

The Impact of Ethics Training Course on Ethical Behaviors of Management Students

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Abstract

This study examines the impacts of educational courses of “ethics” on adherence of management students to ethical principles. In this research, 85 postgraduate students in management were studied. These students were divided into three groups. The first group included the students who had not taken educational course of ethics. The second group was comprised of people who had become familiar with ethical principles informally and at university classes; and the third group included the students who had educational course of ethics in their curriculum. The results of this research showed that taking ethics courses affects the level of adherence of people to educational ethics and personal ethics; moreover, such influence on business ethics was significant in people who had work experience.

Keywords: ethics, ethics training, ethical behaviors, business students, Iran

1. Introduction

Ethics and commitment of people to it has been taken into account by researchers in recent years. Due to the importance of this issue in today’s business world, many researchers have examined the role of adherence of people to ethical principles for their decision-making and management in their workplaces (Holt, 1997; Tung & Miller, 1990; Davis & Rasool, 1988; Perri, Callanan, Rotenberry, & Oehlers, 2009). Meanwhile, some studies have focused on the impact of demographic factors including gender and age and the adherence of people to ethical principles (Betz, O’Connell, & Shephard, 1989; Malinowski & Berger, 1996; Deshpande, 1997; Dawson, 1997; Hoffman, 1998). Some other research works have taken the impact of various environmental factors on morality into consideration. One of the challenging factors in this regard has been the influence of education on adherence of people to ethics which have often ended in different and conflicting results. Since the team of researchers for this study has been involved in organizing training courses related to ethics for administrators and students of management, it has faced with this key question that whether such courses have a significant impact on the attitudes of students and administrators and their commitment to moral principles or not. Finally, a research was conducted to answer this question using filed studies.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

During the past three decades, some studies have been conducted for measuring the impact of educational courses related to ethics on people. Findings of these studies have been inconsistent and in some cases even contradictory. Some of these studies came to the conclusions that such educational courses have no significant influence on ethical behavior of people (Luoma, 1989; Wynd & Mager, 1989; Davis & Welton, 1991; Duizend & McCann, 1998; Peppas & Diskin, 2000). In one of these studies, Peppas and Diskin (2000) studied the effects of taking an ethics course on values of management (business) students with regard to vocational ethics and business ethics. This study could not find a significant difference between those students who had passed the course and those who had not. Meanwhile, other studies showed different results. These studies confirmed that taking educational courses of ethics changes the attitudes of people and motivate them to walk into moral paths (Glenn, 1992; Hildebeitel & Jones, 1992; Eynon, Hill, & Stevens, 1997; Carlson & Burke, 1998; Shannon & Berl, 1997; Kerr & Smith, 1995; Trevino & McCabe, 1994; Owens, 1998; Hosmer, 1999; Langlois & Lapointe, 2010). Some studies also have suggested the positive impact of such courses on ethical decision making of people (Gautschi & Jones,

1998; Perri, Callanan, Rotenberry, & Oehlers, 2009). In their research, Abolmohammadi and Reeves (2000) examined the impacts of taking an ethics course during a semester on business ethics and social accountability of organization, and confirmed the positive impact of these courses. Results of a recent research by Langlois and Lapointe (2010) was conducted on three groups of managers and lasted for three years, and showed that the ethical behavior of managers changed after the study and such courses affected their ethical awareness, judgment, accountability and general behavior in business.

In this research, to measure the adherence of students to ethics and to study the effects of training courses on people for dealing with ethical issues, like some of the previous studies, business ethics was chosen as the main indicator (Abolmohammadi & Reeves, 2000). But given that the sample included students and some of them had very little work experience, it was most probable that measurement of this indicator has had no accurate results, therefore it was decided that personal ethics, including two fields of education and social life also be included in research. Consequently, moral conditions were classified into three groups: personal ethics, business ethics and educational ethics. Personal ethics in social life is related to those aspects of ethics that a person refers to for his/her everyday life and in his/her relationships and interactions with people for his/her decisions. Business ethics is devoted to vocational aspect of personal ethics and includes decisions of an individual in his/her working life; according to the definition by Velasquez (2006) vocational ethics is a specialized study of moral right and wrong as they apply to business institutions, organizations and behavior. In this study, the issues related to corporate ethics are also included in this category. The third set of moral principles includes those principles that people are faced with in their educational life and in educational spaces. Accordingly, the first three hypotheses of this study were defined as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Participation of individuals in courses of ethics is effective in promoting their adherence level to business ethics.

Hypothesis 2: Participation of individuals in courses of ethics is effective in promoting their adherence level to personal ethics.

Hypothesis 3: Participation of individuals in courses of ethics is effective in promoting their adherence level to educational ethics.

At first, the main hypotheses were defined as mentioned above, but with a deeper review of literature and previous studies, another important factor was identified that could not be ignored. This factor was ethical awareness; it is possible that after taking educational courses, a significant impact on level of adherence of people to ethical principles cannot be achieved for various reasons, but their ethical awareness may be strengthened and with passage of the time, may improve their attitudes in ethical situations and increase their level of commitment to ethical principles. As Maclagan (1994) stated in his studies, one of the goals of teaching ethics to managers is to stimulate their ethical imaginations and awareness and in fact, people before acting morally should have the ability to recognize ethical issues. Moral awareness is a necessary and integral part of ethical behaviors. It is the degree to which an individual recognizes the aspects of a situation that carry a reasonable likelihood of moral good or wrong to other people (Lin & Zhang, 2011). A recent study conducted by Cubie Lau (2010) on 707 undergraduate students emphasized that taking an educational course focusing on ethical issues affects the ethical awareness and moral reasoning of students. Consequently, the next hypothesis is formed:

Hypothesis 4: Participation of individuals in courses of ethics is effective in promoting their ethical awareness.

Another issue that has been taken into consideration in moral studies is the influence of gender on their adherence to ethical principles. In this regard, different views have been expressed. Some researches suggest that women are more ethical than men (Malinowski & Berger, 1996; Jones & Gautschi, 1988; Betz, O'Connell, & Shephard, 1989; Lau, 2010). Another group of researchers found no significant difference between moral behavior of men and women (McNichols & Zimmerman, 1985; Tsalikis & Ortiz-Buonafina, 1990). In a study conducted by Roxas and Stoneback (2004) moral behavior of men and women were studied in several countries and interesting results were obtained. In this study, generally women were more ethical than men, but separate studies of countries provided different results. In U.S., Australia, Philippines, and Germany women were a little more ethical than men and this difference was at most in Ukraine. While in other countries such as Canada and Thailand, the level of adherence of men to ethics was slightly higher than that of women and this difference was significant in China. In a recent research conducted regarding the differences between male and female managers, it was concluded that generally female managers believe in the impact of moral codes on the organization more than male managers and they believe that these codes will cause a higher level of business ethics (Ibrahim, Angelidis, & Tomic, 2009). Since the results in this field are still uncertain and such issue has not been evaluated in Iran yet, to evaluate this issue in this research, the last hypothesis was formed:

Hypothesis 5: Men and Women show different levels of ethical behavior and awareness.

3. Methodology

Most of studies performed in this field have examined changes in behavior or attitude of people after taking a course in ethics, or in other words they have compared behavior or attitude of people before and after an educational course (Fraedrich, Cherry, King, & Guo, 2005; Dellaportas, 2006; Boyd, 1981-1982). This research has been formed on the basis of comparing different groups and in which understanding of people from their level of commitment to ethics is examined, so that people who have passed the course of ethics can be compared with those who have not taken it.

3.1 Participants

This study was conducted in Iran's three top educational institutions in the field of management and our statistical population was comprised of students who studied management courses at postgraduate level. Our sample consists of 85 students in those institutes who filled our questionnaire. The statistical population included postgraduate students of University of Tehran, Shahid Beheshti University, and the Industrial Management Institute. University of Tehran and Shahid Beheshti University are the top Iranian universities in the field of management and they are considered as the major centers of management knowledge. Industrial Management Institute is also one of the best and most updated training organizations in Iran and its students have generally more working experience, and they are required to take ethics courses. The questionnaire was sent to more than 300 postgraduate students whose email addresses were provided by the institutions. Therefore, all of those students who were studying in the last year of Business in the mentioned educational institutions were asked to fill the questionnaire. After sending a reminder email for them, the number of respondents amounted to 85.

3.2 Research Design

It was originally intended to divide students into two groups, i.e. those who had a course of ethics in their curriculum and those who had not. After more studies and initial interviews with a number of students, however, we concluded that there are some students who had not taken an ethics course formally, but they had become familiar with these issues during their education via lecturers who had informally included such discussions in their classes, and this would certainly affect the outcome of the research. The students were therefore divided into three groups, those who had taken ethics courses and are the main objective of the research, and those who had not taken ethics courses and form the control group, and those who had become familiar with ethical issues informally and through other classes. It should be noted that in some studies, those people were studied who had passed ethics courses within a short period of time (Jones D. A., 2009; Ritter, 2006). For the purpose of this study, by taking a course in ethics we mean taking such a course within a period that lasts for a semester in line those scholars who have focused on such medium and long term periods (Abolmohammadi & Reeves, 2000; Fraedrich, Cherry, King, & Guo, 2005; Boyd, 1981-1982).

3.3 Measures

To identify the level of adherence of individuals to ethics, after reviewing literature and available questionnaires and tools, a questionnaire consisting of two parts was developed: the first part that was about the demographic data of individuals and the second part that asked 28 Likert Scale questions with regard to four studied aspects. Among these, five questions were about business ethics, 7 questions about personal ethics, 11 questions about educational ethics, and finally 5 questions about the ethical awareness; due to the fact that educational ethics is more tangible for students, it was tried that the number of questions in this section would be more.

3.4 Data Collection

For collecting data for this research, due to the sensitivity of people in answering questions related to ethics, the questionnaires were not given to individuals directly, so that they would not be worry that their information can be identifiable to the researcher. Thus the authors decided to send the questionnaire electronically and via Google Docs for students; this approach made it possible that questionnaires can be returned anonymously and individuals can be ensured their questionnaires were not detectable; on the other hand, it was feared that using this method, a much smaller number of questionnaires would be returned and eventually as it was mentioned before, only 85 students out of 300 filled the questionnaire.

4. Results

Among those 85 respondents to the questionnaire, 42 persons were male and 43 female. During data collection, these people were between 23 to 45 years old, and 90% of them were in the age range of 23 to 32 years. Among these individuals, 39 individuals had not passed ethics courses, 18 persons had received informal education in this

regard and 28 people were educated in this regard (Table 1).

Table 1. The Data of Participants

Variable		F	%
Gender	Male	42	49.5
	Female	43	50.5
Age	24 or less	30	35.3
	25-27	36	42.4
	28-30	8	9.4
	31-33	6	7
	34 or more	5	5.9
Ethical education background	Yes	28	33
	No	39	45.9
	Yes but informal	18	21.1
Working experience (years)	2 or less	52	61.2
	3-5	16	18.8
	6-8	6	7
	9-11	6	7
	12 or more	5	5.9

Before sending the questionnaire, 30 students were considered as pilot samples and were asked to complete the questionnaires. After completing the questionnaire, the SPSS 19 software program was used for data analysis. Cronbach's alpha was calculated and after ensuring its reliability (with value of 0.71) the questionnaire was sent to all students. After completion of the questionnaires, K-S Test was used for assessing the normalization of the data and after becoming ensured of its normality, parametric tests were used for data analysis.

To find the relationship between teaching ethics for students and their adherence to ethics, one-way ANOVA test was used. After comparing the average of all three groups of respondents in relation to the four aspects of ethics, we got some interesting results. After ANOVA test, the value of Sig for personal ethics and educational ethics was less than 5 percent. Therefore the hypothesis that the average of three communities are equal (H_0) was rejected for these two aspects. This indicated that the average of the group which had passed ethics courses had a significant difference from that of other two groups. For two other aspects, business ethics and ethical awareness, the value of Sig was more than 5 percent, so the hypothesis that the average of three communities are equal was accepted and no significant difference was found among averages in this regard.

Also to compare the adherence of men and women to moral issues, Independent Samples T-Test was used and after using this test, the value of Sig was more than 5 percent, so the hypothesis that the average of two communities are equal (H_0) was accepted and the average of these groups had no significant difference.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the impacts of passing educational courses of ethics on understanding of management students with regard to their adherence to ethical principles. After conducting this research, interesting results were obtained that suggest the positive impact of passing these courses on ethical behavior of students. In this study, the ethical behaviors were divided into three aspects: business ethics, personal ethics, and educational ethics. The ethical awareness was another component in this research.

After reviewing the statistical findings, with regard to hypothesis 1 and by comparing the average of three communities, it was concluded that there is no significant difference between the people of these three communities in terms of adherence to business ethics. Since our statistical population is consisted of students, a large number of which have little job experience, it is likely that these students due to lack of work experience and actual dealing with many possible ethical dilemmas, would have no deep understanding of their reactions when confronted with ethical dilemmas or unethical behavior. Therefore, after putting those who had work experience of a year or less aside, we repeated one-way ANOVA test and this time the value of Sig become less than 5%, and the hypothesis that the average of three communities are equal was rejected, this means that in terms of studying hypothesis 1, with regard to those who had more than a year of work experience, we concluded that passing ethics courses has increased their commitment to business ethics. Unfortunately, by this approach, a number of our

samples were removed for hypothesis 1, but accordingly, our understanding that less experienced students have no full knowledge of themselves was strengthened.

With regard to hypothesis 2 and 3, as it was mentioned before, there was a significant difference between the averages of the three communities in both hypotheses; in both hypotheses, the individuals who had passed ethics course had greater adherence to personal and educational ethics than those who had not passed the course and the people who had informal learning.

With regard to the fourth hypothesis, the findings of this study could not demonstrate the effects of courses of ethics on ethical awareness level.

For the fifth hypothesis, no significant difference between male and female students was found and this means that the level of adherence to ethical principles was identical among both groups.

6. Limitations of the Study

Like many other studies, this study has been associated with some constraints. One of the main limitations is its small sample size. Given the sensitivity of respondents to a questionnaire on ethical issues, anonymous electronic questionnaire was used in this study and the rate of return was very low. Furthermore, the questionnaire was sent to email address of students provided by the institutions, therefore the individuals who filled the form were not a random selection of students, but were some students who actually filled the questionnaire.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of pretest and posttest designs. If a questionnaire survey could have been performed before and after such courses in ethics for those who had them in their own curriculum, the confidence level for results would have been more.

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