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# **Exploring the dynamics of ethical judgment: The Sensemaking-Based Evolution Model**

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**Abstract:**

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A growing body of research has been drawing on the sensemaking perspective in order to modelize ethical judgment. Nevertheless, these sensemaking models do not account for how sensemaking can further our conceptualisation of the evolution of ethical judgment over time. In this study, we build on an interview-based design to develop a process model that accounts for the dynamics of ethical judgment. We then identify the mechanisms and influences of this process. Finally, we discuss the practical implications of our findings for ethical decision-making and for the teaching of business ethics.

**Keywords:** ethical judgment, ethical decision making, sensemaking, process

**Mots-clés :** 5 mots-clé maximum

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# **Exploring the dynamics of ethical judgment: The Sensemaking-Based Evolution Model**

## **Introduction**

How do business leaders and individuals respond to ethical issues? This question is crucial if we consider the ongoing corporate and financial misconduct and their far-reaching implications in spite of the organizational policies and guidelines, which were largely put into place following the infamous Enron case in order to safeguard business corporations against unethical practices. An example of the persistence of such misconduct can be found in recent subprime crisis. Consequently, after focusing on the regulation processes on the collective level, practitioners and scholars have paid particular attention to how business leaders and individuals have responded to ethical issues related to business scandals. In this regard, understanding what individuals perceive as being ethical or not is crucial. Individuals' evaluation of the degree to which some action is ethical or unethical refers to the concept of ethical judgment (Sparks & Pan, 2010), and has been defined as a psychological process by which an individual determines that one course of action in a particular situation is morally right or wrong (Rest, 1986).

Ethical judgment has been widely conceptualized as a rational process through traditional ethical decision making (EDM) models (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Ferrell, Gresham, & Fraedrich, 1989; Hunt & Vittel, 1986; Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986; Treviño, 1986). The rationalist approach has limitations when one considers the intuitive aspect of moral judgments and the complex social nature of ethical issues. This limitation has led to new streams of research that build on the recent development in cognitive neuroscience (Reynolds, 2006; Woiceshyn, 2011) and the sensemaking perspective (Mumford et al., 2008; Sonenshein,

2007; Thiel, Bagdasarov, Harkrider, Johnson, & Mumford, 2012) in order to better grasp ethical judgment in organisations. Sonenshein has proposed an alternative model, grounded in sensemaking, which was extended by Thiel et al. (2012). This model addresses the pervasiveness of organizational uncertainty and equivocality and the processes through which individuals face these situations. Thiel et al. (2012) have extended this model by focusing on leaders' specific risks and constraints. In doing so, they identify four cognitive strategies through which leaders make sense of their environment. While these models enable a better understanding of ethical judgment in organizations, they fail to consider the dynamics of ethical judgment through time, and are limited by the fact that they have not been empirically tested.

In this article, we argue that, in addition to understanding ethical judgment per se, understanding its temporal dynamics is also necessary. In particular, clarity is required concerning the mechanisms and influence of the evolution of ethical judgment over time. Indeed, as the evolution of ethical judgment may influence managers' decision-making, its mechanisms and influences should be considered in order to both better understand decision-making antecedents and to enable practitioners to better know how to drive ethical decision-making.

Following the latest EDM frameworks based on a sensemaking perspective, we conducted interpretive research through a qualitative study. We interviewed six cohorts of continuous training professionals. We interviewed 80 people on two separate occasions; first at the beginning of a business ethics course and secondly three months after the sessions. This design enabled us to analyse the evolution of ethical judgement between the two interviews.

From this design, we developed a model based on a sensemaking perspective that describes how ethical judgment evolves through time. We show that initial judgments during the course

differed from judgments of the same situation that took place later. We identify four mechanism dyads through which ethical judgment evolved over time (completing/focusing, conceptualising/reality embedding, gaining certainty/raising questions, ethification/disethification) and explain four phenomena (interaction with others, reflection, experiencing, new information) that influence the evolution of ethical judgment. That said, our research contributes to the development of the sensemaking perspective of ethical judgment and extends previous research through the development of a processual model of the evolution of ethical judgment over time.

The paper begins with an overview of the literature on ethical judgment and explains why the psychosocial perspectives that emerged counterbalance rationalist models of EDM. We explain why the emerging sensemaking of EDM should consider drawing more on the on-going property of sensemaking. The methods section details our research design as well as the data collection and analysis process that led to the construction of the data structure. The findings section opens with a presentation of the overall model of the evolution of ethical judgment over time from a sensemaking perspective. We systematically describe in depth the dimensions of the model and provide illustrative data for each. We conclude the paper by outlining the contribution of this study for further research and by highlighting its practical implications for managers' ethical decision-making and business ethics teaching.

## **1. Theoretical overview**

### **1.1. Going beyond traditional EDM models**

Traditional EDM models have long since conceptualized this notion as a rational process that consists of making conscious assessments of what is ethical or unethical. These evaluations are at times formalized by a reliance on moral philosophy, involving deontological and teleological reasoning (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986) or moral psychology (Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986; Trevino, 1986), that relies on an individual's stage of cognitive moral development (Kohlberg, 1969) or on a combination of both (Ferrell, Gresham, & Fraedrich, 1989). These frameworks have been thoroughly criticized on the grounds that they fail to allow for a full explanation of the processes actually undertaken by people (Miner & Petocz, 2003). More precisely, there have been growing concerns regarding the rationalist approach underlying these models. The fact that ethical decision-making is a deliberate and reasoned process, in which moral judgment is caused by moral reasoning has been seriously challenged in the light of recent advances in psychology as well as in neurocognitive research. Therefore, since the year 2000, new models have been developed (Haidt, 2001; Reynolds, 2006; Sonenshein, 2007), that challenge the role of reasoning and highlighting the role of intuition and other non-rational processes in the way people respond to ethical issues.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2001) was among the first authors to propose an alternative model to rationalist frameworks of EDM, called a "Social Intuitionist Approach" to Moral Judgment. In this model, moral judgment results from a moral intuition that occurs quickly and effortlessly. After the moral judgment is made, a person engages in moral reasoning (an effortful process), in which he or she searches for arguments that will support a premade judgment. From this perspective, moral reasoning is constructed retrospectively in order to

justify the decision. However, this reasoning can also influence other people's intuitive judgment, by triggering new affectively valenced intuitions in the listener. Building on the social interactionist perspective, Haidt suggests that because people are highly sensitive to social influences, they are also directly influenced by the moral judgments made by their acquaintances, even when no reasoned persuasion is used. According to Haidt's perspective, people may at times derive their judgment from sheer reason, overriding their initial intuition and overcoming their "passions". However, such reasoning is hypothesized to be rare. A person may also spontaneously activate a new intuition that contradicts the initial intuitive judgment (for example when a person takes the role of somebody else, thus feeling new emotions in accordance with the other's perspective). Interestingly, Haidt's model is circular, and assumes a specific dynamics: a person's intuition and judgment can evolve and change from an initial position either due to other people's influence or more rarely through force of logic or renewed spontaneous intuition. However, Haidt's model does not explicit the mechanisms through which ethical judgment can evolve through time and identifies only two factors triggering this evolution (others judgment and self reflection).

## **1.2. Renewed perspectives on EDM models**

As Tenbrassel & Smith-Crowe (2008) mention in their thorough review of EDM research, the work of Haidt and his colleagues, in moral psychology, has had wide impact, including impact within the field of business ethics. Following this path, several authors (for example Reynolds, 2006b; Sonenshein, 2007, Thiel et al., 2012; Woiceshyn, 2011) have proposed new EDM models mainly in the field of moral psychology and the field of management, which address intuitive and interpersonal components of EDM. Among those models, some authors follow the developments in cognitive neuroscience in order to highlight a dual processing model of ethical decision-making, combining automatic, unconscious, intuitive processes and

conscious reasoning (Reynolds, 2006, Liebermann et al. 2002, Salvador and Folger, 2009, Woiceshyn, 2011). Besides, a complementary framework, initiated by Sonenshein (2007) and followed by others (for example Thiel et al., 2012) is grounded in the sensemaking perspective. As a matter of fact, as Mumford et al. (2008) explain, sensemaking is critical to understanding EDM because it is a form of complex cognition that occurs when people face ambiguous, high-stakes events. It is based on the ability to accurately construct a problem in a given situation. Therefore it is relevant for the conceptualization of EDM because 1) if the decision situation is not recognized as having ethical implications, ethical standards will not be evoked; 2) most ethical issues allow for a variety of alternative actions; 3) making a decision depends on the predictions people make, that is to say on the mental models applied as a basis for these predictions.

Sonenshein's Sensemaking-Intuition Model (SIM) (2007) is composed of three stages: issue construction, intuitive judgment and post hoc explanation and justification. According to this framework, individuals construct issues from social stimuli in equivocal and uncertain environments, and these constructions are affected by their expectations and motivations. This construction of issue is instantaneously accompanied with an intuitive judgment. Then individuals justify their responses to themselves and others by engaging in post hoc explanation. The SIM depicts the issue-construction process and the general factors that influence the sensemaking process during EDM, that is to say: individuals' expectations and motivational drives, and collective factors such as social anchors and representations (Sonenshein, 2007). Even if the SIM is able to better represent how individuals recognize and respond to ethical issues (when compared to rational models) and identifies various factors influencing judgment construction it fails to consider the dynamical dimension of ethical



judgment. Moreover, although Sonenshein's model relies on theoretically well-grounded assumptions empirically it remains unproven.

In extending Sonenshein's model, Thiel and others (2012) focus on leader-specific ethical issues and the unique risks and constraints leaders are confronted with. In doing so, they identify four cognitive strategies that aim at improving leaders' ability to effectively make sense of their environments during EDM, thus improving their understanding of ethical issues. These strategies are emotion regulation, forecasting, self-reflection and information integration. Thiel et al.'s model does not capture the dynamics of ethical judgment evolution through time, even if their perspective assumes that such evolution might exist. As a matter of fact, they argue that leaders' sensemaking skills can be improved, inducing that a leader's judgment of a given situation might change if he/she is aware of new strategies/mental models to deal with ethical issues. As for Sonenshein's, their model is limited by the fact that it has not been empirically tested.

### **1.3. The Sensemaking perspective of ethical judgment: the stake of judgment dynamics**

Sensemaking-based EDM models have drawn on several properties of sensemaking. In the SIM, Sonenshein (2007) uses the identity-led, social, enactive, and cues-extraction-based and plausible rather than accuracy oriented properties of sensemaking. The four sensemaking strategies developed by Thiel et al. (2012) rely on the same properties of sensemaking. Both mix the initial retrospective property of sensemaking with an emerging prospective dimension of sensemaking (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). That is, when considering the seven properties of sensemaking – grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995) – previous EDM based on sensemaking do not draw on the fact that sensemaking is an ongoing process that

evolves in time. Yet, this property is a fundamental one as it is present in the very definition of sensemaking: “the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (Weick et al., 2005). These models have been developed in order to capture how people make sense of ethically ambiguous situations in order to make decisions. That is, they draw on temporally situated decision-making focus on a single moment. They do not consider that sensemaking is a dynamic phenomenon that evolves over time.

The ongoing property of sensemaking has been fruitful in management research. Indeed, it promotes a better understanding of the dynamics of organising in various situations such as crisis management (Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1993), strategic change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Vaara, 2003) and coordination and cooperation in complex situations (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012; Vlaar, Van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2006; Vlaar, Van Fenema, & Tiwari, 2008). Taken together, these studies stress that sensemaking, through its ongoing property, enables organizing flux of understandings and action (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Therefore, for business ethics research, the exploration of the ongoing property of sensemaking is crucial as people continuously behave according to the flux of action. Moreover, people take decisions based on present situations but also relying on the way they made sense of past situations. As time goes on, people may change the way they make sense of past situations and consequently change their rationale for ethical judgment and decision-making. Accordingly, ethical judgment models based on sensemaking should consider integrating a time dimension that clarifies how ethical judgment evolves over time.

Taken together, recent approaches of ethical judgment suggest that the sensemaking approach seems fruitful for a better understanding of the mechanisms of ethical judgment. However,

although the ongoing property of sensemaking has proven fruitful for a wide variety of research in organizations, how ethical judgment evolves over time is largely missing in theories of ethical judgment. Because we knew little about the process of ethical judgment evolution over time when we began this study, we chose to lead in inductive study relying on a qualitative interpretive approach as proposed by Gioia and colleagues {\*Gioia:2013uj}.

## **2. Methods**

Our study is based on the systematic analysis of ethical judgment evolution over time of 142 interviews with 71 people, representing six cohorts of continuous training professional. These 71<sup>1</sup> professionals – 25 to 55 year old – came from various professional backgrounds: military, engineers, marketing, human resources, etc. We interviewed them twice over a period of three months in order to analyze how their making sense of ethically ambiguous situations evolved over time.

### **2.1. Research design**

**Phase 1: Initial interview about a recent situation that implies ethical judgment.** During the initial stage of our research, we led open interviews with people that attended the continuous training sessions. We asked them to report on a recent ethical issue that they were confronted with and in which they had to make an ethical judgment. We then asked them to describe the situation and to tell us about their position in that situation. We invited them to go in depth about what they felt when faced with the ethical problem. We tried to make them report the issue in the way they had lived it at that moment. Exhibit 1 describes the interview guide we used in order to lead the initial interview.

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<sup>1</sup> We led the study out of 90 students. Nevertheless, we cannot exploit the data for about 19 of them because we only have the initial interview at the moment.

**Exhibit 1: interview guide of initial interview**

Can you tell us about a situation that implied ethical issues that you were recently confronted with in your professional life?

Can you describe the events, the context, the stakeholders, and the issues at stake?

What did you think at that moment?

What was the ethical issue?

Why did you consider it as an ethical issue?

**Phase 2: The in-between.** After the initial interview, all professionals went through various training sessions, for example project management, organizational theories, logistics, management control, etc. In each group, a workshop about business ethics was organized in which professionals could exchange about the ethical issues they faced in their work. One of the authors animated these sessions, which enabled to develop an insider-outsider perspective in the analysis process {Gioia:2010uk, Langley:2011tn}. Moreover, most professionals were employed when participating in the continuous training sessions. That is, they kept experiencing everyday work life until we led the second stream of interviews.

**Phase 3: Second interview about the same situation than the first interview.** Three months after the initial interview, all students were interviewed a second time. Respondents were asked to report about the same situation than during the initial interview. They were asked to tell us about what they then thought about the previous situation and about the position they had taken at that time. We oriented our probes on respondents' justification of their modification or non-modification of ethical judgment, in order to be able to investigate in depth the dynamics of ethical judgment evolution over time.

**Exhibit 2: interview guide of second interview**

Retrospectively, have you noticed any evolution of your judgement since the moment the ethical problem emerged?

How do you analyse that situation today?

What do you think about your initial ethical judgment and the decisions and actions you undertook at that moment?

What led you to change your judgment since the situation emerged?

**2.2. Data analysis**

Even if the different steps of analysis were far from being linear, being instead formed by a recursive analysis procedure, we sequentially describe the main steps that led to the emergence of our findings. The two authors have led the data analysis process together. The initial work of each step has been done while co-working in order to frame the way we would work at each step of the analysis process. Then, we have undertaken the remaining work in parallel. Once finished, we systematically discussed the analysis of the other. Initial disagreements led to changes in the interpretation and to clarification of concepts and mechanisms until we both agreed on each element. We used the CAQDAS Nvivo 10 in order to help us manipulate the volume of data.

**Step 1: Open coding.** First, we led open coding on each initial and second interview in which we used in vivo codes and descriptive codes that adhere very closely to respondents' language in order to build a whole set of elements that represent what respondent said. This initial step led us to develop a range of about 100 codes that we could use in order to develop further steps of analysis. The eventually remaining codes of this step constitute the 1<sup>st</sup> order codes of our data structure.

**Step 2: Confronting initial and later judgments.** After both interviews had been conducted, we grouped interviews in sets that provided us with the two versions of the judgment and the reasons that interviewees had provided in justifying their judgment. We used constant comparisons techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in order to better understand the differences between each respondent's initial and later judgments. Initial open coding facilitated these constant comparisons as could be based on 1<sup>st</sup> order codes. As we compared the two reports of how people make sense of a situation at different times, it appeared that the elements that structure initial judgment and later judgment differ. Indeed, initial judgment consists in a mix of retrospective sensemaking about the situation and prospective sensemaking about the individual's own action. As time goes on, the individual develops a new understanding of the situation. He/she develops retrospective sensemaking about his/her action and a renewed sensemaking about the situation. The prospective dimension of sensemaking in the later judgment lies in the anticipation of future situation.

**Step 3: Identifying modifications between initial and later judgments.** When considering the content of initial and later judgment (non only the structure of the judgment as reported on step 2, but also, the content of the judgments) we identified differences that we interpreted as modification mechanisms. In order to analyse these mechanisms, we compared for each individual what kind of dynamics he/she had gone through in order to develop the second judgment. That is, these modification mechanisms are based on our interpretation of the differences between initial and later judgment. For each respondent, we identified one to three mechanisms, which indicated that they were neither mutually exclusive nor all present at the same time. After initial recognition of mechanisms, it appeared that the various mechanisms could be grouped into dyads of mechanisms, each dyad consisting in one mechanism and its opposite. We identified 4 dyads of mechanisms at this step.

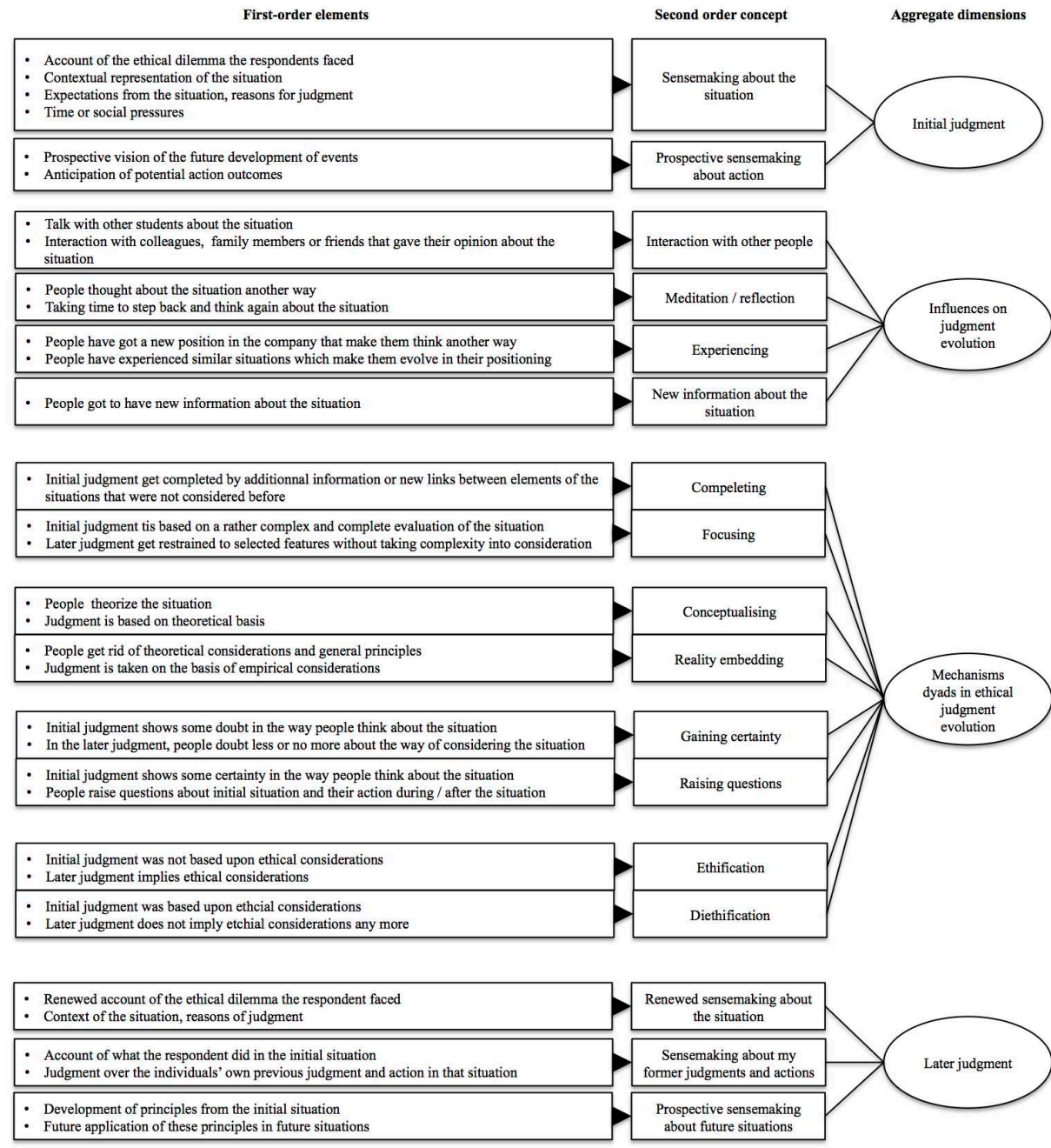
**Step 4: Identifying influences on judgment evolution.** When considering the difference between initial and later judgments, the respondents justified the modification (or stability) either through contextual changes (situations, information, etc.) or personal changes (personal evolution, maturity, etc.). We based here on the 1<sup>st</sup> order concept to aggregate the various influences that were reported by respondents. Eventually, we structured these influences on judgment evolution in four main categories that aggregate all influences that have been mentioned by respondents.

**Step 5: Constructing the data structure.** Out of these four phases, we built a data structure (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) that depicts how we abstracted the categories in order to represent the process of ethical judgment evolution. The data structure is presented in Figure 1, next page.

### **3. Results**

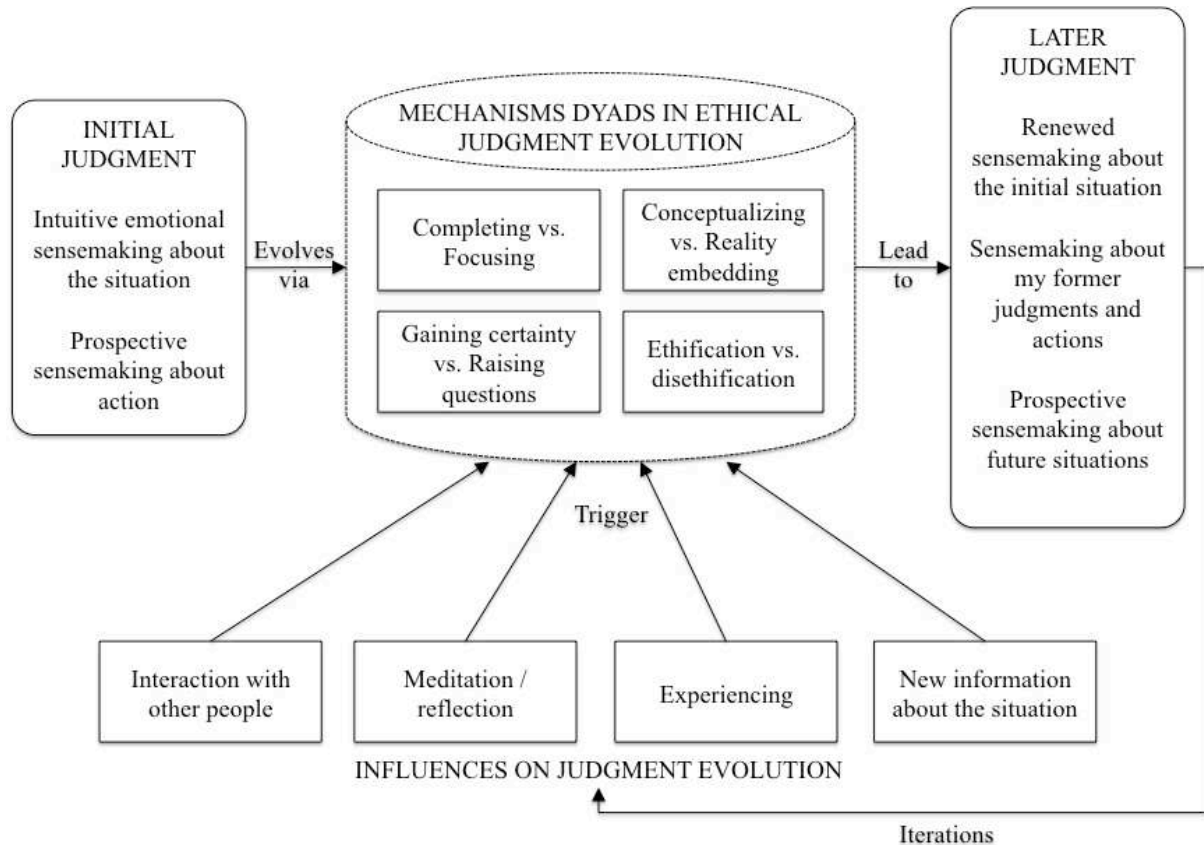
Four main dimensions emerged from our study of the evolution of ethical judgment over time through a sensemaking perspective: 1) initial judgment, 2) mechanisms dyads in ethical judgment evolution, 3) influences on judgment evolution and 4) later judgment. We put these dimensions together in the model presented in Figure 2. In the following sections, we systematically describe these dimensions and their constitutive elements, and provide evidence of data that enabled our theoretical construction.

**Figure 1: Data structure**





**Figure 2: The Sensemaking-Based Evolution Model of Ethical Judgment**



### 3.1. The initial judgment

Initial judgment is developed when the individual is confronted with ethical issues. During this initial stage of the model, the individual develops a judgment based on two main elements. The individual makes sense of the situation in a classical way and develops prospective sensemaking about his/her action. Let us detail these two elements.

#### 3.1.1. Intuitive sensemaking about the situation

The initial judgment of the situation (as articulated by our interviewees) is based on intuitive elements that people do not take time to consider in depth. It is important to notice that individuals mix their own situation and their understanding of the situation in the initial

judgment. That is, they only consider the situation from their own point of view. People mix expectations, their experience, their point of view, their fears, etc. in order to provide an intuitive and holistic judgment of the situation. The individuals we interviewed talk about a feeling that they had during the situation. These feelings emerge in socially embedded situations when the ethical judgment takes place. One of our respondent mentioned: *“I am not the only one to have the feeling that she is not the right person [for this job]. But it is the first time I’ve been confronted with this kind of issue”*.

Some people retrospectively acknowledge that the initial judgment - when the situation took place - was intuitive and sometimes impulsive and could even lead to regrets shortly after having acted on the basis of this initial judgment: *“I regretted my actions because I somehow reacted impulsively and failed [to be consistent with] my values towards my colleagues”*. Some even confess that their judgment is based on cognitive routines and poorly structured *“Thanks to the business ethics course, I realized that my judgment was trivial”*. Sometimes this initial judgment is not clear and rather individuals ask themselves many questions, indicating their embarrassment in front of a given situation. Table 1 exposes some more data from initial interviews that supports the fact that the initial judgment is based on Intuitive emotional sensemaking about the situation.

### 3.1.2. Prospective sensemaking about action

At the same time, individuals develop prospective sensemaking about their action. That is, when making sense of the situation, they project what the situation could be if they were to act a certain way. In doing so, they not only rely on sensemaking (which enables them to understand what is going on) but also develop a future-oriented understanding of the situation. Individuals then have to make sense through complex combinations between elements from

the environment (facts, constraints, norms, orders, etc.) and from themselves. When confronted with ethical issues, individuals consider the potential consequences of their choices and to do so, they foresee what could be the consequences of their acts. Table 1 provides data that illustrate prospective sensemaking in the initial judgment.

Not all individuals combined these two elements at the first stage of judgment. Whereas all of them made sense of the situation in a certain way (sometimes hardly), some of them did not use prospective sensemaking in order to make sense of the situation. In these cases, people would get more passive in the situation and not pro-act in order to shape the situation a certain way.

**Table 1: Data supporting ‘Initial judgment’ dimension**

Theme	Data supporting interpretation
<i>Intuitive emotional sensemaking about the situation</i>	<p>“At first sight, the ethical issue seems to be the following: can we act in a way that is in opposition with our individual values? It is a moral dilemma when you put yourself in the shoes of the customer: actually, as a customer, I would not have accepted so easily such a pricing. It’s not that it is particularly expensive, it just seems a little bit excessive compared with the service. If I would perceive this pricing odd as a customer, why should I implement it as an employee? In a moral way, the pricing tends rather towards bad than good.”</p> <p>“Does meticulous work remain a value in itself, an absolute value, regardless you accept or not the objective of the work ? Can work, considered as a process, a succession of well-done tasks, and not a mean to achieve a goal, become the meaning in itself, a factor of motivation, a self-sufficient stimuli? Is it possible for me to concentrate on the work to be handed in to my hierarchy and to gain satisfaction out of it, while forgetting the ultimate objective of my actions? Can the process be considered as good if it serves a bad purpose? That are the questions that I have at the moment... without having clear answers.</p> <p>“In the case of a call for offers, my boss asked me to favor one of the candidates. I had to rewrite my report in adding irrelevant elements and ‘omitting’ some that seemed important to me. Consequently, I moved from a quite partisan report to something fallacious. In the end, it is an unpleasant experience. It is possible, in my opinion, to make the company’s, the customer’s and the candidate’s interests match. I have the feeling that I betrayed the interests of my customer while presenting him a wrong view of reality.”</p>
<i>Prospective sensemaking about action</i>	<p>“All in all, it is a situation where for the first time in my life I get really conscious that my professional values, (being an effective project manager and succeeding in my work), are in conflict with my human values, here to act while preserving my human integrity and to be in line with who I am. When I push this reasoning, I would say that the better I work, the more I contribute to the outsourcing project, of which I do</p>

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not accept the purpose ! So, accomplishing a good work, which is part of my values, does not make sense. So, my points of reference, which seemed solid, true, universal, totter !”

“In this situation, I made the choice not to notify the inconsistency that I noticed during the meeting and to write a report that does not fit to reality. Admitting my error then or now would put me in a tricky situation – at least I guess.”

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### 3.2. Mechanisms of ethical judgment evolution

We identified 8 different mechanisms explaining why the ethical judgment of an individual concerning a specific situation may change, about the same situation. These mechanisms can be grouped into four dyads that represent a mechanism and its opposite. These mechanisms dyads are not mutually exclusive. That is to say that the judgment evolution can go through several mechanisms. However for analytical purposes we present each mechanism separately (See table 2 for data supporting each mechanism).

#### 3.2.1. Dyad n°1: the scope dyad

The first dyad lies in the fact that, with the passing of time, people may have a more detailed perception of the situation, either by adding some new elements in the way they make sense about it or by focusing on specific elements of the initial situation in order to build their later judgment.

**Completing.** Individuals change their judgment about the situation they lived at one moment because they take into consideration more parameters than previously. They can develop a more complete picture than in the initial judgment through various ways. People may take into consideration more contextual elements they were not aware of or that they did not perceive as essential in the way they made sense of the situation. They can also consider the constraints of stakeholders that they had previously overlooked: their own family, their own career, the competitors, partners, families of people involved in the situation, etc. Moreover,

people may complete their judgment through information that they have only discovered after initial judgment, whether that information was not available or that they did not think to seek about it. Out of this additional information, people become aware of the complexity of the situation and the fact that it is related to several factors in a systemic way rather than being caused by a mere causal relationship.

**Focusing.** Conversely, some individuals modify their initial judgment because they have an easier time creating a hierarchy between various elements that they have in their mind when developing the initial judgment. They focus on a specific set of features of the situation and get rid of the other elements that caused more complexity in their initial judgment. While doing so, they develop a clearer picture of what is right or wrong in the given situation. Conflicting principles and interests made initial judgment more difficult to achieve whereas focusing on priority elements, values or links between cues in the situation clarifies their judgment. Other elements are put apart, as if people would try to avoid fuzziness in the later judgment.

### 3.2.2. Dyad n°2: the pragmatism dyad

The second dyad describes the opposition between a mechanism where people develop a more abstracted view of the situation and a mechanism in which people drop principles and abstract view in order to develop a practical and grounded judgment of the situation.

**Conceptualising.** After experimenting an ethical issue, individuals use general rules, principles or theories that enable them to develop a renewed judgment on the situation. The abstract framework that they use during later judgment enables them to link various elements of the situation that they had not perceived this way during initial judgment. It may reinforce their initial point of view or change it radically. That is, individuals either develop knowledge, abstracted from their experience or import it from their environment, in order to put things

into perspective. This renewed judgment concerns their understanding of ethical standards but also the terms and conditions of their application.

**Reality embedding.** On the opposite, the evolution of individuals' ethical judgment also consists in getting rid of principles and focusing on grounded, embedded considerations, such as considering more contextual elements in order to shape one's judgement. This is the case when the initial ethical judgment relies rigidly on general abstract ethical principles that people get rid of in order to consider practical situated ambiguity of the situation. With time, people are able to understand that it is difficult to blindly apply general rules. They would rather become aware that they have to take into consideration the specificities of the situation: individuals' personality, situation context, interactional context, etc.

### 3.2.3. Dyad n°3: the certainty dyad

The third dyad is constructed on two mechanisms that differ in term of the level of certainty that the individual develops over time about his own judgment. On the one hand, people may get confidence in their judgment. On the other hand, time may instill doubt in the individuals' judgment.

**Gaining certainty.** With time, individuals acquire higher levels of certainty in their ethical judgments: they have a clearer analysis of the situation, which enables them to support or refute their initial ethical judgment with stronger arguments. They are able to more clearly formulate the ethical issue at stake. With the time passing they are less overwhelmed with emotions and have the feeling to develop a more objective perception of the situation. They are more confident in their judgment, and hesitate less in regards to making the appropriate decision that they have or should have taken in the initial situation.

**Raising questions.** As people's judgment evolves, they become more aware of the complexity of the ethical issue at hand. They realize that they do not have full knowledge

about all the aspects of the situation and that they are uncertain about the dynamic relations between the elements of their judgment (people, context, time pressure, authority, etc.). Individuals get aware of various ethical dimensions: the various ethical principles at stake, the various stakeholders involved, the conflicts of interests, etc. As such, they formulate more questions or hypothetical scenarios about possibilities for action.

#### 3.2.4. Dyad n°4: the ethical dyad

This last dyad presents a slightly different nature than the other, as it is based on the emergence/raising or the disappearance/minimization of ethical consideration in the evolution of ethical judgment through time.

**Ethification.** This evolution consists in the emergence or the strengthening of an ethical consideration in the judgement. This is the case when people do not recognize the ethical dimension in the initial situation, either because they lacked ethical knowledge or because they lacked sincerity towards themselves. It can also be that they had seen the ethical issue but they did not consider it important, and the importance of the issue rises over time. For example, individuals identify ethical issues in situations that they previously thought were mere managerial situations. Besides they become aware of their ethical responsibility vs their mere obedience to hierarchical orders.

**Disethification.** Interestingly, ethical judgment can also evolve in a way that it leads to the disappearance or decrease of ethical consideration in the analysis of the situation. This is the case for example when initial judgment was severe or when people realize that part of the problem is a managerial or legal problem and not an ethical one. They can also feel less guilty about a difficult decision, when provided with the tools to analyse it in a rational, methodical way.

**Table 2: Data supporting interpretation for mechanisms dyads of ethical judgment evolution<sup>2</sup>**

<b>Dyad mechanism &amp; ante-mechanism</b>	<b>Theme and definition</b>	<b>Data supporting interpretation</b>
<i>The scope dyad</i>	<i>Completing</i> Basing one's new judgment while taking into consideration more parameters than previously	<p>"The quality of production has always been satisfactory and never endangered personnel's security on sites where his production was used. So, even if the 'scientific' results provide 'average' results, what we experience oblige, from an ethical point of view to keep on working with him."</p> <p>"Since the situation, I've put things into perspective, especially as following an interview with the Human Resources manager and the company works doctor, a procedure for work incapacity is initiated."</p> <p>"I omitted to precise that I got to know later that he was chatting with 12 to 16 year old teenagers! [...] In that case, my ethical problem also had a significant legal dimension."</p> <p>"I had not evaluated the risks for my family and my career."</p>
	<i>Focusing</i> Focusing on a specific set of features of the situation and reducing complexity	<p>"What is important, in the end, is not that the group result is ethical or not, it is that my action was ethical, in my opinion. I followed an ethical way that, in the end, in that case, is ok for me! The other people do not take the same way, do not have the same values... So it's better not to judge them."</p> <p>"At that time, my point of view was more complex and ambiguous. I estimated that a small breach in my ethical principles was acceptable [...] Through time, insidiously, I think I totally failed meeting my moral obligation towards my clients. I presented him a distorted view of candidates offers"</p>
<i>The pragmatism dyad</i>	<i>Conceptualising</i> Theorizing from the situation in order to build general principles in use in the	<p>"Indeed, if the problem would reappear now, the motive of my decision would remain transparency because it enables to stay straight towards all stakeholders. And I think it is eventually a primary ethical notion : transparency enables to dialogue, to confront viewpoints, and it is so a precursor of mentality evolution."</p> <p>"This example illustrates well that being ethical is only relevant through action and makes sense through engaging your responsibility"</p>

<sup>2</sup>Analysis of mechanisms is based on a comparison between initial judgment and later judgment. That is, mechanisms have emerged through a comparison of the whole interviews. Nevertheless, in order to provide evidence of these mechanisms, we extracted verbatim that we believe better illustrate each of the mechanisms.



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ethical judgement

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<p><i>Reality embedding</i></p> <p>Getting rid of principles and focusing on grounded, embedded consideration</p>	<p>“It is ethical to be accountable for risk prevention. Of course, this thought is to be minimized considering our experience and the usual production quality of this supplier”</p> <p>“The facts give reason to this decision as the product range was updates and the last tests are satisfactory.”</p> <p>“Indeed, I did something unethical but it was in the aim of reaching clearly mentioned goals, that were authorized and legal”</p>
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<p><i>The certainty dyad</i></p> <p><i>Gaining certainty</i></p> <p>Acquiring higher levels of certainty while finding plausible ways to manage ethical dilemma</p>	<p>“I sincerely think that my behaviour at that time was unethical. I abused my authority, I abused my team, I profited from the good will of my colleagues and I did not listen to them...”</p> <p>“The business ethics courses reinforced my decision, because when analysing the stakeholders : the young doctor, the industrial and the research center, the three of them are winners and not losers. “</p> <p>“As a matter of fact, if the problem happened again today, the motive of my past decision would remain transparency because it prevents from being out of place and no stake holder can hold it against us.”</p> <p>“The last session of the course made me realize that keeping a colleague out of kindness is not a solution. [...] I then realize that keeping him at all costs was not a solution neither for the company nor for my colleague and it made me get rid of my complexes.”</p> <p>“After attending all the course on ethics, my opinion did not change at all.[...] The courses have confirmed my initial thoughts and reactions. In fact the only difference between before and now is that I can assign a name on his behavior. In my opinion this person did not have at that time an ethical behavior, socially desirable and besides he did not have a behavior in accordance with mine. [...] If the situation occurred today, I would react in the same way. My judgment was and will stay the same”.</p> <p>“Between the moment when the problem aroused and now, my judgment did not change. However my decision making could have been quicker and less time-consuming.”</p> <p>“Retrospectively and after having studied ethics a little with this course, I don’t regret anything because I left the company and did not overlook my personal values and I managed to stay human and to listen to others. The description of the ethical conditions, the dilemma, of the grey area between the law and morality, etc. that we benefited from during the course, have confirmed my initial choices”.</p>
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<p><i>Raising questions</i> Formulating questions or hypothetical scenario about possibilities of action</p>	<p>“But then I asked myself many questions like : were my expectations from my team justified ? What was my room to manoeuvre? What could I do in a different way ?”</p> <p>“Having said so, even if I had realized that before, could I have changed the progress of the project ?”</p> <p>“I also recognize that I didn’t ask myself about the consequences of the reform’s suspension. What would become these vehicles once the reform suspended? The army did not have the necessary means to repair them... Was it worth suspending ? On the other hand why the head of the State did not take any measure in order to put an end to these practices ? I confess that at that time I did not ask myself these questions”.</p> <p>“I confess that it is difficult to say even today what I could have done in the context and the environment of that period after the discourse of the head of the state. May be I should have written in order to stimulate a discussion on the ongoing reform, regarding the critics by the head of the state. It could have done it but I was quite sure that it would not give any result...”</p> <p>“I must also confess that I did not assess the risks regarding my career and my family. May be if I had assessed these risks, I would have less enthusiasm and be more careful and limit myself to my strict responsibility, don nothing, I don’t know».</p> <p>“The second point on the other hand is more complex. Respecting the orders of the hierarchy and cheating the client or “disobeying” and telling the truth? I don’t have an ideal response on what it’s advisable to do”.</p>
<p><i>The ethical dyad</i> <i>Ethification</i> Emergence of an ethical consideration in the judgement</p>	<p>“I was blinded by my personal ambition and my will to succeed in the project at any price!”</p> <p>“I considered I was confronted with a human resources problem but the courses of business ethics I attended to made me understand that it was rather an ethical problem.”</p> <p>“I never considered this on an ethical basis. I did not take a decision or act on an ethical basis. I just followed my company’s instructions. I was an underling, that’s all.”</p>
<p><i>Disethification</i> Disappearance or decreasing of ethical consideration in the situation judgement</p>	<p>“Retrospectively, after having studied the business ethics course, I would revise my judgment. I would be less severe, interestingly.”</p> <p>“Even if the decision of dismissing an employee is never an easy one, I doubt that it would make me have a guilty conscience. So, it is no more an ethical problem. A tough decision yes, but that does deal with ethical considerations.”</p> <p>“The last session of the seminar made me realize that willing to keep a colleague out of kindness is not a solution. As a matter of fact the does not make any progress in spite of the means provided to help him and he even regresses...Moreover he does not seem to have the necessary skills for the job. Therefore I realized that willing to keep him at all costs was not a solution neither for the company nor for my colleague and it helped me get rid of my complexes concerning my wish”</p>

### **3.3. Influences on Judgment Evolution**

Our analysis led us to identify various factors influencing the evolution of ethical judgment, which we have grouped into 4 main categories: 1) interaction with other people, 2) meditation and reflection, 3) new information about the situation, 4) experiencing. Table 3 presents verbatim extracts illustrating each category. These factors are not mutually exclusive, but can be combined in order to influence an individual's ethical judgment, as one of our respondent explains: *“What led me to change my judgment was mainly my personal and professional circle, but also an afterthought due to my experience in the academic field linked to my thesis”*. Moreover, we consider how these influences may emerge from the business ethics courses.

#### 3.3.1. Interaction with other people

Several respondents reported that their ethical judgment had changed following their interaction with other people, either in their professional or personal entourage or while they exchanged opinions and experiences with the other students during the ethics course. That is, when discussing with people, individuals may become aware of elements that they did not consider previously. For example, they may talk about the situation with somebody who sees a strong ethical problem in the report made, which makes individuals change their mind about the situation.

The business ethics courses we have led provides such interaction that students reported as triggering the modification of their judgment. Indeed, the fact that they could speak about the situation, argue why they considered the situation a specific way and that they got feedback on their judgment enabled them to confront various points of view about the situation and about their action in the situation.

### 3.3.2. Meditation and reflection

Many respondents expressed that their ethical judgment changed after with time after they had taken some distance from the event. Stepping back enables people to consider things differently, less passionately. This distance also enables them to be more aware of the conscious and even unconscious processes that led to their initial judgment and the consequent decision and action that they undertook. Various factors enable people to generate meditation and reflection about the past ethical issues. Among them, respondents mentioned personal readings, time off, or striking events with significant consequences that led them to question their position.

Also, the business ethics course has generated meditation and reflection. For professionals, training sessions is like a break in their professional flux. The business ethics course enables to take some time to think about situations that they wouldn't have time to think about in other circumstances. Moreover, the conceptual input that the course enables led to a new way of thinking about ethical issues: students acknowledged that concepts, illustrations or questions raised by the course enabled them to consider the situation in a new way.

### 3.3.3. Getting new information

Respondents reported at times that they changed their initial judgment because they learned of new information on the situation. Indeed, individuals often stay in the organization where they have faced the reported ethical issue. It appears that some information emerge after the situation where the ethical issue was raised. It is the case for example when people get to know that some people had hidden some information. Other kinds of situation imply that as the individuals get to know the consequences of their decision they integrate this information in their judgment about the initial situation. For example, a respondent told us during the initial interview that a decision that was taken by his teams was unethical. During the second

interview, she mentioned that in the end, the decision came to have positive outcomes, even if it had not been taken on a good basis. So, she considered that the ethical issue she had faced was actually nothing important.

#### 3.3.4. Experiencing

Finally, many respondents explained that their judgment changed because they had lived new or other experience during the time between initial and later judgments. This new experience can consist in various situations. Sometimes, respondents have encountered a similar ethical issue in another context. The second situation can make them consider the first one in a different way. Also, some respondents had changed their status in the organization where the ethical issue appeared. For example, while moving from subordinate to managers, some individual testimony that their new role in the organization influences the way they interpret the initial situation. Also, when people move from being the actor to being the victim (or the reverse), they experience the ethical issue from the opposite point of view, which raised empathy. Finally, some people just mention that they have gained professional experience. This is mainly the case when the ethical issue was raised in a situation where the respondent was a newcomer. With the passing of time, individuals may consider that they have gained experience in the organization, which enables them to develop another point of view about the initial ethical issue.

**Table 3: Data supporting influences on judgment evolution.**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Data supporting interpretation</b>
<i>Interaction with other people</i>	<p>“What led me to change my judgment was mainly my personal and professional circle, but also an afterthought due to my experience in the academic field linked to my thesis.”</p> <p>“My judgment has not really changed, but the business ethics courses which foster strongly interaction, helped me better understand the reasoning I had initially when the problem occurred”</p>

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	<p>“Is the solution for the future to avoid taking part to projects with which we don’t share the objectives? The subject remains to be meditated upon. But I would have enjoyed talking about this with persons who already found themselves in the same situation and asked themselves the same kind of questions.”</p>
<p><i>Meditation and reflection</i></p>	<p>“The teaching of this situation considered under the lens of ethics enlightens me on the process I followed consciously and unconsciously. A posteriori, these antagonist questions should not have taken place. By not fulfilling my commitments, I was no longer ethical regarding my contact. I satisfied my own interest to the detriment of my supplier’s”.</p> <p>“Am I taking the right decision? Do I have the right behavior? The reflection made a posteriori, with all the ethical courses, strengthens the decision I took at the time in which I would include the notion of time for a more efficient decision making”.</p> <p>“Helping without expecting anything in return is very good as such. However, in this precise case, it is not acceptable. It is the fact of standing back which enables understanding so. By definition, spontaneous answers are not well thought out”.</p> <p>“This story had great impact on me, I thought about it at length since I was fired following this event. I certainly had a reflection about this subject. This is something I’m used to doing in my life in general, after each striking event”.</p> <p>“I think that the evolution of my judgment follows this ethics course which opened my eyes on various parameters I did not take into consideration methodically during my decision-making”.</p> <p>“I will go further in saying that it is also a matter of assertiveness in front of situations requiring so. The ethical issue is a kind of prism through which we can see ourselves (our values, our morality and our vision of the world). The way somebody resolves an ethical issue says a lot about one’s ethical thinking.”</p>
<p><i>New information about the situation</i></p>	<p>“In the meanwhile we learnt that the fee was reduced. This is certainly also why I am less critical”.</p> <p>“Since my initial analysis I took some distance, especially as following an interview with HR director and the occupational physician, a procedure showing the person’s inability for the job has been started.”</p>
<p><i>Experiencing</i></p>	<p>“Within one year, my position in the company (I was at that time recently hired) and my responsibilities have changed, they asserted themselves. That’s what makes me say that I would react more quickly if this case should occur once more. Besides, I gained autonomy towards my boss and in my relations with the owners. It means that I can take commitments concerning the progress (milestones) of the project in a transparent way without any specific order. With one more year of experience in management, my position towards my boss would be firmer, more insisting, precisely argued. This change is not only due to a different way of thinking after the ethics course which has raised our awareness of these ethical problems and to consider them from a different perspective. It is only due to the evolution of the context within the company that encouraged me to take a quicker decision and in my opinion more appropriate.”</p> <p>“Moreover, my experience of professional interactions, especially in project management reinforces my opinion that a strong empathy is rarely considered to be positive.”</p> <p>“Since that event, I undertook an entrepreneurship project. Therefore, as of today, my vision is that of a future entrepreneur who will fight to win and keep clients. As an entrepreneur, I would not appreciate suffering from an unfair act from a former employee”.</p> <p>“Concerning the refusal of pay increase, my judgment is no longer the same and has</p>

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changed due to a similar personal experience ”.

“The change in my judgment is linked to several factors. But the most important one is what you learn from life and the analysis of men and human beings”

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### **3.4. Retrospective ethical judgment: a two-dimensional sensemaking process**

As time goes on, ethical judgment evolves. We have described the mechanisms and influences that made the judgment evolves over time. We will now move on to explaining what later judgments are made of in terms of sensemaking. We identified three categories of items constituting these judgments: renewed sensemaking about the situation, sensemaking about the individuals own former actions and prospective sensemaking about future situations. That is, later judgment differs from initial judgment as it clearly combined sensemaking about the situation and about people past activities (where initial sensemaking only dealt with the situation and prospective sensemaking about action), and included prospective sensemaking that is related to future potential situations rather than the initial situations.

#### 3.4.1. Renewed sensemaking about the situation

Later judgment implies renewed sense about the situation. Indeed, most of our respondents have changed their mind about the way they deal with the situation they initially related. This change consists in the four mechanisms that we have exposed previously. Therefore, the reference situation is considered through new eyes and/or with additional elements. Due to various factors (detailed in previous section) individuals analyze what had happened and provide a more articulated view of the situation they faced.

Furthermore, people consider the situation once they have seen the consequences of their actions. One of our respondents mentioned: *“The ethical issue was there **as soon as the sanction came.** It was particularly hard for this person. He had told me the difficulty he had to feed his relatives. Moreover, I know he has been extorted food by unscrupulous gangs.*

*When I made the decision [to stop letting him take food], I would enter into a conflict with my values of officer, believer and humanist. I then knew that my act would condemn women and children to death...*” Here, the army officer clearly indicates that he became aware of the ethical issue once he acted. He considered the situation in a new perspective as he can see the consequences of his acts once he acted.

#### 3.4.2. Sensemaking about the individual’s own former actions

As people consider the situation in a new way, they can also see their own actions through a retrospective lens. Their judgment about the situation is completed with a judgment on their own judgment and action in the referenced situation. On the one hand, people may judge that they had the right judgment and that they acted in a way that they are still comfortable with. On the other hand, they may regret that they acted a certain way, or they may recognize that their perception was wrong, as they have changed their mind about the reference situation. When considering the consequences of their actions, getting new information about the situation and its context, interacting with other people after the reference situation or reflecting upon what has happened, they are able to provide a judgment on what they have done and thought in the situation.

Sensemaking about the situation and sensemaking about the individuals own former judgment and action interact in order to make coherent sense of the whole picture, which can be in line or very different from the initial sensemaking during the experience of ethical issue.

#### 3.4.3. Prospective sensemaking about future situations

A third category emerged in the way people make sense about the reference situation as people, without been asked to do so, express ethical principles that emerge from the experience they make sense of. That is, their retrospective sensemaking enables them to



generate prospective sensemaking about imaginary future situations. It differs from “Sensemaking about the individual’s own former actions” as people do not reconsider their way of doing in the reference situation. They project themselves in the future and consider how they would act in similar or other kind of situations.

While doing so, individuals express in which situations they would apply the principles or the lessons that emerge from their renewed way of making sense of what has happened since the ethical issue raised. One option is that people would mention very general principles, such as: *“In the future, the solution may be to avoid any participation in the projects I do not share the objectives of.”* The other option is that they draw conclusions for specific situations that are similar to the initial one: *“If this case occurred again, I am sure that I would not make the mistake of trying to personally acquire one of the vehicles of the deal!”*

### **3.5. Iterations of sensemaking**

Once this new sensemaking process has occurred, infinite iterations of sensemaking may appear over time. Actually, one of our respondent insisted on reporting on an incident that happened many years before the interview. We could then consider that ethical issues could remain in people’s mind for years and emotionally intense. In a general point of view, the influences and mechanisms of ethical judgment evolution that we have identified remain similar through iterations. For each individual, the influences may be simultaneous or sequential, which lead to a wide variety of mechanisms combinations at each iteration of the sensemaking process.

**Table 4: Data supporting interpretation about dual dimension of retrospective sensemaking**

Theme	Data supporting interpretation
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<p><i>Sensemaking about the reference situation</i></p>	<p>“I consider that keeping this provider without penalty seems to be a good ethical decision.”</p> <p>“At that time, my position was more ambiguous than it is today. I thought that a slight ethical misconduct was desirable as far as it was possible to obtain a kind of compromise among the stakeholders: my employer, the applicant companies and my client. With time and insidiously, I totally broke my obligations towards my client. I presented him a distorted vision of the candidates’ offers.”</p> <p>“I realized that even if my behavior towards my team was not exemplary, my contacts- my client and the general manager of my company – were not ethical either.”</p> <p>“Therefore it is no longer an ethical problem.”</p>
<p><i>Sensemaking about the individual’s previous judgement and action</i></p>	<p>“I was young and my will to be integrated and to be recognized as a performing member of the company led me to behave this way. I am very critical towards myself and I don’t want to do this mistake again because it goes beyond the professional sphere. Cases of conscience affect personal life”.</p> <p>“I still believe that I should have talked about my problem with my supervisors and why not propose a back up solution and we should not have lost as much time as we could imagine. For me, we could have had the time to make the people concerned validate the procedures and rules of the site. I should have explained so to my hierarchy, but thanks to this open-mindedness gained during the course and the capacity to identify situations where ethics is at stake I would not do the same thing again but we learn from our mistakes”.</p> <p>“I sincerely think that my behavior at that time was unethical. I abused my authority, I abused my team, I profited from the good will of my colleagues and I did not listen to them...”</p> <p>“Of course, the behavior I had a few weeks before was far from this ideological vision but it helped me to set a target.”</p> <p>“If the case would appear now, It would still raise issues! I may consider it the same way, actually. But one thing would change: the way I judge my acts. Retrospectively, now that I attended the business ethics courses, It is clear that I would change my mind. Curiously, I would be less severe with me.”</p> <p>“My reaction was not adapted, which I regret.”</p> <p>“When analyzing the reasons for this inaction, I note that I did not want to give a bad image of myself by putting an end to an advantageous job for a father in charge of a large family. I got caught in a spiral where I felt more and more guilty which prevented me from taking the right decisions I was responsible of”.</p>
<p><i>Prospective sensemaking about future situations</i></p>	<p>“I think I can talk about ethical emancipation! Indeed, it will be useful to me in the way I deal with future issues and moral dilemma, surprisingly while making things more simple.”</p> <p>“As a conclusion, I would say that ethical problems generally have non trivial solutions. We should always aim at a win-win solution that seems the best adapted to each issue.”</p> <p>“This experience has enabled me to understand that each one has his/her own priorities in his/her investments, and experiences cycles in his/her life as well. It is vain to try to change the course of events.”</p> <p>“In the future, when I face an ethical issue, before taking a decision, I would evaluate the choices that I have, while taking into consideration not only whether they fit my convictions, but also whether they are disadvantageous to me or not.</p> <p>“I will not do the same again. But we learn while making mistakes!”</p>

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“If the same situation would appear today, I would act the same way. My judgment remains and would still be the same”

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## **4. Discussion and conclusion**

Through this study, we contribute to infuse to the ethical judgment literature with a sensemaking perspective, following the path of the latest research on EDM. The sensemaking lens enables to better capture the processes through which people have their judgment evolve when confronted with ethical issues. When compared to the other sensemaking-based frameworks of ethical judgment, our model provides a more dynamic perspective of ethical judgement by describing influences and mechanisms of ethical judgment evolution through time. Whereas the latest studies about ethical judgment remained mostly conceptual (Haidt, 2001; Reynolds 2006, Sonenshein, 2007), here we provide an empirically grounded model of ethical judgment through time. Hence, our research sets a new basis for a better understanding of the mechanisms of ethical learning, thus leading to promising applications and implications in the field of ethics education.

### **4.1. Evolution of sensemaking over time**

Our model describes iterations of sensemaking from the moment individuals face ethical issues (reference situation) to later and potentially infinite moments of sensemaking about this reference situation. In recent EDM research, studies have outlined non-rational properties of ethical judgment and broken with a tradition of research that considered ethical decision making as a rational choice. These studies emphasise the role of emotions and intuition in the way people make sense of ethical issues (Haidt, 2001; Sonenshein, 2007; Thiel et al., 2012). Thiel and al. (2012) propose strategies to make sense of ethical issues. Our study differs from these studies in that we propose to use this sensemaking-based perspective in order to better understand how ethical judgment evolves over time.

In doing so, we show that initial ethical judgment and later judgments differ in the way people make sense of the situation. On the one hand, initial judgment implies the combination of intuitive emotional sensemaking about the situation and prospective sensemaking about action. On the other hand, later judgments consist of a combination of a renewed sensemaking about the situation - often less infused with emotions -, sensemaking about initial actions and judgments, and prospective sensemaking about future situations. That is, our study indicates that real time ethical judgment and later judgment are different and mobilize different elements in the way people make sense about ethical issues over time.

This implies that the prospective/retrospective properties of sensemaking are very helpful in understanding the way people make sense about ethical issue when considered in a dynamic perspective. This finding opens ways to new perspectives for business ethics research. Indeed, it helps modelizing how ethical judgment may be influenced after an initial real time judgment. The timing of sequence of events enables people to make their ethical judgment evolve over time. Consequently, framing sequences of action in a certain way may influence ethical judgment and consequently ethical decision-making. The findings about influences and mechanisms of judgment evolution provide elements for guiding sensemaking about ethical issues over time.

#### **4.2. Ethical judgment evolution and mechanisms dyads**

Through this perspective, we reveal that social influences trigger the evolution of ethical judgment over time. In recent EDM literature, scholars highlighted various factors that influence ethical judgment. According to Haidt (2001), an individual's EJ is influenced by others' judgments and others' reasoning and, occasionally by the individual's own reflection. According to Sonenshein (2007), intuitive ethical judgments come from the individuals' experience and from social pressures.

We highlighted four influences on ethical judgment evolution: interaction with other people, getting new information about the situation, experiencing and meditation/reflection. The first three of them rely directly on the social interaction that is a central element in sensemaking processes. Moreover, our data provide evidence that interaction enables the fourth influence as meditation and reflection are often enabled by initial discussions with others or when confronting artefacts – like books – that enable an inner discussion.

That is, our study provides arguments for a perspective of ethical judgment based on social constructionism. Indeed, not only is the initial judgment socially constructed through people previous experience, social anchors, expectations in the situation, etc. but also the evolution of ethical judgment is based on socially constructed phenomenon.

Furthermore, while our findings are consistent with Haidt's proposition that states that people's intuitive judgments are influenced by the reasoning of others, our study brings some precision to Haidt's central proposition according to which moral reasoning is rarely the direct cause of moral judgment. In fact, our empirical study identifies some circumstances that foster individuals' reasoning: that is to say, when they experience a striking event and when they are provided with theoretical tools that enable them to analyse a situation differently. A possible implication of these findings is that we can improve individuals' ethical judgment by fostering their moral reasoning through experience and theoretical knowledge.

Our study also highlighted 4 mechanisms through which ethical judgment evolves. Previous sensemaking-based models of EDM identified the mechanisms through which a person makes sense of an ethical issue. For example, Thiel et al. (2012) revealed 4 strategies that leaders use to make sense of their environments during EDM: emotion regulation, self-reflection, forecasting, information integration. However no research examined the mechanisms through

which ethical judgment evolves over time. In our study, each mechanism is a dyad, which is composed of one mechanism and its opposite: 1) completing / focusing, 2) conceptualising / reality embedding, 3) gaining certainty / raising questions, 4) ethification / disethification. Interestingly, after following the same ethics course, students' judgments may evolve in opposite ways for each dyad. For example, if we take the 3<sup>rd</sup> dyad, some of them gain certainty in their judgments, while on the contrary, others raise more questions after the course than initially, concerning the ethical issue they were confronted with, and so on for the other dyads. These antagonisms can be assimilated to the two opposite extremes that circumscribe Aristotle's concept of virtue. In effect, virtue or moral excellence is defined as a point between a deficiency and an excess of a character trait. Therefore the point of greatest virtue lies not in the exact middle, but at a golden mean sometimes closer to one extreme than the other. For example, generosity is a virtue that fits between the two extremes of miserliness and being profligate, courage is the golden mean between cowardice and foolhardiness and confidence the golden mean between self-deprecation and vanity. Similarly, we can see in our study that our respondents make sense of the ethical issues they face by navigating between two opposite mechanisms, as if looking for an equilibrium in their way of thinking (for example they become more rational when they initially were too compassionate, or they become more flexible if previously too rigid, or more conscious of the impact of their actions on others when initially too individualist, etc.). Understanding such mechanisms is very helpful for individuals eager to improve their ethical judgment: the right judgment can be attained by counterbalancing the excess or default they automatically tend to having. For example, if they tend to be too compassionate, they will correct their ethical judgment by being less emotional.

### **4.3. Teaching business ethics**

Our study has very interesting implications for business ethics education. As a matter of fact, the purpose of business ethics courses is to change students' ethical judgment by raising their ethical sensitivity and thus increasing their ability to make ethical decisions. In this respect, our model can help educators and training designers focus on the best strategies that foster ethical judgment evolution. For example, our empirical results show that the factors that influence ethical judgment evolution consist in interacting with others, stepping back and thinking and experimenting. Therefore an efficient business ethics course has to provide the necessary pedagogical tools to fulfill these conditions. In our empirical study we noticed that business ethics students were particularly influenced when they exchanged with the others about their ethical dilemmas. Even if many of them initially expressed their desire not to share their personal experiences, due to confidential aspects, at the end, the vast majority of them told others about the ethical issues they faced. All students reported that they found this exchange of experiences particularly fruitful.

Besides, our results show that later (retrospective) ethical judgment consists of a renewed sense-making of the initial situation and the previous judgment and action. This renewed judgment on previous judgment and action seems particularly fruitful in the context of ethics teaching, since it is at the heart of experiential learning. Individuals can't improve their ethical judgment without questioning their previous ethical judgments and decisions. However, this self-questioning is particularly difficult to achieve. It implies recognizing one's weaknesses and mistakes. Our empirical study shows that this process is fostered by experience and benefitting from others' experiences. Besides, the fact of asking the students to make a retrospective analysis on previous judgments and actions forced them to step back and reflect, which turned to be very fruitful. Therefore ethics courses should include in their agenda the

fact of making students aware of the importance of this retrospective analysis and should teach them how to do it.

Also, whereas we have no evidence in our data that the course enables experiencing about the situation that they had to report on, we believe that business ethics courses can do so. Actually, two elements of the business ethics course are based on experiencing without being in direct link with our research. First, between two sessions students are asked to have positive interactions with people they do not like or have difficulties with in their professional environment. Out of this new experience, a great majority of students testified that they change their mind about the people. Second, the course proposed role-playing in which students should behave according to the role description they were provided with. It enabled students to get aware of the net of constraints that individuals have to face and the difference between the role and the behavior they would have undertaken according to their own judgment. That is, they consider the influence of personality in facing ethical issues.

Taken together these elements provide hints to improve business ethics teaching in line with its possibility of evolution over time.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

Many scholars that are renewing EDM research have proposed theoretical models based on a sense-making perspective. We continue this approach while proposing an empirically-grounded framework in order to capture the evolution of ethical judgment over time. The design we have set up in order to capture judgment evolution has enabled to identify judgment evolution, evolution mechanisms and influences on judgment evolution.

Our study presents two main limitations. First, we captured initial sensemaking through retrospective interviews. That is, even if we tried to make them report the initial situation the way they had experienced it in real time, some time has passed since the situation emerged.



For some respondents, the ethical issue was still ongoing but others reported on situations that they faced months or years ago. The use of continuous training students cohorts prevented us from capturing real time initial sensemaking. Future research may start from real time sensemaking in situations, which requires presence on the field, and further interview people that have faced the ethical issue.

Second, the research was designed to stress judgment evolutions as well as mechanisms and influences. That is, we used business ethics courses to frame the data collection with interviews before and after the course sessions. Even if we believe that this design emphasizes judgment evolution and reveals mechanisms and influences, some could argue that our design over stresses judgment evolution as well as the influences and mechanisms through which it evolves. Further research could replicate this study of ethical judgment evolution in situations that are not linked to business ethics courses. Other mechanisms or influences could emerge from such replication studies.

After alternative theoretical perspectives of EDM have been suggested, we have provided here a study that grounds this new perspective on empirical data. We contributed to show the relevance of sensemaking perspective in better understanding EDM. We hope it will encourage others to follow this promising path.

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