

# CHAPTER 2

## The Morally Developed Media Professional

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DENI ELLIOTT

Some people think of ethics as a personality trait: You either have ethics or you don't; you learned the right thing to do from parents or church, or you didn't. In this view, there are bad guys and good guys, them and us. Choices are absolutely right or absolutely wrong. You shouldn't have to think much about how to behave; you just *know*.

In truth, making ethical choices is a skill that gets better with experience. It's a skill that we are all hardwired to have, just as we are hardwired as human beings to have the capacity to walk, talk and grow intellectually. In the same way that playing a sport well requires paying attention to your physical movements, making good ethical decisions requires paying attention to your motivations and choices. The more you understand, the more you practice, the better you get at considering all the important aspects of ethical decision making and the more honest you become in recognizing your own limitations and opportunities for moral development.

In this fast-changing digital age, when everyone with access to the Internet can be both a publisher and consumer of mass communication, and many news organizations feel intense pressure to do whatever's necessary to attract audiences and money, it's more important than ever for media professionals to cultivate and exhibit high ethical standards.

This chapter takes you through the stages from early ethical decision making to moral sophistication. (The descriptions of psychological theories come from a variety of sources, which are listed in the endnotes.) Then you'll read the story of a young reporter who found herself in a clash between her own ethics and those of the profession, ultimately creating an opportunity for self-reflection and moral growth.

## **Moral Development in Theory**

The best analogy for human moral development is how we learn to use our native language. Both processes are sequential, meaning that development happens in a consistent and predictable way. Both depend on environment; excellence may be fostered by those around you, or not.

Finally, moral sophistication, like having excellent communication abilities, describes what you're capable of, not what you actually do in every situation. This is the difference between capacity and achievement. For example, even if you're capable of speaking as eruditely as an Oxford professor, you don't (and shouldn't) talk that way when ordering breakfast at a diner. Even if you're capable of the most sophisticated moral reasoning, you don't sit in your car pondering the benefit to society when you see blue lights flashing behind you and pull over.

The sequential, predictable nature of moral development has led psychologists to identify important signs that indicate where people are in their progress through the stages toward sophisticated reasoning.

### ***Who's Who in Moral Development Theory***

Research in moral development began in the early 20th century with the work of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. Studying the rules that children create in playing games, Piaget recognized that the way they governed their play grew more complex over time, as did their understanding of fairness and what one player owed another, or how one player should compensate for the limitations of another.

A psychologist who expanded the work of Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, is often called the father of moral development theory. Kohlberg was the first to indicate specific markers that revealed how people were reasoning about right and wrong. His theory, along with the work of moral psychologists Robert Perry and Carol Gilligan, provides a multidimensional view of the progression from externally oriented decision making to acting autonomously—making choices that reflect one's own careful reasoning.

Acting in an autonomous way is an essential aspect of moral development. True moral sophistication means not just making choices that avoid causing unjustified harm and promote the overall good, but also making those choices for the right reasons. In an analogous way, consider a student who does well on a math test. What's important is not just that she achieved a high score, which she might have done by looking over her neighbor's shoulder, but that she is demonstrating her ability to reason through the problems and find the correct answer. Just as students who truly understand math can reason about math

concepts in an autonomous way, so too can morally developed mass communicators choose to report accurately and fairly, whether working for editors in a traditional newsroom or working alone on a blog or hyperlocal site.

### ***The Early Stage of Moral Development***

When they make choices about how to treat others, children reason in simple ways: They do what people in authority tell them. Gilligan, Kohlberg and Perry look at this strong external orientation from different angles but reach complementary conclusions.

Gilligan says a morally immature person perceives herself as powerless, working to protect herself from those who might cause her harm.<sup>1</sup> Kohlberg says a person in the early stages of moral development is motivated by the desire to reap reward and to escape punishment.<sup>2</sup> Perry describes learners in the early stages of ethical (as well as intellectual) development as being dogmatic and dependent on external authority for the perceived “correct” answer.<sup>3</sup>

No matter how morally sophisticated we might be, we all respond to authority sometimes, quite appropriately. For instance, we know that we must submit to (if not necessarily respect) authority when we allow ourselves and our bags to be screened at the airport. We show up to work on time because we don’t want to get fired. Pragmatically, it would take too much time to agonize over every choice. It’s natural to save our ethical energy for the tough decisions.

### ***The Conventional Stage of Moral Development***

The middle stage of moral development is called “conventional” because it’s the level on which most people operate, most of the time. Gilligan describes people working from this level as recognizing that they do have power and that a “good” use of that power is in assisting others. Kohlberg says that the hallmark of conventional-level moral development is that people look to peers and to the rules/laws that govern a situation in deciding what is ethically right and wrong.

Perry adds the notion of relativism. While people thinking conventionally are willing to accept that no authority has all the answers, they are also likely to think that maybe there are no truly right answers at all. Rules and notions of right and wrong are thought to change with the situation, culture or group.

Gangs and middle school cliques provide many good examples of reasoning based on conventional morality, as do college faculty, sports teams and dormitories. Any situation in which individuals are encouraged or coerced to adopt group norms is rich with elements of conventional morality. Consider the college classroom. When students speak, when the teacher speaks, whether

students text their friends during class time—all these things are almost always controlled by unspoken, assumed conventions of behavior.

The same is true of any office where you do an internship or get a job. You need to take the time to notice how the place functions—whether interactions are formal or casual, whether decisions are boss-directed or collaborative, and dozens of other variables—before you can be sure of the best way to behave and get your job done. As you'll see in the cases in this book, when young media professionals who are new to an organization encounter an ethical dilemma, their good impulses can be stymied by lack of knowledge of "the system" or fear of speaking out of turn. Learning the office culture is a key part of learning to make good decisions.

Competent adults make hundreds of choices every day about how to act in regards to other people. We don't trip people as they squeeze by on the bus. We don't yell in the library. We wait our turn in the checkout line. These choices don't take much conscious thought, nor should they. We make them to conform with what we have come to know as conventional morality.

### ***The Later Stage of Moral Development***

At some point in their development, people are faced with the need to make their own decisions. Authority figures do not seem to offer an answer that sits well. Going along with the crowd doesn't feel right. The realization that each person is responsible for his or her own decisions is an important step on the road to moral sophistication.

Morally sophisticated decision making is autonomous. The individual is able to reason beyond the reflex to do as he or she is told or to follow external rules. Instead, the person attempts to articulate the principle behind the rules and chooses behaviors that respect others. Morally sophisticated choices aim to contribute to the overall good of community. If someone is going to receive special consideration, it will be because the decision maker perceives that person as having special vulnerabilities. Yet the decision maker also considers her own needs in calculating the best choice. Moral sophistication includes the realization that no one needs to be left out or sacrificed for the overall good.

Morally sophisticated decision making takes time and effort. Most choices do not require this kind of careful calculation, but people who have matured to this level can recognize an ethically complex situation when they encounter it. They work to make sure that no one is hurt unless there is strong justification for causing that harm.

Ironically, recognizing one's fallibility is an important aspect of becoming morally sophisticated. It is a sign of moral maturity to recognize that you may

be wrong. So while the morally sophisticated individual tries to make choices that express her values and take all affected others into account, she is open-minded about considering alternatives that may not have occurred to her.

Theorist William Perry calls this open-mindedness "commitment with uncertainty." We make the best decisions we can, using our knowledge of the relevant facts; meanwhile, we remain open to taking in new information that may end up showing flaws in our previous reasoning. As you read the true stories in this book, you'll see that the young media professionals who consult with others when they face an ethical dilemma are more likely to move beyond their first response and thus more likely to make decisions that take into account all morally relevant aspects.

Morally sophisticated thinking requires being conscious of the decisions that we make and the justification that we use in making them. Doing this consistently and well takes practice.

### **Moral Development in Practice**

Sara was an eager new journalist, having just completed her bachelor's degree. She was pleased to have landed a job as a reporter in a medium-market newsroom; she loved the work and the interesting people she met on her reporting assignments. Sara got to the newsroom early and left late, intoxicated by the possibilities. She was moved by the plights of her story subjects and often found ways to help them. It made her feel strong, proud and ethical to be making a difference in her new community.

I met Sara when she took part in a newsroom ethics workshop that I facilitated some years ago; her name has been changed here to protect her privacy. Her editor had signed Sara up for the workshop, and she came with a dilemma to share.

#### ***One Young Reporter's Wake-Up Call***

Sara told us that her news organization did not appreciate her ethics. She didn't mind working long hours, she said; she had moved cross-country to take the reporting job and didn't know anyone yet. In high school and college, Sara had always been rewarded for her extra effort, but not in the newsroom. The week before Sara came to the workshop, a union representative had told her that she could not work more than eight hours a day without claiming overtime. This policy surprised Sara and didn't seem fair. Because she was new to journalism, she was sure it took her longer to do each story than it would take a more experienced reporter, so she didn't want to point out her inexperience by asking for overtime pay.

The same day that the union representative told her to stick to the negotiated workday, the city editor set limits for Sara as well. "You're a great reporter," he said, "but when you are done reporting a story, it's over." He told her it was not OK for her to check in on the pregnant drug addict she had interviewed. It was against newsroom policy for her to drop off a bag of groceries at the under-the-bridge cardboard shelter where the subject of her story on homelessness lived.

"You are a journalist," the editor said. "Your job is to tell the story. It's up to others in the community to take care of the problems. If the social workers or public agencies are not doing their jobs, then write about that. It is not your job to fix what's broken."

Both the union representative and the city editor told Sara that the other reporters had been complaining about her. "You're making those who have family responsibilities look bad," said the rep. "Being a missionary rather than a reporter is not a good way to make friends in the newsroom," said the editor.

Sara felt angry and hurt that her extra efforts were being criticized rather than appreciated. She thrived on the satisfaction she got from pursuing stories; she loved seeing her byline in the paper, particularly on the front page. How could any of this be wrong?

### ***The Moral Development Perspective***

As Sara shared her plight at the workshop, it was clear that she expected sympathy. Instead, the more seasoned journalists in the group patiently explained to her why they thought that the management perspective had some merit.

Over the lunch break that followed, I sat with Sara; I wanted to make sure she didn't feel beaten up by her peers. To my surprise, Sara said that she was not upset by the feedback she'd gotten; the others were right that she needed to think more about her choices and motivations. She didn't want to be a "lone ranger," but she did want to make a difference—and now she realized it was up to her to figure out how she could do good while working within the conventions of journalism and of her newsroom.

That was the last I saw of Sara. Her story has lived on for me, however, because I've discussed it with so many student journalists wondering about the challenges they'll face in their first jobs, and with journalism ethics instructors who appreciate Sara's dilemma from a moral development point of view.

Here are some aspects of moral development that Sara's story illustrates:

1. No matter how morally sophisticated you are, most people when put in an unfamiliar environment tend to regress to the simplest form of ethical analysis. On some level, Sara knew the importance of building connections with

her peers, and she knew that journalists had the power to change the world through their work. But, feeling isolated and inexperienced in her new job, she looked for approval in the ways that had worked for her before: She put in extra time, she tried to stretch every assignment into a front-page story, and she befriended her story subjects. She looked for others to reward her with gratitude or say that she'd done a good job, just as they always had in school.

2. Moral growth is best facilitated by exposure to people who are thinking in more morally developed ways. When Sara shared her dilemma, participants at the workshop encouraged her to consider what her peers might think about her choices and why they would question those choices. They let her know that her motivations and intuitions did not jibe with conventions of the newsroom.

3. Moral development is best understood by examining motivations rather than by looking only at the behavior. Helping others is a good act, but one may do so for any number of reasons. Doing something nice for her story subjects made Sara feel good and gave her some sense of control at a time when she often felt lost and powerless. When encouraged by the other journalists at the workshop, she was able to think about larger differences that she could make, even if it meant giving up a little immediate self-gratification. She was encouraged to move from a simplistic way of thinking about herself and her job to thinking about herself as a professional journalist.

### ***Becoming a Professional Journalist***

People change and grow through challenging experiences. In the realm of moral development, people can learn how to think more broadly about the situations in which they find themselves, ultimately resulting in what some moral philosophers have described as wisdom or moral sophistication. If Sara wanted to figure out what was reasonable for others to expect of her in her new job, the role-related responsibilities of journalism would provide a place for her to start.

Media theorists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel have provided a succinct description—"The primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing"<sup>4</sup>—that provides a way for journalists to balance the risks and benefits of a proposed action. Sometimes accurate reporting causes harm. The role-related responsibility of journalists to provide citizens with information helps determine when harm caused through publication is justified and when it is not.

For example, citizens need to know that an elected public official has been charged with misuse of public funds. This type of information helps people make important choices. But if the son of that public official was disciplined by his

school for underaged drinking, knowing this has no obvious benefit to the audience. The publication would cause unjustified harm to the child involved. Even if you can legally publish such information, that doesn't make it ethical to do so.

In Sara's case, she was not causing any obvious harm; in fact, she was doing what she could to ease her subjects' burdens. Still, her city editor made a good point: If vulnerable people in the community are not receiving services that government should be providing, then *that* is the important story that needs to be told. Telling the story of one individual, without using it as a portal into a story about the larger issue, causes harm by diverting newsroom resources and public attention from the systemic problem.

Providing groceries to one homeless individual temporarily helps that person. Reporting a well-researched story that explains why people are homeless and looks at how other communities are handling the problem can help your audience advocate for better job opportunities, treatment for mental illnesses and housing to meet the needs of the disenfranchised.

### ***Resolving Sara's Dilemma***

We have no way of knowing what happened to the real-life Sara, but looking at her situation through the lens of moral development provides an idea of how Sara might have learned to better express her best self. If she had left the workshop and resolved to start thinking differently about the way she did her job, here's what might have happened:

Sara had chosen to become a journalist because she wanted to make a difference in the community. The comments from her editor and the union rep, and then from the professionals at the workshop, helped her realize that she would not be the most effective if she stuck to her lone ranger role. When Sara looked at the world solely from her own point of view and those of her story subjects, it was easy to meet the obvious need. When she included the perspectives of her newsroom colleagues and the community as a whole, the choices got more complicated.

She liked to write profiles of individuals, but she realized her editor was right: Stories about larger societal problems, using individuals' experiences to illustrate, could make a bigger difference. Somehow, it just hadn't registered before that her journalistic power gave her the ability to effect great change in the community rather than meeting individual needs here and there.

Because Sara still wanted to do something hands-on to make a difference, she began volunteering at a local women's shelter. Her volunteer work helped her make friends. With more things to do, she began leaving the newsroom as soon as she filed her assignments, at least on some days. Sara found herself thinking



about how her stories could help readers recognize something new about their community. Sometimes she was successful, sometimes not, but she found that keeping this broader perspective gave life and relevance to her writing.

Sara stopped thinking of herself as competing with her peers; instead, she saw herself alongside them, working collaboratively. They were all journalists. They were community members. They were partners and friends and parents. And, through shared experiences and support, they worked to put together the puzzle pieces of becoming the best people that they could be.

### ***Exercise Your Own Moral Development***

There are many good ways to stretch your moral decision-making abilities. Here are three that are easy to try:

1. Consider your recent ethical choices—in simplest terms, choices that promote good or avoid causing harm. Using the categories in this chapter, decide which level of moral development—simple, conventional or sophisticated—describes each choice. Practice explaining to yourself why you make which choice in difficult circumstances.

2. Appreciate your evolving moral sophistication. Think about how your reasoning has changed over time. Take a rule that you try to live by, such as “Don’t lie” or “Respect other people’s property.” Think about when you first learned that rule and the reasons that you had for following it then.

Usually, if the rule was implanted early in childhood, your memory of early motivations will be filled with parental messages of what would happen to you if you did or didn’t follow the rule. You may then find yourself thinking about an experience in middle school and how a child who didn’t follow these rules was ostracized by the group. Finally, your own contemporary reasoning is likely to include an understanding of how following that rule protects vulnerable individuals and how it helps the community to thrive. You still choose to be honest most of the time, but as an adult, you have different reasons for making that choice.

Now try the same exercise using rules you try to follow in a work environment.

3. Find a moral hero to interview. No, this doesn’t have to be a present-day Gandhi. Look around for peers or managers who impress you with the way they treat others. Invite one of them to coffee and start with your observation, saying something like, “I’ve been watching you work, and I like how you always seem to consider other people.” Everybody likes to be noticed for their positive attributes.

Then conduct a good profile interview: “Why do you do that? How did you learn that technique? When you were younger, did you behave differently? Why

do you think that this is a good way to live?" The more that you can try on professional and personal styles that you admire, the more likely you can better develop these traits in yourself.

Now that you've grounded yourself in some theory and seen how that theory applies to one young journalist, and to yourself, you're ready to keep broadening your perspective. The chapters that follow tell the stories of young media professionals and the dilemmas they encountered early in their professional careers. Follow along with their choices, and think what you'd have done in their place, or what advice you might give them if you found yourself in a workshop hearing their stories.

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### NOTES

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