

Assessing the Impact of a Professional Ethics Course: Changes in Value Preferences and Cognitive Moral Reasoning for Undergraduate Business and Pharmacy Students

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Abstract. This research assessed the impact of the participants' personal value orientation preferences and level of principled moral reasoning when comparing undergraduate business students with undergraduate pharmacy students before and after students completed a professional ethics course. Overall there was little significant change in the students' value orientations and principled moral reasoning after completing a professional ethics course, yet some important findings emerged when comparing business to pharmacy students.

Keywords: course impact, value preferences, principled moral reasoning, business students, pharmacy students.

1. Introduction

This research expanded prior work that assessed an ethics course's impact on participants' ethical decision skills, specifically personal value orientation preferences and level of principled moral reasoning, and, compares undergraduate business students with undergraduate pharmacy students before and after students completed a professional ethics course. As Weber explained, "By including both [emphasis in original] personal values and moral reasoning ..., [this] gives a more complete picture of the way individuals approach decision making", [1993, p. 436], or, in this research, how ethical decision making may be affected by the completion of a professional ethics course.

Rokeach (1973) introduced the notion that personally held values are often grouped into collective orientations as individuals seek to make decisions and guide behavior. As described later in this paper, value orientations emerged after our research participants complete the Rokeach Value Survey, and when paired together form four distinct groups: Personal-Competence, Personal-Moral, *This shortened version of the article is for promotional purposes on publicly accessible databases.*

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Social-Competence, and Social-Moral value orientations. The specific values included in each of the value orientations are shown later in this paper in Appendix A. These memberships are based on the factor analysis conducted by Weber (1990, Tables 3 and 4).

Traditionally scholars have depended upon the cognitive moral reasoning framework advanced by Lawrence Kohlberg (1971). Kohlberg's model argues that as an individual matures, the individual develops enhanced cognitive skills which are used to reason through ethical dilemmas. The theory does primary emphasize a principled or rights and justice-based argument as the individual progresses to the higher stages. Kohlberg's model of moral development is a stage-based model. It relies primarily on discerning which stages support or justify why certain actions are perceived as morally just or preferable by the decision maker. These reasons are seen as indicators of an individual's stage of cognitive moral maturity. Kohlberg identified from his longitudinal study three levels of moral maturity or reasoning with each level comprised of two distinct stages. Using Kohlberg's Stage Theory of Moral Development, we are able to identify the participants' preferences for the most ethically aligned level of moral reasoning, the post-conventional, or principled moral reasoning. How we discovered our research participants' personal value orientation and level of principled moral reasoning are explained next.

2. Methods and Materials

Sample

We utilized an undergraduate business and pharmacy student populations from the same private university located in the eastern United States. We wanted to compare business students with another student group immersed in a professional studies program, pharmacy students. Both groups were required to complete a professional, advanced ethics course toward the end of their undergraduate degree program, which was after many students had completed either business internships or clinical fieldwork, as well as years of generalized curricula in their fields of study. Yet, one difference was discovered: the pharmacy school's ethics course emphasized adherence to "professional ethics", as opposed to the business school's course emphasizing principled moral reasoning.

There were 238 business students, with an average age of 20.2 years and 138 males and 100 females. 107 students had not taken the business ethics course and 130 had. From the pharmacy school, there were 341 participants, with an average age of 20.1 years and 138 were male and 203 were female. 119 had not taken the professional pharmacy ethics course, whereas 222 had. Each of the participants were given the Rokeach Value Survey and Moral Reasoning Inventory through an online system to protect their anonymity.

Rokeach Personal Values Survey

The Rokeach Value Survey (RVS) (Rokeach 1973) offers the participants two lists of 18 terminal (personal or social end states of existence) and 18 instrumental (competence or moral modes of conduct) values. The participants were asked to rate (rather than rank, as in the original survey) the 36 values using a 7-point Likert scale to demonstrate the value's importance to the participant.

The importance ratings given by the participants are weighted based on Weber's (1990) classification scheme. Some values were classified into a personal or social value orientation for the terminal values or a competence or moral value orientation for the instrumental values. The strength of this classification was used to give more weight for those values with stronger membership or association to the respective value orientation, see Appendix A.

Moral Reasoning Inventory

A modification of the Defining Issues Test (DIT) instrument is used to include business-context dilemmas to measure the business students' principled moral reasoning - developed by Weber and McGivern (2010). In the absence of any pharmacy-specific measure, we slightly modified the Moral Reasoning Inventory changing the actor's work environment from an engineering or accounting firm to a pharmaceutical company, the issue confronting the actor from a wheel casting on an automobile to the development of a novel drug, and the like. A pre-test was conducted to confirm that each student group recognized the context of the ethical dilemma as relevant to their professional studies.

The Moral Reasoning Inventory offers each student two moral dilemmas - for the business students: Evelyn and Roger, and for the pharmacy students: Frank and Sarah, following each of the moral dilemmas is a list of eight moral reasoning statements where the participants indicated the level of importance of each statement.

Course Material

Each school in this sample conducted a required, professional ethics course for all of its upper-division undergraduate students. For the Pharmacy students that course was: Advanced Law and Ethics Applications. This course covered topics such as Intentional Conduct, Medication Errors, Ethics of Disclosing a Mistake, Responsibility for 3rd Parties, Due Process and Access to Healthcare, Right to Privacy/HIPAA. For the Business students that course was: Business Ethics & Global Citizenship. Course topics included Moral Awareness, Moral Intention, Moral Judgment, Identification of Ethical Principles, Ethics Theories, Cognitive Moral Development, Ethics in Organizations, Stakeholder Model. For full course descriptions and learning objectives please see Appendix B.

3. Analytical Approach