

THE INFLUENCE OF NEGATIVE EMOTIONS AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE ON ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

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ABSTRACT

This study: (1) explores the effect of two negatively valenced discrete emotions, sadness and anger, on EDM and (2) evaluates the role of Emotional Intelligence (EI) in Ethical Decision Making (EDM). In situations where there are personal & psychological costs involved with the more ethical choices, emotions could encourage individuals to make unethical decisions. In study 1, we demonstrate this effect by modifying two EDM scenarios previously used in studies. We manipulated the scenarios so that each had more personal/psychological costs involved and thus, elicited or reduced negative emotions (scenario 1: more sadness, less anger; scenario 2: more anger, more sadness) and consequently lead to less ethical decisions.

Respondents (N = 158) were randomly assigned to two conditions: Low affect (unchanged scenarios; N= 75) and High Affect (modified scenarios; N = 83). Results show that scenarios with higher levels personal or psychological costs (high affect condition) produced significantly different but expected levels of emotions and led to individuals making less ethical choices. Therefore, emotions can bias individuals towards making less ethical choices, when the more ethical choices have personal costs associated with them.

In Study 2, we evaluated the role of traits (neuroticism & extraversion) and ability (Emotional Intelligence). We hypothesized that when the personal costs and overall emotions are higher, EI will play a more important role in helping individuals make more ethical decisions. We also hypothesized that neuroticism will have a direct effect on sadness caused due to the ethical dilemma. We also hypothesized that neuroticism would be more strongly related to sadness in the high affect condition, because more personal and psychological costs are involved.

In study 2, conducted online, Subjects (N =142) were randomly divided into two conditions: Low affect condition (un-modified scenarios; N = 71) and High affect condition (modified scenarios; N = 71). Our analyses indicated that EI did not have a significant impact on ethical decision making. However, we found that EI had a positive but non-significant correlation ($r = .21$) with sadness in the high affect condition for scenario 1. This suggests that EI could be potentially helping individuals to appropriately express sadness in scenario 1, where more personal and psychological costs could be involved with decision making. EI thus lets an individual identify why he or she is feeling sad as they make a more ethical (but less pleasant) decision. We also found that neuroticism, a personality trait was significantly related to sadness in the low affect condition in the second scenario, but not in the high affect condition. Overall, these two studies provide evidence of the involvement of emotions, traits, and abilities in an Ethical Decision Making context. Our findings raise the possibility that EI and neuroticism could be compensating for each others' effects. While in a relatively low affect situation, neuroticism could be inducing more sadness and anger, in a higher affect situation, EI could be mitigating this effect. We did not find a significant influence of EI in Ethical Decision Making.

The full paper and a full set of references are available from the authors upon request.