Differences in Marketing Ethics Attitudes between U.S. and Western European Undergraduates

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study investigated the ethical responses of 309 undergraduates to nine hypothetical marketing moral dilemmas. As hypothesized, participants of western European descent responded more ethically than their U.S. peers. Implications of these findings for socially responsible management, for marketing to different ethnic groups and for the moral education of students were discussed. It was concluded that the increased understanding of different cultures and subcultures will continue to increase an organization’s global competitiveness.

INTRODUCTION

There are at least three implications of any differences among nationalities in marketing ethics: (1) the moral education of students before they enter the business world, (2) the socially responsible management of ethnically diverse employees for long term organizational success as a global competitor, and (3) the effectiveness of multiple segmentation marketing strategies directed to consumers from different cultures.

The present investigation examines whether or not American and western European undergraduates studying in the United States differ in marketing ethics attitudes. But why would there be moral differences between them?

Adler (2002) summarizes a survey of Harvard Business Review readers about American business executives. About half “attributed unethical practices to superiors who were interested in results no matter how they were attained” (p. 189). DeGeorge (1990) writes about the American business system: “some … seek their own goals at the expense of other people. Greed often blinds people to the requirements of fairness. Many … succumb to the temptation to win by whatever means available, fair or not” (p.7). But is this kind of behavior more common in the U.S. than in Western Europe? What about the view that Americans are “unprincipled?” (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998, p. 25). Are these just insults, or are there theoretical-cultural underpinnings for a U.S. versus western European difference in morality?

Hofstede’s Individualism-Collectivism dimension is presented by Adler (2002). McMahan (2009) defines individualism as “A world view that focuses on the uniqueness and independence of autonomous individuals and stresses the importance of personal rights, goals, and needs” and collectivism as “A world view that focuses on the connectedness of the person to the family or group and stresses the importance of upholding the goals, norms, and beliefs of the group” (p. 261). If the individualist is more selfish and less ethical and the collectivist is more selfless and more ethical, than individualist, collectivist differences between Americans and western Europeans could help explain any moral differences between them.

Chan, Yim, and Lam (2010) write that in a collectivist (v. individualist) value orientation “group or collective interests take precedence over the desires and needs of individuals” (p.52). Oyserman (2006) adds “self interest” as a focus of the