ABSTRACT. The purpose of this research is to extend prior research testing the premise that small deviations from ethical behavior lead to even larger deviations from ethical behavior. This study examines the association between a person’s willingness to bribe a police officer to avoid being issued a speeding ticket with their views on inappropriate behavior of corporate executives. Our sample of 528 participants comes from Colombia (90), Ecuador (70), South Africa (131) and the United States (237). As part of our data gathering, we controlled for social desirability response bias in the responses of the students who participated in our study. Our data indicate significant differences between the views of the students from Colombia, Ecuador, and South Africa when compared to the views of the students from the United States. The analysis indicates that, for all four dilemmas, the most significant variable was the belief about how ethical it was to pay a bribe to avoid a traffic ticket. In addition, in three of our four dilemmas, Paulhus’ Impression Management Subscale, which measures social desirability response bias, was the second most significant variable. Finally, in three of the four dilemmas, the students from Colombia, Ecuador and South Africa thought the actions described in the dilemmas were less ethical than the students from the United States.

KEY WORDS: bribery, social desirability response bias

Introduction

Powell (2006, p. 43) suggests that it is difficult to profile an employee who might succumb to bribery because the typical white-collar criminal is a “well-educated … and, of critical importance, a trusted member of the team.” In addition, Baack et al. (2000) suggest that, as an individual ignores minor offenses, one’s ethical sensitivity begins to erode. Finally, a country’s culture (Hofstede, 1980) could also influence the tendency to view unacceptable acts such as bribery as being acceptable. An indication of this tendency is Transparency International’s (2002) Corruption Perceptions Index. Transparency International’s definition of corruption indicates that:

[A]ny person who directly or indirectly gives or accepts or agrees or offers to give or accept and gratification from another person with the purpose of acting personally or influencing another person to act in a manner that amounts to an illegal, dishonest, or unauthorized action or an abuse of authority, a breach of trust, or a violation of a legal duty, is guilty of the offense of corruption.

The purpose of this study was to examine the propensity of one to bribe or act unethically across gender for sample of four countries. This research is an extension of Bernardi and Vassill’s (2004) research that examined the association between a person’s belief about the ethicality of offering a bribe to a
police officer to avoid a speeding ticket and other unethical practices. However, unlike Bernardi and Vassill’s sample, three of the four countries in our sample (e.g., Colombia, Ecuador, and South Africa) are not members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2004). Our study supports Baack et al.’s (2000) premise that accepting small ethical deviations affects attitudes towards larger ethical problems.

Literature review

Overview

A bribe can be defined as either “money or favor given or promised in order to influence the judgment or conduct of a person in a position of trust” or “something that serves to induce or influence” (Merriam-Webster, 2007). Donaldson and Dunfee (1999) use bribery extensively as an example of their concept of a hypernorm – “limits on moral free space” (p. 49). Nichols (1997) notes that major world religions such as: Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism condemn public officials taking bribes. In fact, Hiemann (1994, p. 7) indicates that, while bribery does occur, bribing a public official is illegal in all countries:

There is not a country in the world where bribery is either legally or morally acceptable. That bribes have to be paid secretly everywhere, and that officials have to resign in disgrace if the bribe is disclosed, makes it clear that bribery violates the moral standards of the South and East, just as it does the West.

Bribery is banned by the member nations (countries in our sample) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (United States) and the Organization of American States (Colombia and Ecuador). In addition, South Africa (i.e., the fourth country in our sample) will soon become the first African nation to sign up to the OECD’s convention banning bribery (BBC News, 2007). Finally, the United Nations Convention against Corruption, which is the “first truly global instrument to prevent and combat corruption, built on a broad international consensus” (Argandona, 2007, p. 482) specifically prohibits bribing a public official. Given Donaldson and Dunfee’s belief that bribery violates the duty inherent in the principal-agent relationship and is outlawed in all countries, it is apparent that bribery and ethical behavior transcend a Western view of ethics.

Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) provide a model (Figure 1) indicating the factors that influence an individual’s processing of information and reporting their judgments. Ajzen and Fishbein’s model suggests that personal attitudes as well as subjective norms about ethical conduct influence a person’s judgments. Barnett and Vaicy’s research supports Ajzen and Fishbein’s model and indicates that ethical judgments associate with behavioral intentions.

In our research, we use this model to structure our literature review section. While an individual’s has

![Figure 1. The influence of individual attitudes and subjective norms in decision making. Arrows indicate proposed direction of influence. From: Ajzen and Fishbein (1980, p. 8).](image-url)