

The relationship between attitudes toward general ethical dilemmas and two personality traits: Test anxiety and need for social approval

Carl Malinowski, Pace University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The study investigated the relationship between general ethical attitudes and two traits: test anxiety and need for social approval. It was found that test anxiety was significantly correlated with two of the ten general ethical dilemmas while need approval was significantly related to three of the ethical scenarios. Implications of these findings for management were presented. Appropriate use of data relating personality characteristics to ethical attitudes can give an organization a long-term global competitive advantage. Future research in business ethics should include the relationship between ethical attitudes and the many traits that have not yet been studied by scholars investigating the connection between morality and personality.

Key words: Ethical Attitudes, Test Anxiety, Need for Social Approval, Business Ethics, Morality, Social Responsibility.

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INTRODUCTION

True diversity may be more than the beauty of ethnic variation in the world. It may very well be the uniqueness of each of the 7.5 billion citizens of our planet. A person's individuality is his/her combination of traits, known as personality. If this is the best way for a manager to understand the organization's employees, it can help shape the ethics of the institution. Shaping ethics toward valuing morality and social responsibility can give the company a global competitive advantage.

The theoretical connection between personality and ethics goes back to late nineteenth century Europe and the birth of Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. Schultz and Schultz (2002) discuss Freud's belief that we have a moral compass he called the superego that serves as a guide to moral thought, moral emotion and moral action.

PRIOR ESEARCH RELATING BUSINESS ETHICS AND PERSONALITY

In recent decades the following traits (among others) were related to ethical attitudes: (1) Type A personality (Rayburn and Rayburn 1996); (2) materialism (Muncy and Eastman 1998); (3) relativism and idealism (Erfmeyer, Keillor and LeClair 1998); (4) individualism-collectivism (Teoh, Setany and Lim 1999); (5) judging-perceiving (Malinowski 2003); (6) Machiavellianism (Malinowski 2008); (7) moral judgment (Malinowski 2012); (8) religiosity (Malinowski 2016); (9) guilt (Malinowski 2017) and (10) locus of control (Malinowski 2018).

WHY TEST ANXIETY AND NEED FOR SOCIAL APPROVAL CAN BE STUDIED TOGETHER

Why would the same paper examine test anxiety (also known as fear of failure) and the need for the approval of others? They don't seem like identical qualities. Perhaps self image ties the two characteristics together. Failure can harm the self-image and not being approved by others can do the same. To quote Malinowski (2015): "Therefore, people high in the need for social approval as well as those high in test anxiety may react comparably when their ethical attitudes are measured." (p. 384)

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The present study relates test anxiety and the need for social approval to student responses to general ethical dilemmas. The following combination of features differentiates this investigation from prior research in the area of business ethics and personality: (1) neither test anxiety nor the need for social approval

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appear frequently in the business ethics literature; (2) the combination of the two may have only appeared once (Malinowski 2015); (3) a variety of general ethical dilemmas was presented; (4) participants varied in country born in, race, religion and nationality; (5) over 300 men and better than 300 women participated; (6) both the urban and suburban campuses of the cooperating university were surveyed; (7) undergraduate and graduate students in all business majors volunteered:(accounting, finance, management and marketing) and (8) undergraduate participants included freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors.

HYPOTHESES

Prior research relating test anxiety and ethics. Bergin and Bergin (2012) call test anxiety “a dispositional proneness toward anxiety in test situations that interferes with performance.” (p. 325) It is not a lack of ability, but difficulty in trying to show ability.” (p. 326) But why should test anxiety be correlated with morality? Malinowski and Smith (1985) wrote: “we regard test anxiety as indicative of strength of motivation to avoid failure. Because cheating on a test serves as added protection against failure, subject with high test anxiety should be inclined to cheat.” (p. 1019) Smith, Ryan and Diggins (1972) found that undergraduates high in test anxiety reported more cheating on exams than participants lower on this trait. Malinowski and Smith (1985) studied honesty with which college males reported scores on a rotary pursuit task. Number of trials cheated on was positively related to test anxiety.

But how should test anxiety be correlated with ethical attitudes? Since test anxiety is an operational definition of fear of failure, we may present ethical attitudes to reflect our fear of how others evaluate us. Therefore, people with high test anxiety should give more ethical responses than those with lower test anxiety. Malinowski (2015) gave 570 undergraduates Mandler and Sarason’s (1952) Test Anxiety Questionnaire (TAQ) and nine hypothetical marketing moral dilemmas. As predicted, “the higher the test anxiety , the more moral the attitudes to hypothetical marketing moral dilemmas.” (p. 383)

Hypothesis 1: Students differing in their degree of test anxiety will also differ in their reactions to a series of ten general ethical dilemmas.

Prior research relating need for social approval and ethics. The need for social approval is marked by a tendency to give socially desirable responses. Weiten (2013) sees social desirability as a “tendency to give socially approved answers to questions about oneself.” (p. 62) To Feist and Rosenberg (2012), the need for social approval is “a tendency toward favorable self-perception that could lead to inaccurate self-reports.” (p. 60) Eggen and Kauchak (2013) believe that need approval is “the desire to be accepted and judged positively by others.” (p. 261) But why should need for social approval be correlated with measures of ethics?

Malinowski and Smith (1985) write “that the Social Desirability Scale (Crowne and Marlowe 1964) measures a motive to avoid social disapproval, and that such an avoidance motive will be aroused in situations in which a subject confronts failure that might mean humiliation or rejection.” (p. 1019) In their rotary pursuit study cited above cheating was positively correlated with need for social approval. Malinowski (2015) , also cited above, found, as predicted, that “the greater the need for social approval, the more ethical the attitudes to the ethical scenarios.” (p. 383) People who crave the approval of others give more ethical responses than those lower in need approval.

Hypothesis 2: Students differing in their need for social approval will differ in their reactions to a series of ten general ethical dilemmas.

METHOD

Subjects. A total of 645 undergraduates and graduate students from a large Eastern multi-campus university were studied. Participants from both the urban and suburban campus volunteered.

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Students majored mostly in accounting, finance, management or marketing. Freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors were included. Table 1 shows the demographic breakdown of the sample.

Materials. Test anxiety was measured by Part 1 of the Test Anxiety Questionnaire (Mandler and Sarason, 1952) Scores from Part 1 have been shown to correlate between .84 and .90 with scores from the entire Test Anxiety Questionnaire (Smith, 1965).

Need for social approval was measured by the Social Desirability Scale (Crowne and Marlowe, 1964).

Ten general ethical dilemmas dealing with a variety of moral issues were presented. They are based on the work of Michael Sandel (www.Harvardjustice.org). They deal with the following issues (1) Shipwrecked sailors consider eating a cabin boy (SHIP as the data entry category), (2) Installing a costly guard rail on a road in order to save lives (RAIL), (3) Taxing the rich in order to provide healthcare for the poor (TAX), (4) The right to sell oneself into slavery (SLAVE), (5) Selling one's kidney on the open market (KIDNEY), (6) Shopkeeper considers shortchanging a child (BREAD), (7) Racial profiling by police (UNJUST), (8) Television host earning a lot more than a teacher (HOST), (9) University considering ethnicity in admission decisions (ADMIT) and (10) The ability of the law to make citizens virtuous (VIRTUE).

Each scenario was followed by a five-point Likert scale. The left side was labeled "Strongly Agree" (scored "1") while the right side was labeled "Strongly Disagree" (scored "5").

Procedure. Participants first did the Test Anxiety Questionnaire. They were then given the Social Desirability Scale. This was followed by the ten general ethical dilemmas. Finally, they were given a page of demographic questions.

RESULTS

Test of hypotheses. Table 2 shows Pearson correlation coefficients relating test anxiety to each of the ten general ethical dilemmas. Two of the correlations are statistically significant. The negative correlation between TAX and test anxiety shows that the higher one's test anxiety the more likely one is to agree that it would be just to tax the rich in order to provide healthcare for the uninsured poor. The positive correlation between HOST and test anxiety shows that the greater one's test anxiety the greater one's disagreement that it is just for a talk show host to make a lot more money than the average schoolteacher. However, since only two of the ten correlations between test anxiety and general ethics are significant, Hypothesis 1 is not confirmed.

Table 3 shows Pearson correlations between need for social approval and the dilemmas. Three correlations are significant. The positive correlation between SLAVE and need approval shows that the higher one's need for social approval the greater the disagreement that if you own yourself it follows that you should be free to sell yourself into slavery. The positive correlation between KIDNEY and need approval shows that the higher one's need for approval the greater the disagreement that it should be legal one of your kidneys on the open market. The negative correlation between BREAD and need approval shows that the greater the need for approval the greater the agreement that the shopkeeper giving the child the right change has moral worth. Since three of the correlations between need for social approval and general ethics are significant, Hypothesis 2 is confirmed.

Other findings of interest. Table 4 shows the means for the ten dilemmas. The participants tended to agree that it would be wrong for three shipwrecked sailors to eat and kill the cabin boy to save themselves (SHIP), tended to agree that the city should install a costly guardrail to prevent people from driving off a cliff and be killed (RAIL), tended to disagree that it is just to tax the rich in order to provide healthcare for the uninsured poor (TAX), tended to disagree that if you owned yourself you should be free to sell yourself into slavery (SLAVE), tended to disagree that it should be legal to sell your kidney on the open market (KIDNEY), tended to disagree that the shopkeeper giving a child the correct change has moral worth (BREAD), tended to agree that racial profiling by police is unjust (UNJUST), tended to disagree that a talk show host making a lot more money than a teacher is just (HOST), tended to agree that it is unfair to consider ethnicity as a factor in university admissions (ADMIT) and tended to agree that the law should aim to make citizens virtuous (VIRTUE).

In Table 6 there are significant country born differences on three dilemmas. Compared to Western Europeans, US participants are more likely to agree that it would be just to tax the rich in order to provide healthcare for the poor, more likely to agree that it should be legal to sell one of your kidneys on the open market and more likely to agree that racial profiling by police is unjust.

In Table 7 there are significant race differences on four dilemmas. Black people are more likely than white people to disagree that it would be wrong to eat and kill the cabin boy, more likely to agree that it is just to tax the rich in order to provide healthcare for the poor, more likely to agree that it is unjust for the police to do racial profiling and more likely to disagree that it is unfair for universities to consider ethnicity as a factor in admissions.

In Table 8 there are significant differences in three dilemmas. Catholics are more likely than Muslims to disagree that it would be just to tax the rich in order to provide healthcare for the poor, more likely to agree that it is just for a TV host to make much more than a school teacher and more likely to disagree that it is unfair for universities to consider ethnicity as a factor in admissions.

Table 9 shows women to be significantly higher than men in test anxiety. It also shows that men are significantly higher than women in need for social approval.

DISCUSSION

Only five of the twenty correlations involving test anxiety and need for social approval related to the ten general ethics dilemmas are statistically significant. Yet five different dilemmas accounted for the significant findings: TAX, HOST, SLAVE, KIDNEY and BREAD. Once more we see that ethics are related to non-moral personality traits. These findings are similar to Malinowski's (2015) findings that "the higher the test anxiety, the more moral the attitudes to hypothetical marketing moral dilemmas. Also...that the greater the need for social approval, the more ethical the attitudes to the ethical scenarios." (p. 383)

In Table 4, two standard deviations stand out, the lowest (VIRTUE, .94881) and the highest (BREAD, 1.43971). Respondents show the most agreement on "the law should aim at making citizens virtuous" and the least agreement on the shopkeeper considering shortchanging the child. These differences in variation are consistent with Jones (1991), that the evaluation of a moral issue stems from the moral intensity of the issue. If people see one issue as more serious perhaps there is greater disagreement, thus the higher the standard deviation.

The significant differences between men and women in Table 5 have been found repeatedly in the business and marketing ethics literature. For example, three times Malinowski (2014 and with Berger in 1996 and 2006) presented business students with a series of nine hypothetical marketing moral dilemmas. In each study women were significantly more ethical than men.

The significant differences between U.S born and non-U.S. born (Western European) participants in Table 6 were also found by Malinowski (2011). In that study non-U.S. born participants were born in East Asia. The significant differences between black and white respondents in Table 7 were found by Malinowski in 2021. In Table 8 Catholics were more likely than Muslims to disagree that it would be just to tax the rich in order to provide healthcare for the poor while in 2021 Catholics were more likely than Jews to agree that it would be ethical to do so.

The Table 9 finding that women are more test anxious than men indicates that despite giving men and women more equal opportunity recently, women still have a greater fear of failure than men do. Men have the higher need for social approval. The two gender differences indicate that both sexes need to have their self image and self-esteem bolstered when they are very young.

CONCLUSION

Although support for the hypotheses that test anxiety and need for social approval are each related to general ethics is not strong we again see that non-moral personality traits are related to moral attitudes. Managers should note that their employees' integrity is related to personality characteristics other than moral thoughts, moral emotions and moral conduct. Hiring, retaining and promoting people whose traits reveal integrity could work well for the organization and give it a long term competitive advantage. Future research should continue to examine how both moral and non-moral traits predict ethical attitudes.

Table 1: Sample Demographics

Variable	N	Percent(%)
Degree: Undergraduate	570	88.4
Graduate	75	11.6
Gender: Male	309	47.9
Female	316	49.0
Country Born In:		
U.S.	482	74.7
Central/South America	20	3.1
Western Europe	31	4.8
Eastern Europe	8	1.2
Western Asia	18	2.8
Eastern Asia	18	2.8
Race:		
White	344	53.3
Black	61	9.5
Hispanic	55	8.5
East Asian	45	7.0
South/West Asian	20	3.1
Religion:		
Catholic	223	34.6
Jewish	14	2.2

	Muslim/Islam	26	4.0
	Buddhist	8	1.2
	Hindu	12	1.9
	Atheist	9	1.4
	Agnostic	21	3.3
	Christian	113	17.5
Nationality:	U.S.	123	17.5
Central/South America		168	20.5
Western Europe		176	21.0
Eastern Europe		43	6.7
West Asia		23	3.6
East Asia		35	5.4

Table 2

Relationship between Test Anxiety and Attitudes toward General Ethical Dilemmas

Dilemma	Correlation	Two-tail Significance	N
SHIP	-0.059	.135	644
RAIL	-0.066	.093	642
TAX	-0.135	.001	640
SLAVE	0.019	.631	634
KIDNEY	0.007	.866	636
BREAD	-0.039	.329	640
UNJUST	-0.040	.313	624
HOST	0.144	.001	638
ADMIT	0.066	.096	635
VIRTUE	-0.020	.610	634

Table 3

Relationship between Need Approval and Attitudes toward General Ethical Dilemmas

Dilemma	Correlation	Two-tail Significance	N
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SHIP	-0.039	.319	644
RAIL	-0.012	.760	642
TAX	0.051	.195	640

SLAVE	0.148	.001	634
KIDNEY	0.149	.001	636
BREAD	-0.090	.022	640
UNJUST	0.031	.438	624
HOST	-0.063	.114	638
ADMIT	-0.044	.270	635
VIRTUE	0.064	.107	634

Table 4

Dilemma	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
SHIP	2.1505	1.26466	644
TAX	2.8188	1.28612	640
KIDNEY	3.1997	1.36759	636
RAIL	2.2835	1.20478	642
SLAVE	3.3959	1.35816	634
BREAD	2.7484	1.43971	640
UNJUST	2.1490	1.31123	624
HOST	3.3762	1.29709	638
ADMIT	2.1039	1.27283	635
VIRTUE	2.4353	.94881	634

Table 5

Analysis of Variance: Gender Differences in General Ethical Attitudes

Dilemma	Male Mean	Stand. Deviation	Female Mean	Stand. Deviation	Significance
SHIP .045	2.2597	1.32038	2.0570	1.20466	
TAX .039	2.9223	1.26919	2.7093	1.29662	
HOST .001	3.0550	1.29191	3.7093	1.22021	
ADMIT .023	1.9871	1.21135	2.2186	1.27318	
VIRTUE .036	2.3592	.98219	2.5194	.91267	

Table 6

Analysis of Variance: Country Born In Differences in General Ethical Attitudes

Dilemma	U.S. Mean	Stand. Deviation	W.Europe Mean	Stand. Deviation	Significance
TAX .012	2.7167	1.28055		3.2258	1.38873
KIDNEY .022	3.1279	1.33253		3.7742	1.25724
UNJUST .001	2.0382	1.28768		3.1290	1.40812

Table 7

Analysis of Variance: Racial Differences in General Ethical Attitudes

Dilemma	White Mean	Stand. Deviation	Black Mean	Stand. Deviation	Significance
SHIP .001	2.0233	1.16034		2.4098	1.39496
TAX .001	2.9767	1.31990		2.2623	1.03121
UNJUST .024	2.1953	1.30408		1.5667	1.21246
ADMIT .044	2.0117	1.21084		2.2623	1.51549

Table 8

Analysis of Variance: Religious Differences in General Ethical Attitudes

Dilemma	Catholic Mean	Stand. Deviation	Muslim Mean	Stand. Deviation	Significance
TAX .001	3.0583	1.26677		2.9220	1.15181
HOST .037	3.2152	1.24058		3.5000	1.30384
ADMIT .006	1.9186	1.12115		1.7692	1.06987

Table 9

Analysis of Variance: Gender Differences in Test Anxiety

Male Mean	Standard Deviation	Female Mean	Standard Deviation	Significance
9.99 .001	4.784	12.89	4.644	

Analysis of Variance: Gender Differences in Need for Social Approval

Male Mean	Standard Deviation	Female Mean	Standard Deviation	Significance

17.01	5.244	15.78	5.335
.004			

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