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# HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF TRAINING IN THE SPANISH BANKING INDUSTRY <sup>1</sup>

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*Pablo Ruiz Palomino & Ricardo Martínez*

**Abstract:** Nowadays there is a growing interest in business ethics, both in academia and professionally. However, moral lapses continue to happen in business activities, leading academicians and professionals to rethink what is being done and reinventing new strategies to successfully manage ethics in business organisations. Thus, whereas efforts to promote ethics are basically oriented to using and developing explicit, written formal mechanisms, the literature suggests that other instruments are also useful and necessary to achieve this. Thus, studying the role of the Human Resource Management (hereafter, HRM) in promoting ethics is an emerging research topic due to the heavy influence that HRM practices are thought to have on employees. This paper is aimed at developing a thorough analysis of HRM's role in promoting ethics, and specifically at focusing on one of its practices, training. As an illustrative example of the utility of this practice, an empirical study was conducted on a range

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of Spanish banking companies in which an impact was found on the employees' ethical behaviour when ethics training was being provided inside the organisation. Finally, the practical implications of these findings and directions for future research are presented.

**Keywords:** *Human Resource Management (HRM), ethical behaviour, implementation of ethics, training*

## INTRODUCTION

Recently, a keen interest has emerged in both academic and professional spheres to analyse the important role that ethics plays in the organisational context (Feldman, 1996). As suggested by recent findings (Valentine *et al.*, 2006; Baker *et al.*, 2006; Institute of Business Ethics, 2003), this role is being recognised as positive and beneficial for both the organisational operation and global performance. Indeed, it has been argued that an increased emphasis on ethics and virtue in organisational decisions/behaviours contributes to a more humanised organisational culture (Melé, 2003), a lower probability of failure due to moral lapses (Melé, 2009), greater ease in obtaining happiness for the members of the organisation (Torralba & Palazzi, 2010) and ultimately, increased value generation, not only by positive attitudes and behaviour by internal agents such as employees (Baker *et al.*, 2006; Valentine *et al.*, 2006; Ruiz *et al.*, 2010) but also by higher satisfaction indexes of important external stakeholders such as clients (Torralba & Palazzi, 2010). In sum, ethics can be considered an asset for business (García-Marza *et al.*, 2010), and insofar as the living of virtue ethics is made patent in organisations, excellent businesses can be thought to be successfully run (Torralba & Palazzi, 2010). As such, ethics implementation has become common in business world (Guillen *et al.*, 2002), most likely because managers have somehow realised the significant advantages that can be obtained by behaving ethically (Treviño & Nelson, 2004).

However, despite the high observable rate of organisational mechanisms implemented in business organisations, moral abuses continue to happen (e.g., Banesto, Arthur Andersen, Enron, Worldcom, Health South Corp, Countrywide, etc.). Some of them have had relatively broad consequences,

such as the dealings in the US mortgage derivatives market that have resulted in the collapse of entire companies including Lehman Brothers (Nocera, 2009), and directly or indirectly put pressure on the financial system worldwide, including Spain. Therefore, as cases of unethical behaviour in business (e.g., embezzling company resources, falsifying reports, deceptive advertising, false information, deliberately deceptive accounting, etc.) continue to be uncovered and reported by the media, it seems necessary to move forward in this sphere, specifically in studying and understanding the antecedents of ethical behaviour in organisations. In this sense, to date, little has been done to analyse the role that HRM plays, especially in relation to the influential power of HRM practices on promoting ethics and virtues among employees.

Traditionally, most of the formal ethics programmes have exclusively focused on using codes of ethics, bulletins, memos and similar explicit/formal practices. However, the use of such mechanisms is commonly associated with window-dressing purposes, surely due to the pressures/demands of societal institutions such as government agencies, the media and even trendsetting members of the business community (Weaver *et al.*, 1999). Moral failure in companies is then a probable logical result (Sims & Brinkman, 2003) as these mechanisms might be easily decoupled from daily organisational activities (Weaver *et al.*, 1999). As such, ethics programmes should not be focused exclusively on these mechanisms but should consider other organisational mechanisms through which employees truly perceive that ethics is taken seriously by top management. Human Resources (HR) practices can be those mechanisms since as gleaned from Buckley *et al.* (2001) and Weaver & Treviño (2001), both their content and the way they are developed are thought to be important instruments communicating the company's desired standards and values. As a consequence, in an attempt to shed light on how HRM can be very helpful in promoting ethics, this paper tries to understand the role played by HRM and specifically by one of its corresponding practices, training, in an effort to get a better understanding of basic mechanisms for yielding ethical and virtuous companies. To be precise, training will be studied in terms of its efficacy in affecting employees' ethics in the banking industry, one type of industry which, as recently learnt with the advent of the current financial global crisis (Krugman, 2008), is not exactly exempt from needing to improve its virtue ethics.

Following the introduction, we will present a review of the literature to formulate the hypothesis about the relationship between ethics training

and employees' ethical behaviour. Next, we will describe the method used to test the hypothesis. The results will be described in a following section, and finally, conclusions, managerial implications and future avenues of research will be presented.

## IMPLEMENTATION OF ETHICS

According to Schein (1992), the organisational culture is a key influential mechanism in transmitting values to employees and in influencing their daily organisational behaviour. Therefore, in order to promote ethics, the *organisational culture* factor becomes essential, as does the transmission of ethical values, which is usually accomplished through the use of certain mechanisms such as codes of conduct, memos, bulletins, trainings programmes, myths, histories and hotlines, among others. All of those mechanisms, when implemented in an orderly fashion, are said to constitute an ethics programme whose major function is to promote the awareness of ethical concerns among employees in order to enhance ethics at the workplace (E.R.C., 2001).

The development of ethics programmes has been considerably expanded in business (Treviño & Weaver, 2001; Weaver & Treviño, 1999; Guillén *et al.*, 2002). However, depending on the diverse way those ethics programmes are implemented (Treviño & Weaver, 2001), and specifically on the organisational mechanisms implemented, we can detect greater or lesser effectiveness in promoting ethics. Indeed, some of those programmes are designed only to improve the company's external image—mainly due to external pressures exerted by certain socioeconomic institutions (e.g., the government, media, society, stakeholders, etc.), and usually work rather as window-dressing (Treviño *et al.*, 1999), resulting in insignificant effects on employees' ethics. Therefore, in order to yield the best outcome, any ethics programmes implemented should be strongly linked to everyday organisational activities and have the top management's support and commitment (Weaver *et al.*, 1999), leading managers to not discard the use of certain necessary mechanisms in order to be successful. In this way, even though explicit organisational mechanisms (e.g., codes of ethics, memos, informative bulletins, policy manuals, etc.) are highly important in promoting organisational ethics (Ford & Richardson, 1994; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005), they do not seem to be as effective by themselves at guaranteeing the success of an ethics programme. It is true

that a code of ethics is necessary since it establishes the structure for ethical behaviour (Maclagan, 1990). However, employees may perceive that the implementation of those instruments is aimed more at improving the company's external image than enhancing the organisation's ethical quality. Employees need corporate messages on ethics to become in reality in day-to-day organisational practices (Weaver *et al.*, 1999), and although those explicit mechanisms are important in improving organisational ethics, employees may only perceive that ethics is truly important for top management if they note that the message is communicated through mechanisms with important personal consequences. In this respect, we can say that though there has been a proliferation of business ethics research recently (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005), little has been done about the relationship between HRM practices and employees' ethics, when HRM practices are theoretically supposed to impact employees' working life directly and personally.

## HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT, TRAINING AND ETHICS

The issue at stake in recent decades is a new organisational role which is focused on providing strategies to effectively integrate a programme aimed at fostering organisational ethics (ERC, 2000; 2001). This definition fits a new agent inside the organisation: the *Ethics Officer*, who tries to provide leadership and strategies to assure that ethical norms of organisational and individual behaviour are communicated and sustained throughout the whole organisation (Treviño & Nelson, 2004). Nevertheless, right now this agent may still have a human resources profile (Van Vuuren & Eiselen, 2006), especially in European business (Enderle, 1996)<sup>2</sup>, which is not rare. Ethics is about people's behaviour, and this is a key concern of HR departments, so HRM has an active role to play in raising corporate ethical awareness and facilitating ethical behaviour (Van Vuuren & Eiselen, 2006), especially if there are not enough financial resources in the company to fund a separate ethics position. In that respect, Winstanley *et al.* (1996) noticed that one role identified for HR is that of ethical stewardship, taking charge of raising awareness about ethical issues and

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<sup>2</sup> Following findings obtained by Guillén *et al.* (2002) regarding companies operating in Spain (headquarters in United States -21%, headquarters in Europe-22% or headquarters in Spain-57%), only 12.3% had ethics offices.

promoting organisational ethics. Thus, HRM plays a highly important role in handling these topics (Buckley *et al.*, 2001; Weaver & Treviño, 2001; Winstanley *et al.*, 1996; Van Vuuren & Eiselen, 2006), as HR policies and practices are highly important in transmitting the ethical values encouraged in the organisation (Foote & Robinson, 1999). Such an important role can be somehow noted in the frequently use of those mechanisms (e.g., performance appraisal, promotion policy, etc.) by practitioners in European business (Guillen *et al.*, 2002). This was also noticed by Greengard (1997), who stated that underlying organisational values and official statements should necessarily be perceptible during the recruitment process, employment interviews, orientation sessions and performance reviews in order to generate an organisational culture that truly emphasises ethics.

In sum, as the custodians of organisational values (Van Vuuren & Eiselen, 2006), HR departments seem to play a crucial role in promoting ethics, as every HRM practice/policy serve as a vehicle to transmit what is considered really important in the organisation. Therefore, if those practices are handled inadequately (not considering ethics content in their development) this may cause either cynicism or distrust toward the policy that the organisation seeks to carry out regarding the promotion of organisational ethics. As such, the importance attached to corporate ethics should not be obviated when designing the objectives and orientations of those practices if the goal is truly to promote ethics among employees. Even though the role and function of HRM encompasses a large number of practices (e.g., recruitment, selection, performance appraisals, compensation, punishment and reward systems, downsizing, etc.), in this study the attention was only paid on one of them, specifically the most widely studied by academicians: training (Ford & Richardson, 1994; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005) because although this practice is theoretically supposed to affect employees' ethics, in Spain its efficiency is somehow questioned (Stevens, 1999) and especially scarcely explored.

### Training initiatives and ethics

To transmit and promote ethical behaviour in organisations, the most commonly used instrument is a code of ethics, whose usefulness has received widespread support (Schwartz, 2001; Stevens, 2009). However, a code of ethics is just the beginning of any real effort to promote organisational

ethics (Treviño & Nelson, 2004). In particular, a firm must also establish a training programme to transmit the code's content, since even though a code is aimed at establishing the actions which are appropriate or inappropriate within the organisation, if the reasons for such appropriateness are unclear the desired results of the code will be unattainable. The perfect tool to transmit a code of ethics is the training programme (Weber, 1993; Schwartz, 2001), and for this reason training is usually considered the next step after the code of ethics is implemented (Dean, 1992).

Indeed, any individual might think that certain acts such as *the excessive use of the company telephone for private matters* or *drinking alcohol at work* are not detrimental to the interests of the organisation for which he/she works (Gross-Shaefer *et al.*, 2000; Schwartz, 2001). In previous studies, the findings reveal that a high number of individuals not only regularly steal material from the company but also admit that they are not committing any wrongdoing (Clark & Hollinger, 1983), mainly by using rationalisations like "the company is large enough to afford small losses" or "everyone does it and no one really cares" (Gross-Shaefer *et al.*, 2000: 95). Obviously, when individuals do not realise that such acts are neither justifiable nor admissible, their value system is thought to be dehumanised. In view of the seriousness of this situation, training programmes are thought to be good instruments for reinforcing and clarifying those employees' value systems (Wood *et al.*, 2004) and even to reawaken in those individuals, natural and human values which have been distorted as time goes by<sup>3</sup> and as the individuals have adopted bad habits. Certainly, there is some criticism questioning the efficacy of training in improving employee morality (Stevens, 1999), as employees are thought to be mature enough to change some of their root personal characteristics after joining business organisations. However, according to Kohlberg (1969) and Piaget (1983), anyone is capable of advancing in moral reasoning and behaviour throughout their long lifetime. Furthermore, if training is widely used in the business context to resolve employees' possible technical shortcomings in terms of knowledge, abilities, attitudes and even behaviours (Dolan *et al.*, 2003), there is no reason to doubt its

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<sup>3</sup> As described by Argandoña (1994), in order to be an ethical and virtuous person, perseverance in action is required. Absence of this mechanism is the reason for why the human being can forget certain natural and human values, which is probably due to the numerous external and negative influences to which the human being is subjected daily in today's environment.

efficacy in improving the morality of the employees' behaviour. Therefore, the implementation of ethics training programmes is thought to be an appropriate instrument to promote ethical behaviour among employees, which is also empirically supported in literature. Weber (1990), for example, finds that training, even if only short-term, has a positive impact on individuals' ethics. Purcell (1977), also demonstrates that training results can be seen even a decade after the training took place. Finally, Penn and Collier (1985), Kavathatzopoulos (1994) and Delaney & Sockell (1992) also show examples of empirical studies finding a significant association between ethical behaviour and training.

In sum, previous theoretical studies and empirical findings seem to support the positive influence of training on the employees' ethics. To be precise, simply including ethics in the organisational training content would be enough to have an effect on the employees' ethics (Delaney & Sockell, 1992), as employees surely would perceive that ethics is strongly valued by top management (Treviño, 1990). The underlying reason for that may be found in the fact that such an instrument provides the employees with the necessary behavioural and attitudinal patterns which are closely linked to important personal work outcomes (e.g., increase or decrease in wages, promotions or lay-offs, etc.). A training programme should therefore have a positive influence on the employee's ethical behaviour, thus leading us to propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis: "Training programmes that include ethics in their content have a positive influence on employees' ethical behaviour".

## METHOD

### Sample and Procedure

Surveys were distributed to 4164 employees at large branches/offices of banking companies located in five Spanish provinces. Most of the questionnaires were either given directly to employees after gaining the consent of the branch manager or mailed to them after gaining the approval of the regional director. As with Valentine *et al.* (2006), we intended the sample of companies to be a broad one. A total of 436 usable surveys were returned for a response rate of 10.5%, which is not unreasonable considering the sensitivity of the ethics issue along with the



fact that employees from many locations and companies were surveyed (*cf.*, Valentine *et al.*, 2006). To minimise valuation apprehension and decrease social desirability bias, a cover letter was included stating that there were no *right* or *wrong* answers. The letter also guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality at both the individual and corporate levels of analysis. The sample consisted of 46% males and 28% females and although many of the respondents were in senior posts within the companies (60% have been working for the same company for more than ten years), they were relatively young since 49% of them were under age 40. Furthermore, respondents were characterised by a high educational level, as more than 65% of them had a university degree.

To examine the possibility of non-response bias, we compared the first quartile of submissions to the last quartile under the assumption that late respondents were more similar to non-respondents than early ones (Armstrong & Overton, 1977). However, two-sample t-tests and chi-square tests did not reveal any significant differences in the study variables.

## Measurements

**Ethics training.** This variable was measured using only one item designed exclusively for this study which addresses to what extent ethics is addressed in the training initiatives provided to employees. The reverse scored item used in a five-point response format (1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) is “Training content in this organisation does not include moral issues”.

**Ethical behavioural intention.** As in other studies of business ethics (Fritzsche & Oz, 2007) ethical behavioural intention (hereafter, EBI) was used as a proxy for actual behaviour (*cf.*, Azjen & Fishbein, 1980). Five vignettes adapted from prior studies (Peterson, 2004) were selected, each describing a hypothetical employee who had committed a questionable moral act (misuse, lie, theft, deceit and dishonest defamation). In a five-point response format (1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), respondents indicated their level of agreement with the actions taken in each vignette: “I would be likely to act similarly in that situation”. The responses were reverse-scored and averaged such that higher values represented a stronger intention to behave ethically.

Though the problem is often overstated (Spector, 2006), common

method variance was a potential concern in this study because the same respondent provided the data for both the independent and dependent variables. As such, some of Podsakoff *et al.*'s (2003) procedural remedies were used to avoid such problem (e.g., psychological separation between predictor and criterion variables, use of certain aspects to reduce social desirability bias, etc.).

## Data Analysis

SPSS (v.19.0) statistical software was used to generate descriptive statistics and correlation analyses of the data. Although the results obtained through a bivariate correlation analysis are useful to test the hypothesis formulated in this study, an independent-samples t-test was also executed with the purpose of reinforcing the findings. Prior to executing the corresponding analyses, the reliability of the dependent measure used in this study was assessed. As seen in Table I, reliability does not seem to be a problem for the dependent variable. In fact, although Cronbach's alpha coefficient was slightly less than the minimum level of 0.7 recommended by Nunnally (1978), according to the specific analysis performed using the items (i.e., a single factor for five items and acceptable item correlation level with respect to the scale's corrected total), the scale used for this variable is adequate for basic research.

## RESULTS

### Hypothesis Testing

By conducting a descriptive analysis of the data, slightly high levels of ethicality in banking individuals surveyed was observed (Mean = 3.79; S.D. = 0.66). However, according to the respondents' perceptions, the average level of ethicality in Spanish banks whose training programmes include ethical theory in their content is not so high (Mean = 2.63; S.D. = 1.19).

A correlation analysis was performed to test the strength and direction of the linear relationship between the two target variables in this study: ethics training and EBI. Table I shows the results of this correlation

analysis, which indicates some preliminary support for our hypothesis as the hypothesised association ( $r = 0.18$ ) is significant at least at  $p < .01$  and with the predicted sign.

Table 1. Mean, typical deviations and correlation matrix  
 Cronbach alpha in bold. N= 424

	Mean	S.D.	1	2
1. Ethical behavioural intention (EBI)	3.79	0.66	0.67	
2. Ethics training	2.63	1.19	0.18**	n.a.

Notes: The diagonal shows the Cronbach alpha level. Off-diagonal elements are the correlations among the constructs. n.a.: non applicable due to the fact that the variable considered is manifest.  
 \*\* Significant at the .01 level (one-tailed)

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Our hypothesis as the hypothesised association ( $r = 0.18$ ) is significant at least at  $p < .01$  and with the predicted sign.

In order to reinforce those preliminary results, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to see if the means of two different populations (those perceiving that ethics was/was not included in the training content provided in the company) are statistically different from each other in terms of the employee's EBI. Table II shows the results associated with the testing of the hypothesis. The hypothesis is supported in that the test is significant and also in the predicted direction,  $t(422) = 2.447$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Thus, employees who perceive that moral matters are included in the training content provided in the company ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ,  $n = 223$ ) on average behaved more ethically than those who perceive that ethics is not included in the training programme in their company ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ,  $n = 201$ ).

In addition, we can say with 95% confidence that there is always a mean difference between the two conditions ranging between 0.031 and 0.283. In sum, there are significant differences (in the predicted direction) in the mean level of EBI of employees surveyed according to the extent to which ethics is part of the training content provided in the company. To be precise, ethics training is directly and positively related to EBI at a significant level of  $p < 0.01$ , supporting the hypothesis formulated in the present study.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations, t-value, level of significance and confidence interval

	Ethics in training content				t (one-tailed)	p-value	CI <sub>95</sub>
	Included (n = 223)		Not included (n = 201)				
	M	SD	M	SD			
Ethical intention	3.87	0.63	3.71	0.69	2.447	0.007**	0.031-0.283

\*\* Significant at the .01 level (one-tailed)

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### Summary

Growing concern about business ethics on the part of business managers is insufficient to influence ethics if it is not connected to proper training. Although certainly the ethics programme's success is thought to depend not only on the implementation of explicit and formal written mechanisms (e.g., codes of ethics, memos, bulletins, etc.) but also on inherent coherence with other more implicit organisational processes (Weaver *et al.*, 1999), the empirical exploration of the influential role of the latter is not so high as in the former. As a result, our objective in this study was to explore new organisational areas where ethical behaviour can be promoted. Thus, we both theoretically and empirically explored the role of HRM in impacting employees' ethical behaviour. In this sense, and using a sample from the banking sector in Spain, we examined the relationship between ethics training and EBI. Drawing from the literature, and as hypothesised, ethics training was found to positively relate to employees' EBI, which generates implications for business management and specifically for the HR department in banking companies.

### Implications for Business Practice

The findings of this study have significant implications for business management in terms of enhancing ethics in business. While much has been discussed regarding which organisational mechanisms play an important role in affecting employees' ethics, there is still an empirical and even

theoretical gap on the influence exerted by all those HRM-orientated organisational mechanisms. Therefore, because training was found to be influential on employees' ethical behaviour, more emphasis should be placed on HRM, and specifically on the role of HRM departments.

Indeed, according to the findings of this study, an optimal strategy to promote ethical behaviour should not ignore the importance of HRM practices such as training. If on the one hand it is true that when employees join organisations they bring different personal traits that affect their ethics, it is likewise true that top management has at its disposal numerous mechanisms to influence the employees' behaviour. However, in order to have a heavy impact on the workforce's personal traits by modifying and modelling these traits towards the correct ethical direction, employees need to perceive a vivid message with strong personal implications. HRM practices seem to be included in those mechanisms, so top management's efforts should be focused on including an ethics component in HRM practices. To be precise, analysing results of this study, top management's efforts should be focused on developing training programmes oriented towards strengthening employees' personal traits of virtuously ethical behaviour, thus getting reinforcing the ethics message to be deployed organisationally. On the one hand, as the target of the training initiatives, employees' ethics is directly developed in terms. On the other hand, they are also ethically influenced through the close contact in which they engage in with other members of the organisation (e.g., peers, superiors, subordinates) who have also been the target of the ethics training programme. The case of superiors or leaders as the targets of training initiatives is interesting because this may indirectly lead to a more ethical workforce insofar as leaders are commonly suggested to play an important role in promoting ethics in organisations (Mayer *et al.*, 2009; Peterson, 2004; Ruiz *et al.*, 2010).

Leaders and managers are useful for modelling behaviour and communicating ethical standards (Vickers, 2005), so training initiatives directed to these organisational individuals seem not only to improve the level of ethics in the workforce (Vickers, 2005) but also enhance their real leadership role by enhancing their credibility and confidence among their immediate colleagues (Moreno, 2010).

Therefore, ethics training is concluded to be a critical mechanism to be developed in business organisations, specifically in banking companies. Because the descriptive results of this study (see Table 1) reveal that Spanish banking companies do not seem to include ethics content when providing training, greater efforts should be made by banking HR managers

to deploy ethics training programmes, thus resulting in a more ethical banking industry in Spain. However, creativity is essential to success, and although, as demonstrated in this study, the mere presence of ethics in the training content is enough to have an impact, new and innovative training strategies are also welcomed. Training should not include only ethics theory but also real-life and specific examples (Vickers, 2005; Kavathatzopoulos, 1994) through which employees may feel a keener interest and learn more (Gross-Shaefer *et al.*, 2000). The use of mentors or stories about how other members of the organisation handled ethical dilemmas in the past could also be a useful strategy (Vickers, 2005). Likewise, those strategies that aim to combine training with the use of other controllable influential factors in the organisation could be very helpful (e.g., coaching by ethically exemplary peers or supervisors).

Finally, although the findings in this study only are focused on the HRM practice of training, a successful implementation of ethics should also take every HRM practice into account as other possible fruitful vehicles to convey ethics.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

Like any other single study, our findings are limited to a particular context, in this case, banking in Spain. Therefore, although it is highly probable that the results may be replicated in other socio-cultural contexts, the external validity and scope of our results beyond the population of this study is limited. In addition, although a high number of aspects was considered in order to reduce the problem of social desirability bias to the extent possible (cover letter informing and guaranteeing anonymity, informing about the importance of frankness, use of reverse-score items, etc.) (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003), this study might have been affected by the respondents' tendency to give a (socially and culturally) favourable image of themselves. As such, and in order to control for this problem, in future research we recommend the use of a short social desirability bias scale, such as the reliable Strahan & Gerbasi's (1972) ten-item version of the Marlowe-Crowne scale.

Furthermore, in this study, attention was only paid to influential mechanisms which are external/situational to the employee, but as business ethics literature increasingly seems to suggest (Treviño, 1986; Greenberg, 2002), optimal strategies to promote ethical behaviour should bear in mind that individual (personality and/or cognitive) variables may play

an interactive role by lessening or strengthening the influential power of situational variables. Therefore, future lines of research should incorporate individual variables as moderators in order to test the influence of ethics training on the employees' ethics.

Another limitation is that the dependent variable of this study is intentional in nature, and although there are empirical and theoretical arguments on the suitability of using this as an immediate precursor to the individual's real action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), other arguments claim that ultimately the individual's real response may vary due to other constrictions (Hunt & Vitell, 1993). An interesting constriction to be studied would be the individual's level of virtuousness, because although the individual wants to behave ethically in a certain situation, if he/she does not have/use the necessary courage/caution, he/she may ultimately decide to commit the morally incorrect act. That is, as suggested by Melé (2005), in order to be effective in educating employees on ethics, it seems necessary to have a focus not only on transmitting and discussing rules and values but also on urging and motivating employees to acquire moral virtues (permanent attitudes and/or interior moral strength) in order to deliberate ethically. Therefore, since in the current study, training was only studied in terms of whether the company training content makes reference to ethics or not, a future line of research would be to investigate the effectiveness of training programmes which include not only theoretical content on ethics but also certain patterns leading to the acquisition of moral virtues (fairness, integrity, truthfulness, service to the common good, justice, gratitude, etc.) and/or character development. The consideration of this last aspect when designing training programmes is increasingly considered necessary to really have an impact on the employees' ethics (Melé, 2005), and it may also help the workforce to achieve the Aristotelian concept of happiness (Torralba & Palazzi, 2010). Therefore, testing the association between *virtue ethics* training and positive employee job attitudes would be another interesting future line of research.

Finally, we only tested one HRM practice, the training programme, in terms of its probable association with employees' ethical behaviour. However, there are many other HRM variables that could be explored in future research. Although the objective pursued by exploring training in this study was not only to link HRM to the promotion of organisational ethics but also to reinforce business ethics literature about the influential role of training on employees' ethics, it is important to note that training is the most often-studied HRM practice in the business ethics literature. To

the contrary, performance appraisal, recruitment, selection, compensation, punishment and reward and downsizing systems are have scarcely or not been explored previously in terms of their influential role in promoting ethics among employees. Therefore, there are plenty of future research opportunities to generate knowledge which strongly links HRM practices to the successful implementation of ethics in organisations, and consequently, the optimal promotion of ethics in business organisations. In this sense, future research on the influential role of the wide range of HRM practices on employees' ethics should be focused not only on the content transmitted through those practices but also on the (just/unjust; fair/unfair) way in which those practices are implemented in the organisation since, as some literature seems to suggest (e.g., Weaver & Treviño, 2001, Treviño & Nelson, 2004), if fairness is absent in the process of developing those HRM practices, ethics is probably not perceived by employees to truly be promoted in these practices or others.

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