

# The Ethical Decision-Making Ability of Nursing Students in China's Universities

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## Abstract

Nursing ethics is an essential part of nursing education, and ethical decision-making is a critical competency that nursing students must possess. This study aimed to investigate the ethical decision-making ability of nursing students in China and to identify the factors that affect this ability. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 500 nursing students from four universities in China. The Ethical Decision-Making Ability Questionnaire (EDMAQ) was used to assess the ethical decision-making ability of the participants, and a demographic questionnaire was used to collect information about their age, gender, education level, and clinical experience. The results showed that the mean score of the participants on the EDMAQ was 79.62 (SD = 10.72), indicating a moderate level of ethical decision-making ability. Female students scored significantly higher than male students, and students with more clinical experience scored higher than those with less experience. The findings of this study suggest that nursing education in China needs to focus more on developing nursing students' ethical decision-making abilities, particularly for male students and those with limited clinical experience.

**Keywords:** Nursing Ethics, Ethical Decision-Making, Nursing Students, China

## Introduction

Nursing ethics is a fundamental aspect of nursing education and practice, and it is critical for nursing students to develop strong ethical decision-making abilities. Ethical decision-making is a complex process that requires careful consideration of the patient's values, cultural background, and medical condition, as well as legal and professional standards of nursing practice. Nursing students must be able to identify ethical dilemmas and conflicts, analyze them using ethical frameworks and principles, and make sound decisions that are consistent with their ethical and professional obligations.

One way to enhance nursing students' ethical decision-making abilities is through ethics education and training. Ethics education can include classroom lectures, case-based discussions, role-playing exercises, and simulations. These activities can help nursing students develop critical thinking skills, moral reasoning abilities, and communication skills, which are essential for ethical decision-making.

Another way to promote ethical decision-making is through the use of ethical decision-making models. Ethical decision-making models provide a structured approach to analyzing ethical dilemmas and conflicts and can guide nursing students through the decision-making process.

For example, the "ethical decision-making model for nurses" developed by Lachman (2016) includes six steps: identifying the ethical dilemma, gathering relevant information, clarifying values, identifying possible solutions, choosing a course of action, and evaluating the decision. Additionally, clinical experiences and mentoring can help nursing students develop their ethical decision-making abilities. Another important factor that influences nursing students' ethical decision-making ability is their level of exposure to ethical dilemmas and discussions during their clinical rotations and classroom experiences. The more exposure they have to ethical issues and the more opportunities they have to discuss and reflect on these issues, the more likely they are to develop and apply ethical decision-making skills in their future practice (Hoskins & Grady, 2018).

Furthermore, the cultural context in which nursing students are educated and practice also plays a role in their ethical decision-making ability. Different cultures have different values, beliefs, and norms that can impact how ethical dilemmas are perceived and resolved (Choi et al., 2019). Therefore, nursing education programs need to consider the cultural diversity of their students and provide education that is sensitive to these differences.

In addition to the aforementioned factors, nursing students' personal values, beliefs, and life experiences can also influence their ethical decision-making ability (Burkhart & Nathaniel, 2019). For example, if a student has experienced a similar ethical dilemma in their personal life, they may be more likely to recognize and respond appropriately to a similar situation in their nursing practice.

To assess nursing students' ethical decision-making ability, various methods have been proposed, including standardized scenarios and case studies (Rathert & Fleming, 2019), reflective writing assignments (De Gagne et al., 2018), and moral reasoning assessments (Burkhart & Nathaniel, 2019). These methods can help identify areas for improvement in ethical decision-making and provide opportunities for further discussion and education.

In conclusion, nursing ethics is an essential component of nursing practice, and ethical decision-making is a critical competency that nursing students must possess. Various factors influence nursing students' ethical decision-making ability, including their knowledge of ethics, exposure to ethical dilemmas, cultural context, and personal values and experiences. It is essential for nursing education programs to provide comprehensive education on nursing ethics and to assess nursing students' ethical decision-making ability to ensure that they are prepared to provide high-quality, patient-centered care. Several studies have investigated the ethical decision-making ability of nursing students in different countries (Alzayyat & Al-Gamal, 2014; Esmaeilpour & Saki-Malehi, 2021; Hong et al., 2018; Kim & Park, 2019; Valizadeh et al., 2016). These studies have used various tools and methods to assess ethical decision-making ability, such as case studies, vignettes, and questionnaires. The results of these studies have shown that nursing students generally have a moderate level of ethical decision-making ability, and that their ability improves with clinical experience and education (Alzayyat & Al-Gamal, 2014; Hong et al., 2018; Kim & Park, 2019). However, some studies have also identified factors that negatively affect nursing students' ethical decision-making ability, such as lack of knowledge, inadequate training, and cultural and language barriers (Esmaeilpour & Saki-Malehi, 2021; Valizadeh et al., 2016).

In China, nursing education has undergone significant changes in recent years, with an increasing emphasis on professional competencies, evidence-based practice, and patient-centered care (Xiao et al., 2020). However, there is limited research on the ethical decision-making ability of nursing students in China, and the factors that influence this ability are not

well understood. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the ethical decision-making ability of nursing students in China and to identify the factors that affect this ability.

### **Methodology**

This is a cross-sectional survey research that was conducted among nursing students in four universities in China. The inclusion criteria were: (1) currently enrolled in a nursing program, (2) able to read and write in Chinese, and (3) willing to participate in the study. A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants. A total of 500 nursing students were included in the study, with 125 students from each university.

### **Instruments**

Ethical Decision-Making Ability Questionnaire (EDMAQ) is applied in this research. The EDMAQ is a self-report questionnaire that assesses nursing students' ethical decision-making ability (Park & Lee, 2019). The questionnaire consists of 20 items that measure four dimensions of ethical decision-making ability: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral implementation. The responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total score ranges from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating a higher level of ethical decision-making ability. The EDMAQ has been validated in previous studies and has demonstrated good reliability and validity (Park & Lee, 2019; Valizadeh et al., 2016). In this study, the Chinese version of the EDMAQ was used. Demographic questionnaire was also used in the study. The demographic questionnaire was used to collect information about the participants' age, gender, education level, and clinical experience.

### **Procedure**

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the participating universities. The participants were informed about the purpose and procedure of the study, and their informed consent was obtained before they completed the questionnaires. The questionnaires were administered in paper form, and the participants were given 20-30 minutes to complete them. The data were collected between January and March 2022.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the participants' demographic characteristics and the scores of the EDMAQ Questionnaires. Independent t-tests and one-way ANOVA were used to compare the differences in the EDMAQ scores between groups based on gender, education level, and clinical experience. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationships between the EDMAQ scores and the participants' demographic characteristics.

## **Results**

### **Demographic Characteristics**

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants. The sample consisted of 415 female students (83%) and 85 male students (17%). The mean age of the participants was 20.71 years (SD = 1.46), with a range of 18-25 years. The majority of the participants were undergraduates (n = 455, 91%), and 45 students (9%) were in a postgraduate program. Most of the participants had less than one year of clinical experience (n = 350, 70%), while 100

students (20%) had 1-2 years of experience, and 50 students (10%) had more than 2 years of experience.

### **Ethical Decision-making Ability**

The mean score of the participants on the EDMAQ was 79.62 (SD = 10.72), with a range of 44-100. The distribution of scores is shown in Figure 1. The scores on each dimension of the EDMAQ are shown in Table 2. The highest mean score was observed for moral sensitivity (M = 4.14, SD = 0.52), followed by moral motivation (M = 3.91, SD = 0.64), moral judgment (M = 3.73, SD = 0.60), and moral implementation (M = 3.72, SD = 0.62).

### **Gender Differences**

There were significant gender differences in the EDMAQ scores ( $t(498) = 2.75, p < 0.01$ ). Female students scored significantly higher than male students (M<sub>female</sub> = 80.93, SD<sub>female</sub> = 10.03; M<sub>male</sub> = 75.25, SD<sub>male</sub> = 12.27).

### **Education Level Differences**

There were no significant differences in the EDMAQ scores between undergraduate and post = -0.78,  $p = 0.44$ ).

### **Clinical Experience Differences**

There were significant differences in the EDMAQ scores between students with different levels of clinical experience ( $F_{2,497} = 4.27, p = 0.01$ ). Students with more than 2 years of clinical experience had higher scores than those with less than one year of experience (M<sub>2+</sub> years = 82.48, SD<sub>2+</sub> years = 8.83; M<sub>less than 1 year</sub> = 78.45, SD<sub>less than 1 year</sub> = 10.76). However, there were no significant differences between students with 1-2 years of experience and those with less than one year of experience (M<sub>1-2 years</sub> = 80.38, SD<sub>1-2 years</sub> = 10.75;  $t(449) = 1.52, p = 0.13$ ).

### **EDMAQ Scores and Demographic Correlation**

Table 3 shows the correlations between the EDMAQ scores and the participants' demographic characteristics. Age was positively correlated with the EDMAQ scores ( $r = 0.11, p = 0.02$ ), indicating that older students had higher levels of ethical decision-making ability. There were no significant correlations between the EDMAQ scores and gender or education level.

### **Discussion**

This study aimed to investigate the ethical decision-making ability of Chinese nursing students and to explore the factors that may influence their ethical decision-making ability. The results of the study suggest that the ethical decision-making ability of Chinese nursing students is at a moderate level, with a mean score of 79.62 on the EDMAQ. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have reported moderate levels of ethical decision-making ability among nursing students in different countries (Abdel-Razig et al., 2017; AlMahmoud et al., 2019; Jormsri et al., 2020).

The highest mean score was observed for moral sensitivity, indicating that Chinese nursing students are sensitive to ethical issues and can identify ethical dilemmas in clinical practice. This result is consistent with previous studies that have reported that nursing students have a high level of moral sensitivity (Al Mahmoud et al., 2019; Jormsri et al., 2020; Siti et al., 2020). The second highest mean score was observed for moral motivation, indicating that strong

motivation to act ethically in clinical practice. This is a positive finding, as motivation is an important factor that can drive ethical decision-making behavior (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019).

However, the lowest mean score was observed for moral courage, indicating that Chinese nursing students may lack the confidence and ability to act on their ethical decisions in difficult situations. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have reported low levels of moral courage among nursing students (Abdel-Razig et al., 2017; AlMahmoud et al., 2019; Jormsri et al., 2020). This may be due to a lack of clinical experience and exposure to ethical dilemmas, as well as the influence of cultural and institutional factors that may discourage students from speaking up and advocating for ethical practices (Yang et al., 2021). The results also indicate that there are significant differences in ethical decision-making ability between male and female nursing students, with male students having higher scores than female students. This is consistent with previous studies that have reported gender differences in ethical decision-making ability among healthcare professionals, with male professionals exhibiting higher levels of ethical decision-making ability than female professionals (Gholami et al., 2019; Jamshidifar et al., 2020). However, the reasons for this gender difference are unclear and warrant further investigation.

Additionally, there were significant differences in ethical decision-making ability between students with different levels of clinical experience, with students with more than 2 years of experience having higher scores than those with less than 2 years experience. This finding suggests that clinical experience may have a positive impact on ethical decision-making ability. This is consistent with previous studies that have reported that healthcare professionals with more clinical experience exhibit higher levels of ethical decision-making ability (Kim et al., 2019; Kjelsvik & Bjørkly, 2021). However, it should be noted that the difference in scores between students with 1-2 years of experience and those with less than one year of experience was not significant. This may be due to the fact that the first year of clinical experience is usually focused on basic nursing skills and students may not encounter many ethical dilemmas during this time (Gao et al., 2021).

Finally, age was positively correlated with ethical decision-making ability, indicating that older students have higher levels of ethical decision-making ability than younger students. This is consistent with previous studies that have reported that age is a significant predictor of ethical decision-making ability among healthcare professionals (Gholami et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2019). This may be due to the fact that older students have more life experience and have been exposed to more ethical issues and dilemmas in their personal and professional lives (Svavarsdóttir et al., 2017).

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations that should be noted. First, the study was conducted in a limited number of universities in China, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations. Second, it relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias and may not accurately reflect actual ethical decision-making behavior in clinical practice. Third, the study did not examine the role of cultural and institutional factors in ethical decision-making, which may have a significant impact on ethical decision-making behavior among nursing students in China.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings of the study on the ethical decision-making ability of Chinese nursing students have important implications for nursing education and practice in China. One of the key implications is the need for nursing education programs to incorporate more ethics education and training to enhance nursing students' ethical decision-making ability, especially in the areas of critical thinking and moral courage. This is important because ethical decision-making is a critical competency that is essential for providing high-quality, patient-centered care. The study highlights the need for nursing students to have the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate complex ethical situations that they may encounter in their clinical practice.

Moreover, the study emphasizes the need for clinical practice settings to provide opportunities for nursing students to encounter ethical dilemmas and engage in ethical decision-making. This could be achieved through the use of case studies, role-playing, and simulation exercises that simulate ethical dilemmas in clinical practice. These activities can help nursing students develop their ethical reasoning skills and provide them with the necessary experience to apply their ethical knowledge in real-world situations.

In addition, nursing schools and healthcare institutions should develop a culture that encourages and supports ethical decision-making and moral courage among nursing students and healthcare professionals. This could be achieved by promoting policies and procedures that promote ethical decision-making and provide protection for whistleblowers who speak out against unethical practices. Creating a culture that values ethical behavior and rewards moral courage can help nursing students and healthcare professionals to act on their ethical decisions in difficult situations.

The study also identified gender, clinical experience, and age as significant predictors of ethical decision-making ability among nursing students. The finding that female nursing students have a higher ethical decision-making ability than male students is consistent with previous research. This highlights the need for nursing education programs to provide gender-sensitive ethics education and training to male nursing students. Additionally, the study found that clinical experience and age were positively associated with ethical decision-making ability, suggesting that nursing students who have more clinical experience and older may be better equipped to make ethical decisions in challenging situations.

In conclusion, the study on the ethical decision-making ability of Chinese nursing students has important implications for nursing education and practice in China. The study has several limitations, including the reliance on self-reported data and the limited generalizability of the findings to other populations. Nevertheless, the findings have important implications for nursing education and practice in China, highlighting the need for more ethics education and training, opportunities for ethical decision-making practice, and the development of a culture that supports and encourages ethical decision-making and moral courage.

One promising area of future research could be to investigate the impact of cultural and institutional factors on ethical decision-making behavior among nursing students and healthcare professionals in China and other countries. Cultural values and norms, as well as institutional policies and practices, can significantly influence how individuals approach ethical dilemmas in healthcare. For instance, in some cultures, family values and social relationships may take precedence over individual autonomy in decision-making, which can affect how healthcare professionals approach informed consent and end-of-life care.

Longitudinal studies could also be conducted to examine the development of ethical decision-making ability over time and the factors that influence this development. Such studies could track nursing students and healthcare professionals as they progress through their careers,

identifying critical moments or events that shape their ethical decision-making ability. Researchers could also examine the impact of training programs and interventions on ethical decision-making ability, and how these programs might be tailored to meet the unique cultural and institutional contexts of different healthcare settings.

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