

Influencing factors on the ethical decision making of Iranian accountants

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to determine the extent to which Iranian accountants think ethically. Furthermore, the paper aims to elaborate on the factors influencing the level of Iranian accountants' ethical decisions.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The method used is a quantitative design. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire from a sample of students from four universities in Iran.*

Findings – *Among the factors correlated with students' ethical decision making are gender, level of education, work experience, and familiarity with the Iranian Association of Certified Public Accountants' Code of Ethics.*

Originality/value – *As no study has previously been conducted on Iranian accountants' ethical decision making, this study was initiated in order to gain an insight into it.*

Keywords *Ethics, Accounting, Decision making, Behaviour, Iran*

Paper type *Research paper*

1. Introduction

In recent years, as human society has been associated with environmental issues, a shortage of resources, overpopulation, poverty, and starvation, the necessity of accounting ethics is clear for all to see. Of particular concern are the recent high-profile accounting failures at some companies. Therefore, ethical issues in accounting have become a major topic in many accounting studies. Prior ethical studies can be categorized in three domains:

1. formation of ethical criteria;
2. ethics education; and
3. rules and codes of ethical and professional conduct.

In the first domain, studies have attempted to explore factors influencing accountants' ethical decisions (e.g. Keller *et al.*, 2007; Chan and Leung, 2006; Grasso and Kaplan, 1998; Ameen *et al.*, 1996). Studies in ethics education investigate the necessity and the effectiveness of ethics education in improving the ethical decision-making and judgment skills of accounting students and practitioners (e.g. Boyce, 2008; Armstrong *et al.*, 2003; McPhail, 2001; Waldmann, 2000). Finally, studies in the third category explain the effect of rules and codes of professional ethics on discouraging accountants from immoral behavior (e.g. Pflugrath *et al.*, 2007; Velayutham, 2003; Ziegenfuss and Martinson, 2002; Lin and Chan, 2000; Doost, 1997; Cohen *et al.*, 1992; Loeb, 1971, 1984). This paper tries to cover all of the above areas.

This research examines the impact of gender, level of education, work experience, and familiarity with the Iranian Association of Certified Public Accountants (IACPA) Code of Ethics for Professional Accountants (Iranian Association of Certified Public Accountants,

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2003) on the ethical decision-making of accounting students of four universities in Iran to determine the influencing factors on the formation of ethical criteria. Among these factors, educational level is a factor that determines the efficiency of academic affairs in developing ethical thinking of students. Although in ethical issues are explained briefly auditing courses, the accounting curriculum of Iranian universities does not include accounting and business ethics. Therefore, ethics education in Iranian universities is not systematic and mandatory.

It is expected that a higher level of education lead to stronger ethical criteria, because students can be aware of related theories. Further, we examine the role of the IACPA Code of Ethics in creating awareness of ethics among Iranian accountants.

This paper is organized as follows: a review of contemporary ethical theories is undertaken, and the IACPA Code of Ethics for Professional Accountants is elaborated, then prior research, hypotheses, research methods, analysis of findings, and conclusions are reviewed.

2. Theoretical concepts and literature review

2.1 Ethical models

Several theoretical models have been suggested to explain ethical behaviors. Keller *et al.* (2007), by adding a hermeneutical perspective, have improved the ethics model of Epstein and Spalding (1993), which comprised pragmatism (egoism), utilitarian, religious, and deontological. Duska and Duska (2003) suggest egoism, utilitarianism, and deontology to justify the accountant's ethical behaviors. We consider four models in this study:

1. egoism;
2. utilitarianism;
3. deontology; and
4. religious.

A brief description of each model follows.

2.1.1 Egoism. In this model, only the good for the decision maker needs to be considered; therefore it is an easier process (Keller *et al.*, 2007). It means that although a decision is contrary to others' interests, it is ethical if it serves the decision maker's good. The general principle is to behave in one's own interest (Duska and Duska, 2003). In other words, this theory promotes selfishness, and many people think it is unethical. This theory is the foundation of neoclassical economic theories.

Economists like Adam Smith (1937) thought that society would be more productive if it set up a system that legitimized strong self interest. Adam Smith says:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest. [...] We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages (Duska and Duska, 2003).

Duska and Duska (2003), in their work, claimed that economists and some philosophers and social scientists assume that everyone is self-interested, and they have developed economic and business models based on this assumption. It is clear that in the accounting profession, with codes of professional conduct emphasizing public interests, this economics/philosophical theory cannot be acceptable.

2.1.2 Utilitarianism. Mill (1962) described that "Actions are right proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness". Mill continues that "the happiness" he is talking about is "not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness all together". However, utilitarianism has been defined in a deferent way: do that action which brings about the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Utilitarianism derives significantly from egoism because the consequences that followers of utilitarianism use to judge the worth of an action are not simply the



consequences for everyone directly concerned with or affected by the action (Duska and Duska, 2003).

One of the major problems of utilitarianism is the problem of illicit means. That is, utilitarianism is accused of letting the ends justify the means, even if the means are immoral (Duska and Duska, 2003). Moreover, a cost-benefit analysis to evaluate the consequences of a behavior or action is time consuming and inaccurate.

2.1.3 Deontology. The third ethical model is deontology, which was introduced by Kant (1898). Based on this model, an action is moral if it is done to fulfill an obligation and to do one's duty. Therefore, deontological ethics focuses not on the results of an action, but rather on the action itself. The problem with deontology is that it provides "no basis for the continued evaluation of what is best" (Keller *et al.*, 2007). Since the duty of accountants is to provide useful information for decision-making, based on the model they should evaluate their actions for the purpose of satisfying this duty. The code of professional conduct for accountants could guide them in identifying their duties.

2.1.4 Religious. In this model, religious guidance determines what is right or wrong; therefore, divine consequences of an action should be considered. In other words, the source of ethics involves religious feelings and duties. Based on the type of religion, the ethical rules would differ. The Western world is mostly influenced by Christianity and Judaism, while, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are the prevailing religions in the East. Most Iranians are Muslim.

Muslims derive their ethical criteria from the teachings of the Qur'an and the sunnat (the sayings and behavior of Islam's prophet). Islamic ethical criteria are based on the interrelated concepts of unity, justice and trusteeship (Rice, 1999). Based on Islamic concepts, business activities should be useful for society. In Islam, lying, and harming other people and the environment are forbidden, and honesty, trustworthiness and taking care of the less fortunate are encouraged.

Religious virtue has played a positive role in the development of accountants' ethical perspectives. For accountants who believe in a Creator God, striving to do what is right in His eyes creates a moral imperative greater than human institutions alone. A recent widely distributed study by Gross and Simmons (2006) examined the religious views of US faculty in the top 20 baccalaureate-granting fields. Accounting professors had the highest percentage (63 per cent) saying that they have no doubt that God exists.

2.2 IACPA Code of Ethics for Professional Accountants

The Iranian Association of Certified Public Accountants (IACPA) was established in 1994 and officially commenced its activities in 2001. One of the main responsibilities of IACPA is to introduce ethical standards for professional accountants; for this purpose, the Code of Ethics for Professional Accountants was established in 2003. The Code states the "fundamental principles that should be observed by professional accountants in order to achieve the objectives of accounting profession".

These standards have been developed based on International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) Codes of Ethics for Professional Accountants. The Code emphasizes that the objectives of "the accountancy profession are to work to the highest standards of professionalism, to attain the highest level of performance, and generally to meet the public interest requirement". So, based on these standards, a professional accountant's responsibility is more than satisfying the needs of an individual client or employer. Rather, the standards of the accounting profession are mainly determined by "public interest". Moreover, accountants should work in a manner that leads to "the highest standards of professionalism" and "the highest level of performance". Therefore, the IACPA Codes of Ethics encourage utilitarianism and deontology. Since religions, especially Islam, emphasize these values, it can be said that these Codes of Ethics are in the same direction as the ethical principles of religions and Islam.



2.3 Ethical standards and related research

All over the world, many studies consider different factors influencing the development of ethical standards. Borkowski and Ugras (1992) found that the ethical attitudes of undergraduate and graduate business students are a function of age and gender, but work experience has no impact on it. Mason and Mudrack (1996), Ameen *et al.* (1996), Dawson (1997) and Ones and Viswesvaran (1998) confirmed the correlation between gender and ethical orientation; however, this was not confirmed by Jones and Kavanagh (1996).

Viet and Murphy (1996) suggested that differences in the ethical behaviors of investment analysts are associated with level of education, gender, and work experience. Karcher (1996) examined auditors' ability to discern the presence of ethical problems. She used a questionnaire including ordinary events and circumstances in auditing the workplace to understand auditors' ability to discern the presence of ethical problems and the importance of these problems to them. She found that factors that were useful in predicting whether a subject would mention an ethical issue included the nature of the ethical issue, the issue's severity, and the subject's age. Employment position, expertise, prior exposure to a similar ethical issue and education level (undergraduate versus graduate) were not significant. The actual ethical issue itself was also a significant factor in determining the absolute importance given to ethical issues in her study.

Grasso and Kaplan (1998) examined the extent to which educational background and demographic factors are associated with students' personal standards for ethical issues involving tax professionals. Two hundred and twenty-three students about to complete an introductory tax course were given ten brief scenarios focusing on the ethical and professional responsibilities of CPAs with tax practices. Their results indicated that female students had higher personal ethical standards for issues involving tax professionals than did male students. Exposure to a course in auditing was associated with higher ethical standards, but exposure to a general course on ethics was not. Students aspiring to be tax professionals had higher ethical standards for issues involving tax professionals than those who did not, but their beliefs about the morality of tax evasion were not significantly different.

Keller *et al.* (2007) examined factors influencing the ethical standards of future US accountants. Their findings suggested that there are differences in individual ethical standards based on gender, college level, religiosity, and work experience.

Shafer (2008) performed empirical research on ethics in the Chinese public accounting profession and the ethical culture or climate in Chinese CPA firms. He found that contrary to expectations, the perceived ethical climate in local CPA firms was not more negative. In addition, he indicated that the perceived organizational ethical climate significantly influenced high relativists, but low relativists were not similarly influenced.

Research on ethical decision making in accounting was conducted by Weisbrod (2009). He examined the effect of two variables – i.e. affect and tolerance of ambiguity – on ethics-related decisions made in personal and organizational settings. His experimental study of undergraduate accounting students revealed that tolerance of ambiguity significantly influenced ethical decisions in both personal and organizational settings. In addition, he found that there was a significant interactive effect between negative affect and tolerance of ambiguity.

Prior studies have examined the impact of some factors on developing ethical standards; however, no study has so far been conducted on Iranian accountants' ethical standards, and no study has examined the ethical culture or climate in Iranian CPA firms. Therefore, this study is the first research in this field in Iran.

Since the number of female Iranian accountants has risen over recent years, and this may potentially have some impact on the ethical atmosphere of the Iranian accountancy profession, we examined gender as an influencing factor. On the other hand, we know that one of the main objectives of higher education is to give complementary information about ethical and scientific schools to students to help them in making better and more ethical judgments. But, inefficiency of education or an emphasis on amoral or even immoral



conceptions of accounting can lead to inverse results. Therefore, an examination of the relation between the level of education and the development of ethical standards is important. The relation between work experience and ethical decision-making can show whether or not the professional environment in Iran is encouraging ethical behavior. Finally, the aim of establishing the Professional Codes of Conduct was to directing professionals towards ethical behavior and to discourage them from immoral conduct. Attaining this aim requires effective education. If familiarity with the Professional Codes of Conduct is an effective factor in an improvement in the ethical decision making of accounting students, it must be taken into consideration.

3. Research statements

This study has two goals:

1. to determine the ethical criteria of Iranian accountants; and
2. to determine the factors influencing the ethical criteria of Iranian accountants.

To achieve these objectives, we designed four hypotheses, as outlined below.

Prior research in other countries indicates that gender influences the ethical criteria of accountants (e.g. Keller *et al.*, 2007; Ones and Viswesvaran, 1998; Viet and Murphy, 1996). So, it is expected that the ethical standards of male and female accounting students in Iran are different. Therefore, the first hypothesis of this research is:

- H1.* There are significant differences in ethical standards between male and female students of accounting in Iran.

It is expected that higher education leads to students' awareness of ethical research and theories. Prior research confirmed this expectation (e.g. Keller *et al.*, 2007; Viet and Murphy, 1996). Therefore:

- H2.* There are significant differences in ethical standards between bachelor and Master's students of accounting in Iran.

When entering the work environment, students encounter real ethical issues, so they have to think about ethical dilemmas and their ethical standards may change. Prior research in other countries confirmed the effect of work experience on ethical criteria (e.g. Keller *et al.*, 2007; Viet and Murphy, 1996). Therefore, we expect that:

- H3.* There are significant differences in ethical standards between students with and without work experience in Iran.

The IACPA Code of Ethics for Professional Accountants includes some guidance about ethical behavior. It encourages working in a manner that serves the public interest. Therefore, it is expected that familiarity with these codes influences students' ethical criteria:

- H4.* There are significant differences in ethical standards between students which are familiar with IACPA Code of Ethics for Professional Accountants and students who are not familiar with it.

4. Research method and data acquisition

To test the hypotheses outlined above, we conducted a survey using questionnaires. A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". After a pilot study at Tarbiat Modares University, questionnaires were amended and their reliability and validity were calculated. To avoid bias related to specific university characteristics on generalization of findings, students of four universities were considered for this research. Our sample comprised accounting BS and MSc students of four Iranian universities (University of Tehran, Allameh Tabatabaee University, Shahid Beheshti University, and Alzahra University) who were studying in the spring of 2007. These universities are the biggest universities in Iran to have Bachelor's and Master's degree courses in accounting.



First- and second-year Bachelor's degree students were eliminated from the sample because their familiarity with ethical dilemmas was not sufficient. Although we sent out 270 questionnaires, only 234 were appropriate for analysis. Of the 234 students responding to the survey, 133 identified themselves as female. Table I shows how the sample is composed.

This survey asked students to respond to a series of statements concerning ethics, designed to allow researchers judge the ethical standards of students. Statements were included that could be placed under the categories of egoistic, utilitarian, religious, deontological, and amoral. The "amoral" perspective claims that accounting decisions and ethics are not related (Keller *et al.*, 2007).

5. Findings analysis and results

Each ethical standard (egoistic, utilitarian, religious, deontological, or amoral) was tested with two statements. These statements could be answered on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The questions are listed in Table II. We calculated the average of two questions, and considered these measures in evaluating the level of ethics standards. Analysis of the results emphasized the differences in ethical standards according to gender, level of education, work experience and familiarity with the IACPA Codes of Ethics for Professional Accountants.

Table III shows descriptive statistics of the variables. As Table III indicates, consistent with the findings of Keller *et al.* (2007), most students disagreed with the amoral view. Further, Table III shows that Iranian accounting students' level of ethics is nearly moderate.

A *t*-test was applied to examine the hypotheses. Table IV shows the *t*-test results for examining the differences in ethical standards of males and females. As Table IV indicates, with 95 percent confidence, there is a significant difference between males and females regarding egoistic and religious views. Females have stronger religious beliefs and males are more egoistic than females.

Table V shows the *t*-test results for examining the differences in the ethical standards of BS and MSc students. As Table V indicates, with 95 percent confidence, there is a significant

Table I Sample description

University	BS students	MSc students	Total
University of Tehran	68	28	96
Allameh Tabatabaee University	39	18	57
Shahid Beheshti University	29	14	43
Alzahra University	30	8	38
Total	166	67	234

Table II Statements included in survey instrument

Theory	Related questions
Religious	My ethical values are derived from my religious values
Utilitarian	For finding answers to ethical dilemmas, I use religious guidance
	I take into consideration the public interest and I will take decisions which are in favor of most people
Deontological	I think that what is right for greatest number of people is ethical
	Observing accounting standards or codes of professional ethics can reduce, or even eliminate, confronting with ethical dilemmas
Egoistic	I obey laws, accepted principles or accounting standards
	What is good for me is the basis for my ethical decision-making
Amoral	I will choose the alternatives which are the best for me
	There is no relation between accounting and ethics
	As an accountant, I don't expect to confront ethical dilemmas



<i>Variable</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>SD</i>
Religious	2.408	2	1.076
Utilitarian	2.436	2.5	0.778
Deontological	1.962	2	0.642
Egoistic	3.083	3	1.0173
Amoral	3.970	4.5	0.974

<i>Ethical standard</i>	<i>Total mean</i>	<i>Mean, males</i>	<i>Mean, females</i>	<i>t value</i>	<i>p value</i>
Religious	2.408	2.569	2.286	2.010	0.046
Deontological	1.962	1.896	2.011	-1.362	0.175
Utilitarian	2.436	2.446	2.429	0.165	0.869
Egoistic	3.083	2.896	3.226	-2.481	0.014
Amoral	3.970	3.876	4.041	-1.249	0.213

<i>Ethical standard</i>	<i>Total mean</i>	<i>BS mean</i>	<i>MSc mean</i>	<i>t value</i>	<i>p value</i>
Religious	2.408	2.334	2.588	-1.645	0.100
Deontological	1.962	1.922	2.059	-1.487	0.138
Utilitarian	2.436	2.370	2.596	-2.023	0.044
Egoistic	3.083	3.042	3.184	-0.967	0.335
Amoral	3.970	3.940	4.044	-0.743	0.458

difference between BS and MSc students in accounting in regard to the utilitarian view. Moreover, BS students have stronger religious beliefs.

As Table VI indicates, with 95 per cent confidence, there is a significant difference between students with and without work experience in regard to religious view. Religious beliefs are stronger in students without work experience.

Table VII shows *t*-test results for examining the effect of familiarity with IACPA Codes of Ethics for Professional Accountants on ethical standards of Iranian accounting students. As Table VII indicates, there is a significant difference between students who are aware of IACPA Codes of Ethics and those who are not aware of it. Students who know about IACPA Codes of Ethics are less egoistic than others. Furthermore, their belief to relationship between accounting and ethics is stronger.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the factors influencing ethical standards of Iranian accounting students. Our findings show that there are differences between ethical standards of males

<i>Ethical standard</i>	<i>Total mean</i>	<i>Work experience mean</i>	<i>No work experience mean</i>	<i>t value</i>	<i>p value</i>
Religious	2.408	2.599	2.287	-2.181	0.030
Deontological	1.962	1.973	1.955	-0.208	0.835
Utilitarian	2.436	2.462	2.420	-0.401	0.688
Egoistic	3.083	3.104	3.070	-0.252	0.801
Amoral	3.970	4.005	3.948	-0.443	0.658



Table VII Results of *t* test on the variable familiarity with IACPA Codes of Ethics

Ethical standard	Total mean	Familiar with codes mean	Not familiar with codes mean	t value	p value
Religious	2.408	2.431	2.389	-0.278	0.781
Deontological	1.962	1.938	1.988	0.566	0.572
Utilitarian	2.436	2.448	2.414	-0.313	0.755
Egoistic	3.083	3.201	2.926	-1.952	0.052
Amoral	3.970	4.115	3.815	-2.144	0.034

and females, and BS and MSc students. Moreover, work experience and familiarity with IACPA Codes of Ethics for Professional Accountants are the factors influencing ethical standards of Iranian accounting students. These results are consistent with Viet and Murphy (1996) and Keller *et al.* (2007).

Our findings show that Iranian accounting students' level of ethics is nearly moderate. On the other hand, the level of education influences the level of ethics criteria. Likewise, familiarity with the IACPA Codes of Ethics for Professional Accountants leads to a higher level of ethical standards. In fact, there is a need for an ethics educational program in accounting courses in universities in Iran.

While utilitarian, deontological, and religious ethical thinking are fundamentals of the IACPA Code of Ethics, it seems that Iranian accounting students' reliance on these schools of thinking is not strong. Therefore, it is necessary for accounting teachers to give more attention to these ethical criteria and their importance for a professional accountant.

Finding the factors impacting developing ethical standards is helpful in guiding persons, organizations and society towards ethical behavior. In this research only four factors were examined, namely gender, work experience, level of education, and familiarity with codes of ethics. Conducting further research and finding other factors would help educational centers and regulators to improve the level of professional ethics in Iran.

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