Towards an Understanding of Business Students’ Ethical Perspectives: Implications for Moral Awareness, Moral Reasoning and Moral Decision Making

Objectives & Scope

The many well-publicized ethical missteps in the business arena have lead to criticism of the academic community for not incorporating effective ethics education into the business curriculum (Earley and Kelly, 2004; Madison and Schmidt, 2006; Cohen 2012). Whether our business students become future small enterprise owners, chief executive officers of multi-million dollar corporations, work in government organizations or in the not-for-profit sector, they will need to be aware of, and respond to the many and varied moral issues that arise.

As advocated by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) (AACSB, 2004) a comprehensive ethics education is a fundamental element of a business curriculum to prepare students to be able to identify, reason and to resolve moral dilemmas. While there is no agreed upon best practice approach to teaching business ethics, many business degrees incorporate ethics into the curriculum either as a standalone unit or integrated into the program to support students’ moral awareness, reasoning and decision making processes (Martinov-Bennie & Mladenovic, 2013). The aim of this study is to explore two popular online tools: The Ethical Lens Inventory (Baird & Niacaris, 2010) and the Hot Topic Simulations from the Ethics Game (EthicsGame, 2013) to address three research questions. First, which ethical perspectives (deontological theories, justice theories, consequentialist theories, virtue theories) do business students tend to employ when faced with moral dilemmas? Second, are certain ethical perspectives associated with heightened moral awareness? Finally, are certain ethical perspectives associated with more moral decisions?

The Ethical Lens Inventory & Hot Topic Simulations

The Ethical Lens Inventory (ELI) is an online instrument that contains thirty-six pairs of statements or words with forced choices, students are instructed to choose the item that would indicate their value or action if they had to choose (Baird & Niacaris, 2010, EthicsGame, 2013). Choices determine the preferred ethical lens with the assumption that one's default lens is the favored perspective taken when analyzing all moral dilemmas. Thus, the values and the language of the lens tend to be the place where one begins to analyze a problem from when faced with a disruption in the flow of action due to the presence of a moral dilemma (Baird & Niacaris, 2010). The ELI places students in quadrants that correspond to one of four major ethical perspectives: Deontological theories, justice theories, consequentialist theories or virtue theories allowing for a more specific delineation of ethical preference in decision making. These four perspectives then correspond to the four Ethical Lenses: Rights/Responsibilities, Relationships, Results, and Reputation. The ELI also offers information regarding students’ gifts, blind spots, vices and crises when making moral decisions (Baird & Niacaris, 2010).

In addition to identifying the four ethical perspectives, the ELI also relies on two continuums that address values often found in tension in moral dilemmas: Autonomy versus equality and rationality versus sensibility (Baird & Warnell, 2013). The ELI measures a student’s preference for privileging autonomy or equality and rationality or sensibility in resolving a moral dilemma (EthicsGame, 2013). Below is an illustration of the quadrants and values in tension that comprise
Hot Topic Simulations (HTS) are scenarios that cover a variety of issues (i.e. sexual harassment, embezzlement, whistle blowing, bribery, fraud, etc.) and put students into real-world dilemmas that ask them to determine their course of action using multiple perspectives from the ELI. In combination, the ELI and HTS offer students a fine-grained analysis of the perspectives from which they make moral decisions while also asking them to consider courses of action from lenses different from their own; a valuable skill in a business climate marred by a spate of ethical missteps that stem from a lack of ethical understanding and awareness.

Moral Awareness
Rest (1986) viewed moral awareness as an individual’s ability to simply recognize that a moral issue exists while Butterfield, Treviño, and Weaver (2000) defined it as, “a person’s recognition that his or her potential decision or action could affect the interests, welfare, or expectations of the self or others in a fashion that may conflict with one or more ethical standards” (p. 982). However, Reynolds (2006) suggested that moral awareness is, “a person’s determination that a situation contains moral content and legitimately can be considered from a moral point of view” (p. 233) in line with earlier work by Baier (1958) which suggested that individuals must actually concede that a moral point of view is actually valid.

We build on research by Reynolds (2006, 2008) that examined the impact of ethical predispositions on moral awareness as well as the impact of moral attentiveness on behavior. Rather than a measure of preference for formalism or utilitarianism (Brady & Wheeler, 1996), this research uses the ELI because of the additional information offered by placement in one of the quadrants. By examining students’ responses to the HTS we are able to determine their ability to recognize (or not recognize) the moral issue(s) in each scenario. We can then look at the same students’ ELI to determine if particular lenses lead to greater moral awareness.

Moral reasoning
In order to understand the moral reasoning of students we must identify how they arrived at the “correct” decision or strategy (Weber, 1990) and understanding their assessment of the theories,
frameworks and models they used while making moral decisions is key (Rossouw, 2002). Similar to previous authors (Lau, 2010; Ritter, 2006), we “measure moral reasoning, “in terms of one’s ability to analyze and evaluate different courses of action and outcomes when determining one’s stance, by taking into account some ethical principles or decision rules” (Lau, 2010: 569). We will use students’ analyses and responses to the HTS as the measure of their moral reasoning.

Moral Decision Making
Years of research have determined that moral behavior is the result of a multi-stage process (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986; Treviño, 1986). Rest (1986) proposed the four stages that serve as the foundation of this research. First one must recognize the existence of a moral issue (moral awareness). Next they must make a moral judgment (moral reasoning), and then resolve to act morally (moral decision making). Finally they act on their moral decision by engaging in the moral behavior. We are able to examine moral decision making by looking at students’ responses to the HTS. The student responses provide qualitative data that offer insight into how they went about determining that the moral concerns of the situation were the most important.

Method
The analysis for this research paper is currently being undertaken and will be completed early in 2014. To address the first research question, the business students’ responses will be classified according to where they fell in the ELI quadrants (deontological theories, justice theories, consequentialist theories, virtue theories) in order to determine the ethical perspectives business students tend to employ when faced with moral dilemmas. Research question two, the relationship between students’ ELI and their responses to a question asking them to “identify the moral issues in this case” of the HTS will be examined to ascertain if certain ethical perspectives are associated with heightened moral awareness. The final research question is addressed by exploring the relationship between business students’ classification in the ELI and their overall HTS responses to determine if particular ethical perspectives are associated with more moral decisions.

Implications
Understanding the link between a students’ ethical perspectives, moral awareness, moral reasoning and moral decision making will provide insights into how we design the ethics curriculum and how well we prepare our students to deal with moral dilemmas in business and society. If the results reveal that business students tend to rely on a particular perspective when solving moral dilemmas, assisting them to understand and reflect upon their ethical perspectives preferences enables them to understand the relative strengths and weaknesses that each theoretical perspective offers when reasoning through moral dilemmas and making moral decisions. Furthermore, if the results reveal that certain perspectives tend to result in greater moral awareness and improved moral decision making, this provides the foundation for the development of teaching interventions to increase student’s flexibility to utilize other perspectives. Moreover, if for example, we come to find that students in the Reputation Lens are
more likely to exhibit moral awareness and moral decision making, we could design learning activities that focus on the cultivation of characteristics held by an individual that is thoughtful in their reflection and has noble intentions (Baird, 2005).

**Link to Conference Theme**

“Recent organizational history is replete with examples of bad things happening. For a society ethics and ethical organizations are important. Unethical organizations can hurt society” (Lau 2010: 562). Currently, the poor decisions of a few individuals have lead society to view the business school graduates as corrupt and nefarious, an unjust reflection of business students as a whole. The microscope under which ethics educators find themselves due to these high-level ethical transgressions necessitate changes in how business ethics courses and modules are taught. This paper explores how business students identify, reason and resolve moral dilemmas and how we might be able to support their development to ensure they make decision that have a positive rather than destructive impact on society. Understanding more about the types of ethical perspectives that lead to higher levels of moral awareness, better moral reasoning and moral decision making enables ethics educators to foster these perspectives in business ethics courses. This will support students to recognize, reason and resolve moral dilemmas they encounter in the business world and have a positive impact on society.

**Bibliography**


