Chapter 61
Exploring Variables That Affect Moral Development of Working Professionals

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ABSTRACT

The increase of unethical behavior in the workplace has encouraged contemporary researchers to focus their research efforts on exploring moral development of employees in the business sector. It is thought that moral development may be a crucial driver of ethical decision making, while morality may be affected by a range of variables. In this study, the impact of higher education, ethical education, and work experience on moral development of licensed real-estate agents is examined. Moreover, the impact of higher education on an individual's moral development to a higher level of Kohlberg's theory of moral development is evaluated. The results of the study suggest that the variables of higher education, ethical education, and work experience showed no significant impact or increase of moral development of real-estate agents. The findings imply that the level of moral reasoning of real-estate agents service their occupations ethical requirements.

INTRODUCTION

In terms of historical timeline, many factors have been studied that are believed to impact moral development, which is presumed to influence ethical decision making in one way or another (Curtis, Conover, & Chui, 2012; Mujtaba, Cavico, McCartney, & DiPaolo, 2009; Steele, Branson, & Martin, 2011). Previous studies on moral development have examined and recognized education as an influencing factor of moral

development. However, many studies on whether moral development is affected by obtaining additional education are limited or inadequate due to the use of only college students as population for study (Bouhmama, 1988; Cummings, Maddux, & Cladianos, 2010; Kiser, Morrison, & Craven, 2009; Steele et al., 2011). In the last few decades, more than a quarter of studies investigating business ethics have relied on a population made up of college students only (Albaum & Peterson, 2006). Studies using a variety of measuring instruments to examine the relation between higher education and moral development have shown a relative increase of moral reasoning (Cummings et al., 2010, Maeda, Thoma, & Bebeau, 2009, & Mujtaba et al., 2009; Rest & Thoma, 1985). Still, in terms of using college student groups, studying the impact of additional education on moral reasoning has yielded quite conflicting results.

Business ethics is a topic that has been given much attention from those in the business sector and researchers in the last few decades due to the increase of unethical behavior in the work environment (Yusoff, Salleh, Zakaria, Nair, Vadeveloo, & Luqman, 2011). Chan, Fung, and Yau (2010) suggested that the global financial crisis of 2008 was the catalyst for the increase of research oriented on studying business ethics intensively. Finding variables that impact an individual's ethical decision making may provide businesses with knowledge on how to reduce unwanted behavior and inspire appropriate conduct in the workplace.

Kohlberg's Moral Theory

Lawrence Kohlberg believed that moral judgment development was the same to all individuals, regardless of background or characteristics (Trevino, 1992). Kohlberg identified attributes of an individual's moral judgment that changed with personal growth through his comprehensive research (Rest, Cooper, Coder, Masanz, & Anderson, 1974). Kohlberg's theory of moral development is made up of the growth patterns that include childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, including the division by six stages (Gibbs, Basinger, Grime & Snarey, 2007). The stages of Kohlberg's moral theory are placed in order: punishment, rewards, good-boy/good-girl, authority, social contract, and ethical principles (Baxter & Rarick, 1987). Progress through Kohlberg's moral stages is not random. An individual must move through each stage to progress to the next one and cannot skip a stage. What propels an individual through each stage has been an area of interest for researchers; however, a critical focus of this study is the highest stage of Kohlberg's moral theory.

This study has examined whether individuals with additional education can reach level three of Kohlberg's theory. The highest level of Kohlberg's theory is the postconventional stage that is made up of Stage 5 *Social-Contract Principles* and Stage 6 *Universal Ethical Principles* (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). Kohlberg believed that the majority of people are incapable of developing beyond the level of conventional morality, which is the second level of his moral stages (Baxter & Rarick, 1987). However, Kohlberg did theorize it is highly unlikely for majority of people to reach the third level of his moral stages, although it is not impossible. To reach level three of Kohlberg's moral theory, it is vital to move toward abstract or formal operational reasoning that is flexible enough (Nidich, Nidich, & Alexander, 2000). Flexible moral reasoning would not be founded on traditional rules of society to make ethical decisions.

For an individual to reach the highest level of Kohlberg's theory their moral reasoning would not be grounded on rules governed by society. Reaching level three of Kohlberg's moral theory would indicate that an individual does not follow societal standards, but instead makes ethical decisions based on principles of the Golden Rule (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). The Golden Rule represents the idea of the principle of universalizability in which any moral judgment would be the same for identical situations

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