

An Exploratory Study Utilizing Expressive Writing and a Novel Cognitive Tool as Strategies for Enhanced Moral Perception

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the impact of a decision-making “tool” and an expressive writing task on moral perception, utilizing an ethical vignette. In prior research, both strategies have proven beneficial for improving coping and problem solving; the present research sought to extend these results to the arena of ethical decision making. Results revealed that participants utilizing a cognitive tool or writing task before assessing the moral perception of an ethical dilemma reported enhanced moral judgment and social pressure identification versus no treatment group. Implications of the findings and areas for future research are discussed.

Considerable evidence shows that individuals are at great risk for unethical decision making (for reviews, see O’Fallon & Butterfield, 2005; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). During the last decade, emphasis placed upon ethics in various capacities (e.g., decisions involving individual conduct in the context of workplace, political, religious, academia, etc.) has dramatically increased. Indeed, this enhanced emphasis on ethics and increased scrutiny of decision making by those in power has led many to question the general moral perception and ethical judgment of individuals. In order to prevent the negative consequences frequently announced in headline news captions, however, it is essential to prevent unethical decisions in the first place. Indeed, if unethical decision making is to be ameliorated, the creation of accessible and helpful cognitive tools that assist individuals in ethical decision making processes is of great importance. Much of research in the area of ethics has focused on numerous models to better comprehend why and how individuals make ethical decisions (e.g., McMahon & Harvey, 2007; Sweeney & Costello, 2009; Yang & Wu, 2009), very little has explored and tested tools and resources available to assist decision making. Indeed, to the knowledge of the authors, the only strategy published in the scientific literature is an intervention based upon counter explanation (Chung & Monroe, 2007). This is a technique often described in the cognitive psychology literature and used to counter the negative effect of an explanation.

For example, if Arthur Anderson’s partners had counter explained why they should not retain Enron as a client, Enron’s accounting problems may have been highlighted and made more salient to them, change encouraged, and the collapse of both firms might have been avoided. We found one empirical study utilizing this method; Chung and Monroe (2006) demonstrated that larger numbers of counter explanations (i.e., provided explanations as to why the actions described in the vignettes were incorrect) before recording ethical evaluations and intentions regarding ethical vignettes led to better ethical decision making. The researchers, however, did not examine moral intensity. Jones (1991) argues that moral intensity influences every component of ethical decision making and

behavior, obtaining such measures and testing strategies that enhance ethical decision making are of considerable importance.

Moral intensity refers to characteristics of the ethical issue that compel the decision maker to employ ethical reasoning (Jones, 1991). Jones posits that the construct consists of six components: magnitude of consequences defined as the harms (benefits) to victims (beneficiaries) arising from the moral act; social consensus described as the degree of social agreement regarding the good or evil of a proposed act; probability of effect defined as a joint function of the probability that an act will occur and cause harm (benefits); temporal immediacy defined as the length of time between the act and its ethical consequences; proximity which measures the social, cultural, psychological or physical association of the moral agent with potential victims (beneficiaries); and concentration of effect referring to the degree to which costs or benefits of amoral act apply to a limited number of victims or beneficiaries.

Given the personal and societal importance of making ethical decisions, the present paper focuses on the exploration of two candidate methodologies in assisting individuals with the moral perception and identification of a morally intense scenario: ACED IT and expressive writing.

ACED IT is a cognitive tool denoted by an acronym that stands for Assess, Create, Evaluate, Decide, Implement and Test (Kreitler, Dansereau, Barth & Ito, 2009; Kreitler, Dansereau, Barth, Repasky, & Miller, in press). Two frameworks have been combined in the development of ACED IT to guide individuals through effective decision-making and action planning: ethical decision stages (Toren & Wagner, 2010; Robbins & Judge, 2007), and multiple perspective taking (Atha-Weldon & Dansereau, 2006; Hall & Davis, 2007). The structured tool prompts individuals to examine a number of potential solutions, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of each option, by using a “fill-in-the-space” format to organize the written information (Dansereau, 2005). As noted, ACED IT is partially based upon a standard decision-making model (e.g., Torren & Wagner, 2010; Robbins & Judge 2007) that includes five broad stages: define the issue, generate options, evaluate, select, and act. Additionally, it incorporates alternative perspectives in the form of an internal “Decision Team,” a strategy in which students select and mentally refer to a group of familiar people for guidance (e.g., “What would Mother Theresa do?”; Atha-Weldon & Dansereau, 2006).

Additional perspectives are provided by encouraging participants to consider the ethical implications of their possible choices and actions. These include common ethical perspectives that have been described and taught in college courses: Virtue, Rights, Justice/Fairness, Common Good, and Utilitarian (Velasquez et al., 1988). The Virtue perspective focuses on common ideals such as honesty, caring, tolerance, loyalty, patience, and courage. The Rights perspective focuses on the protection of the basic rights of those involved. The Justice/Fairness approach suggests human beings should be treated equally or, if unequally, fairly based on some standard that is defensible. The Common Good perspective focuses on societal impacts, such as clean air, safety, and healthcare, and supports decisions that may infringe on individual rights in order to reach community goals. The Utilitarian perspective evaluates alternatives in cost/benefit terms. These five ethical approaches are incorporated into ACED IT, to broaden an individual’s view in the development and analysis of alternative courses of action (Velasquez et al., 1988).

ACED IT has been the focus of several recent ethical decision-making workshops for mid-level managers in local government. Feedback from the participants indicated high satisfaction with ACED IT and an intent to use this strategy in the future. Indeed, evaluations sought via email two months following each workshop indicated a continued satisfaction and frequent use of ACED IT.

Past research has provided considerable evidence indicating that expressive writing about a past or ongoing stressful or difficult life event results in a wide range of benefits for the writer. This technique, pioneered by Pennebaker and colleagues (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Francis, 1996), prompts individuals to write about their deepest thought and feelings involving a troubling topic for twenty minutes on three or more occasions. The paradigm demonstrates that when individuals are given the opportunity to disclose a troubling or stressful topic, they do so (Pennebaker, 1997). Research suggests that expressive writing can ameliorate difficulties associated with understanding a dilemma and determining solutions (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996). Expressive writing facilitates emotional release, leading to improved coping processes, mental health, and problem-solving (Sloan, Marx, Epstein, & Dobbs, 2008; Frattaroli, 2006; Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006; Dalton & Glenwick,

2009). Expressive writing is based on the theory that emotional inhibition is effortful and represents a cumulative stressor that adversely impacts physical health (Sloan & Marx, 2004).

Expressive writing allows an individual to release inhibited emotion, resulting in a reduction in stress that, in turn, improves physical health (Pennebaker, 1997).

Further, findings from recent research utilizing both expressive writing and ACED IT revealed that participants reported improved mental health, and a greater likelihood to include others in future decisions after working through a past or current difficult life event or decision that they were facing with than did participants who completed control tasks (Kreitler et al., 2011; Kreitler et al., in press)

General Objectives

Research suggests that utilizing either expressive writing or ACED IT results in beneficial outcomes in various capacities (see Pennebaker, 1997 for review; Kreitler, 2011; Kreitler, in press). Unfortunately, to our knowledge, no studies have explored the potential utility of expressive writing or any structured decision making tool when assessing the moral intensity of an ethical dilemma. The current research sought to determine whether either or both of these methodologies could aid individuals processing an ethical dilemma and/or enhance their moral perception, and, if so, which one was more effective. Our primary hypothesis for this study was that completing ACED IT or a writing task regarding the ethical dilemma would produce an improved perception of the moral intensity of an ethical dilemma vs. completing a control task.

Method

Participants

One hundred and thirteen undergraduate psychology students (84 female and 29 male; average age = 19.29, *SD* = 3.63) from a mid-sized private university in the southwest were recruited. The sample consisted of 82% Caucasians, 8% Latino(a)s, 4% African Americans, 5% Asians, and 1% "Other." Participants volunteered to participate in this research to fulfill a course requirement or receive extra credit for a class.

Materials

Descriptive Data. A questionnaire requesting information about each participant's gender, date of birth, and ethnicity was administered to participants.

ACED IT. This tool is a pre-structured map (Kreitler et al., 2009; Kreitler et al., in press) that utilizes a "fill-in-the-space" format to spatially organize written information. On side one, the map prompts participants to describe a dilemma, note practical issues and individuals affected by the decision dilemma, and generate a decision team. Next, participants are asked to utilize the imagined advice of decision team members to list up to six potential solutions, and then rate each option on a Likert-type scale (0 = *not at all*, 3 = *very much so*), using ethical criteria (e.g., "It protects the rights of those involved"). Participants are then encouraged to eliminate options that score poorly, and consider the ones that are rated most highly. Following selection of the optimal solution, the participant turns to side two, and begins to detail the steps needed to implement his decision (See Figure 1).

Expressive Writing Task. In this task, participants were instructed to express their deepest thoughts and feelings regarding an ethical dilemma. Participants received several sheets of blank paper, allotted 20 minutes, and were given the following instructions, adapted from Pennebaker and Francis (1996):

I would like for you to write about your deepest thoughts and feelings regarding the ethical scenario you just read and imagine yourself in Tom's position. In your writing, I'd like you to really let go and explore your deepest emotions and thoughts about the dilemma. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others, including parents, significant others, friends, or relatives, to your past, your present, or your future. Don't worry about using complete sentences or being logical. Just write whatever comes to your mind about this dilemma.

Non-relevant comparison task. The Positive and Negative Affect Scales form (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) lists 20 adjectives (e.g., proud, alert, nervous). Respondents rate their current experience of each item (i.e., how they feel right now), by using a 5-point scale (1 = very slightly or not at all, 5 = extremely).

Dependent Measure. Perceived moral intensity was measured using 9-item Perceived Moral Intensity Scales (PMIS) adapted from Singhapakdi et al. (1996) and Frey (2000), and previously used by several investigators

(Leitsch, 2006; Sweeney & Costello, 2009) in order to measure the extent to which participants perceived the existence of moral intensity characteristics in the scenario. The scenario detailed a business dilemma (approving a questionable expense report) perceived to be representative of dilemmas found in the workplace.

The scenario ended with an ethically questionable action taken in response. After reading the scenario and the action taken, participants were asked to rate the extent of their agreement. Perceptions of each of the nine moral intensity characteristics were measured with two items for each characteristic using a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Item 1 measures ethical dilemma identification, item 2 measures ethical judgment, item 3 measures ethical intentions, items 4, 6, 7, and 9 measure potential harm identification, and items 5 and 8 measure potential social pressure identification. Composite scores were computed by separately averaging items measuring participant identification of potential harm, and participant identification of social pressure.

Procedure

The participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups: ACED IT ($n = 37$), an expressive writing comparison group ($n = 38$), or a no treatment group ($n = 38$). Individually numbered folders held experimental materials for each of the three groups. These folders were randomly sorted, and placed in one large pile. As participants entered the large lecture hall, they selected the folder on top of the pile, and were then instructed to sit one seat apart from other participants. After informed consent was obtained, participants were asked to follow the brief instructions in their folders. All participants were given instructions asking them to read an ethical scenario regarding approval of a questionable expense report, involving a character named Tom.

Participants in the ACED IT group were then given instructions to complete ACED IT utilizing the dilemma in the scenario they had just read and to imagine themselves in Tom's position when completing ACED IT. For example, "What would I do in Tom's scenario?" was typically written in the dilemma box by participants, followed by the generation of a decision team and potential solutions to this dilemma. Participants in the expressive writing group were asked to imagine themselves in Tom's position and write down their thoughts and feelings regarding the dilemma in the scenario. Participants in the no treatment condition were given an unrelated questionnaire as a control task. All groups were allotted 20 minutes to complete their task. Next, all participants received the dilemma regarding Tom once again, only on the second occasion, they were shown the resulting action taken by Tom, and then asked to rate Tom's decision. Finally, participants were given a full debriefing.

Results

A one-way (ACED IT vs. Expressive Writing vs. No Treatment) MANOVA (see Table 1) was conducted on Moral Intensity Identification, Moral Intensity Judgment, Moral Intention, Perceived Potential Harm Identification, and Perceived Social Pressure Identification. The main effect for experimental condition was significant, as indicated by Wilks' Lambda, $F(10, 212) = 2.72, p < .01$. Significant univariate main effects of group were obtained for Moral Intensity Identification, $F(2, 110) = 3.28, p < .05$, Moral Intensity Judgment, $F(2, 110) = 4.48, p < .05$, and Perceived Social Pressure Identification, $F(2, 110) = 7.60, p < .01$. LSD post hoc tests identified participants in the Expressive Writing Group ($M = 5.21, SD = 1.80$) as more likely to report greater moral intensity judgment than participants in the No Treatment Group ($M = 3.90, SD = 1.98$). Furthermore, participants in the ACED IT Group ($M = 6.43, SD = .60$) and Expressive Writing Group ($M = 6.47, SD = .65$) reported a greater likelihood to perceive the moral intensity of the ethical dilemma than did those in the No Treatment Group ($M = 6.05, SD = 1.04$). Finally, participants in the ACED IT Group ($M = 4.88, SD = .92$) and Expressive Writing Group ($M = 4.43, SD = .89$) demonstrated better perceived social pressure identification compared with those in the No Treatment Group ($M = 3.91, SD = 1.36$). There were no other significant differences.

Discussion

It was hypothesized that participants utilizing ACED IT and expressive writing to explore an ethical dilemma would report greater moral perception of an ethical vignette than would those in the control group. The findings generally supported this hypothesis. Results indicated, as hypothesized, that individuals who utilized ACED IT and expressive writing to work through the ethical dilemma before assessing the moral intensity of the dilemma reported significantly greater moral judgment, and were more likely to identify social pressure in the scenario than were participants who did not utilize a problem solving strategy. Further, individuals who completed expressive writing reported better moral identification of the ethical dilemma than did those who completed a control task. These findings are consistent with the previous research documenting that expressive writing and cognitive

mapping require organization and structure, and promote systematic decision making, which allow individuals to let go and move past their problems resulting in improved problem solving (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996; Kreitler et al., 2011; Kreitler et al., in press).

Our findings, however, not only provided evidence for this assumption, but went beyond earlier research by comparing expressive writing and ACED IT (which presumably involve analytical processing of an ethical dilemma) with no treatment (which we assume replicates typical decision making) in the arena of moral perception. This is important, as it is the first study, to our knowledge, to demonstrate that individuals utilizing ACED IT or expressive writing reported enhanced moral perception versus individuals not utilizing a problem solving technique.

In spite of the original hypothesis, it is interesting to note that there were no significant differences between groups when assessing moral intention and potential harm identification. It is currently unclear why the intervention measures produced no effect on these variables, yet produced significant benefit in terms of moral judgment, identification of social pressure, and moral identification. It may be the case that individuals need more sessions utilizing either problem solving techniques or a lengthier time to reflect on the dilemma (as opposed to 20 minutes) before they are better able to identify moral intention and potential harm. For example, in past research, improved coping and decision making effects were not shown until participants utilized the problem solving technique in at least 2–3 sessions (Pennebaker, 1997; Kreitler et al., 2011). Alternatively, it is certainly conceivable that individuals require less assistance when assessing the moral intention and perceiving harm in a morally intense ethical scenario. Additional work is needed to verify and extend the current set of findings. ACED IT and expressive writing can be easily learned, and are techniques that can be incorporated into corporate ethical training and human resource strategies to assist employees in their problem solving methods, thereby, aiding companies in avoiding personnel, accounting, and productivity pitfalls. Training could be designed, in part, to integrate not only ACED IT but expressive writing as techniques to assist difficult decision making. This training could teach employees useful strategies to rely on when making difficult decisions, and two options may prove more beneficial than one. For example, some individuals may prefer the free style writing versus the structure of ACED IT.

Researchers investigating reports of moral disengagement (e.g., “it’s just part of the game,” “it’s their own fault”), suggested that a standardized list of questions employees are required to complete before important decisions be developed (Detert, Sweitzer, & Trevino, 2008). They felt that development of such a list or tool might assist individuals and groups identify potential moral blind spots in decision processes (Detert et al., 2008). Tools such as CED IT or expressive writing seem well suited to address this need. Indeed, instituting a system that requires managers/committees to complete ACED as important decisions arise may also be able to provide organizations the insight as to why a particular decision was made. Perhaps a corporate or academic committee member, or an individual acting alone to make the decision, will be more morally engaged if they realize there will be “trail” depicting how the decision was made. This simple practice might assist the decision making at the individual level, and simultaneously help safeguard organizations against unethical decisions that have serious negative repercussions.

In summary, our research suggests that utilizing expressive writing and ACED IT are both worthwhile and beneficial when assessing a morally intense vignette, though it is not clear that one intervention is more effective than the other. Perhaps, given that individuals are often likely to make poor decisions (O’Fallon & Butterfield, 2005; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008; Treviño et al., 2006), the decision making benefits gained from utilization of ACED IT and/or expressive writing may provide insight and help individuals avoid the potential pitfalls of unethical decision making. As noted previously, very few empirical studies have tested tools that assist the decision making process. The tools utilized in this study, in addition to the counter explanation technique (Chung & Monroe, 2007), may provide a useful starting point in the development of relevant decision-enhancing tools. The results of this study warrant further efforts to assess and compare these strategies, as they relate to ethical dilemmas.

Limitations and Future Directions

Some limitations of design and data collection should be mentioned. Although the participants themselves are undoubtedly our best resource for information about their own cognitions, *any* data consisting of self-report measures require vigilance, lest demand, perceived desirability, or response biases affect the outcome. The lack of

significant differences in a number of the comparisons (comparisons that would likely have produced type I errors), however, gives us confidence that the participants gave appropriate consideration to their responses, and did not indiscriminately tout the merits of the ACED IT or expressive writing procedures.

Regardless, future research would be strengthened by using independent and objective means of assessment, such as objective behavioral measures, rather than self-reports based upon fictional vignettes. Further, it is unclear whether or not the reported differences are generalizable to different kinds of ethical dilemmas. The current study utilized one business ethics vignette, and future research would undoubtedly benefit from assessing ethical decision making tools in the context of non-business related ethical dilemmas. Moreover, further research is needed to compare ACED IT and expressive writing to counter explanation and determine which strategy is most beneficial in assisting individuals with ethical decision making.

Lastly, our college sample raises concern about generalizability (Gordon, Slade, & Schmitt, 1986). We believe, however, that our sample was appropriate, given the exploratory nature of these strategies. Nonetheless, we recognize that future studies using diverse samples, would prove beneficial in verifying generalizability.

Table 1: One-Way Multiple Analysis of Variance for Perceived Moral Intensity Variables

| <i>Source</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>F</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|
| Identification of ethical dilemma | 2 | 3.28* | .04 |
| Ethical judgment | 2 | 4.48* | .01 |
| Ethical intention | 2 | 0.91 | .41 |
| Perceived harm | 2 | 1.29 | .28 |
| Perceived social pressure | 2 | 7.6** | .00 |
| Wilks' Lambda | 10 | 2.72** | .00 |

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

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