From the use of the word “thug” by journalists to describe #BlackLivesMatter protesters, to calling trans women such as Caitlyn Jenner “he/she” or even “it,” to seemingly mundane stories about urban food deserts, coverage of matters that explicitly or implicitly reflect issues of socially constructed differences present ethical concerns for journalists and audiences alike. Covering stories highlighting issues of race, ethnicity, gender identity or sexual orientation, and so forth is challenging because of the many ethical issues that arise. Yet ethical issues related to diversity or socially constructed differences may occur in nearly any news story.

In this chapter, we argue that the concept of ethical sensitivity can provide a worthwhile tool in the education of not only future and current media professionals but also media audiences. We begin by describing ethical sensitivity (ethsen) and reviewing ethsen research before focusing on ethsen in contexts involving race, gender, and other areas of socially-constructed difference. Finally, we turn to how assessing ethsen may contribute to both undergraduate education and the ongoing professional development of journalists.

Ethical Sensitivity

Moral decision-making about the presentation of the news is complex; especially as our cultures become global and emerging media facilitate citizen journalism, the variety of potential ethical issues, their ramifications, and the
number of stakeholders affected by journalists’ decisions increases. Thus, we need a suitably sophisticated model to guide our thinking about moral decision making in contemporary journalism. For that, we turn to James Rest’s (1986a; 1986b) Four Component Model of moral behavior.

Rest’s Component One, moral or ethical sensitivity, represents an individual’s ability to notice that a situation has a moral or ethical dimension. This involves interpreting and comprehending the situation. Component Two, moral judgment, focuses on an individual’s ability to make the most moral decision. The individual may balance competing goals and values, apply elements of an ethical system or theory, and use some decision criteria. In Component Three, moral motivation, people are confronted with choices between conflicting values, both moral and non-moral. People may balance their moral evaluations with all other pertinent situational factors, and may decide that some action is called for. In Component Four, moral action, people enact (or do not enact) the moral decision they have made. Perhaps setbacks or obstacles cause an individual to abandon an attempt to carry out an intended behavior, or perhaps no attempt will be made.

Although each component offers insight into a significant aspect of moral behavior, and we have conducted research into each of the components over the last two decades,1 our program of research has focused primarily on ethical sensitivity, which we argue is key; before one may solve a moral problem, one must first recognize it as such. Our work is guided by Bebeau, Rest, and Yamoor’s definition of ethical sensitivity: “the perception that something one might do or is doing can affect the welfare of someone else either directly or indirectly (by violating a general practice or commonly held social standard)” (1985, p. 226). The process of recognizing that an ethical issue exists is distinct from the process of its resolution. Ethical sensitivity is a precursor to moral judgment, in that a person must acknowledge the presence of an ethical issue or problem before it can be evaluated and potentially resolved. Lacking the ability to notice that a situation includes moral or ethical characteristics, people are unlikely to make thoughtful, defensible moral decisions.

Many scholars (including Rest, Bebeau, and others) have approached ethical sensitivity as we do: ethsen is a cognitive ability or skill, which with practice may be improved. Thus, ethsen—like any other ability—can benefit from educational interventions which may occur in a classroom, a workshop, or another setting. Bebeau argued that individuals “can learn to see things as others see them, to reason more carefully, to rethink their priorities and to change communication habits that undermine their goals” (2002, p. 288).

Our research team has studied ethsen in a variety of contexts, including media (Lind, 1997; Lind & Rarick, 1995; Lind & Rarick, 1999), organizational communication (Swenson-Lepper, 2005), and classroom settings
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(Lind, Rarick, & Ibrahim, 1996). Although some of our prior work based on the ethical sensitivity construct has articulated analogous constructs such as sensitivity to research misconduct or RMsen (Lind & Swenson-Lepper, 2007) and sensitivity to conflicts of interest or COIsen (Lind & Swenson-Lepper, 2013), we believe it is most appropriate to frame sensitivity to ethical issues involving race and other issues of socially constructed differences—such as gender, social class, able-bodiedness, religious or faith community affiliation, and more—in the broad context of ethical awareness. Our position is consistent with work studying “ethical sensitivity to acts of racial and gender intolerance” (Brabeck et al., 1998, p. 3).

Brabeck et al. noted that intolerance need not “involve physical conflict or be maliciously motivated to be hurtful and/or harmful;” it may take the form of “disapproving and distrustful attitudes” which—whether intentional or unintentional—may “prevent individuals from treating persons different from themselves with respect and dignity” (p. 3). Such attitudes may be rooted in stereotypes or ignorance and may be conveyed subtly or explicitly through verbal or nonverbal communication. Brabeck et al., whose work focused on secondary schools, argued that intolerant acts can “adversely affect the way students feel about themselves, their peers and their schools. This, in turn, will affect their adjustment to school and academic success” (p. 3). The ramifications of intolerance are not limited to the educational setting, however; aversive racism (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005) and microaggressions or “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups” (Nadal, 2008, p. 23) may occur in any social interaction.

Ethical Sensitivity and Professional Obligations

According to Brabeck et al., “educators and other professionals have the responsibility to acquire the knowledge and skills to respond to intolerant behavior in ways that are ethically defensible and consistent with the ethical codes of their profession” (1998, p. 3). Indeed, Brabeck et al. noted that “ethical concerns related to racial and gender intolerance clearly cut across professional disciplines and it is fair to say that there is a core set of ethics that is common to different helping professions” (p. 6). Besides addressing the crucial issue of intolerance, therefore, Brabeck et al. have foregrounded the relevance of professional codes of ethics, with clear applicability to the practice of journalism.

To Bebeau, “professional practice is predominantly a moral enterprise. Consequently, professional schools are concerned with the ethical development of their students” (2002, p. 271). She described ethical sensitivity in professional practice as involving
the ability to see things from the perspective of other individuals and groups (including other cultural and socio-economic groups) and more abstractly, from legal, institutional and national perspectives. Thus, it includes knowing the regulations, codes and norms of one’s profession, and recognising when they apply.

(Bebeau, 2002, p. 283)

She argued that “understanding that one is responsible provides the bridge between knowing the right thing to do and doing it” and that “in professional contexts, moral motivation and commitment has to do with the importance given to professional values in competition with other values” (p. 285).

The need to understand diverse other social and economic groups is evident in the guiding codes of many professional organizations, including but not limited to those affiliated with journalism. For example, the American Society of Newspaper Editors has—since its *Canons of Journalism* were first adopted in 1922—articulated journalists’ professional and moral obligations:

> The First Amendment, protecting freedom of expression from abridgment by any law, guarantees to the people through their press a constitutional right, and thereby places on newspaper people a particular responsibility. Thus journalism demands of its practitioners not only industry and knowledge but also the pursuit of a standard of integrity proportionate to the journalist’s singular obligation.

(ASNE, 1975)

The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) presents “commitment to diversity and inclusiveness” among its nine principles of accreditation (2009), stating among other things that “the professions of journalism and mass communications should understand and reflect the diversity and complexity of people, perspectives and beliefs in a global society and in the multicultural communities they serve,” and that “Programs seeking accreditation should develop curricula and instruction that educate faculty and prepare students with the multicultural knowledge, values and skills essential for professional practice.” ACEJMC’s nine accrediting standards (2013) include “diversity and inclusiveness”; in addition, diversity-related “core values” and competencies are also evident in the “curriculum and instruction” standard.

The Society of Professional Journalists’ *Code of Ethics* (2014) includes in its primary exhortation to “Seek truth and report it” the following specific obligations for journalists to be sensitive to issues of difference
and diversity: “Boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience. Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear,” and “Avoid stereotyping. Journalists should examine the ways their values and experiences may shape their reporting.”

Indeed, these seem to suggest not mere sensitivity to but active engagement with issues of socially constructed difference and multiculturalism—a position consistent with Fowers and Richardson’s description of multiculturalism as “a moral movement that is intended to enhance the dignity, rights, and recognized worth of marginalized groups” (1996, p. 609).

Assessing Ethical Sensitivity

As we have described in prior work (Lind & Swenson-Lepper, 2013), scholars have used three types of tasks to measure ethsen: production tasks, recognition tasks, and self-assessment tasks.

First, production tasks generally ask participants to respond to open-ended questions about a scenario. For example, Sanders and Hoffman (2010) asked participants to detail ethical issues in a social work scenario. Livingston et al. (2006) and Dotger (2010) asked participants to describe racial and ethical issues in scenarios about education. Myyry and Helkama (2002) studied ethical sensitivity in social psychology students and asked about ethical issues in the professional lives of social psychologists. Lohfeld et al. (2012) asked undergraduate medical students to provide brief paragraphs about the ethical issues they noticed in 12 different vignettes about health care. More recently, Martinov-Bennie & Mladenovic (2015) measured students’ ethical sensitivity based on whether they identified two specific ethical issues related to an environment and human rights case. Although we believe production tasks are likely the most effective way to measure ethsen, and, as described below, we use such tasks in our research, many studies using production tasks have failed to encompass the entirety of Rest’s conceptualization of ethical sensitivity, and some have primed participants that the scenario contains an ethical issue. Our approach has attempted to avoid these shortcomings.

Second, in recognition tasks, participants complete surveys after reading short ethical dilemmas. Participants may be asked to select the ethical theory that they believe best fits a scenario, provide a rating of whether the situation has ethical components, or choose an action they might take in that situation (Cohen, Pant, & Sharp, 1993; Ozdogan & Eser, 2007; Shawver & Sennetti, 2009). However, forcing (or at least inviting) people to engage an ethical issue in a survey may not be the most effective way to evaluate their ethical sensitivity, because they may not have perceived any ethical issues until confronted with them as survey options. We concur fully with Schlacter’s argument that: “Researchers who seek to study
the ethical sensitivity of their subjects and use leading questions will tend to prejudice outcomes . . . If ethical consciousness is the object of study, a procedure like this will bias the inquiry at the outset, and that data which result will only indicate a sensitivity to the experimenter’s demand” (1990, p. 848).

Finally, self-assessment tasks measure ethsen by having respondents review descriptions of behaviors and rate how ethical the behaviors are. For instance, Simga-Mugan et al. defined ethical sensitivity as “the tendency to judge the conduct unethical” (2005, p. 147), and based on their self-assessment method, people who rank specific behaviors as more unethical are said to have higher ethical sensitivity. The Ethical Sensitivity Scale Questionnaire (ESSQ) by Tirri and Nokelainen (2007; 2011) asks people to evaluate themselves based on statements such as “When I am working on ethical problems, I consider the impact of my decisions on other people” and “I ponder on different alternatives when aiming at the best possible solution to an ethically problematic situation” (p. 593). Szabó, Németh, and Kéri (2013) and Gholami, Kuusisto, and Tirri (2015) have also used the ESSQ. We note that this type of self-assessment examines respondents’ reported perceptions of their ethical sensitivity, not their actual ability to notice ethical issues and the consequences of those issues to various stakeholders in a particular situation. Yet this is but one of several limitations of the ESSQ—in addition, it is both vulnerable to the problem of social desirability bias inherent in all self-report data and prone to distorted self-perceptions such as may be influenced by narcissism or the positive illusory bias.

Again, we believe production tasks are usually the most appropriate to use when assessing ethical sensitivity, and we have relied on them almost exclusively in our work.

Ethical Sensitivity Indicators

Consistent with the perspective that ethsen is a cognitive ability which can be taught and, with practice, improved, our view of ethical sensitivity has been influenced by an information processing approach, which “focuses on processes of attending to, selecting and storing, integrating, and evaluating information” (Lind & Swenson-Lepper, 2013, p. 45). We see ethical sensitivity as a knowledge structure as defined in the fields of social and organizational cognition: “a mental template that individuals impose on an information environment to give it form and meaning” (Walsh, 1995, p. 281). According to Swenson-Lepper (2005), knowledge structures are developed through “a recursive process of social involvement, reflection, and experience” (p. 208). Informed by work in organizational cognition, we examine integration, defined as “the degree of interconnectedness among the knowledge structure dimensions” (Walsh, 1995,
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pp. 298–299) and differentiation, defined as “the number of dimensions within a knowledge structure” (p. 298).

We argue that people’s knowledge structures can be reflected in their encoding of messages, such as verbalizations during an interview, written responses to open-ended questions, or creation of media content. In our program of research, ethical sensitivity is evidenced by any number of what we call “indicators,” operationally defined as verbalizations of discrete relevant concepts or the relationships among these concepts. Ethsen indicators may take many forms, and represent at least four content domains (and linkages among them) and three dimensions. The content domains and indicators represent differentiation, or the dimensions of a knowledge structure; linkages among these represent integration, or the interconnectedness of the information in the knowledge structure.

The four content domains are situational characteristics, ethical issues, consequences, and stakeholders. Combined, these content domains encompass the sum of Bebeau, Rest, and Yamoor’s (1985) definition of ethical sensitivity. The domain of situational characteristics refers to acknowledging relevant elements, actions, or contextual features of the situation with which one is presented. The ethical issues domain shows understanding that an action may fall along a right-wrong continuum, or may affect the welfare of others positively or negatively. The domain of consequences is illustrated through referencing effects of the ethical issue on people, situations, actions, or ideas. The stakeholders domain reflects individuals, groups, or institutions that may feel the consequences of an ethical issue. The three dimensions of ethsen include time (how quickly or spontaneously ethsen indicators are exhibited), breadth (the range of different ethsen indicators exhibited), and depth (the amount of thought or detail evident in the ethsen indicators).

Conducting Interviews to Assess Ethical Sensitivity

Our preferred method of assessing ethsen involves a production task relying on open-ended, semi-structured interviews using a funnel sequence. We have also had success adapting this method to an open-ended written survey in which questions are revealed, one at a time, after the response to the prior question is complete. A production task, as described above, requires participants to generate their own responses to the situations with which they are faced. Open-ended questions allow respondents to state whatever they wish, so their responses may or may not contain any ethsen indicators. A semi-structured funnel sequence, which presents general questions early in the interview and targeted questions near the end of the interview, allows respondents to discuss ethical issues at any time, even before being specifically asked to do so. It also allows respondents to state that the situation does not present any ethical issues.
In the typical application of our method, we begin by presenting a situation (e.g., a TV news story) to a participant, followed by the interview (or written survey). The early questions solicit only description, not evaluation (asking participants to describe the situation; to highlight what stood out in the situation), although the open-ended questions fully allow for evaluative comments to be made. Later in the interview the questions do solicit evaluation (asking participants whether the story should have been aired; what are some negative and positive aspects of the participant’s decision [to air or not to air the story]), but do not introduce the concept of ethical issues—although ethical issues can be raised by the subject, if desired. Only after subjects respond to these questions are they explicitly asked whether the situation presents any ethical issues—and if so, what they are, who might be affected by them, and how these stakeholders might be affected.

Analyzing the Interviews: Cognitive Maps, Coding, and Scoring

After the recorded interviews are transcribed, we code the transcripts using cognitive mapping techniques (Axelrod, 1976) adapted from a procedure developed by Wrightson (1976). A cognitive map presents characteristics of a subject’s thinking. In our work, the cognitive maps represent ethsen indicators in each of the four content domains (situational characteristics, issues, stakeholders, and consequences) as well as the linkages a subject makes between indicators. The more ethsen indicators that are present in the subjects’ maps, the greater the subjects’ ethical sensitivity. For a more in-depth discussion of how Axelrod’s work has been adapted to ethical sensitivity, including excerpts of maps resulting from the application of our methods, see Lind (1997) and Lind, Rarick, and Swenson-Lepper (1997).

The number of indicators present in subjects’ responses reflects the breadth dimension of ethsen. To factor the time dimension into ethsen, interview or survey responses may be divided into units based on the increasingly targeted focus of the questions. Although we believe that assessments of ethical sensitivity do not always require a calculated ethsen score, we have presented several methods for doing so. The basic method described by Lind, Swenson-Lepper, and Rarick (1998), which reflects the breadth dimension, involves simply summing the number of unique indicators present over the entire interview. An alternative and more sophisticated method is the weighted-additive scoring method, presented in our work assessing sensitivity to conflicts of interest (Lind & Swenson-Lepper, 2013). By giving more value to indicators presented earlier in the interview, the weighted-additive scoring method incorporates both the breadth and the time dimensions of ethical sensitivity.
Applicability to Instructional Contexts

Because our open-ended interview and survey approaches are production tasks, they are especially well-suited to educational contexts. Our funnel-type interview or survey approach (or variants thereof) may be used as the foundation for in-class exercises or formal assignments. Educators—whether at the secondary or tertiary level, or involved in facilitating workshops for the ongoing professional development of working journalists—may use ethsen assessment as a qualitative or quantitative diagnostic tool. For example, responses to stimuli may be used to identify individuals’ relative areas of strength and weakness, which then allows instructors to focus educational efforts on areas in need of improvement. Variants of the method—such as using the funnel sequence to direct a class discussion—may be applied for impromptu assessments of students’ sensitivity to ethical issues such as those arising in any particular current event. Should quantitative assessments be desired in the instructional context, the basic method of summing the number of indicators present in the response will often suffice (Lind, Swenson-Lepper, & Rarick, 1998), although the weighted-additive method (Lind & Swenson-Lepper, 2013) may be preferable in research applications.

We believe that educators and facilitators may also use ethsen assessment techniques when evaluating media content produced by participants in their classrooms or workshops. For example, media texts or artifacts produced by participants may be evaluated according to the extent to which it reflects (or lacks) indicators of ethical sensitivity. These indicators may be encoded in the media content verbally (statements by the reporter/student or an interviewee), visually (actions, framing of shots, textual on-screen identifiers, and so forth), aurally (voiceover, sound on tape, music, sound effects), through editing, and more. Indicators may also be present in the student/reporter’s verbal (written or spoken) self-reflections on the process of and decisions related to creating any given media artifact or set thereof (e.g., a media portfolio).

One of the perhaps unintended benefits of conceptualizing ethical sensitivity as a cognitive ability or skill is that doing so may reduce some attitudinal barriers to participation, which may be especially evident among professionals. Although students are accustomed to producing work for evaluation in a classroom context, media practitioners may not approach the process as eagerly. When ethsen is approached as a skill, however, as Bebeau argued, “because criteria for judgement are grounded in professional expertise, and because norms are available to help an individual compare his/her ability to others, the assessment is viewed as authentic, and professionals are willing to submit to the learning process” (2002, p. 288). A skills approach may also ameliorate some of the negative responses to being associated with lapses in moral judgment or moral
failings. Bebeau wrote that “when practitioners are referred by a licensing board for ethics instruction, they often assume that they are viewed as people who lack integrity” (2002, p. 288), but “helping them to see that they have deficiencies in one or more abilities related to ethical decision-making has restorative power” (p. 288).

Using Ethical Sensitivity Assessment as an Educational Tool

Instructors interested in using ethsen assessment in the classroom or workshop setting must first select an appropriate stimulus and then begin to identify the potential indicators of ethical sensitivity likely to appear in participants’ discourse related to that text. Although, as noted above, we believe that ethsen may be used as a tool when evaluating media texts produced by students or workshop participants, in this section we focus on our traditional interview or survey methods.

Selecting Stimuli

Instructors and others wishing to assess sensitivity to ethical issues involving racial or gender intolerance using the open-ended, funnel-type interview or survey method described above must first select stimulus material and then identify the ethsen indicators it is most likely to generate. Stimuli may be created by the instructor or researcher (see Brabeck et al., 1998), or existing media artifacts (e.g., news stories) may be used (Lind, 1997; Lind & Rarick, 1999; Lind, Swenson-Lepper, & Rarick, 1998). For instance, a scenario could be developed around how #BlackLivesMatter—a movement arising in response to the 2014 shooting of an 18-year-old unarmed African-American man by a White police officer—is portrayed in a news story. A story about this issue (whether in a print, audio, video, or online format) could be selected or generated as a stimulus.

Potential Indicators of Ethical Sensitivity and Intolerance

Following stimuli selection or creation, potential ethsen indicators must be considered. Although the ethsen dimensions defined above are consistent across multiple contexts, as are the conceptual definitions of each of the four content domains and the linkages across content domains, identifying the individual ethsen indicators contained within each of the four content domains is situation-specific. In practice, the ethsen indicators associated with a story about #BlackLivesMatter will be very different from those associated with a story about marriage equality. Lists of ethsen indicators discovered in some of our prior research using actual news stories as
stimuli may be seen in Lind (1997), Lind, Rarick, and Swenson-Lepper (1997), and Lind, Swenson-Lepper, and Rarick (1998). For example, Lind, Swenson-Lepper, and Rarick (1998) used open-ended funnel-type interviewers with 104 individuals who viewed a story about a young Latina who was injured by a hit-and-run driver, and identified in the participants’ discourse 10 unique story characteristics or relevant facts about the situation (e.g., an African American “Good Samaritan” who helped the victim was interviewed), 11 ethical issues (e.g., the appropriateness of depicting certain content—blood, stretcher, victim), 11 consequences (e.g., it may have a positive outcome—help find the criminal, driver may turn him- or herself in, witnesses may come forward), and six stakeholders (e.g., the people directly affected—the victim, her family, friends, and neighbors).

The process of identifying potential ethsen indicators may be guided by relevant scholarly literature, a priori knowledge of the phenomenon of interest, review of the stimuli by professionals, interview or survey pretests, professional codes and standards, and more. However, until the assessments are conducted, the potential indicators are just that—potential, possible, or likely indicators. Creating the actual list of ethsen indicators is done when the evaluative discourse is analyzed. In doing so, we advocate the use of inductively-derived content-analytic systems. Whether applied formally (for research purposes) or informally (for pedagogical purposes), inductively-derived systems are grounded in the discourse itself (e.g., interviews or written responses to media stimuli) rather than created out of context and then imposed on the discourse. Generating a list of the potential indicators of racial or gender intolerance relevant to the particular stimulus material is a helpful starting point, and we agree with Jordan (2007) that linking back to professional codes of ethics enhances content validity. However, as Jordan noted, “Using a code of ethics to define moral issues . . . is not ideal for predicting how individuals would identify moral issues that arise in professional interactions because a profession’s explicit ethics (or legal) code may not contain all important moral issues” (2007, p. 349).

Once created, the list of potential indicators of sensitivity to racial or gender intolerance should be continually supplemented by whatever additional indicators appear in the discourse being evaluated. The initial list—which will likely contain both broadly-applicable (e.g., discrimination is unethical) and situation-specific (e.g., Ms. X crossed the line when she said Y to Mr. Z) indicators—can be enhanced by a review of the stimulus material by members of the profession. For example, prior to analyzing audience evaluations of ethical issues in a TV news report, Lind (1997) asked media ethics experts (ethics scholars, news council members, and journalists) to identify the ethical issues in the story.

A number of sources provide starting points for identifying indicators of ethical sensitivity to issues relating to socially constructed difference.
Many of these may inform analyses of student/reporter discourse or media texts created by course or workshop participants. As with the open-ended interviews, media artifacts created by students or reporters may contain multiple ethsen indicators reflecting relevant decision-making processes and thought structures.

In generating a list of potential ethical issues, one may refer to the six ethical principles presented by Brabeck et al. (1998) based on their review of a number of professional codes of ethics: competence, integrity, professional and scientific responsibility, respect for others’ rights and dignity, concern for others’ welfare, and social responsibility. However, generic ethical principles in and of themselves do not necessarily function as what we call “indicators” of ethical sensitivity – ethsen indicators must be applied to the specific situation at hand. Although Brabeck, et al., did not present the specific ethical issues recognized by participants as ethsen indicators in their study, we believe they qualify as such – these include recognizing that individuals in a scenario had engaged in making stereotypic comments or gendered slurs, differential treatment of individuals, racial bias, modeling racism, seeing diversity as a strength, and more.

Additional guidance regarding principles linked to potential ethsen indicators may be found in the competencies presented in the American Counseling Association’s Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Ratts, et al., 2015), Competencies for Counseling with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex and Ally Individuals (Harper, et al., 2012), and Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling (American Counseling Association, 2009). The American Psychological Association’s (1990) Guidelines for Providers of Psychological Services to Ethnic, Linguistic, and Culturally Diverse Populations may also be of value. The Association of American Colleges and Universities’ program promoting the personal and social responsibility of students includes detailed lists of character traits (AAC&U, n.d.) and numerous potentially relevant rubrics for multiple dimensions of personal and social responsibility (Value rubric development project, n.d.), some of which are directly applicable to issues of tolerance and ethical sensitivity.

Each of these resources considers attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, skills, or actions which not only reflect awareness of diversity, but also acknowledge its fundamental role in the professional’s interactions with members of a community of diverse others. The detailed nature of many of these competencies makes them attractive for modification and application to the assessment of ethical sensitivity. However, despite the value of these resources in helping direct attention to the relevant ethical issues, most focus on the content domain of ethical issues. Indicators reflecting situational characteristics of necessity can only arise from the stimulus
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itself; stakeholders and consequences are somewhat less context-bound but remain significantly context-restrained.

Moving Forward

Our work developing ways for students, faculty, and other professionals to assess ethical sensitivity, and our interest in ethical issues relating to race, gender, and other areas of socially-defined difference, reflect national trends urging attention to multicultural awareness, tolerance, and personal and social responsibility. The various professional competencies referenced above have much to offer in terms of educating our students, although in some cases the need may be more clearly felt by journalism educators and professional workshop facilitators. However, we must also highlight the AAC&U’s work to promote and assess students’ personal and social responsibility of students. Although what Reason (2013) called “Herculean task” of identifying and assessing the relevant learning outcomes is still in progress, two of the five dimensions of personal and social responsibility are particularly relevant to us: “taking seriously the perspectives of others” and “developing competence in ethical and moral reasoning and action.” The first is defined as “recognizing and acting on the obligation to inform one’s own judgment; engaging diverse and competing perspectives as a resource for learning, citizenship, and work”; the second is defined as “developing ethical and moral reasoning in ways that the incorporate the other . . . dimensions; using such reasoning in learning and in life” (Reason, 2013). The connection between dimensions such as these has been noticed by scholars including Narvaez and Endicott, who argued that multicultural experiences “can lead to an adjustment in thinking, a broadening of perspective, and greater cognitive flexibility” (2009, p. 43). Further, Narvaez and Endicott stressed that “cognitive flexibility and similar capacities of ethical sensitivity are critical for ethical behavior in professionals and lay alike” (p. 43).

We believe that the concept of ethical sensitivity should receive more overt attention in the classroom. All too often, when engaging in ethics instruction, we emphasize asking students to analyze the ethical issues we place before them. Perhaps we hope that by discussing these ethical issues in the classroom, students will become more sensitive to the ethical issues in the communication situations all around them. However, although such a practice can help encourage students to approach the ethical decision making process in a logical fashion (e.g., via the Potter Box), it does not necessarily increase ethical sensitivity. Bebeau (2002) reminded us that “studies typically report low to very low correlations between ethical sensitivity and moral judgement” (p. 288). As part of assessing our students’ relative strengths and weaknesses to identify where our educational interventions will have the most impact, we should strive first to
understand how sensitive students are to ethical issues in communication situations, and then try to increase their sensitivity to those issues.

Our work in assessing ethical sensitivity, based on more than two decades of research, is founded in real-life situations and presents a method to measure how well students or practitioners understand relevant situations, detect ethical issues, recognize who may be affected by those ethical issues and how, and make connections among those content domains. Our method, therefore, reflects two crucial components of ethsen training as presented by Bebeau, who argued that “profession-specific measures” are “key to helping an individual identify personal shortcomings,” as is “the analysis of verbatim dialogues offered in response to real-life professional problems” (2002, p. 288) or scenarios. Continued efforts in this realm might focus on developing stimuli related to media coverage of stories involving or invoking issues of socially constructed difference or diversity and incorporating cognitive mapping as an educational strategy for training current and future journalists about covering those stories and issues.

Scenarios could be based on current events, to help make their relevance more clear to participants. They must include realistic ethical issues, stakeholders, and consequences so that participants have the opportunity to develop knowledge structures related to these issues, increasing the likelihood that participants will begin to engage in more complex ways of thinking about diverse others. Alternatively, as discussed above, the very act of creating media content about stories involving matters of race, gender, or other forms of socially constructed difference can be used to teach and assess ethical sensitivity. However, we have not yet tried this approach. What is the best way to incorporate such a method? Does the resulting media text on its own provide sufficient evidence of indicators of ethical sensitivity, or is an accompanying self-analysis required? What are this method’s unique strengths and weaknesses, and what do educators need to be aware of when using this method?

The cognitive mapping techniques discussed here could be used in a multitude of ways. They could be used to gather data about students’ and practitioners’ levels of ethical sensitivity using a pre-test, post-test study design or they might be used by the participants themselves. For instance, after participants have written responses to the scenarios, they could be taught to map the connections they have made. Such active engagement with their responses to the stimuli would not only reinforce the relevance of all four of the content domains of ethsen indicators, but also provide the opportunity for self-reflection about participants’ hidden attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions of multiculturalism. Such experiential and self-reflective learning opportunities can be powerful, especially when taking place in a context involving group discussion. As Rest (1986a) found three decades ago, discussion groups are a particularly valuable way for people
to improve their ethical decision making skills because they provide “concentrated practice in moral problem-solving, stimulated by peer give-and-take (challenging one another’s thinking, reexamining assumptions, being exposed to different points of view, building lines of argument, and responding to counter argument)” (Rest, 1986a, pp. 79–80).

Finally, in the particular context of sensitivity to ethical issues related to diversity or socially constructed differences, the robust preparation of future media professionals is imperative. As students move into and eventually become the standard-bearers of their professions, a lack of multiculturalism can hurt their clientele (e.g., Spindler & Spindler, 1994)—even to the extent of pathologizing those who exhibit different cultural patterns (Sue & Sue 2013).

Ethical sensitivity as a construct has important theoretical, heuristic, pragmatic, and pedagogical applications. Its conceptual core is robust yet sufficiently flexible that it may be applied to vast array of contexts, including, as we have done here, those involving diversity. As we approach a quarter-century of working with what Rest presented as the first of four components of moral behavior, we remain enthusiastic about its possibilities for guiding our work as educators and researchers.

Note

1 The authors dedicate this chapter to their mentor, collaborator, and friend David L. Rarick, in grateful acknowledgment of his pivotal role in and many contributions to this ongoing program of research.

References


