

Ethical Perceptions of Organizational Politics: A Comparative Evaluation of American and Hong Kong Managers

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ABSTRACT. This paper presents a cross-cultural analysis of ethics with U.S. and Hong Kong Chinese managers as subjects. These managers were given the Strategies of Upward Influence instrument and asked to evaluate the ethics of using various political strategies to attain influence within their organizations. Differences were found between Hong Kong and U.S. managers on a variety of dimensions, indicating important differences between these two groups on their perceptions of ethical behavior. In the

paper, we identify potential reasons for the findings, and suggest directions for future work in this area.

Business ethics are applied ethics (Velasquez, 1992). More specifically, business ethics are what is perceived as appropriate in the organizational setting. The growing body of literature in this area provides evidence that business ethics is playing a growing part in the concern of management from the vantage point of both practitioners and academics. Indeed, the recent literature has been characterized by theoretical advances as well as issue-specific treatments in areas such as affirmative action (Berne and Freeman, 1992), environmental impact (Singh and Lakhan, 1989), and insider trading (Salbu, 1992). However, to date, there has been limited scientific investigation into the differences in ethical behavior across cultures.

While it is commonly acknowledged that different cultures interpret ethical behavior differently, and while anecdotal information leads to the conclusion that the ethical climates of businesses across cultures differ substantially from each other (see Sethi, *et al.*, 1984; Shenkar and Ronen, 1987; Weiss, 1994), relatively little empirical research has focused on cross-cultural ethical differences in business behavior. More specifically, there has been virtually no research that has empirically tested the cross-cultural differences in ethical perception of the political behaviors of individuals.

The objective of this paper is first to identify previous cross-cultural research on the ethics of political behavior, and second to combine this research with findings from previous cross-cultural values research in order to develop

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hypotheses that test the dimensions of the Strategies of Upward Influence instrument used with our sample of American and Hong Kong managers.

The issue of ethics in business

While everyone seems to know what is meant by ethics, actually defining what is ethical has long proved to be problematic for both practitioners and researchers (Brenner and Molander, 1977). Scholars have proposed a number of definitions of business ethics. For example, Ferrell and Fraederich (1991) note that “. . . business ethics comprise moral principles and standards that guide behavior in the world of business.” Their definition is perhaps as good as any, and it certainly captures that essence of this issue – determining what “good behavior” is in the business world. Likewise, business ethics research has focused upon what is morally right and good in aspects of business ranging from affirmative action to insider trading.

The evolution of the ethics research

The evolution of the business ethics field has been characterized by investigations of ethics-related phenomena from distinctively different perspectives. Some investigations have taken a philosophical approach, examining ethically relevant topic areas from traditional philosophical vantages (see Velasquez, *et al.*, 1983). Others have taken a more descriptive, illustrative approach, focusing on examples of questionable business practices (see Lutz, 1983; Olasky, 1985). And another group has taken a methodological stance, based on behavioral science methodology, using questionnaires (e.g., Newstrom and Ruch, 1975) or experimentation (e.g., Trevino and Ball, 1992). Yet without a doubt, the driving force behind the critical thought and theory of the field has been the philosophical literature.

Still, while the primary literature in business ethics has emanated from, and is focused on a more philosophical base, a more recent objective has been to integrate organizational behavior

issues, methods, and theory with traditional areas of ethical concern in business. The work of Trevino (1986) and Payne and Giacalone (1990), as well as a recent special issue in the 1992 *Journal of Business Ethics* focusing on behavior, attests to a growing integration and interpolation between behavioral science literature and business ethics literature. Since business ethics literature has traditionally been entrenched in a more philosophical base, the increasingly popular behavioral approach addresses many unexplored theoretical, research, and practitioner issues.

One of these under-explored areas of particular relevance in today's global economy is the issue of differences in ethics across cultures. The ethical relativists, while sometimes criticized for condoning any ethical code as long as a society accepts it, do accurately point out that different cultures have different ethical beliefs. More importantly, perhaps, is that these differences cannot be dismissed simply because the beliefs in other cultures do not coincide with our own (Velasquez, 1992). Dismissing differences in ethical standards can have serious repercussions from both an ethical and business vantage. From an ethical perspective alone, for example, while we condemn the use of child labor in the United States as morally questionable, this position clearly ignores the fact that in some third world countries the money made by a child may be an indispensable source of income without which the family could not survive. Ignoring this critical fact could result in various ethically driven political and/or business decisions designed to pressure the end of these child labor practices, ultimately hurting the very child it was meant to help by eliminating a crucial source of income. Additionally, from a more narrow business perspective, to be insensitive to the ethical values of other cultures would be folly for a multinational company that wants to function effectively in a global economy. Such insensitivity could undermine business relationships by displaying a basic contempt for the values, moral standards and needs of others which would result in long-lasting resentment.

The emerging issue of cross-cultural ethics differences

Despite the growing concern with issues of multiculturalism and international management within the business world, the expanding base of behavioral research in business ethics has not provided much insight into the arena of cross-cultural ethics. The existing literature on cross-cultural ethics involves topic areas such as corporate codes of ethics (Langlois and Schlegelmilch, 1990), managerial values (Becker and Fritzche, 1987), ethical belief structures (Abratt, *et al.*, 1992; Izraeli, 1988), judgements (Whipple and Swords, 1992), bribery (e.g. Tsalikis and Nwachukwu, 1991), and ethical perceptions (McDonald and Zepp, 1988). In addition, there has been some theoretical discussion on generic ethical issues in international business (Scholhammer, 1977), basic models (Wines and Napier, 1992), and approaches to reconciling international norms (Donaldson, 1985). However, virtually ignored in the business ethics literature has been the ethical perceptions of organizational politics, especially cross-cultural politics (see Zahra, 1989).

Organizational politics, while a fact of life, has remained an illusive concept to define (Drory and Romm, 1990; Ferris and Kacmer, 1992). However, based upon contributions previously made in describing political behavior in organizations, we may define organizational politics as self-serving, informal behavior that requires at least two parties: an initiator – the individual trying to exert influence – and a target – the object of the influence attempt (Goffman, 1959; Porter, *et al.*, 1981). This informal behavior is self-serving in that the initiator attempts to use politics to gain control over the target in order to obtain resources or other goals that are not sanctioned by the organization (Mayes and Allen, 1977; Pfeffer, 1981). Porter *et al.* (1981) further extend the description of political behavior by noting that it is frequently used as an upward influence strategy to promote the self-interests of the initiator (e.g., a raise or promotion).

Our focus in this paper is upon the ethical perceptions across cultures of the upward influence political strategies used by organizational members. The dearth of research in this area is

particularly unfortunate for two reasons. First, the literature has shown a serious concern with ethics and its impact on the organization (Mayes and Allen, 1977; Zahra, 1984). Such concern would indicate a need to explore the ethical ramifications and constraints inherent to organizational politics. Second, since the exercise of influence in culturally diverse groups is no doubt an important skill (see Ferguson, 1988; Smith and Peterson, 1988) and may even be a determinant of managerial success (Chacko, 1990; Kotter, 1985), the understanding of how such behaviors are viewed ethically across cultures is no doubt of consequence to the individuals exercising them.

Most research in ethics and organizational politics has been done from a U.S. perspective. Cavanagh, *et al.* (1981) and Velasquez, *et al.* (1983) took a primarily philosophical approach toward the ethics of organizational politics. They argue that because there is nothing inherently unethical regarding organizational behavior, the assessment of any political tactic should involve three distinct criteria: the utility of the political act to all of the involved constituencies, the rights of the individuals involved, and the extent to which the political tactic adheres to accepted canons of justice.

From a more behavioral approach, Zahra (1985) investigated the impact of various demographic and organizational factors on perceptions of organizational politics. In his sampling of managers, he found that while age, gender, and race were significantly associated with ethical perceptions of organizational politics, functional area, job level, and years of work experience were not associated with such perceptions. Using personality and attitudinal variables in another study, Zahra (1989) showed that executives having high scores on measures of concern with status, anomie, and external locus of control, or having a low acceptance of others, tended to view organizational politics as ethical.

From a cross-cultural standpoint, we identified only two studies which have investigated the ethical perceptions of organizational politics. Romm and Drory (1988), in comparing Canadian and Israeli samples, found that Canadians had a greater tendency to view some

aspects of political behavior as less moral, but that both groups were generally in agreement that illegal influence attempts were less moral than formal or informal attempts. Dolecheck and Dolecheck's (1987) comparison of U.S. and Hong Kong managers, while not testing for statistical significance, did indicate that differences appear to exist. Specifically, they conclude that in Hong Kong ethics appear to be tied simply to "that which is allowed by law," whereas the Western view of ethics suggests that what is allowed by law is the lowest acceptable behavior and that ethical behavior transcends legality (Laczniak, 1984).

As implied by the dearth of empirical, cross-cultural research on the ethics of organizational politics, studying this phenomenon can be challenging. Likewise, identifying a suitable measure proved problematic. A review of the literature and available instruments did not yield any cross-culturally developed measures of upward influence strategy.

The "strategies of upward influence" instrument

Due to no cross-culturally developed measures of upward influence being available, the Strategies of Upward Influence [SUI] instrument was developed by Ralston and Gustafson. Our goal was to develop a suitable cross-cultural measure of upward influence. Therefore, we felt that simply trying to modify existing Western measures might constrain the developmental process. Thus, relying heavily upon practitioner input as well as previous theoretical research for the foundation, the SUI instrument was created. The instrument development process identified two separate taxonomies for measuring upward influence.

One taxonomy identified seven "Job Tactics" dimensions. These tactics dimensions are similar to the influence strategies identified in previous studies of American subjects (Kipnis *et al.*, 1980; Yukl and Falbe, 1990; Yukl and Falbe, 1991; Yukl and Tracey, 1992). The other taxonomy, which is less traditional, identified the "Western Values" dimensions of ethics. The actual development

procedure, analysis, and testing of this instrument are presented in another paper. However, an overview of the dimensions of the instrument is presented in the subsequent paragraphs.

The job tactics taxonomy

The dimensions of the "Job Tactics" taxonomy are: Good Soldier (getting ahead through hard work that benefits the organization), Rational Persuasion (demonstrating, with facts and skills related accomplishments, that one should be given consideration), Ingratiation (using subtle, indirect tactics to make oneself appear interpersonally attractive to someone at the superior level), Image Management (actively presenting oneself in a positive manner across the entire organization), Personal Networking (developing and utilizing an informal organizational social structure for one's own benefit), Information Control (controlling information that is restricted from others in order to benefit oneself), and Strong-Arm Coercion (using illegal tactics, such as blackmail, to achieve personal goals).

The Western values taxonomy

The other taxonomy identifies four hierarchical dimensions of "Western values." The purpose of this taxonomy was to create a baseline for comparing acceptable and unacceptable behavior using an American perspective. This taxonomy is unique from those used with other influence research instruments. The dimensions of this taxonomy are: Organizationally Sanctioned Behaviors (behaviors, such as working hard, that are usually prescribed and sanctioned for employees in organizations), Non-Destructive, Legal Behaviors (behaviors that do *not* directly hurt another person but are self-serving for the individual within the organization), Destructive, Legal Behaviors (self-serving behaviors, such as spreading rumors, that directly hurt others but are *not* extreme enough to be illegal), Destructive, Illegal Behaviors (extreme self-serving behaviors that directly hurt others and are illegal, such as stealing business documents).

Hypotheses

While the two cross-cultural studies identified contribute to our understanding of culturally different views on the ethics of organizational politics, they do not provide a significant basis upon which we could formulate hypotheses for our study. More specifically, only one of these studies focused on an East-West culture comparison, and it did not utilize hypothesis-testing statistics (Dolecheck and Dolecheck, 1987). Therefore, to formulate our hypotheses, we relied heavily on the more general cross-cultural values research literature (Hofstede, 1980; Ralston, *et al.*, 1993; Tung, 1988).

Hypotheses for the Job Tactics Dimensions

Recent research supports Hofstede's (1980) findings that the U.S. can be categorized as individualistic and low in power distance, while the Hong Kong culture can be categorized as collectivistic and high in power distance (Ralston *et al.*, 1993). Previous ethics research (McDonald and Zepp, 1988) has noted that these value difference are key distinguishing issues in one's orientation toward what is considered ethical behavior.

Therefore, we predicted that U.S. managers will find tactics that tend to focus on public self-definition and self-promotion as more acceptable, and thus more ethical, than the Hong Kong managers who identify with a collectivist image and eschew public displays of self-promotion. Specifically, we hypothesize that American managers will find the tactics of good soldier, rational persuasion, ingratiation, and image management, to be more ethical than their Hong Kong counterparts. Conversely, we believe that the Hong Kong managers, whose cultural orientation is to work quietly behind the scenes, will find the more private and circuitous tactics to be more ethical than the American managers. As such, we hypothesize that the Hong Kong managers will find personal networking, information control, and strong-arm coercion to be more acceptable – thus more ethical – than the American managers.

- H_a¹: American managers will find *good Soldier* more ethical than will Hong Kong managers.
- H_b¹: American managers will find *rational persuasion* more ethical than will Hong Kong managers.
- H_c¹: American managers will find *ingratiation* more ethical than will Hong Kong managers.
- H_d¹: American managers will find *image management* more ethical than will Hong Kong managers.
- H_e¹: Hong Kong managers will find *personal networking* more ethical than will American managers.
- H_f¹: Hong Kong managers will find *information control* more ethical than will American managers.
- H_g¹: Hong Kong managers will find *strong-arm coercion* more ethical than will American managers.

Hypotheses for the Western Values Dimensions

As noted, previous cross-cultural ethics research (Dolecheck and Dolecheck, 1987) found Hong Kong managers to equate ethics with acting within the law, while American managers were found to view ethical behavior as something that goes beyond mere adherence to the law. However, we believe that the actual explanation may be more complex than this conclusion. For example, Lee Ka-Shing, after being convicted in Hong Kong of insider trading, was selected as Hong Kong's "Man of the Year," and was praised by his associates as one of the most trustworthy people in Hong Kong.

Therefore, to attempt to understand this apparent disparity from a Western point of view, let us begin by noting that the Chinese translation of the word ethics, "dao de," means "the path to virtue." The Chinese Culture Connection (1987) has identified the Chinese society's search for virtue as Confucian work dynamism. This concept reflects the teachings of Confucius, which emphasize a social hierarchy or structure (Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Louie, 1980). It is characterized by a respect for

tradition with a strong desire to save "face." Confucian work dynamism also implies a need to order relationships by status and to respect the order of that status. Thus, the Chinese view of ethical behavior appears to be very pragmatic (Redding, 1990). What is ethical is relative, and as long as "face" is not lost or is not a concern, "dao de" is intact. In contrast to this relative view of ethics, the Western view of ethics tends to be based upon an absolute ideal of "good behavior" (Velasquez, 1992).

Thus, since the Western Values taxonomy is based upon the absolute of ideally good behavior, we would expect Hong Kong managers to be more willing to accept as ethical those things that American managers find less ethical, and vice versa, depending on how pragmatically those things fit the situation. Therefore, we hypothesize that American managers will find the Organizationally Sanctioned behaviors and the Legal/Non-destructive behaviors as more ethical than will the Hong Kong managers because these behaviors consistently fit the Western ideal of "good behavior." Conversely, we hypothesize that the Hong Kong managers will find the Legal/Destructive and Illegal behaviors to be more ethical than the American managers because these may be seen by the Hong Kong managers as pragmatically appropriate in some situations, and therefore more ethically acceptable. These following hypotheses represent morally acceptable strategies that fit within the cultural orientations of each country.

H_a²: American managers will find *organizationally sanctioned behavior* more ethical than will Hong Kong managers.

H_b²: American managers will find *legal/non-destructive behavior* more ethical than will Hong Kong managers.

H_c²: Hong Kong managers will find *legal/destructive behavior* more ethical than will American managers.

H_d²: Hong Kong managers will find *illegal behavior* more ethical than will American managers.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were full-time professionals in the U.S. (n = 161) and Hong Kong (n = 144). The average age of the American subjects was 32.7 years, while the average age of the Hong Kong Chinese subjects was 33.5 years. Overall, the two groups were reasonably comparable. Table I presents the demographic data for these groups.

Procedure

Potential participants were identified and mailed a survey with cover letter and postage-paid return envelope. The instructions accompanying the instrument asked the subjects to think of their

TABLE I
Demographic data for the two groups

		Americans working in the U.S.	HK Chinese working in Hong Kong
Age:	Mean	32.7	33.5
	SD	5.8	6.7
Gender:	% male	64	59
Marital status:	% married	52	58
Years employed:	Mean	8.4	10.0
	SD	5.4	6.1
Number of employees in the company:	Under 100	25%	30%
	100 or more	75%	70%

work experiences when responding to the questions. The instruction also told the subjects that there were no right or wrong answers, and that it was their perceptions that were important.

Instrument

The 38-item Strategies of Upward Influence (SUI) instrument was used to assess influence tactics. For each of the 38 scenario items, the subjects were asked to evaluate the ethics (morality) of using the strategy. The 38 scenarios were measured on a 4-point Likert scale. The response options ranged from "highly ethical" to "highly unethical." The higher the score, the more ethical a scenario was seen to be.

Design and analysis

The first step of the analysis consisted of two one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) tests for the Job Tactics Dimensions and the Western Values Dimensions. Each multivariate analysis had two levels (Americans working in the U.S. and Hong Kong Chinese working in Hong Kong). The dependent variables for the Job Tactics Dimensions analysis were Good Soldier, Rational Persuasion, Ingratiation, Image Management, Personal Networking, Information Control, and Strong-Arm, Coercion. The dependent variables for the Western Values Dimensions were Sanctioned Behavior, Non-Destructive Behavior, Destructive-Legal Behavior, and Illegal Behavior. The multivariate technique was used in these analyses to control experiment-wise error rate with multiple dependent measures. If a significant effect was found in a multivariate analysis, then the second step was to calculate the univariate analyses (ANOVAs) for each of its dimensions (Kirk, 1982).

Results

Job tactics

A MANOVA analysis indicated a significant

effect for differences between U.S. managers and Hong Kong Chinese managers ($\lambda = 0.651$, $df = 6, 2, 456$, $p < 0.001$).

Since the multivariate effect was significant for the Job Tactics dimensions, univariate ANOVAs were used to ascertain which of the seven job tactics were different for the U.S. and Hong Kong managers. As Table II shows, all but the Personal Networking tactic showed significant differences.

The means for the significantly different tactic dimensions indicate that the U.S. managers rated the tactics of Good Soldier, Rational Persuasion, Image Management, and Ingratiation as more ethical, while their Hong Kong counterparts reported Informational Control and Strong-Arm Coercion as more ethical.

Western values hierarchy

A MANOVA analysis indicated a significant effect for differences among U.S. managers and Hong Kong Chinese managers ($\lambda = 0.632$, $df = 3, 2, 459$, $p < 0.001$).

Again, because the multivariate effect was significant for the Western Values measures, univariate ANOVAs were used to determine on which of the four dimensions there were differences. As Table III shows, significant differences were found for the Sanctioned Behavior, Destructive-Legal Behaviour, and Illegal Behavior dimensions.

The pattern of means for these dimensions showed that the Organizationally Sanctioned dimension was rated as more ethical by American managers, while the Destructive/Legal and Illegal dimensions were rated as more acceptable by Hong Kong managers.

Discussion

The results demonstrate that there were a number of cultural differences between the U.S. and Hong Kong managers in their perceptions of ethical behavior. Also, as shown in Table II and III, all dimensions showing significant differences followed the hypothesized direction.

TABLE II
Means, standard deviations, and *F*-test results for the seven job tactics dimensions

Dimension	Nationality	Location	Mean	SD	<i>F</i>
Good Soldier	American	U.S.	3.71	0.30	20.77***
	HK Chinese	Hong Kong	3.52	0.34	
Rational persuasion	American	U.S.	3.52	0.29	7.36***
	HK Chinese	Hong Kong	3.41	0.33	
Image management	American	U.S.	3.01	0.33	5.24**
	HK Chinese	Hong Kong	2.94	0.32	
Ingratiation	American	U.S.	3.10	0.39	11.65***
	HK Chinese	Hong Kong	2.99	0.38	
Personal networking	American	U.S.	2.64	0.37	0.63
	HK Chinese	Hong Kong	2.68	0.33	
Information control	American	U.S.	1.48	0.28	33.86***
	HK Chinese	Hong Kong	1.70	0.30	
Strong-arm coercion	American	U.S.	1.28	0.26	31.71***
	HK Chinese	Hong Kong	1.51	0.31	

** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE III
Means, standard deviations, and *F*-test results for the four western values dimensions

Dimension	Nationality	Location	Mean	SD	<i>F</i>
Sanctioned	American	U.S.	3.71	0.30	20.33***
	HK Chinese	Hong Kong	3.52	0.34	
Non-destructive	American	U.S.	3.52	0.29	2.31
	HK Chinese	Hong Kong	3.41	0.33	
Destructive/legal	American	U.S.	3.01	0.33	26.06***
	HK Chinese	Hong Kong	2.94	0.32	
Illegal	American	U.S.	3.10	0.39	42.55***
	HK Chinese	Hong Kong	2.99	0.38	

*** $p < 0.001$.

Job tactics

On the job tactics dimensions, as hypothesized, U.S. managers saw Good Soldier, Rational Persuasion, Image Management, and Ingratiation as being more ethical alternatives that did their Hong Kong counterparts. Likewise, as hypothesized, Information Control and Strong-Arm Coercion tactics were evaluated as more accept-

able by the Hong Kong managers. The use of Personal Networking tactics was not reported as significantly different by the managers in our study. These findings are consistent with the cross-cultural values research that find Americans to be individualistic and openly aggressive, while finding Hong Kong Chinese as more collectivistic, preferring behind-the-scenes strategies.

Western values

Similarly, U.S. managers found Organizationally Sanctioned behavior as more ethically justifiable than did their Hong Kong counterparts. However, there was no difference between U.S. and Hong Kong managers regarding Non-Destructive/Legal behavior. Also, as hypothesized, the Hong Kong managers reported the Destructive/Legal and Illegal behaviors as more acceptable. These findings are consistent with the view that in the West, ethical behavior is an absolute that applies universally, while in the East, "face" and ethical behavior depend on the situation.

Conclusions

These findings offer practitioners several avenues for consideration. For example, from a training standpoint, cross-cultural managers will need to consider the varying cultural perception of appropriate influence strategies as they train expatriates. Giacalone and Beard (in press) note that individuals who go abroad may succeed or fail largely on their ability to present themselves in socially appropriate ways, since foreign hosts tend to interact with expatriates from the host's cultural perspective. When there are substantive differences in the ethical perceptions of influence strategies between cultures (as this study demonstrates), expatriates will need to be sensitive to those differences, if they hope to attain their objectives of gaining influence.

Likewise, multinational corporations will need to consider the strategies they use to influence external stakeholder. Using strategies viewed as unethical by members of the other culture may backfire and result in negative perceptions of the individual attempting the influence strategy. This scenario has been proven in previous studies (see, for example, Giacalone, 1985).

Future research potential can be drawn from two particular issues that this study did not address. First, the ethical climate within a given multinational organization may moderate the extent to which a particular influence strategy is seen as more or less appropriate (Victor & Cullen, 1988). That is, there may be company

cultures that vary across organizations influencing what organizational members perceive as ethical. For example, a company's culture may be influenced by the home office location of that company. This would be especially likely if many of the top executives come from the home office country, and as such have a common national culture which, in turn, would help to shape the company culture.

Additionally, the situational context may alter the ethical appropriateness perceived in various influence strategies. The cultural relationship between the person attempting the influence and the person over whom the influence is attempted may have an important effect on what is perceived as ethical (Anseri and Kapoor, 1987). For example, a subordinate relating to a superior from his/her own culture may perceive what is acceptable behavior differently than he/she would when relating to a superior from another culture.

In summary, the present study provides two things: information relevant to the hands-on operation of an organization doing business in a multicultural environment, and research avenues for further investigation. Further research may help to determine the degree to which our understanding of the ethical perceptions of organizational politics can be expanded. While our data should be applied cautiously within other cultural contexts, these findings offers global organizations some cogent considerations in their attempts to become more effective by increasing their awareness of the differences in ethical values between cultures.

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