

Ethics in the Hospitality Industry: Review and Research Agenda

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Abstract

Practitioners in the hospitality sector rate ethics as one of the most important issues faced by the industry. Many scholars argue that the hospitality sector is open to frequent unethical practices. Managers and employees, due to intensive face-to-face interactions with clients, confront many ethical dilemmas in their day-to-day operations. Previous research confirms that a positive ethical climate nurtures a healthy organization by increasing manager and employee job satisfaction, enhancing customer experience, and increasing the organization's profit. Despite its crucial role, studies on ethics in the hospitality industry are limited compared to those undertaken in the more general business area. This manuscript reviews the literature on ethical perceptions and practices among hospitality managers, employees and students (future professionals), and proposes a research agenda. This critic review intends to increase awareness and knowledge on the importance of this issue and give some orientations for scholars towards several important topics for future research in the area of hospitality ethics.

Keywords: ethical perceptions and practices, hospitality industry, research agenda

1. Introduction

Ethics are one of the most critical issues in business and, specifically, in human resources management. Previous research shows that employees' perception of their organization's ethical climate is related to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational performance (Kim & Miller, 2008; Pettijohn, Pettijohn, & Taylor, 2008). Therefore, the organization's ethical climate reduces turnover, enhances service quality and visitors' service experience, and increases hotels' productivity and profit. Indeed, integrity (e.g., caring, concerned, fair, and trustworthy) is reported by hotel managers as the second most important dimension of leadership, following professionalism (Wong & Chan, 2010). Also, a number of studies show a direct relationship between ethical climate and job satisfaction (e.g., Deshpande, 1996; Cheng, Yang, Wan, & Chu, 2013).

Lee and Tsang (2013) assert that ethics is an important challenge in the hospitality industry, and claim that the understanding of ethical perception and moral position of all stakeholders should be accentuated. Scholars assert that the hospitality industry is open to unethical practices, and frequently presents its employees with morally and ethically ambiguous situations such as overbooking, theft, whistle-blowing, mistreatment of others, racial prejudices, sabotage, benefit at the expense of guest supplementary service, and misleading information in the restaurant menus, hotel brochures and websites (Stevens, 2001; Yaman & Gurel, 2006; Wong & Chan, 2010; Harris, 2012). Although a large number of ethical behavior investigations have been carried out and reported in the literature, only few empirical studies have been undertaken in the hospitality industry. Indeed, the theoretical foundation of investigation in the hospitality industry (and tourism sector) ethics is very limited (Yaman & Gurel, 2006). Therefore, the objective of this research is to review the literature about ethics in the hospitality sector and suggest avenues for future research. This manuscript intends to accentuate scholar contributions to the development of research in this crucial area.

2. Literature Review: Human Resources' Ethical Behavior

The hotel industry practitioners ascertain the importance of developing and implementing ethics in hospitality school programs and hospitality industry practices (Dopson & Nelson, 2003; Yeh, 2012). In the same way, scholars interested in the hospitality industry pay increasingly attention to the study of ethical decision behavior. The research in ethics behavior in the hospitality industry covered several topics, including social responsible behavior, implementation of ethics codes, and human resources' ethical decision making. This last topic related to the ethical issues that challenge professionals and staffs is relatively the most studied area (Upchurch &

Ruhland, 1995). This section synthesizes the most important findings in the literature. It is organized around three groups: hospitality front-line employees, hospitality managers and directors, and hospitality students.

2.1 Ethical Behavior of Front-Line Employees

In the hotel industry, the ethical values and job-related behaviours of the front-line employees are critical components of the business transaction and consumer service experience (Wong Chak Keung, 1998). In the service industry and in the hotel sector in particular, consumers (service users) are not satisfied with just the tangible components of the hotel experience such as room comfort and food quality (Wong Chak Keung, 1998). Their satisfaction level is contingent on how they “perceive” they are treated during their interaction with the hotel’s staff (personal attention) (Wong Chak Keung, 1998). In the service marketing literature, this interaction between a hotel’s visitors and staff is referred to as the “moment of truth”. If an employee’s attitudes or behaviors are perceived unethical, visitors will reduce their assessment of the service received (Wong Chak Keung, 2000).

Wong Chak Keung (1998) finds that hotel employees’ job-related ethics include four dimensions: ‘no harm’ (e.g., making a phone call in a guest room), ‘unethical behavior’ (e.g., offering free coffee to friends in the hotel restaurant), ‘actively benefiting’ (e.g., breaking a glass or plate but blaming it on a guest’s carelessness), and ‘passively benefiting’ (e.g., accepting tips to arrange a room change for a guest). The author reports that hotel employees are more tolerant of “no harm” and “passively benefiting” ethical beliefs, but less tolerant ‘unethical of behavior’ and ‘actively benefiting’. Front office, and sales and marketing departments’ employees tend to have a lower tolerance of unethical behavior aspects when compared to rooms, security, and food and beverage departments’ employees. Kim and Miller (2008) identify six types of an organization’s ethical climate: moral caring, law and code, self-interest, efficiency, rules, and team spirit. These ethical climates are differently perceived by employees depending on both the characteristics of the organization and the individual (e.g., gender, education). The findings also support the relationships between ethical climate, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

Other studies examine how consumers perceive employees’ unethical behavior. Harris (2012) found that hotel service employees’ misbehaviour is common and frequent, and that consumers notice these actions. Harris (2012) identified five ways in which tourists believed they were cheated: overcharging, charging for unused services, adding on extra charges, forcing use of unneeded services, and short changing. Wong Chak Keung (2000) studied tourists’ perceptions of hotel frontline employees’ questionable behaviour and identified unethical behavior as one of its underlying dimensions. Tourists report that they dislike any unethical behaviour, but those who agree that flexibility is more important than honesty and that hotel employees should satisfy their needs tend to be more tolerant. Tourists very much dislike the infringement of their own property and rights. Finally, Wong and Chan (2010) identify four dimensions of tourists’ perception of hotel front-line employees’ questionable behavior: infringement of guests’ property, benefit at the expense of guest supplementary services, against work rules, and unethical behavior. Tourists are most intolerant of infringement of guests’ property and unethical behavior unless they are intended to better satisfy their own needs. Younger tourists tend to tolerate unethical behavior.

2.2 Managers’ Ethical Orientation and Behavior

Only limited studies have been interested in managers’ ethical behavior (Upchurch & Ruhland, 1995; Withney, 1990; Yaman & Gurel, 2006; Huimin & Ryan, 2011). Huimin and Rayan (2011) find that Chinese senior hotel managers consider that business has wider concerns than making profits. Most of them agree that managers should have a social responsibility beyond the interests of their shareholders, and that social responsibility orientation and profitability are compatible and critical to the organization’s survival. Huimin and Rayan (2011) identify five components of Chinese ethical perceptions: respect for individuals underlying general morality (e.g., do not physically or psychologically harm other individuals; do not threaten or scarify the welfare and dignity of others), tolerance of degree of relativity in moral standards (e.g., moral standards are individualistic and reflect personal rules), the role of corporations in current society, adherence to corporate social responsibility (e.g., corporations and managers have a social responsibility role beyond the organization’s profits), and issues related to expediency in business. Whitney (1990) posits four ethical orientations: individual orientation (i.e., ethical norms are exclusively matters of personal taste or arbitrary preference), traditional orientation (i.e. the concept of right and wrong is learned from the community: parents, friends, teachers, etc.), legal orientation (i.e. ethics are defined through law), and career orientation (i.e., ethical standards are synonymous with those of the industry). In a study among U.S. hotel managers, the author reports that 61% of the managers are of the traditional orientation in their ethical orientation (i.e., that ethical orientations are mostly

based on family, community, and religious values that have become internalized), 18% are of the legal orientation, 8% of the individual orientation, and 1% of career orientation. The other managers (12%) have multiple primary orientations. Managers who agree that profit is the sole factor influencing a company's decisions also agree that a company's code of ethics is a mere public relation document. Upchurch and Ruhland (1995) study the ethical work-climate types as perceived by lodging properties' managers and report that the lodging industry is characterized by a caring working environment that meets the needs of the clientele in an attentive, effective, and efficient manner (i.e., benevolence is the dominant ethical climate type). Upchurch and Ruhland (1995) found that benevolence is the most perceived ethical climate type present in the lodging industry, followed by the ethical principal climate type. The egoism ethical climate type is the least used perspective in making ethical decisions. Yaman and Gurel (2006) emphasize the role of culture in understanding tourism marketers' perceptions of ethics and social responsibility. They report that Turkish tourism marketers (one third of them are operating in the hospitality sector) are both more relativistic and more idealistic than their Australian counterparts. In the Yeh (2012) study, interviewed hotel managers claim that hospitality properties should put more emphasis on business ethics, and that education and training on business ethics may help employees and students to deal better with ethical challenges. Indeed, 81% of the managers report that their organization does not currently offer ethics-related workshops or courses for employees.

2.3 Hospitality Students' Perceptions of Ethical Issues

Scholars emphasize the importance of developing ethic courses in order to foster the ethical perception and judgement of hospitality students (Lee & Tsang, 2013). Ethical education will help students develop critical thinking skills to deal with day to day ethical problems they will encounter in their future career (Yeung & Pine, 2003). Researchers and practitioners argue that hospitality ethics education is crucial to the development of the ethical ground in the hotel industry (Yeh, 2012; Lee & Tsang, 2013). Despite this importance, limited academic attention has been given to hospitality students' perception of ethical issues confronting the industry and their perceptions of the workplace (Stevens, 2001; Yeung & Pine, 2003; Lee & Tsang, 2013). Lee and Tsang (2013) show that tourism and hotel management students possess a high level of ethical standard and acknowledge the importance of ethics in the workplace. Yeh (2012) reports that hotel managers encourage more ethics education and training for hospitality students before they start working in the industry.

Few studies examine how students rate the most critical ethical issues. Weaver, Choi, and Kaufman (1997) report that hospitality students rate conditions of employment as the most ethical issue confronting the industry, followed by solid waste disposal (recycling), sexual harassment, employee theft, and pollution. These results are supported by the Yeung and Pine (2003) study, who report that hospitality students claim that disposal of hazardous waste, acceptance of bribes, sexual harassment, disclosing corporate information, and theft are the most important ethical issues in the industry. Finally, in the Enghagen and Hott (1992) study, hospitality students report that solid waste disposal, conditions of employment, and employment discrimination are the most critical ethical issues.

Other studies contrast ethical perceptions among hospitality students and hospitality managers. Stevens (2001) compares the responses of hospitality students and hospitality human resources directors to a range of ethical scenarios/issues such as racial prejudice, theft, attempt to obtain proprietary information, and keeping gifts. The results show that students and human resources directors esteem the act of theft as the most unethical, followed by sexual harassment, and an attempt to obtain propriety information. Indeed, the results report that hospitality human resources directors rate all the scenarios ethically lower than the hospitality students. Freedman and Bartholomew (1990) find that: hospitality management students who are under 26 years of age and have no managerial experience report a lower personal business ethics score compared to hospitality managers with over five years of management experience; female hospitality management students report significantly higher personal business ethics scores than male students; and gender has no effect on business ethics among managers.

3. Future Research

Previous research on business ethics reports a variety of influencers on ethics perceptions and ethical decision making (e.g., Wong Chak Keung, 2000; Huimin & Rayan, 2011). These include the nature and intensity of ethical dilemma, individual characteristics (e.g., cultural values, ethical values, experience level, prior ethical education, age, and gender) and organizational factors (e.g., organization size) (e.g., Enghagen & Hott, 1992; Yaman & Gurel, 2006; Kim & Miller, 2008). For instance, it has been shown that organization size has an effect on managers' ethical judgement (Huimin & Rayan, 2011) and their conception of ethics as a determinant of organizational effectiveness (Yaman & Gurel, 2006). Yaman and Gurel (2006) conclude that marketers of small organizations have a higher perception of the importance of ethics for organizational effectiveness than those of

larger organizations. In the tourism industry, Kim and Miller (2008) report that employees in a company without an ethical code have a lower perception of 'self-interest' ethical climate than employees in a company with an ethical code. This result contradicts the general view that the implementation of an ethical code fosters ethical behavior and calls for more studies on this issue. Future research may consider the effect of a large number of organization characteristics on ethical orientation. These include the organization's functional structure, communication style, organization type (number of hotel stars), organization size (number of employees), and organization macro-environment characteristics.

Studies relating demographic characteristics to ethical perception, judgement, and behavior have generated some conflicting results (Lee & Tsang, 2013). It has been reported that: age groups, gender, and working experience have no effect on students' perception of ethics importance in the workplace (Lee & Tsang, 2013); gender and status have no effect on managers' sensitivity to ethics (Huiman & Rayan, 2011); gender, race, career path, and number of years in college do not influence students' perceptions of ethical issues (Enghagen & Hott, 1992); age (but not position level) has a negative effect on tolerance of unethical behavior (Wong Chak Keung, 2000); gender and education influence perception of organizations' ethical climate (Kim & Miller, 2008); and gender influences students' perception of business ethics, but did not impact on managers' perception (Freedman & Bartholomew, 1990). Future research is clearly warranted to examine the effects of professionals' and employees' demographic characteristics on ethical judgement and behavior.

Work value is another employee characteristic that may be considered as a determinant of ethical behavior. Previous research in the hospitality industry shows that employees have different work values (e.g., achievement, security, prestige, economic return, independence, creativity, altruism) (Chen & Choi, 2008). These values affect employees' perceptions and behavior, and particularly ethical decision making. For instance, Chen and Choi (2008) identify four work value dimensions (personal growth, professional growth, work environment, and comfort and security) that may be linked to employees' ethical practice and behavior. The interaction between personal work values and an organization's climate in explaining ethical behavior is another fruitful research avenue.

Hospitality ethics awareness and education have seen an increase in interest in the last two decades (Lee & Tsang, 2013; Yeung & Pine, 2003). However, limited academic focus has been given to the attitudes of hospitality students toward ethics with respect to the workplace (Lee & Tsang, 2013). There is still a need to assess the effect of ethics education on students' judgement, ethical behavior, and manner by which they proceed to make decisions. Tsee and Lang (2013) assert that the current offer of ethics courses covers business law and they emphasize the need to develop domain-specific offers that intend to develop awareness, attitudes and skills to meet the hospitality sector's needs. Also, future research is encouraged to study and contrast perceptions and attitudes toward ethical issues among students with different industry work experience levels (full-time work experience, part-time work experience, and without work experience). This understanding will help in preparing students to ethically solve the dilemmas they will encounter in their future career.

Empirical studies examining hotel employees' ethical attitudes and perceptions in different departments (e.g., front office, accounting, housekeeping, marketing, food and beverage) are warranted to respond to the shortcomings in the hospitality literature. This does create an opportunity for future research to better understand the different dilemmas that professionals and employees confront at both different departments and different positions. These studies may help identify the ethical issues to be developed during training programs for actual and new workers. In these studies, the number of years of experience, participation in training programs, age, and education levels could be added as moderators or control variables.

What are the different means of improving the industry's ethical foundation and ethical practices? The lack of an ethics code of conduct may explain some findings referring to the disagreement among hotel professionals about what is ethical and what is not ethical (Beck, Lazer, & Schmidgall, 2007). Ethical guidelines may help professionals to identify what is a question of ethics and how to handle ethical issues in day to day operations. Future studies are needed to evaluate the long term impact of lodging properties' code of ethics on professional and employees' ethical attitudes and behaviors. Indeed, research analyzing the evolution of the ethical foundation in the industry, and that comparing the development and adoption of ethical codes and policies in different countries, are justified. Many international lodging properties have adopted codes of conduct to encourage ethical behavior among employees, but they do not seem to have a great influence in prompting ethical behavior (Beck et al., 2007; Kim & Miller, 2008).

While several studies have been carried out in the last two decades to understand ethics in the hospitality industry (Table 1), these studies are limited to few countries like the United States (Freedman & Bartholomew,

1990; Whitney, 1990; Enghagen & Hott, 1992; Weaver et al., 1997; Yeh, 2012) and China (Wong Chak Keung, 1998; Wong & Chan, 2010; Huimin & Ryan, 2011). More studies are needed to examine the ethics profile of the hospitality industry in other continents such as Latin American and African countries, and in well-known destinations such as Istanbul, Athens, Paris, London, Cancun, Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town, and Mauritius.

Table 1. Synthesis

Authors	Study objectives	Country	Method	Sample size
Freedman and Bartholomew (1990)	Examines the influence of age/experience and gender on ethical considerations.	United States	Quantitative study	135 hotel and restaurant students and 100 hotel and restaurant managers
Whitney (1990)	Discusses issues related to the application of ethical principles to business realities and empirically investigates ethical orientations of hotel managers.	United States	Quantitative study	110 hotel managers
Enghagen and Hott (1992)	Examines the most important ethical concerns challenging the hospitality and tourism industry.	United States	Quantitative study	349 hospitality and tourism students
Upchurch and Ruhland (1995)	Examines managers' leadership style and investigates the relationship between the ethical climate types and the managers' leadership style.	United States	Quantitative study	79 hotel managers
Wong Chak Keung (1998)	Investigates the job-related ethical beliefs of hotel employees (those involved in service encounters in front office, housekeeping, and food and beverage).	China (Hong Kong)	Quantitative study	299 hotel employees (3-star to 5-star hotels)
Stevens (2001)	Investigates and contrasts the reactions of human resource directors and hospitality students to ethical dilemmas.	United States	Quantitative study	84 human resources directors and 81 hospitality students
Yeung, Wong, and Chan (2002)	Understands the hospitality and tourism students' ethical orientations and examines the effect of personal characteristics on ethical issues perceptions.	Hong Kong	Quantitative study	402 tourism and hospitality students
Yeung and Pines (2003)	Identifies the most important ethical issues in the hospitality industry.	Hong Kong	Quantitative study	520 hospitality students
Yaman and Gurel (2006)	Investigates tourism managers' perceptions of the importance of social responsibility and ethics in organizational effectiveness, and examines the effect of culture and demographic characteristics on these perceptions.	Australia and Turkey	Quantitative study	101 (Australia) and 219 (Turkey) tourism and hospitality marketers
Beck et al. (2007)	Examines whether lodging sales and marketing executives are consistent in dealing with ethical marketing issues.	United States	Quantitative study	220 lodging sales and marketing executives
Kim and Miller (2008)	Investigates the ethical climate types in the Korean tourism industry and their influence on job satisfaction and organizational commitment.	Korea	Quantitative study	820 employees from 14 Korean large tourism companies (luxury hotels, international chain restaurants, travel agencies, Korean airline companies)
Nadiri and Tanova (2010)	Investigates the role of justice in explaining turnover intentions, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behavior.	North Cyprus	Quantitative study	208 employees and 40 managers of 5-star hotels
Huimin and	Investigates the nature and strength of	China	Quantitative	257 senior hotel

Ryan (2011)	Chinese hotel managers' ethical attitudes.		study	managers
Harris (2012) – Study 1	Explores the extent to which tourists believe that they have been ripped off by service workers.	United Kingdom	Quantitative study	600 tourists: Londoner, Mainland European, North American, Asian, Australian, African
Harris (2012) – Study 2	Investigates how service workers exploit their role to undertake acts of deception (unethical behavior).	United Kingdom	Qualitative study	25 hospitality workers, 25 transportation workers, and 25 tour service workers
Yeh (2012)	Investigates the perceptions of hotel managers towards ethics education within the industry and in hospitality schools.	United States	Quantitative study	106 hotel managers
Lee and Tsang (2013)	Examines the perceptions of tourism and hospitality management students on ethics.	Hong Kong	Quantitative study	370 tourism and hospitality students

The business ethics literature reports some effects of individual characteristics such as idealism, machiavellianism, opportunism on ethical perceptions and judgements (e.g., Al-Khatib, Malshe, & Abdulkader, 2008; Yeung, et al., 2002). For instance, Al-Khatib et al. (2008) report that machiavellianism and opportunism are the most significant influencers of American managers' ethical perception of negotiation tactics while idealism, relativism, and opportunism are strong predictors of their Saudi managers' counterparts. In addition, Sims (2009) reports that Taiwanese employees are more likely to make unethical decisions for the organization's benefit than their American counterparts. In the hospitality area, studies on the relevance of cultural values on ethical judgement and behavior are scarce. The Yaman and Gurel (2006) study linking marketer moral ethics and moral perception to cultural differences is one exception. The effect of cultural values on ethical perceptions and behavior is a relevant but understudied area in the hospitality management literature. Further research on this issue is required, considering the multicultural environment that mostly characterizes the hospitality workplace. Scholars agree that culture shapes people's thoughts, attitudes, values, and eventually their behavior. For instance, Pizam et al. (1997) conclude that national culture has a greater effect on managers' behavior than the culture of a particular industry. They report more differences than communalities between hotel managers' practices in Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong. Numerous studies in the business ethics area show that culture influences managers' and employees' ethical perceptions, attitudes, and behavior. Future studies should examine the impact of cultural values on managerial attitudes and behavior from the ethical perspective. Researchers could make use of Hofstede's (2001) cultural framework or Schwartz's (1999) model. The former framework includes seven cultural values (egalitarianism, mastery, harmony, hierarchy, affective autonomy, intellectual autonomy and conservatism). The theoretical development and empirical test of the nomological links between cultural value dimensions and ethical attitudes and behavior constitute a great contribution to the hospitality area.

Previous research lacks a theoretical foundation of the determinants and consequences of ethical decision judgement and behavior. Scholars are encouraged to develop and empirically test an integrative conceptual model including both the determinants and consequences of ethical decision making (Yaman & Gurel, 2006). Several theories and concepts may be integrated to develop and test these relationships. For example, the utilitarianism concept postulates that an act can be judged as right or wrong, depending on its result.

Studies on ethics in the hospitality area mostly use a quantitative approach (Table 1). Several studies make use of hypothetical situations (scenarios or vignettes) and ask respondents to judge or rate the ethicality of hospitality professional's behavior (Stevens, 2001; Beck et al., 2008). In some cases, these scenarios reflect real-life ethical dilemmas or practices associated with the hospitality industry (Stevens, 2001). Future research is encouraged to use a mixed approach. We still need qualitative research that helps define what ethical behavior is and what it is not; what is perceived as responsible behavior and what is not. Qualitative research using narrative and case studies methods may help to get an insight to identify and understand different unethical situations in the industry and how managers/employees experience and deal with ethical dilemmas. Finally, research is encouraged to examine the perception of the ethicality of various dilemmas facing different stakeholders (e.g., hotel general managers, executives, sales and marketing directors, employees, hospitality students) in multinational and multicultural contexts.

4. Conclusion

The establishment of a healthy hotel organization environment by fostering ethical awareness, practices, and behavior enhances employee satisfaction, reduces employee turnover intentions, improves visitor experience, and increases the organization's profit (Cheng et al., 2013). Despite an increased literature on tourism and hospitality management, little attention has been devoted to the ethical issues and dilemmas facing human resources in the hospitality sector. Ethical issues are a major concern due to the inherent characteristics of the service sector, and particularly the hospitality sector, such as inseparability, intangibility, and variability (Stevens & Fleckenstein, 1999; Jung, Namkung, & Yoon, 2010). Indeed, a number of studies assert that employees' perception of an organization's ethical values and ethical working environment develops person–organization fit and reduce turnover intent (Kim & Miller, 2008; Jung et al., 2010). In order to stimulate research in this area, this manuscript presented a brief review of the literature and several avenues for future research.

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