

Ethical Decision Making in Business and Marketing with reference to Moral Intensity

Dr. Anupama Mahajan¹, Kamna Virmani²

¹Associate Professor, Bharati College, University of Delhi, Janak Puri, New Delhi, India

²Assistant Professor, Bharati College, University of Delhi, Janak Puri, New Delhi, India

¹anupama.mahajan@live.com, ²kamna.chugh@gmail.com

Abstract: Due to rising concern for ethical issues in marketing, researchers have shown interest in moral issues arising in the field. The process of ethical decision making has been explained by various models given by various researchers. Different models propounded by different authors discuss the impact of various factors like deontological and teleological ideologies, demographics, social knowledge, personal values on ethical decision-making of marketing professionals.

However, it has been observed that ethical decision making is often situation specific. The paper investigates the impact of intensity of a moral issue i.e. how much morally intense a situation is on the ethical decision making. The factors affecting moral intensity of a situation can be magnitude of consequences, social consensus, the probability of effect, temporal immediacy, proximity and the concentration of effect. Ethical decision making also varies according to the nature of individual and the organisational environment. Individual characteristics often included in various models are personal experiences, personality variables and demographics whereas organisational environment includes its culture and values. The perceived moral intensity along with personal moral philosophies lays impact on intentions and behaviour. So, the paper presents an integrated model of antecedents and consequences of Personal moral philosophies and Perceived Moral Intensity. The aim of paper is to present conceptual framework of the Ethical Decision Making Process.

Keywords: Moral, Moral Intensity, Ethical Decision Making, Personal Moral Philosophies, Intentions and Behaviour.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethical decision making has become an important concern for researchers since past few decades. Various decision making models have been given so far by different researchers since past few decades (Ferrell and Gresham, 1985; Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Dubinsky and Loken, 1989; Ferrell, Gresham and Fraederich, 1989; Hunt and Vitell, 1993). These models discussed various antecedents, consequences and mediating effects in ethical decision making process. Empirical testing of these models has been done by various researchers like Mayo and Marks (1990), Vitell and Hunt (1986). Factors which were investigated in these different studies are values, social knowledge, and organisational ethical culture and so on.

Ethical decision making tends to vary according to the nature of moral issue involved (Jones, 1991). For example, using office stationery for personal use may not be an ethical issue for some or use of office transport for personal purpose may not give an ethical call to some employees but they tend to be unethical for others. Also, every issue varies according to the intensity of morality involved, for example, embezzlement of funds is more intense situation as compared to the use of office supplies for personal purpose. Therefore, moral intensity is a multidimensional construct. It should be made clear here that moral intensity does not include traits of moral decision makers for example, ego, strength etc. instead it is situation specific so it includes traits of a situation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethical decision making has a very vast literature. It has been studied both through descriptive philosophical or theological lens and also it has been tested in various disciplines like business, medical, artistic etc.

The process of ethical decision making is based upon employees' affective, cognitive and behavioural responses in dilemmas which occur in corporate life (Jones, 1991; Rest 1986, Robin *et al.* 1996). Ethical decision making models given by various researchers have different steps. Decision making process starts with the step of recognition i.e. individual recognizes that a situation has some ethical issue or problem (Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Jones 1991). Next step involves judgement based on broad assessments like relativism, fairness / equity and social contracts (Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Reidenbach and Robin 1990). Third step consists of establishment of ethical invention which involves consistency in behaving on the basis of previous judgement (Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Rest 1986). Finally last step is actual behaviour generated by ethical inventions (Jones 1991, Rest 1986).

Various empirical researches demonstrate that these steps are positively interrelated either directly or indirectly (Barnett and Valentine, 2004; Fleischman *et al.*, 2007; Singhapakdi *et al.*,

1996, 1999, 2000; Valentine and Barnett, 2007; Valentine *et al.*, 2010)

This process of ethical decision making is also influenced at different level by individual / organizational factors for e.g. An individual's ethics can be shaped by various personal characteristics like demographics, personality, dispositions, moral philosophies and ethical ideologies (Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2010; Loe *et al.*, 2000; O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). Also ethical reasoning can be influenced by various organizational factors such as professional orientation and discipline, policies such as codes of conduct and ethics training that strengthen this context (Douglas *et al.*, 2001; Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2010; Singhapakdi *et al.*, 2000, Valentine and Barnett, 2007; Valentine *et al.* 2010' Adams *et al.* 2001; Valentine and Barnett, 2002; Valentine and Fleischman, 2004, 2008). Individual level factors have been researched extensively.

Gender

Browning and Zabriskie (1983) examined the members of purchasing association and found that there is no significant difference between males and females on the basis of ethical grounds. Whereas, researchers like Beltramini *et al.*, (1984); Ruegger and King (1992); and Whipple and Swords (1992) conceded that females are more ethical than males. Various studies have been conducted examining awareness, judgement, intent and behavior regarding gender.

As regards awareness, Ameen *et al.*, (1996) found that females are more sensitive to and less tolerant of unethical activities than their male counterparts. Whereas, Valentine *et al.*, (2003) reported no significant findings. As far as intentions are concerned, Jones and Kavanagh (1996) and Shafer *et al.*, (2001) reported no significant findings, whereas Singhapakdi (1999) found that women are more likely to disagree with the unethical intentions. Cohen *et al.*, (2001) and Mahajan (2014) reported that women are less willing to act unethically.

Religion

Hegarty and Sims (1978, 1979) conducted a lab experiment, using a student sample to examine the influence of personal factors on ethical behavior and found religiousness to be insignificant. McNichols and Zimmerer (1985), using a scenario technique, concluded that strong religious beliefs were significantly associated with negative attitudes toward the acceptability of unethical behavior. Rallapalli (1994) examined the relationships between religiousness and marketers' norms based on the theoretical work of Hunt and Vitell (1993), and indicated that highly religious marketers tend to have higher norms, suggesting that a highly religious marketer will tend to agree more with guidelines or rules of behavior as guiding principles in his or her behavior than marketers with low religiousness. Bloodgood *et al.*, (2008) found that religiosity is negatively related to cheating behaviour.

Age

Research on age has produced mixed and inconsistent results. Researchers like Browning and Zabriskie (1983) reported that younger managers had a more ethical viewpoint than older managers. Whereas Ruegger and King (1992), Serwinek (1992), Peterson *et al.* (2001) reported that responses to ethical issues are lower for younger respondents. And many others like Larkin (2000), Shafer *et al.* (2001), Singhapakdi (2001) and Mahajan (2014) reported no significant findings. These mixed results may suggest a more complex relationship between age and ethical decision making than is captured by these studies.

Education and work experience

The research generally indicates that more education, employment or work experience is positively related to ethical decision making. As far as, awareness is concerned, Karcher (1996) reported no significant findings with respect to level of education. However, type of education has little or no effect on ethical decision making. For example, Dubinsky and Ingram (1984) and Goodman and Crawford (1974) etc. have reported no significant findings whereas Weeks *et al.* (1999) reported that there is difference in ethical judgment across career stages. In general, individuals in their later stage of career display higher ethical judgments.

In case of intentions, Cohen *et al.*, (2001) stated that accountants are more ethical than students. Shafer *et al.*, (2001) asserted that Job position or education has no influence on intentions. In this regard Shapeero *et al.*, (2003) found that Senior and staff-level accountants are less likely to intend to engage in unethical behavior than supervisors and managers.

Hawkins and Cocanougher (1972) compared business students with other majors and reported that business students are more tolerant of unethical behavior than non business students. On the contrary Beltramini and his associates (1984) report that business majors are more concerned about ethical issues than others. In this regard Ford and Richardson (1994) have stated that business majors may be more concerned than others even though they are more tolerant. Chonko and Hunt (1985) found that managers with technical backgrounds to be more ethical than managers with non-technical backgrounds.

Dubinsky and Gwin (1981) report a comparison between managers and salesperson and shown a significant different ethical perspective between the two. Also, a study by Kidwell and her associates (1987) found a relationship between years of employment and ethical beliefs. According to Larkin (2000) identify unethical behavior is related to experience.

Organisational Factors

Organizational factors like ethical culture, codes of ethics, organizational culture, size, competitiveness etc. are those components of the firm that can influence ethical behaviour.

Other factors include external environment, industry type and training. Given Rest’s (1986) framework of four components, there are fairly consistent results with high personal costs influencing how individuals perceive and respond to ethical dilemmas. There are two studies which shows that personal benefits from actions may have a negative effect on ethical awareness (Greenfield *et al.*, 2008; Bell and Hughes-Jones 2008). Ethical judgement is determined by organisation factors not just through a code of ethics (Cole, 2009; McKinney *et al.*, 2010) or organisational climates (Pfeifer, 2007; O’Leary and Stewart, 2007), but also based on size (Pierce and Sweeney, 2010), managerial trustworthiness (Cianci and Kaplan, 2008), and stakeholder implications (Pfeifer, 2007).

Organisational factors also influence ethical intentions positively. Strong code of ethics leads to ethical intentions (Hwang *et al.*, 2008; Chow *et al.*, 2009). In a study undertaken by Rothwell and Baldwin, 2007, it was found that ethical climate significantly affected ethical intentions but not behaviour. Several studies have found out that emphasis on corporate social responsibility is positively related to ethical behaviour (Houghton *et al.*, 2009; Husted and Allen, 2008; Shafer and Simmons, 2011).

A relatively new construct was found in the ethical decision making literature which is the concept of moral intensity. The concept of moral intensity was conceptualised by Jones (1991). Leitsch (2004) showed that the type and intensity of moral issue affected moral sensitivity, moral judgement, and moral intentions. Moral intensity serves as a strong predictor

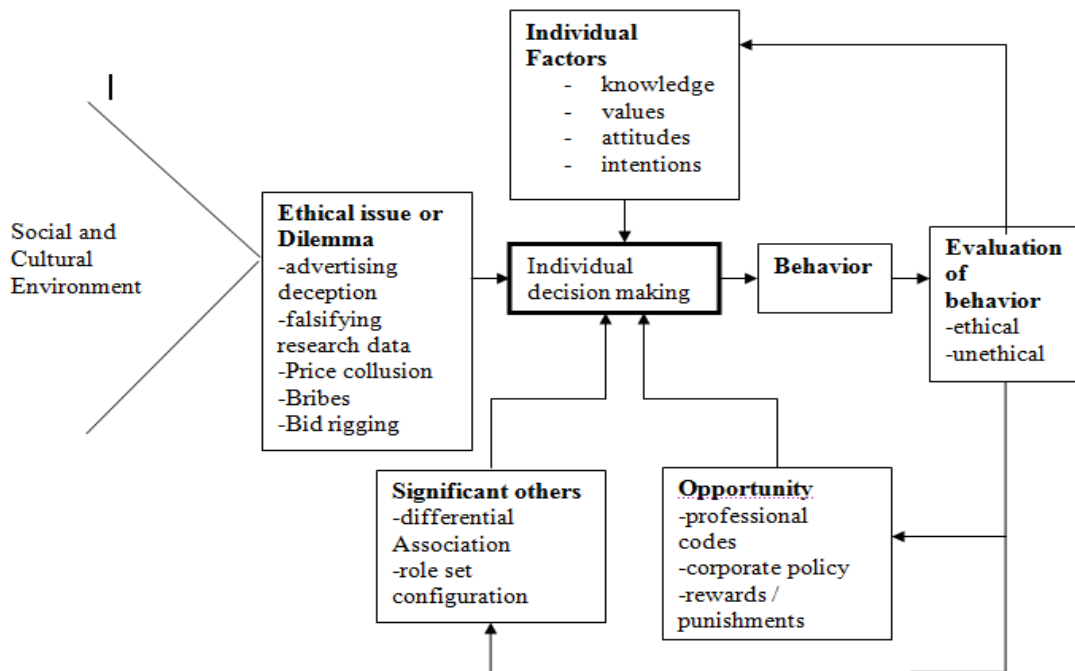
for ethical awareness and recognition of ethical issues (Leitsch, 2004; Mencl and May, 2009; Valentine and Hollingworth, 2012). It can serve as a barometer for engaging in ethical behaviour and intentions, with stronger moral intensity producing more salient ethical intentions (Valentine and Bateman, 2011; Karacaer *et al.*, 2009; Leitsch, 2004). Moral intensity is rapidly becoming an important component in the studies undertaken in ethical decision making process.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Various academic researchers have developed various positive models of ethical decision making process. Out of these models several models focus specifically on marketing ethics. Each of these models possesses unique dimensions which help in enhancing the overall understanding of the decision process in business organisations. A brief summary of these models is presented below:

1. Ferrell and Gresham (1985) Contingency Framework:

The model proposed by Ferrell and Gresham is multidimensional, process oriented, and contingent in nature. Variables used in the model are divided into individual factors, significant others and opportunity. Individual factors include personal background and socialization characteristics, such as educational and business experiences. Significant others include the effects of external to the organization e.g. customers and intra organizational influences such as peers and supervisors. Opportunity deals with conditions that limit barriers or result in rewards.



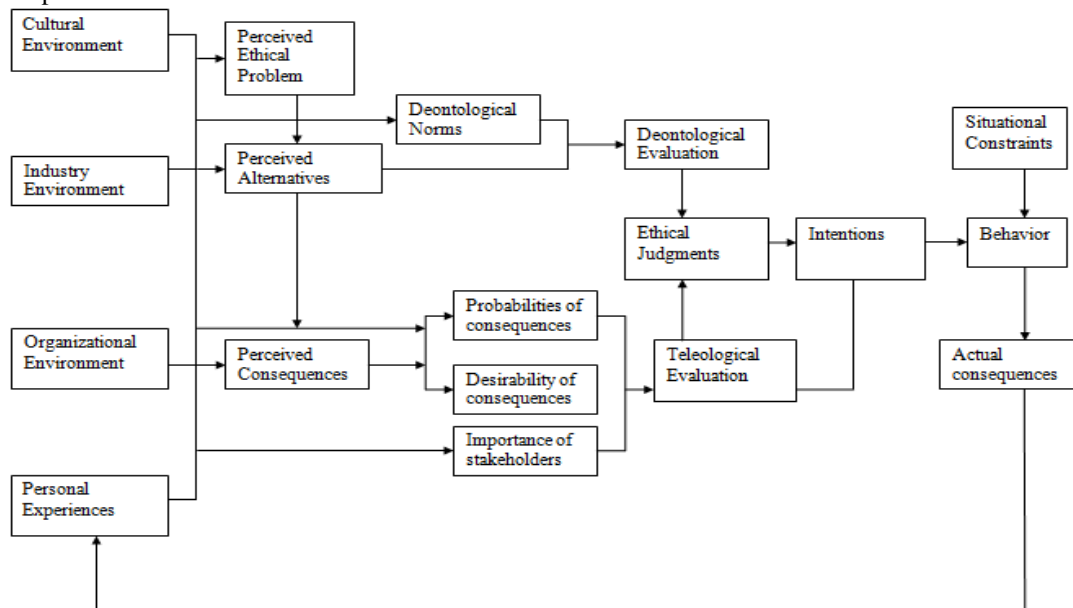
Source: Ferrell and Gresham (1985), “A Contingency Framework for Understanding Ethical Decision Making in Marketing”, *Journal of Marketing*, Volume 49: 87-96.

Ethical decision making process posited by Ferrell and Gresham starts like any other process with recognition of an issue containing ethical element. The interaction between ethical situation, individual characteristics and organizational environment determine the behavior of the individual which is the final outcome of the process. Individual factors are based on the moral philosophies of the marketer which includes deontology and teleology. Apart from individual and organizational factors, opportunity also has a bearing on the decision making. Professional codes of ethics and corporate policies are considered as moderators in controlling opportunity. After all the interaction, the evaluation of the behavioral outcome is done on the basis of ethicality.

The above figure shows how the social and cultural environment stimulates the ethical issue which leads to individual decision making. In the process of decision making, individual factors like knowledge, values, attitude and intentions; significant others and opportunity play a key role in shaping the decision. Lastly, behaviour of the individual is evaluated on the grounds of ethicality.

4. HUNT AND VITELL (1986) GENERAL THEORY OF MARKETING ETHICS:

This model is based on the theories of teleology and deontology. This process starts when the individual confronts a problem perceived as having ethical content. Then, various alternatives are perceived followed to resolve the ethical problem. Since all the alternatives cannot be recognized by the individual, therefore, an evoked set of alternatives is less than the universe. Each alternative is evaluated from teleological and deontological point of view.



Source: Hunt, Shelby D. and Vitell, Scott (1986), "A General Theory of Marketing Ethics", *Journal Of Macromarketing*, 6(Spring), 5-16.

Deontological evaluation consists of four constructs:

- a.) The perceived consequences of each alternative for various stakeholder groups,
- b.) Probability of each consequence that will occur to each stakeholder group,
- c.) Desirability or undesirability of each consequence,
- d.) The importance of each stakeholders group.

Model states that individual’s ethical judgment is function of individual’s deontological evaluation and teleological evaluation. This model incorporates intentions as the intervening variable. It is believed that both the judgments and intentions are the better predictors of behaviour. Ethical judgments, intentions and behaviour may or may not be consistent with each other. The reason argued for this inconsistency is situational constraints e.g. opportunity. Last component of the model is behaviour and its evaluation.

Finally the model proposes that the following four constructs:

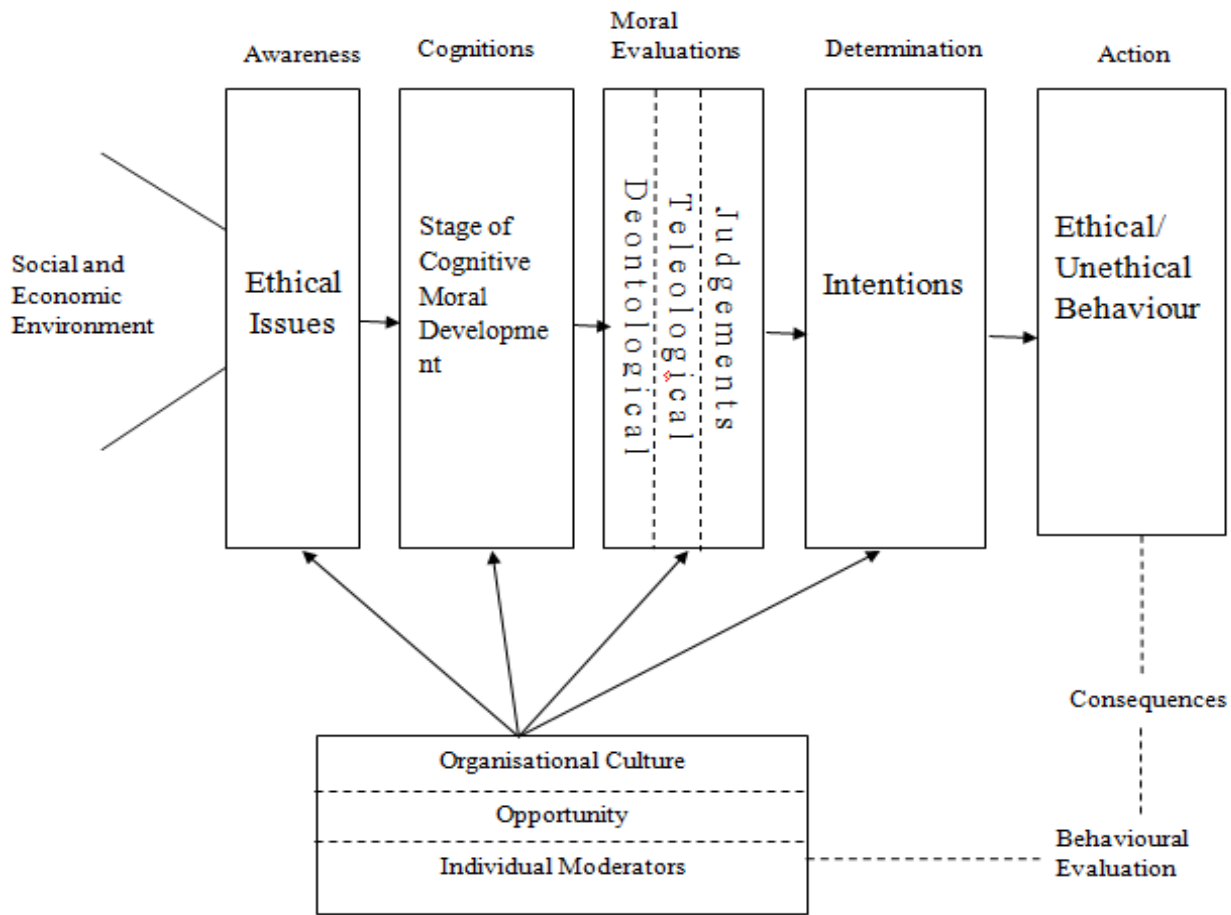
- 1) Personal experiences
- 2) Organizational norms
- 3) Individual norms
- 4) Cultural Norms

which affect the perceived the situations, alternatives, perceived situations, consequences, deontological norms, probabilities of consequences, desirability of consequences and importance of stakeholders.

5. FERRELL, GRESHAM AND FRAEDRICH (1989) SYNTHESIS OF ETHICAL DECISION MAKING MODEL:

In 1989, Ferrell, Gresham and Fraedrich combined the aspects of Ferrell and Gresham model and Hunt and Vitell model and came up with what they called Synthesis of Ethical Decision Making model. This model divides the process into five stages of awareness, cognitions, moral evaluations, determination

and action. According to this model, individual must first be aware that ethical element exist in a situation. The perception of ethical issue depends upon the individuals' stage of cognitive moral development. Evaluation, the third stage deals with the evaluations on the basis of teleology and deontology. Intentions are determined which are predeterminant of the behavioral aspect. Lastly, the synthesis model considers the organizational culture, opportunity and individual moderators as the determinants of ethical behavior within the firm.



Source: Ferrell, O. C., Larry, G. Gresham and John A. Fraedrich (1989), *Synthesis of Ethical Decision Models for Marketing*, *Journal of Macromarketing*, 9(Fall), 55-64.

6. JONES (1991) AN ISSUE CONTINGENT MODEL

This model as all other model follows the basic decision making paradigm starting from recognition of moral issue to moral behavior. However, this model differs from all other previous model on the fact that Jones (1991) argued that ethical decision making is issue contingent. Explicit consideration of the characteristics of the issue itself was missing from all the models, Jones offered an issue-contingent model of ethical decision making. He stated that human beings respond differently to different issues due to the peculiar characteristics of the issue. These characteristics determine the moral intensity which is integral part of ethical decision

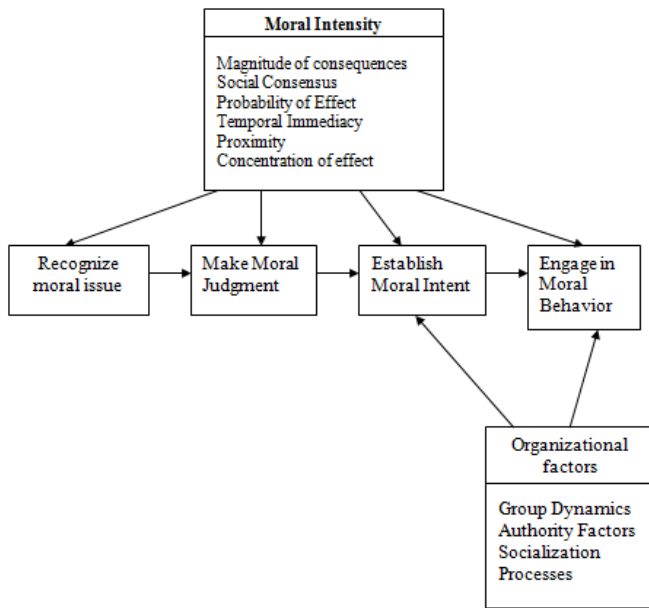
making and behavior. These characteristics as discussed earlier are magnitude of consequences, social consensus, probability of effect, temporal immediacy, proximity, and concentration of effect. Although the moral intensity construct is not found in descriptive models, it is derived from the normative arguments.

Jones model states that the characteristics of moral issue, moral intensity influences each step of moral decision making. Lastly, it has also been argued that organizational factors pose special challenge to moral decision maker. Organization factors are likely to play their role in decision making and

behavior at two points: establishing intentions and engaging behavior.

Jones (1991) recognized the characteristics of the moral issue which might influence the ethical decision making in the organization. Specifically, he proposed the six dimensions of moral intensity construct. These are (a) magnitude of consequences—the sum of the harms (or benefits) done to victims (or beneficiaries) of the moral act in question; (b) social consensus—the degree of social agreement that a proposed act is evil (or good); (c) probability of effect—a joint function of the probability that the act in question will actually take place and the act in question will actually cause the harm (or benefit) predicted; (d) temporal immediacy—the length of time between the present and the onset of consequences of the moral act in question (shorter length implies greater immediacy); (e) proximity—the feeling of nearness (social, cultural, psychological, or physical) that the moral agent has for victims (or beneficiaries) of the evil (or beneficial) act in question; and (f) concentration of effect—an inverse function of the number of people affected by an act of given magnitude.

Moral intensity (Jones, 1991) is often used to examine ethical decision-making in different circumstances (Chia & Mee, 2000; Frey, 2000; Harrington, 1996; Morris & McDonald, 1995; Paolillo & Vitell, 2002; Singer, 1996; Singhapakdi *et al.*, 1996). In brief, this theory postulates that moral issues can be viewed in terms of underlying characteristics that influence the various stages of the decision making process.



Source: Jones, Thomas M. (1991), "Ethical Decision Making by Individuals in Organisations: An Issue Contingent Model". *Academy of Management Review*, Vol 16(2) 366-395.

7. COMPREHENSIVE MODEL

The present paper represents the comprehensive model which takes into account all the features of the model given by Jones (1991) and explains the process of ethical decision making with all the antecedents and consequences of this process.

This model incorporates the concept of moral intensity and its six dimensions and tries to explain how moral intensity affects perceived ethical problem and in turn affects behavioural intentions. Also, it has been shown that demographic and organisational factors act as antecedents of idealism and relativism whereas perceived ethical problem and behavioural intentions are consequences of perceived moral intensity.

This model clearly demonstrates the role of personal moral philosophies and perceived moral intensity in ethical decision making.

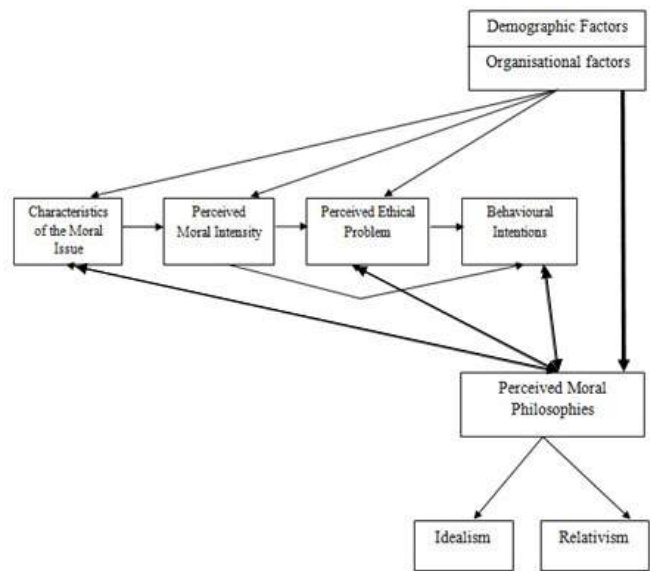


Fig.1. Comprehensive Model on Ethical Decision Making

8. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Depending upon the researches already done, it can be seen that there are clear relationships emerging with regard to various variables associated with ethical decision making stages. However, even after decades of investigations, some relationships have not yielded a clear understanding of their impact. For example, relationships between factors like age, employment, locus of control, religion, ethical climate and ethical decision making still need to be further investigated.

There is dearth of investigations done on the issues related to ethical decision making in India. Most of the studies which have undertaken the empirical investigations belong to outside India. Future ethical research to test the impact of demographic factors and organisational factors on the personal moral

philosophies of individuals needs to be conducted. The construct of moral intensity given by Jones (1991) in the form of ethical decision making model can be investigated in the context of Indian managers to find out whether all the six characteristics define the moral intensity of an individual in India also.

Further, it can also be investigated in the Indian context that does perceived moral intensity affects ethical intentions directly or they influence the perceptions of ethical problem first and then affect ethical intentions. Ethical decision making process can also be investigated so as to explore what are the antecedents and consequences of perceived moral intensity and personal moral philosophies.

All the above issues are addressed in the form of research questions given below to give a direction to the future research in the field of business and marketing ethics:

1. What are the main demographic factors which affect the personal moral philosophies the most?
2. What are those organisational factors which lay direct and most impact on personal moral philosophies?
3. Do all the six characteristics of moral issue lay down the equal impact on moral intensity or some of them are highly effective?
4. Whether elements of moral intensity play a significant role in determining the perceptions of decision maker that if or not the ethical problem even exists?
5. If the decision maker perceives that the given situation involves ethical content, then whether his intentions will be affected?

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