

Effect of Life Stress on Ethical Behavior: Evidence from Thai College Students

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Abstract: Numerous studies indicated that stress can lead to unethical behavior. Nonetheless, many of these studies focused on fostering relationship between work stress and unethical behavior. Despite academic stress in relation to dishonesty and cheating has been widely discussed, a little empirical research evidence has been found in the literature, particularly in Thai context. The aim of this present study was to examine the effect of life stress on ethical behavior. Data were collected from 191 accounting students at a selected government university by using an online questionnaire through Google platform. Analysis of simple linear regression showed the relationship between life stress and ethical behavior ($F(1, 191) = 6.930$, which R^2 of .035. Nonetheless, a low R^2 value indicated that life stress did not explain much in the variation of ethical behavior. Additional independent variables should be added for the further study. As the negative relationship between life stress and ethical behavior was found, this research suggests develop curricular activities to help students relieve their stress leading to support their ethical behavior response.

Keywords: Life stress, Ethical Behavior, Stress, Ethics, College students.

INTRODUCTION

Studying in higher education is considered as a time of transition for many young people. Various factors of college life have placed the pressure on them in several ways. These young college students can be overwhelmed by the burden of academic expectations, finances, social relationship, and independence and accountability (Kokemuller, 2019). The balance between academic success and other aspects of college life is needed. Students who are unable to harmonize and cope with these stressors effectively are facing stress, which can impact their physical and emotional health (Scott, 2019). Students who expect to receive a good grade in order to get a better job in the future are more likely to have stress, which can lead to academic cheating or misbehavior (Palmer, 2005; McBrian, 2017). With a highly competitive environment, pressure to success leads students to act unethically (Begley, 2016). Unethical behavior is unacceptable in academic environment and society. An individual who undermines the integrity of their assignments and responsibilities is viewed as an unethical person.

Though benefits of stress have been broadly discussed in literatures such as alertness and awareness, a recent research pointed out that stressful situation had an impact on an individual's brain, which caused the act of irrational decision or risky behavior (Hugo, 2017). As cortisol level, known as an individual's stress hormone, normally increases when an individual is stressful, the likelihood to behave unethically has escalated to reduce the stress symptoms (Leobowitz, 2015). This can be presumed that people who are experiencing stress may have conducted unethical behavior due to the effect of stress on their brain. Past research exhibited the correlation between unethical behavior and stress (Van Zyl, & Lazenby, 2002). In addition, extreme pressure to reach unrealistic goals can foster people to act unethically (Carucci, 2016). In particular, students who are highly expected a good academic performance by their instructors and parents may find the short corner to accomplish that target. A previous research showed that stress and anxiety had an influence on self-interest and unethical behavior (Kouchaki & Desai, 2015).

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Despite numerous studies revealed that people who had anxiety, stress, or emotional instability were more likely to engage in unethical behavior (Kouchaki & Desai, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2018), these studies placed emphasis on unethical behavior in the workplace. The relationship between academic stress and unethical behavior is obvious, yet a few study attempted to determine the relationship between life stress and unethical behavior among college student, predominantly in the U.S. and Europe (Ramberg & Modin, 2019). As a result, this present study aims at scrutinizing the association between life stress and unethical behavior among college students in Thai context. Findings of this study are to enhance knowledge in this this area and can be utilized as the foundation to extend the study in the future.

Literature Reviews

Kouchaki and Desai (2015) explored the association between anxiety and unethical behavior. They conducted 6 studies in different approaches to explore whether individuals who felt threatened were likely to act in an unethical way. These studies demonstrated consistency of participants in both laboratory and online samples. A lab study of undergraduate students demonstrated that students who were threatened to feel anxious were more likely to commit in unethical behavior than those who were in the unbiased condition. Similarly, an online study, which a workplace scenario provided to participants, showed that respondents who were requested by their supervisor to include untruthful information in a firm report were made to feel stressed were more likely to verify mendacious information in the company report than those in the nonaligned condition. A similar study of Mitchell et al. (2018), which multiple studies were conducted to investigate whether demands for high performance, which may cause performance stress led employees to demonstrate unethical behaviors. Results showed that high pressure expectation led to unethical behavior. In addition, a meta-analysis conducted by Belle and Cantarelli (2017) found that social influence, greed, and egocentrism were major causes of unethical behavior based on synthesis of 137 experiments in 73 articles. This study also revealed approaches that helped lessen unethical behavior including individuals' willingness of retaining a positive self-view, behavior monitors, and moral reminders.

Although these studies attempted to examine the relationship between stress and unethical behavior, they mainly focused on the workplace rather than college and university. Moreover, life stress including social stress, academic stress, relationship stress, and financial stress had been overlooked in the literature as a few evidences were found on the academic database. Besides, most of research primarily paid attention on unethical behavior instead of ethical behavior. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the correlation between life stress and ethical behavior

among college students. In addition, this study tended to explore the effect of life stress on ethical behavior by proposing a research hypothesis as: "life stress had a negative significant effect on ethical behavior among college students."

METHODOLOGY

This empirical research was to examine the relationship between life stress and ethical behavior. Data were gathered from 209 accounting students in a selected government university through an online questionnaire. Only 191 respondents completed the questionnaire and returned it through Google platform. The instrument of this study contains three major parts: respondents' sociodemographic characteristics, life stressful scale, and ethical behavior scale. Sociodemographic information included gender, monthly income, and a number of family members. Life stressful scale contained 8-item of 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scale measurement was modified from Robbins, DeCenzo, and Coulter (2015). Ethical behavior scale was adapted from the work of Lussier (2008), which consisted of 10-item of 4-point rating scale ranging from 1 (frequently) to 4 (Never). Respondents were inquired to rate the item in the extent to which best described their behavior. The quality of these scales was ensured through the conduct of validity and reliability. Content validity was tested by three experts using the Item Objective Congruence Index (*IOC*) method. Table 1 showed the Cronbach's alpha score of these scale measurements, which indicated the satisfactory reliability of these scales. To explore the effect of life stress and ethical behavior, simple linear regression analysis was computed.

Table 1: Reliability Coefficients of Life Stress and Ethical Behavior

Scale Measurement	Alpha Score
Life Stress	0.77
Ethical Behavior	0.86

RESULTS

Analysis of sociodemographic characteristics demonstrated that female was the majority group of respondents in this study (86.9%). As all of them were a college student, their average monthly income was quite low, which nearly 70 percent of these participants earned less than \$150 a month (67.5%). For a number of family members, almost 60 percent of these respondents reported that their family had about 4-6 people (59.7%).

Simple linear regression analysis was calculated to test if life stress can predict ethical behavior of accounting students. The normality was checked through a Q-Q plot to graphically determine whether this inferential statistics was suitable to be used for data analysis. The plot showed that data were normally distributed as the points were close to the

diagonal line. Table 2 showed the results of simple linear regression analysis. A significant equation was discovered ($F(1, 191) = 6.930$, which R^2 of .035. Even though R^2 of this analysis was low, P-value still designated a real association between these two variables. The finding revealed a negative correlation

between life stress and ethical behavior, which could be interpreted that the more life stress students had, the low ethical behavior they responded. However, a low R^2 value showed that life stress did not explain much in the variation of ethical behavior.

Table 2: Simple Linear Regression Analysis of Life Stress on Ethical Behavior

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	3.665	.154		23.773	.000
Life Stress	-.136	.051	-.188	-2.632	.009
$R^2 = .035$ Adjusted $R^2 = .030$ Std. Error of Estimate = .50019 $F = 6.930$ $df = 1$ Sig. = .009					

CONCLUSION, DISCUSSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study attempted to find out if life stress had a significant effect on ethical behavior. Results of analysis indicated the relationship between life stress and ethical behavior, yet R-squared value was very low. This can be interpreted that life stress did not explain much in the variation of ethical behavior. However, findings of this study filled in the gap in the literatures, which a few study paid a direct attention on life stress and ethical behavior. The negative relationship between life stress and ethical behavior designated that the more life stressful they were, the less ethical behavior they acted.

Limitations of this study were variables as only life stress was used as a predictor variable and did not explain much variance of ethical behavior. Hence, the future study should add related independent variables for its analysis. Moreover, an instrument used to analyze life stress in this study was a short modified version, which may not encompass all aspects of stress. Thus, a newly develop instrument of life stress or a standardized scale measurement of life stress should be conducted for a further study. Ethical behavior scale was also needed to be developed to expand the number of items to measure ethical behavior in all dimensions. In addition, samples of this study were limited to accounting students in a selected public university. The next study should extend its sample size to students in other majors and departments as well as private universities.

For research implication, although life stress cannot predict much in the variation of ethical behavior, the benefits of this study's findings can still be taken. As the negative association between these two variables was found, this research suggests develop curricular activities to help students reduce their stress, which leads to strengthen their ethical behavior response. The university should also improve the honor code to encourage students to act more responsibly to maintain standards. Instructors should alter students' mindsets by placing their focus on weighing grade importance as the reward of educational success to other values including integrity, creativity and imagination.

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