ARE FEMALE MARKETING STUDENTS ALWAYS MORE ETHICAL THAN MALE MARKETING STUDENTS?

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ABSTRACT

Several marketing studies have found that female students are more ethical than male students and theorize that this is because females are socialized to be more sensitive about others than are males (the "socialization approach"). However, other studies have found no significant differences between the ethical orientations of female versus male students and theorize that this is because both females and males come to have similar views of ethics because of the common training they receive in preparing and studying for similar careers (the "structural approach"). We test both of these approaches with marketing students and find the results are dependent on the type of scenario presented. Some scenarios tap into socialization issues and lead to different ethical responses between females and males, while other scenarios tap into the common aspects of both female and male acculturation into a common career that lead them to the same ethical conclusions.

INTRODUCTION

A lot of attention has been focused on teaching business students the topic of ethics in the wake of a series of corporate scandals that appear to be the result of managers' unethical behavior (Feldman and Thompson 1990; Murphy 2004). There is a concurrent push by the accreditation agency for collegiate business schools, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), to include ethics in the curriculum (Silver and Valentine 2000). As a result, a number of studies have been done testing the ethical orientation of business students.

One finding across several studies is that female business students are more ethically-oriented than male business students (e.g., Arlow 1991; Barnett, Brown, and Bass 1994; Borkowski and Ugras 1998; Silver and Valentine 2000; Beltramini, Peterson, and Kozmetsky 1984; Lopez, Rechner, and Olson-Buchanan 2005; Luthar, DiBattista, and Gautschi 1997; Luthar and Karri 2005). A more limited number of studies have found that female marketing students are more ethically-oriented than male marketing students (Dawson 1992; Singhapakdi 2004; Singhapakdi and Marta 2005; Whipple and Wolf 1991) or less masculine-oriented marketing students are more ethically oriented than more masculine-oriented marketing students (Yoo and Donthu 2002).

In general, scholars hypothesize that the reason for this difference is that females are socialized very differently than males, which predisposes women to become more ethically-oriented than men. This theory is referred to as "gender socialization" (Mason and Mudrack 1996).

For example, women are thought to be more care-oriented than men (Silver and Valentine 2000) and females are encouraged to develop social relationships, while men are encouraged to focus on competition and achievement (Beutell and Brenner 1986). Gilligan (1977) explains that the moral imperative for women is to "fix troubles" while the moral imperative for men is more pragmatic. This is somewhat supported by Feldman and Thompson (1990), who find that male business students tend to rely more on economic justification for business behavior than female business students and female business students tend to rely more on legal and moral justification for business behavior than male business students.

Despite the gender socialization theory, some researchers believe that over time, this early socialization is diluted in comparison to the role pressures of certain career choices. This theory is referred to as the "structural approach" (see Dawson 1992; Stevenson and Bodkin 1996) or "occupational socialization" (Mason and Mudrack 1996). In this view, because business students are being trained for the same or similar careers, over time their belief systems will tend to converge. Some level of common beliefs may be evident at the beginning of their academic studies because "self-selection" theory holds that men and women who are attracted to business degrees have common beliefs, or aspire to acquire common beliefs thought to lead to a successful business career.

In partial support, some studies find that female and male business students have similar ethical beliefs (Davis and Welton 1991; Nil and Schibrowsky 2005; Tsalikis and Ortiz-Buonafina 1990), and some show that female marketing students are not more ethical than male market-

ing students (Crittenden, Crittenden, and Hawes 1986; Dabholkar and Kellaris 1992; Feldman and Thompson 1990).

How do we reconcile the two different approaches (socialization and structural) that both appear to have specific studies that provide empirical support when studying marketing students? It may be that both theoretical approaches are valid. It is conceivable that some ethical scenarios that are presented to marketing students draw on different socialization processes that are gender-specific, while others draw on common beliefs that have been developed or are in the process of being developed by students regardless of gender studying for a business career.

In support, Jones (1991) presents a model that outlines how ethical perceptions are issue-contingent. In other words, comparisons of ethical perceptions between genders depend on the characteristic of the dilemma at hand. In testing Jones' model, Franke, Crown, and Spake (1997) found that gender differences did depend in part on the nature of the ethical dilemma. More pertinent to our study, Dawson (1992) found that ethical scenarios that appeared to draw on socialization were viewed as significantly different by female business students versus male business students, while ethical scenarios that did not draw on socialization tendencies were not viewed as significantly different by female and male business students.

In order to test the possibility that both the socialization approach and the structural approach could be evident at the same time, two different ethically-oriented scenarios are presented to marketing students. One is hypothesized to tap into some gender-socialization issues and is predicted to show a significant difference in ethical beliefs between female and male marketing students. The other is hypothesized to tap into common structural beliefs and is predicted to show no significant difference between ethical beliefs of female versus male marketing students.

HYPOTHESES

We predict that early socialization differences between the genders will lead to differences in how female and male students perceive situations that are more sexual in nature. According to LaTour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther (1990, p. 51), "female nudity and erotic content have become almost commonplace in contemporary advertising." Even though there appears to be a growing acceptance of nudity in advertising over recent decades by both females and males, there is evidence that nudity and erotic content in advertising is less effective for females than for males (e.g., LaTour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther 1990; Sciglimpaglia, Belch, and Cain 1979). From a socializa-

tion perspective, many believe females are uniquely taught how to behave sexually and/or have become more aware of sexuality issues due to feminist consciousness-raising efforts (Ford, LaTour, and Middleton 1999).

Two studies provide at least partial support for our prediction concerning the socialization approach. First, Whipple and Wolf (1991) find that female marketing students rated one scenario as significantly more unethical than male marketing students. This scenario described a situation whereby the market research director used one-way mirrors in the brassiere department dressing rooms of stores. Second, Lane (1995) finds that the gender difference between female and male business students is greatest in a scenario that focuses on the portrayal of women in advertising. Consequently we hypothesize,

H1: The socialization approach will lead to differences in how female and male students perceive the ethics of sexually-oriented situations.

One of the most basic marketing beliefs is the "marketing concept," which suggests that there should be a company-wide consumer orientation. In other words, all parts of an organization should contribute to assessing and then meeting customer wants and needs. This includes not only product or service needs and wants but also the expectation of how the customer prefers to do business with a given company. An extension of the marketing concept is the development of relationships with customers as an essential ingredient of successful repeat business over the long run (Levey 1998).

One basic need of most customers is that customers prefer to have an honest interaction with organizations (Boone and Kurtz 2005), which if experienced will positively impact their trust with a company and consequently their long-term relationship with that company. The marketing concept and the related topic of relationship marketing have a prominent place in the curriculum of introductory marketing classes (Berman and Sharland 2002; Tashchian and Frieden 1983). Further, these topics are also covered in early chapters of introductory marketing textbooks and presumably are covered early in an introductory marketing class. Because both female and male students are trained on the marketing concept and relationship marketing topics early in their academic careers, and congruent with the structural approach, we believe that this common training will result in both female and male marketing students viewing any marketing situation in which customers are not being treated respectfully (e.g., are lied to) as an ethical violation of the marketing concept.

H2: The structural approach will lead to no differences in how female and male students perceive the ethics of marketing practices that are perceived to be a violation of the marketing concept (e.g., lying to the customer).

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Students were shown an eight-minute videotape portraying two different marketing scenarios. In the first scenario ("Sexist Campaign"), a new advertising agency has been given an account to advertise a new liquid diet supplement. The female account executive has directed the campaign's market research, has held extensive meetings with the client, and has overall responsibility for the upcoming campaign. The account executive is having a conversation with the female copywriter on the campaign. Both the account executive and the copywriter are alumni from the same college and it was this connection that helped the copywriter to get her job. The copywriter says that she is uncomfortable with the campaign recommendations to make the television ad highlighting an attractive woman undressing as sexy and controversial as possible. The account executive says that this is what the client wants and it will work because "sex sells." The copywriter says that as women they both should be the last ones to create sexist ads. The account manager says they have no choice but to do as the client wishes.

In the second scenario on the videotape ("Sales Hype"), two female sales trainees in a furniture department are having a discussion. Sally is an aggressive trainee and is trying hard to impress management. Kara is more conservative and believes that customer loyalty is essential to success in sales. Kara confronts Sally about a recent interaction with a customer. Kara tells Sally that she overheard Sally tell the customer that she could go to any sales representative even though she was Kara's customer. Kara also tells Sally that it was not right to tell this same customer that a dining set she was looking at was a brand-new design that just came into the store even though it has been in the store for over a year. Sally responds that everyone stretches the facts a little in sales and that you need a little "hype" to get the customer interested in the sale.

One hundred and forty-five junior and senior students – 87 male and 58 female – in a beginning marketing class offered at a college of business in the Rocky Mountain region watched the videotape of the two scenarios and responded to a short questionnaire afterward. The topic of ethics and social responsibility had not yet been covered in the course before the videotape was shown.

On the questionnaire the students were asked to decide if each of the two scenarios was ethical or unethical and to give a short reason why they thought the scenario was ethical or unethical. As a manipulation check, the students were asked if each was a violation of the marketing concept. Only 15 percent of the students found the first scenario to be a violation of the marketing concept; whereas, 92 percent of the students found the second scenario to be a violation of the marketing concept.

For purposes of analysis, if the student wrote that the scenario was ethical the response was assigned a value of 1 and if the student wrote that the scenario was unethical, the response was assigned a value of 2. Based on student records, the professor marked each questionnaire indicating whether the respondent was female or male. Table 1 shows the means of responses made by female and male marketing students for each of the two marketing scenarios. As hypothesized, female marketing students found the "sexist campaign" to be significantly more unethical than male marketing students (female means = 1.582 and male means =1.289, $p < .022$). Also as predicted, there was no significant difference between ethical beliefs of female versus male marketing students in reaction to the "sales hype" scenario (female means = 1.906 and male means = 1.876).

DISCUSSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Many researchers have concluded that female business students are more ethically-minded than their male counterparts, while other researchers have concluded that there are no gender differences. This study supports both conclusions and corroborates other research that indicates comparisons of ethical perceptions between genders depend on the characteristic of the dilemma at hand (Dawson 1992; Franke, Crown, and Spake 1997; Jones 1991).

We presented two ethical scenarios to marketing students designed to draw on two different theories. One of the scenarios ("Sexist Campaign") was hypothesized to

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TABLE 1
MARKETING SCENARIO MEANS BY GENDER

	Female Means	Male Means
"Sexist Campaign"	1.582[a]	1.289[b]
"Sales Hype"	1.906[c]	1.876[d]

1 = Ethical and 2 = Unethical.
[ab] Means within the two adjacent columns differ at $p < .022$.
[cd] Means within the two adjacent columns are not significantly different.

tap into "gender-socialization" issues. Gender socialization is based on the belief that females are socialized very differently than males which predisposes women to become more ethically-oriented than men. As predicted, there was a significant difference in ethical beliefs of female versus male students in reaction to this scenario.

The second scenario ("Sales Hype") was hypothesized to tap into "occupational socialization" (also referred to as the structural approach). Occupational socialization is based on the belief that individuals who are in the same occupations or are being trained for the same occupations develop common ethical perceptions, regardless of gender. As predicted there was no significant difference between ethical beliefs of female versus male marketing students in reaction to this scenario.

An important limitation of our study is that we only test one scenario supporting each of the two theoretical approaches. Future research should include several scenarios designed to independently test each theoretical approach in order to provide more convincing evidence that ethical perceptions are, in part, a function of the ethical dilemma itself. In addition, there may be other important considerations that influence a student's ethical perceptions of a given dilemma.

A model presented by Jones (1991), indicates that there are six characteristics of a given ethical dilemma that may have an impact on an individual's ethical perception: (1) proximity or feeling of nearness (social, cultural, psychological, or physical), (2) the magnitude of the consequences, (3) social consensus regarding the morality of the behavior, (4) the probability the behavior will cause harm, (5) the temporal immediacy of likely consequences, and (6) the concentration of effect (e.g., big impact to a small number of people). Future research should integrate these characteristics in order to more fully understand the factors that impact gender similarities and gender differences in ethical perceptions.

Finally, this study did not include any individual factors that may have an impact on ethical perceptions. Forsyth (1980) indicates that there are individual variations to moral judgment and behavior along two dimensions. The first dimension is *relativism* or the extent to which the individual rejects moral rules as being universal or absolute. The second dimension is *idealism* or the extent to which the individual assumes that desirable consequences can always be obtained with the "correct" action. Incorporation of Forsyth's taxonomy of personal moral philosophies in future research might also expand our knowledge about why students react to ethical scenarios as they do.

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