

Ethical Issues and Multicultural Neutralization Attitudes among Professionals in Graduate Leadership Program

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Abstract: Organizations rely on the integrity of their leaders and other employees to sustain the mission of the enterprise and to build customer support for services and products. Integrity is an expression of one's ethical sensibility. Social factors often influence the level of ethical behavior within a social system such as a school district, hospital or business. In their book, *Freakonomics*, Levitt and Dubner describe Paul Feldman's bagel business and its measurement of white-collar crime in corporations that are in the Washington, D.C. area. Approximately, 87 percent of his clients were honest and paid for a bagel and coffee offered on an honor system in the executive and employee lounges. Neutralization and rationalization are human cognitive processes that some people employ to excuse wrongful behavior. This paper presents data from a small sample of multicultural executives and contrasts their openness to neutralization processes. USA and non-USA native-born respondents share similar attitudes towards neutralization as Cazzaniga suggested.

Key words: ethics; neutralization; rationalization and moral leadership

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1. Introduction

Michael Cazzaniga (2005), in his book, *The Ethical Brain*, observes that ethical behavior results from the human brain's reaction to social development and the brain's internal alarm system. In an interview on the Charlie Rose Show for the Public Broadcasting System, USA, he related a summary of research with people of many different cultures from around the world. He told how when people of multiple cultures were presented with the "Trolley Problem", they reacted similarly. Participants were told that a train was rolling down a hill and it would kill five people if it continued. They had an opportunity to be an observer who could pull a switch and move the train to a safe track where only one person was in the way and that person would die if the train switched tracks. They were asked if they would pull the switch. Almost all answered "yes".

When asked if the same train was rolling at a bridge and by pushing a heavy man off the bridge, the train could be stopped and no one else would be killed, eleven percent of the respondents from around the world stated that they could not push the man off the bridge.

Dr. Cazzaniga noted that although respondents from around the world would give different answers as to why they would not push the man off the bridge, eleven percent of them shared a common aversion to the act. He suggests that this aversion may be the result of brain related emotional responses that represent a primitive ethic that

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we all share. Because, in brain scans, parts of the brain related to emotions light up against this act, he suggests that we all have an interpretative center in our brain where we determine who and what we are.

He writes, “Perhaps most simply, emergence—of consciousness or otherwise—in the human brain can be thought of as characterizing the interaction between two broad levels: the mind and the physical brain” (p. 204). He suggests that although brain emergence can be conceptualized as occurring between the two levels of the mind, brain emergence might be a more fundamental property of the human brain system occurring between multiple physical and functional levels (p. 204).

Richard Wright in his book, *The Moral Animal*, suggests that we have learned to preserve ourselves through altruistic behavior that protects the rights of the clan over the rights of the individual. He suggests that we are honest and fair with one another as far as we have to be or believe that we are expected to be. Often, he suggests if we were invisible, we might not be so honest. Cazzaniga and Wright address aspects of a moral animal in society. They note where these beings share and feel personal emotions and yet, they may not respond to their feelings because of other forces at work on their thinking.

John Gardner in his book, *Self Renewal*, explored the relationship between the individual and society and especially our devotion to individual freedom, even license and our strongly felt commitment to social order. He compressed the social contract into a nine-word summary: “Freedom and responsibility, liberty and duty; that’s the deal.”

Gardner told a group of Stanford students: “Your identity is what you’ve committed yourself to” (in Kennedy, March 22, 2002). Aristotle stated that virtue was a learned and practiced behavior. Essentially, when one practiced a discipline or a virtue, one committed to a way of living, and that way of living would be the true expression of who a person was. When one’s life ended, history would reveal what one had been.

For Aristotle, virtue is a discipline, a habit of behavior that one selects between two excesses. Virtue requires that a person hold a deep-seated passion or belief that a particular way of living, particular discipline, sacrifice, self-control, selflessness are cherished and profoundly valued and worth dying for.

Glasser (1990) and Covey (1995) suggest that our primal needs drive us to seek to be safe, to belong, and to be loved, to be respected, to exercise power and to have autonomy. Hence, for most members of human societies, deeply held values for which we would risk our lives are the root cause of virtues and vices.

The civic virtues that healthy societies embody, especially reciprocal altruism, respect for one another’s right to be safe, to pursue happiness and to share power have to be taught in schools for a democratic society to flourish. Schools are societies’ means to connect students to the primary and common values that the society wishes to engender in its youth.

Ethics are the result of a lifetime commitment to manage one’s appetites in an equitable and supportive relationship with all other human beings. Excessive selfish behavior results from insensitivity to ethics and rational defenses of excess. Unrestrained selfish behavior threatens the social contract that we share and so, we construct laws and institutions to sustain the social contract and punish those who violate norms of equity and fairness much as a lioness drives a greedy cub from her litter so that all may survive at the expense of the one.

Some excessive behaviors that we rationalize as necessary choices, warranted acts, or earned entitlements violate civil laws against greed, conflict of interest, and theft of services like failing to sit for a driver’s training class and signing the papers that attest that one completed the program and is entitled to the reduction in insurance fees.

When the University of Chicago economist Steven Levitt teamed up with Stephen Dubner, the New York Times writer, and they shared their economic insights in their book, *Freakonomics*, they also established what a reasonable expectation for honesty would be within most human organizations based upon Paul Feldman’s bagel business.

In 1962, Paul Feldman was a government analyst for weapons expenditures. By 1984, he was looking for another career. He decided to deliver coffee and bagels with a cash basket to companies' snack rooms in the Washington, D.C. area. In a few years, he was delivering 8400 bagels a week to 140 companies. He kept very accurate records of the food and coffee he delivered, what customers did not consume and how much cash he received. What did his data reveal?

By the summer of 2001, the overall payment rate had dropped to 87 percent. After September 2001, the payment rate rose 2 percent. Since many of his clients work in security businesses, an increase in empathy for others may have influenced their behavior. In small companies, the payment rate was higher than in large companies. In a company where the lounges were on different floors and executive offices were on the top floor, the top floor had the highest rate of cheating (Levitt & Dubner).

Feldman believed morale was a big factor in his client companies. When employees liked their bosses and their work, they were more honest. Remember, Feldman had 8400 customers and 1092 stole from him each week (Levitt & Dubner).

The enemy of every CEO who sits at the top of the feeding chain, and every administrator and every social service provider who share some very definitive levels of autonomy, is a sense of entitlement. When we lose a profound sense of duty and stewardship, we lose the honorable purpose for which we sought the position of lead social provider.

The CEO and her or his executive staff are responsible for the level of integrity and honesty within an enterprise. If one does not have a system of checks and balances and one does not monitor revenue and expenses and results from purchases, moderate sized businesses with 840 employees, who comply with the pattern of theft identified by Levitt and Dubner in governmental and for profit enterprises, will have 109 employees stealing from them weekly.

Professionals in many fields have falsified documents, licenses and college transcripts to present themselves as qualified for open positions. In schools, some people have given answers to students on state exams, falsified medical notes, misused sick days and used school district equipment for their private gain and for profit enterprises (Newsday 2000-2012 archives). In all of these cases, someone who knew the records were false turned them in or patterns of abuse revealed themselves in the exceptional behavior that they exposed. In most cases, the deceivers justified their deceptions with a variety of self-serving rationalizations described originally by Sykes and Matza (1957) as neutralization behaviors.

2. Neutralization Theory

Neutralization falls into one of five categories: a denial of responsibility, of injury, of victim, an attitude of condemnation towards the condemners or an appeal to higher loyalties (Skyles & Matza, 1957). Skyles and Matza employed neutralization attitudes to explain how delinquents justified their antisocial behavior. Haines, Diekhoff, LaBeff and Clark (1986) in their study of college cheating reported: "cheaters showed higher levels of neutralization." (p. 346). Other researchers found cheating and its intellectual antecedents among Marketing and Management majors were associated with openness to neutralization processes (Smith, Davey & Easterling, 2004).

Maruna & Copes (2005) argue that after decades of neutralization research it seems reasonable to conclude that neutralization techniques "play an important role in maintaining persistence in crime" (p. 227). They continue in their observation to describe neutralization techniques as "part of the narrative process that individuals use to make meaning for their lives" (p. 227). In a study of nursing students, McCrink (2010) identified how respondents vary in their willingness to use a neutralization process that excused wrongful behavior. She found no difference between European

and American respondents. One wonders if common patterns of aversion to neutralization would be prevalent between USA and non-USA native graduate students pursuing doctoral studies in leadership for social agencies.

If executives and self-regulating professionals have more opportunities to take liberties with their positions in ways that benefit a relative or life partner or provide access to private information about other decision makers, neutralization beliefs often underlie their misbehavior. All leaders of social agencies should examine their own openness to neutralization attitudes. There are good reasons that checks and balances in institutional financial systems include at least two equal oversight authorities. As much as possible, institutional polices must ensure transparency in all financial exchanges and executive decisions. Professional development that sensitizes executives and employees to neutralization practices and beliefs can reduce unethical and immoral behavior in the workplace.

Ethics result from a lifetime commitment to restrain one's appetites, to avoid harming others unnecessarily, and to conduct relationships with all other human beings in ways that enhance their lives as well as one's own life. Neutralizations permit less altruistic behavior and promote selfish behavior that frequently becomes unethical and even illegal acts.

Behavior that is unrestrained by the social contract we share as members of a community often represents excessive greed and power acquisition that we rationalize as necessary, warranted, or earned entitlements. In the final analysis, excessive greed and power grabbing lead to mutual harms for everyone involved. Neutralization is a human disposition that excuses excess. Some professional people seem to be more prone to neutralization dispositions than other comparable peers are. Do USA and non-USA native-born graduate students in an executive leadership program differ in their attitudes toward neutralization behavior?

3. Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this study is to contrast USA nationals and non-USA nationals on a measurement of openness to neutralization, a form of rationalization that excuses unethical behavior.

4. Methodology

A convenient sample of 27 executives and college educators involved in doctoral leadership studies completed a survey with 14 items that investigated how open they were to neutralizations related to cheating in class work. Twelve of the respondents were natives of Cuba, Israel, Jamaica, Ghana, and Pakistan. In addition, fifteen respondents were born in the United States.

5. Data Collection and Analysis

Graduate students in executive leadership programs and recent graduates in small groups of ten, twelve and fourteen received surveys. Twenty-seven of thirty-six nursing educators and hospital administrators, school and college administrators who participate in a doctoral leadership program completed surveys and returned them anonymously in sealed envelopes.

6. Findings

Table 1 presents the gender of the respondents demonstrating that approximately 30 percent were males and 66 percent were females.

Table 1 Gender of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	8	29.6	30.8	30.8
	Female	18	66.7	69.2	100.0
	Total	26	96.3	100.0	
Missing	System	1	3.7		
Total		27	100.0		

Table 2 demonstrates that for this convenient sample of doctoral candidates in leadership studies there is no significant difference between native and non-native USA respondents in their rejection of neutralization attitudes. The mean score for the non-native USA group indicates slightly less rejection of neutralization attitudes while the native USA group shows greater variance in responses.

Table 2 Comparison of Mean Scores for Neutralization between USA and Non-USA Natives

	USA native	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.
Neutralization	No	12	24.3333	15.26930	0.383	0.705
	Yes	15	21.8000	18.35055		

Overall, Michael Gazzaniga's premise that people with cultural differences would tend to have the same reaction to wrongful behavior seems warranted. In addition, larger samples of USA natives and natives of other countries might produce greater variance in their responses. Of course, there remains the question as to how many of the respondents reported what they knew to be the most socially acceptable answer.

The total population of respondents disagreed with the neutralization statements that justified cheating under a variety of circumstances in spite of a few who slightly agreed and one USA respondent who totally agreed with the statements.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Data Conclusions

Based upon an analysis of the data from the two groups of respondents, one must conclude that small groups of native USA and non-native USA professionals in doctoral leadership studies will reject neutralizations that excuse cheating. Even if no one seems to be harmed by the cheating and the event is related to loyalty to a friend or teammates, respondents from the USA, Haiti, Israel, Jamaica, Mexico, Pakistan, Puerto Rico and Mexico will reject neutralizations to a similar degree.

7.2 Philosophical Conclusions

The literature review indicates that administrators must guard against a personal sense of entitlement, as it is a dangerous attitude to adopt because it blinds executives to their mission and responsibilities. In some cases, a sense of entitlement and openness to neutralization allows executives to seek certain privileges, accept gifts and benefits, and use company funds to satisfy personal needs beyond their authorized contracts. Some of these executives use their status, long hours and difficult work history to justify personal excesses.

At times, some executives rationalize that everyone takes advantage of positions like theirs. They tell themselves that it is acceptable to use their position to obtain an underserved or unfair advantage over competitors with a gift or to give a special advantage to a family member. Such beliefs blind them to the fact that justice requires

equality of opportunity and fairness. All executive leaders and teachers who prepare executives must seek fair and equitable treatment for all as a basic practice for executive leadership.

In the end, executives and those who train them must recognize that a selfish act that harms others unnecessarily is an abuse of power that may be legal, and yet, be unethical. If one uses positional power to take advantage of another person or to avoid the normal constraints society has placed upon citizens, unethical behavior results. If an executive or professional has a primary goal only to enrich one self, or to use others as pawns or objects for one's personal satisfactions, one's life is a professional lie and unethical.

Remember, the appearance of an unethical act destroys careers. When you have an ethical itch, or a worry, your conscience is saying consult with others. Put this questionable opportunity into the light of day where ethical decisions have the best possibility of surviving. Leaders must be sensitive to neutralizations and recognize such cognitive attitudes manipulate their emotions and excuse less desirable social behavior.

Leaders are responsible for secrecy, confidentiality, and transparency. Transactions within any system should have more than one set of eyes that review them. Whenever teams of employees share responsibilities to evaluate outcomes, or two or more people check purchases and payments, or executives share personnel evaluations with appropriate supervisors, ethical behavior tends to grow. When the human work of the organization shall occur under the visor of several competent judges, the integrity of the enterprise is more likely to stay intact.

Organizational leaders have a moral obligation to model ethical behavior and to ensure it survives in the social system. Their job is to create as much transparency for all exchanges as possible. The checks and balances within the organization keep the lamp of justice shining on all transactions.

We cannot delegate the responsibility to ensure an ethical climate in our companies, schools and other enterprises to others. Ethical behavior in organizations begins and ends with the leaders. Even the most privileged information and decisions benefit from dissenting, competent and appropriate leaders examining the truth.

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Appendix A

Professional Survey

Please complete the response the best fits your circumstances.

I am a citizen of the USA. Yes_____ No_____

My native country is _____

I am Female_____ Male_____

Select the number that represents your answer:

1 = totally disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree,

4 = somewhat agree, 5 = agree and 6 = totally agree

(1) A little cheating on a test is okay because it does not hurt anyone.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(2) A little cheating on a test is okay because students should help one another.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(3) A little cheating on a test is okay if the people sitting next to me make no attempt to cover their answers.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(4) A little cheating on a test is not terrible if you have studied hard for it.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(5) A little cheating on a test is okay to pass the course.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(6) A little cheating is okay if a good friend is at risk of failing the course and asks for help.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(7) A little cheating on a test is better than failing in the course.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(8) A little cheating like copying a paper is okay if it is to succeed in the program.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(9) A little cheating on a test is okay if everyone else in the class seems to be doing it.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(10) A little cheating is okay if the instructor gives unreasonably difficult assignments or tests.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(11) A little cheating on a test is okay if the course material is too difficult to understand.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(12) A little cheating on a test is okay if you have not had time to study for the test.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(13) A little cheating on a test is okay if there is a great deal of pressure to pass the test.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(14) A little cheating is okay to stay in the program and avoid failing a test.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(Survey was adapted by Robert J. Manley from A. McCrink dissertation, 2008).