

## **Ethical Perceptions of Business and Education Undergraduates: Is there a difference?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

By controlling for undergraduate major area, this research adds to the scientific inquiries regarding the ethical perceptions of undergraduate students. Surveys were completed by undergraduate students at one institution within two educational major areas: business and education. Survey data was used to test whether ethical perceptions are affected by a student's academic major. A factor analysis identified two factors which were labeled dishonest academic acts and dishonest business acts. The ethical perceptions of business and education students was found to be significantly different for dishonest academic acts. Education students responded to the questions addressing dishonest academic acts more ethically than business students. Further analyses revealed that the ethical perceptions of the female and male students surveyed were significantly different. The female students surveyed responded more ethically than the male students.

Keywords: Academic Ethics, Business Ethics, Student Perceptions, Academic Major, Gender

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## INTRODUCTION

A Gallup poll conducted in 2017 sought to rank 22 occupations in terms of ethical standards and honesty. Grade school teachers were ranked the third highest with 66% of participants assessing the respective occupation's ethical standards and honesty as very high or high. By contrast, occupations with more of a business emphasis ranked far lower. Only 25% of participants assessed the ethical standards and honesty of bankers as very high or high. Similarly, only 16% of participants assessed the ethical standards and honesty of business executives as high. These ratings correspond to a rank of 12th and 18th respectively (Brendan, 2017).

While there is clearly a perceived difference in ethical standards between those in the education and business sector, does an actual difference exist? As future members in both sectors, this study seeks to determine whether an actual difference in ethical perceptions exists between undergraduate education and business majors. Further analysis compared perceptions segmented by gender. This research adds to the existing literature addressing the effectiveness of ethics education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Differences in ethical perceptions and actions among students in different college majors have been examined numerous times over the last 50 years. Although many researchers have examined this topic, inconsistent results have been reported.

Reiss and Mitra's (1998) research evidence failed to support their hypothesis that business majors tend to regard organizational behaviors of questionable ethical essence as more tolerable than non-business majors. Another study conducted by Snodgrass and Behling (1996) attempted to establish whether students who were initially attracted to a business major differ in moral reasoning from students with a non-business major. The levels of moral reasoning between business and non-business majors were not found to be significantly different. Likewise, Das and Henderson (2018) did not find a significant difference in levels of moral development between business students and students in other programs of study. Additionally, Laczniak and Inderrieden (1987) and McNichols and Zimmerer (1985) determined that in a work environment, the type of education an individual receives does not significantly affect ethical behavior. Specifically, in regard to business ethics, the difference in attitudes between business and non-business students found by Hermannsdottir, Stangej and Kristinsson (2018) was not significant.

Other research found a relationship between ethical perceptions and majors. Smyth, Davis, and Kroncke (2009) showed a majority of non-business majors responded with a higher level of dishonesty than business majors. Baird, Zelin, and Robert (2007) examined tolerance of unethical behavior among accounting majors, business majors, and non-business majors. Accounting majors exhibited the lowest tolerance of unethical behavior and both accounting and business majors exhibited lower tolerance of unethical behavior than non-business majors.

However, Lau and Haug (2011) found a higher tolerance of cheating among business students than other educational disciplines.

Limited research has been conducted to determine differences in ethical perceptions and actions between specific college majors. Results from Tang and Chen (2008) indicated there was a strong relationship between the love of money and unethical behavior for individuals with a business major. A similar relationship between psychology majors and love for money was not found. Haen, Vandenberg, Sauter, Spoerl, and Molnar (2017) reported a significant difference between the ethical perceptions of business majors and natural science majors. The science majors had more ethical responses to a given survey than business majors. Derryberry, Snyder, and Wilson (2006) found no difference in the likelihood of education majors and liberal arts majors to engage in academic misconduct. Similarly, by controlling for a number of other variables, Ghanem and Mozahem (2019) found the difference between the dishonest behaviors of business and engineering students to be insignificant.

The previous studies suggest a student's academic major may affect ethical perceptions. The following null hypothesis was developed in order to test for a relationship:

H1: The acceptability of dishonest acts will not be significantly different between education and business majors.

Previous research has also examined whether the type of dishonest act, academic or business, has a significant impact on results. In general, previous studies have found that students view dishonesty, whether related to academic or business acts, similarly. Lawson (2004) and Smyth and Davis (2004) did not find a difference between the ethical perceptions of dishonest academic and business acts. Other studies (Nonis & Swift, 2001; Sims, 1993) have indicated that students who cheat in school have a greater propensity to cheat in the workplace.

To determine if the type of dishonest act impacted results, the survey instrument categorized questions as either academic or business questions. Consequently, null hypotheses were developed and tested:

H2a: The acceptability of dishonest academic acts will not be significantly different between education and business majors.

H2b: The acceptability of dishonest business acts will not be significantly different between education and business majors.

An extensive amount of research has been conducted to examine whether a relationship exists between gender and ethical perceptions. Beltramini, Peterson, and Kozmetsky (1984) reported within the sample studied, females were more prone to express a higher level of concern for the presented ethical issues than males. Similarly, Kuntz and Butler (2014) and Lau and Haug (2011) found females deem cheating less acceptable than males. Further, a large number of

studies report males cheat more often than females (Ghanem & Mozahem, 2019; Yang, Huang, & Chen, 2013; Guo, 2011; Atmeh & Al-Khadash, 2008; Rakovski & Levy, 2007; McCabe & Trevino, 1997). Knotts, Lopez, and Mesak (2000), Cole and Smith (1995), and Ruegger and King (1992) all found gender to significantly impact student's ethical perceptions of business scenarios. Smyth, et al. (2009) reported male students judged ethically questionable situations to be unethical less often than did female students. Females demonstrated far more sensitivity for ethical concerns for all 26 statements presented to students for consideration. In Tang and Chen (2008), a relationship between a love of money leading to deceiving or manipulative nature that would ultimately lead to unethical behavior was only present for male business students. Additionally, a meta-analysis of 29 studies reported that all 29 studies showed males exhibited less ethical behaviors and attitudes than females (Borkowski & Ugras, 1998).

The discussed literature suggests gender may have a significant effect, thus the data was segregated between females and males. The following null hypotheses were developed to determine if a significant relationship was present:

H3a: The acceptability of dishonest academic acts will not be significantly different between male education majors and male business majors.

H3b: The acceptability of dishonest business acts will not be significantly different between male education majors and male business majors.

H3c: The acceptability of dishonest academic acts will not be significantly different between female education majors and female business majors.

H3d: The acceptability of dishonest business acts will not be significantly different between female education majors and female business majors.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The survey questionnaire was based on previous research studies. Survey questions were obtained from Molnar, Kletke, and Chongwatpol (2008), Lawson (2004) and Smyth and Davis (2004). Students completed a paper-based survey in regard to their perceptions about dishonest acts. Surveys were deemed appropriate based upon previous research. Beck and Ajzen (1991) found a good predictor of behavior is the intent to participate in such behavior. Reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach Alpha of .869, indicating a strong internal consistency of the survey instrument.

During the fall 2017 and spring 2018 semesters, undergraduate students completed the surveys. The respective college has a liberal arts focus with an enrollment of approximately 2,000 mainly traditional students. The institution also has a Catholic affiliation and is located in the Midwest. To ensure the sample was representative of the desired population, surveys were

administered to students enrolled in a course that was a graduation requirement for their respective major. Students voluntarily completed the questionnaire and were guaranteed complete anonymity. Students were reminded to read the questions closely. Survey responses captured demographic and academic data for each participating student, including age, gender, anticipated graduation year, major and GPA.

An interval assumed Likert-scale of 1 to 5 was utilized to code the survey questions. 'Strongly disagree' was represented with a 1 and 'strongly agree' was represented with a 5. Thus, a smaller overall score indicates that the student feels it is less acceptable to perform the dishonest act. Questions were included in the survey about dishonest academic acts (such as copying from someone during an exam) and dishonest business acts (such as lying on an employment application). Researchers conducted independent sample t-tests utilizing the dependent variables of participant responses to the questions pertinent to the study and segregated by the classifications of dishonest academic acts and dishonest business acts by utilizing SPSS. The average value of participant's responses for each classification was utilized. A smaller average value of the responses indicates a student finds participation in that type of dishonest act to be less acceptable.

## RESULTS

A total of 224 were utilized in the statistical analysis. Eleven surveys were removed due to incomplete answers. Out of the useable surveys, 105 were completed by education majors and 119 were completed by business majors. The participants were 48% male and 52% female; 84% underclassmen and 16% upperclassmen and over 74% noted they were currently maintaining a GPA of 3.0 or higher.

Table 1 (Appendix) shows the t-tests outcomes by major. No significant difference was found (p-value: .070), thus H1 cannot be rejected. Although it is interesting to note that overall, education majors reported a lower mean than business majors, indicating more ethical responses.

A principal factor analysis was conducted on the Likert portion of the survey utilizing the nine questions (Appendix) pertinent to this research. After a varimax rotation, two primary factor groups remained which are categorized as dishonest academic acts and dishonest business acts respectively. Factor loadings  $> 0.5$  and the eigenvalue greater than one criteria as suggested by Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black (1995) resulted in the two-factor solution. The dishonest academic acts category includes seven questions with loadings of .635 to .844, and the dishonest business acts category include two questions with factor group loadings of .821 and .870, see Table 2 (Appendix). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy yielded .881, see Table 3 (Appendix), which has been categorized as meritorious (Kaiser, 1974).

Table 4 (Appendix) shows the t-tests results by major segregated into dishonest academic acts and dishonest business acts. For the dishonest academic acts category, when the responses of the two majors are compared, a significant difference was found. However, for the dishonest business acts category, a significant difference between the majors was not detected. H2a is



rejected but there is not cause to reject H2b. The mean for education majors' is lower (thus more ethical) for the dishonest academic acts.

To control for gender, the data was separated into female and male respondents. Table 5 (Appendix) shows the outcomes for males, segregated by category (dishonest academic acts versus dishonest business acts) and by major. The t-tests with the categories segregated indicate a significant difference when the responses of the two majors are compared for dishonest business acts but not for the dishonest academic acts. H3b is rejected but not H3a. The responses to the dishonest business act questions of the male business majors were more ethical than the responses of the male education majors.

Table 6 (Appendix) shows the results for females, by factor category (dishonest academic acts versus dishonest business acts) by major. The t-tests with the categories segregated do not indicate a significant difference when the responses of the two majors are compared for either dishonest academic acts or dishonest business acts. H3c and H3d are not rejected. Although unable to reject H3c and H3d, it is interesting to note that the average scores for the female responses were lower than the average scores for the male responses. The lower mean suggests females, in general, answered the questionnaire in a more ethical manner than males.

## DISCUSSION

This study reports that the ethical perceptions of business and education majors in regard to academic dishonest acts are significantly different. Education majors were found to answer in a more ethical manner. In an attempt to further understand the reported difference, the effect of gender was analyzed.

As reported in Table 7 (Appendix), when just gender was analyzed with no consideration of major, females responded more ethically. Of the education majors, 73 of the 105 (70%) students surveyed were female while only 44 of the 119 (37%) business majors were females. This suggests that the previously noted statistically significant difference between business and education majors in response to the academic dishonest act questions could be the result of the large percentage of females within the education major. The effect of gender is consistent with the consensus of previous literature which suggests females exercise more ethical judgement.

With regard to the business dishonest act questions, the male business majors responded in a statistically significant more ethical manner than the male education majors, see Table 5 (Appendix). It is possible this difference may be the result of a difference in curriculum between business and education majors. All business students from the surveyed institution complete a business ethics course. It is possible the formal instruction on the topic of business ethics contributed to the reported more ethical responses from the male business majors.

Given that both male and female business majors are required to complete the business ethics course, one could expect similar results when comparing female business majors to female education majors. However, as noted in Table 6 (Appendix), a significant difference was not found for females. The conflicting results suggest completing a business ethics course may

impact male business students' ethical perceptions differently. Alternatively, the lack of consistent results may be due to female business majors beginning their college education with higher ethical standards and thus, having less room for improvement.

In addition, a review of previous literature may also help explain why the males surveyed responded in a statistically significant less ethical manner than females. As noted previously in Tang and Chen (2008), males exhibit a stronger love and desire for money than females. If the male participants of this study attributed engaging in dishonest acts to potential future monetary gains, it may be the case that their desire for money contributed to the findings.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS**

This research suggests that differences in ethical perceptions are not the result of simply one factor. Further research on the effect of gender, materialism, education, and other factors could help contribute to the understanding what impacts ethical perceptions. Understanding what factors impact ethical perceptions could have significant implications for employers and educators.

Future research on how ethical perceptions translate to actual behavior is likely a relevant extension to our research. For example, we show that business majors respond less ethically than education majors to our academic dishonesty questions. Does this ethical perception difference lead to more academic dishonesty by business majors? Answers to similar questions would be useful to detect a link between ethical perceptions and ethical behavior.

Another potential area for future studies is the influence of an ethics course on ethical perceptions. Specifically, do female and male students respond differently to the same ethics curriculum? Our results indicate that the influence of an ethics course might vary by gender. It would be worthwhile to know if ethics education is more effective for males or females and how curriculum might be changed to address any variance in effectiveness.

As is the case with all research, this study is subject to limitations. The relatively small sample size introduces a level of tentativeness to the conclusions. Additional data collection could help support our results, especially given the large proportion of female education majors surveyed.

Further, participants in the study were from a single college located in the Midwest United States. It is possible that results could vary based on the institution's geographic location, size, type, and other factors. The surveys used in this study were administered over the course of two sequential semesters. A larger sample size collected over a larger amount of time would likely increase the reliability of the results.



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**APPENDIX: TABLES, FIGURES, AND SURVEY INSTRUMENT**

Table 1

T-Test by Major						
Category	Major	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	p-value
All Dishonest Acts	Business	119	14.55	4.563	1.821	.070
	Education	105	13.51	3.903		

\*Significant at  $p < .05$

Table 2

Rotated Component Matrix		
Question	Component 1	Component 2
1	.773	.069
2	.819	.125
3	.844	.048
4	.635	.351
5	.739	.267
6	.715	.367
7	.757	.173
8	.183	.821
9	.125	.870

Table 3

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Test										
		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9
Anti-image Covariance	Q1	.520	-.032	-.153	-.019	-.013	-.055	-.070	-.019	.007
	Q2	-.032	.399	-.182	-.099	-.049	-.030	-.018	-.023	.011
	Q3	-.153	-.182	.374	.011	-.044	-.022	-.039	.007	.010
	Q4	-.019	-.099	.011	.564	-.090	-.115	-.013	-.012	-.071
	Q5	-.013	-.049	-.044	-.090	.477	-.071	-.139	.035	-.084
	Q6	-.055	-.030	-.022	-.115	-.071	.456	-.122	-.040	-.072
	Q7	-.070	-.018	-.039	-.013	-.139	-.122	.487	-.081	.083
	Q8	-.019	-.023	.007	-.012	.035	-.040	-.081	.659	-.303
	Q9	.007	.011	.010	-.071	-.084	-.072	.083	-.303	.646
Anti-image Correlation	Q1	.917 <sup>a</sup>	-.071	-.347	-.036	-.026	-.114	-.140	-.032	.012
	Q2	-.071	.880 <sup>a</sup>	-.471	-.209	-.113	-.070	-.041	-.045	.021
	Q3	-.347	-.471	.853 <sup>a</sup>	.024	-.104	-.054	-.093	.015	.020
	Q4	-.036	-.209	.024	.922 <sup>a</sup>	-.174	-.227	-.026	-.019	-.117
	Q5	-.026	-.113	-.104	-.174	.915 <sup>a</sup>	-.152	-.288	.063	-.151
	Q6	-.114	-.070	-.054	-.227	-.152	.920 <sup>a</sup>	-.260	-.072	-.133
	Q7	-.140	-.041	-.093	-.026	-.288	-.260	.896 <sup>a</sup>	-.143	.147
	Q8	-.032	-.045	.015	-.019	.063	-.072	-.143	.782 <sup>a</sup>	-.465
	Q9	.012	.021	.020	-.117	-.151	-.133	.147	-.465	.736 <sup>a</sup>
KMO of Sampling Adequacy: .881										
a. Measures of Sampling Adequacy (MSA)										

Table 4

T-Tests Segregated by Factor and Major						
Category	Major	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	p-value
Dishonest Academic Acts	Business	119	11.24	3.985	2.433	.016*
	Education	105	10.10	3.062		
Dishonest Business Acts	Business	119	3.31	1.110	-.641	.522
	Education	105	3.42	1.378		

\*Significant at  $p < .05$

Table 5

T-Tests for Males Segregated by Factor and Major						
Category	Major	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	p-value
Dishonest Academic Acts	Business	75	11.65	4.035	.151	.880
	Education	32	11.53	3.312		
Dishonest Business Acts	Business	75	3.49	1.155	-2.079	.040*
	Education	32	4.03	1.379		

\*Significant at  $p < .05$



Table 6

T-Tests for Females Segregated by Factor and Major						
Category	Major	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	p-value
Dishonest Academic Acts	Business	44	10.55	3.843	1.631	.107
	Education	73	9.47	2.739		
Dishonest Business Acts	Business	44	3.00	.964	-.717	.475
	Education	73	3.15	1.298		

\*Significant at  $p < .05$

Table 7

T-Tests Segregated by Factor and Gender						
Category	Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	p-value
Dishonest Academic Acts	Male	107	11.62	3.818	3.705	.000*
	Female	117	9.87	3.226		
Dishonest Business Acts	Male	107	3.65	1.245	3.455	.001*
	Female	117	3.09	1.182		
All Dishonest Acts	Male	107	15.27	4.496	4.163	.000*
	Female	117	12.97	3.785		

\*Significant at  $p < .05$

## Survey Questions Pertinent to this Study

1. It is okay for me to copy a someone else's electronic file such as an Excel spreadsheet, word or powerpoint document or computer program and submit it as my own work for a grade.
2. It is okay for me to use a PDA (Personal Data Assistant) or text messaging on a cell phone or iPod or other device to get an answer to a question when it is not allowed during a quiz or an exam.
3. It is okay for me to submit a friend's paper or part of a paper to a class as my own work for a grade.
4. It is okay for me to copy written homework (such as math or accounting problems) from someone else and submit it to a class as my own work for a grade.
5. It is okay for me to look on another student's paper and take an answer during a quiz or exam.
6. It is okay for me to copy material (such as text or images) from a book, periodical or newspaper (without citing it in my work) and submit it to a class as my own work for a grade.
7. It is okay for me to purchase a term/research paper (or part of one) from the internet and submit it to a class as my own work for a grade.
8. It is okay for me to lie to a potential employer/graduate school on an application.
9. It is okay for me to lie to my employer (for example: lying about reasons for missing work, filing a fake expense report, overstating work hours, etc.)

## Survey Instructions

“For each question, please CIRCLE the response that best reflects your university or college educational experience”

## Likert Scale

Strongly Disagree, Disagree, No Opinion, Agree, Strongly Agree