

**GENDER DIFFERENCES IN PERSONAL SELLING ETHICS EVALUATIONS: DO THEY EXIST AND WHAT DOES THEIR EXISTENCE MEAN FOR TEACHING SALES ETHICS?**

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**ABSTRACT**

Sales career opportunities are growing at a 9% rate through 2016, and the number of women in sales and related occupations is nearing the fifty-percent mark (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). However, positive impressions of sales have not kept pace with the growth, and the sales area is widely considered to be a prime arena for ethical abuse (Luthy, 2007; Ramsey, Marshall, Johnston, and Deeter-Schmelz, 2007). Although females are generally more sensitive to ethical issues in business, there is little research reviewing the relative ethical sensitivities of males and females in sales situations (O’Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). Since women are now heavily represented in sales organizations, an understanding of the manner in which each gender evaluates personal selling ethics is required.

The current study seeks to further this understanding through testing gender responses to ethical sales situations and through suggesting possible reasons behind the differences. Findings may be useful for the preparation of pedagogical methods and ethical codes within academia and industry.

The paper begins by reviewing past research on gender-specific ethical evaluations. Particular attention is paid to idealism and relativism since the two constructs are hypothesized to influence the manner in which individuals respond to sales ethics scenarios. Next, male and female responses to various ethical situations in sales are tested. Results are compared with a simultaneously administered moral relativism/idealism test (Forsyth, 1980) to help uncover possible reasons behind the gender divide. The paper concludes with pedagogical recommendations.

To test whether an ethical gender divide exists in sales situations, an updated version of Dabholkar & Kellaris’ (1992) personal selling ethics scale (PSE) was used. The new scale is referred to as PSE-2

(Donoho and Heinze, 2011). A modified version of Forsyth’s (1980) EPQ was used to test whether moral idealism and relativism may influence gender evaluation differences. Data was collected from sales and marketing classes at two public universities in the West. The survey was administered via an on-line survey tool. Taking an average of 15 minutes to complete, the survey was completed by 279 students.

A preliminary analysis of sales ethics evaluation differences found that gender differences exist (see TABLE 1). Women tend to view ethically problematic sales scenarios as less ethical than their male counterparts. Both moral idealism and moral relativism affect ethical evaluations. Though both idealism and relativism affected female evaluations, only idealism affected male evaluations. Idealism and relativism, however, do not entirely explain the differences in sales ethics evaluations. The gender effect remains once idealism and relativism covariates have been entered, suggesting the presence of additional causal constructs. Uncovering these constructs represents an opportunity for future research.

TABLE 1

Model	Variable	Std. Beta	t	Sig
Male	Idealism	-.265	-3.298	.001
	Relativism	.011	.141	.888
Female	Idealism	-.255	-2.688	.008
	Relativism	.220	2.627	.010
All	Idealism	-.269	-4.667	.000
	Relativism	.108	1.877	.062

In light of the growth in sales career opportunities and the number of women pursuing those opportunities, educators must adequately prepare both men and women for facing today’s ethical sales dilemmas. Although moral idealism and relativism influence the gender difference, they do not entirely account for it. Future research should examine

additional causal factors. While including utilitarian perspectives, today's educators should primarily emphasize moral idealism when teaching sales ethics. Educators can be aided in this effort through using ethical codes and situation-based frameworks such as the PSE-2.