

The Impact of Accountants' Religious, Economic, Political Orientations and the Ethical Philosophies on the Perceived Role of Ethics and Social Responsibility

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the religious, economic and political orientations of accountants and their ethical philosophies on their perceived role of ethics and social responsibility. Using structural equation modeling, hypotheses were tested. The result of factor analysis showed that ethical philosophy is separated into two factors, idealism and relativism while the perceived role of ethics and social responsibility is also separated into two factors, long-term gains-ethical priority and short-term gains. The results of WARP showed that religious orientation has a positive effect on idealism. In contrary, economic and political orientations have positive effects on relativism. Idealism has a positive effect on long-term gains-ethical priority while relativism has a positive effect on short-term gains.

Keywords: religious orientation, political orientation, economic orientation, ethical philosophies, perceived role of ethics and social responsibility

Introduction

The studies that have been carried out regarding the ethics of accounting in the recent years clearly shows the interest in this subject. Following the recent big scandals, legislators have tried to prevent the recurrence of such events by introducing new laws and their tighten controls. Researchers have directly focused on accountants. Previous studies have frequently investigated the effect of the demographical characteristics of accountants and their ethical judgements. The purpose of this study, is to examine the impact of the religious, economic and political orientations of accountants on their ethical philosophy and perceived role of ethics and social responsibility.

There are various studies in the relevant literature which examine the effect of religious orientation and political orientation on ethical philosophy and the effect of ethical philosophy on the perceived role of ethics and social responsibility, these two models have been combined into a comprehensive model for the first time. In this study, it was tested against a data set formed by accountants. The ethical philosophies of accountants have been evaluated by degrees of idealism and relativism as dimensioned by Forsyth, an attempt has been made to determine the perceived role of ethics and social responsibility using the PRESOR scale developed by Singhapakdi. In our study, the scale has been separated into two factors: one of which, long-term gains- ethical priority which emphasizes that the level of ethics and social responsibility of the accountant has an effect on their professional success. That ethics and social responsibility is important from the point of view of long-term success of their professional life and that the first priority of the accountant must be to behave in an ethical manner, while the other factor, short-term gains, emphasizes that the quality of the output rather than ethics and social responsibility must be taken as a basis for the professional success of the accountant.

That the basic purpose of accounting is to obtain or increase gains irrespective of conforming or not conforming to ethical rules, that everything may be done for customer satisfaction and that communication is much more important than working with an ethic and social responsibility. Consequently, the perceived role of ethics and social responsibility will be examined along two dimensions, long-term gains-ethical priority and short-term gains.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Religious orientation

Religious orientation was defined as “the personal practice of religion” by Allport and Ross (1967). When we look at the research studied on religious orientation, we see that the term religiosity is used in defining the adherence of an individual to their religious belief. (Conroy and Emerson, 2004; Singhapakdi et al. 2000).

In this study, religious orientation we examined from the point of view of the importance of their religious belief in their life and the extent to which religious belief determines their life. Individuals whose religious orientation is more intensive are more loyal to their beliefs and live according to their beliefs, consequently are more religious.

2.2. Economic orientation

Economic orientation defines the attitude of individuals toward economic issues. In this study economic orientation has been taken up within the framework of its dimension of liberalism. Liberalism is a theory which gives a privilege of freedom to individual activities since it believes that this freedom will have an outcome which ensures the benefit of the individual, their freedom and the public interest in the field of economy. Liberalism advocate a free market economy and property rights and rejects the incentives and support provided by the state. Competition and free trade are defined as the driving force of liberalism, and it is believed that the system will produce what is best for the interest of humanity (Smith, 1776). Consequently, within the scope of this study, economic orientation of individuals has been determined by their levels in the dimension of liberalism and it has been aimed to examine the effect of economic liberalism on the ethical philosophy of the individual.

2.3. Political orientation

Political orientation expresses the attitude of the individual with regard to their relationship with the state and social issues. Just as in economic orientation, the political orientation of the individual has been determined through political liberalism. Political liberalism supports limitless freedom of self-expression, limitless rights to move freely and demands the withdrawal of the state from education and health sectors (Mill, 1859; Donohue, 2003). Thus, this study aims at examining the correlation between the increase of the level of political liberalism and its effect on the ethical philosophy of the individual.

2.4. Ethical philosophies (idealism / relativism)

Forsyth (1980) examined the ethical philosophy of the individual in two dimensions, idealism and relativism. Idealism is the ethical philosophy that accepts all universal ethical rules and takes into consideration the welfare of others. At this dimension, ethical judgement is based on the negative or positive consequences of an action on other individuals. Relativism, on the other hand, is an ethical philosophy that rejects all universal ethical rules and makes a decision depending on the consequences of an action.

In summary, idealistic individuals exhibit a rule based attitude while relativistic individuals behave according to the consequences of an action. Idealists believe that ethical actions must have positive results and causing harm on others must be avoided. Highly relativistic individuals reject universal rules and believe that the evaluation of an action from the ethical point of view depends on the conditions which are specific to that action (Forsyth, 1980).

2.5. Perceived role of ethics and social responsibility

First studies were carried out measuring the relative importance of employees attributing ethical and social responsibility as a criterion for attaining organizational efficiency.

Zahra and La Tour (1987) used an approach with multi-variables for the purpose of examining the relationship between the organizational social responsibility and organizational efficiency. The results suggested that the organizational social responsibility has a multi-dimensional structure which is compatible with organizational efficiency (Obalola, 2008).

Kraft (1991b) expanded his initial study by measuring the perceptions of 53 managers working in enterprises from two service sectors. A questionnaire form used in the previous study (Kraft, 1991a) was given to the participants and we observed that the results were clearly different from the results obtained from the student sample. In both studies (Kraft 1991a, 1991b) showed obvious differences in the demographic and professional roles of the participants, the “industrial effects” have not been taken into consideration in the study which was conducted for the purpose of examining the relative importance of the criterion of social responsibility on attaining organizational efficiency (Obalola, 2008).

Singhapakdi et al. (1996), developed the PRESOR scale (perceived role of ethics and social responsibility) for the purpose of measuring the perceived role of ethics and social responsibility from the perspective of managers. In that study the PRESOR is formed of three dimensions, namely 1) social responsibility and profitability, 2) long-term gains and 3) short-term gains.

3. Hypothesis

3.1. Effect of religious, political and economic orientation on ethical philosophies

Previous research studies carried out on the degree of religious belief and ethical philosophy points fact that the individuals who attribute a higher value to their religious beliefs are more conservative in comparison to those who attribute a lower value (Donahue, 1985; Woodrum, 1988). When the effect of religiosity on ethical philosophy is examined, we see that religiosity has been the statistically significant variable which has created the most powerful effect: a positive relationship on idealism and negative on relativism (Singhapakdi et al, 1999).

Glary and Snyder (1991) asserted that the individuals who are religious at a high level are more interested in the welfare of other individuals. Wiebe and Fleck (1980) found more religious individuals to be more sensitive and prone to empathy with other people. When we consider this issue from the point of view of ethical philosophy, idealistic individuals accept universal ethical rules and while making an ethical judgement, they think on how the consequences of their actions may influence the welfare of other individuals and refrain from actions that might inflict harm on others.

Based on that principle, we can expect that the level of religious orientation has an important and statistically significant effect on ethical philosophy. When we look at the literature, we see that religiosity has a positive and statistically significant effect on idealism and that it has a statistically significant yet negative effect on relativism (Barnett et al. 1996). Singhapakdi et al. (2000) have observed that the level of religious orientation has a positive effect on idealism and a negative effect on relativism in studies they have conducted with marketing managers using the same variables. In a study done later, the finding showed that managers with a high religious orientation are more idealistic, but no significant effect of relativism could be observed (Oumlil and Balloun, 2009). Recently, Ozbek and Ozer (2012), found that religiosity has a statistically significant positive effect on idealism and a nonsignificant negative effect on relativism.

H1a: Religious orientation has a positive effect on idealism.

H1b: Religious orientation has a negative effect on relativism.

When we consider the effect of political and economic orientation on ethical philosophy we see that there is a remarkable similarity between relativism and liberalism. Relativism as an ethical philosophy is based on scepticism and is defined as the degree of the ability of individuals to reject universal rules. When a relativistic individual encounters an ethical problem he makes an ethical judgement according to the nature of the situation and the people affected by that problem. In his study in which he investigated the effect of political orientation on the dimensions of ethical philosophy, Forsyth (1980) reached the conclusion that the absolutists (high level of idealism, low level of relativism) had the most conservative attitude about all subject matters while advocates of situationism (high level of relativism, low level of idealism) had a more liberal attitude about all subject matters. That finding shows that liberalism has a positive effect on relativism.

H2a: Political orientation has a negative effect on idealism.

H2b: Political orientation has a positive effect on relativism.

H3a: Economic orientation has a negative effect on idealism.

H3b: Economic orientation has a positive effect on relativism.

3.3. The effect of ethical philosophy on the perceived importance of ethics and social responsibility

Singhapakdi et al. (1996), who were inspired by Forsyth (1980) for the purpose of measuring the attitude of social responsibility of individuals and their separate individual ethical philosophies (idealism – relativism) have argued that the ethical philosophy of the individual is a statistically significant variable that effects the perceived importance of ethics and social responsibility (Obalola, 2008).

Vitell and Paolillio (2004) also examined the effect of culture on the perceived role of ethics and social responsibility in terms of organizational efficiency reaching the following conclusion: both the ethical philosophy or ethical point of view (idealism and relativism) of the individual who decides on how to act (the personal factor) and the common culture and ethical values (organizational factor) have an effect on the individual perception of the importance of ethical and social responsibility in attaining professional success. The view which is set forth in this study is that idealists are more likely to believe in the importance of ethics and social responsibility for the success of the company and the relativists, on the contrary, do not believe very much that ethics and social responsibility might be important for the success of the company (Obalola, 2008). This view is supported by the studies which were later conducted by Vitell and Hidalgo (2006). In his study on ethical philosophy and the perceived role of social responsibility, Vitell (2010) found that this factor had a meaningful effect in all of the four scenarios that he used.

Departing from that finding, we concluded that highly idealistic individuals attribute more importance to social responsibility and ethics while the relativist individuals, on the contrary, attributed less importance to it. In conclusion, we believe that idealism has a positive effect on the perceived role of ethics and social responsibility while relativism has a negative effect on the perceived role of ethics and social responsibility.

In his study on the indicators on earnings management, Elias (2002) examined the influence of the ethical philosophy on the perceived role of ethics and social responsibility. The results obtained from that study showed that idealism has a positive influence on social responsibility and focusing on long-term targets while relativism has a positive influence on focusing on short-term targets.

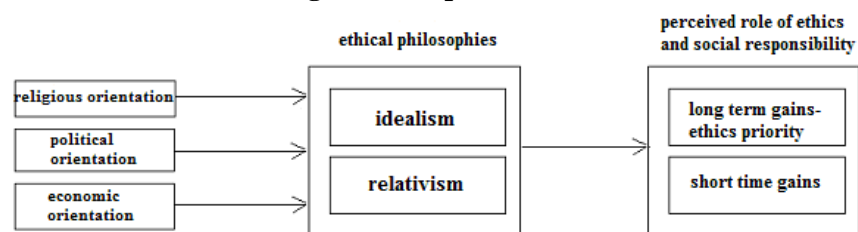
H4a: Idealism has a positive effect on the long-term gains – ethical priority.

H5a: Idealism has a negative effect on short-term gains.

H4b: Relativism has a negative effect on long-term gains – ethical priority.

H5b: Relativism has a positive effect on the short-term gains.

Fig. 1. Conceptual Model



4. Methodology

The purpose of this study is the examination of the religious, political and economic orientation and ethical philosophies of accountants on the perceived role of ethics and social responsibility. Within the scope of this study, the hypothesis was tested using the data obtained from 148 accountants by means of a questionnaire.

Latent variables in the measurement model are religious orientation, political orientation, economic orientation, ethical philosophies (idealism/relativism) and perceived role of ethics and social responsibility (long term gains-ethics priority/ short term gains). Religious orientation was measured through 8-items-scale developed by Marta (1999). To measure political and economic orientation, 10-items-scale was used which consists of 5 items to measure political liberalism and 5 items to measure economic liberalism. This scale was taken from the website of Liberal Democratic Party (<http://www.ldp.org.tr/>). Ethic Position Questionnaire (EPQ), developed by Schlenker and Forsyth (1977) and Forsyth (1980), was used to measure individual ethic philosophy. First 10 items at this scale are to measure individual idealism score, and the rest 10 items are to measure individual relativism score. The Perceived Role of Ethics and Social Responsibility was measured through PRESOR (Perceived Role of Ethics and Social Responsibility) developed by Singhapakdi (1996).

Scale is adapted to measure the perceived role of ethics and social responsibility of professional accountants on their professional success by researcher. The scale of items was answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 5, strongly agree.

5. Results

Structural equation modeling (SEM) based on the technique of nonlinear partial least squares (PLS) regression was used in WarpPLS 3.0 software program for testing the hypothesis of this study. PLS was used because it tests relatively small samples and it does not require variables normally distributed. Therefore, both linear and non-linear relations between constructs can be tested by WarpPLS. With WarpPLS, the independent and dependent variables are measured by the creation of "latent" variables that are associated with single indicators.

Three model fit indices: average path coefficient (APC), average R-squared (ARS), and average variance inflation factor (AVIF) are computed by software. When assessing the model fit with data, P values for the APC and ARS be both lower than 0.05 and AVIF should be lower than 5. The values of the measurement model are as follows: APC=0.244, P<0.001; ARS=0.245, and AVIF=1.033). These values showed good model fit with the data, and low overall collinearity (AVIF<5).

Convergent validity is tested to evaluate whether answers from different individuals to questions are sufficiently correlated with the respective constructs. In a measurement model, P values associated with the loadings must be lower than 0.05 and the loadings must be equal to or greater than 0.5 to meet acceptable convergent validity (Hair et al, 1987; 2009). As Table 1 shows, all item loadings were greater than 0,5 and statistically significant (p< .001)

Table 1: Loadings and cross-loadings of measurement items

Items	Economic orientation	Religious orientation	Idealism	Relativism	Political orientation	Long term gains-ethics	Short term gains	SE	P value
Eco1	0.708	0.022	0.063	-0.135	-0.118	-0.019	0.215	0.118	<0.001
Eco2	0.848	0.006	-0.099	0.101	-0.021	0.004	-0.153	0.098	<0.001
Eco3	0.778	-0.026	0.051	0.013	0.130	0.012	-0.029	0.096	<0.001
Rel1	0.092	0.818	0.023	-0.040	0.118	0.077	-0.016	0.061	<0.001
Rel2	-0.056	0.864	0.060	-0.005	0.119	-0.071	-0.127	0.066	<0.001
Rel3	-0.060	0.872	-0.093	0.104	0.019	0.091	0.005	0.041	<0.001
Rel4	-0.068	0.900	-0.153	-0.075	-0.082	0.167	0.086	0.043	<0.001
Rel5	-0.075	0.910	0.023	-0.004	-0.056	-0.079	0.027	0.052	<0.001
Rel6	0.137	0.783	0.151	0.016	-0.008	-0.076	-0.039	0.074	<0.001
Rel7	0.054	0.889	0.010	0.006	-0.094	-0.112	0.054	0.039	<0.001
Id1	-0.018	0.058	0.848	0.175	0.037	-0.022	-0.114	0.121	<0.001
Id2	0.067	-0.048	0.799	-0.117	-0.043	0.139	0.066	0.098	<0.001
Id3	0.017	-0.039	0.880	-0.085	-0.110	-0.106	0.071	0.113	<0.001
Id4	0.061	-0.066	0.810	-0.086	-0.118	0.067	0.101	0.100	<0.001
Id5	0.007	-0.006	0.898	0.003	0.033	0.039	-0.039	0.131	<0.001
Id6	-0.006	0.050	0.893	-0.025	0.091	-0.155	-0.047	0.127	<0.001
Id7	-0.109	-0.007	0.723	0.009	0.158	0.054	0.075	0.110	<0.001
Id8	-0.032	0.053	0.810	0.128	-0.036	0.013	-0.096	0.122	<0.001
Rol1	0.085	0.030	-0.033	0.765	0.077	0.116	-0.066	0.061	<0.001
Rol2	0.072	0.206	0.106	0.760	0.162	-0.169	-0.019	0.056	<0.001
Rol3	0.051	-0.069	-0.112	0.829	-0.049	0.142	0.029	0.042	<0.001
Rol4	-0.001	-0.043	0.096	0.728	0.019	-0.062	-0.148	0.069	<0.001
Rol5	-0.043	0.005	-0.092	0.769	-0.004	0.086	0.135	0.063	<0.001
Rol6	-0.175	-0.090	0.075	0.739	-0.063	-0.011	-0.007	0.077	<0.001
Rol7	0.002	-0.040	-0.025	0.693	-0.152	-0.132	0.070	0.066	<0.001
Pol1	0.066	0.085	-0.015	-0.057	0.844	0.037	0.026	0.076	<0.001
Pol2	-0.066	-0.085	0.015	0.057	0.844	-0.037	-0.026	0.044	<0.001
Pre1	-0.061	0.147	-0.113	0.053	0.067	0.902	-0.111	0.116	<0.001
Pre2	-0.016	-0.084	0.079	-0.025	-0.084	0.877	0.041	0.114	<0.001
Pre3	0.081	-0.070	0.038	-0.031	0.015	0.848	0.075	0.108	<0.001
Pre4	-0.051	0.084	-0.041	-0.047	0.139	0.043	0.809	0.082	<0.001
Pre5	0.014	-0.045	-0.056	-0.021	-0.025	0.125	0.766	0.069	<0.001
Pre6	0.064	-0.045	-0.027	0.003	0.018	-0.022	0.823	0.103	<0.001
Pre7	0.086	-0.008	0.118	0.107	-0.061	-0.088	0.720	0.068	<0.001
Pre8	-0.119	0.014	0.017	-0.035	-0.091	-0.070	0.707	0.110	<0.001

Bolded items are factor loadings.

Discriminant validity is tested to confirm whether answers from different individuals to questions are either correlated or not with other constructs. As Table 2 shows, the square roots of AVE of all latent variables were greater than acceptable validity is 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) and the square roots of AVE of all constructs were greater than all construct correlation coefficients. Thus, sufficient discriminant validity of the measurement model was achieved.

Table 2: Latent variable correlations and reliability indices

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	CR	Cronbach's alpha	AVE
1 Economic orientation	0.780							0.823	0.676	0.609
2 Religious orientation	0.069	0.863						0.953	0.943	0.745
3 Idealism	-0.085	0.217	0.834					0.948	0.937	0.696
4 Relativism	0.199	-0.069	0.076	0.756				0.903	0.874	0.571
5 Political orientation	0.021	-0.397	0.012	0.181	0.844			0.832	0.596	0.712
6 Long term gains-ethics priority	-0.024	0.242	0.566	0.065	-0.066	0.876		0.908	0.848	0.767
7 Short term gains	0.183	0.169	-0.003	0.532	0.115	-0.067	0.766	0.876	0.823	0.587

Note: Square roots of average variances extracted (AVE's) shown on diagonal.

CR, Composite reliability coefficients

Cronbach's alpha coefficients

AVE, Average variances extracted

Reliability is to measure the quality of the measurement instrument as each item of latent variables are understood in the same way by different participants. Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha coefficients provided from all latent variables are to measure reliability. Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha coefficients should be equal to or greater than 0.7 (Fornell Larcker, 1981). As Table 2 shows, composite reliabilities are greater than 0.80. And Cronbach's alpha coefficients of six latent variables are greater than 0.8. Economic orientation Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.67. Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) said that the threshold could be at 0.6. Thus, that was also acceptable. These results showed that the measurement model had sufficient reliability.

The effects of religious, political and economic orientation on ethical philosophy

As Table 3 shows, the effect of religious orientation on idealism is statistically significant and positive ($\beta = 0.310$ $p < 0.001$), hypothesis 1a is supported. However, the effect of religious orientation on relativism is negative but statistically nonsignificant ($\beta = -0.105$) So, hypothesis 1b is not supported. Political orientation has a positive effect on idealism, but it is statistically nonsignificant ($\beta=0.082$). Thus, hypothesis 2a is not supported. The effect of political orientation on relativism is statistically significant and positive ($\beta =0.143$ $p < 0.05$), Hypothesis 2b is supported. The effect of economic orientation on idealism is statistically significant and negative ($\beta=-0.219$ $p < 0.01$), hypothesis 3a is supported. The effect of economic orientation on relativism is statistically significant and positive ($\beta = 0.220$ $p < 0.01$), hypothesis 3b is supported.

The effects of ethical philosophies on perceived role of ethics and social responsibility

The effect of idealism on long term gains-ethics priority is statistically significant and positive ($\beta =0.565$ $p < 0.001$), hypothesis 4a is supported. However, the effect of idealism on short term gains is negative, but statistically nonsignificant ($\beta = -0.091$). Thus, hypothesis 5a is not supported. The effect of relativism on short term gains is statistically significant and positive ($\beta=0.605$ $p < 0.001$), hypothesis 5b is supported. However, contrary to our expectations, the effect of relativism on long term gains-ethics priority is positive but statistically nonsignificant ($\beta = 0.096$), hypothesis 4b is not supported.

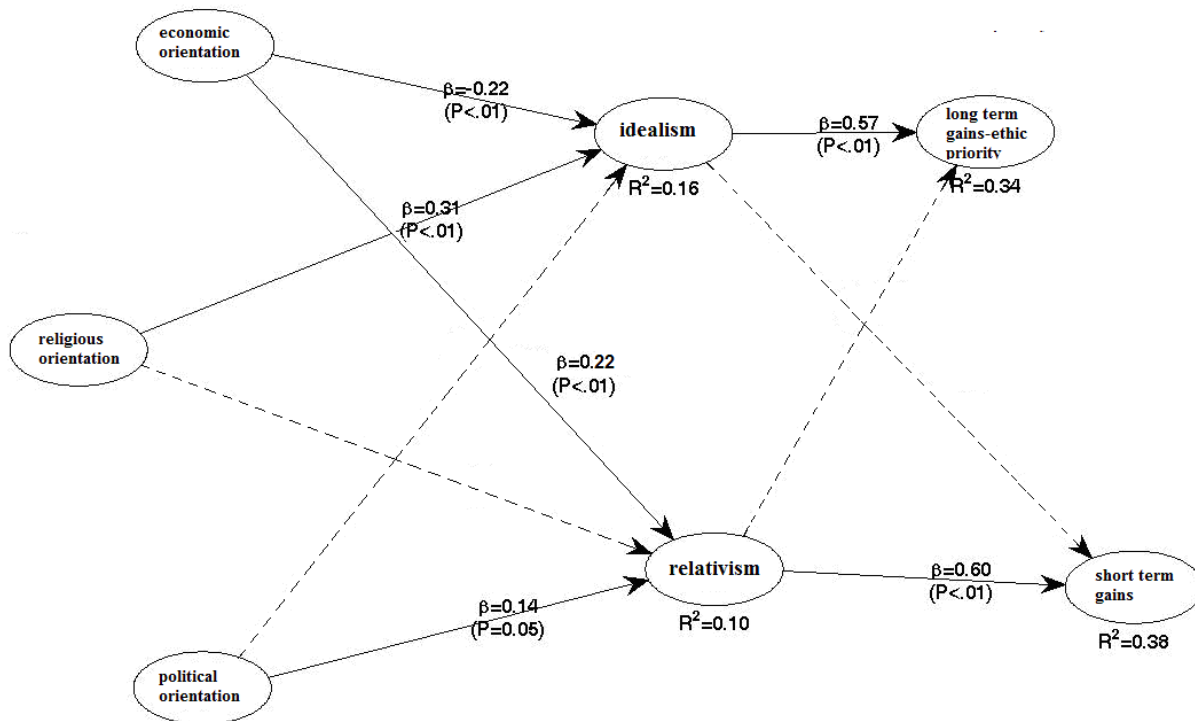
Table 3: Path coefficients

Constructs	Religious orientation	Economic orientation	Political orientation	Idealism	Relativism
Idealism	0.310***	-0.219**	0.082		
Relativism	-0.105	0.220**	0.143*		
Long term gains-ethics priority				0.565***	0.096
Short term gains				-0.091	0.605***

* $p < 0,05$ ** $p < 0,01$

*** $p < 0,001$

Fig 2: PLS analysis results



6. Conclusion

With this study, it was aimed to investigate the impact of accountants' religious, economic, political orientations and the ethical philosophies on the perceived role of ethics and social responsibility.

The results of the study prove that religious orientation has statistically shown a significant and positive effect on idealism while contrarily religious orientation has an insignificant negative effect on relativism. Individuals whose values are religiously orientated are idealistic and tend to be more sensitive to the welfare of others. When religious orientation increases individuals consider the consequences of their actions. These findings are supported by Barnett (1996), Singhapakdi et al (1999), Ozbek and Ozer (2012).

Research on the effect of political orientation on ethical philosophies result in that the political orientation has an insignificant positive effect on idealism and a statistically significant and positive effect on relativism. The scope of the study took the orientation of political liberalism such as freedom of expression, freedom of movement and lesser dependence of the individual on the state. Individuals who are politically orientated are more relativistic. The benefits of the consequences of their actions are important on their judgement of ethical issues. The result expected should have been a negative effect of politic orientation on idealism but the opposite was found.

Research on the effect of economic orientation on ethical philosophies result in that the economic orientation has a statistically significant negative effect on idealism and a statistically significant and positive effect on relativism. The scope of the study considered economic orientation to be the level of individuals liberalism. Economic liberals are more relativistic and less idealistic.

Research on the effect of ethical philosophies on the perceived role of ethics and social responsibility show idealism has a statistically significant and positive effect on long term gains-ethic priority and an insignificant negative effect on short term gains. Idealistic individuals consider the long term gains on their professional judgements and give ethics greater priority contrarily relativists consider the short term gains. These findings are supported by Elias (2002), Obalola (2008), Vitell (2010). An unexpected finding was relativism has an insignificant positive effect on long term gains-ethic priority.

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