



A Conceptual Framework For An Investigation Of Employees' Ethical Behaviors in Thailand

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Abstract

This paper aims to show a conceptual framework of employees' ethical behaviors specifically in the Thai context. The notion of ethical behaviors of employees is extremely important to all organizations worldwide. The challenge for managers is how to enhance and sustain long-term ethical behaviors in organizations. This paper assumes that employees' ethical behaviors are linked to positive work outcomes. However, many organizations have failed to realize the factors affecting employees' ethical behaviors. Employees in different countries might have their own principles for ethical decision-making since they hold different cultural values. In Thailand, employees' ethical behaviors might be affected by various factors. A clear understanding of what factors affect employees' ethical behaviors is useful for managing human resources.

Keywords: *cultural value, ethical behavior, ethical decision-making, human resources*

Introduction.

Human resources are essential to increase organizational productivity (Blaga & Jozsef, 2014). Many organizations spend much more time learning about how to improve employees' performance and productivity (Jiang, Lepak, Han, Hong, Kim & Winkler, 2012). Particularly, business organizations whose primary purpose is to maximize profit for their shareholders may put a lot of effort into increasing productivity while decreasing business cost (Kooskora, 2008). Various managerial tools (e.g. just-in-time (JIT), total quality management (TQM)) have been used for employees' performance improvement so as organizations would achieve high productivity (Moghaddam & Moballeghi, 2008; Salaheldin, 2005). But few studies considered employees' ethical behaviors as extremely important to organizational outcomes (Nguyen, Mujtaba & Cavico, 2015). It should be noted that promoting employees' ethical behaviors could benefit both companies and stakeholders (McCain, Tsai & Bellino, 2010). Meanwhile, managers may have difficulty maintaining long-term ethical behaviors of employees (McCain et al., 2010).

The failure of the corporations sometimes resulted from professionals' unethical behaviors (e.g. the collapses of WorldCom and Enron) (Bayou, Reinstein & Williams, 2011; Brooks & Dunn, 2012). Their ethical failures have been viewed as giving rise to the credibility crises of organizations (Jackling, Cooper, Leung & Dellaportas, 2007). But most organizations have paid less attention to learn about employees' ethical behaviors (Kantor & Weisberg, 2002; Selvarajan & Cloninger, 2009). In practice, managers need to know the determinants of ethical behaviors so that they could effectively enhance employees' ethical behaviors (Honeycutt, Glassman Jr, Zugelder & Karande, 2001; White Jr, 2002). Some studies (e.g. Pitta, Fung & Isberg, 1999; Trapp, 2010) considered cultural diversity as a threat to promoting ethical behaviors in organizations since it has a major influence on individuals' ethical decisions. A study of effects of personal values on auditor's ethical decisions by Karacaer, Gohar, Aygün and Sayin (2009) contends that personal values and cultures are associated with individuals' ethical decision-making. Thus, research on the determinants of





ethical behaviors should be investigated in different cultures in order to fill up the gap of knowledge in a particular area or country.

In Thailand, a developing country in Southeast Asia, research on employees' ethical behaviors is still limited (Sukserm & Takahashi, 2012). Normally, companies in Thailand are more focus on quality improvement than ethical improvement (Intakhan, 2014; Phusavat & Kanchana, 2007). They have been widely concerned about quality management (QM) practices that would give them better productivity (Buavaraporn & Tannock, 2013; Laohavichien, Fredendall & Cantrell, 2011). They believe it supports companies' competitive advantages as well as the nation's competitive advantages (Watchravesringkan, Karpova, Hodges & Copeland, 2010). However, several studies highlighted the importance of ethical behaviors, for instance, a survey of human resource managers in Thailand by Koonmee, Singhapakdi, Virakul and Lee (2010) maintains that ethics in organizations can lead to positive employees' job-related outcomes.

As ethical issue is important to both organizational and personal success (Akhavan, Ramezan, Moghaddam & Mehralian, 2014), this paper discussed relevant factors that may affect employees' ethical behaviors in Thailand. It begins with a conceptual framework of employees' ethical behaviors. It then is followed by discussion and conclusion.

A Conceptual Framework.

Some previous studies maintain that individuals' ethical behaviors are affected by two core factors comprising personal values (Baglione & Zimmener, 2007; Manchiraju & Sadachar, 2014) and personal environments (Shafer & Simmons, 2011). The two factors can also be referred to as internal and external factors. Personal values (i.e. internal factors) are an individual's goals, experiences, and moral level (Leonard & Cronan, 2005). Personal environments (i.e. external factors) are the influence of other people (e.g. family members, co-workers, and significant others) (Leonard & Cronan, 2005), organizational influences, and cultural environment (Shafer & Simmons, 2011). Likewise, this paper hypothesized that personal values and personal environments are predictors of employees' ethical behaviors in Thailand (see figure 1). A proposed framework could be applied to the research on ethical behaviors at the workplace. It is useful to investigate what factors affecting employees' ethical behaviors.

Based on literature (e.g. Kang & Berger, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2015; Whyatt, Wood & Callaghan, 2012), these factors are associated with individuals' ethical behaviors. But the degree to which each factor is correlated to employees' ethical behaviors may be significantly different when compared with those employees in other countries.

Personal values

Personal values can be defined as desirable goals that provide individuals with guiding principles to behave (Brutus & Cabrera, 2004). Personal values may affect ethical behaviors since they encourage individuals to act in accordance with them (Brutus & Cabrera, 2004). In this paper, personal values encompass goals, experiences, and moral level.

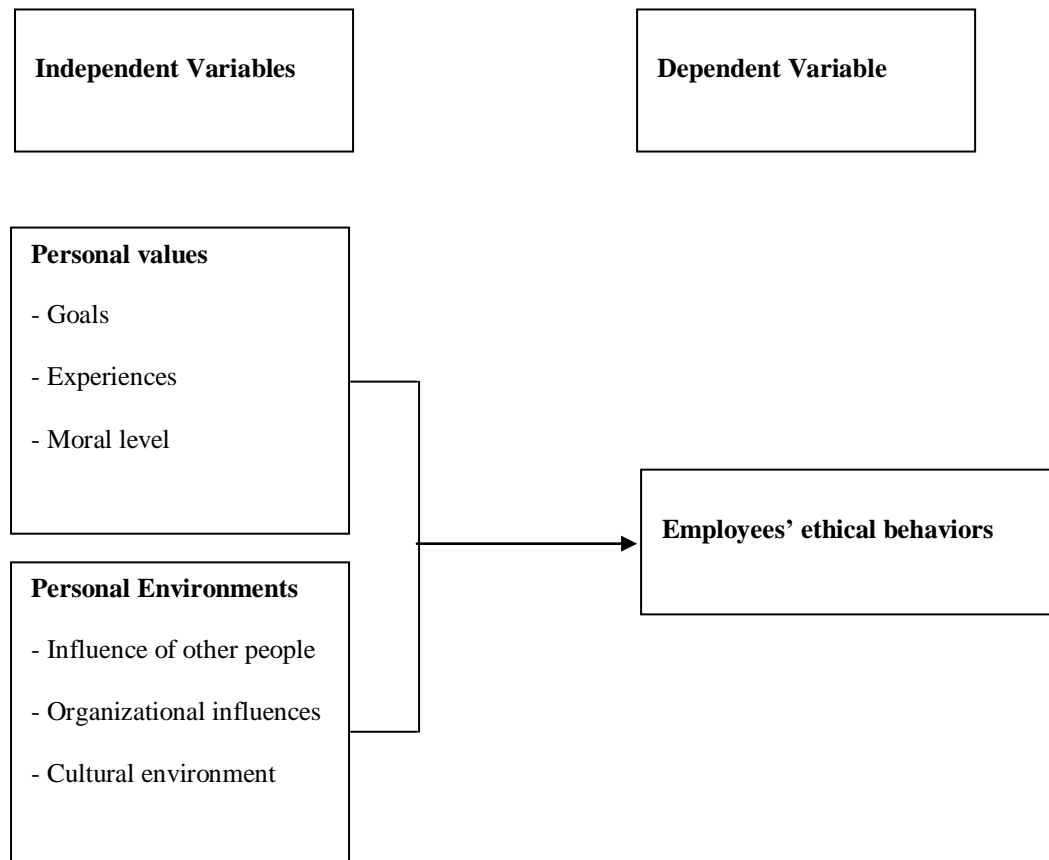
Goals:

The previous studies (e.g. Boonsathorn, 2007; Vedina & Vadi, 2008) state that people from different cultures often have different goals. Thailand is a collectivistic society where people have a commitment to their group (Pimpa, 2012). Thai employees may value group goals over personal goals (Boonsathorn, 2007). They perceive themselves as in-group members (Darawong & Igel, 2012). Therefore, they are more likely to consider "sense of belonging",



“warm relationship with others”, and “affiliation” as very important to their lives (Singhapakdi, Rallapalli, Rao & Vitell, 1995).

Figure 1: A Conceptual Framework of Employee’s Ethical Behaviors



Experiences:

Individuals’ experiences influence their behaviors because they often learn from their personal experiences (Stensaker & Meyer, 2012). Then, they react to events in particular ways (Stensaker & Meyer, 2012). On one hand, individuals’ experiences (e.g. work experiences) influence their perceptions of ethical issues and their ability to identify ethical situations (Finney & Finney, 2013). It can be assumed that employees who have more experiences may have better ability to make ethical decisions. On the other hand, individuals’ positive experiences of their ethical behaviors or actions encourage them to behave ethically in the future (Zhang, Chiu & Wei, 2009). For instance, they may report the wrongdoing again in the future if they had positive experiences when doing so (Zhang et al., 2009).

Moral level:

Moral refers to various rules and principles that are concerned with doing good things (e.g. telling the truth, not ruining others, and treating others fairly) (Brenkert, 2009). Individuals’ moral philosophy is a key factor to determine their ethical beliefs and behaviors (Kung & Huang, 2013). Ethical behaviors are derived from moral judgments (Finney & Finney, 2013; Okpara, 2014). High moral level (or moral intensity) has a positive relationship with an individual’s intention to perform ethically (Marta & Singhapakdi, 2005). Therefore, employees’ ethical behaviors depend on the degree to which they are motivated to reason about moral issues (Novicevic, Zikic, Martin, Humphreys & Roberts, 2013).



Personal environments

Employees' ethical behaviors may be resulted from their environments. Ethical environments are more likely to promote individuals' ethical behaviors (Whyatt et al., 2012).

Influence of other people:

Individuals learn new behaviors through observing behaviors of other people (Fu & Deshpande, 2012). Employees' ethical behaviors are influenced by other people such as co-workers, successful managers within the organization (Fu & Deshpande, 2012), the profession members (Celenk, 2013), family members (Harshman & Harshman, 2008), and significant others (Leonard & Cronan, 2005). For example, behaviors of co-workers at the workplace affect individuals' ethical behaviors (Camps & Majocchi, 2010).

Organizational influences:

Employees' ethical behaviors rely heavily on organizational influences (e.g. a firm's management control system) (Kang & Berger, 2010; Norris & O'Dwyer, 2004). Organizations use the written procedures and policies to direct employees' behaviors (Norris & O'Dwyer, 2004; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2011). They can promote employees' ethical behaviors by rewarding ethical behaviors and punishing unethical behaviors (Andrews, Baker & Hunt, 2011; Norris & O'Dwyer, 2004). Furthermore, a strong fit between employee and organization (person-organization fit) has an impact on employee's ethical behavior (Andrews et al., 2011). A study by Andrews et al. (2011) asserts that employees' ethical behaviors depend on the compatibility of employees' ethical values with their organization's ethical values. A strong fit between values of employees and values of their organization can lead to positive outcomes (Andrews et al., 2011).

Cultural environment:

Very few studies have examined the effects of cultural environment on employees' ethical behaviors in Thailand. Garcia, Mendez, Ellis and Gautney (2014) contend that companies often faced administrative problems in managing their employees in different countries with different national cultures. When promoting employees' ethical behaviors, they must well aware of employees' cultural environment as well. A study by Ntayi, Byabashaija, Eyaa, Ngoma and Muliira (2010) argues that groupthink influences individuals' ethical behaviors. Particularly in a collectivistic society such Thailand, individuals' ethical behaviors may depend highly on groupthink because they value in-group opinions and they are willing to behave consistently with their in-group members' opinions (Yoo & Donthu, 2002). Hence, their behaviors are often resulted from in-group pressures (Kongsompong, Green & Patterson, 2009).

Discussion and Conclusion.

While there is an increasing expectation for companies to be ethical organizations (Fray, 2007; Smith, Barnes & Harris, 2014), many companies experienced ethical pressure in competitive environments (Tan & Wang, 2011). They must improve an organization's management practices responding to new expectations for business (e.g. expectation for corporate stakeholder accountability) (Brooks & Dunn, 2012). As a result, organizations should enhance employees' ethical behaviors. This is because ethical behaviors of employees can support organizational goal achievement (Jacobs, Belschak & Den Hartog, 2014).

Both internal and external factors are important predictors of employees' ethical behaviors. Personal values of employees and also their personal environments have an impact on ethical decision-making and behavior. Employers should realize what factors influence employees' ethical behaviors so that they can effectively promote ethical behaviors to their



employees (Trapp, 2010). However, Thai employees may value specific factors depending on their cultural values. Since Thai employees are more likely to have a commitment to their group (Pimpa, 2012), the study of the effects of group on ethical behavior needs to be done for getting a deeper understanding. Knowledge of ethical behavior can be applied to human resource management (HRM) practices (De Chiara & Spina, 2011). It provides managers with a framework for enhancing employees' ethical behaviors, which in turn it could lead to better performance and productivity (Koonmee et al., 2010; Mastrangelo, Eddy & Lorenzet, 2014).

A proposed framework of employees' ethical behaviors presented in this paper could be used to investigate factors affecting employees' ethical behaviors not only in Thailand, but also in other parts of the world. Future research on employees' ethical behaviors needs to be explored further, particularly in different cultural contexts in order to provide sufficient knowledge of this issue. In Thailand, a proposed framework of employees' ethical behaviors should be adopted throughout all types of organizations (e.g. governmental organizations, business organizations, and non-governmental organizations) because they are involved in different organizational environments and cultures (Jingjit & Fotaki, 2010; Shinnaranantana, Dimmitt & Siengthai, 2011).

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