ABSTRACT. In an effort to build on the current knowledge of ethical behaviour in Asia this paper proposes to replicate existing ethical research and to investigate specific questions relating to intra-cultural differences in Hong Kong. Four major conclusions were derived from this descriptive empirical study. A statistically significant correlation exists between age and ethical beliefs, with older employees less likely to express agreement to an unethical action than younger employees. In contrast to many previous studies no statistically significant differences in ethical beliefs were found in relation to gender, level in the organisation, company size, and whether the respondent worked in a multinational or local company. Significant differences in responses to ethical dilemmas were identified between local and expatriate personnel with expatriate respondents indicating a lower level of agreement to unethical actions. For local respondents, of Hong Kong origin, there was no significant correlation between level of education, religiosity, years of business experience, functional origin and their ethical responses.

Introduction

In order to enhance the recognition of ethical issues in business and to advance creditability for the study of business ethics, De George (1989) has emphasised the importance of clearly distinguishing between ‘Ethics in Business’ and ‘Business Ethics’. This semantic clarification is essential as the former term ‘Ethics in Business’ appears to be on extremely shallow ground given such frequent pronouncements of unethical activities involving for example, unfair practices, discrimination, deception, corruption and other mercantile normative violations. ‘Business Ethics’ is a much broader concept and constitutes an emerging field. As a new area of academic interest business ethics is recognised as encompassing a philosophical and theoretical base, hypothesis development, empirical research and strategic applications, particularly in the area of operational suggestions that might preclude the development of ethical conflict in organisations. However, most of this research has been developed in the United States and with realistic concern as to the applicability of inductive con-
cclusions to other cultural setting, particularly Asia.

Over the last decade a limited number of general ethical attitudinal studies have started to emerge in the Asia-Pacific Region for example: Singapore (Metha and Kau, 1984), Hong Kong (Kam, 1980; 1981; Chan et al., 1988, Chan and Lee, 1986, Dolecheck and Dolecheck, 1987, McDonald and Zepp, 1988, Armstrong et al., 1991), Malaysia (Zabid and Alsagoff, 1993), New Zealand (Alam, 1993), and Australia (Armstrong, 1992; Small, 1992). However considerable effort is still needed in order for the literature in business ethics to go further than generalised statements of distaste that merely lament the erosion of ethical standards in business, or to sermonise on the consequence of increasing unethical behaviour. While this type of discussion may initially prompt ethical awareness such an inactive stance is however hardly constructive in a formal sense to disciplined academic research, data evaluation, and theory development. What is needed in ethical research is a building on existing methodologies and findings, and the expansion of research efforts to ensure the accuracies of research conclusions particularly in differing cultures.

Prior research

The descriptive research of relevance to this study can be broadly delineated into biographical organisational, and intra-cultural studies.

Biographical variable studies

The biographical variables used to predict ethicality have been numerous. Differences in age groups have been examined with conflicting findings. Longnecker et al. (1989) concluded that younger respondents appeared less exacting in their moral judgements on a broad range of issues. Serwinek (1992) reinforced this with the finding that older workers had stricter interpretations of ethical standards while Ruegger and King (1992) have been even more precise in their conclusion that students falling in the 40 plus year age group were the most ethical. The general conclusion is that younger people tend to be less ethical than older people (Miesing and Preble, 1985). Differences in gender have been repeatedly examined with mixed findings. Some studies have found ethical perceptions between males and females to be similar (e.g., Kidwell et al., 1987, Stevens and Stevens, 1987; McNichols and Zimmerer, 1985; Hegarty and Sims, 1979; Tsalkis and Ortz-Buonafina, 1990) while in the main the research has indicated females to be less likely to cheat in an academic context (Karlins et al., 1989), more concerned about ethical issues than their male counterparts (Beltramini et al., 1984), more inclined to disagree to unethical actions (Miesing and Preble, 1985; Betz et al., 1989; Ruegger and King, 1992), evince higher ethical judgements (Akaah, 1989), handle ethical dilemmas differently (Barnett and Karson, 1989), displayed a greater tendency to take action when they perceive a questionable practice (Jones and Gautschi, 1988), and in general demonstrate a consistent tendency to be more ethically oriented toward work-related decisions than males (Shephard and Hartenian, 1990).

The influence of religion on ethical attitudes and behaviour has had limited study. Darley and Batson (1973) investigated the influence of ‘religious personality variable’ on helping behaviour in an emergency situation. They concluded that religious personality variables did not predict whether an individual would help the victim or not. The influence of religion on moral development has been discussed extensively (e.g., Middleton and Putney, 1962; Wright and Cox, 1971; Stassen, 1977), although examination of the interactive relationship between religion and ethical attitudes as they operate in the business environment is still developing. Where business ethics has been investigated from a religious perspective the literature has predominantly discussed the relationship of Christianity to capitalism (e.g., Byron, 1982), instructional discourses on theology as applied to the modern business manager (e.g., Erteszek, 1982, Friedman, 1985; McAhon; 1985, Lantos, 1985; 1989; Magill, 1992), as well as more general discussions on the protestant work ethic (e.g.,