

Demographic Indicators and Professional Ethical Behaviour of Accounting Students

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Abstract: *This study examined the influence of demographic indicators on ethical behaviour of accounting students. One hundred and thirty questionnaires were administered; ninety one questionnaires were completed and returned. The study employed the survey research design. The major instrument used for generating the primary data was the questionnaire, which was designed in five-point likert-scale. The stated hypothesis was statistically tested with t-test with the aid of e-views 7. Our findings revealed that gender has a negative effect on ethics using public university data while a positive effect is observed using private university data. However both effects are significant at five percent level. The significance of the variable also suggests that gender is crucial in explaining ethical behaviour. Marital status has a positive effect on ethics using public university data while a positive effect is also observed using private university data. Both effects are significant suggesting that marital status is crucial in explaining ethical behaviour. Age has a positive effect on ethics using public university data while a negative effect is observed using private university data. However both effects are significant at five percent level. The significance of the variable suggests that age is crucial in explaining ethical behaviour. The study recommends that there is the need to incorporate ethics into the accounting curriculum of universities.*

Keywords: Ethics, Professional behaviour, Ethical behaviour, Accounting ethics

I. Introduction

The question of ethics is one that is linked with the history of mankind. Ethics deals with the character and conduct and morals of human beings. It deals with good or bad, right or wrong behaviour; it evaluates conduct against some absolute criteria and puts negative or positive values on it. Miner (2002) defined ethics as right or wrong actions that stems from the value and expectation of society. Furthermore, Mintz and Morris (2007) note that ethics are acceptable standards of behaviour that define how people ought to act (i.e. prescriptive) not how people really act (i.e. descriptive).

The formalization of ethics training for accounting students has become a major concern following reports of rampant corrupt practices in government, corporate arenas as well as recent business scandals. Ethics education, which provides training in systematic thinking and reasoning about ethics, may be essential at the college level if personal and business ethics are to be improved (Bampton & Maclagan, 2005). Shafer, Morris and Ketchland (2001) identify the need to align personal and societal ethics as a cornerstone of efforts to improve ethical decision making. If ethics training is to accomplish the goal of aligning ethical beliefs, we need to understand the current status of student ethics as we design an ethics curriculum. The goal of many professional fields is to attempt to hire and retain competent employees that exhibit high moral conduct and good ethical decision making skills. Prior literature has reported that accounting students exhibit lower levels of ethical reasoning (Mautz, 1975; Blank, 1986; Armstrong, 1987). Gaining a better understanding of accounting students' ethical reasoning processes and moral behavior has practical implications for accounting education and future accounting ethics research. The results can aid universities in developing and incorporating adequate ethics curricula to increase students' ethical awareness, which may better prepare students for the challenges faced in business. The results can also help businesses decide on appropriate training needs for their employees when faced with ethical dilemmas. Rest (1994) argues that developing adequate ethics training begins with gaining an understanding of individuals' ethical reasoning processes.

A substantial amount of literature suggests that ethical judgments vary according to demographic factor such as age (see, Dellaportas, 2006; Abdolmohammadi & Reeves, 2000; Rest and Narvaez, 1994) and gender (see, Peterson, Rhoads, & Vaught, 2001; Harris, Feder, & Taman-Maitis, 2006; Alleyne, Devonish, Nurse, & Cadogan-McClean, 2006; Devonish, Alleyne, Cadogan-McClean, & Greenidge, 2009; Sidani, Abib, Rawwas, & Moussawer, 2009; Alleyne, Devonish, Allman, Charles-Soverall, & Young, 2010). However, the research finding in this regards appears to be very inconsistent and as such there is no clear unanimity regarding what demographic factors are crucial for influencing ethical behaviour and how those factors would influence ethical behaviour. An important incremental benefit of this study is that we juxtapose data for both private and public universities resulting from the clear differences in structure and operations that exist between them. The difference in structure is defined by ownership, while public universities are owned by government; private

universities are owned by private individuals. By operations, their motives are different, private university is profit-making oriented while public is not. This study examines the effect of age, gender and marital status on students' ethical perception and behaviour.

II. Literature Review

The notion of ethics is regularly drawn upon in the context of expected patterns of behaviours written or unwritten, consistent with generally accepted standards for those to whom it may concern. Griffin (1999) defines the concept as an individual's personal belief about what is right or wrong, good or bad. Nevertheless, the generic sociological meaning of the concept of ethics seems to provide a common ground for most of them. Sociologically speaking, ethics are provided in order to render behavior intelligible and to prevent conflicts from arising by bridging the gap between action and expectation (Scott & Lyman, 1986).

In the context of an operational definition with regards to professions, Ethics generally refer to those principles and codes of behaviour that guide the conduct of any profession. The term usually carries along moral values, normative judgments and moral obligations. At any rate, every profession possesses its own ethics. However, there are some commonalities in professional ethics. A basic theoretical framework for organizational ethics is best explained through the Agency theory.

Fisher (2004) defines the concept as an individual's personal belief about what is right or wrong, good or bad. It is the arbiter of an individual's evaluation of the "rightness" or otherwise of his or her actions. Though often regarded as subjective, it is traceable to the foundation of an individual's belief system and judged within context. Conversely, Logsdon and Yuthas (1997) note that the ethical stance of a firm is constructed based on the expectation of society, that is, the legitimate claims made by the constituencies to whom the firm interacts. According to Hanekom (1984), the question of ethics is one that is linked with the history of mankind. Ethics deals with the character and conduct and morals of human beings. It evaluates conduct against some absolute criteria and puts negative or positive values on it. It is the reflective study of what one ought to do, or how one ought to live.

2.1 Theoretical framework

Relativism Theory suggests that ethical action is based on whether it is tolerated and sanctioned by the individual's family, culture or tradition. According to Forsyth (1992) relativists generally feel that moral actions depend upon the nature of the situation and the individuals involved, and when judging others, they weigh the circumstances more than the ethical principle that was violated. Persons who are high relativists are perceived as skeptics and feel that the situation and ethical principle involve do not influence the moral action (Karande, Rao, & Singhapakdi, 2002). In contrast, low relativists feel that moral behaviour is influenced by moral principles, norms or laws. From the above, we deduced that females because of cultural norms will avoid finding themselves in dirty deals compared to the male forks who always feel that the laws or cultures are not made for them.

2.2 Gender and ethics

Several studies (Peterson *et al.*, 2001; Alleyne *et al.*, 2010) have tested the proposition that females are more ethical than males. This assumption is supported by Landry *et al.* (2004) since they believe that this is based on the reality of females identifying and understanding the "nuances" of ethical dilemmas. Adebayo (2005) explains that this is a direct result of each gender's perceptions. Gilligan (1982) argued that there are contrasting differences between males and females with respect to their morality, which may have arisen due to the early socialization process. The literature indicates that females are socialized to show not only compassion, but to be caring, while males are portrayed as being more competitive and justice-oriented (Gilligan, 1982; Devonish *et al.*, 2009; Sidani *et al.*, 2009). For example, Peterson *et al.* (2001) argued that women are assumed to view ethical dilemmas in terms of understanding relationships, responsibilities and compassion for others. On the other hand, it is assumed that men learn to resolve ethical problems in terms of rules, rights, fairness and justice.

Adebayo (2005) further stresses that the ethical reference point chosen by each gender is based on the differences in the socialization techniques instilled throughout their developmental stages in life. Consequently, females tend to be more friendly, unselfish and submissive, and thus their perception is focused on caring or maintaining relations, while disapproving of those who threaten this position. In contrast, males are generally taught to be independent, assertive, fierce and aggressive in their perceived automatic obligations of financially providing – usually for their mothers – and subsequently their new family (child and/or child mother). Thus, males have been found to possess a stronger ethical view in issues relating to duty and justice, but may ignore laws when placed in a situation where there is a choice between adhering to ethical conduct and the pursuit of wealth or self-interest goals, regardless of costs.

Additionally, Singhapakdi, Vitell, & Franke, (1999) argued that women appear to be more idealistic in nature, and men appear to be more relativistic. Research undertaken by Gismondi (2006) concluded that male students tend to accept unethical behavior more than female students. The research carried out by Landry, Moyes, and Cortes, (2004) suggests that gender has implications for the constructs of justice, relativism, deontology, utilitarianism, and egoism. Notwithstanding, it should be noted that some research has shown that gender did not have a significant effect on ethical perceptions (Rowe & Snizek, 1995; McCuddy & Perry, 1996). Gender differences in ethical decision making have been the focus of numerous empirical studies. The results of these studies have been diverse with numerous studies indicating that females behave more ethically and other studies show that gender has no effect (Cruz, 2003).

Bass, Barnett and Brown (1998) found that women, generally, are socialized to be more sensitive ethically than are men, although, this advantage may be reduced by external pressures (Shawver, Bancroft & Sennetti, 2006). Results of other studies indicated that females and males significantly differ in judgments of whether a perceived action is ethical and whether their peers were likely to engage in such actions; the difference was even more significant when the underlying moral reasoning was explored (Malone, 2006; Cohen, Pant & Sharp, 1998). Gilligan (1982) suggests that females' social development focuses on relationships while male social development stresses individually. Based on this, females' moral development and ways of reasoning are fundamentally different from males. We therefore propose: ***Ho: Gender is not a determinant of students' ethical behaviour***

2.3. Age and ethics

Another key influence on ethical behavior is age (Emerson, Conroy & Stanley, 2007). Borkowski and Ugras (1992) found that ethical positions seem to change with age, although they could identify no single factor causing this change. In their 1998 meta-analysis of 47 studies, Borkowski and Ugras found that individuals' behavior and attitude tended to be more ethical with age which supported Kohlberg's (1984) theory that individuals may experience a moral maturation as they proceed through the stages of moral behavior (Emerson, et al, 2007). Borkowski and Ugras (1998) concluded that 13 studies showed that older students responded more ethically than the younger students; whereas, only two studies showed that younger students were more ethical. The study found that fresher and juniors are more justice-oriented than MBA's; the MBA's tended to be more utilitarian in their approach to ethical dilemmas.

Other empirical evidence shows that moral reasoning increases with age may be an important factor in moral judgment development (Dellaportas, 2006; Abdolmohammadi & Reeves, 2000). Rest and Narvaez (1994) found unusual gains in moral judgment with age, but also found that education was a far more powerful predictor of moral development with the general trend that the longer students continue in formal education the higher the DIT scores tend to be. When formal education ceased, DIT scores tended to plateau (Abdolmohammadi & Reeves, 2000; Rest & Narvaez, 1994). Rest (1986) found in reviewing two meta-analyses of around 10,000 participants that age and education accounted for 30 to 50 percent of the variance in DIT scores (Emerson, et al, 2007). Age has been a significant variable in the study of ethics, but typically the respondents are non-student groups; a review of literature using university students generally find limited or no evidence in age differences (Roger & Smith, 2001). Consequently, we propose the following hypothesis; ***H2: Age is not a significant determinant of student's ethical behaviour***

III. Research Methodology

The research design for this study is the survey design, since the research work entails the collection or observation of the behavior of a large number of respondents involved in the research. The population of the study is made up of 192 final year accounting students of both a private University (33) and a public University (159) in Benin. Since the population is a finite one, application of statistical formula becomes imperative in determining the sample size. The sample size according to Okeke (1995) can be determined by using Taro Yamani's technique. Using the technique a sample of 22 was arrived at for private university and 108 for public University, making a total sample of 130 students. This study adopted the use of a well structured questionnaire designed to generate data from the respondents. The instrument consists of twenty (20) items questionnaire, using the Likert scale rating type. The questions are structured into a five (5) point likert scale of strongly agree (SA)-1, Agree (A)-2, Indifferent (ID)-3, Disagree (DA)-4 and Strongly Disagree (SD)-5. The source of data collection for this research was basically primary data. The t-test statistical method was employed to test the hypothesis.

IV. Presentation And Analysis Of Data

Data collected from the study's respondents are presented and analyzed in this section. Data was sorted from two (2) universities and one hundred and thirty (130) questionnaires were distributed, only ninety one (91) respondents responded to the questionnaire within the time specified. 22 questionnaires were distributed to

private university's students and 20 were retrieved while 108 Questionnaires were distributed to the public university's students and 71 were retrieved. The cumulative retrieved questionnaires represent 70% of the distributed questionnaires. The response rate is adequate for an empirical study. Table I below shows the descriptive statistics of the data collected.

Table I: Descriptive Statistics Results of respondent's demographics

VARIABLES	SCALE	FREQUENCY		PERCENTAGE	
		private	public	private	public
GENDER	Male	14	42	70.0	59.2
	Female	6	29	30.0	40.8
	TOTAL	20	71	100.0	100.0
AGE	Less than 20	0.0	7	0.0	9.9
	20 – 25	18	35	90.0	49.3
	26 – 30	2	24	10.0	33.8
	31 and above	0.0	5	0.0	7.0
	TOTAL	20	71	100.0	100.0
MARITAL STATUS	Missing	0.0	5	0.0	7.0
	Single	19	48	95.0	67.6
	Married	1	17	5.0	23.9
	Widowed	0.0	1	0.0	1.4
	TOTAL	20	71	100.0	100.0
ETHICAL BEHAVIOURS	Strongly agree	9	43	45.0	60.6
	Agree	7	23	35.0	32.4
	Undecided	2	2	10.0	2.8
	Disagree	0.0	3	0.0	4.2
	Strongly disagreed	2	0.0	10.0	0.0
	TOTAL	20	71	100.0	100.0

Source: Source: Researchers computation (2015)

From table 1 above, 70% / 30% of the students are male from private & public universities respectively while, female students represent 59% / 41% respectively. The students are mainly within the age of 20 – 25 years with 90% / 49% respectively while 10% / 34% respectively represent students within the ages of 26 – 30 years. Only 7% of public university's students are aged above 31 years. 95% / 68% respectively of the students are single while, 5% / 24% respectively, are married and about 1.4% of public university's students are widowed. In order to achieve the study's objective, we first asked the students a question that will help the study understand the students perception of students understanding of ethical behaviours and the result shows that, 45% / 61% respectively, of the students strongly agreed to the fact and 35% / 32% respectively, just agreed to the fact and when combined for agree, we have 80% / 93% respectively, agreeing to the fact while 20% / 7% respectively, disagree to the question of students understanding ethical behaviours.

Table 2. The Correlation Analysis between Ethics and demographic factors

	Ethics	Age	Gender	Marital status
Public University				
Ethics	1			
Age {Sig.}	0.220 {0.04}	1		
Gender {Sig. }	0.082 {0.039}	0.075 {0.927}	1	.
Marital status {Sig.}	0.317 {0.441}	0.573 {0.041}	0.406 {0.012}	1
Private University				
Ethics	1			
Age {Sig.}	-0.046 {0.531}	1		
Gender {Sig.}	0.233 {0.033}	0.145 {0.492}	1	.
Marital status {Sig.}	0.243 {0.012}	0.688 {0.029}	0.350 {0.012}	1

Source: Researchers computation (2015)

From table 2 above, the correlation coefficients of the variables are examined. However of particular interest to the study is the correlation between ethics and the demographic factors (age, gender and marital status). The analysis for data from public university respondents suggest that a positive correlation exists between Age and ethics (r= 0.220), gender and ethics (r=0.082), Marital status and ethics (r=0.317). The analysis for data from private university respondents suggest that a negative correlation exists between Age and ethics (r= -0.046), gender and ethics (r=0.233), Marital status and ethics (r=0.243). A positive correlation

suggests that a change (increase or decrease) in one can be associated with a change (increase or decrease) in the other. It however does not suggest strict causality or functional dependence.

Table 3: Regression Result

Variable	Ethics (public university)	Ethics(private university)
C	46.9823 {0.779} (0.000)	76.693 {28.608} (0.002)
AGE	1.3514 {1.716} (0.032)	-20.2308 {1.301} (0.000)
GENDER	-2.2072 {3.8311} (0.014)	4.3692 {1.792} (0.0378)
MARITAL STATUS	11.2860 {4.1011} (0.8290)	33.631 {1.041} (0.031)
R ²	0.56	0.33
Adjusted R ²	0.47	0.23
D.W	2.018	1.19
Mean of Dep.Var	292.679	83.506
S.E of Regression	72.663	82.190
F-stat	6.993 (0.004)	7.786 (0.001)

Source: Researchers computation (2015)

The table above shows the regression result conducted to examine the effects of demographics on ethical behaviours. The regression is conducted using the White Heteroskedasticity-Consistent Standard Errors & Covariance to control for possible heteroscedasticity in the model. Commenting on the reported regression statistics, we find that for both regression results (public and private universities) the R² measuring the explanatory ability of the model is 0.56 and 0.33 respectively and this suggest that the model explains 56% and 33% of the systematic changes in the dependent variable. It is observed that the data for the demographic variables has a higher explanatory capacity for public university. The F-stat value is used to test for the goodness of fit of the model and it serves as a test of the joint statistical significance of all the variables examined together and also tests the existence of a significant linear relationship between the dependent and independent variables. The decision rule is to accept the F-stat as significant if the probability value is less than 0.05 otherwise it is rejected. From the table above, the associated p-value of the F-stat for both estimations are less than 0.05 and hence we accept the joint statistical significance of the model and that significant linear relationship exists between the dependent and independent variables.

The evaluation of the slope coefficients of the explanatory variables reveals that age has a positive effect on ethics (1.3514) using public university data while a negative effect (-20.231) is observed using private university data. It is not surprising that the results from both institutions are in parallel. Probably, it could be from the fact that, in private universities, you find younger students than the public institutions. Hence, the level of maturity in the private universities' students is low. However both effects are significant at 5% level. The significance of the variable suggests that age is crucial in explaining ethical behaviour. The result is consistent with Dellaportas (2006) and Abdolmohammadi and Reeves (2000). Gender has a negative effect on ethics (-2.207) using public university data while a positive effect (4.369) is observed using private university data. This result has shown that the more girls where are in an institution the lesser the ethical value while the fewer the girls the higher the ethical values. This finding is not consistent with Cruz, (2003) and Gismondi (2006) studies' findings while it is with Singhapakdi, Vitell, & Franke, (1999) and Peterson *et al.* (2001). However both effects are significant at 5% level. The significance of the variable also suggests that gender is crucial in explaining ethical behaviour. Marital status has a positive effect on ethics (11.286) using public university data while a positive effect (33.631) is also observed using private university data. This simply shows that marriage brings with it some sense of responsibility, such that, the result of this study has shown that, the more married students there are in an institution the higher their ethical values. However both effects are significant at 5% level. Again the significance of the variable suggests that marital status is crucial in explaining ethical behaviour.

V. Conclusion

The information requirements and environments under which financial reporting is made is both very complex and challenging. It is complex to the extent that there is the likelihood that a conflict of interest might arise due to the multiplicity of end users of accounting information. Consequently, the continuum of interested parties; Management, shareholders, creditors, employees amongst others puts the financial statements and its preparers in a complex environment. Thus, against the background, the need for the enforcement of ethical

practices has come to the fore and the role of ethics in accounting practice is becoming more inevitable. The formalization of ethics training for accounting students has become a major concern following reports of rampant cheating at the college level and recent business scandals. Gaining a better understanding of accounting students' ethical reasoning processes and moral behavior has practical implications for accounting education and future accounting ethics research. Using the survey research design and juxtaposing data from respondents for both private and public universities, the study finds that Gender, age and marital are significantly crucial in explaining ethical behaviour. The study recommends that there is the need to incorporate ethics into the accounting curriculum of universities.

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