Promoting the moral sensitivity of police and military personnel

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Abstract

To make good decisions, people must be able to identify the ethical features of a situation, i.e., to notice when and how the welfare of others and ethical values are at stake. In the work of military and law enforcement officers, moral sensitivity is of special importance, due to an especially stressful working environment and the severe consequences that a blindness to moral features may have for diverse parties. As we argue, morally sensitive people overcome three blinders that may lead others to ignore moral aspects in their decision making: Cognitive overload, psychological biases, and moral disengagement. Based on these challenges, we suggest four general learning outcomes for the training of moral sensitivity: (1) an empathic concern for relevant groups, (2) an awareness for one's vulnerability to biases and stress, (3) moral schemas for the evaluation of risky situations, and (4) a sensitivity to attitudes of moral disengagement. To achieve the relevant learning outcomes in the ethics training of military and police personnel, we offer indicative training examples and references.

To make good decisions, we must be able to identify the ethical features of a situation: How could our actions impact the welfare of others, human relations, etc.? If we fail to detect moral aspects, we risk harm to others; not out of evil intentions, but out of ignorance. Hence, moral sensitivity is commonly viewed as the first step of moral decision-making and moral action (e.g., Rest 1982; Tanner & Christen 2014).

Moral sensitivity is obviously an important competence in general, but it seems to be particularly significant for members of the police and military (in the following, we will speak, more generally, of "security personnel"). Police officers' societal mission is to act as guardians of public values: They have a special duty to reflect on their work, on the coherence of their professional values, and whether their methods and attitudes promote the public values they are supposed to protect (Norberg 2013). Looking to the military, national defense is "fraught with ethical issues and life and death decisions that must be handled quickly and correctly," (Heyler et al. 2016, p. 790) making the morality of soldiers equally important. At the same time, the work of security personnel includes handling heated, stressful and dangerous situations, often in dealing with strangers. Taking notice of ethical features and the welfare of others is particularly challenging under such circumstances, e.g., when feeling threatened personally. However, unethical behaviors of security personnel, such as insulting, hitting or kicking people who pose no security threat, violating humanitarian law, or damaging private property can have serious moral and legal ramifications, damage military/police relations with local populations, and jeopardize the ability of operational forces to realize their public objectives (Warner et al. 2011). Due to the negative repercussions that a lack of moral sensitivity (moral blindness) can have

in these contexts, and the need of security personnel to account to these aspects appropriately, it becomes an imperative to assure their moral sensitivity.

How can we promote and assure the development of moral sensitivity through training activities? Due to its reliance on multiple reflective and automatic cognitive processes (e.g., Blum 1991), we understand moral sensitivity as a *competence* (Tanner & Christen, 2014). A competence, as a learnable ability to solve a certain type of problem autonomously and responsibly (EQF 2008), ought to address all relevant features of the problem type. Hence, in seeking to identify what defines the required competence, we need to first understand the relevant challenge or problem: in this case, *moral blindness,* i.e., when people overlook moral aspects partially or entirely in their decision making. In the following, we present the driving factors of moral blindness. Based on these factors, we then propose four priorities for the training of moral sensitivity and make proposals how these may be addressed in the training of security personnel.

Overcoming moral blindness: the challenge of moral sensitivity

Numerous factors may lead people to overlook moral aspects, and thus to ignore them. In Figure 1, we present a short synthesis of our findings from a systematic review that is work in progress (Katsarov et al. *forthcoming*). In brief, three sets of factors may blind people to moral aspects: They may be cognitively overwhelmed, psychologically biased, or morally disengaged. This presumes that they are generally motivated to be moral, a distinct goal of ethics training, which we cannot discuss here.
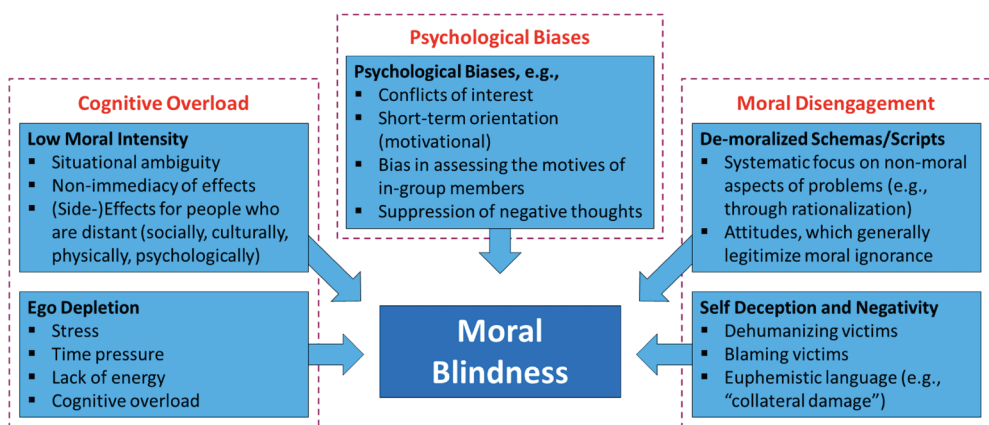

Figure 1: Causes of Moral Blindness

Blindness due to cognitive overload

Even three-year-old children notice moral issues when they are blatantly obvious, e.g., when a person is hit intentionally (Decety et al. 2012). Morally sensitive people have been shown to notice ethical issues, even when other aspects distract from them – unlike insensitive people, who only notice ethical issues, when there are no distractors (Fialkov et al. 2014). Two factors are likely to cognitively overwhelm people in detecting ethical issues: low *moral intensity* and *ego depletion*.

Moral intensity: Negative consequences in the future, for people who aren't present, and which are a side-effect of one's action (or inaction) are more difficult to notice than immediate consequences for colleagues or family members. Jones (1991) introduced the idea of moral intensity to help distinguish between obvious moral aspects (high intensity) and more subtle aspects (low intensity). A colleague's alcohol problem may qualify as an example for low moral intensity (Seiler et al. 2011): People may underestimate the risk that their colleague could make serious mistakes on duty, thereby potentially harming other people, who aren't clearly identified.

Ego depletion: In and after situations of high stress, e.g., time pressure or cognitive strain, people's capacity for self-control is diminished, limiting their ability to behave in line with their (moral) aspirations, and reducing their ability to recognize ethical features of situations (Gino et al. 2011). Warner and colleagues (2011) found that the best predictor of U.S. soldiers' unethical behavior against non-combatants in the battlefield was the intensity of their exposure to direct combat; stress, which was also a strong correlate of depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. Stress is also known to affect law enforcement personnel strongly (Morgan et al. 2000).

Blindness Due to Psychological Biases

A wide array of psychological biases can be an additional source of moral blindness, many of which are discussed by Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011). They can distract even those people who can see through situations of low moral intensity and whose cognitive capacity isn't overloaded. Several of these biases are already implicitly involved in lowering the moral intensity of issues: People tend to discount the future, paying more attention to immediate consequences *(discounting-the-future bias)*, and consequences for people close to them *(in-group-favoritism)*, or alike them *(similarity-familiarity-bias)*. Two other psychological biases may be especially hazardous in security contexts: *conflicts of interest* and the *status-quo bias*.

Conflicts of interest: When people have a personal interest, they are unable to assess situations objectively – even when they actively try to be objective and are rewarded for their objectivity (Moore et al. 2010). In the dangerous work of police and military, the risk of distorted perceptions is high, e.g., regarding the risks of different strategies (was it really impossible to help?), or a colleague's behavior (was he really being fair?).

Status-quo bias: People tend to favor established behaviors and conditions, even when there are good reasons to change them (Samuelson & Zeckhauser 1988). When existing practices are immoral, e.g., discriminatory behaviors towards female colleagues, or "teaching a lesson" to convicted felons by beating them up, people may feel more concerned about the risks of changing their behavior (e.g., losing their sense of identity) than about the risk of failing to change (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel 2011).

Blindness Due to Moral Disengagement

Another reason why people may be blind to moral aspects, is that they have developed attitudes, which cause them to discount any ethical considerations in the first place, e.g., when dealing with a certain group of people. Following Bandura (1999), we speak of attitudes of *moral disengagement* here. There is some evidence that security personnel may be particularly prone to developing such attitudes. For instance, Morgan and colleagues (2000, 213) found that some police officers conveyed "us and them" attitudes, cynicism and a lack of trust towards citizens, and that some law enforcement trainees thought that the justice system should move towards "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Two types of moral disengagement, which may be particularly relevant in operational contexts are *rigid framing* and *dehumanizing*.

Rigid framing: Frames are mental structures that people develop to make sense of complex reality. Rigid framing occurs, when people exclude ethical considerations from decision-making and only view it as a matter of strategy or tactics, for instance (Palazzo et al., 2012). In a military setting, rigid framing could lead soldiers to focus on eliminating an enemy so strongly, for instance, that they ignore potential harm to noncombatants.

Dehumanizing: Goffman (2014) describes how police officers harass the relatives of former convicts to pressure them into give away the whereabouts of the people they are looking for. It is likely that the relevant police officers are so convinced about being "at war" with the entire community of the former convicts that they dismiss or forget about the people's rights and ignore the harm they are doing to them, or even attribute the blame to them (cf. Bandura 1999).

Consequences for moral sensitivity training

Based on these three types of blinders, we propose four central goals for the training of moral sensitivity:

- An empathic concern for relevant groups
- An awareness for one's vulnerability to biases and stress
- Moral schemas for the evaluation of risky situations
- Sensitivity to attitudes of moral disengagement

In the following, we will shortly introduce these educational goals in relation to the three types of blinders and share some suggestions on relevant training approaches. It is important to note that these different strategies may reinforce each other and overlap to some extent.

Empathic concern for relevant groups
An active concern for relevant groups, and knowledge of their needs and interests makes it easier for people to imagine how others could be affected by different actions and situations. If people don't care about the welfare of groups to which they don't belong, and don't understand their way of life, noticing when situations and actions could harm them becomes difficult.

In-group favoritism and the *familiarity-similarity bias* may be particularly important topics both for the military and the police. Security personnel need to depend on each other in moments of high stress and uncertainty, when their lives are at risk; in the battlefield, or when facing an armed criminal. Hence, it's only natural that they develop a strong emotional concern for their colleagues and other members of their vocation (Cacioppo et al. 2015). This tendency for a strong social cohesion can lead members of high-risk occupations to isolate themselves socially as a community, a well-known phenomenon among law enforcement officers (Schmalleger 1997). Morgan et al. (2000, 214) suggest that this tendency to self-imposed isolation "could possibly limit the ability of many of these police officers to take a broader perspective and analyse different points of view." Police officers, with whom they worked, expressed "us and them" attitudes when speaking of civilians, a reluctance to trust "outsiders", and an unwillingness to "burden" friends and family members.

Police and soldiers risk being biased in their perception of moral issues in several ways due to this phenomenon. First, their social isolation may lead them to neglect the needs and social realities of diverse groups, with which they deal on a regular basis. They may develop attitudes towards other groups, which don't allow them to feel an adequate empathic concern for people of these groups, e.g., when they are harmed or at risk of being harmed. Moreover, they probably experience a tendency to discount the perspectives of people from other groups, when members of their own in-group are involved in a conflict. Building empathic concern for relevant groups seems particularly important for these reasons, e.g., for civilian non-combatants of nations where the military is intervening, or for people from different local social groups in the case of police officers.

There are two key strategies to develop an empathic concern for relevant groups – which, of course, need to be identified first. First, *exposure* to these groups can change our attitudes significantly. As Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011, 48) argue: "The less exposure we have to people who are different from us, whether in terms of race, culture, religion, and so on, the more likely we are to view them through a narrow, biased lens." Second, exercises of *perspective taking* can promote an empathic concern for members of the relevant groups (Batson et al. 1997). An important point here is to imagine how individual members of specific groups may have felt about and perceived specific events – not how oneself would feel and perceive a situation (Decety & Cowell 2014). Members of these groups should be portrayed positively, from the perspective of learners. This is crucial, because the goal must be to foster learners' identification with members of this group, the foundation of people's ability to empathize with others at an affective level, as if they were concerned themselves (Mitchell et al. 2006).

Awareness for one's vulnerability to biases and stress
All professionals should be aware of their vulnerability to psychological biases, which may distort their perceptions and decision-making – especially professionals who need to make rapid decisions under high pressure. Bazerman & Tenbrunsel (2011) suggest that a couple of intervention strategies are helpful for most biases.

A general awareness to one's vulnerability to biases and stress and the possible negative consequences of misguided actions can facilitate more *careful and critical attitudes* and the development of better *impulse control*. This awareness can then be used in exercises, where learners anticipate how they may feel and behave in situations that are prone to bias, e.g., pressure through a supervisor. The goal of such exercises is to develop personal *scripts* how one would act in such a situation, e.g., questions one could ask, or how one could gain time to think matters through (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel 2011).

Interventions for the development of individual or social *resilience* in dealing with stress are probably another powerful antidote to this source of moral blindness. In the training of medical professionals, mindfulness training has led to substantial improvements of resilience, including lower burnout, less dehumanization of patients, and higher levels of empathy (Krasner et al. 2009). *Emotional intelligence* training is probably also helpful in terms of learners' ability to notice their own emotional reactions (e.g., to group pressure) and be more aware of their physiological condition and needs (tiredness, nervousness, etc.) – which ought to be perceived as important warning signals for an increased vulnerability to biased perceptions and the effects of ego depletion.

Moral schemas for the evaluation of risky situations

When moral intensity is low, i.e., when it isn't immediately clear, how an action may cause harm to other people or society at large, people may overlook moral issues. For instance, it is important for police to understand how corruption can support the growth of organized crime and, over time, create a more dangerous environment for citizens and the police (negative consequences). What matters here, is the accessibility of the motivationally relevant moral representations (schemas) for an immediate interpretation of certain situations, e.g., accepting a favor in exchange for ignoring injustice, as morally problematic (cf. Eitam & Higgins 2010). If people lack mental representations, which help them to interpret morally relevant actions, options, or situations *intuitively*, they will easily fail to notice ethical issues of low moral intensity, especially when acting under pressure.

Security personnel should be trained in developing moral schemas for the evaluation of frequent ethical risks and problems in their line of work. Seiler et al. (2011) demonstrate a powerful approach. They organized one-week trainings for military officers and soldiers, who were trained and assessed in recognizing moral issues of realistic military cases and finding solutions to them. They varied cases of high moral intensity (lives at stake) with cases of low moral intensity (e.g., alcohol problem of an officer). Their training combined an intensive individual reflection of the cases with an interactional approach, where participants first listened to each other's reflections and solutions in small groups and were then challenged to come to a consensus. After the training, participants of the intervention group identified significantly more moral and instrumental components to consider in decision making than before – both for high- and low-intensity cases, also in the long term.

An alternative approach could be for learners to write up and share their own, real cases (Norberg 2013). We assume that such case-based activities can foster moral sensitivity mainly by developing moral schemas, e.g. to detect and interpret warning signals for immoral acts automatically and associate them with potential harm to others. Additionally, case-based learning may also help to sensitize people for the dangers of psychological biases and attitudes of moral disengagement.

Sensitivity to attitudes of moral disengagement

Often, people don't start out with morally disengaged attitudes. Rather, they gradually change their attitudes, by making one mildly unethical decision at first, which they then *rationalize* and treat as the new norm. For instance, people may make unethical decisions due to psychological biases, and then convince themselves that their decision was correct by *blaming the victim* ("He should have been more *careful*. I *just* did my job."). Step by step, they develop attitudes of moral disengagement on this kind of a *slippery slope* (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel 2011). Attitudes of moral disengagement may therefore be understood as systems of evaluative beliefs, which people have internalized over time, and which lead them to make unethical decisions and defend them.

To help people overcome attitudes of moral disengagement, they need to understand how specific attitudes may affect their moral behavior negatively and lead to unethical outcomes. Where people don't care about members of certain groups, it is probably necessary to build empathic concern for these groups first (see above). When people engage in *rigid framing*, e.g., when they only "weigh the costs" of different strategies in monetary value – even when people's lives are at stake – strategies like the development of moral schemas (see above) may be helpful. A powerful strategy is to show people, how different attitudes, including attitudes of moral disengagement, lead to different consequences, e.g., using movie vignettes (Warner et al. 2011) or through trial-and-error exercises in simulations or video games (see Katsarov et al. 2016 and 2017 for further details).

Finally, a critical introspection on one's own norms, their origin and their relation to power may be necessary for people to overcome deeply rooted attitudes of moral exclusion (Opotow 2011), e.g., whereby women or foreigners are generally viewed as inferior, unworthy of moral consideration, and legitimate victims of oppression. Approaches of anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro 2000) may be required here.[1]

Discussion

We are currently working on a systematic review of interventions for the development of moral sensitivity (Katsarov et al. forthcoming). Well-conceived interventions tend to be relatively successful, especially when learners are actively involved in the process. Differentiated comparisons and combinations of the different learning strategies, which we have suggested here, have yet to be tested. Also, game-based learning interventions, which promise to be fruitful, have hardly been tested so far (Katsarov et al. 2017). We hope that this framework will help stimulate new interventional efforts and rigorous research for their evaluation.

On a final note, moral sensitivity cannot and should not only be stimulated educationally. It also depends on the ethical culture of the relevant community: Butterfield

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and colleagues (2000) have found that the use of moral language and the existence of a competitive framework both influence moral sensitivity. Supporting the importance of relevant leadership, Warner and colleagues (2011, p. 922) concluded that the success of their program was probably related to the fact that military leaders at each level of the hierarchy trained their own subordinates, which probably led to a cultural change of enhanced ethical awareness and leadership expectations. Seiler and colleagues (2011, 465) suggest that "the moral dimension of military decision making has to be systematically integrated in tactical and operational decision making in military training exercises." As humans, we are always learning and optimizing our work – not only in training. Leaders must recognize this and ensure that moral sensitivity matters in practice.

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