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Review Article

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An Empirical Evaluation of Ethical Decision-Making in Indian Business Students: Findings from a Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT
This pilot study investigates ethical reasoning among Indian business students with work experience, using a composite instrument informed by dual-process cognitive theory and Vedantic ethics. The instrument included ethical vignettes, CRT, AOT, moral disengagement, EDMSI, and Vedantic reflection scales. The study revealed dominant dharma-based responses, moderate moral disengagement, low cognitive reflection, and positive associations between Vedantic reasoning and open- mindedness. These results validate the instrument and support the need for culturally informed ethics education.

Keywords: Ethical Decision-Making, India, Moral Cognition, Vedantic Ethics, Cognitive Reflection, Business Students, Moral Disengagement

Introduction

Grounded in dual-process theory and Rest's Four-Component Model, this paper draws on Greene's neurocognitive findings, Haidt's Social Intuitionist Model, and Stanovich's work on cognitive reflection and individual differences [1-5]. It also incorporates Indian-specific ethical overlays, such as moral disengagement, intuitive ethics rooted in dharma, and hybrid moral orientations prevalent in Indian business schools [6-9]. These frameworks offer a more ecologically valid account of how ethical reasoning unfolds in Indian business settings, especially under contextual pressures like hierarchy, loyalty, and utilitarian trade-offs.

Theoretical Framing

The study contributes to both theory and practice in three critical ways. First, it contextualizes dual-process theories within Indian moral psychology, extending current models to include Vedantic and collectivist ethical constructs. Second, it empirically examines ethical decision-making in an under-researched population—Indian business students with work experience—who are future ethical gatekeepers in corporate India. Third, it informs ethics education and curriculum design by identifying cognitive and cultural variables that can shape moral judgment and behavior in Indian management education.

Significance of the Study This paper aims to:

1. Examine how Indian business students engage System 1 (intuition) and System 2 (reflection) in ethical decision-making.
2. Explore the influence of individual traits such as Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT) scores and Actively Open-minded Thinking (AOT) on ethical reasoning styles.
3. Investigate how cultural norms—particularly moral disengagement and dharmic ethics—moderate the relationship between cognition and ethical behavior.

Objectives of the Study

Despite the growing recognition of culture and cognition in ethical judgment, there is limited empirical understanding of how Indian business students balance intuitive and deliberative processes when faced with moral dilemmas. Existing models of ethical decision-making have rarely been tested within Indian educational or organizational contexts, nor have they adequately incorporated Indian ethical constructs such as 2iveka (discriminative reasoning), smriti (moral memory), or moral disengagement rooted in hierarchical norms.

Research Problem

This redefinition is especially significant in culturally diverse contexts such as India, where ethical reasoning is often guided by embedded traditions, spiritual values, and relational hierarchies. Indian business students and managers are not merely recipients of universal ethical norms but active negotiators of culturally

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situated dilemmas—drawing upon dharma (moral duty), personal relationships, and situational appropriateness in ways that challenge conventional Western frameworks [7,8]. Yet, there remains a paucity of empirical studies that explore how these cultural overlays intersect with cognitive processing systems in real-world ethical decision-making among Indian business students.

In the evolving landscape of business ethics, the assumption that ethical decision-making is solely a product of rational, deliberate reasoning has increasingly come under scrutiny. While traditional Western models have long emphasized structured moral development and principled reasoning—such as those posited by Kohlberg and Rest — emerging research underscores the pivotal role of intuition, culture, and personal traits in shaping ethical judgment [2,4,10]. These dual-process models, distinguishing between fast, intuitive (System 1) and slow, deliberative (System 2) thinking, have redefined the way researchers understand moral cognition.

Literature Review

Dual-Process Moral Reasoning and Ethical Orientation

Traditional Rationalist Theories

Traditional models of moral psychology, like Piaget and Kohlberg, highlighted rational, deliberative moral reasoning—similar to Kahneman's System 2: slow, effortful, and reflective [10,11]. Their theories formed the rationalist foundation of moral development models, focusing on structured stages of ethical maturity.

Intuition-Based Theories

Haidt's Social Intuitionist Model challenged rationalist dominance by showing that moral intuitions—emotionally charged and fast (System 1)—often precede conscious reasoning [4]. Supported by evidence like moral dumbfounding and neuroscientific studies, this model laid the groundwork for dual-process theories.

Dual-Process Models

Building on Haidt and Kahneman, Greene et al. (2001) used fMRI to show distinct neural correlates for utilitarian (System 2) vs. deontological (System 1) reasoning [4]. Paxton and Greene fMRI evidence shows utilitarian reasoning activates the Dorsolateral prefrontal Cortex (DLPFC), while deontological reasoning engages the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (VMPFC) [12]. Notably, moral reasoning can override intuitive biases, supporting fairness and consistency in ethical judgment. This positions System 2 as a plastic, educable component vital for ethical progress.

Stanovich and West further refined the model by introducing the concept of 'cognitive decoupling'—the ability to override intuitive responses based on cognitive dispositions like reflection or open-mindedness [5].

Neurocognitive Ethics Model

Reynolds builds upon dual-process theory by proposing a neurocognitive model that differentiates between two distinct but interrelated cycles in ethical decision-making: a reflexive pattern-matching cycle (aligned with System 1) and a higher-order conscious reasoning cycle (aligned with System 2) [13]. The model integrates recent understanding of how the brain processes ethical dilemmas, emphasizing that ethical behavior arises not only from deliberate reasoning but also from intuitive and retrospective pattern recognition. Reynolds' approach bridges cognitive neuroscience with moral psychology, emphasizing the interdependence of intuition and reflection; thus, offering a more dynamic and biologically grounded perspective that resonates with culturally situated ethics like those found in India.

Rest's Four-Component Model and Meta-Moral Cognition

Rest, Craft, and Narvaez introduced a four-stage model: moral awareness (S1), moral judgment (S2), moral intent (S2), and behaviour. Meta-moral cognition—such as moral conversation and critique—strengthens ethical maturity and deepens System 2 engagement [2,14,].

Craft reviewed 84 studies using Rest's Four-Component Model—moral awareness, judgment, intent, and behavior—linking System 1 to awareness and System 2 to judgment and intent [2,14,]. Intuitive factors like values and emotion dominate early ethical perception, while frameworks like deontology and utilitarianism shape reasoned decisions. Craft and Shannon provide a systematic literature review of 85 empirical studies on ethical decision-making (EDM) in business contexts conducted between 2012 and 2022 [15]. Anchored in Rest's Four-Component Model (FCM) and Jones' Moral Intensity Framework, the review categorizes 388 empirical findings across awareness, judgment, intent, and behavior. This quinary review moves beyond simple demographic correlations to examine deeper themes such as emotions, upbringing, role identity, customer deviance, power dynamics, and interpersonal pressure.

Key to this study is the emphasis on cognitive-emotional traits like self-awareness, emotion regulation, interdependent self-construal, and moral conversation—all of which intersect with System 1 and System 2 processes. The review also introduces novel constructs like "awareness of self and others", fantasy and imagination, and violent rhetoric as influencers of EDM. For example, moral conversation (a deliberative, System 2 process) was found to outperform emotionally-charged conversations in promoting ethical outcomes [16].

Notably, while CRT and AOT were not directly studied in this review, the findings support a need to examine individual differences in moral cognition, especially in terms of thinking dispositions, reflection tendencies, and emotional influences, making the inclusion of CRT and AOT scales both relevant and timely.

The study calls for future EDM research to focus on intersectionality, longitudinal designs, and decolonial perspectives, especially across cultural and national contexts. This aligns with research agendas rooted in Indian ethical contexts, where spirituality, dharma, hierarchy, and contextual reasoning may influence System 1/System 2 engagement in morally charged decisions.

Narvaez and Vaydich introduce the construct of meta-moral cognitive skills—the capacity to critically reflect on and refine one's ethical decisions over time [17]. Rooted in Rest's Four-Component Model and dual-process frameworks, their findings

show that the process of articulating rationales for moral actions (System 2) and engaging with peer or institutional critique catalyzes higher-order moral reasoning. This developmental process builds ethical maturity by encouraging individuals to re-evaluate intuitive decisions (System 1) in light of reasoned perspectives and social accountability.

Building on the interplay of cognition and social context, the next section explores how stable personality traits further shape moral judgment in both intuitive and deliberative systems.

This framework is especially useful in educational and professional ethics training. In the Indian business context, where intuition (often shaped by dharma or social roles) plays a strong role in initial ethical judgment, structured opportunities to explain and critique ethical decisions could promote greater cognitive flexibility and intercultural moral competence. Integrating critique-based exercises into pedagogy may thus support the development of both System 2 engagement and meta-moral reflection in Indian learners.

Individual Differences: CRT and AOT

Stanovich, Capraro et al. showed that individual traits like cognitive reflection (CRT) and actively open-minded thinking (AOT) influence System 2 engagement. Indian studies reveal higher CRT scores predict more socially fair outcomes, indicating the need for trait-based assessments.

Stanovich and West emphasize individual differences in engaging System 2 [5]. Traits like cognitive reflection, open-mindedness, and epistemic curiosity influence whether individuals override intuitive responses. For Indian business students with work experience, such traits may determine reliance on utilitarian vs. deontological reasoning. Tools like the CRT and AOT scale should be used in future research to assess cognitive style effects on moral reasoning in Indian contexts.

Capraro et al. used the CRT with Indian and U.S. participants in economic decision tasks [18]. They found that higher CRT scores, and by extension, more System 2 engagement, correlated with more socially efficient (fair) allocations. Lower CRT scorers and faster responses were more self-interested, favouring individual gain. This underscores trait-level reflection differences among Indian participants and supports using CRT to measure individual variation in dual-process moral reasoning.

Ethical Decision-Making Styles

Banerjee, Acharya & Pradhan extended the System 1/System 2 model into practical decision-making styles—rational, intuitive, dependent, avoidant, and spontaneous [9]. These styles align with Epstein's Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory.

Fernandes & Singh found that personality traits such as conscientiousness and agreeableness influence ethical decision-making styles among Indian MBAs, reflecting differential engagement of System 1 vs. System 2 processes [19].

Moral Disengagement and Cultural Overlay

Bandura conceptualized moral disengagement as intuitive justifications that block System 2 [6]. In India, duty, hierarchy, and loyalty reinforce disengagement, especially among young professionals. Malhotra and Sharma & Talwar show how dharmic norms interact with ethical reasoning [7,8].

Bandura et al. define moral disengagement as a set of psychological mechanisms that enable individuals to behave unethically without experiencing guilt or self-sanction [6]. These mechanisms include moral justification, euphemistic labeling, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, and victim dehumanization. Each process short-circuits the activation of System 2 ethical reasoning by providing an intuitive (System 1) justification that protects self-image while enabling moral transgressions. In professional and organizational contexts, such disengagement is often normalized, especially under hierarchical authority, peer conformity, or utilitarian justifications. In the Indian business environment—where duty, loyalty, and hierarchy often guide moral scripts—moral disengagement may be subtly reinforced, particularly among younger professionals navigating conflicting expectations.

Including moral disengagement in the study of Indian business students helps capture the gap between ethical judgment and ethical behaviour, adding a critical dimension to dualprocess and trait-based models (e.g., Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT) and Actively OpenMinded Thinking (AOT)). It also aligns with the call for ethics education that not only enhances reasoning but also addresses the mechanisms that suppress moral intent. Malhotra studied Indian managers and business students, showing younger individuals often rely on intuitive, System 1-driven responses, sometimes justifying unethical behavior [7]. In contrast, experienced managers demonstrated more moral intensity and reliance on System 2 reasoning aligned with universal ethical principles.

Contextual factors such as institutional culture and gender influenced moral intuition, supporting Haidt's idea that intuition is socially shaped. This underscores the need for ethics education that helps students transition from intuitive to reflective moral agents. Sharma and Talwar offer a Vedic perspective on CSR, emphasizing inner conscience over strategic reasoning [8]. Rooted in dharmic traditions, such intuitive ethics (System 1) align with India's spiritual-communal moral landscape. This complements Western System 2-based models by adding culturally specific dimensions of selfregulation and mutual harmony.

Integrated Indian Ethical Orientation

Indian business students often navigate hybrid moral codes combining utilitarian outcomes, deontological rules, and dharmic intuition. This context-sensitive reasoning necessitates both trait-based and culturally adaptive ethical education, emphasizing the interaction of System 1 and 2 within Indian moral frameworks. Across frameworks, one consistent insight emerges: moral reasoning is neither purely rational nor fully intuitive— it is context-sensitive and culturally grounded. In the Indian moral landscape—shaped by dharma, social roles, and spiritual traditions—System 1 and System 2 operate interactively. This chapter builds on that integrated framework to explore how Indian business students navigate moral dilemmas using hybrid ethical orientations shaped by culture, experience, and organizational norms.

Evolution of Ethical Decision-Making Models

Traditional Rationalist Theories

Piaget Stage-based moral development; rationalist foundation (System 2) [11].

Kohlberg Moral reasoning stages: abstract justice reasoning (System 2) [10]

- Emphasis on deliberate, staged moral reasoning (System 2)

Intuition-Based Theories

Haidt Social Intuitionist Model; intuition before reasoning [4].

- emotion-driven, fast, automatic moral judgements (System 1)

Dual Process Models

Stanovich & West Dual-process thinking, cognitive decoupling [5].

- Intuitive (S1) vs Deliberative (S2)
- Greene et al. fMRI shows neural split between utilitarian (DLPFC) and deontological (VMPFC) reasoning [3]

Neurocognitive Model of Ethics

Reynolds Neurocognitive dual-cycle model integrating neuroscience and ethics [13].

- Reflexive pattern matching +conscious moral reasoning

Rest's Four-Component Model

Craft Meta-analysis linking Rest's FCM to dual-process models Narvaez and Vaydich introduce the construct of meta-moral cognitive skills [14,17].

2024 – Craft & Shannon: Quinary EDM model with Rest + moral intensity + traits

- Awareness(S1), judgment /Intent (S2)
- Builds ethical maturity through reflection

Individual Differences Model

CRT, AOT – Stanovich and West; Capraro et al. and System 2 engagement in Indian and global samples [5,18]

- Higher CRT =more fair decisions
- System 2 varies by trait

Decision-Making Styles

Fernandes & Singh (2022) Personality and decision style among Indian MBAs Banerjee

et al.: System 1/2 linked to decision-making styles in India [9,19]

- Styles: rational, intuitive, avoidant
- Linked to personality traits

Moral Disengagement & Sociocultural Overlay

Bandura, Malhotra Sharma and Talwar [6-8]

- Dharma, hierarchy suppress or activate S2

Integrated Ethical Orientation in Indian Context

Indian hybrid model: Reasoning + Dharma + Institutional norms Synthesizes dual-process, traits and culture.

This timeline shows the evolution from rationalist to culturally integrated, neurocognitive models. The field has moved from stage-based reasoning to integrated models that account for affective intuition, neurocognition, and individual traits, culminating in culturally situated ethical orientations. However, despite this growth, critical conceptual and empirical gaps remain.

2.10 Linking Theoretical Constructs to Empirical Findings

To improve the alignment between theory and observation, this section maps ethical constructs to key theories and findings, with a focus on Indian business students.

Table 1: Linking Ethical Constructs, Authors, Findings, and Indian Context [3-5,7,9,13-19]

Construct	Empirical Study	Method/ Design	Cognitive Process	Major Finding	Implications for Indian Students
Utilitarianism	Greene et al. (2001)	fMRI study	System 2	DLPFC is activated in utilitarian decision	Reinforce reasoning in training for complex moral tradeoffs
Deontology	Haidt (2001); Bago et al. (2019)	Intuition & timing studies	System 1	Emotionally rooted, fast deontological decisions	Leverage dharma-based instincts while scaffolding reflections
Justice	Kapur, Malhotra & Singh (2022)	Survey (Indian MBA students)	System 2 (Justice framing)	Distributive justice dominant ethical orientation	Design ethics curriculum around fairness as primary value
Rights	Craft (2023)	metaanalysis	Mixed	Rights-based reasoning weak among business students globally	Address Rights explicitly in Indian Business education
Rest's FCM	Craft (2013) Narvaez (2001)	Meta- analysis theoretical	Mixed (Awareness-S1, Judgment – S2)	Reasoning stages influence behavior over time	Use reflection stages to build ethical maturity
Dual Process	Reynolds (2006);	Theoretical + Empirical	Integrated	Two neurocognitive cycles; intuitive pattern-matching and conscious reasoning	Integrate both intuitive and reflective training strategies
Individual Differences	Stanovich & West (2000) Capraro et al (2016)	CRT tasks survey	Varies by trait	Higher CRT = more socially efficient (fair) outcomes	Measures and develop CRT/AOT for better moral reasoning

Decision Styles	Banerjee et al (2025) Fernandes & Singh (2022)	Survey	Trait-linked vs System 1 System 2	Ethical decision style varies by personality	Map student personality to ethical decision styles

The literature review this far reveals a rich and evolving understanding of ethical decision making as a dual process interplay between intuitive (System 1) and deliberative (System 2) cognitive functions. Western frameworks such as Haidt's Intuitionist Model , Greene's fMRI-based studies, Reynolds' neurocognitive model, and Rest's Four Component Model (FCM) provide foundational insights into the cognitive and emotional mechanisms underlying moral judgement. These models have been empirically extended through tools like Cognition Reflection Test (CRT), Actively Open-minded Thinking (AOT) and decision style inventories, allowing researchers to capture individual variation in ethical reasoning.

Indian contributions add crucial depth to this body of knowledge. Empirical studies involving Indian business students show how contextual elements such as distributive justice framing, personality-linked decision styles, and moral disengagement interact with dual process cognition in culturally specific ways. Importantly, dharmic traditions and Vedantic ethics bring forth a philosophical layer that aligns intuition with moral duty (dharma) and self-reflection (Viveka), challenging the Western dichotomy between emotion and reason.

In conclusion, the literature review demonstrates a clear progression from rationalist moral development theories to integrated dual-process and neurocognitive models, enriched by Indian philosophical constructs. It reveals that ethical decision making is shaped by an interplay between intuition (System 1), deliberation (System 2), individual traits, and cultural norms. While existing models provide valuable insights, significant gaps remain— especially in contextualizing Indian ethical traditions, validating trait-based instruments in local settings, and bridging Vedantic principles with cognitive science. The current study aims to fill these gaps by integrating empirical methods with culturally situated ethics to build a hybrid, developmentally sensitive model of moral reasoning among Indian business students.

The following table summarizes the key conceptual, methodological, and contextual gaps identified from the review of ethical decision-making literature, with particular reference to Indian business students.

Table 2: Research Gaps Identified from Literature Review

Gap Category	Description	Implication for Current Study
Cultural Integration	Limited incorporation of Vedantic or Indian ethical frameworks (e.g., dharma, viveka) into dual-process models.	Current study extends existing models by integrating Vedantic ethics as culturally grounded moral cognition.
Moral Disengagement Contextualization	Bandura's model is applied without adequate linkage to Indian sociocultural norms (e.g., hierarchy, loyalty).	Explores how System 1 disengagement is normalized under Indian organizational structures.
Trait-Based Validation Tools	CRT and AOT instruments are Western-developed and under-tested in Indian educational and cultural contexts.	Adapts and contextualizes trait-based instruments for Indian business students.
Developmental Trajectories	Lack of longitudinal studies tracking ethical maturation or changes in System 1/System 2 balance over time.	Proposes an evolving model of ethical orientation, potentially across age or experience bands.
Real-World Integration Case	Theories insufficiently tested against real business dilemmas or ethical conflicts in Indian settings.	Designs culturally embedded ethical scenarios to empirically test response patterns.
Empirical-Vedantic Bridge	Scarcity of attempts to link Vedantic texts or philosophical terms to psychological constructs or decision models.	Maps Vedantic elements (e.g., viveka, smriti) to cognitive processing stages (System 1/System 2).

Given the exploratory nature of this pilot study and the identified research gaps in the Indian ethical decision-making literature, formal hypothesis testing was not the primary objective. Instead, the study was guided by a set of culturally grounded research questions and theoretical propositions.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative survey-based research design to explore the dualprocess ethical decision-making styles among Indian business students with work experience. The final study approach will be cross-sectional and explanatory, aiming to identify cognitive and cultural predictors of ethical reasoning.

Sample and Participants

Participants were postgraduate business students enrolled in a premier Indian management institute, with a minimum of one year/nil o work experience. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure participants had relevant exposure to ethical dilemmas in organizational contexts. The pilot study sample consisted of 20 respondents and the final study will be

of approximately 200 respondents, balanced across gender and academic domains (e.g., marketing, HR, operations).

Instruments

Ethical Decision-Making Scenarios:

- set of custom-designed vignettes presenting realistic organizational moral dilemmas (e.g., fairness in appraisal, whistleblowing, peer pressure). Each scenario offered 3–4 response options reflecting different ethical orientations (utilitarian, deontological, intuitive, avoidant).

Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT) – Frederick :

- validated three-item instrument used to assess an individual's tendency to override an intuitive (System 1) response in favor of reflective (System 2) reasoning. Higher CRT scores indicate greater cognitive control and deliberative thinking [20].

Actively Open-Minded Thinking (AOT) Scale – Stanovich & West: Measures participants' willingness to consider diverse viewpoints, revise beliefs, and resist cognitive closure. This trait reflects the likelihood of engaging System 2 reasoning in complex or ambiguous ethical situations [5].

Moral Disengagement Scale – Bandura et al., adapted to Indian cultural contexts:
Assesses eight mechanisms (e.g., moral justification, diffusion of responsibility) that allow individuals to justify unethical behavior without self-censure [6]. Adaptations included culturally specific references to hierarchy, familial obligation, and institutional loyalty.

Ethical Decision-Making Style Inventory – Banerjee, Acharya & Pradhan:
Assesses individual differences in ethical decision-making approaches, including rational, intuitive, dependent, avoidant, and spontaneous styles. This tool aligns with Epstein's Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory and maps decision styles to System 1 vs. System 2 preference [9].

The structured questionnaire was administered to a sample of 20 postgraduate business students. The instrument covered seven sections: demographics, ethical vignettes, CRT, AOT, MDS, EDMSI, and a Vedantic Ethical Reflection Scale. Responses were coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlations, and qualitative interpretation.

Results Key findings from the pilot include: -

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

The following section presents descriptive and inferential statistics for the four key psychometric scales used in this pilot study: Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT), Actively Open-minded Thinking (AOT), Vedantic Ethical Reflection Scale, and Moral Disengagement Scale (MDS).

Mean Scores:

- CRT: 0.00 (indicative of intuitive dominance)
- AOT: ~19.75 (moderately high open-mindedness)
- Vedantic Ethics: ~16.2 (strong cultural moral reflection)
- MDS: ~25.8 (moderate rationalization tendencies)

These results suggest a significant inclination toward System 1 (intuitive) reasoning, with culturally informed ethical engagement through Vedantic principles. Students show moderate moral disengagement, which may reflect internal rationalizations within hierarchical or relational norms.

Figure 1: Mean scores across CRT, AOT, Vedantic Ethics, and MDS scales.

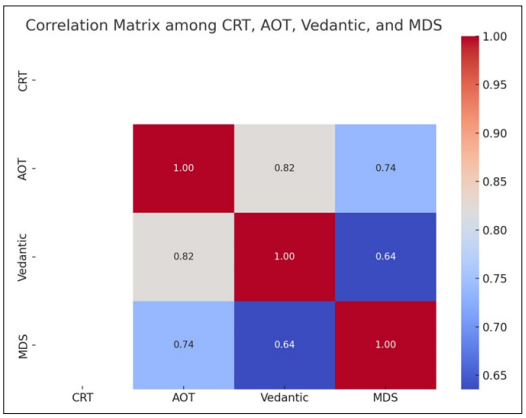

Figure 2: Correlation matrix showing relationships among AOT, Vedantic Ethics, and MDS.

Discussion

Findings affirm a culturally grounded pattern of ethical cognition. Participants show a blend of intuitive reasoning and reflective moral thought influenced by Vedantic values. These insights challenge the sufficiency of purely Western ethical models and suggest integrating cultural frameworks into ethics education.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This pilot confirms the utility of a dual-process, culturally sensitive ethical instrument.

Recommendations for the final study include: -

- Increase sample size to 150–200
- Conduct exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis
- Include additional vignettes across domains
- Retest with reliability and validity checks
- Use regression to assess predictors of ethical styles

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Declaration of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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