



# Predictors, consequence, and measurement of ethical judgments: Review and meta-analysis

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## ABSTRACT

As a central construct in theories of ethical decision making, ethical judgments have been the subject of more than one hundred empirical studies. Despite its size, the ethical judgments literature seems to lack clarity in three areas. First, empirical results are sometimes inconsistent or contradictory across studies. Second, a broad array of diverse measures of ethical judgments raises concerns about research validity. Third, differences in sample composition may affect comparability of study results. To help resolve these issues, this study conducts a review and meta-analysis of the ethical judgments literature. The results offer insights in all three areas. They help resolve some of the inconsistencies in the relationships between ethical judgments and certain theoretical antecedents; they support the use of diverse measures of ethical judgments; and they offer caution in the use of student samples in ethical judgments research.

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## 1. Introduction

The ethical judgments construct occupies prominent theoretical and empirical roles in the business ethics literature. Ethical judgments is central to major theories of ethical decision making (i.e., Hunt and Vitell, 1986, 1992; Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986) and appears in well over one hundred empirical studies. Despite its size and level of development, the ethical judgments literature seems to lack clarity in some important respects. First, empirical research on theoretically important correlates of ethical judgments frequently appears to be inconsistent with theory and occasionally contradictory of other empirical research. Second, great diversity exists in the measurement of ethical judgments. Studies of ethical judgments employ single- and multi-item measures with varied means of scaling responses. Yet these widely different measurement approaches purport to operationalize the same construct. Third, differences in sample composition across studies can attenuate effect sizes and inhibit the comparability of results. Collectively, these issues may limit research generalizability and hinder the testing of ethical decision making theories.

In light of these conditions, the time seems opportune for a meta-analytic review of the ethical judgments literature. Unlike narrative literature reviews, meta-analyses permit researchers to quantitatively summarize findings across studies and establish the generalizability

of reported relationships. Additionally, meta-analyses help resolve inconsistent findings by evaluating the effects of study characteristics on empirical results. Therefore, this study reports the results of a meta-analysis of the ethical judgments literature to address the areas of needed clarity described above. To help resolve inconsistent or conflicting results, this study reviews the literature to identify relevant antecedents and a consequence of ethical judgments, develops hypotheses about them, and then tests the hypotheses. To investigate how measurement affects the relationships between ethical judgments and its antecedents and consequence, the study tests for moderation of the relationships by various types of ethical judgments measures. Moderation effects by sample composition are tested by comparing student to nonstudent samples. The study concludes with a discussion of the results on future ethical judgments research.

## 2. Research hypotheses and moderating variables

The literature review identified several antecedents to ethical judgments and one consequence. The antecedents are classified as personal demographic characteristics, philosophical and psychological characteristics, characteristics of the acts being judged, and environmental characteristics. The consequence variable is behavioral intentions. Hypotheses for these variables follow.

### 2.1. Personal demographic characteristics

#### 2.1.1. Age

Age is an antecedent variable for which empirical results differ across studies. Research frequently predicts the relationship between

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age and strictness of ethical judgments to be positive (Chiu, 2003; Peterson et al., 2001; Vitell and Paolillo, 2003). That is, people tend to be more ethical as they grow older. However, some empirical studies find that younger people render stricter ethical judgments than older people (Ede et al., 2000; Vitell et al., 2007). Other studies report no significant relationship between age and ethical judgments (e.g., Barnett and Valentine, 2004; Schepers, 2003). Despite these inconsistencies, the theoretical consensus appears to support that age improves one's ability to apply relevant ethical standards, which produces more disapproving views of ethical lapses.

**H1.** As age increases, ethical judgments become stricter.

### 2.1.2. Sex

An entire literature exists on investigations of ethical differences between women and men. While not all studies support the presence of statistically significant sex differences in ethical judgments, those that do conclude that women apply stricter ethical standards than men. Some attribute these differences to socialization (Marta et al., 2004; Roxas and Stoneback, 2004). Men and women have socially ascribed sex roles. Socialization emphasizing ambition assertion, and competition shape men's ethical judgments while socialization stressing harmony, warmth, and caring shape women's ethical judgments. Whatever its explanation, the general consensus on the presence and direction of sex differences in ethical judgments leads to the hypothesis:

**H2.** The ethical judgments of women will be stricter than those of men.

### 2.1.3. Education

Kohlberg (1981) theorizes that people who better understand complex and nuanced issues will display more sophisticated levels of moral reasoning. Grounded in this view, researchers frequently hypothesize positive relationships between education and ethical judgment. Empirically, the evidence does not appear to support this view. Many studies fail to find a link between education and ethical judgments (Laczniak and Inderrieden, 1987; Serwinek, 1992; Swaidan et al., 2003), while others report negative relationships (Chiu, 2003; Fullerton et al., 1996). Although these empirical results might seem contrary to Kohlberg's theory, they may actually support it. Higher levels of education might encourage people to more fully consider alternate perspectives or extenuating circumstances rather than judging complex ethical issues in narrow absolute terms. If so, a negative relationship between education and strictness of ethical judgments could be explained under Kohlberg.

**H3.** As education increases, ethical judgments become less strict.

### 2.1.4. Income

Empirical evidence from the few studies that address the relationship between ethical judgments and income is conflicting. Some research concludes that lower incomes correlate with less strict ethical standards (Muncy and Vitell, 1992); others suggest the converse (Ang et al., 2001; Pratt, 1991). Still others report no strong relationship (Bass and Hebert, 1995; Vitell and Paolillo, 2003). Such equivocal empirical evidence suggests consideration of a close correlate of income, education. Inasmuch as the positive relationship between education and income is generally well-established, then education and income may exhibit similar relationships to ethical judgments.

**H4.** As income rises, ethical judgments become less strict.

### 2.1.5. Work experience

As with other antecedents, contradictory empirical evidence exists among studies of work experience and ethical judgments. Chiu (2003)

reports that work experience lessens the strictness of ethical judgments, while Kidwell et al. (1987) and Weeks et al. (1999) find that work experience leads to stricter ethical judgments. Some studies find the variables to be unrelated (e.g., Barnett and Valentine, 2004; Schepers, 2003). According to Hunt and Vitell (1986, 1992), socialization to workplace norms at least indirectly affect ethical judgments. If so, the more time spent in a job strengthens socialization outcomes. Unlike education, which may improve one's ability to apply ethical standards, workplace socialization may actually raise the ethical standards themselves. As such, more work experience could produce stricter ethical judgments.

**H5.** As work experience increases, ethical judgments become stricter.

## 2.2. Psychological and philosophical characteristics

### 2.2.1. Idealism and relativism

Since Forsyth (1980) introduced the Ethics Position Questionnaire, the philosophies of idealism and relativism appear frequently in ethics research. According to Forsyth (1980), individuals scoring high on idealism generally believe that morally right behavior leads to positive consequences, whereas those scoring high on relativism tend to reject the notion of absolute moral principles. Because of their strong belief in the inherent goodness or badness of an action, idealists value altruism and the well being of others, and hence render stricter ethical judgments than those less idealistic (Barnett et al., 1994; Kleiser et al., 2003; Vitell et al., 2003). In contrast, relativism rejects universal moral principles and holds that individuals strictly determine morality their own morality. People who adhere to relativism would likely judge unethical acts less strictly because stricter judgments require the application of universal moral principles. Empirical evidence strongly supports this view (Bass et al., 1999; Kleiser et al., 2003; Vitell and Paolillo, 2003).

**H6.** As idealism increases, ethical judgments become stricter.

**H7.** As relativism increases, ethical judgments become less strict.

### 2.2.2. Machiavellianism

Because highly Machiavellian individuals do what is necessary to achieve their goals, they do not generally judge the morality of ambiguous ethical acts (Bass et al., 1999). Theory associates Machiavellian characteristics with unethical behaviors such as manipulation or even deceit to achieve personal objectives. As such, individuals scoring high on measures of Machiavellianism might judge ethical violations more leniently. Consistent with this perspective, empirical studies tend to find that "high Machs" exhibit less strict ethical judgments than their "low Mach" counterparts (Bass et al., 1999; Shafer and Simmons, 2008). Though some studies find no relationship (e.g., Schepers, 2003), collectively the evidence supports less strict ethical judgments in the presence of stronger Machiavellianism.

**H8.** As Machiavellianism increases, ethical judgments become less strict.

### 2.2.3. Locus of control

Rotter (1966) defines locus of control as the degree to which people believe that the outcomes they experience result from their own actions or decisions. People with an internal locus of control believe that their behaviors or characteristics lead to the things they experience while those with an external locus of control attribute consequences to factors beyond their control. To the extent that people with an internal locus of control believe everyone should take responsibility for their own actions, they may be relatively strict judges of unethical behavior. Previous empirical research links locus of control to various types of moral behavior, including whistleblowing, and resisting social pressure to perform unethical acts (e.g., Cherry and Fraedrich, 2000; Chiu, 2003). In general,

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