

STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS BUSINESS CODES OF ETHICS: THE IMPACT OF GENDER

John Angelidis, St. John's University, New York, NY 11439. (718) 990-6495

Igor Tomic, St. John's University, New York, NY 11439. (718) 990-7304

Faramarz Parsa, University of West Georgia, Carrollton, GA 30118. (678) 839-4830

Nabil Ibrahim, Augusta State University, Augusta, GA 30904. (706) 667-4527

ABSTRACT

This paper extends previous research by investigating the basis for attitudes toward codes of business ethics. Specifically, its purposes are twofold. First, to examine students' attitudes with regard to codes of ethics. Second, to ascertain whether differences do exist between the genders with respect to these attitudes.

A total of 853 students enrolled in seven universities in the northeastern and southeastern United States participated in the study. The analysis of the data was conducted in several stages. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed where the students' gender constituted the two levels of the independent variable and their scores on eight items were the dependent variables. The MANOVA revealed that overall there were significant differences between the genders. To understand the underlying contributions of the variables to the significant multivariate effect, each of the eight dependent variables was tested using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the two groups treated as our two levels of the independent variable.

The results revealed significant differences between the two samples. Overall, the female students were more sanguine about the efficacy of codes of business ethics. Limited generalizations and important implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The ethical standards and attitudes of managers and business students have been among the principal issues confronting business and society for many years. Of particular interest to educators, practitioners, and regulators is the extent to which corporations are responsive to the expectations of shareholders and society. While businesses have always been responsible for maximizing long-term value for the shareholders, they are increasingly expected to recognize the importance of their responsibilities toward society and to faithfully adhere to certain ethical standards.

The effects of individual and organizational factors on business ethics have received much attention in the literature. This is mostly motivated by concern over the public's declining positive attitudes about the ethical values and integrity of current and future managers and business executives. Visible indicators of problematic leadership eventually surface in the form of corporate crises such as bankruptcy, executive turnover, legal difficulties, ethical failings, and hostile relations with various stakeholders.

In recent years, widespread media accounts of outbreaks of ethical failings and questionable or abusive practices by corporations have prompted fresh concern over the societal impact of corporate activities and the extent to which managers are responsive to society's expectations. Not surprisingly, these revelations and criticisms have fostered considerable interest and scholarly work in the ethics area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Codes of Ethics

Several organizational variables help shape ethical behavior. Some companies legitimize the

consideration of ethics as an integral part of decision making by providing strong guidance and continuously reminding managers of what is ethical. Codes of ethics are an increasingly popular tool. Businesses rely on them to reduce ambiguity, promote ethical practices, and establish a strong ethical environment. These are formal documents, expressed in language anyone can understand, that state an organization's primary values and the ethical rules and principles employees are expected to adhere to (see, e.g., Adams et al., 2001; Farrell and Farrell, 1998; Valentine and Barnett, 2002, 2003). They are "moral standards used to guide employee or corporate behavior" (Schwartz, 2001, p. 248). Kaptein (2004) shows that among the two hundred largest corporations in the world, 52.5 percent have adopted some type of code of ethics. Codes of ethics are particularly helpful when an individual's self-interest is incompatible with acting in accordance with his or her ethical standards.

It must be remembered that codes of ethics have limits because they cannot anticipate every situation that may arise. Also, in some cases, they are principally public relations statements. Their effectiveness depends heavily on whether they are current and robust, whether they are strictly implemented, and how employees who break the codes are treated. Most importantly, they require management's genuine commitment and their explicit and unequivocal support. The Enron corporation "while continuing to use three different sets of accounts, ...also gave its four-page ethical codes to all new employees to sign on their first day" (Hemingway and MacLagan, 2004, p. 35). A number of writers have shown that codes of ethics may be used to provide organizations with legitimacy (e.g., Boiral, 2003; Weaver et al., 1999). Indeed, more than three decades ago, Meyer and Rowan (1977) argued that managers may symbolically employ legitimizing structures such as codes of ethics solely to create a positive impression. Suchman (1995) contends that "organizations often put forth cynically self-serving claims of moral propriety and buttress these claims with hollow symbolic gestures..." (p. 579).

Some studies of codes of ethics have focused on specific industries. For example, Montoya and Richard (1994) compared health care facilities and energy companies. Emmelhainz and Adams (1999) targeted firms in the apparel industry, Kolk and van Tulder (2002) surveyed international garment companies, van Tulder and Kolk (2001) concentrated on the sporting goods industry, and Preble and Hoffman (1999) analyzed the franchising industry.

A number of investigations have examined a variety of professions. Gaumnitz and Lere (2002) examined fifteen professional organizations such as the Institute of Internal Auditors and the American Marketing Association. Somers (2001) compared management accountants working in organizations with and without a code of ethics. Pierce and Henry (2000) and Harrington (1996) surveyed information systems professionals, Nwachukwu and Vitell (1997) examined marketing and advertising professionals, and Valentine and Barnett (2002) concentrated on sales organizations.

Other researchers have investigated whether organizations with codes of ethics elicited greater commitment from their professional staff. For example, Valentine and Barnett (2003) report that sales managers employed by companies with a code of ethics exhibit greater commitment toward their organization than those whose companies had not developed such a code. Similarly, Somers (2001) found that accountants' organizational commitment was higher in companies with a code of ethics than was commitment in those that did not have one.

Still others have examined codes of ethics in certain countries. Brytting (1997) surveyed companies in Sweden. Lefebvre and Singh (1996) compared companies in Canada and the U.S. Bondy, Matten, and Moon (2004) compared Canadian, German, and U.K. companies. Boo and Koh (2001) surveyed top and middle-level managers in Singapore. Stohs and Brannick (1999) interviewed managers in Irish owned companies.

Gender

A sizeable academic literature has investigated students' attitudes toward business ethics. The research

has come from many disciplines, and has focused on a wide range of issues. Business leaders and organizational theorists have long recognized the importance of including these prospective leaders and executives in ethics research. Their perceptions may be a harbinger of attitudes in the business community. In their research, Glenn and Van Loo (1993) noted that there were indications that business students were making less ethical choices in the 1980s than in the 1960s. More recently, Webster and Harmon (2002) compared today's college students with college students of the 1960s and found "a continuing societal movement toward Machiavellian behavior" (p. 435).

One important stream of research is in response to calls for the study of a person's demographic characteristics as antecedent variables (e.g., Kelley et al., 1990). As a growing number of women graduate from business schools and rise to managerial and executive levels, the ethics literature has appreciated the value of examining the influence of gender. According to Robin and Babin (1997), gender and age are the two most heavily researched variables in this literature. The purpose of such research is to investigate differences and commonalities of attitudes based on the gender of respondents. Indeed, one of the major criticisms of Kohlberg's (1969, 1984) seminal work on moral development has been that the critical data to empirically validate his model were drawn from an all-male sample.

When gender was included as an independent variable, the results have been inconclusive. Some studies have reported no significant differences between female and male students. Overall, empirical studies of the influence of gender on students' ethics have produced conflicting results. For example, no gender differences were found by Davis and Welton (1991) regarding 17 ethical situations dealing with professional ethics. Similar results were obtained by Tsalikis and Ortiz-Buonafina (1990); Ford and Lowery (1986); Friedman, Robinson, and Friedman (1987); and McCuddy and Peery (1996). Other studies have focused on more homogenous subjects, based on their area of study. For example, Stanga and Turpen's (1991) survey of accounting students found no significant differences between females and males. Similarly, Gilligan and Attanucci's (1988) study of medical students revealed no relationship between gender and moral orientation.

Other studies have reported very different results. Significant differences in ethical judgments of female and male business students have been found by a number of authors. For example, Arlow's (1991) study found that females place greater emphasis on ethical values and social responsibility than males. A study by Church et al. (2005) revealed that gender does influence ethical decisions. Ruegger and King (1992) reported that female students rated behavior as less ethically acceptable than males in 6 of 10 situations. Also, Whipple and Wolf (1991) and Whipple and Swords (1992) concluded that females are more ethical when different business scenarios were presented to them. Galbraith and Stephenson (1993) reported that, when dealing with issues of self-interest, males and females use different decision criteria. Concerning the role of ethics in social and interpersonal relationships, Smith and Oakley (1997) found that females had higher expectations for ethical behaviors which reflect concern for social and interpersonal relationships. In a study of undergraduate business students, males and females offered different perceptions of a just society (Prasad et al., 1998). When Lawson (2004) examined classroom cheating, he concluded that, on average, women held more ethical beliefs than men. Betz, O'Connell, and Shepard (1989) observed that men were more than twice as likely than women to say they would engage in certain actions regarded as less ethical. Khazanchi (1995) concluded that women are better able to recognize unethical actions in information systems than men. Landry et al. (2004) found that female students, compared with the men, had a higher degree of ethical sophistication. The women demonstrated stronger responses with respect to situations involving unfairness, injustice, and moral wrongness. Also, Loe and Weeks (2000) found that women demonstrated higher levels of moral development than did the men. Finally, Ameen, Guffey, and McMillan (1996) reported that, among accounting students, females were less tolerant than males of unethical behavior.

While many studies have attempted to determine whether there were differences in ethical attitudes and behavior between female and male students, significant gaps in the literature remain. One area which has

been largely overlooked is whether there are differences with respect to attitudes toward codes of business ethics. The current study attempts to partially fill this void. One important longitudinal study examining business students' attitudes toward ethics codes was conducted by Peppas (2003). He assessed opinions of ethics codes and what their reasonable enforcement would accomplish via an instrument developed by Becker and Fritzsche (1987) to survey managers in Germany, France and the U.S. Peppas' study was conducted in 1998 and 2002 to compare attitudes at two different points in time. The findings indicated that, with one exception, attitudes toward codes of ethics were not significantly different in 2002 from what they were in 1998. That is, they did not change following the highly publicized reports of corporate unethical conduct and scandals. While this study has made important contributions to our understanding of attitudes toward codes of ethics, no attempt was made to examine differences between female and male students in spite of the possible influence of gender on ethical attitudes as reported by other studies. This concern warrants further investigation.

Therefore, this paper extends previous research by taking its point of departure in Peppas' appeal that "the findings of (his) study beg for further research ... to shed light on and to examine the *basis* (italics mine) for attitudes toward codes of ethics..." (p.85). Specifically, its purposes are twofold. First, to examine students' attitudes with regard to codes of ethics. Second, to ascertain whether there is an association between these attitudes and a person's gender.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected as part of a larger cross-national study of business ethics. A total of 874 graduating undergraduate students from seven universities in the southeastern and northeastern U.S. were surveyed. All were volunteers who were briefed on the importance of the study and told that all the questionnaires were anonymous. Although participation during class time was voluntary, only eighteen students refused to participate in the study. Of the 874 completed questionnaires, twenty-one did not disclose their gender and were, therefore, excluded from the analysis.

Table 1. "Codes of Ethics" Variables

Assume for the moment that an Ethical Practices Code has been drawn up by professional pharmacists in your state. The following statements assess what you think such a code and its reasonable enforcement would accomplish.

1. The code would raise the ethical level of business in this profession
 2. The code would be easy to enforce
 3. In situations of severe competition, the code would reduce unethical practices
 4. Individuals working in this profession would welcome the code
 5. The code would protect inefficient pharmacists
 6. The code would reduce the profitability of pharmacies
 7. The code would help pharmacists by clearly defining the limits of acceptable conduct
 8. People would violate the code whenever they thought they could avoid detection
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A demographic section gathered data on the respondents' gender, age, and years of work experience. The questionnaire included an additional section designed to assess attitudes toward ethics codes for professional pharmacists. This profession was selected primarily due to its innocuous character, and because it does not tend to elicit negative reactions and is not afflicted by disapproving opinions or attitudes. The eight items in this section were inspired by the research of Becker and Fritzsche (1987) and Peppas (2003). Respondents were asked to assume that an Ethical Practices Code had been developed for professional pharmacists. Then they were requested to indicate on a five-point Likert scale (1= Strongly

Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) the extent to which they disagreed or agreed with eight statements relating to the possible consequences of such a code in this profession.

Table 1 shows the eight statements. To evaluate the clarity of the instructions and items, the questionnaire was pilot tested on a group comprised of graduate students in a research methods class. Several minor problems in the format and wording of the items were found and changes and refinements were made accordingly. The eight items were treated as the dependent variables in the analysis, while gender constituted the independent variable.

RESULTS

Fifty-five percent of the students were male. The average age was 25 years. Overall, they had 4.7 years of work experience. Two *t*-tests showed no significant differences between the genders with respect to age and years of work experience, respectively. The average scores and their standard deviations from the entire sample for the eight items are displayed in Table 2.

The analysis of the results was conducted in several stages. Since, as shown in Table 3, the means of the two groups' scores on each of the items are different, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) procedure was considered to be the most appropriate analytic technique for exploring differences in scores between the genders. This procedure compensates for variable intercorrelation and provides an omnibus test of any multivariate effect. However, as a preliminary check for robustness, a test for unequal variances between the two groups was conducted. Box's *M* test for homogeneity of dispersion matrices produced a nonsignificant *F* ($p = .39$). This confirmed the homogeneity of the two variance-covariance matrices thus validating the appropriateness of the use of the MANOVA for the analysis. The MANOVA revealed significant differences between the two groups. That is, overall, the two groups provided different responses.

Finally, to understand the underlying contributions of the variables to the significant multivariate effect, each of the eight dependent variables was tested using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the two groups treated as our two levels of the independent variable. The results, depicted in Table 3, show that differences between the two groups were significant on seven of the eight variables.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for the Entire Sample

	Mean	s.d.
1. The code would raise the ethical level of business in this profession	3.04	1.15
2. The code would be easy to enforce	3.03	0.85
3. In situations of severe competition, the code would reduce unethical practices	2.88	1.03
4. Individuals working in this profession would welcome the code	4.46	1.37
5. The code would protect inefficient pharmacists	3.33	1.18
6. The code would reduce the profitability of pharmacies	3.36	1.36
7. The code would help pharmacists by clearly defining the limits of acceptable conduct	3.66	1.45
8. People would violate the code whenever they thought they could avoid detection	3.78	1.31

DISCUSSION

Surprisingly little attention has been given to students' perceptions of business codes of ethics. A particularly critical subject concerns similarities and differences between female and male students with respect to these codes. This study led to several insights about this relationship with important implications for practitioners and educators. First, when the results shown in Table 3 are analyzed, several patterns emerge. Overall, the male students felt that the pharmacists would welcome the code (mean = 4.44) and that it would help them "by clearly defining the limits of acceptable conduct" (mean = 3.50); however, many believed these same pharmacists would violate the code whenever they thought they could avoid detection (mean = 3.97). Indeed, their average scores were even lower for "the code would raise the ethical level of business" (mean = 2.96), "the code would be easy to enforce" (mean = 2.87), and "in situations of severe competition, the code would reduce unethical practices" (mean = 2.86). Interestingly, the mean scores for these three items were below the midpoints of the scales. That is, although they believed that the code would be well received by pharmacists and that it would help clarify the limits of acceptable behavior, in their opinion its impact would be modest. Finally, the male students' scores for "the code would protect inefficient pharmacists" and "the code would reduce the profitability of pharmacies" were well above the midpoints of these two scales (means = 3.49 and 3.68, respectively).

The female students felt that the pharmacists would welcome the code (mean = 4.50) and that "the code would help pharmacists by clearly defining the limits of acceptable conduct" (mean = 3.86), but believed that these same pharmacists would violate the code whenever they thought they could avoid detection (mean = 3.55). Their average scores for "the code would raise the ethical level of business" (mean = 3.12), "the code would be easy to enforce" (mean = 3.18), and "in situations of severe competition, the code would reduce unethical practices" (mean = 3.02) were slightly above or slightly below the midpoints of the scales and well below their overall feeling that the pharmacists "would welcome the code" (mean = 4.50). Finally, the females' scores for "the code would protect inefficient pharmacists" and "the code would reduce the profitability of pharmacies" were slightly above the midpoints of these two scales (means = 3.18 and 3.01, respectively).

When the men's scores are compared with those of the female students, the ANOVA results show that, in general, the latter were more positive with respect to the impact of codes of ethics - they were more confident that the code would raise the ethical level of business ($F_{1,851} = 4.07, p = .04$). In addition, the females were more optimistic about the ethical impact of the code "in situations of severe competition" ($F_{1,850} = 5.03, p = .03$) and regarding their perception that "the code would be easy to enforce" ($F_{1,851} = 28.31, p < .00$). Also, the female students were more confident that the code would help pharmacists by clearly defining the limits of acceptable conduct ($F_{1,849} = 13.01, p < .00$). On the other hand, male students were more certain that the code would reduce the profitability of the industry ($F_{1,841} = 51.27, p < .00$), would protect inefficient pharmacies ($F_{1,851} = 14.52, p < .00$), and would be violated whenever pharmacists thought they could avoid detection ($F_{1,851} = 21.69, p < .00$). Finally, no significant differences between the female and male students with regard to the code being welcomed by individuals working in this profession ($F_{1,846} = 0.41, p = .52$).

Taken as a whole, these results corroborate previous research showing that gender has a significant impact on students' attitudes toward business ethics. Overall, the females were more sanguine with respect to the code's influence on the pharmacists' behavior and efficiency, its impact on the profitability of their industry, and the ease of its enforcement. One potential explanation may be found in the literature on the socialization process. Gilligan (1982) and Gilligan and Attanucci (1994), for example, concluded that men and women perceive ethical matters from distinctly different perspectives. They contend that these differences can be attributed to the early socialization process which fosters an "ethic of caring" in women. Nevertheless, both groups agreed that the code would be difficult to enforce and that it would not reduce unethical practices when competition is intense.

Table 3. ANOVA Results for Differences between Female and Male Students ^a

Dependent Variables	Females (<i>n</i> = 384)	Males (<i>n</i> = 469)	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	Mean	Mean		
The code would raise the ethical level of business in this profession	3.12 (1.19)	2.96 (1.12)	4.07	.04
The code would be easy to enforce	3.18 (1.22)	2.87 (0.80)	28.31	<.00
In situations of severe competition, the code would reduce unethical practices	3.02 (1.02)	2.86 (1.05)	5.03	.03
Individuals working in this profession would welcome the code	4.50 (1.39)	4.44 (1.35)	0.41	.52
The code would protect inefficient pharmacists	3.18 (1.02)	3.49 (1.30)	14.52	<.00
The code would reduce the profitability of pharmacies	3.01 (1.43)	3.68 (1.30)	51.27	<.00
The code would help pharmacists by clearly defining the limits of acceptable conduct	3.86 (1.36)	3.50 (1.52)	13.01	<.00
People would violate the code whenever they thought they could avoid detection	3.55 (1.22)	3.97 (1.38)	21.69	<.00

^a Standard deviations are in parentheses.

In spite of these differences, both groups' scores provide little encouragement and comfort to those who advocate and wish to promote high ethical standards in business. There was general agreement that pharmacists would welcome a code of ethics and that such a code would help clarify the limits of acceptable behavior. Yet both groups expected pharmacists to violate the code when they could evade detection. Furthermore, they did not expect such a code to have much of an impact and felt that it was "bad business".

For business practitioners, these results evoke a greater urgency for the need to advance organizational ethics. Although female students were generally more disposed and sensitive to codes of ethics, this study demonstrates both genders' skepticism regarding their efficacy. Business leaders must recognize that codes of ethics alone are necessary but insufficient. Businesses legitimize the consideration of ethics as an integral part of decision making by providing strong guidance and continuously reminding managers of what is ethical. Some rely exclusively on codes of ethics to reduce ambiguity, promote ethical practices, and establish a strong ethical environment. "Merely having standards is not enough, a company must make the standards understood, and ensure their proper dissemination within the organizational structure" (Palmer and Zakhem, 2001, p. 83). Codes are more effective when they are supported by formalized training programs that promote ethical conduct. According to Valentine and Fleischman (2007), "ethics codes and training signify that the company is institutionalizing an ethical culture by improving individual moral development" (p. 167). Today many businesses and professional societies are setting up seminars and workshops in ethics training. Typically, their code of ethics is used as a guide or standard. The purpose of such training is to sharpen the written ethical code, demonstrate its relevancy, and bring it to life (Valentine and Fleischman, 2008).

These results provide additional momentum to calls for requiring business ethics courses in the business curriculum. There is evidence that these classes do have an impact upon ethical behavior by reinforcing and strengthening the ethical beliefs of some or, for others, calling the inadequacy of their beliefs into question. Although this topic is discussed in depth in separate courses, and often arises in the ordinary course of teaching other business subjects, Albrecht and Sack (2000) report that one of the most frequent criticisms of business curricula and course content is "we do not deal enough with values, ethics, and integrity" (p. 512). The results seem to offer proponents of greater emphasis on societal issues and ethical conduct in business education support for their normative suggestions. For example, Hathaway (1990) contends that business students should be trained in understanding the responsibility of business to its larger social system. Only then can they "become better managers...and lead a corporation or two toward the kind of responsible behavior sorely needed in this troubled world" (p. 61). Indeed, some authors have argued that, if business schools themselves are to act as socially responsible organizations, they have a moral obligation to foster an awareness of the broader implications of business decisions (Gandz and Hayes, 1988).

This study contributes to an improved understanding of differences between female and male managers. However, caveats must be offered regarding the conclusions generated by this research. First, additional research with larger national samples from each group would be necessary to confirm these findings. As Shaub (1994) points out, an individual's ethical perspective could be influenced by geographical and cultural location. Another caveat concerns the generalizability of these results. A study such as this one is based largely on aggregate measures. However, it opens a line of inquiry on whether these results are valid when only those operating in particular industries are surveyed. This would ensure a greater homogeneity within the group being studied. Finally, a comparison of business students and practitioners would be another productive avenue. For example, it would be useful to examine differences between future managers, younger managers, and managers with more extensive work experience. This type of analysis would yield insight into the perceptions of these three generations' attitudes toward codes of ethics.

In conclusion, the findings of this study provide helpful insights into an area of growing concern to society and all types of organizations. The numerous managerial ambiguities that are inherent in business decisions are further complicated by growing societal demands on corporations and increased awareness of the ethical dimension of decision making. This issue is likely to gain increased attention by educators and practitioners in the coming years.

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