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**Abstract**

Previous research has produced contradictory results on whether and how “experience” relates to ethical decision making in the workplace. Maintaining that these divergent findings result from underspecified and inconsistent treatments of experience in the business ethics literature, we build theory around experience and its connection to ethical decision making. To this end, we draw upon and advance research on ethical expertise, defined as the degree to which one is knowledgeable about and skilled at applying moral values within a given work context. We also unpack the nature and consequences of two forms of ethical expertise, convergent and divergent. Building on this foundation—and seeking to reconcile the contradictory results around experience and ethical decision making—we theorize factors associated with the acquisition of ethical expertise in the workplace. We conclude by discussing the implications of our theorizing for business ethics scholarship and expertise research.

**Keywords**

Business ethics, cognitive schemas, ethical expertise, experience, expert performance

Fueled by an unrelenting string of corporate scandals, research on business ethics has gained prominence in organizational psychology. In particular, researchers have developed and tested a number of theories and frameworks designed to

explain why people make unethical decisions in the workplace (for reviews, see Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008; Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2014; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). Emerging from this body of work is

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the view that unethical decision making is not restricted to “bad apples.” Rather, a host of factors subtly nudge people to make unethical decisions (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008; Martin, Kish-Gephart, & Detert, *in press*; Moore & Gino, 2013).

While unethical decision making may be commonplace, one might expect that people become more capable of making ethical (or equivalently, moral) decisions as they attain experience, either in life or, more specifically, in the workplace. This expectation accords with Aristotle’s assertion that ethical decision making is a form of excellence rooted in good habits cultivated through experience and training (Solomon, 1992). It also aligns with the claim that, through acquiring certain experiences in the moral domain, people become more advanced in their moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1981). Nevertheless, research has yielded little consensus about the relationship between experience and ethical decision making in the workplace (T. W. Lee, Ferrell, & Mansfield, 2000; O’Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). In fact, while some studies have concluded that this relationship is positive (e.g., Cole & Smith, 1996; Larkin, 2000; Weeks, Moore, McKinney, & Longenecker, 1999), others have found it to be either insignificant (e.g., Cohen, Pant, & Sharp, 2001; Roozen, Pelsmacker, & Bostyn, 2001; Wimalasiri, Pavri, & Jalil, 1996) or negative (e.g., Elm & Nichols, 1993; Kaynama, King, & Smith, 1996; Reiss & Mitra, 1998).

These findings are puzzling not simply because they diverge but also because of the central role experience plays across multiple areas of business ethics scholarship. For example, experience is integral to moral development models advanced by researchers who view ethical decision making as a function of systematic moral reasoning (e.g., Kohlberg, 1981; Rest, 1986; Treviño, 1986). Likewise, scholars who maintain that ethical decision making is oftentimes rooted in intuitive or automatic processes rather than rational analysis view experience as a key input to the moral intuitions that

underlie ethical decisions (e.g., Haidt, 2001; Sonenshein, 2007; Weaver, Reynolds, & Brown, 2014). This raises the important question of why empirical research is inconclusive, and even contradictory, on the relationship between experience and ethical decision making.

In reviewing existing theory and findings in this area, it is apparent that the business ethics literature lacks a sufficient theoretical basis for conceptualizing experience. Indeed, experience has been assessed through an assortment of constructs including age (e.g., Elm & Nichols, 1993), education (e.g., Cole & Smith, 1996), and organizational tenure (e.g., Weeks et al., 1999). Adding to the confusion in this area, scholars have yet to consider sufficiently what individuals gain from experience that fosters (un)ethical decision making. Together, these fragmented measures and underspecified mechanisms point to a fundamental shortfall in our understanding of experience in business ethics.

Seeking to bring greater coherence to this area of research, we provide a detailed treatment of experience and ethical decision making in the workplace by drawing upon an expanding body of research on the concept of expertise (for reviews, see Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich, & Hoffman, 2006; Salas, Rosen, & DiazGranados, 2010; Sonnentag, 2000). We find value in expertise research because it is concerned with the nature of experience as well as the psychological processes by which people approach problems and make decisions in work settings. Through integrating business ethics research with expertise scholarship, we structure our arguments around the concept of ethical expertise, which we define as the degree to which one is knowledgeable about and skilled at applying moral values within a given work context. We propose that ethical expertise enables individuals to overcome a range of challenges associated with ethical decision making. In making this case, we draw a distinction between “convergent” and “divergent” ethical expertise and suggest that the former facilitates moral awareness and moral judgment whereas the latter helps people resolve

moral dilemmas. While in some cases the individuals possessing convergent or divergent ethical expertise may occupy formal roles in organizations (e.g., ethics officers), we focus on a broader set of individuals we term “ethical experts”—people who are knowledgeable about and skilled at applying moral values in their work context, regardless of their role or rank.

Besides accounting for the nature and consequences of ethical expertise, we focus in depth on how individuals can attain such expertise. Specifically, we canvass a range of factors that may influence the development of convergent and divergent ethical expertise. Thus, we theorize avenues by which one can progress from ethical novice to ethical expert at work. In doing so, we shed light on why research has yielded little consensus on the link between experience and ethical decision making and provide a basis for rethinking what it means to gain experience in the moral domain.

We begin this paper by reviewing and elaborating theory on ethical expertise and discussing its influence on ethical decision making in the workplace. Building on this foundation, we explore how people acquire convergent and divergent ethical expertise in work settings and consider why some forms of experience facilitate ethical decision making while others do not. We conclude by discussing the implications of our theorizing for multiples lines of research related to business ethics and expertise.

## Ethical expertise

In recent years, scholarly interest in the concept of expertise, defined as the degree to which one possesses knowledge and skills within a given domain, has blossomed (Ericsson et al., 2006). Due to their knowledge and skills, experts tend to solve problems and make decisions more effectively than others within the focal domain (Bilalić, McLeod, & Gobet, 2009; Dane, Rockmann, & Pratt, 2012). More generally, experts demonstrate “reproducibly superior performance” (Ericsson,

Roring, & Nandagopal, 2007)—a testament to the reliability and the caliber of their abilities.

Though rarely considered in organizational psychology, some work suggests that people can become experts in the moral domain. Notably, Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1991) proposed that ethical expertise is comparable to other forms of expertise in that it involves a set of skills acquired through specific experiences. From this perspective, individuals vary in ethical expertise across a continuum ranging from novice to expert. Adopting this perspective, other scholars have invoked the term ethical expertise, though in different ways. For example, while Stichter (2007) construed ethical expertise in terms of skills and virtues, Reed (2013) enriched this view by defining ethical expertise, in part, based on one’s openness to refutation during philosophical arguments. While most discussions of ethical expertise are rooted in philosophical perspectives, a few psychological scholars have examined the claim that ethical decision making is a matter of expertise. For example, Narvaez and Lapsley (2005) suggested that research on expertise provides a window into the processes and methods (e.g., education) by which children develop an understanding of morality. Extending this line of theorizing, Narvaez (2010) observed that through the course of growth and development, people become increasingly competent at engaging with the moral problems they encounter in everyday life.

Existing research on ethical expertise dovetails with Kohlberg’s (1981) theory of moral development. As frequently discussed in the literature, Kohlberg (1981) submitted that ethical reasoning becomes increasingly sophisticated with age, progressing sequentially and irreversibly through six stages of moral development (the final two stages of which Kohlberg believed many individuals never reach). In Stage 3, for example, judgments concerning morality are premised on the beliefs of significant others; in Stage 4, such judgments are based on rules and laws. Despite the prominence of Kohlberg’s

work, scholars have criticized his arguments on several grounds (see e.g., Haidt, 2012; Krebs & Denton, 2005; Schweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987). Notably, scholars have questioned Kohlberg's assumption that ethical decision making generally involves a formalized and systematic process of reasoning—an assumption at odds with some contemporary theories of moral judgment (e.g., Haidt, 2001; Sonenshein, 2007). Moreover, scholars have challenged Kohlberg's claim that moral development occurs primarily through intellectual goals. As argued by Krebs and Denton (2005), acquisition of knowledge and skill in the moral domain stems not only from intellectual goals but also from personal and social goals associated with people's desire to attain acceptance and influence within social communities—an argument pointing to the value of experiences accrued within specific social contexts (e.g., one's organization).

As these critiques suggest, theorizing ethical expertise from a moral development perspective may prevent scholars from accounting for relevant phenomena beyond the scope of Kohlberg's theorizing. More generally, limiting discussion of ethical expertise to a particular line of ethics research runs the risk of neglecting potentially critical psychological processes central to a body of work fundamentally concerned with the nature, complexities, and consequences of experience—expertise research. Consequently, we see value in developing an integrative perspective on ethical expertise that provides for theory and findings associated with multiple lines of organizational and psychological scholarship.

In keeping with extant views of ethical expertise as well as current psychological scholarship on the topic of expertise, we define ethical expertise (from a workplace perspective) as the degree to which one is knowledgeable about and skilled at applying moral values within a given work context (e.g., an organization, occupation, or profession). This definition indicates that ethical expertise is a body of knowledge and skills attainable to varying degrees. As such, ethical expertise is

distinct from concepts like moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002), moral attentiveness (Reynolds, 2008), and idealism (Forsyth, 1980)—concepts typically viewed as dispositional factors rather than skills acquired through significant levels of experience, training, practice, or effort (see Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010, for a review and meta-analysis of dispositional factors related to [un]ethical decision making). This is not to say, however, that ethical expertise is unrelated to dispositional factors. On the contrary, as we later theorize, certain dispositional factors may influence the development of ethical expertise (see Acquiring Ethical Expertise section).

### *Knowledge of moral values*

Ethical expertise entails knowledge of moral values—a form of “declarative knowledge,” or knowledge of facts and rules (Anderson, 1996). To be considered moral, values must align with—or at least not violate—universal moral principles (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999; Reynolds, Dang, Yam, & Leavitt, 2014). Accordingly, the term *moral values*, as used in our definition of ethical expertise, applies to all values within the focal context that equate with (or do not violate) moral principles that are endorsed universally. As cases involving moral corruption remind us, not all organizational values are moral (Ashforth, Gioia, Robinson, & Treviño, 2008). For example, values that promote stealing assets—the type of values evinced in recent corporate scandals—do not meet universally held standards of morality and therefore do not constitute values around which ethical expertise congeals. These cases aside, we follow the lead of other scholars in assuming that organizations generally espouse and seek to uphold universal moral principles (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). At the same time, we recognize that even when broadly aligned with such principles, the content of moral values can differ between organizations (Phillips & Margolis, 1999; Victor & Cullen, 1988). For example, some organizations

ban any smoking by their employees, whereas others deliberately refrain from regulating their employees' personal lives. While these divergent policies affirm different moral values (e.g., a utilitarian value for lowering healthcare costs versus a deontological value for protecting individuals' rights), in each case the value affirmed may be concordant with universal moral principles. As this example suggests, context-specific moral values are often richer and more concrete than the "thin" content of universal morality (Sonenshein, 2005; Walzer, 1994).

### *Applying moral values: Convergent and divergent processes*

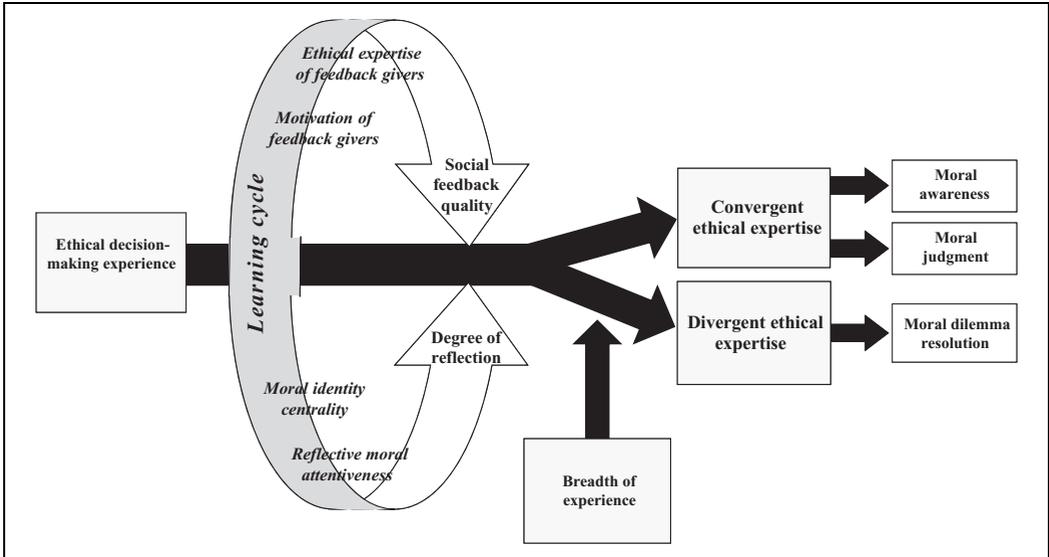
Ethical expertise also concerns skill at *applying* moral values—a competence scholars have termed "procedural knowledge" or "know-how" (Anderson, 1996; Brady, 1986). This claim follows from the observation that experts possess not only a sizable body of knowledge about domain-related rules and principles but also the ability to put these rules and principles into practice in a manner that promotes effective task performance (Ericsson & Towne, 2010). While procedural knowledge is often associated with physical or motor skill domains (e.g., athletics), in some domains such knowledge is primarily cognitive (e.g., chess). Indeed, this is the case in the moral domain.

Another distinction concerning procedural knowledge is especially relevant to our theorizing. While, in some cases, procedural knowledge involves the ability to perform a given set of tasks reliably and repeatedly, in other cases procedural knowledge involves the ability to generate novelty (Barnett & Koslowski, 2002; Ericsson, 1999). For example, a visual artist may be either an expert at replicating the style and quality of master painters or an expert at producing work that is highly original (or both). Given its focus on consistency, the former type of procedural knowledge involves cognitive processes that are convergent, or rooted in pattern recognition and categorization (Brophy, 2000–

2001; Cropley, 2006). Convergent processing fosters consistent performance in that it involves drawing upon and applying a set of rules encoded in cognitive schemas to make decisions and solve problems in a repeatable, predictable manner (Cropley, 2006). The latter type of procedural knowledge, in contrast, implicates divergent cognitive processes, which involve rearranging components of one's schemas to produce a new idea or concept (Mumford & Gustafson, 1988). In line with this observation, researchers have argued that divergent processes are critical to (though not synonymous with) creative idea generation (e.g., Runco, 2008; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993).

Extending this theorizing to the moral domain, we distinguish between convergent ethical expertise and divergent ethical expertise. Convergent ethical expertise enables people to put into practice the moral values of their organization via convergent cognitive operations, a skill that, as argued in what follows, increases moral awareness and aligns moral judgment with the moral values of the focal context. Divergent ethical expertise enables people to think flexibly and generate imaginative solutions, a skill that, as later suggested, helps people resolve moral dilemmas. In drawing this distinction, we do not mean to suggest that individuals cannot be skilled in each of these respects. On the contrary, as we later theorize, one can acquire ethical expertise in both regards under certain circumstances.

Applying moral values (either convergently or divergently) is not a trivial feat. It is one thing to understand moral values; it is quite another to put those values into practice when making decisions. As discussed before, universal moral principles are generally abstract (Walzer, 1994), which renders them subject to contextual contingencies when applied within the "thick" cultural environments of organizations (Sonenshein, 2005). Moreover, organizations often have context-specific moral values, the application of which may require a nuanced understanding of how such values



**Figure 1.** Means of acquisition and consequences of ethical expertise.

align with particular situations one may encounter at work. Illustrating and extending these observations, we consider below how ethical expertise facilitates ethical decision making in the workplace.

## Ethical expertise and ethical decision making

In this section, we consider how both convergent and divergent ethical expertise contribute to ethical decision making in work settings. We focus on the connections between ethical expertise and three phenomena that have received considerable attention in the business ethics literature: (a) whether one “sees” the ethics associated with a given situation (moral awareness), (b) how one evaluates or judges what actions are morally appropriate (moral judgment), and (c) whether and how one generates solutions to moral dilemmas (moral dilemma resolution). Figure 1 depicts the relationships theorized in this section as well as additional relationships theorized in subsequent sections of this paper.

In drawing connections between ethical expertise and the phenomena noted before, we devote attention to the schema-level features of expertise—features that underlie and account for experts’ declarative and procedural knowledge (Chi, Feltovich, & Glaser, 1981; de Jong & Ferguson-Hessler, 1996). Research suggests that experts’ cognitive schemas—or structures containing “knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus, including its attributes and the relations among those attributes” (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 98)—are more complex than novices’ schemas in terms of the number of attributes they contain as well as the number of relations between these attributes and the number of relations between the schemas themselves (Dane, 2010). By implication, insofar as one possesses a large body of knowledge concerning moral values and is adept at applying those values, one is likely to have complex moral schemas (cf. Narvaez & Bock, 2002).

### *Moral awareness*

Disconcertingly, research suggests that even when people are cognizant of relevant moral

values, they can fail to perceive the ethical issues associated with a number of problems they encounter in the workplace (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). In such situations, people lack “moral awareness” (Butterfield, Treviño, & Weaver, 2000). For example, although an organization may have moral values that oppose discrimination, a manager familiar with these values may not notice that a proposed set of recruiting criteria will result in discrimination against members of a certain demographic group. Consequently, this manager may not take into account ethical issues when deciding whether to accept or reject the proposed criteria.

As with many awareness-related tasks, spotting ethical issues in a given problem involves a largely convergent act of perception (Rest, 1986)—an act that can be challenging given humans’ limited attentional resources (Simon, 1947). In the moral domain, these limitations amount to “bounded ethicality” (Chugh & Bazerman, 2007). Due to bounded ethicality, moral awareness is not perfect; people often overlook the moral content of the problems they face. This does not mean, however, that all people are equally vulnerable in this regard; in fact, research suggests that some individuals are more morally aware than others (Reynolds, 2006a, 2008).

We posit that, within work settings, the development of convergent ethical expertise partially accounts for interpersonal variance in moral awareness. Unpacking this claim, we return to the observation that ethical expertise is encoded in complex cognitive schemas. As research suggests, schemas guide human attention (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Specifically, they direct people toward certain targets and away from others—a convergent cognitive process (Gobet & Simon, 1996; Henderson, 2003). The more complex one’s domain schemas, the more likely one’s schemas will activate automatically upon exposure to domain-related cues (Lewandowsky, Little, & Kalish, 2007). For example, an expert teacher’s domain schemas may activate when the teacher walks into a classroom

(cf. Hogan & Rabinowitz, 2009). Once one’s domain schemas are activated, one is likely to notice domain-related objects or events (Myles-Worsley, Johnston, & Simons, 1988).

Domain schemas shape not only what people see but also how they interpret the stimuli they perceive (George & Jones, 2001). To illustrate, due to different levels of expertise (and different levels of schema complexity), a neophyte trial attorney may perceive an unexpected event during a courtroom trial as either unrelated or threatening to his or her case while a more seasoned attorney may spot opportunities in that event (Dane, 2013). This suggests that insofar as one possesses complex, context-specific moral schemas, one not only focuses attention on moral problems but also perceives ethical issues in the problems to which one attends. By implication, then, the higher one’s convergent ethical expertise in a given work setting, the more attuned one should be to both the presence and the content of moral problems (aspects of attention involving convergent psychological processes). In short, convergent ethical expertise should enhance moral awareness.

### *Moral judgment*

When individuals perceive moral content in a problem, they make moral judgments (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008). As indicated by a large volume of scholarly discussion and debate, multiple cognitive processes can shape moral judgments, including systematic and deliberate forms of reasoning as well as rapid and largely nonconscious processes (e.g., Gunia, Wang, Huang, Wang, & Murnighan, 2012; Haidt, 2007; Narvaez, 2010; Reynolds, 2006b; Zhong, 2011). Nevertheless, a growing body of research suggests that the processes associated with many moral judgments are less conscious or deliberative than once believed (for reviews, see Dinh & Lord, 2013; Rogerson, Gottlieb, Handelsman, Knapp, & Younggren, 2011; Weaver et al., 2014). Indeed, some research suggests that the operations precipitating moral judgments are

oftentimes akin to those producing aesthetic judgments. That is, each type of judgment may arise from a convergent pattern-matching process in which evaluations of “good” versus “bad,” like evaluations of “beautiful” versus “ugly,” are made almost immediately (Dane & Pratt, 2009; Tsukiura & Cabeza, 2011).

Within the body of research advancing intuition-based accounts of moral judgment, a more focused line of investigation has examined the nature and applications of heuristics in the moral domain (e.g., Gigerenzer, 2010; Sunstein, 2005, 2008). Heuristics are effort-reducing cognitive devices that enable people to make judgments by examining relatively fewer cues, integrating less information, or considering fewer alternatives (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008). Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier define a heuristic as “a strategy that ignores part of the information, with the goal of making decisions more quickly, frugally, and/or accurately than more complex methods” (2011, p. 454).

While in some cases heuristics may produce judgments aligned with the moral values of a given work context, in other cases heuristics may backfire and produce moral judgments that, upon examination, conflict with these values. For example, Sunstein (2005) observes that in making a judgment about the moral appropriateness of emissions trading, individuals may be inclined to apply a particular heuristic—namely, that people should not be permitted to engage in moral wrongdoing for a fee. In applying this heuristic, individuals treat pollution as “equivalent to a crime in a way that overgeneralizes a moral intuition that makes sense in other contexts” (Sunstein, 2005, p. 537).

Convergent ethical expertise may prevent people from applying heuristics to moral problems inappropriately. As noted earlier, people with convergent ethical expertise possess complex moral schemas that enable them to apply moral values consistently and accurately. Such schemas should not only attune people to moral problems (as discussed earlier) but also shape the moral judgments people

make. In particular, the more complex one’s moral schemas, the more likely one’s moral judgments will reflect nuances and exigencies related to the focal context and the less likely these judgments will arise from context-insensitive heuristics (Narvaez, 2010). This claim aligns with the observation that the intuitive judgments of experts tend to be both accurate and domain relevant (Dane & Pratt, 2007) and equates with the observation that, in the moral domain, expertise is associated with “a movement *away from*, rather than *towards*, moral judgments guided by heuristics” (Bartsch & Wright, 2005, p. 547).

In short, convergent ethical expertise should reduce the likelihood that individuals will misapply heuristics in the moral domain. This is not necessarily because such expertise ensures that people will spot the potential limitations or risks of these heuristics but rather because ethical expertise decreases the likelihood that their judgments will be based on heuristics in the first place. Resistant to the influence of heuristics, the moral judgments associated with convergent ethical expertise are byproducts of complex, context-sensitive moral schemas.

### *Moral dilemma resolution*

While many moral problems pose challenges for ethical decision making, one type of moral problem may prove especially vexing—moral dilemmas (Monin, Pizarro, & Beer, 2007). By their nature, moral dilemmas concern a perceived trade-off between seemingly incompatible courses of action involving conflicting moral requirements (Sinnott-Armstrong, 1997). Hence, moral dilemmas involve a “clash of moral duties” (Monin et al., 2007, p. 102). Moral dilemmas are a fundamental element of Kohlberg’s (1981) model and are evident in classic ethics debates, such as those involving trade-offs between utilitarian and deontological ethical systems (e.g., should one tell a lie to ensure the welfare of others?), as well as workplace scenarios involving competing moral values.

For example, the moral values of a particular manufacturing organization may entail both minimizing environmental damage and maximizing shareholder value. At times, these distinct moral values may produce moral dilemmas for organizational decision makers that seem difficult, if not impossible, to resolve.

To resolve a moral dilemma, one must recognize and account for the fact that the dilemma may contain one or more options that are not immediately obvious (Gruber, 1993). These less visible options may enable one to resolve the dilemma without making an unfortunate trade-off. To illustrate, consider the radical reinvention of Interface Carpet (Anderson, 1998). In this case, the organization's CEO, Ray Anderson, had the insight that two seemingly opposing moral values he supported—treating the environment with respect and honoring shareholder commitments—could be reconciled. Consequently, he reoriented his company toward a strategy that was not only profitable but also environmentally sustainable.

To identify novel options in the face of a moral dilemma, one may need to construct a novel representation of the problem at hand—an operation that calls for rearranging the components of one's moral schemas (Johnson, 1993; Narvaez, 2010). While schema rearrangement may occur in various and sometimes straightforward ways (e.g., through incorporating exceptions; see Fiske & Taylor, 1991), revising schemas in the service of generating original ideas is a divergent cognitive process (Mumford, Mobley, Uhlman, Reiter-Palmon, & Doares, 1991). This suggests that when it comes to resolving moral dilemmas, divergent ethical expertise should be invaluable. Not only does divergent ethical expertise involve complex schemas—a feature that creates the potential for a large number of schema rearrangements (Dane, 2010)—but it also entails proficiency for generating original ideas and novel possibilities. In generating such possibilities, one may arrive at a solution that satisfies

all moral claims and duties pertinent to the dilemma.

## Acquiring ethical expertise

As expertise research suggests, any statement to the effect of “experience leads to ethical expertise” is likely oversimplified, as acquiring expertise in a given domain requires more than time alone (Kahneman & Klein, 2009). The experiences most conducive to expertise acquisition are not passive but rather involve active participation and a high degree of repetition (Ericsson & Charness, 1994). Furthermore, to facilitate expertise acquisition, experiences should involve rapid and accurate feedback (Dane & Pratt, 2007) coupled with a high degree of reflection—a key aspect of learning (Daudelin, 1996). Consistent with these claims, and as depicted in Figure 1, we theorize that organizational members accrue both convergent and divergent ethical expertise insofar as they engage with moral problems in work settings (“ethical decision-making experience”), receive high-quality social feedback, and reflect on this feedback. Furthermore, we suggest that an additional factor, breadth of experience, influences the degree to which divergent ethical expertise arises through the processes described next.

## Ethical decision-making experience

In engaging with moral problems at work, organizational members gain ethical decision-making experience. As a means of ethical expertise acquisition, ethical decision-making experience is pivotal, particularly when accompanied by social feedback (Hannah, Avolio, & May, 2011; Sonenshein, 2007). In some cases, one may attain feedback by seeking the input of colleagues on decisions one is in the process of making. In other cases, feedback may be received without prompting after one has made a decision. In either case, feedback comes from people in a specific organizational context. For example, a decision one believed to be

consistent with moral values might meet the disapproval of a colleague or supervisor. This disapproval may trigger emotions like guilt, shame, or embarrassment—emotions related to the recognition that one has violated social standards for moral behavior (Warren & Smith-Crowe, 2008). The emotional imprint of social feedback concerning a particular decision is likely to modify subsequent decisions under similar circumstances (Keltner & Buswell, 1997). At the cognitive level, this modification reflects an increase in the complexity of context-specific moral schemas.

Although schema complexity underlies expertise (Dane, 2010; Narvaez & Bock, 2002), schema complexity is not necessarily equivalent to schema accuracy. In some cases, one's schemas, including those pertinent to the moral domain, may be complex but also faulty in certain respects. On a related note, the complexity of one's moral schemas may be limited even when one has accrued considerable ethical decision-making experience. Accounting for these possibilities, we consider two dimensions that may affect the degree to which ethical decision-making experience fosters ethical expertise: the quality of social feedback and the degree to which one reflects on this feedback. Taken together, these dimensions constitute the learning cycle associated with ethical expertise acquisition (Figure 1).

### *Social feedback quality*

While decisions made in the moral domain often elicit social feedback (Haidt, 2001; Narvaez, 2010), the feedback one receives may vary in accuracy, precision, or more generally, "quality" (Hogarth, 2001). Ultimately, the extent to which one develops convergent and divergent ethical expertise via ethical decision-making experience depends on the quality of social feedback one receives. Just as receiving prescriptions from a misguided coach may hinder one's development in a range of performance domains (Duke & Simmons, 2006; Reid, Crespo,

Lay, & Berry, 2007) so too may receiving low-quality social feedback compromise the learning cycle and limit the development of ethical expertise. We theorize that characteristics of feedback givers—notably their ethical expertise and their motivation for providing feedback—determine whether the feedback one receives is high or low in quality.

*Ethical expertise of feedback givers.* By their very nature, ethical experts understand the moral values of the focal context and know how to put these values into practice. As such, the feedback these individuals provide is likely high in quality. By no means, however, is social feedback limited to the input offered by ethical experts. Indeed, feedback often stems from leaders, supervisors, and other authority figures and research suggests that such individuals are not always adept in the moral domain (Aguilera & Vadera, 2008; M. E. Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Whether social feedback originates from an authority figure, a colleague, or a subordinate, one should not discount the possibility that the feedback giver may be "unskilled and unaware of it" (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). More generally, one should consider that the quality of social feedback one receives is likely tied to the company one keeps at work.

*Motivation of feedback givers.* Research suggests that feedback tends to be higher in quality when provided by a person who is motivated by a desire to help others—that is, when the feedback giver's motives are prosocial (De Dreu, Nijstad, & van Knippenberg, 2008). In particular, when one takes others' interests to heart and provides feedback customized to their needs, one's feedback is generally detailed and useful (Steinel, Utz, & Koning, 2010). In the moral domain, this suggests that high-quality social feedback is often delivered by those who are "other oriented" or "concerned with and helpful to other people" (Meglino & Korsgaard, 2004, p. 948). By contrast, the quality of social feedback likely declines when the feedback

giver's motivation is self-serving or perhaps even ill-intentioned (e.g., Felps, Mitchell, & Byington, 2006).

### *Degree of reflection*

Acquiring expertise involves not only pursuing specific experiences and receiving feedback but also making an effort to obtain the lessons of experience through reflection (Bandura, 2001; A. Y. Lee & Hutchison, 1998). Multifaceted in form, reflection is pertinent to—and catalytic of—multiple lines of research. Some work, for example, examines “reflection-in-action” (Schön, 1983), a form of reflection enlisted in the service of real-time problem solving and privileged in epistemological perspectives on organizational knowing (Cook & Brown, 1999; Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). Other lines of theorizing, including the arguments advanced in the present paper, are concerned more centrally with “reflection-on-action” (Schön, 1983), which involves devoting thought to previously experienced events and seeking to gain lessons or insights from these experiences (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Moon, 2004). Psychological processes associated with such reflection include counterfactual thinking (Epstude & Roese, 2008), social comparison (Brewer & Weber, 1994), and, more generally, mental simulation (Markman & McMullen, 2003). As some have suggested, the psychological processes surrounding reflection are generally adaptive; they facilitate learning and enable individuals to interact effectively with social communities (Baumeister & Masicampo, 2010).

We theorize that, in the moral domain, reflection facilitates the acquisition of convergent and divergent ethical expertise. More specifically, we suggest that the relationship between ethical decision-making experience and each type of ethical expertise is amplified for individuals who devote considerable reflection to the moral problems they have faced, the decisions they have made in response to such problems, and how these decisions were

received within the focal context. In contrast, the effects of ethical decision-making experience on expertise acquisition should be weaker for individuals disinclined to reflect upon such experiences and the associated social feedback. Building on these claims, we propose that certain dispositional factors—notably moral identity centrality and reflective moral attentiveness—influence the degree to which one reflects on one's experiences.

*Moral identity centrality.* While most people possess a moral identity—a view of oneself as a moral actor—individuals vary in the degree to which they view their moral identity as central to their self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002; O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011). Scholars suggest that those who view moral identity as self-defining (i.e., those high in moral identity centrality) are strongly motivated to maintain consistency between their decisions and their moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012). For this reason, individuals with high moral identity centrality are especially concerned with making ethical decisions (Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009; Mulder & Aquino, 2013). Accordingly, we theorize that individuals with high moral identity centrality are likely to reflect on the decisions they made in the moral domain, asking themselves to what extent their decisions fit the moral values at hand and how they might improve in this regard. Relatedly, we expect that these individuals will devote much thought to the social feedback they receive. In short, the more central one's moral identity is to one's self-concept, the more one should engage in reflection in the moral domain.

*Reflective moral attentiveness.* Research indicates that individuals vary in moral attentiveness—“the extent to which an individual chronically perceives and considers morality and moral elements in his or her experiences” (Reynolds, 2008, p. 1028). As this definition suggests, moral attentiveness can be divided into two

aspects—perceptual and reflective. While perceptual moral attentiveness is concerned with “how information is automatically colored as it is encountered,” reflective moral attentiveness concerns the degree to which one “uses morality to reflect on and examine experience” (Reynolds, 2008, p. 1028). This latter aspect, reflective moral attentiveness, is particularly relevant to the learning cycle described here, given the prominence of reflection in this cycle. By its nature, reflective moral attentiveness involves devoting thought to the moral content and ethical implications of the choices and decisions one has made. As such, individuals with high reflective moral attentiveness should engage in a high degree of reflection in the moral domain. That is, these individuals are likely to reflect upon the ethical decision-making experiences they have accrued as well as the social feedback accompanying such experiences.

### *Breadth of experience*

As depicted in Figure 1, we theorize that the learning cycle discussed before contributes directly to the development of convergent ethical expertise. This claim aligns with research demonstrating the value of feedback in helping people develop convergent psychological capacities (Lopes & Oden, 1987; Thompson & DeHarpport, 1994) and the value of reflection in helping people acquire expertise in domains associated with convergent thinking (Andrews, 1996; Mamede & Schmidt, 2004). With respect to the development of divergent ethical expertise, we theorize that feedback and reflection may prove similarly useful. That is, through the course of receiving feedback on—and reflecting upon—their decision-making efforts in the moral domain, individuals may learn to think flexibly about moral problems and draw divergent connections accordingly (cf. Memmert, Baker, & Bertsch, 2010). Nevertheless, we posit that the strength of the link between the learning cycle and divergent ethical expertise

is contingent on an additional factor—breadth of experience.

Research suggests that individuals who think divergently tend to be those who have gained experience performing a wide range of roles and tasks (Barnett & Koslowski, 2002; Kimball & Holyoak, 2000). In accruing a wide-ranging set of experiences, individuals encounter situations in which they find it necessary to deviate from the problem-solving methods they typically rely on. In engaging with such situations, they are likely to develop a capacity for drawing comparisons, forming analogies, and thinking in terms of theoretical concepts (Barnett & Koslowski, 2002)—key aspects of adapting to novel situations and generating solutions to challenging problems (Barnett & Ceci, 2002; Novick, 1988). More generally, research suggests that accruing experiences across different domains—domains that may vary significantly in their rules, principles, or customs—increases the flexibility of one’s schemas and sparks imagination (Dane, 2010; Hargadon, 2006).

In line with these observations, we expect that the individuals most adept at thinking divergently about moral problems are those who have accrued a significant degree of experience in work settings beyond the focal context. In seeking to make decisions that accord with the moral values of different organizational departments or units—or even different organizations or industries—individuals may come to recognize that, in some cases, moral problems can be resolved in a variety of ways (cf. Werhane, 1999). With this recognition, they may begin to approach moral problems with a spirit of inquiry, perceiving such problems as opportunities to devise a range of possible solutions—an approach that may help these individuals maintain flexible moral schemas and think divergently about moral problems. In short, to the extent their breadth of work experience is high, individuals acquiring ethical expertise in a given work context stand to develop

moral schemas that are not only complex but also flexible enough to permit them to work with and integrate moral values through divergent operations.

## Discussion and implications

Research surrounding the relationship between experience and ethical decision making has produced contradictory findings. While some studies indicate that experience fosters ethical decision making, other studies point to more tenuous and even negative links. To make sense of this puzzle, we integrated multiple lines of research on business ethics with research on the concept of expertise. In the process, we developed theory on ethical expertise in work settings. As discussed in what follows, our theorizing carries a number of implications for business ethics scholarship, particularly research connecting experience to ethical decision making. We also describe key contributions to research on expertise.

### *Implications for business ethics*

Our theorizing suggests that experience is a deceptively simple construct that requires careful thought. In reconsidering the nature of experience in business ethics, we identified limitations of conceptualizing experience in terms of age or tenure (e.g., Roozen et al., 2001; Weeks et al., 1999). Specifically, we theorized that even when organizational members are similar in age, job tenure, or organizational tenure they may differ in the degree to which they have engaged with and made decisions in response to moral problems (ethical decision-making experience), received high-quality social feedback, or reflected on their decisions. These claims highlight the importance of looking beyond existing, coarse-grained views of experience and developing a richer understanding of the specific types of experience conducive to ethical decision making and how these types of experience matter for predicting

important ethics-related phenomena. Relatedly, our theorizing aligns with—and sheds light on—the fact that organizational managers and leaders are not always highly ethical (M. E. Brown & Mitchell, 2010). In line with the learning cycle discussed here, it is possible that some leaders, including those with significant organizational tenure, have not received the experiences that facilitate ethical expertise acquisition.

Concerning the relationship between experience and ethical decision making, our theorizing suggests that the key to understanding the contradictory results reviewed here is recognizing that experience is not a unitary construct with straightforward effects. Not only can experience be deconstructed into different types (e.g., age, tenure, ethical decision-making experience) but the same type of experience (perhaps most notably, ethical decision-making experience) can vary in its consequences depending on the nature and degree of social feedback and reflection surrounding it. Accounting for these nuances advances us toward a more comprehensive understanding of experience and its connections to ethical decision making in work settings. It also recasts the tension motivating this paper. Rather than assuming in line with previous research that the link between experience and ethical decision making can be reduced to a single relationship, we see value in embracing the possibility that a multitude of relationships exist (given that experience can take on different forms) and recognizing that, together, these relationships illustrate the complexity of experience in the moral domain. From this perspective, the question worth asking is not “is experience beneficial?” but rather “what experiences matter most and how can they be attained?” In this paper, we developed theory around these very issues.

Along related lines, our theorizing points to an underappreciated explanation for some cases of unethical decision making in organizations—namely, individuals make unethical

decisions because they lack the skills necessary to do otherwise. While this viewpoint dovetails with the assumption that people are often unaware of their ethical violations (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011), the implications of our claims are less bleak. As we suggested, under the right conditions, people can acquire expertise in the moral domain, affording them the knowledge and skills necessary to engage with the challenges they face in the moral domain. Analogous to expert athletes who are highly attuned to the events and phenomena unfolding in their performance arena (Werner & Thies, 2000) or chess grandmasters who can perform almost as well intuitively as with great deliberation (Simon, 1987), individuals with a high level of ethical expertise are capable of achievements in the moral domain that set them apart from others.

Finally, the arguments we advanced suggest cautionary notes for ethics training in organizations. Like other forms of expertise, ethical expertise cannot be attained simply by memorizing and regurgitating a codified set of principles. One acquires ethical expertise over a relatively lengthy period by becoming knowledgeable about the moral values of the context in which one is situated and skillful at making decisions aligned with these moral values. Thus, organizations should be wary of conveying to members that the ethical standards of the workplace can be easily understood and mastered via a few training sessions. Doing so may trivialize the complexities of ethical decision making and lead members to rely on an oversimplified set of ethical rules (Stansbury & Barry, 2007).

### *Implications for expertise*

In this paper, we extended the theoretical reach of expertise into a domain heretofore unexplored in expertise scholarship—ethical decision making. In doing so, we suggested that some of the features associated with expertise in other domains (e.g., athletics, chess, medicine) may hold in the

moral domain. Like other experts, ethical experts have complex schemas and acquire their expertise via certain forms of experience. At the same time, it is important to note that ethical expertise is distinct from other varieties of expertise receiving scholarly attention. Perhaps most fundamentally, ethical expertise applies to problems perceived to have moral content. As such, decisions made within the moral domain are subject to a different standard of effectiveness—one rooted in moral values as opposed to factual support or formal proof (Haidt & Kesebir, 2008).

Furthermore, the type of experience proposed to lead to ethical expertise (ethical decision-making experience) differs in some respects from that which spurs expertise acquisition in other domains. For example, while a frequently discussed avenue toward expertise acquisition, “deliberate practice” (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993), generally occurs separately from job performance itself (e.g., a professional golfer practices the same type of shot repeatedly, under the eye of a coach, in preparation for a tournament), ethical decision-making experience occurs “on the job.” Of course, for ethical expertise to arise, ethical decision-making experience must be accompanied by high-quality social feedback. Our arguments suggest that, in many instances, the social feedback critical for expertise acquisition does not come from individuals specifically appointed or hired to promote expertise acquisition (e.g., trainers or coaches) but instead emanates from a broader set of individuals within the organization (ideally those who have accrued high levels of ethical expertise). This hints at the potentially important, though underexplored, role of social relationships and networks in the development of expertise in the moral domain, and in other domains as well (cf. Cotton, Shen, & Livne-Tarandach, 2011).

Our theorizing also suggests that scholarly and layperson emphasis on deliberate practice—as witnessed in formal publications (e.g., Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007) and across the internet (e.g., Carter, 2014)—may be a

product of the contexts in which expertise has been considered. To be sure, deliberate practice is an invaluable and perhaps essential avenue toward expertise acquisition in a number of domains. But as managers and other organizational employees may attest, at least some level of expertise within their lines of work may be accrued through experiential avenues that do not meet the characteristics of deliberate practice, strictly defined. That is, for some workers, the road to expertise may be paved with stepping stones anchored as much in performance as in practice (Prietula & Simon, 1989). Of course, as we have emphasized, it is not merely time on the job that stokes expertise acquisition but rather specific experiences accompanied by appropriate learning conditions. Therefore, while deliberate practice may not be a prerequisite for expertise acquisition in the moral domain, one should not discount the importance of learning cycles when considering the link between experience and expertise in virtually any domain.

### *Future research directions*

Our theorizing surrounding ethical expertise opens several avenues for future research. While we theorized consequences of ethical expertise across three factors tied to ethical decision making (moral awareness, moral judgment, and moral dilemma resolution), ethical expertise might have other consequences. Researchers could investigate, for example, whether ethical experts are more attuned than others to the cognitive processes that often arise following an unethical decision (in the event that their expertise fails them and they succumb to unethical decision making). Here, research suggests that, after making an unethical decision, individuals are prone to forget the moral rules that were pertinent to the decision they made (Shu & Gino, 2012). While the processes by which such forgetting occurs may be largely automatic—a feature that should make direct observation of these processes difficult—we have argued that ethical experts are

deeply attuned to moral values. Therefore, upon making an unethical decision, it is possible that ethical experts are more likely to recognize, after the fact, a violation of moral values. Research is needed to test this possibility and, more generally, to examine the potential connections between ethical expertise and the temporal aspects of (un)ethical decision making (cf. Tenbrunsel, Diekmann, Wade-Benzoni, & Bazerman, 2010).

As the preceding observations suggest, ethical expertise is not a panacea for unethical decision making and we do not present it as such. Indeed, we see value in research investigating circumstances in which no amount of ethical expertise may be sufficient to prevent moral transgressions. In pursuing this avenue, scholars could grant attention to research indicating that some cases of unethical decision making are rooted in implicit biases (Bazerman, 2006). To illustrate, a supervisor may assign a low score to a subordinate on a performance review simply because this supervisor holds an implicit bias against a particular demographic group of which the subordinate happens to be a member (Banaji, Bazerman, & Chugh, 2003). Whether and to what degree individuals can subdue such threats to ethical decision making by developing ethical expertise remains unclear. On the one hand, some research suggests that implicit biases may be difficult if not impossible to consciously combat (see Bazerman & Banaji, 2004)—an assumption underlying the claim that organizations should adopt protocols to counter these biases (Banaji et al., 2003). On the other hand, scholars have noted that implicit attitudes and biases are not necessarily inaccessible to consciousness; rather, they arise through rapid and automatic cognitive processes (Gawronski, Hofmann, & Wilbur, 2006). This suggests that although implicit biases are not easily switched off, they can perhaps be spotted in flight. Here, research indicates that due to mindful self-awareness some individuals are particularly attuned to the outputs of implicit processes (K. W. Brown &

Ryan, 2003). More generally, research suggests that by focusing attention on intrapsychic processes, people can perceive a number of phenomena including attitudes and judgments they might otherwise overlook and thus fail to incorporate into their decision making (Carlson, 2013; Ruedy & Schweitzer, 2010). Through further research, scholars could investigate whether susceptibility to implicit biases varies across organizational decision makers and whether ethical expertise accounts for variance in this regard.

Finally, while we have focused on the knowledge and skills that help individuals make ethical decisions, we acknowledge that knowing how to make ethical decisions is not synonymous with actually behaving ethically (Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986). Although we suspect that being an ethical expert increases the likelihood that one will behave ethically, we recognize that the link between ethical expertise and ethical behavior is not always straightforward. For example, in some cases ethical experts may feel compelled by economic or industry events to take actions that violate the moral values of their organization to ensure its viability. Furthermore, a high level of physical exhaustion (Barnes, Schaubroeck, Huth, & Ghumman, 2011), an absence of financial support (Sharma, Mazar, Alter, & Ariely, 2014), a shortage of moral courage (Sekerka, Bagozzi, & Charnigo, 2009), or temptations that arise in “the heat of the moment” (Ariely & Loewenstein, 2006) may reduce the likelihood that ethical experts, like others, will pursue morally appropriate courses of action.

## Conclusion

Since antiquity, philosophers including Aristotle have asserted that ethical decision making can improve through experience. Such claims privilege the concept of experience even as they raise questions and complications for the study of business ethics. Perhaps most notably, if experience is beneficial in the moral domain, why has previous research failed to provide clear and

convincing evidence for this possibility? Engaging with this question, we focused this manuscript on issues concerning experience and ethical decision making by drawing attention to—and building theory on—ethical expertise. The expertise perspective advanced here clarifies and resolves theoretical tensions in the business ethics literature and sheds light on when and how various types of experience facilitate ethical decision making in organizations.

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