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Exploring felt responsibility in professional and personal contexts

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# Role morality discrepancy and ethical purchasing: exploring felt responsibility in professional and personal contexts

**Short title: Felt responsibility for ethical purchasing across roles**

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**Conflict of interest:** Author A/corresponding author has previously been employed by the University of Edinburgh's Department for Social Responsibility and Sustainability, focusing on socially responsible supply chains, and so has gained practitioner knowledge of the university's sustainable procurement work, which is the context of this paper. This research was conducted as part of that role/period of employment, and so has been conducted by a practitioner researcher. Author B works in the same university's Business School, but has no conflict of interest regarding this piece of research.

## **Abstract**

The same person can make different moral judgements in their professional role compared to in their personal life. For example, people may follow a different moral code when making purchases at work compared to in their purchasing lives – yet this potential difference has largely remained unexamined to date. This study examines differences in felt moral responsibility when considering the impacts of purchasing decisions on supply chain workers in workplace and private purchasing settings, exploring the influence of personal values and ethical work climate. The case of a high-profile university in the UK is studied, which has made strong commitments to socially responsible public procurement. Based on a survey of 318 university staff who make purchases at work, stronger moral values related to harm/care are associated with higher felt responsibility in personal purchasing than in workplace purchasing, whereas less strong harm/care values are associated with higher felt responsibility in workplace purchasing than personal purchasing. In relation to ethical work climate, detailed awareness of organisational ethical procurement commitments is found to be associated with higher felt responsibility in workplace purchasing and is found to increase the discrepancy between workplace and personal felt responsibility, increasing felt responsibility in the workplace but not in personal purchasing. These findings demonstrate the influence of individual and contextual factors on felt responsibility across different roles. Recommendations are made for further empirical research on felt responsibility across roles, and additional internal communication on social responsibility for devolved public purchasing contexts.

**Keywords:** *role morality; harm/care values; felt responsibility; public procurement; ethical purchasing.*

Prior research on ethical purchasing has focused on personal shopping habits, or to a lesser extent, on socially responsible public procurement (e.g., Brammer & Walker, 2011; Sachdeva et al., 2015). However, there has been no exploration to date of how moral judgements related to purchasing compare between people's personal lives and their work lives. For example, an individual procuring goods or services for a public organisation may consider it their moral duty to ensure they avoid contracting a company with a poor human rights record, but the same individual may not consider it their responsibility to ask questions about the recruitment practices of a firm they contract to carry out building work on their own home. Another individual may always buy fair trade tea and coffee for their household, but at work, they may contract catering services from the cheapest supplier, without consideration of supply chain ethics. Role morality theory recognises that different moral codes may operate in different contexts for the same person, and a professional moral code may force individuals to suppress their personal moral values. For example, a professional code of ethics may override personal moral judgements (Luban, 2007). The context of ethical purchasing decision-making, which is usually only studied in the context of private purchasing, provides an opportunity to study felt moral responsibility associated with two different roles, and how moral codes relating to the same issue may be different across contexts.

The primary contribution of this study is to provide empirical evidence of a discrepancy in felt moral responsibility across personal and workplace roles, and of individual and contextual factors influencing reported felt moral responsibility in purchasing. Specifically, we provide evidence of 1) how stronger personal moral values related to harm/care are associated with higher felt moral responsibility in personal purchasing than in

workplace purchasing, whereas less strong harm/care values are associated with higher workplace purchasing felt responsibility than personal purchasing felt responsibility 2) how an ethical work climate, measured as detailed awareness of organisational ethical commitments, is associated with higher felt moral responsibility in workplace purchasing, but not in personal purchasing, thus increasing the discrepancy in felt responsibility between roles. Our secondary contribution is to provide practical insights for social responsibility-oriented organisations on the importance of effective internal communication regarding organisational ethical commitments, to facilitate the development of more ethical character, judgements, and hopefully in turn ethical behaviour among staff.

The paper is structured as follows: we first explain prior research and theory on felt responsibility for ethical purchasing, role morality, moral values related to harm/care, and ethical work climate, to develop our hypotheses. We then present our methods and report our findings. Finally, we conclude with both theoretical and practical implications and avenues for future research.

## **Theory and Hypotheses**

### *The Effect of Personal vs Work Roles on Felt Responsibility for Ethical Purchasing*

Responsibility relates to having a duty, being accountable, or having a moral obligation to behave correctly (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021). The concept of felt responsibility refers to a personal sense of responsibility, as opposed to responsibility that is externally assigned to someone (Bergsteiner & Avery, 2010; Fuller et al., 2006). Felt responsibility for constructive change in the workplace has been found to be associated with proactive behaviour among employees (Fuller et al., 2006). In this study, we examine felt responsibility specifically for taking into account ethics in purchasing decisions. Ethical

purchasing relates to considering the social and environmental impacts of the products one buys, for example buying fair trade goods to try to improve workers' livelihoods in global supply chains or buying organic food to try to reduce harmful chemical use on soils. Luchs et al. (2015) found that felt responsibility for ethical purchasing is associated with more sustainable consumption behaviour. Yet, like most research on ethical purchasing, they only looked at consumers making personal purchasing decisions, and not at purchasing decisions made by employees in the workplace on behalf of employers.

Research that has examined ethical purchasing in the workplace context has focused on socially responsible public procurement carried out by trained procurement professionals, since public bodies in the EU, including publicly funded universities, are required under EU law to consider social and environmental factors in their choices of suppliers of goods and services (European Union, 2014). Brammer and Walker (2011) and Preuss (2009) identify numerous barriers to ethical purchasing among procurement professionals, and Husser et al. (2014) used scenarios of ethical dilemmas to study choices made by professional buyers. However, this focus on procurement professionals who carry out centralised procurement in public bodies misses out the vast amount of purchasing decisions made in a devolved way by different types of staff in these organisations. While centralised procurement professionals may establish guidance and provide support for many procurement decisions taking place across such organisations, a wide range of other types of staff make purchasing decisions within their departments or teams.

Since many people make purchasing decisions both in their personal lives, and in their work roles, potentially buying similar things such as food, stationery, or furniture, we consider whether there may be differences in felt responsibility across these two contexts.

The theory of role morality proposes that it may be appropriate for a professional (or organisational) moral code to override one's own moral code (Luban, 2007; Radtke, 2008). Theoretical discussions of role morality often focus on instances where a collective moral code is being imposed on an individual, requiring or allowing them to do something that "harm(s) others in ways that, if not for the role, would be wrong" (Applbaum, 2000), for example, a doctor being obliged to refrain from telling relatives of a patient of a disease risk that may affect them, or a judge being required to sentence someone harshly due to having committed multiple small offences (Gibson, 2003). Where an explicit, written moral code is not present, there may still be differences between an individual's moral code and a workplace moral code. For example, Goldman (1980) considers the potential tension for a business manager making workplace purchasing decisions between his or her personal moral code related to social responsibility, and the moral responsibility to respect the goal of maximising short-term profits for shareholders. In this study, we ask participants specifically about felt moral responsibility related to workers in supply chains when making purchasing decisions, and we hypothesise that there may be a difference between felt responsibility for ethical purchasing across workplace and personal purchasing roles, since different moral codes may be operating, and these may be interpreted differently by different individuals.

**Hypothesis 1:** A difference in felt responsibility for ethical purchasing is predicted across role contexts (personal vs. professional).

If workplace purchasing felt responsibility (WPFR) is higher than personal purchasing felt responsibility (PPFR), then a perceived moral code of the workplace is taking precedence and may be overriding a personal moral code. If, however, PPFR is higher than WPFR, then a personal moral code is proving stronger than a workplace one. We refer to the difference

between these two reported senses of felt responsibility, for the same act of purchasing, as *role morality discrepancy*.

We also explore two factors that may influence any potential difference between felt responsibility for ethical purchasing across the two contexts – personal moral values, and ethical work climate, explored in the following sections.

### *Moral Values Related to Harm/Care*

Personal moral values are likely to play an important role in influencing people to feel a sense of responsibility. Indeed, Punzo et al. (2019) found that values lead to felt responsibility which leads to pro-environmental behaviour. Collectivist values, related to concern for others, are found to be associated with socially responsible behaviour, including in the workplace (Hemingway, 2005). A prominent theory that deals with moral values is the Moral Foundations Theory, which identifies how different people hold different groupings of values, which often relate to people's political views and intended behaviours (Graham & Haidt, 2012; Haidt & Joseph, 2004). The five moral foundations identified are harm/care; fairness/reciprocity; ingroup/loyalty; authority/respect; and purity/sanctity (Graham & Haidt, 2012). The harm/care foundation is particularly relevant to the context of ethical purchasing, since purchasing decisions are made based on reducing harm to and a sense of care for the environment and for workers in supply chains. Indeed, Watkins et al. (2016) studied how the Moral Foundations Theory applies to ethical purchasing, finding that those with a strong harm/care moral foundation were more likely to undertake sustainable consumption. There is an opportunity to study how harm/care values relate to purchasing in workplace contexts as well. Our study, therefore, provides insights into how personal values, specifically related to the harm/care moral foundation, relate to ethical purchasing intentions in both work and non-work contexts. For example, do individuals with stronger harm/care moral values feel more



responsible for the impacts of their purchasing in their personal lives or at work? And similarly, do individuals with less strong harm/care moral values feel more responsible in their personal lives or at work?

**Hypothesis 2:** Strength of harm/care moral values (SHCV) moderate the effect of role context (personal vs. professional) on felt responsibility for ethical purchasing.

### *Ethical Work Climate - Awareness of the University's Socially Responsible Purchasing Commitments*

In addition to personal factors, environmental factors may also influence felt responsibility related to ethical purchasing. In business ethics literature, the concept of an ethical work climate, and its influence on workplace decision-making has been widely explored, since an early detailed study was introduced by Victor and Cullen (1987). An ethical work climate is defined as a work group's shared perception of what is right and wrong, which may be influenced by policies, strategies, codes of conduct, leadership behaviour, training, rewards, and sanctions (Craft, 2013; Lehnert et al., 2015; Loe et al., 2000; Martin & Cullen, 2006; Paterson & Huang, 2019). It is of course important to consider employee awareness of such efforts to create an ethical work climate, rather than simply the existence of policies and codes (Fabrigar et al., 2006; Wotruba et al., 2001). An ethical work climate has been found to be associated with increased individual moral awareness (VanSandt, 2003), with reporting more ethical intentions (Barnett & Vaicys, 2000).

The goals of creating an ethical work climate may be broad, for example, related to fostering honesty and integrity, and equality of opportunity. Yet increasingly, many organisations are attempting to create ethical work climates specifically related to sustainability and social responsibility issues, including ethical purchasing. Our study is of a

university that is recognised in the sector as doing leading work in sustainability and has made substantial commitments to socially responsible procurement over the years, including public commitments from senior managers, policies and strategies, staff training and communication campaigns, and membership of external supply chain monitoring networks. In this study, staff members who make purchases at work are asked about their awareness of the organisation's socially responsible procurement commitments (SRPC). The aim is to find out firstly, whether level of awareness of such commitments influences felt moral responsibility related to making purchasing decisions in the workplace, and secondly, whether it influences any discrepancy between felt responsibility in the workplace and non-work settings.

**Hypothesis 3:** High SRPC awareness is associated with a) higher WPFR than PPRF, and b) greater discrepancy between the two.

## **Methods**

### *Participants and Procedure*

While this study is part of a wider multi-method research project, which provided insights directly to practitioners, the data collection method for the findings presented in this paper was an online survey of university staff with self-report measures, carried out between March and May 2018. Any types of employee in the university studied who undertake purchasing as part of their roles were considered part of the population to be studied. A convenience sample of participants who were university staff who made purchases at work was recruited through several bulk staff email lists. Recruitment was primarily through a list of staff with access to purchasing systems held by the Procurement Office, plus requests to contacts across central service departments and academic Schools, and through promotion on relevant staff newsletters and social media. While we cannot know precisely how many staff were reached

through these methods, the number will be in the thousands, out of more than 13,000 staff in total at the time. Respondents were asked to confirm that they were university staff before commencing and were asked whether they made purchases at work. Though convenience samples are widely used within business ethics research (see Castille et al., 2018; Randall & Gibson, 1990), especially when the research site is a single organisation (Johns, 2006), we acknowledge the limitation in generalisability and urge caution.

Research ethics procedures were followed in line with University department principles, paying careful attention to anonymity, secure data storage, informed consent, and the right to withdraw consent. In total 318 full survey responses were collected, after excluding incomplete responses. From this, 101 were academic staff, 147 were professional services staff, 38 were technical staff, and 32 described themselves as other. Respondents were predominantly female (211) and were spread fairly evenly throughout the 25-54 age range.

### *Measures*

The survey was designed with four sets of measures: 1. strength of harm/care values (SHCV); 2. workplace purchasing felt responsibility (WPFR); 3. personal purchasing felt responsibility (PPFR); and 4. awareness of socially responsible procurement commitments (SRPC awareness). Five-point scales (fully disagree, slightly disagree, neither agree nor disagree/unsure, slightly agree, fully agree) were used for the first three sets of questions, and a three-point scale was used for the final question (no awareness, vague awareness, detailed awareness). A pilot survey was conducted with 11 members of staff who fed back on potential ambiguity of questions. Self-report measures were adopted in our study as they are appropriate for measuring personal values and awareness, thus sufficient for testing our hypotheses. They are commonly used in similar research that examines business within

society (Katic & Ingram, 2018; Mudrack & Mason, 2019). Aiming to reduce social desirability bias, participants were assured that any data provided would be anonymized and that there were no ‘right or wrong’ answers (see Huang, 2006). We recognise the risk of social desirability bias and general limitations of self-reported responses, and this is expanded upon in our limitations section below.

In the first question set, participants were asked to provide data that would indicate the strength of their personal moral values related to harm/care, by stating the extent to which they agreed with three statements: *My moral identity is central to my sense of self; One should not perform an action which might in any way threaten the dignity and welfare of another individual; Risks to another should never be tolerated, irrespective of how small the risks might be*, ( $\alpha = .79$ ). These statements were informed by Forsyth’s (1980) Ethics Position Questionnaire and Aquino and Reed’s (2002) study on reported self-importance of moral identity in relation to moral thought and action. The first statement in the measures reflects the importance of moral centrality in studying the moral self (Jennings et al., 2015). The second two statements relate to the notion of self-conscious emotions related to not wanting to harm others (Jennings et al., 2015), and specifically reflect the harm/care moral values (Graham & Haidt, 2012) given that, as discussed above, this foundation has been found to be associated with ethical purchasing. Clearly, the second two statements describe very strong (and probably unattainable) moral positions related to how important morality is to sense of self, and to the importance of avoiding harming or neglecting to care for others. The idea is not to get at an accurate description of how participants behave, but to find out the extent to which these statements reflect what might be their view of the ideal moral values for themselves.

Workplace purchasing felt responsibility (WPFR) and personal purchasing felt responsibility (PPFR) were measured by two randomised question blocks to reduce order bias. That is, some participants were shown the WPFR question set first, and others were shown the PPFR question set first, since participants may respond differently depending on whether they were asked to think about workplace or personal purchasing first. The context of each question block was reiterated in bold at the top of the survey page, to reduce the likelihood of confusion. For WPFR, participants were asked to what extent they agreed with these three statements: *I have a moral responsibility to consider the working conditions of people in supply chains when making purchases with University money; I have an ethical duty to take into account the working conditions of people in supply chains when shopping with University money; I must do the right thing and consider the treatment of workers who have produced the goods I buy with University money*, ( $\alpha = .98$ ). For PPFR, participants were asked to what extent they agreed with these three statements: *I have a moral responsibility to consider the working conditions of people in supply chains when making purchases with my own money; I have an ethical duty to take into account the working conditions of people in supply chains when shopping with my own money; I must do the right thing and consider the treatment of workers who have produced the goods I buy with my own money*, ( $\alpha = .98$ ).

## **Analysis and Results**

To address hypotheses 1 and 2, a mixed-model ANCOVA was employed. The within-subject factor *felt responsibility* consisted of two levels: *workplace vs. personal purchasing felt responsibility (WPFR vs. PPFR)*. The between-subject factor *strength of harm/care values (SHCV)* was a dichotomization of the SHCV scale, creating two levels 'higher' and 'lower', representing participants who were either higher or lower in SHCV respectively. Due to data for SHCV being non-normal hence negatively skewed (-1.623), we followed advice on

dichotomizing non-normally distributed variables, therefore performed a media split, see Streiner (2002). Furthermore, using a binary SHCV variable within a mixed-model ANCOVA provides more intuitive findings that are more easily decipherable with regards to contrasting professional versus personal purchasing felt responsibility. We acknowledge the drawbacks of dichotomizing variables and provide further correlation analysis to reinforce the findings of the mixed-model ANCOVA, with SHCV as a continuous predictor (Cohen, 1983; Royston et al., 2006).

SRPC awareness, age, and gender were considered as control variables, however, due to null effect of gender, this variable was dropped from the presented analysis for parsimony. The Box-M test for homogeneity of covariance matrices was significant ( $p < .01$ ), therefore Pillai Trace correction was applied. The findings showed no significant within-subject difference between WPFR and PFR overall, therefore hypothesis 1 was not supported. The mean for professional purchasing morality for individuals ( $M = 4.152$ ,  $SE = .056$ ) was very similar to the mean of their personal purchasing morality ( $M = 4.147$ ,  $SE = .058$ ). In other words, no significant difference in felt responsibility for ethical purchasing was found across professional and personal contexts.

However, our findings do support hypothesis 2 since a significant interaction was found between discrepancy between PFR and WPFR and SHCV:  $F(1, 277) = 3.940$ ,  $p = .048$ . Figure 1 illustrates the nature of this interaction. This result suggests higher levels of WPFR compared to PFR for those who score lower on SHCV, and higher PFR than WPFR for individuals' who score higher on SHCV. This relationship is further supported by a correlation analysis finding SHCV (continuous measure) positively correlated with the discrepancy (DV calculated by WPFR minus PFR),  $r = -.126$ ,  $p = .033$ . This illustrates that

the greater the SHCV, the greater the discrepancy between professional and personal purchasing moral responsibility. Furthermore, age and SRPC awareness provided a significant interaction with the discrepancy between WPFR and PPFR as explained below, respectively,  $F(1, 277) = 5.458, p = .020$ ,  $F(1, 277) = 14.860, p < .001$ .

*Figure 1 here*

To test hypothesis 3, an ANCOVA was run, with SRPC awareness (no awareness,  $n = 58$ , vague,  $n = 192$ , detailed,  $n = 31$ ) as the IV on WPFR (DV), controlling for age and SHCV (continuous). Levene's test revealed equality of variance was violated. Though analyses of variance are found to be relatively robust against such violation (Ito, 1980; Weerahandi, 1995), since group sizes are unequal across the three levels of the independent variable, a Kruskal-Wallis test was run to provide additional validation. This supplementary test concurred with the ANCOVA, therefore we continued with satisfactory confidence, although we urge interpretations should be taken with caution. The results of the ANCOVA revealed a significant main effect of SRPC awareness on WPFR,  $F(2, 264) = 5.307, p = .005$ , illustrated in Figure 2, therefore our findings support the first part of hypothesis 3. Specifically, post-hoc tests show that there is a significantly higher WPFR reported for individuals who had detailed SRPC awareness ( $M = 4.697, SE = .153$ ) compared with either vague ( $M = 4.204, SE = .061$ ) or no awareness ( $M = 4.077, SE = .113$ ),  $p < .01$ . No significant difference was found between vague and no awareness ( $p > .05$ ). In addition, a significant main effect was found for age  $F(1, 276) = 5.144, p = .024$ , interpreted through the parameter estimated showed that as age increased WPFR decreased ( $\beta = -.108$ ). Furthermore, SHCV examined here as a covariate provided a significant positive association with WPFR  $F(1, 276) = 124.102, p < .001, \beta = .636$ .

*Figure 2 here*

To examine the second part of hypotheses 3, a further ANCOVA was run with SRPC awareness (no awareness,  $n = 58$ , vague,  $n = 192$ , detailed,  $n = 31$ ) as the IV and with moral responsibility discrepancy (WPFR minus PFR) as the DV, controlling for age and SHCV (continuous). Equality of variance was assumed with regards to the Levene's test,  $p = .076$ . Results provided a significant main effect of SRPC awareness on discrepancy between WPFR and PFR,  $F(2, 276) = 7.168$ ,  $p = .001$ , depicted in Figure 3, therefore our results also support the second part of hypothesis 3. Post-hoc tests showing that the means scores for discrepancy in felt responsibility differed across all three levels of SRPC awareness. Please note for interpreting these results a negative value reveals  $WPFR < PFR$  and a positive value  $WPFR > PFR$ . Specifically, participants with no awareness were found to have significantly greater discrepancy between PFR than WPFR compared to those who had vague awareness ( $MD = -.127$ ,  $SE = .111$ ,  $p = .017$ ) and those with detailed awareness ( $MD = -.625$ ,  $SE = .166$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, respondents with detailed awareness were found to have greater discrepancy between WPFR than PFR than those who had only vague awareness ( $MD = .358$ ,  $SE = .142$ ,  $p = .012$ ). In essence, these results illustrate that increased SRPC awareness, though indeed increases WPFR, does not necessarily influence PFR, as the gap between the two increases. Additionally, a significant main effect was found for age, showing that increasing age was associated with greater PFR than WPFR,  $F(1, 276) = 5.59$ ,  $p = .019$ ,  $\beta = -.108$ ). SHCV was supported in negatively predicting moral responsibility discrepancy  $F(1, 276) = 3.120$ ,  $p = .075$ ,  $\beta = -.088$ ), albeit this was only approaching significance (i.e.  $p = .075 > p = .05$ ). Though inevitably caution should be exercised in interpreting this result, it largely supports findings above.



*Figure 3 here*

## **Discussion and Implications**

These findings have provided empirical insights into role morality discrepancy in practice, measured by reported felt responsibility for ethical purchasing in an organisational context and in personal contexts. Our first key finding relates to the influence of harm/care values on felt responsibility related to purchasing. Our results indicate that strong harm/care values have a stronger influence on felt responsibility in personal purchasing than in workplace purchasing, since higher SHCV is associated with higher moral responsibility in the personal purchasing context than the workplace context, whereas lower SHCV is associated with higher felt responsibility in workplace purchasing than in personal purchasing. This supports the previous studies discussed above that have found values related to harm/care to be strong drivers of ethical purchasing in personal contexts (Watkins et al., 2016), while adding insights into the difference in the influence of personal values in workplace purchasing.

There may be various explanations for this difference in felt responsibility depending on personal moral values and roles. Those with a higher SHCV, who could be assumed to be more likely to engage in ethical purchasing in their personal lives (Luchs et al., 2015), may feel unable to draw on their personal moral values as much in the workplace, facing competing values such as professionalism and conformity, or a need to maximise public budgets. They may feel that their personal moral codes must be overridden by a professional moral code, reflecting the traditional role morality concept. Yet given this organisation's commitments to ethical procurement, if individuals with strong personal moral values feel less moral responsibility at work, our results may indicate a lack of understanding of the

institutional commitments and guidance on social responsibility – the attempts at constructing an ethical work climate may not be successful yet. Given that organisational and individual values in these cases are a closer match than the employees seemingly realise, our results indicate an opportunity to enable these staff members to bring more of their ‘whole selves’ and moral values to their work (Alzola, 2018; Glavas, 2016; Jones et al., 2007). Congruence between personal and professional values has been shown to improve people’s attitudes about their work (Posner & Schmidt, 1993), meaning a win-win for organisations and employees.

On the other hand, those with a lower SHCV may have exhibited a higher felt responsibility in the work context due to an ethical climate to some extent successful influencing their judgement at work and overriding their personal values. Outside of work, they perhaps but feel more freedom to base their purchasing choices on other values, such as quality or price. They may be viewing the institution as providing moral rules for behaviour which include considering social responsibility, whereas such rules from above are absent in their personal lives. For both groups, our study is unable to provide empirical evidence of the reasons behind the role morality discrepancy, therefore further qualitative research to explore this and potential other explanations.

Since our first key finding leads us to consider whether an ethical work climate may be perceived by some but not others, or perceived in different ways, our second key finding sheds further light on this. This relates to the influence of employees’ awareness of an organisation’s ethical commitments (ethical work climate) on felt responsibility related to purchasing. Detailed awareness of organisational ethical commitments is found to be associated with a higher felt responsibility in workplace purchasing, and is found to increase role morality discrepancy, so again there is no spill-over seen of felt responsibility across

roles, this time from the workplace to the personal role. This reflects the conclusions of several studies that have found that awareness of corporate social responsibility strategies and broader organisational ethics programmes, rather than just codes, can influence employee judgements at work (Crane & Glozer, 2016; McDonald & Nijhof, 1999). It may be that detailed awareness of the broad range of commitments made by the university studied, comprising strategies, policies, senior leadership roles, training, and communication, is more likely to create an ethical work climate, than awareness of a code of conduct alone. Yet our study goes further in identifying the effect of such awareness on the discrepancy between felt responsibility in the workplace and in personal lives. Again, since our study can only provide initial insights into the potential effect, further research is needed to understand why there is no spill-over across roles – that is, what factors may be influencing felt responsibility for ethical purchasing outside of work.

Lack of SRPC awareness was associated with the opposite trend: employees with no knowledge or only vague knowledge these commitments demonstrated a greater felt responsibility in their personal purchasing than in workplace purchasing. In a context of a perceived absence of ethical rules in the workplace, and so perhaps in a lack of ethical work climate, these employees appear to be making less moral judgements regarding purchasing at work than at home, as has found to be the case by other studies (Rupp et al., 2015). Or, as discussed above for participants with high SHCV and lower felt responsibility at work, these employees may be perceiving the workplace moral code to be more focused on different values, such as thrifty management of public money. Again, further study is needed to unpack the interactions between different moral values in the different role contexts.

Since this study was conceived based on practitioner insights and challenges, we now briefly turn to practical implications of our findings. While many universities and public sector organisations are increasingly working on sustainable procurement strategies and implementation at central level, coordinated by qualified procurement and sustainability professionals, our findings indicate that some staff who are interested in ethical purchasing outside of work may currently perceive their work climate as a barrier to ethical purchasing, whereas others with less interest in ethical purchasing outside of work are reporting being influenced by organizational commitments to socially responsible procurement. This suggests that better communication and training regarding such strategies with staff undertaking devolved purchasing is key to achieving more socially responsible purchasing across organisations, regardless of how strong people report their personal values related to harm/care to be.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While this research provides useful insights for others to build on, we acknowledge several key limitations. Firstly, we recognise the limitations of our self-report measures. Though self-report measures are commonly used within the field and particularly appropriate here given our hypotheses are based on personal values, feelings, and awareness, rather than behaviour, we acknowledge biases may exist. To address these, attempts were made to ensure participants would understand the questions in similar ways through piloting the survey and asking pilot participants about their interpretations. Furthermore, we acknowledge the risk of social desirability bias, which is especially an issue when asking about moral issues. While we followed recommended steps to try to reduce potential biases, such as assuring participants of their anonymity in completing the online survey (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986), issues may still exist. This risk is difficult to overcome in studies that rely on self-reporting, and so we propose that further studies could aim to test our findings through a triangulation

of both self-report and in-depth qualitative studies. We also acknowledge that our research, like the majority of other survey studies, may suffer from non-response bias. Given the means through which the survey was distributed using a range of university mailing lists and social media accounts to staff irrespective of if their role involves purchasing, it is impossible for us to calculate an exact response rate for those who met our sample criteria. Future studies should aim to validate our findings while taking measures to ensure high response rates, see Manzo and Burke (2012).

Secondly, measuring complex concepts such as moral values and felt responsibility across roles is challenging. While we developed a workable method for measuring SHCV for our particular context, this could be theorised and measured in many different ways. Furthermore, while we made a simple comparison between a work role and a non-work role, an individual working in a particular job role in a university may hold different moral identities for different aspects of their role. For example, Leavitt et al. (2012) identified different moral identities within a job role (such as the identities associated with being an engineer and also a manager) and found these different moral identities influenced moral judgements in the workplace. These limitations present numerous opportunities for further empirical research on role morality, looking both at different role identities and at commonalities of professional identities across an organisation.

Thirdly, we urge caution in generalising our statistical findings, rather we present this study as a first exploration in empirically researching felt responsibility discrepancy and factors influencing it. Our finding of an interaction effect of role morality discrepancy and SHCV, albeit significant and supported with additional correlation analysis, illustrates only very small differences between WPFR and PFR for individuals with higher or lower SHCV.

Therefore, we urge this effect is treated as an initial insight and thus caution is exercised in the interpretation of this effect for the grounds of further studies and practical implications. Nonetheless, we propose further studies aim to replicate and investigate this effect in additional contexts.

Fourthly, it would be beneficial to find out whether there was any interaction effect between the individual and contextual variables tested (Jennings et al., 2015; Trevino, 1986), but our sample sizes for different subgroups of participants were too small to allow such statistical tests to be carried out. Future research could ensure larger sample sizes across groups and investigate these interaction effects.

## **Conclusion**

This research has found that role morality discrepancy, in this case, the difference between felt responsibility for ethical purchasing in a professional and personal setting, can be influenced by particular individual and contextual factors. Participants with strong harm/care values related report higher felt responsibility in their personal lives than at work, and those with less strong harm/care values report higher felt responsibility at work. Strong care for supply chain workers in personal purchasing, therefore, does not appear to spill over into the work role. Detailed awareness of organisational ethical commitments is found to be associated with a higher felt responsibility in workplace purchasing, and is found to increase the discrepancy between workplace and personal responsibility – as such awareness increases felt responsibility in the workplace but this does not spill over into personal purchasing. These findings extend our understandings of role morality in practice, which has largely remained a theoretical concept to date, and provide a starting point for further empirical research on factors affecting role morality in different professional and organisational contexts.

We also highlight practical opportunities related to the context of socially responsible public procurement, given the devolved nature of much purchasing that takes place in a large organisation. Since there is scope for individuals to feel more morally responsible at work if they have detailed awareness of institutional commitments, practical recommendations are made regarding increased communication and monitoring awareness of the socially responsible procurement commitments in this university, in order to develop a more ethical work climate. This could enable staff with strong moral values related to ethical purchasing to bring their whole selves to work and contribute to the institution's social responsibility impacts.

We advise caution on taking these findings to be generalisable on the basis of one study in one context. Similar studies in different contexts could build on and improve the methods used in this one. This study has also highlighted the need for more research into different individual and contextual factors affecting role morality and role morality discrepancies, plus any interplay between such factors. In terms of the ethical purchasing context specifically, studies investigating further aspects of ethical work climate on employees' moral judgement and also behaviour regarding public procurement would provide additional practical recommendations. The types of research methods used for such studies should be expanded beyond surveys, to include a greater focus on parallel qualitative studies using, for example, interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observation of ethical workplace behaviour in practice.

*Ethical approval: All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee*

and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

### **Acronyms**

SHCV – strength of harm/care values

PPFR – personal purchasing felt responsibility

WPFR – workplace purchasing felt responsibility

SRPC awareness – awareness of socially responsible procurement commitments

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## Figures

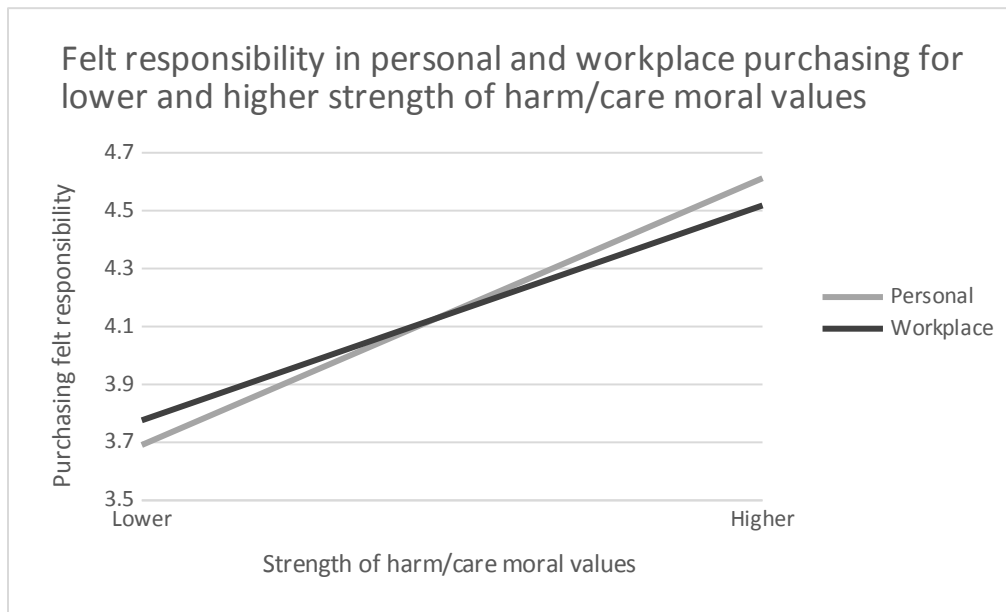


Figure 1: Illustrates the interaction effect between purchasing moral responsibility (workplace vs. personal) and an individuals' strength of harm/care moral values

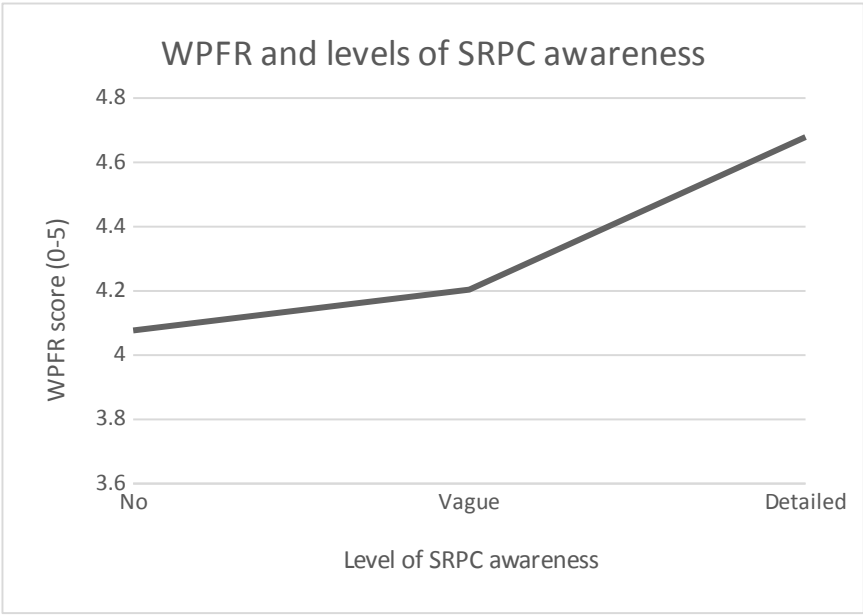


Figure 2: Illustrates differences in WPFR for individuals with differing SRPC awareness (no awareness, vague awareness, detailed awareness).



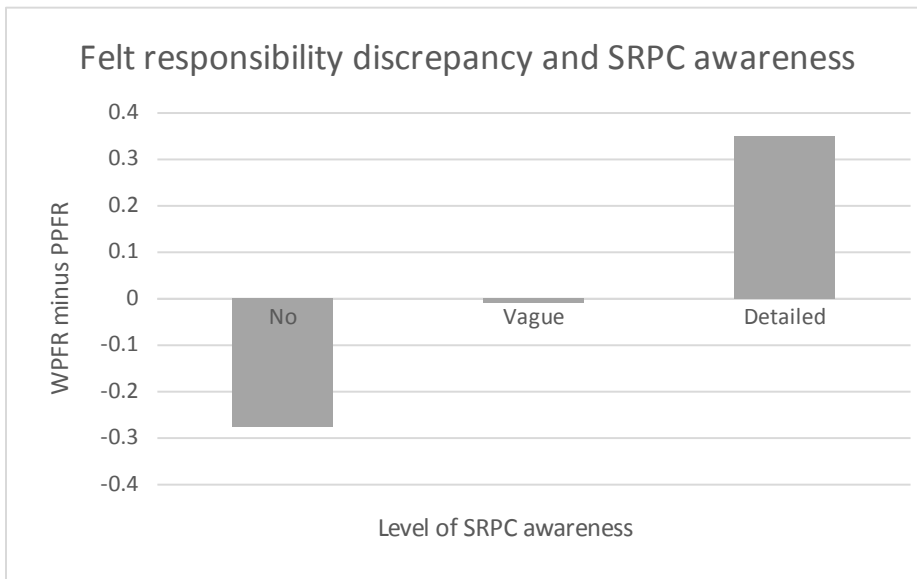


Figure 3: Illustrates differences in felt responsibility discrepancy (WPF minus PPFR) for individuals with differing levels of SRPC awareness (no awareness, vague awareness, detailed awareness).