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14. ABSTRACT The standard approach to ethics training in the military currently utilizes the deontological philosophy across the full spectrum of military personnel. Using this philosophy for younger military personnel, such as entry-level enlisted and officer, is useful because it enhances the understanding needed to make ethical choices guided by established rules. However, when individuals experience neurological maturity, the deontological approach loses its effect. Furthermore, the ethical situations faced by more senior personnel are less distinguished through established rules. The military's ethics development can improve through implementing tailored training to exclusive audiences that would provide more applicability. The research that has emerged from the study of behavioral ethics offers a practical approach for ethics development for the more senior level of military personnel.												
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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**TITLE: THE VALUE OF BEHAVIORAL ETHICS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
THE ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT OF MILITARY PERSONNEL**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

Title: The Value of Behavioral Ethics in the Implementation of the Ethical Development of Military Personnel

Author: Lieutenant Commander Trenten Long, Chaplain Corps, United States Navy

Thesis: The traditional approach for ethics training in the military, though adequate for younger ranking members, has a minimal impression on more senior ranking members and would be more effective if ethics training and education introduced them to the influence of cognitive biases and misjudgments through intuition, presented in behavioral ethics.

Discussion: Military service members are responsible for the execution of various tasks that carry ethical implications. The ethicality of these responsibilities of service members can become blurry. This reality is nothing new. Military leaders have recognized the importance of maintaining a force that is adept at making ethical decisions, even when the enemy refuses to act within the same ethical standards. There is a significant necessity for military members to behave and make decisions ethically. Ethics education must improve to meet the need for ethical leaders. The field of behavioral ethics illuminates a vast potential for educating decision-makers in the military to recognize ethical situations and feel prepared to address these circumstances in the best way.

Conclusion: Behavioral ethics offers an alternative to current strategies in cultivating ethical leaders in the military. The understanding of behavioral ethics causes the learner to confront misconceptions about intuitions, blinds spots, and biases that can inadvertently produce an unethical ending to a decision. The military should implement the lessons learned from behavioral ethics research.

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Preface

When I consider the number of ethical decisions made by military service members, particularly military commanders, I cannot help but sympathize over the weight of such a challenging task. My research has shown that the military forces are not delinquent in providing courses on ethical decision-making; however, I believe that much of the effort has failed to penetrate the root of the problem. I think the research found in behavioral ethics addresses the gaps and presents opportunities to improve ethical behavior. Ultimately, understanding behavioral ethics foments ethical conduct and provides commanders and other military members a means to enhance their decisions to remain ethical.

Indeed, my research has forced me to consider personal ethical behavior vulnerabilities. The study has also grown me professionally. In my role as a chaplain, I have come to realize that I can use the research of behavioral ethics to relate to people and introduce the forgiveness that God desires to lavish upon anyone at the point of their recognized need.

I am grateful to my wife, Ashton, for reading my research and offering invaluable input. Also, she has indulged in many conversations about my research. Her insights caused me to see things from a different perspective. I am also thankful for my children, allowing me the time needed to complete this project even at the expense of the time we would have shared. I am also grateful for Dr. Paulo Tripodi, who became a friend and mentored me through my research. He stimulated tremendous amounts of thinking and continues to be a valued mentor. I also want to thank Commander Cristiano DeSousa. He has demonstrated what it means to be a professional chaplain and has provided esteemed insight as I went through this research journey.

INTRODUCTION

The military strives to ensure that its members are equipped and ready to make ethical decisions in the midst of some of the most complex situations. To this end, leaders implement ethics training to improve this capability. However, even some of the sincerest and most vigorous efforts have not entirely attained the desired results. This shortcoming begs the question of why and prompts two additional questions. The first question is whether the measurement of ethicality is even rational. Because human nature will always be a part of the decision-making process, unethical decisions will always be a reality. Perfection is unattainable, so demanding perfection will only foster frustration. The second question is whether implemented ethics training is adequate. Implementing robust and consistent training is moot if the method of training fails to hit the target. The first question can be answered individually upon honest personal reflection. This research will address the second question presented in detail. The traditional approach for ethics training in the military, though adequate for younger ranking members, has a minimal impression on older ranking members and would be more effective if ethics training and education introduced them to the influence of cognitive biases and misjudgments through intuition presented in behavioral ethics.

Background

In the United States, the military is considered one of the most trusted of professionals. A 2017 Gallup poll demonstrates this, with results showing that 71% of Americans bear a very high opinion of the military officer.¹ This notion is a lofty sentiment that should inspire military officers to strive at living up to the expectation. The population wants to trust its military officers because these officers take on monumental tasks. Military officers lead men and women into war, and war is messy. Knowingly leading young men and women into an environment where an

enemy is an imminently threatening life is a terrible task. Perhaps the most important expectation for building the trust that Americans bestow upon the military is for the military officer to behave ethically. Although it is unknown why the Gallup poll distinguishes officers from the military as a whole, the officer's ethical behavior indeed bears more influence, thereby leveraging more trust. Overall, the general population may not differentiate between an officer and enlisted.

Nonetheless, it is incumbent on all military members to withhold a high standard, particularly as the realm of responsibilities increase. Everyone of all ranks makes decisions with ethical implications; the more senior personnel's decisions can often bear a more profound ethical consequence. Still, when misdeeds are broadcast to the public—whether junior enlisted or senior officer does not matter—the entire military, indeed the nation, feels the impact. The elevated level of respect and trust imparted to the citizenry's defensive forces can quickly deteriorate with these transgressions. Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras, professors at the Army War College, warned that unethical behavior would “erode the internal and external trust critical to the institution of the military...”² Trust is critical because it has a direct influence on the preservation of life. Despite the positive results found in the Gallup poll, it is also essential to understand why, as the survey indicates, 24% of Americans have an average view of the military officer, and 2% have a meager opinion.³ Perhaps these numbers cannot improve, and particularly the number of those who maintain meager opinions could be immovable due to preconceived biases of their own. Nonetheless, it is imperative to consider that some of the mistrust results from actual moral and ethical failures within the military ranks.

The Problem

Over the last two decades, the unethical behavior amongst many U.S. military members has attracted unwanted attention from top military officials, including elected civilians. Some argue that the amount of unethical behavior amongst military personnel is not rampant.⁴ Though not exclusively, many senior military leaders were the offenders of misconduct that consumed much of the attention. Charles D. Allen, Professor of Leadership and Cultural Studies at the Army War College, acknowledged the distressing number of senior military brass who were relieved of their duties for personal, professional ethics concerns in 2012 alone.⁵ Allen also noted that even minimal amounts of misconduct erode public trust.⁶ The events of human rights abuses at Abu Ghraib in 2003 had already accentuated a deep concern for the need for ethics development in the military.⁷ As a result, the actuality and reputability of the military's ethics training became more deeply scrutinized. Indeed, ethics training in the military does occur, but current approaches to military personnel's ethical development might be inadequate. As a student at Air War College, Lieutenant Colonel Beth Behn discovered in her research that ethics and leadership training are a part of the curriculum structure but fail to span across all portions of the curriculum.⁸ This *check-in-the-box* approach signals a lack of importance.

As with many other things in the military, if a problem arises, there is a concerted attempt to cure the issue with increased training. It follows then that the existence of any unethical behavior is bound to result in attempts to train towards more ethical decision-makers. This practice is common in various organizations. Top leaders in nearly any institution strive to ensure their employees act most ethically. As a result, organizations expend extensive resources to develop and implement some variation of ethics compliance training. Such training meant to stimulate ethical conduct includes mandated online classes to in-person instruction offered by

hired ethics professionals. The military institution has pursued a similar goal. The military recognizes a problem and, in turn, sees a necessity for improved ethical decision-makers. Therefore, military leaders strive to find the best ways to instill a strong ethicality within personnel. Thus, the military has tried and tested various types of training with hopes of creating ethical decision-makers.

Making Ethical Decisions

Ethical behavior connects directly to decision-making. Bill Rhodes, former head of the Department of Philosophy at the U.S. Air Force Academy, said it more directly, “[m]aking choices is the heart of ethics.”⁹ Making a decision is not just for those with tremendous amounts of responsibility. Everybody makes choices. Naturally, though, with increased responsibility comes more decisions and more significant consequences for many of those decisions.

Nonetheless, decision-making is an obligation required of all. Moreover, many choices present a right and wrong option. Said differently, some choices present an ethical and unethical opportunity. Decisions become complicated when knowledge of right and wrong or ethical and unethical is not always explicit. Even those who would like to see the world in black and white must recognize that choices exist, in abundance, that are not black and white. Instead, many decisions are gray and full of complexities. Because ethical behavior connects to decision making and many decisions fail to present an ethical option, it is easy to see the difficulty of making ethical decisions.

Adding to the complexity, the U.S. armed forces have the unique responsibility to perform tasks that seem morally messy. Shannon Vallor, philosopher of technology, claimed that “war [is not] virtuous, because it characteristically impedes rather than supports human flourishing...”¹⁰ For example, the U.S. military demands members to destroy enemy targets or

structures. Furthermore, the military is required, at times, to turn a blind eye to egregious injustices. For example, many service members had to turn a blind eye against the sexual exploitation of “chai boys (tea boys)—dolled-up boys...in Afghanistan [who were] forced to perform sexual service.”¹¹ Perhaps most morally conflicting for some is the military’s role in killing human life. These immoral dilemmas create what seems to be a paradox. Despite the immersion into moral conflict, there is an expectation for military members to act and live morally and ethically.

Ethics and Morals

For the sake of clarity, there does not appear to be a clear distinction upon which most scholars agree when differentiating between ethics and morals. Consequentially, scholars often use them interchangeably. However, they are distinct words, and, as such, some clarification is beneficial. According to Lumen Learning, an individual’s morality is shaped by what they learn through norms, customs, traditions, and religion. In contrast, ethics is a discipline of philosophy that utilizes reason to determine what is right and wrong.¹² Military members frequently find themselves in complex situations, such as the examples above. During these moments, their moral compass (the inner sense that reminds them that destroying a person’s property, the sexual exploitation of the innocent, or killing another human being is wrong) tells them that these things are wrong. Individuals develop this moral compass through social norms. However, ethics demands more subjective thinking. A person’s ethics guide them on what to do when there is no law or when a social norm is not applicable; for example, during a war, carrying out orders to kill another human being who is a known enemy combatant is lawful. Yet, killing is immoral according to learned social norms. In this situation, deciding from just a moral perspective would be problematic because anyone who is taught that killing is immoral must disobey a lawful order

and not kill. Alternatively, suppose that the same individual believes that one must always obey authority. Since the order is legal, this creates a moral dilemma that demands the ability to employ ethics. Morals are learned knowledge, while ethics is the wisdom that applies knowledge.

The U.S. military must never compromise on the demand for moral and ethical behavior from service members. The employment of ethics is crucial. For this reason, the nation deserves and must demand that its military be representatives of ethical conduct. Thus, tailoring ethics education to the complexities of military service is imperative.

NORMATIVE ETHICS

There are a few philosophies from which ethics education is taught. An individual's actions generally trace back to three popular philosophies of ethical behavior. Scholars refer to these as normative ethics philosophies. In no particular order, these philosophies are deontological ethics, consequentialist ethics, and virtue ethics. Volumes have been written to breakdown and scrutinize each theory. For this writing's purpose and intent, a brief description of the normative ethics theories will suffice.

Deontological Ethics

The deontological ethics philosophy is the most prominent method for training U.S. military personnel ethical behavior and decision making. Immanuel Kant popularized this philosophy, and it contends that a person will act ethically through strict obedience to established rules. The outcome of a situation is not the determining factor of whether or not something is ethical. As Kant explains, what is moral is not only behavior that conforms to the law but also behavior for the law's sake.¹³ Many employers, the military, in particular, will establish a standard upon which employees must adhere. It can be easy to see why the military prefers this

philosophy as it approaches ethics training for military personnel. For example, the military details precise requirements to arrive at work at an exact time, maintain physical fitness, dress in a specific uniform, wear your hair a particular way, respect the chain of command, and the list goes on. The deontologist contends that those who remain true to these requirements act ethically.

Consequentialism (Utilitarianism)

The consequentialist theory, made popular by philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham and John S. Mill, is a “theory that judges whether or not something is right by what its consequences are.”¹⁴ The theory teaches that the ends justify the means. As long as the outcome is the best, it is ethical and matters none how the effect was achieved. For example, consider a scenario where a helpless child is starving, nigh unto death. Most would agree that allowing the child to die is not ethical. But consider that this child’s caretaker is a father without a job and has no means of purchasing food for the child. The child’s father then chooses to rob a store to get enough food for his starving child. Even though the father will experience the penalties of breaking the law, the consequentialist will argue that the father acted ethically because the child was fed instead of left to starve to death. The consequentialist would further claim that the father’s actions were ethical because the child is collected and is cared for by the government. This scenario is an excellent example of the consequentialist theory. The act of robbing the store was unethical, but that detail is moot to the consequentialist because it achieved the desired ethical end of ensuring the child is fed.

A subset of consequentialism is utilitarianism. Rhodes explained that the determinate factor of what is ethical in utilitarianism is whatever brings “about the greatest good for the greatest number of people affected.”¹⁵ In World War I, German soldiers received sawtooth

bayonets meant to function as a tool for cutting wood and the normal defense function. The Germans never intended the sawtooth feature to increase the effectiveness of killing; however, the tool's design resulted in gruesome killings. The deaths were considered too horrific in public perception; therefore, the German's re-issued the bayonet after shaving down the saw teeth.¹⁶ After the switch, the end was approved, a weapon for killing, because the means, less gruesome killing, was tolerable.

It should be noted that the consequentialist approach to ethics education should not even be considered as an option. There are some issues with this approach. First, it would be impossible to know all the possible consequences of an action. Unethical behavior for the purpose of achieving a good outcome is dangerous. Generally, the effect of unethical behavior will be unethical results, even when unintended, because one cannot know of all the possible outcomes. Secondly, when considering the utilitarian path, it is difficult to imagine that most people's greatest good is fully understood. An enormous amount of information easily clouds the judgment of the decision-maker.

Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics is a philosophy of normative ethics introduced by Socrates and Plato and popularized by Aristotle. David Carr and Jan Steutel, in the collection of essays on virtue ethics, defined virtue ethics "as a systematic and coherent account of virtues."¹⁷ Although this definition is broad, it establishes the foundation upon which one understands virtue ethics. Character development is the practice of virtues to form habits that will be manifest through ethical conduct. Rhodes contends that most adults are most familiar with this theory, not because of some past formal lesson or because they have given it thought and metaphorically placed their stake into this philosophy, but because the application of virtues improves the quality of life.¹⁸ In

this sense, virtues are to ethics, as physical fitness is to health. Virtues must be practiced, and without the proper care and attention, they will ultimately atrophy. Within virtue ethics, Aristotle presents the doctrine of the mean, which places virtue as the mean between two vices. As a single example, the mean between cowardice and rashness would be the virtue of bravery. Paula Gottlieb, a philosophy professor at the University of Wisconsin, artfully described the doctrine of the mean in an analogy, stating:

“Imagine an old-fashioned pair of scales. The empty scales consist of a pivot and a cross-bar with two pans. If the pivot is in the correct place, and the cross-bar is balanced on it, the scales are in equilibrium. Then, when an amount to be weighed is placed in one of the pans, the amount needed to balance it in the other pan will be the correct amount. The scales will work correctly.

“The virtuous human being is analogous to the empty scales that are correctly balanced. When something happens, the virtuous human being, who is properly balanced, will respond and act in the correct way. The human being who lacks a balanced disposition will not have the right emotions and act correctly in the right situation, just as unbalanced scales will not correctly react to the weight in the pan. The analogy is between the virtuous human being and the correctly balanced empty scales. A correctly balanced pair of empty scales will correctly weigh what is in one of the empty pans. A human being, correctly balanced, will correctly react to and act on the situation at hand.”¹⁹

The correct (or ethical) reaction of the virtue ethicist is the mean between two vices. The key to a virtuous ethic is maintaining balance. According to the virtue ethicists, maintaining the mean as best as possible is the key to virtuous living. Thus, one will behave ethically when presented with an ethical decision if they have preserved the mean. The McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas explains that the person who practices virtue will utilize virtues as a guide through ethical challenges rather than following specific rules (the deontological philosophy).²⁰ Although virtue ethicists do not hold a monopoly on virtues, the central premise behind this philosophy is that virtues build character, driving ethical behavior.

Shortfalls

There are certainly reasons for concerns with the system of ethics training within the military. Paul Robinson, Associate Professor in Public and International Relations at the University of Ottawa, maintains that while some form of ethics training has occurred and is occurring amongst military personnel, in reality, this training could be “counterproductive.”²¹ There is particular counterproductivity because the vast majority of ethics training within the military, specifically across the various services, is disjointed. The lack of continuity amongst the services results in multiple outcomes. It can confuse. Asencio et al. feared that the training offered through the various leadership courses in the military is limited in scope because it fails to go beyond strengthening moral competence.²² That is, training would be best suited to expand the capability of ethical decision-making through a thoughtful process, rather than a deontological approach of rules-based ethical compliance. Following this sentiment, the military should explore ethics education options, apart from the normative ethics philosophies, to cultivate ethical behavior and decision making.

CURRENT ETHICS TRAINING IN THE MILITARY

Ethics education in the military can undoubtedly improve. An additional challenge is that the extent and necessity of ethics training for military personnel, particularly in combat, is sometimes contended. In a 2010 speech to the Naval War College, then Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster bemoaned an appeal to relax ethicality and the rules of war in response to the enemy’s exceptional unethicity.²³ Relaxing ethicality simply because of an adversary’s lack of ethicality can create a slippery slope. Furthermore, this apathetic attitude permeates military personnel’s off-duty behavior. McMaster did not discover a new concept. Robinson highlighted a comment made by General Maxwell Taylor, distinguished World War II veteran, who said that he “saw no

moral problems in serving with a combat-ready officer who is ‘loyal to his superiors and his profession but disloyal to his wife,’ or keep[s] physically fit but has ‘General Grant’s weakness for strong drink.’”²⁴ Regrettably, Taylor is wrong and failed to consider the importance of well-rounded ethical leaders in all aspects of living, both on- and off-duty. McMaster eschewed the thought of relaxing ethical standards, contending in his Naval War College speech that “[t]he war in which we are engaged demands that we retain the moral high ground despite the depravity of our enemy.”²⁵ The study and research conducted by Hugo Asencio and Theodore Byrne, Professors at California State University, and Edin Mujkic, a Professor at the University of Colorado, present a solid case for the need for robust ethics training amongst leaders in the military in a co-authored article entitled “Ethics Training for U.S. Military Leaders: Challenging the Conventional Approach,” which they published in *Public Integrity* in 2017. They astutely emphasize the importance of military personnel to be ethical decision-makers, “[g]iven the nature of the combat and noncombat duties military personnel perform...and the dilemmas they face.”²⁶ The nature of employment for any given military person is unquestionably unique. It is not difficult to extrapolate the military’s consequences if an emphasis on ethical behavior became neglected.

As was mentioned previously, an erosion of public trust is dangerous. There is a metaphorical spotlight upon service members simply because of the nature of their work. U.S. service members are ambassadors of virtue both domestically and abroad. Service members can be more susceptible to ethical failure and have a heightened expectation for consistent ethical decision-making. For this reason, Asencio et al. emphasized the absolute cruciality of ethics training to military personnel.²⁷ Neglecting to address the vulnerabilities and offer to administer

ethics education within the military is a dangerous precedence. Fortunately, many influential leaders of the U.S. military recognize the importance of ethical cultivation.

An in-depth analysis of ethics training in the military has become more prominent in the last two decades. While this is not necessarily a new concept, the appeal for heightened ethical standards has recently gained more attention and energy. At the turn of the century, with the beginning of a protracted war, the necessity for ethics development rose to the forefront. Various scholars have conducted comprehensive research into both the existence and the effectiveness of ethics training and offered insight into the best way forward with ethics training. McMaster underscored a shift in ethics training in the military by contrasting the training before the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and its evolution within the wars' first ten years. He contended that before combat, the intent of ethics training was deontological (following rules is the ethical thing to do). In contrast, it evolved into the virtues-based approach (those who practice virtues will act ethically).²⁸ While this may have been McMaster's assessment and hope, a closer look at the current methodology from each military service in the approach to ethics training (which will be explored later in this research) indicates that there has been no significant shift. At best, there was a slight adjustment, but most military ethics training focuses predominantly on the deontological philosophy of learning ethical behavior. To be clear, the deontological approach to ethical decision-making is practical, particularly in most contexts of service for entry-level military personnel, where their primary duty is obedience to specific orders.

The age of most junior enlisted, and many junior officers, ranges from 18 to 25. According to the journal *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*, the brain's prefrontal cortex, responsible for behavior and decision-making, does not stop developing until around age 25.²⁹ During this phase of neurological development, the deontological education method has more

effect. However, implementing this rules-based theory across all ranks is not enough.

Deontological ethics cannot sufficiently isolate the full spectrum of ethical challenges in decision-making, particularly for those beyond the junior ranks.

Nonetheless, the War on Terror did exhibit the reality that ethics training is needed within the military ranks. Asencio et al. argued that the current state of ethics training and education is not adequate.³⁰ Fortunately, ethics training within service war colleges does occur. However, although robust, such training aims to expose senior leaders to specific scenarios-based ethical pitfalls to avoid—the deontological methodology. James Connelly, Professor of Political Theory at the University of Hull, United Kingdom, revealed the limitations of such training that focuses on strict obedience to the “law” and fails to acknowledge the necessity of critical skills needed for ethical decision-making where the law does not prescribe.³¹ Instruction in law is undoubtedly beneficial but cannot be a singular point of reference in ethics development. One can easily imagine that ethical decisions will arise for which rules do not apply or exist. This problem creates legitimate concern for the adequacy of the current structure of ethical development in the military; leaders must make ethics training and education more reputable and effective.³² If training and education neglect to address the problem’s entirety, then the natural expectation will be persistent ethical failures.

Audiences and Approaches

There are various sentiments regarding the right audience and the proper ethical theories to employ when teaching ethics in the military. Florian Emonet, a Sergeant Major in the Swiss Army, rightfully emphasizes the importance of introducing ethics training at the entry-level, arguing that military ethics “are a core capacity that every service member should gain, develop, and enhance throughout their career.”³³ However, Emonet neglects to acknowledge that ethics

training must be adjusted and tailored as military members reach neurological maturity and advance through the ranks. In contrast, Asencio et al. neglect to acknowledge the importance of entry-level ethics training but make a strong case for enhanced ethics training for senior military leaders, mainly because of the compounded challenges they face daily.³⁴ Emonet and Asencio et al. are correct, but combining the two philosophies is the best approach.

The problem with McMaster's hope—that military members practice virtue to act ethically—is that everybody possesses different virtues and even different levels of importance placed upon these virtues. Military personnel represent a wide range of virtues taught from various formats (i.e., religion and family). For those who possess strong virtues, ethical decision-making is likely a consistent pattern. But the opposite would also be true. If practicing virtues results in ethical decision-making, then failure to practice virtues will favor the likelihood of unethical decision-making. Education of virtues has its merits. However, knowledge of virtues without the practice of virtues is futile. Unless a person consistently practices and establishes virtues as their foundation for behavior, this training method and education might ultimately result in a reversion to a former method, such as the deontological process of decision-making, which can decrease the likelihood of an ethical outcome. Without the proper foundation, a desire to do right simply because it is the right is unlikely.

Again, the deontological approach to ethics is most useful amongst entry-level military ranks but loses its sway among those beyond age 25. It is difficult to extrapolate that one will act ethically because rules demand it when consequences are meager or unlikely to occur. The military's disciplined structure is the reason deontological ethics is helpful in the junior ranks. Entry-level ranks quickly become familiar with following rules, which is their conduit for upward movement in the military. However, the more advanced ranks are given the

responsibility of enforcing the rules, and in many cases, less accountability. These advanced ranks obtain increased responsibility as oversight decreases. This increased responsibility, in effect, reduces the impact of deontological ethics training among this group. Because the deontological method of ethics training is applied across all military ranks, an unfortunate gap remains in ethics education for those beyond age 25.

BEHAVIORAL ETHICS

A growing field of research that the military should consider is the field of behavioral ethics. Behavioral ethics is a relatively new theory that describes why a person will make a particular decision when faced with a moral dilemma. Instead of being prescriptive (how a person ought to behave), as is the typical outcome of the normative ethical theories, behavioral ethics is descriptive (how a person will behave). The field of behavioral ethics is a product of studies in behavioral psychology, cognitive science, evolutionary biology, and behavioral economics.

Good People Behave Unethically

It is common to assume that corruption, scandal, and all sorts of misconduct are the typical behaviors of “bad people” who set out towards wrongdoing.³⁵ By contrast, for those who are not on this purposeful path of transgression (relatively “good people”), it is natural to infer that they make decisions using careful consideration by employing some code of conduct, virtues, or established rules and standards to make decisions. This understanding is the premise of behavioral ethics, that “good people” believe they will make well-intended, ethical, or morally right decisions when faced with a moral dilemma, when, in reality, they are very susceptible to unconsciously making corrupt decisions. It is essential to define what is meant by “good people.” Good people see themselves as generally good and would self-describe as having a high level of

confidence that when faced with a choice to act ethically or unethically, they will choose the ethical. By this definition, the majority of people believe they are good people. In an interview with Matthew Schivone, Noam Chomsky made this statement:

You almost never find anyone, whether it's in a weapons plant, or planning agency, or in corporate management, or almost anywhere, who says, 'I'm really a bad guy, and I just want to do things that benefit myself and my friends.' Almost invariably you get noble rhetoric like: 'We're working for the benefit of the people.' The corporate executive who is slaving for the benefit of the workers and community; the friendly banker who just wants to help everybody start their business; the political leader who's trying to bring freedom and justice to the world—and they probably all believe it. I'm not suggesting that they're lying. There's an array of routine justification for whatever you're doing. And it's easy to believe them. It's very hard to look into the mirror and say, 'Yeah that guy looking at me is a vicious criminal.' It's much easier to say, 'That guy looking at me is really very benign, self-sacrificing, and he has to do these things because it's for the benefit of everyone.'³⁶

People generally believe themselves to be good and that their ambitions and motivation are altruistic. Many of this belief's roots can trace back to a consequentialist or deontological tendency by which many spontaneously function.

Perhaps surprisingly, studies have shown that those who intend to be good people and know the difference between right and wrong—setting out to do right—actually make unethical choices regularly. Not only are they capable of unethical decisions, but they are quite common. Scholars and leaders in behavioral ethics research include (but are not limited to) Max H. Bazerman, Ann E. Tenbrunsel, Dan Ariely, David M. Messick, and Robert Prentice. Their research has gained particular popularity in the realm of business ethics. They emphasized that good people unknowingly make unethical decisions. Additionally, they advocate the integration of psychology into ethics education to reverse this trend. But this phenomenon is not limited to the field of business. Likewise, the benefits of the research in behavioral ethics are not limited to the business profession. Through years of dedicated research, scholars have made

recommendations for expanding the promising field of behavioral ethics, which, when applied, proposes solutions for reversing trends of unethicity.

Behavioral ethics is the study of *how* people might make choices when confronted with ethical decisions. The research integrates findings of psychological processes that stimulate ethical and unethical decisions. Prominent researchers in the field, Ann E. Tenbrunsel and David M. Messick, in their article “Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behavior,” labeled behavioral ethics as an integration of the question of ‘ought’ with the question of ‘how.’³⁷ People with an intent of being ethical know what they *ought* to do, and behavioral ethics emphasizes *how* people with the awareness of what they ought to do actually behave unethically.

Intuition

Yuval Feldman, a leading researcher in behavioral ethics, recognized that good people sometimes justify a corrupt decision by subconsciously rationalizing the decision for various reasons.³⁸ He goes on to note that “when people do not have time to consider behavior carefully, they rely on fast, automatic thought processes that can enable them to act unethically without reflecting on the implication of their actions.”³⁹ This impulse (an emotion-based decision) is often confused with intuition (an experienced-based decision).

However, intuition is generally misunderstood. The common understanding of intuition, for example, is that it is some innate quality, more robust in some than others, that allows them to discern a situation or see something that others are unable to discern or see. A colloquial term for intuition would be a *gut feeling*. For example, a day-trader might be more or less inclined to buy a stock. If successful, then the day-trader must possess a great deal of intuition. Conversely, if the choice failed, then the day-trader has lousy intuition. “Intuitive” people have an uncanny ability to see or predict the future, which would influence their decisions. But this understanding

of intuition is not entirely accurate. The research of Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman has provided incredible insight and understanding of how intuition works. Kahneman does not dismiss the validity or existence of intuition; instead, he adequately explains what it truly is and debunks the misconceptions about intuition. He argues that a person's intuition is developed through personal experiences. These experiences build up a database of information.⁴⁰ Inevitably this database of experiences, filed away somewhere in the brain, will influence someone's reaction to a problem, including those with ethical implications.

In his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Kahneman introduces two types of decision-making processes: System 1 and System 2. System 1 thinking is rapid thinking that is automatic, requiring no cognitive effort in making a decision. This system is what is commonly referred to as intuition. Consider, the exact number of decisions you make subconsciously throughout each day is incalculable. These decisions require no cognitive rigor but are reflexive. For example, when you watch television, your brain will respond to what it sees through some level of emotional response. Many of these responses are involuntary. These involuntary responses are an application of System 1 thinking. System 2 thinking requires an increased cognitive effort and is the slower process used in making decisions. Most decisions are made using System 1, but System 2 is requiring of more profound cognitive effort. Kahneman provides the following example in his book to help distinguish between the two systems:

“A bat and ball together cost \$1.10. The bat cost \$1 more than the ball. How much does the ball cost?”⁴¹

The answer is 5 cents. In this example, most people will quickly answer 10 cents. This answer of 10 cents is deduced using System 1. But with a bit more cognitive effort, using System 2, most people can determine the correct answer is actually 5 cents.

Nonetheless, most decisions are made using System 1, which leads to an increased vulnerability of making the wrong decision without conscious awareness. This susceptibility is especially true when an individual, as noted earlier, believes that they commonly act and behave ethically. In the example above, most people would have never even considered that they answered incorrectly unless someone else pointed it out and would have just gone on their way ignorant of the mistake. While the example is not one where the decision made is either ethical or unethical, it illustrates the human mind's capability to make a decision unconsciously.

With this understanding of how System 1 works, it is easy to see that many decisions (using System 1) have the capacity for being immoral or corrupt decisions—decisions made unconsciously. Morally corrupt choices that are made using System 2 are decisions that involve forethought and deeper consideration.

The understanding of behavioral ethics is linked to the knowledge of Kahneman's System 1 and System 2 thinking theory. Decisions made using System 1 thinking are capable of employing unconscious biases that influence behavior. Good people can make immoral or corrupt decisions without conscious awareness because of their unconscious biases or blind spots.

Biases and Blind Spots

Blind spots are areas that are not visible from an individual perspective. These are places where reality is indiscernible to an individual. Blind spots, like those that the operator of an automobile might experience, are also fundamental in the realm of ethics and morality. Particular moral and ethical beliefs that a person espouses might not be reflected in their behavior because of ethical blind spots. In essence, people make decisions without full knowledge of all the details, which causes a greater chance of making an unethical decision without being aware.

Generally, this reality is evident to others that do not retain the same blind spots. The capability of making an unethical choice, unbeknownst to the decision-maker, can be extremely dangerous, particularly amongst military personnel, where decisions can determine the difference between life and death.

Bazerman and Tenbrunsel co-authored the book, *Blind Spots: Why We Fail to Do What's Right and What to Do About It* in 2011. They effectively argue that most people believe themselves to be much better than they are but fail to recognize their unethical behavior.⁴² Moreover, the book intends to inform readers of gaps (blind spots) that lead to unethical behavior.⁴³ Prentice emphasized the importance of this notion, contending that behavioral ethics hinges upon the understanding that people are not nearly as ethical as they believe themselves to be.⁴⁴ Bazerman and Tenbrunsel attributed this to something they call *bounded ethicality*, which “focuses on the psychological processes that lead even good people to engage in ethically questionable behavior that contradicts their own preferred ethics.”⁴⁵ While it can be difficult to imagine that one would act in contradiction to their own desired ethicality, this is a common occurrence. Bounded ethicality limits the ability of people to see their own unethical behavior. Most people, assuming themselves to be good, intend to make ethical choices. However, as previously noted, many people often and unknowingly make unethical choices.

Moreover, amid a pervasive frequency of unethical behavior, these seemingly “good people” even go so far as to deny such unethical behavior is possible. This denial is why, as Yuval Feldman, Professor at Bar-Ilan University, stressed, when there is a revelation of unethical behavior, the tendency is to place “the blame for such wrongdoing on ‘bad people’—self-centered individuals who consciously promote personal interests.”⁴⁶ Yet, research exposes deficiencies in this assumption, revealing that “good people” often have a penchant for making

self-centered decisions motivated by self-promotion.⁴⁷ The findings of behavioral ethics raise a critical concern of whether or not “good people” can do anything about these named gaps.

Fortunately, research has gone beyond the simple recognition of gaps in the perceived self and actual self and has discovered many factors contributing to these gaps.

Furthermore, the discovery of influences that foment blind spots is still growing. The primary findings have determined that most decisions are made within the context of cognitive barriers. Tenbrunsel and Messick called these barriers “psychological forces.”⁴⁸ These psychological barriers lead a person to believe they made an ethical decision when this is not always the case.

Recognizing blind spots is key to solving the problem of unconscious unethical behavior. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel aggregated a significant amount of their research to accentuate various blind spots. These blind spots are caused by unintended biases and heuristics, creating an erroneous perception that can result in unethical decisions.⁴⁹ Cognitive biases are psychological limitations in processing information that lead to an inaccurate perception.⁵⁰ While all cognitive biases can produce unconscious behavior, not all cognitive biases produce unethical behavior. Nonetheless, it is common, indeed frequent, that various cognitive biases do yield unintended, unconscious unethical behavior.

The Value of Behavioral Ethics

The findings in behavioral ethics research have the potential to illuminate the root cause of much of the unethical behavior that happens unconsciously. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel present a model, popularized by the acclaimed psychologist J. R. Rest, for how ethical decisions are made, starting with moral awareness, moral judgment, moral intent, and moral decision, but when moral awareness does not exist, then the first link in the chain of moral decision-making is

already broken.⁵¹ When a person is unaware that they are in a situation of ethical implication, the chances of making an unethical decision increase.

Military personnel are no different from the examples of people who believe themselves to be ethical. Wong and Gerras, in their research, “Lying to Ourselves,” present a compelling and convicting allegation of the Army’s ethical failings. They argue “that the military needs to introspectively examine how it might be inadvertently abetting the very behavior it deems unacceptable.”⁵² While it may seem to be an inaccurate accusation, they give compelling examples such as a tendency to exaggerate reports regarding training requirements and readiness. However, this is not exclusive to the Army. These ostensibly minor infractions are rampant through all branches of the military. Over time, everyone can be susceptible to what is known as *ethical fading*. Tenbrunsel and Mesick explained that ethical fading happens when the ‘moral colors of an ethical decision fade into the bleached hues that are void of moral implications.’⁵³ Things such as “goals, rewards, compliance systems, and informal pressures” contribute to ethical fading.⁵⁴ It is human nature to justify the ‘small’ unethical things that seemingly have little to no influence. But the justification continues to broaden until the ‘small’ thing is no longer a small thing, and the unethical action can have a significant impact—every time an excuse is made for unethical behavior, the ethical standard moves. As Wong and Gerras recounted, “[o]nce the bar of ethical standards is lowered, the malleability of those standards becomes a rationale for other unethical decisions.”⁵⁵

Behavioral Ethics for Military Personnel

While continued research in the implementation of behavioral ethics is needed, a couple of recommendations are offered. The first and perhaps most important step to reversing unconscious unethical behavior trends is the education of behavioral ethics. Bazerman and

Tenbrunsel indicate that unawareness is the greatest inhibitor of change.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, because most people consider themselves to be good and believe that they would choose the ethical in an ethical situation, there is no way to become aware of blind spots with the proper education. A rules-based (or deontological) method of ethics training is still essential, particularly for basic training and the lower ranks. Yet, as military personnel advance, they must become literate in behavioral ethics and become acquainted with the dangers of cognitive biases and blind spots. The importance of rules-based ethics training is not lost and will continue to provide a payoff amongst the younger ranks. However, incorporating behavioral ethics, particularly for the advanced ranks, can produce the desired results of increased ethical behavior. This education should occur in the venues of leadership courses in professional military education and command preparation schools.

A second suggestion for initiating change is to become more aware of self through personality tests and leadership evaluations. Evaluations such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), DiSC personality test, and the Keirsey Temperament Sorter are examples of personality tests that teach a person their strengths and weaknesses based upon their temperament. A good leadership inventory, such as the Leadership Practices Inventory 360, presents leadership strengths and weaknesses as well as illuminate blinds spots and biases. Although these tools can incur a monetary cost, they can provide an invaluable resource to the military to facilitate mid-level and senior leaders' education.

The application of these findings within military training could prove to be extremely beneficial. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel also contend that “[i]f ethics training is to actually change and improve ethical decision making, it needs to incorporate behavioral ethics, and specifically the subtle ways in which our ethics are bounded.”⁵⁷ Robert Prentice, Department Chair at the

McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas, claims that the study and research of behavioral ethics is “the next big thing” in ethics because the implementation of findings can help prevent unconscious unethical transgressions.⁵⁸ These simple reasons should encourage the military to pursue the benefits of behavioral ethics education.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the result of an ethical decision of a military service member is vital. The result can alter the public’s overall opinion of the military. In the absence of social norms, a person’s ethics will guide their actions. As men and women advance in military service ranks, they experience more scenarios where social norms or rules do not clearly differentiate what is ethical and what is not. Yet, the military generally approaches ethics training as though it does.

Entry-level service members benefit significantly from receiving a deontological training style, but as service members mature, the methodology for ethics training must be tailored to fit the changing need. Maintaining the conventional approach only increases the likelihood of ethical misdeeds. To assist military personnel in behaving ethically, the military should invest in the most advanced ethics education from behavioral ethics. While it is common for the military to show reluctance in pursuing an innovative method without a guaranteed result, the military must believe that an investment in behavioral ethics education will yield a return in investment. The innovative research found in behavioral ethics can achieve the military’s desire to shape ethical leaders.

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