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Strengthening Moral Judgment: A Moral Identity-Based Leverage Strategy in Business Ethics Education

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Abstract In this study, we examine the relationship between appeal to self-perceptions of moral identity, included in the teaching of ethics, and the strengthening of moral judgment among postgraduate business students. As appeal to moral identity emphasizes personal engagement in the appraisal of an ethically charged situation, it addresses critiques of abstract rule application and principle transfer leveled at traditional business ethics teaching. Eighty-one participants (divided into experimental and control groups) completed a series of reflective writing exercises throughout a twelve-week business ethics unit. Based on an instrument completed at the beginning and end of the education process, our results indicate a positive shift in moral judgement intensity. We, therefore, recommend appeal to moral identity as a leverage strategy to be employed in business ethics education in order to strengthen students' moral judgment.

Keywords Ethics education innovation · Moral identity · Moral judgment · Moral psychology · Moral self-perception · Teaching business ethics

Introduction

Studies in moral psychology (Blasi 1983, 1995; Walker 2004) have found that awareness of ethical issues and rules

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does not necessarily trigger the subject's involvement, to the level of taking an active position, whether through public statements or responsive behaviors, in ethically charged situations. This problem is particularly relevant in business education settings, where students tend to take a more lax attitude toward ethical issues, e.g., cheating in exams, than students of other disciplines (Klein et al. 2007; McCabe et al. 2006; McCabe and Trevino 1995). It has been suggested that increasing ethical awareness through rule-based teaching, e.g., based on the application of utilitarian or deontological principles (Gauschi and Jones 1998; Lowry 2003), should address this problem. However, limitations of these approaches have also been highlighted in outcome measurement studies (Jewe 2008; Peppas and Diskin 2001; Wynd and Mager 1989), as well as in critical discussions (Nisan 2004; Rabouin 1997). The common themes in describing these limitations refer to the failure of rule prescriptions to engage the moral agent's personal experiences and emotions in the given context.

This insight emphasizes an important distinction. Making one aware that a particular situation presents an ethical problem, and even helping them articulate, via ethical principles, what the problem consists of, does not imply an ability to appraise the severity of the problem and respond to it with appropriate intensity. Even a description of potential consequences may leave the subject unresponsive in the absence of an emotion-based perception of the matter. We contend, together with virtue ethicists (Crossan et al. 2012; Mele 2005; Woods and Lamond 2011) and moral psychologists (Eisenberg 2000; Shu et al. 2011), that self-regulation of ethical behavior through emotional connection rather than analytical reasoning is a leverage area that should not be neglected.

Intensity of moral judgment, understood as appraisal of the extent to which an issue or action is ethical or unethical

(Greene and Haidt 2002; Haidt 2001) is an important aspect in this context. It has been shown that more intense moral judgment, in the form of more perceptive attitudes toward ethical issues, leads to better self-regulation of ethical behavior (Eisenberg et al. 2010; Haidt 2001; Zhong et al. 2009) and a stronger sense of citizenship and community responsibility, e.g., an increased propensity to take public attitude toward social issues (Renzulli and D'Souza 2013). As it has long been argued (Smith 1976), an increased sense of responsibility and citizenship has many social benefits, and contributes significantly to empowering citizens in making governments, large corporations, and other dominant institutions more accountable (Brock 2009; Ozanne et al. 2009).

If intensity of moral judgment has such far reaching implications, then what can be done differently in ethics education, to overcome the limitations of traditional, rule-based teaching? Inspired by psychological experiments on appeal to moral identity, Gu and Neesham (2014) develop a new approach to teaching ethics, which engages students in regular written reflections on their own experience of ethical values. They also show that this approach enhances ethical decision making more effectively than rule-based ethics education. The approach is regarded as a leverage point because it involves relatively small changes to the curriculum which lead to significant changes in learning and decision-making outcomes.

To advance this direction of research, we hypothesize that, beyond improving ethical decision making, appeal to moral identity can also strengthen students' moral judgment. We, therefore, assess the relationship between moral identity and moral judgment by comparing the moral judgment intensity of two groups of postgraduate business ethics students, one engaged in identity-based ethics teaching and the other not so engaged, over the course of a twelve-week teaching period. To assess the moral judgment intensity outcomes of this educational approach, we apply recognized measures published by Schnall et al. (2008) and Zhong et al. (2010). Our study is the first to illustrate how andragogy informed by experimental moral psychology can strengthen moral judgment by overcoming the limitations of traditional teaching as identified in the literature, namely by engaging the emotions and personal experiences of learners through intuitive–reflective rather than rule-based, analytical processes.

This paper begins with an account of the key elements involved in the proposed moral identity-based approach as a teaching and learning process. The ambiguous concept of moral judgment is also clarified and defined for the purposes of this study. The method of our research is then presented, including a description of the sample, procedures, and instruments used. The results are subsequently discussed, to include observations on benefits as well as potentially adverse effects of moral judgment strengthening. Implications of our findings, as well as limitations and suggestions for further research, conclude our report.

Appeal to Moral Identity As a Teaching–Learning Process

Rule-based learning has been criticized as unreflective, "superficial indoctrination" (Brinkmann and Sims 2001, p. 175). Furthermore, ethics researchers have signaled the existence of a gap between rule transfer and personal identity (Nyberg 2007). In response to these limitations, appeal to an individual's moral identity is positioned as a means of enriching the ethical reflections of learners.

Moral identity refers to the relative importance of being a moral person as part of an individual's self-identity (Aquino and Reed 2002; Reed and Aquino 2003; Shao et al. 2008), based on common traits such as honesty, fairness, helpfulness, care—and so on. It has been understood as "a commitment consistent with one's sense of self to lines of action that promote or protect the welfare of others" (Hart et al. 1998, p. 515). Moral psychology studies show that, the more weight moral identity is accorded within one's overall self-conception, the more likely one is to behave morally (Blasi 2005; Walker 2004). Positive relationships have been identified, for example, between moral identity and rates of charity donation, community service, and prosocial behaviors (Aquino and Reed 2002; Arnold 1993; Pratt et al. 2003).

This has positive implications for ethics teaching and learning, especially if the projected learning outcomes are designed to reach beyond recognition of ethical issues, and further into ethical decision making and responsiveness (Weaver 2006). As a teaching–learning process, appeal to moral identity has been found to have several distinct advantages: it involves activities that are easy and simple, both in design and delivery; it refers to the person holistically, rather than via an elicited response to a given situation; it triggers recollection of personal experiences, which increases likelihood of emotional engagement; it encourages autonomous context selection and implicit conceptual association; and it stimulates moral self-regulation (Gu and Neesham 2014).

As appeal to moral identity emphasizes personal engagement in the appraisal of ethically charged situations, it addresses critiques of abstract rule application and principle transfer leveled at traditional business ethics teaching. Given the new method's emphasis of the personal engagement dimension, appeal to moral identity is likely to increase students' responsiveness to ethical issues.

Moral Judgment As Assessed Outcome in Ethics Education

The concept of moral judgment has had a rich and ambiguous semantic evolution in both moral psychology and business ethics education. Although Rest (1979) and Kohlberg (1981) clearly distinguish between moral reasoning (as inferential, analytical process) and moral judgment (as evaluative outcome), their work's emphasis on reasoning processes, enforced by subsequent moral development research, has blurred the boundaries of this distinction and largely constructed the perception that reasoning is the main (if not the only) cause of moral judgment. Unfortunately, this has led to ignoring the role of intuition and emotion in moral judgment (Cushman et al. 2006).

Some studies (e.g., Reynolds and Ceranic 2007) identify moral judgment with moral reasoning, the latter being understood mainly in the form of consequentialism and deontology. Hence, moral judgment and moral identity appear as alternative (and opposing) means to establish an intention to act ethically and thus bridge the gap between moral awareness and moral action. While moral judgment is defined as the process of "determining what is right or wrong" (Reynolds and Ceranic 2007, p. 1611), moral identity justifies decisions to act in terms of the moral agent's understanding of their own personal ethical commitments.

A view of moral judgment that is more intimately connected with emotional involvement is provided by social intuitionist theory (Haidt 2001; Haidt and Baron 1996). In this theory, moral judgments are defined as 'evaluations (good vs. bad) of the actions or character of a person that are made with respect to a set of virtues held by a culture or subculture to be obligatory' (Haidt 2001, p. 6). More specifically,

> moral judgment is much like aesthetic judgment: we see an action or hear a story and we have an instant feeling of approval or disapproval. These feelings are best thought of as affect-laden intuitions, as they appear suddenly and effortlessly in consciousness, with an affective valence (good or bad), but without a feeling of having gone through steps of searching, weighing evidence, or inferring conclusion. These intuitions—for example, about reciprocity, loyalty, purity, suffering—are shaped by natural selection, as well as by cultural forces. (Greene and Haidt 2002, p. 517)

For the purposes of this study, we interpret moral judgment as an outcome not as a process. Irrespective of the analytical and/or intuitive–emotional sources involved, we take the key distinctive feature of moral judgment as outcome to be the evaluative or appraising element informing decisions and actions in response to an ethically charged situation. In adopting this definition of moral judgment, we are supported by the observation that both moral development theory and social intuitionism share the element of evaluation or appraisal in their respective interpretations of the concept.

Using this definition, and encouraged by social intuitionist research, we suggest that moral identity and moral judgment (understood purely as evaluative outcome) are not opposing alternatives but contributing factors influencing each other in building moral behavior. As our study shows, intensity of moral judgment can be enhanced by appeal to moral identity. In other words, reflecting on personal commitment to ethical values contributes significantly to determining what is right or wrong—and, in addition, to appraising the severity of the respective right or wrong.

Moral judgment has been measured in terms of discernment of relatively better choices through reasoning (Rest 1994; Treviño et al. 2006). However, given our focus on moral judgment as outcome rather than process, we move away from this approach and, instead, propose that we examine students' appraisal of the level of morality or immorality of a particular action. We do so not by reference to alternative factors or contexts but simply by recording the students' immediate moral reactions to particular situational stimuli and/or particular social issues.

In studies of moral judgment as reasoning process, the preferred question addressed to test participants is: when exposed to scenario X, which choice/action is morally more justifiable, *and why*? In assessing moral judgment as an outcome, we ask participants to indicate how moral or immoral they consider a particular course of action to be.

Our approach is also supported by the assumption that moral judgment intensity, as an expression of moral attentiveness, implies moral awareness and moral sensitivity (Reynolds 2008). In addition, we adopt the view that individuals are not just recipients of moral issues and rules but also, through the moral judgments exercised and actions taken, active participants in the creation of moral norms. In generalizing moral actions to the level of self-generated norms, individuals are more likely to apply those norms to themselves, as well as others, and to build an antidote against moral disengagement. Indeed, the latter, defined as the act of decoupling awareness of an ethical issue from a sense of responsibility and responsiveness to it (Detert et al. 2008; Kish-Gephart et al. 2014), has been shown to play an important role in unethical behaviors of extreme severity (Bandura 1999).

By focusing on moral judgment understood as intensity of moral appraisal, we emphasize the personal engagement over the analytical reasoning aspect of the judgment activity. The intensity aspect of moral judgment has

occasionally been employed in assessing business ethics education outcomes. For example, Litschka et al. (2011) use the moral intensity question to ascertain not only the moral sensitivity but also engagement of managers when exposed to some complex ethical dilemma scenarios, while Mitchell et al. (1993) apply it to identify the attitudes of business students to the specific issue of increasing executive remuneration. Having regard to the connections already established in the literature between low moral judgment intensity and moral disengagement (Aquino et al. 2007), we contend that moral judgment intensity, understood as enhanced personal involvement and responsiveness to ethical context, deserves a much more comprehensive and systematic attention in our teaching–learning approaches to ethics in business schools.

To sum up, we contribute to the research on business ethics teaching by focusing on an outcome that has been relatively under-researched in the existing literature, namely intensity of moral judgment as evaluative outcome. Our reading of the current literature suggests that traditional ethics teaching approaches have focused too much on moral awareness at the expense of other important aspects of moral functioning (Baker 2014; Lickona 1980). However, empirical evidence suggests an interdependence across the several major aspects of moral functioning—namely, awareness, judgment, intention, and action (Bebeau 2002; Rest 1982). We have thus adopted a social intuitive perspective on moral judgment (Haidt 2001) and argued that appeal to moral identity would help elicit students' personal engagement on moral issues and lead to stronger moral judgment. We, therefore, hypothesize that the students who engage in the moral identity-strengthening procedure outlined below would exhibit increased moral judgment intensity compared to those who do not. This suggests that the new approach to ethics teaching recommended here can be used as an effective leverage strategy in enhancing the moral functioning of business students.

Our Method

This section outlines the key features of the participant sample, as well as the procedures and materials used to deliver the two teaching modes and assess their respective outcomes. The key elements of our experiment are the initial (pre-teaching) tests, the two parallel sets of teaching activities, and the final (post-teaching) tests.

Sample and Procedures

Our sample consists of a total of 81 postgraduate students (54 % female; $M_{age} = 24$, $SD = 1.6$, $M_{working\ experience} = 1.6$ years,

$SD = 2.2$) enrolled in a Business Ethics course in the business school of a large Australian university. After research ethics approval of the project was given by the university's research ethics committee, in accordance with national and international standards, students were invited to participate on a voluntary basis. All participants gave their informed consent prior to inclusion in this study.

The sample was comprised of nine student groups, which were randomly assigned into one of two conditions: identity-based reflective writing tasks added to rule-based ethics teaching (condition 1), and rule-based teaching only (condition 2). Due to the different number of students in each group and different numbers of groups in each condition (five groups in condition 1 and four groups in condition 2), the final numbers of participants who gave consent and completed the study were 53 in conditions 1 and 28 in condition 2.

To verify the comparability of the participants in the two conditions with regard to their moral judgment intensity, we invited all students who consented in writing to participate in the study to complete a measure of moral judgment which involved rating on a given scale the level of morality or immorality of a particular action in three given scenarios, each describing an ethically questionable behavior (Schnall et al. 2008). The students had a very limited period of time (only a few minutes) to complete this task. The details of the instrument are described in the next subsection. We predicted that, before embarking on their respective teaching–learning modes, the participants in the two conditions would not differ in their intensity of ethical judgment of these behaviors.

Over nine weeks during their ethics course, the participants completed a weekly individual self-reflection task, which involved writing about a moral trait (in condition 1) or a non-moral positive trait (in condition 2). The instructions were similar each week for all nine weeks, except that a different moral or non-moral trait was referred to each time. At the end of the nine weeks, all participants completed a final moral judgment intensity scale (Zhong et al. 2010), in which they were asked to rate the level of morality or immorality of a given number of social behaviors, again in a very limited time interval (a few minutes only). Details of the content of this instrument are presented in the next subsection. We hypothesized that the participants in the identity-based teaching condition would judge the listed social behaviors to be less moral compared to the participants in the control condition. In addition, all participants completed a suspicion detection procedure and a form collecting demographic data such as gender, age, major subject of study, ethnicity, length of work experience, and English speaking experience.

Materials and Instruments Used

Initial (Pre-teaching) Moral Judgment Measure

Participants judged the morality of three ethically questionable behaviors using an 11-point Likert scale (-5 = very immoral, 0 = neutral, 5 = very moral). The three behaviors in question are: a film studio decides to release a documentary about immigrants without full consent of the individuals captured in the film; a poor person who found a lost wallet decides to return the wallet and its contents to the owner but keep the cash; and, a person who is desperate to find a job misrepresents information on their resume to get an advantage in an upcoming interview. A full description of this measure is available upon request.

Moral Identity-Based Activities

This section of project applied the procedure developed by Gu and Neesham (2014). Over nine weeks, the participants in the identity-strengthening condition were asked to complete a self-reflection task each week, where they thought about themselves in relation to one moral trait for 60 seconds and then wrote a short essay about themselves using the respective trait at least five times. The moral traits used were: "caring", "compassionate", "fair", "friendly", "generous", "helpful", "hardworking", "honest", and "kind". In contrast, the participants in the control condition completed the same reflection tasks using the following positive but non-moral traits: "carefree", "compatible", "favourable", "cheerful", "happy", "harmless", "open-minded", "respectable", and "polite". Both the moral and the non-moral traits are listed here in the order in which they were introduced to the participants through the weekly written reflection tasks.

Final (Post-teaching) Moral Judgment Scale

To appraise any changes in the moral judgment intensity experienced by the participants, we used the 16-item measure applied in Zhong et al. (2010). Accordingly, the participants judged the morality of a broad spectrum of social behaviors using an 11-point Likert scale, with -5 for 'very immoral', 0 for 'neutral', and 5 for 'very moral'. The listed behaviors were: abortion, adultery, alcoholism, casual sex, recreational drug use, wearing animal fur, homosexuality, littering, masturbation, obesity, pollution, pornography, premarital sex, profane language, prostitution, and smoking. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.83$) and the items were thus averaged to create an ethical decision score, with higher scores representing judgments that the social behaviors are ethical.

As a manipulation check, following this test the participants were asked to remember the traits in their self-reflection tasks by choosing among three sets of words. These words were: "caring, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, and kind" (in set 1), "carefree, cheerful, happy, harmless, open-minded, respectable, and polite" (in set 2), and "car, tree, house, river, desk, bicycle, store, and park" (in set 3).

Results and Discussion

We first examined the comparability of the participants in the two conditions by comparing their response to the first moral judgment measure. As predicted, the participants in the moral identity-strengthening condition judged the behaviors to be equally moral ($M = -2.13$, $SD = 1.44$) compared to those in the control condition ($M = -2.83$, $SD = 1.21$), $t(46) = 1.69$, $p = 0.10$). In other words, the participants in the two conditions did not differ in their moral judgment before receiving ethics teaching.

Following this, we compared participants' responses to the final moral judgment scale. As predicted, independent sample T tests revealed that the participants in the moral identity strengthening condition judged the social issues to be less ethical ($M = -1.12$, $SD = 1.27$) compared to those in the control condition ($M = -0.52$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(79) = 2.03$, $p = 0.045$). We also found that, in response to the manipulation check question, all participants correctly identified the traits that corresponded with the condition they were in.

Taken together, the results suggest that the difference in teaching procedures led to different levels of moral judgment across the two conditions. This is consistent with our theorizing, namely that moral identity focused teaching can increase intensity of moral judgment.

We have emphasized the advantages of increasing intensity of moral judgment in the context of engaging business students more in their attitudes to ethical issues. We are aware, however, that this powerful engagement tool can have both positive and negative implications. As noted by Schnall et al. (2008) and Zhong et al. (2010), while moral judgment may beneficially increase sensitivity to morally charged situations in some contexts, in other contexts it may also foster judgmentalism, namely a kind of intolerance toward people who behave differently, which may further lead to discrimination and prejudice. Similarly, while appeal to moral identity may sometimes be useful in providing a basis for an individual standing up for their values against undue external pressures, in other circumstances it may over-emphasize self-identity at the expense of failing to recognize and respect the identity of others—especially when differences in the evaluation of

moral issues are experienced as forms of identity threat (Aquino and Douglas 2003).

Implications for Teaching Business Ethics

Notwithstanding some reservations as discussed above, our teaching experience suggests that the benefits of appeal to moral identity in business ethics teaching largely outweigh potential undesirable outcomes. As teachers and mentors, in our communications with and observations of post-graduate business students, especially those spending longer periods of time in high-pressured and ultra-competitive corporate environments, we have found that instances of elevated responsibility have far outnumbered those of judgmentalism.

Taking all of our evaluations into account, we contend that moral identity, together with other self-focused moral concepts such as moral self-worth and moral self-regulation (Jordan et al. 2011; Zhong et al. 2009), should be given more attention in the design and delivery of business ethics education programs.

There are several important reasons why this should be the case. First, creating a safe and comfortable space for individual reflection in class encourages students to tap into rich sources not emphasized before, namely personal experiences and emotional engagement. This can lead to a paradigmatic shift, from ethics by reasoning to ethics by feeling, which may be further reaching and have a higher, more enduring impact on the moral agent (Cushman et al. 2006). Second, we observed that, after completing their written activities, students were often more likely to internalize the concepts and values reflected upon and more likely to use their critical thinking. For example, during short discussion sessions (sometimes spontaneously) following these tasks, they questioned the legitimacy and/or purpose of social institutions previously taken for granted (e.g., 'what if this law is wrong (in some cases)?', 'what if we (as a society) have been too intolerant?', 'what if our ethical rules and principles have perverse effects?'). These reactions, which multiplied as the program progressed and which the students themselves found increasingly surprising (e.g., 'I didn't think I was going to feel/say this…'), suggest that emotional engagement is more likely to improve contextual responsiveness to ethical issues than appeal to rules and inferences. Third, in addition to a more sensitive appraisal of a particular ethical context, we have witnessed how appeal to moral identity (via reflection on values relative to past personal experiences) have led many of our students to adjust their perceptions to changing circumstances and to transform their moral beliefs in response to challenging and complex ethical problems. This points to general self-organizing capacities we all seem to possess, which allow us to transform ourselves for the purpose of preserving a coherent moral self.

All of these three features, namely paradigm shifting, purpose revision and self-organization by co-evolution with our environment, make appeal to moral identity an attractive leverage point, in the sense defined by Meadows (2008). Furthermore, appeal to moral identity has multiple effects, e.g., on ethical decision making (Gu & Neesham 2014) and, according to this study's findings, on moral judgment. As suggested by Reynolds (2008), these effects are also likely to increase moral awareness and moral sensitivity. Thus, most of the components of ethical behavior (Rest 1982, 1994) are simultaneously addressed.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

Although we have so far argued for the wider positive consequences of appeal to moral identity and increasing moral judgment intensity on an experiential basis, we believe that further (empirical) research should be engaged in exploring the scope and limitations of these consequences, especially in relation to potential negative consequences, as outlined above. Moreover, so far we have predicted only two outcomes of increased moral judgment intensity, namely enhanced moral responsibility and engagement, and judgmentalism. However, given the open diversity of ethically charged situations and the complexity of human behavior, further empirical studies may reveal other, less predictable, outcomes of this teaching approach.

We are also aware that exposure to a given set of social issues may be subject to important cultural differences in moral judgment intensity across countries. What people consider to be immoral in Australia, for example, may be treated with far more acceptance in other parts of the world - and vice versa. We recommend that further studies should be developed to test the effectiveness of our proposed teaching process in other cultures.

In addition, we acknowledge that the effects of our teaching were measured only at the end of the twelve-week teaching program. On completion of this program, we observed some promising positive changes in the participants' ethical attitudes and engagement. Therefore, we believe it is important that the level of retention of these changes should be monitored over a longer period of time. We propose that empirical testing of the type proposed in this paper be reiterated six and twelve months after the completion of the business ethics teaching program, as well as upon completion of the business degree and (if feasible) one or two years afterwards. A comprehensive perspective on these effects would enable business ethics educators to identify possible leverage points in the course of a

student's academic experience and, as a consequence, plan their input into the overall business curriculum more effectively.

Finally, while encouraged by the multiple effects of appeal to moral identity, e.g., on ethical decision making and moral judgment, improvements in moral action are still to be confirmed. Therefore, we recommend that future empirical studies should develop appropriate instruments and measure the effects of this method, to determine the extent to which moral action is improved (if at all) by appeal to moral identity, especially relative to other business ethics teaching approaches. Taking into account the increased level of responsiveness to ethically charged situations that we have noted in our students at the end of the teaching program, we suggest that it may also be possible to design instruments that enable us to observe and/or infer synergies among all four components of ethical behavior, i.e., sensitivity–judgment–intention–action. In making this suggestion, we are encouraged by our observation, acquired over many years of teaching ethics in business schools, that ethical responsiveness appears to involve all four components at once.

Conclusion

Our study shows that appeal to moral identity can strengthen students' moral judgment more effectively than rule-based ethics teaching only. By utilizing the intuitive–reflective teaching intervention as described, the moral self-concept of students is enhanced through the learning response. Furthermore, increasing the intensity of business students' moral judgment supports moral self-regulation.

On this basis, we recommend the inclusion of appeal to moral identity as an additive teaching strategy in business ethics education to effectively promote attitudinal change to business students' response to ethical issues. While the long-term retention effects of this observed identity shift would benefit from further examination, the inclusion of moral identity into business ethics education appears to be a strategy worth further consideration.

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