Doing a Doctorate in an International Environment

Marta Villegas

Jones International University

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Abstract

Being an international graduate student located in Colombia, South America, in an online environment is one of the most amazing personal, academic, and professional experiences. Knowing the commitment of conducting rigorous, world-class research, a qualitative case study was chosen, which explored managerial perceptions regarding codes of ethics, ethical behavior, and the relationship of these concepts to organizational culture in a Colombian bank ZOX (pseudonym), in a South-American environment. The data-collection phase contained a purposive sample of ten ZOX senior managers, four of whom participated in one-on-one interviews, a focus-group interview with the remaining six managers, and company documents. The findings include the facts that codes of ethics are mandatory and serve to sanction those behaviors that are not allowed by the organization; ethical behavior follows general principles and values as ethical guides of duty regardless of the consequences; and the organizational culture is influenced by the leaders’ ethical behavior. A suggestion for further research might be going deeper in the understanding that members from other levels of the organization and from other organizations and contexts have regarding the concepts under study, in order to help those who are interested in fostering ethical organizational cultures.
Getting a Doctorate in an International Environment

The opportunities that new technologies offer to everyone in any circumstance are well-known; however, as an international student located in Colombia, South America, having the experience of doing a doctorate in an online environment is one of the most amazing personal, academic, and professional experiences. Moreover, the JIU model – based on a highly qualified faculty, a peer-review process, well-designed courses, and the personal assistance, among others – allows foreign students to be part of a global community of learners (Jones International University, 2014). Therefore, this paper includes experiences of being an international student including choosing an online university, building a support community, and choosing a research topic, in which the research topic “Codes of Ethics, Ethical Behavior and Organizational Culture from the Managerial Approach: A Case Study in the Colombian Banking Industry” (Villegas, 2014), includes its background, the problem statement, the research question, the methodology, as well as the process of conducting successful research, and the conclusion and recommendations for further study.

Being an International Student

Getting the highest academic degree as a non-English speaker and through online education has been one of the demanding challenges anyone could experience. However, having the proper assistance and technological support from the JIU team, as well as accompanying professors and cooperative cohort members, gradually allows foreign students to gain confidence and focuses them on fulfilling the requirements demanded by each course of the program. Therefore, being an international student comprises some issues such as choosing an online university, being admitted to JIU, building a support community, and overcoming technological barriers.
Choosing an Online University

Having begun doctoral studies in Colombia in a traditional university, and not being satisfied with its rhythm of studies and its curriculum, new alternatives were explored that were proper to a life-style as an adult with multiple responsibilities. JIU University was found to be one of the accredited online universities in the U. S. A JUI writing course was taken in order to get acquainted with its process and technology. So, after having a positive experience, the next step was to get ready and proceed with the JUI admission process.

Building a Support Community

Starting the courses at JIU, as a global university, implied the challenge of interacting with diverse people from around the world, most of whom were located in the U. S. A prior cohort member defined me as an ESL student. Following the forum discussions and getting to know the cohort members, as well as learn about their professional experience and interests, was a challenge. The professors and the design of the courses gradually fostered the interaction and confidence among our community of learners. For instance, Dr. Sue Raftery, a professor in one of the courses, recommended contacting a former graduate student, Dr. Paul Toth, who was part of the community support during this journey of being a doctoral student. Therefore, building a strong community of support, including family, current cohort members and prior professors, was crucial to successfully achieving this goal.

Overcoming Technological Barriers

Located in Colombia and being dependent on a local Internet provider implied suffering through several technical issues in order to stay online and comply with the due dates of the assignments. During this journey, there were several fights with the local provider by trying to put them in contact with the JIU technical support. However, knowing that the cohort members
also had the same problem and fortunately our professors understood this situation, helped alleviate worries. In fact, the capability to overcome technological barriers is a value added to the process of studying online.

**Choosing a Research Topic**

In this scenario and knowing the commitment of conducting rigorous, world-class research, the research topic “Codes of Ethics, Ethical Behavior and Organizational Culture from the Managerial Approach: A Case Study in the Colombian Banking Industry” (Villegas, 2014), which involved a qualitative approach, was chosen. This situation implied stating the background of the research, the problem statement and the research question.

**Background of the Research**

Even though business ethics has its roots in ancient disciplines, including philosophy, theology, and law, in the twenty-first century its significance has been triggered by corporate scandals and the financial crisis of 2008, in which the Colombian banking sector was not immune. In this scenario, organizations establish norms and instruments, such as codes of ethics, in order to influence employee behavior as well as to recover stakeholder trust. Moreover, several studies (Dobson, 2005; Kaptein, 2011; Kaptein & Schwartz, 2008; Singh, 2011; Stevens, 2004, 2008) have demonstrated the interest to measure the effectiveness of these instruments associated with certain factors to predict ethical behavior. However, these authors evidence a gap in the literature regarding the different meanings and interpretations of the concepts of codes of ethics, ethical behavior, and the relationship of these concepts to organizational culture, as well as their development in other contexts, such as in the Colombian banking industry.
Problem Statement

In the twenty-first-century business environment, corporations have increased the adoption of codes of ethics as part of their corporate governance and strategy. For this reason, in their process of accessing global markets, larger Colombian companies, such as ZOX (a pseudonym), are also facing these new rules. According to Singh (2011), “the code conveys the message that the corporation is committed with ethical behavior” (p. 386), which implies the managerial assumption that there is a relationship between codes of ethics and ethical behavior. However, according to Fassin and Van Rosem (2009), “unclear semantics and special terminology, concepts are continuously mixed up in terms of context, content, and perspectives” (p. 573), causing some misunderstandings among employees about managerial concepts, such as codes of ethics and ethical behavior, among others. These misunderstandings impact the effectiveness of codes of ethics as part of an ethical organizational culture, which provides organizational differentiation and competitiveness.

Research Question

Knowing how senior managers conceptualize and understand codes of ethics and ethical behavior in specific contexts, such as ZOX, allows discovering new meanings regarding these concepts and their relationship to organizational culture. Thus, the chosen research sought to find an answer to the following research question: “How do managers of the Colombian bank ZOX understand the concepts of codes of ethics and ethical behavior and the relationship of these concepts to organizational culture?”

Selecting a Methodology Approach

The study utilized a qualitative approach to address the research question to gain a better understanding of the different conceptions and meanings that senior managers have toward the
constructs under study in the context of the Colombian banking industry. According to Schein (1999), assessing culture by qualitative techniques ensures better reliability and efficiency than survey or questionnaires because in the latter, it is too difficult to judge these concepts. Hence, qualitative techniques allowed exploring and making explicit those managerial assumptions and shared values that are part of a mental model that guides the organizational behavior.

**Population and Sample**

The study was conducted in ZOX, a bank located in Colombia, South America. The target population for the proposed study was 38 senior managers from ZOX, which comprised ZOX’s Board members, the President, and the Vice Presidents (Superintendencia Financiera de Colombia, 2013). In addition, the study included a purposive sampling of ten ZOX senior managers, who “yield[ed] the most relevant and plentiful data” (Yin, 2011, p. 88), and whose composition offered many possible understandings or managerial perspectives of the concepts under study and allowed avoiding potential biases.

**Procedures**

The data-collection process included interviews, a focus-group interview, and documents as research techniques. Four of ZOX’s senior managers participated in face-to-face interviews, which were conducted in a semi-structured manner. The focus-group interview included the remaining six ZOX senior managers who had been selected. As the third research procedure, relevant documents, including corporate governance, policy, and codes of ethics published on the corporate webpage, were gathered.

**Interviews.** The individual interviews were face-to-face, in an agreed-upon place; each one lasted around one hour and was recorded with the consent of each of the participants. The guiding questions of the interviews asked for the in-depth perceptions and viewpoints of the
participants. The use of unstructured interviews allowed the researcher to start with those questions related to ethical behavior in order to introduce the interviewee to the topic sequentially.

**Focus Group Interviews.** The senior managers selected to participate in the focus group had similar responsibilities and influence in the organization. In the focus group the author served as moderator and followed Mayan’s (2009) advice of having “one person taking notes” (p. 73) and observing during the whole session in order to complement the tape-recording data. The participation of a note-taker and observer was previously consulted and accepted by the participants. Both the individual interviews and the focus-group interview were conducted in Spanish, and they were recorded with participant permission as established in the consent form. The interview information was then translated into English.

**Documents.** This procedure included gathering relevant documents including corporate governance, policy, and codes of ethics published on the corporate webpage. Since “documents are rarely a stand-alone data collection source” (Mayan, 2009, p. 82), they complemented the information gathered through interviews and the focus-group interview, not only to corroborate information but also to gain a perspective of the phenomenon under study.

**Conducting Successful Research**

Conducting the research implied the cooperation of the sponsor regarding the development of the chosen methodology and its procedures. Moreover, according to Adams, Khan, Raeside, and White (2009), because of the sensitivity of the issue under study and the interviewees’ characteristics, contacting the interviewees required a gatekeeper who promoted the participation of the selected participants because of his/her awareness of the importance of the study to the implementation of the current ZOX policy. Thus, ensuring the success of the
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Research included getting the confidence of the sponsor, ensuring ethical issues, and analyzing and discussing the results.

**Getting the Confidence of the Sponsor**

Among the milestones of successful research is gaining the approval of the sponsor as well as its agreement to proceed with the chosen methodology, by ensuring the entry of the researcher and the cooperation of all participants. For instance, the author noted in her reflexive journal,

> Today I met the ZOX gatekeeper, who was with one of his Directors. I was very anxious because I was in their hands about their willingness to support me in conducting the interviews and the focus group at this time (December and January), which is holiday time, (Villegas, personal communication, November 27, 2013)

by evidencing the anxiety experienced as a researcher in getting access and approval of conducting the research. Fortunately, the experience and knowledge gained from the professors and the readings and courses allowed the author to persuade the gatekeeper of the sponsored organization positively about the potential local and global impacts of the results of the research.

**Ensuring Ethical Issues**

The selection of interviews and the focus-group interview as research techniques included the confidentiality of the data in order to protect the identity of the participants. In addition, as Yin (2011) noted, the study protocol, which “outlines the main features … in relation to concerns over protecting its participants” (p. 45), was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and approval to conduct the research was received. For this reason, written consent forms were obtained from each participant prior to the individual and focus-group interviews; these forms included issues, such as description of the research, data storage to protect
confidentiality, and the freedom of participants to withdraw their consent at any time.

Confidentiality clauses that were duly signed by the English translator and the note-taker and observer in the focus-group interview, procedures that were stated in the consent form, were also included.

**Analyzing and Discussing the Results**

The data-analysis process followed the content-analysis technique, which was supported by the use of the ATLAS.ti qualitative data-analysis software. The data from the interviews and the focus-group interview included the participants’ responses regarding their perceptions of the concepts under study. The participants’ responses, once were transcribed and translated to English, were downloaded into the ATLAS.ti software in order to proceed with the data analysis. Once the researcher had compiled the data, she proceeded to code the texts by identifying common patterns. Once the data were coded, the researcher went to higher levels of analysis using categories and themes. In total, the researcher selected 141 quotations from the ten participants in four interviews and one focus group. Table 1 shows the summary of the data collected, as well as the emerging main patterns.

**Table 1**

*Themes, Categories, and Number of Quotations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Quotations</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Behavior</td>
<td>Principles</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Particular situations</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Happiness - Fulfillment</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Common good</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes of Ethics</td>
<td>Compelling</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regulating</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inspiring</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Culture</td>
<td>Rites</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>External environment</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics in the Future</td>
<td>Reinventing</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethical banking</td>
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</table>
The aim of the study was to learn how senior managers conceptualize and understand codes of ethics and ethical behavior in specific contexts, such as ZOX, as well as the relationship of these concepts to organizational culture, by involving a qualitative approach. Therefore, some of the interpretations of the main themes under study are explained as follows.

**Codes of Ethics.** The adoption of codes of ethics by organizations has been triggered for different reasons, including those that are forced on companies by regulators or as a result of the pressure of their stakeholders. The participants noted that there are explicit rules that require financial institutions and organizations to have mandatory codes of ethics. Hence, the reasons behind implementing codes seemed to be that regulators and organizations are aware of the social demands regarding corporate duties to the system as a whole, in which the adoption of codes of ethics reactively obeys an answer to the external conditions.

Codes of ethics also serve to sanction those behaviors that are not allowed by the specific group or organization, in which codes establish the consequences that non-compliance carries. According to Colburn (2008), the agents’ motivation to act depends on their beliefs and options, in which sanctions play a normative role. Thus, the codes’ attribute of sanctioning relates to the characteristic of codes of being mandatory and their aim to control the desired behaviors in the organization, in which communications and training are focused on the organizational consequences of the individual’s acts.

Codes of ethics act as a mechanism that reinforces actual behavior, which is supplemented by corporate communications and other tools, such as ethics committees and ethics hotlines, among others, in order to be effective. Moreover, the participants agreed that codes of ethics talk about behaviors and they are coherent with the organizational behavior in
which communication favors their understanding and effectiveness. Hence, codes of ethics need the support of supplemental mechanisms, such as communications, in order to ensure the employees’ understanding of an agreement with what is established in the code of ethics.

**Ethical Behavior.** Ethical behavior relates to that behavior that it is guided by principles and values that recognize the dignity of the other as a human being, in which truth and transparency govern the relationships regardless of the generated consequences. Under this view, these principles and values relate to the deontological approach, in which they act as ethical guides to act in any circumstance (Brady, 1999; Kant, 1993). Hence, ethical behavior is perceived as the behavior that follows general principles and values as ethical guides of duty regardless of the consequences, such as those that involve reputational issues.

Furthermore, ethical behavior is also expressed in the willingness of the individual to serve others, which is evidenced even more in those who have power. According to Darling and Utecht (2010), servant leaders promote and live meaningful purposes that allow and motivate all collaborators to enhance their lives and that of others. Therefore, ethical behavior is also perceived as a willingness to serve others by transcending self-interest, in which servant leaders represent a leadership style that fosters a sound moral environment with its commitment to ethical behavior.

Ethical behavior also relates to the individual’s spirituality, which is guided by transcending values that inspire the individual to recognize that he/she and others are creatures of God as well as the individual’s inner consciousness. This awareness also comes from the capability of self-reflection that demands reviewing the consequences of one’s acts. Thus, fostering spirituality and the aptitude for self-reflection favor ethical behavior by contributing to the common good and the evolution of the system as a whole.
Organizational Culture. Leadership seems to be one of the most important factors that influence the ethical organizational culture through the way that leaders interpret, communicate, and live those values and norms that are established in the codes of ethics. Authentic leaders exert their values through their words and actions by being a role model for their followers, in which their character is grounded in integrity and their own values (Leroy, Palanski, & Simons, 2012; Rozuel & Kakabadse, 2010). Therefore, those leaders who live their values, as well as those established in the code of ethics, can influence the organizational culture by guiding and inspiring others to decide and act regarding those values in a differentiated manner.

Moreover, the transformation of the organizational culture is driven by leaders who live their values and utilize language as a means to communicate their vision and understand those values that identify the organization. In this sense, Webley and Werner (2008) and Stevens (2008), highlighted the fact that embeddedness and the communication of codes are the main drivers of their effectiveness. However, the participants’ interpretation refers again to the importance of leaders’ communication and language in order to embed the message of the codes of ethics into the organizational culture, which is a continuous, dynamic exercise.

On the other hand, organizational culture is also transformed by those practices and rites that are continuously implemented and convey those values and beliefs that are established in the codes of ethics and are enacted by its leaders. According to Valentine, Godkin, Fleischman, and Kidwell (2011), “a corporate culture strengthened by ethical values and other positive business practices likely yields more favorable employee work responses” (p. 353), by enhancing positive attitudes and relationships to act ethically. Therefore, building trust is a dynamic process that demands an organizational culture that exhibits an alignment among the leaders’ values and
behaviors, its organizational practices and processes, and the values and beliefs stated in the corporate code of conduct.

**Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Study**

Among the main findings of the study were that most of the participants understand that codes of ethics are mandatory and serve to sanction those behaviors that are not allowed by the organization. The codes are also supplemented by corporate communications and other tools in order to reinforce the values pursued by the organization. Ethical behavior is guided by universal principles and values, in which service and the leader’s spirituality are the bases of the search for the common good and the sustainability of the system. Moreover, the organizational culture is influenced by the leaders’ values and example, in which the leaders’ interpretation and implementation of those values established in the codes of ethics foster ethical organizational cultures.

Building and reinforcing an ethical organizational culture demand the discussion and understanding of the meanings that concepts, such as codes of ethics and ethical behavior, have to all members in the organization. According to Bass (2009), “leaders create the mechanisms for cultural embedding and cultural reinforcement” (p. 749), in which leaders’ values, priorities, understandings, and behaviors help to transform the organizational culture. Hence, this study calls for further research about the understanding that members from other levels of the organization and from other organizations and contexts have regarding the concepts under study, in order to help those who are interested in fostering ethical organizational cultures.

Moreover, the current study calls for new research related to leadership and the inner self of leaders by going beyond the leadership styles. According to Rozuel and Kakabadse (2010), those who are consistent with their own core values and work “towards the state of a whole self” (p. 426), are natural leaders who can influence a sound moral climate. Therefore, further research could
explore the connections between peoples’ inner values and beliefs and their ability to influence ethical organizational cultures.
References


