



# What is the Value of Ethical Reasoning in Higher Education?

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## Abstract/Introduction

Within the past decade, stories of corporate greed and scandal have dominated the headlines. Many of the individuals implicated in these scandals, from Bernard Madoff to Enron CEO's Jeffrey Skilling and Ken Lay, were educated at the finest institutions of higher education in America. Curiously, however, these individuals all seem to lack a sense of ethical reasoning.

As a result, researchers have begun to question whether universities ought to be doing more than simply imparting the knowledge to their students. Indeed, many universities now explicitly state that one of their primary aims is to develop in their student body a competence in the area of ethical reasoning (Stemler, in press).

Within the field of psychology, ethical reasoning has been most closely associated with the work of Kohlberg (1981) and the work of Schwartz (1992).

The current study combines the situational judgment approach to measurement advocated by Kohlberg with the theory of underlying universal values proposed by Schwartz, leading to a new approach to measurement that is akin to the "revealed preferences" approach found in Economics.

## Methods

49 students from an Introductory Psychology class were recruited to participate in an Ethical Reasoning study and were given course credit for participation. 28 participants were male, and 21 were female. The ethnic composition of the sample was 68% White, 2% Asian/Asian American White, 12% Asian/Asian American, 6% Black/African American, 2% Black/African American Black, and 8% Latino/Latina.

## Procedure

A pre and post test was administered to participants. A 28 item situational questionnaire was given, indicating specific core values (Honesty, Order, Safety, Responsibility, Justice, Autonomy, Loyalty and Kindness). Below are two example items from our new Ethical Reasoning Test:

*1. Your little sister spent a great deal of time fixing her hair and makeup before her first school dance and she asks you how she looks. You think she looks ridiculous but you realize that her date will be arriving any minute and telling her what you think might undermine her self-confidence. Do you tell her?"*

\_\_\_Yes

\_\_\_No

By answering yes you are being truthful with your sister on how you think she looks indicating a core value "Honesty." By answering no you are looking out for her, and how she may feel if you tell her the truth therefore indicating the core value "Kindness."

*2. It is the middle of winter and you really want to make it to the store, which is pretty close, to pick up some food you are craving. However, your car is not well equipped to drive with how icy the roads are. The only other option is to call a taxi, which would take you there but it would be a very long wait. Do you drive your own car to the store?"*

\_\_\_Yes

\_\_\_No

By answering yes to this question the core value that is being emphasized is "Autonomy" because you are making your own decision for your own benefit. However, by answering no the core value being emphasized is "Safety" because of the fact that your car is not well equipped for the inclement weather and it may be hazardous to drive.

The Heinz dilemma from the Kohlberg Scale and the 50 item self-report measure of Values from Schwartz scale were administered at the same time in order to examine the convergent validity of the three tests. Basic questions such as race, gender and religious affiliation were also asked on the test.

## Scoring

These Schwartz scale consists of 50 phrases associated with the 10 core values outlined by Schwartz. Participants rated themselves on how accurately those particular statements described them. Each of the 50 statements was categorized a priori into one of the Schwartz's core values (Power, Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, Self-direction, Universalism, Benevolence, Tradition, Conformity and Security) with which it was most closely associated.

Because the sample to variable ratio was low, a factor analysis was not run on all items simultaneously, but rather for each particular Schwartz core value subscale. Items with high loadings were then summed to create subscale scores. These 10 new variables were then correlated with the 8 core values derived from our revealed preferences measure that were included in both the pre and posttest.

## Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that there was convergent validity present among some of the core values on our test and the Schwartz test. As expected, Kindness and Conformity were positively correlated ( $p = .36$ ). Loyalty was also significantly correlated with Tradition ( $p = .32$ ). Honesty and Hedonism were significantly negatively correlated ( $p = -.31$ ), as were Honesty and Universalism ( $p = -.31$ ).

The findings also indicated no significant associations between certain core values that were predicted to relate to one another, such as Autonomy and Self-direction or Responsibility and Self-direction. One reason as to why this occurred was that there may have been differences between self-report (i.e., Schwartz) and choice (our scale) measures. A well-known problem with self-report measures is their potential to "social desirability response bias," (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). A second potential reason as to why some of the expected relations were not observed at a level of statistical significance may be that the study lacked sufficient power to detect relationships due to a relatively small sample size. This problem can remedied by replicating the study

## Correlations

Statistics=Correlation Coefficient

		Power	Achievement	Hedonism	Stimulation	Self_direction	Universalism	Benevolence	Tradition	Conformity	Security
Spearman's rho	Honesty	-.22	<b>-.30</b>	<b>-.31</b>	-.12	-.24	<b>-.31</b>	<b>.17</b>	-.14	<b>-.09</b>	-.11
	Order	<b>0</b>	<b>.04</b>	-.15	-.12	<b>0</b>	-.16	-.04	-.18	-.25	.03
	Safety	-.05	.17	.03	-.06	.01	<b>.06</b>	<b>.13</b>	-.02	-.07	<b>.15</b>
	Responsibility	.02	<b>.04</b>	-.20	-.13	-.01	-.08	-.26	-.04	-.08	-.03
	Justice	-.05	-.03	-.03	.10	-.15	<b>.26</b>	<b>0</b>	-.08	.06	<b>-.15</b>
	Autonomy	.03	.12	<b>.11</b>	<b>.16</b>	-.09	-.01	-.16	<b>-.01</b>	<b>-.06</b>	.07
	Loyalty	.22	.12	<b>.27</b>	<b>.32</b>	.25	.09	.15	<b>.32</b>	<b>.18</b>	.22
	Kindness	.13	-.15	<b>.32</b>	-.04	.22	.22	<b>-.06</b>	.16	<b>.36</b>	-.21

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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All statistically significant values ( $p < .05$ ) are bolded along with a \*

Values highlighted indicate core values that were expected to correlate with each other

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