

Tensions: A Grounded Theory of Ethical Practice

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Academic advising is fraught with ethical dilemmas. Advisors' actions are beholden to various and conflicting constituents. Existing literature on ethics in academic advising provides guidance for advisors via normative ethical principles, suggested processes, and statements about how advising ought to be practiced. However, knowledge of advisors' experiences of ethical dilemmas remains limited. This grounded theory study produced a model of how primary-role academic advisors working in large state university systems engage in ethical practice. It includes four cyclical phases: pre-encounter, encounter, discernment, and response. Each phase highlights discrete but interconnected themes grounded in data gleaned from semi-structured interviews with 12 advisors. The grounded theory has implications for advisors, advising administrators, and future research in bolstering ethical practice.

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An ethical foundation of advising work is student success and access to higher education. Advisors serve students, but also faculty and university administrators, constituencies whose interests can be at odds with what advisors see as the best support for students. For example, when a student's desired academic interest is more achievable at another institution, the advisor might experience a conflict between acting to benefit the student and fidelity to the institution's retention goals. These ethical tensions are part of academic advisors' everyday work.

There are numerous challenges that complicate ethics within academic advising. Without a central and enforceable code of ethics similar to professions such as counseling psychology, medicine, or law, advisors must understand ethical practice on a local level. Thus, scholarship furthering an understanding of ethical practice is needed for the field's professionalization (McGill, 2018; Shaffer et al., 2010). Much of the existing scholarship on ethics provides normative foundations for advisors to frame ethical dilemmas and tensions in the work of advising as well as processes for engaging in

ethical actions (Buck et al., 2001; Damminger, 2015; Frank, 2000; Lowenstein, 2008; Lowenstein & Grites, 1993). These normative writings illuminate the ethical tensions in advising; however, few descriptive studies of ethical practice exist. Thus, there is no baseline of how advisors are comprehending and engaging with ethical tensions in practice. Without that awareness, it is difficult to use existing normative writings on ethical practice or to understand how advisors utilize them.

In this constructivist-grounded theory study (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014), I sought to explore the process by which academic advisors encounter, name, and engage with ethical tensions in their work. The goal of this research was to answer the following research questions:

1. How do primary-role academic advisors discern the presence of an ethical dilemma or problem?
2. How do they work through that dilemma or problem?

Literature Review

In framing the extant literature on ethics in advising, it is important to note the distinction between three ways of engaging scholarly inquiry on ethics: metaethics and moral psychology, normative or applied ethics, and descriptive ethics (Holmes, 1993). Metaethics is an attempt to understand the nature of the judgments of normative ethics, and the larger framework and definition of terms for morality. Normative ethics seeks to "identify and explain... right and wrong or good and bad" (Holmes, 1993, p. 15), and applied ethics attempts to reason through an issue. Descriptive ethics is concerned with describing how a culture or group engages in ethical reasoning and practice.

The foundational writings on ethics in academic advising are decidedly normative. Several scholars argued for what ought to be, thus serving as guides for practice (Buck et al., 2001; Damminger, 2015; Frank, 2000; Lowenstein, 2008; Lowenstein & Grites, 1993). One component of normative writing includes prescriptive statements that address behavior or actions advisors should or should not take. Another component of these foundations

includes ethical principles that ought to be a *prima facie* reason to take (or refrain from) a particular action (Lowenstein & Grites, 1993) and that frame dilemma in practice (e.g., doing no harm). A third normative category is processes for how to reason through an ethical dilemma including any protocol of ethical questions or lists for ethical decision-making (Buck et al., 2001; Church & Robinson, 2006; Fisher, 2005; Frank, 2000; Lutz et al., 2016). These normative writings do not report how advisors actually act when confronted with an ethical problem. Rather, they articulate a particular approach to guide advisors' actions.

Studies of descriptive ethics in advising and student affairs fall into two categories: those demonstrating connections and disconnections between sources of guidance and actual practice (Abelman et al., 2007; Abelman & Molina, 2006; Keeling, 2010; Kihl, 2007), and those exploring the types and frequency of dilemmas that student affairs professionals encounter (Holzweiss & Walker, 2016; Janosik, 2007; Janosik et al., 2004). More recently, Wilson et al. (2020) used survey research to identify the inviolable norms of primary role advising practice. They found that policy violations, disrespectful interactions, confidentiality breaches, and neglectful supervision were areas that primary-role advisors thought worthy of sanctions. Kohfeld et al. (2019) compared reactions of staff, faculty, and students and found each group could identify less-than-ethical behavior—but students often could not identify more ethical responses from advisors. Additionally, they did not find the expected level of agreement or disagreement on responses that centered the student over more advisor-centered responses to a given dilemma. Though within the quantitative paradigm, this study most closely aligned with the present study, in that it explored the awareness of an ethical issue.

Method

The inductive nature of grounded theory served as a novel way to explore ethics in advising practice. Inductive logic allowed descriptions of how advisors engage ethics and their processes without the pre-conceptions of a normative framework. Grounded theory researchers “do not force preconceived ideas and theories” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 32); this study embraces such openness for discovery not rooted in the frameworks of existing literature. Moreover, grounded theory provided a coherent basis with which to uncover the unnamed

processes that advisors engage when confronting a dilemma. Given the dearth of studies on ethics in academic advising, a grounded theory approach allows rich description and initial theorization (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Participants

I solicited participants using convenience sampling via 16 colleagues who nominated 33 potential participants from various backgrounds, including 12 primary-role academic advisors from 7 large state university systems. Table 1 provides each participant's biographical and demographic information. Participants' years of advising experience ranged from 1.5 to 18.5 years, while age ranged from 26 to 60 years, with a mean age of 38.8 years. The geographic distribution of the participants' institutions represents 5 of 10 NACADA regions within the United States. Participants identified their most salient identities relevant in their work as advisors. Education levels ranged from in-progress master's program to completed doctoral degrees.

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews. Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to “reflect upon ethical problems or dilemmas in your work as an advisor, and think of two stories to tell from your practice of advising in which you have confronted an ethical dilemma.” Story solicitation is a useful strategy for understanding the question being asked (McCracken, 1988), and helped participants prepare for the interview. Participants were told the study's purpose was not to uncover unethical behavior but rather to understand perceptions of how they engage with ethical problems. Like Janosik et al.'s (2004) study, this framework left the definition of “dilemma” or “problem” up to the participant.

Interviews included open-ended questions (see Appendix) meant to invite reflection on ethical dilemmas, process, reasoning, and gauge influence in addressing ethical issues in advising. The protocol was developed and refined from a pilot study. Multiple scholars provided feedback on the protocol to refine the initial and anticipated follow-up responses. Interviews ranged from 50 to 90 minutes. Transcriptions of the audio recordings were sent to participants to check for accuracy.

Using constant comparative analysis, there were initial and intermediate rounds of coding interview transcripts. Initial line-by-line coding

Table 1. Participant Overview

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Years in Advising	Salient Identity
Gavin	male	Caucasian	5.5	White male from other region
Belle	female	Caucasian	1.5	Age (youth)
Julia	female	White/Caucasian	15	[data missing]
Emma	woman	Black	8	Race
Isabel	female	White/Caucasian	1	adult learner
Aiden	male	“White, non-Hispanic”	4.5	Rural farm kid
Evie	female	“Bi-Racial; Caucasian - African American	9	Race
Ali	female	Caucasian	5.5	None
Liam	male	White	18.5	major in the humanities
Braden	male	White	8	Compassionate
Leyton	male	White; Caucasian	1.5	None
Zach	male	White	4	white-gay-male

used short descriptive codes describing what was happening in the responses and stories. Next, I identified patterns in the initial codes and created 22 focused codes using constant comparison to test their validity. Focused codes fit into four core themes: 1) existing conditions (non-static); 2) tensions; 3) discernment; and 4) responses. Some focused codes had relevancy for two or more of these core categories. For clarity, I engaged in diagramming and noticed that these core themes outlined the basic form of the process. This helped to refine focused codes and see pivot points within the emerging model. Grouping focused codes showed the relationships between codes.

Trustworthiness

I used five strategies in this study to promote trustworthiness: clarification of bias, presentation of negative examples, peer debriefing, rich thick description, and member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2017). I specifically sought negative or discrepant case examples via constant comparison and engaged in peer debriefing during the theoretical coding phase as the model emerged. At points where these counterexamples were contradictory to the definition of the theme, I included those examples in the presentation.

Findings

The analysis' thematic coding illustrated how participants who comprehended a situation as containing an ethical tension acted (or not) in light of that tension. The preliminary model has four phases relating the four core themes' relationship to the moment of encounter with a dilemma: Pre-

Encounter, Encounter, Discernment, and Response (Figure 1). The model is non-linear in that the experience of ethical tension feeds back to the pre-encounter conditions of future dilemmas.

Pre-Encounter

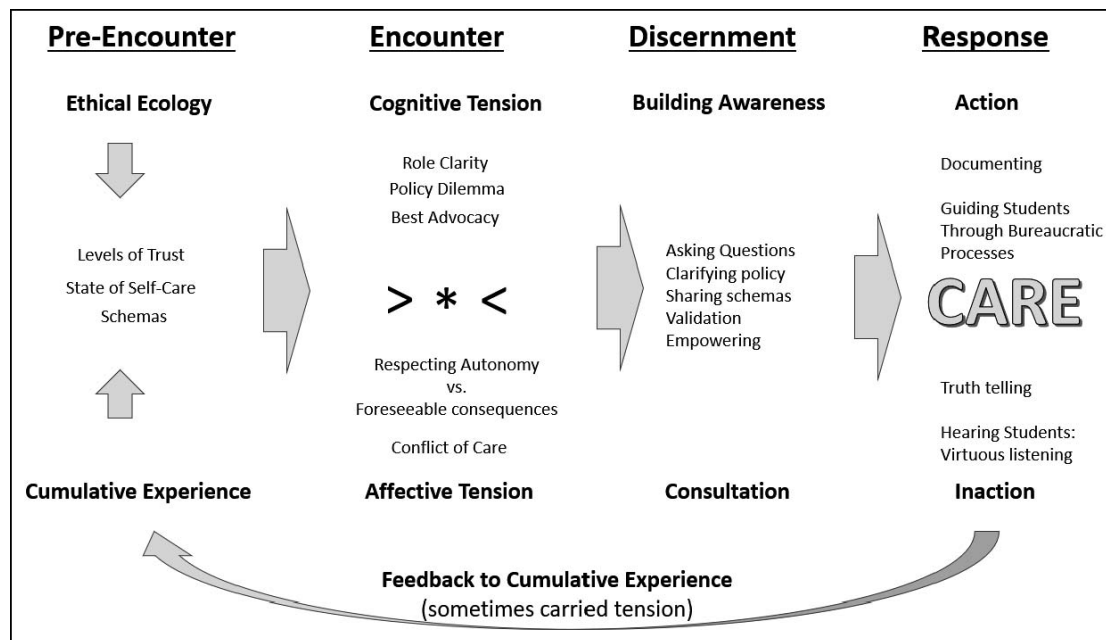
The pre-encounter phase is an ever-changing reality for advisors until they encounter a dilemma. The two major categories of this phase are Ethical Ecology and Cumulative Experience. Three categories further define the reality of the pre-encounter: Schemas, Self-Care, and Trust. There is a dynamic interrelationship between these categories and subcategories.

Ethical Ecology

Ethical ecology refers to the physical and organizational environment where advisors encounter ethical tension. Physical environments can shape ethical encounters (e.g., advisors may engage others formally or informally) and affect the facilitation of confidentiality. A lack of confidential space triggers ethical tensions. Organizational environments comprise another facet of ethical ecology. Does the organization share values, engage in decision making, or empower advisors to make decisions? Finally, there is a technological environment (McClellan, 2007) that may influence how advisors approach their work and methods by which they engage the person behind the student record.

Cumulative Experience

Cumulative experience refers to participants' life experiences that shape the way they see and

Figure 1. Emerging model of ethical encounter and response

understand the world, their work, their understanding of policy, and their basic philosophy, approach, and habits of the practice in advising. Some participants believed that moral development starting at infancy contributed to ethical foundations. For example, Belle asserted that “my parents obviously had a huge impact on the way I face dilemmas and make decisions.” Participants drew connections to graduate school preparation, previous careers, a significant mentoring relationship, or the communities in which they were raised as influential elements of their experience.

Schemas, Self-Care, and Trust

Moreover, ethical ecology and cumulative experiences set the stage of pre-encounter in the schemas, levels of trust, and state of self-care each advisor brings into the encounter phase. Schemas are cognitive shortcuts that advisors take based on previous experiences. For example, Aiden reflected upon learning: “when a mistake is identified, obviously then trying to be more mindful of what you did wrong and what you should do in the future so that you can avoid making that mistake again.” Similarly, Liam recalled his experiences in working through exceptions to academic policy and how past experiences shaped his present outlook.

Trust comes from relationships with people within an environment and was another condition in pre-encounter. Trust is important because it facilitates or inhibits the extent to which advisors consult one another. Additionally, self-care influences how people experience the encounter phase and engage with the discernment phase. Belle noted that she learned to trust one of her colleagues by repeatedly going out to lunch with her. This is an example of how informal interactions build trust. The cumulative experiences and ethical ecology leading to trust, self-care, and schemas constructed the reality of the encounter phase.

Encounter

Advisors often encounter ethical dilemmas when participants encounter a cognitive affective nexus. As participants told their dilemma stories, I asked if their awareness of the dilemma was more cognitive or affective. Data revealed more feelings than thoughts. Participants’ language expressed emotion (e.g., “feeling,” “felt,” “worry”), though some described their encounter as something other than a thought. However, the encounter’s description was not always clearly a conflict of thought or feeling; sometimes one led to the other. For example, Julia’s awareness of her dilemma story came through emotion (worry).

Table 2. Focused Coding of Named Tensions

Type of Ethical Tension	Definition	Example
Care	A principle or virtue that guides practice, usually with the student's best interest in mind. Related to why some said they even began advising or others said advisors "must be."	What support to offer a student struggling with alcoholism while not enabling?
Policy	Perceived rules and practices set forth by an institution that advisors sometimes perceive to be at odds with the student's interest either individually or for specific subgroups of students. It could be formal or informal, related to students or not.	Does an advisor make an exception to a registration policy (set forth by the faculty) in order to do what best serves the student?
Awareness of Timing	The limitations of the deliberation – response that add pressure to a situation that advisors will perceive as a tension.	Does an advisor agree to give a student a reference when they ask you the day before it is due?
Role Clarity	Tensions that arise from mixing or from the ambiguous roles advisors play with students, faculty, and staff.	Should an advisor address concerning behavior in class or should that fall to a trained mental health professional?
Best Advocacy	Actions that are intended to best serve a student in light of bureaucratic systems, policies, and processes (in some cases because they are designed to serve institutional interests at conflict with that which advisors see as the interests of an individual student or specific population of students).	How does an advisor respond to a student who expects higher completion of requirements from their transfer credits? Does the advisor have a response to the institution?
Fidelity to Autonomy	An ethical principle to respect a student's right to make decisions where they have choice. For advisors, this might mean helping students understand the choices available to them.	Do I advise a student around an institutional policy that limits their choice?

She observed: "I think it can be both [cognitive and affective]... I think that it can be more one or the other depending on the situation, but I do not often think that it is entirely one or the other."

Another layer of complexity emerged in Julia's reflection: "I do not think I was actively aware of thinking about that at the time. It was just more knowing that this was something that required additional help that I wasn't going to be able to provide." This idea of "just more knowing" is a

complicated nexus of cognitive and affective dissonance in the encounter of ethical tensions.

The participants' expressions show that advisors' experiences with ethical tension occurred along six categories: care, policy, timing, role clarity, advocacy, and fidelity to autonomy. These tensions emerged from focused coding and are not mutually exclusive. For example, an ethical tension around care could also be an issue of role clarity. These categories are neither comprehensive nor

definitive, but represent the convergences of participants' responses.

Table 2's examples come from participants' shared stories. These subcategories of encounter are sites of ethical tension impacted by pre-encounter conditions. Because some categories function as virtues or principles, they may also launch the next phase for advisors with a discernment of how to navigate those which conflict. Advisors described experiencing tensions around rendering care, but it was also a contemplation in discernment.

Discernment

Upon encountering a dilemma, participants described actions that fit into two interrelated categories of how to respond. *Discernment* is distinct from response in that it is contemplative rather than simply action or inaction. Discernment could happen in the instant of the encounter or well after. Discernment's categories include building awareness and consultation. The latter is sometimes a means of accomplishing the former, though consultation has multiple functions:

Building Awareness

Participants took actions or asked questions to build awareness of ethical tensions. This included asking students questions to appraise the individual or situation. It also included asking questions of themselves either during or after the moment of encounter. Evie gave a definitive statement of how building awareness works for her: "I try to use information, I try to gather all the information I possibly can, what I know, experiences, what's happening right in front of me – that kind of thing, to inform ethical decisions." Similarly, Isabel listed the questions that arose when describing her ethical process in working with struggling students:

Is it lack of motivation? Is it just sort of the student's context for work and school? Growing up. . . what was their home environment, their family environment? What is their context for work? What is their context for doing well in school? What is doing well in school?

These are reflective questions which show Isabel's way of building internal awareness of tension.

Consultation

Consultation is a core component of how advisors in this study engaged in discernment. It was present in all participants' stories and involved conversations between participants and other interested parties as a means of discerning an ethical response to a perceived tension. The most common form of consultation was with other advisors or supervisors, and typically on an informal basis. The purpose of consultation was to gather information on policy, discern role clarity, and anticipate possible outcomes. Consultation allows the advisor access to the schemas of supervisors, fellow advisors, and other colleagues.

Engaging in consultation seemed to affirm a course of action for advisors. Aiden conveyed that consultation was affirming: "I consulted with a more senior advisor and the director of advising for the college and they re-affirmed my position where the student needed to be honest." Leyton expressed a similar sense of validation from consultation in describing his ethical process after an ill-prepared student asked him to support her application to a graduate program:

This is a student that frequently uses drop-in advising over making appointments, so she has met with a lot of people in our office. So, I definitely consulted with a couple other people in the office who also said that it was a bad idea, but agreed with what my ultimate decision was.

In this situation, Leyton's consultation affirmed both his thoughts and feelings about the situation prior to his choice of response to the tension.

Consultation can allow advisors to engage in both critical reflection on a situation but also in group think. When relational dynamics and ecology limit consultation, then advisors are left to operate in a vacuum. Consultation and awareness building validate advisor actions and empower them to pursue a particular course of action or inaction in response to ethical tensions.

Response

Response to an ethical tension can be an advisor's action or inaction, which either brings resolution to a situation or carries that tension forward (see Table 2). In the response part of the process, advisors engage in activities such as

documenting, guiding students through bureaucratic processes, truth-telling, and hearing students.

Documenting

Documenting is not an inherently ethical action, though it is often a duty that institutions require of advisors. It can sometimes operate like a contract in that institutions should be faithful to the notes that advisors make regarding advice given to students. Emma, Gavin, and Julia all told stories about discovering misadvising through documentation. Julia explained that “it is easy when it is in writing, right? They have an email exchange, take this class, blah, blah, blah, and then sometimes you have to honor that and make an exception.” She contrasted this with the absence of documentation saying, “It is less easy I think when it . . . becomes almost like a ‘he said, she said’ sometimes.” The resolution in this case came from following the trail of documentation or discerning right action despite the absence of documentation. Another ethical tension is requiring documentation of medical or other extenuating circumstances in an academic petition process. Liam explained possible problems in these processes: “The other factor is the documentation, which is itself its own ethical dilemma, because not all students have things that are equally documentable.” Liam saw this as a problem for committees or individuals considering exceptions to academic policies.

Guiding Students through Bureaucratic Processes

Policy adherence or circumvention is at the heart of many dilemmas, leading to conflict within itself or with other principles such as care or best advocacy. For example, Zach described a situation where he sought to balance respecting that a course section was full by the rules of the department faculty and giving a student an override out of a sense of care. In this case, Zach asked the student to reflect upon other options and to seek their own solution; ultimately, he overrode the rule. He valued that the student would make some “earnest honest effort” to comply with the policy before he intervened to circumvent it. In this situation, Zach balanced faculty rights to make registration policy even when he saw it as arbitrary and conflicting with care. Care for the student in this case did not automatically mean giving them what they desired, but Zach approached rendering care as inviting the student to consider options. Zach

needed to operate in such a way that faculty did not see an override as capricious; simultaneously, Zach demonstrated to the student that the bureaucratic rules, though pliable, should not be ignored entirely.

Truth Telling

Truth telling is a basic requirement of fidelity as an ethical principle, one essential for respecting student autonomy. Participants’ responses to ethical tensions often involved just what to tell another person. Truth telling may be a way of washing one’s hands of foreseeable consequences, but it does respect autonomy. For example, Leyton felt that giving all options was important even when a student was likely to choose a foreseeably self-harmful option. He explained: “I believe that we have to present all options to students, even if the options may not be the best option.” Similarly, Isabel noted complications in rendering an opinion to students: “You know it’s not that you want to advise someone out of your school and into another one, but sometimes that is the best option for a student.” Conversely, Evie once withheld the truth as an ethical inaction response; she did not tell the student about a policy, and in fact anticipated that the policy would be circumvented by the registrar’s lack of enforcement. Evie’s decision weighed care over fidelity.

Hearing Students

Hearing students can be a response to tensions, but also a general practice in advising. It is a process-oriented response in that it does not necessarily move toward any outcome, but rather becomes an action of care. Gavin had a definitive example of really hearing students going through academic difficulty: “Some are just like ‘oh, I am not doing well in that class.’ Okay well let’s talk about why, what are your extenuating circumstances? . . . Listening to them and not just shutting down saying that’s not good enough.” Hearing students can sometimes involve questioning to get beneath the surface meaning of what they are saying. This is similar to information gathering in the encounter phase, but has an emotional context to it that is a process-oriented response.

Care

Ultimately, hearing students is an enactment of care. Advisors commitment to demonstrating care

can frame an ethical dilemma (e.g., this student needs more help than I am trained to provide) and the virtue that leads to rationalizing response (i.e., how do I show care in this situation?). In this way care is a central virtue in the way participants understood and responded to dilemmas. Care functioned as a self-evident rationale for the participants' confidence in their responses to dilemmas. For example, Evie explained her process for getting through a dilemma with a student by noting, "Well, I care about others; I care about the student and how he's doing. I used that focus." All participants centered care in their experience of Encounter, Discernment, and Response.

Feeding Back to Cumulative Experience

The experience of encountering and responding to a dilemma logically feeds back into cumulative experience. Participants either carried forward ethical tensions or resolved dissonances; in either case, these added to their cumulative experiences for the next time they faced an ethical tension. In this way, the model is circular. Carried tension often has an emotional dimension for advisors. For example, Julia described carried tension after the suicide of an advisee: "I think that is why it stuck with me for so long because there is still that part of like oh, could we have done more? So I still struggle with that a little bit." Emotion lingers as part of cumulative experience. Whether emotional or cognitive, this feedback from the experience closes the loop in the model's phases of pre-encounter, encounter, discernment, and response. This grounded theory as a study of descriptive ethics has important connections with existing literature.

Discussion

Using grounded theory, I probed the stories that participants labeled as ethical tensions in their advising work. This preliminary theoretical model centers on the ethical tensions identified by advisors and the conditions that contribute to those tensions. There are several points of convergence between the preliminary model and the existing literature for both ethics in advising and other theoretical frameworks. Ethical ecology is taken directly from Strange and Banning's (2015) writings on campus ecology. The findings of how the pre-dilemma circumstances influence both the ability to discern a dilemma as well as the process taken to resolve it are quite consistent with the

factors that Strange and Banning identify in the campus ecology framework, noting that behavior is shaped by both personal and environmental factors. For environmental factors, the office layout and the extent that the physical environment facilitates access to other professionals affects how advisors engage in consultation.

Seven participants named encountered tensions as both cognitive and affective. This nexus of affective and cognitive dissonance as a marker of ethical tension can help us in understanding the point of encountering a dilemma. Haidt (2013) noted that "intuition comes first, strategic reasoning second" (p. 286). Though there were some in the present study who talked about cognitive dissonances, it was clear that encounter had an affective or intuitive quality. This similarity with Haidt's (2013) work is important not just for the moment of encounter with the dilemma, but also for navigating it: "Affective reactions structure and constrict the mental space within which subsequent thinking occurs" (p. 283). This is not an entirely problematic lack of reasoning. Haidt (2013) explained that "when emotion is removed, the result is not hyper-rational behavior, it is a disastrous inability to narrow down the choices and then choose among them" (p. 284). The advisors in the present study needed their emotional reactions as much as they needed reasoned responses. In some cases, it was the affective tension that caused them to label the situation as an ethical issue.

Additionally, Haidt's (2013) writing illuminates the consultation component of the model. Haidt (2013) explained that though people engage in confirmation bias when confronted with their initial moral intuition, that "flawed...individual reasoner[s]" (p. 288) can effectively challenge one another. These findings show there was both cognitive and affective reassurance through consultation. Haidt (2013) also explained tensions within this dynamic by noting that "morality binds and blinds" (p. 293). Similarly, consultation can create criticality and/or group think. For example, Emma was critical of directions she received in consulting her supervisor, and this led her to subvert systems that she saw as unjust. At the same time, others seeking validation may not have engaged in consultation in ways that broadened the possibilities of response options.

Care is one of the seven core values of NACADA (2017): "Academic advisors respond to and are accessible to others in ways that challenge, support, nurture, and teach. Advisors build

relationships through empathetic listening and compassion for students, colleagues, and others” (para. 4). Noddings’s (1984) explanation of caring as an approach to ethics is congruent with data presented above. Conflicts of care are a source of ethical tension for this study’s participants, but also serve as justification for responses. Conflicts arose at times from both the presentation of circumstances in students’ lives, as well as the institutional constraints impacting how advisors provide care. These data support McClellan’s (2009) assertion that the ethos of caring is present in advising by showing the ways in which participants perceived and navigated ethical tensions.

Implications for Practice

Advisors must continue to deepen awareness of ethical tensions and ways of engaging normative literature in discerning responses to develop as a profession. Based upon this model, explained in Figure 1, there are a number of recommendations for advisors, advising administrators, and for future scholarship. First, because advisors bring perspective-shaping cumulative experiences to their work, they must engage in critical self-reflection. Administrators and others who train and socialize new advisors should understand how identity shapes awareness and approaches to ethical reasoning—findings both present in the current literature (Begley & Johnson, 2001; McClellan, 2009) and in the above findings. For example, an advisor who has difficulty trusting colleagues may need a supervisor who works to foster that trust with team members so that they can engage in consultation activities of the discernment phase.

Next, ethical environments matter. Environments, both physical and organizational, shape the awareness of ethical dilemmas as well as facilitate responses. Close proximity of other practitioners allows advisors the opportunity to seek out challenges, validation, and empowerment when faced with ethical tensions. Participants’ descriptions of consultation mostly highlighted how consultation occurs informally. Thus, proximity of office and common shared spaces (e.g., the proverbial water cooler) are likely important aspects of ethical environments. The present study was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and that may add layers of electronically-mediated communication impacting consultation that needs further consideration and study.

However, it is not enough that the physical environment facilitate consultation. Advisors must

be in trusting relationships and have organizations that promote self-care. Advising administrators should follow McClellan’s (2014) suggestion and build teams in which advisors trust each other. When trust was present for participants, they engaged in consultation to better understand their role and normalize their responses. When trust was absent, advisors acted in ways they felt were ethical, but carried feelings of uncertainty and resentment for the lack of support. Trust building should happen between supervisors and fellow practitioners. Participants described how trust developed organically; therefore, advising administrators should actively seek to foster organizations that encourage self-care (He et al., 2020). Though more recent scholarship has questioned ego depletion (Englert & Bertrams, 2021), an organizational environment that encourages self-care may improve an advisor’s physiological state to help them make sound ethical decisions.

Though informality facilitated consultation, advising administrators should be systematic and intentional in raising consciousness about ethical practice. The normative ethical literature is important, and systematic and periodic review of ethics in higher education should be part of continual training like that described by Damminger (2011). Continual training will keep ethical practices in the forefront of advisors’ minds. Most participants could name formal sources of normative ethical guidance yet relatively little specific impact from those sources on their daily practice. Consistent review will help with the rational and cognitive aspects of recognizing and naming ethical tensions. Advising might look to other professions for ways in which ethics are continually renewed and taught.

With the knowledge of the emotional dimensions of moral intuition (Haidt, 2013), advisors should be taught to pay close attention to their emotional reactions as potential harbingers of ethical tension. Administrators should consider the emotional language that advisors use when describing their practice. Tense or frustrated emotions may be evidence of an ethical tension in care, role clarity, policy, or advocacy. Advising administrators should help advisors individually and collectively to develop a deep and critical understanding of the ethics of care, how it plays out in their work, the limits of care, and other virtues which may inform their practices. Advisors and administrators should challenge moral intuitions in ways that balance emotional validation with reason.

Future Research

Future scholarship on advising could test these findings quantitatively. For example, the extent to which all advisors engage in consultation could be the subject of quantitative research. Further qualitative inquiry could refine the model and produce a deeper understanding of how varying demographics might influence the extent to which this model holds true beyond participants' experiences. Additionally, future research could focus on specific identity groups, a longitudinal approach, and define ethical problems within the field—perhaps by presenting an ethical problem gauging the extent this grounded theory is explanatory of respondents' reactions. Similar studies of descriptive ethics with a moral psychological framework could further increase our understanding of ethical practice. Applying specific normative frameworks as a tool of analysis may refine the teaching of normative ethics in the advising literature.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. Participants were less racially diverse than the overall population of NACADA members (83% vs. 62% White). They also represented more men than reflected in NACADA membership (50% vs. 20.5%), and no participants identified as transgender or non-binary. There are likely gender differences in the ways in which practitioners encounter and navigate ethical tensions as well as the ways in which they express care. Moreover, a more robust theoretical sampling process would have strengthened the study. All participants were part of a large public university system. Janosik et al. (2004) found that student affairs practitioners at large public institutions reported fewer justice dilemmas. Though this lack of institutional diversity may have limited the types of dilemmas experienced, some participants had previously worked at other types of institutions, and shared those experiences as well.

In the present study, the definition of ethical dilemma or tension was left open to participants' interpretations, rather than offering established ethical dilemmas from advising literature. A limitation of this approach was that some of the tensions may not meet strict definitions of dilemmas in ways that a more deontological approach to ethics might require. A study using more specificity about dilemmas may have yielded different results.

Conclusion

The model presented above shows the complexities of how advisors comprehend and navigate the ethical tensions in their work. Discernment of the most caring action for many advisors is synonymous with discerning the most ethical action. There is much to be balanced in rendering care, and advisors need one another to understand this complex balance. Advisors try to do what is right; they sometimes succeed and sometimes fail. Advisors learn from experience and one another, then take those experiences forward. Understanding this pattern can help the profession better serve our students by making institutions of higher education more ethical and just.

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Author's Notes

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Appendix. Semi-structured Interview Protocol

DATE: SUBJECT:	TIME:
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☐ **Consent form Received**
☐ **Need phone fully charged with charger plugged in right near the computer**
☐ **Get recorder ready**
☐ **Facetime/Skype (need phone # and/or skype name)**

Script:
I am beginning the recording now.

Consent: This interview is for my dissertation research project, the topic of which is ethics in advising. The goal of the study is not to uncover unethical practices, but rather to determine how advisors identify and navigate the ethical issues or dilemmas they encounter in the real world. You have signed the consent forms, and I want to remind you that your participation in this study is completely optional and you can withdraw that consent at any point up until you have reviewed the transcript for accuracy. Though your identity will not be linked to your statements through use of pseudonyms, there is some risk of participation in that someone (for example the person who nominated you) might find identifiers that would connect you with your statements. The interview is being recorded.

Demography:

College or University where you are currently employed: _____

City & State of that institution: _____

Current Job Title: _____

In your current position, do you consider yourself to be a primary role advisor? _____

How many years of experience do you have in advising? _____

How many years of experience do you have working in higher education? _____

Do you consider yourself to be an active member of NACADA? _____

Are you an active member of any other association? _____

How do you identify your race or races? _____

How do you identify your gender? (what pronouns do you use?): _____

How old are you? _____

What is your educational background? (degrees earned; majors etc.) _____

Are there any particularly salient features of your identity that you think impact your advising practice?

Questions:

- 1) What influences (ie grad school, etc.) have impacted your understanding of ethics and ethical practice in advising?
 - a. Are there any documents from NACADA or another organization that guide your practice as an advisor? Any specific to ethics?
 - b. Does your institution give you any guidance?
 - c. Please describe your approach to advising and/or theory you draw upon and/or advising philosophy and/or guiding principle
- 2) You were asked to reflect on one or two dilemmas that you've faced in your practice of advising, could you please tell the stories of those dilemmas?
 - a. How did you know that you were facing an ethical situation? (was it more thought or feeling – cognitive or affective)
 - b. At what point in the story did you know that you were in a dilemma
 - c. Was it more of a cognitive or affective sort of awareness? More thinking dilemma or feeling dilemma or both? If both which came first?
- 3) Could you please talk about the process you go through when trying to resolve an ethical dilemma?
 - a. Is there any way that the professional literature informed your understanding or action in his situation?
 - b. Is part of your process to consult others and if so, who do you consult and what does that look like?
 - c. I noticed that both dilemmas were about students/colleagues/faculty. Do you ever encounter dilemmas with other staff or faculty? Does that look different than with students?
- 4) There is debate in NACADA about whether or not advising is a distinct profession. This is not to say that we don't have a degree of professionalism. However, it is a debate over whether or not we have all the ingredients that constitute a profession. One criticism is that we lack an enforceable code of ethics. Would a code of ethics from NACADA for advisors be useful to you? Why or why not? Would it be helpful for everyday use or more for bigger picture use with your institution?
- 5) Where do you think your sense of ethics and morality comes from?
 - a. What values drive you in the work of advising? [may have to identify values in their story]
 - b. Perhaps specifically ask about equity and fairness.
 - c. Does a sense of social justice inform your ethical actions? If so, how?
- 6) If you had to name a hope for each and every one of your advisees, what would that be?
- 7) Solicit a final reflection – Do you have any final thoughts or reflections on how you encounter and navigate ethical tensions in the work of advising?

REVIEW NEXT STEPS: 1) TS Review;