

## Reflection and action

### *A study on moral learning consultation within DJI*

#### **English Summary**

*Below, you will find a summary of the final report of a study on moral learning consultation ('moreel leeroverleg') within Dienst Justitiële Inrichtingen (DJI). The study was conducted by the dr. Gijs van Houwelingen (project leader), dr. Niek Hoogervorst and Prof. Dr. Marius van Dijke from the Erasmus Centre of Behavioural Ethics (ECBE, Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University). The researchers used a mixture of empirical research (i.e., semi-structured interviews with DJI employees) and a literature study. The study was commissioned by the Scientific Research and Documentation Centre (WODC: "Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum") of the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice ("Ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie").*

The most important outcome of the study is a proposal for a pilot project regarding moral learning consultation (see chapter 5). We recommend addressing two moral pitfalls in this project: a lack of moral awareness and the excessive influence of automatic processes such as emotions and intuitions. Moral awareness refers to the ability to recognize and to act on moral aspects of a situation. Several processes can undermine moral awareness. One example is ethical fading: the fading of ethical aspects of a decision or action when we are often exposed to a stimulus or situation, or when we perform a certain act repeatedly. A second pitfall is judging or acting upon intuitions (heuristics, rules of thumb) or emotions without considering whether these intuitions provide the right course of action. Such intuitive processes often play a much larger role than people realize; people believe that moral judgments are driven by moral reasoning and that emotions play, or should play an insignificant role. Moral reasoning, however, is more frequently employed to justify moral judgment than to shape it. Put differently, moral judgment is frequently driven by intuitions and emotions; moral reasoning usually provides post hoc explanations of these judgments to others.

The proposed pilot project is intended to help individuals in avoiding both moral pitfalls. The project focuses on stimulating moral awareness, but also on acquiring techniques to better cope with unwanted effects of automatic processes. Moral awareness could be stimulated by means of moral deliberation. Moral deliberation is a type of moral conversation that, in a structured manner, sheds light on the moral aspects of specific situations from practice. Moral deliberation increases moral awareness because it helps interpreting dilemmas from a moral perspective, and because it creates social consensus about the appropriate course of action in specific situations.

It is important that people learn to better control, but not suppress the influence of automatic processes (intuitions and emotions). Emotions and intuitions often provide important information and operate faster than conscious processes. Hence, they can be of great importance in situations that require swift action. A number of factors contribute to an increased ability to use automatic input in the moral judgment process. First, stress reduction is important. Research shows that people under stress are more likely to rely on automatic processes. In general, work at DJI is experienced as stressful. This is mainly due to the population that employees work with - prisoners can act in unpleasant and/or unpredictable ways. We therefore propose to include stress reduction exercises in the pilot project. A second major source of stress is a lack of trust within the organization. People experience more stress when they believe that others in the organization cannot be trusted. Part of the stress of the DJI employees is also caused by the fact that prisoners can sometimes be difficult to trust. Research shows that trust in certain actors, such as managers and colleagues, can provide a buffer against the effects of a lack of trust in

others (in this case, prisoners). It is therefore important that the pilot project will be conducted within a strong climate of trust.

Even if stress is not high, people sometimes get carried away by their emotions. For example, people may experience a strong sense of disgust with respect to a person who does not take good care of him- or herself. It has been shown that such feelings can substantially strengthen moral disapproval. Put differently, people will more quickly and more strongly disapprove of behavior from a person who evokes disgust compared to similar behavior from a person who does not evoke disgust. DJI employees, however, are expected to treat everyone the same way.

An effective way of dealing with the influence of emotions is by exercising emotion reappraisal. Emotion reappraisal helps people to put emotions in a proper perspective so that they are less likely to feel overwhelmed. An example is the adoption of a third person perspective in emotional situations, e.g., the perspective of an admired role model ("What would X do?"). This approach reduces the intensity of the emotion, but does not suppress it. This is important because suppressing emotions has been found to have adverse effects on mental health.

A similar argument can be made about the influence of intuitions: this influence is not necessarily harmful, provided that intuitions point us in the right direction. Intuition is a fairly broad term that refers to a variety of automatic and unconscious processes. What these processes have in common is that they are all based on very basic decision rules that we automatically apply without thinking ("if this, then that"), mostly because we are used to doing so. An example of a moral intuition that many people hold is that incest is morally reprehensible. Even if the most often mentioned reasons for such reprehension do not apply (for example, there is no risk of pregnancy or psychological damage), most people will still condemn incestuous relationships. One way to deal with the influence of intuitions is by taking a critical look at these intuitions and, if necessary, improve them with a lot of training and repetition. Such efforts are better known as building moral expertise. In the pilot project we propose increasing moral expertise through the formulation of so-called 'fast and frugal decision trees': simple decision trees that are easy to learn and that help people to take decisions quickly. There is already much experience with applying such decision trees successfully in other contexts, such as health care.

In this report, we propose a pilot project that aims to support and encourage employees to avoid pitfalls (lack of moral awareness, too much influence of emotions and intuitions) that undermine their moral decision-making. To achieve this, the project consists of a mixture of information and knowledge transfer (e.g., on the influence of automatic processes), moral deliberation (aimed at boosting moral awareness) and exercises (that help people cope with the impact of automatic processes). We recommend that the project will be evaluated in at least two stages: an exploratory and confirmatory stage. In the exploratory stage, a process and outcome evaluation should be implemented and the project will be further optimized in consultation with the participants. Assuming that the outcome of this process and outcome evaluation is positive, the confirmatory stage should focus on quantifying the effects of the project. We propose a so called clustered-step-wedge-design. This implies that the group that participates in the moral learning consultation is compared with two control groups: one group that does not participate and another group who participates in more traditional 'peer' meetings. This approach should help to determine the effectiveness of the intervention. These control groups will also participate in the moral learning consultation eventually, though at a later time.