

Finnish Business Students and Business Ethics: A Preliminary Survey

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Abstract

We know a great deal of ethical views of American business students. However, some regions, especially Scandinavia have been under-researched. This research details a preliminary survey of Finnish college students and their views of business ethics. In the current project, we surveyed business students in Helsinki, Finland (n=74) in spring, 2012. We found significant differences in ethical orientations between Finnish business students based on several demographic factors. We conclude by discussing the implications for further research in this area.

Introduction

A recent search (February 1, 2013) on Ebsco Host found over 4800 peer reviewed articles on “business ethics” since 1980. Survey research projects of American business students are numerous. As a result of this research we have learned a great deal about the ethical views of American business students. However, American views of ethics are not the same as other areas, such as continental Europe (Enderle, 1999).

Even within a specific region such as Europe, the views of business ethics are varied (Martens, 2004). While there are numerous ethics research projects in Europe, surveys involving Finnish students have been more limited. Lindfelt (2004) explained “Finland has not been a country where there has been extensive discussions on business ethics” (p.269). However, published papers on Finland’s business ethics have increased in the last decade (Kujala, 2010).

Finland is an interesting country for ethical research. Past examinations have found Finland to be a very ethical country. The Corruption Perception Index (CPI) has determined Finland to be among the least corrupt countries in the world (Kujala, 2010). From 2000-2007, Finland was the in the first position in terms of fighting corruption (Kujala, 2010). In addition, the Finnish Ethical Forum was created in 2001. The Forum gathers businesses, unions, government, and the Lutheran Church to discuss social responsibility (Lindfelt, 2004).

Besides high ethical standards their culture, Finland provides an interesting population for study. Finland has very homogeneous group both ethnically and culturally compared with the United States. Finland’s population is small. The current population of Finland is 5,401,267 at the end of 2011 (Statistics Finland, 2012), comparable in size with Oklahoma in the United States.

High education standards also make Finland a unique population to examine. Finland has highest education and literacy rate in the world (Hannula and Comegys, 2003). Paranen (2012) describes Finland as the reigning education superpower. Finland has scored in the top three nations in all standardized international testing for the past decade.

There are many lessons from Finland's educational success (Anderson, 2011). There are no private or for-profit schools in Finland. Public schools also provide free meals, counseling, and individualized student guidance. Finland also reports 100% literacy and 100% of students with access to the internet, compared with 97% in the US (Hannula and Comegys, 2003).

With this unique population, we wanted to discover their views on business ethics. What is business ethics? This is an easy question if you are not searching for an exact or an agreed definition. Johnson and Smith (1999) reviewed the literature and found a mere 300 definitions of business ethics. Business ethics has many operational definitions because of the many views of an acceptable behavior for business. This survey examines several of the ethical orientations of business students in Finland.

In this paper, we will examine the current state of business ethics research of Finnish students. We will then explore our current project's methodology. Next, we will examine the statistically significant results of business ethics and demographic factors. Following this, we will discuss the findings. We will conclude with implications for further research and a call for action.

Review of the Literature

There are several studies which are similar to the current project. For example, Grunbaum (1997) compared Finnish and American business students (n=346). Both American and Finnish students believed in honesty in business and also saw a clear distinction between legal and ethical behavior. Both groups supported cultural relativism. Differences were that Americans more strongly supported relativism. In addition, Americans had a stronger impact of religion on their moral decisions.

Kujala (2001) examined how Finnish business managers changed their ethical views from 1994-1999. Kujala surveyed the top business managers in Finland on four moral dilemmas to determine which ethical theoretical background they supported. The results found that Finnish business managers supported many ethical backgrounds. The most common were teleological thinking and utilitarianism.

Kujala (2010) followed up on the earlier project by expanding the time frame for change to a decade. The survey also examined various stakeholder orientations. The project demonstrated that Finnish managers have great support for the environment. In addition, managers are more concerned with social responsibility when their company is strong financially. When the company has difficult economic times, the concern for social responsibility diminished. Overall, the survey found that the stakeholder approach has significantly increased in importance.

Lamsa, et al (2008) examined MBA students (n=217) from two Finnish schools on their views of corporate responsibility. They found that Finnish students support the stakeholder model of corporate responsibility. In addition, they found that while men and women have different views about corporate responsibility (stronger for women), that these views did not change as a result of business school experience.

Amberla, et al (2010) compared environmental science students in Finland (n=311) and USA (n=257) on environmental ethics. They found Finnish students have more collectivist views while American students have individualistic attitudes. They also found that American students have much more orientation for the free market as a solution. In addition, they found significant gender differences, with males having stronger individualistic values than female students.

Helkama, et al (2003) investigated moral reasoning among Finnish medical students (n=43). They found that medical students regress in their moral judgment (on issues such as mercy killing) because of the demands of medical school education and little time for recreation. Also in the medical area, Aitamaa, et al (2010) investigated ethical problems among nurse managers in Finland (n=501). They found that codes of ethics were often used to solve ethical dilemmas in nursing practice, such as resource allocation (Aitamaa, et al, 2010).

Halila (2003) reported on the six national ethics commissions in Finland. Since the first board was created in 1991, these boards have established reviews on all areas of bioethical issues in Finland (Halila, 2003). The boards establish policies and review projects related to a spectrum of issues in medicine, such as animal experimentation, gene research, research procedures on subjects, and others.

Tolvanen (2009) examined the business ethics in Finland, specifically corporate criminal liability. Corporate fines against firms are rare in Finland, and when applied are minimal. Tolvanen (2009) found that in 2005 only 15 businesses were sanctioned. In five cases the claim was dismissed, and in two cases the court waived the charges. Once a sanction was applied, the average fine was a mere 6813 Euro (approx. \$10,000), far too small to influence a corporation to change behavior (Tolvanen, 2009).

Lindfelt (2004) examined ethics codes in fifty Finnish businesses. While Finnish businesses strongly recognize the importance of ethics, they tend to promote those values internally rather than with publicized ethics codes and reports. Kujala (2010) explained the old saying in Finland that “speaking is silver, silence is gold,” which indicates Finnish people do not want to be too proud of their efforts.

Maksimainen, Saariluoma, and Jokivuori (2010) examined views of corporate social responsibility of engineers and architects (n=118). They found that among engineers, older employees and those without children have higher views of corporate social responsibility. Gender, level of training, work hours, and field of study did not have any impact toward their views of corporate social responsibility.

The current project continued a line of survey research which was done in America, China, and Russia (Ludlum and Smith, 2011; Ludlum and Moskalionov, 2003; Ludlum, 2010; Ludlum, Moskalionov, and Ramachandran, 2010; and Ludlum, 2004). We wanted to examine a Finnish sample of students for comparison. We began with this preliminary project.

Method for the Survey

A convenience sample of business majors were taken from three survey classes at Arcada University in Helsinki in the spring semester of 2012. Arcada is a relatively new school, established in 1996 with 170 staff/faculty and 3000 current students. Arcada University offers 16 applied science degree programs, four of which are conducted in English (Arcada, 2012).

Three classes were selected at random from the courses conducted in English. Students were asked to complete the questionnaire (written in English) during class time. The survey instrument was voluntary and anonymous. A total of 74 completed surveys resulted. No surveys were rejected because of incomplete answers. However, in some questions, there were fewer than 74 responses.

Students were not informed of the purpose of the survey. Naroll (1973) explained the difficulty of research on ethics, that survey takers may be inclined to give answers that are socially acceptable. As a result, the survey’s purpose was not disclosed and included non-ethics questions to disguise the purpose.

Nearly all (96%) of survey participants were business majors. The group was fairly distributed among academic years. The respondents were in the following years of education: first, 7%; second, 55%; third, 27%; and fourth, 7%. More than 41% had taken a class in business ethics. Over 33% had taken a class in business law.

Females and males were evenly divided. This is typical of Finnish business schools (Lamsa, et al, 2008). This demonstrated a gender change in the Finnish business because the current business management in Finland has been very male dominated (Lamsa, 2008; Valhala, 2003).

By age, the group consisted of traditional students with an average age of 22.7. Only 2 of the respondents were married, and those 2 had children. This was consistent with other research. A national survey of Finnish students (n=9967) found that only 9% of applied science students (like Arcada) had children (Kunttu and Huttunen, 2009).

Tobacco use was reported by 35% of the students. This finding was interesting because of the indoor smoking ban in Helsinki. Helsinki was declared a smoke-free city in January, 2007 (Suomen Ash, 2011). In 2011, Helsinki was voted the best smoke-free workplace in Finland (Suomen Ash, 2011). However, there were many smokers in student population. A national survey of Finnish students (n=9967) found that only 16% of applied science students (like Arcada) were smokers (Kunttu and Huttunen, 2009). Our sample smoked at twice the rate of the national survey.

Most students at Arcada worked while attending school (75%), but only 10% worked full time. This contrasted with the Reports of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, which conducted a student survey in 2010 (n=4000) and found 30% of Finnish students work regularly (Saarenmaa and Virtanen, 2010).

That same study found a third of Finnish students have slowed their educational progress because of employment (Saarenmaa and Virtanen, 2010). More specifically, an earlier national survey of Finnish students (n=9967) found that 40% of applied science students (like Arcada) worked half time while in school (Kunttu and Huttunen, 2009). Our sample worked at nearly twice the rate of the national sample.

Finland's national religion, the Lutheran Church of Finland, comprises 82.5% of the population (CIA Factbook, 2011). Our sample found the same dominance of the Lutheran Church. In our sample, 63.5% identified with the state church. Only 1 student was Muslim. Six students (8%) reported being Roman Catholic. Over 25% of students reported no religious affiliation. No students reported being Jewish, Orthodox, or "other" religions.

Ketola (2006) explained "Human beings are intrinsically value-ridden creatures. Furthermore, we are brought up according to the values of our parents, families and societies, which vary in different cultures. Religion is one central component of any culture" (p.28). Since Finland is dominated by one religion, there is also one dominant social guide for their culture.

Religion has a tremendous influence on culture. Taira (2004) argued that religion cannot be separated from social and cultural contexts. Ketola (2006) stated secularized Finnish managers make Lutheran decisions and appeal to Lutheran teachings to justify their actions. The Lutheran church has a substantial influence on the ethical culture of Finland.

We also inquired about the political views of the students. The choices were very conservative, conservative, independent, liberal, or very liberal. No descriptions were attached to the question, so these terms may not match similarly named political view in the United States. No students reported being very conservative. Five students (6.76%) reported being conservative. Twenty-six students (35%) were independent. The largest group, 35 students (47%), was liberal. Five students (6.76%) were very liberal. Other than five conservative students, all the others described themselves as independent or liberal.

We wanted to examine the ethical mindsets of Finnish students. We did so by asking their agreement or disagreement to a series of ethical rationales. A list of the questions used in the survey is in the appendix.

Findings

We asked students their agreement on whether businesses have an ethical duty to care for the environment. The choices were on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, to strongly disagree. Overwhelmingly, the students agreed (42% strongly agreed, 54% agreed). Then we broke the results down by demographic factors. We examined gender, age, tobacco use, employment, religion, taking courses in ethics and business law, and year in school. We only report the statistically significant findings.

A stronger ethical duty to care for the environment was stated by students who had not taken business law ($x^2=7.941$, $df=3$, $p=.047$), students who did not smoke ($x^2=6.781$, $df=3$, $p=.079$), older students ($x^2=52.707$, $df=33$, $p=.016$), and students with no religious affiliation ($x^2=39.57$, $df=9$, $p=.000$). We reported these differences but did not attempt to develop a theory to explain them. Such a theory would need to be developed with a much larger sample.

These findings were generally consistent with prior research. Takala (1996) reported on the development of social responsibility towards the environment by business. Much of Finland's economy depends on the forest and the related exports. By concerns for the environment, Finland can protect the future of their export related industries. In a comparative study, Amberla et al (2010) found US and Finnish students on environmental issues in forestry industry. They found Finnish students much more concerned about the environment.

Next, we asked student opinions on the statement, "A business only has an obligation to its shareholders." We used the same five point Likert scale for comparison. This statement espoused the shareholder view. The shareholder view was expressed by Milton Friedman (1982) in *Capitalism and Freedom*. He described the role of business as: "...there is one and only one social responsibility of business – to use its resources to engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition, without deception or fraud" (p.133). The opposing view, the stakeholder approach, is a dominant theme in American business schools.

Most students disagreed with the shareholder view. Overall, 57% disagreed, and 16.2% strongly disagreed. When broken down by demographics, we found that students who smoked had a higher support of the shareholder/Friedman view ($\chi^2=8.193$, $df=4$, $p=.085$). The effect of smoking on ethical beliefs has not been thoroughly examined.

The stakeholder view has been the strong ideology in Finland (Kujala, 2010). Kujala (2010) found that the managers' support for the stakeholder view decreased as economic troubles affected the firm. Lamsa, et al (2008) found that Finnish business students were better socialized to stakeholder thinking than to the shareholder model.

We asked students their agreement on the statement: "There are clear and uniform standards of right and wrong by which everyone should be judged." The choices were on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, to strongly disagree. The majority agreed with 5.4% strongly agreed, 46% agreed, and 26% had no opinion.

When broken down by demographics we found that males ($\chi^2=12.448$, $df=4$, $p=.014$), students who had taken an ethics course ($\chi^2=15.792$, $df=4$, $p=.003$), and non-smokers ($\chi^2=11.003$, $df=4$, $p=.027$), felt that there were objective standards of right and wrong applicable to everyone.

Next, we asked students their agreement on the statement: "Corporate social responsibility means that a corporation should give part of its profits to charity." The choices were on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, to strongly disagree. This question did not find any consensus (26% agreed, 20% no opinion, 43% disagreed). There were no significant results when examined by any of the demographic groups.

We asked students their agreement on the statement: "What is right and wrong depends on individual values and cultural diversity." The choices were on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, to strongly disagree. A strong majority of students agreed (69% agreed, 11% disagreed). We also found that students who were employed ($\chi^2=13.976$, $df=8$, $p=.082$) and younger students ($\chi^2=75.717$, $df=44$, $p=.002$) supported more individualized views of ethics.

Next, we asked students their views on the statement: "Should the government be more involved in regulating business, less involved, or remain the same?" Most students supported the status quo (26% more, 55% same, 14% less). Older students ($\chi^2=95.604$, $df=44$, $p=.000$) thought the government should be more involved in regulating business. No other sub-groups had statistically significant results.

These results identified an aspect to be investigated in future research. Older students wanted more government involvement in business. In contrast, younger students felt business ethics to be more based on individual values and diversity, which would lead to less governmental regulation in business. Future research would need to more clearly examine this difference.

We asked students their views on the statement: "Are you more or less likely to work for a company if you know from your own experience that the company is not ethical?" Knowing a company was unethical did not make a difference in the students' views (23% less, 73% same). Gender was the only statistically significant result. Females were slightly less likely to work for an unethical company ($\chi^2=10.175$, $df=2$, $p=.006$).

This finding is consistent with past research. Females tend to be more ethical than males (Ludlum and Smith, 2011; Ludlum, 2010; and Ludlum, 2004). This is true among business ethics research across many different cultures (Ludlum and Moskalionov, 2003; Ludlum, Moskalionov, and Ramachandran, 2010).

We asked students their agreement on the statement: "Businesses have an ethical duty to care for their employees." The choices were on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, to strongly disagree. The general results were very one-sided (97% agreed or strongly agreed, 0% disagreed or strongly disagreed). The only statistically significant result was by age. Younger students more strongly viewed businesses as having an ethical duty to care for their employees ($\chi^2=50.805$, $df=22$, $p=.000$).

Finally, we asked students their agreement on the statement: "Businesses have an ethical duty to care for their community." The choices were on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, to strongly disagree. An overwhelming majority agreed (26% strongly agreed, 50% agreed).

Religion was the only significant result. Lutheran students regarded the ethical care for the community as more important than non-religious students ($\chi^2=19.882$, $df=12$, $p=.069$).

One assumption/criticism of teaching ethics or moral issues in college was this would lead to an indoctrination of the students (Collier, 1993). Students would adopt the views of their instructors and would affect the students into the future. However, we did not find any evidence of this. No statistically significant results were found on any question based on the students' year in school. If indoctrination existed, the students' views would change the longer they were in college. The longer they were exposed to the professors' ideas, the more indoctrinated they would become. Our findings did not support this view. The idea of indoctrination while in school did not show any results.

Implications for Further Research & Conclusion

Generally the findings would show that Finnish business students are very ethical and very concerned for the stakeholders, not just the shareholders. This supports the findings of Kujala (2010), and others which report Finland to be a very ethical country. These are one of many reasons Finland has a vibrant international business climate.

There are two significant limitations to making large conclusions from this study. First, this study has a relatively small sample size. Second, the current sample is very homogeneous. All the students in this sample were applied science students from a single school. Future research should involve a much larger sample and add university students from multiple schools in both undergraduate and graduate programs.

We know a great deal about American business students, who are the future of America's economy (Ludlum, 2010). In a global economy, we need to be aware of the different business cultures across the world. By examining the ethical views and behaviors of all our trading partners, we are better able to train our students for international transactions in a truly global marketplace.

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Appendix. Survey Questions

DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME OR IDENTITY NUMBER ON THE SURVEY.

ALL ANSWERS ARE CONFIDENTIAL. You are not required to participate. If you do not wish to participate, please turn in your survey blank. If you are under age 18, please do not participate.

Please circle the correct answer. Thank you in advance for your participation.

What year in school are you presently?

What is your major?

Are you male or female?

Have you taken a course in business ethics?

Have you taken a course in Business Law or Legal Environment of Business?

Would you describe yourself?

Very Conservative – Conservative – Independent – Liberal - Very Liberal

Do you use tobacco?

Are you currently employed?

Are you married?

What is your age?

How many children do you have?

How many credit (plastic) cards do you have?

How many hours a week do you spend studying outside of class (average)?

How would you describe your religious views:

Muslim - Roman Catholic - Lutheran Church - Orthodox Church – Jewish – Other - None

How many hours a WEEK do you spend time on the internet?

How many times a MONTH do you attend religious services or meetings?

How many hours a WEEK do you spend reading something other than class assignments?

Would you want to work for a company that had been accused of unethical business practices?

How would you describe your religious views?

Very Religious - Moderately Religious - Slightly Religious - Not Religious

FOR THE REMAINING QUESTIONS: THESE INVOLVE YOUR FEELINGS & ATTITUDES. THERE ARE NO CORRECT ANSWERS.

Describe your views on the following statement: “There are clear and uniform standards of right and wrong by which everyone should be judged.”

Strongly Agree – Agree - No Opinion – Disagree - Strongly Disagree

Describe your views on the following statement: “Corporate Social Responsibility means that a corporation should give part of its profits to charity.”

Strongly Agree – Agree - No Opinion – Disagree - Strongly Disagree

Describe your views on the following statement: “What is right and wrong depends on individual values and cultural diversity.”

Strongly Agree – Agree - No Opinion – Disagree - Strongly Disagree

Should the government be more involved in regulating business, less involved, or remain the same?

More Involved – Less Involved – Remain the Same

Describe your views on the following statement: “A business only has an obligation to its shareholders.”

Strongly Agree – Agree - No Opinion – Disagree - Strongly Disagree

Describe your views on the following statement: “Businesses have an ethical duty to care for their employees.”

Strongly Agree – Agree - No Opinion – Disagree - Strongly Disagree

Describe your views on the following statement: “Businesses have an ethical duty to care for the environment.”

Strongly Agree – Agree - No Opinion – Disagree - Strongly Disagree

Describe your views on the following statement: “Businesses have an ethical duty to care for their community.”

Strongly Agree – Agree - No Opinion – Disagree - Strongly Disagree

Are you more or less likely to work for a company if you know from your own experience that the company is not ethical?

More likely - About the same - Less likely

NOTE: There were additional questions which are not part of this research.