

# Promoting Ethical Sensitivity in Nursing Education: A Systematic Review of Case Study-Based Health Education

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**Abstract:** *Introduction:* Nursing ethical sensitivity refers to a nurse's capacity for thoughtful consideration of ethical issues when faced with dilemmas. In the nursing domain, ethical dilemmas arise when nurses face challenges in making sound ethical decisions during clinical practice. These challenges may stem from conflicts between personal values and professional responsibilities. *Methodology:* Articles downloaded from Pub Med, CNKI, and Google Scholar were reviewed. *Results:* After rigorous screening, a meticulous analysis was conducted, encompassing 10 articles and involving a substantial cohort of 2863 participants. Existing literature revealed variations in the ethical dilemmas faced by nurses across different departments. The ethical sensitivity of nurses also varies, with higher ethical sensitivity correlating with stronger empathetic abilities. Zhen *et al.* classified the causes of ethical dilemmas into four main categories: (1) Ethical dilemmas arising from personal reasons of nursing students; (2) Ethical dilemmas stemming from the actions of teachers; (3) Ethical dilemmas triggered by patients; (4) Ethical dilemmas resulting from miscellaneous reasons. **Conclusion:** According to literature findings, nursing ethical sensitivity was positively linked to the nurse's ethical decision-making ability. A case study-oriented teaching program has proven effective in enhancing ethical sensitivity among nursing students.

**Keywords:** Ethical sensitivity; Ethical dilemma; Case study education; Nursing ethical sensitivity scale; Influencing factors; Nursing student

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## 1. Introduction

In contemporary society, science and technology are developing rapidly, where cultures and values from different regions are colliding and integrating, medical technology is constantly evolving and progressing, healthcare models have been transformed, patients' life expectancy has been extended, and the quality of care has been improved. However, nurses often encounter ethical dilemmas in their clinical practice due to the high cost of healthcare, insufficient resources, and the clash of different values<sup>[1,2]</sup>. Nursing is no longer disease-centered, but more holistic with a focus on human spiritual, psychological, and emotional factors<sup>[3]</sup>. In daily clinical work, nurses should

have high ethical literacy and decision-making skills in addition to good professional competence <sup>[4]</sup>. Ethical dilemmas were first presented by Jameton, who argued that ethical dilemmas arise in some situations where nurses are expected to act in a morally appropriate manner but are unable to do so because of impediments in the form of rules and regulations <sup>[5]</sup>. Ethical dilemmas, also referred to as ethical confusion, are essentially multiple moral obligations that conflict with each other <sup>[6]</sup>.

Yang suggested that ethical dilemmas in nursing can affect the quality of nursing care and the development of the nursing profession, and considers that ethical dilemmas in nursing are an issue of concern <sup>[7]</sup>. Ethical dilemmas can cause some negative emotions such as fear, anger, and anxiety, which are not conducive to nurses working in the clinic and can reduce the quality of their work <sup>[2]</sup>. Ethical dilemmas result in moral injuries and experiments have shown that moral distress is positively associated with the nurses' willingness to leave their jobs <sup>[8]</sup>. Laurs *et al.* randomly selected 900 nurses out of 2,560 registered nurses in five large hospitals in Lithuania and conducted a questionnaire survey using the Moral Distress Scale-Revised (MDS-R), and received 612 responses with a response rate of 68% <sup>[8]</sup>. 32.3% of nurses felt that they suffered a low level of moral distress, 33.9% felt that they suffered a medium level of, and 33.8% felt that they suffered a high level. Nurses with high levels of moral distress were three times more likely to leave their jobs than nurses with moderate and low levels of moral distress.

The essence of nursing is humanistic care <sup>[9]</sup>. Ethical decision-making in nursing is required of all nurses in clinical practice and is affected by their gender, age, education, and literacy. Low ethical decision-making ability can put nurses in ethical dilemmas which can reduce the quality of care <sup>[10]</sup>.

Ethical dilemmas experienced by nurses in different departments in hospitals are not the same, according to Lusigani *et al.* <sup>[11]</sup>. Nurses in medical-surgical departments and intensive care units (ICUs) using the MDS-R were surveyed and found that the ethical dilemmas encountered by nurses in these departments with a high frequency of occurrence were performing some unnecessary treatments and tests on critically ill patients as per the doctor's orders, maintaining the patient's vital signs as requested by the family when the patient is in great distress and providing care to the patient that does not alleviate distress.

Trautmann *et al.* used the MDS-R to investigate ethical dilemmas of emergency department nurses and found that the most common ethical dilemma for nurses in this department was a decreased quality of care due to communication problems <sup>[12]</sup>. Sun *et al.* used the MDS-R to conduct a relevant survey of nurses in two hospitals in Tai'an City, a tertiary care hospital, and found that ineffective nursing care was the main cause of ethical dilemmas in nursing <sup>[13]</sup>. The types of ethical dilemmas encountered by nurses in different departments and circumstances in the clinic are not the same, hence appropriate teaching cases should be developed for different departments to guide clinical nurses to make better ethical decisions.

Ethical dilemmas can negatively impact nurses, affecting their mood and reducing the quality of nursing work. Ethical dilemmas should be faced head on and attention should be paid to the education related to ethical sensitivity. Ethical sensitivity is an integral part of the foundation of ethical action and a decrease in the ethical sensitivity of nurses can lead to moral disharmony <sup>[14]</sup>. Ethical sensitivity is the awareness of perceiving ethical issues without apparent ethical conflicts. This is manifested in responding to the ethical needs of others, anticipating certain actions that will harm or bring benefit to others, and judging whether any ethical principles or codes of conduct are violated. Good ethical sensitivity will help nurses make better ethical decisions, improve the quality of their work, reduce the probability of ethical conflicts in the clinic, and reduce the willingness of nurses to leave their jobs <sup>[15]</sup>.

Nurses with different levels of ethical sensitivity will differ in ways they handle problems encountered in the clinic, which in turn affects the relationship between nurses with their patients and doctors <sup>[16]</sup>. Yue *et al.*

suggested that the ethical sensitivity of nurses in tertiary hospitals is medium and there is room for improvement<sup>[17]</sup>. Interventions should be implemented by managers to improve the ethical sensitivity of nurses, which is conducive to the stabilization of the nursing workforce and the improvement of the quality of nursing services.

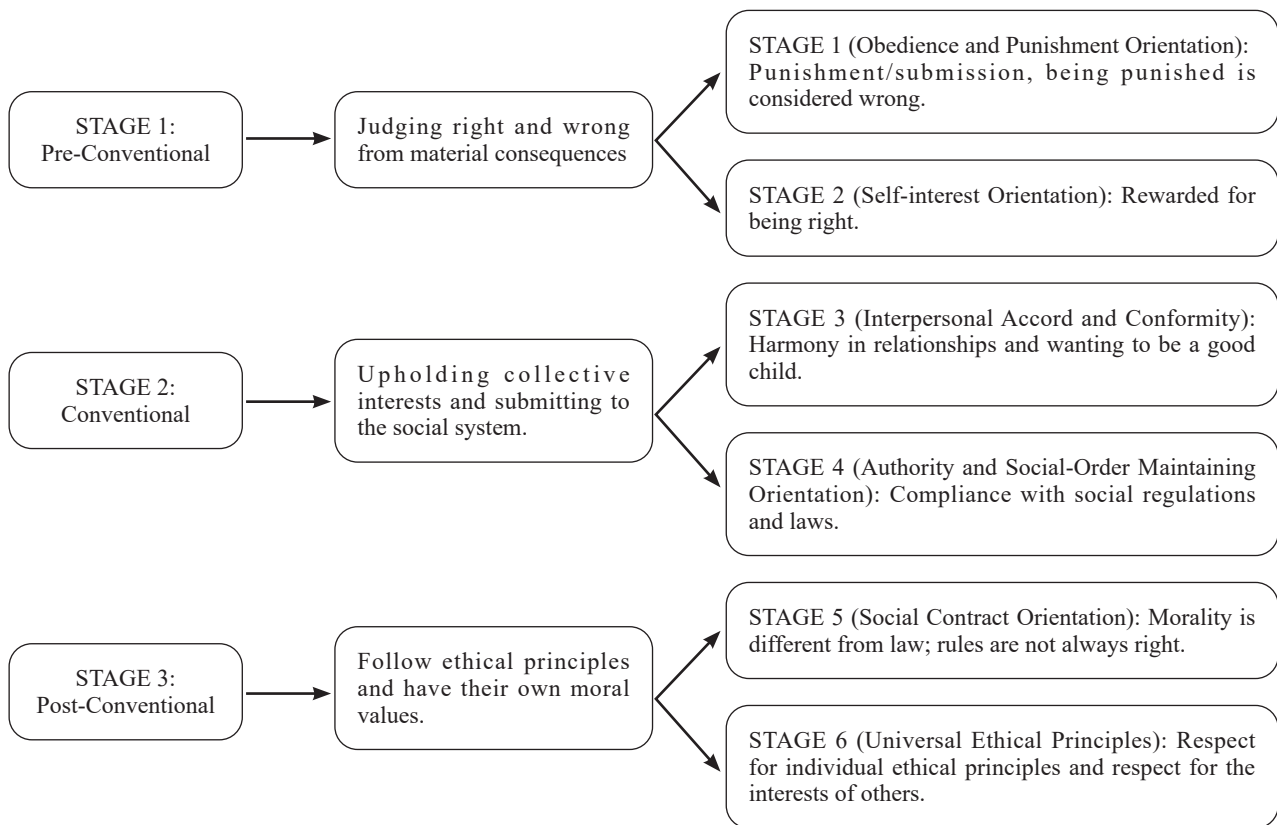
Zhou deployed a nurse ethical sensitivity questionnaire in Hunan Children's Hospital, using a whole group convenience sampling method, and surveyed 485 nurses<sup>[18]</sup>. The results showed that younger nurses had shorter working hours, poor work embeddedness, and a lower level of ethical sensitivity. Li *et al.* conducted a study on 438 pediatric nurses in Zhengzhou Children's Hospital on the correlation between ethical sensitivity, moral courage, and the ability to empathize<sup>[19]</sup>. Pediatric nurses are also required to deal with pressure from the children's parents, so their ethical sensitivity is low. It was found that the higher the nurses' ethical sensitivity, the higher the level of moral courage and level of empathy.

Wu *et al.* conducted a medical-surgical nursing (MSN) questionnaire survey on 184 nurses in hospice in 2022, and the results showed that the level of ethical sensitivity of nurses in hospice was medium<sup>[20]</sup>. Additionally, the level of ethical sensitivity was higher for females with high education who plan to work in hospice for a long time. Nursing students inevitably encounter ethical dilemmas in clinical practice. Clinical practice is the most appropriate way for nursing students to learn ethical guidelines and master ethical dilemma resolution<sup>[21]</sup>. Ghazanfari *et al.* believed that the factors can be divided into external, internal, and clinical factors and that nursing ethical dilemmas may bring potential negative impacts on the ethical sensitivity of nurses and even physical and mental health problems<sup>[22]</sup>.

Zhen *et al.* used a sampling method in a nursing school in Huafang selected 14 students for interviews, and classified the experimental results into four core categories. (1) Ethical dilemmas are caused by the nursing student's reasons; (2) Ethical dilemmas caused by leading teachers; (3) Ethical dilemmas caused by patients; (4) Ethical dilemmas are caused by other reasons. The core categories are interrelated, and to prevent and resolve the occurrence of ethical dilemmas, nursing students are required to be proficient in and appropriately apply ethical principles and norms, and be able to make reasonable ethical decisions in the clinic<sup>[23]</sup>.

### 1.1. Case study-based health education

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the Stages of Moral Development Theory by Lawrence Kohlberg, extending Jean Piaget's Occurrence Cognition Theory. Kohlberg categorized moral judgment into three levels and six stages as shown in **Figure 1**. Promoting ethical sensitivity in nurses is important and there are various ways of educating nursing students. The theoretical basis for improving ethical sensitivity in nurses is Kohlberg's Six Stages of Moral Development, which provides many new characteristics to moral judgment and divides it into 6 developmental stages<sup>[24]</sup>. Theoretical research on humanistic care in nursing should take into full consideration the diversity of humanistic care, address the gaps in the development of nursing practice, and promote institutional reform<sup>[25]</sup>. The current situation in medical ethics education is that the main knowledge of the teaching is insufficient, teachers and students do not have the same knowledge of medical ethics, and nursing students are not very concerned about their medical ethics. Nursing education is often in a single form, with class lectures as the main way. Furthermore, the teaching does not relate to reality and with insufficient content. The design concept of the case study-based teaching method includes correlating education with reality, which can increase the immersion experience of nursing students. Social activities can be carried out by implementing role-playing methods in case studies, which will improve the spirit of teamwork. The role-playing is based on real-life cases, which is manipulatable, and is suitable learning content for nursing students<sup>[10]</sup>.



**Figure 1.** Kohlberg's six stages of moral development conceptual graph

Yang *et al.* conducted a case study teaching method for nursing students with different academic qualifications to increase their sensitivity to ethical issues and promote analytical and problem-solving skills<sup>[26]</sup>. Zhang selected 105 current nursing students at her school and taught them using the case-based teaching method, where questionnaires were distributed at the end of the course and achieved a 100% return rate<sup>[32]</sup>. Nursing ethics teaching was arranged in the second and third academic years, with a total of 40 class hours, using specific cases to deepen the understanding of principle issues. The results of the survey showed that before the class started, only 29.52% of the students were willing to listen to the class, and after the class started, 75.24% of the students were willing to listen. There were 73.33% of students thought that they improved in medical ethics and 74.29% thought that they improved their ability to analyze and solve ethical dilemmas. Zhang believed that the use of case-based teaching methods to educate nursing students about nursing ethics helped nursing students grasp and apply ethical principles and moral theories, increased sensitivity to ethical dilemmas, improved nursing their ability to analyze and resolve ethical dilemmas, and better assisted them to make appropriate choices when encountering ethical dilemmas in clinical practice<sup>[32]</sup>. Case-based teaching can better develop nursing students' sense of ethics and develop their ability to apply their knowledge in real-life situations<sup>[27]</sup>.

## 1.2. A study of an ethical sensitivity assessment tool for nurses

Ethical sensitivity is a new field of study following the traditional study of ethical judgment and theory<sup>[28]</sup>. The mainstream scale for measuring nurses' ethical sensitivity is the Moral Sensitivity Questionnaire (MSQ) developed by Swedish scholars. However, Tuvevsson *et al.* thought that the Moral Sensitivity Questionnaire (MSQ) was not fully suitable for nursing students<sup>[29]</sup>. Comparatively, the Ethical Sensitivity Questionnaire for Nursing Students (ESQ-NS) has good reliability and validity and is more suitable for assessing the level of ethical sensitivity of nursing students<sup>[30]</sup>.

This literature describes how to improve nursing students' ethical sensitivity using case study-based teaching methods. The recommended ethical sensitivity scale for nursing students is the ESQ-NS developed by Japanese scholars Muramatsu *et al.* [31]. This scale uses Cronbach's- $\alpha$  coefficient to measure reliability. In general, Cronbach's- $\alpha$  values greater than 0.9 indicate redundancy for some items, 0.70–0.90 indicates good internal consistency and 0.50–0.69 indicates poor internal consistency. The ESQ-NS scale had a Cronbach's- $\alpha$  coefficient of 0.81 for personal respect, 0.79 for distributive justice, 0.79 for maintaining patients' confidentiality, and 0.77 for good reliability [31].

## 2. Methodology

A search was performed to identify the articles to examine the role of case study-based teaching methodology on the enhancement of ethical sensitivity in nursing students. Data were collected from PubMed, Google Scholar, CNKI, etc. Keywords used include “ethical sensitivity,” “ethical dilemma,” “case study education,” “nursing ethical sensitivity scale,” “influencing factors,” and “nursing student.”

## 3. Result

After thorough screening, a meticulous analysis was conducted, encompassing 10 articles and a substantial cohort of 2863 participants. The articles searched and referenced in this literature were from countries such as China, Malaysia, the USA, and Japan. The sampling methods varied, such as the purposive sampling method and the random sampling method. The experimental methods were qualitative research, quantitative research, and mixed research. The number of experiments in the reference-related literature is mostly 100–400, which was somewhat informative. **Table 1** summarizes the relevant articles found and referenced.

**Table 1.** Articles obtained related to the role of case study-based teaching in enhancing nursing student's ethical sensitivity

Authors	Title	Conclusion
Su Xiangdan, et al., 2021	Analysis of Correlation Among Professional Values, Ethical Sensitivity, and Ethical Decision-Making of Undergraduate Nursing Students From a University in Henan Province	The ethical decision-making skills of undergraduate nursing students are medium and need further improvement.
Chen Xuelei, et al., 2019	Correlation Between Nurses' Ethical Sensitivity and Empathy Ability in Three Tertiary Hospitals	Nurses' ethical sensitivity and empathy are closely related, and training related to ethical sensitivity should be strengthened to improve empathy.
Farideh Namadi, et al., 2019	The Effects of Nursing Ethics Education Through Case-Based Learning on Moral Reasoning Among Nursing Students	Utilizing CBL for nursing ethics education proves effective in enhancing moral reasoning abilities among nursing students.
Zhang Xiaohong, 2010	The Use of Case-Based Teaching in The Teaching of Nursing Ethics	Case-based teaching can enhance nursing students' sensitivity to medical ethics issues and improve their ability to analyze and solve problems.
Yang Fang, et al., 2000	Use of The Case Study Approach in Teaching Nursing Ethics	Case-based teaching can better stimulate the initiative and motivation of nursing students and better develop their ability to apply knowledge.
Zhou Si, 2022	Analysis of Status Quo and Influencing Factors of Moral Sensitivity of Nurses in a Tertiary Grade A Children's Hospital	The level of ethical sensitivity of nurses in children's hospitals was moderately high, with lower levels of ethical sensitivity among younger nurses, who had shorter working hours and low empathy.

**Table 1 (Continued)**

Authors	Title	Conclusion
Zhen Shuo, et al., 2019	A Qualitative Study of Ethical Dilemmas in Clinical Practice Among Senior Nursing Students	Nursing students should not only learn to apply ethical principles but also develop medical humanism.
Yue Xinyan, et al., 2021	Analysis of Status Quo And Influencing Factors of Ethical Sensitivity Among Nurses in Tertiary Hospitals	Hospital administrators should target interventions for nurses to improve ethical sensitivity in nursing.
Zhu Lei, et al., 2020	Effect of Case Analysis Combined With Scene Simulation on Ethical Decision-Making Competence of Higher Vocational Nursing Students	Case analysis combined with Scene Simulation helps to improve the ethical sensitivity of nursing students and is more effective than traditional teaching methods.
Miao Meijing, et al., 2008	Application of A Case-Based Approach to Teaching and Learning in a Nursing Ethics Course	The case study teaching method promotes group thinking, improves student initiative, and increases interest in learning.

## 4. Conclusion

Nursing ethical sensitivity is the ability of nurses to cope with and recognize ethical dilemmas in clinical work and is positively correlated with their ethical decision-making ability. Exploring ways to enhance nurses' ethical sensitivity is beneficial to the cultivation of excellent nursing professionals. A case study-based teaching approach provides nursing students with specific cases in which students can simulate real-life scenarios and improve their empathy. The ESQ-NS can better measure the ethical sensitivity of nursing students. However, in-depth research and investigation of nursing ethical sensitivity in the future is conducive to better promoting the ethical sensitivity of nursing students.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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