

# Moral Development and Narcissism of Private and Public University Business Students

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**ABSTRACT.** In this study, researchers examined the assumption that senior-level undergraduate students from private colleges universities possess higher levels of moral and ethical development than students from public institutions. In addition, the researchers sought to determine (a) if there was a relationship between narcissistic personality traits and the level of moral reasoning, and (b) there was a difference in the level of narcissistic personality tendencies of business students from private vs. public institutions based on demographic and textual variables. A cluster sampling approach was used in the sample selection. The sample was limited to students majoring in general business at seven public and six private universities in North Dakota and Minnesota. A total of 269 subjects participated in the research project: 145 at private institutions and 124 at public institutions. The Defining Issues Test version 2 (DIT-2) and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) were used to collect data at seven public and six private institutions. Students from public and private universities scored similarly on the DIT-2. A significant difference between the NPI scores of the private college students and the public college students was found. No significant relationship was found between the NPI score and level of moral reasoning. Business educators should be concerned that an increase in the number of business ethics courses completed did not significantly impact students' moral reasoning or narcissistic traits.

**KEY WORDS:** moral development, ethics, narcissism, higher education, business education

## **Introduction**

Businesses want to hire ethical employees. According to the Graduate Management Admission Council (2005), companies seek graduates with advanced ethical conduct proficiency (p. 11). However, survey

results of students' ethical behaviors in high school, undergraduate, and graduate programs are cause for concern. In a survey of 25,000 high school students (Ferrell et al., 2008), 62% of students admitted to cheating on an exam at least once, 35% admitted to shoplifting, and 25% to cheating in order to win in sports. Covey (2006) found additional disturbing results in a study of undergraduate college students showing that 75% of business students acknowledged they cheated in order to improve their odds of getting into graduate school. This compares with 43% of liberal arts students, 52% of education students, 63% of medical students, and 63% of law students (Covey, 2006). It appears the business students in Covey's study may be more unethical than students in other disciplines, or perhaps they became more unethical throughout their studies. McCabe et al. (2006) found similar results and reported that 56% of students surveyed in business graduate programs admitted to cheating at least once in the last academic year, compared to 47% of their non-business peers. The Aspen Institute (2003) conducted a longitudinal study involving approximately 2000 MBA students from various business schools. The institute found that, over the term of the MBA program, students showed a weakening of moral character and a diminished view of the importance of social values. In addition, there was an increase in the number of students who believed their main responsibility as business people would be to the company's shareholders. Given the high incidence of cheating, the weakening of moral character, and the diminished view of the importance of social values, educators and employers may have cause for concern about the moral and ethical behaviors of business graduates when they enter the workforce.

Businesses try to increase their odds of hiring ethical people through recruitment practices, screening, and evaluation of potential employees. However, it is

often difficult to determine which candidates, once hired, will exhibit the attitudes and behaviors needed to establish and maintain an ethical organizational culture. Employers are not just looking for competent managers, but also for those who know the importance of making ethical decisions (Roy and Roy, 2004). There has been a recent movement within business toward the integration of spirituality in the workplace. This trend is reflected by the increasing numbers of management books that have an overtly spiritual theme (Brandt, 1995). The core principles of spirituality – the belief that all individuals have dignity, that we are interconnected, and that a transcendent being or force defines purpose in human affairs – dovetail with contemporary management thinking about what drives great companies (Gunther, 2001). Sociologist Alan Wolfe stated that as far as “combin[ing] professionalism with ultimate questions...faith-based institutions have done at least as well, if not better, than secular institutions” (Schaefer, 2003). For students at institutions that have a religious affiliation, business, and ethics are often more closely intertwined in the curriculum (Di Meglio, 2007). This leads some firms to focus their recruiting efforts on students graduating from private colleges and universities, which most often have a religious affiliation, with the assumption that these candidates possess higher levels of moral and ethical development than students from public institutions.

This study examined the assumption that senior-level business undergraduate students from private colleges and universities possess higher levels of moral and ethical development than students from public institutions. In addition, the researchers sought to determine if (a) there is a relationship between narcissistic personality traits and the level of moral reasoning, and (b) there is a difference in the level of narcissistic personality tendencies of business students from private vs. public institutions based on demographic and textual variables.

### Literature review

Moral development involves thoughts, behaviors, feelings, and actions about what is right and wrong. Moral development has an intrapersonal dimension (a person's basic values and sense of self) and an interpersonal dimension (a focus on what people

should do in their interactions with other people). Many believe this development to be a cognitive process (Santrock, 2007).

According to Fraedrich et al. (1994), “Most, if not all, of the current models of ethical decision making in business ... utilize Kohlberg's work to expand the disciplines's understanding of ethical decision making” (p. 831). Kohlberg (1976) contended that individuals develop morally in stages. Kohlberg was not interested in the decisions an individual makes, but rather the motivational factors for choices based upon the individual's stage and level of cognitive moral development.

The first of the three levels defined by Kohlberg is the *Preconventional Level*. Individuals at this level of moral development are very self-focused and base decisions on the belief they will either receive a reward or avoid a punishment. Moral values are not internalized; moral reasoning is controlled by external rewards and punishment (Santrock, 2007). In level two, the *Conventional Reasoning Level* (Kohlberg, 1976), moral values are internalized. However, they are not the individual's values, but those of others. At this level, individuals feel a sense of loyalty to others, such as family, and act based on a sense of duty to protect a community or society. The third level is the *Postconventional Level*. At this level, individuals may put others' interests ahead of their own personal interests. Individuals feel concern for the universal rights of others and recognize potential conflicts between the rights of individuals and the rights of society (Ferrell et al., 2008).

Kohlberg believed the stages of moral development to be sequential and age-related; an individual's moral orientation unfolds as a consequence of cognitive development (Duska and Whelan, 1975; Kohlberg, 1976; Santrock, 2007). He also believed that moral development can be fostered by exposing individuals to others with beliefs at one level higher of development than the individual's current stage of development (Power et al., 1989).

James Rest developed the *NeoKohlbergian Approach* (Rest, 1999). While Rest agreed that an individual's moral development was a cognitive process, he felt Kohlberg's stages were too rigid and that moral judgment was only one psychological component of moral development. Rest and his colleagues developed the Defining Issues Test (DIT) based on the concept of schemas vs. stages. A schema

is “a general knowledge structure, residing in long-term memory, which is invoked or activated by a current stimulus configuration that resembles previous stimuli” (Rest, 1999, p. 136). The similarities and recurrences of stimuli are the basis for building cognitive structures that become more complex as individuals gain experience and exposure to moral choices. The DIT was developed to activate moral schemas in a subject’s long-term memory by presenting the subject with various short story scenarios. The research subject would read each scenario, decide the best choice of action from a number of stated options, rate in importance each of the issues presented in the story to indicate how the issue impacted the decision, and rank the top four items in terms of importance to the decision process. The DIT has been widely used and cited as a measure of moral judgment (Loviscky et al., 2007).

Researchers have found that education, in general, increases moral reasoning scores (McNeel, 1994; Rest, 1979, 1994, 1999). According to Kohlberg’s theory, growth in moral judgment happens as a result of cognitive accommodation: “Change in one’s cognitions comes from experiences that do not fit one’s earlier (and simpler) conceptions. Cognitive disequilibrium is the condition for development” (Rest, 1986, p. 32). Rest agreed, proposing that moral development is more a matter of richness of experience and stimulation than the mere passage of years (Rest, 1999, p. 125).

The tenets of a liberal arts education are consistent with this view of the growth of moral judgment. Students are exposed to a broad range of views and facts in diverse areas of education. Researchers (Hawkins, 2003; Koeplin, 1998; McNeel, 1994) have concluded that students graduating from a liberal arts institution, regardless of major, possessed a higher level of moral development as measured by Rest’s DIT than did students from Bible colleges or from programs focused on technical skills.

Rest analyzed the relationships between DIT scores and demographic and textual variables. A direct relationship between age and scores was found. As individuals aged and matured, their scores increased. However, increased scores may be a consequence of education more than age. Rest reported that one of the strongest and most consistent correlates of development in moral judgment had been years of formal education, even more so than

chronological age (McNeel, 1994; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Rest, 1986, p. 33).

Other factors that have been shown to correlate with increased DIT scores include a liberal arts education (Hawkins, 2003; Koeplin, 1998; McNeel, 1994; Ponemon and Glazer, 1990), academic success (Rest, 1986), and socio-economic status (Rest, 1979). Conservative religious practices and theology were found to have a negative correlation with DIT scores (Hawkins, 2003; McNeel, 1994; Rest, 1986, 1994, 1999). There have been mixed results in correlating the choice of an academic major to either higher or lower scores. Findings related to gender differences have been mixed. When differences do occur, females tend to score slightly higher than males (Rest, 1986, 1994, 1999). Studies have shown that people who have taken college ethics courses have increased DIT scores. (Bonawitz, 2002; Chapuis, 1997; Gautschi and Jones, 1998; Golden, 1996; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Rest, 1986, 1994, 1999; Roselli, 1998).

Studies of business students have tended to concentrate on accounting students and liberal arts curricula vs. technically focused curricula, and not private vs. public general business students. Research (Ponemon and Gabhart, 1994; Ponemon and Glazer, 1990) has shown accounting students from a program encouraging liberal learning possessed higher levels of moral reasoning than students from a traditional accounting program.

#### *Narcissistic personality traits*

Narcissism is broadly defined as a grandiose sense of self-importance (Judge et al., 2006). Certainly all people have some level of narcissistic tendencies. Studies revealed that most ordinary people secretly think they are better than others. According to Vogel (2006) people rate themselves as more dependable, smarter, harder working, and less prejudiced than others. Healthy narcissism raises self-confidence. It may be impossible for the ordinary person to leave behind all narcissism, but people who understand its dangers will constantly monitor themselves both internally and externally to ensure narcissism does not reach an unhealthy level.

Twenge (2006) studied generational differences for 13 years and was especially interested in analyzing changes in levels of narcissism in young people.

Her analysis of 12 studies of over 1.3 million young people in the U.S. illustrated how today's young people differ from young people in previous generations. Twenge concluded that young people born in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s are the most narcissistic generation that has existed to date.

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) (Raskin and Hall, 1979) was developed to measure "individual differences in narcissism in non-clinical populations" (Raskin and Terry, 1988, p. 892). An analysis of responses on the NPI, collected from 85 undergraduates of 4 year institutions between 1980 and 2006, showed a progressive increase in the students' level of narcissism over those years. When weighed by sample size, a significant and positive relationship existed between NPI scores and the year of data collection. The regression equation developed in the study yielded an average NPI score of 15.06 in 1982 and 17.29 in 2006: a 30% increase in the mean score (Twenge et al., 2008).

It is interesting to note that NPI scores for college students have been increasing throughout the last two decades, while the DIT scores for college students have been decreasing over the same time period. College students have been found to be more narcissistic and are at lower stages of moral development compared to students of previous generations. The average DIT scores Rest reported in 1979 for senior high students are similar to the recent DIT scores for college students. An explanation for the declining scores could not be found in the literature.

## Methodology

### *Sampling procedures*

Surveys and questionnaires were used to gather data from senior-level undergraduate business students attending public and private institutions. Instruments used in the study included a student demographic survey; Rest's Defining Issues Test version 2 (DIT-2); and the NPI. The study received Institutional Review Board approval.

A cluster sampling approach was used in the sample selection. The sample was limited to students majoring in general business at seven public and six

private institutions in North Dakota and Minnesota. A total of 269 subjects participated in the research project: 145 at private institutions and 124 at public institutions. The private institution participants were 66% male and 34% female. Public institution participants were 53% male, 44% female, and 3% not identified. The mode age of the students was 22 at both types of institutions. The mean age of private university students was 21.9 and public university students was 23.7. The mean self-reported grad point average (GPA) of the private university students was 3.10 and the public university students was 2.94.

### *Defining Issues Test*

For this study, the researchers used the DIT-2, a more recent version of the DIT, because it takes less time to complete, has streamlined instructions, and purges fewer subjects for unreliability. The DIT-2 has been found valid and reliable in other studies (Bebeau and Thoma, 2003). The DIT-2 yields developmental indices to measure group differences. The Personal Interest Schema score reflects the proportion of selected items that appeal to Stages 2 and 3 considerations. Stage 2 considerations focus on the direct advantages to the actor; Stage 3 considerations focus on the good or evil intention of the parties, and on the party's concern for maintaining friendships, relationships, and approval. The Maintaining Norms Schema score represents the proportion of selected items that appeal to Stage 4 considerations, which focus on maintaining the existing legal system, roles, and formal organizational structures. The Postconventional Schema score represents the proportion of selected items that appeal to Stages 5 and 6 considerations. The focus within this schema is on consensus building, safeguarding basic rights, and organizing social arrangements and relationships (Bebeau and Thoma, 2003).

### *The Narcissistic Personality Inventory*

The NPI was developed to measure "individual differences in narcissism in non-clinical populations" (Raskin and Terry, 1988, p. 892). Studies have found the NPI to be a valid and reliable instrument

(Auerbach, 1984; Emmons, 1987; Mullins and Kopelman, 1988; Raskin and Hall, 1981; Watson, et al., 1984). Items are presented in a forced-choice dyad and the respondent chooses which of two statements is most agreeable. By using forced-choice dyads, the NPI is somewhat protected from social desirability influences. This is shown by lack of correlation of the NPI with measures of social desirability (Watson et al., 1984). High scores indicate higher levels of narcissism (Penney and Spector, 2002).

## Findings

Rest's DIT-2 was used to measure each participant's level of moral judgment. The test data was analyzed for 206 usable surveys: 116 private students and 90 public students. Surveys were purged if respondents failed to rate an item three or more times and if six or more rankings were left blank. The DIT-2 provides an N2 score. A high N2 score indicates high-level moral reasoning and decision-making (Rest et al., 1999). Table I shows the mean N2 scores for the sample by institution type and gender.

Male and female students from the private institutions scored higher on moral judgment than similar gender groups from public institutions. However, a *t* test comparing the N2 (moral reasoning) scores between the private and public students found the difference was not significant at an  $\alpha$  of 0.05. The results were  $t(205) = 0.325$ ,  $p = 0.708$  (two-tailed). A comparison was also made between the N2 scores for males and females in the sample. The average score for all males was 26.87 and females 29.31. A *t* test for these samples found the difference to be not significant, with  $t(204) = -1.117$ ,  $p = 0.265$  (two-tailed).

Students from public and private institutions scored similarly on all three indices. The mean Personal Interest Schema Score for private institution students was 30.43 and the public institution students' mean score was 30.17. Private students scored slightly lower on the Maintain Norms Schema at 32.72 compared to public students at 34.61. Private institution students also scored slightly higher on the Postconventional Schema at 29.32 and public institution students scored 27.49.

A significant difference was found between the NPI scores of the private college students and public college students. The private NPI mean score was 19.43, and public mean was 15.71. The *t* test result was  $t(263) = 4.393$ ,  $p = 0.000$  (two-tailed). Data for gender comparison are provided in Table II.

A Spearman  $\rho$  correlation analysis was performed on both the N2 scores and NPI scores against all of the demographic and textual data to determine significant relationships. Table III reflects the correlation analysis by demographic variables between the NPI (narcissism) and N2 (moral reasoning) scores. Those found to be significant are noted. An analysis was performed to see if there was a significant relationship between the NPI score and the three schema scores, with no significant correlations found. Pearson correlations did not reveal a significant relationship between the NPI score and the N2 (moral reasoning) score. Correlation analysis was used to investigate an association between the NPI score and the schema scores, with no significant relationships found.

Partial correlation analysis controlling for each of the demographic variables was completed. Significant correlations were found when controlling for two variables: family type and GPA. When controlling for family type, the correlation coefficient between the N2 score and NPI score was  $-0.041$ .

TABLE I  
Mean N2 scores by institution type and gender: range 5.16–66.09

	Total	Private institutions		Public institutions	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
Sample <i>n</i>	206	80	36	44	46
N2 mean	27.80	27.28	30.12	26.12	28.69
SD	15.39	15.62	15.96	14.99	15.27

TABLE II  
Mean NPI scores by institution type and gender: range 0–35

	Total	Private institutions		Public institutions	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
Sample <i>n</i>	265	96	49	65	55
NPI mean	17.74	20.43	17.47	17.42	13.69
SD	7.09	6.23	7.44	7.37	5.88

TABLE III  
Correlation coefficients between variables and, NPI and N2 Scores

Variable	NPI scores		N2 scores	
	Coefficient	Sig.	Coefficient	Sig.
Age	−0.161	0.012*	0.019	0.784
Sex	−0.278	0.000**	0.092	0.190
NPI score	–		−0.070	0.317
N2 score	−0.070	0.317	–	
Institution type	−0.303	0.000**	−0.031	0.662
Degree	0.198	0.002**	0.013	0.853
GPA	−0.107	0.098	0.160	0.023*
Community type	0.216	0.001**	0.054	0.443
Family type	0.144	0.026*	−0.037	0.598
Income level	0.154	0.018*	0.041	0.569
Prior college academic group	0.064	0.326	0.140	0.047*
Prior college athletics	0.153	0.018*	0.030	0.671
College athletics	0.210	0.001**	0.026	0.719
Total number of college activities	0.140	0.031*	0.164	0.020*
Number of ethics courses	0.056	0.391	−0.037	0.608
Number of business ethics courses	0.130	0.047*	0.059	0.410
Faith importance	0.005	0.934	−0.046	0.517
Ethics incorporation into B classes	0.045	0.494	0.095	0.182
Feeling prepared	0.113	0.083	0.095	0.183

\* $p < 0.05$  level (two-tailed), \*\* $p < 0.01$  level (two-tailed).

Controlling for GPA yielded a correlation coefficient of  $-0.026$ .

Three demographic items were found to correlate at a significant level with the N2 scores: GPA, prior college academic group, and total number of college activities. The GPA and prior college academic group, such as honor society, are similar, as one must possess a high GPA to be allowed membership into academic groups. No significant difference was found between genders, which was consistent with prior research.

All of the private universities participating in the study were affiliated with a faith-based institution. However, the importance of faith in making daily decisions did not vary significantly between students at the two types of institutions. The majority of students at both private and public institutions, 73 and 68%, respectively, either agreed or strongly agreed that faith was important to them when making decisions. This similarity may reflect regional values in the upper plains states.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the levels of moral and ethical development of senior-level undergraduate business students in private and public institutions. As measured by Rest's DIT-2, no significant differences were found in the level of moral development between students in private and public institutions. The scores for business students in this study were lower than the scores reported by Rest. Rest reported college student scores in a range from the low to mid-40s (Bebeau and Thoma, 2003; Rest, 1979, 1999). The mean moral reasoning score in this study was 27.8, which is consistent with Rest's reported mean score for senior high school students. However, as previously discussed, scores have been declining. The mean scores for this sample appear to be consistent with studies from the early 1990s and later, which have averaged in the upper 20s to low 30s for upper level college students (Bonawitz, 2002; Chapuis, 1997; Richmond, 2001; Stewart, 1991).

When measured by N2 scores, no significant relationship was found between narcissistic personality traits and the level of moral reasoning. A relationship was anticipated between the N2 scores and the Personal Interest schema score; however, no significant relationships were found between the N2 scores and any of the three schema scores.

When compared to public institution students, private institution students had significantly higher scores on the NPI. This may be due in part to private institution students being from more affluent families, where parents have discretionary funds to fulfill their child's wants. This assumption was reinforced by a significant relationship between the NPI score and family income. Several demographic items were found to correlate with the NPI scores. As age increased, NPI scores decreased. Males showed more narcissistic traits than females. Private institution students, as well as students earning a bachelor of arts degree, scored higher than public institution students and those earning a bachelor of science degree. Students from larger communities or urban settings scored higher on the NPI. A significant relationship was shown between the NPI score and family type; students from non-traditional homes showed more narcissistic tendencies. We suggest that persons raised in single-parent homes

had to learn self-dependence, which increased their self-confidence and narcissistic tendencies.

It is noteworthy that participation in athletics, both at the high school and college level, showed significant positive correlation with NPI scores. Athletes in this study were more narcissistic in nature than non-athletes. The private institutions had a much higher percentage of student athletes, which contributed to the higher mean NPI score. In the private institutions, 64.3% of the students indicated they participate in college athletics, compared to 33.9% of the public institution students. Private institutions often use athletic programs as a means of recruiting and increasing enrollment. Higher NPI scores were also found for students participating in other college activities. While no single activity, other than athletics, showed a correlation with NPI scores, the greater number of activities a student participated in, the higher the NPI score.

The two additional variables in this study correlating to NPI scores were the number of business ethics courses students had taken and students' self-assessment of their preparation to face real-life ethical dilemmas in the workplace. A positive correlation was also found between students' narcissistic tendencies and their feeling of preparedness. As their level of narcissism increased, the more they judged themselves to be prepared to face real-life ethical dilemmas. Business educators should be concerned that an increase in the number of business ethics courses did not significantly impact students' moral reasoning, as evidenced by the DIT-2 scores, and the more courses students had taken, the more they demonstrated narcissistic traits.

Some educators may find comfort in the fact that a significant relationship was not found between narcissistic tendencies and the ability to morally reason. However, rising NPI scores should be a concern to educators who are attempting to prepare young people for the work environment. It is disconcerting that the students consider themselves well prepared to face ethical dilemmas in the workplace, while their ethical reasoning scores suggest otherwise. In addition to the annoyance and frustration that some employers have expressed regarding the new generation entering the workforce, a greater concern may be whether students can become self-aware of personal needs and weakness to seek additional guidance and training. Narcissistic

tendencies may need to be addressed in conjunction with business ethics education for students to gain self-awareness. This adds another dimension of human development that educators need to understand in order to develop effective teaching tools and methods for ethical development.

#### *Recommendations for further study*

Educators, students, and future employers should be concerned that the study found no significant relationship between the number of ethics courses, business ethics courses, or the incorporation of ethics into other business courses and the ability to reason morally. While prior research has shown that ethics courses raise students' moral reasoning skills (Bonawitz, 2002; Chapuis, 1997; Gautschi and Jones, 1998; Golden, 1996; Roselli, 1998; Uthe-Burow, 2001), this study found that, even though the students from private institutions had more ethics training than public institution students, their scores did not reflect higher levels of ethical development.

Business departments should evaluate the design of the ethics component of the curricula to determine how to increase the ethical development of students. As business ethics education has future implications for the success of both organizations and individuals, it is an area with significant opportunities for additional research. Research in the area of assessment that could be used to establish appropriate objectives and tools to evaluate ethics education outcomes could be beneficial to programs and instructors striving to prepare students for the changing work environment. Are there some methods that produce more positive learning outcomes for students than others? What are appropriate objectives for the instruction of business ethics? What are appropriate means to assess students' learning of those objectives? What additional training do business instructors need to feel comfortable and confident in the incorporation of ethics in a specific area of instruction?

The decline of DIT scores over time is another area for further research. What are some of the possible causes of the decreasing scores? Have individual's scores declined over time, or are the declines reflected in specific cohorts only? Has there been a change in value systems over time, and if so, is there

a correlation between those changes and the declining DIT scores? Is there a relationship between a student's value system and their DIT score? Is there a relationship between a student's level of narcissistic tendencies and their value system? Do these areas need to be addressed in conjunction with ethics education to provide meaningful results that will influence behavior in the new workforce?

The task of preparing young people for a business environment ever increasing in diversity and complexity is challenging, exciting, and rewarding. This remains an area rich in potential for continued study, experimentation, and assessment. Research-driven practice is essential for business school faculty striving to better educate students for life in the world of business.

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