

## Ethical Decision Making of Gen Z Student Leaders in the Phenomenological-Empirical Context

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigated the ethical decision-making experienced by the Generation Z student leaders. As student leaders face various ethical problems in the environment and culture that are increasingly complex, multicultural, and ambiguous, there is an increasing focus on the value of their ethical decision-making. Shedding light on this problem, respondents' lived experiences on ethical decision-making were explored qualitatively using a phenomenological approach. The data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured online interviews and open-ended questioning with the respondents. Although respondents frequently identify the areas of concern as ethical, the thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews revealed nine main themes when they faced moral dilemmas and moral distress. These are: (1) the difficulty in defining and articulating the ethical decision-making process; (2) the costs of making an ethical decision; (3) the frequency and recognition that they were involved in an ethical dilemma; (4) thoughts, feelings/emotions during and after the event; (5) significant influences on the decision making process and the final decision; (6) negative responses due to the stress of making ethical decisions; (7) long-lasting effects of making ethical decisions; (8) barriers to making sound ethical decisions; and lastly, (9) suggestions to make the process of ethical decision making. Several reasons were offered to explain their ethical decision-making during moral dilemmas. Furthermore, the study discovers the cultural laden Transformational-Motivational Framework of ethical decision-making as a novel framework to encapsulate all the themes. Finally, given the scarcity of prior empirical research, the findings of this study need to be validated further.*

**Keywords:** *Ethical decision-making, Moral dilemma Transformational-Motivational Framework*

### INTRODUCTION

Ethical decision-making is a multi-faceted phenomenon, and student leaders experience this stressful ethical challenge in the university's and society's increasingly complex ethical situations. Moreover, an ethical problem involves conflict about the right thing to do. For example, student leaders may feel ethical conflict if student leaders fail to work correctly with the university administration or handle conflicts in their roles as students and, at the same time, as student leaders. In like manner, many factors may challenge the student leaders' environment in adhering to ethical values. Hence, student leaders and professionals need to deal effectively with ethical problems, particularly moral dilemmas. It can also be useful, however, as a sociology of bioethics in which the discipline of bioethics itself becomes an object of research (Borry et al., 2004).

Proper decision making must be similar to proper problem solving: a series of consecutive stages through which the decision to change the situation is carried out (Fazli & Mustafa, 2020).

In essence, ethical decision-making is a cognitive process that considers various ethical principles, rules, and virtues or the maintenance of relationships to guide or judge individual or group decisions-oriented actions. Thereupon in the context of decision-making, the ethics of students are their standards of what is right and wrong. (Kvalnes, 2019).

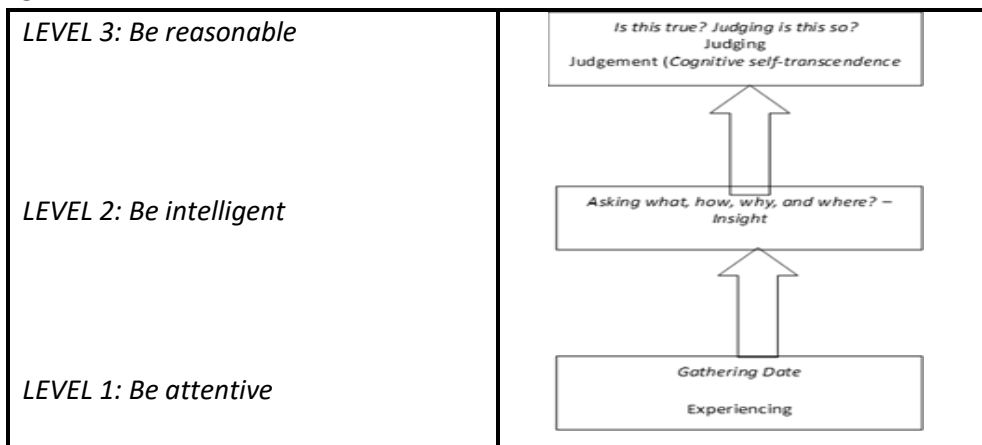
Furthermore Jaramilla et al. (2020) claimed that in the Ilokano way of life, social and moral standards are guided by the social community. The individual commits to a binding agreement to achieve high morale and, undoubtedly, a dependable organization. An individual submits himself/herself and respects the standards set by society that looks at culture's observance as a social contract. Every individual who is part of the social group adheres to a behavioral quality as a manifestation of belongingness. In addition, Jaramilla and Alterado (2019) emphasized that philosophy is not all about parroting Western ideas and categorizations.

According to the Lonerganian Ethical Decision Framework (EDM) framework depicted in Figure 1, when we come to know something, we are attentive to our experiences (level 1); we ask questions about our experiences and receive insight (level 2); we follow up by reflecting and determining whether our insights are correct (level 3); and finally we make decisions and act (level 4). (level 4). Lonergan refers to the nexus of the transcendental method as "self-appropriation" (Byrne, 2016). Insight temporarily relieves the tension of investigation by identifying a potential solution to the problem or question in which the investigating subject is absorbed. We are on our way to discovering what we are actually doing when pursuing knowledge through personal appropriation of what is already going on in consciousness. Experiencing comes before knowing; it is not the same as knowing. It provides information on the first dimension or level of knowledge. This is the world as it is perceived through the senses. However, this is only the beginning of what constitutes full human knowing. Intelligence questions drive the search for data meaning: What is it? How does it function? Following the development of an insight and formulation of an understanding, the desire for precise understanding compels us to ask additional questions for reflection. Is that correct? Are you sure? Larres and Kelly (2002).

Rest (1986) proposed a four-part model for individual ethical decision making and behavior in which a moral agent must (a) recognize the moral issue, (b) make a moral judgment, (c) resolve to prioritize moral concerns over other concerns (establish moral intent), and (d) act on moral concerns. He contended that each stage of the process is conceptually distinct, and that success in one stage does not imply success in the next. For example, a person with a well- developed sense of moral reasoning (Component 2) will not necessarily have the great resolve to act morally (Component 3). Much of the empirical research conducted in the context of this model has involved either Component 2, called moral development by Kolberg (1976) and Rest (1986), or the relationship between Components 2 and 4, moral development and action.

### Figure 1

#### *Lonergan Ethical Decision Framework*



When an individual faces a moral quandary, ethical decision-making is put to the test. Kvalnes (2019) defined moral dilemmas as situations in which the decision-maker must consider two or more moral values or duties but can only honor one of them; thus, regardless of the decision, the individual will violate at least one critical moral concern. In other words, a moral dilemma is an ethical quandary involving a difficult choice between two opposing courses of action, neither of which can be performed without violating a moral principle. Similarly, Chen (2016) discovered that moral sensitivity is positively related to ethical decision-making. Furthermore, professional values are associated with ethical decision-making. As a result, focusing ethics education on students' professional values and moral sensitivity can help them improve their ethical decision-making ability and competency.

This research study is anchored on symbolic interactionism theory which focuses on meanings attached to human interaction, both verbal and non-verbal, and to symbols. The communication highlights the exchange of meaning through language and symbols which people use to make sense of their social worlds. Furthermore, cultural hegemony was considered in this study because it guides the researchers to understand better the process and focus on the construction process of the collective experience, of the modeling of meanings, from the development of values, the creation of world conceptions and of the moral, cultural and intellectual direction of society through education. Four theories informed the analysis of the themes from the lived experiences of Generation Z student leaders in their ethical decision-making. Visser and Tosey (2019) and Chris Argyris and Donald Schön's (1974) theories of action, espoused theory and theory-in-use, provided insight into the difference between what people claim they do and their actualized behavior. Symbolic interactionism, a term coined by Max Weber, helped bring forward the truth of the situation from the actors' perspective. For Rana (2020), cultural hegemony explains how the power of society could impact one's beliefs and practices. Finally, authentic leadership theory offers an understanding of how student leaders use self-regulation to align values with actions.

The difficulty for researchers is that ethical decision making appears to include multiple influences such as individual difference, which includes personality and environmental factors and can affect ethical/ unethical behavior. When exceptions are made and there is confusion about ethical responsibilities, ethical decision-making becomes a problem.

Furthermore, the study of Turk and Avclar (2018) disclosed that instrumental value positively affects the students' ethical decision-making criteria. Utilitarianism, justice, and relativism have the greatest influence on students' intentions to engage in ethical behavior. Also, Oboh (2019) reported that age, economic status, upbringing, moral idealism and relativism, the magnitude of consequence, and social consensus are significant determinants of the ethical- decision making process of accounting professionals. According to Valentine and Godkin (2019), several dimensions of moral intensity, predominantly seriousness of consequences and social consensus, are positively related to components of ethical decision making, namely the recognition and perceived importance of an ethical issue, ethical judgment, and ethical intention.

While previous research efforts in student moral decision making have been valuable in their own right, they have frequently been focused on a small group of variables deemed important in scientific study and chosen by the researchers. Less common are discovery-oriented approaches that focus on issues that have not yet been addressed. These may include contextual factors, which are frequently overlooked in common research settings due to the traditional nature of "sterile environment" experiments. Contextual factors are so important to organizational reality, according to some researchers, that they are vastly underutilized (Aadland, 2010; Moberg, 2006).

Empirical research can play in the process of ethical clarification and decision-making. Ethical reflection almost always proceeds in three steps: the description of the moral question, the assessment of the moral question, and the evaluation of the decision-making. Empirical research can contribute to each step of this process. In the description of the moral object, first of all, empirical research has a role to play in the description of morally relevant facts, in answering the "reality- revealing questions" (what, why, how, who, where and when), in assessing the consequences, and in proposing alternative courses of action. Secondly, empirical research plays a role in assessing the moral question. Thirdly, empirical research also has a role to play in evaluating the decision-making process. It can rule out certain moral choices by pointing out the occurrence of certain unexpected consequences or effects. It can also be useful, however, as a sociology of bioethics in which the discipline of bioethics itself becomes an object of research (Borry et al., 2004)

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of the Generation Z student leaders in their ethical decision-making. The intention was to understand better how the lived experiences of generation Z student leaders would provide insight for teachers and other students in the university alike who strive to improve the balance between being student leaders and ordinary regular students. As campus figures, student organization officers are expected to resonate with worth-emulating demonstrations of genuine leadership. More than this, they are always presumed to display a sense of commitment and ethical standards-such as dayaw – that are constitutive of befitting character and conduct (Jaramilla et al., 2020).

The researchers recognized the study conducted by Arthur J. Schwartz (2015) titled "Inspiring and Equipping students to be Ethical Leaders. Further, "Nursing Students' Ethical Decision Making: A Review of the Literature" was conducted by Numminen and Leino-Kilpi (2007).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The researchers used a qualitative- narrative phenomenological approach. Interviewing is central to narrative research. This study created opportunities to reflect with respondents about their experiences as student leaders. Since student leaders' ethical decision-making is yet unknown, particularly when they experience and deal with moral dilemmas, a qualitative study was done to explore their lived experiences. It is deemed that this is the best method to collect the information to address and understand the essence of their lived experiences. According to Worthington (2013), the essence is defined as "the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced." Likewise, the richness and depth of the lived experiences could not be discovered through quantitative methods such as a questionnaire or a survey. Qualitative interviews were utilized to generate a thick description of student leaders' retrospective sense of their ethical decision-making. Furthermore, in a semi-structured interview, the researchers asked probing follow-up questions to make participants think deeply about their answers. This reflective discussion enabled this study to draw out detailed, nuanced descriptions of student leaders' ethical decision-making processes. The data were coded, analyzed, and organized using the philosophical phenomenological method comprising four intertwining steps: 1) the epoche, 2) phenomenological reduction, 3) imaginative variation, and 4) synthesis (Moustakas, 1994).

Purposive and snowball sampling determined the respondents of the study. The researchers sought permission from the Dean of Students Affairs Office. The researchers used social media applications through Facebook to contact the student leaders. The respondents included in this undertaking are the key officers of mandated and accredited organizations such as the presidents, secretaries, and treasurers of the organizations. Further, all the Student Council officers were taken as respondents. On the other hand, all positions that were not mentioned were not included. The student leaders were contacted for an orientation and interview appointment. In-depth interviews and participant observation were used to understand the symbolic worlds in which the research subjects live.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Textural Themes of the Study**

Nine textural themes emerged from the data analysis: The Difficulty in Defining and Articulating the Ethical Decision-Making Process; The Costs of Making an Ethical Decision; The Frequency and Recognition that They Were Involved in an Ethical Dilemma; Thoughts, Feelings/Emotions During and After the Event; Significant Influences on the Decision Making

Process and The Final Decision; Negative Responses Due to the Stress of Making Ethical Decisions; Long-Lasting Effects of Making Ethical Decisions; Barriers to Making Sound Ethical Decisions; and lastly, Suggestions to Make the Process of Ethical Decision Making. Each theme is presented followed by a participant's quote to demonstrate grounding in the data. In this paper the focus is on the methodology hand in hand with the findings of the research.

### **The Difficulty in Defining and Articulating the Ethical Decision-Making Process**

The informants noted that "sometimes, it is really difficult for us to make a moral decision especially when we are confronted with a dilemma with friends and subordinates. Most of the time the dilemma is there. There are many what ifs and what may bring questions in our mind. If the dilemma is there and we are forced to make a decision, we just faced it, think and reflect on it, and hopefully we made a wise decision.' Further, the informants also exclaimed that whenever there is a decision making process in the organization, "it takes a lot of courage to stand with our own personal decision, we withdrew from the group, think, reflect and ask some opinions as we consult but if there is a conflict, we manage to deliberate properly but with difficulty". This affirms Kohlberg's model of cognitive moral development, which proposes that an individual's level of cognitive moral development strongly influences a person's decision regarding what is right or wrong in a situation. Kohlberg's model provides the theoretical basis for understanding and determining how leaders think about ethical dilemmas.

However, cognition of right or wrong is not enough to predict or explain ethical behavior. According to Chan and Ananthram (2019), ethical decision-making is dependent on the influences of external and internal variables of the process of ethical decision making. However, these variables may not be found within the individuals in the context of an organization.

Another assumption made by behavioral ethics theorists is that individuals who commit unethical actions are well-intentioned people who engage in unethical behavior because they are unaware of the moral dimensions of their actions. Catacutan (2021) and Bazerman and Gino (2012) termed these actions "unintentional dishonesty" arising from "bounded ethicality." Bounded ethicality leads people to engage in behaviors they would otherwise disapprove and judge as unethical after considerable reflection. Using Rest's theory on moral development, Bazerman and Gino (2012) argue that dishonest actions carried out under conditions of bounded ethicality should be considered unintentional because individuals made unethical decisions without awareness of the ethical dimension of their actions and likely without deliberate intent to engage in unethical behavior arising from this lack of moral awareness.

Moral sensitivity or awareness was conceptualized by Rest (1984) as one of the components of moral behavior. According to him, the first component involved in making a moral judgment and taking moral action is moral awareness or the ability to recognize the existence of a moral issue. It also entails interpreting the context or situation surrounding action and considering possible actions that one could take of the people affected and how these people will be affected by the likely consequences of these actions. Significantly, he maintains that all four components (1) sensitivity, (2) judgment, (3) motivation, and (4)

character are necessary to enact moral behavior, and moral failure could be attributed to a failure in any of these processes.

Thus, articulating the ethical decision-making process relies heavily on many factors making the discussion of this topic highly complex. The quality of conversation depends on the stage of cognitive development the student leader has obtained at the time of the dilemma.

### **The costs of making an ethical decision**

When the participants were articulating the costs of making an ethical decision, their answers were either internally or externally focused. The informants narrated that "it is hard to be a student leader. They put all the blames on you especially if the organization fails. If you make a decision, you take the moral responsibility. You suffer all the consequences and the problems but if succeeded, everyone is happy. So, we discussed the problems and decide as a group. If we disagree on some issues, we discussed more until we arrive to a consensus. This will avoid blaming each other. This is our culture as Filipinos, we give value on unity and cooperation." Further, most of the time we have to stand firm and we stand to the constitution and by-laws of the organization." The centrality of their answers in the following concept: what would be the effect on others, a fear of being judged by the final decision, the inability to meet the given goal make the compromise that must take place during the decision-making process, the inconvenience of having to compromise, abuse of power, and a breach of confidentiality. This finding confirms the study of Strojny (2020) that fear tendencies are linked to individual behaviors, and the burden of moral decisions were influenced by what we fear and affected moral choices.

Garrigan et al. (2018) also cited Kohlberg, who claimed that advanced moral reasoning is dependent on advanced logical reasoning. Kohlberg identified six stages of moral reasoning, representing six problem-solving strategies, used to arrive at morals of obedience in his theory of moral development.

The moralities of instrumental egoism and simple exchange, interpersonal concordance, law and duty to the social order, consensus building, and personal autonomy Individuals' judgments about what is right are based on authority at the most basic or pre-conventional level. Individuals at this stage, motivated by the fear of punishment, adhere to norms established by authority as the primary criterion for making decisions. Individuals' judgments on the next level are primarily influenced by instrumental motives, motivated by self-interest; individuals at this level judge what is right based on the benefits that they can derive from it. Individuals make judgments about the expectations of significant others at the middle or conventional level, behaving in ways to achieve some semblance of goodness in one's social circle. In the following category, moral judgments are based on adherence to social norms or conventions regarded as necessary foundations of law and order. At the traditional post level, decisions are made out of a sense of duty, with the intention of acting in ways that respect individual rights and democratically accepted laws. Finally, at the highest level, decisions are made on the basis of one's conscience in reference to universally accepted moral principles. Individuals in the most advanced stages are described as fully

autonomous, principled, and highly consistent with their moral thought. As a result, there is a parallel between an individual's logical and moral stages.

### **The Frequency and Recognition of Dilemma that are involved in an Ethical- Decision Making**

The participants, in their quest for leadership activities as well as their academic formation, an ethical dilemma cannot cease to exist or occur. Admittedly, an ethical dilemma is frequently experienced by them. When dealing with subordinates, mentors, and even employees in the university, the dilemma can be triggered as often as necessary. According to the informants, ethical dilemmas are on and off in their lives as student leaders. It comes and it goes, it is frequently or every day in their lives. "Being a student leader, we cannot get rid of dilemma, therefore, we just need to study carefully the issues and the real situation. It is really very challenging; however, we have to stand up as one organization. I believe, as student leader I am confident because I consulted people whom I know could help me make the best decisions whenever we are faced with a dilemma. That is why I sometimes I don't any regrets at all and I always take the responsibility whatever decisions we make".

The participants' responses to the question of frequency varied. Six participants reported dealing with ethical quandaries throughout the year. Others emphasize the importance of daily ethical decision-making that is value-based regardless of the issue. This supports Aristotle's model of virtue ethics, which aids in the development of an ethical character and the promotion of ethical behavior. Wang and Hackett (2020) argued that focusing on virtues-centered moral identity emphasizes the importance of developing moral character in leaders (and eventually followers) as the most promising way to promote ethical (moral) choices. According to Minja (2017), modern virtue ethics is based on Aristotle's understanding of character and virtue. Aristotelian character is a state of being that possesses the necessary inner states. Kindness, for example, involves emotions related to feelings and actions toward others. Character is also about what you do. The Aristotelian theory is an action theory because virtuous inner dispositions will move you to act.

On the other hand, Kumar (2019) a person's own set of beliefs and values that are part of cultural variables provides the framework for considering ethical dilemma situations. That type of framework of an individual in EDM (ethical decision making) is called one's moral philosophy (Barnett et al. 1996). That personal moral philosophy is also called ethical attitude. Personal moral philosophy is a set of beliefs, attitudes, and values that promote creating, forming, and considering ethical dilemmas.

### **Thoughts, Feelings/Emotions During and After the Event**

In general, thoughts, feelings/emotions both during and after were put into two categories by the researchers: negative and positive thoughts, self-talk, feelings, and emotions. The informants exclaimed that "there are many things that are very disturbing on our thoughts that we do not understand. Sometimes these situations are complicated. That is why we are confused. So, we just try to reflect deeper and discussed the issues with the group and our friends in order to be enlightened better. Though we try to excel in our academics at the same time we are also passionate in serving our fellow students and achieving the transformation of our organization." Other informants shared their



experiences and said “if we are caught into a dilemma, we feel that we have become wiser and stronger in our moral decision.” Moreover, an informant said, “I almost lost my mind. I usually find talking to myself alone in front of the mirror. I do selfie sometimes to unleash my down moments. We work hard to reach the aspirations of our organization.”

It can be plausible that participants experienced positive and negative thoughts, emotions, and feelings when caught or situated in an ethical decision. The positive cluster that participants experienced were generalized and synthesized as related to closure, having no regrets, being proud of the final decision, and vindication. The negative cluster also illustrates the significance of anger, anxiety, concern, confusion, disappointment, fear, frustration, and guilt. Overwhelming expectations, a negative standpoint of the experience was still felt by participants even if it sourced from a positive and negative aspect. According to Milgram's study on obedience (as cited by Catacutan, 2021), the ethical decision-making process produced high emotion for most participants and was indicated in this study. Karimnia (2019), on the other hand, posited that moral reasoning determines how individuals react to a moral dilemma.

Rest (1986) made the classic reference to emotion during ethical decisions, claiming that interpreting feelings that arise in response to a moral situation is an important part of moral judgment. According to Jones' (1991) concept of moral intensity, individuals experience some issue- contingent emotion as they progress through the process of moral reasoning. This ethical decision-making model is based on the assumption that situations differ in terms of the imperative moral present. Nonetheless, despite the paucity of research linking emotion and ethics, there is compelling evidence (both physiological and qualitative) to support and qualify the examination of emotion as a critical component in the ethical decision-making process.

### **Significant Influences on the Decision-Making Process and the Final Decision**

Several significant influences gave power to the participants' decision- making process and final decision. Influences and pressures from peers or mentors/advisers, parents, self or personality traits, the setting where the participants processed their moral distress and dilemmas, and religious beliefs or spirituality significantly impacted the participants' final ethical decision-making. It is fascinating that all participants expressed the need for isolation or alone time in a quiet place to reflect their decision related to the ethical dilemma. According to informants, “sometimes, we withdrew from people to think well if not the best. We isolate ourselves from distractions and disturbance from people. This will make us reflect deeper on the moral issues involved and consequently, we hope that we will be able to make the right decisions.” Another informant points out that “the decision is very difficult; thus, it caused us to go out with our circle of friends for the meantime. We also try to satisfy ourselves with so much foods in order to relieve us from stress. The best thing to do is to communicate and decide well”.

According to Garrigan (2018), moral theorists have proposed a variety of component processes and factors necessary for moral decision-making and moral development, such as perspective-taking, intuitions, and empathy. These elements have not yet been combined into a single comprehensive theory that explains how moral decisions are made in real time

and how they mature over time. According to Shah and Amjad (2017), moral intensity influences consumers' self-consciousness, neutralization techniques, and behavioral intention. Interestingly, Abozeid (2018) added that, while moral intensity was initially conceptualized as a six-dimensional construct, factor analysis revealed only two dimensions, which were named "perceived social pressure" and "actual harm," with the results indicating that these two dimensions, particularly social pressure, are the strongest predictors. Although it has received less attention, locus of control is a personality trait that has been linked to the ethical decision-making process. Individuals with an internal locus of control, according to Soltwisch and Krahnke (2017), believe they can make a difference and accept responsibility for negative situations or failures. People with an external locus of control may believe they have no control over the situation and attribute their successes and failures to chance or external circumstances. Personality factors such as ego strength, locus of control, and field dependence, according to Trevino et al. (2006), should be considered. Jones (1991) contended that the locus of control must be related to perceived volition in order to recognize that an issue has moral content.

Religion is a final individual variable that is frequently associated with ethical behavior. Religion is an inextricably linked component or variable of culture, and previous research has consistently shown that religion and culture can influence ethical attitudes and behavior (Kumar, 2019). Kumar (2019) discovered that religiosity may be an important construct of ethical behavior. It was discovered that religiosity influences how one behaves ethically. According to Wiguna (2019), one of the main components in overcoming ethical quandaries is the religious emphasis or aspects of spiritualism (Ljubomir & Angelina, 2015).

However, Lopez (2018) does not support the influence of religion in the ethical decision-making process among Mexican managers but is most strongly influenced by the hermeneutical framework, the belief that one should act as a moral compass in making ethical decisions related to their organization. From these mixed findings, it is clear that more research is needed to explore the relationship between religion and ethics. Furthermore, there is a better need to define the construct of religion in future studies.

Furthermore, research has discovered that most adults are at the conventional level; their moral reasoning is primarily influenced by significant others and rules and laws. According to Rest (cited in Trevino et al., 2006), only about 20% of American adults are principled. Adults reaching last stage are so rare in empirical evidence that it is considered only a theoretically postulated stage. Brown and Chikeleze (2020), on the other hand, Trevino et al. (2006) emphasized that interactionist model of ethical decision making in organizations, which is based on Kohlberg's (1969) work and proposes that "The level of cognitive moral development of an individual strongly influences a person's decision about what is right and wrong; the rights, duties, and obligations involved in a particular ethical dilemma.

### **Negative Responses Due to the Stress of Making Ethical Decisions**

The weight of making ethical decisions during an ethical dilemma or distress can be very stressful. The problem is understanding how stress affects the ethical decision-making process, leading to unethical decisions. The participants shared that they experienced generalized anxiety, physical illness, and sleep disturbance. According to one informant,

“sometimes I could hardly sleep at night. I am not relaxed and sometimes, I don’t have the appetite to eat because of the stress of making a moral decision especially if it concerns the organization. I really try to make sure that I made the right decision.” I need to reflect and be alone and later make a good decision. Moreover, another informant shared that, “If I were caught in a dilemma, I feel sick, at sometimes it triggers my anxiety and depression.” That will be the time to talk to someone”. When stress is added into the equation, student leaders may make unethical decisions when fear of failing is imminent. Perceived stressful situations lead the decision-makers to act more unethical (Selart et al., 2020). Furthermore, it may be observed that a lack of reward leads decision-makers sometimes to compensate themselves in an unethical way.

In light of the constant shadowing of the transcription from the participants, Milgram's (1963) study of obedience determined that the "teachers" experienced significant levels of moral distress. While processing the decision to follow the directives of the researcher, which was evidenced by either refusing to continue or the display of negative emotion including pleading to be allowed to stop, profuse sweating, blunted affect, arrogance, somber signs of hopelessness, nervous laughter, and strange behavior. Punishing the student by increasing the shock voltage acted against most teachers' values resulting in moral distress. Jones (1991), as cited by Muller (2020), included proximity as one of the six elements (along with the magnitude of consequences, social consensus, probability of effect, temporal immediacy, and concentration of effect) that contribute to moral intensity. Jones's model is particularly significant because it is issue-contingent and applied to singular events. The moral intensity was the construct Jones developed to capture the extent of issue-related moral imperative in a situation. He described proximity of the moral issue as 'the feeling of nearness (social, cultural, psychological, or physical) that the moral agent has for victims (beneficiaries) of the evil (beneficial) act in question.' To demonstrate, he quoted a militiaman for one of Beirut's factional forces, explaining his reasoning that as long as the victims are strangers, the killing does not bother him: 'Those I do not know, I do not care about, Mencl and May (2009), as mentioned by Muller (2020), found that in intense situations, a combination of proximity and empathy were decisive factors in ethical decision-making.

Finally, as Selart et al. (2020) claimed, many leaders are daily exposed to stress when making decisions, and there are often social reasons for this. Social standards prescribe that a leader must be proactive, make decisions, and not flee the situation. Conflicts in decision-making situations often create stress. The more critical a decision is, the more conflict and stress it contains as a rule. Leaders must understand that not stress in itself causes terrible decisions. Instead, leaders' time pressure may stop them from gathering enough relevant information. Accordingly, one way of overcoming stressful situations is to prioritize right. Jaramilla et al., (2020) also argued that the community imposes rigid requirements to the members of the society to submit a portion of their cherished personality to forge a social contract, a binding ethical and moral value for attaining the highest and ultimate good of the society.

### **Long-Lasting Effects of Making Ethical Decisions**

Participants shared that their experiences managing an ethical dilemma during their stint as college student leaders have had lasting effects on their character and values. An informant noted that “Making ethical decisions as a student leader may affect my character and my principle. With this situation, I become wiser and it also affected my decision making process for my personal life.” Further, an informant also shared that “ethical decision making is very valuable to me; it gives me direction and it leads me to success. The life of being a student leader is never a piece of cake. We so worked hard to comply with our academics and at the same time do our responsibilities in the organization. They now understand the process better, the importance of being reflective, and recognizing the degree of success they experience from dealing with complex moral conflicts. Diplomacy, or the process of keeping the peace by addressing a problem conscientiously with objectivity and social accountability and with confidence, was a learned and valued skill obtained through managing an ethical dilemma and engaging in ethical decision-making by all participants. In addition, the participants' emphasis on the moral intensity of the situation and the magnitude of the consequences appear to be considered whenever they make an ethical decision.

When studying the long-term effects of engaging in ethical decision-making, it is believed that such an experience is an opportunity for student development. Smith (1978) discussed the practical implications of Kohlberg's (1969) model of moral development; he argued that one of the most important ways for students to develop morally is to be challenged by moral dilemmas. The experience may be a very critical period for the development of moral reasoning because students either will continue to hold to a conventional level of reasoning or be sufficiently jarred that they begin to question previously unquestioned beliefs.

### **Barriers to Making Sound Ethical Decisions**

Negative thinking is due to biases and prejudices in the individual's personality. The participants shared barriers to their decision-making; however, each participant had a different answer. An informant said that, “There are so many barriers to have a sound ethical decision like our friends, teachers, and family and relatives who would like to interfere in our decisions.” “Sometimes they caused more problems and troubles in the organization but sometimes they also extend us good pieces of advice.” Another informant points out that “in the process of sound decisions, I still adhere to the right and ethical decision even if I am just a young student in the university.’ I have to consider everything. I always think of what is best for the organization to the point sacrificing my very self.” The logical reason for this phenomenon would be that each participant has their unique view of the world regarding the factors that inhibit them from making sound ethical decisions (Moustakas, 1994).

It is important to note that one participant articulated the influence of social media in making a sound ethical decision. An informant noted that “Social media had a great influence on my decision making process. Sometimes I read some comments and posts that help and direct me to the right decision.” “One time I was able to watch a video in the internet/vlog in terms of how to process decision properly.” Gaidhani (2019) explained further that Generation Z is determined to be highly connected, living in an era of high-tech

communication, technology-driven lifestyles, and prolific use of social media. According to the Institute for Emerging Issues (2012), as cited by Gaidhani (2019), Gen Z is the most ethnically diverse and technologically sophisticated generation. On the other hand, Slavin (2015), as cited by Agarwal (2018), found that members of the Gen Z want to be heard irrespective of their young age. Technology is a part of their identity, and they are tech savvy but lack problem-solving skills and have not demonstrated the ability to look at a situation, put it in context, analyze it, and make a decision.

### **Suggestions to Make the Process of Ethical Decision-Making Better**

Participants had interesting insights that they shared to have a better ethical decision-making process. They highlighted the value of ethical leadership training, moral sensitivity, and spiritual development in managing and dealing with ethical dilemmas and moral conflicts. An informant exclaimed that “What is so amazing of being student leader is that we learned a lot from the many seminars, trainings, and workshops we attend that helped us in making good and right moral decisions.” Most often than not, the school is expending a lot of financial resources for us as student leaders. We are fortunate to have very accommodating advisers, teachers, and mentors to guide us in the right path.” Another informant said, “I like being a student leader not because of the benefits but of the learnings that I gained. I became more mature and wiser in dealing with moral challenges. I became more patient and I learned the meaning of self-sacrifice. I have transformed to be the best version of myself and happier in spite of the pains and hurts that I encountered in my journey as a student leader.”

Nash (2002) advocates engaging students in meaningful and rich moral conversation, which results in the student's ethical literacy and problem skills. For Ludwig & Longenecker's (1993), ethical failures in leaders are due to the lack of preparation for success which can distract them from their purpose and work. Langlois and Lapointe (2010) found that training program participants engaged in a transformative cycle and were led to improved ethical awareness, judgment structuring, sense of responsibility, and overall improved conduct. Jones's (1991) work on moral intensity advocates applying ethics to the proximity of the dilemma. This premise postulates that a personally closer dilemma will receive much more time and quality through the decision process than a less personal dilemma. Ruedy and Schweitzer (2010), as mentioned by Jayawardena-Willis, Pio, and McGhee (2021), found that mindfulness played a significant role in the ethical decision-making of individuals. Participants with a higher mindfulness score acted ethically and cheated less when confronted with an ethical decision. Lastly, Latta and Dugan (2019), a study that used university students as participants, support the expectation that students will develop morally and ethically by applying a virtue ethics principle to ethical decision-making.

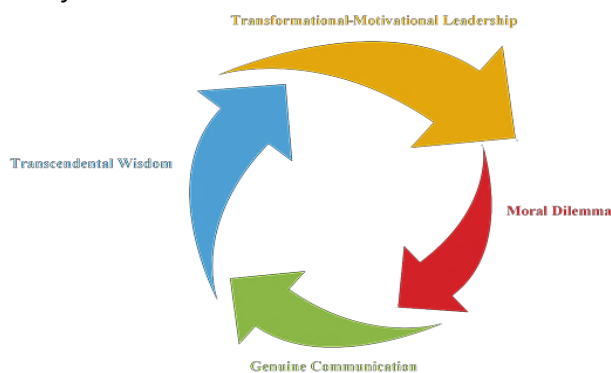
## **CONCLUSIONS**

The study investigated the ethical decision-making of participants during moral dilemmas. In this light, the results demonstrated that the participants experienced the

essence of ethical decision-making through their ability to rely on their values and morality during the ethical decision-making process and the acceptance of the burden of possibly making an error in decision-making, leading to ethical failure as a leader. When participants made a sound ethical decision, they relied on their moral values, making them feel proud, confident, and clear in themselves. The powerful feelings of pride, confidence, and clarity felt by the participants in their work seemed to counterbalance the intense difficulty of being responsible for a negative outcome of an ethical decision as student leaders. Their ability to manage an ethical dilemma successfully by relying on their values and morality helped them achieve an ethical accomplishment rather than an ethical failure. Furthermore, this study finds the culturally laden Transformational- Motivational Framework of Ethical Decision Making through authentic dialogue within the self and others when a moral agent is in the midst of moral distress or dilemma. The dialogue within the self (I-I relationship) and a dialogue with others (I- Thou) through reflective journals will make the moral agent discern the best ethical decision making when faced with moral dilemmas. Through this authentic dialogical relationship, the moral agent becomes a role and a catalyst ethical student leader in society. Further, transformational leaders are generally energetic, enthusiastic, and passionate. Not only are these leaders concerned and involved in the process; they are also focused on helping every member of the group succeed as well. The T-M framework considers a holistic approach towards a certain goal. It is not biased and one-sided but looks into the very core of human existence under the ambit of human nature which is basically good. The central paradigm lies in a twofold world that emerges out of the twofold attitudes of human beings. This duality unfolds from the analytic wisdom through the reflection of the genuine original unity, the lived relationship. In the desire that T-M framework to establish in the decision-making process of student leaders, it connotes a deeper meaning in the light of ignorance and innocence as a framework for facing the right values and establishing the ability to confront a world of discrete things as an indispensable aspect of human life. From the narrative of the student leaders, when summarize and generalize, it gives birth to a new framework. This framework then will be considered a new model approach for ethical decision making especially for student leaders. Thus, the new model for transformational-motivational framework can be seen in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Transformational-Motivational Ethical Decision-Making Framework*



### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Since moral reasoning determines how individuals react to a moral dilemma, educators must specifically focus on the impact of education on moral reasoning. The university has to prepare the initial grounds for students, specifically the student leaders, to be conscious of the overall structure of moral action and to make them aware that moral judgment is somehow mediated by personal judgment. This understanding could help them develop a critical approach to moral decisions. Future study may employ a triangulation strategy to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the ethical decision-making of student leaders.

### **ETHICAL STATEMENT**

Principles of ethics in conducting research are very important. The researchers of this study adhered to the guidelines and complied with the requirements of the University of Northern Philippines Ethics Review Committee in conducting a research involving human participants. Informed consent was used in this study. The researchers provided the participants full disclosure about the nature of the study, the risks, benefits, and an opportunity to ask questions before deciding whether or not to participate.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

The researchers would like to express their profoundest gratitude to the University of Northern Philippines and the UNP Research and Development Office for their kind assistance and strong support in the conduct of this study. We are indeed more than grateful for the guidance and encouragement to get this done.

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