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Megan M. Thompson
Tonya Hendriks
DRDC - Toronto Research Centre

Ann-Renée Blais
Director Research Operational and Organizational Dynamics Director General Military Personnel
Research and Analysis

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Military Ethical Decision Making: The Effects of Option Choice and Perspective Taking on Moral Decision-Making Processes and Intentions

Megan M. Thompson and Tonya Hendriks
Ann-Renée Blais

We investigated the ethical decision-making processes and intentions of 151 military personnel responding to 1 of 2 ethical scenarios drawn from the deployment experiences of military commanders. For each scenario, option choice and perspective affected decision-making processes. Differences were also found between the 2 scenarios. Results add to the emerging literature concerning operational ethical conflicts and highlight the complexity and challenge that often accompanies operational ethics.

Keywords: military moral decision making, option choice, perspective taking

Military ethics is a crucial foundation that separates “soldiers from murderers” (Liivoja, 2012, p. 146) and “warfare from slaughter” (Ignatieff, as cited in Liivoja, 2012, p. 146). In doing so, military ethics has a variety of other important functions. It protects the individual soldier from moral stress and injury (Litz et al., 2009; Nilsson, 2010; Shay, 2002, 2011) and promotes unit cohesion (Kirkland, 2003; although Winslow, 2004, provided a different perspective on the military unit cohesion–ethics relation). Abiding by military ethics also ensures continuing public support of the military and for a particular mission (Bradley & Tymchuk, 2013; Riesman & Antoniou, as cited in Dunlop, 2009; Robinson, 2007; Stouffer & Seiler, 2010; Warner & Appenzeller, 2011), whereas “ethical failures . . . may have far-reaching political and strategic consequences” (Olsen, Eid, & Larsson, 2010, p. S138). For all of these reasons, moral judgment is an “integral part of the military profession” (Verweij, Hofhuis, & Soeters, 2007, p. 20).

Still, recent incidents from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Banks, 2012; de Graaff & Van Den Berg, 2010; Macdonald, Sharpe, & Davis, 2009; Rayment, 2011; Robinson, 2009; Santow, 2011) have understandably refocused attention on military ethics during operations. In groundbreaking research Castro and McGurk (2007) found that fewer than half the U.S. soldiers and marines surveyed agreed

that noncombatants always should be treated with respect, with more than one third agreeing that torture was allowable in order to save the life of a team member and 10% reporting that they had engaged in immoral behaviors (e.g., the unnecessary hitting or kicking a civilian or the destruction of their property). Just as important, this study and subsequent research (Warner et al., 2011; Wilk et al., 2013) also revealed the links between these unethical attitudes and behaviors and combat exposure, trauma, negative emotions, and stress reactions. Although the United States has been the leader in systematically documenting such attitudes and behaviors, other militaries have also grappled with these same issues (see “Bad Behavior in Afghanistan,” 2006; Banks, 2012; Bercuson, 1996; Santow, 2011).

Further complicating matters, modern military missions are often counterinsurgency operations that most often occur among civilian populations (Kimhi & Kasher, 2015; Olsen et al., 2010) and in which soldiers often shift between peacekeeper, diplomat, and warrior” roles (Schut, de Graaff, & Verweij, 2015, p. 616). These factors result in “morally and culturally critical situations [that are] complex and loaded with ambiguity” (Schut & Moelker, 2015, p. 232; see also Seiler, Fischer, & Voegtli, 2011) and require sustaining the “acknowledged norms of ethical behavior in the face of aggression and provocations in order to avoid adverse consequences such as a counterproductive escalation of hostilities” (Bartone, 2004, cited in Olsen et al., 2010, p. s152).

It is also important to remember that, although some soldiers engage in ethical transgressions, not all soldiers do; thus it becomes incredibly important to understand how military personnel make ethical decisions, the factors that can affect these processes, and how these factors interact. The current research begins to explore these points, investigating the effects of ethical option choice and the perspective taken on the ethical decision-making processes of a sample of military personnel.

THE ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The ethical decision-making process begins with the recognition that ethical issues are at play (see Blum, 1991; Verweij et al., 2007). This ethical awareness allows moral judgments, that is, assessments of the values and interests underlying and the inherent goodness or badness, rightness or wrongness, fairness or unfairness of the situation (see Rest, 1986) to be made. This awareness and such judgments affect ethical intent, the decision maker’s resolve or his or her estimate of the likelihood of actually engaging in that option choice should the real situation arise (Barnett, 2001; Barnett & Vaicys, 2000; Barnett & Valentine, 2004; Flory, Phillips, Reidenbach, & Robin, 1992; Jones, 1991; May & Pauli, 2002; Rallapalli, Vitell, & Barnes, 1998; Rest, 1986; Robin, Gordon, Jordon, & Reidenbach, 1996). Also important in the moral decision-making process is the individual’s assessments of moral intensity (Jones, 1991), the ethical impetus associated with the characteristics of the situation itself. With respect to moral intensity, the degree of harm anticipated (i.e., magnitude of consequences) and the perceived social agreement (social consensus) that an act is ethical or not are the dimensions that have the

¹ The other moral intensity dimensions include *probability of effect*, the likelihood that the event actually will take place and cause the harm or benefit predicted; *Proximity*, the degree of perceived social, cultural, physical, or psychological nearness to the victims/beneficiaries; *temporal immediacy*, the length of time between the present and the anticipated onset of the moral act.; and *concentration of effect*, the inverse function of the number of people affected by an act of a given magnitude, specifically, that acts affecting an individual are rated as more ethically charged than those that affect many people.

most consistently reported effects¹ (Carlson, Kacmar, & Wadsworth, 2002; Harrington, 1997; Jaffe & Pasternak, 2006; Morris & McDonald, 1995; Singer, 1998; Singer & Singer, 1997; Weber, 1990). Together these factors affect ethical actions, defined as behaviors that are deliberately undertaken that are related to or are intended to produce fair, just, and/or beneficent outcomes to others (Schulman, 2002).

Although this decision-making process is well documented in civilian samples, explorations of military moral decision-making are a more recent addition to the literature (Verweij et al., 2007). The research conducted to date has been revealing; as noted earlier, illuminating the moral attitudes and behaviors of deployed personnel and its links to deployment stress and to anger (Castro & McGurk, 2007; Warner et al., 2011). Other research also documents the moral complexity and challenges that military personnel can face while deployed (e.g., Jans & Cullens, 2010; Schut & Moelkera, 2015; Thompson, Thomson, & Adams, 2008; Van Baarle, Bosch, Widdershoven, Verweij, & Molewijk, 2015). In their research, Schut et al. (2015) found that ethically charged situations were most often found to involve cultural differences and that strange and unfamiliar practices were mostly associated with other condemning moral emotions (anger, disgust), as well as compassion for victims. In this research, the soldiers also indicated that their typical reaction to these events was restraint, in that they most reported reactions that involved trying to understand (or rationalizing, moral justification, numbing and moral relativism; see de Graaff, Schut, Verweij, Vermetten, & Giebels, 2016) the cultural differences and/or talking to the transgressor rather than being aggressive or leaving the situation. Despite the temptation to see the ethical decision making of soldiers as inherently different from that of civilians, at least one study demonstrated that the ethical judgments of military personnel are often consistent with higher levels of moral development and are generally comparable to those of civilians and military reservists (Kimhi & Kasher, 2015; Verweij et al., 2007)—although in their work Kimhi and Kasher also found regular force soldiers to be more authoritarian and right-wing and found that their responses to a military ethical scenario included a lower agreement with the proportionality principle and a higher use of force and lower agreement with in comparison to a student sample. Still other research has begun to explore the effects of situational aspects of the scenario, finding that soldiers applied different mental-processing sensemaking strategies in high- and low-intensity scenarios (de Graaff, Giebels, Meijer, & Verweij, 2016; Seiler et al., 2011), with deployment experience also reducing perceptions of degree of harm in low-intensity scenarios (de Graaff, Giebels, et al., 2016). A final set of studies have investigated military ethical education, finding that soldiers rate ethical education as important (Verweij et al., 2007), and that ethical education courses improved the ethical decision-making processes and moral competence of soldiers (Seiler et al., 2011; Van Baarle et al., 2015). However, educational tools and even military codes of conduct were not rated as having been influential in the responses of military personnel who had previously encountered an operational moral dilemma (Verweij et al., 2007).

Two additional experiments took a different approach to the study of decision-making processes in response to military ethical challenges. In that work, Krosch, Figner, and Weber (2012) and Blais and Thompson (2013) conducted studies in which civilian participants were presented with written scenarios drawn from the operational experiences of Canadian Armed Forces personnel (Thomson, Adams, & Sartori, 2005). Respondents were asked to imagine themselves in the role of the commander of a military mission deployed to a country in the midst of a vicious civil war. One scenario involved a decision about whether to allow civilian refugees who were the targets of shelling safe haven in their military camp, a decision that would critically stretch camp resources and contravene orders to maintain neutrality in the conflict.

The alternative would be to turn the refugees away. The other scenario involved a decision to either privately reprimand or court-martial a subordinate (and good friend) for a repeated risky operational decision that put soldiers in potential risk and contravened the mission's neutrality.

The results of these studies revealed the ethical challenge and complexity inherent in these situations for the civilian respondents. For example, Krosch et al.'s (2012) participants were equally split between choosing to let the refugees in and turning them away from the camp, whereas about 70% of their sample chose the private reprimand versus the court martial. Respondents who rated care or humanitarian concerns as paramount relative to others such as consequence, self-interest, or role-based considerations were more likely to opt to let the refugees into the camp. Moreover, speaking to ethical complexity, they found that conflicts in underlying moral principles (e.g., where care concerns were rated about equally to consequence or role-based concerns) were associated with greater future worry and, in some cases, a higher level of physiological arousal.

Although Blais and Thompson's (2013) civilian sample responded somewhat differently—60% opted to keep the refugees out of the military camp, and there was an equal split between the private reprimand and the court-martial of the subordinate—their results also revealed a degree of ethical complexity. That is, participants' ratings of social consensus, magnitude of consequences, and ethical judgments were congruent only in the subordinate scenario: Here, greater social consensus and lower harm were accorded, regardless of the choice made. However, in the refugee scenario, respondents who opted to turn the refugees away from the camp (vs. letting them in) indicated that fewer other people would agree with this decision and rated the choice as less good, fair, and/or just, but they also indicated that this choice would be associated with lower harm levels. In the current research we apply and extend these findings, using these operational scenarios and general methodology to investigate these ethical decision processes in a military sample.

EFFECTS OF PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Krosch et al. (2012) and Blais and Thompson (2013) also posited that the perspective taken by the respondents might have affected the ethical decision-making process results in their respective studies. For instance, Krosch et al. wondered whether the limited pattern of results that they found for ethical emotions was because they assessed these emotions only from the perspective of the decision maker. Blais and Thompson pointed out that respondent assessments of the degree of harm might differ depending on the perspective taken. More specifically, they speculated that the perceived degree of harm associated with turning the refugees away in the refugee scenario might be lower if one was focusing on harm to oneself versus harm to others.

Other research similarly suggests that perspective taking should play a role in ethical decision making, demonstrating, for instance, that ethical decisions and/or processes differ for people who differ in temporary moral self-worth levels (Sachdeva, Ilic, & Medin, 2009) or who are low versus high in empathy (the latter predicated on ability to assume another's perspective), although this relationship can be complex (Maibom, 2014). Boccia et al. (2017) also found some effects of perspective on the ethical decision making of Italian Air Force pilots and civilian controls. That is, ethical scenarios in which the respondent would also be a target of harm produced more utilitarian responses (minimizing the number of people harmed) than scenarios in

which only others are targets of harm, although in this study perspective also interacted with scenario type, gender, military versus civilian status, and flight hours. Carlson et al. (2002) directly manipulated the perspective taken, having respondents make ethical assessments when the ethical agent in a scenario was the self, a third person (other orientation), or an organization. They found that moral awareness (and perceptions of proximity) accounted for more of the variance in the moral judgments made in the self condition than in the other two conditions—significantly so for the organization orientation. Although intriguing, it is of note that Carlson et al. manipulated the self/other/organizational orientations in the context of three entirely different scenarios, and the differential effects of perspective also could have been affected by differences in other aspects of the scenarios themselves.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The current research aims to contribute to an understanding of military ethical decision-making processes. We apply a traditional ethical decision-making experimental procedure to explore the ethical choices and decision processes of military personnel using the two military ethical scenarios used in previous research with civilian samples. With respect to option choice, the military scenarios have embedded within them mission orders to remain neutral and impartial, and this is expected to guide the choices and judgments of the majority of military personnel. In the case of the refugee scenario this would mean that the majority of military members would elect to keep the refugees out of the camp, as allowing them in could violate impartiality and neutrality. In the subordinate scenario, the court-martial might be seen as the appropriate choice, as the subordinate has now repeatedly violated the principles of impartiality and neutrality and has put his or her comrades and the mission at risk.

The examination of choice on subsequent ethical decision processes in this study is exploratory, as this is the first time that a military sample is being used. However, based the previous research (Blais & Thompson, 2013; Krosch et al., 2012), we continue to expect to see the differential effects of choice on ethical decision-making processes. That is, in some cases we still expect to see evidence of ethical conflict, defined as an inconsistency between the choices made and the ratings of the dimensions of ethical decision making that are associated with those choices.

We investigate the role of perspective taking by varying whether military respondents focus on the degree of harm that could occur to (a) self or (b) to others, or (c) when the target of harm is left undefined. Moreover, we manipulate perspective taken within the context of the same ethical scenario. This allows us to more clearly see the specific effects of perspective taking isolated from any effects of scenario per se. Following from the literature in the area, the perspective manipulation is expected to differentially affect ethical decision making. Specifically, a self-focus should reduce the overall perceptions of harm associated with turning the refugees away from the camp and the court-martial of the subordinate, relative to adopting an “other” perspective. Leaving the target of harm undefined may allow respondents to focus on themselves, others, or both self and others all at once. As such, responses might be expected to fall somewhere between the self and the other perspective. Although the perspective manipulation is expected to affect magnitude of consequences (i.e., degree of harm) ratings, for completeness we include it as a factor in all relevant analyses.

METHOD

Participants²

Participants were 151 military personnel (28 women, 123 men; $M_{\text{Age}} = 36.24$, $SD_{\text{Age}} = 10.33$) who worked at a Canadian Armed Forces regional headquarters. Of the participants, 120 were noncommissioned members (NCM: privates–sergeants) and 30 were officers (captains–colonels); one respondent did not provide a rank. Seventy-four respondents indicated that they had at least one prior overseas deployment.

Procedure

Recruitment

General information about a study of decision making was advertised via posters in the hallways of the regional headquarters and spread by word of mouth. Interested military personnel attended a prescheduled research session in one of the headquarters classrooms. After a brief introduction to the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three perspective conditions (i.e., self, other, undefined) and to read one of two ethical scenarios.

Volunteers began by completing a brief demographic questionnaire, then read the ethical scenario and its two associated courses of action and made their choice. Next, they rated the magnitude of consequences, social consensus, moral awareness, and moral judgment associated with their choice. They then indicated the extent to which they would actually choose their initial option selection in a real-life setting, relative to all other possible courses of action. Last, they could add an open-ended response indicating whom they were thinking of when they considered the possible degree of harm and negative consequences of their decision. The participants took 20 to 30 min on average to complete the study and received Can\$32.56 for their participation. All study procedures and measures were reviewed and approved by the Defence Research and Development Canada Human Research Ethics Committee.

Ethical Scenarios

The military ethical scenarios used in this research replicated those of Blais and Thompson (2013) and Krosch et al. (2012) and were drawn from the operational experiences of Canadian Armed Forces commanders (see appendix in Blais & Thompson, 2013; Thomson et al., 2005).

Measures

Option choice. In the refugee scenario, respondents could choose between turning the refugees away from the camp and letting them in. In the subordinate scenario, option choices were a private reprimand or a court martial.

Social consensus. Two items from the well-established multi-item scales of McMahon and Harvey (2006) assessed social consensus (i.e., “Most people would agree on what the

² We deliberately chose to limit the number and specificity of the demographic questions asked to increase the anonymity of our participants and their responses in this sensitive area.

appropriate decision is in this scenario” and “People are not likely to agree about whether the decision was right or wrong”). Participants rated the extent to which they agreed with each of the statements on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The Spearman–Brown internal reliability coefficient, a measure of internal consistency for two item scales (see Eisinga, Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2013) was .39, unfortunately falling well below the accepted standard of 0.7, as suggested by Nunally and Bernstein (1994).

Magnitude of consequences and perspective manipulation. Two items assessed magnitude of consequences, that is, the degree of potential harm likely to occur as a result of the decision (“The overall harm as a result of the decision will be very small” and “The negative consequences of the decision will be very serious”; McMahon & Harvey, 2006). In addition, respondents’ perspective was manipulated by amending the endings of the harm items (i.e., self perspective: “The negative consequences of the decision will be very serious *for me*”; other perspective: “The negative consequences of the decision will be very serious *for others*”; control/undefined perspective: “The negative consequences of the decision will be very serious”). Participants again rated the extent to which they agreed with each of the magnitude of consequences statements on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. In this case, the Spearman–Brown coefficient was .62.

Moral awareness. Three items, originating from the work of Reynolds (2006), assessed moral awareness (i.e., “This situation could be described as a moral issue,” “There are very important ethical aspects to this situation,” and “This matter clearly does not involve ethics or moral issues [reversal]”). These items were also rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The internal reliability for this scale was good (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .85$).

Moral judgment. Participants responded to eight 7-point semantic-differential rating scales were used to assess the moral judgment (e.g., *just–unjust*, *morally right–not morally right*, *culturally acceptable–culturally unacceptable*; Reidenbach & Robin, 1990) of their selected option. The internal reliability for this scale was good (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80$).

Moral intent. One 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *extremely likely* to *extremely unlikely* followed the question, “If you were to face this dilemma in real life, how likely would you be to choose the same option (i.e., the one you just chose) as opposed to any other option?”

Open-ended response. A space was provided at the end of the questionnaire for participants to indicate whom they were thinking of when they considered the possible degree of harm and negative consequences of their decision.

RESULTS

Initial Analyses

As seen in Table 1, moral awareness scores were high across conditions, suggesting that moral awareness was triggered for our respondents—a prerequisite for the engagement of ethical decision-making processes. We initially ran a 2 (scenario) \times 2 (choice) \times 3 (orientation) analysis

TABLE 1
Mean Ratings by Dilemma, Choice, and Perspective

	n	MA		MC		SC		MJ		MI	
		M	SD								
Refugees scenario											
Let them in	15	6.58	0.44	4.20	0.44	3.93	0.39	5.42	0.29	5.31	0.38
Undefined	5	6.53	0.71	4.10	0.72	3.80	0.64	5.15	0.46	5.80	0.61
Others	7	6.67	0.60	3.00	0.61	4.00	0.54	5.36	0.39	6.14	0.52
Self	3	6.56	0.91	5.50	0.92	4.00	0.83	5.75	0.60	4.00	0.79
Turn them away	58	5.25	0.21	4.88	0.21	3.92	0.19	4.38	0.14	5.62	0.18
Undefined	19	5.37	0.36	5.42	0.37	3.84	0.33	4.13	0.24	5.53	0.32
Others	17	4.88	0.38	4.97	0.39	3.97	0.35	4.57	0.25	5.82	0.33
Self	22	5.48	0.34	4.25	0.34	3.96	0.31	4.44	0.22	5.50	0.29
Subordinate scenario											
Private reprimand	39	5.54	0.27	4.14	0.26	4.18	0.23	4.84	0.17	5.39	0.21
Undefined	16	5.56	0.41	3.50	0.40	4.06	0.35	4.94	0.25	5.06	0.30
Others	10	5.10	0.52	3.50	0.50	3.95	0.44	4.56	0.32	5.50	0.38
Self	13	5.97	0.45	5.42	0.44	4.54	0.39	5.00	0.28	5.61	0.34
Court-martial	39	4.95	0.27	3.86	0.27	4.87	0.24	5.70	0.17	6.11	0.20
Undefined	8	4.38	0.58	3.69	0.57	4.63	0.49	5.33	0.36	6.13	0.43
Others	16	5.17	0.41	4.00	0.40	4.84	0.35	5.99	0.25	6.00	0.30
Self	15	5.31	0.42	3.90	0.41	5.13	0.36	5.78	0.26	6.20	0.31

Note. $N = 151$. Minimum and maximum scores are 1 and 7, respectively. MA = moral awareness; MC = magnitude of consequences; SC = social consensus; MJ = moral judgment; MI = moral intent.

of variance (ANOVA), which revealed significant or marginally significant main effects of scenario on moral awareness, magnitude of consequences, social consensus, and moral judgment scores: Thus we elected to analyze the scenarios separately.

Choice

In the subordinate scenario, participants were equally divided between response options, with 50% ($N = 39$) of the respondents opting for the reprimand and 50% opting for the court martial, ($\chi^2 = 0$, ns). On the other hand, in the current sample there was a clear majority preference insofar as the refugee scenario was concerned. Almost 80% (79.45%, $N = 58/73$) of the military respondents chose the option of turning the refugees away from the camp over letting them in, a finding that was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 73) = 25.33$, $p < .001$.

Analyses of Variance

To examine the effects of the perspective and choice manipulations on the mean moral awareness, magnitude of consequences, social consensus, moral judgment, and moral intention scores, we conducted 2 (choice) \times 3 (perspective) completely between-subjects ANOVAs for each scenario. Due to low power, we describe all significant ($\alpha < .05$) and marginal ($\alpha < .10$) effects.

Moral Awareness

In the subordinate scenario, the ANOVA did not reveal any significant main effects or interaction of choice and perspective on moral awareness. In the refugee scenario, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of choice, $F(1, 67) = 7.81$, $MSE = 2.48$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$, on moral awareness: Participants who had chosen to let the refugees into the camp reported higher levels of moral awareness than did those participants who had chosen to turn the refugees away ($M_s = 5.55$ vs. 4.95).

Magnitude of Consequences

In the subordinate scenario, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of perspective, $F(2, 72) = 3.36$, $MSE = 2.54$, $p = .040$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$, and a marginally significant Choice \times Perspective interaction effect, $F(2, 72) = 3.06$, $MSE = 2.54$, $p = .053$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. As indicated in Table 1, the mean magnitude of consequences score was higher in the self perspective condition ($M = 4.66$) compared to the undefined ($M = 3.59$) and other ($M = 3.75$) perspective conditions, though the Tukey honestly significant difference (HSD) post hoc test indicated that mean scores for the self perspective condition were significantly greater than the undefined perspective condition only ($p = .055$). The Tukey HSD post hoc test for the marginal Choice \times Perspective interaction indicated that this interaction was driven by a significant difference between mean scores for the self perspective and undefined perspective conditions for those who chose to privately reprimand the subordinate only ($p = .022$; $M_s = 5.42$ vs. 3.50).

In the refugee scenario, the ANOVA revealed a significant Choice \times Perspective interaction effect, $F(1, 67) = 3.56$, $MSE = 2.59$, $p = .034$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$. Although the results of the Tukey HSD post hoc test did not reveal any statistically significant differences between the means, observation of the means revealed a trend for a crossover effect. Specifically, the mean magnitude of consequences tended to be higher in the self perspective condition (compared to the undefined and other perspective conditions) for those who opted to let the refugees in, whereas the mean magnitude of consequences was lower in the self perspective condition (compared to the undefined and other perspective conditions) for those who elected to turn the refugees away.

Social Consensus

In the subordinate scenario, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of choice, $F(1, 72) = 4.36$, $MSE = 1.96$, $p = .040$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, on social consensus. Those participants who elected to court-martial the subordinate anticipated that more people would agree on what was the correct course of action than did those participants who opted to privately reprimand the subordinate ($M_s = 4.87$ vs 4.18). In the refugee scenario, the ANOVA did not reveal any significant main effects or interaction between option choice and perspective on social consensus.

Moral Judgment

In the subordinate scenario, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of choice, $F(1, 72) = 13.63$, $MSE = 1.02$, $p = .000$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$, on moral judgment, indicating that those

participants who chose to court-martial the subordinate judged their choice as being significantly *more* ethical than did those participants who had chosen to privately reprimand the subordinate ($M_s = 5.70$ vs. 4.83).

In the refugee scenario, the ANOVA also revealed a significant main effect of choice, $F(1, 67) = 10.87$, $MSE = 1.08$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$, on moral judgment. In this instance, however, those participants who opted to turn the refugees away from the camp judged their choice as being significantly *less* ethical than did those participants who had chosen to let them in ($M_s = 4.38$ vs. 5.42).

Moral Intent

In the subordinate scenario, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of choice, $F(1, 72) = 6.36$, $MSE = 1.47$, $p = .014$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$, on moral intent, showing that those participants who chose to court-martial the subordinate indicated that they would be significantly more likely to make the same decision in real life than did those participants who opted to reprimand the subordinate ($M_s = 6.11$ vs. 5.39).

In the refugee scenario, the ANOVA revealed a marginal main effect of perspective, $F(1, 67) = 2.81$, $MSE = 1.89$, $p = .067$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$, on moral intent, revealing a trend for those participants in the other perspective condition to indicate that they were more likely to make the same decision in real life than participants in the undefined or self perspective conditions ($M_s = 5.98$ vs. 5.66 and 4.75).

Effects of Demographic Variables

Although not included as variables of interest in this research, for completeness we conducted an exploratory analyses that included three demographic variables (sex: male vs. female, previous operational experience: yes vs. no, and rank: NCM vs. officer), as well as our two independent variables of choice and perspective as fixed factors in our ANOVAs on moral awareness, magnitude of consequences, social consensus, moral judgment, and moral intent scores. Given the extremely low power due the small sample sizes in some of the cells in our experimental design, we can investigate only the main effects of the demographic variables (as well as choice and perspective and their interaction term) on ethical decision-making process variables. Results of these analyses yielded few consistent effects of demographics.

In the refugee scenario there was a significant main effect of rank only on magnitude of consequences, $F(1, 63) = 9.13$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$, with NCMs reporting a significantly lower mean magnitude of consequences score than officers ($M_s = 4.19$ vs. 5.54). There was also a main effect of operational experience on moral judgment scores that just failed to reach significance, $F(1, 63) = 3.76$, $p = .057$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. Results indicated that participants with operational experience reported marginally significantly higher mean moral judgment scores than those without operational experience ($M_s = 5.14$ vs. 4.63).

Similar analyses for the subordinate scenario yielded only one significant main effect of sex on mean magnitude of consequences scores, $F(1,69) = 6.92$, $p = .011$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$, with women reporting significantly higher mean magnitude of consequences scores than their male counterparts ($M_s = 5.19$ vs. 3.91). Important to note, however the addition of these variables did not

change the pattern of results seen for choice or perspective on the ethical decision-making process variables.

Open-ended responses. For the subordinate scenario, 49 of 78 (62.8%) of the sample provided responses to the open-ended question that asked them to indicate whom they were thinking of when they considered the possible degree of harm and negative consequences of their decision. Those participants who chose to reprimand the subordinate indicated that they were thinking primarily about the implications of their decision for their friend. For example, comments such as “My considerations are for my friend, who thought he was doing the right thing, he just needed to have the facts reinstated to him,” “the impact on my friend’s life and career,” and “The soldier, friend or not, deserves the chance to get it right. Both sides would not have fought as long as he was there” were provided by those who selected the option to reprimand the subordinate. For those who chose the option to court-martial the subordinate, comments such as “the effect it has on the mission,” “greatest harm to mission and trust if neutrality is violated,” and “my soldiers and the soldiers on the next roto³” were given, indicating that these respondents were thinking about the wider implications of their decision for the current and future mission.

For the refugee scenario, 45 of 73 (61.6%) of respondents provided open ended-responses. The participants who elected to let the refugees into the camp were thinking primarily about the implications for the civilian population. For example, comments such as “civilian people,” “I was thinking of people who were getting injured/killed,” and “Highest priority is to preservation of life. Next priority is to perception [*sic*] of impartiality my decision/action is a way to try to solve both” illustrate that the protection of the civilians was their priority. On the other hand, comments made by those who chose the response more consistent with mission orders (i.e., turning the refugees away) suggest that participants were concerned with the long-term consequences of their decision. For example, comments such as “The long range, wider consequences of the action. Possible ruptured relations, years of continued conflict, forcing my superiors and country into damaged-control mode. Not to mention putting our own camp at jeopardy because we’re not set up to take in refugees (of that number)” and “Not just 100 people outside the gate but the bigger picture and possible ramifications as outlined by command” were provided.

DISCUSSION

Building on previous research that explored civilians’ responses to military operational ethical scenarios drawn from the deployment experiences of military commanders (Blais & Thompson, 2013; Krosch et al., 2012), we investigated the ethical decision-making processes of military personnel. We also explored the effects of perspective taking on these ethical decision processes, specifically with respect to magnitude of consequences scores. We realized that these were difficult moral decisions in that some potential harm would occur no matter which alternative was selected (Seiler et al., 2011; Verweij et al., 2007). Still, it is the reality of military that certain

³ Refers to a military rotation, or the deployment of a group of military personnel in an operation, that is, “I will be on the next roto to Afghanistan.”

decision options will be more consistent with stated mission-specific rules of engagement, and we felt that this was useful to understand and to reflect in research conducted with military participants. Thus, we expected that the embedded mission orders concerning neutrality and impartiality might guide the option selected by military personnel and that the majority of personnel would elect to keep the refugees out of the camp or to court martial the subordinate for the repeated violation of neutrality. Yet, consistent with Blais and Thompson (2013) and Krosch et al. (2012), we wondered whether the choices of at least some of the military respondents' might depart from mission rules and they would opt to let refugees into the camp or reprimand their subordinate. We also wondered if some of these choices might be associated with some degree of ethical conflict, that is, inconsistencies among ethical decision-making indices. We also hypothesized that perspective adopted would affect degree of harm scores, such that specifically focusing on oneself might yield lower overall magnitude of harm scores if the option chosen was keeping the refugees out of the camp or the court martial of the subordinate.

The mean scores seen here indicated that the ethical awareness of the military participants was activated and that the moral decision-making process was engaged. Thus, we conclude that this approach has utility with military participants. However, the prior civilian research yielded equal levels of ethical awareness for both scenarios: In the current study, the refugee scenario produced higher mean ethical awareness scores than did the subordinate scenario. Also in contrast to prior civilian data, 80% of our military respondents opted to keep the refugees out of the camp; they were equally split in terms of the private reprimand or the court-martial of the subordinate.

These ethical awareness and option choice findings (as well as the results of our initial analyses) suggest that the two scenarios were perceived as being more psychologically distinct for our military participants than was the case for the civilians in previous studies using these same scenarios. Although civilian versus military group differences were not specifically addressed by the current data, our thinking concerning the difference between the current findings and those of prior research is that military personnel may be more attuned to the presence, importance, and influence of rules of engagement and orders on their decisions than would civilian student samples. More specifically, in the refugees scenario the option choice for keeping the refugees out of the camp is more directly tied to the rules of engagement, and the rationale for making a conceivably more difficult decision is explicitly outlined. That is, letting the refugees into the camp would be a choice that would quite clearly and directly be an active violation of stated mission rules, not to mention a choice with potentially more immediate and indeed sustained consequences in terms of severely stretching existing care provisions, and in prompting additional waves of refugees to seek safe haven in the camp—with this consequence further undermining rules to remain impartial and neutral to all parties to the conflict. On the other hand, although the subordinate had repeated a risky decision, the choice to privately reprimand rather than court-martial the subordinate would not, in and of itself, necessarily have the same potential magnitude of immediate or long-term consequences for the mission, perhaps providing respondents with greater perceived latitude in responding.

Another possibility is that the two scenarios also differed in terms of other moral intensity dimensions, for instance, the perceived social proximity of the targets of harm of the decision (close friend vs. refugees). Perhaps if the subordinate had not also been a close friend, the decisions and decision processes may have been different. Although the literature indicates that the most consistent moral intensity effects are associated with social consensus and magnitude of

consequences, the current findings indicate that future research should include assessments of all moral intensity dimensions, at least until some can be ruled out as important.

Overall, results of 2×3 ANOVAs revealed that the ethical decision-making processes of these military respondents was nuanced, and affected by choice made and perspective adopted, with these factors sometimes interacting. In addition, the results also showed differences in the patterns of results based on the ethical scenario read. Two exceptions occurred. First, in both scenarios magnitude of consequences scores tended to be affected by option selected and perspective adopted. Specifically, harm scores were highest when participants were asked to evaluate the potential degree of harm to self and had chosen the option that was less consistent with stated mission rules (private reprimand and letting the refugees into the camp). In retrospect, however, this finding makes sense: When military participants were asked to focus on the degree of harm to oneself, they were aware that there is potential for a higher degree of harm to self that could occur when their behaviors were not consistent with mission rules. We did not find any other significant effects with respect to the other or the undefined perspective conditions. As also anticipated, the effects of perspective concerning the target of harm were limited to magnitude of consequences scores save for the marginal main effect of perspective that revealed a tendency for higher moral intent scores to occur for participants in the other-perspective condition who had read the refugee scenario. Of course, given that it is only marginally significant effect, replication is needed to determine whether this is a robust finding.

As well, choice significantly affected ethical judgment scores for both scenarios, although the specific direction of the effects differed. That is, on the one hand, those who opted for the court-martial of the subordinate (a choice more consistent with state mission rules) rated the choice as being significantly *more* ethical than those who opted for the private reprimand. On the other hand, in the refugee scenario those whose choice was more consistent with mission rules (turn the refugees away) rated their choice as being *less* ethical than did those who opted to let the refugees in. Thus, similar to the prior civilian research, we also see evidence of moral conflict in the responses of our military participants to the refugee scenario.

Other than this, the operational scenarios tended to produce different patterns of results. In the refugee scenario there was a significant main effect of choice, with those who chose to let the refugees into the camp having significantly higher moral awareness scores than those who elected to keep them out of the camp, whereas in the subordinate there were no differences in moral awareness scores regardless of option selected or perspective condition. Similarly, with respect to social consensus, there was a significant main effect of choice, with those who opted for the court-martial indicating that most other people would agree on what would be the appropriate choice here, whereas there were no significant main effects or interactions of choice or perspective on mean social consensus scores in the refugee scenario. There was a significant effect of choice on moral intention in the subordinate scenario, whereas there was a main effect of perspective in the refugee scenario. Those choosing the court-martial indicated that they would be more likely to do so in real life. In the refugee scenario, regardless of choice made, those in the other perspective condition were more likely to indicate that they would do so in real life, although this effect was marginal.

Finally, our results revealed that respondents whose choices were consistent with mission rules were not blindly obedient in following mission orders. Rather, their short-answer responses revealed that they were considering the wider and longer term mission implications when they opted to turn civilians away and to court-martial the subordinate. Those who opted to privately

reprimand the subordinate focused on the negative long-term implications for their friend. Not surprisingly, those who opted to let the civilians in were focused on the civilian population: "Highest priority is preservation of life. Next priority is perception of impartiality. My decision/action is a way to try and solve both." Whether these are post hoc justifications of their option choices (Haidt, 1995) remains an empirical question.

This study has several implications for the military and for future research in this area. First, our findings continue to add to the emerging military literature that reveals the potential complexity of ethical decision making in operational contexts, the difficult choices that soldiers can be asked to make, and the attitudinal conflicts that can occur as a result of those choices. Second, the findings demonstrate that not all operational ethical challenges are created equal: Soldiers do not necessarily react to all ethical challenges in the same way. Therefore future research should investigate those aspects that make specific ethical situations particularly challenging for soldiers in both the short and long term and focus training and other potential amelioration efforts there. Third, as we saw, some effects for the perspective adopted could affect aspects of ethical decision making. In some ways the results are analogous to other work that has looked at the importance of forecasting different potential outcomes in ethical decision making. In that research, Harkrider et al. (2012) varied forecasting content in ethics case studies, finding that doing so was associated with improvements in knowledge acquisition and decision making. Thus, one application of this research might be to more explicitly integrate things like perspective taking and forecasting into military ethics education and determine its effects of decision making during operations. Indeed, these ideas could be integrated with other recent work that has demonstrated the value of rich emotional case content (Thiel et al., 2013) and the inclusion of ethical codes (Harkrider et al., 2012) in improving aspects of ethical decision making and education and training for same.

Fourth, speaking to the issue of training, beyond providing useful empirical results we believe that the current methodology could be integrated into various aspects of operational ethics training. For instance, at the individual level the methodology could be modified to be an online venue to enable soldiers to work through relevant operational scenarios and receive relevant feedback on aspects of the decision-making process. As well, this format also allows systematic variations of key features of scenarios to assess the aspects of decision-making processes that are affected by these variations and to what extent. With sufficient numbers of respondents, the results themselves could be integrated into operational ethics training. Fifth, capitalizing on the experimental control that is possible in the lab, this methodology allows for systematic investigations to demonstrate the effects of operational stressors such as sleep deprivation, time pressure, and information overload or ambiguity on ethical decision-making choices and processes. Moreover, given the findings demonstrating the relationship of specific deployment experiences such as witnessing atrocities and anger as a response to those experiences (Castro & McGurk, 2007; Warner et al., 2011), these are other relevant variables that future research in this area might pursue.

In addition, future research would benefit from focused investigations of the effects of leaders and other military team members on the ethical attitudes decision-making processes, ethical intentions, and behaviors of military personnel (Castro & McGurk, 2007; Nilsson et al., 2015; Olsen et al., 2010; Warner & Appenzeller, 2011). Such investigations would seem especially useful as military culture emphasizes (informed) obedience to legitimate authority, leadership, and cohesion (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003; Siebold, 2006). Assessments of the potential

effects of selected individual differences may also be valuable. Just like authoritarianism, religiosity and political have been implicated in aspects of ethical decision making of civilians and military personnel (Kimhi & Kasher, 2015), and other variables such as a belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980) might be of value to investigate. Indeed, O’Fallon and Butterfield (2005) reviewed several attitudinal individual differences relevant to aspects of ethical decision making, including need for cognition, locus of control, and Machiavellianism, whereas individual differences in reactivity and self-regulation (Rothbart, Ellis, & Posner, 2004) may also be implicated. Many of these would seem relevant to pursue—not just in terms of their effects but also potential mechanisms to ameliorate their effects, or determine the extent to which positive approaches that underlie selected individual differences can be taught or modelled.

In the current study we deliberately chose to limit the demographic questions to encourage candid responses. Although the small sample size precluded in-depth investigation and was not a focus here, we attempted to begin to account for the effects of gender, rank, and past deployment experience on military ethical decision-making processes. Results of these additional preliminary analyses indicated few consistent effects of demographic variables, although similar to de Graaff, Schut et al. (2016) we did see how operational experience can affect ethical decision-making: In our study, prior experience was associated with higher moral judgment scores in the refugee scenario. More important, the inclusion of these variables in the current analyses did not change the pattern of results in our main variables of interest. Still, civilian and military ethical decision-making research has actively pursued demographic effects such as gender and/or experience levels (Boccia et al., 2017; Cohen, Pant, & Sharp, 2001; Keller, Smith, & Smith, 2007; Loe, Ferrell, & Mansfield, 2000; Mumford et al., 2009; Valentine & Rittenburg, 2007) but overall have produced mixed findings. Nonetheless, future research would benefit from a more in-depth exploration of how these and other military demographic variables—for instance, number of past deployments (de Graaff, Giebels et al., 2016) rank level (Schut et al., 2015), or past ethical training (Harkrider et al., 2012; Seiler et al., 2011)—may affect the ethical decision-making process of soldiers. Further specific deployment experiences may also affect ethical choices and decision-making processes.

Some caveats regarding this study: The small sample size, relative to the conditions being tested here, resulted in low cell sample size numbers in some instances, which can lead to low power and to the instability of statistical findings (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002), a particular issue regarding the findings concerning the interactions of perspective and choice on magnitude of consequences—especially in the refugee scenario, as so few participants chose to let the refugees into the camp. Thus, replicating this study with a bigger sample size is recommended. Also of concern were the low reliabilities for the social consensus and magnitude of consequences; however, we attribute this at least in part to their being two-item measures. Although research using two-item measures of moral intensity dimensions has yielded acceptable alpha levels (Butterfield, Trevino, & Weaver, 2000; May & Pauli, 2002), other published research such as de Graaff, Giebels et al. (2016) using the shorter versions of the McMahan measures and military samples have encountered similar issues of low reliability. Thus, like de Graaff, Giebels et al. we also encourage future researchers to explore other measures of moral intensity as well, especially for use with the military. Third, although the military volunteers were randomly assigned to experimental conditions (i.e., scenario and harm perspective) and, in order to reduce demand characteristics, were told only that this was a study investigating military decision making, it may be that there was a self-selection bias with respect to the personnel who

were interested in volunteering for the study, which might also impact the current results. There was also no explicit manipulation check question concerning assignment to perspective condition (e.g., asking people to confirm whether they were asked to assess the consequences of their decision to themselves, to others, or target not defined). Thus, future research should consider including a manipulation check concerning perspective. Finally, the current research also utilized written scenarios in a laboratory-based methodology. Although the experimental approach is useful in that it provides more control to reduce the effects of random sources of error, it also means that the military personnel were responding under artificial conditions. Even though the scenarios were rated as compelling, as evidenced by the high levels of moral awareness and other ethical decision-making dimensions scores, the results reported here would be expected to be less intense than would be the case under operational conditions.

Even with these caveats in mind, we believe that this research remains of value. The current methodology provides a systematic way to document and understand the ethical decision-making processes of soldiers. As such, it provides a potential way ahead for military training that, if properly integrated into all phases of military ethical education and training, may be one avenue to assist in improving decision making in this regard. Moreover, the scenarios and the results of this study speak to the challenging moral landscape that military personnel can face in operations and the complexity of at least some of the operational decisions that soldiers can be called upon to make—decisions that in actual operations are often required to be made under the high time pressure, informational ambiguity, and a variety of stressors that are a part of the reality of military operations (Thompson & Jetly, 2014). This is especially important, as there is every indication that future military operations will continue to involve, or increase in, ethical complexity. We have seen the profound consequences of operational conditions on the ethical attitudes, decision making, behaviors, and the well-being of soldiers (e.g., Banks, 2012; Bercuson, 1996; Castro & McGurk, 2007; Santow, 2011; Spiegel, 2006; Warner et al., 2011; Wilk et al., 2013). Given these realities, militaries must understand military ethical decision making, how it is affected by various operational factors, and how lapses in ethical decision making can be mitigated. This knowledge must then be effectively integrated into operational ethics education and training to prepare military personnel to respond ethically when sent into the moral crucible of operations.

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We investigated the ethical decision-making processes and intentions of 151 military personnel responding to 1 of 2 ethical scenarios drawn from the deployment experiences of military commanders. For each scenario, option choice and perspective affected decision-making processes. Differences were also found between the 2 scenarios. Results add to the emerging literature concerning operational ethical conflicts and highlight the complexity and challenge that often accompanies operational ethics.

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