

# ETHICAL BEHAVIOR OF ROMANIAN STUDENTS. DOES GENDER MATTER?

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**ABSTRACT.** The present research is focused on a quantitative analysis regarding the ethical attitudes of students, future practitioners, on the students' perception towards some ethically questionable practices, with the specific aim of identifying possible differences among groups with respect to gender. The practical importance of the applicative study is illustrated by the confirmation of the idea, present in many studies, according to which male participants have more unethical attitudes as compared to female participants and the fact that unethical attitudes acquired while at university continue after graduation, in the professional activity.

**Key words:** business ethics, ethical behavior, gender differences, Romanian students' attitude on ethics

**JEL Classification:** M19

**Recommended citation:** Lupu, M., *Ethical Behavior of Romanian Students. Does Gender Matter?*, Studia UBB Negotia, vol. 62, issue 3 (September), 2017, pp. 49-67.

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## **Introduction**

The collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 marked not only the beginning of the rapid decline of the communist ideology, but opened the world to a market which had remained in an economic vacuum for over four decades. Since then, business ethics in former communist countries undergoing the process of transition, have become an increasing challenge for Western enterprises doing business here. In Romania, we consider that the topic of business ethics, in its current meaning, is not older than a decade in the economic and academic climate. Some twenty years ago the domain of business ethics was practically inexistent in Romania, as a consequence of economic and political circumstances of this former communist country with a tyrannical form of totalitarianism. After the 1989 revolution, Romanians were intensely preoccupied by the vulgar instrument of daily economic exchanges – the money, with no attention to the moral or immoral nature of getting money.

Since the economic crisis in 2009, topics related to business ethics have become more discussed not only in the news, but also in the academic world. In an attempt of sending more ethical students in the workplace, faculties have introduced more ethics related courses. In this sense, the present study tries to highlight the importance of creating ethical specialists in the business world and to determine which variables are important in modelling the ethical behavior.

The present research is focused on a quantitative analysis regarding the ethical attitudes of students, future practitioners, on the students' perception towards some ethically questionable practices, with the specific aim of identifying possible differences among groups with respect to gender.

The practical importance of the applicative study is illustrated by the confirmation of the idea, present in many studies, according to which unethical attitudes acquired while at university continue after graduation, in the professional activity.

This paper further discusses the literature review with regard to the unethical behavior of students, followed by the research methodology, the results of the study and conclusions.

### **Literature review**

In this context, of great interest is the way in which students, future specialists are educated for implementing an ethical climate in business at the moment when they are absorbed in the work place. Representing the new managers' generation, business students are a group with a potentially powerful impact on the everyday business activity and also on the ethical principles governing the business world.

It is assumed that business students behave more unethically as compared to students who have a different major, because they want to obtain higher grades. If this were true, there are serious implications for the students' future professional activity, because there are data that positively correlate unethical behavior in the workplace with unethical behavior in school. In a study on MBA (Master in Business Administration) students, Sims (1993) highlighted the strong positive correlation between exam cheating and unethical behavior in the work place.

Past research (Lawson, 2004) has revealed a correlation between academic and business ethics. Lawson states that students believe that there is need for ethical behavior in a business setting and their actions in an academic setting. Also the study states that students believe that business people fail to act in an ethical manner and that they may need to act unethically to advance their careers.

Nonis and Swift (2001) found that students who believed that cheating, or dishonest acts are acceptable were more likely to engage in these dishonest behaviors. Additionally, students who engaged in dishonest acts in college classes were more likely to engage in dishonest acts at the workplace.

In former communist countries, the university system is impacted by corruption and academic dishonesty. Romania does not constitute an exception to this negative tendency. Romanian corruption and academic dishonesty is characterised by bribing the professors in order to pass the exams, paying an illegal fee to be admitted at university, paying for the issue of an university diploma, the presence of favoritism etc. (Miroiu et al. 2005). At their turn, students who are encouraged by the unethical behavior of their professors, cheat in exams, plagiarize, sell dissertations etc. In a more recent study, Hermkens & Luca (2016) identified the following student's motivations for cheating: no reasons; the subject is too difficult; insufficient time for study; various obstacles; a higher grade; keep my free of tuition seat; to get a scholarship and because teachers allow it.

Academic fraud has also been analysed by Tudorel et al. (2007, p. 715) in relation with the characteristics that raise the probability of cheating during exams with the conclusion that „extraprofessional activities, such as parties and gathering with friends, internet surfing, video games tend to increase the probability of cheating at an exam. More time a student allocates to these activities, more likely to fraud the exam”, showing that the environment does have an influence up on the way we act.

Previous studies (Teixeira & Rocha, 2010) show that in Southern European countries, including Romania, the probability of cheating is much higher as compared to students who are enrolled in schools located in Scandinavian countries, the US and British Isles Blocks. On a distinctly different level, however, students enrolled in schools in Western and especially Eastern European countries reveal statistically significant higher propensities towards committing academic fraud.

In this context we consider it is very important to establish the way in which Romanian students see themselves as related to unethical behavior, the study being realised on a sample of considerable dimensions; moreover the relevance of the study is also related to the fact that there are few studies that have made such an analysis on Romanian students

(Bageac et al. 2011; McGee, 2006; Teixeira & Rocha, 2010; Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009).

On the other hand, grounded on the previous research related to the distinction based on gender and the ethical behavior, we assume that female participants in the study have higher standards of ethics as compared to male participants.

Academic dishonesty is influenced by variables such as gender, age, school performance, parents' level of education and extracurricular activity (Teodorescu & Andrei, 2009). Previous research revealed that male students behave more unethically than female students, those with lower grade-point averages would more easily engage in unethical behaviors and students whose parents have a higher level of education would behave more ethically (McCabe & Trevino, 1997).

The gender difference related to ethical behavior has been discussed in numerous studies (Betz et al. 1989; Ruegger & King, 1992; Khazanch, 1995; Ameen et al. 1996; Jones & Kavanagh, 1996; Luthar et al. 1997; Dawson, 1997; Hoffman, 1998; Buckley, Wise & Harvey, 1998; Ekin & Tezölmez, 1999; Roxas & Stoneback, 2004; Albaum & Peterson, 2006; McCabe et al. 2006; Atakan et al. 2008; Chen & Tang, 2006; Lund, 2008; Ibrahim et al. 2009; Eweje & Brunton, 2010; Kum-Lung & Teck-Chai, 2010; Bageac et al. 2011; Cojuharenco et al. 2012, Wang & Calvano, 2015). The vast majority of these studies confirm the hypothesis according to which female survey participants are significantly more ethically inclined than male survey participants and are showing a more favorable attitude towards ethical behaviors.

On the other hand, the studies that support the idea that there is no significant difference between female participants and male participants in regards to ethical behavior are scarce (Jones & Kavanagh, 1996; Dawson, 1997; McCabe et al. 2006; Lund, 2008).

## Research Methodology

We have conducted a survey at 3 universities from Cluj-Napoca and Baia Mare (the major public higher education institution Babes-Bolyai University, Iuliu Hatieganu Medicine and Pharmacy University and a private one Bogdan-Voda University). The transversal and correlational study will verify the following hypothesis: *Male students are more prone to have an unethical behavior as compared to female students.*

In the research we have used the survey method and as a research tool the questionnaire, namely the Student Ethical Behavior Questionnaire (SEBQ)<sup>2</sup>. This tool was designed to evaluate the perception of ethical behavior by students from different faculties of Cluj-Napoca and Baia Mare cities. An exploratory research has been conducted, the selected research method being „face to face” inquiry, as I have followed the improvement of answer rate. A number of 750 questionnaires have been processed, the results of the survey contributing to the identification of the way in which ethics is perceived by different students from the Cluj-Napoca and Baia Mare university environment. The results that have been obtained are at least interesting, as they can be used in defining the character traits of the respondents, since the ethical attitudes of the students will also show themselves at the moment they become practitioners.

On this sample we applied the SEBQ tool. The questionnaire has 14 items, divided on three scales:

1. Attitudes towards unethical behavior in society with 3 items: 1, 3, 4.
2. Attitudes towards unethical behavior in profession with 4 items: 2, 5, 7, 8.

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<sup>2</sup> Translated and adapted after: Sedmak Suzana, Bojan Nastav, Perception of ethical behavior among business studies students, Social Responsibility, Professional Ethics, and Management, Proceedings of the 11th International Conference, 2010 Ankara, Turkey, 24–27 November 2010, pag. 1175-1189

3. Attitudes towards unethical behavior in school with 7 items: 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14.

Each dimension was measured using 14 items, on a 5 point Likert scales with anchors "1 – Completely morally unacceptable" and "5 – Completely morally acceptable". The variables representing the unethical behavior dimensions were computed as the average score of all the items describing the specific dimensions. The Independent sample T test was used to determine if there are statistically significant differences between female and male students in regard to unethical behavior. The listed results are only those that represent a minimum statistically accepted value, that have a p-value equal to or lower than 0,05. The threshold for statistical significance of 0,05 is widely accepted by all major statistical psychology and sociology treaties.

Because we applied the questionnaire on Romanian, English and French lines of study we have used the Romanian, English and French versions of the questionnaire.

As for the results, the higher the scores in the items and scales of the questionnaire, the higher the approval of unethical behavior in faculty, profession and society.

The raw data obtained after applying the questionnaire were successively processed with Excel 2003, Excel 2007 and SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), version 17. 0.

### ***Sample characteristics***

The majority of the subjects studied are female, 67% (503), the same being the structure of the students for each Faculty analysed. The male participants represent 33% (247) of the sample studied.

The majority of the participants, as expected, are not married 91% (683), followed by those who are married 6% (41), in conjugal union 2% (18), divorced 1% (7) or separated less than 1% (1) represent the minority of the subjects studied.

The percentage of the smoking participants is of one fourth 25% (189), three fourths of the students being non-smoking students 75% (561).

The majority of the participants are first year students 76% (570), followed by third year students 22% (162) and second year students 2% (18). The Master students represent only 7% (50) of the participants; thus the majority of the sample is represented by undergraduate students 93% (700).

The majority of the participants study at the Medicine and Pharmacy University „Iuliu Hațieganu” 61% (457) and „Babeş-Bolyai” University in Cluj-Napoca 30% (224), while the participants who study at „Bogdan Vodă” University in Baia Mare represent only 9% (69).

The majority of the participants, according to their religious affiliation are Orthodox, followed by Free Thinkers, Roman-Catholics, Muslims, Atheists and Reformed. The remainder cults account for less significant quotas, as it is showed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Structure of the sample according to religion affiliation**

<b>Religion</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Orthodox	410	54,7
Free thinker	70	9,3
Roman-catholic	66	8,8
Muslims	45	6,0
Atheist	39	5,2
Reformed	34	4,5
Penticostal	28	3,7
Greek-catholic	21	2,8
Baptist	17	2,3
Adventist	11	1,5
Jews	6	0,8
The Jehovah's Witness	2	0,3
Gospel Christians	1	0,1
Total	750	100%

*Source: author's own calculations based on survey data*



According to Faculty enrollment, most of the participants study at UMF Cluj-Napoca, followed by the students of the Faculty of Business and Faculty of Economics and Business Administration. The structure is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. The structure of the sample according to Faculty affiliation**

<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Faculty of Business UBB	143	19,1
Dentistry	112	14,9
General Medicine	88	11,7
General Medicine – French line	86	11,5
General Medicine – English line	83	11,1
Faculty of Economics and Business Administration UBB	81	10,8
Licensed Nurses	49	6,5
Management UBV	45	6,0
Medical Profile College	39	25,2
Physical Education and Sport UBV	19	2,5
Health Management UBV	5	0,7
Total	750	100%

*Source: author's own calculations based on survey data*

## **Results and discussions**

Our results colligate with the findings of most of the other research on the topic and indicate that women are more inclined to act ethically than men, with male students reporting a higher propensity to engage in unethical behavior.

The hypothesis of the study has been confirmed by the results of the empirical study conducted on a population sample of considerable dimensions.

The data of the present study are in agreement with those of most of the studies on this subject from the international literature. Thus, male students are more permissive with the unethical behavior at university, at the workplace and in society, in contrast to female subjects.

Related to the general scores of the questionnaire, we registered the highest mean scores by item regarding the unethical behavior in profession, mainly with reference to calling in sick, even though not in fact sick and leaving personal post to be mailed among business post.

Regarding the unethical behavior in school/faculty, the most frequently mentioned items are the attitudes related to writing seminar work for other students, looking at other students' exam papers during exam, stating false reasons for not attending the classes, as can be easily observed in Table 3.

**Table 3. Descriptive statistical processing results of the raw data of the study**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
1. Reporting own-inflicted car damage to the insurance agency as being inflicted by third party	2,13	1,43
2. Taking office accessories (pens, paper, etc.) for own home use	2,01	1,04
3. Finding a wallet, keeping the money and disposing of the wallet	1,32	0,76
4. Taking the newspaper from the neighbour's post-box	1,82	2
5. Calling in sick, even though not in fact sick	2,39	2
6. Forging the student-status papers in order to obtain student-status-related benefits (e.g. cheaper food in restaurant etc.)	1,70	1
7. Leaving personal post to be mailed among business post (on company's expenses)	2,11	2
8. Conducting non-job-related activity while at the job.	2,43	2
9. Stating false reasons for not attending classes	2,42	2
10. Looking at other students' exam papers during exam	2,45	2

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
11. Writing seminar work for other student.	2,73	3
12. Asking other student to take the exam for you (in your name)	1,46	1
13. Using unallowed techniques (cheating) during the exam	1,84	2
14. Copying seminar work from sources, not listed in the bibliography	2,15	2
<b><i>Unethical behavior in society</i></b>	<b>1,71</b>	<b>1,85</b>
<b><i>Unethical behavior in profession</i></b>	<b>2,18</b>	<b>2,34</b>
<b><i>Unethical behavior in school</i></b>	<b>2,03</b>	<b>2,26</b>
<b>Total score questionnaire SEBQ</b>	<b>28,97</b>	<b>28</b>

*Source: author's own calculations based on survey data*

The unethical behavior in society has the highest score regarding reporting own-inflicted car damage to the insurance agency as being inflicted by third party.

On the other hand, the highest score of the questionnaire is related to unethical behavior in school, mainly writing seminar work for another student and the lowest score refers to asking another student to take the exam for you.

These results show that Romanian students are more prone to behave unethically in the workplace, very close being also the unethical behavior in school. Based on the results we can assume that unethical behavior in school does have an influence on the way today's students will behave when they find themselves in the workfield.

In Table 4 the statistical significance of the differences in responses among students with respect to gender can be seen.

**Table 4. The statistical significance of the differences in responses between genders**

		<i>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</i>		<i>t-test for Equality of Means</i>						
		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	<i>Mean Difference</i>	<i>Std. Error Difference</i>	<i>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</i>	
									<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>
1. Reporting own-inflicted car damage to the insurance agency as being inflicted by third party	Equal variances assumed	.300	.584	2.358	748	<b>.019</b>	.262	.111	.044	.480
2. Taking office accessories (pens, paper, etc.) for own home use	Equal variances assumed	6.403	.012	2.827	748	<b>.005</b>	.228	.081	.070	.386
3. Finding a wallet, keeping the money and disposing of the wallet	Equal variances assumed	41.925	.000	3.961	748	<b>.000</b>	.231	.058	.117	.346
4. Taking the newspaper from the neighbour's post-box.	Equal variances assumed	.019	.891	-.827	748	.409	-.060	.072	-.201	.082
5. Calling in sick, even though not in fact sick.	Equal variances assumed	4.151	.042	.510	748	.610	.043	.085	-.123	.210

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		<b>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</b>		<b>t-test for Equality of Means</b>						
		<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	<b>Mean Difference</b>	<b>Std. Error Difference</b>	<b>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</b>	
									<b>Lower</b>	<b>Upper</b>
6. Forging the student-status papers in order to obtain student-status-related benefits (e.g. cheaper food in restaurant etc.)	Equal variances assumed	13.841	.000	5.878	748	.000	.455	.077	.303	.607
7. Leaving personal post to be mailed among business post (on company's expenses)	Equal variances assumed	4.162	.042	2.600	748	.010	.207	.080	.051	.364
8. Conducting non-job-related activity while on job.	Equal variances assumed	1.075	.300	1.888	748	.059	.149	.079	-.006	.303
9. Stating false reasons for not attending the classes.	Equal variances assumed	2.976	.085	1.279	748	.201	.112	.088	-.060	.285
10. Looking at other students' exam papers during exam.	Equal variances assumed	11.722	.001	1.633	748	.103	.151	.092	-.031	.333

		<i>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</i>		<i>t-test for Equality of Means</i>						
		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	<i>Mean Difference</i>	<i>Std. Error Difference</i>	<i>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</i>	
									<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>
11. Writing seminar work for other student.	Equal variances assumed	7.477	.006	.455	748	.649	.041	.091	-.137	.220
12. Asking other student to take the exam for you (in your name).	Equal variances assumed	43.711	.000	4.456	748	<b>.000</b>	.310	.070	.174	.447
13. Using unallowed techniques (cheating) during the exam.	Equal variances assumed	6.572	.011	2.887	748	<b>.004</b>	.237	.082	.076	.398
14. Copying seminar work from sources, not listed in the bibliography.	Equal variances assumed	17.159	.000	3.818	748	<b>.000</b>	.321	.084	.156	.486

Source: author's own calculations based on survey data

The results of the study show that male participants have a higher propensity in agreeing with reporting own-inflicted car damage to the insurance agency as being inflicted by third party, as compared to the female subjects ( p-value of 0,019).

Regarding the item of taking the newspaper from the neighbour's post-box, there is no significant difference between male and female subjects (p-value = 0,409); similarly, the item reveals no significant difference among respondents by gender related to calling in sick even though not in fact sick (p-value 0, 610).

Taking office accessories (pens, paper, etc.) for own home use will be easier done by male subjects, as compared to the female participants (p-value of 0,005).

Male respondents are, in theory, more prone to keeping the money and disposing of the found wallet, as compared to the female respondents (p-value = 0,000) .

Likewise, forging the student-status papers in order to obtain student-status-related benefits is a practice easier accepted by male students as compared to the female subjects (p-value = 0,000).

Male participants have a higher score related to the agreement of leaving personal post to be mailed among business post (on company's expenses), as compared to the female subjects (p-value = 0,010).

The mean scores of the SEBQ tool item regarding the agreement with the substitutability of persons in an exam (p-value = 0,000) show that the substitutability of persons in an exam is a practice that is more agreed with by male participants as compared to the female subjects.

Male participants in the study strongly agree with using unallowed techniques (cheating) during the exam, as compared to female respondents (p-value = 0,004).

The mean scores of the SEBQ tool item regarding the agreement with academic plagiarism ((p-value = 0,000) show that there is no strong agreement with academic plagiarism from the female participants as compared to male respondents.

Going further, the results regarding the 3 scales analysed, namely unethical behavior in society, profession and school show that male participants have higher scores related to unethical behavior in society, profession and school, as compared to female participants, as it can be easily observed in Table 5.

**Table 5. Differences between gender and unethical behavior in society, profession and school**

		<i>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</i>		<i>t-test for Equality of Means</i>						
		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	<i>Mean Difference</i>	<i>Std. Error Difference</i>	<i>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</i>	
									<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>
<b>Society</b>	Equal variances assumed	1.894	.169	2.858	748	.004	.14449	.05055	.04524	.24373
<b>Profession</b>	Equal variances assumed	2.473	.116	2.670	748	.008	.15670	.05869	.04149	.27191
<b>School</b>	Equal variances assumed	17.793	.000	4.127	748	.000	.23250	.05634	.12190	.34309

Source: author's own calculations based on survey data

These results are a ethically problematic sign, showing that male students keep their unethical behavior in all three settings (school, profession, workplace). Although this is somewhat worrying for male students, the “relaxing” fact is that female students are stricter in this sense – leaving the chance that female future managers will react more



in line with ethical guidelines. Furthermore, somewhat reassuring is the fact that in today's business world and not only, diversity management and hiring women in top management positions is being encouraged.

On the other hand, previous studies (Sims, 1993, Harding et al., 2004) show that there is a correlation between unethical behavior in school and profession/in the workplace, but further conclude that encouraging ethical behavior in the academic setting might have positive effects on the "future ethical decision-making in workplace settings" (Harding et al., 2004). So, in relation with the present research, universities should take into consideration this aspect and offer more support and ethical training programs for male students, and not only, in order to create and encourage ethical behavior. This is also the view of Aristotel, one of the strongest advocates of a liberal arts education, which stresses the education of the whole person, including one's moral character, rather than merely learning a set of skills.

## **Conclusions**

The results of the study confirm the opinions of most of the international researchers and the hypothesis of the study has been confirmed. Hence, male undergraduate and postgraduate students are more permissible with unethical behavior at school, at the workplace and in society as opposed to female students. At every item of the SEBQ tool and on all scales, ranging from 1 to 5, female subjects are more ethical than men. On the other hand, the present study has also confirmed that female students have higher grades as compared to male students.

Related to the implications of the study, we believe that taking into account the academic environment and its peculiarities, as previously discussed, it is important for the teachers and educators to offer ethical models and to try to instill into students an ethical behavior. For

example, related to cheating during the exams, teachers can offer support to students in acting ethically by strongly verifying and observing the students during the exams in order not to encourage cheating. This aspect is even more important because research suggests that most students and managers do look to the social context and culture to determine what is ethically right and wrong (Litzky et al., 2006; Trevino & Brown, 2004).

Also, the results of the study clearly show that women are more ethical as compared to men, which is an important factor to be taken into account by the business environment if they want to create a more ethical organization.

The limitations of the study refer to the need to go deeper into the analysis of unethical behavior and of the implication of unethical behavior in relation with profession, society and school. We consider that more studies on unethical behavior of students, in relation with more variables should be conducted. Furthermore, we may have to focus on our ethics training for students in general, and male students in particular.

Future studies should be conducted in order to collect data at other points of time and in order not to influence the students that they are supposed to pretend to be ethical and offer socially acceptable responses, ideally, a social desirability scale could be included as part of the survey.

We wish this research paper not to remain a mere transversal analysis of a phenomenon, useful only in the academic environment but to be promoted in order to have an impact on the way in which we educate the future employees of the Romanian companies, the future managers or the future politicians, so that we will eventually build an ethical culture, one of responsibility for our common welfare.

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