

Ethical Mindsets and Ethical Climates: Research Work in Progress

THEODORA ISSA AND
DAVID PICK

Seeking a solution to the recent deterioration in ethical standards that are witnessed in organizations around the world, Alzola (2011) urged the establishment of a reconciliation of normative and descriptive approaches to investigate and research the relationship between business and ethics. Our research in ethical mindsets, which extended recently into ethical climates, comes in response to such calls and other diverse calls by several scholars from different disciplines such as Lane & Klenke (2004), Ashar and Lane-Maher (2004), and Ghoshal (2005).

This increased chorus of calls,

especially with the market meltdown and its global ramifications, have been appealing for a re-examination of ethics guiding individuals. These individuals continue to struggle with emerging issues such as: uncertainty, risk, ambiguity and suffering and, in severe cases, these individuals might feel alienated in this society (as argued by Arian, 1993). Such developments in this post-ideological period and post-modern society seem to threaten the very fabric of the society, by allowing individuals to stand alone, and to introduce change to or even reject the values that have hitherto defined the character of Western society.

This trend, if left unchecked, might lead to grievous consequences for the society as a whole. Our research has been designed with special attention to Ghoshal (2005), who argues for a re-casting of management theory away from the currently dominant 'scientific model' that has tended to reduce the role of ethical and moral dimensions in theories and therefore in ideas about management practice. This is similar to Weick's (1999) recommendation that we abandon the heavy tool of paradigms and monologues and focus instead on achieving a deeper awareness of organizations by

Do Politicians Have Ethical Obligations? (Cont'd)

cal in nature, even of evolutionary origin, and that it has generated five foundations to morality: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. They assert that "political liberals have moral intuitions base on the first two foundations". They are misunderstood therefore by "political conservatives who generally rely on all five foundations"

Haidt and Graham may well be right. Their conclusion is certainly borne out by general observation. Politicians, at least under this analysis, can never win ethical plaudits across the entire population. And if a government tries to

determine where the majority might lie, it will be accused of being poll-driven. So we regard members of a government as unethical, but only when they do not agree with our particular political view point. Otherwise they exhibit ethical and unethical behaviours no different to the rest of us.

Whether in greater frequency than the rest of us is another question.

Peter Bowden,

Department of Philosophy, University of Sydney.

References

Brown, AJ. (2008). *Whistleblow-*

ing in the Australian Public Sector ANU ePress p.64.

Kerridge, I., Lowe, M., Stewart, C. (2009). *Ethics and law for the health professions*, 3rd ed. Sydney: Federation Press.

Beauchamp, Tom L. and Childress, James F. (2008). *Principles of Bio-medical Ethics* 6th. ed. Oxford University Press, New York.

Haidt, Jonathon and Graham, Jesse. (2007). 'When Morality Opposes Justice: Conservatives have moral intuitions that Liberals may not recognize.' *Social Justice Research*. 20, 1, 98-116.

Royal Commission on the Failure of the West Gate Bridge, 1971.

ETHICAL MINDSETS AND ETHICAL CLIMATES (CONT'D)

Theodora Issa and David Pick

theorizing through intuition, feeling, stories, experience, awe, vocabulary and empathy, and most importantly the ability to listen attentively to create theories that have practical as well as academic value. With this in mind, the aim of our research is to examine the mindsets of individuals, expanding into ethical climates. It is argued that research in ethics, and specifically business ethics, is gaining momentum. Our interest in researching mindsets comes despite the call by Alzola (2008) that questions whether ethicists need to abandon the very enterprise of building a character-based moral theory in business ethics and organizational behaviour.

This research on ethical mindsets and ethical climates draws mainly on two separate but allied business ethics literatures relating to spirituality and aesthetics, two issues that were and continue to be probed using the theoretical lens of mindsets. In order to achieve the aims and objectives of this research, an interpretive mixed-methods approach was considered the most appropriate. This research contributes to the contemporary debate on business ethics, moving behind the progressively

“Spirituality draws attention to individuals’ conscientiousness in inventing ethical workplaces, whilst aesthetics focuses the conversation and discernment on ethical behaviour in business. .”

more modernized investigative languages that prevail and beyond the traditional. Indeed, this research goes past and well beyond the obvious. With the exception of the work being undertaken by the authors (e.g. Issa and Pick, 2010), there is relatively little research that integrates spirituality, aesthetics and ethical mindsets. Spirituality draws attention to individuals’ conscientiousness in inventing ethical workplaces, whilst aesthetics focuses the conversation and discernment on ethical behaviour in business. Mindsets provide a key perspective that combines spirituality and aesthetics into a single analytical framework, thus allowing the investigation of both the individual and the organization (i.e. the ethical mindset and the ethical climate). Ethical Mindset has been defined as ‘an appreciation of and reflection on any situation through the filter of personal beliefs and values such as honesty, integrity, harmony, balance, optimism, pursuit of joy, peace and beauty, truth seeking, making a difference, and being professional, deriving from the strength rooted in individual’s inner-self’ (Issa, 2009, p. 163).

The project puts into practice a research tool generated from

Issa’s (2009) PhD thesis that identified eight components of ethical mindsets (i.e. aesthetic spirituality, religious spirituality, optimism, harmony and balance, personal truth, contentment, making a difference and interconnectedness). The results to date are limited to Australia and indicate that people might be ‘spiritual’ but this is not necessarily religious; instead, evidence is gathering to suggest that it might be derived from aesthetics. The research to date clearly demonstrates the context dependency of mindsets. Furthermore, a number of issues and questions were raised that are worthy of further examination, particularly in relation to the influence and importance of ethical mindsets and to varying and sometimes conflicting understandings and definitions of the term ‘spirituality’. Whilst there is a place of religious belief in workplaces, with the emergence of ‘religious spirituality’ as one of the components of ethical mindsets, nevertheless, to make it the sole focus would be a mistake given the evidence from this research of a strong and vibrant secular spirituality. However, this religious spirituality should not be diverted from its religious meaning and connotations; whereas if individuals are keen to think of spirituality components with secular mindsets, this should be referred to as aesthetic spiritual-

**ETHICAL MINDSETS AND ETHICAL CLIMATES:
RESEARCH WORK IN PROGRESS (CONT'D)**

**Theodora Issa and
David Pick**

ity. This will reduce the confusion, and emphasize the necessity to consider this important concept and its positive influence on individuals and in turn their organizations, society and community.

As for ethical climates, our research results so far suggest that public servants rate highly such values as integrity, honesty, support and compassion that act as a positive force for making the workplace more tolerable, flexible, and most importantly, in support of an ethical climate that is accountable. However, some respondents expressed concerns that management do not necessarily maintain or display such values. This is reflected in the doubt cast by respondents that an individual with a self-serving (selfish) ethical mindset can be changed for the better. This suggests, just as with ethical mindsets, that there are a number of different possible ethical climates. Furthermore, the analysis suggests that respondents display a high level of respect for belief systems different to their own. While there are those who stated that they do not 'wear their beliefs on their sleeves', those belief systems come out in the way they treat others and the way they view the world. To improve the ethical climate of public service organizations, the data suggests that it is important to combat feelings amongst staff that favouritism is

being practiced. Interestingly, respondents concede that this too is in the hands of management, saying that they say 'set the ethical scene'.

The next phase is to focus on achieving a wider understanding of ethical mindsets and ethical climates by undertaking international comparative research beginning with Australia, South Af-

"The analysis suggests that respondents display a high level of respect for belief systems different to their own."

rica, India, and Canada.

Dr Theodora Issa and Associate Professor David Pick,

Curtin Business School, Curtin University, WA.

References

ALZOLA, M. 2008. Character and Environment: The Status of Virtues in Organizations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 78, 343-357.

ARISIAN, K. 1993. *Will Humanism Survive the Postmodern era? A preface* [Online]. [Online]. Available: humanismto-

day.org. Available: <http://www.humanismtoday.org/vol8/> [2005, July 29th] [Accessed].

ASHAR, H. & LANE-MAHER, M. 2004. Success and Spirituality in the New Business Paradigm. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 13, 249-260.

GHOSHAL, S. 2005. Bad Management Theories Are Destroying Good Management Practices. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 4, 75-91.

ISSA, T. 2009. *Ethical mindsets, aesthetics and spirituality: A mixed-methods approach analysis of the Australian services sector*. Doctoral research thesis, Curtin University of Technology.

ISSA, T. & PICK, D. 2010. Ethical Mindsets: An Australian Study. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 96, 613-629.

LANE, M. S. & KLENKE, K. 2004. The Ambiguity Tolerance Interface: A Modified Social Cognitive Model for Leading under uncertainty. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 10, 69-81.

WEICK, K. E. 1999. Theory Construction as disciplined reflexivity: Tradeoffs in the 90s. *The Academy of Management Review*, 24, 797-806.