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McClaren, Nick and Adam, Stewart 2007, Socialisation and the work-related norms of marketing practitioners, in ANZMAC 2007 : 3Rs, reputation responsibility relevance, University of Otago, School of Business, Dept. of Marketing, Dunedin, N.Z., pp. 2414-2420.

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Socialisation and the Work-Related Norms of Marketing Practitioners

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Abstract

This paper empirically describes the influences of professional and organisational socialisation on the norms of marketers. Based on a survey of 5,000 practitioners, it finds that the socialisation of marketers into their profession and organisations positively influences their marketing-related norms. This research appears to be the first investigation in the marketing ethics literature of the relationships among these constructs. The paper explains how the learning of professional and organisational rules, guidelines, and values influence the work-related norms of marketers. The findings have important implications for marketing managers and managers of professional associations.

Introduction

Professional marketing bodies claim ethical benefits arise from membership of their associations. The American Marketing Association, for instance, expects that their members maintain the highest ethical norms as the “established standards of conduct that are expected and maintained by society and / or professional organisations” (AMA 2007). They are committed to promoting the highest standard of professional ethical norms and values for their members. Similarly, the Australian Marketing Institute claims to lead, promote, and develop the profession of marketing in Australia by providing professionalism and integrity (AMI 2007).

Despite the claims made by such associations, there is a paucity of research investigating the professional socialisation of marketers and their ethics. Sparks and Hunt (1998) asserted there were no studies into the process of professional socialisation in the marketing ethics literature. McClaren (2000) and O’Fallon and Butterfield (2005) reported no studies of socialisation in their reviews of the sales and empirical ethics literature. Clearly, there is a need to investigate this area and to provide insight into the ethical benefits provided by professional socialisation. Such insights will provide the focus and direction for marketing managers and managers of professional associations to maintain professional standards and behaviour.

Ethical Decision-Making in Marketing and Research Hypotheses

Deontological norms are the guiding principles or rules which partly guide the ethical judgements of individuals. The importance of norms is well-established conceptually and empirically in the marketing ethics literature. Ferrell and others (Ferrell and Gresham 1985; Ferrell and Weaver 1978; Ferrell et al. 1983) provided a contingency explanation of decision-making which allowed for the influence of norms arising from individual factors and from interactions with significant others. Trevino (1986) suggested that organisational cultures included the normative structures that influence the cognitions which shape individual ethical behaviour. Hunt and Vitell (1986; 1993) proposed that deontological norms influence deontological evaluations, which then partly influence ethical judgements. Research based on Dubinsky and Loken (1989) and Jones (1991) confirm socialisation processes are organisational factors that influence moral behaviour.
There is a substantial body of empirical research indicating that evaluations based on deontological norms influence ethical judgements. Such research includes Vitell and Hunt (1990), Vitell et al. (1993) Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga (1993), DeConinck and Lewis (1997), Menguc (1998), and Rallapalli (1998; 2000), among many others. Collectively, they found that although marketers rely on deontological and teleological evaluations when forming ethical judgements, a large part of such judgements are accounted for by deontological evaluations and a smaller part by teleological ones.

Despite the importance of norms in ethical decision-making, few researchers provide an adequate explanation for the variation in these norms. For example, Hunt and Vitell (1986; 1993) theorised that deontological norms arise from personal experience and from cultural, industry, and organisational environments. How and which personal experiences and environments contribute most to these norms is an unresolved issue. The current research proposes that the process by which marketers are socialised into their organisations and professions influences their deontological norms. It is the learning of such rules and values that influence ethical judgements.

Organisational Socialisation can be defined as “the process by which individuals acquire the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organisational role” (Van Maanen and Schein 1979, p. 211). Socialisation is the process by which individuals become members of a group through interaction with others and by learning the normative beliefs about the roles, rewards and punishments members will receive for certain behaviour (Brim 1966; Sparks and Hunt 1998). How organisational and professional values influence the deontological norms of marketers, and thereby govern their ethical decisions, is not addressed adequately in the marketing ethics literature.

Two ethics studies are particularly relevant to the examination of the professional and organisational socialisation of marketers. Singhapakdi and Vitell (1991) found there was no significant relationship between organisational culture and the deontological norms of employees. They reasoned that organisational culture is too far removed from the deontological norms of the marketers to have much impact. However, they measured organisational culture in a limited way as the existence of codes of ethics. Similar to Singhapakdi and Vitell (1991), the current research proposes that the culture of the organisation influences the deontological norms of marketers. However, it is argued here that the measure of the culture of an organisation is reflected better on dimensions other than codes of ethics. It is reasoned in this research that the extent to which marketers are socialised into their organisations can be taken as a reflection of organisational culture, and will influence their deontological norms. Hypothesis H1 theorises that Organisational Socialisation influences positively the Deontological Norms of marketers.

Similar to organisational socialisation, professional socialisation has been viewed as an outcome of the learning process and has been defined as “the degree to which members learn the norms and values of their profession” (Sparks and Hunt 1998, p. 96). Organisational and Professional Socialisation are distinguished on the basis that the norms of professional behaviour in marketing can be learned through separate, but related, social processes (Hunt and Vitell 1993; Sparks and Hunt 1998; Van Maanen 1976). Sparks and Hunt found relationships between the moral judgements of market researchers, measured in terms of relativistic and idealistic ethical perspectives, and socialisation.

Following Sparks and Hunt (1998), it is theorised in the present research study that Professional Socialisation is a different construct to Organisational Socialisation. It is also argued herein that Professional Socialisation is a better measure of the professional ethical environment, compared to measuring professional values as deontological norms, as done by Singhapakdi and Vitell (1991). It
is reasoned that the process by which marketers are socialised into their profession better reflects the professional environment, and that this measure can be distinguished from the deontological norms of marketers. Therefore, hypothesis $H_2$ theorises that Professional Socialisation influences positively the Deontological Norms of marketers.

Conceptually and empirically, Professional and Organisational Socialisation are separate, but related constructs (Sparks and Hunt 1998). Because the learning of rules and values occurs over time, it is reasoned that the experience of marketers in their profession is likely to influence the learning that occurs in their specific organisations. Therefore, hypothesis $H_3$ theorises that Professional Socialisation influences positively the Organisational Socialisation of marketers.

Methodology: Measures, Sample, Survey, and Data Analysis

The three constructs were defined previously. Deontological Norms were measured using seven items from Singhapakdi and Vitell (1991). Organisational and Professional Socialisation were each measured using two sets of four items from Sparks and Hunt (1998). A judgement sample of 5,000 marketing practitioners was drawn randomly from a commercial list of 26,000 marketers. The self-administered, postal survey produced a response rate of 9 per cent. The statistical procedures in the research followed recommended guidelines. In this research, only the 382 cases with no missing values for these constructs were used in the data analysis.

Firstly, with item trimming, a measurement model containing nine indicator items was produced with three constructs, and with confirmatory factor analysis indicating these measured different dimensions. In this model, Deontological Norms correlated with Professional Socialisation ($r^2 = 0.40$) and with Organisational Socialisation ($r^2 = 0.52$). Professional and Organisational Socialisation correlated at $r^2 = 0.54$. The model-fit statistics are the same as the structural model, as shown in Figure 1.

These items were then included in a structural model, shown as Figure 1. The model-fit statistics indicated a good fit between the data and the model. Here, 29 per cent of the explained variance in Deontological Norms was accounted for by Professional Socialisation and Organisational Socialisation. Professional Socialisation accounted for 29 per cent of the explained variance in Organisational Socialisation. All three hypotheses were supported statistically, as shown in Table 1.
Table 1: Statistics for the Hypothesis Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Confirmed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H$_1$</td>
<td>DEONNORM</td>
<td>ORGSOC</td>
<td>0.43</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H$_2$</td>
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<td>PROFSOC</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H$_3$</td>
<td>ORGSOC</td>
<td>PROFSOC</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Structural Model of Socialisation and Deontological Norms
Discussion and Future Research

With low correlations among the constructs, the measurement model indicated statistically that the predictor indicators of Deontological Norms, Professional Socialisation, and Organisational Socialisation were measuring different constructs. This finding supports Sparks and Hunt (1998) who asserted that Professional Socialisation and Organisational Socialisation were socialisation processes that reflected the learning that occurs in different environments. The current research also contributes to the marketing ethics research by identifying conceptually and empirically that Deontological Norms is a construct different to Professional Socialisation and Organisational Socialisation. The importance of truthful communication, being honest with customers, and being guided by laws appears to be work-related norms that are different from the knowledge gained through socialisation. These work-related norms apparently differ from the knowledge gained through socialisation, such as knowing the actions of a good marketers and knowing appropriate behaviour.

As predicted, our study finds that Professional and Organisational Socialisation positively influence the work-related norms of marketers. Managers of marketing associations can feel confident that professional socialisation contributes to higher ethical decision-making through the influence that higher work-related norms have on ethical judgements. As expected, Professional Socialisation also influences Organisational Socialisation. Managers of professional associations can promote the influence that professionalism has on knowing organisational behaviour and standards as a benefit. However, further research is needed to identify other aspects of professional socialisation that may affect these relationships. Professional membership, the types of association of which marketers are members, their tenure in these bodies, and other factors, may moderate these relationships.

Marketing Managers may also feel confident that socialisation into their organisations positively influences the work-related norms of marketers. The relatively stronger influence of organisational socialisation, compared to professional socialisation on deontological norms, is likely to arise from the more continuous and potentially rewarding behaviour of activity conducted in organisations. Using different measures of professionalism and organisational climate, this finding appears to be inconsistent with the conclusions made by Singhapakdi and Vitell (1991) and Vitell et al. (1993). Organisational socialisation influences deontological norms positively and this influence is likely to be extended to ethical judgements. Because this influence is stronger than the influence from professional socialisation on norms, further research should investigate the compatibility and consistency of these influences. More research is needed to verify these findings and to establish other factors that may influence this relationship.
References


