

## Promoting Ethical Decision-Making In Nursing Practice

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### Abstract

Integrating ethics into the nursing school curriculum is essential, since it is a core aspect of nursing practice. Despite the efforts of several organizations to promote ethics in nursing, and the study conducted on this topic, it remains challenging to precisely define the specific elements of this skill. This review aims to elucidate this aspect and provide a more precise definition of ethical competence within the setting of nursing practice. A review was conducted using the CINAHL, MEDLINE, as well as EMBASE databases, as well as the journal Nursing Ethics. The terms nursing ethics and ethical ability were used to provide a comprehensive coverage of the idea of "ethical competence" within the context of a nursing university program. A total of 89 articles were ultimately chosen. We have adhered to the ethical norms pertaining to the sources and writing. This literature study does not include any conflict of interest. The phrases most often used to describe ethical competence in nursing include ethical sensibility, knowledge of ethics, ethical contemplation, ethical decision-making, ethical behavior, and ethical conduct. They were then delineated in order to more accurately determine the potential elements of ethical proficiency in nursing. While ethical competence is considered an essential skill in nursing practice, there is little agreement in the literature about its precise definition. The identification of the components and their interactions via this integrative examination contributes to a better understanding of its definition. It sets the stage for future research that will enhance our comprehension of its progression, particularly among nursing learners and

working nurses, and also the variables that may have an impact. Therefore, further teaching initiatives might be proposed to enhance its growth.

**Keywords:** Ethics, decision-making, nurses, literature review, ethical behavior.

## 1. Introduction

Ethics is an essential aspect of nursing practice, hence it is imperative to explicitly include ethics into the nursing school curriculum. The teaching of ethics in nursing is actively encouraged by several organizations (1-4). These organizations, such as the National League of Nursing and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, recognize the importance of ethical behavior in nursing education. The Carnegie Report and the Institute of Medicine also emphasize the integration of ethics in nursing education (5-9). Additionally, the work of Carper (10) and of Chinn and Kramer (11) highlight the significant role of ethical knowledge in providing care.

In addition, nursing practice is founded on the unique bond formed between the patient and nurse (12), particularly under the transformation paradigm, specifically within the caring school of thought as conceptualized by Watson (13). The relationship serves as the basis for ethics (14). This understanding of ethics aligns with a philosophical definition, such as Ricoeur's (15), where ethics is contemplated and lived as a pursuit of a morally upright existence in fair institutions. In this perspective, ethics is inherent in the connection between two or more individuals. Nursing practice is fundamentally guided by ethics. This principle is further emphasized in Gilligan's Ethics of Care, which specifically applies to nursing practice. It highlights the significance of interdependent relationships rooted in care and the obligation to meet the needs of others without causing harm. Consequently, the integration of ethics into these relationships strongly supports the idea of incorporating ethical competence into nursing education curricula. This inclusion can greatly assist nurses in their advocacy role and facilitate the effective management of moral distress.

Despite the importance of ethical competence in nursing practice, its definition remains unclear. This lack of clarity is attributed to the fact that the available data on the subject

come from fragmented studies that are not easily comparable, as explained by Goethals et al. A comprehensive review, based on the approach of Whittemore and Knafl,<sup>27</sup> was conducted to provide a clear understanding of ethical competence.

## **2. Methodology**

This review conducted a comprehensive search across the CINAHL, MEDLINE, and EMBASE databases, as well as the journal *Nursing Ethics*. The search was focused on the keywords "nursing ethics" and "ethical competence." These terms were chosen not because they have identical meanings, but because previous literature suggested that both expressions are used to discuss ethical competence in the field of nursing.

The study examined the elements of ethical competence in nursing, even though the word "ethical competence" was not expressly addressed. Articles were required to be connected to ethics and the practical application of ethical principles in everyday nursing practice or in challenging circumstances. Only items produced in English or French were included. Articles pertaining to disciplines other than nursing were omitted.

The articles were first chosen based on a review of their titles and abstracts. After doing thorough research, a total of 43 papers were chosen from the databases CINAHL, MEDLINE, and EMBASE. Additionally, 24 articles from *Nursing Ethics*, which were not included in these databases, were also included. An additional 22 papers were included in this study after being analyzed. Their identification was accomplished by analyzing the first 67 papers, all of which are available in MEDLINE. However, the keywords previously specified did not provide any results.

## **3. Results**

According to Gallagher's definition in 2006, as used by Cannaerts et al. in their work, ethical competence is defined by

[...] the possession of ethical knowledge next to the ability to "see" what a situation presents (ethical perception); to reflect critically about what nurses know, are, and do (ethical reflection); to bring out the ethical practice (ethical behavior); and to "be" ethical.<sup>33</sup>

This definition highlights that ethical competence consists of various interconnected components, and it

emphasizes that it is a complex and continually evolving process. It can be organized into different steps.

In 2014, Poikkeus et al. conducted a comprehensive analysis of 34 papers that presented the findings of empirical, qualitative, and/or quantitative investigations on ethical competence. The researchers also determined that ethical competence was examined from various angles, encompassing ethical decision-making, ethical reasoning, ethical sensitivity, ethical reflection, ethical knowledge, ethical behavior, and ethical action. Based on these articles, ethical competence appears to consist of several interrelated but distinct elements, such as ethical reasoning, ethical action, or ethical behavior, which are sometimes studied independently or in conjunction with one another, frequently without a formal definition.

The original objective of defining ethical competence was altered as the analysis progressed. Instead of seeking a specific definition, the focus shifted towards identifying recurring concepts related to ethics in nursing and documenting their connections as a secondary step. The 89 articles mostly focus on the topics of ethical sensitivity, ethical knowledge, ethical contemplation, ethical decision-making, ethical action, and ethical conduct. By integrating them, it becomes feasible to more precisely define ethical competence.

Furthermore, it was feasible to develop definitions for each of these recurring notions similar to ethical competence. The definitions were developed by amalgamating and linking different elements detected in the surveyed articles, where they were clear enough to enhance our comprehension of the constituent notions of ethical competence and the concept of ethical competence itself.

#### **4. Ethical Sensitivity**

Ethical sensitivity refers to the ability to recognize and understand ethical issues and dilemmas, as well as the potential consequences of one's actions from an ethical standpoint. In their systematic review, Poikkeus et al.<sup>25</sup> take inspiration from the arguments of Ersoy and Goz<sup>101</sup> and Kim et al.,<sup>102</sup> to define ethical sensitivity as a “ability to recognize an ethical problem or ethical aspects of situations.” They add that ethical sensitivity is a key element facilitating decision-making in nursing practice,<sup>25,103</sup> which makes it necessary “to interpret verbal and non-verbal behaviors to identify patients’ needs.”<sup>25,102</sup> Robichaux,<sup>2</sup> whose reflections are based on

work by Rest,<sup>104</sup> asserts that “ethical sensitivity involves the skill or ability to interpret the reactions and feelings of others.” In this respect, Robichaux<sup>2</sup> is in line with what Poikkeus et al.<sup>25</sup> already mentioned: “Sensitivity, that is, accurate perception of, exquisite attention to, and assessment of the needs of patients’ and patients’ families is an essential precursor to clinically competent reasoning and nursing practice.” To further develop the interpretations of Poikkeus et al.<sup>25</sup> and those of Robichaux<sup>2</sup> regarding ethical sensitivity, we took into account the concept analysis recently carried out by Weaver et al.<sup>105</sup>

Ethical sensitivity refers to the capacity to identify ethical dilemmas that may arise in various circumstances, particularly in connection to other individuals. The subject serves as a means for contemplation, making choices, and engaging in accountable behavior. Ethical sensitivity is the fundamental aspect of ethical competence, serving as the basis for the implementation of all other components. It entails a compassionate sensitivity that may be associated with personal knowledge.

## **5. Moral Knowledge**

According to Park, ethical knowledge consists of theoretical components, as well as other factors, as emphasized by Ramos et al. According to their perspective, lecturers should expand their understanding of ethics beyond just the standard and duty-based aspects. On the other hand, Wright and Brajtman argue that nurses possess at least two types of knowledge: relational knowledge and embodied knowledge. Lechasseur et al. further specify that ethical knowledge in the context of care refers to the moral and ethical component that helps guide reasonable decision-making for the well-being of the recipient of care.

In order to provide a clearer definition of this concept, further investigation included the article by Durgahee<sup>107</sup>, who states that ethical nursing knowledge is a synthesis of research-based knowledge, contextual episteme (awareness), and lay knowledge. It is worth mentioning that as early as 1997, Durgahee advocated for a reflective practice to enhance ethical knowledge.

Therefore, considering the evidence found in various articles, ethical knowledge can be defined as a blend of philosophical knowledge, theoretical knowledge (including

normative, deontological, and scientific knowledge), and practical knowledge, all while considering the specific contexts and individuals involved. The many forms of knowledge will be used in the process of developing ethical competence, including ethical reflection.

## **6. Ethical Contemplation**

Monteverde argues that ethical reflection is seen as the application of ethical principles in the conduct of healthcare practitioners. The notions of doing, deciding, and acting are also present in other methodologies. The approach of Söderhamn et al.,<sup>81</sup> defines ethical reflection as a process of considering ethical issues and exploring different courses of action. Similarly, Cannaerts et al.<sup>33</sup> describe ethical reflection as a critical examination of nurses' knowledge, values, and actions .

Based on these many definitions, ethical reflection is seen as a repetitive and thoughtful process that involves considering numerous options to address ethical issues. Without a doubt, the opinions and values of stakeholders, especially the nurse engaged, will have an impact on this process. It is crucial to keep them informed and consider their effect. The concepts of ethical contemplation and ethical decision-making are separate, although they may seem interconnected or tightly linked.

## **7. Ethical Decision-Making**

According to Park, Cerit, and Dinç, they agree with the idea that ethical decision-making can be described as a series of interconnected phases, although they prefer to use the term "sequential phases" instead of "stages." Gropelli also emphasizes the complexity of ethical decision-making in healthcare, stating that it is a complex issue. Based on the aforementioned criteria and the main point derived from the several evaluated definitions, ethical decision-making may be characterized as a process of making a rational and accountable choice from a range of choices. Ethical decision-making is shown via ethical behavior.

## **8. Ethical Action**

Paganini and Yoshikawa Egry believe that ethical action is achieved via the process of contemplation, analysis, and judgment. This activity is grounded on a comprehensive

comprehension of people and their circumstances, together with a thoughtful evaluation of their susceptibility. Therefore, ethical action entails taking a deliberate action after recognizing ethical conflict, reflecting on gained information, and considering many possibilities and their consequences in order to provide care and enhance human well-being.

According to the combined arguments of Keyko, Robichaux, Paganini, and Yoshikawa, ethical action may be described as action that is the result of careful thought and analysis, driven by the intention to support and accompany an individual on their journey. Therefore, it is a distinct kind of behavior that is tailored to a certain occasion and environment, setting it apart from ethical conduct. Indeed, ethical behavior is a consistent and universal practice that the nurse adheres to, regardless of the particular circumstances they may encounter.

#### **9. Moral conduct**

Cannaerts et al. define ethical conduct as the act of promoting ethical practice, whereas Choe et al. consider it to be an attitude of moderation. The literature study included the works of Dierckx de Casterlé et al.(37) and Benner et al.(7) to further elucidate the idea of ethical conduct and refine its definition. According to Dierckx de Casterlé et al., ethical conduct encompasses both the ethical thinking of students and how this reasoning influences their actions. Ethical conduct is so evident in the knowledge and personal abilities of nursing students and professionals. The principles used by Benner et al.(7) are consistent with the aforementioned remark. As to the authors, "ethical comportment" refers to the practical and embodied knowledge of how to interact with people in a manner that is kind, attentive, and helpful towards their needs and interests.

#### **10. Conclusion**

The study and analysis have allowed a more accurate identification of the composition, use, and specific goals of ethical competence. Proposals have been made for components, linkages, and definitions. Nevertheless, more qualitative research is necessary to further our comprehension of the development of nursing students' skills and how they continue to evolve in their professional practice. Indeed, experience seems to be a beneficial element in the execution of this skill. Future studies will also allow for the identification

of additional factors that influence the development of ethical competence, both positively and negatively. This research may lead to the creation of a cognitive model for learning ethical competence, which is based on valid scientific evidence. The model will outline the stages of development from beginner to expert, starting with critical learning. This model could serve as a foundation for designing an education system that effectively promotes the development of ethical competence. Ultimately, this would strengthen the patient-caregiver relationship, support nurses in their advocacy role, and potentially reduce moral distress among nurses.

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