The Influence of Business Ethics on Lebanese University Students: Can Business Ethics Be Learned?

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Abstract. When it comes to business ethics, views diverge and conflict. There are those who believe that ethics can't be taught but is rather a development, such as Aristotle; and there are those who like Socrates, believe that ethics is knowing what we ought to do, and therefore this knowledge can be learned. In the Lebanese society that faces ethical crises, ethical education becomes important. When business students are taught that "business is business" and business deals are "not a matter of ethics, but of business" in class, it becomes difficult to show them that "good ethics, is good business". In such conditions ethical education becomes imperative. Teaching ethics means that one believes that people can change, that ethical behavior can be taught. However, is this applicable? Can we teach Hitler or Bernard Madoff ethics or as Orwin (2009) implies "Can we teach pigs to fly?" This paper investigated the effects of learning business ethics on various Lebanese university students who have successfully completed the course's objectives. The participants were the researcher's students in two local universities, which caused limitations of the results for they couldn't be generalized. The results revealed that ethics course(s) did positively affect the students' behavior.

Key Words: business, ethics, education, influence, university students, attitude.

1. INTRODUCTION

Most societies promote ambition, personal gain and pursuit of self-interest (Mann, 2005). The Lebanese society is no different. However, after various scandals, societies have started calling for action in rethinking business attitudes. Rossouw (2004) argues that in our modern times business ethics has gained strategic importance in the world of business, because the attitudes have changed. In the past, businesses have always been given the sole responsibility of maximizing profit. However, now businesses are expected to recognize the importance of their responsibilities toward society and to follow in good conscious ethical standards.

The public's loss of faith and respect towards the ethical values of the available business people has turned the issue of neglecting business ethics of high importance since this act establishes a high risk action which could heavily cost companies whether financially or in terms of reputation. In his study, Sedmak (2010) blame the 2008/2009 global economic crisis on the unethical business practices done by major companies around the world. Such scandals have revealed to the public the need of managers having ethics education because they run business and business being the running engine for economic development, has significant influence on the evolution and well-being of the societies (Crane, 2010).

The many scandals have made many companies aware of how much unethical behavior can cost them (Luthar, Dibathista & Gautschi, 1997). Unethical behavior in business causes heavy damages to all fractions of society (Crane, 2010). For this reason, the best interest for all is following "corporate social responsibility (CSR) as the way out when dealing with social and environmental ills" (Doane, 2005). This CSR is the tool that will incorporate ethics and values into business goals (Fombrun & Foss, 2004). Companies who practice CSR have had greater amounts of investments in the past years (Dunfee, 2003).

All this has brought increased attention toward the teaching of business ethics. There is increasing pressure on business schools to prepare their graduates for the ethical dilemmas in business (Lau,

Carcciolo, Roddenberry & Scroggins, 2012). Business schools are becoming aware of their responsibilities of acquainting their graduates with all possible ethical challenges they might face at work. A lot of discussions regarding ethics education are taking place and matters of business ethics are widely discussed in the professional and academic literature (Gaa & Thorne, 2004; Felton & Sims, 2005; Lau, Carcciolo, Roddenberry & Scroggins, 2012).

Recent research has centered on the importance of ethics education in preparing future ethical mangers. Conflicting results have appeared. Results yielded opposing views; some concluded that classroom instruction affects ethical perceptions and actual behavior while others concluded the opposite-it does not have any effects (Lau, Carcciolo, Roddenberry & Scroggins, 2012). If the latter has become the case, then it is vital that ethics education should be built into the curriculum and society as a whole (ElZein & Alameddine, 2012). Felton and Sims (2005) affirm that business schools are responsible for making their graduates ethical so that they become better managers. Many issues affect the acquisition of ethical behavior. Sigma-Mugan et al. (2005) concluded that agents' actions are affected by their cultural background, education, attitude and the gender they belong to. Gill's (2009) study revealed that females are more ethical than men, and Peryer and Jordan (2002) stated that men tend to be less diverse in their ethical decisions. Finally, Ahmed et al. (2003) observed that people's perceptions and attitudes towards ethics are affected by their cultures.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives are to investigate the attitudes of some Lebanese university students towards business ethics, and whether teaching ethics influences their behavior. To investigate this issue, the following questions will be looked at:
1. Does taking ethics course(s) change the attitudes of the students?
2. Does gender affect the agent's attitudes towards ethics?
3. Does the level of education affect the agents' attitude?
4. Does the major affect the agents' attitude?

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.

3.1 Business Ethics: Definition and Significance

Due to the large amount of business scandals resulting from unethical behavior, scholars have framed the relationship that exists between business and society. This new frame has been the result of the Enron scandal that began as standard case of bankruptcy and ended up in a huge scandal that acted as the 'tsunami' that redefined the business-society relationship (Caroll & Buchholtz, 2009). As a result of such scandal, societies started demanding more ethical conduct on the part of corporations, expecting them to go beyond just making money and profit. Corporations should be held responsible for their actions (Verstracten, 2000). This shaping should be done through business ethics. It is no longer accepted, many academics and practitioners agree, when businesses use their power for their own interests which usually lead to unethical consequences (Verstracten, 2000).

To understand the relationship between business and society, one has to understand the nature of business ethics. Non academics usually use the two terms morality and ethics interchangeably- there is no difference in the meaning. However, morality and ethics are two district things. Morality is the set of standards of what is right and wrong or good and bad. Ethics, on the other hand, is the study of those standards (Shaw, 2005). Moreover ethics informs agents of how to apply these rules and standards. From this perspective, moral responsibility becomes the act of holding agents morally accountable for their actions because they are able to make moral decisions since they are rational and autonomous moral agents and societies can, therefore, hold managers and business people morally accountable for their actions since

these agents possess morality and should not separate this morality from their business profession. Kant believed that personal ethics and professional ethics are not different, but one and the same.

Ethics can be simply defined as "the discipline dealing with what is good and bad with moral duty and obligation" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2013). Furthermore, definitions of ethics describe ethics as codes of moral principles that informs agents of what a good or bad behavior is (Hellriegel et al, 2008; Smit et al, 2007). Hence, ethics plays a major role on individuals' and business organizations daily life (Smit et al, 2007). Through ethics, agents can manage their affairs with others regarding responsibility, honesty, loyalty and decency at work. Organizations are also affected by ethics since it moderates their conduct with other corporations and guides them in their decision making. Business ethics builds on ethics standards to moderate business transactions. It involves the process of a company's integration of its core values (such as honesty, trust, loyalty …) into its policies and daily practices (Hellriegel et al, 2008). Business ethics also involves the application of the standards of right and wrong/good and bad of business interaction. To Rossouw (2004), business ethics guide business in identifying good moral behavior and then implementing that behavior without causing any harm to the stakeholders' interests. In addition, business ethics is the study of ethical values which regulate the business world (Ahmed et al, 2003). Hence, business ethics regulates people's behavior while participating in economic transactions to ensure that all parties not only serve their own interest, but the interest of others too.

Over the past 30 years, business ethics has become important because of the dismay of societies caused by the unethical behaviors of corporations and managers (Verstraeten, 2000). Moreover, the fast and constant changes that societies are facing because of globalization gave added importance to business ethics, which in its turn has become important for academia and business managers. By referring to business ethics in their decision making process, managers can and will reach ethically sound decisions (Crane, 2010).

3.2 Attitudes of University Students and Business Ethics

With research advancing in the field of business ethics, scholars have now started investigating the attitudes and ethical frameworks of managers and business people. Studies investigating attitudes date back to the late 1970s (Brenner & Molander, 1977) and the theory of Reasoned Action reveals the link that exists between attitudes and actual conduct (Fishben & Ajzen, 1975). With the rising needs for good business ethics education, researchers saw the importance of researching the means for educating future managers through studies conducted with the objectives of developing better curriculums (Beltramini, Peterson & Kozmetsky, 1984).

Studies have revealed that attitudes of people affect their behavior. This implies that if an agent has a negative attitude toward ethical behavior, then s/he is more likely to behave unethically at work. It seems that in general, business students are more willing to cheat than other students (Rettinger & Jordan, 2005; McCabe & Trevino, 1995) because they have a loose attitude towards what constitutes cheating (Klein, Levenburg, McKendal & Mothersell, 2006); thus these students are more of cheating than other students (Crown & Spiller, 1998). Business students are usually taught that the end justifies the means and that what is important is getting the job done and not how it was done (Timiraos, 2002).

Finally practitioners also recognize the importance of attitudes when investigating to what extent students who behaved unethically in school would do so at work. Studies revealed that students who cheat or act unethically in school will also do so in the workplace (Crown & Spiller, 1998; Granitz & Loeury, 2007). Moreover, the willingness to act unethically is a consistent attribute- this means that those who have cheated in the past will most probably do the same in the future (Davis & Ludvigson, 1995; Nonis & Swift, 1998; Smith, Davy, Rosenberg & Haight, 2009).

3.3 Business Ethics and Gender

Gender has been an important factor in investigating ethical conduct in business studies date back to the 1980s and revealed that in general, females are more concerned with ethical matters than males.

In 1991, Arlow concluded that women are more socially conscious and feel more responsible towards society's needs than men. The study affirms that a significant difference exists between how women see the role of balancing the needs of society and corporations and how men do.

McCabe et al. (2006) concluded that men are more willing to behave unethically than women and that they are less likely to regard some questionable acts as ethically unacceptable. Peterson et al. (2010) concur with this view and add that women have higher ethical standards. This is because most literature reveals that men and women have different ethical attitudes and views (Perryer & Jordan, 2002). This goes in line with the research concluding that women are more ethically predisposed than men (Gill, 2009; Peterson & Albaum, 2006). Women are more worried about relationship and compassion and not competition and dominance. Finally, women consider the various activities done on the expense of the company more unethical their male counterparts (Deshpande et al., 2002). Yet, Phau and Kea (2006) concluded that men had higher levels of ethical behavior than women.

However, the literature also reveals that there is no significant difference between the genders. Several studies revealed that there are no significant differences between how genders perceive ethics (McCuddy & Berger, 1996; Pryer & Jordan, 2002) and that if there is a difference, then it is so minimal that it is insignificant (Sower & Sower, 2005).

3.4 Business Ethics and Education

The debate, of whether we can teach ethics or not, goes thousands of years. Plato believed that like any skill, ethics can be taught. This belief is shared by many academics who believe that teaching business students ethics does make a difference in their beliefs and changes their attitudes towards non-ethical business behavior. This school of thought believes that people's attitudes and behavior regarding ethical and social issues can be shaped, modified and refined through education. Hence, through education, the future leaders and managers can become ethical. This view is supported with recent research which indicated that agents have the ability to learn ethics which they use later in their lives after having developed new ethical values (Rest as summarized by Velasquez, Andre, Sharks & Mayer, 2012).

The study of White and Montgomery (1980) revealed that the best place that encourages the development of ethical values is colleges. Further studies conclude that business programs give more concern to ethics than other programs (Beltramini, Peterson & Kozmetsky, 1984) which prepare the business students for a more active ethical life. However, there are some thinkers that argue against the idea teaching ethics is possible. They follow in Aristotle's footsteps and assert that ethics can't be taught but is a development whose virtues are acquired throughout our upbringing and habitual acts. They refer to the experiences of some universities which tried to integrate business ethics courses in their teaching of business, but have not been successful in implementing this issue (Collins & Wartzik, 1995; Pizollato & Bevil, 1996). Moreover, studies have also argued that teaching ethics at universities is ineffective and comes far too late (Peppas & Diskin, 2000) because as Aristotle held, ethics is taught while agents are growing up and are under the influence of their family and society. Yet, there are moralists who believe that ethics can be taught if supported by good curriculum. ElZein and Alameddine (2012) present a framework for ethics teaching where all fractions of society work together to provide college students in general, and business students in particular, with a sound ethical framework. When applied properly, students will be endowed with even a better ethical consciousness than the improved framework that Sleeper, Schnider and Weber (2006) discovered in students who had taken business ethics courses during their college years.

Some research has also yielded contrasting results. In their study, Ludlum and Moskaloinov (2005) concluded that the longer students stay in school, the more willing they become to taking ethical risks. It seems that when students become seniors, they are exhausted from their departments' and professors' attempts making them accept unethical behavior. However, other studies have revealed that the

year or level of students don't have a major effect on the students' attitude and view of ethics (Ahmed et al, 2003; Du Plessis et al, 2011).

Research has revealed that the longer students stay in school, the more they develop negative attitudes towards ethics. In their study, Amberla et al. (2010) discovered that their study participants who were senior students had a more cynical attitude of the current ethical atmosphere. New students, on the other hand, are more knowledgeable of current ethical atmosphere, particularly after being exposed to ethical issues in an ethics course. These students, the study reveals, have a more positive attitude towards ethics. Along the same line of positive attitude towards business ethical behavior, Lindeman and Verkasalo (2000) revealed in their study that business students regard business ethics positively and believe it exists and is practiced in business, while non-business students are less enthusiastic about the practice.

3.5 Business and Non-business Students

Do business students tend to be less ethical and more tolerant than non-business students? Research trying to address this question has yielded conflicting results. In 1972, Hawkings and Cocanougher (as cited by Ibrahim 2012) concluded that business students are more tolerant of 'fishy' practices than non-business students. Some studies conducted in the 1990s reached the same conclusion (Hosmer, 1999; Smyth & Davis, 2004; Crown & Spiller, 1998; McCabe & Trevino, 1993; Roig & Ballew, 1994). These studies found out that business students: 1) scored less than others on tests of moral reasoning; 2) are more likely to regard business ethics as trivial than other students;3) are more tolerant of unethical conduct; and 4) are more willing to cheat and approve of cheating than other students. The image of business students is not positive either. Sparks and Johhlke (1996) discovered in their study that students of non-business majors regarded business people and students as unethical.

On the other hand, other studies have revealed that there are no significant differences between the attitudes of business and non-business students (Arlow, 1991; Beltramini et al 1984 as cited by Ibrahim 2012). Several meta-analyses have been conducted to investigate this contradiction to reach the conclusion that 20% of the studies revealed that two groups differ in their attitude towards ethics, 57% studies concluded that there are no significant differences, while 23% of the studies reached mixed conclusions (Ibrahim, 2012). In other words, there are no conclusive studies indicating that non-business students have different perceptions of business ethics (Ford & Richardson, 1994; Borkowski & Urgas, 1998).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Population and Sample

The study used quantitative research method, an empirical approach consisting of data collection through the use of questionnaires developed by the researcher and distributed in a survey. Qualitative approach is the systematic and empirical investigation of social phenomena through the use of statistical and mathematical (Cooper & Schindler, 2003) or SPSS program.

This qualitative study collected the data from 59 undergraduate and 12 graduate university students that attend two local universities. The sample size was the researcher's students who answered the questionnaire. Hence, the population was not random but convenient sample. The questionnaire was emailed to the participants of both universities. Means and crosstabs were used for data analysis.

4.2 Measurement

The questionnaire used Likert Scale questions to determine students' attitude toward ethical behavior. It was piloted to s mall group and adjusted as needed. The questionnaire consisted of 31 questions that investigated the possible behavior of the respondents. These respondents expressed their opinions on five-point Likert Scale ranging from 'very unlikely' to 'very likely' and 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

100 questionnaires were emailed to participants and 71 returned. The response rate was 70%. The results revealed that 55% were males and 45% were females; 56% were non-business students and 44% were Business; 1.4% were Freshmen, 12.7% were sophomore, 22.5% were Junior, 46.6 were senior and 16.9 were graduate.

5.1 Ethics courses and attitude

The results reveal that the number of courses does not affect the attitude. There is no significant difference regarding ethical behavior between those who have taken only one course and those more than one. Both share the same positive attitude towards ethical behavior. The number of courses doesn't affect ethical conduct; thus, taking more courses does not necessarily make one more ethical.

One can conclude that once the agents have sound ethical framework, they will follow it regardless of the number of courses taken. Moreover, taking ethics courses does improve their ethical conduct (Sleeper, Schnider & Webr, 2006).

5.2 Gender and Attitude

The data revealed mixed results. Female participants revealed that in some cases, such as reporting taxes or plagiarism/willing to cheat in class, they are more willing to indulge in unethical conduct. While in other cases, the mean is a little higher than that of male participants. This suggests that female's ethical attitude is a little higher. However, this difference is very minimal for data shows that both females and males reflect on their acts so as not violate ethical norms and are committed to the fair treatment of others. They routinely reflect on the importance of ethical behavior and care about their reputation. Females and males differ in their attitude and willingness to act ethically when faced by competition and external pressure. Men are more willing to behave unethically when faced with hyper-competitive co-workers or when unethical conduct is forced by the organization. Females, on the other hand, are firmer in their beliefs of their ethical codes.

In general, both females and males are ethical and have positive attitude towards ethics and ethical conduct (McCuddy & Berger, 1996; Pryer & Jordan, 2002). When differences do exist, they are very insignificant (Sower & Sower, 2005).

5.3 Level of Study and Ethics

The data shows that the average mean of senior students is lower than that of the rest. They are more likely to plagiarize and are neutral regarding following clear ethical standards. Moreover, they do use role models or superiors to guide their behavior, even if it means following unethical leader. Yet, when faced with whether to violate a customer's contract, seniors strongly disagreed, refusing such act.

Seniors are the least ethical of the group (Amberla et al, 2010; Moskaloinov, 2005) and are more willing to make unethical decisions, while the graduates are the most ethical. Graduates might be influenced by their religious commitments since the data indicated that they frequently attend religious services. Seniors, however, agreeing with Fatoki & Marembo (2012), hold that customers should be treated well. This is an interesting fact given that they are tolerant of unethical behavior. It would be interesting to investigate why they believe so: is it from business perspective or purely ethical?

5.4 Major and Ethics

Results concur with Lindeman and Verkasalo (2000) that business majors have positive attitude towards ethics, believing that it should and is practiced in business. Although business student participants don't use role models in their decision-making, they are more committed to the fair treatment of others. This has relevance to the seniors' beliefs that customers should be treated ethically. Here too, it would be worth finding out the reason. It could be that after being exposed to ethical issues in their business major (Beltramini, Peterson & Kozmetsky, 1984), they are more conscious of ethical issues. Business major students share the same values as non-business majors. There is no significant difference whether positive or negative.

5.6 Attitude towards Ethics

In general, the participants regard ethics positively. The majority of them are not willing to behave unethically for the sake of more profit, or exploit authority or under pressure. They do, however, regard unethical acts such as plagiarism or concealing information as permissible. These acts to them are not major offences but barely misdemeanors, and therefore they are very tolerant of such behavior. This could be attributed to their upbringing. Lebanese culture puts great value on ethical behavior such as lying, stealing or abusing others. Parents discuss and teach these values to their children. They do not discuss issues of plagiarism or define what it means. This seems to be the major factor why the participants were very tolerant of cheating and plagiarism but not of unethical conduct.

In conclusion, the overall data reveals that there are no major differences in ethical behavior and attitude in regard to gender or major. However, when it comes to level of education, differences occur. In general, the respondents revealed a healthy attitude toward ethics, which was inconsistent with most research, but is consistent with some research (Amberla et al, 2010; Chatelier, 2011). This can be attributed to their culture.

6. LIMITATIONS
Two limitations need addressing: 1) the findings cannot be generalized because of the sample choice, which is not random but convenient. Thus, it does not represent all the Lebanese population. 2) To collect data, the study used one tool for measurement; hence the results cannot be regarded as 100% reliable.

7. REOMMENDATIONS

When analyzing the reasons behind the negative attitude of agents towards ethics, the way ethics is taught always surfaces. Reshaping of how business ethics is taught is essential in higher education to assess students in acquiring better awareness towards ethical conduct. ElZein & Alameddine (2012) argue ethics education at universities should start with re-establishing what is given in the course and how and by whom it is given. Moreover, courses should clarify the practices that must be acquired, particularly what

should be the case and not what is by differentiating between moral facts and mere opinions and practices. Piper (1993) shares the same views and explains that for good ethical education, ethics courses should be integrated throughout the curriculum and reinforced so as to provide its students with ethical critical skills that will lead them to making sound ethical conduct at work. Moreover, a serious commitment by the faculty and university is essential for creating ethical leadership.

Ethical leadership and conduct starts at college. Students should be encouraged to take ethics and moral reasoning courses and workshops so that they can sharpen their ethical awareness faculty and become the future managers the society wants them to be and needs.

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