# Design and Validation of the Conceptual Model of School Principals' Ethical Decision-making: A Case Study of Schools in the Lorestan Province

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**Abstract**

School principals' ethical considerations and organizational decisions can improve schools' image and social credibility. This study designed and validated Lorestan principals' conceptual, ethical decision-making model. The study has an exploratory mixed-methods design. The qualitative section included grounded theory, paradigm-based theme analysis, and interpretive structural modeling. Exploratory, descriptive methods underpinned the quantitative section. Education experts with scientific experience in decision-making and ethics and one or more articles in those fields constituted the qualitative section's research field. The quantitative section's statistical population comprised Lorestan's nearly 1,000 school principals. Semi-structured interviews with 18 purposively selected school principals provided data for the qualitative section. Random cluster sampling and Krejcie and Morgan's table selected 181 people for the quantitative section. A researcher-made questionnaire was used to collect data in this section. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the paradigm model and interpretive structural modeling in three stages (open, axial, and selective coding) using MAXQDA 18. Management experts' opinions and Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.95 ensured the questionnaire's content validity and reliability. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS-25 and SPSS Amos software for confirmatory factor analysis and partial square model. Qualitative findings identified 15 organizing and five overarching themes: contextual factors, causal factors, strategic factors, intervening factors, and outcomes. The quantitative results from structural equation modeling demonstrated that Lorestan school principals' ethical decision-making model fits well

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## Introduction

Today, organizational goals are hard to achieve without a concurrent consideration of ethical and economic behaviors. In fact, moral weakness has a negative impact on the organization's performance and raises the overt and covert costs of performance (Moghimi and Ghafari, 2015). Ignoring moral issues and avoiding social obligations and responsibilities can eventually result in the organization's demise. Therefore, the majority of prosperous organizations prioritize professional ethics (Shafipour et al., 2016). Abuse of job positions, embezzlement, fraud, favoritism, blackmail, dissatisfaction among clients and stakeholders, theft of the organization's assets, sale of the organization's confidential information to third parties, illegal appropriation, and other unethical behaviors are indicators of administrative-financial corruption in organizations (Noor Ali Dekht, 2016). Indeed, the ethical aspects of decision-making are connected to the prevention of such unethical actions in one way or another.

One management skill is the ability to make appropriate decisions. Performing managerial duties and responsibilities entails nothing more than deciding how to carry out activities. The degree of success and achievement of organizational goals is contingent upon the caliber and manner of these decisions (Rwangerd et al., 2012). Decision-making by leaders is crucial for short- and long-term success, while selecting solutions to problems is frequently influenced by ethical considerations (Zine et al., 2016). In addition to providing the necessary grounds to act in accordance with the code of professional conduct, another problem associated with any professional code of conduct (and, in principle, with any type of decision-making process) is that no code of professional conduct can solve every type of potential ethical issue that a professional may encounter. In addition, the code of professional conduct can serve as a blueprint for laying the necessary groundwork to enhance the competence and usefulness of professionals (Castte, 2016). Understanding the factors that lead to ethical or unethical decisions and actions is crucial for human resources professionals, particularly managers (Siah Kurody et al., 2014). Ethical decision-making involves moral concerns. Ethical issues arise wherever the free actions of individuals may harm or benefit others. Similarly, implementing the manager's decisions produces results for others, which is considered an aspect of the manager's choice (Selart and Johansen, 2011). Especially at the highest levels of an organization, ethical decisions result in advantages such as increased customer trust (Zine et al., 2016). Additionally, the necessity of promoting ethical decision-making has been considered in response to the rise in ethical scandals in organizations (Kanjanapathy and Ramakrishnan, 2018).

Educational organizations have goals and a sound structure in place to carry

out specified operations. The human resources of these organizations play a crucial role in achieving their objectives. Human resources are responsible for accomplishing organizational tasks and missions, and their performance is deemed identical to that of the organization (Hochen, 2000). Today, experts believe that proper and scientific management makes it possible for organizations to achieve their objectives and effect change. In the current era, ethical issues tend to be the most significant management challenges; these problems are especially significant in educational organizations, where unethical management actions and practices can cause irreparable harm to the education process.

Management science thinkers have come to the conclusion that managers should consider ethical factors when making decisions. Ethical decision-making is the evaluation of the correctness of a decision or behavior using ethical principles and standards (Ferrell and Fredich, 2015). Ethical decision-making, as a structured form of ethical reflection, aims to resolve ethical conflicts and is regarded as a critical component in educational institutions (Brown, 2020). Ethical decision-making is crucial in the management profession, particularly in education. As professionals, educational managers should be familiar with the process of ethical decision-making and respect the moral rights of students without compromising their own moral conscience (Mahdavi and Mousavinejad, 2013).

Several factors influence an individual's ethical decision-making within an organization, including organizational culture, personal values, circumstances, available options, personality, intention, economic and professional climate, legal and governmental environment, moral standing, the seriousness of the issue, experience or employment status, the reward and punishment structure, organizational policies, organizational charter, training programs on ethical principles, ethical work environment, centralization, control, organization size, inadequate forgiveness in the environment, organization goals, cognitive moral development, and a host of other factors (Siah Kurody et al., 2014). Ethical decision-making is a process that resolves ethical disputes and conflicts within an organization, boosts organizational commitment, and satisfies employees by making fair judgments. Therefore, moral evaluation is one of the phases of moral decision-making (Rest, 1986). Reasoning and moral judgment should be the basis for managers' whole decisions, through which they assume responsibility for themselves and the society to which they are subordinate. In addition, the manager must make decisions regarding a variety of novel and unpredictable issues and situations. In order to rely on it, it is necessary to be equipped with correct judgments. Professional competency for managers includes the

ability to evaluate moral issues. A person's moral judgment is the degree to which they consider a particular action morally acceptable. The moral judgment of a person influences their perception of why certain actions are deemed moral or preferable (Salman Panah, 2013). Below, the research that has been conducted concerning this issue is summarized:

In their study titled "Relationship between professional ethics and the effectiveness of managers", Saibi and Mostahfezian (2018) discovered a positive and statistically significant relationship between managers' effectiveness and professional ethics. Besides, among the variables studied in the regression analysis, moral duty-orientedness was the best predictor of managers' effectiveness, followed by the selfish moral dimension. In addition, the results demonstrated that the managers of sports clubs exhibit the highest standards of behavior and ethics and treat their coworkers with impartiality and equality. Yadgari and Salehi (2018) conducted a study titled "Presenting the grounded theory to explain the current processes of moral education in secondary schools in Tehran". In this study, eight major categories and twenty-four subcategories were extracted. In addition, the results demonstrated that the insufficient attention and prioritization by schools towards the moral education of students, as the central phenomenon of the study, provided suitable grounds for the emergence of undesirable outcomes,

such as the formation of an extreme pleasure-oriented spirit in students, the emergence of instrumental ethics, and the passivity and pessimism of school trustees.

Mohammad Davoodi and Motahari (2017) conducted a research study entitled "The relationship between moral intelligence and moral judgment with moral decision-making of primary school principals in Saveh city". The study's findings revealed that the variables of moral intelligence and moral judgment correlated significantly with the moral decision-making of principals. In addition, the components of honesty, responsibility, compassion, and forgiveness explained approximately 29.6% of the changes in the moral decision-making of primary school principals in Saveh. Huhtala et al. (2021) investigated the processes of ethical identity in the workplace, as well as the behavior of principals as ethical leaders. Moreover, they enquired into the way they handled ethical issues and the ways to recognize, reason, and resolve ethical conflicts. The findings revealed that some leaders were steadfast in adhering to their values and moral obligations, while others attempted to disregard moral considerations in their work. Some leaders view moral conflicts as unjust occurrences whose resolution results in the development and transformation of moral identity.

In their research, Fatmah et al. (2020) examined the impact of Islamic work ethics on teachers' performance and the

impact of leadership style on Islamic work ethics and teachers' performance. The study's findings indicated that Islamic work ethics had a substantial impact on the performance of educators. In addition, Islamic work ethics was discussed to cause superior performance. Additionally, leadership style affected the connection between Islamic work ethics and teacher performance. Indeed, teachers had already demonstrated their leadership ability by guide members through novel ideas, initiatives, intelligence, and supervision. In their research, Ahmad et al. (2020) enquired into how job satisfaction and organizational commitment were connected with ethical decision-making. The findings revealed a positive association between ethics and organizational commitment. Contrary to expectations, however, there was no correlation between ethics and job satisfaction. Moreover, as opposed to previous studies conducted in the West, there was no significant link between morality and age, experience, or position. This indicates that, unlike in the West, morality does not increase with age, experience, or position.

Kuenzi et al. (2020) investigated the relationship between ethical leadership and unethical behavior in the ethical organizational climate, mediated by ethical identity. The results evidenced a correlation between ethical leadership and ethical organizational climate. Additionally, an ethical organizational climate was negatively associated with unethical unit behavior. Furthermore, the indirect effect was significant for the relationship between ethical leadership and the unit's unethical conduct via ethical organizational climate. Last but not least, Alwagfi et al. (2020) investigated the facts regarding social responsibility and its ethical dimensions in commercial-educational organizations, concluding that social responsibility correlated significantly with ethical dimensions.

Due to its significance, numerous researchers in the field of ethics have attempted to develop decision-making models that incorporate the most influential factors. In practice, these models demonstrate the evolution of the ethical decision-making process beyond a few straightforward and predetermined steps (Alipour et al., 2014). This study seeks to examine and develop a model for school principals' ethical decision-making. The significance of schools and their role in preparing individuals for organizational or non-organizational roles in the future cannot be overlooked. As a result, paying close attention to the most important duty of every principal, namely, decision-making, can significantly impact the future of students. Each school principal has a specific approach to managing the school and communicating with students and teachers. In this study, the researcher seeks to develop an ethical model for principals so that they can apply and implement ethical principles in their schools to the greatest extent possible,

thereby delivering morally oriented citizens to society.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the decision-making component, and emphasis has been placed on its ethical implications. However, no research has been conducted, as far as the literature indicates, on the ethical decision-making of primary school principals with a focus on this educational stage and the unique characteristics of primary school students. Findings can be shared with Education Department officials so that they can build on a valid model of ethical decision-making in the appointment of school principals and pay special attention to their decision-making abilities, particularly in the field of ethical decision-making. The findings can serve as a guide for primary school principals and increase the knowledge and awareness of school stakeholders regarding the scope and level of primary school principals' accountability. Consequently, it is necessary to conduct such educational research. This study was conducted to answer the following questions regarding the ethical decision-making of school principals in the province of Lorestan:

1. What are the causal factors contributing to the ethical decision-making of school principals in Lorestan province?

2. What are the most important strategies adopted by school principals in Lorestan province to deal with ethical decision-making?

3. What are the intervening factors for the ethical decision-making of school principals in Lorestan province?

4. What are the background factors for the ethical decision-making of school principals in Lorestan province?

5. What are the outcomes of ethical decision-making by school principals in Lorestan province?

6. From the point of view of teachers, how valid is the designed model of ethical decision-making of school principals? And does this model have a good fitting?

As a result, the current study aims to introduce new effective factors on ethical decision-making by incorporating the perspectives of education department and educational management experts, and to present the influencing relationships in the form of an ethical decision-making model for school principles in Lorestan povince.

**Methodology**

The study is applied in terms of purpose and mixed-methods (qualitative-quantitative; exploratory type) in terms of data collection. The qualitative section utilized the grounded theory approach, the paradigm-based theme analysis method, and interpretive structural modeling. The quantitative section was built on the exploratory, descriptive method. Education experts, particularly those who worked in the field of decision-making and ethics and had published at least one article in this field, comprised the qualitative section's research field. In the quantitative

section, the statistical population comprised all school principals in the province of Lorestan, totaling approximately one thousand individuals. In the qualitative section, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 school principals, who were selected purposively. In the quantitative section, a statistical sample of 181 people was selected using random cluster sampling and Morgan's table. Moreover, a researcher-made questionnaire was used to collect data in this section. Reviews by participants and non-participating experts were employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the interviews. In the qualitative section, the obtained data were analyzed utilizing thematic analysis based on the paradigm model and interpretive structural modeling in three stages (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding) using the MAXQDA 18 software. For the content validity of the questionnaire, management experts' opinions were gathered, and the questionnaire's reliability was calculated using a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.95. The confirmatory factor analysis and partial square model methods were utilized to analyze the quantitative data using SPSS-25 and SPSS Amos software programs.

### Results

There were three women and fifteen men among the 18 interviewed experts; four held bachelor's degrees, ten held master's degrees, and four held doctorates. Fourteen had between 10 and 20 years of experience, while four had more than 20 years of tenure. The primary codes were analyzed, and themes, concepts, categories, and key concepts were extracted. The final model was derived by identifying the causal, intervening, strategic, and background factors, as well as the outcomes. In each stage, the researcher built on the constant juxtaposition of findings and made any needed modifications. Due to their abundance, open codes are not included in this report. Among the codes obtained, 150 axial codes and 46 selective codes were identified.

**Table (1). Indicators, components, and dimensions in each of the main categories(Causal factors)**

| Category | Dimension | Components | Indicators |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Causal factors** | Organizational factors | Structural mechanisms | Clear job description and no ambiguity in the role |
| | | | Official ethical codes in the organization |
| | | | An official ethics committee in the organization |
| | | | Appointment of an official ethics advisor |
| | | Organizational goals and mission | Unambiguous goals |
| | | | Specific strategies |
| | | | Alignment of principal's and organization's goals |
| | | Human resource management | Reward and punishment-based structure |
| | | | Proportionate service compensation |
| | | | Meritocracy |
| | | Organizational culture | Existence of organizational trust |
| | | | Team-based and collaborative organizational culture |
| | | | The flexibility of school organizational culture |
| | Individual factors | Spirituality | Religious beliefs |
| | | | Personal beliefs and values |
| | | Moral perception | Familiarity with the basics of ethics |
| | | | Ethical sensitivity |
| | | Personality characteristics | The rule of law |
| | | | Honesty and trustworthiness |
| | | | Compassion |
| | | | Self-responsibility |
| | | | Fairness |
| | | | Conscientiousness |
| | | | Team spirit |
| | | | Spiritual health |
| | | | Farseeing |
| | | Decision-making style | The principal's collaborative decision-making style |
| | | | Awareness of recent rules and regulations |
| | | | In-house control center |
| | | | No prejudice against past wrong decisions |
| | | Personal motivations | Public service motivation |
| | | | The centrality of public interests |
| | | Individual emotions | Fear of the reaction of colleagues |

| | | | Fear of punishment |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Personal attitudes | Commitment and conscience |
| | | | Job satisfaction |
| | | | The extent of moral development |
| | | Demographic characteristics | Gender |
| | | | Age |
| | | | Experience and tenure |
| | Environmental factors | Societal values | National values |
| | | | Religious values |
| | | Legal factors | Presence of restrictive rules and regulations |
| | | | Legal reprimand and punishment of violators |
| | | | Disclosure mechanisms |
| | | | Transparent mechanisms for punishing offenders |

**Table (2). Indicators, components, and dimensions in each of the main categories(Background Factors)**

| Category | Dimension | Components | Indicators |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Background Factors** | Individual factors | Patience | Patience in identifying the decision problem |
| | | | Attention to the decision process and output |
| | | Moral judgment | Basic understanding of the situation |
| | | | Judgment based on rules and principles |
| | Organizational factors | Organizational culture | Ethical climate of the organization |
| | | | Ethics-centered colleagues and subordinates |
| | | | Honoring moral values in general policies |
| | | | Respect for the principal's ethical decision |
| | | | Ethical norms and standards |
| | | | Encouraging ethical behavior |
| | | | Ethics-based communication process |
| | | | The dominance of collaborative culture |
| | | | Organizational transparency |
| | | | Efficient management information system |
| | | Organizational structure | Organizational coherence and coordination |

| | | | Accountability for outcomes |
| | | | Lack of focus in decision-making |
| | Environmental factors | The value-driven climate of society | The boldness of religious values among principals |
| | | | Exclusion of unethical decision-makers |
| | | Economic conditions | Absence of organizational financial issues |
| | | | Macroeconomic stability |

**Table (3). Indicators, components, and dimensions in each of the main categories(Strategic factors)**

| Category | Dimension | Components | Indicators |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Strategic factors** | Organizational factors | Management information system | Inclusive identification of the problem |
| | | | Reliable sources of information |
| | | | Timely notification |
| | | | Comprehensive information |
| | | | Accurate and unambiguous information |
| | | An appropriate and fair salary system | Fair compensation for services |
| | | | Compensation for services according to positions |
| | | A flexible organizational structure | Decentralization in decision-making |
| | | | Institutionalization of the collaborative decision-making style |
| | Individual factors | Learning ethical principles | Learning moral principles |
| | | | Institutionalization of moral models |
| | | Attention to ethical audit | Ensuring an ethical decision |
| | | | Mastery and application of ethical analysis tools |
| | | Cognitive capacity enhancement | Strengthening problem-solving skills |
| | | | Coping with uncertainty |

**Table (4). Indicators, components, and dimensions in each of the main categories(Outcomes)**
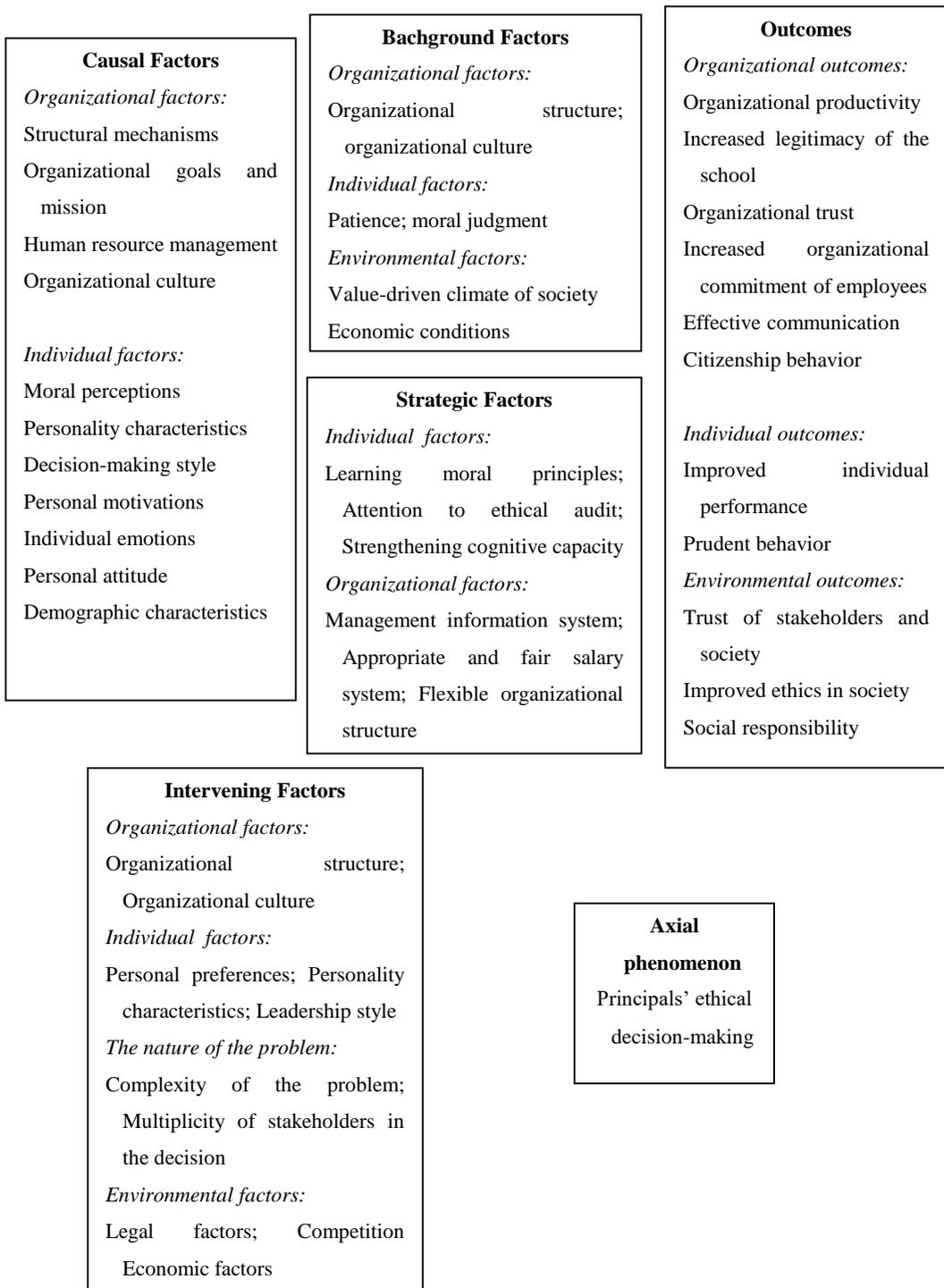
| Category | Dimension | Components | Indicators |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Outcomes** | Organizational outcomes | Organizational productivity | Increased organizational belonging of teachers and staff |
| | | | Improved performance of teachers |
| | | | Reduced absenteeism |
| | | | Convergence to achieve goals |
| | | | Establishment of a meritocracy system |
| | | | Reduced ancillary and operational costs |
| | | | Improved overall school performance |
| | | | The effectiveness of the educational system |
| | | Increased legitimacy of the school | Increased goodwill and reputation of the organization |
| | | | Gaining the satisfaction and trust of parents |
| | | Organizational trust | Strengthened benevolence |
| | | | Increased honesty |
| | | | Increased interpersonal trust |
| | | Increased organizational commitment of employees | Loyalty |
| | | | Enhanced organizational belonging of staff |
| | | Effective communications | Improved principal-staff interactions |
| | | | Reducing misunderstandings and conflicts |
| | | | Increased trust-based communication |
| | | Citizenship behavior | Improved citizenship and positive social behaviors |
| | | | Increased empathy |
| | | | Increased contribution |
| | Individual outcomes | Improved individual performance | Strengthened accountability |
| | | | Increased confidence |
| | | | Improved abilities |
| | | | Inner and spiritual satisfaction |
| | | | Increased job satisfaction |
| | | Prudent behavior | Increased ability to understand the situation |
| | | | Increased inclusiveness |

| | | | Reduced politics-oriented behavior of the principal |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Peace of mind |
| | | The trust of stakeholders and society | Winning public trust |
| | | | The prosperity of society |
| | | Improved ethics in society | The prevalence of ethics in society |
| | | | Maintaining the community's identity and standards |
| | Environmental outcomes | Social responsibility | Increasing social responsibility |
| | | | Adherence to justice and meritocracy in the recruitment of personnel |
| | | | Commitment to proper education and protecting the rights of students |
| | | | Respect for social rights |

**Table (5). Indicators, components, and dimensions in each of the main categories(Intervening factors)**

| Category | Dimension | Components | Indicators |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Intervening factors** | Individual factors | Personal preferences | Wealth accumulation |
| | | | Ambition for position |
| | | | Prioritization of personal interests |
| | | Personality characteristics | Opportunism |
| | | | Evading responsibility |
| | | | Favoring one's taste and inattention to the law |
| | | | Disbelief in consultation |
| | | | Lack of benevolence |
| | | | Utilitarianism |
| | | | Individualism |
| | | Leadership style | Authoritarian management style |
| | | | Self-centeredness of the principal |
| | The nature of the problem | The complexity of the problem | Ambiguity in the aspects of the problem |
| | | | Opportunity for unethical decision |

| | | | Multiplicity of stakeholders |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | A multiplicity of stakeholders in the decision | Conflicting rights of stakeholders |
| | | | Non-participation of stakeholders in the decision |
| | Environmental factors | Legal factors | Vague rules |
| | | | Absence of deterring laws |
| | | | No punishment |
| | | Competition | Motivation for competition |
| | | | Multiplicity of rivals |
| | | Economic factors | Presence of financial issues |
| | | | Unstable economic conditions |
| | Organizational factors | Organizational structure | The authority of the management position |
| | | | Lack of meritocracy |
| | | | Ambiguity in roles |
| | | | Focus on decision-making |
| | | Organizational culture | The prevailing atmosphere of distrust in the school |
| | | | Failure to give priority to moral values |

**Causal Factors**

*Organizational factors:*

Structural mechanisms

Organizational goals and mission

Human resource management

Organizational culture

*Individual factors:*

Moral perceptions

Personality characteristics

Decision-making style

Personal motivations

Individual emotions

Personal attitude

Demographic characteristics

**Bachground Factors**

*Organizational factors:*

Organizational structure; organizational culture

*Individual factors:*

Patience; moral judgment

*Environmental factors:*

Value-driven climate of society

Economic conditions

**Strategic Factors**

*Individual factors:*

Learning moral principles; Attention to ethical audit; Strengthening cognitive capacity

*Organizational factors:*

Management information system; Appropriate and fair salary system; Flexible organizational structure

**Outcomes**

*Organizational outcomes:*

Organizational productivity

Increased legitimacy of the school

Organizational trust

Increased organizational commitment of employees

Effective communication

Citizenship behavior

*Individual outcomes:*

Improved individual performance

Prudent behavior

*Environmental outcomes:*

Trust of stakeholders and society

Improved ethics in society

Social responsibility

**Intervening Factors**

*Organizational factors:*

Organizational structure; Organizational culture

*Individual factors:*

Personal preferences; Personality characteristics; Leadership style

*The nature of the problem:*

Complexity of the problem; Multiplicity of stakeholders in the decision

*Environmental factors:*

Legal factors; Competition Economic factors

**Axial phenomenon**

Principals' ethical decision-making

**Figure 1. Final conceptual model of the research**

According to Strauss and Corbin's framework, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, causal conditions directly influence principals' ethical decision-making. These factors comprise organizational, individual, and environmental dimensions. The four components of organizational factors are structural mechanisms, organizational goals and mission, human resource management, and organizational culture. Individual factors consist of eight components: spirituality, moral perception, personality characteristics, decision-making style, personal motivations, individual emotions, individual attitudes, and demographic characteristics. Lastly, environmental factors consist of two elements: societal values and legal factors. Principals' ethical decision-making impacts strategies. The ethical decision-making strategies of principals have organizational and individual dimensions. There are three components of organizational factors: the management information system, a fair salary system, and a flexible organizational structure. In addition, individual factors include the three components of learning ethical principles, attention to ethical audits, and cognitive capacity enhancement.

Background factors involve organizational, individual, and environmental dimensions. The organizational factors include organizational culture and organizational structure; the individual

factors entail patience and moral judgment; the environmental factors comprise economic conditions and the value-driven climate of society. The four components of intervening factors are organizational factors, individual factors, environmental factors, and the nature of the issue. The two components of organizational factors are organizational structure and organizational culture; the two components of individual factors are personal preferences and personality characteristics; the two components of the nature of the problem are problem complexity and the multiplicity of stakeholders involved in the decision. The ethical decision-making of principals has organizational, individual, and environmental outcomes. There are six components to organizational outcomes: organizational productivity, increased legitimacy of the school, organizational trust, increased organizational commitment of employees, effective communication, and citizenship behavior. Individual outcomes have two components, namely, improved individual performance and prudent behavior, while environmental outcomes have three: the trust of stakeholders and society, improved ethics in society, and social responsibility.

A total of 181 questionnaires were collected for the quantitative section. Regarding gender, there were 126 men (69.6%) and 55 women (30.4%). The majority of the respondents, i.e., 46 (25.4%), worked in private schools, 123

(68.0%) served in public schools, 6 (3.3%) worked in exemplary public schools, and 6 (3.3%) were in talented schools. In terms of tenure, 28 (15.5%) had less than 10 years of service, 124 (68.5%) had between 10 and 20 years of service, and 29 (16%) had more than 20 years of service. Lastly, 46 (25.4%) held a bachelor's degree, 84 (46.4%) held a master's degree, and 39 (21.5%) had a doctorate.

In order to fit the model, the Amos software was used to conduct confirmatory factor analysis on the axial variable and its associated factors. In confirmatory factor analysis, the researcher knows which questions are associated with which dimensions. In other words, there is a conceptual model for each research concept or variable in confirmatory factor analysis. The fundamental question when examining each model is whether these measurement models are appropriate. In other words, do the research data correspond to the conceptual model or not? According to the findings of semi-structured interviews with experts in the qualitative section, the ethical decision-making of principals is comprised of five main components: causal conditions, strategies, intervening conditions, background conditions, and outcomes. In this section, confirmatory factor analysis was employed to assess the validity of the components of the principals' ethical decision-making model or whether the items accurately measured the components. Table 2 displays the final analysis of the questionnaire's validity and reliability indicators.

**Table 6. Assessing the construct validity of the research tool**

| No. | Variable | Factor loads | AVE | Composite reliability | Cronbach's alpha coefficient |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Causal factors | 0.46 | 0.55 | 0.69 | 0.78 |
| 2 | | 0.41 | | | |
| 3 | | 0.45 | | | |
| 4 | | 0.49 | | | |
| 5 | | 0.48 | | | |
| 6 | | 0.92 | | | |
| 7 | Background factors | 0.59 | 0.53 | 0.88 | 0.86 |
| 8 | | 0.57 | | | |
| 9 | | 0.77 | | | |
| 10 | | 0.73 | | | |
| 11 | | 0.85 | | | |
| 12 | | 0.81 | | | |
| 13 | | 0.84 | | | |
| 14 | Strategic factors | 0.78 | 0.54 | 0.85 | 0.80 |
| 15 | | 0.65 | | | |
| 16 | | 0.77 | | | |
| 17 | | 0.87 | | | |
| 18 | | 0.56 | | | |

| No. | Variable | Factor loads | AVE | Composite reliability | Cronbach's alpha coefficient |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 19 | Outcomes | 0.91 | 0.81 | 0.95 | 0.94 |
| 20 | | 0.88 | | | |
| 21 | | 0.90 | | | |
| 22 | | 0.88 | | | |
| 23 | | 0.92 | | | |
| 24 | Intervening factors | 0.55 | 0.53 | 0.81 | 0.73 |
| 25 | | 0.84 | | | |
| 26 | | 0.77 | | | |
| 27 | | 0.55 | | | |
| 28 | | 0.65 | | | |
| 29 | | 0.50 | | | |

The construct's (convergent and divergent) validity and reliability were examined through the construct evaluation of the data collection instrument. Indicator reliability is confirmed when the standardized factor loading exceeds 0.4 (Hulland and Business, 1999). Construct reliability is confirmed when the composite reliability coefficient is greater than 0.6 and Cronbach's alpha coefficient is above 0.7 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). According to Table 2, the standard factor loadings range from 0.41 to 0.96, and the

composite reliability coefficient for all constructs is greater than 0.60. In other words, the utilized questionnaire was a reliable measurement instrument. If the average variance extracted is greater than 0.5, the convergent validity of the measurement tool is confirmed (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Table 2's results reveal that the average variance extracted for all constructs is greater than 0.5, confirming the convergence validity of the measurement instrument.

**Figure 2. Factor loading coefficients of research indicators**

The factor loading test was used to evaluate the reliability of the factors. In this test, each factor load must exceed 0.4 (items with factor loads below 0.4 must be eliminated unless they have a high convergence validity with other items. In this case, the researcher cannot eliminate the item).

**Figure 3. Significance coefficients of research factor loadings**

Factor loading demonstrates the strength of the relationship between the (latent variable) factor and the manifest variable. Factor loading is the correlation coefficient between latent and manifest variables in a measurement model. This coefficient determines how much the latent variable explains the variance of the manifest variables, and it must be statistically significant because it is a correlation coefficient. The t-value statistic is employed to determine the significance of factor load. Since significance is evaluated at the 0.05 level of error, if the amount of factor loadings calculated by the t-value test is smaller than 1.96, the relationship is insignificant, and the item should be eliminated from the research. According to Table 2 and Figures 2 and 3, the main components of principals' ethical decision-making in the designed model are appropriate, as indicated by the validity and reliability indicators of the model in the factor analysis. Therefore, it can be concluded that the ethical decision-making model of school principals in the province of Lorestan is well-fit.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

**1) what are the casual factors of ethical decision-making by school administrators?**

The image and credibility of the organization are enhanced by paying attention to ethical principles in management and business. The decision-making among principals is also influenced by ethical considerations, necessitating a focus on and promotion of decision-making among principals. Although many researchers have described the process of ethical decision-making in the form of ethical decision-making models, rarely have the fundamental models cited by so many researchers been assembled in such a comprehensive manner and based on the evolution process over several years as in the present study.

The present research model demonstrates that organizational factors, such as organizational structure and mission, can be among the causal conditions for principals' ethical decision-making, as confirmed by other research. The findings of Zareian Moradabadi's research (2021) demonstrate the impact of ethical decision-making and human resource strategy on organizational structure and performance. Individual factors constitute another important category within the causal conditions of ethical decision-making by principals, and the results indicate that these factors impact the ethical decision-making of principals. Moreover, environmental factors are another category of causal conditions that significantly affect the ethical decisions of principals. Mehrani et al. (2011) stated in their research that

environmental factors such as laws and regulations could influence certified accountants' ethical decision-making. Similarly, Johansen and Sellart (2011) found that stressful environmental conditions can influence the ethical decisions of school principals. Likewise, Kuenzi et al. (2020) revealed that the ethical climate has a significant impact on ethical decision-making.

Spirituality and individual values are important concepts in the model of ethical decision-making in the current research. Siah Kurody et al. (2014) evidenced in their research that religious beliefs and personal values are significant and influential factors in principals' ethical decision-making. An organization's ethical environment consists of the ethical ideology selected by the organization's personnel, the institutionalized ideology associated with ethical management and leadership, and the ethical standards that shape the organization in practice. These environments can increase people's reasoning and moral justification under a variety of circumstances and improve employee behavior in morally ambiguous and incomprehensible work situations (Baharifar and Javaheri Kamel, 2008). In order to explain these findings, it may be safe to assert that organizations play a significant role in shaping the individual behaviors of employees. Creating ethical values at the organizational level can raise ethics among employees by influencing other organizational factors. However, spirituality was also included in these

variables. Managers can create a sense that their work is meaningful and aligned with the organization's goals by incorporating spirituality into the workplace and employing non-material tools.

**2- what are the ethical decision-making strategies of school administrators?**

Our results revealed that the ethical decision-making strategies of principals included organizational and individual dimensions. Organizational factors entailed a management information system, a fair salary system, and a flexible organizational structure; individual factors included learning ethical principles, attention to ethical audit, and cognitive capacity enhancement. The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of Bagherpour (2018), Beharifar and Javaheri Kamel (2008), and Ahmad et al. (2020). The research of Noval (2016) has also demonstrated the impact of an individual's personal philosophical components or values and emotions on their moral decision-making process. In explanation of these results, it can be stated that one of the most important objectives of any organization is to achieve productivity and efficiency, which is only attainable through the participation of its members. Thus, it will be necessary to pay attention to behavioral and attitude factors in the employee work process. Fair salaries, on the other hand, give principals the impression that the organization cares about them; consequently, their ethical

behavior toward the organization will improve. In addition, the flexible organizational structure will make the employees feel that their opinions are taken into account and that they are involved in the decision-making process. Hence, they will view the organization's decisions as part of their own decisions and goals, which will enhance their ethical behavior.

**3- what are the underlying factors for the ethical decision-making of school administrators?**

In the current research model, organizational culture is one of the significant background conditions for the ethical decision-making model of principals. Bahagir (2019) demonstrated that an organization's ethical culture could result in ethical behavior, ethical decision-making, and the organizational commitment of principals. In their research, Mohammadi Eliasi and Badli (2014) discussed that social factors, economic factors, and religious-humanistic values, which are analogous to the components of philosophy or individual values, are conducive to ethical decision-making, similar to the findings of the current study. According to the research of Siah Kurody et al. (2014), organizational culture has the greatest impact on the ethical decision-making of principals. In addition, Paik et al. (2019) have revealed through their research that work ethics is contingent upon culture and time.

In the target model of this study, moral judgment is another concept of background conditions. Moral judgment

has a direct and positive effect on ethical decision-making. In their research, Siah Kurody et al. (2014) have demonstrated that ethical leadership, ethical judgment, and ethical systems have the greatest impact on the ethical decision-making of Payamnoor University administrators. In addition, Mohammad Dawoudi and Motahari (2017) illustrated through their research that moral judgment is significantly related to the moral decision-making of principals. In explanation of these results, it may be postulated that in organizations with a strong and cohesive culture, the organization will be similar to a family to its employees, and therefore ethical decisions will be made. On the other hand, it can be said that a strong organizational culture leads to improved employee morale and work performance. In addition, the organization's strong culture increases people's commitment to the organization and aligns individual and organizational goals.

### 4-what are the interfering factors in the ethical decision-making of school administrators?

Dimensions of intervening factors include organizational factors, individual factors, environmental factors, and the nature of the problem. Individual factors include two components: personal preferences and personality characteristics; organizational factors involve two components: organizational structure and organizational culture; and the nature of the problem comprises two components: problem complexity and the multiplicity of stakeholders involved in the decision.

The findings of this study are consistent with those of Moadab Nia (2013), Akwasi (2004), and Vitez (2010). Musbah et al. (2016) confirmed that moral intensity and personal philosophy or values affect ethical decision-making. According to their interpretive structural model, these factors fall within the third level of influence. Principals should pay close attention to organizational culture because it influences the implementation of any management strategy or method. Organizational culture influences all aspects of the organization, and one of the chief responsibilities of organizational leaders is to modify or transform cultural values. The most obvious role of culture in an organization is to provide members with a sense of identity; the second is to generate a commitment to the organization's mission; and the third is to determine and strengthen standards of behavior (Rahimi, 2016). Indeed, it can be raised that a strong organizational culture fosters unity and cohesion among employees and encourages them to adopt organizational objectives as their own. In contrast, the individual needs of employees in contemporary organizations have changed in terms of type and quantity. Organizations will be successful if they are fully responsive to their employees' biological, social, psychological, and spiritual needs.

**5-what are the consequences of the ethical decision-making of school administrators?**

Among the outcomes mentioned in the ethical decision-making model of the present study are organizational trust, social responsibility, organizational commitment, citizenship behavior, and organizational productivity. In their study, Farid et al. (2019) found that Islamic work ethics strengthen the connection between the perception of justice and citizenship behaviors. In addition, Fatmah et al. (2020) stated in their research that Islamic work ethics in the environment of teachers fosters trust, responsibility, and honesty among colleagues. Ahmad et al. (2020) also demonstrated that ethics and organizational commitment correlate positively. Alwagfi et al. (2020) exhibited a statistically significant correlation between social responsibility and ethical dimensions. McDevitt et al. (2007) also highlighted that social and competitive factors are conducive. Lastly, Yusoff et al. (2011) confirmed the impact of organizational commitment and job satisfaction on ethical decision-making.

When decisions in an organization are based on ethical principles, people have a higher level of trust in the organization. The organization should have considered the employee and organizational needs when making these decisions. In addition, the organizational decision-makers are expected to consider themselves responsible for making such decisions since they view the decisions as individual decisions in accordance with the individual objectives of the staff. Moreover, citizenship behaviors are voluntary actions that go beyond an individual's organizational responsibilities and are not governed by organizational rules. As a result of these decisions and under the influence of ethics, employees exhibit more citizenship behaviors.

This study, similar to other studies, is not without limitations. The research was conducted among school principals in the province of Lorestan; therefore, not all results can be generalized to school principals in other regions. It was difficult to collect data for both the qualitative and quantitative sections due to the paucity of domestic information resources and the vastness of the field under study. Interviews and questionnaires were used to collect the data, but not everyone was willing to give their opinions or participate in interviews. The researcher encountered difficulties in selecting qualified individuals who are both proficient in the field of grounded theory research and have specialized work experience in the cultural field, as well as those with sufficient education and experience in these fields. Last but not least, in addition to locating the desired dimensions in the ethical decision-making model, the researcher had to contend with the dimensions' complexity and the multiplicity of components and indicators, which made

their use and application challenging at times.

In light of these findings, the following recommendations are made for institutionalizing the ethical decision-making model of school principals in the province of Lorestan. The first recommendation of the researcher is to utilize and analyze Islamic moral teachings through Islamic books. As regards ethical decision-making, future scholars can examine the teachings of the Holy Quran and other Islamic texts, such as the Sahifah Sajjadiyeh, with greater care. Thanks to meetings and conferences on ethical behavior among employees and supervisors, the organizational culture is gradually shifting towards an ethical environment and away from administrative corruption. In addition, by providing training in the field of organizational health, administrative corruption can be averted, and the foundations of ethical behavior in the organization can be bolstered, leading to ethical decision-making. Planning strategically, changing the current culture, and establishing an ethical organizational structure should be performed with stable communication and a clear division of responsibilities.

It is imperative that the organizational culture be improved in schools, that the culture of schools be adapted to the cultural context and the needs of the organization and staff, and that the environment of education organizations be infused with an atmosphere of meritocracy and commitment. This way,

justice and moral judgment will spread among individuals, and they will not engage in unethical behaviors to achieve their objectives. Participation and consultation in decision-making can also lead to more ethical decisions. Establishing standards and adopting stringent laws on ethical behavior can contribute to making ethical decisions. Assurance of security, comfort, peace, and a lack of pressure in the workplace facilitates the implementation of ethical principles within the organization.

Additionally, researchers can investigate the ethical decision-making of other organizations. Future researchers can look into the obstacles and problems of ethical decision-making in various organizations, including school employees and principals. A study should be conducted to determine the weight and significance of each of the notions found in the ethical decision-making model. Furthermore, researchers may wish to compare the model of ethical decision criteria in Islam with those of other divine religions and even human schools. Thus, the differences between religious perspectives on this issue will be identified and determined.

### Ethical considerations

During the implementation of this research and the preparation of the article, all national laws and principles of professional ethics related to the subject of research, including the rights of statistical community, organizations and institutions, as well as authors and

writers have been observed. Adherence to the principles of research ethics in the present study was observed and consent forms were consciously completed by all statistical community.

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