

Does Management Experience Change the Ethical Perceptions of Retail Professionals: A Comparison of the Ethical Perceptions of Current Students with those of Recent Graduates?

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study was to extend the previous research on ethics in retailing. Prior research of Dornoff and Tankersley (1985–1976), Gifford and Norris (1987), Norris and Gifford (1988), and Burns and Rayman (1989) examined the ethics orientation of retail sales persons, sales managers, and business school students. These studies found the college students less ethically-oriented than retail sales people and retail managers. The present study attempts to extend the research on ethics formation to a geographically and academically diverse sample, and to determine if retail management experience in the form of a professional practicum or internship, or entry level management training programs, such as experienced by recent graduates, are critical factors in the formation of business ethics. The sample consisted of thirty-three students majoring in Human Ecology with a concentration in Retail Merchandising and 51 recent graduates of the retail Merchandising program. The series of fourteen vignettes developed by Dornoff and Tankersley (1975–1976) was used. An acknowledged limitation of this study is the validity of the questionnaire

developed by Dornoff and Tankersley due to the method of development and new laws concerning warranties and credit etc. which have occurred since 1976. The instrument was used, however, to maintain consistency with earlier studies for the purpose of comparison of groups. No significant differences were found in the students' perceptions of the fourteen actions presented in the vignettes, but the range of the responses in the post-internship tests increased in many cases. The alumni appeared to be slightly more ethical than the students but not as ethical as the managers surveyed in 1986 by Norris and Gifford. Indications are that the critical point of ethics formation may be at the mid-management level and that internships and management training programs have little effect on the ethical perceptions of participants. These findings are consistent with studies such as Gable and Topol (1988), and Jordan and Davis (1990) which showed high Machiavellian scores among young retailing executives, often buyers, as opposed to upper level retailing management. Scales which measure Machiavellianism, or manipulateness, have been used as an alternative method of examining business ethics.

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Introduction

The wake of the consumer movement of the late 1960's and 1970's combined with degeneration in the social mores and living values (McNichols and Zimmerman, 1985) has precipitated a shift in contemporary ethical formation focus from the increasingly ineffectual traditional bastions of home/church/school to the business community. The reality of implementing this new responsi-

bility in the business community has been disputed (Dornoff and Tankersley, 1976). The visibility and boundary-spanning role of retailers (Belasco, 1966; Hise, 1970; Pruden, 1969; Walker *et al.*, 1973) has been clearly identified. Longitudinal studies of retail store managers (Gifford and Norris, 1987) compared to earlier studies (Dornoff and Tankersley, 1975–1976) found contemporary store managers evidencing perceptions of college students (Norris and Gifford, 1988 and Burns and Rayman, 1989) indicate that retail students are less ethically-oriented than current retail managers. The present study attempts to extend the research on ethics formation by college students to a geographically and academically diverse sample, and to determine if retail management experience in the form of an internship or a few years of management experience is a critical factor in the formation of business ethics.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to extend the previous research on the ethical perceptions of students of retailing. Prior research of Dornoff and Tankersley (1975–1976), Gifford and Norris (1987), Norris and Gifford (1988), and Burns and Rayman (1989) examined the ethics orientation of retail sales persons, retail sales managers, Midwestern Business School seniors, and Midwestern Business School freshmen and sophomores. Results of those studies found the college students less ethically-oriented than retail sales people and retail managers. The major goal of this research was to determine if there is a significant difference in ethical perceptions: (1) Of Textiles and Clothing majors before and after a professional retail management practicum or internship; and (2) Of recent graduates after experience with an entry level management training program.

Methodology

Sample

The sample consisted of thirty three students at a large Southwestern university majoring in Home Economics with a concentration in Retail Merchandising. The students were seniors enrolled for a nine-hour block of courses that constitutes an internship in retail merchandising. All the students had completed at least three-fourths of the requirements for graduation, including eighteen hours in Business Administration and thirty-plus hours in Home Economics, a preparatory retail merchandising course, and such course options as Retailing Research, Business Ethics, and Business Law. The students had successfully completed a competitive process to secure the internship. Intern placement was in leading discount, specialty and department stores across the nation.

The alumni sample consisted of 150 percent graduates of the retail merchandising degree option. Surveys were mailed to every third name on the alumni listing of graduates of this program.

Instrument

In order to replicate and extend the ethics research of Gifford and Norris (1987), Norris and Gifford (1988), and Burns and Rayman (1989), the series of fourteen vignettes developed by Dornoff and Tankersley (1975–1976) was used. Fifty-six usable student surveys were obtained, representing an 85% response rate. The students surveyed were female; 97% had prior retail sales experience; 15.2% had previous retail management experience; and 84% had non-retail work experience. A large number, 27.3% of the students, indicated that they had completed a course in Business Ethics, and 39.4% were actively involved in a religious organization.

The students responded to a questionnaire administered at two critical points in the internship experience. The ethical perceptions of the same student sample were sampled at an orientation meeting held just prior to the beginning

of the internship and at a conference visit held within the last three weeks of the internship. The internship period is a twelve and one-half week professional experience that includes at least 480 hours of managerial work in discount, department and specialty stores.

Fifty-one usable alumni surveys were obtained, after one mailing, representing a 33 percent response rate. The survey instrument sent to recent graduates were identical to the one administered to the students. The graduates surveyed were 99% female; 94% had been employed in retail sales; 78% had held management jobs in retailing; 84% had held a non-retailing job; 39% had completed a course in business ethics and; 55% indicated they were active in a religious organization.

Analysis

The perceptions of the students and the alumni were compared to the results of the prior research cited. The students' perceptions were compared pre- and post-internship. In addition, the pre- and post-internship ratings were compared to the results of the prior research. The fourteen vignettes, reproduced in Table I, are a condensed version of the most frequently cited causes of consumer dissatisfaction reported by retailers, consumers, and retailing authorities in three Midwestern cities across three store types:

discount, specialty, and department stores (Dornoff and Tankersley, 1975-1976). A resultant managerial action was presented for each situation. Respondents were requested to indicate their agreement with the actions taken by rating according to the following five-point Likert scale:

Strongly Agree	No Opinion	Strongly Disagree
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Existing limitations to this procedure, as well as the previous research studies, include changes in retail practices and the legislative requirements that impact them in the intervening time frame (1975-1990). However, to permit comparison and trend analysis over time, the same survey instrument was used in this study. Use of the vignette-based survey method, while acceptable for assessing ethical perceptions (Levy and Dubinsky, 1983), lacks clear validity, and it is notable that components reflecting social norms may be influenced over time. As the same limitations apply to earlier research, for comparative purposes, they are constant.

A summary of the respondents' perceptions of the vignette actions appears in Table II. Results of the studies of Burns and Rayman (1989), Norris and Gifford (1987), Gifford and Norris (1988), and Dornoff and Tankersley (1975-1976) are presented for purposes of comparison. Weighted averages of the responses to each of the vignettes were calculated, giving a zero value to No Opinion responses, therefore excluding these

TABLE I
Retail ethical vignettes

Please indicate your degree of agreement with the actions suggested for each of the vignettes below. Your responses will only be used in summary form and will be kept confidential.

1. A young man, recently hired as a salesman for a local retail store, has been working very hard to favorable impress his boss with his selling ability. At times, this young man, anxious for an order, has been a little overeager. To get the order, he exaggerates the value of the item or withholds relevant information concerning the product he is trying to sell. No fraud or deceit is intended by his actions, he is simple overeager.

Action: His boss, the owner of the store, is aware of this salesman's actions, but he has done nothing to stop such practice.

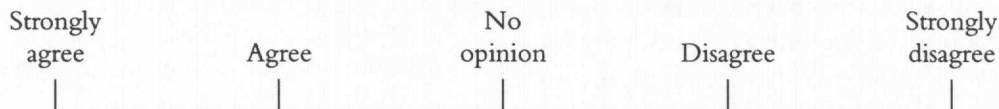
Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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TABLE I (Continued)

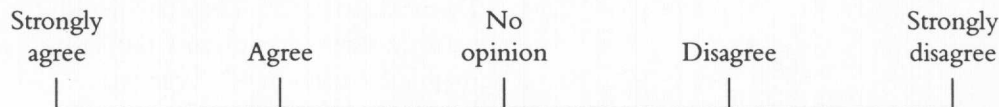
2. A local retailer has a coat with a fur collar that he wants to get rid of. He has tried unsuccessfully for months to sell it for \$89.95. He then decided to put it on sale at its approximate cost, \$63.95. He still is unable to sell the coat, so he makes a new price tag, listing an original price of \$129.95.

Action: The retailer marks down this price (\$129.95) to the sale price (\$63.95).



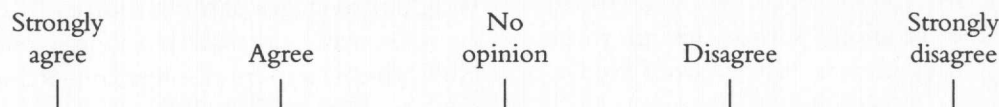
3. A person bought a new car from a franchised automobile dealership (in the local area). Eight months after the car was purchased, he began having problems with the transmission. He took the car back to the dealer, and some minor adjustments were made. During the next few months, he continually had a similar problem with the transmission slipping. Each time the dealer made only minor adjustments on the care. Again, during the 13th month after the car had been bought, the man returned to the dealer because the transmission still was not functioning properly. At this time, the transmission was completely overhauled.

Action: Since the warranty was for only one year (12 months from date of purchase), the retailer charged full price for parts and labor.



4. A woman purchased a dress from a local retail store. Instructions for washing the dress were attached to the garment by the manufacturer. These instructions were still attached to the dress at the time of sale and the customer was fully aware of them. After wearing the dress one time she washed it, carefully following the manufacturer's instruction. Much to her dismay, the colors in the dress faded with the washing. Also, the colors ran and made streaks in the while collar and cuffs to the dress. She returned to the retail store within three days after the purchase date with the merchandise.

Action: The retailer refused to refund her money, since the dress had been worn and washed.



5. A local retail store ran an ad in the Sunday newspaper, announcing a sale on a well-known brand of high-quality men's slacks. The ad read that a large quantity of these slacks were available in all sizes, colors, fabrics, and styles. Response to the ad was very enthusiastic. After the second day of the sale, only 1/4 of the advertised merchandise was still available.

Action: The retailer continued to run the ad each day for an entire week (up to and including the following Sunday).

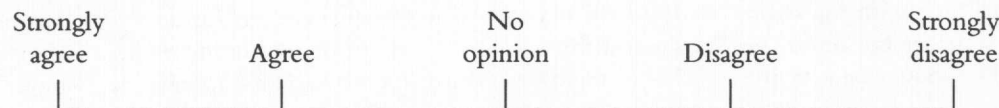
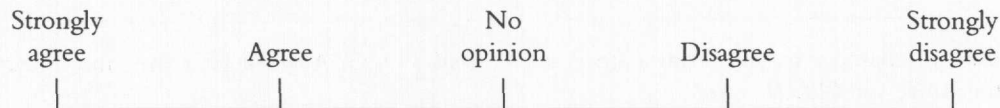


TABLE I (Continued)

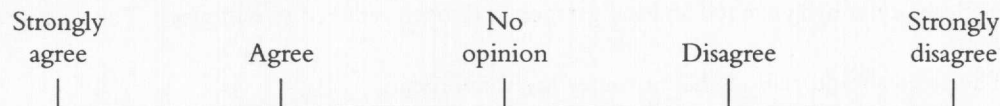
6. Sets of a well-known brand of 'good' china dinnerware are advertised on sale at a considerable discount by a local retailer. Several patterns are available from which to choose, each requiring the purchase of a typical 45-piece service for eight. The customer may also buy any 'odd' pieces which are available in stock (for instance, a butter dish, a gravy bowl, etc.). The ad does not include, however, that these patterns have been discontinued by the manufacturer.

Action: The retailer offers this information only if the customer directly asks if the merchandise is discontinued.



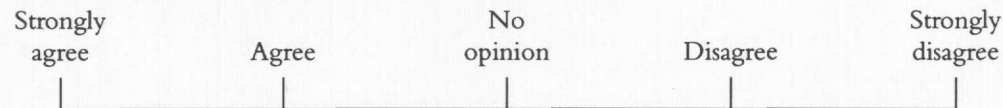
7. A retail grocery chain operates several stores throughout the local area, including one in the city's 'ghetto' area. Independent studies have shown that prices tend to be higher and there is less of a selection of products in this particular store than in the other locations.

Action: On pay day (the day welfare checks are received in the area of the city), the retailer increases prices on all his merchandise.



8. Some recent research has shown that many consumers are misusing Product X, a product distributed and sold through local retailers. There is no danger involved in this misuse; the consumers are simply wasting their money by using too much of it at a time. Displays, which actually seem to encourage this misuse, are provided by the manufacturer to each retailer. A certain retailer, Retailer A is aware that consumers are misusing Product X. He is also aware that the manufacturer's display encourages this misuse.

Action: The retailer continues to use this display in his store.



9. According to a local retail store's credit policy, any purchase made before the 10th of the month is included in the billing. Full payment is required on an account within 25 days of this day (usually this is the 5th of the following month). If not paid in full, interest charges are then added to the balance. A person ordered a piece of furniture from this store on May 9, and charged the purchase to his credit account. The particular piece of furniture was not available for immediate delivery. By June 5, the furniture still had not been delivered, so the bill was not paid. The furniture finally arrived on June 7, and a check was then sent to the store for payment in full. The June 10 billing was received the following week.

Action: On the bill sent by the retailer, interest charges were included since the bill had not been paid by the due date, June 5.

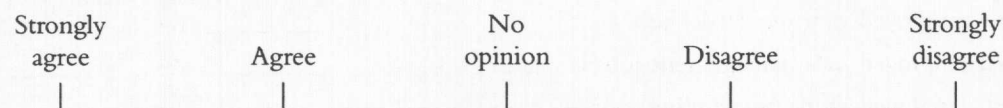


TABLE I (Continued)

10. A customer brings into the store a coffee pot which he explains was a wedding gift. He indicates that he already has a fine coffee pot and would like a cash refund. The pot is carried by the store, but since it was a gift the man has no sales slip. The pot retails at a \$12.00.

Action: The man should receive a full refund.

Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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11. A customer purchased a bicycle from a store at a cost of \$59.95. A week later the same bicycle is put on sale by that store for \$49.00.

Action: The store should refund the customer the difference.

Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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12. A customer purchased a foundation garment. A year later the garment was returned with no sales slip. Since that time, styles had changed and the garment had been reduced to half price. The customer requested a full refund.

Action: The store should refund the customer the difference.

Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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13. A customer calls the retailer to report that her refrigerator purchased two weeks ago is not cooling properly and that all the food has spoiled.

Action: The retailer should repair that refrigerator at no cost.

Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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14. A customer calls the retailer to report that her refrigerator purchased two weeks ago is not cooling properly and that all the food has spoiled.

Action: The customer should be reimbursed for the value of the spoiled food.

Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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Please answer the following demographic questions:

What is your sex?	_____ female	_____ male
Have you been employed in a retail sales job?	_____ Yes	_____ No
Have you been employed in a management job in retailing?	_____ Yes	_____ No
Have you been employed in a non-retailing job?	_____ Yes	_____ No
Have you had a course in Business ethics?	_____ Yes	_____ No
Are you active in a religious organization?	_____ Yes	_____ No

TABLE II
Ethical perceptions – Dornoff-Tankersley instrument

Vignette number	Respondents	Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Weighted average	
1. Managers	1976 D & T (1975–76)	9	22	26	34	9	2.58	
	1986 G & N (1987)	1	5	3	47	44	3.38	
	Students	1976 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	3.06
		1986 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	3.02
		1988 B & R (1989)	0	15	7	65	14	2.98
		1989 Before	0	3	1	25	4	3.03
		1989 After	0	2	3	14	4	3.10
		1990 Alumni	0	3	1	34	13	3.20
2. Managers	1976 D & T (1975–76)	11	40	20	14	14	2.39	
	1986 G & N (1987)	3	14	5	28	50	3.32	
	Students	1976 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	2.99
		1986 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	2.98
		1988 B & R (1989)	6	18	16	38	23	2.92
		1989 Before	4	10	3	12	4	2.53
		1989 After	2	5	1	10	5	2.82
		1990 Alumni	2	13	7	13	16	2.98
3. Managers	1976 D & T (1975–76)	26	34	14	20	6	2.07	
	1986 G & N (1987)	1	2	2	24	71	3.68	
	Students	1976 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	3.50
		1986 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	3.44
		1988 B & R (1989)	0	4	1	16	78	3.76
		1989 Before	0	1	3	9	20	3.63
		1989 After	0	0	2	8	13	3.62
		1990 Alumni	1	3	0	8	39	3.67
4. Managers	1976 D & T (1975–76)	8	44	14	19	14	2.45	
	1986 G & N (1987)	1	11	15	37	36	3.28	
	Students	1976 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	3.61
		1986 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	3.49
		1988 B & R (1989)	7	8	3	30	53	3.32
		1989 Before	1	2	1	6	23	3.59
		1989 After	0	1	0	6	16	3.65
		1990 Alumni	0	0	0	5	46	3.90
5. Managers	1976 D & T (1975–76)	34	34	9	9	14	2.03	
	1986 G & N (1987)	1	11	15	37	36	3.28	
	Students	1976 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	2.99
		1986 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	3.05
		1988 B & R (1989)	0	18	19	47	16	2.97
		1989 Before	0	5	4	16	8	3.10
		1989 After	0	3	4	9	7	3.21
		1990 Alumni	0	7	2	26	16	3.19

TABLE II (Continued)

Vignette number	Respondents	Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Weighted average	
6. Managers	1976 D & T (1975-76)	31	49	6	11	3	1.85	
	Students	1986 G & N (1987)	4	33	11	35	17	2.73
		1976 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	2.81
		1986 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	2.81
		1988 B & R (1989)	0	26	14	35	26	3.00
		1989 Before	1	7	7	13	5	2.85
		1989 After	0	6	1	15	1	2.78
		1990 Alumni	2	10	5	19	15	3.02
7. Managers		1976 D & T (1975-76)	23	34	20	14	9	2.11
	Students	1986 G & N (1987)	0	2	6	21	72	3.74
		1976 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	3.72
		1986 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	3.47
		1988 B & R (1989)	0	1	1	25	73	3.73
		1989 Before	0	0	2	5	26	3.84
		1989 After	0	0	2	7	14	3.67
		1990 Alumni	0	0	0	5	46	3.90
8. Managers		1976 D & T (1975-76)	17	40	17	17	9	2.21
	Students	1986 G & N (1987)	1	11	19	46	24	3.13
		1976 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	2.95
		1986 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	3.61
		1988 B & R (1989)	0	19	26	42	14	2.93
		1989 Before	0	7	8	11	7	3.00
		1989 After	0	4	5	10	4	3.00
		1990 Alumni	0	2	10	25	14	3.29
9. Managers		1976 D & T (1975-76)	26	60	7	9	0	1.82
	Students	1986 G & N (1987)	0	6	2	30	62	3.57
		1976 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	3.25
		1986 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	3.05
		1988 B & R (1989)	0	14	14	38	35	3.24
		1989 Before	1	7	5	11	.9	3.00
		1989 After	0	5	3	11	4	2.95
		1990 Alumni	1	5	4	13	28	3.45
10. Managers		1976 D & T (1975-76)	14	29	11	34	11	2.52
	Students	1986 G & N (1987)	33	33	7	18	9	2.98
		1976 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	2.60
		1986 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	2.30
		1988 B & R (1989)	29	35	11	19	7	2.98
		1989 Before	1	6	1	18	7	2.97
		1989 After	5	11	4	21	10	2.77
		1990 Alumni	0	3	1	34	13	3.20

TABLE II (Continued)

Vignette number	Respondents	Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Weighted average	
11. Managers	1976 D & T (1975-76)	9	11	9	31	40	1.87	
	1986 G & N (1987)	38	45	4	10	3	3.23	
	Students	1976 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	1.93
		1986 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	2.25
	1989	1988 B & R (1989)	11	20	4	37	28	2.15
		Before	5	7	2	8	11	2.81
		1989 After	1	6	1	11	4	2.82
	1990 Alumni	6	10	7	19	9	2.70	
12. Managers	1976 D & T (1975-76)	26	26	6	26	17	2.64	
	1986 G & N (1987)	33	45	4	12	6	3.10	
	Students	1976 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	2.05
		1986 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	2.37
	1989	1988 B & R (1989)	22	40	10	10	20	2.70
		Before	8	17	2	6	0	1.94
		1989 After	4	12	2	4	1	2.10
	1990 Alumni	18	22	2	5	4	1.90	
13. Managers	1976 D & T (1975-76)	51	37	9	3	0	3.53	
	1986 G & N (1987)	62	35	1	1	1	3.59	
	Students	1976 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	3.37
		1986 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	3.31
	1989	1988 B & R (1989)	72	25	3	0	0	3.74
		Before	0	1	2	16	14	3.42
		1989 After	1	3	0	9	10	3.22
	1990 Alumni	0	1	1	21	28	3.54	
14. Managers	1976 D & T (1975-76)	14	20	9	49	9	2.44	
	1986 G & N (1987)	11	41	18	28	2	2.74	
	Students	1976 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	2.61
		1986 N & G (1988)	*	*	*	*	*	2.27
	1989	1988 B & R (1989)	19	19	18	33	11	2.56
		Before	4	5	12	10	2	2.48
		1989 After	0	7	6	8	2	2.71
	1990 Alumni	4	12	5	21	9	2.74	

* Information not reported by Norris and Gifford (1988).

responses from the analysis. The direction of items ten through fourteen were reversed, and the scale weights for those responses were reversed to determine the weighted averages of responses to those items. Comparisons were made using Chi-square as reported in Table III.

Findings

No significant differences were found in the students' perceptions of the fourteen actions presented in the vignettes, but the range of the responses in the post-internship tests increased in many cases. The range of responses to items 6, 9, 11 and 15, however, narrowed. These situations were closely related to floor management,

TABLE III
Statistical analysis of vignettes

Vignette number	Chi-square	Significance	Degrees of freedom	Probability level
1	2.60	NS	3	0.46
2	1.90	NS	4	0.75
3	0.99	NS	3	0.80
4	1.86	NS	4	0.76
5	0.77	NS	3	0.86
6	6.82	NS	4	0.15
7	2.22	NS	2	0.33
8	0.61	NS	3	0.89
9	2.04	NS	4	0.73
10	8.88	NS	4	0.64
11	5.20	NS	4	0.27
12	1.89	NS	4	0.76
13	5.00	NS	4	0.29
14	4.93	NS	4	0.29

and the students' responses may indicate greater clarity of standard retail procedures and policy. The intervening internship experience is assumed to be the variable affecting the changes in the student responses.

Cross tabs gave some significant results. Retail sales experience gave significant results with vignettes number one and number six. Both vignettes involve sales functions, and those students having no retail experience had a more ethical view point on these vignettes. Retail management experience was significant for vignette number three and was a trend with vignette number nine. These warranty and interest decisions reflect a more informed view of policy decisions at the management level. Management experience resulted in a more ethical position. Work experience (not retail) was significant for vignettes number twelve and number thirteen and was a trend with vignette number eight. Those with no work experience had a consumer viewpoint which was more ethical. Those who had taken an ethics class took a less ethical point of view on vignette number five, which was a significant difference. In addition, an ethics class and vignette number twelve provided a trend with those having had the class taking the less ethical position. Religious involvement was a trend with vignette number

fourteen. Those not involved in religious organizations had a more opinionated position both positively and negatively.

Burns and Rayman (1989) found that the retail perceptions of college students who had taken an introductory course in retail management were less-ethical than retail practitioners. The current results reported here corroborate the findings of the longitudinal study of senior-level retail students by Norris and Gifford (1988). Comparison of Home Economics Retail Merchandising senior students are consistent with the results of the previous research as the students' rating, when compared to the managers surveyed by Gifford and Norris (1987), are "less-ethically oriented". The senior Home Economics students' perceptions were slightly lower on five items after the professional experience.

The alumni responses appeared to be slightly more ethical than those of the students but not as ethical as the managers surveyed in 1986 by Norris and Gifford. Internships and management training programs appear to have little effect on the ethical perceptions of participants. These findings are consistent with those such as Gable and Topol (1988) which showed high Machiavellian scores among young retailing executives, often buyers, as opposed to upper level retailing management. Scales which measure

Machiavellianism, or manipulateness, have been used as an alternative method of examining business ethics.

Implications

The ethical perceptions of college students preparing to enter retailing careers does not significantly vary by geographical location, academic discipline or classification, or exposure to the professional work place via a managerial practicum or internship. These ethical perceptions apparently represent a decline from the current ethical standards of the contemporary retail industry. The emerging "new ethics" of the younger professionals will influence the industry long-range since the business ethics of the new generation appears to evidence a marked decline from current business practice. Still, it must be noted that current managers often come out of the consumer era of the 1960's when business was not popular and so they may be more ethically attuned to the consumer. In addition, the less ethical managers may have lost out in the competition for management positions over the years, leaving only the most ethical of their generation still active in the management of the stores surveyed.

Courses in Business Ethics, entry-level work experience, and retail sales experience appear to reduce the ethics orientation of students. As those with previous retail management experience evidence more ethical decision-making, the critical point of ethics formation may be at the mid-management level. Based on our findings we conclude that very little emphasis is placed on ethical or store policy decision formation in existing retail internships.

The alumni appeared to be slightly more ethical than the students but not as ethical as the managers surveyed in 1986 by Norris and Gifford. Indications are that the critical point of ethics formation may be at the Mid-management level.

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