

# JOURNALISTS' MORAL JUDGMENT ABOUT CHILDREN

## Do as I say, not as I do?

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*This study used a controlled experiment to examine the ethical decision-making of 99 professional journalists in the United States to see if they held different attitudes, made different decisions, and used different levels of moral judgment when stories involved children than when they involved adults. It found that these journalists were significantly more concerned with protecting children's privacy, keeping them from harm, and ensuring informed consent than they were for adults. But they did not use significantly higher levels of moral judgment for children than adults, nor did they withhold children's photographs significantly more often than adults'. The journalists in this study believed they were protecting children from harm but did not carry through with those beliefs. It is important that the news media treat children well because having children's voices in news stories is vital to understanding their worlds and reporting on injustices against them.*

KEYWORDS children; ethics; journalism; moral development

### Introduction

One of the newer and thornier subjects in journalism ethics is how to handle children when they are the subjects and sources of stories (Ponte, 2007). Trade journals are tackling the subject (Daugherty, 2002; Jenkins, 2002; Lipinski, 1998; Stone, 1999), as is scholarly research (Fullerton, 2004; Mackay, 2008; Moeller, 2002; Slopen et al., 2007). The consensus among journalists is that children deserve special protection, and that journalists do take extra care to protect children's privacy, ensure the accuracy of their accounts, help them understand the consequences of media coverage, and use their images responsibly (Fullerton, 2004). But do they really? While most of the discussion by journalists presumes the extra steps they take to protect children from harm, social science research is more equivocal. Some studies show evidence of more responsible journalism when children are involved (Slopen et al., 2007), while others show the opposite (Mackay, 2008). The purpose of this study is to examine the ethical decision-making of US journalists when children are the subjects of news coverage at two levels: what journalists' *think* they do when it comes to using children in the news and what they *actually* do. The findings from this study will allow us to see if journalists' perceptions of their treatment of children are in line with their actual decisions and help us understand the conflicting findings of previous research.

This study uses a controlled experiment to examine whether 99 professional journalists in the United States made different decisions and moral judgments when stories involved children than when they involved adults. It also examines whether these journalists hold different attitudes for children than for adults about issues of privacy, avoiding harm, balance of power, credibility, informed consent, and attribution of

responsibility. This study is important because if journalists believe they are protecting children from harm but are not carrying through with those beliefs then children stand to suffer. Journalists need to know if their good intentions are reflected in their practices or not. This research adds evidence to our body of knowledge about influences on the moral reasoning of journalists and offers important evidence that can improve journalism practice and education.

## Literature Review

### *Ethical Issues Specific to Children*

There is little in the way of research or written standards to guide reporters on where to draw the line when covering children (Stone, 1999). Ethics codes frequently do not address children (Fullerton, 2004). One study showed that of 16 media ethics codes in the United States, only three mentioned children specifically (Williams, 1997). The Radio-Television News Directors' Association and the Society of Professional Journalists in the US codes urge journalists to use special care with children but there are no insights into particular situations (Fullerton, 2004). More detailed help can be found in the UNICEF media team's document on children (Fullerton, 2004), but that is not a staple in most newsrooms. Journalists acknowledge that codes of ethics are only somewhat helpful, and that many journalists do not read codes (Williams, 1997). Furthermore, many journalists say their own newsrooms have no specific policies on dealing with children (Mackay, 2008). Rather, reporters tend to develop their own ethical guidelines over time (Allen, 2003).

From a legal perspective, children are afforded special protection in the United States. Generally, US law deems children to be 18 years old or younger. When the US legal system is involved, reporting standards are clearer; some court records of juveniles are confidential and the information is not made public. Even so, boundaries continue to shift; more states in the United States are opening juvenile court records and are trying juveniles as adults at younger and younger ages, as young as 11 in some cases, making the information about them public record. Even then, US journalists are not legally obligated to withhold the names and photographs of children in the justice system if they have obtained that information by other, legal, means (Stone, 1999).

Only three empirical studies could be found that related directly to the questions in this research (Fullerton, 2004; Mackay, 2008; Slopen et al., 2007). One of those studies used in-depth interviews with Canadian journalists and showed that journalists believed they did everything in their power to protect children, but that there were no real guidelines or protocols for ensuring this (Fullerton, 2004). The other two analyzed the content of news stories in the United States and produced conflicting results; Mackay (2008) found that children were more likely to be named than not in news stories, while Slopen et al. (2007) found more elements of responsible journalism in stories about mental health issues and children. Because there is little on this topic and the findings of the only two studies of behavior conflict, this study asks research questions rather than makes predictions using hypotheses.

In reviewing the literature on news coverage of children, one topic continually recurred and was discussed as being particularly sensitive—running photographs of children. Moeller's (2002) analysis of the media's use of children in international news used examples of photographs almost exclusively—images of starving children in Somalia, dead

children in war-torn countries, Elian Gonzalez, etc. She singled out "the epidemic use of images of children" to tell stories effectively (Moeller, 1999, p. 38). She asked, "Yet, are children so favored and so protected? Or is child-centeredness a fantasy. . .?" (1999, p. 46), an illusion of journalists and the public she terms the "hierarchy of the innocent." Moeller went on to explain the prominence of photographs of children in the ethical line-up: "It is not pictures per se that are important. What is essential is the story that certain pictures tell. It is the moral argument that the pictures make" (Moeller, 2002, p. 51).

Because of the frequency and sensitive nature of using photographs, which Moeller placed at the top of important ethical issues when covering children, this study examines journalists' decision-making about children in the context of using their photographs. It is common in experimental studies to start with the strongest manipulation; if no effects are found, there is little reason to continue examining weaker manipulations. If effects *are* found, then lesser manipulations can be explored. Thus, this study is set in the context of use of photographs. Future studies should look at other contexts, such as naming children or making sure they understand the consequences of media coverage, but one study cannot cover all contexts.

In addition to using photographs, a search of the academic and industry literature on the topic of covering children highlighted six issues that formed the focus of discussion on dealing ethically with children: privacy, credibility, informed consent, avoiding harm, the balance of power between adults and children, and whether children are less responsible for their situations than adults. These areas are reviewed below.

*Privacy* concerns have mainly revolved around revealing children's identities by either naming them or showing their pictures (Elliott, 1990; Mackay, 2008). The Poynter Institute offered guidelines that included giving children greater privacy protection than adults, and Stone (1999) cites the example of children who have either been involved in or were witnesses to serious crimes. Elliott (1990) said newswriters should not decide for themselves if the seriousness of the crime merits revealing children's identities, but should consult experts. Stone (1999) also cites reporters who say it is appropriate to disguise the identity of a child who reveals information that might upset their parent.

*Avoiding harm* goes hand-in-hand with privacy issues because children may not understand the consequences of news coverage (Tompkins, 1999). Long-term psychological risks are real and dangerous. A child's quotes may cause him or her to be scorned or taunted by classmates or adults. Children are not capable of understanding long-term consequences in the way that adults are, says Elliott (1990), and reporters agree on the need to weigh whether child sources can make the assessments necessary to protect themselves (Allen, 2003). Complicating matters, for journalists, the duty to do no harm is often in direct conflict with, and superseded by, the duty to tell the truth—journalism's primary ethical value. "We do not start with minimizing harm. We must first consider our journalistic mission," said one reporter (Stone, 1999, p. 32). But another reporter says, "A reporters' need or mission to tell the truth doesn't mean you have to wound someone in the process" (Allen, 2003, p. 10).

*Informed consent* is related to issues of privacy and harm but different in that it emphasizes ensuring that children have a clear understanding of what news coverage might mean in terms of privacy and other consequences. It stresses that children's cooperation must be obtained from an "informed position" (Fullerton, 2004, p. 515). Journalists often achieve informed consent by allowing children the option to withdraw from participation (Fullerton, 2004). One editor talked about voluntarily deleting

information if he did not feel the child understood the implications of participation (Stone, 1999). Other journalists seek parental permission before using children as subjects or sources, but even then, children may feel pressured to participate because they know their parents expect it (Fullerton, 2004).

The *power balance* between child sources or subjects and adult journalists is another related topic and revolves around the sense of authority that children feel toward adults, a skilled reporter's ability to elicit sensitive information, and whether a false sense of friendship is created between the journalist and child. "Kids don't have an even playing field about this," said one reporter (Stone, 1999, p. 33). Another reporter summed up the issue by saying that a child should "have the right to say 'don't print that'" (Stone, 1999, p. 33). Because the balance of power is unequal, children "may not feel able to decline to comment" (Fullerton, 2004, p. 512). The unequal power between children and their parents is another consideration (Fullerton, 2004). Although legally, parents can make decisions for their children, morally, those decisions may not always be in the child's best interest (Fullerton, 2004).

*Credibility* is an issue because children's reasoning abilities are less well developed than adults' (Mackay, 2008), and child development research confirms this (Piaget, 1965). Children may not be the most accurate of sources (Stone, 1999). Psychologists have pinpointed age 13 as when children become reliable sources (Stone, 1999).

Finally, the issue of *attribution of responsibility* is important to explore in the context of covering children. In social psychology, attribution theory is concerned with judgments of causal responsibility for events and their consequences; that is, explaining and predicting how people place blame (Weiner, 1993). Attribution of responsibility is critical because whom people hold accountable for social problems can determine the kinds of solutions they choose (Iyengar, 1991). Attribution theory says that people in Western cultures typically exaggerate the role of individuals' motives and intentions while downplaying the role of contextual or societal factors. Psychologists have termed this the fundamental attribution error (Jones, 1979). Research has shown that certain kinds of news stories tend to encourage this fundamental attribution error of placing responsibility with individuals, while other kinds of news frames are associated with a tendency to attribute responsibility to societal factors more than to individuals. Iyengar (1991) looked at how stories were framed to document attribution differences; this study is concerned with differences in attribution of responsibility according to whether stories feature adults or children. If journalists hold children less accountable for their own problems and blame adults more for theirs, then it stands to reason that journalists would take different actions toward children than adults, presumably protecting them more.

These concepts are explored in the first research question:

RQ1: Do journalists say that children deserve greater protection than adults on the issues of privacy, harm, power, and consent, and do they worry more about children's credibility and attribute less personal responsibility to children than adults?

### *Ethical Theory*

These practical questions about journalists' treatment of children in news coverage derive from a good deal of ethical theory as well as moral development theory. The ethical philosophy that speaks most directly to issues of protecting children is John Rawls' (1971)

theory of social responsibility. His concept of a “veil of ignorance” is one where people can reason about ethics as if there are no social differences, and thus, no one would know whether they would be harmed or helped by the decision. From this position, Rawls reasoned that people would make decisions based on two values, maximizing individual liberty and protecting weaker parties. It is that second value that arises when making ethical decisions about children. Rawls’ definition of weaker parties includes people who have traditionally had less power—people of color, the poor, and children. Rawls’ principle of protecting weaker parties speaks to inherent inequalities; therefore, the most vulnerable parties receive priority. For Rawls, social fairness involved a level playing field for all. This speaks directly to the issue of journalists’ ethical choices about covering children. The discussion about how to handle children in news coverage is fundamentally one of ethics, not merely norms or routines.

### *Moral Development Theory*

One offshoot of moral philosophy that helps us understand and predict the ethical decision-making of people, particularly those in professional capacities such as doctors, lawyers, or journalists, is moral development theory. This theory, which describes how people grow and develop in their capacity for making more advanced moral judgments, is based on the classical ethical theories of Rawls as well as Kant, Mills, and others. Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1981, 1984) is credited with developing the theory, and others have continued to refine and develop it such as James Rest and his colleagues (Rest, 1983, 1986; Rest and Narvaez, 1994; Rest et al., 1997, 1999).

Numerous refinements to the theory have been made over the years in response to criticism, including refinements from feminist scholars employing “other-regarding” evaluations of ethical behavior. One such scholar was Carol Gilligan (1982), a former student of Kohlberg’s, who said that women develop differently from men. Her study of women making moral choices about abortion showed that women are more concerned with caring for others and suggested that moral weight should be given to reasoning about connections. Kohlberg’s theory and instrument had privileged rights and justice, and consistently found that women scored lower than men. He and others incorporated this ethic of care into the highest level of moral development and those differences disappeared; now, men and women do about the same in studies using this theory (Thoma, 1986). Although no differences between men and women are expected, this study will examine that question to see if the subject of children engenders different moral reasoning in men and women.

According to the theory, moral development proceeds in stages that represent better quality moral judgments as defined by the classical ethical philosophies. The stages, which have been categorized into three levels, proceed as follows: the lowest stage, termed *Pre-conventional*, describes someone who is concerned with his or her own welfare; behavior that benefits one’s self is right. Other people are considered, but only when their needs are the same as one’s own. The middle stage, named *Conventional*, is defined by conforming to society’s expectations, such as helping others and gaining approval in order to maintain the social contract. The highest stage of moral judgment, the *Post-conventional*, is defined by giving each person a stake in the system and being committed to universal ethical principles that are the result of intellectual reasoning. At this level, laws and rules are respected if they achieve full reciprocity—that is, they should

not favor one group over another. Right and wrong and the value of rules and law are determined by their appeal to mutuality. If journalists are indeed reasoning at higher levels about children, then use of this theory will allow detection of that.

This study uses Kohlberg's theory of moral development for several reasons. It is the most widely used theory of moral development today (Coleman and Wilkins, 2009). Since the 1970s more than 1000 studies of literally hundreds of thousands of people in more than 40 countries have been conducted, giving us much comparative data. Most of that work is specifically focused on moral reasoning in the professions, making it a good fit for this study of journalists. Other theories and approaches are equally valid; Kohlberg's theory is well suited for this particular study.

Rest et al. (1999) developed a questionnaire to measure the moral judgment of professionals who face ethical dilemmas called the Defining Issues Test, or DIT. It has been given to doctors, nurses, dentists, teachers, accountants, and in two studies, to journalists (Coleman and Wilkins, 2002; Westbrook, 1995). Versions of it customized for journalism have been given on several occasions (Coleman, 2003, 2007; Westbrook, 1995) and have been demonstrated to reliably and unobtrusively gauge a journalists' level of moral judgment according to Kohlberg's stage theory. This study uses such a version of the DIT, described below. Furthermore, situational differences such as whether journalists see photographs or not, and having people of different races in the dilemmas has been shown to lead to improvements or decreases in journalists' ethical reasoning (Coleman, 2007, 2003). Therefore, it is appropriate to test whether having children or adults in the dilemmas changes the moral judgment and actions of journalists using this instrument. This study asks a research question regarding how journalists actually behave when making ethical decisions about children:

RQ2: Do journalists use significantly different levels of moral judgment for children than adults?

Moral development research is understandably concerned with whether high-quality reasoning predicts high-quality ethical behavior. Studies have correlated DIT scores with measures of behavior such as cheating on tests, prosocial acts, professional decision-making, and job performance (Rest et al., 1999) and found that there is, indeed, a fairly high correlation. In other words, it does not just measure what people *say* they would do, but correlates with what they would be likely to *actually* do. Additionally, there is one behavioral measure on the test that asks participants to choose an action they would take to resolve each dilemma; for example, to run a news photograph or not run the photograph. Therefore, this test does have a proxy measure of behavior—what action the participant would take. The dilemmas on the instrument are true dilemmas in the sense that there is no obvious right or wrong answer; a strong ethical argument can be made for either course of action. This study uses the moral argument of whether to run a picture to test whether journalists actually do protect children more than adults with their actions in the final research question:

RQ3: Do journalists protect children by withholding their pictures more often than they withhold pictures of adults?

## Methods

This study used a within-subjects experimental design where all participants were given all four stories with children as subjects in two stories, and adults as subjects in two.

This helped reduce effects due to individual differences because participants acted as their own controls. The order of the stories and the use of children or adults were rotated so that all stories featured children and adults an equal number of times (i.e., for each story, approximately 50 participants read about children and about 50 read about adults). It investigated whether age of story subjects has a cause-and-effect relationship on the moral judgment of professional journalists. In other words, did participants make different decisions or use different levels of moral judgment because the story subjects were children versus adults when everything else was the same? Because everything except the age of the story subjects was the same, if differences are found, they must be due to the story subjects' age.

The stimuli were four ethical dilemmas that working journalists might encounter. For all four, participants had to decide whether to run a photograph or not. Story Issue (Homelessness/Spouse or Child Abuse/Drug Use/Illegal Immigration) was the repetition factor (see Appendix A for dilemmas). All four story issues were written with children and with adults, resulting in eight story versions. That is, there was a story on homeless children and a story on homeless adults; a story on child abuse and a story on spouse abuse; a story on illegal immigrants who were children and illegal immigrants who were adults; a story on drug use by adults and drug use by children. The stories were identical except for the main character's age and slight wording changes to fit the story; for example, a homeless child is described as begging for money whereas the homeless adult is described as finding work when he can. All children were described as 12 or 13 years old because that is the age at which psychologists say children become more responsible for their own actions, thus providing a true dilemma for participants. Adults in the stories were depicted as being 29–34 years old. Debriefing of participants showed that none detected that age was the focus of the study.

Participants were professional journalists at newspapers and television stations across the South and Southwest region of the United States. They were recruited by the researcher writing and telephoning managers for permission to come to their newsrooms to conduct a study. No managers refused to allow the researcher to come. Newsrooms managers announced the study, its date, time, and location to employees in advance via email. The researcher then traveled to the newsrooms where participants completed the questionnaire, usually in a conference room, and the researcher provided either lunch on the premises or gift cards to local restaurants in exchange for participation. The entire study took approximately 30 minutes.

### *Instrument*

*Moral judgment.* The main dependent variable in this study, level of moral judgment, is operationalized by a paper-and-pencil instrument designed to work like the Defining Issues Test (Rest et al., 1999). It was constructed so that ethical dilemmas specific to journalism could be used. The instrument was extensively pretested and has been used in two previously published studies where reliability testing is described (Coleman, 2003, 2007).

Immediately after reading each dilemma, participants decided whether to run the photo or not; "Can't Decide" was a third choice. This decision choice represented one measure of behavior; whether journalists chose to protect story subjects by withholding a photo.

The second measure of behavior—the level of moral judgment journalists used—was calculated by a more complex formula. Immediately after reading the dilemma and choosing

a course of action, participants rated 12 statements according to how important each was in making a decision using a five-point scale (great, much, some, little, or no importance). Each statement reflects functioning at one of Kohlberg's stages. Sample statements included: "The competition is working on a similar story; if the paper doesn't run the photo, the competition will just run something like it"—a Pre-conventional (lowest stage) statement; "Whether the public has a right to know all the facts"—a Conventional (middle stage) statement; and "If the paper doesn't run this photo, conditions leading to situations like this will persist"—a Post-conventional (highest stage) statement. All statements were correlated highly and significantly with at least four other statements at the stage they were meant to represent, and did not correlate with any statements at other stages.

Last, participants used the ratings they gave to each of the 12 statements above to rank their four most important of the 12. From this ranking, each participant's moral judgment score was calculated by the researcher. If participants ranked a Post-conventional statement as "Most Important," it scored 4 points; if a Post-conventional statement was ranked as "Second Most Important," it scored 3 points. This continued with "Third" scoring 2 points and "Fourth" scoring 1 point. Statements at lower stages than Post-conventional scored zero.<sup>1</sup> Scores were summed for a range of 0–10 per dilemma. Scores for the two children's stories were summed; and scores for the two adult stories were summed for two measures—a moral judgment score on stories with children, and a moral judgment score on stories with adults. All story scores were summed for an overall moral judgment score. This represented the second measure of behavior.

*Attitude measures.* Journalists' self-reported attitudes toward the six issues of privacy, harm, power, credibility, consent, and attribution of responsibility were measured with indexes consisting of two to six questions for each; all were measured on seven-point Likert scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The indexes were:

- *Privacy* (Cronbach's alpha = 0.78): "I would be careful to protect this woman's/boy's privacy" and "I think a lot about how this woman's life will be part of the public record."
- *Harm* (Cronbach's alpha = 0.85): "I wouldn't use some of the photos even if she/he said it was OK," "I would put the interests of the woman/boy ahead of the story," "I worry about whether the coverage will harm her/him emotionally or otherwise," and "My obligation to tell the truth supersedes the desire to protect this woman/boy" (reverse coded).
- *Power* (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87): "I want to make sure there is an even playing field between us," and "I worry about the balance of power between us."
- *Credibility* (Cronbach's alpha = 0.78): "I worry if s/he was really capable of telling me the truth," "I worry about this woman's/boy's credibility."
- *Consent* (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88): "I want her/him to feel comfortable telling me 'don't print that,'" "I want to make sure s/he understands everything s/he shows me is fair game for the story," "I would consider showing her/him anything sensitive before printing it," and "I worry s/he felt pressured into participating in this story."
- *Responsibility* (Cronbach's alpha = 0.82): "I partly blame this woman/boy for her/his problems," "Our society should offer more programs to help people in situations like this" (reverse coded), "Issues like this are not treated realistically in our culture" (reverse coded), "S/he bears some responsibility for her/his own situation," "This woman/boy should think more about how her/his actions will affect other people," and "Society is partly to blame for problems like this."

Participants were asked the usual demographics of age, gender and race.



**Results**

A total of 99 professional journalists participated in this study; 49 percent were men and the average age was 32. Seventy-six percent were white, 13 percent were African American, 4 percent were Hispanic, 1 percent was Asian and 6 percent listed their race as "other." Age did not significantly correlate with overall moral reasoning (calculated with all four stories) ( $r = -0.009, p = 0.933$ ) and there were no significant differences in level of overall reasoning between men and women ( $t = -0.894, df = 96, p = 0.374$ ; Men mean = 16.6, SD = 6.69; Women mean = 15.41, SD = 6.87).

RQ1: Do journalists say that children deserve greater protection than adults on the issues of privacy, harm, power, and consent, and do they worry more about children's credibility and attribute less personal responsibility to children than adults?

The journalists in this study said children deserved more privacy, protection from harm and informed consent than did adults, and the differences were statistically significant. However, they were not significantly more concerned about the power balance or credibility of children over adults. They did attribute significantly more individual responsibility to adults than to children (see Table 1).

RQ2: Do journalists use significantly different levels of moral judgment for children than adults?

No, the difference in moral judgment scores for children and adults was not significantly different. These journalists showed an average moral judgment score of 8.26 (SD = 3.7) for children and 7.91 (SD = 3.6) for adults. The difference was not significant ( $t = 1.90, df = 94, p = 0.277$ ).

RQ3: Do journalists protect children by withholding their pictures more often than they withhold pictures of adults?

No, journalists did not withhold pictures of children more often than they withheld pictures of adults. The journalists in this study ran the photos of children 116 times and withheld the photos of children only 47 times. That compares similarly with what they said they would do for photos of adults—125 would run the photos, 39 would not run the photo. This represents a difference of only nine times more that journalists would run the photo of adults than children, and only eight times more that journalists would withhold

**TABLE 1**  
*t*-Tests of differences between children and adults on attitudes

	Mean (SD)		<i>t</i> -Value (df)
	Children	Adults	
Privacy	5.24 (1.15)	4.9 (1.16)	3.37**
Harm	4.8 (1.1)	4.6 (1.03)	2.6*
Power	4.5 (1.2)	4.4 (1.0)	1.75
Consent	5.1 (1.0)	5.0 (1.0)	2.28*
Credibility	4.11 (1.6)	4.17 (1.1)	-0.47
Responsibility	3.36 (.89)	3.7 (.73)	-4.54***

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ,  $df = 97$ .

the photos because they were of children. A Chi Square test was not significant ( $\chi^2 = 0.832$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.3616$ ) (see Table 2).

### Discussion and Conclusion

This study shows there is clearly a disconnect between what these US professional journalists said they were concerned about and would do when using children as sources and subjects of news stories, and the choices they actually made. These 99 participants said they would go to great lengths to protect the privacy of children, make sure children understood the implications of being in a story or photo, and keep children from harm even at the expense of the story. What they did not do was take that one step further and actually withhold the photographs of children. Instead, they chose to run a child's photograph 116 times; they withheld photographs of children only 47 times. This is practically the same as the choices they made for adults—running the photos of adults 125 times, and withholding the photos of adults 39 times. Nor did these journalists use better quality ethical reasons when thinking about dilemmas with children; their moral judgment scores were not significantly different for children than for adults.

Interestingly, these journalists were not more worried about the credibility of child sources than adults, nor were they more concerned about the balance of power between themselves and children than they were between themselves and adults. In the professional literature, these two topics arose as something that professional journalists said they were especially concerned about when children were covered; that did not prove to be the case with the journalists in this study.

This study does not mean to imply that choosing to run a child's photo is inherently unethical; it is not. Nor is it a plea to withhold photos, names, and other information. What this paper is concerned with is that these journalists' actions did not reflect the things they said they were concerned with. In so much of the professional literature, journalists profess to protect children's privacy, emotions, and futures by withholding names and photographs, not using statements that reflect badly on children, and even abandoning whole stories. That was not the case here when 99 professional journalists in the United States were actually faced with such a decision. They overwhelmingly chose to run photographs of children despite concerns about privacy, harm, and informed consent. As Elliott (1990) fears, it appears that children are being used as means to ends.

It is sometimes hard to admit that we do not always practice what we preach. The results of this study mirror the discussion in the professional literature, where journalists have given serious thought and debate to their coverage of children, but goes beyond that to show that this ethical soul-searching is often used as a permission slip to privilege the story over the child, the public's "right to know" over the child's right to privacy and

**TABLE 2**

Frequencies of running and not running adults' and children's photographs

	Run photo	Do not run photo
Children	116	47
Adults	125	39

$\chi^2 = 0.832$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.3616$ .

protection from harm. The results of this study raise concerns that ethical discussion in newsrooms becomes an exercise in justifying what journalists want to do, not a real heart-to-heart about whether or not they should do it in the first place. This study shows that decisions about running or withholding photos of children are lopsidedly in favor of running photos. A greater balance needs to be struck. Giving serious thought to the impact and ramifications of news coverage is laudable, but it does not go far enough. Action must follow. We must do more than pay lip service to not running the photo or withholding the name of a child; we must actually withhold the photos and names. If journalists are not carrying through with their intentions to protect children, not only do those children stand to suffer but journalism will too.

Just as ethical lapses have caused the public to lose faith in the accuracy of journalism, ethical missteps with children can cause them and their parents or guardians to refuse to cooperate with journalists. Without children's voices in the news, citizens will not fully understand their worlds. Reports on injustices against children will lack the emotion and credibility that these small voices bring. Society stands to lose as well.

Ethical soul-searching is not enough; it must translate into action. If journalists are aware of possible discrepancies in their attitudes and behavior, they can begin to address them. It is important that the news media treat children well because having children's voices in news stories is vital to understanding their worlds and reporting on injustices against them (Williams, 1997). The media must see that their own values translate into action if they are to have the trust of children and their guardians that will ensure these small voices continue to be heard and their stories told.

This study acknowledges that much good is done by journalists reporting on children—day care centers where children are sexually abused are brought to justice, foster homes that neglect their small charges are shut down, social policies are created that improve children's lives, the underlying causes of school shootings are addressed. The ability to do good works such as these is jeopardized when journalists privilege the story over the child.

I suggest that "golden means" are often overlooked in coverage of children; stories can still effect powerful change without the names of children, or comments that might come back to haunt them. Photographs can still pull at readers' heartstrings and urge them to action even though they may not be the most graphic or powerful photograph of the shoot. Perhaps that most powerful photo goes inside instead of on the front page, runs small instead of large, or below the fold instead of above. As media credibility continues to decline, journalists may feel more pressure to assure readers that the children in their stories are real, not fakes or composites, by naming them and showing their pictures. Instead, journalists should work harder to tell the story by other methods than overwhelmingly choosing to show photographs of children. Compromises are possible. As Aristotle said, the right course of action often lies between two extremes.

This study found willingness on the part of these journalists to question themselves and examine ethical issues, but when it came time to make decisions and take action, little was different for children than for adults. It appears to be a case of "do as I say, not as I do."

## NOTE

1. Contact the author for more information on scoring.

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## Appendix A

### *Homeless Children*

Pete Stevens, a newspaper photojournalist, has been working on a story about homelessness. Michael Glenn, 13, ran away from home and lives on the streets. When he can get enough money from begging, he stays in one of the cheap, dirty motels frequented by prostitutes. The rest of the time, he sleeps in an abandoned van. Dinner for Michael is often a bowl of cereal. The emotional scenes in Stevens' photos depict the challenges he faces in his daily existence. Michael gave Stevens permission to use his photos and signed a consent form. There are mixed opinions in the newsroom. Should the newspaper use this boy's photo?

### *Homeless Adults*

Pete Stevens, a newspaper photojournalist, has been working on a story about homelessness. When 32-year-old Michael Glenn can find work, he stays in one of the cheap, dirty motels frequented by prostitutes. The rest of the time, he sleeps in an abandoned van. Dinner for Michael is often a bowl of cereal. The emotional scenes in Stevens' photos depict the challenges he faces in his daily existence. Michael gave Stevens

permission to use his photos and signed a consent form. There are mixed opinions in the newsroom. Should the newspaper use this man's photo?

### *Drugs and Children*

Cliff Jackson, a newspaper photojournalist, has been doing a story in an area of town frequented by drug dealers and addicts. He has compelling photographs to go with the story. One photo shows 13-year-old Jeremy Dickens playing "junkie," a game that imitates his addicted parents. In the photo, a piece of rubber tubing is wrapped around his upper arm, the ends clenched tight in his teeth, and a syringe pointed at his forearm. The photo was taken in a public place and Jeremy and his parents gave Jackson permission to take the pictures. They have seen the photograph and agreed to its publication, signing a consent form. Opinions in the newsroom are mixed over whether to run this boy's photo. Should the newspaper run the photo?

### *Drugs and Adults*

Cliff Jackson, a newspaper photojournalist, has been doing a story in an area of town frequented by drug dealers and addicts. He has compelling photographs to go with the story. One photo shows Jeremy Dickens, 32, a local addict, with a piece of rubber tubing wrapped around his upper arm, the ends clenched tight in his teeth, and a syringe pointed at his forearm. The photo was taken in a public place and Jeremy gave Jackson permission to take the pictures. He has seen the photograph and agreed to its publication, signing a consent form. Opinions in the newsroom are mixed over whether to run this man's photo. Should the newspaper run the photo?

### *Illegal Immigrant Children*

Jill Jenkins is a newspaper photojournalist doing a story on illegal immigrants. She has a compelling photo of Ben Jarno, a 13-year-old boy from Croatia who barely speaks English. He snuck into the country with a fake passport, got a fake birth certificate and social security card so he could work in the United States. He says he is fleeing political persecution in Croatia. Thinking that publicity will help his cause and that of other illegal immigrants, he encourages Jenkins to run his picture in the paper. There are mixed opinions in the newsroom. Should the newspaper run this boy's photo?

### *Illegal Immigrant Adults*

Jill Jenkins is a newspaper photojournalist doing a story on illegal immigrants. She has a compelling photo of Ben Jarno, a 32-year-old man from Croatia who barely speaks English. He snuck into the country with a fake passport, got a fake birth certificate and social security card so he could work in the United States. He says he is fleeing political persecution in Croatia. Thinking that publicity will help his cause and that of other illegal immigrants, he encourages Jenkins to run his picture in the paper. There are mixed opinions in the newsroom. Should the newspaper run this man's photo?

*Child Abuse*

Robin Meyers, a photojournalist for a daily newspaper, has been working on a story about child abuse among middle- and upper-class families. Most people think that child abuse only happens to the poor, but in this city, an increasing number of children of important families are showing up at emergency rooms with signs of abuse. Meyers is at a hospital when Andy Langley, the 13-year-old son of a local developer, comes in bloodied and bruised. The boy's mother says his father gets frustrated because Andy steals cars and takes drugs. The boy's mother encourages Meyers to take the boy's photo saying she wants people to know that it could happen to anyone. The boy and his mother sign Meyers' consent form. Opinions in the newsroom are mixed about whether to use the photo. Should the newspaper use this boy's photo?

*Spouse Abuse*

Robin Meyers, a photojournalist for a daily newspaper, has been working on a story about spouse abuse among middle- and upper-class families. Most people think that spouse abuse only happens to the poor, but in this city, an increasing number of wives of important businessmen are showing up at emergency rooms with signs of abuse. Meyers is at a hospital when Angela Langley, the 34-year-old wife of a local developer, comes in bloodied and bruised. Langley says this has happened before but she doesn't want to press charges and keeps going back to her husband because he says he'll change. Langley encourages Meyers to take her photo saying she wants people to know that it could happen to anyone. She signs Meyers' consent form. Opinions in the newsroom are mixed about whether to use the photo. Should the newspaper use this woman's photo?

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