Connections Between Ethics and Cultural Dimensions

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The research question in this paper is how ethics is related with national culture. This explores our understanding of ethics, and helps us successfully handle ethical conflicts, and avoid or at least resolve crises. In this paper, the term “ethics” has a relatively broad meaning – it does not only refer to business ethics, but also to social ethics.

The paper starts with an overview of the theory, including definitions of ethics, illustrations of the three main theoretical ethical systems, the scope and domains of ethical conflicts, and an analysis of the factors influencing ethics. This is followed by an analysis of an empirical study conducted in Brazil, China and Estonia.

Theoretical Background

Ethics scholars hold various positions and have defined and classified ethics under various categories.

Definition of Ethics

According to Spence and Van Heekeren (2005), ethics can simply be defined as a set of prescriptive rules, principles, values and virtues of character that inform and guide interpersonal and intrapersonal conduct: that is, the conduct of people toward each other and the conduct of people toward themselves.

Gini (2004) considers that ethics is about the assessment and evaluation of values, because all of life is value-laden.

Three dominant theories in the ethics literature

Looking back through the history of the development of ethical theories, there are many different systems with various viewpoints. In this paper, the authors highlight three dominant theories that have been discussed most by ethics scholars.

Traditionally, there are two major types of theoretical ethical systems: Deontological ethics and Teleological (Utilitarianism) ethics. Table 1 compares these theories, their focus and representatives.
Three ethical theories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Deontology</th>
<th>Teleology (Utilitarianism)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Duties, obligations, and principles; moral rightness and wrongness;</td>
<td>Primarily focuses on consequences in determining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing what is</td>
<td>&quot;right&quot;;</td>
<td>Doing what will maximize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No-harm Principle</td>
<td>Benevolence Principle</td>
<td>societal welfare.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Represen
tative(s) | Kant I. (1724-1804) | Bentham, J. (1748-1832) & Mill J. S. (1806-1873) |


Theories that emphasize the nature of the act are called deontological (from the Greek word for "duty"). These theories hold that something is inherently right or good about such acts as truth telling and promise keeping and inherently wrong or bad about such acts as lying and promise breaking (Pojman, 2002).

Focusing on duties, obligations and principles, deontologists base their decisions about what is right on broad abstract universal principles such as honesty, promise keeping, fairness, rights (to safety, privacy, etc.), justice and respect for people and property (Trevino and Katherine, 1999). This system is expressed as the No-Harm Principle (Michalos, 1995): one ought to act so that one’s actions tend not to harm anyone else. The basic moral objective of this approach is to carry out one’s duty irrespective of the consequence, or end, of any action (McEwan, 2001).

Teleological ethics focus primarily on consequences in determining moral rightness and wrongness (Pojman, 2002). Utilitarianism is considered as the dominant version of teleological ethics (Trevino & Katherine, 1999; Pojman, 2002). Michalos (1995) states that this system follows the Beneficence Principle: one ought to act so that the consequences tend to impartially improve the quality of life. Utilitarianism leads one to do what is most likely to have the best consequences – to do that which will produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people (Pojman, 2002).

As Trevino and Katherine (1999) point out, a deontologist focuses on doing what is "right" (based on moral principles such as honesty), whereas a utilitarian focuses on the consequences and what would expectedly maximise societal welfare.

Pojman (2002) considers virtue-based ethical systems, sometimes called aretaic ethics, as the third theoretical ethical system. According to virtue-based ethics it is important not only to do the right thing, but also to have the requisite dispositions, motivations and emotions in being good and doing right. Obviously, the virtue ethics approach focuses more on the integrity of the moral actor than on the moral act itself (Trevino & Katherine, 1999). Fisher and Lovell (2003) argue that virtue ethics is not a system of rules, but rather a set of personal characteristics that, if practiced, will ensure that the individual is likely to make the ‘right’ choice in any ethically complex situation.

Ethical relativism could be used to make distinction between these two ethical theories. Highly relativistic individuals prefer to believe that moral actions depend on the nature of the situation and universal moral principles could be rejected (Forsyth, 1992).

Ethics domains and scope

Ferrell and Fraedrich (1997) argue that most ethical issues can be classified into four categories: conflicts of interest, fairness and honesty, communications and organizational relationships. A conflict of interest exists when an individual must choose whether to advance his or her own interests, those of the organization or those of some other group. Honesty refers to truthfulness, integrity and trustworthiness; fairness is the quality of being just, equitable and impartial. Communication, which refers to the transmission of information and the sharing of meaning, can be ethically impaired by lying because it destroys trust. Organizational relationships refer to ethical aspects of the behaviour of organizational members toward customers, suppliers, subordinates, peers and others (Ferrell and Fraedrich, 1997).

According to Pojman (2002), most ethical analysis falls into one or a number of the following domains: action, consequences, character and motive. These domains can be better understood from the possible sates they can assume. Action could be described in the following evaluative terms: right, wrong, obligatory and optional. Consequences are either good or bad or indifferent. Character could be virtuous, vicious or neutral. The terms used to describe motives are good will, evil will and neutral.

Factors influencing ethical conduct

Previous studies indicate, that the institutional context has impact on organisational culture (Übius & Alas 2009), on corporate social responsibility (Tafel-Viia & Alas, 2009; Übius & Alas, 2009) and on employee attitudes toward changes (Alas et al 2009b). All these concepts are connected with values and ethics. Institutions are ‘social structures’ which contain cultural elements and provide ‘meaning to social life’ (Scott 1995). McHoskey (1996) highlights need to consider cultural differences as context for ethical considerations. Ethical conduct is influenced by both situational pushes and pulls and the characteristics of the individual that we will call individual differences (Trevino & Katherine, 1999).

When people behave ethically, they must, among other things, decide what course of action is morally right, and they must choose the morally right path over others (Rest, 1986).

Another individual characteristic that has been found to influence ethical conduct is locus of control (Rotter, 1966). Locus of control refers to an individual’s perception of how much control he or she exerts over events in life. It is not something a person is born with. It is developed over time through interaction with other people and the social environment (Trevino & Katherine, 1999).
Why ethics is necessary

In terms of the purpose of ethics, Pojman (2002) lists five statements to illustrate why ethics are necessary: (1) keep society from falling apart, (2) ameliorate human suffering, (3) promote human flourishing, (4) resolve conflicts of interest in just and orderly ways, and, (5) assign praise and blame, reward and punishment, and guilt.

National culture

Previous studies indicate impact of the national culture on managerial values (Alas et al (in press) and on management practices (Alas 2008 and Alas et al 2009a). Social scientists use the term culture to mark a set of parameters for collectives that differentiate each social group in a meaningful way. In the GLOBE study, culture is defined as shared motives, values, beliefs, identities and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences among members of collectives that are transmitted across generations (House & Javidan, 2004).

As one of the most comprehensive studies of national cultures, the GLOBE study provides worldwide, multiphase, multi-method cross-cultural research data. It involves 170 social scientists and management scholars from 62 cultures that represent all major regions of the world.

According to House & Javidan (2004), there are two distinct kinds of cultural manifestations – values and practices – and nine core cultural dimensions in the GLOBE project:

- **Uncertainty Avoidance** is the extent to which members of an organization or society strive to avoid uncertainty by relying on established social norms, rituals and bureaucratic practices. People in high uncertainty avoidance cultures actively seek to decrease the probability of unpredictable future events that could adversely affect the operation of an organization or society and remedy the success of such adverse effects.

- **Power Distance** is the degree to which members of an organization or society expect and agree that power should be stratified and concentrated at higher levels of an organization or government.

- **Institutional Collectivism** is the degree to which organizational and societal institutional practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective action.

- **In-Group Collectivism** is the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty and cohesiveness in their organizations or families.

- **Gender Egalitarianism** is the degree to which an organization or society minimizes gender role differences while promoting gender equality.

- **Assertiveness** is the degree to which individuals in organizations or societies are assertive, confrontational and aggressive in social relationships.

- **Future Orientation** is the degree to which individuals in organizations or societies engage in future-oriented behaviours such as planning, investing in the future and delaying individual or collective gratification.

- **Performance Orientation** is the degree to which an organization or society encourages and rewards group members for performance improvement and excellence.

- **Humane Orientation** is the degree to which individuals in organizations or societies encourage and reward individuals for being fair, altruistic, generous, caring and kind to others (Ibid).

Studying and discovering the relationship between ethics and national culture may help people to apply appropriate ethical standards and adopt corresponding ethical understanding when dealing with ethical issues and handling ethical crises.

This brings the authors to the following research question: Is there any association between national culture and ethics? As culture is connected with norms people collectively follow, the deontological theories of ethics are most suitable for studying this research question. Therefore paper adopt a deontological approach by testing the absoluteness of “right” and “wrong” and the importance of the No-harm Principle.

Empirical Study

The aim of this empirical study was to identify how ethics is connected with differences in national culture. The research question is: Are there any connections between national culture and ethics? Three countries were selected for the investigation – Brazil, China and Estonia. These three countries are from 3 different continents: America, Asia, and Europe.

The sample

In 2008–2009, 356 questionnaires were answered in Brazil, China and Estonia. Among the entire sample 59 of the respondents were Brazilian, 236 were Chinese and 61 were Estonian. According to gender, 39.89% were male and 59.27% were female.

The respondents had a variety of work experience from a range of sectors. Of 356 respondents, 136 had 5 years work experience or more, 58 respondents had had between 1 and 5 years ( inclusively), 17 respondents had less than 1 year, and 95 respondents had not worked yet. According to sectors, 55 respondents were from the public sector, 104 from the private sector, 47 had worked in both sectors, and 95 that had not worked yet could not indicate any sector.

It is worth noting that there are some missing percentages or numbers in some of the information sections. That is due to some respondents not providing certain information.

The Method

The method used to measure ethics was questionnaire developed by Schlenker & Forsyth (1977) and Forsyth (1980). The first part was designed to assess the respondent’s background information, such as gender, age, education level, and work experience. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of the Ethics Position Questionnaire. The questionnaire was translated into Chinese and Estonian languages to conduct the research in these countries. Retranslation was done back into English.
to make sure that the translation was accurate. In Brazil an English questionnaire was passed out.

Each respondent answered the questionnaire independently and anonymously. The questionnaire contained 20 ethical statements. Each statement was followed by a 5-point-scale Likert-scale: 1 - strongly disagree, 2 - disagree, 3 - neutral, 4 - agree and 5 - strongly agree.

The EPQ consists of 20 items. Originally first 10 measure idealism and the last 10 measure relativism. In current study principal components analysis with VARIMAX rotation led to the identification of two dimensions, which were called Ethical Relativism (ER; Cronbach’s alpha = .749) and No-Harm Principle (NH; Cronbach’s alpha = .705). The first scale was formed from 5 questions, which in original questionnaire belonged also to ethical relativism scale and the second scale from 4 questions belonging to scale called ethical idealism. On current study the second scale is called No-Harm Principle, because authors find that this label illustrates the content of remained 4 items better.

The first scale, Ethical Relativism, suggests that ethical variety exists in different situations and societies. What one person considers to be moral may be judged to be immoral by another person, and different types of morality cannot be treated in terms of “right” or “wrong” because what is moral depends on the situation.

The second scale, No-Harm Principle, suggests that one should never psychologically or physically harm another person, and one should not perform an action that might threaten the dignity and welfare of another individual.

### Results

The analysis begins with the comparison of the three countries. In order to find statistically significant differences an ANOVA test was used. The results are listed in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Ethical Relativism</th>
<th>No-Harm Principle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>N=59</td>
<td>4.112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>.796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>N=236</td>
<td>4.113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>.615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>N=61</td>
<td>4.371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>.592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>.649</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1. Bold fonts indicate statistically significant differences (p< .050).
2. Analysis was conducted via an ANOVA test.

For Ethical Relativism, a statistically significant difference between at least two countries was found (F(2; 349) = 3.997, p = .019). Ethics was most relative for Estonian respondents (n = 61, mean = 4.371), then for Chinese respondents (n = 236, m = 4.113), and the least for Brazilian respondents (n = 59, mean = 4.112).

Statistically significant differences were not found in the No-Harm Principle scale (F(2; 353) = 2.974, p = .052). Estonian respondents (m = 3.800) were least likely to harm others, next came the Chinese respondents (m = 3.613), while the respondents from Brazil (m = 3.522) support the No-Harm Principle the least.

Both scales show the highest scores in Estonia, then in China and the lowest scores were in Brazil.

### Connections between ethics scales according to cultural dimensions

In order to measure and analyse the respondents’ answers, cultural practices and values data were used. The data about the country-level cultural dimensions in Appendix 1 are taken from the GLOBE study (House et al., 2004; Alas, 2006).

The Pearson Correlation analysis results in Appendix II indicate that a statistically significant correlation existed for scale 1, Ethical Relativism, (p << .05, 2-tailed) in 6 core cultural dimensions of the Practices manifestation. Ethical Relativism was negatively related to In-Group Collectivism, Institutional Collectivism, Humane Orientation, and Performance Orientation. Ethical Relativism was positively correlated with Future Orientation and Gender Egalitarianism (r = .116). In the Values manifestation, statistically significant negative connections existed in 2 dimensions: In-Group Collectivism and Uncertainty Avoidance. Regarding the No-Harm Principle, there was one dimension with a statistically significant correlation in the cultural values – In-Group Collectivism was negatively correlated.

Figure 1 illustrates the cultural practices and Figure 2 cultural values in three countries.
tend to consider ethics to be less relative compared to Estonians. Estonians also find the No-Harm Principle more important than the people from other two countries.

According to current study the impact of national cultural was greater on Ethical Relativism, where six cultural practices and two cultural values seem to influence how people think about what is right and wrong. Concerning the No-Harm Principle, one should not psychologically or physically harm another person, nor perform an action which might threaten the dignity and welfare of another individual, only In-Group Collectivism as a value had any impact: societies where In-Group Collectivism was higher followed this principle less.

In Figure 3 the connections between Ethical Relativism and cultural dimensions are shown.

When comparing the four dimensions of practices, Institutional Collectivism, In-Group Collectivism, Humane Orientation and Performance Orientation, which were negatively related to Ethical Relativism, China (4.67, 5.86, 4.29, 4.37) has the highest score in each dimension, Brazil (3.94, 5.16, 3.76, 4.11) the next highest and Estonia (3.71, 4.79, 3.39, 3.87) the lowest score. However, for the two dimensions, Future Orientation and Gender Egalitarianism, which were positively related to Ethical Relativism, Estonia (4.20, 3.60) has the highest score in each dimension, Brazil (3.90, 3.44) the next highest and China (3.68, 3.03) the lowest score.

In one of the two values dimensions, In-Group Collectivism, which was negatively related to Ethical Relativism, and was also the only dimension related to the No-Harm Principle (negatively related), Brazil (5.17) has the highest score in comparison with the other two countries – China (5.12) has the next highest and Estonia (4.95) the lowest. In one other values dimension, Uncertainty Avoidance, China (5.34) has the highest score, Brazil (5.00) the next highest and Estonia (4.31) the lowest.

**Conclusions**

The globalization of the economies of the world requires increased interaction between individuals from various cultures. The results of the current study indicate differences in ethics between countries. The comparison of countries indicates that Chinese and Brazilian respondents
Some connections could be drawn to previous studies. High In-Group Collectivism and Institutional Collectivism, which showed less Ethical Relativism in current study, indicated higher importance of ethics in study conducted in 12 countries (Alas, 2006). Therefore it could be assumed, that people who score lower in Ethical Relativism find ethics more important than those who score higher in Ethical Relativism. But there are also some contrasting results: Humane Orientation and Performance Orientation showed also less Ethical Relativism, but indicated lower importance of ethics in 12 countries study (Alas, 2006). At the same time deeper analysis in 12 countries study showed that the group with higher desire for ethics showed positive connection between this desire for ethics and two cultural dimensions: Humane Orientation and Performance Orientation (Alas, 2006).

Although current study does not clarify the contradictory results from previous studies, our findings could be the bases for developing propositions of future studies in different institutional environments. To conduct this research in other countries might help to test additionally the connections between Ethics and Cultural dimensions. Moreover, testing the model with larger populations in the same countries could help to obtain more information about the relationship between ethics and cultural dimensions in groups with different demographic characteristics. Bigger samples from more countries could enable to consider more contextual factors.

To conclude, some connections between national culture and ethics were found. Paying attention to the following cultural dimensions when doing business in different cultures could be useful: In-Group Collectivism, Institutional Collectivism, Humane Orientation, Performance Orientation, Future Orientation and Gender Egalitarianism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Practices</th>
<th>Ethical Relativism</th>
<th>No-Harm Principle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>5.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>5.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>5.52</td>
<td>4.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


Ruth Alas, Junhong Gao, Jorge Carneiro

*Santykis tarp etikos ir kultūros dimensijų*

Santrauka

Kai globalios ekonomikos susijusio ir vis daugiau organizacijų bendradarbiavau su savo partneriais ir konkurentais, tampė labai svarbu suprasti įvairias kultūros vertės, tradicijas, įsitikinimus, kurių valdo atskirų individų elgesi. Etniškių problemų paprastai kyla dėl konfliktų tarp individų moralės filosofijų ir vertių, taip pat tarp organizacijų vertių į darbe, visuomenės, kurioje jos funkcionuoja (Ferell ir Fraedrich, 1997). Norint sėkmingai spręsti šiuos konfliktus, žmonės, ypač aukštesnio lygio vadybininkai, turi sukti atitinkamus organizacijos etikos koncepcijos bei standartus ir tinkamai juos taikyti ir numatyti rezultatus.

Šio straipsnio tikslai – svarbiausia suprasti etiką, padėti žmonėms sėkmingai spręsti etikos konfliktus ir vengti su etika susijusių križių arba jas tiesiog spręsti. Atliekant tyrimą spręžiamas šis klausimas: ar yra sąsają tarp nacionalinės kultūros ir etikos? Straipsnyje taikoma deontologinis požiūris


Antrąsija skale – „be žalos“ principų, joks asmuo negali kentoti psichologiskai arba fiziškai kitam asmeniui ir negalima imtis veiksnių, kurie galėtų gręsti kito individuo gerovei ir orumui.


Vertinant ir analizuojant respondentų atsakymus, buvo panaudoti vertybų ir kultūros pavyzdžių duomenys. Duomenys apie šalių kultūrinės demensijos buvo paimti iš studijos GLOBE (House, 2004; Alas, 2006).

Po ir koreliacijos analizės rezultatai rodo, kad etiniai rekatyvizmo statistikai reikšmingai koreliacija egzistavo. Pastas pasirinkti nebuvo neišgaunamas susijęs su grupės kolektyvizmo, institucijų kolektyvizmo, žmogiškai orientacijos ir veiklos orientacijos. Etnik rekatyvizmo buvo teigiamai susijęs su etiniu rekatyvizmu ir dominuojama į atitinkančią orientaciją ir giminės egalitarizmui. Vertybėse statistikai svarbios neigiamai sąsajos įvairių kultūrių rekatyvizmo procese ir netikrumo vengimo procese. Atsidžiuvė „be žalos“ principų, su statistikai reikšminga koreliacija kultūros vertybėse buvo vien dimensija – grupinės kolektyvizmos buvo neigiamai koreliuojama. Keturtis praktinės dimensijos (grupės kolektyvizmas, žmogiškai orientacija ir veiklos orientacija) buvo neigiamai susijusios su etiniu rekatyvizmu. Kinijos kiekvieno dimensijos įvertinimas atitinka aukščiausius (4,67; 5,86; 4,29; 4,37), po to Brazilijos (3,94; 5,16; 3,76; 4,11), žemiausiausias rezultatas – Estijos (3,71; 4,79; 3,39; 5,87). Tačiau dvi dimensijos (ateities orientacija ir giminės lygybėje), kurios buvo teigiamai susijusios su etiniu rekatyvizmu, rodė, kad Estijos rezultatas aukščiausias (4,20; 3,60), po to – Brazilijos (3,90; 3,44) ir Kinijos (3,68; 3,03).

Brazilijos grupės kolektyvizmo dimensijos, kuri buvo nieigiamai susijusi su etiniu rekatyvizmu ir buvo vienintelė dimensija, susijusi su „be žalos“ principu, įvertintas aukščiausias – 5,17, palyginti su kitiomis dviem šalimis (Kinijos – 5,12; Estijos – 4,09). Kinijos netikrumo vengimo dimensijos įvertinimas aukščiausias – 5,34, Brazilijos – 5,00, Estijos – 4,31.

Kad vyktų pasaulio ekonomikos globalizacija, reikalinga daugiau bendradarbiauti įvairių kultūrų individams. Šio tyrinėto rezultatui parodo skirtumus tarp šalių etikos sritėje. Šalį paplitusios teorijos, kad Kinijos ir Brazilijos respondentų menypus, etika mažiau susijusi su pasauliniais procesais. Estų nuomone, „be žalos“ principas svarbesnis, nei mano kitos šalys.


Žvelgendą į kultūros vertybes, grupės kolektyvizmas ir netikrumo vengimas veikia įvairią etiką. Visuomenėje, kurioje yra aukščiausias grupės kolektyvizmas ir vengiama netikrumo, etinis rekatyvizmas yra mažiau susijęs su kultūros vertybėmis.


Buvo nustatyta priklausomybė tarp nacionalinės kultūros ir etikos, taip pat svarbios koloniių dimensijos verslo įvairių sąlygų vystytis: grupės kolektyvizmas, institucinis kolektyvizmas, žmogiškai orientacija, veiklos orientacija, atvirkštinė orientacija ir lyčių lygybė.

Raktas: etika, kultūra, kultūrinės vertybės, Estija, Kinija, Brazilija.

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