The Influence of Business Ethics Education on Moral Efficacy, Moral Meaningfulness, and Moral Courage: A Quasi-experimental Study

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Abstract The research described here contributes to the extant empirical research on business ethics education by examining outcomes drawn from the literature on positive organizational scholarship (POS). The general research question explored is whether a course on ethical decision-making in business could positively influence students' confidence in their abilities to handle ethical problems at work (i.e., moral efficacy), boost the relative importance of ethics in their work lives (i.e., moral meaningfulness), and encourage them to be more courageous in raising ethical problems at work even if it is unpopular (i.e., moral courage). Specifically, the study used a rigorous quasi-experimental pretest–posttest research design with a treatment ($N = 30$) and control group ($N = 30$) to investigate whether a graduate-level course in business ethics could influence students' levels of moral efficacy, meaningfulness, and courage. Findings revealed that participants in the business ethics treatment course experienced significant positive increases in each of the three outcome variables as compared to the control group. The largest increase was in moral efficacy, followed by moral courage, and finally, moral meaningfulness. These findings are discussed in the context of the current research on business ethics education and POS. Implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords Business ethics education · Positive organizational scholarship · Moral efficacy · Moral meaningfulness · Moral courage

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Many top global graduate business schools are implementing business ethics, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability courses in their programs (Christensen et al. 2007; Evans and Marcal 2005; Evans and Weiss 2008; Rasche et al. 2013) to respond to the plethora of business ethics-related scandals and calls from academics to advance business ethics education in universities (see Swanson and Fisher 2008). Christensen et al. (2007) found that a majority of the top 50 Financial Times global MBA programs require one or more of these topics be covered in their MBA curricula. While studies have examined the effects of such courses on moral recognition and moral reasoning (see Lau 2010; Waples et al. 2009) and students' perspectives of effective teaching (Carroll 2005), methodologically rigorous research on other relevant psychological outcomes of business ethics courses has not kept pace with the integration of such courses into curricula.

The emerging fields of positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship (POS) have both argued for a positive approach to ethics (Handelsman et al. 2002;