
Ethics and gender at the point of decision-making: An exploration of intervention and kinship

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Abstract

This article reports the results, by gender, of an international ethics survey that was tested with communication students in New Zealand in 2009. The findings signal gender differences in ethical decision-making, but also that both genders change their behaviour to select more ethical options when a kinship factor is involved. This suggests that feminist ethical theories that promote the value of concepts of relational interdependence to enhancing ethical thinking are relevant for both genders. The findings also point to the importance for organisations of facilitating and supporting diverse perspectives on ethical issues, and creating a culture of equality in which both genders feel able to speak out about ethical problems. The article explores some of the main implications of these findings for public relations practice.¹

Introduction

Ethics has become of vital concern to public relations theory-building since the normative proposition that the public relations function should provide an organisation's 'conscience' (Ryan & Martinson, 1983; Bowen, 2002). In practice, too, public relations staff are increasingly involved in strategic decisions with an ethical component, and in contributing to organisation-wide programmes to set standards, manage compliance, and stimulate ethical organisational culture (Tilley, 2008; 2009). For both scholarly and applied public relations contexts, therefore, an appreciation of the many variables that may impact upon ethical outcomes is crucial. Ethics is both exceptionally philosophically and culturally complex and, given that at bottom it comes

down to the choices between alternatives that are made by individuals and groups at any given moment in time, also very pragmatic. Any research that can offer insights into how the diverse variables affect the applied decision-making is useful, particularly in the public relations field where it is generally agreed that practitioners lack sufficient practical guidance for the heavy responsibility of intricate ethical decision-making they face (Bowen, 2004). The present article explores only two variables (gender and kinship) of many that are relevant to ethical reasoning, but uses scenarios derived from real-life situations to try to capture how those variables play out at the 'coal face' in the instant of making an ethical choice. Some ramifications of these variables for public relations practitioners involved in ethics-related tasks associated with internal and external reputation and relationship management, such as identifying potential ethical risks or creating supportive contexts for whistleblowing, are examined.

The scenario-based ethics survey instrument used here was originally developed by Andrea Hornett (Temple University) and Susan Fredricks (Pennsylvania State University, Brandywine) in collaboration with their students, as a tool for improving the educators' understanding of how today's students reason, and thereby enhancing the relevance of ethics teaching (Hornett & Fredricks, 2005). The aim of consulting with students was to identify realistic "micro dilemmas that can affect anyone on a daily basis and lead to a slippery slope" (Fredricks & Hornett, 2007, p.80) and then use the research process both to gather data and, when feeding back findings, to encourage students to think about and discuss their own decision-making processes and

influences. One early finding in discussions with students was that the students' views about ethical behaviour towards family members tended to differ from the educators' views. Therefore a measure of the 'kinship effect' was included in the survey instrument (Fredricks & Hornett, 2007). Kinship effect is described in more detail in the literature review, below, but is essentially the influence that a sense of literal or metaphorical relatedness has on ethical behaviour towards others.

Fredricks, Hornett and colleagues tested the final 10 ethical decision-making scenarios with several cohorts in the USA (Fredricks, Ramsey, Hornett & Mueller, 2009) and the same scenarios have subsequently, at their invitation, been administered in other locations around the world in an attempt to determine whether students studying elsewhere respond differently and may therefore need different teaching approaches for ethics. Cross-cultural differences between data from the United States of America and New Zealand were apparent, and those comparisons are reported elsewhere (Tilley, Fredricks & Hornett, in press). In the present article, only New Zealand data are analysed, in order to control for the geographical variances found in international comparisons. For each scenario, the New Zealand data have been cross-tabulated by gender, in order to investigate whether, for this cohort of soon-to-graduate communication students, gender is a variable in ethical reasoning. The resulting conclusions are a very partial picture of what creates ethical outcomes, but do indicate that both gender and the kinship effect have measurable impact upon ethical choices. Hence it is suggested that the feminist ethical theories that already deal with these two concepts of gender and relatedness in particular, will have relevance both for these students, and for public relations practitioners seeking to better understand their diverse publics' ethical reasoning processes. Feminist ethics is therefore recommended both for curricular inclusion, and as a tool for those practitioners who aim to promote ethical behaviour within and by their organisations and strive towards the normative expectation of being an organisational conscience.

Method

The research used, with permission, an instrument already developed and longitudinally tested in the United States of America, consisting of a printed survey with 10 real-life-derived scenarios. It was administered to various classes of second and third year undergraduate communication students (N=114) in two locations in New Zealand. The students were given the option to participate by selecting from different responses to ethical dilemmas. Two scenarios specifically tested whether respondents were likely to change their nominated course of action when a kinship relationship was introduced—that is, if a relative would be affected by their choice.

The actual scenarios as tested are provided in the findings section below. Each scenario describes a situation that requires the respondent to make an ethical decision, then offers a range of different response options to tick, including an option to select 'other' and provide a qualitative response. Minor wording adaptations (replacing 'cart' with 'trolley', for example) were made for the New Zealand context to ensure that the sense of the survey was the same as the original, but the instrument and its administration were otherwise unchanged. Full university ethics approval was obtained, screening procedures were applied to ensure that the New Zealand researcher did not at any time survey her own students, and participation was voluntary.

Limitations

Survey research is generally held to be strong on reliability, but weaker in validity and artificial in testing (Babbie, 1998). Since the survey questions are simulated (even though derived from real-life examples), and administered in a classroom, not a workplace, how participants respond does not necessarily correspond with any action they might take in daily life. Austin and Pinkleton (2006) caution that, for complex topics, survey data may be of restricted value because respondents "may find it difficult to identify and explain their true feelings" (p. 173)—although for this survey the choice of descriptive answers and 'other' option rather than a Likert scale for agreement with a single statement do allow for expression

of a wider range of feelings than in many surveys. However, these particular choices may never arise in real life, given these are mock situations. The questions themselves are limited especially in that they are derived from a functionalist approach to ethics and gender. In testing specific, artificial situations the scenarios can only reproduce knowledge about responses to those situations rather than enable the discovery of novel ideas applicable to wider contexts.

Surveys can also tend to produce an acquiescence bias, particularly for a value-laden issue such as ethics. Descriptive surveys such as this one are also limited in their ability to shed light on the 'why', or respondents' motivations for their answers: they "describe, rather than explain a set of conditions, characteristics, or attributes of people in a population based on measurement of a sample" (Alreck & Settle, 1985, p. 408). They "cannot provide direct evidence of causation" (Austin & Pinkleton, 2006, p. 172). However, the strength of the survey approach is the reliability of asking the same questions of all participants. Therefore, the data can be used to identify patterns within different groups of respondents, helping to discover whether variables such as gender are worth further investigation using other methods. Lazarsfeld (in Bulmer, 1984) points out that the "finding of regularities is the beginning of any science and surveys can make an important contribution in this respect... it is necessary that we know what people usually do under many and different circumstances if we are to develop theories explaining their behaviour" (p. 55).

A further limitation of this particular study is the small sample (N=114, of which 81 were females and 33 were males). The sample cannot be generalised to a wider population, given that the respondents were all university students, which will skew a number of demographics including most obviously age. However, for a pilot study (this being the first research to test kinship effect on ethics by gender outside the USA) this sample is still sufficient to signal issues of importance for further investigation. The majority of students tested here will shortly graduate to jobs in the New Zealand communication workforce, meaning differences

identified here may soon flow into that profession. The gender distribution in the student sample (71% female) is similar to the gender distribution in the New Zealand public relations workforce (74% female) (PRINZ, 2008).

Literature review

Gender, sex and ethics

Contemporary ethics literature contains a robust selection of normative and theoretical literature, collectively labelled feminist ethics, which is based upon the premise that approaches to ethics do vary by gender (e.g. Kittay, 2003; Held, 1993, 2006; Daly, 1978; Cannon, 2000; Hoagland, 1988; Ruddick, 1990). Since Gilligan's influential 1982 book *In a different voice* emphasised that women's contribution to moral philosophy and reasoning could be different from men's and valuable in its own right (see also Gilligan, 2009), numerous theorists have developed accounts of the ways in which feminist norms and values offer alternatives to traditional patriarchal ways of seeing ethics.

Kittay (2001) summarises feminist ethical principles as "a commitment to social justice, equality, and democracy and a concern that responsibilities for children and the most vulnerable are met adequately, and shared by all" (p. 524). While there has been widespread acknowledgement that power distribution follows many social fault lines in addition to gender (see for example Moreton-Robinson, 2000), and that women's experiences are diverse and cannot be essentialised to a singular 'feminine' (Andrew, Keller & Schwartzman, 2005), a feminist ethics nonetheless provides an important "corrective to the predominantly male perspective in theorizing" (Dalmyia, 2009, p. 222). One fundamental difference between the various feminist ethics and prevailing Western ethical paradigms such as Aristotelian virtue is that a feminist ethics "works with a conception of persons as relational, rather than as the self-sufficient independent individuals of the dominant moral theories" (Held, 2006, p.13). In particular, it:

introduces the lived experience of ordinary women as philosophically relevant and hence, retrieves emotions

and practices relegated to the domestic realm as resources for thinking about justice. As an example of a feminist ethics based on love, care ethics aims to recognize the feminine features of vulnerability and dependence rather than inculcate the masculine virtues of strength, courage, and independence (Dalmiya, 2009, p. 222).

In the public relations scholarship field specifically, a feminist ethics has been explored by Grunig, Toth and Hon (2000), for whom values of “cooperation, respect, caring, nurturance, interconnection, justice, equity, honesty, sensitivity, perceptiveness, intuition, altruism, fairness, morality, and commitment” (p. 49) suggest a direction for professionals seeking to attain normative public relations ideals such as “understanding and valuing the perceptions of diverse publics, inside and outside the organization” (p. 50). Grunig et al. (2000) fall short of exploring how feminist ethical ideals of power sharing and non-coercive relationships, such as articulated in Foss and Griffin’s (1995) invitational, non-persuasive feminist rhetoric, can co-exist with the competitive marketplace paradigm within which public relations typically operates as an influencing force (Berger, 2005), but they nonetheless contribute to a substantial stream of thinking about feminist values in public relations (e.g. Hon, 1995; Toth, 2001; Aldoory, 2003, 2005).

The literature described above makes necessary theory-building and normative contributions to the field of ethical and moral philosophy. There is much less literature that offers observation of how actual responses to ethical situations differ by gender and what this might mean for processes relevant for public relations practice, such as promoting and managing ethics within and by organisations. While feminist ethics is focused upon gender—that is, the socialised and institutionalised norms that prescript masculine and feminine cultural and familial roles and inter-relationships, and which theorists such as Butler (1999) have convincingly argued are arbitrary and learned—there is another research paradigm that looks at sex-based differences between men and women. There is some

controversy surrounding this latter paradigm, with questions as to whether findings of difference can conclusively be attributed to biology or to gender, given that it is not possible to obtain unacculturated research subjects—see for example the criticisms of Brizendine’s 2006 book *The female brain* by, among others, Fine (2008) and Mehl, Vazire, Ramírez-Esparza, Slatcher, and Pennebaker (2007). There is also very little research in the biological paradigm on ethics and sexual difference: indeed DesAutels notes in 2010 that “discussions in neuroethics [the neurological study of ethical behavior] to date have ignored an ever-increasing neuroscientific literature on sex differences in brains” (p. 95), despite the fact that these findings “if true” (p. 96) may have “significant implications for theories of morality” (p. 95).

While not discounting the existence of the second paradigm, the present research seeks to add to the body of knowledge in the first (gender-focused) paradigm by testing whether gender correlates with particular decision-making selections of subjects faced with an ethical dilemma. Do male-identifying and female-identifying New Zealand university students tend to choose the same or different responses to ethical scenarios? The first research question for this study, then, was simply as follows:

- *RQ1: Do the genders differ in their responses to the survey’s ethical dilemmas?*

Gender difference and intervention

Much of the literature on ethics acknowledges that making ethical choices can involve substantial effort or ‘toughness’. Raising ethical problems often necessitates assertively stating opposition to or intervening in established practices or norms. This requires the dynamic mental stance that Bandura (1999) calls ‘moral engagement’—a concept compellingly identified as lacking in contemporary corporate contexts by Zimbardo (2008) in *The Lucifer effect*. As both Bandura and Zimbardo assert, effective ethical intervention requires not only awareness of moral issues but willingness to do something about them (in Bandura’s words, “moral agency must link moral knowledge and reasoning to

moral action” (1999, p. 194)). Being a corporate whistleblower in particular may require strong and longstanding commitment to one’s beliefs and sustained levels of assertive communication, sometimes in the face of personal disadvantage. Jos, Tompkins and Hays (1989) approvingly describe ideal whistleblowers as ‘difficult people’, because they are willing to raise uncomfortable issues. Lipman-Blumen (2005) observes that, realistically, whistleblowers must “expect a virulent response from the leadership group” (p. 41).

While there is no literature suggesting that the mental vigilance of moral engagement in any way differs by gender, there is some literature suggesting that, as a generalisation, the assertive stance required for translating moral engagement into active intervention may be impacted in different ways by gender-related factors. Some of the feminist ethics literature focuses on interdependence, solidarity, and vulnerability as more typically associated with socialisation into female roles. These factors may, depending how they are applied, work against women enacting the tough individualism that seems to be required in many whistleblowing cases. Conversely, Alford (2001) argues that intervention to expose wrongdoing is easier for people who are “unassimilated to the organizational culture” (p. 23). Building on Alford’s point about the advantages of ‘outsider-within’ status, Lipman-Blumen (2005) argues that women are more often subject to “structured marginality within organizations” (p. 260) than men—meaning theoretically women may be more likely to see organisational norms as open to question, even though there is as yet “no clear evidence that women are more likely than men to blow the whistle” (p. 260).

In the public relations field specifically, research by Hon (1995) suggested conflicting factors for and against female public relations practitioners speaking out within organisations. Her study is now more than 15 years old, but at the time indicated that public relations was often itself a marginalised function within organisations, which were also typically androcentric (meaning female public relations practitioners were doubly marginalised). While

marginalisation may actually facilitate the task of perceiving alternatives to organisational norms, Hon (1995) also found that women had lower ‘self-esteem’, lacked female role models, and were subjected to stereotypes about passivity as a desirable feminine behaviour.

In line with Hon’s findings, some communication theorists have proposed that assertiveness is more difficult for women, because it is perceived to be a masculine-associated trait. Assertiveness is typically defined as “the extent to which a culture encourages individuals to be tough, confrontational, and competitive, as opposed to modest and tender” (Johnson, 2009, p. 323). Muted group theory (Ardener, 1978; Kramer, 1981) suggests that women are less comfortable speaking out in public, because they are accustomed to being both explicitly and implicitly silenced by the structures and norms of public communication. Other observers show how stereotypes of women as ‘more tentative’ are constructed and reinforced: for example Audi (2008) notes that audio and audio-visual advertising frequently depicts females (more-so than males) using ‘upspeak’, or rising inflection, which “tends to conduce to stereotyping females as less decisive than men” (p. 205).

In the public relations field specifically, Aldoory, Reber, Berger and Toth (2008) found, in a study of how male and female public relations practitioners express dissent in the workplace, that “Males were significantly more likely than females to confront, combat, and challenge management. Females were significantly more likely to present, suggest, or share alternate solutions, and to work and negotiate with leaders to reach a solution” (p. 18).

Wood (1999) points to prevalent gender stereotypes for both men and women that may impact on decisions to speak up about ethics. For women, the pejorative ‘iron maiden’ stereotype suggests “that it is unfeminine to be independent, ambitious, directive, competitive and tough at times” (Wood, 1999, p. 263), while for men, the ‘sturdy oak’ stereotype can work against admitting doubts, revealing errors, and consulting with others. Wood suggests that some men’s levels of comfort in questioning

leaders and challenging organisational norms may also be impacted by the 'fighter' and 'breadwinner' masculine stereotypes, which pressure men to "put the cause, company, or country first and to fight for it with everything they have" (1999, p. 265) and to "earn a good salary" (p. 266) as priorities above other values.

These conflicting pressures on both men and women seem to be reflected in the small body of existing research that looks at gender and ethics behaviour specifically within public relations. While differences are found, they are not consistent. For example, Grunig et al. (2000) report that:

At least one study of public relations students suggests ethical differences based on respondents' gender. Wakefield (1993) found that 12 times as many female as male students recognized an overriding responsibility to society as a whole. Twice as many male as female students recognized specific responsibilities to the general public. Nearly twice as many women as men recognized specific responsibilities to publics directly affected by a situation. Nearly twice as many male as female students expressed a preference for situational ethics. From these data, Wakefield concluded, "For whatever reasons, men and women studying public relations look at ethics through different-colored glasses" (p. 4). (Grunig et al., 2000, p. 59)

From the literature, then, there is agreement that gender makes a difference, but no clear consensus as to how gender might impact upon willingness to choose an interventionist action that opposes organisational norms or confronts an ethical problem. Among the scenarios in this survey, some of the response options were more interventionist than others (for example, to do nothing is clearly less interventionist than to query one's boss about a workplace event). The second research question, then, sought to identify whether, if any patterns in gender response occurred, they tended to align interventionist responses with one or other gender.

- *RQ2: Does one gender more frequently choose intervention responses to the survey's ethical scenarios?*

The kinship effect

One of the other key variables Hornett and Fredricks' survey scenarios test is the 'kinship effect', or the idea that "people identify ethical actions when they are motivated to do so by a relationship to those who may suffer an injustice" (Fredricks & Hornett, 2007, p. 85). There is a substantial longitudinal body of research on biological kinship's influence on altruism (e.g. Barber, 1994), that supports what is known as 'Hamilton's rule' (Hamilton, 1964; Dawkins, 1989). Hamilton's rule asserts that, for evolutionary reasons, individuals will usually act more selflessly towards biologically related others than towards unrelated others. Hamilton's rule has been found through both observational and experimental research to hold true for a wide range of situations (a full review of kinship effect literature is beyond the scope of this article but see Madsen et al., 2007 for an excellent review and recent experimental support for its validity).

There is also mounting evidence that 'kinship' can influence ethics even when it is metaphorical not biological, as in the case of in-laws and adoptees. Many anthropologists now define human kinship bonds not by genealogy but by two surrogate factors: commitment and sense of affinity (Nanda & Warms, 2010). Madsen et al. (2007) argue that "humans use cues such as affection, cohabitation, or [shared] social norms as proxies for relatedness" (p. 355). The link from these kinds of proxy kinship feelings to ethical behaviour has been demonstrated: for example, one study found that shared surnames prompted higher altruism towards others regardless of actual relationship (Oates & Wilson, 2002). Such studies provide empirical support for the normative feminist ethics principle that ethical behaviour towards others may be enhanced by encouraging a greater sense of relational interdependence or connectedness, or by choosing to perceive a duty to care for vulnerable others in the public sphere in the same way one cares for children or other family members in the domestic sphere.

While there is much literature on the deliberately familial nature of culture in many business organisations (see e.g. Handel, 2003; Koontz & Weihrich, 2008) and it has been well established that making employees feel like they belong to a workplace community enhances their general sense of engagement with their job (Maslach & Leiter, 2008), there is almost no research exploring kinship feeling and impact on ethics in organisational contexts. The cross-cultural research using these scenarios (Tilley, Fredricks & Hornett, in press; Fredricks & Tilley, in press) confirmed that there are cultural differences (between the USA and New Zealand) when there is *no* kinship effect, but that introducing a kinship factor served to bring the culturally different populations more into alignment in their thinking. That is, people in the different cultures thought differently about ethics towards non-relatives but similarly about ethics towards relatives. RQ3 for this research sought

to test whether this alignment effect also applied for gender.

- RQ3: Will a kinship effect reduce gender differences in responses to the survey's ethical dilemmas?

Findings

Each of the scenarios is presented below, followed by a table of the quantitative frequency results by gender for that scenario, then a sentence or two summarising the main findings for that table. It is not valid to provide detailed statistical computations for the survey results beyond basic counts and percentages, as the data are nominal and many of the cell counts are low, but the proportional differences are nonetheless distinct enough to signal broad patterns of gender-based divergence and convergence in the responses, particularly when aggregated into intervention and non-intervention. These indicate areas where future research could investigate further.²

Scenarios and response frequencies by gender

Scenario I: *You are shopping at the local supermarket and are second in line at the checkout. The man in front of you has emptied his trolley on the conveyor belt. You start to empty your trolley and notice that he has a large package of chicken down below on the bottom rung of the trolley. It is hidden from the cashier's view. The cashier does not notice. What do you do?*

Table 1: Counts and percentages of the Scenario I results by gender

			Answer options				Total
			Nothing	Speak to the man	Speak to the cashier	Other	
Gender	Male	Count	11	16	3	3	33
		% within gender	33.3%	48.5%	9.1%	9.1%	100.0%
	Female	Count	17	41	14	8	80
		% within gender	21.3%	51.3%	17.5%	10.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	28	57	17	11	113
		% of Total	24.8%	50.4%	15.0%	9.7%	100.0%

In **Table 1**, both genders were most likely to speak to the man of all possible responses, but males were more likely than females to do nothing, and females were almost twice as likely as males to speak to the cashier.

Scenario II: *You are shopping at the local supermarket and are second in line at the checkout. The man in front of you has emptied his trolley on the conveyor belt. You start to empty your trolley and notice that he has a large package of chicken down below on the bottom rung of the trolley. It is hidden from the cashier's view. The cashier does not notice. Your closest relative is the manager of the meat department in this store and personally pays for inventory shortages. What do you do?*

Table 2: Counts and percentages of the Scenario II results by gender

			Answer options				Total
			Nothing	Speak to the man	Speak to the cashier	Other	
Gender	Male	Count	2	19	7	3	31
		% within gender	6.5%	61.3%	22.6%	9.7%	100.0%
	Female	Count	0	50	19	7	76
		% within gender	.0%	65.8%	25.0%	9.2%	100.0%
Total		Count	2	69	26	10	107
		% of total	1.9%	64.5%	24.3%	9.3%	100.0%

When the kinship factor was introduced, **in Table 2**, both genders became more likely to speak to either the man or the cashier than when there was no kinship factor. The number of males speaking to the cashier has more than doubled, bringing the proportion up to similar levels as the females. Males are still more likely than females to choose 'nothing' as a response.

Scenario III: *You are working for a major corporation in your home town. The pay is good and the benefits are what you classify as exceptional. As part of your benefits, your retirement provides for stock options. In fact, the basis of your retirement is company stock options. The company seems to be doing well and the stock price is rising. You feel on top of the world, your stock price is increasing and you are getting an increasing share of a rising stock. Your job is flexible and is providing significant opportunities for you. You are sitting at your desk when you get a phone call from your boss, asking for your assistance. The Security and Exchange Commission is conducting a spot check on your company and its trading behaviours. The phones on the trading floor need to be covered by personnel. It is well known throughout the company that these phones are not staffed because there is no trading activity. Your boss encourages you to drop everything and to proceed to the trading floor in order "to put on a good show" for the S.E.C. What do you do?*

Table 3: Counts and percentages of the Scenario III results by gender

			Answer options						Total
			Nothing, ignore the request and continue with your work	Talk to your boss about the request	Proceed to the trading floor as directed	Tell one of your friends at work and you both agree to stay behind	Tell one of your friends and convince your friend to go with you	Other	
Gender	Male	Count	0	18	11	1	2	1	33
		% within gender	.0%	54.5%	33.3%	3.0%	6.1%	3.0%	100.0%
	Female	Count	1	46	16	2	9	2	76
		% within gender	1.3%	60.5%	21.1%	2.6%	11.8%	2.6%	100.0%
Total		Count	1	64	27	3	11	3	109
		% of total	.9%	58.7%	24.8%	2.8%	10.1%	2.8%	100.0%

The third scenario (**Table 3**) provided an organisational context to test intervention likelihood. More males than females said they would follow their boss’s directive, while more females would talk to their boss. More females than males would convince a friend to join them if they did follow the unethical directive.

Scenario IV: Assume that you proceed to the trading floor no questions asked because your boss requested it. As you proceed up to the trading floor, you notice several more employees making their way there as well. As you enter the trading floor, you are given instructions to find a desk and pick up the phone and pretend to place calls to people from an established list. You watch more and more company employees enter the floor and realise that there are over seventy (70) employees relocated to the trading floor. As you find a desk, and start placing calls, members of the S.E.C. staff arrive and are given a tour of the floor. Once they have gone, further instructions are given to have you return to your normal duties. What do you do?

Table 4: Counts and percentages of the Scenario IV results by gender

			Answer options					Total
			Nothing, go back to your normal duties as instructed	Speak to your boss and ask for further clarification about the situation	Speak to your boss and tell them that you are uncomfortable	Speak to the company's Chief Ethics Officer	Other	
Gender	Male	Count	9	13	6	4	0	32
		% within gender	28.1%	40.6%	18.8%	12.5%	.0%	100.0%
	Female	Count	9	23	26	19	1	78
		% within gender	11.5%	29.5%	33.3%	24.4%	1.3%	100.0%
Total		Count	18	36	32	23	1	110
		% of total	16.4%	32.7%	29.1%	20.9%	.9%	100.0%

Scenario IV, which assumes that others in the workplace are now following the order to deceive a regulatory agency, introduced a peer effect. More males than females chose to return to normal duties without speaking out (**Table 4**), and more males than females chose to speak to their boss for ‘clarification’. More females than males chose to speak to the boss and express discomfort, and proportionally almost twice as many females as males signalled they would speak to the organisation’s ethics officer. Overall, only one-fifth of respondents would report this example of serious corporate fraud to the ethics officer.

Scenario V: *You are beginning a new semester at your college/university. Your financial aid has not arrived on time and if you do not pay your tuition, you will have to drop out. Although you do not live at home, you call your parents and ask to borrow some money. They are pretty broke right now but they reluctantly agree and send you the money needed and you pay your bill. The financial aid arrives and you now have more money than expected. Your parents did not know that you would be getting financial aid. What do you do?*

Table 5: Counts and percentages of the Scenario V results by gender

			Answer options					Total
			Pay your parents back	Keep all the money and not tell your parents	Pay off your credit cards with the money	Pay some of the money back to your parents	Other	
Gender	Male	Count	26	1	1	1	2	31
		% within gender	83.9%	3.2%	3.2%	3.2%	6.5%	100.0%
	Female	Count	67	2	4	5	2	80
		% within gender	83.8%	2.5%	5.0%	6.3%	2.5%	100.0%
Total		Count	93	3	5	6	4	111
		% of total	83.8%	2.7%	4.5%	5.4%	3.6%	100.0%

Males and females responded similarly to this scenario (**Table 5**), which deals with ethical behaviour towards family members. Overwhelmingly both genders chose to repay the borrowed money.

Scenario VI: *Someone you supervised was putting hours on their timecard that they were not working. S/He was a very good employee and always completed projects under budget. All of the hours were billed directly to a client, and they were happy with the costs they were incurring to have the work done. What do you do?*

Table 6: Counts and percentages of the Scenario VI results by gender

			Answer options				Total
			Confront the employee	Pretend you did not know what was happening	Adjust the client's bill to accurately reflect the hours	Other	
Gender	Male	Count	18	7	4	0	29
		% within gender	62.1%	24.1%	13.8%	.0%	100.0%
	Female	Count	46	6	21	2	75
		% within gender	61.3%	8.0%	28.0%	2.7%	100.0%
Total		Count	64	13	25	2	104
		% of total	61.5%	12.5%	24.0%	1.9%	100.0%

Males and females were equally willing to confront the wrongdoing employee (the most popular course of action) but there was a gender difference among those choosing not to confront. Among the non-confrontational group, females were more likely to adjust the client's bill, while males were more likely to pretend ignorance of the problem. When the data were aggregated into two variables (do nothing or do something) the difference in responses by gender was significant at the 0.05 level.

Scenario VII: *As a sales representative, you often have to balance your personal gain with the customer's gain. You are compensated for a sale even if you believe that the customer should not purchase the product. At the same time, if you did not produce your quota, your job would be in jeopardy. A customer approaches you with a purchase of an exceedingly expensive watch. With this purchase you will receive a huge commission. Based upon their credit situation, paying for the watch through various credit cards, you deduce this may not be the best watch for them. What do you do?*

Table 7: Counts and percentages of the Scenario VII results by gender

			Answer options				Total
			Let them purchase the watch anyway	Refuse to sell them the watch	Try and steer them towards other less expensive watches	Other	
Gender	Male	Count	15	1	15	2	33
		% within gender	45.5%	3.0%	45.5%	6.1%	100.0%
	Female	Count	26	2	46	5	79
		% within gender	32.9%	2.5%	58.2%	6.3%	100.0%
Total		Count	41	3	61	7	112
		% of total	36.6%	2.7%	54.5%	6.3%	100.0%

Neither males nor females were likely to refuse to sell the client a watch, but females were more likely than males to adopt the moderately interventionist stance of suggesting a cheaper purchase, while males were more likely than females not to intervene in the customer's purchase decision.

Scenario VIII: *While you were employed as a production supervisor, you occasionally went out with the group for drinks. One subordinate, whom you found attractive, let it be known that s/he would like to date you. The company has no policy on work relationships. What do you do?*

Table 8: Counts and percentages of the Scenario VIII results by gender

			Answer options				Total
			Ask the person out on a date	Tell the person that it would be inappropriate to mix business and pleasure	Ignore the person's comments	Other	
Gender	Male	Count	15	9	5	4	33
		% within gender	45.5%	27.3%	15.2%	12.1%	100.0%
	Female	Count	29	27	13	10	79
		% within gender	36.7%	34.2%	16.5%	12.7%	100.0%
Total		Count	44	36	18	14	112
		% of total	39.3%	32.1%	16.1%	12.5%	100.0%

Both males and females selected asking the co-worker for a date more often than the options of either ignoring or rebuffing them. Although males were more likely than females to ask for the date, when the data were aggregated into two options (date or not-date), Pearson's Chi Square indicated there were no significant differences by gender. Females were more likely to actively rebuff the co-worker than males were. Males and females were about equally likely to ignore the person.

Scenario IX: *You work in a retail establishment and see your supervisor taking home merchandise at least once a week. Your uncle got you this job and is a good friend with the owner of the store. What do you do?*

Table 9: Counts and percentages of the Scenario IX results by gender

			Answer options				Total
			Nothing	Contact your uncle	Start taking merchandise too	Other	
Gender	Male	Count	7	17	3	6	33
		% within gender	21.2%	51.5%	9.1%	18.2%	100.0%
	Female	Count	5	53	1	21	80
		% within gender	6.3%	66.3%	1.3%	26.3%	100.0%
Total		Count	12	70	4	27	113
		% of total	10.6%	61.9%	3.5%	23.9%	100.0%

The kinship factor in this scenario (**Table 9**) did not align gender responses to the same degree as in Table 2—in fact this scenario showed the greatest overall difference by gender (when using Pearson’s Chi Square test) on both overall and aggregated responses. Here, males were more likely than females to join in the unethical behaviour. Both genders were most likely to contact their family member of any response, but females were more likely to do so than males. Males were more than three times more likely to do nothing than females. The high ‘other’ count included a range of varied alternative responses from both genders, such as confronting the supervisor or informing the owner.

Scenario X: *While auditing one of your client’s accounts, you came across something in the contract that had been overlooked by everyone involved. This item wasn’t very large, just a few dollars here and there. However, the contract was from a few years ago, and your client was very large, so the dollars added up. The client was overcharged significantly. To correct this error, a credit would have to be applied to every single error, which would be extremely time-consuming for you and the client. You are short on staff and in the middle of your busiest season. You were the only one who recognised the error. What do you do?*

Table 10: Counts and percentages of the Scenario X results by gender

			Answer options				Total
			Nothing, no one else has noticed it	Tell my direct supervisor so that s/he can make the decision	Let the client know about the error	Other	
Gender	Male	Count	5	23	3	1	32
		% within gender	15.6%	71.9%	9.4%	3.1%	100.0%
	Female	Count	3	59	14	1	77
		% within gender	3.9%	76.6%	18.2%	1.3%	100.0%
Total		Count	8	82	17	2	109
		% of total	7.3%	75.2%	15.6%	1.8%	100.0%

In **Table 10**, again, males were notably more likely than females to do nothing, with proportionally four times more males selecting the ‘nothing’ option. Females were a little more likely than males to tell their supervisor, but almost twice as likely as males to let the client know about the error.

Discussion

RQ1: Gender difference and ethics

Overall, as feminist ethics theory predicts, males and females frequently differed in their responses to these ethical scenarios. The US data (N=454) were also independently analysed by gender and, while the total US baseline responses were geographically different from the total New Zealand baselines as will be reported elsewhere, similar overall gender-based patterns of response difference were found, in which males and females had distinctly different reactions to most of the scenarios.³

For the New Zealand data, in both public and organisational contexts, females were consistently more likely than males to choose to speak to an authority figure such as a cashier (Table 1), their boss (Table 3), an ethics officer (Table 4), or the affected client (Table 10). In the two organisational scenarios where respondents had a choice to keep things within the organisation or involve an external client (Tables 6 and 10), females were twice as likely as males to do the latter. When family was involved and the context was non-workplace-based, the genders responded in similar ways, such as in overwhelmingly choosing to pay back money to parents (Table 5). However, when family was involved in a workplace context (Table 9), there remained some prominent differences in response by gender. Two notable differences by gender both occurred in workplace contexts, firstly when the respondent has been ordered to engage in unethical behaviour by their boss and has seen peers obeying the order (Table 4), and secondly when the respondent is the boss and detects subordinate misconduct (Table 6).

Because these scenarios were not explicitly designed to test specific feminist ethical principles, it is not possible to extrapolate such things as a preference for solidarity or interdependence from the identified differences. However, what these findings do show is that, as feminist ethicists have repeatedly asserted, women and men have different contributions to offer to the ethical reasoning process and will have varied perspectives. These variances were particularly evident in the workplace scenarios. This research shows gender perspectives will

also vary in similarity depending on the issue with, for example, diverse views on confronting bosses and subordinates, but more closely aligned views on some other workplace issues including dating in the workplace.

For public relations practitioners involved in developing ethical standards and procedures for organisations, this underscores the importance of recognising diversity and responding to it with an inclusive, participatory process in which pluralism is supported and valued, and a range of perspectives is brought to bear on every ethical issue. An ethics code developed exclusively by men, for example, may be irrelevant or unworkable for women, and vice versa. Any standard or code expected to apply indiscriminately to both genders will need to have both genders' input into, and consensus on, scope and design. Likewise, given that these findings confirm that gender does impact on values and actions related to ethics, ethics committees (such as those which consider allegations of wrong-doing and enforce sanctions) will need to have gender diversity in membership if they are to offer a fair hearing to both genders. The present data, although limited to these particular scenarios, suggest this might be particularly important where interactions are occurring across hierarchies within organisations, given the particularly noteworthy gender differences in scenarios involving relating to bosses or subordinates. It could also be argued that, if organisations appoint only one ethics officer at a time to be responsible for promulgating ethical culture and handling ethics-related inquiries, they should rotate the gender of the officer to ensure diverse and complementary perspectives influence the organisation's stance and programmes on ethics over time. Ideally, organisations might even consider having gender-diverse ethics teams, rather than a single individual as ethics officer at any one time, to ensure the benefits of multiple viewpoints in such a role are consistently leveraged.

Most important for public relations staff though, is simply an awareness of gender diversity as an influential ethical variable. Plainly put, it should be expected that men and women, whether they are staff or external publics, may see ethical issues differently. The

benefits of this awareness will include reducing misunderstandings, building tolerance for dissent, and thereby creating more successful relationships both within organisations and between organisations and their publics. Such benefits are, like the benefits that flow from better understanding of other diversity variables such as cultural difference, likely to be substantial in their long-term influence on both interpersonal and organisational relationship strength and satisfaction.

RQ2: Gender difference and intervention

Females were consistently more interventionist than males in a range of circumstances (Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9 & 10). In Table 1, contrary to the expectations of muted group theory, female respondents did not appear to be less comfortable speaking out in public than male respondents. Table 4 is also of interest, given that when respondents were offered choices between relative levels of intervention in a workplace context (querying, expressing discomfort, or involving the ethics officer), proportionally many more females than males chose options towards the more interventionist end of the spectrum. Likewise Table 6 gives insights into the nuances of decision-making: although males and females were equally likely to confront a wrong-doing employee, responses among those preferring not to confront differed by gender, with three times the proportion of males choosing to 'pretend you did not know what was happening' than females.

When findings from the seven scenarios with a 'do nothing' option available to respondents are aggregated (Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 9 and 10), males are more than twice as likely as females to choose 'nothing' when that option is offered (18.4% of males answering these scenarios chose 'nothing' compared with 7.5 % of females).⁴ In one workplace-based scenario (Table 10, about correcting an error), males were four times more likely than females to do nothing. These results convincingly belie the stereotype that females are more passive than males.

While further investigation would be needed to determine reasons for the finding that males are less likely to intervene than females, this research suggests that the masculine stereotypes

that Wood identified in the 1990s in which silence is conflated with strength may remain a potential issue for today's students. Wood (1999) warns that ethical scandals such as "Watergate, the Iran-Contra affair, savings and loan scandals, POWs left in Vietnam and other flawed national courses of action and the cover-ups that followed them ... may have been influenced by efforts to live up to the image of men as self-sufficient sturdy oaks, who need no help and make no errors" (p. 264). Conversely, perhaps the finding in this research that females were more interventionist in workplace contexts reflects the critically-enabling effect of a marginalised perspective as suggested by Lipman-Blumen (2005). Gender differences were greatest in the organisational scenarios, where Lipman-Blumen's research suggests women feel peripheral, and less apparent in the family-context scenarios. Although to conclusively identify causes of that difference is beyond the scope of this data, the fact of the difference indicates that some thoughtful discussion of issues such as silence and marginalisation in the workplace context remains appropriate. Proactive discussion of such stereotypes needs to be considered both by educators and by communication teams in the workplaces today's students will soon enter.

One clear finding in the data is that the female respondents in this research typically did not feel constrained from choosing decisive, even confrontational, action when they perceived it as ethically necessary, whatever the context. For organisations, this finding reinforces the importance of having women at top managerial and strategic levels as well as men. Their gender differences will be complementary in ensuring a multivalent, inclusive approach to ethics. An awareness that gender may impact upon ethical actions adds further weight to the existing arguments about the importance of ensuring the public relations function continues to grow its organisational status and power during the increasing feminisation of the profession (Creedon, 1991). If feminisation means that, in determinedly androcentric organisations or industries, public relations loses traction at the dominant coalition level, the organisation may also lose valuable capability in its ability to identify the full range

of, and respond proactively to, ethical risks. By way of example, a vulnerability audit conducted by either gender may not identify as comprehensive a range of ethical risks as one conducted by both genders, because men and women will see different things as potentially ethically problematic, as will the organisation's male and female publics. Gender therefore has repercussions for reputation and issue management. In short, given the two genders' expertise on ethics is not simply interchangeable, ensuring gender diversity in managerial perspectives on ethical issues should be part of any comprehensive organisational strategy to develop a 'conscience', as well as integral to crisis prevention and response.

RQ3: The kinship effect

In a public situation (Table 2), both genders responded in line with Hamilton's rule by changing their answers, suggesting a kinship effect is influential on both male and female New Zealanders' ethics. Interestingly, however, the kinship influence was not sufficient to overcome the male students' greater preference for the 'do nothing' option in Scenario II. Longitudinal social research aligns with this finding: 91.4% of New Zealand males and 95.1% of New Zealand females rank family as 'very important in life' (World Values Survey, 2009). This finding suggests that the focus, in feminist ethics, upon relationships and interdependence, has resonance for both males and females in New Zealand culture. Hence, as feminist ethicists have argued, if the traditionally 'domestic sphere' values of interdependence, nurturance and care for others can be reproduced in the public or workplace spheres, ethics may be enhanced. However, currently in the workplace context (Table 9), there was less alignment across gender when kinship was involved. This suggests that greater emphasis in workplace contexts on thinking about relational connections with those affected by workplace decisions may help males and females see some aspects of workplace ethics in more similar ways, but may not completely overcome fundamental gender differences.

For public relations practitioners dealing with diverse workforces, stimulating kinship ideas, including through proxy factors that build a sense of community, may be a uniting factor that helps with reaching consensus on ethical expectations, but there will still be a need to acknowledge that men and women think differently. This recognition of diversity is reflected in the feminist ethics literature which, while emphasising interdependence, "also focuses on difference—evaluating context and particularity, and requiring attentiveness and responsiveness to diverse people and situations" (Levy & Palley, 2010, p. 81). Public relations practitioners may therefore find the ideas of feminist ethics useful as a resource for all staff, for contributing to and stimulating workplace discussion of ethical issues. Even the discussion itself is likely to be beneficial to public relations' goal of inculcating concern for ethics: in the wake of discussing their survey findings with their students, Fredricks and Hornett found that "once students learn from a micro ethical dilemma, they may become better able to apply ethics to the macro level" (2007, p. 79). At the very least, these findings indicate that these kinds of issues (kinship feeling and its influence on ethics) need to be a part of any organisation's broader discussion of its values. The feminist ethics literature provides the most comprehensive existing resource for contributing to any such discussion.

Conclusions

In the decade since Wood (1999) asserted that "overall society expects men to be assertive and women to be deferential, men to be independent and women to be relationship oriented" (p. 269), have stereotypes shifted?

Although, as noted above, descriptive research provides 'what' but not 'why', the emphatic finding that female students were equally or more likely to intervene in every scenario tested, suggests that stereotypes about assertiveness and deference are changing. The finding that both males and females were impacted by a kinship effect suggests that a sense of relatedness can be influential on ethical decision-making regardless of gender. Whatever the reasons, males and females responded differently in many situations, but

both genders altered their answers to shift towards more ethical responses when kinship was introduced.

The implications of these findings for the public relations context include: the importance of workplace gender diversity (men and women will bring different perspectives to the task of providing an organisation's 'ethical conscience'); the value to maintaining ethical standards of creating kinship feelings both within organisations and between organisations and the external environment; and the importance of a collaborative, inclusive approach to determining and enforcing ethical standards which is based in awareness of gender difference and appreciation of that diversity as a valuable resource for organisations. For internal communicators working on organisational ethics, and public relations educators, the research suggests a process for focusing ethics teaching on staff or students' own lives, values and ethical concerns, through a participative workshop process to develop realistic ethical scenarios which can then be tested, followed by a discussion of the results, to tease out the implications of differences such as by gender.

More research is needed in many of the areas highlighted by this pilot study. For example, would it make a difference to response by gender if the customer observed stealing in Scenarios I and II was not specified as a 'man'? If asked for explanations, what reasons would males and females provide for their choices to intervene or do nothing? How can kinship feelings best be created in organisations and between organisations and their environments, and will males and females be able to contribute different ways of creating them? If such feelings can be stimulated through proxy means, can subsequent widespread changes in ethical behaviour be measured? How can gender diversity on ethics best be harnessed to create effective ethical guidelines? In particular, focus-group research to explore the motivations behind gender differences in intervention behaviours, such as talking to authority figures, may help enhance our understanding of ethical decision-making in organisational contexts such as whistleblowing. Given normative calls for public relations to

encourage whistleblowing as a crisis prevention strategy (Bruijns & McDonald, 2002), better understanding of that area may contribute appreciably to expanding the public relations body of knowledge.

In a complex and under-researched area such as ethics, a small pilot study such as the present one can take only minute steps towards identifying some of these research gaps. Nonetheless, given the paucity of our understanding of how these issues play out at the 'coal face' when actual decisions about ethics are made, and the importance of building practical understandings of ethics in an age when the negative impacts of many of our behaviours (as a species) on the planet are becoming increasingly apparent, even such small steps are important.

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Endnotes

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² Using Pearson's Chi Square on a scenario-by-scenario basis, Scenario IX showed a significant difference by gender at the 0.025 level, while Scenarios IV and VI showed difference by gender at the 0.10 level. Given the small counts in some cells we can only conclude that it is probable that differences for these scenarios are associated with gender. When answer options for some scenarios were merged into assertive and non-assertive choices, there were significant gender differences at the 0.05 level in a further five scenarios (see below). Other ways of grouping the data may also have provided further evidence of significance but, for the purposes of this exploratory pilot study it was considered adequate to demonstrate significance in at least five of the 10 scenarios, thereby enabling the conclusion that gender does measurably impact upon the responses. As this was a pilot study with only 33 male respondents, these computations have less importance to the current research questions than the overall trends in the data as a whole, which signal broad patterns of response and, as such, the discussion in this article focuses on those broader patterns.

³ Readers are welcome to contact the author for further information on other aspects of the overall cross-cultural study.

⁴ Of the seven scenarios with 'do nothing' options, Pearson's Chi Square test on the aggregated variables (grouped into 'do nothing' or 'do something' options to create a two by two table) indicated significance in five. Tables 2, 4, 6 and 10 showed significance at 0.05 level and Table 9 at 0.025 level. In other words, it is probable that the higher proportion of males choosing to do nothing in Scenarios II, IV, VI, IX, and X is associated with their gender, particularly in Scenario IX where the association is strongest. As noted earlier, the small sample and low cell counts mitigate against relying upon computations of statistical significance as definitive, but they do give a further indication that the apparent correlation between respondents' gender and the distribution of their answers is probably not due to chance.