

INDIVIDUALS' CHARACTERISTICS AND ETHICAL FINANCIAL REPORTING CHOICE

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the influence of individuals' characteristics such as cognitive moral development, idealism, machiavellianism, deontology, and risk preference on the ethical financial reporting choice. The accountant profession cannot be separated from many ethical considerations that have been set with the professional ethics, and the professional ethics will be closely related with the individuals to consider how far they have applied those professional ethics, thus this research aims to identify whether the individuals' characteristics influence the ethical financial reporting choice. This research is expected to be an important reference in the development of accounting knowledge particularly that which is related with the ethical-based financial reporting. Total sample of 56 respondent were used for this study. Primary data gained through questionnaires were analyzed using logistic regression model. The findings of this study showed that risk preference had negatively significant influence on ethical financial reporting choice, while cognitive moral development, idealism, machiavellianism, and deontology had no significant effect on ethical financial reporting choice.

Keywords: Ethical Financial Reporting; Cognitive Moral Development; Machiavellianism; Deontology; Risk Preference

INTRODUCTION

The ethical behavior is required during the preparation of a financial report. A financial report consists of loss-benefits report, equity changes, balance, cash flow, and notes on the financial report itself. In the behavioral model by Hunt & Vitell (1986), the behavior is influenced by *intentions, ethical judgments, teleological evaluations, and deontological evaluations*. According to Steenhaut & Van Kenhove (2006) teleological and deontological are in line with two concepts of ethical dimension, i.e. idealism and relativism. Meanwhile, the ethical assessment is based on the concept of ethical belief. The ethical considerations have become important for the learning of accountant professional behavior because there are many professional assessments which are relied on individuals' values and trust (Ponemon, 1992). The definition has also been ever stated by Richmond (2001) who reviewed a number of studies and explained that there is a linear relationship between ethical considerations and moral behavior.

The studies on individual characteristics of auditors have been currently applied both in foreign countries and in Indonesia. Many studies on the ethics of accounting field are led by increasing number of ethical violations. From this condition, there are many researchers who want to passionately explore certain factors believed to determine or influence the ethical financial reporting (Anwar & Amarullah, 2006). Some previous studies, like Forsyth (1980) stated that idealism and relativism are two separated conceptual dimensions and both can be used to classify the individuals' ethical ideology. A single individual may keep

his idealistic and relativistic perspectives at one time without any frictions. The individuals' intensity is in line with their idealism and relativism which influence their actions over the time.

Richmond (2001) stated that the nature of Machiavellian influences the ethical behavior of the accountants and accounting students. Purnamasari & Chrismastuti (2006) stated that the auditors with high nature of Machiavellian will tend to act dependently. There is an influence of ethical learning through the course of Ethics on the level of the nature of Machiavellian on the accounting students (Chrismastuti & Purnamasari, 2004). The influence of gender toward business ethics and ethics of accountant profession does not show any significant differences between the perceptions of female and male accountants, and female and male accounting students (Murtanto & Marini, 2003). In psychological literature, besides the theories of Machiavellian, the ethical choice is also influenced by the theory of cognitive moral development by Kohlberg which has been widely accepted as a leading theory in term of moral thinking, i.e. a theory about the moral thinking which focuses on cognitive process used by individuals to lead them to decide what is wrong and right (Marwanto, 2007).

The previous studies by Tanne et.al (2007) empirically showed that deontological framework and consequentialism are two main factors in a decision-making process and entirely have positive correlation. Meanwhile, there are people who are categorized as purely deontological or consequentialism based on their own orientation. Tanner, et. al (2008) showed the results from most people who combined those two factors in making their decisions in business fields. Cote, et.al (2013) stated that some previous studies also show that the researchers view risk preferences as stable personal characteristics applied consistently in various decision-making processes (Fischhoff, Lichtenstein, Slovic, Derby, & Keeney, 1981; Ghosh & Ray, 1997); Keinan, Meir, & Gome-Nemirovsky, 1984).

This research is the development of Cote, et.al (2013) who examined the influence of individuals' characteristics toward the ethical financial reporting choice. This research is done to answer the question whether the individuals' characteristics influence the ethical financial reporting choice with the sample of master program (S-2) accounting students of Semarang College University. There are two main contributions used in this research. The first is the results of this research can be used as a reference of the development of accounting knowledge and information particularly those related with the ethical-based financial reporting. Second, the results are also expected to be used as the reference for the preparation of financial report which focuses on the need of ethics in selecting the most appropriate financial reporting methods.

The research done by Kohlberg in 1963 and 1964 was an initial step to introduce the *Cognitive Moral Development* to the society. According to the prospective of cognitive moral development, the individuals' moral capacity will be more complex if they get additional cognitive moral structure on each level of their moral growth and development. The research of Kohlberg was then developed by Rest (1986) in term of validity and reliability of the instruments to measure the ethical considerations. The four components of Rest (1986) described that most individuals use them for their ethical decision-making and behaviour. The model of these four components also describes how the cognitive structure is combined into a single process

when it is being faced with an ethical dilemma. It is also believed to be applied on the ethical financial reporting choice. Citing the argument of Keenan, Meir, & Gome-Nemirovsky (1984), this research believes that the individuals who have high-level cognitive moral tend to choose an ethical financial reporting. Therefore, the first hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H1: The cognitive moral development positively influences positive the ethical financial reporting.

According to Forsyth (1980), moral philosophy is controlled by two characteristics, namely idealism and relativism. Idealism refers to one thing strongly believed by an individual with its own and expected consequences which do not break and violate moral values. The idealism is connected with the level where the individuals believe that their expected consequences (positive consequences) will never break any moral rules. This idealistic attitude is also defined as being fair and avoiding certain interests. An accountant who does not have this kind of attitude will only be a selfish person to obtain higher fee and leaves his/her independency.

Forsyth (1980) showed that the individuals have certain principles for the ethics and positions they will take which also influence the judgment process they make. Forsyth (1980) argued that some differences in classical philosophies can be simply presented into two dimensions, relativism and idealism. This also applies for the ethical financial reporting choice (Fischhoff, Lichtenstein, Slovic, Derby, & Keeney, 1981; Ghosh & Ray, 1997). The individuals who have strong idealism tendency tend to choose an ethical financial reporting. Therefore, this research proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Idealism positively influences the ethical financial reporting.

In the theory of *Machiavellianism* (abbreviated as *Mach*), an individual with dominant pragmatic Machiavellianism will always keep his emotional distance, and believes that the results can correct the ways. "If it works, use it!" Consistent with the perspective of Mach, a number of research have found that the people with dominant Mach manipulate more, win more, less influenced, as well as influence others more than those with low Mach (Richmond, 2001). Christie & Geis (1970) stated that Machiavellianism is an anti-social personality, ignores conventional morality and has low ideological commitment. The individuals who have high Machiavellianism personality will do everything required to achieve their goals. Shafer & Simmons (2006) believed that someone who tends to use manipulative tactics and is careless for his moral will be involved in unethical actions in various situations. The individuals who obtain high scores in the Machiavellianism scale tend to be less influenced with moral issues like justice and fairness, and they think that they are born to be "the winners". This personality will lead to manipulative tactics and dishonest ways in running a business as well as unethical actions.

Shafer & Simmons (2006) held a research on the influence of the nature of Machiavellian toward tax professionals in Hong Kong, and showed that Machiavellianism has significant impacts on the assessment of ethical decision-making. Another research stated that Machiavellianism has significant influence toward ethical decision-making done by Singhapakdi (1999). Singhapakdi stated that an individual who obtain high score of Machiavellianism tends to have lower ethical norms. The research of Singhapakdi is supported by Trevino (1986), Richmond (2001), Pan & Sparks (2012) as well as Christmastuti & Purnamasari (2004) stating that the Machiavellian scale becomes a proxy of moral behavior which influences the behavior of

ethical decision-makers. This indicates that the individuals with high nature of Machiavellianism have greater possibilities to do unethical actions than the lower ones, including in the selection of financial reporting choice. The higher the Machiavelist owned by someone, the more unethical the financial reporting done.

H3: *Machiavellianism* negatively influences the ethical financial reporting.

Hunt & Vitell (1986) assumed that the ethical assessment is a combination between the evaluation of moral deontological and teleology. The theory of deontology is based on moral imperative about what is rong and right. This deontological evaluation emphasizes on inherent morality (embedded internally on each individual) as a basis for an action (Shapeero, et.al, 2003). The previous studies done indicate that these evaluations may have certain meanings in a process of ethical-based decision-making done by the accountants. For instance, consistent deontological approaches, Ponemon (1992) & Gabhart (1983) believed that the individuals with high integrity tend to form their ethical assessment free from bias and pressure from both internal and external environment/outside of the public accounting office. Deontology has the main focus on intrinsic of action quality, task concept, and obedience of moral (Tanner et al., 2008). The individuals with deontological perspectives may be encouraged to act morality to find whether they really want to apply such kind of attitude (Koehn, 1995). Meanwhile, there is a tradition of considering the orientation between deontology and konsekquentialism as exclusively interrelated; the consequences of an action which often defines what the ethics is (Tanner 2008).

Both moral theories are rules and results-oriented in solving ethical and business dilemma which successfully equalize the influence of each framework when making strategic decisions (Brady, 1987; Coty & Lynn, 1992; Pastin 1986). The deontology and consequentialism give a basis for the ethical decision making in the business. The previous study by Tanner, et. al (2008) showed that the frameworks of deontology and consequentialism are the key factors in the decision making and they have entirely positive correlation. While there are individuals who are categorized as pure deontology or consequentialism according to their own orientation, Tanner, et. al (2008) explained that most individuals combine the two frameworks in their business decision making process, including in the financial reporting. The individuals with high deontological perspective tend to choose the ethical financial reporting method. Therefore, the hypothesis proposed is:

H4: Deontology has positive influence on the ethical financial reporting choice.

The risk preference is one of personal characteristics where it can influence the individuals' behaviour (Sitkin & Pablo, 1992). Conceptually, the risk preference covers three parts, i.e. avoiding the risk, being neutral in facing the risk, and is in favor in finding the risk. An individual's risk preference is one of the components of certain theories which are related with the decision making process, including the financial reporting choice. Gibson, Ivancevich, & Donnelly (1985) stated that a tendency to take a risk is an aspect that influences the decision making process. A decision maker who is unwilling to take a risk will determine some different targets, evaluate the alternatives differently, and select the alternatives which are different

from what others are supposed to take in the same situation. The individuals who tend to avoid the risk will take the choices with low-level uncertainty, or high-level certainty.

Kadous & Magro (2001) stated that even a tax consultant wants to give the best for his clients, but his personal goals should be balanced with other long-term ones on his job. The tax consultants must always consider the risks and rewards that they may obtain from any decisions they have made. Next, Kadous & Magro (2001) explained that the tax consultants face the risk of higher costs to make certain unethical decisions. The costs may include penalty cost set by the tax office as a consequence of inappropriate tax report as well as violations against the tax reporting rules, interest cost on unpaid tax, as well as the cost on legal duties if the tax reporting violations are brought into the court. Besides the cost risks above, the tax consultants also face the risk of relationship break-up with their clients and lose their reputation if they suggest unethical recommendations to the clients.

If the tax consultants are dare to take any risks, the the decisions made will tend to be unethical. It is supported with a research done by Killian & Doyle (2004) explaining that there are some differences of recommendations given by the tax consultants who have high and low level risk preference. A tax consultant who dares to break any tax rules and take any risks tends to give more aggressive recommendations in avoiding the task. The organizational risk preference alos influences the individuals' ethical decision making. It is shown by the research done Adriana, et.al (2014) describing that surrounding professional atmosphere will positively influence the ethical decision making. The atmosphere and ways of doing everything within the organization will influence an individual's ethical behavior. Therefore, if the organization is getting more agresive and dare to take any risks menerima risiko, then the decisions made by the individuals will be more unethical, and vice versa.

H5: The risk preference negatively influences the ethical financial reporting choice.

METHODS

Table 1. Descriptions of Respondents' Questionnaire

| Note | Number | Percentage of return (100%) |
|----------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|
| Distributed questionnaire | 77 | 100% |
| Non-returned questionnaire | 7 | 9% |
| Returned questionnaire | 70 | 91% |
| Usable questionnaire | 56 | 73% |

Source: adapted from primary data, 2016

This is a quantitative research. The hypothesis testing used in this research is binary logistics regression analysis method. The respondents for this research are master program (S-2) accounting students of Higher Education Institutions in Semarang. The questionnaires distributed are 77 based on the number of the students met.

Table 2. Definitions of operational variables

| Variable | Description | Indicator | Measurement |
|--------------------------------|---|------------------------|------------------|
| Financial reporting | The financial reporting includes not only the report itself but also other information reporting media. | Cote (2013) | Dummy |
| Development of Cognitive Moral | The development of cognitive moral emphasizes on <i>moral thought process</i> , what is thought by an individual in facing an ethical dilemma. | Sari (2015) | Likert scale 1-5 |
| Idealism | The idealism refers to certain things believed by an individual with their expected consequences which do not break any moral rules and values. | Forsyth (1980) | Likert scale 1-5 |
| Machiavellianism | Machiavellian tends to spend certain situations to obtain personal benefits and has strong desire to break the rules. | Christie & Geis (1970) | Likert scale 1-5 |
| Deontology | Deontology is certain actions considered as good or bad subased on whether the actions are in accordance with the duties. | Trenkamp (2009) | Likert scale 1-5 |
| Risk Preference | The risk preference is a condition where the workers prefer to take the risk or to take the lower level risk. | Hung & Tangpong (2010) | Likert scale 1-5 |

To test the influence of independent and dependent variables, this research uses ini logistics regression analysis method. The model is as follows:

$$\text{Ln} \frac{\text{Ethical}}{\text{Unethical}} = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 \text{CMD} + \beta_2 \text{IDEAL} + \beta_3 \text{MACH} + \beta_4 \text{DEON} + \beta_5 \text{PREF} + \epsilon$$

Note:

$\text{Ln} \frac{\text{Ethical}}{\text{Unethical}}$ = Dummy variable for the perception of ethical financial reporting choice, namely: ethical financial reporting choice is valued as 1 (one), and unethical financial reporting choice is valued as 0 (nil)

α = constant

CMD = cognitive moral development

IDEAL = idealism

MACH = Machiavellianism

DEON = Deontology

PREF = Risk Preference

e = error

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive statistic analysis is used to show the distribution of research data.

Table 3. Results of Descriptive Statistic Analysis

| Variable | All Respondents' | | | | Ethical financial | | | | Unethical financial | | | |
|-----------------------|------------------|-----|-------|------|-------------------|-----|-------|------|---------------------|-----|-------|------|
| | Perceptions | | | | reporting choice | | | | reporting choice | | | |
| | Min | Max | Mean | Std | Min | Max | Mean | Std | Min | Max | Mean | Std |
| CMD | 16 | 39 | 29,79 | 4,73 | 18 | 39 | 29,58 | 4,63 | 16 | 39 | 30,15 | 5,01 |
| IDEAL | 27 | 45 | 36,86 | 4,44 | 27 | 45 | 36,72 | 4,61 | 30 | 45 | 37,10 | 4,24 |
| DEON | 35 | 60 | 46,07 | 5,87 | 37 | 60 | 46,53 | 6,36 | 35 | 56 | 45,25 | 4,91 |
| PREF | 26 | 50 | 37,48 | 5,42 | 31 | 50 | 37,67 | 5,83 | 26 | 44 | 37,15 | 4,72 |
| CMD | 19 | 35 | 26,95 | 3,57 | 19 | 35 | 26,39 | 4,07 | 25 | 32 | 27,95 | 2,19 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 56 | | | | 36 | | | | 20 | | | |

Logistics is used to test the influence of cognitive moral development, idealism, and Machiavellianism, deontology and risk preference toward the perception of ethical financial reporting choice. This research uses the level of significance 0,05, thus the hypothesis is accepted if *p-value* is less than 0,05. In contrary, if *p-value* is more than 0,05 then the hypothesis is rejected. The test results are presented in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Results of Hypothesis Testing

| | Coefficient | (<i>p-value</i>) |
|----------|-------------|--------------------|
| CMD | -0,02 | 0,81 |
| IDEAL | -0,05 | 0,68 |
| MACH | 0,12 | 0,26 |
| DEON | 0,10 | 0,36 |
| PREF | -0,36 | 0,02 |
| Constant | 3,20 | 24,64 |

Source: adapted primary data, 2016

Hypothesis 1 (H1) states that the development of cognitive moral has positive influence toward the ethical financial reporting choice. The table 4 shows that the variable of the development of cognitive moral has coefficient value of -0,02 and *p-value* of 0,81. These values show that the development of cognitive moral negatively influences and is insignificant toward the ethical financial reporting choice. Therefore, this research rejects the hypothesis 1 (H1). This research results support the research done by Cote (2013) explaining that there is no relationship that influences the development of moral cognitive with the dependent variable (ethical financial reporting choice). From this research and the previous one, it can be concluded that the development of cognitive moral is not a dominant factor determining the ethical financial reporting choice.

Each individual has his/her own ethical standards toward the development of cognitive moral. As has been explained by Kohlberg (1981) that the majority of the respondents have been into the stage of post-conventional reasoning, which means they already have developed a moral standard based on universal human rights. In facing a conflict between the laws and inner voice, someone will probably follow his own inner voice, although the decision he will make may involve personal risks. The ethical decision will be less influenced by the development of cognitive moral because each individual's ethical standards are influenced by different inner voice. Wright (1995) also explained that on the level of post-conventional, someone differentiates his *self-esteem*-nya from others' rules and expectations as well as determines his personal values related with the principles he have chosen by his own.

Hypothesis two (H2) states that the idealism positively influences the ethical financial reporting choice. Table 4 shows that the idealism has coefficient value as much as -0,05 and *p-value* of 0,68. These values show that the idealism negatively influences and is insignificant toward the ethical financial reporting choice. Therefore, this result rejects in the hypothesis two (H2). This result supports the research done by Falah (2006) explaining that the idealism is not significant toward ethical sensitivity, which means rejects hypothesis two. This may be due to the respondents who consider that it is unethical if someone harms others. There may be differences about the ethical financial reporting choice believed by the respondents who tend to be more theological, i.e. behavioural attention and focus and the human's actions are more on how to achieve the goals as best as possible, by giving less concentration on the ways, techniques or procedures used (M. Mintchik & A. Farmer, 2009).

Hypothesis three (H3) states that Machiavellianism negatively influences the ethical financial reporting choice. Table 4 shows that the Machiavellianism has coefficient value of 0,12 and *p-value* of 0,26. These values show that the Machiavellianism positively influences and is not significant toward the ethical financial reporting choice. Therefore, this result rejects hypothesis three (H3). The results of this hypothesis testing do not successfully prove that the Machiavellianism influences the ethical financial reporting choice. Besides, the research results are not in line with the previous studies and theories proposed by Shafer & Simmons (2006), Singhapakdi (1999), Barnett, Bass, & Brown (1996), Richmond (2001), and Cote (2013) who concluded that the Machiavellianism influences significantly the individuals' ethical decision making. This research does not also support Pan & Sparks (2012), as well as Chrismastuti and Purnamasari (2004) who explained that Machiavellian scale becomes a proxy for the moral behaviour which influences the ethical decision making behavior. This is because the respondents consider that the ethical financial reporting choice is not significantly influenced by the nature of *Machiavellianism*. The nature of Machiavellian on the respondents is not indicated significantly influences the ethical financial reporting choice, because Indonesian people commonly have more collectivism nature. The individuals do not take any personal advantages in a condition which allows them to do it. The culture of Indonesian people, like explained by Hofstede (1983) that Indonesian people relatively have strong characteristics of collectivism, i.e. the individuals' attitude that is aware more of public/collective interests within a community. The

Machiavellian is not relatively and obviously seen, thus it is not indicated as strongly influences the ethical financial reporting choice.

Hypothesis four (H4) states that the deontology positively influences the ethical financial reporting choice. Table 4 shows that the deontology has coefficient value of 0,10 and *p-value* of 0,36. These values show that the variable of deontology gives positive influence and not significant toward the ethical financial reporting choice. Therefore, the results reject the hypothesis four (H4). The research results support the studies done by Cote (2013) stated that an individual who has a perspective that the choice which is based on the moral belief does not prove that the choice is considered as ethical. The results of the previous research indicate also that the deontology is not an important factor that influences the ethical financial reporting choice.

Hypothesis five (H5) explains that the risk preference negatively influences the ethical financial reporting choice. Table 4 shows that the variable of risk preference has coefficient value of -0.36 and *p-value* of 0,02. These values show that the risk preference negatively influences and not significant toward the the ethical financial reporting choice. Dengan demikian, hasil penelitian ini menolak hipotesis lima (H5). The result supports the research done by Wittmer (2010) who stated that the professional atmosphere in the work place will positively influence the ethical decision making. The atmosphere and ways of doing everything within the organization will influence an individual's ethical behavior. Therefore, if the organization is getting more aggressive and dare to take many risks, then the decisions made by the individuals will be more unethical, and vice versa.

CONCLUSION

This research aims to examine the influence of individuals' characteristics such as the development of cognitive moral, idealism, Machiavellianism, deontology, and risk preference toward the ethical financial reporting choice. To analyze intervariables influence, it is used multiple regression method in the hypothesis testing. The sample used is 56 students of accounting master program (S-2) in *Universitas Diponegoro* and *Universitas Katolik Soegijapranata*. Based on the analysis and the explanation in the previous sections, it can be drawn some conclusions as follows: first, the risk preference negatively influences the ethical financial reporting choice, thus it is significantly influenced by the risk preference. In contrary, the cognitive moral development, idealism, *Machiavellianism* and deontology do not give any significant influence toward the ethical financial reporting choice. The rejection on those four variables may be caused by current characters of Indonesian people. Nowadays, the Indonesian people have been able to easily access the information from around the world, and it causes the development of values, norms, and ultimately moral. Universally, the development of ethical values is currently influenced by the inner voice due to different backgrounds of each individual and this has been accepted generally. Idealism gets less attention because the people consider that achieving goals is more important and if it does not harms other, the it is considered as worthy to do. The Indonesian people always try to uphold togetherness in every moment, so that they

never think to do something for their personal interest. Therefore, Machiavllianism is not commonly applied in Indonesia.

The decision makers, related with professional ethics, are expected to make and prepare ethical rules not only based on the cognitive moral dvelopment. It should be also considered about the individual values and inner voice where the ethical rules will be applied. The condition of Indonesian people who tend to avoid the risks can be used to make certain ethical rules that directly guide the people to solve any uncertain conditions bin their career as the professional accountants during their duties on the field. This research also certainly has limitations. First, this research is only applied for the students of accounting master program (S-2) in higher education institutions in Semarang, so that the result only resume or describe the ethical financial reporting choice on the students of accounting master program in the higher education institutions in Semarang. Second, the data collection method used in this research dalam penelitian ini dengan carais only by distributing the questionnaire for the respondents, so that the data collected are less valid due to the existence of respondets' arguments that are influenced by others. Third, relatively complex instruments used to yang relatif rumit dalam measure all research variables may cause the respondents' confusion in answering the questions.

Based on the conclusions and limitations of this research, there are some suggestions proposed by the writers. First, for the netx research, the future researchers should be able to expand their research objects in other regions so that the results obtained can be generalized. Second, the next research should involve direct interview method in collecting tha data to reduce the weaknesses related with the influence from other parties. Last, the future researchers should be able to modify the design of the instruments to be simpler to be able to to catch the influence of each research aspect, because a good research should not be too complex and difficult.

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