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The Santa Clara Ethics Scale

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Abstract

Ethics and ethical decision making is important for well-functioning communities and societies including college campuses. Yet, there are very few quality, cost effective, relevant, and easy-to-use assessment instruments currently available. This paper introduces the new Santa Clara Ethics Scale, a very brief, no cost, questionnaire assessing general ethics. The 10-item scale was administered to 200 university students along with several other measures to assess convergent and divergent validity. Information regarding the validity and reliability of the scale along with test utility is presented. Implications for future research and use are discussed as well.

Keywords: ethics, college, morality, assessment

Ethics essentially are principles of living that attempt to answer the ongoing and age-old question, “Who do you want to be?” (Plante, 2004). Ethics are often defined as “moral principles that govern a person’s behavior or the conducting of an activity” (Ethics, n.d.) and are important in guiding all decisions and determining courses of correct action (Bishop, 2013; Vaughn, 2015). Ethics are especially important in settings requiring continued and frequent decision making associated with important consequences.

One such setting is college which can be a transformative time for young adults who are experiencing newfound freedoms away from home and surrounded by peers who are also grappling with new responsibilities and opportunities. It is often an important and developmentally critical time for emerging adults to decide how to best manage challenges associated with alcohol and drug use, sexuality and peer relations, impulse control, independence, and identity formation as these issues typically become especially salient for them (Plante & Plante, 2017; Smith & Zhang, 2009). Unfortunately, too often these freedoms and experiences during the college years can result in poor and life-altering choices that are not adequately grounded in good ethical decision making (e.g., National Institute of Health, 2002; White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014). It is reasonable to suggest that a solid, thoughtful, and discerning ethical foundation could assist students in making better choices about college life.

For example, according to a recent report from the Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, (National Institutes of Health, 2002) there are more than 1,400 deaths among college students related to alcohol abuse each year. In addition, the report found that each year approximately 500,000 college students are accidentally injured while intoxicated, 600,000 students are physically assaulted by another drunk student, and

70,000 students reported an alcohol related sexual assault. The White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault (2014) reported that 1 in 5 female college students have been sexually assaulted. Yet only 2% of incapacitated sexual assault victims reporting these incidents to authorities and only 13% of forced rape victims report the offense to law enforcement or campus police. Alcohol abuse and sexual assaults on college campuses are common and speak to significant problems in ethical decision making on the part of students and their peers.

Cheating is another excellent example of significant problems in college student ethical decision making. Almost half of college students admit to academic related cheating with 43% admitting to cheating on tests and written assignments (“Facts & Stats,” 2015). In one retrospective study involving college alumni, 82% of former students reported having cheated during their undergraduate education (Yardley, Rodriguez, Bates, & Nelson, 2009). A 20 year longitudinal study of student cheating found rates of cheating at 54% in 1984, 61% in 1994, and 54% in 2004 (Vandehey, Diekhoff, & LaBeff, 2007). Overall, in these studies and others, typically over half of college students admit to cheating, which also begs the question of how many cheat yet don’t admit to it in self-report survey studies.

Problematic and frequent misbehavior on college campuses associated with alcohol, sexual acting out, and academic cheating is a reflection of poor decision making among college students and underscores how ethical reflection and guidance is a potentially critical topic to address on college campuses. Decisions regarding sexual engagement, alcohol and drug use, and academic cheating are all ethical decisions in general that rely on student’s thoughtful reflection and decision making about what is and what is not appropriate, reasonable, and acceptable behavior (Plante & Plante, 2017). Understanding how to best increase the ethical engagement,

interest, and focus of college students could be an important step in better addressing these issues.

Since the college years are a formative time when emerging adults are preparing to enter the workforce, students and their parents, as well as university administrators, hope that these young people will learn both hard and soft skills and behaviors that will help them to succeed in their postgraduate careers and lives. Nonis and Swift (2001) found that dishonesty in academics was related to subsequent dishonesty in the workplace, highlighting the need for ethical development aimed at nurturing lifelong integrity. Lawson (2004) also found a clear relationship between how likely students were to cheat and their perception of and attitude towards unethical business practices. Bishop (2013) underscores the many ethical failures of businesses in the 21st century, highlighting the 2008 housing market crash and resulting Great Recession as prime examples, as catastrophic events resulting from clear and direct ethical decision making failures. The widespread lack of ethical judgement and behavior thus has had enormous and far reaching negative consequences for our society. These studies, among others, suggest that a focus on ethics at early stages including the college years are needed to maximize ethical and honest business practices. Since college students of today become tomorrow's leaders and decision makers in business and other fields it is especially important that they have strong and well developed ethical guiding principles as they conduct themselves throughout life.

In order to evaluate ethical thinking, engagement, and behavior among college students and others, it is important to have valid, reliable, and useful assessment instruments. For example, Quesenberry, Phillips, Woodburne, and Yang (2012) assessed the relationship between values intensive courses and ethical scores on an essay, finding that those who had taken more courses scored higher on their ethics rubric. The university designed the values intensive courses

from a standpoint that “the choices people make are implicit statements of their values” and had several goals, one of which was that “students will be able to make reasoned choices as they shape and reshape their own academic and personal values” (p. 195-6). In this particular study, the values intensive courses did have an impact on students’ ethical engagement as evaluated by essay writing, which hopefully might also translate into ethical behavior outside of the classroom environment.

The Research Protocol Ethics Assessment Tool (RePEAT; Weiss, 1999) is an instrument aimed at ensuring those conducting research are aware of and abide by the ethical principles published by the American Psychological Association. The general principles highlighted in this professional code of ethics include beneficence and nonmaleficence, fidelity and responsibility, integrity, justice, and respect for people’s rights and dignity (American Psychological Association, 2017). The RePEAT contains 24 evaluative questions and 2 summary questions which address whether or not a research protocol meets these standards. The instrument is most applicable in academic research situations to ensure that research and educational activities follow these ethics principles.

The Multidimensional Ethics Scale (MES; Reidenbach & Robin, 1990), is an 8 item ethics questionnaire that is primarily used in business settings (Cruz, Shafer, & Strawser, 2000). The scale focuses primarily on the process of ethical decision making and offers respondents business setting scenarios and assesses their responses in 3 dimensions that include moral equity, relativism and contractualism.

The Measure of Moral Orientation (Liddell, Halpin, & Halpin, 1992) highlights social justice issues and is time consuming using 89 questions. The Defining Issues Test (Rest, Cooper, Coder, Masanz, & Anderson, 1974) is a measure of moral judgement based on Kohlberg’s stages

of moral development and includes dilemmas along with 12 issues that participants rank by importance. It is aimed at evaluating moral development across cognitive progression (Thoma & Dong, 2014).

Although these scales have their place, they are either too narrowly focused, lengthy and cumbersome, or expensive for practical use in many non-profit educational and research settings. The specificity of these scales renders them impractical assessing more general ethics. Therefore, there appears to be a need for a very brief and general, reliable, valid, and useful low or no cost ethics questionnaire that could be used for multiple purposes perhaps most especially among college aged emerging adults. The purpose of this current study is to introduce the Santa Clara Ethics Scale, a measure designed to be an efficient, easy to complete and score, and psychometrically reliable and valid assessment of ethics. This study introduces the scale and reports preliminary reliability and validity findings, as well as discusses its potential uses.

Method

Participants

Participants included 201 students between the ages of 17 and 23 with a mean age of 18.86 years. Of these participants, 68% were female ($n = 130$) and 32% were male ($n = 61$). All were enrolled in General Psychology during the 2017 winter term. Forty had not yet declared their majors, 60 were majoring in the social sciences, 41 in the natural sciences, 26 in professional schools of business or engineering, and 25 were majors in the humanities. Approximately 43% of the participants identified as agnostic, atheist, or unaffiliated, 32% as Catholic, 19% as non-Catholic Christians, and 0.06% as other (including Hindu, Jewish, and Buddhist). Students were recruited through SONA, a system which allows students to receive

class credit for participating in research studies. All participation was voluntary as students had an alternate course assignment option if desired.

Measures

Santa Clara Ethics Scale (SCES; see Appendix). The SCES is a 10 item measure designed by the first author to assess ethical engagement and interest. Items reflect ethical decision making discussed in earlier publications (e.g., Plante, 2004; Plante & Plante, 2017) that highlight a virtue and value approach to ethics that underscores respect, responsibility, integrity, competence, and concerns for others (i.e., RRICC; Plante, 2004). The theoretical model that underscores the test items comes from a generally accepted list of virtues discussed in moral philosophy and particular to college student behavior (see Plante, 2004, Plante & Plante, 2017 for details). The scale includes statements regarding ethics such as, “Respecting others, even those who I don’t like or agree with, is very important to me,” rated on a 4 point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4).

Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale (SCBCS; Hwang, Plante & Lackey, 2008; Plante & Mejia, 2016). The SCBCS is a 5 item scale designed to measure compassion. Items include statements such as, “I tend to feel compassion for people, even if I do not know them,” measured on a 7 point scale, 1 being “not at all true of me” and 7 being “very true of me.” Plante and Mejia (2016) report coefficient alphas of .89 and .90.

Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (SCSORF; Plante & Boccaccini, 1997). The SCSORF is a 10 item measure which assesses strength of religious faith. It includes statements such as, “My religious faith is very important to me.” It is measured on a 4 point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Plante and Boccaccini (1997) report a Cronbach's alpha of .95.

Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006). A modified 11 item version of the NPI 16 item version, which has a reported Cronbach's alpha of .72, was used to measure narcissistic personality tendencies (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006). Each item includes two statements such as, "I am no better or no worse than most people" and "I am a special person," from which participants must decide which describes them best. Each narcissistic response is scored as 1 point, higher scores relate to more narcissistic tendencies.

Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MC-SDS; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). This 33 item measure is used to determine to what extent participants are responding in order to present themselves in a socially desirable manner. The measure is considered both valid and reliable with internal consistency coefficient reported at .88 and subsequent studies have corroborated its validity and reliability (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960, Loo & Thorpe, 2000). Items include true/false statements such as, "I have never intensely disliked anyone."

Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003). The SCS is a reliable and valid 26 item measure used to determine how kind and understanding one is towards oneself. It includes statements such as, "I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies," asking the participants to rate how often they behave in that manner on a scale of 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). Neff reports an internal consistency of .92 (Neff, 2003).

Procedure

The research project was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). All students consented to being involved in the study and their responses were kept confidential. They were invited to participate through an online questionnaire and received class credit upon completion. The results were transferred into an SPSS file for statistical analysis.

Results

The mean ethics score as assessed by the Santa Clara Ethics Scale was 31.70 ($SD = 4.19$, $n = 194$) with a maximum of 10 and a minimum of 40. The scale was found to have adequate split half reliability ($r = .76$) and internal reliability (Cronbach Alpha = .83).

Descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1. The mean compassion score as measured by the Santa Clara Compassion Scale was 26.08 ($SD = 6.23$, $n = 194$, minimum = 10, maximum = 40). The Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire resulted in a mean of 21.87 ($SD = 9.60$, $n = 189$) with a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 40. The mean narcissism score was 2.97 ($SD = 2.16$, $n = 193$, minimum = 0, maximum = 11). The mean score on the MC Social Desirability Scale was 14.26 ($SD = 4.68$, $n = 192$, minimum = 0, maximum = 33). The Self-Compassion scale resulted in a mean of 70.93 ($SD = 15.02$, $n = 183$) minimum of 26 and maximum of 130.

[Insert Table 1 about Here]

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated for all of the included measures and are included in Table 2. Ethics and compassion had a strong positive correlation ($r = .53$, $p < .01$). There was a moderate positive correlation between ethics and social desirability ($r = .39$, $p < .01$). Also significant was the positive relationship between ethics and faith ($r = .16$, $p < .05$). Social desirability and self-compassion were significantly related to each other ($r = .39$, $p < .01$). Compassion and social desirability were positively correlated ($r = .22$, $p < .01$) as were compassion and faith ($r = .21$, $p < .01$). Narcissism was not significantly correlated with any other variables (all p 's $> .05$).

[Insert Table 2 about Here]

A multiple regression analysis was conducted using the total on the scores of the SCES as the dependent measure. Social desirability, as assessed by the Marlowe-Crowne scale, and compassion were entered into the equation. Social desirability accounted for 17% of the variance in ethics scores ($F(1,178) = 36.44, p < .001$). When both social desirability and compassion were entered into the equation, they accounted for 36% of the variance in ethics scores ($F(2,178) = 48.91, p < .001$).

A factor analysis for the Santa Clara Ethics Scale was conducted using a principle component analysis and Varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization. From this analysis, one factor emerged and was extracted from this effort. This factor accounts for 42% of the variability in all 10 variables of the scale.

Discussion

This investigation introduces the Santa Clara Ethics Scale and provides preliminary reliability, validity, and utility information about the new instrument. Overall, the measure was found to have adequate convergent and divergent validity (e.g., correlating with faith and compassion but not with narcissism), while reporting adequate Cronbach's Alpha and split-half reliability. The scale is correlated with social desirability and thus this self-reporting bias is important to attend to with this and any ethics scale. By entering the influence of social desirability into the regression equation first, one can statistically control for this influencing factor when entering other variables afterwards. Overall, the scale may be advantageous to researchers due to its brevity, simplicity, generalizability, and ease of scoring. It is also readily available and free to use.

Future research should focus on using the SCES with other student and non-students populations in order to continue to determine the validity and reliability of this measure, as well

as the generalizability and utility. The current study was conducted with Santa Clara University students only and so it would be beneficial to evaluate the scale with other university populations to broaden the research findings and generalizability of the normative sample. Perhaps institutions that highly value ethical development and decision making such as faith-based and military affiliated institutions, might be most interested in this new assessment instrument. The scale could be used to determine whether or not their ethical inspired programs, courses, and interventions might increase ethical engagement and awareness over time. Furthermore, larger groups of subjects from diverse backgrounds could be used in order to develop a more heterogeneous sample of questionnaire respondents which would hopefully help to better generalize the results. For example, using this scale in a business and nonprofit settings with adults of varying ages would offer insight into the generalizability of results across age and employment variables.

In order to continue to examine convergent and divergent validity, the scale could be used with other relevant measures that were not included in this current study. These could include other ethics scales or measures related to ethical behavior (e.g., Weiss, 1999; Liddell et al., 1992; Rest et al., 1974). There are older and thus more established measures and scales with more research that could be used to compare to our current scale.

The SCES provides an opportunity for potential longitudinal studies assessing how ethics might change over time. Studies of this nature would allow researchers to determine test-retest reliability from time 1 to time 2 as well as how ethics inspired interventions (e.g., ethics classes, service learning and volunteer experiences, ethics workshops) all might change respondents over time. This type of study would be particularly beneficial if there was an ethics intervention specifically aimed at increasing ethical engagement and offering the SCES before and after the

intervention could examine change over time. Another potential area of further study could be to examine SCES scores compared with ethics scenarios involving actual ethical decision making in the form of real life decision making or lab based experiments.

The SCES appears to be a reasonable and appropriate brief general assessment of ethical engagement appropriate for college samples. It appears to have adequate reliability and validity and could be potentially used in a variety of research and educational projects. The scale does significant correlate with social desirability and so future research should try and find ways to minimize the impact of this potential self-reporting bias or at least co-vary this influencing variable in data analysis. Much more research is needed and will hopefully occur over time using this new scale. Attention to ethical reflection and decision making in college environment is sorely needed to address contemporary challenges associated with student character development and ethical engagement. And having easy to use and brief assessment instruments that are available for research and educational purposes is important.

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Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of Measures

| <u>Measure</u> | <u>Mean</u> | <u>Standard Deviation</u> | <u><i>n</i></u> |
|---------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Compassion | 26.08 | 6.23 | 194 |
| Faith | 21.87 | 9.60 | 189 |
| Ethics | 31.70 | 4.19 | 194 |
| Narcissism | 2.97 | 2.16 | 193 |
| MC Social Desirability | 14.26 | 4.68 | 192 |
| Self- Compassion | 70.92 | 15.02 | 183 |

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Measures

| | Faith | Ethics | Narcissism | Social Desirability | Self-Compassion |
|---------------------|-------|--------|------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Compassion | .21** | .53** | -.01 | .22** | -.01 |
| Faith | | .16* | .11 | .08 | .12 |
| Ethics | | | -.06 | .39** | .09 |
| Narcissism | | | | -.01 | .10 |
| Social Desirability | | | | | .39** |

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)

Appendix

Santa Clara Ethics Scale

Please answer the following questions using the scale below. Indicate the level of agreement (or disagreement) for each statement.

1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = agree 4 = strongly agree

- _____ 1. Respecting others, even those who I don't like or agree with, is very important to me.
- _____ 2. Being responsible and accountable, even when I have to admit that I'm wrong or have erred, is very important to me.
- _____ 3. Being honest, fair, and maintaining integrity, even when it might put me at a disadvantage, is very important to me.
- _____ 4. I strive to be competent in my areas of personal or professional expertise and am the first to admit it when I am not and have fallen short.
- _____ 5. I feel a great deal of compassion for others, even those whom I don't know or have few things in common with.
- _____ 6. I have clear ethical guiding principles that I keep in mind and follow at all times.
- _____ 7. It is more important for me to behave ethically than to get an advantage in life.
- _____ 8. I never take advantage of others and am truthful in my relationships and interactions even when it might put me at a disadvantage.
- _____ 9. I would not be embarrassed if all of my actions were filmed and played back for others to see and evaluate.
- _____ 10. I typically ask myself what the right thing to do is from an ethical or moral perspective before making decisions.