

The impact of emotional intelligence on ethical judgment

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the important relationships between emotional intelligence (EI) and ethical decision making (EDM).

Design/methodology/approach – Participants were 100 students from MBA programs in the USA and India who completed two surveys: one measuring their EI, and the second their use of four different ethical perspectives in three scenarios. Multiple regression analyses were performed to discover relationships between overall EI, certain dimensions of EI and their ethical judgments.

Findings – The authors' results found that the composite EI score as well as the EI subscale of decision making were both significantly related to the relativism ethical perspective. Age was an additional significant factor for EI and EDM.

Research limitations/implications – Future research should attempt to replicate these findings among different managerial levels, industries and countries to further understand the distinctive relationships between EI and ethical judgments.

Practical implications – This study highlights the importance of integrating EI and ethical judgment within corporate training programs and business school curricula, as important is the emphasis on moving the subject of ethical judgment from one of awareness to sustained ethical behavior through accountability.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the literature by identifying how EI and its decision-making subscale are significant to EDM.

Keywords Emotional intelligence, Ethical judgement

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In today's competitive business environment, an ethical workplace culture protects company assets, provides emotional security and promotes effective decision making (Ventimiglio, 2015). Despite the benefits of ethical business practices, 20 years of surveys (Ethics Research Center, 2013) indicate consistent ethical challenges that organizations face covering a range of offenses from falsifying records to conflicts of interest to bribery and theft. The latest National Business Ethics Survey of the US Workforce (Ethics Research Center, 2013) reported that 60 percent of workplace misconduct involved someone with managerial responsibilities. Unethical business practices result in severely damaged company image, increased dysfunctional behavior and decreased value of the company (Meinert, 2017). Given the detrimental consequences of unethical decisions, it is important for organizations to foster an ethical workplace culture and promote ethical decision making (EDM).

A perplexing problem for researchers is understanding the EDM process and the factors that influence EDM (Krishnakumar and Rymph, 2012). Many models of EDM have been proposed (e.g. Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986), with ethical judgment as the central step in a multistep decision-making process. For example, Jones (1991) suggested a model of EDM based on Rest's (1986) classic work of moral reasoning, in which he stated that ethical judgment is the direct antecedent of ethical behavioral intentions.



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There is evidence that emotions have a significant role in ethical judgment and decision making (Haidt, 2003). Maak and Pless (2006) argue that “responsible leaders need both emotional and ethical qualities to guide their action and behavior in interaction” (p. 105). Bay and McKeage (2006) state “It may eventually be shown that emotional intelligence is one of the variables that may explain the current gap between ethical understanding and ethical behavior” (p. 441). Only a few studies have explored the relationship between EI and certain aspects of ethics, such as honesty and integrity (e.g. Bay and Greenberg, 2001; Holian, 2006; McPhail, 2004). Hence research exploring the direct relationship between EI and EDM is needed.

This research study proposes to fill a gap in the literature by demonstrating the direct effect that EI has on ethical judgment resulting in ethical decisions. In addition to discovering the impact of overall EI on ethical decisions, this study will investigate the specific dimensions of EI that have a direct relationship with ethical judgment across two cultures.

Review of literature

Emotional intelligence

EI is an ability which helps us to intelligently process our emotions and obtain positive outcomes (Deepa and Krishnaveni, 2011). EI is formally defined as “the capacity to reason about emotions, and of emotions, to enhance thinking” (Mayer *et al.*, 2004, p. 197). EI has been found to have a strong impact on all walks of human life. In the organizational context, EI influences performance, organizational commitment, conflict management and well-being, among other outcomes (e.g. Dulewicz *et al.*, 2005; Hopkins and Yonker, 2015; Krishnaveni and Deepa, 2013). Mayer and Salovey (1997) believe that individuals who are highly emotionally intelligent are more adept at reasoning and subsequently use that information to guide their thoughts and actions.

Ethical judgment

Ethical judgment refers to an individual's personal evaluation of the degree to which some behavior is ethical or unethical (Sparks and Pan, 2010). Reidenbach and Robin (1988, 1990) developed a model of moral decision making which extended the two ethical frameworks of teleology and deontology to encompass five moral philosophies: egoism, utilitarianism, relativism, justice and deontology. Egoism is the extent to which one selects an action based on self-interest. Utilitarianism is defined as whether the action results in the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Relativism is concerned with beliefs guided by the standards of society. Justice, or moral equity, is associated with the inherent fairness and goodness of a decision. Finally, deontology focuses on the implied contract, duties or obligations that exist between society and business.

Relationships between these five moral philosophies, ethical judgments and decision making have been examined. The results of a study of tax professionals discovered that EDM was most heavily influenced by the moral equity dimension, followed by contractualism (Cruz *et al.*, 2000). The moral philosophies of justice and relativism predominated the decision making of managers in India (Gupta, 2010). After researching ethical decisions in marketing, Bateman *et al.* (2003) reported that all ethical decisions are preceded by a combination of rule-based and cost/benefit-based reasoning processes. Interestingly, relativistic managers reported more positive ethical evaluations of controversial sales practices in a survey of sales executives (Sivadas *et al.*, 2003). Boyle (2000) found similar results in a study of real estate agents. Finally, Kim (2003) found that individuals with less relativism made stricter ethical judgments in a study of Korean public relations practitioners.

Cross-cultural comparisons of ethical judgment have uncovered both similarities and differences. For example, a survey of business managers from India, Korea and the USA found that attitudes toward unethical decision making differed across culture (Christie *et al.*, 2003). On the contrary, purchasing professionals in Taiwan and China were found to rely on similar moral philosophies (Ho and Lin, 2016); and both Americans and Egyptians relied on the relativism ethical perspective for their behavioral intentions (Beekun *et al.*, 2008). Thus, the results of cross-cultural comparisons of ethical judgment provide mixed and inconclusive results.

Emotional intelligence and ethical decision making

What are the connections between EI and ethical judgment? Prior research has considered the positive role of emotional regulation in ethical behavior (e.g. Eisenberg, 2000; Fu, 2014). Overall EI, which encompasses not only one's regulation of emotions but also an awareness of one's emotions as well as the effective use of emotions, was found to influence the ethical behavior of hospital employees (Deshpande, 2009). Individuals who were high in EI were better able to deal with their emotions of anger and sadness to make ethical choices (Krishnakumar and Rymph, 2012). Angelidis and Ibrahim (2011) reported that managers with higher EI scores believed that their actions should not be deceptive nor do harm while those with lower EI scores were willing to take actions with potential negative outcomes.

A study examining four dimensions of EI concluded that the ability to appraise and express emotions in oneself was negatively related to beliefs about actively benefitting from illegal actions as well as questionable but legal actions (Chowdhury, 2017). The ability to recognize the emotions of others was positively related to beliefs about doing good or pro-social actions. Another study found that while the overall EI contribution to ethics in the workplace was very small, three EI dimensions were positively associated with ethics: interpersonal connectivity, emotional regulation and self-awareness (Singh, 2010). A third investigation concluded that the ability to recognize the emotions of others was significantly related to ethics at work (Joseph *et al.*, 2009).

Summary and research questions

Although there have been a few research studies on the topics of emotions or EI and ethics, the extant literature has not explored the direct relationships between EI and specific moral philosophies resulting in EDM. Prior literature has called for more specific investigations of the relationships between these topics. In addition, previous research on cross-cultural comparisons of ethical perspectives has yielded inconclusive results.

With this in mind, this study aims to investigate the relationships between overall EI and certain moral philosophies guiding EDM, and also between specific components of EI and those moral philosophies. A cross-cultural comparison of these relationships is a further objective of this research. The following are our research questions:

- RQ1. How does EI directly relate to ethical judgment guiding ethical decisions?
- RQ2. What specific dimensions of EI directly relate to ethical judgment guiding ethical decisions?
- RQ3. What are the cross-cultural comparisons of the relationships between EI and ethical judgment guiding ethical decisions?

Methodology

Participants were MBA students in two business schools, one located in the USA and the other in India. The study initially included 109 students pursuing their MBA degree at the

US business school and 90 students pursuing their MBA at the Indian business school. The final sample had 100 respondents, 77 from the USA and 23 from India, yielding a response rate of 50 percent. The mean age of the participants was 25 years old. The respondents were coded by number to match their responses to the two surveys used for collecting data on the independent variable of EI and the outcome variable of ethical judgment.

Data collection was completed online through two validated instruments. EI was measured using the 132-item Emotional Quotient Inventory 2.0 (Multi-Health Systems, Inc., 2011) which measures overall EI and has five subscales: self-perception, self-expression, interpersonal, decision making and stress management. Respondents specified the frequency with which they believed that they demonstrated behaviors related to each subscale, for example: "It is hard for me to decide on the best solution when solving a problem."

Ethical judgment was assessed using the multidimensional ethics scale (MES) (Reidenbach and Robin, 1988, 1990). Respondents read three brief ethical scenarios (adapted from Cohen *et al.*, 2001) and then completed the ten-item MES. The scenarios included a decision to launch a new product which has had insufficient product testing, a determination to ship a product early to a customer in order to receive a quarterly bonus and the granting of a loan to a friend who does not meet the bank's loan criteria. Sample items from the MES scale are: "Is this decision just or unjust?" "Is this decision fair or unfair?" "Does this decision violate an unwritten contract or not?" "Is the decision ethical or unethical?" Four ethical perspectives were measured in the MES items: moral equity (four items), relativism (two items), utilitarianism (two items) and contractualism (two items).

The data were analyzed through multiple regression analysis in order to predict the relationships between EI and the four ethical perspectives, as well as between the subscales of EI and the four ethical perspectives. For each model, the control variables of gender and age of the participants were entered on the first block.

Results

The model with the total EI score as a predictor of the relativism ethical perspective was significant ($R^2 = 0.13$, $F(3, 96) = 4.6$, $p < 0.01$). An individual's composite EI score was a significant predictor of the relativism ethical perspective ($\beta = 0.21$, $t = 2.012$, $p < 0.05$). In addition, the age of the person was significant ($\beta = 0.21$, $t = 2.012$, $p < 0.05$).

The model with the total EI score as a predictor of the moral equity ethical perspective was also significant ($R^2 = 0.10$, $F(3, 96) = 3.722$, $p < 0.01$). The only variable which was a significant predictor of this ethical perspective was the age of the respondent ($\beta = 0.239$, $t = 2.294$, $p < 0.05$).

The two models with the dependent variables of the contractualism ($R^2 = 0.019$, $F(3, 96) = 0.630$, $p > 0.05$) and utilitarianism ($R^2 = 0.028$, $F(3, 96) = 0.909$, $p > 0.05$) ethical perspectives and the independent variable of the total EI score were not significant, nor did they contain any significant independent variable relationships.

The next set of regressions examined which of the five EI subscales (self-perception, self-expression, interpersonal, decision making and stress management) were predictors of the four ethical perspectives, addressing the second research question in this study. The model with the relativism ethical perspective was significant ($R^2 = 0.21$, $F(7, 92) = 3.545$, $p < 0.01$) with three significant relationships. The interpersonal EI subscale was a significant predictor of the relativism ethical perspective ($\beta = 0.27$, $t = 2.176$, $p < 0.05$) as was the decision-making EI subscale ($\beta = 0.41$, $t = 2.902$, $p < 0.01$) and age ($\beta = 0.23$, $t = 2.330$, $p < 0.05$). A second model was run, was highly significant ($p < 0.001$), and accounted for 18 percent of the variance in the participants' relativism scores. The decision-making EI subscale was again found to be a significant predictor of the relativism ethical perspective ($\beta = 0.218$, $t = 2.079$, $p < 0.05$). However, the interpersonal EI subscale and the

age control variable were no longer significant predictors. A third model was tested and was highly significant ($R^2 = 0.154$, $F(3, 96) = 5.817$, $p < 0.001$), with the decision-making aspect of EI a significant predictor of the relativism ethical perspective ($\beta = 0.271$, $t = 2.713$, $p < 0.01$), as well as age ($\beta = 0.198$, $t = 1.999$, $p < 0.05$).

The regression model with the outcome variable of the contractualism ethical perspective, while not significant ($R^2 = 0.09$, $F(7, 92) = 1.315$, $p > 0.05$), did have one significant negative relationship with the stress management EI subscale ($\beta = -0.31$, $t = -2.011$, $p < 0.05$). A second model was not significant, nor were there any significant relationships found between any of the variables.

The model of the regression analyses for the relationships between the two control variables, the five EI subscales and the outcome variable of the moral equity ethical perspective was significant ($R^2 = 0.158$, $F(7, 92) = 2.466$, $p < 0.05$), yet the only significant predictor variable was the control variable of age ($\beta = 0.258$, $t = 2.471$, $p < 0.01$).

Finally, the model with the ethical perspective of utilitarianism as an outcome, the five subscales of EI and control variables of age and gender were not significant nor did it discover any significant relationships among the variables ($R^2 = 0.049$, $F(7, 92) = 0.674$, $p > 0.05$).

Since this was a cross-cultural sample group, we investigated whether there were any variations between the participants from the USA and India. We found no significant differences in their responses.

Table I provides a summary of the significant results from all of the regression models.

Discussion

Individuals in ethical situations require the skills and abilities to make informed judgments in order to ethically address those situations. Emotions are a contributing factor to the individual's conceptualization and judgment in their EDM. Our study identifies novel findings between EI and ethical perspectives.

First, there is a strong association between a composite of EI abilities and the relativism ethical perspective. Individuals who demonstrate EI are self-aware, perceptive of others and can effectively manage their emotions. They are mindful not only of their own values but also of the belief systems and social consensus of their teams, companies, community and culture. Directly related to these attributes of an emotionally intelligent individual is the ethical perspective of relativism, which is concerned with beliefs guided by the standards of society and the socio-cultural system. A relativistic approach to ethical judgment necessitates an awareness of the requisite behavior in certain situations. Thus, emotionally intelligent individuals will go through the process of recognizing the ethical issue and the societal norms regarding that issue. They will comprehend the societal standards and framework for assessing the ethical concern. They will also perceive how their emotions may be affecting their judgment and effectively use their emotions to problem-solve.

Another major conclusion from this study is the importance of the decision-making element of EI to the relativism ethical perspective. This result makes sense for several reasons. The three abilities that comprise the EI subscale of decision making are problem solving,

Outcome variables	Predictor variables	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	β	R^2	Overall model <i>F</i>
Relativism	Overall EI	0.109	0.054	0.210*	0.126	4.605**
Relativism	Age	1.886	0.937	0.207*		
Moral equity	Age	4.076	1.776	0.239*	0.104	3.722**
Relativism	Decision making EI subscale	0.117	0.043	0.271**	0.154	5.817***

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table I.
Summary of
significant results

reality testing and impulse control. Problem solving is the ability to solve problems that involve emotions and to effectively manage emotions. Reality testing is the ability to be grounded and level headed, especially in stressful situations. Impulse control is the ability to analyze situations before taking action. Ethical decisions inherently are problems to be solved through assessments and judgment. The capacity to monitor, regulate and control emotions assists in understanding the ethical situation and making an informed ethical decision. When making an ethical decision, considering the cultural operating norms involves a proficiency in analyzing the context and environment within which the decision is being made. For example, the reality testing element within the decision making EI subscale would assist an individual in realizing that certain behaviors may be perfectly acceptable in some industries or professions yet not suitable in others.

While EI overall and its decision making component were found to be strongly related to the relativism ethical perspective, our results did not discover any connections between EI and the other ethical perspectives examined in our study. One reason may be that a good deal of the business ethics traditions and literature follows a relativistic framework (Tsalikis *et al.*, 2001). In analyzing ethical business situations, for instance, an emphasis tends to be placed on the nature of the situation along with the circumstances and context. This is in contrast to the moral equity ethical perspective, for example, which proposes that there are certain rights and wrongs. Most business ethical decisions are not so black and white and are not that easily placed into a right or wrong category (Badaracco, 2016). An emotionally intelligent individual will more likely be aware of the nuances in ethical situations and see the shades of gray in making an ethical choice.

Our study also did not find any significant differences in ethical judgment between the participants in India and the USA. A prior cross-cultural comparison of business ethics in the USA and India revealed that certain aspects of business codes of conduct are equivalently valued in both cultures (LeFebvre, 2011). These commonalities could be attributed to the finding that respondents from both cultures had no significant difference in their ethical judgments.

Implications

The ethical behavior of leaders has been one of the most concerning and perpetual issues facing business and society. While calls for reform and closer attention to business practices have been made, there remains an urgent need to better understand the ethical behavior of decision makers and to determine the potential facilitators of their ethical judgment.

A central finding in this study is the significance of EI to the relativism ethical perspective. For practitioners, this result highlights the importance of developing EI. A leader who demonstrates EI is one who is aware of their emotions and the emotions of others. In turn, they realize how their emotions are affecting their judgments. Thus, they are more likely to make ethical decisions weighing the societal implications of their choice. Corporate development programs could integrate EI module(s) within their programs and provide 360-degree instruments to assist in increasing the participants' self-awareness. Business and other professional schools could include the topic of EI in their curriculum. In this way, students are introduced to the importance of EI and its positive relationship to favorable outcomes at an early stage in their careers.

In addition to emphasizing EI, it is important that corporate development programs and business schools give a high priority to ethical judgment, decision making and behavior. Prior research has reported contradictory findings regarding the effectiveness of ethics training programs in corporations and business curricula (Angelidis and Ibrahim, 2011). The challenge in ethics education for practitioners and business students is to move beyond a focus on rules, procedures, and rights and wrongs which represent the first level of ethics awareness and understanding. The critical second level is to impact the judgment and the

behavior of individuals. Business educators and corporate trainers could integrate additional experiential activities and applied projects within their curriculum to achieve the second level of ethical judgment and behavior. For organizations to sustain an ethical culture, an essential third level is to hold all employees and stakeholders accountable for their ethical decisions through rewards and recognition for positive judgments and accountability measures for erroneous judgments.

Finally, in addition to stressing the development of EI and EDM, business schools and corporations must emphasize the important connections between demonstrating EI and taking ethical perspectives. As practitioners and students realize the linkages between these two, hopefully this will contribute to more ethical judgments.

Limitations and future research

Although this study showed that EI has an impact on the ethical judgment of individuals, one limitation is the sample group of MBA students, many who are yet to enter into corporate avenues. Future research can explore managers at different organizational levels, across industries, and across countries to understand the interplay between the variables. The moderating effect of national culture and organizational culture on the relation between EI and ethical judgments will be an interesting area for further investigation. Our study showed relationships between age and EI, and age and ethical judgment. Additional research in these domains would also throw light on the intricacies of these influences.

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