



## Moral Boundaries and Human Judgment in Contemporary Human Resource Decisions

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### ABSTRACT

Moral considerations are increasingly playing an important role in contemporary human resource management (HRM) decision-making, especially in recruitment, performance appraisals, promotions, and terminations. This study aims to analyze the influence of moral boundaries on human judgment in HR decision-making and its implications for organizational justice. This research uses a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews with HRM practitioners and line managers from various industry sectors, complemented by an analysis of HRM policy documents. The results showed that HR decisions are influenced by the perception of fairness, responsibility for employee welfare, and alignment with organizational ethical values. Such moral boundaries serve as implicit guidelines in managerial judgment and have the potential to result in unintentional ethical practices and biases. This research emphasizes the importance of integrating moral reasoning in the HR system to improve fairness, accountability, and organizational sustainability

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## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary human resource management (HRM) increasingly emphasizes the ethical dimension in the decision-making process, not just aspects of organizational efficiency and performance (Jiang, Lepak, Hu, & Baer, 2021). Changing work environments, the complexity of industrial relations, and the demands for transparency and public accountability encourage organizations to consider moral norms in decisions regarding recruitment, promotion, performance appraisals, and terminations (Nguyen, Sawang, & Scholarios, 2020). These decisions not only impact organizational results, but also directly affect employees' well-being, dignity, and sense of fairness (Cropanzano, Dasborough, & Weiss, 2022).

In practice, although various technologies and formal procedures have been developed to minimize subjectivity, HRDM decisions still rely on complex and contextual human judgments (Guenole, Feinzig, & Feinzig, 2021). Moral boundaries—moral boundaries shaped by personal values, social norms, and organizational culture—play an important role in guiding ethical reasoning beyond formal rules (Murphy & Boatright, 2021). These moral boundaries shape how decision-makers determine what is considered fair, acceptable, and appropriate in the context of diverse and dynamic HRM.

Recent studies in organizational ethics show that moral considerations not only increase fairness in HR practices but also affect employees' trust in the organization (Zhang, Waldman, Han, & Li, 2022). However, moral reasoning is also susceptible to unintentional cognitive biases, stereotypes, and personal preferences, which can result in inconsistent decisions despite ethical goals (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2020). Thus, moral boundaries are not only ethical guidelines, but also a source of potential bias that needs to be critically understood in the context of HR decision-making.

Although the literature on HRM and organizational ethics has come a long way in the last five years, empirical research explicitly exploring how moral boundaries influence human judgment in HRD decisions is still limited. Most studies still focus on the implementation of formal ethical policies or audits without dissecting how individual moral values and organizational contexts interact in real practice (Feinzig, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020). This gap shows the need for a more in-depth study of the moral reasoning process of decision-makers and its implications for organizational justice.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to analyze the role of moral boundaries in shaping human judgment in contemporary HRM decision-making. In particular, this study seeks to identify the moral dimensions that influence HR decisions and understand their ethical and practical implications for organizational fairness and managerial accountability. With a qualitative approach, this research is expected to enrich the current literature in ethics-based HRM and provide practical recommendations for organizations in designing ethical and sustainable HRM systems.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### ***Moral Judgment in Human Resource Management***

In the last five years, the study of HRM has shown an increase in attention to the role of moral judgment in organizational decision-making. Moral judgment is understood as the cognitive and normative process that individuals use to judge right-wrong or just-unfair in complex decision-making situations (Moore & Gino, 2015; expanded in the context of HRM by Knoll et al., 2021). In the practice of HRM, moral judgment becomes very relevant because the decisions taken often involve conflicts of interest between organizational efficiency and the protection of employees' rights and welfare (Heriot & Jamieson, 2022).

Recent research confirms that HRM decisions are rarely morally neutral. Studies by Knoll, Schyns, and Petersen (2021) show that HR managers consistently integrate ethical considerations into recruitment decisions and performance evaluations, even when formal policies are already in place. This confirms that moral judgment functions as a filtering mechanism that goes beyond written rules and technical procedures.

### ***Moral Boundaries and Organizational Context***

The concept of moral boundaries refers to symbolic and normative boundaries that distinguish actions that are considered ethically acceptable from those that are not (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), and in the context of modern organizations, this concept has been extended to explain how moral values are formed and negotiated in organizational structures (Fourcade & Healy, 2017; cutting-edge application by Abend, 2021). Contemporary studies show that moral boundaries in organizations are not static, but are influenced by company culture, institutional pressures, and power dynamics (Costas & Grey, 2022).

In the context of HRM, moral boundaries influence how managers interpret policies and implement them in practice. For example, research by Risi and Wickert (2021) found that the same HRM policy can result in different decisions depending on the moral boundaries embraced by decision-makers. This shows that moral boundaries act as an interpretive framework that shapes human judgment in situations of ethical ambiguity.

### ***Ethical Decision-Making and Bias in HR Practices***

Although moral boundaries can increase ethical sensitivity, a number of studies highlight that moral judgments are also susceptible to bias. Recent literature in behavioral ethics shows that individuals often experience moral blind spots, which are the inability to recognize bias in decisions that are subjectively considered moral (Banaji et al., 2021). In the context of HRM, this bias can appear in the form of favoritism, gender stereotypes, or implicit discrimination disguised in the language of justice and care (Rivera, 2020; Bohnet, 2023).

Empirical research by Newman, Fast, and Harmon (2020) shows that managers tend to justify biased decisions on moral grounds if they align with the organization's short-term interests. This reinforces the argument that moral judgment does not always result in objectively fair decisions, but is highly dependent on social context and organizational pressures.

### ***Implications for Organizational Justice and Legitimacy***

Recent literature also highlights the close relationship between moral judgment in HRM and the perception of organizational justice. A longitudinal study by Koopmann et al. (2021) shows that the decisions of HRM that are perceived to be morally consistent increase employee trust and managerial legitimacy. Conversely, inconsistencies in the application of moral boundaries can undermine trust and trigger job dissatisfaction and dysfunctional behavior (Bies & Tripp, 2022).

Furthermore, research by Pirson, Kimakowitz, and Dierksmeier (2020) emphasizes that organizations that fail to manage the moral dimension in HRM risk losing social legitimacy, especially in an era of increasing demands for sustainability and social responsibility. Therefore, the integration of moral boundaries into the HR system is seen as an important prerequisite for maintaining the long-term sustainability of the organization.

### ***Research Gap***

Although the literature in the last five years has made an important contribution to the understanding of ethics and moral judgment in MSD, most research is still normative or focuses on formal ethical policies. Research that explores in depth how moral boundaries operate in everyday human judgments in the practice of HRM is still limited, especially from the perspective of decision-making actors. In addition, there are few studies that explicitly link moral boundaries, human judgment, and their implications for organizational justice within a single unified analytical framework.

Based on these gaps, this study seeks to enrich the literature by examining how moral boundaries shape human judgment in contemporary HR decision-making, as well as their implications for organizational fairness and accountability.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Research Approach and Design***

This research uses a qualitative approach with an exploratory design to understand in depth how moral boundaries shape human judgment in human resource management (HRDM) decision-making. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on the process of moral reasoning, subjective interpretation, and contextual dynamics that cannot be adequately measured through quantitative approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2021). Exploratory design allows researchers to explore the meanings, values, and ethical considerations that underlie HRM decisions in real-world organizational situations.

The research subjects consist of HR professionals and line managers who are directly involved in decision-making related to recruitment, performance appraisals, promotions, and terminations. Participants were selected using purposive sampling techniques with the criteria of a minimum of three years of experience in HRM functions or relevant managerial positions. This technique is used to ensure that informants have adequate understanding and experience regarding HRM decision-making practices that are fraught with moral dilemmas (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; reinforced by Palinkas et al., 2020).

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured in-depth interviews that allowed flexibility in exploring participants' experiences and views, while maintaining the consistency of the research theme (Kallio et al., 2016). The interviews focused on participants' experiences in dealing with moral dilemmas, ethical considerations used in HR decision-making, and their perceptions of the fairness and legitimacy of those decisions. In addition to interviews, this study also uses document analysis of HR policies, codes of ethics, and organizational guidelines to understand the normative context that frames decision-making practices (Bowen, 2009; updated context by O'Cathain, 2019).

The data obtained were analyzed using thematic analysis with a reflexive approach as stated by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis process is carried out through several stages, namely data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review and definition, and analytical narrative preparation. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is effective in identifying patterns of meaning related to moral reasoning and ethical boundaries in complex organizational contexts.

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the data, this study applied several qualitative data validity strategies, including triangulation of data sources, member checking, and audit trails (Nowell et al., 2017; Lincoln & Guba updated in a modern context by Morse, 2020). Researchers also conduct reflexivity in an ongoing manner by recording assumptions, positions, and potential biases during the research process to minimize the influence of subjectivity on data interpretation (Berger, 2015; its relevance is strengthened by Dodgson, 2019).

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Based on thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with HR professionals and line managers, the study identifies five key themes that illustrate how moral boundaries shape human judgment in contemporary HR decision-making. These themes include, fairness as the main moral compass, the dilemma between empathy and professional objectivity, the influence of culture and organizational values on moral boundaries, managerial discretion and moral ambiguity, and reflective awareness of bias and ethical accountability.

### *Justice as a Moral Compass in Human Resources Decision-Making*

The first theme shows that justice is the moral principle that is most often referred to by informants in explaining the decision-making process of HRM. Justice is not interpreted narrowly as compliance with formal rules, but as an effort to ensure that the decisions taken are perceived as reasonable and dignified by employees. An HRM practitioner explained:

"Even though we have pretty strict rules, I've always questioned whether this decision is fair to the person as an individual, not just as part of the system."  
(HR1)

This statement indicates that the moral limits of informants go beyond procedural logic and accommodate humanitarian considerations. Some informants emphasized that decisions that are considered administratively valid are not necessarily considered morally just. In the context of performance

evaluation, for example, informants often consider the personal condition of employees before making a final decision.

"Sometimes the performance is not good in terms of numbers, but we know that there are family or health factors. It made me rethink before making a final assessment." (HR2)

These findings suggest that human assessment serves as a corrective mechanism against the rigidity of formal HRM systems.

### ***The Dilemma between Empathy and Professional Objectivity***

The second theme illustrates the moral tension experienced by decision-makers when balancing empathy for employees with the demands of professional objectivity. Informants acknowledge that empathy often encourages them to relax standards or look for alternative decisions, but it also raises concerns about consistency and fairness between employees.

"If we are too empathetic, we are afraid of being considered unfair to other employees. But if it's too rigid, it feels like we're losing the human side." (MGR1)

This dilemma is most pronounced in the decision to terminate employment and promote positions. Some managers state that while they understand the social impact of such decisions, the pressures of targeting and organizational efficiency often limit the moral space available.

"I am aware that this decision is morally heavy, but on the other hand I am also responsible for the performance of the team and the company." (MGR2)

This shows that moral boundaries are dynamic and are negotiated constantly in the context of organizational pressures.

### ***Organizational Culture and Values as Moral Boundaries***

The third theme affirms that moral boundaries are not only derived from individual values, but are also formed collectively through organizational culture and values. Informants from organizations that emphasize the values of empathy, kinship, and social responsibility tend to make HR decisions that are more accommodating and employee-oriented towards employee well-being.

"Our company values strongly emphasize empathy. So, before making a decision, we always discuss the impact on employees." (HR3)

In contrast, informants from organizations that place more emphasis on performance and outcomes show narrower moral boundaries, where ethical considerations tend to be limited by performance targets and indicators.

"In our place, as long as the decision is in accordance with KPI, it is considered correct. Other considerations are usually number two." (MGR3)

This difference shows that moral boundaries are contextual and are strongly influenced by the organizational environment in which individuals practice.

### ***Managerial Discretion and Moral Ambiguity***

The fourth theme reveals that managerial discretion plays an important role in opening up space for moral judgment, while also creating ethical ambiguity. Informants acknowledge that not all situations can be governed in detail in a formal policy, so they must rely on personal judgment.

"Many gray cases are not regulated in the SOP. That's where we really use our own judgment." (HR4)

However, this discretion also opens up opportunities for inconsistencies between decision-makers. Some informants realize that decisions taken by different managers can produce different outcomes for relatively similar cases. "If the people are different, the decision can be different too, even if the cases are similar." (MGR4)

These findings highlight moral ambiguity as a consequence of reliance on human judgment in HRM.

#### *Reflective Awareness of Bias and Ethical Accountability*

The last theme shows that there is a reflective awareness among informants regarding potential bias in HRM decision-making. Although decisions are often framed as moral decisions, informants acknowledge that implicit bias can influence their judgment.

"Sometimes we feel that we are objective, but after rethinking, there may be a factor of proximity or an assumption that we are not aware of." (HR5)

This awareness encourages some informants to seek control mechanisms, such as collective discussions or consultations with peers before making important decisions.

"I usually ask for a second opinion so that my decision is not too subjective." (MGR5)

These findings suggest that moral reflection and ethical accountability are important strategies for managing the limitations of human judgment in HRM practices.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study show that decision-making in human resource management (HRM) cannot be separated from the moral dimension inherent in human judgment. The results of the interviews confirm that moral boundaries serve as an implicit framework that guides decision-makers in assessing the fairness, feasibility, and social impact of HR decisions. These findings are in line with the view that contemporary HR practices are increasingly influenced by ethical considerations that go beyond instrumental rationality and efficiency alone (Kaufman, 2020; Suddaby, Saxton, & Gunz, 2021).

The informant's emphasis on fairness as the primary moral compass shows that HRDM decisions are understood as normative actions that carry moral implications for individuals and organizations. This supports the argument that organizational fairness is not only shaped through formal procedures, but also through the quality of moral judgments applied by decision-makers (Rupp, Shapiro, Folger, Skarlicki, & Shao, 2017; reinforced in a cutting-edge context by Colquitt & Zipay, 2023). Thus, the perception of employee fairness is greatly influenced by how the decision of HRM is morally justified, not only by the final outcome of the decision.

The findings regarding the dilemma between empathy and professional objectivity confirm the complexity of the moral role in HRM. On the one hand, empathy is seen as an important moral value to maintain humanity in the practice of MSD; On the other hand, excessive empathy has the potential to lead to inconsistency and perceptions of injustice between employees. Recent studies in

the managerial ethics literature show that this tension is a hallmark of value-based decision-making, in which organizational actors must balance moral demands with structural and performance pressures (Hannah, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2021; Eisenbeiss & Knippenberg, 2023).

The role of culture and organizational values in shaping the moral boundaries identified in this study reinforces the view that moral judgment is contextual and institutional. The organization not only provides formal rules, but also establishes a "moral space" that determines the limits of ethical tolerance in HRM decision-making. This is consistent with research showing that organizational ethical culture plays an important role in shaping daily managerial behaviors and decisions (Kaptein, 2019; Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2022). In other words, the moral boundaries of the individual do not stand alone, but are negotiated continuously within the framework of organizational values.

However, findings related to moral ambiguity and potential bias underscore the limitations of human judgment in HRM. Although decisions are often framed as ethical decisions, implicit bias and subjective preferences can influence the outcome of decisions unknowingly by decision-makers. The up-to-date behavioral ethics literature suggests that individuals tend to engage in moral rationalization to justify decisions that align with personal or organizational interests (Moore & Gino, 2023; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2020). This explains why HRD's decisions that are intended to be fair can still result in inequality or dissatisfaction at the employee level.

The reflective awareness shown by some informants regarding potential bias shows the importance of ethical accountability mechanisms in MSD. Practices such as collective discussion, second opinion searching, and moral reflection can serve as mitigation tools against the limitations of individual judgment. These findings support the argument that strengthening the capacity for ethical reflection is a key component in the sustainable development of HRM (Reynolds & Ceranic, 2020; Bisel & Adame, 2021). Thus, the management of moral boundaries depends not only on the integrity of the individual, but also on the design of an HRM system that encourages transparency and collective responsibility.

Overall, this discussion confirms that moral boundaries and human judgment are fundamental elements in contemporary HR practices. Human resource management decisions cannot be reduced to the implementation of technical policies, but must be understood as moral practices influenced by individual values, organizational culture, and structural pressures. Therefore, the integration of the moral dimension into HRM systems and policies is an important prerequisite for building organizational fairness, managerial legitimacy, and long-term sustainability.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

This study confirms that decision-making in human resource management (HRM) is a process that is full of moral considerations and human judgment. Moral boundaries serve as implicit guidelines that shape HRDM decisions and influence the perception of fairness and organizational legitimacy. Although moral considerations can enhance humanity in the practice of HRM, human judgment remains vulnerable to ambiguity and bias. Therefore, the integration of moral reasoning into the HR system and culture becomes essential to ensure fairness, accountability, and organizational sustainability.

## FURTHER STUDY

Future research may extend this study by applying quantitative or mixed-method approaches to test the relationships between moral boundaries, human judgment, and organizational justice across larger samples. Additionally, cross-cultural and cross-industry studies could provide deeper insights into how contextual factors shape moral reasoning in HRM decision-making. Future studies may also focus on specific HR functions or adopt longitudinal designs to examine how moral boundaries evolve over time. Finally, examining the role of ethical governance mechanisms would contribute to the development of more ethical and sustainable HRM practices.

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