

THE IMPACT OF BUSINESS ETHICS COURSE ON ETHICAL PERCEPTIONS AND INTENTIONS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether attending a business ethics course changes the ethical problem perceptions and ethical intentions of marketing students. In other words, this study investigates the effectiveness of business ethics training. An experimental study is conducted on 152 undergraduate students. Nearly half of the students (experimental group) attended a 10 hours course on business ethics, while the other half (control group) did not attend the course. Their ethical perceptions and intentions-regarding four different scenarios about ethical issues-are measured before and after the training. Differences between groups are tested by paired samples t tests. Data analyses revealed that, ethical perceptions and intentions of the experimental group significantly increased after attending the course, while there was no significant difference on the control group. Results are discussed and theoretical and managerial implications of the findings are provided.

Keywords: Business ethics education, Marketing ethics, Perceived ethical problem, Ethical intentions, Experimental design.

INTRODUCTION

Several reasons may cause unethical behavior, however, among them lack of training on ethics plays a significant role in ethically questionable actions. Providing ethics training to university students, who will be employees, executives and entrepreneurs in the future is important to improve ethical standards in the business life. Raising ethical leaders of the future is one of the challenging issues business schools face for decades. Determining ethics material to be offered to students, choosing the faculty members to transfer this knowledge of ethics, and assessing students' learning outcomes, are issues to be addressed by all universities (Hejase and Tabch, 2012). The good news is that number of ethics courses (i.e., business ethics, marketing ethics, accounting ethics, tourism ethics) provided to university students is increasing in the recent years. Such courses are of vital importance to students through developing an ethical view (Stevens et al., 1993; Özbek, Özer and Aydın, 2013). Nonetheless, some researchers believe that ethics cannot be taught (Byrne, 1992). Still some others believe that university students' moral values and ethical perceptions would have been already set by their families, peers, environments, schools, religious places, and jobs by the time they reached college (Stevens et al., 1993). Thus, there is a doubt on the effectiveness of ethics training on developing ethical judgment and performance of the students. The question "can ethics be taught?" is yet to be fully answered. A number of researchers believe that ethics courses in a business school can not prompt students to more ethical decision making (Cloninger and Selvarajan, 2010). Disaccording views and research findings make this field worth to study. Concordantly, the existing study is concerned with possible effects of attending a business ethics course on the ethical problem perceptions and ethical intentions of college students.

When individuals face with ethical dilemmas, they must examine the issue and evaluate possible actions to take before articulating it as ethical or unethical. This interpretation is named as ethical decision making. Perception of an ethical problem is a prerequisite for ethical intentions; if the individual does not perceive some ethical content in a problem situation, subsequent elements of the model do not come into play" (Hunt

and Vitell 1986). In daily life, in business life or in the marketing field, any given action can be articulated as ethical or unethical by using the filter of ethical decision making. If individuals view any ethical problem in an issue, this is called as “ethical problem perception”, and a positive or negative inclination caused by this perception is called as “ethical intentions (Özbek, 2012). Business ethics training is expected to positively influence business students’ ethical judgment and ethical intentions. However the extant literature has contradicting findings regarding this issue. Arguments on the effectiveness of ethics training vary (Cloninger and Selvarajan, 2010). From this point of view, this study aims to find out whether ethics training influences the ethical problem perceptions and ethical intentions of students studying marketing. In the following section, a literature review is provided about ethics training, ethical problem perceptions and ethical intentions. Next, research hypotheses, methods and data analyses are provided. The paper finishes with concluding remarks and implications based on the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Perceived Ethical Problem and Ethical Intentions

Ethical problem perception and ethical intentions are antecedents of ethical behavior in the ethical decision making process. Most of the ethical decision making models presume the importance of ethical problem perception and ethical intentions within the ethical decision making process (Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Dubinsky and Loken, 1989; Jones, 1991). Hunt and Vitell (1986) argue that ethical problem perception is a prerequisite of ethical intentions. According to their theory, if the individual does not perceive some ethical content in a problem situation, subsequent elements of the model do not come into play. Hence, perceived ethical problem is an important variable that activate the other elements of the theory.

Perceived ethical problem is the attitude of an individual towards an ethical issue, in other words, his awareness about an issue that is ethically questionable (Uyar and Özer, 2011). Perceived ethical problem is the answer for “do you perceive any ethical problem in this issue?”. Ethical intention is an individual’s predisposition to act in an ethical manner (Singhapakdi, 2004). It is the answer for “will you behave in the same manner?”. If a company aspires to positively change consumers’ ethical towards the firm, any questionable behavior that may result in ethical problem perception must be prevented. Several studies exhibits that decreased ethical problem perception results in a positive change in ethical intentions (Barnett et al., 1996; Singhapakdi et al., 2000a; Singhapakdi et al., 2000a; Singhapakdi, 2004; Cherry, 2006). Ethical problem perception and ethical intentions are closely associated with personal moral development. However, it is still under debate whether these traits could be improved with business ethics education. Studies provide controversial results about the effect of ethics education on ethical problem perception and ethical intentions.

Business Ethics Education

Over the past decade, ethics instruction has become an accepted part of the business school curriculum at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (Waples et al. 2009). A recent study by Litzky and MacLean (2011) shows that approximately 70 % of the top business schools have some form of an ethics course in their curricula. Similar results are attained by Turkish researchers. In a study on business ethics training on management and economics faculties in Turkey, Akdogan (2008) found that most of the faculties incorporated business ethics courses in their curricula. Golbasi (2009) argues a vast majority of the Turkish universities incorporated ethics courses in their programs. He also found that the number of universities providing business ethics courses increased 3,5 times between 2005 and 2009. However, there is a conflict upon the effectiveness of business ethics courses. The issue “can ethics be taught?” is still under debate since Socrates. Recent studies revealed equivocal results about the effectiveness of ethics training. Some studies concluded that ethics courses have no significant effect on ethical behavior (Luoma, 1989; Wynd & Mager, 1989; Davis & Welton, 1991; Duizend & McCann, 1998; Peppas & Diskin, 2000), while some other studies exerted that ethics courses improve ethical awareness, attitudes and intentions and motivate people to behave in an ethical manner (Glenn, 1992; Trevino & McCabe, 1994; Shannon & Berl, 1997; Gautschi & Jones, 1998; Carlson & Burke, 1998; Owens, 1998; Hosmer, 1999; Langlois & Lapointe, 2010).

Ethics education can help students better assess complex situations and realize that being ethical is in their own best interests (Cloninger and Selvarajan, 2010). Business ethics training is expected to help individuals to improve their ethical judgments in the business life and lead to develop a more ethical society. Despite the increasing number of ethics courses in the business schools’ curricula, findings on the effectiveness of ethics

training vary. A number of academic studies revealed that integrating ethics into the curriculum is significant and decreases tolerance for unethical behavior (Lopez, Rechner, Sundaramurthy and Olson-Buchanan, 2005). These findings are supported by Weber (1990) who found that students' ethical awareness or reasoning skills improve after taking ethics courses. On the contrary, Jewe (2008) found that completion of a business ethics course had no significant effect on the respondent's ethical attitudes. However, these controversial results may be caused by using different training materials, training period and methods.

Development of Hypotheses

Ethics literature embraces a plethora of studies that examine the effectiveness of business ethics training. However, there are controversial findings about the impact of ethics training programs on the ethical perceptions of students (Glenn, 1992). For example, Martin (1981-1982) found that ethics courses did not significantly impact the students' ethical reasoning and ability to correctly assess various ethics scenarios. In addition, there are some other studies who failed to identify any significant impact of ethics training on the students' ethical perceptions (Piper et al., 1993; Stewart, et al., 1996; Trevino and Nelson, 1999; Brinkmann and Sims, 2001). However, some other studies documented significant effects of ethics training on the ethical awareness, perceptions and intentions of students. Boyd (1981-1982) found that attending ethics courses positively influenced students' moral judgments. Glenn (1992) revealed that students who attended the ethics training significantly (positively) differed from those who did not attend the training in terms of their responses to 13 out of 53 ethical statements. In another experimental study, Gautschi and Jones (1998) found that ethical awareness of the students who received ethics training were significantly increased compared to others who did not receive the training. Abdolmohammadi & Reeves (2000), Wu (2003) and DeMoss & McCann (1997) found similar results. In a recent study, Langlois and Lapointe (2010) found that the ethical behavior of managers changed after the studying ethics and the training affected their ethical awareness, judgment, accountability and general behavior in business. These controversial findings might be caused by family, religion, previous education and cultural interactions in different settings. Here in the present study we examine how attending a business ethics course affects the ethical problem perceptions and ethical intentions of marketing students in Turkey. Based on the literature review, we propose that ethics training will change the way that students' perceive ethical issues and respond to those issues. More specifically we propose that:

H₁: Business ethics training will significantly improve ethical problem perceptions.

H₂: Business ethics training will significantly improve ethical intentions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Goal

The purpose of this study is examining the effect of ethics training on ethical problem perceptions and ethical intentions of university students. In order to test the research hypotheses, an experimental study is conducted and data is collected from university students by using a face to face survey.

Sample and Data Collection

This is an experimental study comprising a pre-post test design with both a treatment group and a control group. For the pretesting, 152 undergraduate students are conveniently selected from different programs of Balikesir University, Burhaniye School of Applied Sciences during 2014-2015 fall semester. Selected students had not attended a business ethics course previously. A pretest questionnaire is applied to these students. Seventy two of the students are randomly assigned to experimental group and they attended a business ethics course during the semester. The course comprised of lectures and case studies on business ethics and moral philosophies. Remaining 80 students are assigned to the control group and they did not attend the business ethics course. A post test questionnaire (same questions) is administered to both experimental and control groups at the end of the semester.

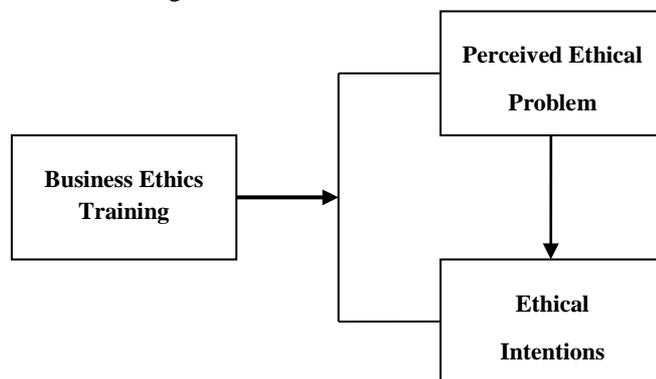
Vignette methodology and a self administered questionnaire are employed for data collection. The questionnaire is comprised of two sections. Questions measuring the demographic characteristics of the respondents are placed in the first section. The second part of the questionnaire featured four different vignettes narrating some ethically questionable marketing activities. After reading the vignettes, students

expressed their level of agreement or disagreement with two statements measuring their ethical problem perception and ethical intentions.

Vignette methodology is used in this study to induce ethical problem perception and ethical intentions. Vignette methodology consists of presenting participants with carefully constructed and realistic scenarios to assess dependent variables including intentions, attitudes, and behaviors, thereby enhancing experimental realism and also allowing researchers to manipulate and control independent variables (Aguinis and Bradley, 2014). Vignette methodology and scenarios are widely used in ethical decision making research (Barnett and Valentine, 2004). Using short scenarios (vignettes) has the benefit of allowing the researcher to introduce a greater amount of background information and detail into an ethically questionable issue (Fritzsche and Becker, 1982). Hence, vignettes are thought to elicit, “a higher quality of data in this type of research than is possible from simple questions” (Cavanaugh and Fritzsche, 1985; Tsalikis & Ortiz-Buonafina, 1990; Longenecker et al., 2004). In the current study, four vignettes are used (See Appendix). First vignette is about an over-eager salesperson exaggerating the value of the item or withholding relevant product information. The second vignette is about the failure to honor a warranty. These vignettes are taken from Dornoff and Tankersley (1975). The third vignette is about misleading a car appraiser; the last one is about withholding important information in the ads. These vignettes are taken from Reidenbach, Robin and Dawson (1991). Ethical problem perception is measured by a single question asking the level of agreement with the following statement: “I think that there is an ethical issue in this story”. Ethical intentions is measured with another question asking the level of agreement with the following statement: “If I were the person in this story, I would behave in the same manner”. Respondents expressed their level of agreement with a five point Likert type scale where 1= Strongly Disagree and 5= Strongly Agree. It is common to measure these variables with single questions (Singhapakdi and Vitell, 1992; Singhapakdi et al., 1994; Singhapakdi et al., 2000a; Singhapakdi et al., 2000b).

Research Model

Conceptual research model is provided in Figure 1. This is a pre test-post test experimental study with a control group, examining the differences on the ethical problem perceptions and ethical intentions of university students before and after attending a 10 hour business ethics course.



The arrow indicates the possible variants influences

Figure 1. A conceptual model of the study

Analyses and Results

The sample included 91 females (59,9%). Mean age of the respondents is 22,1 years. Average family income is 2529,62 TL/month. 52% of the respondents are studying tourism, 36,8% are studying banking&finance, 11,2% are studying international trade. 80 respondents are in their first year of study, 17 of them are in the second year, 55 of them are in the third year. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics about demographic characteristics of the study participants in treatment and control groups separately.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

	Attended to Ethics Course (Treatment Group)	Not Attended to Ethics Course (Control Group)	Total
GENDER			
Female	54	37	91
Male	18	43	61
FIELD OF STUDY			
Tourism	33	46	79
Banking&Finance	22	34	56
International Trade	17	-	17
YEAR OF STUDY			
1	-	80	80
2	17	-	17
3	55	-	55
FAMILY INCOME (TL/month)	2135,41	2884,40	2529,62

Research hypotheses are tested by paired samples t tests. Table 2 presents the mean scores of perceived ethical problem (PEP) and ethical intentions (EI) in different groups and corresponding t test results. As expected, post test PEP mean scores (after the training) are found to be significantly higher ($p < 0,005$) than the corresponding pretest PEP mean scores (before the training) in the treatment group (students who attended the course) in all different scenarios. On the other hand, control group's (students who did not attend the course) post test scores found to be decreased in all conditions except the first scenario. However, none of these differences are found to be statistically significant. According to these results, H1 is supported. Attending a business ethics training significantly improved the level of ethical problem perceptions of the students.

Table 2. Mean Scores of PEP and EI in Different Groups and Scenarios

	Attended to Ethics Course (Treatment Group)								Not Attended to Ethics Course (Control Group)							
	Scenario 1		Scenario 2		Scenario 3		Scenario 4		Scenario 1		Scenario 2		Scenario 3		Scenario 4	
	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A
PEP	3,72	4,07	4,07	4,47	4,14	4,57	3,83	4,17	3,61	3,63	4,05	3,88	4,12	3,95	3,84	3,58
	t= -2,296		t= -2,656		t= -3,282		t= -2,349		t= -,145		t=,886		t= 1,062		t= 1,677	
	p= ,025		p=,010		p=,002		p=,022		p=,885		p=,378		p=,292		p=,098	
EI	2,39	2,45	1,99	1,68	1,74	1,35	2,37	1,86	2,57	2,52	2,08	1,95	1,93	1,74	2,41	2,35
	t= -,364		t= 1,920		t= 2,964		t= 3,526		t=,278		t=,679		t= 1,266		t=,419	
	p=,717		p=,059		p=,004		p=,001		p=,782		p=,499		p=,209		p=,676	

PEP: Perceived ethical problem; EI: Ethical intentions; B: Before; A: After

It is seen that, EI scores of the treatment group are decreased after the training in all scenarios except the first one. Since the EI statement is a negatively formulated, lower EI scores represent higher ethical intentions. Hence, we attained expected results in 3 scenarios. Mean score differences for Scenarios 3 and 4 are found to be statistically significant ($p < 0,05$). For Scenario 2, the difference in the mean score is only marginally significant ($p = 0,059$). For Scenario 1, no significant difference is found.

On the other hand, control group's (students who did not attend the course) post test EI scores found to be slightly decreased in all conditions. However, none of these differences are found to be statistically significant. According to these results, H₂ is supported for three scenarios out of four. Attending a business ethics training significantly improved the level of ethical intentions of the students.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of business ethics training on ethical problem perceptions and ethical intentions of university students. A before-after experimental study with a control group revealed that ethics training significantly improved the ethical problem perceptions and ethical intentions to some degree. These findings are consistent with a number of previous studies. Some of the previous studies revealed that ethics training improved ethical awareness, moral judgments, and ethical perceptions of the students (Weber, 1990; Glenn, 1992; Carlson and Burke, 1998; Gautschi and Jones, 1998; Wu, 2003; Hejase and Tabch, 2012). Nevertheless, some researchers argue that this effect is either minimal or transient (Seshadri, Broekemier and Nelson, 1998; Richards et al., 2002). Still some other researchers found that business ethics training does not provide any significant impact on ethical development of individuals (Jewe, 2008).

Our research provides additional evidence in favor of the argument that ethics training may improve the ethical problem perceptions and ethical intentions of young adults. This means that ethics training helps individuals to recognize any ethical issue in a given situation and to behave in a more ethical manner in case of facing ethical dilemmas. Our findings also provide support to the view of "business ethics can be taught". Hence, we believe that business ethics training must be incorporated into the core curricula of business schools. Business ethics courses can help students to use a more structured and internalized approach in understanding and responding issues with an ethical content. Students who completed a business ethics course can gain an increased ability to recognize ethical issues. Our findings show that even attending a 10 hour course on business ethics can improve the ethical perceptions and ethical intentions of students. Nonetheless, expecting a single business ethics course to result in consistent change in the ethical attitudes of the students completing the course is quite unreasonable. More comprehensive approach to ethics education is needed to produce significant and persistent change in the ethical attitudes and behavior. In addition, further research should focus on ways to improving ethical awareness, attitudes and behavior on students using a variety of teaching methods, such as role plays, case studies, videos and debates.

Implication of ethical management is the responsibility of top management of an organisation. Ethical management can achieve its goals only if it is administered in conjunction with organisation's strategic management procedure. Ethical management must be integrated into company's strategic framework by linking it with the statements of mission, vision and basic values. By doing so, administrators as well as the employees at all levels can figure out the importance of ethical principles throughout the organization. This conception will lead employees to assimilate the ethical culture within the company. Yet, if we consider the empirical evidence showing the positive relationship between ethical climate and organizational commitment (Zehir et al, 2003; Zehir et al, 2011; Zehir et al, 2012), ethical management should be treated as a critical factor in company success. In this regard, providing management students (prospective managers) with the ethics training will significantly contribute the advancement of ethical business practices and social responsibility in the future.

Our results must be interpreted with caution considering the study limitations. Potential limitations of this study include the use of a convenience sample of students studying business and tourism management at a state university. Therefore, generalizability of the findings is limited. Student sample has limited experience in business environment and they may lack the capacity to recognize and deal with many possible ethical dilemmas. It must be noted that a more diverse sample population may yield different findings. Conducting a similar or identical study on business professionals is needed to reach a more definitive conclusion. Another limitation is the utilization of vignettes to introduce ethically questionable issues. A fictitious scenario may induce different considerations compared the real life setting. Despite all, our findings can be used for preliminary investigation of the relationships between the research variables, without generalizing to a wider population.

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Appendix: Experimental Scenarios Used in the Study

Scenario 1: Over-eager salesperson

A young man, recently hired as a salesman for a local retail store, has been working very hard to favorably impress his boss with his selling ability. At times, this young man, anxious for an order, has been a little over-eager. To get the order, he exaggerates the value of the item or withholds relevant information concerning the product he is trying to sell. No fraud or deceit is intended by his actions, he is simply over-eager.

Action: The owner of the retail store is aware of this salesman's actions, but has done nothing to stop such practice.

Scenario 2: Failure to honor a warranty

A person bought a new car from a franchised automobile dealership in the local area. Eight months after the car was purchased, he began having problems with the transmission. He took the car back to the dealer, and some minor adjustments were made. During the next few months he continually had a similar problem with the transmission slipping. Each time the dealer made only minor adjustments on the car. Again, during the 13th month after the car had been bought, the man returned to the dealer because the transmission still was not functioning properly. At this time, the transmission was completely overhauled.

Action: Since the warranty was for only 1 year (12 months from the date of purchase), the dealer charged the full price for parts and labor.

Scenario 3: Misleading the appraiser

An automobile salesman is told by a customer that a serious engine problem exists with a trade-in. However, because of his desire to make the sale, he does not inform the used car appraiser at the dealership, and the problem is not identified.

Action: The salesman closes the deal that includes the trade-in.

Scenario 4: Withholding information

Sets of a well-known brand of "good" china dinnerware are advertised on sale at a considerable discount by a local retailer. Several patterns of a typical 45-piece service for eight are listed. The customer may also buy any "odd" pieces which are available in stock (for instance, a butter dish, a gravy bowl, etc.). The ad does not indicate, however, that these patterns have been discontinued by the manufacturer.

Action: The retailer offers this information only if the customer directly asks if the merchandise is discontinued.