Examining the need of ethics course in China hospitality industry

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Abstract

With the rapid development of the tourism in China, it is important that its ethical standards meet international expectations. However, the teaching of professional ethics is largely overlooked in many hospitality programs in China. Thus, this study attempts to understand the perception of hospitality practitioners towards the need of ethics teaching. Face to face interviews were conducted with twenty hospitality executives to solicit their opinion. It is concluded that because of the one child policy, many spoiled young people nowadays exhibit poor working attitude and inconsiderate behaviors implying the need for a hospitality ethics course is strong and urgent.

1. Introduction

Today, the most concern of organizations is the ethical element of human behavior that relates to the ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ of what people do as well as how their deeds affect other people. As defined by Garret (1996), when a behavior involves whether it is right or wrong, then it is considered to be an ethical issue. Ethics is the science of judging particularly human ends and the relationship of means to those ends. Ethical and unethical acts have influences on individuals, firms, the business community and society as a whole. However, in societies where different religions and cultures exist, just to achieve in getting people to agree on the proper ethical response to a specific situation is hard. This is especially true in countries with a clear distinction between secular governments and religious bodies, it is said that teaching moral and ethical values in schools will involve the state in supporting a particular form of religion. As a result, in many places, school administrators and teachers intentionally avoid the discussions of ethical issues in class (Starret, 1994).

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Moreover, Starrett also claims that there is argument that ethical teaching does not belong in schools at all, but rather belong in homes and churches. These people believe that there is a great difference between objective, scientific knowledge, and subjective ethical preferences and religious beliefs. In their minds, ethical principles are based on values, not on facts; ethics reflect cultural traditions, religious socialization, and personal preferences, not rigorous scientific proof. Unfortunately, when these arguments on how to handle the teaching of ethics are still debating heatedly among people in the societies, statistics in the United States about increases in murder, rape, child abuse, domestic violence, drug addiction have shown signs of serious moral deterioration during the last decades.

Further evidence of decline in moral standards was provided by Vallen and Casado (2000) who reported in their study that 12 to 24 percent of students’ resumes contain false information and an increasing willingness on the part of students to lie in their application for financial aids. They found that in April 1999, twenty four students in a business ethics course at San Diego State University were dismissed from the class and put on academic probation for the reason of cheating in class.

The ethical situation in China is alarming and worrying as many incidents have flagged for international concerns such as the issues of bribery and corruption. Chinese President Xi Jinping has pledged a no-holds barred anti-corruption crusade, warning ruling Communist Party and government officials that all dirty hands will be caught. In 2013, anti-graft authorities received more than 1.95 million allegations of corruption and as a result, the Communist Party punished more than 182,000 officials in its high-profile anti-corruption campaign. So far, at least 19 officials at vice-ministerial levels or above have fallen since last November including Jiang Jiemin, head of China’s state-owned assets watchdog, and Li Dongsheng, formerly a vice minister of public security.

The hospitality industry, as one of the largest earners of foreign exchange in China, is thus in an even more critical state to restore the reputation and integrity of the industry. It is therefore, apart from the hospitality educators, the responsibility of hospitality practitioners to ensure that when hiring graduates of hospitality programs, they are already equipped with the knowledge and understanding to act “ethically” and the ability and skills to make sound ethical judgments. However, the higher education institutes usually have overlooked the importance of moral education, which helps students to become more alert of their behaviors and how they may have affected the lives of others. A study conducted in the United States by Enghagen (1991) revealed that although 73% of the hospitality programs somehow include ethics in their curriculum, only 42% includes it as a required component of their curriculum while 31% include it as an elective only. Twenty-seven percent (27%) do not include ethics in their undergraduate programs at all. In regard to where ethics is taught in the curriculum, it is usually found to be integrated into a functional course (36%), or integrated into a business law course (34%) and only 3% offer it as a separate module.

The situation in China is worse. In China, despite there are hundreds of hospitality and tourism programs, it is commented that there are very few programs that offers the teaching of ethics as a separate module. In view of the current state that ethics is barely taught nor integrated into the curriculum in the hospitality programs in China, this study aims primarily to understand the perception of hospitality practitioners towards the integration of “ethics” into the program curriculum. More specifically, it is hoped that the study can reveal the underlying difficulties and barriers that constitute to its exclusion. Although it is reported by Enghagen (1991) that the most common reasons cited by hospitality/tourism programs and business schools for the exclusion of ethics were that the curriculum is too full, and that there is a lack of interest and qualified professors, this is probably the first attempt to examine the issue in China. Therefore, it would be worthwhile as a pilot study, to examine the need and difficulties in the provision of ethics teaching in hospitality programs in China.

2. Literature Review

Although Bok has argued in 1976 that higher education had largely ignored moral education, which helps students to become more alert to issues of day, reason more carefully and clarify individual moral aspirations, there are evidence that more attention has been drawn in recent years to improve the situation. Clark (1983) reiterated these sentiments, avowing that “it is of the utmost importance that applied ethics to be offered to college students… so that their self-concept as a person in a given occupation can be informed by serious moral reflection” (p.68). As Davis and Welton (1991) said, “Part of the long-term solution to improving professional ethics is to address the areas as it relates to educating future business professional, i.e. college students” (p.451). Nucci and Pascarella
et primary job of teaching basic skills in language and science and therefore should let alone developing critical
ethics in curriculum by offering courses in ethics and require students to take those courses. It is believed that acting
ethically requires certain intellectual skills that develop with both maturity and formal education. If ethical
principles have been internalized during college, they will be readily carried into the workplace. The college years
are almost certainly the best opportunity that educators could instill ethics in students.

Business leaders have also expressed concerns of creating awareness of ethical principles. Examples include the
annual conferences on applied ethics and the two institutions dedicated to the advancement of ethics in the
hospitality industry namely the International Institute for Quality and Service in Ethics and Tourism (IIQUEST) and
the Marion Isbell Endowment for Hospitality Ethics Center. Both are non-profit organizations dedicated to the
promotion of ethics in hospitality and tourism (Vallen and Casado, 2000). Apart from educators and industry
practitioners, a study by Shannon and Berl (1997) with 273 business students of 8 universities in US indicated that
students believe quite strongly that the discussion of ethics and ethical issues is worthwhile and important. Many
feel a course in business ethics should be required and they would take such a course, if offered, even if it was not
required

Despite the increasing importance of ethics education, there are also indications that the integration of ethics into
a curriculum has its difficulties and barriers. One of the major difficulties cited is the inability of the teaching staff
to teach ethics. It is noted by Oddo (1997) that some business faculty feel uneasy about discussing ethical theories
in the business classroom because they are not trained ethicists. Although there are some colleges that support the
need for ethical education, but in their minds, their teachers are not competent to teach ethics. As they claimed, few
teachers in the schools have ever had a course in ethics. If we demand that teachers know mathematics or biology
before teaching those subjects, how can we maintain a consistent demand for professional quality among our teacher
when we ask them to attend to ethical concerns with no professional training in that area?

Enghagen (1991) also reported that for hospitality programs that do not include ethics in the curriculum
expressed that the most common reasons for the exclusion of ethics in the curriculum were that the curriculum is too
full, and there is a lack of interested and qualified professors. Of the 18 hospitality programs which do not include
ethics in the curriculum, 11 stated as their reasons that it was too full, and 4 each cited the lack of interested and
qualified professors. Similarly, of the 8 business schools in this category, 6 cited the curriculum being too full as the
rationale for excluding ethics, while 5 pointed to the lack of qualified professors and 4 indicated that their professors
lacked the interest in teaching in this area.

Starratt (1994) explains that schools simply do not have the times to give and are already falling behind in their
primary job of teaching basic skills in language and science and therefore should let alone developing critical
thinking skills for lifelong learning. They protested that if they are not getting the job done in academics, how could
they afford to divert time and resources away from academics to attend to ethics? In another survey of ethics
conducted by Mintz (1990) with management accounting courses, it is found that only slightly more than half of the
respondents integrated ethics into their courses. For those who did not teach ethics cited curriculum constraints,
lack of subject materials, and lack of ability as the primary reasons for not integrating ethics into their courses.

Lack of teaching materials is also found to be one of the major constraints. Gunz and McCutcheon (1998) stated
that when reviewing the commitment of accounting academics to teaching accounting ethics, it is noted that one of
the fundamental difficulties is that the existing knowledge about incidences of ethical dilemmas in accounting
practices is limited. Most material is either theoretical or anecdotal and only very few are of real-world cases. They
also reported that the diminishing human resources and the continuing pressures to incorporate new technical
material are also significant constraints cited by the schools.
3. Methodology

This is an exploratory and qualitative research study. It is a cross-sectional design that involves data collection at one point in time from a sample. Despite the investigation of ethics teaching can involve various stakeholders including industry practitioners, students and educators, this study intends to limit its scope of study due to the time constraint. Thus, interviews were only carried out with the industry practitioners. It is felt that as a pilot study, its main purpose is to collect initial ideas, patterns or themes that will form the basis for a full-scale research in the future that will include the hospitality educators and the students.

This study adopted a qualitative, inductive and descriptive approach. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted in 2012 with hotel industry practitioners who were identified as key stakeholders of the hotel industry and education. This study took on the non-probabilistic, systematic ‘snowball sampling’ method. In the first stage of interviewing, a vice president of government-owned hotel group in China with the requisite characteristics, such as having prominent industry status, immense knowledge of the industry was identified and interviewed. This person later identified others as respondents to the researcher who worked in the same hotel group. The second stage of interviewing involved interviewing those persons who were referred by the respondents in the first stage of interview. Finally, the study interviewed 20 hospitality executives in Hangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing including positions such as hotel general managers, directors of human resources, directors of rooms, housekeeping managers, food and beverage managers and security managers. Each interview usually lasted between one to two hours and was tape-recorded. Despite the sample not being representative of the larger population, it is perfectly adequate for this study since this study has no desire to generalize its findings beyond the respondents.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted which is defined as having some planning on the part of interviewer but at the same time allows flexibility in the questions to be asked of the interviewees (Fisher et al, 1996). It is the researcher’s intent that the answers emerged from these interviews will help to develop a questionnaire that can be used in future study with the aim to triangulate the validity and reliability of the findings in this study. All the interviews were conducted in the work premises of the interviewers. The processes of all interviews were recorded on tape. The following major questions formed the main body of the interviews:

- What do you see in the relation between ethics and the hospitality industry?
- What do you think about the current state of ethics teaching in hospitality programs?
- What do you see as the barriers of teaching ethics in the hospitality programs?
- What do you think about the teaching of ethics in relation to religion, home, primary, secondary education?
- How do you think the teaching of ethics should be delivered? As compulsory stand-alone subject, major electives, non-stream electives, integrated into each functional subjects or a general education elective?

The conversation of all interviews was afterwards transcribed into English. This study adopted the content analysis to make sense of the mass material and information obtained from the interviews. It would help understand the meaning of the communication; that is, both its manifest and latent meaning within the context of the respondents’ own frame of reference.

4. Findings and discussion

All the respondents unanimously expressed that there is a strong link between ethics and the hospitality industry. They particularly pinpointed that the hospitality industry is a people industry where the staff has ample opportunities of direct guest contact. These contacts often create situations where ethical judgments have to be made such as invitation to dinner gathering and gift giving. In comparison, other industries with no guest contacts, such as manufacturing or clerical, have fewer confrontations of ethical dilemmas. Again, all respondents expressed that ethics teaching in hospitality programs is insufficient. What they understand from their graduate employees is that the existing program curriculum is structured in such a way that the focus is placed on teaching operational and technical know-how required to perform tasks at the future workplace such as revenue management, marketing, food and beverage knowledge and room division management. The hospitality schools rarely take the time out to develop the uprightness and integrity of the students. This finding is similar to the study of Enghagen (1991) who
discovered that ethics almost has no place in the curriculum. Its teaching is not made mandatory or compulsory and is up to the discretion of the subject lecturers to see it fit.

Many respondents have criticized that the insufficient teaching of ethics in high school and university are largely due to the perceived low importance of ethics among both school management, teaching staff and parents. All of them mainly concern about students’ success rate of getting into universities and the potential of good career opportunities. The overall personal and moral development is only secondary. It is only very recently that the issue of ethics has drawn the attention of the general public as there are a few ethical incidents occurred in the political arena.

One respondent indicated that the education system of China has always been focusing on teaching subjects of practical use that help to prepare students to take part in various public examinations such as the National Higher Education Entrance Examination or College English Test (CET). The system basically overlooks the development of the student’s individual character. People of China including schools, students and parents place high values on matters with practical and short-term benefits. Respondents also commented that the situation is China may be comparatively worse than other countries because of its one child policy introduced in 1979. The intention of the policy is to alleviate social, economic, and environmental problems in China. After its introduction, the fertility rate in China fell from 2.63 births per woman in 1980 to 1.61 in 2009. The policy is said to have negative consequences on the development of the child. Being the only child in the family, they are usually spoiled by their parents. Therefore, the young people of generation Y are mostly materialistic, egocentric and will try all means to achieve personal benefits disregarding the welfare of others. As a result, guanxi, gift giving, bribery, short-cuts are common in the society and the hospitality industry.

The study by Oddo (1997) cited the inability of teaching staff to teach ethics is the major difficulty. However, only a few respondents in the study commented it as a major reason while the rest of the respondents did not provide any comment on the ability of the teaching staff to teach ethics. But they did agree that most of the teaching staff has not received any formal education on ethics and therefore they should go through prior training on ethics if they really think of integrating ethics into the curriculum. Most respondents agreed that the teaching of ethics should stem from early childhood. Important influences begin with parents, friends, social circles, teachers and later co-workers and managers. In the hospitality industry, corporate cultures set the tone for employee behavior at work. Managers are role models for employees to follow and therefore, their work values, belief and behaviors are extremely crucial if an ethical work environment is to be maintained. The respondents believed that hospitality leaders must create a culture of trust and credibility which emphasize on honesty, competence and ability to inspire. To cultivate the trust environment, everyone in the organization must act fairly, speak the truth, show consistency, fulfill promises and practice openness. Clear guidelines and policies on work ethics are important and must be properly channeled to all employees. In this regard, hospitality educators and industry practitioners can work closely in the design and implementation of ethics teaching in the curriculum.

There are diverse views from the respondents on the ways how ethics teaching should be delivered. Both stand-alone or integrated into various subjects have their pros and cons. Some argued that a stand-alone hospitality ethics subject can stand out the importance of work ethics and can have a longer-term impact on the students. In particular, not every teacher has the knowledge and ability to teach ethics. They believed that the ability to assign the right teacher to teach work ethics is crucial to its success. However, opponents opined that integrating the teaching of ethics into various subjects can help students to easily relate how ethics are relevant to the subject area that they are taking. To conclude, this study has confirmed that the practitioners in the China hospitality industry see the urgent need to teach ethics in the hospitality programs especially after the introduction of the one-child policy.

References