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University Students' Perceptions of Ethical Leadership and Work Ethics

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Abstract: To achieve the sustainable development goals, it is recommended that organizations worldwide set and adhere to ethical and governance standards. Workplace ethics is an expression of the values an organization holds towards its employees, and therefore includes the behavior of managers and their leadership style and practices. The young generations' perceptions of ethical leadership are worth exploring because they will be the decision-makers of the future. In our research, we interviewed Hungarian university students - mainly studying economics - about ethical leadership and work ethics who have had work experience (N=143). We developed our hypotheses based on Starratt's three-dimensional ethical model and conducted SEM analysis using SmartPLS4 software. We found that the Ethics of Justice factor influences the Ethics of Critique and Ethics of Care factors. Our results also show that achieving greater social justice is important to them in their decision-making. The surveyed Generation Z in Hungary considers the interests of both the individual and the community to be important for workplace ethics. Our research contributes to young people's understanding of ethics in the workplace and ethical leadership.

Keywords: Ethical leadership, Generation Z, Starratt's three-dimensional model, Dimension of individualism-collectivism

Introduction

Imagine the following situation. A teenager is at a job interview and answers the questions. Everything seems to be going well, when suddenly he hears a beep, indicating a new text message on his mobile phone. The teenager automatically reaches for his mobile and his fingers are already typing. His eyes dart back and forth between his phone and the interviewer (Jones, 2011). It is not a special story, but illustrates a new, almost instinctive habit of the young generation, and it also shows that there are some habits and characteristics that they have that are different from the older generations. The big question for us is what and how young people differ. Does this include ethical issues?

The spread of the concept of Employer Branding is clear evidence that organizations need to compete to attract and retain the best employees. The ethical standards and practices of the workplace are important to employees. Nowadays, ethical processes include ethical leadership. To answer our questions, after a review of the relevant literature, we present the results of our questionnaire survey and make suggestions for further research.

Literature review

According to Cambridge Dictionary ethics "is a system of accepted beliefs that control behavior, especially such a system based on morals. But it is also the study of what is morally right and what is not" (Cambridge Dictionary). Hornby (2015) adds that "ethics as moral principles that controls or influences person's behavior, professional or business or is a branch of philosophy that deals with moral principles" (p. 427). Originally, we can talk about descriptive ethics, which describes the actual ethical and moral state of a society, the existing norms and behaviors. Descriptive ethics draws on the findings of sociology and psychology. Prescriptive ethics

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is not about existing morality, but about what morality should be. Its task is to give norms, to define what is ethically right and desires the ethically desirable behavior. Business ethics belong to applied ethics and involve “rules, principles, and standards for deciding what is morally right or wrong when doing business” (Cambridge Dictionary) This includes the principles and norms of how the organization behaves towards its external stakeholders, but also how it acts as an employer. From the perspective of business ethics, two other ethical concepts are worth mentioning. One is constructivist ethics, which seeks to put moral standards into practice. The other is consensual ethics; David Gauthier called it cooperative ethics, explicitly stressing that cooperation is more than mere coordination, as the cooperator chooses the course of action that leads to mutual benefits (Gauthier, 2013).

In the 21st century, the unfortunate side effects of globalization and liberalization are corruption, favoritism, the erosion of human values and the widening of social inequalities. Nevertheless, ethical standards are also becoming an increasingly important factor, and it is no longer enough for companies to operate effectively in a fiercely competitive environment, but also to comply with community standards and ethical principles of public behavior. It is therefore necessary to define the organization's expectations, both of other market players and of its own employees. Business behavior, which includes ethical elements and attitudes, is becoming more widespread throughout the world and the adoption of codes of ethics by organizations and their incorporation into the core operations of the company is spreading (Girisha et al., 2020). In practice, workplace ethics shows the values that an organization holds towards its employees (Meyer, 2019).

Both individuals and organizations therefore consider ethics important, and most of them try to live and behave accordingly. Then why good people do bad things? “Decades of evidence shows us that situation can persuade even most ethical and compassionate people to betray their own values,” (Phil Zimbardo, who conducted the famous Stanford Prison Experiment 1971 (Bekiempis, 2015). Maybe it happens due to ethical fading. Ethical fading happens when a decision somehow fades away from the ethical aspects of it (Ethics & Compliance Association, 2015). This may be because we focus more on the factors of the decision, such as profit or winning, while we want to see what we are looking for in the first place, and so the ethical dimensions may be overshadowed. This can be traced back to the ethical dilemma between the “should” (our values, principles) and the “will/want” (our self-interest, protection of ourselves). A well-known example of ethical fading from the pharmaceutical industry was when Martin Shkreli, the CEO of a pharmaceutical company, first made a generic version of a life-saving drug unavailable in order to increase profits, then overnight raised the price by nearly 4000% (for which he was jailed) (e.g. Torchinsky, 2022).

Ethical leadership involves consideration, and accountability (Brown et al., 2005), integrating the leader's own interests and values with those of the community or the other party (May et al., 2003), the importance of relationships between managers and their subordinates (Van Den Akker et al., 2009), applying ethical competence (Osafo et al., 2021), encouraging employees to behave ethically for the common good (Hollander, 2012), and ethical behavior even in risk situations (Johnson, 2018). In case of ethical leadership managers communicate honestly and treat employees with trust (Yildiz, 2019), and as a consequence it raises efficiency and improves job satisfaction (Schwepker, 2019). According to Starratt (2004), one of the most important qualities of an ethical leader is credibility. “The authentic educational leader unceasingly cultivates an environment that promotes the work of authentic teaching and learning.” (p. 81)

Starratt's three-dimensional model of ethics (1991) is based on a multifaceted and deep philosophical foundation, and is primarily intended for educational institutions, providing recommendations on how to run an ethical educational institution. But it is also favored by the academic world (the article currently has 2050 downloads and 970 citations); in the empirical part of our paper we will apply this model and elements of it.

The three elements of Starratt's model (1991): *The ethic of critique*. The most common issues involved here are sexist language, legal and racial prejudice in the workplace, the education system and other areas of social life; and the rationalization and legitimization of prisons, orphanages, armies, the nuclear industry and the state itself. This factor includes issues of hierarchy, power, privilege, class differences and distortions. On the one hand, the ethics of critique helps us to build, for example, ethical work environments. On the other hand, the ethics of criticism can reveal unethical processes in an organization. *The ethic of justice*. Starratt says that we govern ourselves by adhering to justice, more concretely we treat each other according to a uniformly applied standard of justice. Ethics is thus built from practice within the community. This aspect of the model addresses the responsibility of smarter students, suggesting that they share their gifts for the benefit of the community, for example by tutoring their peers. Overall, it covers issues such as resource allocation, responsibilities, rights, fair trial, assessment, and equal access. *Ethics of caring*. The ethics of caring implies loyalty to the other person and openness and respect to accept the other person for who he or she is. This kind of ethics goes beyond

organizational effectiveness, so people, employees, are seen more as mere means to a productivity goal. The ethic of care closes the loop of the model at this point. This factor deals with quality of life, individualism, loyalty, human dignity, and empowerment. A summary of the model is shown in Figure 1. Later Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) suggested adding a fourth factor, the ethic of profession, which addresses the specific ethical characteristics of a given field, professional ethics and the integration of individual, personal ethical rules.

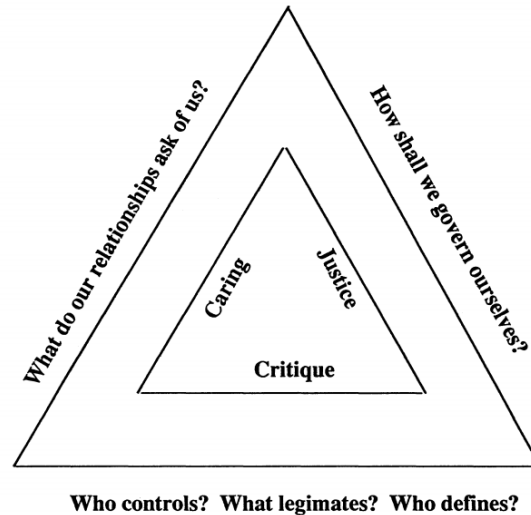


Figure 1. Structure of Starratt's model (1991, p.199)

Geert Hofstede (1980), as a result of an empirical study covering more than 40 countries, was able to identify 4 dimensions along which differences in international cultures can be captured; these are (Hofstede, 1980):

- 1) Individualism-collectivism (IDC): the social norms of the relationship between the individual and the community of the individual and the individual's relationship with others, values for living together.
- 2) Power distance index (PDI): The power distance between the leader and the subordinate in a hierarchy is equal to the difference between the leader's ability to determine the subordinate's behavior and the subordinate's ability to control the subordinate's behavior.
- 3) Masculine-Feminine values (MAS): the behavior expected of women and men varies from culture to culture, but the men are generally expected to be dynamic and purposeful, while women are expected to be primarily women are expected to be more dynamic, dynamic and driven.
- 4) Uncertainty avoidance index: measures the degree of adherence to rules (UAI). The way we cope with uncertainty is partly personality-dependent, but it is built into our behavior through socialization in a given society and we learn to conform to norms.

He first created the above 4 dimensions, to which he later added 2 more (Hofstede, 2001): one is Long Term Orientation vs. Short Term Normative Orientation (LTO): the time orientation of society is determined by long or short term thinking. The other one is Indulgence vs. Restraint (IND): how much they try to control their desires, their impulsivity. Hofstede (2011) found that the distance of power and the avoidance of uncertainty have a particularly strong influence on the type of organizational structures that emerge in a country. The difference in group phenomena is best explained along the lines of individual vs. collective and small vs. large power distance.

Generation Z: The Oxford Dictionaries define Generation Z as "the group of people who were born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s, who are regarded as being very familiar with the internet." The members of this generation are characterized: Zoomers, digital natives (e.g. Turner, 2015), but not always digitally literate (Strauss, 2019; Dobos et al., 2022), risk-averse (Economist, 2019), more sensitive against systemic racism and has modern views on gender identity (Schroth, 2019), outcome-focused, tech-savvy (Kebritchi et al., 2016; Tuluk & Yurdugul, 2020), naturally use the smartphones and Internet (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Hebebe & Shelley, 2018), moral issues are also important for them (e.g. Zubairu et al., 2016) and social media has a huge impact on them (Wozniak, 2016; Duffett, 2017). It seems that they prefer autonomy at work (Wiedmer, 2015; Garai Fodor & Jäckel, 2022) and expect real-time – rather personal – feedback (Lazányi & Bilan, 2017), so we see that personal interaction is important for them despite obvious digitalization effects (Zhou & Shalley, 2003). They are pragmatic in e.g. length of working time, work-life balance, values of the organization, quick carrier development (Chillakuri & Mahanandia, 2018; Chillakuri, 2020)

To explore the publications on ethics, and more specifically on ethical leadership among Generation Z, we use of a large, reliably high-quality database, which gives us a good chance to learn about publications and research trends on a given scientific topic. For this purpose, the internationally known and recognized Web of Science database was examined. In general, the topic of “ethical leadership” is very popular among researchers, with Web of Science providing 6428 hits for this keyword. If we narrow this down to publications in the social sciences, we still get 3158 results. Next, we searched for the terms "ethics" and "Generation Z" without any time constraints, and found 29 hits. However our topic is perception of Generation Z about ethical leadership therefore we have made a new search for "ethical leadership" and "Generation Z", and we found a total of 1 publication. The focus of this paper (Evans et al., 2021) is on the impact of helicopter parents and the workplace ethics of the Generation Z youth concerned, where the authors provide recommendations for the Millennial generation managers who lead them. So this article is not primarily about ethical management of Generation Z either. This suggests that the ethical perceptions of Generation Z, especially their perceptions of ethical leadership, are a rather under-researched topic. On the one hand, the young age of Generation Z is a natural explanation for this, but it is important to add that the oldest members of Generation Z are already 26-27 years old, who have not only just entered the workplace, but are often already in a leader position.

Based on literature review the hypotheses of our study are:

H1: The Starratt model is valid for Generation Z.

H2: Generation Z in Hungary tends to avoid conflict in terms of workplace ethics.

H3: In ethical leadership Generation Z in Hungary takes an individualistic approach.

Method

More scholars (e.g. Scanlan, 2007; Osafo et al., 2021) used Starratt's model in their empirical research on ethics and found it useful. Therefore our empirical research used the Ethical Leadership Questionnaire of Langlois and co-authors (2014), who also applied the three elements of the Starratt model. They asked leaders in higher education, and we asked Generation Z undergraduate students. The Ethical Leadership Questionnaire was divided into 3 groups, with each item measured on a six-point Likert scale. The first group of items was about the respondent's own perception of ethical issues at work; "When I reflect on the way I act at work, I can see that..." The second group was about how the respondent solves ethical problems at work, while the third group focused on what criteria the respondent uses to make a decision when faced with an ethical dilemma. The English questionnaire was translated into Hungarian and finalized after testing. In our research we investigated the relationship shown in Figure 2 using Langlois' questionnaire and Starratt's model. For this purpose, we sent a link to our questionnaire to 3000 undergraduate students with work experience in the faculty of economics and management at a Hungarian university, and received 143 responses.

Limitation of our study: Due to the small sample size, the results of our study cannot be generalized to the population, the Hungarian Generation Z youth or university students. However, we consider our empirical results to be significant due to the high degree of under-research on the topic.

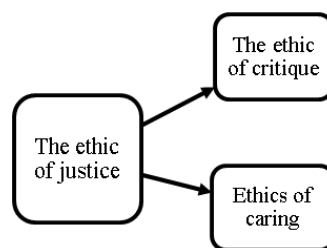


Figure 2. Model tested based on Starratt (1991)

Results and Discussion

First we introduce our demographics. As it can be seen in Table 1 69 of 143 respondents are men, 73 women and one student chose option 3. In this research we focus on Generation Z that's why use valid data of BSc students, so 1 means 18-21 years and 2 means 22-25 years (see Table 2). A link to the questionnaire was sent out to a university faculty of economics and management, but some students (undergraduates with work experience) who are not economics students also filled in the questionnaire. This is how the distribution of

respondents by education was obtained: Economic, business and management: 132 respondents (92.3%), Engineering sciences: 4, Health and Human Services: 1, others: 6.

Table 1. Gender distribution of respondents

	Gender	
	Frequency	Percent
1	69	48.3
2	73	51.0
3	1	.7
Total	143	100.0

Table 2. Distribution of respondents by age

	Age	
	Frequency	Percent
1	83	58.0
2	60	42.0
Total	143	100.0

Table 3 shows the Cronbach's alpha values, suggesting that the questionnaire is reliable. Examining the VIF values, we saw that there is no multicollinearity.

Table 3. Construct reliability and validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)
Care	0.838	0.864	0.823
Critique	0.790	0.803	0.785
Justice	0.728	0.726	0.719

Smart PLS4 software (Consistent PLS-SEM algorithm) was used to analyses the data. The three factors include the following items:

Care = 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21

Critique = 3, 6, 7, 10, 11, 16, 23

Justice = 4, 12, 13, 14, 15, 22

Table 4. R-square matrix

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Care	0.568	0.565
Critique	0.584	0.581

In multivariate regression, the strength of the relationship between the variables is R^2 is the multiple correlation coefficients, also known as the multiple coefficient of determination squared. According to Chin (1998) if R^2 values are 0.67 those mean substantial variables and our values (Critique: 0.584 and Care: 0.568) are close to this. (See Table 4, Table 5, and Figure 3)

Table 5. Path coefficients

	Path coefficients
Justice -> Care	0.754
Justice -> Critique	0.764

The following statements received the largest outer loadings:

Critique:

16. When I have to resolve an ethical dilemma, I try to oppose injustice.

23. My decision in the resolution of an ethical dilemma is based on greater social justice.

Care:

20. When I have to resolve an ethical dilemma, I pay attention to individuals.

18. When I have to resolve an ethical dilemma, I seek to preserve bonds and harmony within the organization.

The factor 'ethic of justice' (how we govern ourselves) is significantly influenced by the factors 'care' (what our relationships want from us) and 'critique' (who we control). We see that Starratt's 3-dimensional model is also

valid among the surveyed Generation Z young people with work experience that's why we accept H1. Catacutan and co-authors (2015) also found the 'care' and 'justice' factors to be dominant in their research in the Philippines, interviewing deans. In this respect, it seems that the younger generation does not behave differently.

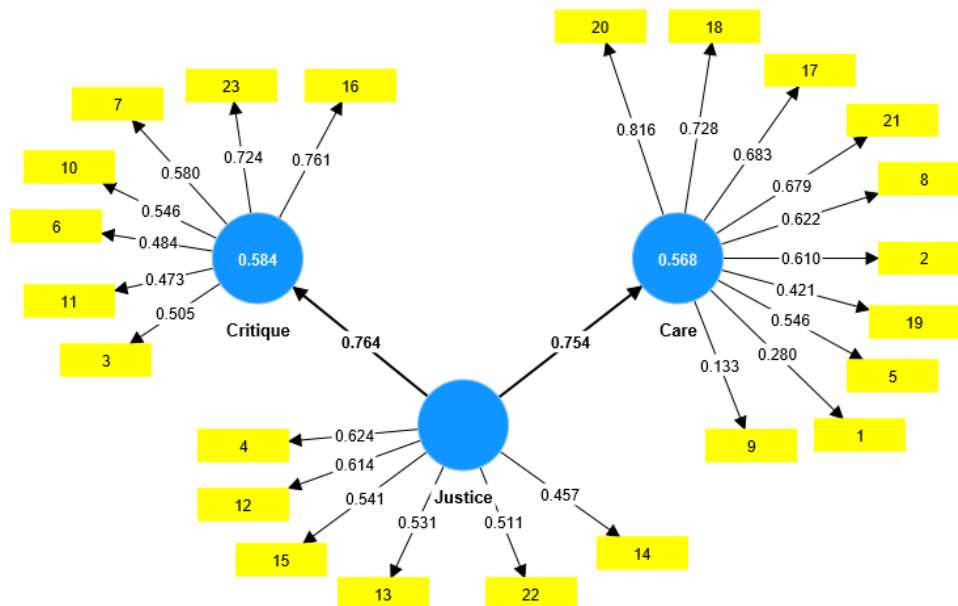


Figure 3. Results and the received SEM Model

The strongest components of the 'critique' factor show that our young respondents really want to do something about an ethical work environment, not by avoiding unethical practices but by confronting them. Additionally they want to achieve and work on the greater social well-being so we reject H2. The key statements of the 'care' factor address the needs of both the individual and the community in an interesting way. Thus, it cannot be said that the young people interviewed in Generation Z Hungary are individualistic at the expense of the community, but on the contrary; harmony at work is about as important to them as the well-being of the individual, and even the well-being of society. This is a surprising result, since, for example, according to Hofstede's model, these students would be somewhere in the very middle on the individual/collective (IDV) scale, although the Hungarian score of 80 indicates an Individualist society. Surprisingly, we reject our H3. In empirical research, Garai Fodor et al. (2022) also found that Hungarian students in courses prefer pair or group tasks.

Conclusion

There are many publications that address the fact that young generations think differently, communicate differently and have different expectations in the workplace. Indeed, through the integrated, natural use of new technologies, they behave and perceive their environment differently in many ways. But we also see, for example, that harmony at work is extremely important to them. A surprising finding is that community well-being, and indeed wider social well-being, is a much higher priority for them than expected. Further empirical research is also suggested on Generation Z's perceptions of ethics in the workplace, their behavior and their views on ethical leadership. A multi-country survey would be ideal, where globalization and national effects could be measured.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

The author declares that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPSS journal belongs to the author.

Acknowledgements or Notes

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