



## THE ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF NURSES IN A PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

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### Abstract

Ethical sensitivity is recognized as a fundamental element of ethical behavior. Lack of ethical awareness may lead to providing care that is not aligned with the ethical standards expected of nursing professionals. Therefore, it is crucial to evaluate ethical sensitivity in order to develop strategies that promote ethical behavior and to ensure that nurses understand the full scope of their professional ethical responsibilities. The purpose of this study is to evaluate and analyze the current state of knowledge on the ethical sensitivity of nurses, and to combine the results from several research. A thorough computerized search was conducted to find relevant material published in the Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health material and PubMed. The data was extracted, reduced, and synthesized using a methodical methodology. Four primary conceptualizations of ethical sensitivity were identified in the literature. Although a concept analysis and a validated technique exist, ethical sensitivity is still a highly speculative topic with various, and often conflicting, interpretations. While ethical sensitivity has been thoroughly evaluated in the context of ethical challenges, there has been less focus on its application in everyday situations. Future study should prioritize the development of more effective methods to measure and evaluate the notion, specifically emphasizing the extent to which nurses are aware of the ethical aspects of their daily work.

**Keywords:** Ethical sensitivity, review, nurses, nursing professionals, ethical behavior.

### 1. Introduction

The number of nurses involved in malpractice awards and adverse action reports has almost quadrupled over the previous decade.<sup>1</sup> Many negligence cases against nurses stem from their inability to fulfill their duty as a patient advocate.<sup>2</sup> In addition, recent media attention has brought to light the improper use of social media by nurses, such as sharing pictures of patient care locations after life-saving incidents or making postings about feeling unengaged at work and desiring a medical emergency.<sup>3,4</sup> Recently, a paper authored anonymously in the Annals of Internal Medicine<sup>5</sup> recounted disturbing incidents when sedated gynecological patients were



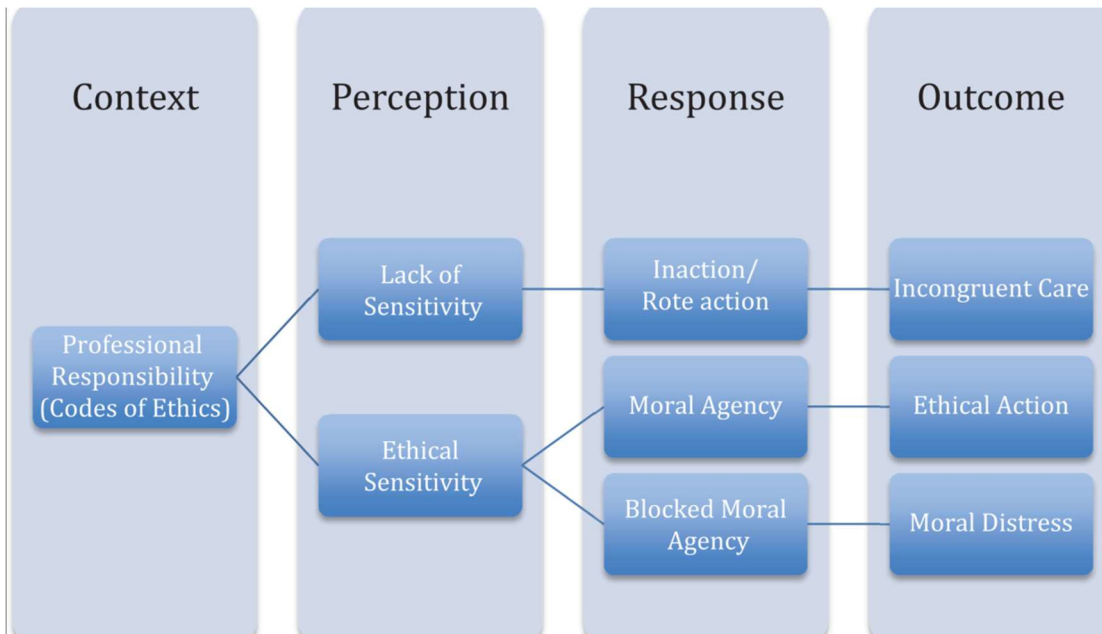
dehumanized in operating rooms, and bystanders neglected to intervene. In all of these scenarios, professionals neglected to acknowledge the ethical consequences of their conduct or lack thereof.

Nurse ethical sensitivity refers to the ability of nurses to understand the inherent ethical character of their profession and every action they take in their practice. The objective of each nursing intervention is to achieve nursing objectives that have been established over a period of time and are outlined in ethical codes, which function as the profession's indisputable ethical standards.<sup>7</sup> Ethical awareness is a prerequisite for moral agency, but it alone is not enough. Nurse moral agency encompasses the capacity and readiness to provide high-quality patient care, while considering the patient's needs and values within the care setting.<sup>10</sup> Ethical sensitivity is recognized as a fundamental aspect of ethical behavior. Diminished or absent ethical awareness may lead to providing care that is ethically incongruent, meaning it does not align with the professional responsibilities of nursing. Therefore, it is crucial to evaluate ethical sensitivity in order to develop strategies that promote ethical behavior and ensure that nurses fully understand their professional ethical responsibilities.

## **2. Comparison between ethics and morality**

The word "ethical sensitivity" has often been referred to as "moral sensitivity" in several researches on the subject. There is a debate over whether moral and ethical are different or whether they mean the same thing in the context of "professional judgment and action". For the purpose of this review, ethical sensitivity and moral sensitivity shall be used interchangeably, as per the terminology employed by the mentioned writers.

The model (Figure 1) first analyzes the background of the healthcare environment,<sup>17</sup> with a focus on professional obligations as delineated by codes of ethics.<sup>7,11</sup> Perception is influenced by context, and ethical awareness may either be present or absent. In the absence of ethical awareness, the resulting reaction tends to be either inactivity or action driven by routine, which may result in treatment that does not align with the aims of both the patient and the healthcare provider.<sup>17</sup> While repetitive actions may sometimes result in providing treatment that aligns with the desires and requirements of patients, it is not guaranteed to happen uniformly without ethical awareness.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model.

When one has ethical awareness, several potential outcomes arise. Initially, possessing ethical awareness has the potential to result in the ability to make moral decisions and take moral action. 9, 17, 23 Having moral agency results in engaging in ethical behavior.<sup>9</sup> While having ethical awareness is important, it is not enough to ensure ethical behavior, especially when the situation makes it difficult or impossible. This leads to the obstruction of moral agency and consequent experience of moral discomfort.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Analysis

There are now four main ways of understanding ethical sensitivity that have been documented in existing literature. These different conceptualizations have led to the creation of a significant instrument called the MSQ, as well as several qualitative methods for evaluating this idea. Empirical publications often exhibit a moderate level of methodological rigor and quality, whereas theoretical articles tend to have a lower level of methodological rigor but a higher level of conceptual quality. Although much study has been conducted, there are still numerous crucial issues that have not been addressed. This section will examine the constraints of these prior studies, the difficulties with current metrics, and the circumstances in which past research has been conducted.

The idea of ethical sensitivity has been defined in several ways in the current body of literature. Although a concept analysis has identified this difficulty and a validated method has been developed, there are still challenges in accurately evaluating ethical sensitivity in a manner that facilitates the application of the results in practice. Ethical sensitivity refers to the ability to identify ethical dilemmas, make intelligent and compassionate decisions, understand the patients' circumstances, be aware of the moral consequences of decisions, and recognize the impact of our

actions on others.<sup>8</sup> It is still uncertain if ethical sensitivity is a talent that has to be cultivated for recognition, a capacity for making decisions, or an understanding of the consequences of nursing activities. Although more work is needed to fully understand the idea of ethical sensitivity, it is clear that a common characteristic seen in several definitions is the recognition and understanding of the ethical consequences of nursing acts. The current assessments have some limits when it comes to practical application, and prior research have mostly focused on ethical awareness within the context of ethical issues.

#### **4. Background of prior research**

Both the MSQ and vignette techniques specifically aim to assess ethical sensitivity within the framework of ethical problems, such as concealing a diagnosis from a patient or administering drugs forcefully when a patient refuses to take them orally.<sup>22</sup> Existing evaluation techniques do not directly evaluate the extent to which nurses are aware of the ethical implications associated with their regular acts in practice.

According to Van Der Zande et al.<sup>39</sup>, ethical sensitivity research should focus on the everyday practice of care as the starting point (p. 75). The value of ethical sensitivity in daily life cannot be overstated. As Austin<sup>42</sup> contends, the commonplace nature of everyday ethical dilemmas often leads to their moral importance being overlooked (p. 82). It is crucial for nurses to have a keen awareness of the ethical aspects of their work in order to properly fulfill their role as moral agents.<sup>9</sup>

In the absence of ethical awareness, moral agency is unlikely to occur, since nurses must first identify the ethical aspects of a situation before adopting appropriate ethical action. In the absence of moral agency, the resultant treatment may not align with the patient's desires and the professional objectives. Seventeen In addition, if ethical awareness does not lead to moral agency, nurses may encounter moral anguish, which has been linked to attrition, nurses creating distance between themselves and patients, and other harmful consequences.<sup>43</sup>

Empirical observations indicate that there is a lack of advanced ethical awareness about the nature of routine activities. Troug et al. (44) state that doctors often fail to acknowledge the ethical aspects that underlie routine therapeutic interactions (p. 12). Although it is expected that excellent nursing practice aligns with good ethics, it is uncertain if nurses fully acknowledge the ethical nature of their work.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This literature study discovered many conceptualizations of ethical sensitivity. Future study should prioritize the development of more effective methods to define and evaluate the idea, since it is crucial to establish clear and precise definitions in order to create accurate and consistent metrics. Furthermore, the majority of research conducted so far has mostly focused on ethical sensitivity within the framework of ethical issues and have predominantly been of a theoretical character. Although the significance of ethical sensitivity in problems and moral decision-making is recognized, there is a lack of understanding of its functioning in everyday situations.

Moreover, it is yet to be determined if nurses possess an understanding of the intrinsically ethical aspect of every action they do in their work. Within this review, ethical sensitivity was identified as a crucial characteristic that is marked by the presence of awareness. Having ethical awareness is essential, but not enough, for developing ethical sensitivity, followed by moral agency and moral action. Forty-eight Prior to developing treatments to enhance ethical decision making and promote moral agency, it is essential to determine if nurses possess the ability to identify the ethical aspects of their daily work. Without this consciousness, the other elements of ethical sensitivity will remain dormant.

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