The Development of a Virtue Ethics Scale

ABSTRACT. Drawing on conceptual works by Murphy (1999) and Solomon (1999), we develop a virtue ethics scale. Other ethics scales, which are grounded in deontological and teleological principles, may be used to classify people according to their beliefs about (1) the criteria they use to make ethical decisions, or (2) the ethicality of those decisions. We suggest augmenting these scales with our virtue ethics scale, which may be used to classify people according to their beliefs about the virtuous qualities of businesspeople.

KEY WORDS: scale development, virtue ethics

Introduction

Some business ethicists treat ethics as a branch of philosophy involving two types of moral principles: deontology and teleology (Ferrell and Gresham, 1985; Ferrell et al., 1989; Hunt and Vitell, 1986). Deontological principles assume behaviors are inherently right or wrong; duty to others or the natural rights of others determine the ethicality of actions. Teleological principles consider the consequences of actions; decisions are based on expected rewards or punishments (Hansen, 1992; Louden, 1992; Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga, 1993).

Scholarly treatments of business ethics suggest that people use both deontological and teleological criteria when making ethical judgments (Hunt and Vitell 1986; Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga 1993). Self-report scales jointly grounded in these moral philosophies include cognitive moral development scales (Elm and Nichols, 1993; Goolsby and Hunt, 1992; Kohlberg, 1969; Tansey et al., 1994; Rest, 1986); multi-dimensional scales with items related to moral equity, personal relativism, national relativism, religion,
contractualism, and utilitarianism (Hyman, 1996; Reidenbach and Robin, 1990); a tendency toward relativism versus idealism scale (Forsyth, 1980, 1992; Tansey et al., 1994); and a perceived role of ethics and social responsibility scale (Etheredge, 1999; Singhapakdi et al., 1996). Although these scales may be used to assess criteria for making ethical decisions or the ethicality of those decisions, they cannot be used to assess the value placed on aspects of moral character like courage or tolerance. To remove this lacuna from the business ethics literature, researchers could augment these scales with one that may be used to assess beliefs about the virtuous qualities of businesspeople. Such a complementary approach accords a proper balance between act-oriented ethics and the process of moral character development (Louden, 1984; Whetstone, 2001).

The virtue ethics literature offers a framework for developing a scale to assess peoples’ beliefs about the virtuous qualities of businesspeople. We now summarize a preliminary effort, comparable to that of Reidenbach and Robin (1988, 1990), to create such a scale. Specifically, to build on the set of core marketing virtues suggested by Murphy (1999), we applied traditional scale development procedures to a catalog of business virtues provided by Solomon (1999). We also suggest possible applications for this scale.

**Virtue ethics: an alternative framework**

Virtue ethics, which “can be traced back to Aristotle . . . where traits such as compassion, fairness, loyalty and openness shape a person’s and an organization’s vision” (Williams and Murphy, 1990, p. 19), has been proposed as a guide for moral behavior in disciplines such as psychology (Kitchener, 1984, 1996; Vasquez, 1996), finance (Dobson, 1997), feminism (Tessman, 2000), and military science (Bonadonna, 1994; Brinsfield, 1998). It entails the pursuit of morally inclusive excellence, a community that values these virtues, a reliance on more than simple rules for guidance, and role models or moral exemplars to disseminate these virtues (Dobson, 1997); thus, it is learned through the observation and adoption of others’ behaviors. People of virtuous character intend to act rightly (Ryan, 1998) and do so to be true to themselves (Williams and Murphy, 1990). Their actions are the product of good habits and good character developed over a lifetime (McCracken et al., 1998).

Previously identified virtues that apply to business include autonomy, caring, caution, confidentiality, conflict avoidance, compassion, consideration, consistency, courage, dependability, duty, empathy, entrepreneurialism, equity, fairness, faith, fidelity, friendliness, good temper, honesty, honor, humility, integrity, justice, kindness, legality, liberality, loyalty, magnificence, pride, prudence, reliability, respect, responsibility, sensitivity, shame, temperance, tolerance, toughness, trust, trustworthiness, truthfulness, wisdom, and wittiness (Card, 1996; Brewer, 1997; Brinsfield, 1998; Dean, 1992; Dobson, 1997; Gier, 2001; Limbs and Fort, 2000; McCloskey, 1994; McCracken et al., 1998; Murphy, 1999; Seeger and Ulmer, 2001; Solomon, 1992; Tessman, 2000). Previously suggested groupings of these virtues include military virtues (comprised of courage, integrity, loyalty, and respect) (Brinsfield, 1998) and accounting virtues (comprised of caution, fairness, fidelity, legality, and respect) (Dean, 1992).

Murphy (1999) suggests five core virtues for international marketing:

1. **integrity**, or “adherence to a moral code and completeness” (p. 113), is judged longitudinally, often used as a surrogate for ethics in general, and related to honesty and moral courage, (p. 113);
2. **fairness**, or “marked by equity and free from prejudice or favoritism” (p. 113), is related to justice and central to the exchange process;
3. **trust**, or “faith or confidence in another party” (p. 113), is related to reliability and dependability among customers and suppliers;
4. **respect**, or “giving regard to views of others” (p. 113), is related to consideration and tolerance of dissenting views and other cultures; and
5. **empathy**, or “being aware of and sensitive