch, D. L. (2004). Differences in perceptions of moral intensity in the moral decision process: An empirical examination of accounting students. *Journal of Business Ethics, 53*(3), 313–323.
- Locke, K. (2001). *Grounded theory in management research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Marshall, B., & Dewe, P. (1997). An investigation of the components of moral intensity. *Journal of Business Ethics, 16*(5), 521–530.
- Martinko, M. J., Gundlach, M. J., & Douglas, S. C. (2002). Toward an integrative theory of counterproductive workplace behavior: A causal reasoning perspective. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment, 10*(1/2), 36–50.
- May, D. R., & Pauli, K. P. (2002). The role of moral intensity in decision-making. *Business & Society, 41*, 84–117.
- McMahon, J. M., & Harvey, R. J. (2006). The effect of moral intensity on ethical judgment. *Journal of Business Ethics, 72*(4), 335–357.
- Messick, D., & Bazerman, M. (1996). Ethical leadership and the psychology of decision making. *Sloan Management Review, 37*, 9–22.
- Moe, T., Ferrell, L., & Mansfield, P. (2000). A review of empirical studies assessing ethical decision making in business. *Journal of Business Ethics, 25*, 185–204.
- Morris, S. A., & McDonald, R. A. (1995). The role of moral intensity in moral judgments: An empirical investigation. *Journal of Business Ethics, 14*(9), 715–726.
- O'Fallon, M. J., & Butterfield, K. D. (2005). A review of the empirical ethical decision-making literature: 1996–2003. *Journal of Business Ethics, 59*(4), 375–413.
- Paine, L. S. (2004). *Value shift: Why companies must merge social and financial imperatives to achieve superior performance*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Palazzo, G., Krings, F., & Hoffrage, U. (2008). *A person-situation interactionist framework to account for ethical blindness*. Paper presented at the National Academy of Management, Anaheim, CA.
- Rallapalli, K. C., Vitell, S. J., & Barnes, J. H. (1998). The influence of norms on ethical judgments and intentions: An empirical study of marketing professionals. *Journal of Business Research, 43*(3), 157–168.
- Randall, D. M., & Fernandes, M. F. (1991). The social desirability response bias in ethics research. *Journal of Business Ethics, 10*(11), 805–817.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rest, J. (1979). *Moral development*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rest, J. R., Barnett, R., Bebeau, M., Deemer, E., Getz, I., Moon, Y., et al. (1986). *Moral development: Advances in research and theory*. New York: Praeger Press.
- Reynolds, S. J. (2006). Moral awareness and ethical predispositions: Investigating the role of individual differences in the recognition of moral issues. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 91*(1), 233–243.
- Reynolds, S. J., & Ceranic, T. (2006). *The effects of diverse ethical predispositions on group ethical decision-making*. Working paper, University of Washington.
- Robertson, D. (1993). Empiricism in business ethics: Suggested research directions. *Journal of Business Ethics, 12*(8), 585–599.
- Robertson, D., Snarey, J., Ousley, O., Harenski, K., Bowman, F. D., Gilkey, R., et al. (2007). The neural processing of moral sensitivity to issues of justice and care. *Neuropsychologia, 45*(8), 755–766.

- Schminke, M., Ambrose, M. L., & Noel, T. W. (1997). The effect of ethical frameworks on perceptions of organizational justice. *Academy of Management Journal*, 40(5), 1190–1207.
- Scott, E. D. (2000). Moral values: Situationally defined individual difference. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 10(2), 497–521.
- Shaub, M. K. (1997). Commentary on the relationship between and individual's values and perceptions of moral intensity: An empirical study. *Behavioral Research in Accounting*, 9, 41–49.
- Singer, M. (1996). The role of moral intensity and fairness perception in judgments of ethicality: A comparison of managerial professionals and the general public. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 15(4), 469–474.
- Singhapadki, A., Vitell, S. J., & Kraft, K. L. (1996). Moral intensity and moral decision-making of marketing professionals. *Journal of Business Research*, 36, 245–255.
- Sparks, J. R., & Hunt, S. D. (1998). Marketing researcher ethical sensitivity: Conceptualization, measurement, and exploratory investigation. *Journal of Marketing*, 62, 96–109.
- Treviño, L. K. (1986). Ethical decision-making in organizations: A person-situation interactionist model. *Academy of Management Review*, 11(3), 601–617.
- Treviño, L. K., Butterfield, K., & McCabe, D. (1998). The ethical context in organizations: Influences on employee attitudes and behaviors. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 8(3), 447–476.
- Treviño, L. K., & Weaver, G. R. (1994). Business ethics/business ethics: One field or two? *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 4(2), 113–128.
- Treviño, L. K., Weaver, G. R., & Reynolds, S. J. (2006). Behavioral ethics in organizations: A review. *Journal of Management*, 32(6), 951–990.
- Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1986). Rational choice and the framing of decisions. *Journal of Business*, 59(4), S251–S278.
- Vardi, Y. (2001). The effects of organizational and ethical climates on misconduct at work. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 29(4), 325–337.
- Warren, D. (2003). Constructive and destructive deviance in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 28(4), 622–632.
- Weber, J. (1990). Managers' moral reasoning: Assessing their responses to three moral dilemmas. *Human Relations*, 43, 228–236.
- Weber, J. (1996). Influences upon managerial moral decision-making: Nature of harm and magnitude of consequences. *Human Relations*, 49, 1–22.
- Weber, J., & Wasieleski, D. (2001). Investigating influences on managers' moral reasoning: The impact of context and personal and organizational factors. *Business & Society*, 40(1), 79–112.