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An Examination of the Influence of Family and Ethics Training in Students' Critical Reasoning

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Researchers sought to assess the role of family influences in students' critical deliberation of an ethical dilemma and to determine how that role changed with exposure to educational content pertaining to professional ethics. Qualitative data from four classes (85 paired responses) were collected over a period of two years. Consistent with ecological, social learning, and family systems theory, results showed that students' families played a consistent and important role in shaping their ethical perspectives and reasoning. Some degree of shift in rationale and in integration of philosophical concepts affirmed the impact of ethics course content. Content analysis of student responses elicited three primary themes: compassion and caring, commitment and endurance, and safety and protection, as well as several secondary themes.

"Purposeful moral deliberation is essential to the ethical practice of family and consumer sciences (FCS)" (Roubanis, Garner & Purcell, 2006, p. 30). Members of the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS) embrace an ecological perspective when they strive to assist individuals, families and communities. Ethics requires taking into consideration interpersonal relationships and ethical knowledge. This process is, therefore, necessarily complex. Professional organizations establish standards of conduct, or professional codes, that are intended to guide members in their decision-making and activity. Those codes attempt to take into account the multiple levels of human ecology and interaction, and in turn, they influence curriculum design. To maintain relevance over time, those codes require regular review. The AAFCS Code of Ethics underwent such evaluation in 2012-2013, resulting in a modified structure and the addition of the principle of integrity (Roubanis, 2013). Recent calls for curriculum changes in post-secondary FCS programs have focused on increasing students' awareness of and reflection upon ethics to improve critical analysis skills and, ultimately, to better prepare them to confront and address professional dilemmas.

The current study examines how a course that teaches ethical reasoning enhances FCS students' ability to critically reason about the influence of their families' values in resolving an ethical dilemma. Specifically, researchers asked students to reflect upon an adoption scenario that presented a disruptive, potentially violent, family situation to (a) determine, using a thematic analysis, how students drew upon their own family experiences to analyze and justify resolutions to that ethical dilemma, and (b) identify how exposure to course content may have influenced student reasoning.

Review of Literature

Kidder (2003) referred to ethical decision-making and behavior as voluntary obedience to an otherwise unenforceable sense of moral duty to uphold what one values, while morals are beliefs in intrinsic rights and wrongs. Yet, Kidder cautions against drifting too far into academic discourse because (a) most people have a working understanding of good, and (b) ethics is really more about inner impulses, judgments, and duties than it is about definitions (p. 63). Thus, curriculum emphasis on critical reasoning should increase student awareness and heighten students' sense of duty to effectively address and resolve personal and professional ethical issues.

Several time-honored theories form a basis for examining social and family processes' impact on ethical decision-making. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) posits that one's development is heavily influenced from the earliest stages of life by the social cues that one observes through interaction. It combines social experience with intellect, providing a basis for "analyzing human motivation, thought, and action" (Bandura, 1986, p. xi). The process of symbolizing provides an avenue for turning experiences into wisdom, allowing ability to assess potential outcomes. FCS graduates must integrate ethics content into practical field applications.

Ecological theory provides a basis for thinking about how individuals are influenced by systems at a variety of levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Personal characteristics and environment are intertwined. In the family, the ethical development of individuals is a product of the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. As noted by Bretherton (1993), we view "family as a system of interlocked but separate minds" (p. 294).

During the 1980s, family scholars increased the focus on the role of the family in the transmission of ethics. As evidence of this recognition, ethics and families was the theme of the 1993 National Council on Family Relations (Boss, Doherty, LaRossa, Schumm & Steinmetz, 1993). Arising out of general systems theory, Bowen's systems theory (Kerr, 2000) recognizes that a significant event for one or more family members reverberates among all family members, including shaping outlook on situations. Societal emotional process – the influence of affect on behavior - applies to workplace dilemmas. The current study tests the premise that microsystemic influences from family life affect the salient mental anchors used in ethical reasoning.

Family influence on moral development can be substantial and long lasting. Beginning in childhood, family heavily influences socialization, including moral perspectives and value development (White, 1996). As individuals are exposed to a larger ecosystem, adolescence and young adulthood are times to refine ethical decision making. According to Walker and Taylor (1991), the moral development of children is best predicted by a parenting style that uses supportive interactions and applies a higher level of moral reasoning. Pratt, Arnold, Pratt and Diessner (1999) assessed adolescent moral reasoning using the standard Kohlberg Moral Judgment interview. Researchers concluded that authoritative parenting was related to a greater likelihood for common views between parent and child in moral socialization. Encouraging adolescents to voice their opinions and showing respect for their views aided their ability to apply moral reasoning with greater sophistication.

Kennedy, Felner, Cauce, and Primavera (1988) examined the relationship between two aspects of social competence: moral reasoning and interpersonal cognitive problem-solving skill (ICPS) among high school students. Those adolescents who possessed a healthy self-concept tended to refer to personal history in their decision-making. This reflection, paired with growing exposure to ethical decision-making approaches, coincided with growth in moral development.

In addition, family experiences are fundamental in shaping cognitive outcomes. Adolescents' perceptions of their family climate also shape personal incentives, such as academic motivation (Urdan, Solek & Schoenfelder, 2007). Indeed, both family obligation and critical incidents can influence motivation.

Moral judgment is influenced by family, particularly parents, at a microsystem level. Ethical development at a macrosystem level can result from curriculum that includes character education, beginning in junior high; but the advancement of moral thinking can be explained by the neo-Kohlbergian model (Thoma, 2014). At the university level, the microsystem and macrosystem converge, resulting in the four components of the model: moral sensitivity, judgement, and motivation, as well as a method for constructing an appropriate action. Thus, Speicher (1994) found that sons and daughters who graduated from college achieved a higher moral stage in comparison to their parents.

As reasoning advances from conforming to societal norms to individual application of principles, moral development is positively correlated with the college experience (Pascarella, 1997). Advanced moral development, through exposure to ethics course content and ethics dialogue, encourages reasoning that applies learned moral principles. Pearson and Bruess (2001) identified factors that college students perceive as important to their identity and moral development. Students noted relationships with family, peers and mentors most frequently. Personal values also had a significant influence on their development. Such findings demonstrate the influence of family on moral growth.

Practical application, grounded in a core of fundamental values, is the objective of most ethics curricula. Klugman and Stump (2006) acknowledged that teaching goals should challenge students to identify core values and beliefs as well as improve students' ability to think critically, reason coherently, and articulate their stances. While pre- and post-tests conducted in a freshman ethics course found few significant modifications in students' stated values and beliefs, students did surprisingly well at articulating their reasoning in response to posed dilemmas. Shurden, Santandreu, and Shurden (2010) found that college seniors were even better able than they had been as freshmen to analyze their thought processes in response to ethical dilemmas and succeeded in transferring that analysis to practical applications in their field. Similarly, in their analysis of potential change in the moral reasoning of dietetic interns after a week of ethics training, Nortje' and Esterhuyse (2015) found interns used more detail in their decision-making and moved from rule-oriented analysis to incorporation of universal principles.

Empirical evidence shows students benefit from and appreciate ethics education (Lau, Caracciolo, Roddenberry & Scroggins, 2011). Kohlberg and Hersh (1977) emphasized the importance of teacher-guided discussions in the classroom as a means of critically reasoning through a conflict while recognizing and addressing inconsistencies. Graduates must be prepared to address ethical conflicts because a young professional's poor decisions or behaviors could do considerable harm to the interests of key stakeholders.

A FCS department that offers a course in which ethics is a dominant theme sends a powerful message about the importance of grounded reasoning. The focus of such training should be on both the process of moral decision-making, as well as ethical sensitivity. This compels students to give greater thought to what they value and believe, what those with other perspectives and experiences value and believe, and how the two compare (Farnsworth & Kleiner, 2003). Dahm (2015) considered the impact of ethics training in a senior-level FCS capstone course. The instructional design and content, based on Kayes' (2002) ethics instruction approach, emphasized application of normative models of decision-making in applied settings

and "led to positive changes in student views, including increased appreciation for diverse opinions, openness to considering and integrating alternative positions in the reasoning process, and a more invested sense of professional and social responsibility" (p. 27). A course that improves students' capacity to reason coherently prepares young professionals to successfully address a variety of situations where the decision-maker's ethics are critical to preserving or elevating the well-being of others. The results bear pedagogical implications for courses that focus on ethical decision-making while also building on our understanding of how family experiences constitute fundamental reference points that influence young professionals' reasoning and ethical choices.

The literature has primarily focused on the effect of ethical training in university settings on decision-making in business, health sciences and legal field settings (Allen, Bacdayan, Kowalski & Roy, 2005; Baykara, Demir & Yaman , 2015; Etzioni, 2002, Kayes, 2002; McCabe, Dukerich, & Dutton, 1991). Bommer, Gratto, Gravander and Tuttle (1987) proposed a conceptual model of decision-making within organizations. In addition to consideration of the aforementioned environments, the personal environment, including the family, was acknowledged. Individual attributes, including life experiences, were also recognized. Thus, individual and family influences play an integral role in the decision process within professional settings.

If purposeful moral deliberation is determined to be essential to the practice of FCS (Roubanis et al., 2006) and, if FCS professionals advocate the integration of an ethics component into the required curriculum, then it is important to identify what other factors influence students' analytic processes. There must be an accounting for the role of the family in shaping a young person's morality and, ultimately, his/her rationale for resolving situations of an ethical nature. In this study, researchers sought to achieve that by asking FCS students who were taking part in a capstone course on ethics to resolve a family-based ethical dilemma, while articulating the influence of their own family experience on their final decision.

Method

In the current study, researchers collected data from students enrolled in a senior-level capstone course where enhancement of ethical decision-making was a fundamental objective. At the beginning and the end of the course, in a private student-instructor electronic journal, students responded to a professional dilemma concerning an adoptive family (See Appendix). Using a qualitative design, researchers examined the responses for both time periods to discover the degree to which students incorporated their own family experiences into formulating a resolution to the dilemma, and to evaluate how that reasoning changed over the semester (Time 1 = beginning, Time 2 = end) based on exposure to course content.

In qualitative research, immersion in the data in order to distinguish emergent themes is key (Rosenblatt & Fischer, 1993). In the current study, analysis using NVivo® software allowed researchers to review the responses and assign each detected idea or thought to a thematic node. For example, a student wrote that she believed non-violent children deserve protection from violent children at all costs. This comment was coded under a node titled *Safety*. On occasion, a given splice of text was assigned to multiple nodes when it reflected more than one theme. Excel® software was also used to build an "at-a-glance" reference table so that each student's responses could be charted.

The credibility of a qualitative study is promoted through several activities, including prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). Each of these occurred in conducting the current study. Prolonged engagement is the "investment of sufficient time" (p. 301) to achieve the study's purposes. Because researchers collected data on eight different occasions over the course of a two-year period, we maintain that threshold was met. Researchers achieved triangulation of sources using in-class discussion of the students' journal entries. Peer debriefing refers to "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer…for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). Debriefing meetings were held by the research team throughout the analysis process, particularly by one member of the team who mostly led the analysis process meeting with the member of the team who led the data collection process. Finally, member checking occurred via two of the three graduate research assistants who both worked on the study and were, themselves, former participants in the course. As such, they were able to affirm that the responses were "recognizable…as adequate representations of their own (and multiple) realities" and had the "opportunity to react to them" (p. 314).

Results

Sample

Of the 112 students enrolled in the course, 85 students (75%) participated, i.e. provided responses at both the beginning and the end of the course. The data were collected across four separate semesters over a two-year period. Females constituted the majority (97.6%) of respondents. Racially, Caucasians composed about half (49.9%) of the sample, with African Americans making up 36.5% of the group, and Latinos representing 9.4%. The sample included a relatively small number of Asian Americans (2.3%). The remainder consisted of students who did not declare any particular race.

Students' Time 1 Responses

Influence of the Family. In Time 1, students incorporated family influences into their reasoning in 88.2% (n=75) of their responses. Students quantitatively rated (0 to 10) the level of family influence on their reasoning and solutions. The mean for Time 1 was 7.2.

Students' Decisions. Of the 88% (n=75) who indicated a clear choice in the dilemma during Time 1, approximately half (n=38) supported removal of the adopted 8-year-old child Tiffany, while the others (n=37) chose for Tiffany to remain with the family. During Time 1, 12% (n=11) did not offer a clear choice.

Primary Themes Embedded in Rationale. Table 1 conveys the frequencies of the three major themes found in students' responses. Within a given theme, students may have discussed the theme in either a positive light (e.g. caring) or a negative light (e.g. neglect).

The qualitative analysis of student responses revealed three primary themes in students' Time 1 rationale: compassion/caring 23%, (n=17), commitment/endurance 19%, (n=14), and protection/safety 16% (n=12). Assertions students made within the compassion/caring theme typically centered on the principle that those in a decision-making position ought to take a sympathetic view toward the difficulty being experienced by others. Conversely, some students recalled a lack of compassion from their past family experiences. Within the commitment/endurance theme, students routinely stressed the importance of not giving up on family relationships, and the rewards that often await those who weather dark times. Alternatively, they also commented on the damage done when family commitments were not honored. Finally, students who spoke about protection/safety affirmed the pragmatic need to ensure that no person's health be threatened by the circumstance. Included in that, some students

Table 1
Themes by Time 1 and Time 2 Occurrence

Theme	Time 1	Time 2	Total
Compassion/Caring	12	20	32
Opposite, including Neglect	5	2	7
Total	17	22	**39**
Commitment/Endurance	11	11	22
Opposite, including Divorce	3	2	5
Total	14	13	**27**
Protection/Safety	8	9	17
Opposite, including Violence	4	3	7
Total	12	12	**24**
Other Themes	38	32	**70**
No Theme Indicated	10	13	**23**
N	**91**	**92**	**183**

** Note: First row of data for each theme reflects positive affect related to family experiences, while second row indicates negative affect for the same theme.*

recalled incidents of family violence that had affected their lives.

Seven other themes came to light to a lesser degree. These included: responsibility/obligation, family communication, stability, equality/fairness, miscellaneous family beliefs (most often related to Christian scripture), a belief that professional help is valuable, and a belief in utilitarianism—i.e., that decisions are best made considering what is likely to offer the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people. Notably, these lesser themes represented 44% of the responses submitted.

Students' Time 2 Responses and Changes Observed

Influence of the Family. In Time 2, students' responses incorporated family influences into their reasoning in 83.5% (n=71) of the responses. Students were asked to quantitively rate (0 to 10) the level of family influence on their solutions. The mean for Time 2 was 7.2, exactly equal to that of Time 1. In other words, there was no perceived change in family influence in the aggregate when students evaluated this dilemma at the end of the course. However, when responses from those students who supported Tiffany's removal on both occasions (Time 1 and Time 2) were examined, the level of family influence increased by 20%. By comparison, a review of all other student responses (i.e. those who supported removal only once or who never supported removal) revealed a marked decrease (57%) in reference to family influence.

Students' Decisions. Of those who indicated a clear choice during Time 2, 55% (n=47) believed Tiffany should remain with the adoptive parents, an increase of 6% (n=37). Conversely, 45% (n=38) supported removal, a decrease of 6% (n=38). During Time 2, 7% (n=6) did not offer a clear choice - a decrease from Time 1 (12%, n=10).

Of all 85 students, 69% (n=59) maintained their Time 1 decision through Time 2, while 14% (n=12) reversed their original decision in Time 2. The remaining 16% (n=14) did not offer a concrete decision in either Time 1 or in Time 2. Two-thirds of those who changed their minds (8 of 12) shifted from removal of the child to keeping Tiffany in the adoptive parents' home. Within that group, it is notable that 75% (6 of 8) said they had changed their minds because they

placed a higher priority on the biological children's welfare rather than that of the adopted child.

With some degree of consistency—38% (n=32) in Time 1 and 40% (n=34) in Time 2—students proposed that therapeutic intervention could be useful in resolving the adopted child's violent behaviors. It was the opinion of 18% (n=15) that counseling not only could be useful, but that it should be given a chance to work before reaching any final determination of the adopted child's removal from or remaining with her adoptive family.

For those students who supported removal of the child, this choice was often associated with placing greatest priority on the biological children's safety. Among those who consistently (both Time 1 and Time 2) prescribed that Tiffany should remain with her adoptive family, 97% (n=32) indicated that their highest priority was the adopted child's welfare. However, there was less uniformity among those who consistently prescribed the child's removal; that is, 41% (n=13) identified the safety of the biological children as their priority, 18% (n=6) identified Tiffany's welfare as their priority, 15% (n=5) indicated that both choices were equivalent priorities, while 3% (n=1) indicated the agency's concerns should be given highest priority.

Positive versus Negative Family Experiences

Our analysis also examined whether there were differences between those who cited positive family experiences within their rationale and those who cited negative ones. For example, some students used positive terms to describe family experiences in which their own parents had taken the responsibility to raise children outside of their immediate family, while others offered general admiration for a relative's work ethic or warm memories of how the family made holidays special. Others invoked negative situations, characterized by disappointment, regret or antagonism, such as dealing with neglectful or abusive parenting behaviors. Of 85 students, 60% (n=51) indicated positive family experiences in both Time 1 and Time 2 as a basis for their decision.

We explored whether there was a relationship between those positive experiences and the decision students made. We found that of those 51 students, 43% (n=22) consistently chose for Tiffany to remain with her adoptive parents; 24% (n=12) consistently chose for Tiffany to be removed from the home; 8% (n=4) initially determined to remove Tiffany, but later decided for her to remain; and, 4% (n=2) initially determined for Tiffany to remain, but later decided to remove her. The remaining 22% (n=11), either at Time 1 or Time 2, were not clear about their decision.

A smaller group, 14% (n=12), consistently indicated negative family experiences as a basis for their conclusion. Within that group, 33% (n=4) consistently chose for Tiffany to be removed from the home; 17% (n=2) consistently chose for Tiffany to remain with her adoptive parents; and, 25% (n=3) initially determined to remove Tiffany, but later decided for her to remain. No student advocated in Time 1 that Tiffany remain, and then in Time 2, changed position to favor removal. The remaining 25% (n=3) did not specify a decision either at Time 1 or at Time 2. What is notable here is the seemingly moderating effect that occurred between Time 1 and Time 2—that is, only 2 of the 12 determined in Time 1 for Tiffany to remain with her adoptive parents, but 6 of the 12 had made that determination in Time 2; adding to that, only 3 of the 12 prescribed therapy in Time 1, but that grew to 8 of the 12 for Time 2.

Primary Themes Embedded in Rationale. As indicated in Table 1, qualitative analysis revealed that, of those students who responded with content suggestive of one or more themes (72 of 85) in Time 2, the same three prominent themes were affirmed on 79 occasions:

compassion/caring (28%, n=22 responses), commitment/endurance (16%, n=13 responses), and protection/safety (15%, n=12 responses). Once again, multiple themes were sometimes found in a given student's response. The seven secondary themes also arose in the Time 2 content analysis. References to those themes occurred in 30% (n=24) of the responses. Of the three themes, compassion and caring was the only theme that exhibited a marked increase in occurrence from Time 1 to Time 2 (23% to 28%).

Discussion

Influence of the Family

Study findings support that students were aware of the degree to which their own family life influenced their attitudes and beliefs in resolving an ethical dilemma. That is, they tended to recognize how certain principles had been instilled in them and how certain experiences had affected their perspective. Responses revealed a substantial (7.2 out of 10) amount of family influence on student reasoning in both Time 1 and Time 2. Such findings affirm the resilience of the social learning process.

Analysis indicated that most students drew upon positive experiences both times they were queried, whereas a minority drew upon negative experiences on both occasions. Importantly, differences appeared in the ultimate choice of those two groups as to how the dilemma ought to be resolved. That is, almost half of those drawing upon positive experiences took an optimistic approach, deciding that the child should continue to live with her adoptive parents, whereas those drawing upon negative experiences were more inclined toward caution, seeking her removal from the adoptive family over working with the parents for her to remain in their home.

Thematic Discussion

Compassion and caring. The most common associations that students made between their family experiences and their dilemma decisions centered on the theme of compassion and caring. Reference to this theme increased notably from Time 1 to Time 2. Further, compassion and caring were most commonly referenced in a positive light, though some respondents drew upon some form of neglect or emotional abuse. Recounting a positive experience, one student said that she "felt enough love from my own family to know the effects a situation like this can have on a child." Then, that same student elaborated on that sentiment in Time 2 when she gave a more detailed explanation:

> From my own personal family life, I've always been in an environment where love is a factor. Love, patience and discipline has allowed for all of us to grow into successful people. My older brother and sister came from an extremely impoverished home into my home where my mother raised them with these three factors. While it was hard for her taking in these kindergarten aged children who had to grow up a little to survive, she was able to do it. I've seen first-hand her influence on my siblings.

There also were occasions when students drew upon experiences where they felt rejection and, in some instances, had experienced a form of neglect or emotional abuse. One student recalled:

> When I was younger my dad married a woman named Lisa and at first she loved me like one of her own children, but then she turned into what I can best describe as the evil step

> mother from Cinderella. Her children, in her eyes, could do no wrong, even though they were the ones causing any trouble going on in the house. I'm not saying I was an angel, but because of my up-bringing and my father, I knew better. But I would still be more disciplined than her children when really I wasn't to blame for anything. And staying in a home where someone isn't willing to make a change is only going to be detrimental to a child, especially one as young as Tiffany in the scenario. The only true way to get out and move on from an issue such as that is to get out of it completely and put distance between what's happening. To me, it's an overall better solution for everyone simply because I wasn't happy when I was living in a home where I didn't feel welcomed.

Given that our sample consisted of students who have chosen to pursue majors in fields where workers with considerable emotional intelligence and advanced interpersonal skills are in demand, it is no surprise that compassion and caring emerged as the most prominent theme.

Commitment and endurance. Commitment and endurance among the families constituted the second most common theme in the content analysis. Most students indicated positive family experiences associated with this theme. In a response that is typical of this theme, a student said,

> This scenario reminds me of my sister. She suffers from depression and is a compulsive liar. She has caused problems at home before as well, which I would rather not say but are relevant to the scenario. Even though my sister has her problems, we don't give up on her. The family got her help and she is doing better. The main point is that we did not lose faith in her when we found out what was wrong.

Another student wrote,

> About a year ago, my mom and step-father got a divorce…I no longer had a home to go back to in Houston…My dad begs to come back into our life, but I am glad that my mom will not allow him to. Even though he is a good man, he let drugs take over, and he would threaten my mom and I was scared for her.

Clearly, students identified strongly with those in their families who demonstrated resolve, felt admiration for those who demonstrated the virtues of commitment and endurance, and were compelled to incorporate that into their rationale for their final decisions.

Protection and safety. The third most common theme arising from the dilemma analysis evoked students' experience of feeling safe and protected in their families, or alternatively, feeling vulnerable and threatened, possibly abused. Most students recalled positive experiences associated with this theme; but one-third of the students recalled something negative. Reflective of one who perceived the benefit of her mother's protective instincts, one student said:

> I came to my decision because I was raised to do whatever is possible to keep my family out of harm's way…. I watched my parents treat each of us differently because they wanted the best for each of us, yet if it ever came to one of us harming the other I do feel they would have protected the other two children first before anything else was done. Yet

> that doesn't say they wouldn't do anything in their power to help the one causing the harm. This is a difficult question because I have always wanted to adopt and I never thought about being faced with this scenario.

Another student conveyed how her mother's abusive behaviors allowed her to empathize with the adopted child in the scenario.

> I came to my conclusion because my mom was addicted to alcohol and I had a similar childhood to Tiffany. Having support from my family and friends is what kept me sane. I experienced the same kind of abuse and neglect and had I been an [sic] considered an issue, which to my step mom I was, I probably would have felt threatened as Tiffany probably did in her situation. Why else would she be aggressive and threatened towards the family. Being that she is so young she is still highly impressionable there is a glimpse of hope for her to get help. Counseling is the family's best option to get Tiffany help. And their support too is crucial.

Protection and safety represent the most pragmatic of the three major themes and, accordingly, many students were inclined to consider those in their rationale.

Secondary themes. In the secondary themes, students sometimes launched into memories of how they were taught to think and behave, typically by a parent, and sometimes directly referencing Christian teachings. One student recalled, "My parents are both big believers in the necessity to compromise, so I think that though Tiffany does not seem to be fitting in well with Ron and Katie's family, we could sit down and see if a compromise was possible."

To a slightly lesser degree, students spoke of the importance of living up to responsibilities in deference to societal or family expectations: "First, I believe that my ultimate job is to take care of Tiffany. She is the client I was charged with, and her well-being is my responsibility."

Equally, they referenced the need for optimal family communication. For instance, a student reflected on her own communication with her partner, stating "I feel like if I actually take the time to find out what is wrong and ways that I can help him, instead of just giving my opinion, he would be better off." Other themes included stability, equality, the benefits of gaining professional help, and esteem for utilitarianism.

Drawing Upon Approaches as Pedagogical Underpinning

Of specific interest to this study was the degree to which the course content may have provided students with an improved capacity to reason and/or to convey their reasoning—and in so doing, incorporate some prominent theories of social science as well as concepts presented in the course. Content analysis of student responses across Time 2 revealed that students often articulated their reasoning using key language phrases emphasized in the course. For example, utilitarianism was explicated using the phrase "the greatest good for the greatest number of people." Meanwhile the Kantian Imperative relied upon a "rules-based approach." And, finally, virtue ethics was taught using the Golden Rule, i.e. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The increased use of these key words and phrases in Time 2 responses provided evidence that students had integrated course concepts into their reasoning process.

The study affirmed the salience of social learning theory in that students recalled

experiences that shaped their perspectives and guiding principles. Many of those experiences were examples of reinforcement, some in which the student him or herself was a primary participant, others in which the student became affected as a matter of vicarious reinforcement. "a person's behavior can act on the environment, as well as the other way around" (Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1993, p. 537). The specific effects of one's microsystem (i.e., which generally includes family members and the home) and ecological theory were especially validated when students provided evidence that their interactions with family had had influence upon their reasoning. Moreover, students indicated that they had influenced other family members, supporting the reciprocity element that is a central tenet of ecological theory. Finally, systems theory was evoked in how students explained roles and rules, both implicit and explicit, that exist or existed in their family, and how their families sought—some successfully, others unsuccessfully—to maintain homeostasis.

The major premise that microsystemic influences from family life affect the mental anchors used in ethical reasoning was supported. In support of White's (1996) conclusion that moral perspectives and value development are greatly influenced by the family beginning in childhood, respondents frequently noted family influence in their analyses. From systems theory, feedback control was evident between the family and external social influences.

In all of this, the magnitude of the influence and relevance of family experiences for both reasoning and decision-making in the professional context was unmistakable. Accordingly, this finding gives merit to the importance in any family sciences course content of including activities that help students process their own experiences in light of ethical principles.

Limitations and Future Research

In this study, paired responses were evaluated to determine students' reasoning about an ethical dilemma based on their exposure to a course centered on ethics and ethical decision-making. Yet, there is always a concern for attributing changes to a particular variable in a non-controlled environment. In other words, student responses may have been influenced by factors that occurred outside the classroom. Although the influence of family upon the dilemma solution seemed strong (7.2 out of 10), self-report was the sole source of this metric. Self-report responses should be interpreted with caution. Further, the conclusions of this study were based on 85 paired responses from students who attend one public southern university. Generalization of the conclusions to all senior FCS students should be limited. A future similarly designed study might compare the responses of students by geographical area. And, of course, findings might vary based on the pedagogical approach to exposing students to ethics-based curriculum.

While we used a structured analytical approach (following Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to categorize and interpret data and improve the credibility of the findings, all qualitative data are subject to variability of interpretation. Future research might test the resilience of the themes isolated in this study with respect to types of familial influence on the rationale underlying a difficult decision. Further, it might be interesting to determine how different dilemmas influence the distribution of data into the various theme categories, or whether demographic differences (ex. age, gender, ethnicity) influence the data distribution. For instance, this study examined the responses of college seniors. What might the responses of middle school students or young adult professionals be? Both cognitive and moral reasoning – as well as life experience - change occur over time; therefore, age may play an important mediating role in determining the influence of family in decisions.

Further study is warranted of the finding that family influence was more relevant to the

final decisions of those students who chose consistently (both Time 1 and Time 2) to remove the child. Perhaps an inquiry that specifically examines those students' responses considering the "good boy good girl" orientation (i.e., due to that stage's inherent referencing of family and friends for approval) associated with Kohlberg's moral reasoning theory would be valuable.

In the current study, most students held the same conclusion from Time 1 to Time 2. A longitudinal study might consider whether students hold the same conclusion to an ethical dilemma over time. It would be valuable then, to compare that finding across disciplines.

The focus of much ethics-based curriculum is to facilitate the translation of conceptual moral approaches into practical applications in the professional environment. The process of purposeful moral deliberation toward sound solutions should be strengthened and reified as FCS students address dilemmas in the field. Of interest would be a longitudinal study that examines both the kinds of dilemmas encountered by student graduates and the critical reasoning used to resolve them. This study revealed that family values and belief systems learned at an early age are fundamental to the individual's moral reasoning process as he/she progresses through life. Senior FCS students reported the influence of family values played an important role in interpreting and resolving the presented dilemma, reflecting application of societal emotional process noted in systems theory. As students move into their professions of choice, how might the role of family continue to underpin dilemma solutions? How does post-graduate personal and professional experience reinforce the identified family influences in both positive and negative ways? Do the three primary themes identified in this study remain in evidence, or do others emerge? And what would we find if we were to compare the dilemma solutions and reasoning of experienced FCS professionals to that of FCS seniors?

Conclusions and Implications

This study examined family influences and changes in reasoning processes among senior FCS students. We found evidence that ethics course content affected how students articulated their responses. Indeed, the authors are persuaded that exposure to the leading principles ought to occur early in students' academic careers, allowing them greater capacity to achieve and deepen that processing as they progress through their programs. If we accept that our goal is greater coherence and stronger depth of thought to help students deal with a variety of professional situations, then FCS curriculum should provide a greater opportunity for students to have their beliefs, assumptions and conclusions assessed by faculty. Thus, a major recommendation of this paper is that programs insert a unit within their "front door" course that seeks to familiarize students with ethical principles, and then to insert within succeeding courses specific activities that compel students to reflect on their own family experiences and to reach reasoned conclusions.

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Appendix

The Dilemma

You work for the government agency that helps to place children for adoption whose parents have had their parental rights terminated because of the parents' gross neglect or abuse or because of some criminal activity. About a year ago, you helped place an 8 year-old girl named Tiffany with what appeared to be an excellent home: both Ron and Katie (the father and mother) had good jobs, yet flexible enough to devote ample time to the child's needs, and furthermore, several references testified to the fact that Ron and Katie had been wonderful and loving parents to their two biological children. Recently, however, you were surprised when the couple asked you for assistance with revoking the adoption. They explained to you that Tiffany—who you knew had experienced a number

of incidents of neglect and abuse associated with her parents' substance abuse—was too much for them to handle. Ron and Katie explained that since bringing her home, the child had been prone to violence, threatening on more than one occasion to use a knife to murder either one of them or one of her siblings. Ron and Katie had taken her for psychiatric evaluation, and received a very grim picture prognosis of what the next several years were likely to hold for their family if Tiffany remained in the home.

Question #1:
Imagine that you are the person whose opinion matters most regarding how things turn out for this child and for the family. Think about how you will proceed, and consider what priority should prevail in this case. In the space below, specify what you believe your highest priority should be from among these choices:

a) Eight year-old Tiffany's well-being and future development;
b) The well-being of Ron, Katie and their biological children;
c) Your agency, which has never allowed parents to return a child who exhibits psychological or behavioral problems, and has to be cognizant of how this situation will set a future precedent for other families; or,
d) Some other priority that you perceive should be of highest importance above any of those

Question #2:
On a scale of 0 to 10, with zero being "absolutely none whatsoever," and ten being "completely one-hundred percent," rate the degree to which you believe you arrived at your decision in this scenario as a direct result of the influences of routine interactions and specific experiences over your lifetime with those you regard as your family.

Question #3:
Feel free to approach the following question in whatever way you believe is most accurate—that is, you may be inclined to think about general qualities, conditions or expectations that characterized your life in your family, and thus, had influence on you; or, you may consider one or more external events that in some way impacted the family's stability, whether temporarily or permanently; or, perhaps the influence is mostly attributable to the words, actions or experiences of a particular relative or relatives. The question is this: In a brief paragraph, describe the influences from your own family life that are most relevant to how you determined the position you would take to resolve the scenario above.