

# WHERE DO MEN AND WOMEN LEARN THEIR ETHICS? DIFFERENT SOURCES?

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## ABSTRACT

Are the differences observed between men and women in the corporate world a function of biological and psychological differences or are they mostly a function of cultural learning and definition of gender roles? The author, using data collected on men and women's attitude towards business ethics has found discernable differences between men and women as far as the sources of their attitudes are concerned and this fits well with a previous study that indicated lack of divergence in their ethical attitudes. Thus, it is concluded, most of the observed differences are functions of the lingering cultural discrimination between genders.

Keyword: gender difference, ethical attitudes, ethics, morality,



## INTRODUCTION

There is an age-old belief in many countries that has persisted throughout centuries in almost all civilizations that men and women are different. This belief seems to fulfill an important function, which may explain its longevity, namely justifying discriminative treatment of women in the society. Discrimination against any group of people, and prejudice that follows it, seek and develop their justification in the very notions that separate such groups and differentiate them from the rest of the society. David G. Myers (1994) presents a very interesting and concise discussion of discrimination and prejudice. Based on his idea, affective attitudes of men towards women be they mothers, wives, sisters, lovers, etc. would not allow, without justification, their treatment as less than equal. Psychological dissonance created by the conflicting attitudes of love, affection and general attraction and the socially determined discrimination (prejudice, sexism) against women can only become tolerable by a culturally shared belief that women are at some level essentially different from men. Such socially sanctioned beliefs (almost myths) can be observed, even to day, in many cultures where they serve as the justification for inequitable treatment of women.

Although recent studies show that prejudice against women is far less common today than it was even a few decades ago (Myers,p.228), there are many articles, research papers and books that are being published every day that still debate this point, some arguing for and others against this notion. For example see Cynthia B. Costello and others (1998), who through a series of articles examine the dynamic position of women in the American society in the twentieth century. The overwhelming argument put forth and the sentiments presented, along with data and other documentation, is that there is no difference between men and women, and therefore, there is no justification for discrimination.

There is, however, a growing body of recent studies that point to the existence of some differences. Some of these articles point out differences in the biological functioning of the two genders, such as the report from the University of Indiana that proposed that while women use both sides of their brain while listening, men use only the left side of theirs in similar situations (LA Times), or the newer article in the *Neurobiology of Learning and Memory*, that proclaims that men and women process emotional memories in opposite sides of the amygdale region of the brain (Cahill, et.al).

Others concentrate more on finding different patterns of behavior among men and women. These studies generally argue that there are different patterns of leadership behavior (Deaux ,1985; Eagly,1990,; Helgesen, 1990) or patterns of management behavior and types of relationship with subordinates and/or superiors and attitude toward life in the corporate world and place of women in it (Brody,1993; Hall (1984) ; Rafaeli, 1989),

## ATTITUDES AS MEASURES OF DIFFERENTIATION

Attitudes are learned and, therefore, are very susceptible to influence from the culture. In fact, as individuals grow up in a society many of their attitudes are learned through the process of socialization. Several institutions are involved in this process:

family, church, school, clubs, etc. Through the process of socialization/acclturation individuals learn a society's shared values, beliefs, norms, mores as well as world-view and other attitudes (Myers, 1994). Thus, it is reasoned that girls and boys learn to respond to different expectations, aspire to different ideals, and hope to fulfill different roles in their lives by example, differential treatment and injection of a value system which teaches them their expected roles. Most of these processes, it is further argued, have overt or subtle sexist biases. Boys and girls are treated differently and as they grow up they consider this unequal treatment not only as natural but also expected and appropriate (Myers 1994).

Almost all feminists (i.e., active proponents of women's equal rights in the society) agree that there are few, if any, psychological differences that would make the work place the exclusive domain of men. On the other hand, most opponents of feminist activism in the job market reason that women approach life and work in a totally different framework, and that these differences are more biological and psychological than cultural. These opponents, thus conclude that, women should not be given the same employment opportunities, let alone special considerations in the work place--pregnancy and child care benefits notwithstanding.

An argument put forth by many feminists is that the subtle differences observed in the behaviors of male and female managers are all learned through many years of socialization. Thus, for instance, girls are brought up to become nurturing women, who pay attention to relationships and consensus building, while boys learn to become assertive, task oriented men who are more interested in solving problems than building relationships. In other words, should the society treat boys and girls on an equal basis as they grow up the differences that are observed between genders would be less important than differences within genders. That is to say, if the acculturation process is kept constant, the cultural values, mores, norms and world views acquired by men and women in a society would be similar (Myers, 1994). By the same token, if the observable attitudes of men and women towards a specific subject are similar it can be postulated that the source of their attitude is also similar.

In earlier studies this author was able to postulate that a large part of business related attitudes and cultural values are transmitted to newer generations while attending institutions of higher learning and receiving university education (Mahdavi and Weaver, 1999 and 2000). In another study the hypothesis was validated that men and women have similar attitudes towards business ethics (Mahdavi, 2003).

The research objective for this study is to verify if the source of their attitude is also similar. The hypothesis of this paper is: women and men learn their business ethical attitudes from similar sources.

## **METHODOLOGY**

An electronic survey was made, utilizing randomly selected email addresses of recent graduates and current students of a private American university in California. Two thousand email addresses were contacted requesting participation in the survey. A total of 406 visits (20%) were made from which 261 (13%) responses were generated. Respondents consisted of alumni, graduate and undergraduate students in several

fields of study, including business, education, criminal justice, computer science and psychology. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the demographic data.

**Table 1: Academic Standing and Gender of Respondents**

Academic Standing:			
	Total	Gender:	
		Male	Female
<b>Total</b>	<b>261</b>	106	155
<b>Undergraduate Student</b>	71	29	42
<b>Graduate Student</b>	163	66	97
<b>Alumni</b>	27	11	16

**Table 2: Academic Field and Age of Respondents**

Academic field:							
	Total	Age group of Respondents					
		Less than 20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	Over 61
<b>Total</b>	<b>261</b>	3	97	78	56	22	5
<b>Business</b>	44	0	17	12	11	3	1
<b>Education</b>	140	2	51	43	26	17	1
<b>Computer Science</b>	12	0	2	7	2	0	1
<b>Criminal Justice</b>	12	1	7	3	1	0	0
<b>Psychology</b>	15	0	6	6	1	1	1
<b>Other, Please Specify</b>	38	0	14	7	15	1	

The instrument: The self-administered survey questionnaire used in this study contained a list of possible sources of learning business ethical attitudes. Respondents were asked to choose three from that list as the most important sources of influence and rank them as the most to the least influential.

**RESULTS**

The results validated the hypothesis. Respondents were asked to respond to the following instruction:

“From the list below please choose the top three sources who were most influential in development of your business ethical attitudes. Please rank them 1, 2, and three according to the degree of influence (1 most influential, 3 least influential)”.

The categories to choose from were:

1. Parents or siblings
2. Spouse or partner
3. College or University
4. Religious organizations
5. Supervisors

## 6. Mentors

The following tables summarize the responses given by the subjects. As it can be observed there is no significant difference between the choices made by male and female respondents. Almost equal percentages of males and female choose each category as the most important or least important in their ethical attitude formation.

**Table 3: Influence of Parents and Spouses**

Gender:							
	Total	Parents & Siblings			Spouse or partner		
		1	2	3	1	2	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>261</b>	171	45	33	73	72	54
<b>Male</b>	106	70	18	13	30	34	21
<b>Female</b>	155	101	27	20	43	38	33

**Table 4: Influence of university and Religious Organizations**

Gender:							
	Total	University/College			Religious Organization		
		1	2	3	1	2	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>261</b>	69	80	54	89	60	55
<b>Male</b>	106	26	38	26	34	30	21
<b>Female</b>	155	43	42	28	55	30	34

**Table 5: Influence of Supervisors and Mentors**

Gender:							
	Total	Supervisor			Mentor		
		1	2	3	1	2	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>261</b>	36	74	73	84	62	48
<b>Male</b>	106	20	31	31	36	25	25
<b>Female</b>	155	16	43	42	48	37	23

As shown in these tables, the most influential sources in the formation of ethical attitudes are the family, parents and siblings. This is true about both genders. An interesting point to note is the tendency of both genders to emphasize, or not to emphasize, the same influence categories almost to the same degree.

## DISCUSSION

Several points stand out from this study; data and analysis which underline basic assumption that men and women, in spite of a few variations, may not really be that different from each other, at least as far as graduates of a business school are concerned.

1. The research hypothesis that men and women learn their ethical attitudes from the same sources is validated.
2. Since, as mentioned in previous paragraphs, men and women were shown to have similar ethical attitudes and since the sources of influence in their moral development is shown to be similar it follows that they are in fact not dissimilar.
3. There are still many aspects of the traditional culture which are defining roles and expectations of women, including traditionally defined “suitable” causes (such as children, education and the elderly) that even women in business and politics are expected to champion.
4. This research and other studies on the same subject are strong documentations that there is no objective basis for discriminating against women in the business world.



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