

Religious Background as Predictor of Ethical Behavior in College Students

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Ethics has been the topic of many research studies in the past. Various approaches have been undertaken and numerous variables, including sex, income, age, and religion, have been observed. The only variable which has consistently affected ethical standards is religious commitment. Therefore, assuming that most religious students attend a religious university, we can conclude that religious universities possess a student body with stronger ethical standards when compared to students attending public universities. This paper seeks to establish either the presence or absence of a relationship between ethical standards and universities' religious affiliation. It is hypothesized that the ethical standards of students attending a religious university are higher than that of their secular counterpart. The implications involved if this hypothesis is proven are great. Employers may be more likely to hire graduates from religious universities over those who attended non-religious schools. This paper finds that there is a positive correlation between student religious background and ethical behavior. However, this positive relationship is not based on the type of university attended but rather on religious background and religious support in the community.

INTRODUCTION

Values are a set of beliefs and standards that regulate how a person thinks. Ethics are these values in action in everyday life. In the fields of accounting, finance, and economics values are important, but they mean nothing without ethics in action. Shareholders of companies depend on these ethics in their decision making. The statements and decisions that come from the accounting, finance, and economic departments solely relies on ethics. If a shareholder is to invest more into a company, he or she depends on the integrity of the company and the ethics of its decision makers.

Considering that the problem of ethics is not limited to any particular market or business, it is in our best interest as a nation to put business leaders in charge that have a high value for ethics. As technology continues to change the workplace and humans are left to make choices, there will always be a need for ethical standards to be set. If ethics were established early on within the education of the individual, it is safe to assume that the subject would have more relevance and importance in overall education. It is assumed that religion plays an important role in the education of ethics.

Religious universities promote among potential student candidates the education of morals and ethics, implying the importance of such matters in the workplace. With the recent trend of corporate scandals in the news, the need for ethical employees is dire. Recognizing such needs, religious universities still emphasize the importance of ethics, and some secular schools are adding more emphasis to ethics within their curriculums.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Personal ethical standards are considered benchmark characteristics of an integrity-bound business professional. The prevalence of unethical business behavior in recent decades has led to the presumption that ethical values are a rare attribute found in the modern business professional. Modern business has adopted an unspoken norm mandating that profit precedes ethics in business dealings, a fact that has prompted researchers to investigate the significance of age, sex, gender, as well as other demographic factors on ethical decision-making. In the present paper, the impact that religious values have on ethical perceptions is investigated. The following literature reviews support and attempts to prove that religion plays a significant role as a predictor of ethical behavior.

A significant amount of research has been conducted concerning the implications of religion on ethical behavior. Kennedy and Lawton attempted to support the theoretical thought that a relationship between characteristics of religiousness and attitudes towards business ethics was in fact existent by contributing their essay "*Religiousness and Business Ethics.*" The purpose of the study was to measure the accuracy of the following hypotheses: 1) "Students at religiously-affiliated colleges will have higher levels of intrinsic religiousness than students at public institutions." 2) Students at evangelical schools will differ in their willingness to do unethical behavior than students at other colleges; and other students at religion affiliated colleges will differ also. 3) Students who are more religious will be less willing to do unethical behavior than their counterparts. 4) Highly religious students at public universities will be less likely to engage in unethical behavior than highly religious students at religious institutions. 5) Business students will be more willing to engage in unethical behavior.

In this study, researchers chose two public schools, an evangelical school, and a Catholic school to conduct random surveys. The questionnaires contained scenarios "designed to elicit responses on a six-point scale measuring willingness to engage in unethical behavior." At the conclusion of the study, researchers found that students at Evangelical schools had significantly higher levels of intrinsic religiousness, but there was virtually no difference between Catholic and public institutions. There was little evidence supporting the hypothesis that students at religiously affiliated colleges would differ in their willingness to engage in unethical behavior; however, of the colleges surveyed, evangelical students were least likely to make unethical decisions. Furthermore, research failed to support the hypothesis that students of greater religious influence would be less inclined to engage in unethical behavior than their less religiously-influenced counterparts. A positive correlation between both types of students existed. Research also contended that no difference existed between ethical attitudes of students attending public or religious universities, or between students enrolled in business programs and non-business programs (Kennedy, Lawton, 1981).

Burns, Fawcett, and Lanasa conducted a study evaluating the differences in ethical perceptions of business students attending an evangelical Protestant university and business students enrolled at a secular university. These collegiate business students from diverse college

curriculums represented individuals from two distinct micro cultural perspectives as they attended either a major public university or a private conservative-Protestant university, both of which were considered exemplary in their field. The study consisted of a variety of different retail situations and practices, and was analyzed by using a number of variance and univariate tests, as well as the implementation of MANOVA analyses. In their paper "*Business Students' Ethical Perceptions of Retail Situations: A Microcultural Comparison*," Burns, Fawcett, and Lanasa concluded that the diversity of collegiate background bears a significant influence on ethical perceptions (Burns, Fawcett, and Lanasa, 1994). Furthermore, differences in curriculum may play a compelling role in contrary ethical attitudes, especially regarding the specific handling of the ethics courses at each institution. The observations of the study concluded that samples from different universities, which reflect distinct microcultures (in this case religious and non-religious), reflect different attitudes concerning ethical situations and practices in retail situations, further supporting the hypothesis that religion plays a role in varying ethical behavior.

Conroy and Emerson continue the argument in their paper "*Business Ethics and Religion: Religiosity as a Predictor of Ethical Awareness among Students*." The authors test two hypotheses within their research: (1) "whether ethical attitudes are affected by religiosity" and (2) "whether ethical attitudes are affected by courses in ethics, religion, or theology." Religiosity was defined by matters of religious behavior including "religious affiliation, church attendance, prayer/meditation frequency," etc.

For the study, researchers used a sample of 850 students from two different universities (a public university and a private, religious university) located in the Southern United States. The students involved in the survey were selected from a number of different college curriculums, and were classified as both undergraduate and graduate students. Students were asked to respond to 25 ethical 'vignettes' previously used in prior published studies, as well as questions about personal demographic information. The data was then analyzed as researchers examined descriptive statistics including the weighted mean and standard deviation.

Upon completion of research, Conroy and Emerson concluded that religiosity was "a statistically significant predictor of responses in a number of ethical scenarios." On the other hand, the relevance of completion of courses in ethics, religion, or theology on ethical behavior was not as prevalent of a predictor in shaping ethical behavior (Conroy and Emerson, 2004).

Borkowski studies whether or not college students have a stable 'ethical position' when entering college or if it changes due to "maturity, experience to ethical discussion in coursework, work experience, or a combination of factors." The ethical attitudes contrasted in this article included: "the ethical attitudes of freshman and junior accounting majors and graduate MBA students." The students were confronted with two ethical dilemmas. These cases were picked out of several options in order to omit scenarios that were prone to various biases.

While there are several different theories regarding moral judgment, the study undertaken here did not seek to argue one view over the other. The test, instead, categorized student reactions into three main categories: utilitarian, rights (Kantian) model, and justice (Golden Rule) model. The utilitarian group encapsulates responses made that involve the ethical choice that "maximizes benefits and minimizes costs for the most people or stakeholders" (Borkowski, 1992). The rights model categorizes reactions that assure human rights are maintained. The justice model, like its name, ensures justice to all regarding fairness and equality. The study concluded that the majority of ethical behavior fell into one of these three categories.

The responses of the students were compared to each of the three models in order to identify characteristics. The two cases used in the study found very different results. The first case (Case

One) did not find that previous work experience or exposure to ethics coursework had any impact on the student responses. In contrast, the results of Case Two found that the work experience of the MBA students may have affected their responses and curbed their idealism. Case Two also showed that males were more utilitarian oriented than females. Both cases showed that undergraduates were more justice-oriented than MBAs. The study attempted to explain this by saying that the actual work experience of the MBA students may be in contrast to the idealistic undergraduates with little to no practical work experience.

Age does seem to have an impact on a person's ethical position though the cause of this change is yet to be determined. The study pointed out that ethical intent does not necessary mandate ethical behavior in all cases (Borkowski, 1992). Further, more-in-dept study is needed on this topic in order to ascertain the factors involved.

In another paper, Grant, Jr. and Broom studies the "predictability of ethical decision behavior in potential employees." The family income and the father's occupation variables are tested against the type of ethical behavior that students have. Students from three business schools with different classifications: a private religious, a small state, and a major state university were all presented with the same dilemma. The participants were not allowed to discuss their responses. Grant and Broom compared response to the dilemma test against several variables in order to find out if demographics will have an effect on the ethical behavior of students. The variables included: the family income, the father's occupation, and the type of university attended. There are four ranges of income for a family: below \$10,000, \$10,000-19,999, \$20,000-39,999, and above \$40,000. The result of the family income analysis was that 'middle' income families are the ones that make decisions either more ethically or more compromising. The outcome was the same for the occupation of labor for the father. The options for the occupation are: manager, labor, professional, or unemployed. However, the results from the type of university were different. 'Large' state universities and private religious universities had a variety of ethical attitudes, whereas students from a 'small' state university were more ethically minded (Grant, Broom, 1988).

HYPOTHESIS

It is a common assumption that religion and ethical behavior are inherently related. Our research will attempt to prove that a relationship between these two factors does in fact exist. In this respect, we propose the following hypothesis: Student religious background will determine their ethical behavior in colleges, independently of the type of college, religious or public.

METHODOLOGY

In order to measure religious beliefs as a predictor of ethical behavior this paper measures the ethical standards of college students at both religious and non-religious universities. Six universities were selected in the East Texas and Western Louisiana area. Four of the six schools are public institutions and two of the universities are classified as Christian universities. Three of the four public universities had an enrollment of more than 1,000 students and the fourth was considered a major state university consisting of over 4,200 students. The first Christian university enrolled approximately 1,200 students and the second Christian university had an enrollment of approximately 1,300. At the conclusion of the survey, 386 completed samples were obtained. These universities were located in what is called the 'Bible Belt' region

composed on northeast Texas and northwest Louisiana. Results in the survey indicated that 93 percent of the respondents had attended ‘weekly’ a church where they were children and teenagers. Only 7 percent indicated that they were not attending weekly church when they were children or teenagers.

The students at each university were given identical surveys which consisted of three categories of inquiries. The surveys were distributed to freshman-senior level business courses. The first section of data posed questions pertaining to the student’s personal, academic, and religious background. The second section of data consisted of ten ethical dilemmas common in the workplace which students were asked to answer according to the following numerical scale (Figure 1):

FIGURE 1
NUMERICAL SCALE FOR ETHICAL DILEMMAS QUESTIONS IN THE
WORKPLACE

| |
|---|
| Strongly Agree – 1 Agree – 2 Neutral – 3 Disagree – 4 Strongly Disagree - 5 |
|---|

The third section of data presented seven common campus ethical situations, responding to a different numerical scale. Students were asked to choose the most accurate response from the following numerical scale (Figure 2):

FIGURE 2
NUMERICAL SCALE FOR ETHICAL QUESTIONS IN CAMPUS

| |
|---|
| Always – 1 Most of the Time – 2 I Don’t Know – 3 Occasionally – 4 Never – 5 |
|---|

For the purpose of our research, the responses to each question are modified to fit a universal numerical scale, as seen below. On this adjusted scale, student responses coded 1 represent the most unethical action, while responses coded 5 represent the most ethical action (Figure 3). On this scale, the survey expects that the higher the number, the more ethical the response.

FIGURE 3
NUMERICAL SCALE FOR ETHICAL RESPONSE

| |
|---|
| Most Unethical – 1 Unethical – 2 Neutral – 3 Ethical – 4 Most Ethical - 5 |
|---|

RESULTS

In order to test our results we decided to compare three key items in order to determine if our hypothesis had any validity: 1) Did religious universities respond more ethically than their counterparts? 2) Does frequency of current church attendance affect ethical responses? 3) Does past frequency of church attendance affect ethical responses? In order to analyze the data, a

simple average technique, multiple regression analysis, and Tukey-Kramer procedures are implemented.

Student responses from the section of the survey soliciting responses to ethical dilemmas were converted to a numerical scale and given a corresponding rating from 1-5, as aforementioned. In this section, a more ethical response was represented by a higher number. Results were then classified by school average.

In order to see if religious universities had more ethical responses than non-religious universities we decided to take a simple average of there responses in the survey. Again, since we made the scale universal, the lower the average response the more unethical and the higher the average response the more ethical. After averaging every university the following chart shows the results:

TABLE 1
ETHICAL AVERAGE AMONG UNIVERSITIES

| Type of School | Average Response |
|------------------------|------------------|
| Non-Christian School 1 | 3.83 |
| Non-Christian School 2 | 3.74 |
| Non-Christian School 3 | 3.82 |
| Non-Christian School 4 | 3.96 |
| Christian School 1 | 3.86 |
| Christian School 2 | 3.85 |

The next step we decided to take was to determine which type of university (religious or non-religious) had the higher overall average. The four non-religious universities had a total average of 3.838 and the religious universities had a total average of 3.855. These results evidence slightly more ethical responses in Christian-affiliated schools; however, the results do not vary enough to conclude that ethical behavior is more predominant in universities supporting a religious mission.

In order to further test our hypothesis we decided to measure the relevance of current and past frequency of church attendance to responses to ethical dilemmas in the survey. The original survey contained a section in which the respondent was asked two questions concerning their church involvement. The first question addressed current attendance and was stated in this way: “how frequent is your current involvement with a religious denomination?” The next question was designed to measure an individual’s religious background and was the following: “how frequent were you involved with a religious denomination while growing up?” The choices for these questions were: a) weekly b) monthly c) yearly d) none. Responses were assigned a rating from 1-4, with an initial response of ‘a’ being 1 and ‘d’ being 4. In this scale, the lower the

number, the greater church attendance frequency. School averages in this section then were taken and compared to each other.

The data was then used to perform a multiple regression analysis. In this procedure, the dependent variable is average response to ethical dilemmas, and the independent variables are average current church attendance and average past church attendance. Both the dependent and independent variables are the averages for each surveyed university.

According to the regression, the two independent variables (average current/past church attendance) explain only 32.4% of the variance in average ethical response. Despite this low percentage, however, a normal probability plot of the residuals evidences a positive linear relationship between the dependent and independent variables.

TABLE 2
CHURCH ATTENDANCE BACKGROUND

| Universities | Avg. Current Church Attendance | Avg. Past Church Attendance | Avg. Responses for the Ethical Questions |
|--------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| U1 | 1.88 | 1.63 | 3.83 |
| U2 | 2.25 | 1.81 | 3.74 |
| U3 | 1.82 | 1.4 | 3.82 |
| U4 | 2.07 | 1.56 | 3.96 |
| U5 | 1.37 | 1.24 | 3.86 |
| U6 | 1.22 | 1.14 | 3.85 |

Next, multiple regression analyses was performed for each of the averages in which the dependent variable was the average response per school and the independent variables were again set as the average frequency of past and present church attendance. Of the 17 average responses analyzed, only two of the responses showed both a high coefficient of determination (R^2) and a significant correlation with both independent variables. One of the answers showed a high correlation between current attendance at church, but not a significant correlation between ethical response and past church attendance. This question gave a scenario where an employee entered their CEO's office and saw a note concerning an affair the CEO was having while married. The scenario ends with the employee ignoring the note and the question asks if the respondent agrees with the employee's decision. The data revealed that respondents generally agreed more with the employee's decision to ignore the incriminating note. Some reasons that current church attendance shows a significant relationship with the responses maybe that work place experience and situations have had an influence of the respondents' responses. Maturity may be another factor that had an effect on this answer. One of the two responses that had a significant relationship involved public prayer before a sales convention. The scenario asks if the respondent agrees with this action. Both current and past church attendance proved to be good

predictors of ethical responses to this scenario. In fact, the independent variables current and past church attendance predicted approximately 76 percent of the variation between average responses. The second scenario that showed a significant relationship stated: “When I was growing up, my family taught me about ethical behavior by applying their religious beliefs.” The respondent was asked if they agreed with this type of teaching. Past and present church attendance served as excellent predictors of ethical responses on this question. We expected this to be the case because many people in the East Texas and Western Louisiana area are raised in church-going families and attending churches as young children.

When running the multiple regression analysis we also saw a large correlation between past church attendance and present church attendance. The two explained approximately 95 percent of the variation. The conclusion we came to is that many people who currently attend church did so while growing up.

To get an idea of how many students were in each category, we ran a test to find the percentages for each variable. We received the following results for the college, religious affiliation, frequency of religious attendance in the youth, and the frequency of religious attendance currently: As Figure 4 shows, the percentage of surveyed students attending a public college is 61.92%. Out of 386 students, 94.04% claim to be Christian. The ‘Youth’ and ‘Current’ percentages represent the number of students who attend frequently weekly (4), monthly (3), yearly (2), and none (1). However, the Tukey-Kramer Procedure showed no real difference between religious and non-religious universities. The Tukey-Kramer Procedure showed that some of the means were different, but in no specific order to indicate a school being more unethical as a whole than another university. Many of the questions showed that the means had no difference between any groups, which even further validates that there is no true difference between these schools in ethical behavior.

The answers to the survey questions were each awarded points as indicated above. The average answer of each student was then determined using a simple mean average. These individual student averages were then averaged again to give each school an average ethical value.

**FIGURE 4
DISCRETE VARIABLES: UNIVERSITY, AFFILIATION, YOUTH, CURRENT**

| Discrete Variables: University, Affiliation, Youth, Current | | | | |
|--|---------|---------------|---------|---------|
| University | Percent | Affiliation | Percent | |
| Public | 61.92 | Non-Christian | 5.96 | |
| Christian | 38.08 | Christian | 94.04 | |
| <u>Attendance to Church</u> | | | | |
| | Youth | Percent | Current | Percent |
| | None | 3.89 | None | 9.84 |
| | Yearly | 6.48 | Yearly | 10.88 |
| | Monthly | 16.06 | Monthly | 18.39 |
| | Weekly | 73.58 | Weekly | 60.88 |

This information was then used to determine whether or not a significant difference existed between those who attend a Christian University and those who attend a public university. The following data was obtained through the Tukey-Kramer test:

**TABLE 3
COMPARISON AMONG UNIVERSITIES**

| Group | Mean | Size | | Comparison | Difference | of Difference | Range | Results |
|-----------------------|----------|------|--|--------------------|------------|---------------|-------|-------------------------|
| 1 | 3.860819 | 57 | | Group 1 to Group 2 | 0.148319 | 0.07750884 | 0.163 | Means are not different |
| 2 | 3.7125 | 32 | | Group 1 to Group 3 | 0.007139 | 0.06131098 | 0.129 | Means are not different |
| 3 | 3.85368 | 77 | | Group 1 to Group 4 | 0.146487 | 0.06202138 | 0.13 | Means are different |
| 4 | 4.007306 | 73 | | Group 1 to Group 5 | 0.017442 | 0.0695458 | 0.146 | Means are not different |
| 5 | 3.878261 | 46 | | Group 1 to Group 6 | 0.044132 | 0.05812983 | 0.122 | Means are not different |
| 6 | 3.90495 | 101 | | Group 2 to Group 3 | 0.14118 | 0.07380088 | 0.155 | Means are not different |
| | | | | Group 2 to Group 4 | 0.294806 | 0.07439211 | 0.156 | Means are different |
| Other Data | | | | Group 2 to Group 5 | 0.165761 | 0.08077222 | 0.17 | Means are not different |
| Level of significance | 0.05 | | | Group 2 to Group 6 | 0.19245 | 0.07118013 | 0.149 | Means are different |
| Numerator d.f. | 6 | | | Group 3 to Group 4 | 0.153626 | 0.05732017 | 0.12 | Means are different |
| Denominator d.f. | 380 | | | Group 3 to Group 5 | 0.024581 | 0.06538783 | 0.137 | Means are not different |
| MSW | 0.246245 | | | Group 3 to Group 6 | 0.051271 | 0.05308509 | 0.111 | Means are not different |
| Q Statistic | 2.0986 | | | Group 4 to Group 5 | 0.129045 | 0.0660544 | 0.139 | Means are not different |
| | | | | Group 4 to Group 6 | 0.102355 | 0.05390402 | 0.113 | Means are not different |
| | | | | Group 5 to Group 6 | 0.02669 | 0.06241482 | 0.131 | Means are not different |

Analysis of the above data tells us that the only schools that were significantly different from the others were Groups 2 and 4 (both are small public colleges). Individually, Group 2 had the lowest ethical mean while Group 4 had the highest.

A very unique response to this research is that the only time when students responded differently with respect to ethics behavior was when the questions were based on grades and salaries. It seems to be that there is consequential effect when decisions affect the students personally.

CONCLUSION

Our research concluded that students at the universities surveyed showed no real difference in ethical behavior based on the affiliation (religious or non-religious) of their respective schools. The only study that showed any evidence was the simple average analysis, but the results were

not significant enough to prove that individuals enrolled at religiously-affiliated institutions were more prone to respond ethically. The geographic region known as the 'Bible Belt,' explains the tendency for students to adhere to a religious faith and typically provide ethical responses. The main findings of this paper are that the religious background is the main support for ethical behavior. Students did not change their ethical behavior independently of attending religious or not religious universities. Also, we concluded that church attendance has continued even when they are enrolled in public universities in this area.

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