

Evaluating a New Field of Research About the Influence of Business Ethics Education

Steven Lovett¹

A COMMENTARY ON Douglas R. May, Matthew T. Luth, and Catherine E. Schwoerer (2014), “The Influence of Business Ethics Education on Moral Efficacy, Moral Meaningfulness, and Moral Courage: A Quasi-Experimental Study,” *J Bus Ethics* 124(1): 67–80, <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1860-6>

ABSTRACT

Douglas May, Matthew Luth, and Catherine Schwoerer, identify and study an area that lacks empirical research, namely the effectiveness of teaching, and learning, business ethics, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability. The authors assess whether courses that teach ethical decision-making in business settings positively influence students’ moral efficacy, moral meaningfulness, and moral courage. Their findings demonstrate increases in the ethics education treatment group’s outcomes for each of the three variables. This experimental data is encouraging, but the definitional subjectivity of each variable, and the unique effects of various methods of instruction, should provide motivation for further research efforts.

WHILE BUSINESS ETHICS education is largely concerned with the effects of teaching business ethics on a student’s moral reasoning and

¹ Emporia State University. Email: slovett1@emporia.edu

a student's ability to recognize moral issues and moral dilemmas, Douglas May, Matthew Luth, and Catherine Schwoerer, posit that outcome-oriented research should be taken a step further. Specifically, they are concerned with "factors that *facilitate* ethical decision-making" (2014: 68, emphasis in the original). They justifiably theorize that factors that facilitate ethical conduct in business should be studied empirically because these factors have the potential to promote positive ethical organizational cultures and positive organizational reputations (2014: 68). Their work identifies, describes, and applies a hypothesis to three such factors, or variables, which are the focus of their study: moral efficacy, moral meaningfulness, and moral courage (2014: 68). Ultimately, their analysis reveals that a treatment course in business ethics "influenced each of [the] positive psychology variables" with the most notable change occurring in the moral efficacy outcome (2014: 75). As a secondary effect, their study demonstrates the ongoing "potential value of positive psychology and [positive organizational scholarship (POS)] literature to business ethics researchers" (2014: 75). I share the authors' enthusiasm, and I applaud their innovative steps into a new field of research, but it is the "potential value" of their premise that gives me pause to critically question the dependability and usefulness of their results and conclusions in the absence of further research.

The Authors' Purpose

Teaching ethics has most often followed a "traditional negative approach to ethics" which "narrowly focuses on prohibited behaviors, enforceable rules, and sanctions for misconduct" (2014: 68). However, a growing trend toward a "positive approach to ethics," promoting "morally praiseworthy ideals and behaviors," has created a need for exploring and examining effective methods of teaching and learning ethics "in order to enhance the ethical culture and reputation of businesses" (2014: 68).

May et al. propose the conjoining of the body of literature concerning business ethics education, and the body of literature concerning POS, in order to better understand the influence ethics education may have on a person's ability to successfully address ethical challenges in the workplace. They begin their study by defining each of the three variables. Moral efficacy consists of an individual's belief in his ability "to deal positively with ethical issues . . . and to

overcome obstacles to developing . . . solutions” in a workplace environment. Moral meaningfulness consists of the value an individual places on ethics in the individual’s work life. Moral courage consists of an individual’s willingness to “stand up for what is right even in the face of adverse personal outcomes” (2014: 68). The authors posit three hypotheses, which drive their study; the hypotheses are that moral efficacy, moral meaningfulness, and moral courage increase for individuals who take a business ethics treatment course (2014: 70–71).

The Authors’ Study and Outcomes

The authors use a “quasi-experimental pretest-posttest nonequivalent control group design” (2014: 71). The pretest-posttest design book-ended an 8-week, required MBA course. The ethics treatment group was enrolled in a course dedicated to the topic of business ethics, while the control group was enrolled in a human resource management class. In addition to the measurements for moral efficacy, moral meaningfulness, and moral courage, three variables were also controlled for: (1) an individual’s ability to assimilate educational materials; (2) an individual’s impression management (the tendency to present a positive social image); and (3) whether participants had previously taken a stand-alone ethics course (2014: 72–73). The authors provide evidence of the discriminant validity of the study’s three outcome measures, and they also tested for selection effects and a one-way analysis of covariance. The breakdown of the study’s results supports all three of the authors’ hypotheses with the largest, positive change occurring in the moral efficacy outcome (2014: 74–75).

Evaluation

This study spearheads a new area of research based on a changing perception of, and pedagogical approach to, business ethics. Perhaps the most significant effect of their study is described in the opening sentence of their “Discussion” section (2014: 75, citation omitted):

The results of this study demonstrate the potential value of positive psychology and POS literatures to business ethics researchers as a source of psychological constructs that ethics education may influence.

While the authors’ study appears valid and reliable on its face, I would caution against overestimating the implications of the study’s

goals and its results. Too many variables require further research, and are likely to have a significant and measurable impact on this topic, before the authors' premises and conclusions can be said to be generally, and consistently, dependable.

The authors identify seven areas for future research, and their discussion of their study's strengths and limitations fairly address several of its shortcomings. However, while some of the limitations identified by the authors may be more significant than others, there is at least one in particular that should be considered a fundamental limitation, potentially compromising the entirety of the study's reliability, and that is the underlying instructional methodologies of the courses that constituted the experimental and control arms of their study. Another limitation has the potential to challenge the study's reliability: the subjectivity of the definitions of moral efficacy, moral meaningfulness, and moral courage.

The first such limitation, regarding underlying instructional methodologies used in the classroom, is raised by the authors themselves, but because of its notable impact on influencing the "learning that students [can] achieve" (Bulger, et al. 2002), I do not think the parameters of the authors' study properly take into account the influence of instructional methodologies as a variable for determining the effectiveness of teaching business ethics. Their first suggestion for future research is to "explore the influence of specific instructional methods" (2014: 75). The authors disclose that the instructional methods in their treatment group were "varied" (2014: 76). If students are required through hands-on-style teaching and/or intervention methodologies to practice their skills, and to analyze, develop, and recommend solutions for ethical dilemmas (Penn 1990), it is very likely their moral efficacy will increase to a greater extent than if students merely learn about these competencies through a lecture-style methodology (Laurillard 2002). The authors rightly point out that "more research needs to be conducted to determine what [teaching] method may be most influential in producing such fundamental changes in students" (2014: 76). Indeed, future studies based on ethics courses largely taught by lecture may not reflect the same positive results as did the courses in the authors' study. Another significant question worth asking is whether the subject matter of an ethics course is the primary factor that leads to increased moral efficacy, moral meaningfulness, and moral courage (Sims and Brinkmann

2002), versus the teaching style by which ethics is taught. Perhaps an ethics curriculum might mean very little without the use of an interactive and “applied” teaching methodology in the classroom. The authors’ second research suggestion – to “focus on instructional methods that enable individuals to tie the discussion of ethics and values more directly to [students’] own experiences or future chosen profession” (2014: 76) – begs the same question as the first: whether instructional methods that draw associations between ethics and specific industries and personal experiences are the paramount driving forces behind positive increases in moral activity and moral meaning in the workplace. I would propose new studies be performed which seek to identify specific correlations between instructional methodologies and increases in moral activity in the workplace.

The second area that should be explored as part of future research – the definitional bias of each of the three variables – is harder to locate in the authors’ own assessment of their study or in their recommendations for future work. While the authors’ study relied on a set of “treatment” students, who took the same MBA course dedicated to the topic of business ethics (2014: 71), another ethics course might have taught these same students a different viewpoint of morality, subsequently altering their understanding and subjective interpretation of what constitutes moral efficacy, moral meaningfulness, and moral courage (Taft and White 2007). For example, when I teach my business ethics courses, I typically begin each course by inductively building from my students’ personal ethical principles outward toward a higher, organizational level. This approach can identify diverse, but legitimate, definitional biases related to subjects like moral meaningfulness and moral courage. When a study attempts to evaluate an individual’s subjective assessment of his or her own actions based upon specifically defined factors, it is necessary to make sure the definitions and meanings of those factors are as widely agreed-upon as possible; if a widespread definition is not possible, then the subjectivity of those factors must be taken into account. If not, results that appear to have meaning may have latent, and consequential, inaccuracies. For instance, a person’s understanding of the word “moral” depends on that person’s perception, understanding, and application of other words, such as “right,” “wrong,” “goodness,” “badness,” “proper,” “improper,” “prudent,” “religion,” “belief,” and “faith.” Likewise, a person’s understanding of the word “moral” may

also depend on an assortment of sociological and historical factors.² This concern about definitional bias may point to an informal fallacy of which to be wary: what constitutes a “well-taught ethics curriculum” is not a concept or curriculum which is well-defined and frequently existent throughout academia. Outcome-oriented research based on the efficacy of an ethics curriculum, such as the authors’, needs to be understood in light of the multitude of ways in which business ethics can be taught and may be learned in any given university setting.

In conclusion, May, et al. have done a fine job of introducing research that attempts to examine the factors that facilitate a person’s ethical decision-making abilities. Their study lays the groundwork for the proposition that

business ethics instructors are able to not only build students’ skills in moral recognition and reasoning, but also increase individuals’ beliefs in their abilities to use these skills to grapple with complex moral issues and to derive and recommend solutions (2014: 78).

While there are important limitations to the authors’ study, overall, I am encouraged by their results and by the promise of business ethics education producing notable, positive, ethical results in the workplace.

Received 5 March 2015 / Posted 6 April 2015

REFERENCES

- Bulger, S., D. Mohr, and R. Walls. 2002. “Stack the Deck in Favor of Your Students by Using the Four Aces of Effective Teaching.” *J Effect Teach* 5(2), available at <http://uncw.edu/cte/et/articles/bulger/>
- Laurillard, D. 2002. *Rethinking University Teaching: A Conversational Framework for the Effective Use of Learning Technologies*. New York: Routledge.
- Martin, M. 2002. *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- May, Douglas R., Matthew T. Luth, and Catherine E. Schwoerer. 2014. “The Influence of Business Ethics Education on Moral Efficacy, Moral Mean-

² To illustrate the point, Michael Martin’s book, *Atheism, Morality, and Meaning*, opens with the following presumptive sentence: “The idea that objective morality and the meaningfulness of life are impossible without belief in God has a long history in Western religious thought and is still used by Christian apologists to argue against atheism” (Martin 2002: 11).

- ingfulness, and Moral Courage: A Quasi-Experimental Study.” *J Bus Ethics* 124(1): 67–80, <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1860-6>
- Penn, W. 1990. “Teaching Ethics—A Direct Approach.” *J Moral Educ* 19(2): 124–138, <http://doi.org/10.1080/0305724900190206>
- Sims, R. and J. Brinkmann, 2003. “Business Ethics Curriculum Design: Suggestions and Illustrations.” *Teach Bus Ethics* 7(1): 69–86, <http://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022602521549>
- Taft, S. and J. White. 2007. “Ethics Education: Using Inductive Reasoning to Develop Individual, Group, Organizational, and Global Perspectives.” *J Mgmt Educ* 31(5): 614–646, <http://doi.org/10.1177/1052562907307641>