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Moral intensity as a predictor of social responsibility

Eugene D. Jaffe and Hanoch Pasternak*

Background

Recent attributions of moral wrongdoing, such as the Enron and HCA (formerly known as the Columbia/HCA Healthcare Corporation) cases in the United States, have given rise to increased concern by business practitioners and the general public about the state of ethics and social responsibility. Some concrete results of this concern have occurred in the form of more ethics courses/and or instructional hours devoted to ethics in universities, and to the strengthening of punitive legislation with the aim of constraining moral impropriety. At the same time, academic research concerning the causes of ethical/unethical business behaviour has increased. Bommer et al. (1987), Ford & Richardson (1994) and Loe et al. (2000) provide comprehensive reviews of the more recent academic research in business ethics. After assessing a number of theoretical models that explain ethical/unethical behaviour, Loe et al. (2000) concluded that Jones' (1991: 186) issue-contingent construct of perceived moral intensity 'provides the most comprehensive model of ethical decision making'.

The concept of perceived moral intensity in ethical decision making was introduced by Jones (1991) and is based on the premise that people tend to become much more concerned about moral issues that affect those close to them rather than those with whom they have little or no contact, namely, by the proximity of the event.

Intuitively, people care more about those close to them physically and emotionally (e.g., family, club associates, co-workers) than those who are remote. Also, people tend to react more strongly to what they perceive as an injustice if it has immediate effects as opposed to an injustice whose effects will impact in the future. For example, an individual may feel some responsibility for the solution of immediate national environmental problems, rather than those that may take effect in the long run. People also tend to react more strongly to events where there is a high probability that harm will actually occur and the degree to which there is social consensus condemning or approving an act. Magnitude of consequences is the sum of the benefits or harms done to the beneficiaries or victims of a moral event, respectively. For example, an event that causes 1000 people to suffer has greater magnitude than an event that similarly impacts upon 100 people. Concentration of effect is the inverse function of the number of people affected by an act of a given magnitude. Therefore, moral events that have significant benefits or serious harmful consequences are more likely to lead to an ethical response. To summarize, a decision will have high moral intensity if the proximity of the event is close to the decision maker, most people agree that the event is harmful, there are immediate harmful effects as a result of the event, a negative outcome would harm a relatively large number of people and the potential harm itself is perceived to be substantial. According to Jones (1991), perceived moral intensity influences recognition of a moral issue, making a moral judgement, intention to act and behaviour.

*Respectively, Visiting Professor, Department of Marketing, Copenhagen Business School, Frederiksberg, Denmark; and Senior Researcher, Volcani Institute, Beit Dagan, Israel.

Literature review of moral intensity research

Recent research has demonstrated evidence that moral intensity influences ethical decision making, moderated by individual and organizational characteristics.

Singer et al. (1998) found that whether various scenarios were perceived as ethical was positively influenced by three of six moral intensity dimensions; magnitude of consequences, social consensus and temporal immediacy. Singhapakdi et al. (1999) investigated the roles of personal moral philosophies (idealism, relativism) and perceived moral intensity in ethical decision making. Four scenarios were shown to a sample of 453 respondents from a sampling frame of US members of the American Marketing Association. Results showed that an ethical issue is primarily determined by perceptions of magnitude, probability, immediacy and concentration of effect. Idealists held higher perceptions of moral intensity, while relativists held lower perceptions of them.

In a study of environmental ethical decision making in the US metal-finishing industry, Flannery & Douglas (2000) found that the magnitude of consequences moderated the relationships between attitudes, subjective norms and managers' environmental ethical decision intentions. May & Pauli (2002) found that the dimensions of moral intensity were related to the recognition of moral issues, moral evaluations and moral intentions. Carlson et al. (2002) investigated whether three components of moral intensity (concentration of effect, probability of effect and proximity) impact upon self, other and organizational orientations. Their sample consisted of students from a Southern US university. They found that the closer in proximity an individual was to the situation, the greater the perception of ethicality. Also, as a situation becomes less personal, people allow different factors to play a role in the decision-making process, potentially reducing the moral intensity of the situation. However, probability of effect and concentration of effect were not significant predictors of moral intensity.

In a sample of New Zealand business owners and managers, Singer & Singer (1997) found that membership in an in-group, magnitude of consequences, social consensus and probability of effect determine whether an act is perceived as ethical or unethical. Singhapakdi et al. (1996) found significant correlations between a measure of the ethicality of three scenarios and all six dimensions of moral intensity. When respondents' intention to act was measured, all dimensions were found to be significant predictors, with the exception of proximity. Morris & McDonald (1995) concluded that various dimensions of perceived moral intensity influenced moral judgements in three different business scenarios. Frey (2000) designed a within-scenario manipulation of all six moral intensity components. Using two scenarios, the results showed that social consensus, magnitude of consequences and the probability of effect were significant determinants of ethical intentions, whereas temporal immediacy, concentration of effect and proximity were not significant.

Kelley & Elm (2003) studied the types of ethical issues that social service employees and administrators experienced to determine whether moral intensity was affected by contextual background (organizational settings and factors). A phenomenological designed study found that five of Jones' six dimensions (the exception was probability of effect) affected the respondents' response to ethical issues.

Table 1 summarizes the research findings of these and some earlier studies. The summary shows that the most frequent, significant predictors of moral intensity are Magnitude of Consequences and Social Consensus (in nine out of 12 of the cited studies) and Proximity (five out of 12). Only one study, Singhapakdi et al. (1996), found all six dimensions significant predictors of moral intensity, while most found only two or three.

The present study

This study adds to the extant literature by providing two innovations to most current research applying the moral intensity construct.

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Table 1: Significant findings of studies of moral intensity

Study	Significant dimensions
Morris & McDonald (1995)	MC, SC
Singhapakdi et al. (1996)	MC, CE, PE, PR, SC, TI
Weber (1996)	MC
Harrington (1997)	MC, SC
Singer & Singer (1997)	MC, PE, SC
Davis et al. (1998)	SC, PR
Singer et al. (1998)	MC, SC, TI
Singhapakdi et al. (1999)	MC, CE, PE, TI
Frey (2000)	MC, SC, PE
Silver & Valentine (2000)	SC, PR
Carlson et al. (2002)*	PR
Kelley & Elm (2003)	MC, TI, PR, SC, CE

*This research design included only CE, PR and PE.
MC, magnitude of consequence; SC, social consensus; PE, probability of effect; PR, proximity; CE, concentration of effect; TI, temporal immediacy.
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First, it deals with an issue of corporate social responsibility, rather than an ethical event. The concept of corporate social responsibility refers to 'the firm's consideration of, and response to, issues beyond [its] economic, technical, and legal requirements . . .' (Davis 1973). Thus, according to this view, a firm should evaluate the effects of its decision making on the external social system and not only on its internal objectives. Others, such as Kok et al. (2001) and Carroll (1999), suggest a broader construct such that the firm should use its resources to benefit society even at the expense of achieving corporate goals. Whether or not moral responsibility can be placed in the hands of agents such as business firms has been the subject of debate (Goodpaster & Matthews 1982, French 1995, Soares 2003). Corporate social responsibility may be examined through stakeholder theory, regarding a firm as responsible to its stakeholders (cf. Coombs 1998, Maignan & Ralston 2002). Therefore, an action may be judged to be either socially responsible or not by stakeholders involved. Second, in contrast with previous studies, the present research measures *proximity* not only within the context of a scenario, but also by the actual physical distance of respondents from the act itself. Moreover, the act in question is based on a real event, rather than a theoretical one.

The issue upon which this study is based concerns the possible closing of the *Phonecia* glass-making factory in the southern town of *Yeruham* in Israel. The factory employed some 200 workers who were threatened with unemployment. The town is located in an area that already had a high rate of unemployment owing to plant closures and the lack of alternative workplaces for job seekers. Thus, the threat of another plant closing presented a social dilemma for stakeholders. The overall research question was: How do people, both those living in the area and those beyond, perceive the issue? Can the construct explain what action a person will take when confronted with such an issue?

The research model

Table 2 shows the dimensions and the values of the moral intensity construct parameters used in this study. An example of the scenario used is shown in the Appendix. The number of workers (*magnitude*) in jeopardy of being fired was set at either 40 or 300. The economic loss (*harm*) was estimated to be either IS50,000 or IS200,000 per worker. Respondents were told that they were not acquainted with the plant's workers, or that one of the workers was a close relative (*proximity*). A 'national survey' showed that either there was high *consensus* (85% agreement that the plant should receive government support), or low *consensus* (25% agreement). All scenarios related the fact that the plant was in jeopardy (*probability*) of closing and that the probability that workers could find alternative employment

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Table 2: Research parameters

Probability	Immediate	Probability	Immediate
Harm	IS200,000	Harm	IS50,000
Proximity*	Personal	Proximity	Impersonal
Magnitude	300 workers	Magnitude	40 workers
Consensus	High	Consensus	Low

*Proximity was measured by the actual geographic distance of the respondents from the plant location; either 40 km or less, or more than 100 km.
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was low. This is the only parameter that was not varied in each scenario because it reflected actual economic realities at the time of the survey.

A factorial design was used to vary the parameters used in the scenarios. This resulted in 16 scenario versions, allowing a within-scenario manipulation of the moral intensity construct treating all dimensions concurrently, making possible a test for possible interaction effects. Each questionnaire contained four scenarios, resulting in eight questionnaire versions. The first scenario in each questionnaire version was rotated in order to reduce position bias.

While the dimensions of the perceived moral intensity construct provided the independent, explanatory variables, the dependent variable was the extent to which respondents believe that government support of the plant is necessary, measured on a five-point Likert-type scale that ran from 'Government definitely should support the plant' to 'Government definitely should not support the plant'.

Some may believe that support for a failing business is government's responsibility. Others may believe that it is an individual's responsibility as well. Respondents were queried as to whether they would be willing to pay (Bennett & Blaney 2002) a premium for soft drinks in glass bottles in order to keep the plant from closing. A statement was added after each scenario that if soft drinks were sold in glass bottles, rather than in plastic containers, this would help keep the plant open. However, this would cost households a nominal amount of IS15[1] added to their monthly food bill. Respondents expressed their opinion on a five-point scale running from 'I would definitely pay the extra amount' to 'I would definitely not pay the extra amount'. Ratings on this scale served as the WILLING TO PAY variable. There should be a strong relationship between moral intensity and the choice of either socially responsible alternative.

Personal influences that were part of the research model included ethical ideologies (idealism and relativism) and locus of control. The locus of control index adopted by Fleming and Courtney (Whalen *et al.* 1991), from Rotter's (1972) Internal–External Locus of Control Scale,

and Forsyth's (1980) 20-item ethical ideology scale were included in the questionnaire. After removing two items, coefficient α was 0.69. The Fleming and Courtney scale consists of 14 statements, 12 measuring external and two measuring internal locus of control. The ethical ideology scale had a coefficient α of 0.70. Respondents were asked to indicate their disagreement and agreement with those statements using a seven-point Likert scale.

Finally, place of residence, gender and whether the respondent personally knows someone who is unemployed were recorded. This last item was included to determine whether personally knowing someone who was unemployed would affect one's perception of a social dilemma. In the data analysis process, the two statements that represent internality were reversed, so the whole scale was measured in terms of externality of the individual. The mean of these 14 questions by respondent is the locus of control measure.

Given the above model parameters, the following hypotheses were raised.

Hypotheses

The cost per worker (*harm*) if the plant closed was either IS50,000 or IS200,000. According to the moral intensity paradigm, the greater the harm, the greater the chance that a person would act ethically or responsibly. This leads to Hypothesis 1:

> **H1:** The greater the sum of the harm to others, the more likely a person will choose a socially responsible alternative.

If the plant closed, either 40 or 300 workers would be fired (*magnitude*), and the economic loss per worker would be either IS50,000 or IS200,000. Therefore, *ceterus paribus*, people should view the worst scenario as the greatest harm to the largest number of workers affected. Therefore:

> **H2:** The greater the sum of the harm to workers, the more likely a person will choose a socially responsible alternative.

Jones (1991: 377) defines *concentration of effect* as the inverse function of the number of people affected by an act of given magnitude. He gives an example of a situation in which few people are

involved, but harmed considerably (a change in a warranty policy denying coverage to 10 people with claims of $10,000) vs. a situation, in which many are involved, but harmed little (denying coverage to 10,000 people with claims of $10). Accordingly, the first situation has the greater concentration of effect. Given Jones's paradigm, the situation where 40 workers are affected with a loss of IS200,000 has the greatest concentration of effect, while the situation where 300 workers are affected with a loss of IS50,000 has the least effect. However, given the structure of our scenarios, the higher concentration of effect is 300 workers unemployed at a cost of IS200,000 and the least effect is 40 workers unemployed at a cost of IS50,000. Therefore, we hypothesize that as the concentration of effect of a dilemma increases, individuals will perceive a higher degree of social responsibility involved. Therefore:

> **H3:** The greater the concentration of effect, the more likely an individual will choose a socially responsive outcome.

Respondents were told that they were either related (or not) to any of the plant's workers or staff (*proximity*). These manipulations lead to Hypotheses 4–6:

> **H4:** The more personal a relationship to harmed others, the more likely a person will choose a socially responsible alternative.

Hypothesis 5 serves as a control to the hypothetical relationship of the respondent to a plant employee. Approximately one half of the respondents reside within a 20-mile radius of the plant, while the other half live 100 miles or more from the plant. We expect that a person's physical closeness to the event in question will moderate whatever personal connection there is to the act. That is, those residing in the area and who are not related to a plant employee should behave more responsibly than those remote from the area.

> **H5:** The closer a person resides to harmed others, the greater the likelihood of choosing a socially responsible alternative.

Being physically close to an ethical dilemma involving a social issue such as a plant closing may or may not affect a person's choice of a solution to the problem. We also hypothesize that in such a specific case, knowing an unemployed person should also have an impact on one's social choice. Therefore:

> **H6:** People who personally know an unemployed person will choose a socially responsible alternative more than those who do not know such a person.

Most of the studies of moral intensity found that social consensus is related to the choice of an ethical alternative. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

> **H7:** The greater the consensus regarding a social issue, the greater the likelihood of choosing a socially responsible alternative.

A number of studies have found that moral intensity is moderated by underlying factors such as a person's idealism (Finch 1995, Singhapakdi et al. 1999, Nebenzahl et al. 2001), gender and age (Singhapakdi et al. 1999, Silver & Valentine 2000), orientation to self or organization (Carlson et al. 2002) and locus of control (Nebenzahl et al. 2001). From previous research it has been found that idealists are more sensitive to ethical issues. Relativists tend to insist on their own rights, while idealists emphasize social rights because they rely on universal moral rules. Therefore:

> **H8:** More idealistic individuals have higher perceptions of moral intensity than less idealistic individuals.

Locus of control measures an individual's attitudes about his or her ability to affect events in social circumstances. An individual who has a high degree of internal control accepts that personal power or effort is a basic determinant of outcomes of social events. An individual who has a low degree of internal control, however, accepts that events in social life cannot be taken under control (Trevino 1986, Whalen et al. 1991). An external individual, then, is less likely to feel social responsibility for the consequences of an event. Therefore:

Figure 1: Hypothesized measurement model.
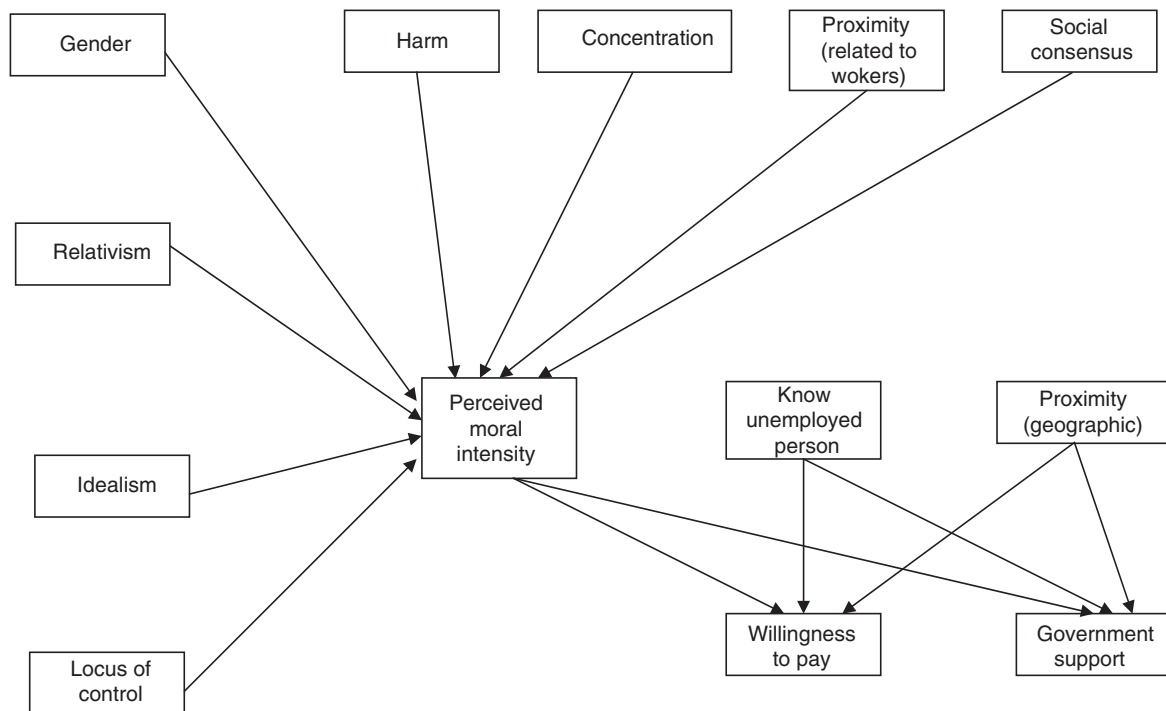
The hypothesized research model

The hypothesized research model is shown in Figure 1. The dependent variables are Willingness to Pay, the extent to which respondents are willing to pay more for glass bottles in order to keep the plant from closing, and Government Support, the extent to which respondents believe that government should subsidize the plant. The dependent variables in turn are influenced directly by parameters of the moral intensity construct, and whether respondents know an unemployed person and their geographic proximity to the plant in question. The moral intensity construct is modified by the Gender, Relativism/Idealism and Locus of control of the respondents.

Sample

A convenience sample ($n = 246$) of two groups of undergraduate and graduate university students was taken at colleges and universities located in the southern part of Israel, situated in a radius of about 40 miles from *Yeruham*, and from the central part of the country, some 100 miles or more from *Yeruham*. Questionnaires were filled out by the students under the supervision of research assistants prior to the beginning of lectures. Students who attended universities in the southern part of Israel, but who lived in the centre of the country, were excluded from the sample. The same procedure was followed for students attending a university in the centre of the country. In a pre-test of the questionnaire, both groups had approximately the same knowledge about the plant closing. Their demographic characteristics (55% females and 45% males) were also very similar, with the exception that the graduate students were slightly older (overall average age of the students was 26). The only other difference between them was the physical distance (*proximity*) between where they resided and the plant in question.

After cleaning the questionnaires for incomplete answers, the southern group numbered 83 and the central group numbered 135 undergraduate and graduate students.

Findings

In order to test the hypotheses raised in this study, structural equation modelling was done using the *Amos* analysis of moment structures program (Arbuckle 1989, 1994, 1996, Wothke & Arbuckle 1996). A principal component with varimax rotation factor analysis of the model parameters was done in order to determine if it was uni- or multi-dimensional. As Frey (2000) pointed out, Jones (1991) is not clear on this point. The results in Table 3 show that the components are multi-dimensional with *magnitude*, *harm* and *proximity* comprising the first factor and *consensus* comprising the second factor (consensus was significant in both factors). These results are identical to Singhapakdi *et al.*'s (1996) two-factor solution,[2] but dissimilar to Frey's (2000) two-factor solution, which showed *magnitude*, *social consensus*, *likelihood*, *proximity* and *immediacy* loaded on the first factor and *concentration of effect* as a separate, second factor. As in Singhapakdi *et al.* (1996) and the present analysis, it follows that Jones' construct may be collapsed into two dimensions: the extent of harm caused and proximity, and the degree of social pressure generated by the dilemma.

The structural equation model

The next step was to test the adequacy of the perceived moral intensity model to adequately represent the processes of the hypothesized model. The resulting measurement model is shown in Figure 2. Some 'goodness of fit' measures of the independent model compared with the hypothesized model are shown in Table 4.

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Table 3: Principal component loadings of PMI items

Component	Factor 1	Factor 2
Magnitude	0.559	0.112
Harm	0.575	0.124
Proximity	− 0.651	0.529
Consensus	0.235	0.865
Eigenvalues	1.123	1.056
Explained variance	28.081	26.391

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The normal fit index statistic compares the hypothesized model to the independent model to describe how much covariation has been included. Generally, values over 0.90 are considered good, as is the case shown in Table 4. The root mean-square error of approximation statistic indicates the discrepancy between the hypothesized model and an optimal model of the population. Values below 0.05 are desirable, but values as high as 0.08 or so are indicative of a good fit.

Two groups of latent variables are found in Figure 2; 'personal', which is comprised of the ethical ideology scale, and 'locus of control' are two items of the moral intensity construct. As shown, ethical ideology (coefficient of 0.48) was significant, while locus of control was not. Idealists are more likely than relativists to believe that government should support the plant and are also more likely to agree to pay a higher price for soft drinks in bottles (WILLING TO PAY). Only two components of the moral intensity construct were significant, *magnitude of consequences* (0.56) and *social consensus* (0.10). Gender is related to choice of an outcome; females are more likely to choose both the government support and *willing to pay* solutions to the plant closing.

On the other hand, the objective measure of *proximity*, the physical distance of respondents to the plant, was not a significant factor. Knowing (KNOWLEDGE OF UNEMPLOYED) an unemployed person was also insignificant. To sum up, the choice of a socially responsible alternative to the plant-closing dilemma was determined by ethical ideology, gender and the two parameters of the moral intensity construct, *magnitude of consequences* and *social consensus*.
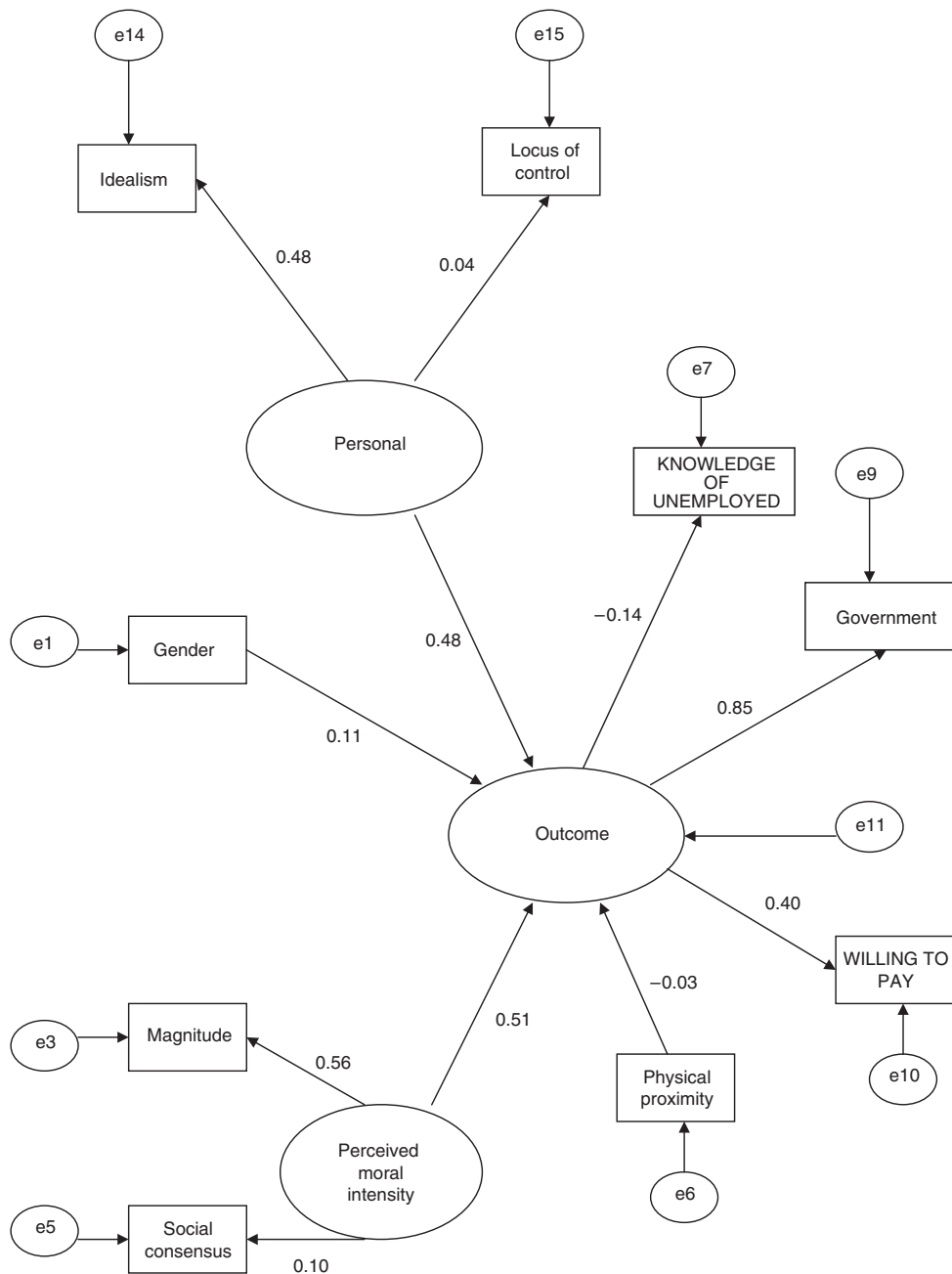
On the basis of these results, the acceptance or rejection of our hypotheses are summarized in Table 5.

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Table 4: Goodness of fit measures

Model	χ^2	DF	NFI	RMSEA
Independent	14,347.91	45	0	0.675
Hypothesized	155.947	25	0.98	0.087

NFI, normal fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation.

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Figure 2: Structural measurement model.

Discussion

The finding that only two components of the moral intensity construct are related to behaviour in a socially responsible dilemma is not surprising for two reasons. First, the construct is not unidimensional. Therefore, it should be expected that some components contribute more than others to the perception of ethical/social responsible dilemmas. Second, most of the studies shown in Table 1 found that two or three components were related to perceived outcomes in ethical situations. The more frequent, significant components in those studies (i.e. the degree of social consensus regarding a

social issue and the magnitude of its consequence) were similar to those found in the present study.

We had hypothesized that an objective measure of proximity should be a more powerful predictor of moral intensity than a subjective measure. However, our objective measure of proximity may not have been sensitive enough. While respondents were sampled in proximity to the plant location, those sampled in the centre of the country may not have been distanced enough from the plant. Perhaps it might have been better to have sampled additional respondents residing in the north of the country. In any case, given the proliferation of electronic media, it is difficult to determine what physical/emotional distance from a dilemma is necessary to distinguish between those impacted by it and those not impacted, especially in a small country like Israel. Because of Israel's small size, the plant's difficulties were common knowledge to a cross section of the population. Even though there may have been a significant physical distance between both samples, the emotional distance may have been the same.

It was hypothesized that knowing an unemployed person should have sensitized people to the plant's dilemma. Seventy-five per cent of the respondents knew an unemployed person at the time of the survey. National unemployment stood at 10% of the workforce and was on the upturn.

Given the fact that so many people were unemployed may have de-sensitized the respondents to the problem of one small plant in a development town.[3] This may also explain why both the *proximity* component of the perceived moral intensity construct and the geographic proximity variable were not related to either government support or willingness to pay, even though both of the latter were significant indicators of the outcome.

Respondents having internal locus of control were no more sensitive to the dilemma than those having external locus of control. An explanation for this outcome may be that people felt powerless to do anything about the plant closing and believed that it was the government's responsibility.

To sum up, this research has found common conclusions with other studies that have shown that Jones's construct is essentially two dimensional, comprised of the extent of potential harm and the extent of social consensus regarding that harm. In our case, respondents who expressed social concern for the dilemma saw it as either government's responsibility or as a personal responsibility, or both. However, more respondents perceived the solution as government's responsibility, rather than a personal one, even though the personal cost per month was relatively low (half the price of a movie ticket). Perhaps it would be wise for the govern-

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Table 5: Accepted or rejected hypotheses

H1:	The greater the harm to others, the more likely a person will choose a socially responsible alternative	Rejected
H2:	The greater the sum of harmed workers, the more likely a person will choose a socially responsible alternative	Accepted
H3:	The greater the concentration of effect, the more likely an individual will choose a socially responsive outcome	Rejected
H4:	The more personal a relationship to harmed others, the more likely a person will choose a socially responsible alternative	Rejected
H5:	The more proximate a person is to harmed others, the greater the likelihood of choosing a socially responsible alternative	Rejected
H6:	People who personally know an unemployed person will choose a socially responsible alternative more than those who do not know such a person	Rejected
H7:	The greater the consensus regarding a social issue, the greater the likelihood of choosing a socially responsible alternative	Accepted
H8:	More idealistic individuals have higher perceptions of moral intensity than less idealistic individuals	Accepted
H9:	People who have higher locus of control will be more likely to choose a socially responsible outcome	Rejected

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ment to influence public opinion to the fact that not all economic crises, especially those affecting private enterprise, could or should be solved by the government alone.

Every study of this sort suffers from limitations. This study is no exception. Even though there is some justification for using students as respondents, the study would have been more representative had a sample been drawn from the general population. Moreover, as one reviewer pointed out, the study could have been improved had we measured respondents' perception of the situation as a social responsibility question, rather than assuming it. Nevertheless, the issue did receive much media attention and the social ramifications of the plant closing were emphasized.

Appendix: Sample scenario

The *Phonecia* Glass Factory in *Yeroham* is in danger of bankruptcy because of decreased demand for glass bottles. All of its 300 (40) workers will be fired. The possibility of finding alternative employment is very low. The loss per worker is estimated to be IS200,000 (IS50,000). Assume that your father's cousin whom you see frequently is a worker in the factory (You do not know any of the workers). A national opinion poll taken recently showed that 85% (25%) of the adult population believes that the government should support the factory.

In your opinion should the government support the plant?

Glass bottles are more costly than plastic. If more soft drinks were sold in glass bottles this would ensure continued operation of the plant. Would you be willing to bear the expense of an additional IS15 to your monthly food bill to cover the additional production cost?

Notes

1. Israeli Shekel (IS). Exchange rates during this study were in the range of IS5.1–IL5.4 = €1.

2. Singhapakdi's first factor also included *probability of effect*, *temporal immediacy* and *concentration of effect*, which were not included in our analysis.
3. Even though *Phonecia* was the only manufacturer of glass bottles. However, many respondents probably did not know this fact.

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