

STUDY ON MBA STUDENTS POINTS TO TENDENCY TO JUSTIFY, NOT LACK OF MORALITY

The art of 'management' of unethical behaviour

G.S. MUDUR

New Delhi: Aspiring business administrators often justify unethical behaviour through competition, pressure, or social norms even when they recognise it as wrong, a two-year study on Indian MBA students has found, signalling how future managers rationalise ethical compromises.

The study has identified recurring patterns in how MBA students rationalised their peers' actions, ranging from cheating in exams and inflating sales figures to submitting fake bills, exaggerating CVs, or lying to employers, teachers, or parents.

"We found students often viewed unethical behaviour

as acceptable, not because they lacked ethical or moral values, but because they developed ways to justify it," said A. Anisha, an assistant professor at the Shri Ram College of Commerce, New Delhi, who led the study.

The findings challenge the notion that managers act unethically because they lack moral clarity. Instead, the study found that social expectations, institutional culture, and what is considered acceptable shape how individuals come to excuse questionable conduct.

Earlier studies on business ethics, especially outside India, have suggested that unethical behaviour reflects weak moral values. But the Delhi researchers

have found that students continued to express conventional ethical values even while justifying unethical actions.

"We saw a marked misalignment between stated values and actual behaviour," said Mala Sinha, former professor of business ethics at the University of Delhi Faculty of Management Studies, who supervised the study.

The results, Sinha said, suggest management schools might need to rethink how business ethics is taught. Rather than focusing only on abstract ideas of right and wrong, students need to be trained to recognise and resist lines of thinking adopted to justify unethical actions.

The study, published in the *Asian Journal of Business Ethics*, drew on responses from 56 MBA students enrolled at a business school in New Delhi, many of whom came from different parts of the country. Many students had some work experience before they joined the programme.

Examples surfaced in academic and personal settings. Students described allowing friends to copy assignments, overlooking plagiarism, inflating sales figures, favouring peers in placements, and concealing aspects of their lives from parents or teachers to avoid confrontation.

Some students described avoiding disputes with parents out of respect,

choosing instead to hide behaviour such as drinking or relationships rather than directly challenge family expectations.

Some participants drew on familiar cultural narratives to justify their unethical actions. For instance, some cited the character of Karna from the epic *Mahabharata* as a symbol of loyalty, even when that loyalty led to morally questionable decisions.

Some cited values such as friendship and duty to defend unethical practices.

Such explanations, reflecting social and institutional conditions specific to India, are less visible in earlier international studies on business ethics, the researchers say. Students

also defended unethical conduct by citing unfair disadvantage or by arguing that rules carry little meaning in environments perceived as marked by inconsistent enforcement.

The researchers argue that broader institutional, social and economic conditions also matter. "Weak enforcement of rules, exposure to corruption, and competitive pressures can create environments where unethical actions begin to be viewed as normal, even justified," Anisha told *The Telegraph*.

The propensity to justify unethical behaviour does not emerge in isolation, she said.

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The art of justifying unethical behaviour

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Students grow up in environments where corporate scandals, weak enforcement of rules, and everyday compromises often blur the boundary between ethical ideals and actual behaviour.

This month, for instance, the CBI uncovered a nationwide network of individuals helping students cheat in the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test.

A management science expert not associated with the Delhi study said its value lies in its attempts to understand how people rationalise unethical actions, but cautioned against over-associating the findings with MBA students alone.

“Business schools may reveal these tendencies, but they don’t create them,” said Khan, noting that similar forms of ethical rationalisation can emerge across workplaces and educational institutions. The study, she said, “is useful not as proof of widespread misconduct but as an exploration of the gap between what people say they value and how they behave under pressure”.