

# Global Ethical Decision Making Research Project

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The purpose of this global ethics decision-making research project was to test two competing hypotheses—first, that there are global, shared values, and thus a universally shared view of ethics; and second, that values and ethics are shaped by diversity factors such as age, gender, culture, role, education, and industry. These hypotheses were examined through an online survey—opened in August 2016 and running through March 2017—and were explored hypothetically, because people were telling us what they would choose to do without us ever knowing what, in fact, they would actually have done.

The thinking behind our hypotheses was that ethics is a common global phenomenon, but how people decide to act in particular ethical situations may often be “local”—that is, influenced by culture, as well as other factors such as age, gender, job, and education. This research was designed to explore whether there were differences in ethical decision

making in the workplace. It used 10 short ethics case studies with forced-choice options, after first providing anonymously some demographic data on the survey takers (see the appendix for demographics and survey questions and options). We received close to 3,500 responses from around the globe, and around 3,000 of those who answered responded to most of the questions in the survey. It must be noted, as a disclaimer, that the survey was conducted in English only, thus limiting the inclusion of survey participants to only those who can speak or understand English worldwide. Any future research to corroborate our findings should provide multiple language options.

Overall, one of the findings of the survey is that ethics appears to have a high level of universality, seen in many of the cases where an option to do nothing was universally rejected (having zero or very low percentage scores across cultures, age, gender, education, etc.).

The other finding of the research is that there are various ways in which ethical decision making appears to be influenced by culture, age, gender, and so forth. This perhaps is not surprising because cultural and other differences are well documented around the globe, and thus, one would expect these factors to impact ethical decision making to some degree. Some differences are rather small, and others more significant, as we explore a wide range of differences. Culture, followed by age, showed the more widespread differences; some significant results for culture were shown in all 10 cases, and in seven of the 10 cases for age. Industry showed significance in six of the 10 cases, role in five cases, gender and title in four cases each, and education level in only two of the 10 cases.

Using multinomial logistic regression analyses, we tested the null hypothesis that the demographic information has no impact on the ethics questions. This paper reports some of the significant results of these regression models. There was one model for each ethics question. Significance was tested with an alpha level of 0.05, or in other words, a 95% probability of correctly rejecting the null hypothesis. Because of overlapping variables with high correlations leading to

misleading results in regression analyses, we only performed multivariate analyses on demographic questions 1 (gender), 2 (age), 5 (culture), 6 (education), 7 (role), 8 (title), and 10 (industry).

We will now describe the differences we found across the demographic data, where significant, using the case study data where appropriate. Please see the appendix for the full cases, questions and answer options.

## Gender



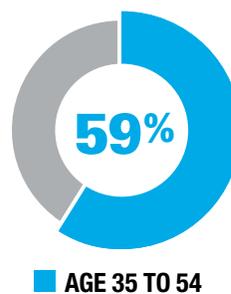
Of the survey takers, 62.2% were men and 37.4% were women, and 0.3% chose “other.” The differences between men and women were surprisingly small, significant in only four of the 10 cases.

In **Case 4**, which concerns the possibility that the CEO’s medical condition could have a very negative impact on the company’s operations, males were 20% more likely than females to confront the CEO as opposed to doing nothing, and 30% more likely than females to ask for a private meeting. This may support the idea that men are more direct than women, and that women are more relationship-oriented (a trait that would lead then to respect the CEO and do nothing) versus men who are more task-oriented (which would lead them to confront or ask for a meeting).

In the **Case 6** scenario, in which a male colleague might be threatened by a female colleague’s competence, males were 40% less likely than females to make an effort to point out the woman’s outstanding performance to the boss at every opportunity, compared with talking with the male peer about perceptions. Again, this suggests that women may be more supportive and relationship-oriented than men.

## Age

The majority of survey takers were in the 35 to 54 age range (59%) and we see differences across the age groups below 35 years, 35–44, 45–54, and 55 and older. Significant age differences showed up in 7 of the 10 cases.



In the **Case 2** scenario, dealing with options in which a potential supplier has invited you to attend an all-expenses-paid, invitation-only seminar that his company is sponsoring on the latest business technology, each older age group was 40% less likely than the next younger group to accept the invitation versus politely decline it which appears to show a greater awareness of conflict of interest growing with age, as well as growing restraint, versus indulgence, with age.

## Country and Ethnicity/Culture

We will examine these factors together, as there is considerable overlap between them, and the cultural dimension was the main impetus for this research. The cultural/country dimension showed the greatest variability, with significant differences being revealed in all 10 cases.

In **Case 1**, you are a senior leader. A female manager on your staff complains to you that a married manager, who also reports to you, constantly asks her out, compliments her makeup and clothing, and on one occasion kissed her when no one was around. Your options include telling the accused manager that there have been complaints and that you won't tolerate this behavior; and beginning a formal investigation to determine whether some sanction should be imposed on the accused manager. The two options were regarded differently by country. Overall, the confronting option received 42% of the responses and formal investigation one got 55%, but in the United States, the split was 35%/65%, while in Germany it was 66%/28%, in Italy 59%/36%, and in the United Kingdom 49%/50%. This may reflect the universal-particular dimension, made famous by Trompenaars (Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, *Riding the*

In the **Case 5** scenario on whether to “jump ship” for another job offer in the midst of a critical long-term project, each older age group was 20% less likely to inform their company of the offer and ask for a salary match over declining the offer—perhaps suggesting that younger workers are more willing to negotiate or leave, compared to more loyal, older workers.

*Waves of Culture*, McGraw-Hill 1998), where the confronting option is more particularist (relationship-oriented) and the formal investigation option is more universal (rules-oriented). Overall, Europeans were 90% more likely to choose confrontation over investigation, compared with North Americans.

In **Case 2**, in which an all-expenses-paid seminar is offered, both Asians and Europeans were more likely to choose the “accept” option versus the decline option, compared to North Americans—possibly again reflecting particularist-universalist differences.

In **Case 5**, the mid-project job offer, Asians were 40% less likely than Europeans to choose informing their employer of the offer and then “jumping ship” if the salary is not matched, over the “decline” option. North Americans were 100% more likely to choose accepting the position over declining it, compared to Europeans. These results suggest greater individualism among North Americans, compared with higher collectivism in Europeans, and even more collectivism in Asians, compared to North Americans.

## Education

Perhaps surprisingly, only two of the 10 cases showed any significant differences by educational level.

In **Case 3**, which concerns potential plagiarism by a member of your virtual team, respondents with an undergraduate degree were 20% more likely to consult with other team

members first, versus confronting the possible plagiarist. This suggests that more highly educated people may be more direct and perhaps more task-oriented than relationship-oriented.

## Role

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Half of the cases (five out of 10) showed some significant differences in role.

In **Case 1**, involving potential sexual harassment, contractors/consultants were 40% more likely to choose confronting the accused manager versus beginning a formal investigation than managers, suggesting that they are more particularist and relationship-oriented than managers, who are comparatively more universalist or rules-oriented.

In **Case 5**, the mid-project job offer, faculty members were 40% less likely to choose an option seeking legal advice on contractual obligations than managers, also suggesting that faculty members are more particularist and relationship-oriented than managers, who are comparatively more universalist or rules-oriented.

## Title

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Because we were interested in analyzing role for the general results, because role overlaps significantly with title, and also because we are specifically interested in the project management aspect of title, for this predictor we conducted bivariate models separate from the multivariate models that we used in the rest of the paper. In the bivariate models, eight of the 10 cases showed some significance in results when comparing project management titles versus non-project management titles.

In **Case 2**, the all-expenses-paid seminar, project managers were 30% less likely to choose the accept option versus politely declining to attend the seminar, compared with non-project manager titles. This may suggest that people with project management titles show a greater awareness of conflicts of interest compared with non-project management titles.

## Industry

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Six of the 10 cases showed significant differences with regard to industry.

In **Case 2**, compared with the IT industry, 70% of contractors/consultants were more likely to choose the accept option versus the decline option. People in the education/training industry were 200% more likely than those in IT to choose accept over decline. This suggests that the IT industry appears to show a greater awareness of conflicts of interest, compared with some other industries.

The scenario for **Case 10** involves a senior manager learning that an individual to be hired lied about financial matters and cheated customers. People in the consulting industry and the education industry were both 40% less likely to choose an option to report what they heard to the company's investigators over an option to talk to the hiring manager than people in the IT industry. People in the nonprofit industry were 60% less likely to choose the reporting option over talking to the hiring manager than people in the IT industry. This suggests that people in the IT industry may

be more aware of the ethics or compliance function and/or more willing to go to members of such units for reporting, compared with those who work in some other industries.

Our 10 cases were a mix of ethical issues, covering unfair treatment, conflicts of interest, and issues of confidentiality, truth telling, and honesty. Most of the cases could be regarded as issues resolvable by following one's company's policy (if such is in existence), whereas only one or two cases could be considered true ethical dilemmas, revolving around a clash of values, outside of organizational control—for example, **Case 5** (whether to "jump ship" in the midst of a major project) and possibly **Case 4** (divulging news about the CEO's health). However, the significant findings across all 10 cases do not point to a special or different pattern for the dilemma cases.

## Summary of Research Findings

In a good many of the cases, we find few if any significant differences across diversity dimensions. This supports to some extent the universality hypothesis in ethical decision making. We found significant differences with culture, followed by age, that showed more widespread variations. At least some significant differences for culture were shown in all 10 cases. The hypothesis that culture makes a difference is what initially drove the research. What surprised us was that age brackets

showed the next-highest rating, significant in seven of the 10 cases. Industry showed significant differences in six of the 10 cases, role in five cases, and gender and title in four cases each out of the 10. Also surprising was that education levels were only significant in two of the 10 cases. We would not have predicted that education levels would have fewer significant findings compared with the other diversity dimensions.

## Acknowledgments

This research would not have been possible without the support of the Project Management Institute, which hosted the survey online and provided the logistics for gathering the data and assisted in the analysis. At PMI a special thanks to Bill Scarborough, Leah Brophy, Karen White, PMI's Ethics System Modernization Task Team and the PMI Ethics Member Advisory Group. At NASA, a special thank you to, Ed Hoffman, the retired chief knowledge officer, and current International Project Management (IPM) course manager at NASA, who connected us with PMI and encouraged this research to update the ethics module in NASA's IPM course that I (Alan Richter) deliver. We also thank Dale Crossman and Dan Daly at NASA. We also thank Kate Pugh, faculty at Columbia University, and Joan Dubinsky, ex-ethics officer at the United Nations, who both reviewed the survey design in its entirety. Last but by no means least, we thank Anna Josiah Brown, who did all the statistical analysis and provided invaluable help in making sense of the data.

# Appendix

## Survey Form

### The demographic data covered:

**1. Gender**

- Male  Female  Other

**2. Age**

- under 35  35–44  45–54  55 and above

**3. Country of origin**

\_\_\_\_\_ [List all 200 countries pre-coded by region]

**4. Current country:** In what country do you currently work?

\_\_\_\_\_ [List countries, as above]

**5. Culture:** How do you culturally identify yourself currently? (Check all that apply)

- African  
 Asian  
 Caribbean  
 European  
 Latino  
 Middle Eastern  
 North American  
 Pacific Islander  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

**6. Education:** What diploma/degree have you earned? (Check highest degree earned)

- Secondary school diploma  
 University undergraduate degree  
 University graduate degree  
 (master's degree, doctoral degree)  
 Other: Please specify \_\_\_\_\_  
 No diploma/degree

**7. What is the role you currently most identify with?**

- Student  
 Employee  
 Contractor/consultant  
 Manager/director  
 Faculty  
 Executive/administrator  
 Retiree  
 Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

**8. What is your current job title?**

- Chief Executive Officer (CEO)  
 Chief Operating Officer (COO)  
 Chief Information Officer (CIO)  
 Director of Project Management/Director of PMO  
 Managing Director  
 Portfolio Manager

- Program Manager  
 Project Manager III  
 Project Manager II  
 Project Manager I  
 Project Management Specialist  
 Project Management Consultant  
 Functional Manager (e.g., IT Manager, HR Manager)  
 Supervisor  
 Staff Member  
 Educator/Trainer  
 Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

**9. Select the primary functional area in which you work from the list below:**

- Communications  
 Customer service  
 Education  
 Engineering  
 Finance  
 Human resources  
 IT or IS  
 Management  
 Marketing  
 Operations  
 Project management department or PMO  
 Quality management  
 Regulatory compliance  
 Research and development  
 Sales  
 Security  
 Supply chain management/logistics  
 Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Select the answer that best fits the industry in which you work:**

- Aerospace  
 Automotive  
 Construction  
 Consulting  
 Education and/or training  
 Energy  
 Financial services  
 Food and beverage  
 Government  
 Health care  
 Information technology  
 Legal  
 Manufacturing  
 Mining  
 Pharmaceutical  
 Retail  
 Telecom  
 Transportation/logistics/distribution  
 None (not employed/retired)  
 Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

## The Ethics Cases:

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### CASE 1

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You are a senior leader. A female manager on your staff complains to you that a married manager, who also reports to you, constantly asks her out, compliments her makeup and clothing, and on one occasion kissed her when no one was around. You:

- (A) Tell her that she's attractive and will have to learn how to handle situations like this.
- (B) Tell the accused manager that there have been complaints and that you won't tolerate this behavior.
- (C) Begin a formal investigation to determine whether some sanction should be imposed on the accused manager.
- (D) Do nothing.

### CASE 2

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You are the chief technology officer in a firm that needs a major technology upgrade. A potential supplier has invited you to attend an all-expenses-paid, invitation-only seminar that his company is sponsoring on the latest business technology. The seminar will be held on board a luxury cruise ship. You believe that many of your competitors will attend. You:

- (A) Accept, but determine not to favor this supplier in your decision when upgrading.
- (B) Accept the offer, period.
- (C) Tell them that you would like to attend, but that you must be allowed to assume all costs for your participation in the seminar.
- (D) Politely decline to attend the seminar.

### CASE 3

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You have just started working on a virtual team, and have not met anyone on the team in person. One of the team members, Jack, has just sent you information you requested with his copyright on the material, but you happen to recognize that this is someone else's work, which has not been credited. You:

- (A) Ask Jack outright if this is, in fact, his copyright.
- (B) Do nothing.

- (C) Go to the other team members and share what happened, before considering how to respond to Jack.
- (D) Address the issue only with the project team leader.

### CASE 4

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You are the likely successor to the current chief executive officer (CEO). Much to your shock, you've just learned that the CEO has brain cancer. The board is currently meeting to determine whether to extend the term of the CEO for five more years. You are convinced that this medical condition could have a very negative impact on the company's operations. You:

- (A) Ask for a private meeting with the board and reveal the information you have.
- (B) Confront the CEO and tell him that if he doesn't inform the board, you will.
- (C) Do nothing.
- (D) Reveal the information publicly.

### CASE 5

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Six months ago, you began supervising a major research project at your company. You understood when you accepted the assignment that the project would take three years to complete and that its success could be critically important to your company's long-term sustainability. You have just been offered a new position in another company outside of your industry. This company offers to double your salary, provided that you start immediately. You:

- (A) Decline the new position.
- (B) Accept the new position.
- (C) Inform your company of the offer, and if it will not meet the salary offered, accept the new position.
- (D) Obtain legal advice as to whether you are contractually bound to your existing company, and if you are not, accept the new position.

### CASE 6

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You have a good working relationship with Bart, who is one of your peers and with whom you work closely. However, there's something about Bart that disturbs you. He constantly finds

fault with Vera, an industrious young woman who reports to him. You find Vera to be intelligent, efficient, and creative. On a weekly basis, Bart speaks negatively about her at meetings with the boss that both of you and other direct reports attend. You are concerned that Bart is threatened by Vera's competence and that he is giving the boss a very inaccurate perception. What should you do?

- (A) Do nothing.
- (B) Make an effort to point out Vera's outstanding performance to the chief at every opportunity.
- (C) Have a private conversation with Vera and suggest that she consider transferring.
- (D) Talk to Bart about your perceptions.

### CASE 7

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You and several colleagues have begun work on an important and time-sensitive project with an outside consultant. You have just had a drink with this consultant and are very surprised to learn that this consultant is an old college roommate of your peer, Janos, who reviewed the CVs of the consultants and recommended hiring the consultant on this project. Furthermore, the consultant confides to you that his relationship with Janos must have come in handy during the decision making for this job. "Janos gave me a pretty good idea about how to get this assignment," he said. You:

- (A) Meet with the project leader/chief to report what the consultant told you.
- (B) Go back to review the documents related to the consultant selection process and see if this outside consultant was the best qualified.
- (C) Talk to Janos about what the consultant revealed, and ask him to explain how he managed the candidate selection process.
- (D) Do nothing.

### CASE 8

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You are a research assistant and have helped prepare a paper describing your team's research. The abstract for this paper was accepted for a major conference that will be held soon. In reading over the paper, you point out to your team's lead researcher that he has described a certain data set as "a typical data set," though you know for sure it was atypical,

extracted from the best possible data. He dismisses you by saying that calling the data set "typical" is just a manner of speaking. What should you do now?

- (A) Do nothing.
- (B) Offline, ask other members of the team to support you before re-engaging the lead again.
- (C) Ask the lead researcher to reconsider and revise the presentation for the conference.
- (D) Ask to be removed from the team and any involvement in the conference paper.

### CASE 9

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You are in charge of purchasing supplies for your company, and always order them from Jill at Company Q. Your daughter wants to purchase an office printer for personal use. You ask Jill for a recommendation. Jill obliges, and also offers you a significant discount—20% below the corporate discount your company receives—if you buy her recommended printer by week's end. You:

- (A) Thank Jill, and order the printer.
- (B) Ask your manager for permission before you order the printer.
- (C) Thank Jill, but ask only for the standard corporate discount price.
- (D) Thank Jill for the recommendation and purchase the printer elsewhere.

### CASE 10

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As a senior manager, you have good relationships with many of your counterparts in competing organizations. A colleague at a competing firm has just called you to advise you that your company has made an employment offer to someone her company recently fired. She tells you that this individual lied about financial matters and cheated customers, leading to his firing. This individual will begin work next week in another department of your company. You:

- (A) Do nothing.
- (B) Call the hiring manager and convey what you heard.
- (C) Investigate the situation through other colleagues whom you know in your industry.
- (D) Call your company's ethics, audit, or investigations unit and report what you heard.



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