

Ethical Practices of Students: Predictions of Honesty

Dennis E. Clayson, University of Northern Iowa

ABSTRACT

Students' perception of the ethics of certain behaviors were found to be very consistent across different areas of the country. Students believe that their peers are less ethical than themselves. Purposeful violation of ethical principles and environmental situation seem to be predictive of a student's own perception of honesty, but they appear to believe that their peers' honesty is predetermined by violation of social norms.

A recent Business Week/Harris poll of American adults found that less than half of those surveyed rated the ethical standards of business behavior as good and 12% rated it as poor (Business Week 1987). Studies since the 70's seem to indicate that ethical behavior and perceptions have decreased among students and practitioners (Hawkins and Cocanougher 1972; Shuptrine 1979; George 1985; Budner 1988).

Many students do not seem to realize that the student of today becomes the business person of tomorrow and that attitudes, work habits, and beliefs will remain largely intact (Kelley and Simonsen 1989). This reality is especially pertinent in the area of ethics.

Following this logic, Forrest and Pritchett (1990) created a survey of ethics that took various practices in the work place and translated them into classroom situations. They tested two hypotheses. First, that students in individual universities would not differ in their ethical standards, and secondly, that students would report their beliefs about questionable classroom activities to be the same as their peers' beliefs. Using respondents from five Southern universities, the first hypothesis was supported. The second hypothesis was overwhelmingly rejected. The students believed that their peers were much more likely than themselves to be accepting of unethical behavior. The researchers also included a global statement that asked whether the students believed that honesty was more important than getting good grades. About 80% of the respondents indicated that they agreed with this statement, but they believed that only about 49% of their peers would agree. Forrest and Pritchett did not investigate how this global "honesty" statement was related to beliefs about other specified behaviors.

Purpose

This study probed student perceptions of ethics to investigate two questions.

1. Could Forrest and Pritchett's findings be replicated in another area of the country? The original study may have been biased by perceptions of ethical behavior perhaps characterized by Southern states.

2. What ethical perceptions of classroom behavior would be predictive of a student's global concept of honesty?

METHOD

Forrest and Pritchett's survey was used with one exception. Instead of the original five point scale, the present study used a seven point scale with the same anchors to gain a better measure for correlational purposes. The survey consisted of eight practices (Forrest and Pritchett 1990), and a statement about honesty. Each of the eight practices was repeated twice, one which began with "I believe that..." and the other began with "I think that most students would believe that..." The self evaluation and the peer evaluation were counterbalanced across practices resulting in 16 specific questions with an additional two about honesty. As in the original study, respondents were a nonrandom sample of upper-division business (primarily marketing) students. The survey was conducted at a Midwestern university. A total of 161 useable questionnaires were used in the analysis.

RESULTS

In the original study, position (1) and (2), and (4) and (5) were combined to give an "acceptable" and an "unacceptable" frequency. It was felt that a neutral position (4) on the seven point scale represented (on a study of ethics) a position that could best be interpreted as unacceptable in the original study. Therefore, a (1), (2), and (3) response were combined to calculate the percentage of "acceptable" for a practice and that

Marketing Education, 1988 Proceeding of WMEA, (Bruce Stern and Doug Lincoln Eds.), (April), 25.

Business Week (1987), "Business Week/Harris Poll: Is an Antibusiness Backlash Building?" (July 20), 71.

Forest, P.J. and Thomas K. Pritchett (1990), "Business Students' Perception of Ethics in the Classroom," Journal of Midwest Marketing, 5 (Spring), 117-124.

George, Richard J. (1985), "The Ethical Perceptions of Present and Future Corporate Executives," Proceedings, 1985 Southwestern Marketing Association Conference, 143-146.

Hawkins, Del I. and A. Benton Cocanougher (1972), "Student Evaluations of the Ethics of Marketing Practices: The Role of Marketing Education," Journal of Marketing, 36(April), 61-64.

Joreskog, Karl G. and Dag Sorbom (1988A), Prelis, Mooresville, In.: Scientific Software.

_____ (1988B), Lisrel 7: A Guide to the Program and Applications, Chicago: SPSS Inc.

Kelley, Craig A. and Cindy L. Simonsen (1989), "Unethical Student Practices Hint at Future Business Behavior," Marketing Educator, 8 (Winter), 5.

Shuptrine, F. Kelley (1979), "Evaluating the Ethics of Marketing Practices: Student Perceptions," Proceedings, 1979 AMA Educators Conference, 124-127.