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An analysis of the key determinants of hotel employees' ethical behavior

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ABSTRACT

One of the main challenges plaguing the hotel industry today is the unethical behavior of its employees which spreads like a bad, contagious disease across all departments of a hotel company, has a strong negative impact on hotel operations, results in huge financial losses and other detrimental consequences and has become a major headache for many hotel companies. The purpose of this study is to identify what the main factors are that impact the ethical behavior of hotel employees to help hotels understand the source of this problem. More specifically, this study attempts to replicate Deshpande, Joseph, and Prasad's (2006) study -which was conducted in hospitals-in three, four, and five star hotels in Greece to examine whether it will yield similar results. This study is based on a previous work that the first author presented at the EuroCHRIE 2013 conference in Freiburg, Germany and is among the first ones to be conducted in hotels as most research studies on this topic were conducted in non-hospitality settings. The examined factors include the following: the ethical behavior of peers and managers, the hotel employees' business ethics education, as well as the role of gender, nationality, age, level of education and length of time that participants have worked in the position they were in as well as in the hotel industry overall. Results revealed that some of these factors are key determinants that rule the ethical behavior of employees regardless of the setting they are in.

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1. Introduction

An increasing number of ethical scandals have kept the hotel industry in the spotlight in recent years. “Hotel ethical scandals include, but are not limited to, cases of sexual harassment, different types of discrimination, lack of workplace diversity, violations of international business and cross-cultural norms, environmental injustice and sustainability, marketing and pricing, theft, and blame shifting, all over the world” (Dimitriou, 2013). Cases like Starwood Hotels accusing Hilton of trade secret theft (Orey, 2009), or individual hotel employees suing the company they worked for on the grounds of being treated unethically such as Charlotte Thomas who sued Marriott for age and sex discrimination (Cadwallader, 2009) are some of the characteristic examples which reflect the unethical conditions and behaviors that currently exist and prevail in the hotel industry. This study aims to highlight these issues and find some answers to these challenges in an effort to help the hotel industry address them. The only way to achieve this goal is by going to the root of the problem of unethical behavior and closely examining the factors which promote and encourage ethical behavior. In other words, to find answers to the following questions: What factors could influence hotel employees to switch to a more ethical decision-making? What factors could cause them to conduct their business in a more responsible manner?

Directors' and researchers' studies on non-hospitality environments blamed the companies' organizational culture, the intense competition, or the people's personal characteristics for the reasons why employees steal or behave in an irresponsible and inappropriate manner in a working environment (Weber, Kurke, & Pentico, 2003). Other studies found that peers can significantly influence the ethical behavior of salespeople (Jones & Kavanagh, 1996; Lantos, 1999; Singhapakdi & Vitell, 1990). Some researchers (Cagle & Baucus, 2006; Hollier, Blankenship, & Jones, 2013) contended that business ethics education has a positive effect on the

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way business and finance students think and behave whereas others supported that managers play a key role when it comes to the ethical behavior of their subordinates (Jaffe & Tsimerman, 2005). However, all these studies focused on non-hospitality employees and students and there has been a lack of research on the factors influencing the ethical behavior of employees in hospitality settings. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to close this gap in the hospitality literature and identify the factors influencing the ethical behavior of employees in the hotel industry. The significance of this study is immense as it also aims to assist the hotel industry gain a deeper understanding of what determines employees' ethical behavior and leads to a more responsible and sound decision-making. The most important stimulus that inspired both the research framework and survey instrument for this study was Deshpande, Joseph, & Prasad's (2006) study, which was an in-depth analysis of factors influencing the ethical behavior of hospital personnel. Research findings revealed that ethical behavior of peers, ethical behavior of successful managers, and professional education impacted the ethical behavior of the respondents. In addition, female nurses behaved more ethically than their male counterparts. The current study attempts to replicate Deshpande, Joseph, and Prasad (2006) study in hotel settings and examine whether it will yield similar results. It must be noted that the current study is also based on a previous work that the first author presented at the EuroCHRIE 2013 conference in Freiburg, Germany (Dimitriou, 2013). The research model used for this study is based on Deshpande et al. (2006) research model and focuses on the factors influencing the ethical behavior of hotel employees as seen in Fig. 1.

2. Literature review

2.1. The power of the ethical behavior of peers

Ethical behavior is defined as the kind of behavior that is "consistent with organizationally prescribed policies, values and norms" (Baker, Hunt, & Andrews, 2006, p. 853). When it comes to examining the factors influencing a person's ethical behavior, the most prominent one seems to be the ethical behavior of peers. It is important to point out that "early research on ethical behavior has shown that perception of peer behavior had the most impact on ethical behavior" (Deshpande et al., 2006, p. 208). Studies conducted on different kinds of employees such as nurses (Deshpande et al., 2006) and salespeople (Jones & Kavanagh, 1996; Lantos, 1999; Singhapakdi & Vitell, 1990) also proved that this is true. Therefore, a key question that arises at this point is whether peer ethical behavior will determine hotel employees' ethical behavior, as well.

A closer look at what the literature offers regarding this matter brought up several other notable aspects. Keith, Pettijohn, and Burnett (2003) study not only revealed how strong the influence of peer's ethical behavior is on someone's ethical behavior but it also brought up another key characteristic. More specifically, they noted that "it appears that one's peers have a significant impact on employees' ethical behaviors toward their firm, customers, and competitors" (Keith et al., 2003, p. 261). An additional very interesting point that must be made is that the power of peer behavior to impact the ethical behavior of an individual is consistent across cultures. For example, studies conducted in the U. S. (Deshpande et al., 2006) yielded the exact same results as studies conducted in China (Fu & Deshpande, 2012). Therefore, it is important to know that the current study is among the first ones to be carried in Europe and more specifically in Greece.

On a theoretical level, O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005) discussed the power and influence of peer behavior by basing it on two things: a) social learning theory which states that people adapt and exhibit behavior similar to those around them deriving from careful observation (Bandura, 1977) and b) differential association theory. "Sutherland stated differential association theory as a set of nine propositions, which introduced three concepts-normative conflict, differential association, and differential group organization-that

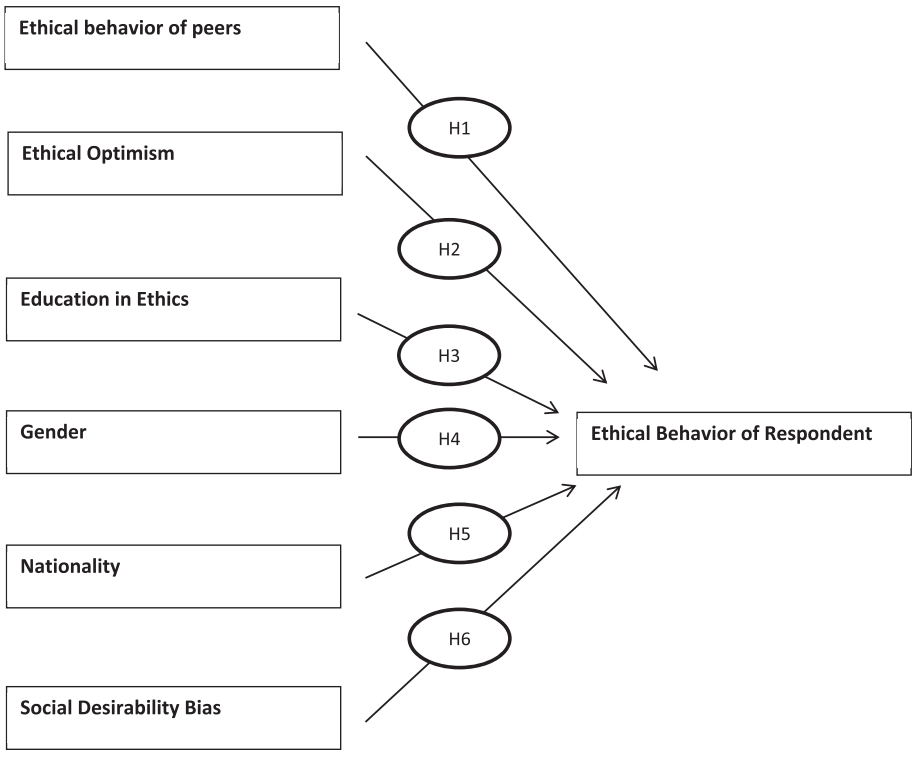

Fig. 1. Research framework.

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