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Research notes

Encouraging informed balance in management education: An ethical path to understanding Middle Eastern culturalism

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ABSTRACT

Practitioner tools to promote multicultural understanding in business ethics are scarce. Moreover, training is often ethnocentric, potentially fanning differences and even exacerbating tensions when values conflict. We address this void by presenting a framework to help managers consider ethical decision-making from an alternative perspective. By way of example, we focus on the tribal-collectivist perspective emanating from the Middle East. Our goal is to prompt openness regarding a tribal-collectivist lens in relation to the more individualistic standards common in the West. By examining an alternative way of approaching ethical issues, we show how other views may complement and/or contradict Western assumptions in pursuit of moral action. Several management education activities are presented, designed to create a more balanced focus toward business ethics, elevating strengths and weaknesses, and framing alternative viewpoints as resources. Through facilitated discovery managers from around the world can transcend their own biases and assumptions, using Balanced Experiential Inquiry (BEI) to build moral competency. Working to identify commonalities and differences is essential if we hope to advance respect and accommodation for the views of others. Rather than overlooking precepts derived from culture and religion, collaborative reflection and discourse can be used to advance ethical awareness in organizational settings.

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1. Introduction

Given the diverse nature of today's management population, it is essential those representing the field learn how to recognize and respect alternative views. This requires the ability to identify and address ethical issues that emerge from conflicting values, stemming from assumptions derived from different cultural vantage points. Caruso and her colleagues (Caruso, Collins, Schragle-Law, & Thorpe, 2012) outline how management education needs to encourage managers to become more aware of and embrace core ethical principles. But what happens when principles of ethical action differ? Clearly, business ethics among multinational corporations presents a complex picture, one that is vague and undergoing rapid transformation (Dabic & Zorko, 2011). With the global economy constantly confronted by unethical business practices, educators and practitioners need to teach business professionals skill sets that support and build ethical strength.

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When faced with ethical challenges in the workplace, determining what is right can be influenced by the person, their situation, and the particular context (Treviño, 1986). People are often motivated to frame ethical issues relativistically, with a bias toward self-interest. A focus on the self, however, rarely fosters empathy, much less supports the use of character strengths like self-regulation and other virtues that bolster moral choices. Therefore, teaching managers how to navigate an ethical decision-making path that considers the views of others is not only difficult, but some deem it unworthy of their time. Additionally, when the values of another culture appear to support practices that run counter to one's own assumptions and expectations, ethical issues may arise. Given the potential for tension and volatility when people of different cultures, faiths and national origins come together, we offer a platform to build understanding in workplace settings.

This work addresses a very real and practical problem: an immediate need to understand and respect Middle Eastern/Western coexistence on both geographic and global levels. Common sense dictates that this need exists in the workplace, given that transnational realities permeate workplace dynamics. With the Middle East largely receiving negative media coverage (events describing the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, Arab Spring, ISIS, oil markets and the Syrian migrant crisis), the consequential uneasiness and growing xenophobia and Islamophobia emerges in the workplace. Education that fosters adult learning has global significance, bearing in mind the degree to which immigration, migration and forced displacement have accelerated in recent years. In 2015, 244 million people, or 3.3 per cent of the world's population, lived outside their country of origin. The majority of migrants crossing borders do so in search of economic and social opportunities, half of the people women (UNPF, 2016). Some flee in crisis, leading to displaced refugees, political strife and a tightening of borders. Migration is an important force in development, remaining a high priority globally.

With these changes, employees may begin to see themselves as being forced to tolerate and coexist with incoming "others." This underscores the vast importance of creating awareness within workplace settings, between the dominant group and outsiders trying to join and contribute. Our goal and rationale for this article is to advance understanding and a willingness to work with those who appear to be different and/or hold alternative perspectives from one's own. By helping managers discover value similarities, educators can reduce misconceptions and perceptions that are associated with external threats, which may not even be consciously realized. Making perceptions and expectations explicit is essential, if management hopes to establish and maintain functional and ethical performance. Given the potential for tension and volatility when people of different cultures, faiths and national origins come together, we offer a platform to broaden and build understanding in workplace settings.

We shed light on a corner of the world which is oft misrepresented, under-funded and marginalized. Stereotypes and false assumptions abound in public discourse regarding Middle Eastern practices. With limited scholarship on the topic of cross-cultural awareness and business ethics, we bring this subject forward to encourage meaningful reflection and discourse. In so doing we stand to gain a greater understanding of the sociopolitical, educational, and overall human underpinnings of coexistence, specifically embracing a Middle Eastern lens. Cross-cultural work often means having to think about issues in new ways i.e., perspectives one might not normally consider. Our aim is to offer tools that serve as catalysts for reflection and critical thinking, along with self- and other-awareness. To assume that people in the workplace consider a perspective or lens that is different from their own is naïve. As such, our intent is to encourage use of processes like Balanced Experiential Inquiry so adult learners can better understand how cross-cultural perspectives might inform their ethical decision-making efforts.

As Conklin (2013, p. 500) describes, "it is not uncommon to hear of managers' perceived irrelevance of their management studies to their post-commencement work experience" (Mintzberg, 2004; Porter & McKibbin, 1988). We take this concern seriously, emphasizing that adult-centered ongoing development in the workplace is necessary. Useful for this effort are experiential learning processes based upon principles of andragogy, framing alternative viewpoints as beneficial resources. As we encourage managers to collectively reflect on their experiences, ethical awareness and cultural sensitivity can be advanced. The process and framework we offer can be used to reveal tacit competing or conflicting values, which may be hidden or disregarded in ethical decision-making. Our work bridges theory and practice, offering international management educators novel applications for tools previously considered useful in the business management literature, but retooled for a discrete purpose. We believe it unlikely that current workplace ethics education and training consider misconceptions of Middle Eastern perspectives or practices as ethical issues/concerns.

To effectively navigate ethical issues we underscore a focus on balance by comparing two perspectives: Middle Eastern and Western. To advance this goal, readers are asked to tolerate a broad generalization of these views as we set forth an introductory platform for additional reflection and discourse. We begin with a description of some unique elements emanating from the Middle East, values that can motivate behavior in ways that might conflict with the typical compliance-oriented practices of the West. To encourage managers to consider alternative perspectives in a more thoughtful manner, tools are presented to help adult learners engage in multicultural cooperative reflective discourse. As McClean (2010) suggests, we need to be sensitive to the fact that theories and research tools designed in one culture might not be applicable in different cultural settings or in workplace situations where multiple perspectives co-exist. This highlights the need for processes that embrace openness and awareness of the self and others, as managers consider ethical issues and how these issues might be perceived, examined and resolved.

Relevant to international management education, we bridge cross-cultural learning with business ethics. It is unlikely that people in the workplace consciously think about how tribal-collectivism might present different ethical issues, than those stemming from a Western-individualistic approach. Cross-cultural awareness means having to think about a situation or context in a new light, in ways one might not normally consider. Use of static frameworks or models can stimulate awareness, while insights garnered in collaborative adult learning processes can help managers deal with competing or conflicting values

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