



## INDIVIDUAL ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS, ETHICAL SENSITIVITY AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT OF ACADEMIC STAFF IN UNIVERSITIES IN UGANDA

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### ABSTRACT

*Professional conduct of academic staff has become to be a major area of concern. The professional behavior of academic staff in universities in Uganda is influenced by a number of factors. Individual ethical orientation and ethical sensitivity are some of the factors that affect the professional conduct of academic staff in Uganda. This study attempts to study the relationship between individual ethical orientations, ethical sensitivity and the professional behavior of academic staff in Universities in Uganda. Individual ethical orientations and ethical sensitivity are important because they do determine the behavior of academic staff. The research was based on academic staff in universities in Uganda. A Sample of 300 was taken composed of academic staff in these institutions. A survey questionnaire was used which was adopted from those used by previous scholars and was modified to suit the local setting. A response rate of 73% was achieved. The study established that individual ethical orientation explained 42 % of the variation in the professional conduct of academic staff and ethical sensitivity explained 49% of the variation in the professional behavior of academic staff. According to the results, when ethical sensitivity was introduced the beta coefficients for individual ethical orientation dropped from 0.32 to 0.20. These results raise implications to the Chancellors and vice chancellors in these Universities. This is the first study to document the effect of individual ethical orientations and ethical sensitivity on the professional behavior of academic staff in Universities in Uganda. Despite the increasing un professional conduct of academic staff in these Universities, the staff concerned with the administrative issues in the universities have neglected the issues of individual ethical orientations and ethical sensitivity which have really promoted un professional conduct among the academic staff. The results indicate that the professional conduct of academic staff is influenced by their individual ethical orientations and ethical sensitivity.*

**Keywords:** *individual ethical orientation, Ethical sensitivity, Professional conduct of academic staff, Universities, Uganda*

### INTRODUCTION

A number of ethical challenges related to professional misconduct of academic staff are encountered in the university setting. Academic staff in universities engage in a number of un professional practices. Such practices include becoming sexually involved with a student, assigning lower grades to students with alternative ideas, accepting money or gifts for grades, giving out marks for sex and plagiarizing research (Valentine and Roland,2008).This is attributed to the ethical orientations and the level of sensitivity academic staff have towards ethical issues.

Individual ethical orientations influence the professional conduct of an academic staff basing on the relativistic and idealistic orientations. Relativistic ethical orientations hold that there is no such thing as universal ethical truths and that ethical dimensions of right and wrong vary from person to person and culture to culture (Holmes, 1999).Therefore the professional conduct of academic staff depends on their culture and how they perceive what is right and wrong. On the other hand idealistic ethical orientations focus on idealism in ethical judgement.Academic staff with idealistic ethical orientations assume that “right” action will result in desirable

consequences. Those who are less idealistic believe that “right” action does not always result in desirable consequences (Forsyth, 1980).

Ethical orientations go hand in hand with ethical sensitivity. Ethical Sensitivity refers to the awareness of how one’s actions affect others. It involves an awareness of different possible actions and how such actions affect the parties concerned. It involves originally academic staff constructing possible scenarios and knowing the consequences of their actions. Therefore academic staff have to firstly perceive that the situation has ethical implications and then identify the roles of, and effects of the situation on all affected parties. Finally, alternative actions are identified and potential outcomes are evaluated. Ethical orientations affect the ethical sensitivity of academic staff. Academic staff respond to ethical issues depending on what their orientations are (Valentine and Roland, 2008).

Individual ethical orientations of academic staff and ethical sensitivity are some of the determinants of professional behavior of academic staff. A number of studies have been focused on the ethical conduct of students and few on the professional conduct of academic staff while others have been focused in other areas rather than the academic arena. In Uganda no studies have been carried on the effect of ethical orientations of academic staff and ethical sensitivity on the professional conduct of academic staff (Valentine and Roland, 2008).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Ethical sensitivity and professional conduct of academic staff*

Ethical sensitivity is the awareness of how one’s own actions affect other people. It involves being aware of different possible lines of action and the potential effect of these on other people and as having consequences. Ethics is important in the day to day dealings of universities. Universities have to ensure that high ethical standards of behavior for their academic staff are in place (Loo, 2002). This ethics is affected by the way the academic staffs perceive the ethical issue. Ethical sensitivity involves the ability to determine whether or not a situation involves ethical issues, awareness of the moral intensity of the ethical situation and the ability to identify the moral virtues or values underlying an ethical situation. The ability to weigh the moral intensity of ethical issues also provides academic staff with a much needed skill they will need in their professional careers. Moral intensity often determines the ethical response of an academic staff. It enables them judge the seriousness of the harm and the urgency of a response or action (Tuana, 2007).

Further still using the utilitarian ethical frame work, academic staff are able to judge the consequences of any action while the deontological or duty-based ethical framework looks at the intentions behind actions and argues that they are ethically relevant. In this instance, and unlike focusing solely on the utilitarian ethical frame work, academic staff learn that even if their actions resulted in good consequences, if their intention was bad, the action is unethical (Stuart Mill, 2002; Kant 2002). So though the consequences of the action actually benefited the academic staff, a duty-based framework would argue that since the intentions were in violation of their duty to be fair and respectful, the action was unethical. All these are based on a person’s ethical orientation (Mill, 2002; Kant 2002).

Kohlberg’s (1984) theoretical framework of moral development, moral reasoning and moral action provides some understanding of the basis for professional conduct among academic staff. When faced with temptation to engage in any academic unethical behavior, academic staff are confronted with an ethical decision: whether to comply with the academic norm not to engage in the malpractice or to give into temptation and engage in professional misconduct. The manner in which the decision is made, the factors that influence the decision and the outcome of the decision might differ between individuals because of differences in their moral reasoning and, situational and social phenomenon and that many factors are involved in determining action. Baldwin et al. (1996) however cautioned that unethical behavior of academic staff is a complex psychological issue.

One of such factors is motivation (Rest, 1994; Olasehinde, 2005). Cognitive Psychologists (Rawsthorne and Elliot, 1999; Ryan and Deci, 1996) made a distinction between the two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic, which push academic staff to act in particular ways. In relation to academic behaviors for instance, academic staff may be extrinsically motivated (for instance the amount of salary paid compared to others) to engage in academic dishonesty to achieve a desired level of living (Feldman, 2002). Fortunately in spite of the fact that academic dishonesty is a symptom of poor moral and motivational adjustment, academic staff can be helped to overcome the problem or even prevented from succumbing to any such dishonest behavior in the first place (Marzean, 2001).

**Individual ethical orientation and professional conduct of academic staff**

Ethics involves a number of moral philosophies. Moral philosophy refers to the set of principles or ideologies that academic staff use to decide what a professional conduct is or what is not (Hansen, 1992). According to Forsyth (1980), an academic staff's ethical principle provides a unique perspective on moral questions that determines how he or she reasons about such issues. Such philosophies include deontology, teleological (egoism and utilitarianism), relativism, and justice. Individual ethical (individual ethics) orientation of academic staff affect the professional behavior of academic staff. The individual ethical orientation of academic staff represents basic orientations such as utilitarianism, justice and honesty, duty and responsibilities, cultural recognition, and self-interest, utilized by the individual in ethical decision-making (Jones et al., 2003). Individual ethical orientation has four dimensions: justice, deontology, relativism, and teleology.

Justice orientation is where an academic staff is fair in his or her ethical decisions and makes decisions by paying attention to concepts such as honesty, rightness and equity (Aupperle, 2008). Academic staff have to behave in a just way by considering all the stakeholders while making professional decisions. Justice as an act is determined by the notion that "equals ought to be treated equally" and "unequals ought to be treated unequally", with an emphasis on fairness (Reidenbach and Robin, 1990). This takes into account the idea of distributive justice and procedural justice. Distributive justice looks at how fairly things are distributed, while procedural justice develops rules or procedures that result in fair outcomes (Hansen, 1992).

Deontological or contractualist orientation involves academic staff following or complying with the universal principles, rules of law, individual duties and responsibilities, unwritten rules and obligations and making ethical decisions accordingly (Buckley et al., 1998; Reinstein et al., 2006). The issue of deontology further maintains that the concept of duty is free of the concept of good, and that actions are not justified by the consequences of the actions, but insist on the importance of the motives and character of the academic staff rather than the consequences actually produced by the academic staff (Beauchamp and Bowie, 1983). Academic staff who adopt a strict deontological belief do not the consequences of an action as inappropriate for making moral judgments about the action. They will instead focus on moral laws or rules, to which there are few, if any, exceptions (Reidenbach and Robin, 1988).

Relativism constitutes the third dimension of individual ethical orientation and this refers to the perception of ethical decisions and behaviors that may differ among academic staff. A decision regarded as ethical by one academic staff can be considered as non-ethical by (Loo, 2002; Gupta, 2010). Relativism maintains that decisions relating to what is ethical are a function of an academic staff's culture and therefore universal rules do not apply to all academic staff (Reidenbach and Robin, 1990). Relativists look at moral views as simply based on how one feels. (Beauchamp and Bowie, 1983; Cruz, C. A., W. E. Shafer and J. R. Strawser: (2000) ).

The fourth dimension of individual ethical orientation is teleological orientation. In this orientation, ethical decisions are made by considering the amount of individual and/or social benefit that an academic staff will obtain as a result of the decision. Academic staff regard a decision to be ethical if it increases their long-term self interest (Beu and Buckley, 2001). Actions are taken to be right or wrong only in terms of their ability to bring about desired ends. Academic staff who hold the teleological position believe that ethical decisions regarding an action should be made based on the consequences that result from the action. There are two constructs the teleological ethical orientation; utilitarianism and egoism.

Utilitarianism is concerned with the consequences of actions and that all action is right if it leads to the greatest good for the greatest number or to the least possible balance of bad consequences (Beauchamp and Bowie, 1983). Utilitarianism makes academic staff to consider all of the outcomes of an action or inaction and to evaluate one against another to determine which is best (Reidenbach and Robin, 1990). The main difference between utilitarianism and egoism is on the subject of the decision. While utilitarianism focuses on the university society's long-term interests, egoism focuses on the academic staff's long-term interests (Reidenbach and Robin, 1990). However those academic staff who hold the egoism principle will automatically perform their functions in an attempt to achieve their interests.

According to Forsyth (1980), individual ethical orientation of academic staff is looked at in two ways. One is to look at the idealistic orientations and second the relativistic orientations. These two are taken to be important predictors of academic staff's individual orientation. Idealism is defined by Forsyth as the degree to which academic staff "assume that desirable consequences can, with the *right action*, always be obtained" (1980,

p.176, emphasis in original). Relativism, on the other hand, is defined by Forsyth (1980, p.175) as “the extent to which an academic staff rejects universal moral rules” when making ethical judgments. Idealism and relativism are independent constructs and an academic staff can have either dimension high or low (Forsyth, 1980).

Kohlberg (2006) explains individual ethical orientation of academic staff using his stages of moral development. Kohlberg connotes that academic staff behave the way they do basing on the stage at which they are. In stage one of Kohlberg, academic staff possess high levels of individual ethical orientation because they want to avoid punishment. So staff are concerned with the physical consequences of the action. In stage two academic staff choose actions that satisfy their needs and at the same time the needs of others. In stage three academic staff behave in a way that pleases or helps others and is approved by them. The stage involves academic staff follow rules to perform their duties and this is referred to as law and order orientation. In stage five academic staff chooses standards and individual rights that have been examined and agreed upon by the society. Lastly stage six is where academic staff follow the universal principle ethical orientation. Behaviors of academic staff are regarded right if the decision is in accordance with the self chosen ethical principles of appealing to comprehensiveness, universality and consistency. All in all the individual ethical orientations of academic staff do affect the way they make the decisions.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a cross – sectional, analytical descriptive study design. A cross – sectional design was adopted because the study was undertaken at one point in time and an analytical and descriptive study design was used because it was deemed fit to meet the objectives of the study. Data that was required was collected from within the institutions of higher learning. A self – administered questionnaire was used to collect the data. Researchers were provided with letters introducing them to the respondents. They approached the firms with the introductory letters and requested to see academic staff in these institutions. Item scales adopted were anchored on a five (5) point Likert scale: - 5 – strongly agree, 4 – agree, 3 – Am not sure, 2 – disagree and 1 – strongly disagree. This was preferred because more often than not, respondents might truly feel neutral about a given topic, and presenting to these respondents a scale without a neutral midpoint can introduce respondent bias as respondents are forced to choose a more positive or negative response. Some researchers point out that in many cases respondents will accentuate the negative in an experience (Inforsurv, 2006). The data was collected from academic staff in institutions of higher learning in Uganda. The study focused on academic staff because there is need for them to develop continuously in their careers in order to call these institution learning institutions. Surveys were carried out on 300 academic staff and 219 were received back a response rate of 73%.

Measurement scales for the variables in the study were obtained from previous studies and revised to meet the Ugandan context in which the study was being undertaken. Individual ethical orientation was measured using Forsyth (1980) and the reliability coefficient was 0.78. Ethical sensitivity was measured using Darcia and Narves (2001) and had a reliability coefficient of 0.87. The professional conduct of academic staff was measured using Brimble and Stevenson-Clarke, (2005) and had a reliability coefficient of 0.78. Measures tested for reliability using the Cronbach Alpha Co-efficient. The collected data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS). Correlation analysis was used to determine the nature of the relationship between the variables and regression analysis to determine the variance in the dependent variable explained by independent variables.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDING

### *Sample Characteristics of respondents and respondent firms*

41% were between 21 and 25 years of age, 30% were between 26-30 years of age, 17% between 31-35 years of age, 9% between 36 and 40 years of age and 1% were above 41 and above years. 47% of the academic staff were married, 51% were single, 1% were divorced and 1% were divorced. 56% of the academic staff were male while 43% of the academic staff were female. 31 percent had served less than a year, 21% were between 1-2 years, 23% were between 3-5 years, 16% were between 6-10 years and 1% were over 10 years. 41% of the academic staff were from private universities while 58% of the academic staff were from public universities. 15% were from Makerere University Business School, 5% were from Mutesa royal University, 16% were from Mbale University, 21% were from Nkumba University, 20% were from Makerere University and 23% were from

Mbarara University.20% of the Universities were 60 and above years, 64% were between 1 and 20 years while 16% were between21 and 40 years.

### Correlation

Descriptive statistics and Zero order correlations among the study variables are presented in table 1  
Table 1; Zero Correlation (N= 218-219)

	Mean	S.D	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Age of respondents(1)	2	1.1	1						
Marital Status(2)	1.6	0.6	-0.5	1					
Sex of respondents(3)	1.4	0.5	-0.1	0.1	1				
Work experience(4)	2.3	1.1	0.706**	-0.5	-0.1	1			
Individual ethical orientation(5)	3.2	0.5	0.1	0	0	0.281**	1		
Ethical Sensitivity(6)	3.4	0.5	0.145*	-0.1	-0.1	0.389**	0.506**	0.605**	1
Professional conduct(7)	3.1	0.5	-0.2	0	-0.1	0.182**	0.267**	0.274**	0.281**
*Correlation is significant at the 0.005 level (2-tailed)**Correlation Significant at 0.001 level (2-tailed test)									

Source: Primary Data

All respondents from these Universities were un decided on individual ethical orientation (mean=3.2), Ethical sensitivity (mean=3.3), and professional behavior of academic staff (mean=3.1), .This because all the means of the variables were below 4 on the item scale.

The study revealed a significant positive relationship between significant positive relationship between ethical sensitivity and professional behavior of academic staff ( $r=0.274^{**}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and a significant positive relationship between individual ethical orientation and professional behavior of academic staff ( $r=0.267^{***}$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Findings on ethical sensitivity and professional behavior of academic staff showed that academic staff need to be aware of ethical issues in order not to engage in an ethical behavior. So institutions of higher learning have to ensure that they communicate the ethics of the academic profession to all academic staff in their institution. This is supported by Kohlberg's (1984) theoretical framework of moral development who asserts that when faced with temptation to engage in any academic unethical behavior, academic staff are confronted with an ethical decision whether to comply with the academic norm not to engage in the malpractice or to give into temptation and engage in academic dishonesty.

Findings on individual ethical orientation and the professional behavior of academic staff showed that individual ethical orientations among academic staff make them determine the way they behave .This also explains the positive relationship between individual ethical orientation and the professional behavior of academic staff. This supported by Rosamond,( 2002)who says that academic staff need integrity in order for their profession not to be threatened .Academic staff institutions of higher learning are expected to behave ethically in its pursuit of knowledge, and the existence of academic integrity is considered as the cultural glue that enables academic staff to function successfully

**Table: 2** Hierarchical regression analysis with the professional conduct of academic staff as the dependent variable

	model1	Std error	model2	Std error	model3	Std error	Colinearity	
							Tolerance	VIF
Constant	3.48**	0.21	2.6**	0.26	1.86**	0.3	Na	na
work experience	-0.07	0.05	-0.22	0.05	0.35	0.04	0.49	2.06
sex of respondents	0.07	0.07	0.67	0.07	0.09	0.06	0.99	1.01
marital status	-0.14	0.08	-0.18	0.07	-0.18	0.06	0.71	1.41
age of respondents	-0.25	0.05	-0.19	0.05	-0.13	0.05	0.46	2.18
ethical orientation			0.32**	0.06	0.20**	0.07	0.69	1.45
ethical sensitivity					0.35**	0.08	0.48	2.07
R	0.27		0.42		0.49		Na	na
R square	0.07		0.18		0.24		Na	na
Adjusted R square	0.05		0.16		0.22		Na	na
F-statistics	4.03		9.09		11.28		Na	na
sig	0.04		0		0		Na	na
R-square change	0.7		0.11		0.07		Na	na
F-change statistics	4.03		27.31		18.49		Na	na
Sig F change	0.04		0		0		Na	na

Note: n=218, \*\*regression is significant at 0.01 level,\*regression is significant at the 0.05 level, standardized coefficients are reported.

Hierarchical analysis explains the extent to which the independent variables predict career growth. In model 1 control variable of age of the respondent, sex of the respondent, work experience of the respondents and marital status tested and work experience were introduced.

In model 2 individual ethical orientation was introduced which predicted 42% of the variation in the professional behavior of academic staff. When the third model was run entering ethical sensitivity, both individual ethical orientation and ethical sensitivity were significant predictors of professional behavior of academic staff with a prediction potential of 49%.The R square change was 7% and the F-change statics was significant (F-Statistic =4.03).When individual ethical sensitivity was introduced, the Beta coefficient for organizational individual ethical orientation dropped from 0.32 to 0.20. The Beta coefficient for the ethical sensitivity construct was  $\beta=0.35$ .This was in line with hypothesis two (H2).

Individual ethical orientation is seen to be a significant predictor of the professional behavior of academic staff. The professional behavior of academic staff depends on their individual ethical orientation. Further still academic staff with an idealistic ethical orientation are more prone to engaging in academic misconduct unlike the ones for realistic ethical orientation (Murdock & Anderman, 2006). Ethical sensitivity involves creating a awareness of the ethical issues of the organization. Institutions of higher learning ensure ethical awareness within their institutions. This helps improve the ethical decision making process of academic staff. They are able to identify ethical issues from unethical issues. Lack of awareness results into academic dishonesty of academic staff. This leads inevitably to limits on the institution's capacity to attract, retain, and nurture those with the essential qualifications, academic ability, and commitment necessary for higher education to perform its unique role in the university as some staff may be dismissed as result of lack of ethical sensitivity (Evans and Meyer, 2005).

There were no issues of multicollinearity because the tolerance factors were above 0.10 and the VIF factors were less than 5.0. A tolerance of less than 0.20 or 0.10 and/or a VIF of 5 or 10 and above indicates a multicollinearity problem (O'Brien 2007).

### ***Implications of the study***

#### **Practical implications**

The university administrators in institutions of higher learning should understand the individual ethical orientations of their academic staff because it is from these that academic staff may choose to behave ethically or unethically i.e. idealistic or relativistic interests. Further still these institutions should ensure that they create ethical awareness of what is required from academic staff i.e. what they think is good in the academic profession and what is bad in the profession incase an academic staff behaved in that way. This sensitization could be done through carrying out meetings, workshops etc and also communicating the consequences of bad behaviors. This could help the academic staff both old and new to easily identify what is ethical or not ethical.

For issues of academic misconduct there is need to provide punishments to those academic staff who engage in such conduct and also carry out right dismissals for the staff. Such behavior has continued to exist in institutions of higher learning because those who in unethical behavior are not punished neither are they dismissed. This creates room for the act to continue because there are no actions taken incase such behavior occurred. This means that the individuals will continue with the career with in these institutions.

#### **Theoretical implications.**

Our study looked at individual ethical orientation, ethical sensitivity and the professional behavior of academic staff in institutions of universities in Uganda. All these were stated to be important factors for the professional behavior of academic staff. Few studies have been carried out in relation to this and our study makes a number of contributions to the theory and study of professional ethical behavior in relation to the study variables. The study contributes to an understanding of individual ethical orientation, ethical sensitivity and the professional behavior of academic staff in a developing country. Given that most studies on individual ethical orientation, ethical sensitivity and the professional behavior of academic staff is more in developed countries and few in the developing countries, further research in the area be carried out in these universities.

#### **Limitations of the study and areas of further research**

##### **Limitations of the study.**

- Items used were not developed for career growth environment but were developed for an ethical setting environment.
- There is need for a qualitative study to be carried out.
- The measures used have been used by researchers in the international world and not the local environment in Uganda.
- The instrument that was used is closed ended and some of the data may not be captured.
- The researcher did not survey all universities due to time constraints and results can not applied to all.

### Areas of further research

- Similar research be carried out in other Universities in developing countries
- Longitudinal survey be carried out in the same area.

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### BIBIOGRAPHY

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