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EDITORS@ASIAENTREPRENEURSHIPJOURNAL.COM

Business Ethics of University Professors in China A Preliminary Analysis¹

Alan K.M. Au²,
School of Business and Administration
The Open University of Hong Kong
Homantin, Kowloon
Hong Kong

Allan K.K. Chan
Hong Kong Baptist University

Alan C. B. Tse
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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² Dr. Alan Au is an Associate Professor at The Open University of Hong Kong and the Principal Investigator of this RGC funded research. Prof. Allan Chan is the Associate Dean of the School of Business at the Hong Kong Baptist University while Prof. Alan Tse is a Professor with the Department of Marketing at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Abstract

While the economic reform in the Chinese Mainland improves the overall standard of living in China, the fast economic growth, inevitably, created a lot of social problems: the widespread of the level of corruption is just an example. Since corruption is a social practice, it takes time to correct such an unwelcomed behaviour. Therefore, it is important that in educating the younger generation, Chinese educators, especially business educators, must place more emphasis on ethics education. However, how ethical is business educators? This is an interesting question but not frequently asked. This is especially important when society relies on this group of people to build up the future of a nation. This research is designed to investigate the ethical standards of business educators in China. The findings of this study suggested that there was no significant difference between Chinese academic staff with different personal attributes; except in three areas: household income, academic seniority and gender.

Introduction

For recent decades, business educators have been called on to provide a greater emphasis on ethics education. One interesting question which is seldom asked is: "How ethical are business educators?" This is an important question because if business educators are having a tendency to behaviour unethically, how can society rely on them to provide a greater emphasis on teaching our future leaders to act in an ethical and socially responsible manner. Despite the importance of this topic, few studies have been carried out in this area and this is especially understudied in China. Studies on business ethics education have become important in China because of the unhealthy upsurge in corruption in recent years. Hence, the aim of this research is to investigate the current ethical position of university professors in China. This paper is divided into six sections. The next section discusses the background of this study. The design of research instrument is explained in section three. Section four presents the hypotheses to be tested in this research. The results of the study are shown in section five while the concluding section provides some implications for future research.

Background of the Research

Ethical decision making has been a topic of interest for business researchers for many years. Ethical decision making models divide influences on an individual's ethical beliefs and decision making into two broad categories; that is, 1) factors associated with an individual and 2) factors which form and define the situation surrounding which decisions are made (Hood and Logsdon 2002, Lawson 2004, Randall and Gibson 1990, and Turnipsed 2002,).

Perhaps the factors that received by far the most attention are relating to the personal attributes of the subjects. A variety of personal attributes, such as 1) gender (Coate and Frey 2000, Lawson 2004, Serwinek 1992); 2) religion (Farling and Winston 2001, and Wimalasiri 2004); 3) Nationality (Abratt et al 1992, White and Rhodeback 1992); 4) age (Callan 1992, Lawson 2004, and Wimalasiri 2004); and 5) types and years of employment (Callan 1992, and Serwinek 1992), have been investigated, but there seems to be mixed results and a general lack of significant correlations in many studies.

Therefore, while some studies confirm the existence of relationships between individual attributes and individual's ethical beliefs, others do not. In addition, there is also limited research conducted on the ethical education in China, especially those relating to the ethical position of the Chinese academic community. Hence, this study aims to investigate the influence of these individual attributes to the educators' ethical beliefs in the Chinese context.

Research Design

After reviewing the relevant literature, a questionnaire, which comprised two parts, was designed. The first part contained 42 statements which were designed to probe respondent's judgments on ethical issues. These statements were developed along a six-point Likert scale. In second part of the questionnaire, the respondent's demographic profiles were also asked.

The questionnaire was originally developed with 61 statements to determine respondent's judgments on ethical issues and written in "Hong Kong" Chinese. Since the survey was conducted in the mainland, the language and cultural aspects of the statements were evaluated by an expert panel to ensure the appropriateness of these statements. The panel comprised 3

professors of different academic disciplines from two mainland universities; that is, one from the business (marketing) field, another from the social science (economics), and the third from the science (engineering). The evaluation was in two stages. First, the professors were asked to modify the language of the 61 statements so that they were understandable by Mainland Chinese. After collecting the feedback from the professors, the statements were revised accordingly. A revised questionnaire was then sent to the professors again. In the second round of the process, the professors were asked to rate each statement as being "suitable", "moderately suitable" or "not suitable" for evaluating ethical standard of respondents. A statement would not be adopted if any one of the three professors rated it as "not suitable". A statement was only included when at least two of the three professors rated the statement as "suitable". The final questionnaire contained 42 statements.

Because of the nature of the research and the length of the questionnaire, convenience sampling technique was adopted for this survey. The sample of this study was composed of 100 teaching staff at the People's University of China in Beijing. The final useable questionnaires were 92, providing a response rate of 92%. The questionnaire was distributed through one of our Chinese mainland Research Associates who was a Professor at a major university located in Beijing. The high response rate is explained by the fact that the Research Associates in this project are senior professors at major universities in China who carry high respects in the Chinese academia. In addition, the Research Associates had personally distributed and collected the questionnaires from the respondents and therefore, most respondents were willing to participate in this study.

Hypothesis Testing

After reviewing the literature, eight hypotheses were tested. These hypotheses attempted to look at how ethical position is affected by educators' personal characteristics. The first variable studied was the gender of the respondents and the following hypothesis was tested.

H₁: There is no significant difference between the ethical standard of female and male educators.

In addition to the gender variable, the academic seniority of the individual could also affect the respondents' ethical position. Following this line of thought, the following hypothesis was set up and tested:

H₂: There is no significant difference between the ethical standard of senior and junior academics

The other two demographic variables studied were the business exposure of the academics and the religiosity of the educators. Little work has been done on the business exposure of the academic. For religiosity, Shepard and Hartenian (1990) found that respondents high on religiosity tended to be more ethical. The relevant hypotheses were as follows:

H₃: There is no significant difference between the ethical standard of academics with outside consultancy practices and those without such practices.

H₄: There is no significant difference between the ethical standard of academics having religious beliefs and those not having religious beliefs.

Family income may also affect the ethical position of the educators. Hence, the following hypothesis was also tested:

H₅: There is no significant difference between the ethical standard of academic with higher family income and those with lower family income.

In addition, it is also interesting to determine whether being a member of the communist party would have an impact on the ethical position of the educators. What is more, the risk taking attitude of the faculty members could also influence their ethical belief. In this respect, the following two hypotheses were designed to look into these aspects:

H₆: There is no significant difference between the ethical standard of academics who are members of the Communist party and those who are not.

H₇: There is no significant difference between the ethical standard of academics who are more risk averse and those who are less.

Finally, the relationship between the marital status and the ethical position of the respondents was also investigated:

H₈: There is no significant difference between the ethical standard of academics who are married and those who are never married.

Results

Cronbach's alpha was used to test for the reliability of the scale. The coefficient alpha for the summated scale was found to be 0.811, which is considered as satisfactory. Hence, during the analyses, a summated score (Ethics) based on the sum of the scores of individual statements was used in testing the hypotheses.

ANOVA was used to test the above hypotheses. In the ANOVA tests below, the Leven test for homogeneity of variances was conducted to test the homogeneity of variances. The results showed that the basic assumption has not been violated.

The hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the ethical standard of male and female professors was rejected with $p = 0.052$. Hence, there is a significant difference between male and female professors in terms of their ethical position. It was found that male educators were less ethical than their counterparts of the opposite sex.

Regarding the hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the ethical standard of senior and junior academics, it was found that there was no significant difference between full professors and associate professors in terms of ethical standards, but lecturers are significantly more unethical than both groups of professors ($p = 0.100$).

On the question of the relationship between a person's religiosity and one's ethical position, it was found that the effect due to religion was insignificant ($p = 0.551$). This means that the ethical position of faculty members is not affected by whether they have a religion or not. In addition, this study also found out that there was no significant difference in terms of ethical position between university educators who had and those who did not have outside consultancy practices ($p = 0.549$)

On the issue of the income effect on the ethical position of faculty members, the main effect due to household income is significant ($p = 0.000$). It was found that the lower the income, the lower the ethical standard of the respondents.

Interestingly, it was found that there was no significant difference in the ethical position between educators who were members of the communist party and those who were not ($p = 0.165$). Again, the risk taking attitude of the respondents did not have an impact on the level of ethical position of the respondents ($p = 0.283$). Finally, this study found that there was no relationships between the ethical position of university educators and their marital status ($p = 0.396$).

Discussion

In general, the findings suggest that there is no significant difference between faculty with different personal attributes; except in three areas: household income, academic seniority and gender. Like other studies, male are found to be less ethical than female. For the level of academic maturity, the result suggests that senior academics are more ethical than junior academics. This supports findings of previous studies that maturity is a factor affecting the ethical standards of people. This may be the result of an increased ethical maturity on the part of senior academics from having faced more life situations involving ethical issues. Interestingly, those with a religion and those who are members of the communist party are found to be no more ethical than their counterparts who are less religious and not a communist party member. Finally, the family income of the educators affects their ethical position as well, with lower income respondents exhibit a tendency to act unethically.

This preliminary study suggests the need for additional research in this area of study. Expanded studies to include more universities are necessary to determine whether these findings can be generalized. Such results can provide a means to evaluate the ethics education process in universities in China. It is also suggested that longitudinal study is needed to ascertain changes in the ethical positions of faculty and how such changes may affect the ethical development of students.

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