

***Does University Coursework
Impact Student Involvement with
Social Issues and Business Ethics?***

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Discussion Idea

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Discussion Idea: Does University Coursework Impact Student Involvement with Social Issues and Business Ethics?

The research question addressed in this early-stage empirical exploration is whether or not coursework related to issues such as global climate change and business ethics alter the nature and degree of involvement(s) students feel toward those issues. As a theoretic construct *involvement* has been conceptualized as a “heightened motivational state” toward some object (Day et al. 1995; Mittal 1989a; Mittal 1989b) that is derived from the object’s importance to the individual. While involvement has been extensively examined in the study of persuasion—most particularly within the communication and marketing literature—application has not been made to the domain of business and society research, and only in rare instances to the impact academic instruction and/or institutional policy has on student involvement. The current research aims to extend the research on involvement into both these spheres.

Recent research has identified *sub-factors* of involvement (Chapman et al. 2009), as well as different *types* of involvement. Of specific interest to the current investigation are new measures of *values-relevant involvement* and *outcome-relevant involvement*. Value-relevant involvement is the “psychological state that is created by the activation of attitudes that are linked to important values” and outcome relevant involvement is the “extent to which the attitudinal issue under consideration is of personal importance” (Cho and Boster 2005). Prior research has shown that as outcome-relevant involvement increases information seeking increases. We further propose that as value-relevant involvement increases attitude extremity (dogmatism) increases while information seeking decreases.

The latter distinction points to a further extension of the current research. A positive correlation is posited between *value-relevant involvement*—having more to do with ego and self-concept than with values as traditionally understood within the business ethics literature—and an ethical predisposition to *formalism* (or *universalism* or *deontology*). Additionally, a positive correlation is posited between *outcome-relevant involvement*—having to do with future consequences for the subject—and an ethical predisposition to *utilitarianism* (Brady 1985; Brady & Wheeler 1996). If this hypothesized link is supported, the practical implications are profound: extrapolating from the research into persuasion effectiveness, it can be postulated that high-involvement formalists can be predicted to be overall *less* subject to persuasion than high-involvement utilitarians, particularly if that persuasion takes the form of what in the involvement literature has termed ‘good argument.’

Potential benefits of this research stream include furthering our understanding of the influence that coursework has on student involvement with social issues and ethics, as well as enhancing the ability to predict the extent of future information-seeking that may be attributed to coursework related to issue of social importance. Additionally, research participants will learn more about factors influencing attitudes about social issues.

At the time of this submission relevant extant research has been surveyed, a research design has been established, a study population has been identified, university human subjects approvals have been secured, and the pre-test phase of the on-line survey administration has been completed. The sample population consists of over 100 upper-division business students taking a required core course in Corporate Social Responsibility/Business Ethics at a regional

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comprehensive university in the Northwestern United States. By the time of the conference itself the post-test phase of the on-line survey administration will have been completed and preliminary statistical analysis completed—offering more than adequate ‘grist’ for a discussion of not only the research design and methods but of the initial findings as well.

The authors are submitting this as an *IABS discussion idea*:

This session format provides an opportunity to share an idea that is in the early to middle stages of development but is not yet paper-ready. Sessions will provide ample time for conversation, questions, suggestions, and other feedback from attendees. Proposals should be approximately two to three pages (single-spaced) in length and should clarify how the idea fits into the field and why it is important/interesting.

The current submission is offered consistent with these guidelines, and in the ‘spirit’ of IABS—which was founded and continues to operate (among other purposes...) as a forum for discussion and critique of ideas not yet fully-formed. The research project is both preliminary and provocative. From the perspective of pedagogy, this research will stimulate conversation on an important topic: the relevance of university instruction around social issues and business ethics to the practical lives of our students. From the perspective of theory, this research advocates connections across disciplines—applying existing research from the fields of communication and marketing to the domain of social issues and business ethics.

Questions serving to organize a discussion around the session include but are not limited to the following:

- Can the construct of involvement be usefully employed in the assessment of social issues/business ethics coursework?
- Does student involvement with social issues/business ethics depend in part on whether the involvement is values-based or outcome-based?
- Are the theoretic constructs of outcome-based involvement and ethical utilitarianism usefully correlated?
- Are the theoretic constructs of values-based involvement and ethical formalism usefully correlated?
- What practical prescriptions can be offered with respect to heightening students’ motivational state(s) relative to social issues/business ethics coursework?
- Should faculty set elevating students’ likelihood to engage with social and ethical issues as an objective for social issues/business ethics coursework—or limit themselves to more ‘traditional’ learning outcomes?

This submission is offered with the hope that the ‘logic’ of the research design will receive critical and constructive evaluation from experts in the research topic(s) under consideration, and that additionally the rigor of the research methods can be similarly evaluated—to the end of enhancing understanding of student ethical predispositions as these relate to involvement with social issues/business ethics coursework, as well as to involvement with social and ethical issues within the broader societal context.

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