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THE IMPACT OF ETHICAL DILEMMAS ON THE CAREER ASPIRATIONS OF CRIMINOLOGY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how ethical dilemmas influence the academic experiences, moral reasoning, and career aspirations of criminology students in General Santos City, Philippines. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, the researchers purposively selected six criminology students from Mindanao Polytechnic College, Holy Trinity College, and Ramon Magsaysay Memorial College. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and written responses, then examined through inductive thematic analysis and interpreted using Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. Findings showed that students encountered ethical tensions involving conflicts with instructors, peer pressure, bullying, confidentiality during fieldwork, and academic dishonesty. These experiences generated moral discomfort and uncertainty, while also encouraging reflection, critical thinking, and stronger commitments to integrity. Participants expressed interest in careers and agencies that value fairness, transparency, accountability, rehabilitation, and human rights. Financial hardship and perceived institutional barriers, however, complicated their aspirations. Students reported coping through emotional control, reflection, consultation with peers or faculty, and decisions guided by personal principles, professional codes, and potential consequences. The findings suggest that ethics education should extend beyond lectures to include scenario-based exercises, guided reflection, accessible reporting and feedback mechanisms, faculty mentorship, and career guidance that addresses ethical realities in criminal justice work. Because the study involved six purposively selected participants in one city, the findings provide contextual insight rather than statistical generalization.

Keywords: *criminology students*, *ethical dilemmas*, *career aspirations*, *moral reasoning*, *ethical resilience*, *professional*

INTRODUCTION

Ethical dilemmas arise when people must choose among competing obligations, values, or possible consequences. In criminology and criminal justice, such dilemmas may involve balancing legal duties, fairness, confidentiality, public safety, human rights, and personal moral convictions. Ethical tensions are relevant not only to experienced practitioners but also to students as they encounter classroom discussions, group assignments, internships, and fieldwork. Research on criminological ethics emphasizes that the relationship between research or professional responsibilities and moral obligations can be complex (Adorjan & Ricciardelli, 2021; Castro Toledo, 2020).

Criminology students often enter their programs with an interest in justice, public service, and crime prevention. Their professional goals may develop as they gain experience and learn more about the realities of criminal justice work. Research on students' motivations for studying criminology highlights interests in justice, helping others, and future career possibilities (Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2022). Philippine studies have also examined criminology students' career preferences and the financial or structural challenges that can shape career plans (Aroy et al., 2024; Nobis, 2025). Experiential learning, including practical activities and field placements, can connect classroom concepts with real-world situations and prompt reflection on professional responsibilities (Coleman, 2024; Commission on Higher Education, 2018; Tiessen, 2024).

Moral development provides a useful lens for understanding how students interpret these experiences. Kohlberg's theory describes changes in moral reasoning from decisions oriented toward personal consequences and social expectations to reasoning based on broader ethical principles (Kohlberg, 1981). Rest's work further emphasizes that ethical action involves more than identifying a moral issue; it also involves judgment, motivation, and follow-through (Rest, 1986). Research on dilemma-based ethics learning likewise examines how structured discussion can support moral reasoning, while studies of practicum experiences describe the emotional and practical tensions students may encounter (Juujärvi & Myyry, 2022; Wang et al., 2022).

The thesis on which this article is based identified a need to understand how ethical dilemmas specifically shape the career aspirations of criminology students in General Santos City. Existing literature discussed criminology career motivations, ethical issues, and professional expectations, but the researchers identified limited local exploration of the connection between students' lived ethical experiences and their future career decisions. The present study therefore examined students' experiences across three institutions and considered how they responded to ethical conflicts, how these experiences shaped their career goals, and what forms of educational support may help prepare them for professional practice.

Research Questions

1. How do ethical dilemmas shape the experiences and academic journeys of criminology students during their studies?
2. How do these ethical dilemmas influence the career aspirations and decisions of criminology students?

3. How do criminology students approach and resolve ethical conflicts in the context of the criminal justice field?

METHODOLOGY

The researchers used a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of criminology students who had encountered ethical dilemmas during their academic studies or practical training. The study was conducted in General Santos City, Philippines, and involved students from Mindanao Polytechnic College, Holy Trinity College, and Ramon Magsaysay Memorial College during the 2024–2025 academic year.

Six participants were selected through purposive sampling because they could describe relevant ethical experiences. The participants were identified as P1 to P6 to protect their identities. Their experiences included navigating concerns with instructors, financial and institutional constraints, witnessing bullying during field exposure, managing sensitive disclosures during field research, and responding to academic dishonesty or pressure to overlook errors.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and written responses guided by questions aligned with the study's three research questions. The open-ended format allowed participants to describe events, their interpretations, the decisions they made, and the influence of these experiences on their career plans. Field notes and interview transcripts supported the analysis. The thesis describes transcription review and peer debriefing as steps used to support the accuracy and coherence of interpretation.

The researchers applied inductive thematic analysis. They reviewed the narratives, coded meaningful statements, grouped related codes into categories, and developed broader themes. The themes were interpreted using Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development, with Rest's Four-Component Model also used in the discussion to consider the processes involved in ethical action. Trustworthiness was supported through in-depth interviews, comparison of interview material with field notes, peer debriefing, an audit trail, and researcher reflexivity.

Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and participants were advised of their right to withdraw. The researchers reported maintaining confidentiality and anonymity and securely storing research data. The study's principal limitation is its small, purposively selected sample from three institutions in one city; its findings are context-specific and are not intended to represent all criminology students.

RESULTS

The findings below retain the three research-question areas, the themes and subthemes presented in Chapter IV of the thesis, and illustrative statements from all six

participants (P1–P6). Participant labels are retained to protect anonymity. Translations are included where the original thesis provided them.

Research Question 1: Ethical Dilemmas in Students' Academic and Field Experiences

The thesis grouped the findings for this question under two major themes: Moral Conflict During Training and Ethical Resilience and Preparedness. The associated core ideas were Confronting Dishonesty and Ethical Pressure, and Developing Integrity and Confidence Through Dilemmas. Both were classified as general responses in the thesis, indicating that these experiences appeared broadly across the participants' accounts.

Table 1. Ethical dilemmas shape the experiences and academic journeys of criminology students during their studies.

Major Themes	Core Ideas	Frequency of Responses
Moral Conflict During Training	Confronting dishonesty and ethical pressure	General
Ethical Resilience and Preparedness	Developing integrity and confidence through dilemmas	General

Theme 1. Moral Conflict During Training

Participants described ethical tension in classroom interactions, group work, research, and field exposure. The dilemmas involved difficulty voicing concerns to instructors, pressure to conform to peers, witnessing bullying, receiving sensitive disclosures, and being asked to overlook or alter academic information. The accounts showed that students had to weigh personal integrity against authority, peer relationships, confidentiality, and possible consequences.

P1 described difficulty expressing student grievances to teachers: "Conflict sa teachers… dili nimo ma-gawas imong hinaing as a student sa kuwan, teachers" ("Conflict with teachers… you cannot express your grievances as a student to the teachers).

P2 described choosing to go along with classmates despite having reservations: "Naa man, pero as a student na lang nga kabalo man ko nga lahi-lahi tag ginikanan… makipag-go with the flow na lang ko sa ilaha" ("There were times, but as a student I knew we all come from different backgrounds… so I just went with the flow with them").

P3 recalled witnessing bullying and deciding to intervene despite the risk: "I witnessed a group of students bullying a classmate… if we intervened, there was a risk… Even with those risks, we decided to do the right thing and stop the bullying."

P4 recounted a juvenile research participant's disclosure: "Nagtiwala sa akin ang isang kalahok at inamin na siya at ang ilan sa kanyang mga kasamahan ay sangkot pa rin sa mga criminal na aktibidad" ("A participant confided in me and admitted that he and

some of his peers were still involved in criminal activities"). This created tension between confidentiality and responsibility for safety.

P5 encountered pressure to manipulate group-research data: "I once faced an ethical dilemma during a group research when some members wanted to alter data to make our results look better." P6 likewise described a classmate asking him to ignore an error in a case analysis, but he chose honesty and correction.

Subtheme: Confronting Dishonesty and Ethical Pressure

The thesis highlighted P5's recognition that honesty may carry an academic cost: "It made me realize the importance of honesty, even if it means getting a lower grade." P6 stated that the experience strengthened his belief that "doing what is right must always come before convenience or pressure." P3 connected intervention to a responsibility to protect students' safety, while P4 emphasized that decisions should be guided "not only by laws but also by moral principles." These statements show that participants understood ethical action as more than simply complying with expectations.

Theme 2. Ethical Resilience and Preparedness

Participants generally described their experiences as opportunities to strengthen critical thinking, moral awareness, and readiness for future professional dilemmas. However, preparedness was not uniform: several participants expressed confidence, while P4 stressed that the pressure and uncertainty of real settings could not be fully learned through classroom preparation alone.

P1 said future dilemmas would not be entirely new and that she could overcome them. P2 expressed determination to continue because she was already in the program. P3 said studies and internship experiences had taught him to think carefully before deciding. P4 stated, "Hindi pa ako handa dahil sa iba ang pressure at kalabuan sa pagsasanay… matutunan lamang sa pamamagitan ng paggawa pa" ("I am not yet prepared because the pressure and uncertainty in training are different… these can only be learned through more real practice"). P5 said studies had taught critical thinking but acknowledged that real-life situations would test personal values. P6 similarly said he was prepared to stand by what was right while continuing to learn because real situations are more complicated.

Subtheme: Developing Integrity and Confidence Through Dilemmas

Participants viewed ethical challenges as formative rather than merely obstructive. P3 said the experiences demonstrated the importance of "integrity, responsibility, and making ethical decisions." P5 emphasized that his studies taught him to think critically, while P1 stated that the challenges were no longer unfamiliar and could be overcome. Collectively, the accounts linked ethical learning with confidence, reflection, and a stronger sense of professional responsibility.

Research Question 2: Influence of Ethical Dilemmas on Career Aspirations and Decisions

For this research question, Chapter IV presented Values-Driven Career Decisions and Systemic Barriers to Aspiration as the two major themes. Their associated core ideas were Pursuing Value-Driven Roles in Just and Transparent Agencies and Navigating Institutional and Socioeconomic Constraints. The thesis classified these responses as

typical, reflecting important patterns that several participants discussed, although they were not expressed in the same way by everyone.

Table 2. Ethical dilemmas influence the career aspirations of criminology students.

Major Themes	Core Ideas	Frequency of Responses
Values-Driven Career Decisions	Pursuing value-driven roles in just and transparent agencies	General
Systemic Barriers to Aspiration	Navigating institutional and socioeconomic constraints	General

Theme 3. Values-Driven Career Decisions

Ethical experiences prompted students to consider the kinds of professionals they wanted to become and the agencies where they hoped to work. Participants referred to integrity, fairness, accountability, transparency, respect for human rights, and rehabilitation. Some questioned whether they could manage the moral pressure associated with law enforcement, but their doubts did not necessarily lead them to abandon criminology; for some, they strengthened their motivation to contribute to positive change.

P1 worried that becoming a parent might create an obstacle when applying for work. P2 expressed concern that criminology was not prioritized compared with other courses, saying it could make the program feel undervalued. P3 stated that he hoped to work where “integrity, fairness, and accountability are prioritized.” P4 wanted an environment where “integridad, transparency, at accountability” were valued. P5 said, “I want to work in agencies that promote transparency, like human rights or rehabilitation focused organizations.” P6 likewise wanted an agency that valued transparency, accountability, and respect for human rights.

Subtheme: Pursuing Value-Driven Roles in Just and Transparent Agencies

The thesis reported that all six participants expressed a preference for institutions that supported ethical practice. P3 wanted an agency that valued ethical decision-making and supported staff who did what was right. P5 identified transparency-oriented, human-rights, or rehabilitation-focused organizations. P6 wanted a role where he could practice professionally without pressure to compromise his integrity. These responses suggest that participants considered ethical alignment—not only employment itself—when imagining their future careers.

Theme 4. Systemic Barriers to Aspiration

Participants also identified practical conditions that could constrain their career plans. The thesis described financial hardship, application and qualification costs, institutional limitations, perceived corruption or nepotism, and concerns about the pressures of professional practice. Students recognized that the roles most consistent with their values

might not always be easy to access or financially sustainable, creating tension between their ideals and responsibilities to themselves or their families.

P1 described wanting to prove that she could graduate despite having a child. P2 worried that financial limitations could prevent her from applying to the “tri-bureaus” or completing requirements. P3 observed that being a practitioner was not always easy but could be rewarding when one did the right thing. P4 described the emotional burden of handling sensitive information while balancing confidentiality and public safety. P5 questioned whether he could manage the moral pressures of law enforcement, and P6 recalled doubts about being strong enough to handle real-life situations.

Subtheme: Navigating Institutional and Socioeconomic Constraints

The thesis emphasized the practical effects of limited resources. P2 stated that financial hardship might prevent him from completing application requirements. P4 questioned whether he had the strength to face ethical challenges in a real setting, while P6 concluded that such moments showed the field needed honest and principled people. The findings point to a tension between ethical ambition and the resources, opportunities, and support available to students.

Research Question 3: Approaches to Resolving Ethical Conflicts

Chapter IV organized this area around Coping Strategies and Conflict Resolution Strategies. The corresponding core ideas were Managing Emotional Stress and Moral Discomfort in Ethical Dilemmas and Responding to Dilemmas Through Principled Action or Adaptive Choice. Both were classified as general responses. Participants described personal coping practices, reflection, peer and faculty consultation, adherence to law and professional codes, and choices about when to confront a problem directly or respond more cautiously.

Table 3. Criminology students approach and resolve ethical conflicts in the criminal justice field.

Major Themes	Core Ideas	Frequency of Responses
Coping Strategies	Managing emotional stress and moral discomfort in ethical dilemmas	General
Conflict Resolution Strategies	Responding to dilemmas through principled action or adaptive choices	General

Theme 5. Coping Strategies

Participants described ethical dilemmas as sources of uncertainty, discomfort, and emotional pressure. Their coping approaches included prayer, self-belief, exercise or jogging, reflection, and discussing concerns with trusted classmates or teachers. Some students stayed silent or avoided direct confrontation when they feared repercussions, while still trying to preserve their ethical position.

P1 identified prayer and believing in oneself as key strategies. P2 said that he prayed and managed stress by working out or jogging. P3 described relying on fairness, law, professional rules, and personal values when deciding what to do. P4 described combining principles with practical strategies. P5 said he tried to see all sides, remain objective, and use moral values and professional codes. P6 emphasized honesty, integrity, respect for others, the law, professional codes of conduct, and the likely consequences of actions.

Subtheme: Managing Emotional Stress and Moral Discomfort

The thesis noted that participants could feel fear, frustration, or powerlessness, especially when facing unethical conduct by people in authority or institutions. P2 again identified exercise and jogging as ways to cope; P1 referred to prayer and self-belief; and P5 emphasized objectivity and professional codes. These accounts suggest that coping involved both emotional regulation and efforts to keep decisions aligned with ethical principles.

Theme 6. Conflict Resolution Strategies

Participants described resolving ethical conflicts by consulting others, checking facts, considering competing perspectives, following professional rules, and deciding whether direct intervention was safe and appropriate. Some acted openly against unethical behavior; others sought advice or chose a cautious approach in response to institutional dynamics. Their accounts showed that ethical decision-making involved both moral conviction and attention to consequences.

P1 said classmates were easier to approach than professors. P2 shared concerns with classmates and teachers to lessen the emotional burden. P3 consulted a supervisor and batchmates about how to address bullying without escalating the situation and reported a positive outcome. P4 discussed whether sensitive information disclosed by a participant should be reported despite a promise of confidentiality; the professor explained that confidentiality may have exceptions when safety is at risk. P5 said ethical discussions helped him understand that issues are not always black and white and that people hold different perspectives. P6 consulted a professor about an inconsistency in a case-study report, and they corrected it.

Subtheme: Responding Through Principled Action or Adaptive Choice

The thesis described a range of responses, from confronting a problem directly to adapting one's approach to avoid unnecessary escalation. P3's account of intervening safely in a bullying incident and P6's account of correcting a report illustrated principled action. P4's consultation about confidentiality showed how ethical choices may require balancing a general principle with safety obligations. Overall, participants described trying to preserve integrity while considering risks, institutional expectations, and the people affected.

Summary of Results Across the Three Research Questions

Across the six participants, the findings presented in Chapter IV showed that ethical dilemmas arose in ordinary academic interactions as well as field and research settings. The dilemmas tested honesty, courage, confidentiality, fairness, and relationships with

peers and authority figures. Participants described both growth in ethical awareness and continuing uncertainty about real-world pressures. Their career aspirations tended toward agencies and roles associated with transparency, accountability, human rights, and rehabilitation, while financial hardship and institutional constraints complicated access to those paths. Students used reflection, personal coping practices, and consultation with peers, instructors, or supervisors to navigate conflicts, with responses ranging from direct principled action to cautious adaptation.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that ethical dilemmas were embedded in students' everyday academic and field experiences. Conflicts involving instructors, peer pressure, bullying, confidentiality, and dishonest academic practices required students to balance personal principles with external expectations. This pattern is consistent with the study's use of Kohlberg's theory: participants sometimes navigated social expectations and authority, while in other situations they relied on principles such as honesty, fairness, and respect for human dignity (Kohlberg, 1981). The narratives also illustrate that ethical action requires more than recognizing a problem; students must judge what is appropriate, decide which values to prioritize, and act despite possible costs, an issue relevant to Rest's (1986) framework.

The second research question concerned career aspirations. Participants' stated preference for transparent, accountable, and rights-respecting agencies suggests that ethical experiences contributed to how they defined a suitable professional environment. This finding can be considered alongside research on criminology students' motivations and career preferences, including studies that discuss the influence of career opportunities and practical constraints (Aroy et al., 2024; Nobis, 2025; Trebilcock & Griffiths, 2022). Research on police education has also examined the relationship between professional socialization, human rights, and moral reasoning (Lin et al., 2024). In this study, ethical conflict sometimes produced doubt, but it also encouraged students to clarify their values and consider roles that align with justice, human rights, or rehabilitation. The small sample does not establish how common these preferences are among criminology students more broadly.

The findings further suggest that institutional and socioeconomic circumstances shape students' ability to translate ethical commitments into career choices. Financial limitations and perceived institutional barriers were reported alongside students' desire to pursue principled work. These experiences point to the importance of practical career guidance and accessible institutional support, rather than assuming that personal integrity alone enables students to overcome every constraint.

Regarding the third research question, students used both reflective and interpersonal strategies to resolve dilemmas. They considered moral principles, professional standards, consequences, and advice from trusted people. The differences between direct action and silence also suggest that students' responses are shaped by perceived

risk, authority, and the clarity of available procedures. Experiential learning and dilemma-based discussions can provide opportunities to rehearse ethical decisions, particularly when followed by structured reflection and discussion (Coleman, 2024; Juujärvi & Myyry, 2022; Tiessen, 2024; Wang et al., 2022).

Taken together, the findings support an approach to ethics education that combines theory with realistic scenarios, reflective exercises, mentorship, and institutional mechanisms for raising concerns. Students should have opportunities to practice responding to academic dishonesty, confidentiality dilemmas, peer misconduct, and competing professional obligations. Faculty and field supervisors can help by explaining decision-making procedures, modeling ethical conduct, and providing non-retaliatory channels for consultation. These implications arise from the participants' accounts and should be examined further with larger and more diverse samples.

Conclusions

For the first research question, ethical dilemmas shaped students' academic and field experiences through conflicts with authority, peer pressure, bullying, confidentiality concerns, and academic dishonesty. These situations challenged students' values and prompted reflection on integrity, fairness, and responsibility.

For the second research question, ethical dilemmas influenced students' career aspirations by clarifying the importance they placed on transparency, accountability, human rights, and rehabilitation. Some participants experienced uncertainty about future work, while others became more determined to pursue roles consistent with their principles. Financial and institutional constraints also influenced how students viewed their options.

For the third research question, students approached ethical conflicts through reflection, emotional regulation, consultation, consideration of professional codes and consequences, and in some cases principled intervention or correction of errors. Others described silence or adaptation when they felt constrained by authority or uncertainty. Overall, the findings suggest that ethical resilience develops through experience, reflection, and support, and that educational institutions have a role in helping students prepare for complex professional situations.

Recommendations

Criminology programs should integrate scenario-based activities, role-playing, case discussions, and reflective writing into ethics instruction. Scenarios should include academic dishonesty, confidentiality and safety, peer misconduct, and conflicts between institutional expectations and professional values.

Schools should provide clear, confidential, and accessible processes for students to raise ethical concerns and seek guidance without fear of retaliation. Faculty members and field supervisors should receive development opportunities focused on ethical mentoring, respectful communication, and consistent handling of student concerns.

Career services should include structured discussions about ethical expectations across law enforcement, corrections, rehabilitation, human rights, and related fields. Such

guidance can help students examine how their values relate to different professional environments while considering practical barriers and available pathways.

Future researchers should include more participants and institutions, compare experiences across locations, and consider longitudinal or mixed-methods designs. Further research may examine how ethical reasoning changes during internships and after entry into professional practice. Because the current study is qualitative and based on six participants, future studies should not assume that its findings apply uniformly to all criminology students.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The researchers reported obtaining informed consent and informing participants that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw without penalty. Participant identities were anonymized through labels P1–P6, and confidentiality was maintained. Research data were reported to have been securely stored. The researchers aimed to represent participants' accounts faithfully through reflexivity and peer debriefing. The study was conducted for academic research purposes.

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