MORAL REASONING AND OPINIONS CONCERNING THE APPROPRIATENESS OF ETHICALLY QUESTIONABLE WORKPLACE ACTIVITIES

The relationship between moral reasoning and beliefs about the appropriateness of ethically questionable workplace activities may be more complex than perhaps it first appears. This paper argues that researchers must carefully consider both the specific moral reasoning index to use, and the intended beneficiary of the ethically questionable actions (individuals or organizations).

Ethics is important in organizational life, and business organizations devote a great deal of time, attention, and money to ethics training (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2003). Ethics, however, is not always a “cut and dried” issue with clear demarcation lines between “ethical” and “unethical” conduct. Therefore, part of the purpose of ethics training is (or should be) to provide individuals with tools to assist them in recognizing common situations with ethical overtones and in formulating opinions about the appropriateness of various courses of action (with the expectation that behaviour will often, although perhaps not always, be consistent with such opinions). In different words, at least part of ethics training should involve more than simply telling people what to do, but rather to assist people in thinking independently (because not all ethical situations can be anticipated in advance). As independent thinking in the context of morality is central to the notion of moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1976; Rest, 1979, 1986), the paper now turns to a brief overview of moral reasoning. Following this, the paper will formulate and test hypotheses concerning relationships between a variety of moral reasoning indices and beliefs about the appropriateness of various ethically questionable workplace activities (a likely precursor to behaviour). Two types of questionable activities will be considered: those designed to benefit individuals at the expense of organizations and those intended to benefit organizations. The specific nature and direction of relationships with moral reasoning indices may depend upon the intended beneficiary of ethically questionable actions.

Moral Reasoning: A Brief Overview

Individuals develop through three levels of moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1976): preconventional, conventional, and postconventional. Each level is composed of two stages, with the second stage representing a more advanced form of the first. In moral reasoning, the reasons for decisions seem more critical than the specific decisions themselves. In different words, what considerations were important to people when making their decision? At the preconventional level (Stages 1 and 2), actions are justified largely on the basis of pure self-interest, and decision makers seek to maximize rewards, avoid punishments, and obey authority figures. Stage three decisions (conventional level) are made on the basis of conformity to norms and standards of the family, group, or nation. Unquestioned acceptance of the majority assessment of acceptable behaviours is reflected in moral reasoning. Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma (1999) suggested that these three stages all reflect “personal interest” considerations in decision making. Stage four reasoning adopts a wider perspective that incorporates societal interests, and people begin to emphasize legal, religious, or societal precepts in their decision making. The dominant theme in Stage 4 is “maintaining norms” (Rest et al., 1999). Postconventional or principled reasoning (the most advanced) is characterized by independent thinking. Stage 5 and 6 considerations emerge from self-chosen ethical principles that are logical, comprehensive, and consistent. Such considerations stress the importance of upholding individual rights and dignity regardless of both
the opinions of others, or existing rules, norms, or societal standards.

Moral reasoning research often investigates connections with various attitudes and behaviours. It is possible to draw at least two contradictory conclusions from this literature. On the one hand, moral reasoning clearly has enormous practical relevance. Moral reasoning is linked with optimism (Rim, 1992), risk taking behaviours (Levenson, 1990), attitudes toward minorities (Glover, 1994), openness to experience (Cawley, Martin, & Johnson, 2000), behaviours of jury members (e.g., Rotenberg, Hewlett, & Siegwart, 1998), teachers (MacCallum, 1993), and athletes (e.g., Bredemeier & Shields, 1994), participation in social protest activities (Franz & McClelland, 1994), support for affirmative action (Vozzola & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2000), child rearing practices (Pratt, Arnold, Pratt, & Diessner, 1999), religious beliefs (Glover, 1997), substance abuse among adolescents (Kuther, 2000), and voting behaviour (Thoma, 1993). In light of such findings, it hardly seems as if there could be a single area of life for which moral reasoning would not be practically meaningful.

On the other hand, the moral reasoning literature is replete with (perhaps surprisingly) weak associations with ethical orientations (e.g., Arnett & Hunt, 2002; Forsyth, 1980; Lasson & Bass, 1997; Uddin & Gillett, 2002). Similar weak associations generally appear with personality variables with ethical implications, such as Machiavellianism and locus of control (e.g., Ho, Vitell, Barnes, & Desborde, 1997; Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981; Trevino & Youngblood, 1990). Marnburg (2001), in fact, questioned whether moral development has any real relevance to business ethics, and such questioning seems entirely appropriate in light of the weak findings addressed above. Seemingly, moral reasoning contributes little to our understanding of ethics, and this is surprising in light of the connections discussed at the outset between independent thinking (central to moral reasoning) and ethics training. Given the importance of ethics in organizations, it seems critical to understand the connections between moral reasoning and ethical orientations, because this could provide insights into the likely contributions of various forms and types of ethics training (e.g., is independent thinking about ethical issues truly a desirable goal of ethics training in organizations?).

**Moral Reasoning and Ethical Orientations: Why Are Relationships So Weak?**

The “straightforward” relationship between moral reasoning and ethical orientations may be unexpectedly complex. “Moral reasoning” is not simply a unitary construct, but, as discussed above, consists of levels and stages. Many indices of moral reasoning seem possible given such a complex construct, and indeed many indices are available in the commonly used Defining Issues Test (DIT) measure. Researchers, however, tend to rely exclusively on only one of these indices (the P score), and this may not always be the ideal choice for testing hypotheses fairly. Therefore, one possible explanation for the weak relationships observed between moral reasoning and ethical orientations is that researchers use the “wrong” index of moral reasoning; that is, one biased against finding relationships even when they may exist.

Another explanation for observed weak relationships is that “ethical orientations” may also not be a unitary construct. Specifically, the perceived appropriateness of ethically questionable workplace activities may depend, in part, upon the intended beneficiary of such activities. Individuals could regard ethically dubious activities as appropriate because these benefit themselves (e.g., taking money from petty cash), or because these benefit their employing organization. Persons capable of advanced moral reasoning might respond differently to the prospect of ethically questionable activities depending upon the intended beneficiary. For example, telling lies to protect one’s employer involves a (perhaps implicit) obedience to authority that is missing when one behaves “inappropriately” out of self-interest. One marked
characteristic of advanced moral reasoning is independent thinking, and not simply obeying authority unquestioningly. Researchers who have investigated connections between moral reasoning and ethical orientations may not have accounted for the implied beneficiary of ethically questionable activities, and thus have used the “wrong” measure of ethical orientations.

Of course, there are other explanations for observed weak relationships between moral reasoning and ethical orientations. Moral reasoning may simply not be strongly associated with these at the construct level. Opinions or attitudes may have little obvious connections to behaviour, and thus measures that assess ethical opinions should be discarded. The DIT may be a poor way to assess moral reasoning and should be abandoned altogether. There is no obvious standard measure of “ethical orientations”, and more work needs to be done to develop such measures before the aforementioned relationships can be tested. Before recommending that existing measures be abandoned or that new measures be created, however, it seems prudent first to consider the possibilities that researchers simply need to think more carefully about both the specific indices of moral reasoning they use (rather than seemingly relying on the DIT P score as the default option), and about the impact that different intended beneficiaries of ethically questionable activities might have on their hypothesized relationships.

The Defining Issues Test (DIT) as a Measure of Moral Reasoning

The DIT presents respondents with moral dilemma scenarios. Should someone, for example, who discovers that a law-abiding man escaped from prison several years earlier inform the proper authorities? For each scenario, respondents complete three tasks. First, they indicate an action choice (e.g., should the escaped prisoner be reported?). Next, they rate the relative importance of twelve pertinent items in helping them make this decision on a five-point scale (e.g., “Is crime encouraged if someone escapes punishment for a crime?”). Finally, of the twelve items presented, respondents rank the four most important in helping them make their decision. The various items are designed to be consistent with reasoning at various stages of moral development, or else are included for reliability purposes. The reliability and validity of the DIT seem well established (e.g., Elm & Weber, 1994; Rest, 1979, 1986; Rest et al., 1999).

DIT P Scores

Several relevant scores emerge from DIT responses (Rest, 1979, 1986). By far the most commonly used and reported DIT index is the P score (Rest, Thoma, Narvaez, & Bebeau, 1997). Historically, this was the first index developed from the DIT and is also easy to calculate by hand (DIT surveys may also, for a fee, be scored by experts). The P score represents the proportion of postconventional items that respondents rank as important. In the Prisoner scenario above, the statement “How would the will of the people and the public good best be served?” is one such item. If a respondent ranked this particular survey item as important, then this would increase this person’s P score beyond what it otherwise would have been.

Although there is nothing necessarily “wrong” with the P score, the wider implications of the method used to compute it may not have been carefully thought through. A great deal of relevant information is discarded when calculating P scores. Relying on ranking data obviously means that P scores incorporate no rating data. Moreover, no information about lower stage scores is used in the P index. Simply put, items reflecting postconventional moral reasoning either are or are not ranked as important. Persons who rank relatively large numbers of statements reflecting postconventional moral reasoning as important in helping them make a decision receive high P scores. Respondents with low P scores do not rank relatively large numbers of statements reflecting such moral reasoning as important.
Low P scorers may nonetheless be heterogeneous in their characteristic moral reasoning. Low P scores could be attained if persons rank as important items reflecting preconventional reasoning, or conventional reasoning at Stages 3 or 4. As discussed above, low P scores are attained by persons who do not rank many postconventional items as important, but what they actually do rank as important is not relevant. Individuals guided by “personal interest” considerations could thus receive the same low P score as those guided by considerations of “maintaining norms”. In effect, there may be apparently unrecognized heterogeneity between and among low P scorers that may be crucial in making sense of the absence of expected relationships involving P scores. As a practical illustration of such heterogeneity, consider three hypothetical types of response patterns among respondents who complete the DIT (see Table 1, Row 1). Type 1 respondents rank many postconventional items as important, and receive high P scores. Both Type 2 and 3 respondents rank no such items as important, and receive P scores of zero. However, assume that these two types of individuals nonetheless reason differently about moral dilemmas. Type 2 respondents rank as most important items that reflect obeying laws and following rules (i.e., reasoning consistent with Stage 4). Type 3 respondents, in contrast, rank as important items that reflect self-interest and personal advantage (i.e., Stage 2 reasoning).

### Table 1

**DIT Scores and Perceived Appropriateness of Ethically Questionable Activities Beneficial to Organizations for Three Hypothetical Response Patterns**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Pattern</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 P Score</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>Zero</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 D Score</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Are ethically questionable activities appropriate?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents characterized by Response Pattern 1 have a predominant pattern of postconventional reasoning, those with Response Pattern 2 are characterized by Stage 4 “maintaining norms” reasoning, and those with Response Pattern 3 are guided by Stage 2 “personal interest” considerations in moral reasoning.*

**Relationships between Moral Reasoning Indices and Beliefs about the Appropriateness of Ethically Questionable Activities Beneficial to Organizations**

**P Scores**

How might these DIT response patterns be linked with beliefs about the appropriateness of ethically questionable workplace activities? Let us first consider perceptions of the appropriateness of such activities performed to benefit an employing organization. Respondent Types 1 and 2 may agree, for example (see Table 1, Row 3), that it is wrong under most conditions to lie (or otherwise behave “inappropriately”) to protect one’s employer, even if they disagree on the reasons why. Type 1 respondents may feel that ethically questionable behaviours are unacceptable because of possible harm to the wider society. Type 2 respondents may regard such activities as inappropriate because they violate societal “rules”. In contrast, Type 3 respondents may feel that telling lies is acceptable provided only that one escapes detection (and
because acting in an employer’s best interests may lead to personal rewards). In this example, persons with high P scores (Type 1 respondents) and persons with zero P scores (Type 2 respondents) would likely respond similarly on a variable of interest (see Table 1, Row 3), but would also differ from Type 3 respondents (who also received zero P scores). The aggregate relationship between P scores and beliefs about the appropriateness of lies to benefit an employer would thus probably be weak or even close to zero. High P scorers in this example responded identically to some zero P scorers, who in turn responded oppositely to other zero P scorers.

**D Scores**

In the previous example, moral reasoning would likely emerge as orthogonal to scores on a variable with which it seemingly “should” be associated. As discussed above, the literature is replete with such unexpected null results. However, any conclusion that moral reasoning is orthogonal to scores on an apparently relevant variable should not be accepted based on P scores alone. The relationship between D scores (rarely considered in the literature) and variables of interest must first be considered. D (developmental) scores represent an overall index of moral development. Higher D scores imply that respondents rated items at more advanced levels of moral reasoning as more important than those representing less advanced levels. D score calculations also adjust for tendencies to rate all items as equally important and also for items that are more popular than others regardless of their stage content. Most importantly, D scores utilize information from all stages of moral development.

Let us revisit again the three hypothetical response patterns in the DIT (see Table 1, Row 2). Type 1 respondents would likely have high P and high D scores. Although respondent Types 2 and 3 received identical P scores, their D scores would differ appreciably. Because Type 3 respondents are guided by self-interest, their D scores would be lower than those received by norm maintaining and rule abiding Type 2 respondents. In contrast to P scores, higher D scores would likely be more consistently associated with beliefs that lying to protect one’s employer is wrong, whereas lower D scores would be more consistently linked with the opposite belief (see Table 1, Row 3). Thus, the amount of variance explained in the relationship between D scores and beliefs about the appropriateness of telling lies in this context would almost certainly be higher than the amount explained in the relationship involving P scores. In other words, the reported absence of a relationship would simply be an artifact of researcher reliance on P scores. Parenthetically, researchers who do report statistically significant results involving D scores may have done so because P scores did not relate significantly or “as expected” with variables of interest, without necessarily understanding fully why such differential results may have emerged. Regardless, the preceding discussion suggests the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 1.** High D scorers will tend to regard ethically questionable workplace activities designed to benefit an employing organization as relatively inappropriate. P scores may, however, be orthogonal to beliefs about the appropriateness of such activities.

**Stage 4 Scores**

The relationship involving DIT Stage 4 scores may, however, not be so straightforward. High Stage 4 scorers seem likely to experience unusually high degrees of internal conflict when faced with the prospect of behaving “inappropriately” to advance the welfare of an employer. Stage 4 reasoning is characterized by a tendency to follow rules and to attach great importance to preserving law and order (Rest, 1979, 1986). However, when faced with the prospect of behaving unethically to benefit an employing organization, two mutually exclusive sets of “rules” seem to exist. Society’s “rules” suggest that ethically questionable workplace activities are
inappropriate. However, the (perhaps implicit) “rules” of an employer may reflect the primacy of organizational welfare, and therefore any activities (however questionable) that promote this welfare may be seen as appropriate. After all, if employees are required, for example, to lie at work, then authority figures must presumably want this for a “good reason”. The notion that the “rules” for business can differ from those in other settings seems well established (Carr, 1968; Friedman, 1970; Carroll & Buchholtz, 2003, Chapter 7), even without unanimous agreement about the desirability of such an approach.

Although all individuals expected to behave “unethically” for a “good reason” are faced with two sets of mutually exclusive “rules”, not everyone may feel conflicted. Advanced moral reasoners think for themselves, and do not simply obey authority unquestioningly (Rest, 1979, 1986). Such persons are unlikely to approve of activities that benefit an organization but harm external stakeholders (e.g., those to whom any lies are directed), and are unlikely to feel “torn” about this. Persons with high Stage 2 scores seem focused on self-interest, and thus may feel little internal conflict when faced with conflicting “rules” (which may be relevant only if they provide clues as to likely rewards and punishments). Those with high Stage 4 scores, however, seem to want to “do the right thing”. In the face of conflicting versions of the “right thing”, high Stage 4 scorers may not necessarily agree on the most appropriate response to ethically questionable workplace activities beneficial to an employer. Therefore, no hypothesis will be advanced about the connection between Stage 4 scores and the appropriateness of such activities.

**Stage 2 Scores**

Preconventional Stage 2 reasoning, as discussed above, is guided by self-interest and personal advantage. Individuals characterized by this reasoning pattern generally may see little wrong in “unethical” behaviour, as long as one avoids getting caught. As acting in an employer’s best interests may lead to personal rewards, the following hypothesis seems reasonable.

**Hypothesis 2.** High Stage 2 scorers will tend to regard ethically questionable workplace activities designed to benefit an employing organization as relatively appropriate.

**Relationships between Moral Reasoning Indices and Beliefs about the Appropriateness of Ethically Questionable Activities Beneficial to Individuals**

**P Scores and D Scores**

Many ethically questionable workplace activities are designed not to serve an employer, but rather to benefit oneself at an employer’s expense. How might advanced moral reasoners feel, for example, about inflating an expense account? Unlike organizational activities that can affect a broad range of societal members, most activities that benefit an individual inflict relatively little harm, regardless of how ethically questionable they may be. A company with apparent “deep pockets” perhaps has to pay for some “unnecessary” expenses if expense accounts are fudged. When compared with the potential for harm to the wider society, ethically dubious activities performed for an individual’s benefit may seem trivial and insignificant (and thus not necessarily inappropriate) to advanced moral reasoners.

High scorers on measures of moral reasoning also seem generally to be forgiving rather than punitive (e.g., Lupfer, Cohen, Bernard, & Brown, 1987), have nonpunitive and rehabilitation oriented stances toward criminals (Carroll, Perkowitz, Lurigio, & Weaver, 1987; De Wolfe & Jackson, 1984; Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989), and tend to be tolerant and nonjudgmental (e.g., Breslin, 1982; Polovy, 1980). As a result, such persons may be reluctant to condemn
ethically questionable activities of individuals, especially when these occur in the context of an unequal power relationship with an organization. In summary, individuals characterized by advanced moral reasoning scores seem neither likely nor unlikely to disapprove of ethically questionable activities that help individuals at the expense of organizations. On balance, therefore, D scores and P scores should both be orthogonal to beliefs about the appropriateness of ethically questionable activities performed for an employee’s personal benefit.

**Stage 4 and Stage 2 Scores**

High Stage 4 scorers, on the other hand, interpret behaviour which conforms to existing laws and rules as “ethical” (e.g., Gutkin & Suls, 1979; Nardi & Tsujimoto, 1979), and value both conformity and tradition (Ostini & Ellerman, 1997). In an organizational context, many “rules” are determined and enforced by supervisors and other authority figures. Most wishes of such individuals must, in this view, be obeyed unquestioningly (except perhaps those that violate societal “rules”). Moreover, the ultimate well being of the organization may be paramount concern to high Stage 4 scorers and be the touchstone that guides most daily activities. This is because organizational authority figures both implicitly and explicitly advocate the same concerns and use the same touchstone. Any action such as inflating an expense account that harms the company, therefore, may seem inappropriate to high Stage 4 scorers. Such individuals also seem disinclined to be tolerant and forgiving toward persons who “harm” an employing organization. The greatest tendency to blame individuals themselves for social and moral problems, for example, occurs among persons with high Stage 4 scores (Tsujimoto, 1979). High Stage 4 scorers may thus disagree vehemently that ethically questionable workplace activities that harm an organization represent acceptable conduct. In contrast, individuals with high Stage 2 scores, for whom self-interested considerations are critical, would likely have few concerns with taking advantage of an employing organization by, for example, padding an expense account. As before, such activities might only seem problematic if one should get caught.

**Hypothesis 3.** High Stage 4 scorers will tend to regard ethically questionable workplace designed to benefit individuals at the expense of organizations as relatively inappropriate.

**Hypothesis 4.** High Stage 2 scorers will tend to regard ethically questionable workplace designed to benefit individuals at the expense of organizations as relatively appropriate.

**Method**

The hypotheses were tested in a sample of 213 fully employed persons recruited from MBA classes at a large university. These individuals completed the six-story version of the DIT (most published studies use three stories), and two scales designed to assess the perceived acceptability of workplace behaviours of a dubious ethical nature (see Table 2 for sample items). These scales are similar, but differ in the intended beneficiary of the ethically questionable activities. Both scales appeared in a seven point response format, with *strongly disagree* (one point) and *strongly agree* (seven points) as end points. Higher scores on both scales suggest that the activities represented in the survey items are seen as more inappropriate (i.e., presumably a “more ethical” response). Items in the *Company Benefits* scale (Froelich & Kottke, 1991; \( \alpha = .82 \)) evaluate workplace behaviours designed to further company interests (e.g., lying to protect one’s company). Items in the *Self Benefits* scale (Jones, 1990; \( \alpha = .71 \)) pertain to activities in which individuals could gain at the expense of their employers (e.g., by pilfering office supplies). In the context of these measures, a summary of this study’s hypotheses appears in Table 3. Not all respondents were included in the final sample, because some DIT surveys did not pass various consistency checks that indicate meaningful responses. Mean age in the sample of 185 retained
DIT surveys was 29.6 years (76 women, 109 men; 99 non-managers; 86 managers).

Table 2
Sample Scale Items

Company Benefits Scale (scoring reversed for all items)
“Profits should be given a higher priority than the safety of a product”
“There is nothing wrong with a supervisor asking a subordinate to falsify a document”
“An employee may need to lie to a co-worker to protect the company”.

Self Benefits Scale
“It is unacceptable to take home a few office supplies from work (e.g., paper clips, pencils)”
“It is acceptable to use a company telephone for a personal long-distance call” (scoring reversed)
“It is unacceptable to make personal copies on a company copy machine”.

Table 3
Summary of Hypothesized Relationships between DIT Indices and Perceptions of the Appropriateness of Ethically Questionable Workplace Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beneficiary</th>
<th>P Score</th>
<th>D Score</th>
<th>Stage 4 Score</th>
<th>Stage 2 Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Company</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a The "Beneficiary" column refers to who benefits from the ethically questionable activities (organizations or individuals). Higher scores on both the Company Benefits and the Self Benefits scales suggest that the ethically questionable activities are viewed as increasingly inappropriate and unacceptable.

Results

Descriptive statistics and a correlation matrix appear in Table 4. As discussed earlier, most studies using the DIT report results involving only P scores. If this study had followed suit, the results would have indeed been unimpressive. P scores related weakly with both ethics-oriented scales (r = .15, p < .05, Company Benefits; r = -.07, ns, Self Benefits). However, considering other indices available in the DIT provided a markedly different picture. Hypothesis 1 predicted a positive relationship between D scores and Company Benefits scores, and received clear support (r = .34, p < .001). Thus, relative to low scorers, high D scorers tend to regard ethically questionable activities designed to benefit an employer as inappropriate. In contrast, Stage 2 scores correlated negatively and significantly with Company Benefits scores (r = -.33, p < .001). These results support Hypothesis 2, and suggest that (relative to low scorers) high Stage 2 scorers regarded ethically questionable activities as appropriate.

Results involving the Self Benefits scale differed from those discussed above. As expected, Self Benefits scores were orthogonal to P and D scores. Stage 4 scores, although
orthogonal to Company Benefits scores, correlated positively and significantly with Self Benefits scores \( (r = .31, p < .001) \). High Stage 4 scorers thus regarded activities in which employees “rip off” their organization as inappropriate, and this supported the third hypothesis. Hypothesis 4 predicted an inverse relationship between Stage 2 scores and Self Benefits scores, and also received support \( (r = -.22, p < .01) \). Stage 2 scores represented the only DIT index that correlated significantly with both “ethics” measures.

### Table 4

**Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. P Score</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. D Score</td>
<td>.54***</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Stage 4 Score</td>
<td>-.62***</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Stage 2 Score</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>-.36***</td>
<td>-.21**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Company Benefits</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.33***</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Self Benefits</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.31***</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>.33***</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Age</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Gender</td>
<td>-.24***</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Managerial Status</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>37.69</td>
<td>23.76</td>
<td>21.49</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>52.14</td>
<td>42.84</td>
<td>29.55</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>12.53</td>
<td>6.74</td>
<td>7.29</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>8.05</td>
<td>7.91</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\* “Age” is in years. “Gender” was scored as “1” for women and “2” for men. “Managerial status” was scored as “1” for “does not supervise other employees” and “2” for “supervises other employees”. \( * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001. \)

### Discussion

This paper began by asserting the importance of ethics in contemporary organizations. If ethics indeed is important, then it seems crucial to achieve a clearer understanding of this vital topic. This understanding cannot be achieved without first developing a firmer grasp of the conceptual implications of popular measurement tools. Research into moral reasoning (using the DIT) typically relies on only one of many possible available indices. The P score is used in the vast majority of such studies (apparently by default), and seemingly without grasping its inherent conceptual limitations. “Ethical orientations” appear to be assessed without considering the potential conceptual importance of the implicit or explicit intended beneficiary of ethically questionable activities. Those activities intended to benefit individuals seem guided by self-interest. In contrast, similar activities designed to benefit employing organizations seem guided, in part, by a desire to conform to authority. These differing motivations for “unethical” behaviour alone suggest the possibility of significant differences in patterns of causes, consequences, and correlates for ethical orientations depending on the identity of the intended beneficiary.

Perhaps the best way to appreciate this study’s contributions would be to consider results if, like the vast majority of studies, it had relied exclusively on DIT P scores. Seemingly, moral reasoning should be connected to ethical orientations, with more advanced reasoning linked with higher “ethics” (however assessed). P scores, however, correlated weakly with scores on both “ethics” scales used here. Such results are consistent with those of many other studies that found weak relationships at best between P scores and seemingly relevant ethics-oriented variables. These include locus of control (e.g., Trevino & Youngblood, 1990), Machiavellianism (e.g., Rushton et al., 1981), attitudes toward honesty (Lasson & Bass, 1997; Uddin & Gillett, 2002), cheating behaviours (e.g., Bruggeman & Hart, 1996), deontological orientation (Arnett & Hunt, 2002), academic misconduct (Cummings, Dyas, Maddux, & Kochman, 2001), and ethical
idealism and relativism (Arnett & Hunt, 2002; Forsyth, 1980; Ho et al., 1997). Marnburg (2001) argued that moral reasoning simply has little relevance to ethics, and this paper might have concurred. Yet how can it be that moral reasoning is unconnected with “ethics”? 

One possible answer to the preceding question is that researchers must recognize that P scores may not always be an appropriate index of moral reasoning. As discussed, the P score may be unable to tap into important differences among low scoring respondents. The potential of this measurement limitation of the P score to understate the magnitude of relationships with other variables has apparently not been recognized in the literature. The DIT D score seems better able to differentiate among the wide range of respondents’ moral reasoning modes, and thus D scores may often relate significantly to apparently relevant variables even when P scores may not. This precise result appeared in relationships involving the Company Benefits variable assessing beliefs about the appropriateness of ethically questionable activities beneficial to employing organizations. Although the D index may not necessarily be “better than” the widely used P index, researchers must be alert to the circumstances in which a consideration of the D index is essential in order to test predictions fairly. D scores appear to be important if advanced moral reasoners seem, a priori, likely to respond similarly on an apparently relevant variable to persons with high Stage 4, “maintaining norms” moral reasoning scores (see Table 1).

Researchers may also need to consider the conceptual implications of the intended beneficiary of the ethically questionable activities under consideration. At work, such activities could benefit either organizations as a whole or individuals at the expense of organizations. At first glance, it might appear as if all ethically dubious activities are essentially “created equal”, and that individual motivation to respond “unethically” would be the same regardless of the beneficiary. However, a key distinction between different intended beneficiaries is fundamental attitudes toward authority. Activities performed for an organization's benefit may often conform to the (perhaps implicit) wishes of persons in positions of formal authority. However, activities that harm an organization are generally contrary to the wishes of such individuals.

Differences in moral reasoning between and among individuals often entail differences in fundamental attitudes toward authority. High Stage 4 scorers, for example, seem inclined to conform to the wishes of established authority (defined broadly), whereas high P scorers sometimes are willing to defy authority for the “greater good” (e.g., upholding the dignity of others). Conceptually, it thus makes sense that different moral reasoning indices might relate differently to ethical orientations with different intended beneficiaries. In this study, high D scorers regarded ethically questionable activities benefiting organizations as inappropriate, but not those benefiting individuals. High Stage 4 scorers regarded ethically questionable activities benefiting individuals as inappropriate, but not those benefiting organizations.

Any study of ethics seems potentially contaminated by social desirability response bias. As no measure of social desirability appeared on the surveys administered to respondents, this interpretation cannot directly be refuted. Nonetheless, social desirability seems an unlikely explanation for the results observed. Both the Company Benefits and Self Benefits scales would seem equally susceptible to socially desirable responding, in that presumably it “looks good” to indicate that any ethically questionable activity is inappropriate. Therefore, if social desirability were influencing this study's results, then relationships involving the Company Benefits scale would likely closely resemble those involving the Self Benefits scale (e.g., correlations of the same magnitude, significance level, directional sign). However, as shown, correlations between DIT indices and these two scales generally differed appreciably (and these differences were consistent with theoretical expectations). In general, social desirability effects seem unable to make some relationships “magically” appear, and “magically” to prevent others from appearing at
all. Moreover, the DIT seems unlikely to be influenced seriously by social desirability. One of this measure's strengths is the procedures used to eliminate respondents who may have responded “inappropriately”. Therefore, the mechanism by which social desirability might have influenced observed results hardly seems apparent.

The primary contribution of this paper may be the unifying conceptual framework designed to explain a perplexing pattern of empirical findings concerning moral reasoning (see Table 1). Many relevant variables “should be” significantly associated with moral reasoning indices (i.e., DIT P scores), but such relationships often fail to emerge. Researchers who have administered the DIT, and who uncovered weak or nonsignificant relationships involving P scores, may very well have results in their “file drawers” that require reexamination in light of the preceding unifying explanatory framework (e.g., using D scores). After all, given the many weak and nonsignificant results involving moral reasoning indices that have appeared in the published literature (e.g., Elm & Nichols, 1993), it seems probable that many similar results have never been published.

Earlier, this paper asked whether independent thinking about ethics truly represented a desirable goal of ethics training in organizations. Perhaps it does, but the “problem” is that managers must recognize that independent thinkers (i.e., advanced moral reasoners) may defy the presumed wishes and desires of organizational authority figures. If ethics training works “too well” and produces advanced moral reasoners, then organizational interests may not always be of primary importance to employees. Advanced moral reasoners in this study (i.e., high D scorers) regarded ethically questionable workplace activities designed to benefit employing organizations as inappropriate. Therefore if the goals of ethics training are unclear or are “insincere” (e.g., a desire to have “ethical” employees only when convenient, or when it suits organizational interests), then such training may very well produce unintended consequences.

References


