

## **Ethical perceptions of newly staffed accountants: an exploratory study**

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### **Abstract**

The current economic crisis coupled with corporate scandals may have impacted the future leadership of newly staffed accountants. As a result, it may be of some benefit to see if the ethical perceptions among newly staffed accountants were affected by the unethical decision-making of some key corporate leaders. The purpose of this study therefore, was to explore the ethical perceptions among newly staffed accountants in light of the unethical behaviors of some corporate leaders. This study explores the stages of the theory of moral development by Lawrence Kohlberg using Victor and Cullen's Ethical Climate Questionnaire (ECQ). Approximately 75 newly staffed accountants were surveyed. Findings suggest that newly staffed accountants surveyed in this paper can be used to improve both academia and corporate training.

Keywords: Accounting, Business Ethics

## INTRODUCTION

The unethical acts committed by some corporate leaders may have contributed to a change in the ethical perceptions of newly staffed accountants (Koumbiadis, Conway & Gupta, 2009; Dellaportas, 2006; Esmond-Kiger, 2004). The unethical conduct by some public accountants has necessitated a change in the manner of responsibility for improving the quality of public accountants (Desplaces, Melchar, Beauvais, & Bosco, 2007). An investigation on this topic reveals that little research has been conducted on this issue and none at all on the ethical perceptions of newly staffed accountants in view of the unethical acts committed by some corporate leaders.

Since 2008, a revision of the accounting curriculum by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) effected most post-secondary institutions (Earley & Kelly, 2004). Students enrolled as accounting majors were faced with new challenges within the profession as a result of unethical acts committed by some corporations (Puxty, Sikka, & Willmott, 1994). The challenge today for staff accountants is to maintain an ethical posture learned from the new educational requirements by the AICAP, and to remain responsible within the accounting profession in light of the corruption of some unethical leaders (Malone, 2006).

Newly staffed accountants are the future leaders within the accounting profession. An investigation into the ethical perceptions of newly staffed accountants may help society by improving the awareness of ethical practices when making decisions that may curtail any possible future unethical business practices (Myers, 2003).

There are some states that have gone as far as adopted an oath for newly staffed accountants who have successfully passed the CPA exam. For example, the state of Maryland requires each individual to take an oath stating that:

I solemnly swear that I will assume the responsibilities and obligations as a certified public accountant in the state of Maryland and in the United States of America. I will support the laws and regulations and perform my professional duties to the best of my ability in an ethical, professional and objective manner. As a CPA, I will uphold the honor and dignity of the accounting profession and abide by the rules of professional conduct. <http://www.cpasuccess.com/2009/06/protect-the-public-you-have-their-word.html>

The focus for this research relates to ethical perception of newly staffed accounting graduates. Certified Public Accountants (CPAs) agree that individuals seeking a profession in accounting are required to be highly ethical (Mason, 1994). According to Alan and Jack (2008), clients pressure accountants to reduce fees and hours reported to the firm. Additionally, the expenses of maintaining a firm have increased as a result of the enactment of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002. Also, Jenkins and Wolf (2008) stated that the “CPA faces many challenges with an increase in liability risk, standards overload, a lack of growth in the demand for services, and keeping pace with the explosion in technological advances” (p. 46). Therefore, newly staffed accounting graduates are to exhibit good moral character. This study also described models, perspectives, issues of importance, and controversies that are associated with ethical decisions and an individual’s moral ethical behavior.

## Research Problem

Financial information that is prepared by accountants for external reporting must conform to Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP). When GAAP is followed, the information usually contains certain characteristics that make financial reports both relevant and reliable. The unethical decisions made on the financial reports by some accountants has proven damaging to the public who use the information for decision-making (Brown, Stocks, & Wilder, 2007; Gene, 2005). In addition, public confidence in the accountant has been shaken by some corporate scandals, which spurred a crisis affecting the economy and the reputation and credibility of accounting professionals (Earley & Kelly, 2004; Zabihollah, 2004). This crisis of ethics involving financial reporting by U.S. corporations has necessitated a change both government intervention by passing the 2002 Sarbanes-Oxley Act and a revision to the accounting curriculum mandated by the AICPA (Koestenbaum, et al., 2005; Cunningham, 2006). The question is whether the unethical acts by some corporate scandals affected the ethical perceptions of newly staffed accountants.

## Research Questions

The research questions below were developed from a review of the literature. The questions have been found to be appropriate to the study of ethics (Koumbiadis & Okpara, 2008; Dellaportas, 2006; Earley & Kelly, 2004; Cullen, Parboteeah, & Victor, 2003). The research questions serve as a basis for developing the hypotheses for this study. These research questions (RQ) helped to guide this study and were answered in accordance with the responses recorded on the ECQ and Demographic Questionnaire (DQ) questionnaires:

*RQ1*: Is there a relationship between the ethical perception (*egoism*) of newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders?

*H1*: There is no relationship between ethical perceptions (*egoism*) of newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders.

*RQ2*: Is there a relationship between the ethical perception (*benevolence*) of newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders?

*H2*: There is no relationship between ethical perceptions (*benevolence*) of newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders.

*RQ3*: Is there a relationship between the ethical perception (*principle*) of newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders?

*H3*: There is no relationship between ethical perceptions (*principle*) of newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders.

## Theoretical Framework

Kohlberg's moral development theory provides the theoretical foundation for most contemporary empirical ethics research. Kohlberg's theory suggests that people use three general hierarchical approaches to resolve an ethical dilemma. These dilemmas are classified into various levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional or principled, which are further broken down into stages. The six stages of the pre- through post-conventional levels include a developmental sequence of ethical, problem-solving strategies. The moral development theory's basic tenet is that an individual will progress through the stages in a sequential manner (Kohlberg, 1976; Rest, 1973, 1979). Kohlberg's (1969) theory on cognitive moral development gave details on how people's ability to make rational choices in society is influenced by one's surroundings, which include culture, religion, and education. Kohlberg demonstrated that ethical reasoning is taught early on in life and develops gradually as individuals mature. Education, according to Kohlberg (1969), provides intervention and stimulates cognition as people go through a series of stages.

## Literature Review

Among the most well-known paradigms on ethics is Kohlberg's (1969) theory on Cognitive Moral Development (CMD), which expanded on Piaget's (1932) work on children's moral reasoning development. Kohlberg was interested more in the way of one's moral thinking as opposed to one's moral actions. Kohlberg's theory on CMD has been used broadly to study the levels of moral progression of accounting students and accounting professionals (Jones et al., 2003). Jones et al. (2003) revealed a "relationship between a variety of individual characteristics and ethical development" (p. 92).

Kohlberg's (1969) research on CMD was measured in a "series of stages that begin in adolescence and extend through adulthood" under the headings of pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional (p. 39). Under each heading appeared two stages. Kohlberg made it clear that people's ability to rationalize ethically in society was carried by associations with others in one's environment. Kohlberg showed that ethical values through moral reasoning may develop early on in life and grow slowly as people mature into adulthood. Rest (1986) noted that Kohlberg's "six stages are viewed as forming an invariant developmental sequence in which attainment of an advanced stage is dependent on the attainment of each of the preceding stages" (p. 226).

Kohlberg's six stages of moral maturity are found in Table 2. Victor and Cullen's ethical climates "suggest that individuals' moral reasoning skills (judgment on how moral dilemmas ought to be resolved) evolve over time, reflecting three distinct categories of moral judgment processes, which he termed pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional" (p.185-186).

Kohlberg (1969) stated that most people do not proceed beyond stage four of the ethical decision-making process, and theorized that most individuals do not progress through the three levels of cognitive moral development. Individuals who do get through the three levels use moral reasoning that would be characterized by reference to universal values or principles, even when these might not be compatible with society's law (Trevino, 1986). Kohlberg's theory is relevant to this study because of the way accounting students progress through the stages of moral maturity as they go through the accounting curriculum from the time they are freshmen to the

time they graduate as seniors (Earley & Kelly, 2004; Clikeman, 2003; Jones, Massey, & Thorne, 2003).

## Victor and Cullen’s Ethical Climate

Grounded in Kohlberg’s theory of Cognitive Moral Reasoning (CMD), Victor and Cullen (1988) developed the Ethical Climate Questionnaire (ECQ) to measure moral reasoning by examining the organization’s ethical climate. The ECQ is a two-dimensional model that recognizes shared perceptions, ethical events, ethical practices, and ethical procedures which depend on the first dimension, the ethical criterion, and the second dimension, the loci of analysis.

The Ethical Climate Questionnaire (ECQ) is the instrument used to collect data in order to assess the ethical climate within an organization that is being studied. The ECQ employs a two-dimensional approach that recognizes ethical climates internal to an organization. The first dimension is characterized by the ethical criteria that consist of self in egoism, namely one’s own interest, benevolence, emphasizing the individual’s interest within the organization, and principle used within an organization, which is an “adherence to universal standards and beliefs” (Gül Selin & Ayse Begüm, 2008, p. 959). The second dimension suggests each ethical criterion is related to each individual, groups (local), and a greater population (cosmopolitan), which corresponds to the locus of analysis, which is shown in Table 1.

Victor and Cullen (1988) expound on the locus of analysis in their matrix:

Locus of analysis is a referent group identifying the source of moral reasoning used for applying ethical criteria to organizational decisions and/or the limits on what would be considered in ethical analyses of organizational decisions (Victor & Cullen 1988, p.105-106).

Table 1  
Theoretical Ethical Climate Types

Ethical Criterion	Locus of Analysis		
	Individual	Local	Cosmopolitan
Egoism	Self-Interest (EI)	Company Profit (EL)	Efficiency(EC)
Benevolence	Friendship(BI)	Team Interest(BL)	Social Responsibility(BC)
Principle	Personal Morality(PI)	Company Rules and Procedures(PL)	Laws and Professional(PC)

Source: Victor and Cullen (1988, p. 104). From “Matching Ethical Work Climate to In-role and Extra-role Behaviors in a Collectivist Work Setting,” by A. S. M. Leung, 2008, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 79, p. 43-55. Copyrighted 1993 by the American Psychological Association with permission of the author

## Methodology

While research on evaluating the ethical perceptions of individuals has been conducted in an earlier period (Kohlberg, 1976; Rest, 1973; Victor & Cullen, 1988), little research has been conducted on this issue, and no research, as far as can be found, is available on this topic pertaining to the unethical decision-making of some key corporate leaders and the ethical perceptions among newly employed staff accountants.

## Research Design

The research design chosen for this study, which looks at newly staffed accountants from both private and public accounting firms in New York State, used a non-experimental, cross-sectional survey design employing a hypothesis testing for this study on ethical perceptions (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). A cross-sectional survey design was the most appropriate choice for this quantitative study because these procedures allowed the researchers to “compare two or more groups in terms of attitudes, beliefs, opinions, or practices. The group comparisons may compare male with female...or they may compare other groups within the firms settings” (Creswell, 2005, p. 356). Cross-sectional studies have been used to evaluate groups in past accounting research (Shimin, 2008; Albrecht, Shamsub, & Giannatasio, 2007).

## Sampling

The researchers chose a sample of newly staffed accountants. A sample list of 155 subjects for each group was selected from a list of colleges from the New York State Education Department Office of Higher Education (NYSED) (n.d.), under the 2008 Statistical Data and Reports on institutional files.

A stratified random sample technique was used to collect data from the two groups of accounting majors. This technique of sampling was chosen because unevenness on a characteristic of the sample studied may exist. From a representative sample of newly staffed accounting graduates for each group, the researchers first separated the population into subgroups pertaining to certain characteristics (e.g., gender, GPA, and having taken an ethics course), and then a particular number of respondents using a simple random sample was selected from each subgroup. For example, there may be more female participants from the 120 credit program than the 150 credit program. According to Creswell (2005) “stratification ensures that the stratum desire will be represented in the sample in proportion to that existence in the population” (p. 148).

## Instrumentation

The instrument used for gathering data was Victor and Cullen’s Ethical Climate Questionnaire (ECQ). The ECQ consists of 36 questions and uses a two-dimensional approach to recognize ethical climates within a current work organization. The first dimension is characterized by the ethical criteria consisting of self in egoism, benevolence, and principle that are used within an organization. The second dimension corresponds to the locus of analysis. The objective of the ECQ in this study was to determine whether a significant difference exists between the ethical perceptions of the two groups of newly staffed accounting graduates. Additional factors may exist as potential limitations to this study, such as an individual’s culture, religion, and type of organization where an individual may be employed.

## Data Collection

The set of questions asked the participants to read a scenario regarding coworkers who frequently remove resources (e.g., stationary, pens, etc.) from the office for their own personal use. The participants responded by indicating either “yes” or “no” and asked whether they would

confront or avoid the individual. The choices included: a) Should rules be broken?, b) What is the distinction between what should be done as part of your job or what you know your peers feel you should do?, and c) What is your overall attitude on unethical behavior? The last part of the questions used a Likert scale ranging from completely false (1) to completely true (5). The 76 participants were asked to focus on what suggestions can be made by several recommendations on how to decrease unethical behavior among peers and fraudulent reporting. The choices comprise: a) documenting the findings, b) meet with a manager, c) assemble and collect all pertinent documents, and d) do nothing.

The lead author conducted the survey in the distribution of the instrument in both private and public universities. Out of the 135 surveys administered, a total of 155 students indicated an interest in participating. A total of 3 surveys were removed due to incomplete answers on the questionnaires. As a result, 76 surveys samples were used in the analysis of the study representing 56% for those surveyed. Table 2 shows the number of questionnaires distributed and the number that was ultimately used for the data analysis.

Table 2

*Questionnaire Response Summary*

135	120 emailed, 15 mailed through the post office
4	Questionnaires partially completed 3%
55	No response was returned to the researcher 41%
76	Total usable questionnaires (a response rate of 56%)

The demographic data received from the respondents indicated that the newly staffed accounting graduates sample is a representative of the population of the two groups of newly staffed accounting graduates. Table 3 presents the frequency distributions of the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents. The newly staffed accountants consisted of 76 respondents. Of the 76 respondents, 41 or 53.9% represented males and 35 or 46.1% represented females. The second question was on which respondents completed the mandated AICPA 150 credit hour program. Of the 76 respondents, 49 or 64.5% represented those staff accountants who did not graduate with 150 credits and 27 or 35.5% represented the staff accountants who have completed the mandated AICPA 150 credit hour program.

When it came to answering whether they had taken an ethics course, 62 or 81.6% of the respondents reported having taken an ethics course compared to 14 or 18.4% of the respondents have not taken an ethics course.

Table 3

*Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents (N=76)*

Demographic Variable		Newly Staffed Accountants	
			%
Gender	Male	41	53.9%
	Female	35	46.1%
Program Credit	120	49	64.5%
	150	27	35.5%

Credit				
GPA	3.5 to	47	55%	
	4.00	33	39%	
	3.0 to	5	6%	
3.45	2.5 to			
	2.95			
Have you taken an ethics course?	Yes	62	81.6%	
	No	14	18.4%	
Awareness of Corporate scandals	Poor	0	0%	
	Fair	20	26.3%	
	Good	53	69.7%	
	Excellent	3	3.9%	

Note. Newly staffed accountants N=76

## Results

The aim of this study was to explore the ethical perceptions of newly staffed accounting graduates. To accomplish this, the researchers evaluated if a relationship existed among the tested variables using Pearson's correlation, which was chosen as the best method of analysis for this study. The researchers used Pearson's correlation, which helped determine if any relationship existed between the knowledge of corporate scandals (independent variable) and the ethical perceptions of newly staffed accounting graduates (dependent variable). Any variations of newly staffed accounting graduates were statistically analyzed and reported.

Table 4 shows a description of the respondents on the means and standard deviations of the study's variables which are derived from the nine dimensions of the Ethical Climate Questionnaire (ECQ). Furthermore, this section discusses the statistical tests that were used for data treatment and analysis. The results of the three hypotheses are reported and discussions of the findings of each research hypothesis are also presented.

Table 4 *Variable Means and Standard Deviations of both programs and ethics course*

Program	120 credit program		150 credit program	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
ECQ				
Egoism	2.94	.870	3.61	.680
Benevolence	3.03	.821	3.46	.370
Principle	3.40	.690	3.76	.460

Note. N=76

A total of three hypotheses were derived from the Ethical Climate Questionnaire (ECQ) and were tested in this study using Pearson's correlation (see Table 5). This test was appropriate



for this study since the hypotheses tested for a relationship among the variables of newly staffed accounting graduates and corporate scandals.

Table 5 Pearson's correlation

ECQ Variables

	Awareness of Corp Scandals	Egoism	Benevolence	Principle
1. Egoism	.341**			
2. Benevolence	.116	.395**		
3. Principle	.488**	.378**	.537**	

Note. N=76 \*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## Hypothesis 1

Pearson's correlation was conducted to determine if a statistical significance existed. The *r*-values were highly significant at .01. The three hypotheses are presented above in Table 5. The null hypotheses were expressed as H1. Hypothesis 1 began with looking to see if there was a relationship between the ethical perceptions of *egoism* and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders.

*H1*: There is no relationship between ethical perceptions (*egoism*) of newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders.

Hypothesis 1 shows that there was a statistical significance reported with an *r*-value of .341 among the newly staffed accounting graduates and their ethical perceptions in light of the recent unethical behaviors of corporate leaders. The researchers were 95% confident that a statistical relationship existed. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected that there were no relationship between ethical perceptions (*egoism*) of newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders.

## Hypothesis 2

Pearson's correlation was conducted to determine if a statistical significance existed. The *r*-values were not significant at .05. The three hypotheses are presented above in Table 5. The null hypotheses were expressed as H2. Hypothesis 2 began with looking to see if there was a relationship between the ethical perceptions of *benevolence* and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders.

*H2*: There is no relationship between ethical perceptions (*benevolence*) of newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders.

Hypothesis 2 showed that there was no statistical significance reported with an  $r$ -value of .116, which was greater than .05. The researcher was 95% confident that a statistical difference did not exist among the newly staffed accounting graduates and their ethical perceptions in light of the recent unethical behaviors of corporate leaders. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted and the alternative hypothesis was rejected that there was a statistical relationship (*benevolence*) of newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders.

### Hypothesis 3

Pearson's correlation was conducted to determine if a statistical significance existed. The  $r$ -values were highly significant at .01. The three hypotheses are presented above in Table 5. The null hypotheses were expressed as H3. Hypothesis 3 began with looking to see if there was a relationship between the ethical perceptions of *principle* and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders.

*H3*: There is no relationship between ethical perceptions (*principle*) of newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders.

Hypothesis 3 showed that there was a highly statistical significance reported with an  $r$ -value of .488 among the newly staffed accounting graduates and their ethical perceptions in light of the recent unethical behaviors of corporate leaders. The researchers were 95% confident that a statistical relationship existed. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected that there was no relationship between ethical perceptions (*egoism*) of newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected that there were no relationship between ethical perceptions (*principle*) of newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders.

### Conclusion and Implications

The study established that a relationship existed for H1 and H3 of newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders. Overall, newly staffed accountants are more likely to be aware of the importance of ethical behavior as a result of the demise of some large corporations, the ripple effect of these catastrophes on the economy, and the judicial consequences of perpetrating the financial fraud.

This study also had some limitations. The researchers only compared the relationships between newly staffed accountants and the unethical behaviors of corporate leaders. It is possible that comparing GPA, gender, employment, and taking an ethics class may turn out a different outcome. However, based on the findings and conclusion of this research, it is suggested that business school programs, especially accounting, should continue to emphasize ethical and moral issues in their respective programs. Accounting professors, in the opinion of the authors, should devote more time to raising students' awareness of ethical issues in the classrooms.

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