

# **ETHICS, EXPECTATIONS AND GENERATION Y: A PROPOSAL TO EXAMINE WILLINGNESS TO FABRICATE ON RESUMES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Our target population of interest is the Generation Y students in a school of business in the southeastern United States. This group is slightly larger than the BabyBoomer group that is nearing retirement, and it has been widely studied over the last few years. This proposed research will contribute to the extant literature by looking at African-American Generation Yers at a Historically Black College or University (HBCUs) within the “Bible Belt” of the southeastern United States. Do these students who chose an HBCU, in part because of the strong underlying religious cultural values and are exposed to ethics training through their course work have the same attitude toward job search “mis-information” as current professionals and other Generation Yers? Does their level of self-monitoring impact the likelihood that they will embellish on their resumes or other aspects of their job search?

## **INTRODUCTION**

In 1979, the Association to Advance College Schools of Business/International Association for Management Education (AACSB-IME) made ethics instruction mandatory for all students in business education programs. Since that time, AACSB-IME has encouraged that all schools of business provide even more attention to the breadth and depth of the ethical education and training to which their students are exposed. This organization encourages member schools to ramp up their commitment to and focus on ethics awareness and development (2004).

Part of this renewed fervor and attention is because this is “the right thing to do”; part is because of the well-publicized scandals in the popular press and literature around scandals and malfeasance in large and small corporations. These scandals range from deliberate mis-reporting of financial data (number of companies are having to “re-state” their data); corporate spying on executives and members of Boards of Directors (e.g., Hewlett-Packard); insider trading (e.g., Martha Stewart) and other unethical practices (e.g., Enron); sexual misconduct (e.g., U.S. Congressman, church leaders of major church associations); accounting sleight of hand (e.g., Dr. McGuire, CEO of United Health Group backdating stock option); accepting bribes and racketeering (New Haven, CT Mayor Joseph P. Ganim). The former CEO of Tyco International, Dennis Kozlowski was accused of tax evasion and personal use of corporate funds (Daft, 2005).

Punishment of these corporate misdeeds have not always resulted in jail terms, loss of income, etc., for the individuals involved, but they have led to some level of devastation to the company and its

shareholders. In some instances, criminal legal action has been pursued (e.g., Enron); in others, restitution has been required (Dr. McGuire), while further legal action may be pursued. The scandals at Enron and other businesses have created the consequence of more and more governmental oversight (e.g., Sarbanes-Oxley and additional proposed legislation) to legislate ethical behavior in the workplace. The U.S. Founding Fathers could hardly have envisioned that the “pursuit of happiness” meant for those in corporate (and other) leadership roles, a virtual cessation of moral values and ethical conduct.

As a result of these reported scandals and questionable business practices, business students may have a distorted view of the reward/ethics balance. Business students may be experiencing cognitive dissonance. That is, they are being taught what is “right, fair and honest” in ethics courses and ethics modules embedded in other business courses but observe unethical behaviors and the rewards or lack of punishment associated with said behavior. As a result, it is likely that they will see a greater reward for unethical behavior than for ethical behavior. If the punishment for unethical behavior is less than the perceived reward, students may be influenced to make choices that violate the ethical standards and principles that are being taught.

The “hand slaps” given to individuals who have been caught with their hands in the proverbial cookie jar may not be sufficient deterrent for this behavior. While several high-profile individuals have received somewhat harsher punishments, they do not equate with what similar behavior might be among the rank and file. For example, an individual embezzling millions from a corporation might receive a short jail sentence at a “country club” jail, while an individual robbing a 7-Eleven of \$100 might receive 3-5 years in prison.

Additionally, recent anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a high level of cheating in the classroom, even at the “better institutions” of higher learning. A recent article in the Raleigh, NC, News and Observer stated that reported cheating was on the rise at Duke University. In a USA Today survey, 82% of CEOs said that they lied about their golf scores. While this may seem insignificant, it does suggest that there is a slippery slope when it comes to honesty – little acts of dishonesty may push the envelope and blur the boundaries. Individuals may then engage in more significant acts of dishonesty.

## **RELEVANT LITERATURE**

The literature on ethical behavior and the formulation of ethical values is rich, varied, and exhaustive. The purpose of this brief literature review is to identify the framework in which the reported study was conducted.

Ethics can be defined as the underlying value systems of individuals, groups and organizations. These value systems, whether or not articulated, but certainly as operationalized, have a significant impact on society. The individual’s level of moral development impacts his capacity to make moral choices.

It may be argued that what individuals observe and see rewarded has more of an impact on what is perceived as the lower echelons of society, since these individuals occupy the lowest positions of power and have fewer options available. For example, recent statistics indicate a disparate application of law and harsher sentencing for the same crime when comparing African-Americans and Latinos with Caucasians (with socioeconomic level held constant). Additionally, the latest information from the Department of Labor indicates that the wage/salary levels for women and racial/ethnic minorities, while improving, still lag behind their Caucasian (male) counterparts even when the same human capital investment is made (Calasanti & Smith, 1998, 2002).

The mentoring literature provides many examples of differential impact of mentoring by race and gender (Smith & Calasanti, 2005; Smith, Smith, & Markham, 2000). Livers and Caver (2003) discussed the impact of race and gender on the career and psychosocial success of managers and reported the miasma

that African-American managers experience in the U.S. workplace. Racioethnic minorities tend to have a lower return on their investment in their own futures than the corresponding investment among their Caucasian counterparts (Smith & Calasanti, 2005).

These phenomena create an interesting environment in which individuals' ethical values are further formulated and shaped. Kohlberg (1984, 1987) suggested that moral reasoning (defined by Kail & Cavanaugh (2000:346) as "the rules of ethical conduct that people bring to bear on a problem to justify their solution to the problem") develops over an individual's lifetime in a universal, invariant sequence of six stages. Criticism to his research counters that Kohlberg's theory is most applicable to Western-like civilizations but has less applicability to the moral reasoning in other cultures (Snarey, 1985; Lei, 1994). Gilligan (1982) presented an alternative conceptualization of the developmental progression by including the variable "care and responsibility in interpersonal relationships", particularly with women. Over the course of a lifetime, individuals progress in their growth in understanding of caring and responsibility.

In a study by Tsui (1996), an examination was made between ethical reasoning and ethical behavior of 50 Hong Kong and United States auditors who were either partners or managers. These auditors were placed in an audit conflict situation/dilemma. Their results reflected that the higher the level of the individual's ethical reasoning, the more likely they were to engage in independent behavior. The auditors with high levels of ethical reasoning were less likely to give into a client's request to "modify" the audit.

Another study with accounting-related samples was conducted by Allen and Ng (2001), where they examined the relationship between 123 AICPA members' ethical position and the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) reversal of the bans imposed on commission, referral and contingent fees. CPAs' ethical positions were not related to the reversal of the bans; however, when the relationship between the CPAs professional level and their affect toward the bans, they found that CPAs at higher levels were more opposed to the bans. Allen and Ng concluded that the CPA partner-level professionals favored the ban removal, which would then lead to an increase in their personal income levels.

Mangan (2006) found that 81% of MBA students surveyed believe that businesses have an obligation to improve society; and 78% of them want the concept of "social responsibility" integrated throughout their business courses. Mangan further reported that while 89% of the MBA students believed that social and environmental effects should be factored into corporate business decisions and 60% of them felt that this would be a profitable approach, only 18% of them felt that businesses were currently working to better society.

In a study conducted by Mujtaba & Sims (2006), informal social processes to shape ethical attitudes of full-time employees were less effective than those of their managers who were socialized using a formal approach. Additionally, Mujtaba & Sims reported that employees were not as bothered by unethical behavior as their managers were.

There is some evidence to suggest that women and racioethnic minorities experience the workplace differently than their Caucasian male counterparts; that ethical values are formed through our family of origin, religion, life's experiences, education, and training; and that there may be differences based on race and gender. Our contribution to the literature is through our examination of the self-reported ethics of individuals in Generation Y. This generation has been widely analyzed and studied. Again, we provide a brief sketch of our target population and will describe several propositions that we will make concerning them.

## FABRICATION ON RESUMES

People lie on their resumes for various reasons – some want to portray themselves in the best possible light; others see it as a competitive advantage; still others think it's a little “white” lie, and no real harm is done. Others utilize career counseling and resume writing assistance, often crossing the line from honest self promotion into misrepresentation, exaggeration, and even outright lying about their backgrounds and what they have accomplished (Brown 2004; Sabatini, 2006).

There are a number of high-profile stories of individuals lying or providing mis-information about their backgrounds. These examples include David Edmondson, CEO of RadioShack who claimed to have two college degrees, when in fact he had none (Sabatini, 2006); Ronald Zarrella, CEO of Bausch & Lomb and Ken Lonchar, CFO at Veritas Software (now Symantec), who lied about having MBAs; David Swanson, CEO of R.H. Donnelley Corporation and telephone-directory publisher in Cary, NC, was found to have misleading news releases stating that he had a college degree, which he did not (Wall Street Journal, September 12, 2006). Some of the individuals were fired or resigned; others kept their jobs but had tarnished reputations.

A recent on-line study by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) that was reported by the New York Times found that 44% of the 2.6 million respondents said they had mis-stated their work experience (Vinocur, 2006). In their 1998 survey, SHRM found that 90% of respondents said that they found fabricated references during reference checks (Haskell, 2006). In addition, more than 50% of the applicants checked either regularly or sometimes lied about length of employment (53%) and past salaries (51%). Others lied about criminal records (45%), former employers (44%), former titles (44%), their driving record (33%), academic degrees (30%), credit history (25%), schools attended (22%), and social security number (14%). The 2003 findings by the Risk Advisory Group showed that 65% of curriculum vitae submitted by job applicants contained lies, which was a rise of 16% over those reported in 2002 (Hartley, 2004).

In response to this known embellishment, a new industry has been spawned. According to SHRM, third-party screeners have expanded rapidly over the past ten years (Cullen, 2006). InfoLink Screening Services, a background-checking company, estimates that 14% of job applicants lie about their educational background, and ResumeDoctor.com, a resume-writing business found 43% of resumes it screened over a six-month period had one or more “significant inaccuracies” (Cullen, 2006).

It is in this corporate environment that students trained in schools of business aspire to work. Our target population of interest is the Generation Y students in a school of business in the southeastern United States. This group is slightly larger than the BabyBoomer group that is nearing retirement, and it has been widely studied over the last few years. This reported research will contribute to the extant literature by looking at African-American Generation Yers at a Historically Black College or University (HBCUs) within the “Bible Belt” of the southeastern United States. Do these students who chose an HBCU, in part because of the strong underlying religious cultural values and are exposed to ethics training through their course work have the same attitude toward job search mis-information as current professionals and other Generation Yers?

Another possible variable that may impact an individual's propensity to embellish their qualifications during the job search may be their level of self-monitoring. A review of the extant literature by Gangestad & Snyder (2000) indicates that “high self-monitors may be highly responsive to social and interpersonal cues of situationally appropriate performances,” whereas “for those low self-monitors, expressive behaviors are not controlled by deliberate attempts to appear situationally appropriate; instead, their expressive behavior functionally reflects their own inner attitudes, emotions and dispositions.”

Freeman (2006) suggests that high self-monitors pick up cues from their external environment and reframe their behavior to impress other people. On the other hand, low self-monitors who do not change their behavior either resist or are unable to do so (Day, Schleicher, Unkless & Hiller, 2002; Gangestad & Snyder, 2000; Turnley & Bolino, 2001).

Further, in their study of employed Executive MBA students, Barrick, Parks & Mount (2005) found a relationship between self-monitoring and the Big Five personality traits. When self-monitoring was high, the relationships between Extroversion, Emotional Stability, and Openness to Experience and supervisory ratings of interpersonal performance were attenuated (Freeman, 2006).

In addition, Flynn, Chatman, and Spatero (2001) found that the more demographically different people were from their coworkers (e.g., citizenship, race, etc.), the more negatively they were perceived than individuals who were more similar to their co-workers. However, the impressions were more favorable when the individuals were either high self-monitors or more extroverted (Flynn, Chatman & Spatero, 2001). Finally, Kilduff and Day (1994) tracked MBA graduates over a five year period and found that high self-monitors were better able to adapt to circumstances and opportunities, thus resulting in more successful managerial career strategies than low self-monitors. One would then argue that because the high self monitors are more aware of acceptable and unacceptable behavior within the environment, they will present their positive traits and minimize their shortcomings and reduce the need for embellishment.

## **Generation Y Characteristics**

Generation Y consists of individuals who were born between 1979-1999 and would currently be teenagers and in their 20s (en.Wikipedia.org, 2006). In general, Generation Yers expect the following benefits as part of their employment: Group medical insurance, paid vacation, 401(k) retirement plan, personal/sick time, flexible work schedules and awards. In addition, the values that their potential employer/company should have are social responsibility, loyalty to the individual employee, and integrity (Armour, 2006; Dougherty, Harder, Hill, Kirk & Miller, 2006).

Generation Yers need public praise and to be constantly rewarded. They are accustomed to constant feedback and compliments. They expect promotions frequently or sooner and want to be at the top of the chain of command right away. This group prefers to work in teams whenever possible, is tolerant towards diversity, and is comfortable working with innovative technology. They are open to the use of mentors and have high expectations of themselves/higher value of self fulfillment. On average, members of this group need customized career paths, are multi-taskers, and look for ongoing training. In addition, they want jobs with telecommuting options and to have the ability to work part-time. Members of Generation Y are also future-oriented regarding employment and avoid, if possible, working overtime ([www.vlerick.be](http://www.vlerick.be), 2006).

## **Method**

### **Sample**

Undergraduate students in the School of Business of a Master-Level I HBCU in the southeastern United States. Approximately 90% of the students are African-American.

### **Research Measures and Methods**

In response to a request by the local human resource management association, a survey was completed on 300 undergraduates who were matriculating at three local universities, two of which were HBCUs with African-American populations of 80% and 94%; the third university was a majority institution where 14% of its students were African-American, and 25% were international students. The association wanted a quick look at areas where students would fabricate data, in rank order. The survey was completed over a 5-year period with a convenience sample. During the intervening period, the devastations of 9-11 and Hurricane Katrina occurred, significantly impacting both the economy and the student population. The preliminary study examined student attitudes toward being less than truthful in their job search. We asked students from three different universities to identify what, if anything, they would lie about as they pursue professional career opportunities. In particular, they were asked to rank several items in order in which they would be most likely to embellish the truth.

Three hundred and one subjects participated in the study. The subjects were almost all undergraduates from three universities in the southeast. Only five graduate students participated. Forty-four percent were men and 56% were women. A total of 205 subjects completed usable questionnaires, resulting in a response rate of 68.1%. However, nearly half of the subjects did not rank the items or ranked only a few of those items, leaving the remainder blank.

There were problems inherent with the rankings because it provided ordinal data which does not provide the most meaningful statistical analysis. In addition, there was no scale given on the questionnaire on how to rank these items. It was also not clear whether the subjects were willing to fabricate or whether they were unwilling to provide the information. The “0’s” currently in the database may or may not have indicated a willingness (or lack thereof) to be creative.

Data entry was also a problem, as there was a lot of missing data even in the demographic data, and some of the observation entries appear to be in inappropriate columns. The integrity of the data entered needed to be (and was) rechecked for accuracy. There was also the opportunity for individuals to provide qualitative data, but because of the mis-entry of data, it was difficult to attribute the qualitative comments to the appropriate individual or to then analyze the data.

With those lessons learned and our unwillingness to further the chaos by massaging the data or interpreting information for which the support is suspect or lacking, we have chosen to re-start this research and develop the following propositions:

### **Future Research Questions/Propositions:**

Question 1: To what extent, if any, do the members of Generation Y engage in job search strategies that include fabrication of information?

Proposition 1: Members of Generation Y will report significantly high levels of job search fabrications.

Proposition 2: There will be differences between the reported levels of fabrication by Generation Yers and those of other generations.

Question 2: If there is fabrication, what factors impact their willingness to fabricate information?

Proposition 1: There will be differences, by race and gender, in the numbers of areas in which individuals are willing to fabricate.

Proposition 2: Women will fabricate less than men.

Proposition 3: There will be differences, by race and gender, in the incidence of the top 5 areas in which individuals are willing to fabricate.

Proposition 4: Individuals who are high on self-monitoring will engage in lower levels of job search “mis-information” than individuals who are low on self monitoring.

Proposition 5: The report of significantly high levels of fabrication behavior by members of Generation Y will vary by race and gender.

### Proposed Sample and Measure

An on-line survey will be created and distributed via e-mail to the entire School of Business undergraduate student population. We will use a Likert scale, with ratings 1 to 5: “For each of the items below, use the following scale to indicate the possibility or likelihood that you would exaggerate or “be creative” on your resume, where 1 = not at all likely, 2 = slightly likely, 3 = somewhat likely, 4 = very likely, and 5 = highly likely.”

The variables of interest are: self-monitoring, GPA, work experience, extracurricular activities, organizational activities, awards and honors, references, career objective, length of employment, former titles, criminal record, academic degrees, past salaries, driving record, credit history, reasons for leaving prior job, results/accomplishments, and age.

With modifications made to this study as a result of the pilot study, we believe that we will be able to provide further insight into the characteristics of Generation Yers, as well as to contribute to the literature on career search from an applicants’ perspective and the self-monitoring literature.

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