Chapter 16
Differences in Ethical Perceptions Between Male and Female Managers: Myth or Reality?

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Introduction

As recently as 15 years ago very few women pursued careers in management (*Time*, March 10 1964). Because of this the study of pertinent issues in the management field focused on the male manager. The 1980s, however, present quite a contrasting picture.

Today women are entering management careers in record numbers, and therefore psychologists and organizational behavior theorists are faced with a new challenge in the study of those same pertinent issues. One specific issue involves the area of ethical management decision making. As Mark Pastin, editor of *Business Horizons* magazine stated:

> As management problems become more complex, they become more ethical. As management problems become more ethical, they become more complex. (Pastin 1983).

An illustration of this can be found in the Bendix case. In 1979, Mary Cunningham, a 28-year-old Harvard Business School graduate, was hired by William Agee, 43, Chairman of Bendix Corporation, to serve as his executive assistant. Within a year Agee promoted Cunningham to the position of vice-president for corporate and

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public affairs (Velasquez 1983). Rumors quickly spread about the relationship between Agee and Cunningham and sparks began to fly at Bendix. Although the then-married Agee denied all rumors, claiming that Ms. Cunningham was a "close friend and a friend of my family", the pressure became too much and in October of 1980 Cunningham resigned from Bendix (Velasquez 1983). Since that time William Agee and Mary Cunningham have been married.

Did Mary Cunningham's rapid rise at Bendix have anything to do with her personal relationship with William Agee? Were the decisions and behaviors of Agee and Cunningham ethical or unethical? If Ms. Cunningham had been a 'he' instead of a 'she' would the issue have arisen at all? Although we may never arrive at a consensus on what is right and what is wrong, in the Bendix Case, it is essential that the ethical dilemma presented not be ignored.

Prior research has dealt with the practice of ethical governance in business (Andrews 1984), and professional codes of ethics in management (Mc-Nulty 1975). Additional research has studied the ethics of businessmen (Brennan et al. 1961), and the ethics of managers as a whole (Ruch and Newstrom 1975). However, little published research is available which specifically compares and contrasts the ethical decisions of male and female managers. This study was undertaken for the purpose of filling that gap.

Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this study were:

1. To identify whether or not differences existed between the ethical decisions of male and female managers.
2. If differences do exist, to identify the areas in which they occur.
3. To determine how each gender perceived their counterparts would respond to the same ethical decision making situations.
4. To determine if there were business or demographic variables which could be used to predict the ethical decision responses of managers whether male or female.

Research Methodology

The population of interest in this study consisted of men and women, in comparable managerial positions. Given the pilot nature of the study, a nonprobability, quota sampling procedure was employed. Self-administered questionnaires were hand delivered to 60 male and 60 female managers in three midwestern states. Since a person other than the researcher delivered the questionnaires, they were briefed on the purpose of the study and asked to adhere to that purpose by not biasing their choices of managers who would be asked to participate in the study. To increase the response rate a cover letter was attached to each questionnaire.

The questionnaires were used to gain information in three areas: business background, ethical decisions, and demographic characteristics. To measure ethical decisions a closed response questionnaire was chosen. Two-way frequencies and a median version of the chi-square test were used to test for significant differences between all variables. Also, the *t*-test for independent means was utilized to test for significant differences in business background/ethical decision responses and demographic characteristics/ethical decision responses. A 0.05 level of significance was used.

Findings

Of the 120 questionnaires distributed, 107 were returned; a response rate of 89%. Because a predetermined sample size had been established, only questionnaires from the first 50 male and first 50 female respondents were used. Table 16.1 provides a breakdown of respondent characteristics.

Two of the objectives of this study were to identify whether differences existed between the ethical decisions of male and female managers and, if they did exist to identify areas in which the differences occurred. To obtain this information respondents were asked to rate 17 ethical decision situations by assigning each a score between 1 and 5; with 1 equaling 'Very Unethical' and 5 signifying "Not At All Unethical". Results showed a significant difference between the responses of men and women in only *one* ethical situation – *concealing one's errors.* When comparing responses to that decision situation it was found that females viewed such behavior as more unethical than did their male counterparts. Twenty-four percent of female respondents answered that concealing one's errors was very unethical, while only 15% of males responded in like manner. Although 2% of the males responded that the situation was not at all unethical, none of the females responded that way. See Table 16.2 for the results of the self ratings.

Another objective of the study was to determine how each gender perceived their counterparts would respond to the same set of ethical decision situations. Findings revealed several significant differences. Men viewed their female counterparts as significantly different than themselves in every situation *except* concealing one's errors. Women, on the other hand, felt that men would react in a different manner in every situation except 'Not reporting other's violations of company rules and policies.' Table 16.3 provides a breakdown of the decision situations and the mean scores associated with the perceptions of the genders.

The results showed only one area where significant differences existed between males and females on what they considered to be ethical. However, there were significant differences in 16 out of 17 situations when they rated the ethical behavior of their male/female counterparts, i.e., males rated females as being significantly less ethical than themselves and vice versa.

The last objective of the study was to determine if there were business background or demographic variables which could be used to predict the ethical decision responses

Table 16.1 Characteristics of respondents

Gender:		Age:	
Male	50%	Under 25	4%
Female	50%	25–34	31%
		35–44	33%
		45–54	20%
Number of years in work force:		Marital status:	
Less than 1	3%	Single	19%
1 but less than 6	19%	Married	74%
6 but less than 11	21%	Divorced	6%
11 or more	57%	Widowed	1%
Management level:		Education:	
Supervisory	57%	High school/GED	11%
Middle	39%	Attended college	15%
Upper	3%	College graduate	36%
		Graduate work	38%
Number of employees supervised:		Before tax annual income:	
0	10%	Under $20,000	9%
1–5	36%	$20,000–$34,999	30%
6–10	22%	$35,000–$49,999	26%
More than 10	32%	$50,000–$64,999	19%
		$65,000 and over	16%
Gender of supervisor:			
Male	85%	Religious preference:	
Female	15%	Protestant	82%
		Catholic	15%
		Jewish	0%
		Other	3%
Industry:			
Finance/banking	9%		
Oil and gas	71%		
Consumer goods	20%	Church attendance:	
		More than weekly	11%
Resident state:		Weekly	27%
Oklahoma	86%	Monthly	16%
Illinois	11%	Special occasions	27%
Missouri	3%	Rarely, if ever	18%

of managers. Responses to several of the survey questions were analyzed against the responses to the ethical decision making situations. Variables analyzed were:

1. Number of years in the work force
2. Age
3. Highest level of education attained, to date
4. Before tax annual income level
5. Religious preference
6. Frequency of church attendance

Table 16.2 Ethical decision situations [a]

	Mean score	
Situation	Males	Females
Using company services for personal use	2.38	2.34
Padding an expense account up to 10%	1.50	1.52
Padding an expense account in excess of 10%	1.24	1.16
Giving gifts/favors in exchange for preferential treatment	1.56	1.64
Taking longer than necessary to do a job	2.34	1.84
Doing personal business on company time	2.64	2.74
Divulging confidential information	1.22	1.22
Concealing one's errors	2.06[b]	1.80[b]
Passing blame for errors to an innocent co-worker	1.24	1.10
Claiming credit for someone else's work	1.56	1.28
Falsifying time/quality reports	1.30	1.28
Calling in sick to take a day off	1.90	1.82
Authorizing a subordinate to violate company rules or policies	1.62	1.26
Using company materials and supplies for personal use	2.44	2.70
Accepting gifts/favors in exchange for preferential treatment	1.50	1.66
Taking extra personal time (long lunches, late arrivals,…)	2.54	2.52
Not reporting others' violations of company rules and policies	2.66	2.56

Self ratings (1 = very unethical, 5 = not at all unethical)
[a] Reprinted by permission of the publisher, from Ruch and Newstrom (1975), p. 18. © 1975 AMACOM, a division of American Management Associations, New York
[b] Denotes a significant difference at the 0.05 level of significance

Table 16.3 Ethical decision situations

	Mean score	
	How females	How males
Situation	view males	view females
Using company services for personal use	2.68*	2.29*
Padding an expense account up to 10%	2.46*	1.32*
Padding an expense account in excess of 10%	1.80*	1.18*
Giving gifts/favors in exchange for preferential treatment	2.40*	1.72*
Taking longer than necessary to do a job	2.14*	2.28*
Doing personal business on company time	3.14*	2.72*
Divulging confidential information	1.32*	1.63*
Concealing one's errors	2.30*	2.08
Passing blame for errors to an innocent co-worker	1.78*	1.32*
Claiming credit for someone else's work	2.22*	1.62*
Falsifying time/quality reports	1.72*	1.42*
Calling in sick to take a day off	2.26*	2.41*
Authorizing a subordinate to violate company rules or policies	1.78*	1.72*
Using company materials and supplies for personal use	3.06*	2.64*
Accepting gifts/favors in exchange for preferential treatment	2.16*	1.78*
Taking extra personal time (long lunches, late arrivals,…)	3.28*	2.72*
Not reporting others' violations of company rules and policies	2.54	2.52*

Perceptions of the opposite gender (1 = very unethical, 5 = not at all unethical)
* Denotes a significant difference at the 0.05 level of significance

Results showed that the only characteristic which had a consistent significance on the entire set of decision situations was number of years in the work force. According to the chi-square test and *t*-test for independent means, those respondents who had been employed in the work force for a longer period of time tended to exhibit more ethical responses to the decision making situations.

Conclusions and Implications

One major finding of this study was that male and female managers generally do not differ in their perception of what is ethical and what is unethical. With only one exception they tended to agree completely regarding what one should or shouldn't do in the ethical decision situations they were presented with. The only significant difference in responses was in the decision situation of whether or not to conceal one's errors. In this decision situation, male managers indicated more of a propensity to conceal errors than did the female managers. Perhaps the explanation for that could be found in the larger culture and the socialization process. Before these managers entered the work force they all received the role prescriptions that the larger society metes out. Male managers enter the world of work with a general idea of what they *must* do and *cannot* do. The same, of course, is true for females. One common stereotype that exists is that men shouldn't make mistakes or errors. Obviously, given the role prescription, men would be more inclined than females to conceal one's errors. Generally though, this study tends to confirm that when faced with decision situations that contain an ethical component both male and female managers tend to react the same. Further evidence that there are few differences between male and female managers.

More significant was the second major finding of the study. When male and female managers were asked to estimate the ethics of the opposite sex in each of the decision situations, almost universally each sex viewed the opposite sex as being more unethical than themselves. The significance of this is that one tends to act as one perceives. When male managers have to interact with female managers in the organization and this interaction includes an ethical component then, given each's perception of the other, major problems could develop, communications could breakdown and cooperative behaviors could cease. The solution to this potential problem scenario is perhaps suggested in the third major finding, that years in the work force tended to correlate positively with ethical decision making. Over time, male and female managers will learn that the other sex is no more unethical than themselves. Other evidence also suggests that as female managers became more commonplace in the work force, the incidence of stereotypical behaviors tended to decrease and individuals started treating others as individuals regardless of sex.

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