

College Student Ethics in Chile: Public versus Private Universities

ABSTRACT

This research aims at comparing two universities, a public and a private Catholic, regarding a key educational outcome, the ethical orientation of their business students. The central question is not whether one group of business students is more or less ethical than the other group, but if their formation of ethical judgments is based on the same principles and if their making of ethical decisions is guided by the same criteria. The differences, if any, would signal the differential emphasis on moral education each type of university pursues in benefitting its students.

Using the theory of marketing ethics, a quasi-experimental design, and a large sample of business students in each university chosen, this research finds that business students are fundamentally deontological (moral) in forming ethical judgments, and either deontological or teleological (consequential) when making decisions like rewarding or punishing acts involving ethical or unethical behavior like cheating or plagiarizing. A sizeable segment of students choose a purely teleological route when making decisions involving cheating and plagiarizing. The differences between the two universities are highlighted and some theoretical and pedagogical implications are drawn.

Keywords: Chilean college students, student ethics, business students, ethical judgment, intention to act, deontological evaluation, teleological evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

Public universities may provide education that is targeted to more peoples and at lesser cost to the student due to state subsidies. Conversely, private universities may serve a more segmented demand and do so at higher cost to the student lacking subsidizing funds. Regarding educational content, however, public and private universities may not differ significantly except for selective emphasis on certain areas of knowledge or trade each university chooses to identify with when positioning in a competitive market.

A specific area of choice may be moral education, in particular in universities like those affiliated to religious faiths – e.g., Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, etc. - that would like to distinguish themselves as leaders in this area of education. In Chile, Catholic universities are common place. They are spread throughout the country and pride themselves as the source of moral values and ethical education.

This research aims at comparing two universities, a public and a private Catholic, regarding a key educational outcome, the ethical orientation of their business students. The central question is not whether one group of business students is more or less ethical than the other group, but if their formation of ethical judgments is based on the same principles and if their making of ethical decisions is guided by the same criteria. The differences, if any, would signal the differential emphasis on moral education each type of university pursues in benefitting its students.

In the following sections, we first review the theoretical framework of the study and key research performed in student ethics including insights on student attitudes towards ethical behavior. We then present the methodology of the study; the results obtained using the samples pertaining to two Chilean universities, a public and a private Catholic; and the discussion, conclusions and implications that are derived for the study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To compare the ethical orientation of business students in two settings, public and private, we ought to use a theoretical framework that facilitates such comparison. From the various frameworks addressing ethical decision making in the business disciplines (Ferrell and Gresham 1985; Ferrell, Gresham, and Fraedrich 1989; Hunt and Vitell 1986; Jones 1991; Velasquez 1982; Wotruba 1990), the Hunt-Vitell (1986) theory of marketing ethics offers both an operational set of variables and a parsimonious structure of relationships. It includes the basic DU (deontological and utilitarian) model, which is considered to be superior to other basic models (Brady and Dunn 1995) and attempts to explain ethical judgments and intentions to act, key outcomes of the decision-making process followed by most business people. It focuses on the

joint impact of deontological or moral evaluations and teleological or consequential evaluations to form ethical judgments and arrive at intentions to act, as shown in Figure 1.

---- Figure 1 about here ----

Ethical Judgment

When forming ethical judgments, most individuals combine both considerations, deontological and teleological, and teleological ones but under moral limitations (Etzioni, 1988). Hunt and Vitell (1986) argued that people use either deontology or teleology, or a combination, to solve ethical problems. Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga (1993) empirically tested the Hunt and Vitell (1986) theory by use of a quasi-experimental design and found that (1) sales and marketing managers rely on deontological evaluations (DEs) than on teleological evaluations (TEs) in arriving at their ethical judgments.

Intention to Act

Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga (1993) found that sales and marketing managers rely on ethical judgments and TEs in rewarding or punishing salespeople, and extended the findings by reporting that ethical behaviors that have negative consequences are less rewarded than those having positive consequences. Sales and marketing managers actually encouraged unethical behavior by rewarding unethical acts that had positive consequences for the firm and, conversely, discouraged ethical behavior by punishing ethical behavior that have negative consequences for the firm.

In applying the Hunt-Vitell (1986) model to understand student ethics, Flores and Vasquez-Parraga (2010) found that even though most students use a deontological (moral) route when forming their ethical judgments, many students use both routes, deontological and teleological (consequences), or the latter only, to guide their actions. Ethical judgment and action are different outcomes of an ethical decision-making process. Data encompassing business students in various sub disciplines (management, marketing, finance, information systems and accounting) showed also that some students use exclusively a teleological route when deciding to reward or punish an ethical or unethical action. These students are essentially opportunistic when assigning a reward or punishment to an action, that is, they do not consider the morality of the action or make an ethical judgment in their decision-making process; they are purely consequentialists. Both, descriptive statistics and regression results illustrated this pattern of reasoning along the non-opportunistic patterns followed by other students.

Ethical Education in Chile

Chilean public universities may have not promoted ethical education in their general curricula. Business ethics course are seldom listed in their course offerings. In most programs ethics is teaching transversely, but not with an

independent ethical training course. However, National Accreditation Commission of Chile (CNA), in its evaluation criteria for the accreditation of professional programs, provides that "... *the program, it includes training activities that promote ethical behavior.*" The organization CNA is clear and explicit in stating that ethics should be in the general curriculum. This is a great challenge for public universities to incorporate training programs that teach ethics.

Chilean private universities, in particular Catholic ones, may have often included at least one course of business ethics in their curricula. As a general norm the *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* says that the education of students has to combine academic and professional development with formation in moral and religious principles and the social teachings of the Church; therefore the curriculum for each of the various professions have to include an appropriate ethical formation in that profession. Therefore, courses in Catholic doctrine are to be made available to all students (Pope John Paul II, 1990). Thus, most of the Catholic universities in Chile declare in their mission, among others, education of professionals with a strong ethical vision (Bernasconi, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a 2x2 randomized experimental design adapted from Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga (1993) including two scenarios. Each scenario reflects student life and has four iterations each resulting from a combination of a moral or immoral act and a negative or positive consequence that derives from the act in the scenario (see Appendix 1). Each questionnaire contains two scenarios in one of the four versions or combinations: 1) Immoral act with positive consequences, 2) Immoral act with negative consequences, 3) Moral act with positive consequences, and 4) Moral act with negative consequences.

Measures

The scenarios generated two deontological conditions, moral or right and immoral or wrong, and two teleological conditions, positive consequences and negative consequences. Each deontological condition was treated as a dummy variable with 1 designating the moral state and 0 denoting the immoral state. Similarly, each teleological condition was treated as a dummy variable with 1 conveying positive consequences and 0 indicating negative consequences. The scenarios were adapted from original versions in English (Flores and Vasquez-Parraga, 2010), translated and back-translated paying attention to the equivalence requirements. See scenarios in Appendix A.

Following Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga (1993), ethical judgment was measured using a 7 point scale (from 1 = very unethical to 7 = very ethical) and intention to act was measured by the respondent's choice of reward or punishment to the act in the scenario. The choice was ordered from the highest reward (three levels) to the strongest punishment (three levels) and a neutral position (in the middle) of taking no action at all.

- a. Give (name) a good grade and positive in class verbal recognition
- b. Give (name) a good grade and encouraging written comments on the exam
- c. Give (name) positive in class verbal recognition
- d. Give (name) a passing grade
- e. Take no action at all
- f. Give (name) a written reprimand
- g. Give (name) an in class verbal reprimand
- h. Give (name) an F on the exam
- i. Report (name) to the VP of Student Affairs

The choice was preceded by an instruction to read the set of possible actions and a question asking which single action was most appropriate considering the student's conduct in the scenario and the outcome of the scenario. Two choices related to punishment (h and i) were adapted to each context in order to reflect what is actually practiced but without reducing the level of gravity of the punishment so as to secure measurement equivalence.

Sample Frame – College Business Students

Comparable sample frames were supplied by two universities in Chile, a public one represented by *Universidad del Bio-Bio* in Chillan and private Catholic one represented by *Universidad Catolica de la Santisima Concepcion* in Concepcion. All business disciplines (management, marketing, finance, information systems and accounting) available in the identified university were included. All classes offered in the semester or quarter in which the research was performed was included in the sample frame.

Sample

Because the initial (introductory) classes and ending (cap-course) classes in a career (mostly undergraduate) or program (mostly graduate) showed meaningful differences in a pilot study (Flores and Vasquez-Parraga, 2010), only one

initial class and an ending class per career or program was chosen, except when the size of the class was less than 20 students, in which case a second class in the level was added. A sample of 682 business students was obtained, 359 from the public university and 323 from the private university. Table 1 shows the distribution and demographic characteristics of the sampled students. Of the 682 respondents 43 percent were male and 57 percent female; 84 percent single and 16 percent no single; 40 percent were between 17-20 years old, 38 percent in 21-24, 12 percent in 25-30, and 10 percent in 31-61.

---- Table 1 about here ----

Data collection Procedures

A trained professional approached and administered the survey in each class as agreed with the instructor. After informing the students about the survey, the four versions of the questionnaire were randomly distributed in each class. Participants took between 10 to 17 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The administrator checked that each questionnaire was complete in order to be retained, numbered and delivered to the person in charge of entering the data.

RESULTS

Ethical Judgment

The morality or deontological evaluations dominate the consequences or teleological evaluations in the formation of student ethical judgments in the two samples. About 9 in 10 students consider unethical an immoral action in the scenarios. However, the presence of consequences is meaningful in situations reflecting dilemmas (immoral act with positive consequences and moral act with negative consequences) as shown in the cross-tabulated results of Tables 2A and 2B. About one in 10 students judge ethical or is indifferent to an act that is immoral but that has positive consequences in both scenarios. Conversely, about 3 in 10 students judge unethical or is indifferent to an act that is moral but that has negative consequences. Slightly more students in both samples were trapped in judging the first dilemma (scenario 1) and evaluating a moral act that produces negative consequences. Between 30% and 50% of students showed obfuscation as they considered unethical or were indifferent to an act that is moral, compared to the 10% to 20% of students that judged ethical or were indifferent to an act that is immoral but that has positive consequences in both scenarios. And yet, relatively more students in the private university (50%) dwindled in the first scenario than students in the public university (33%) when judging a moral act that produces negative consequences.

---- Table 2 about here ----

Overall, the standardized coefficient (beta) of deontological evaluations on ethical judgment is highly significant (.834 (public) and .748 (private)), whereas the standardized coefficient of teleological evaluations on ethical judgment is not significant (.05 for both samples). Consequently, the determination of ethical judgment by deontological evaluations is very strong ($R^2 = .695$ (public) and $R^2 = .562$ (private)) as shown in Figure 1.

Intention to Act

The morality or deontological evaluations prevail over the consequences or teleological evaluations in the intention to act regarding the situation in the scenario, but both types of evaluations are significant in the explanation of the intention to act. The impact of the consequences is stronger in situations reproducing dilemmas (immoral act with positive consequences and moral act with negative consequences) as shown in the cross-tabulated results of Tables 3A and 3B. About 3 in 10 students rewarded or were indifferent to an act that is immoral but that has positive consequences in both scenarios. Conversely, about 7 in 10 students punished or were indifferent to an act that is moral but that has negative consequences. Similar numbers of students in both samples were trapped in evaluating the first dilemma (scenario 1), 78.6% of students in the public university punished or were indifferent to an act that is moral but that has negative consequences, 79% of students in the private university. Comparatively, those numbers are 53.7% and 55.4%, respectively, when evaluating the second scenario.

---- Table 3 about here ----

Overall, the standardized coefficient of ethical judgment (which is highly impacted by deontological evaluations) on intention to act is highly significant (.658 (public) and .550 (private)), as depicted in Figure 1. Yet, the standardized coefficient (beta) of teleological evaluations on intention to act is also significant (.245 (public) and .198 (private)) and shows a non-ethical route to also arrive at intentions to act. The determination of intention to act by both ethical judgment and teleological evaluations is strong ($R^2 = .491$ (public) and $R^2 = .353$ (private)) with ethical judgment showing more power than teleological evaluations. The presence of the later in the determination of intention to act, however, is anomalous to ethical reasoning and behavior.

The presence of a significant linkage between teleological evaluations and intentions to act contributing to the explanation of the later is noteworthy. A non-ethical route is used by a significant number of students to also arrive at an

intention to act. The route is anomalous to ethical reasoning and behavior but it exist, as predicted by the Hunt-Vitell theory of marketing ethics and corroborated for managers and executives in previous research (Hunt and Vasquez-Parraga, 1993).

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Ethical judgment is fundamentally deontological, that is, it is guided by moral principles like telling the truth, but the intention to act regarding cheating or plagiarizing is both deontological and teleological. Students use one route to form their ethical judgment but two routes to arrive at intentions to act. The latter means that while some students solve practical ethical problems on the basis of ethical judgment (that is determined by deontological evaluations), other students do so on the basis of teleological evaluations alone. Teleological evaluations focus on the consequences of the actions like cheating and plagiarizing and may not require a consideration of a moral principle to solve an ethical problem, in particular an ethical dilemma.

The results have important implications for understanding student ethical conduct and teaching business ethics. College students represent a population with higher levels of education compared to the rest of the population. The advantage is manifest in their easiness to think and form correct ethical judgments when needed. Despite a cognitive advantage, however, they may easily be trapped by the importance of the consequences when intending to act and if lacking appropriate training to make ethical decisions. Accordingly, the students who take the deontological route may just need reinforcement in education, whereas the students who take the teleological route urgently need ethical training in the classroom or elsewhere. Authors have considered various avenues to provide appropriate ethical education to business students (Lopez, Rechner and Olson-Buchanan, 2005; Waples et al., 2009).

No fundamental differences were observed when comparing the two samples of students, in public and private universities. This finding contributes to the strength of the theory used in this study to emphasize generalization, and the understanding that all students are fundamentally similar in their way to form ethical judgments and intend to act regarding ethical problems like cheating or plagiarizing.

Nonetheless, a few differences were noted in the results obtained from the tow universities. One relates to the way students form ethical judgments by either using deontological norms or teleological norms or both. Relatively more students in the private university (50%) dwindled in the first scenario than students in the public university (33%) when judging a moral act that produces negative consequences. Those students considered unethical an act that is moral only because it produced negative consequences. The other conclusion relates to the way students arrive at ethical decisions. Students in

both universities are overwhelmingly misguided: about 8 in 10 students in both samples (78.6% in public university and 79% in private university) were trapped in evaluating the first dilemma (scenario 1) as those students punished or were indifferent to an act that is moral but that has negative consequences. Comparatively, those numbers are slightly lower (53.7% and 55.4%, respectively) when dispensing punishment as the proper action in the second scenario.

Appendix A. Quasi-experimental Treatment Scenarios¹

Scenario 1

Luis es un estudiante universitario de último año de su carrera de ingeniería, tiene examen el lunes entrante. Durante el fin de semana Luis decidió con sus amigos ir al partido de futbol de su equipo favorito a 450 Km de distancia. Luis no estudió para su examen antes de salir, pero llevó todos sus apuntes y materiales de estudio para hacerlo en el viaje, lo cual resultó imposible. Dos de los amigos de Luis que fueron al viaje con él y que tienen el mismo examen el lunes por la mañana hicieron un torpedo que les ayudará a pasar el examen. Luis recibió una copia del torpedo y lo colocó dentro de su mochila la mañana del examen. Una vez que el examen empezó, Luis puso delante de él su mochila, quedando visible el torpedo para que copiara. Luis obtuvo un 7 en el examen y fue reconocido por el profesor en clase como uno de los dos alumnos que recibió un 7. El otro estudiante que obtuvo 7 no copió en el examen y se dividió con Luis una beca prometida debido a que había una sola beca disponible.

Scenario 2

María, estudiante universitaria de contabilidad conocida por todos sus compañeros y profesores como alumna dedicada e inteligente, está en su último semestre a sólo dos semanas de terminar y poder graduarse. María va a la universidad sólo porque necesita un título para obtener una promoción en su trabajo. En una de sus clases María debe entregar un trabajo final en 6 días. Estando tan cerca de su graduación, María ha perdido motivación para seguir trabajando fuerte. Ella no quiere hacer el trabajo y decide más bien comprar el trabajo de un servicio por internet que tiene trabajos en el mismo tópico asignado en clase. Sus acciones constituyen claramente un caso de plagio y María está consciente de este hecho. María confía en que su profesor le tiene aprecio por el trabajo que ha hecho hasta ahora en el programa. Más aún, María cree que su profesor no revisaría su trabajo por plagio dado que ella tiene una buena reputación y por tanto entrega el trabajo que compró por internet. Tal como lo creyó, su profesor no revisó su trabajo por plagio. María obtuvo un 7 y un reconocimiento verbal del profesor quien mencionó que el trabajo era de muy alta calidad. El trabajo es todo lo que tenía que entregar para quedar exenta del examen final debido a que su promedio había sido elevado a un 6 gracias al trabajo. Algo más, después de su graduación, María recibió una promoción en su trabajo y un premio por el "mejor trabajo" de parte de la universidad en mérito al trabajo que ella había entregado.

¹ Each questionnaire included two scenarios and each scenario represented a situation that combined a moral or immoral stance with positive or negative consequences to the actor. Thus, the four combinations were: 1) moral act resulting in negative consequences; 2) moral act resulting in positive consequences; 3) immoral act resulting in positive consequences – like the scenarios shown above; and 4) immoral act resulting in negative consequences.

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Table 1. Sample Profile

Demographic Characteristic	Public University	Private University
SAMPLE SIZE	359	323
GENDER (%)		
Males	44	43
Females	56	57
AGE (%)		
Between 17-20	41	39
Between 21-24	27	49
Between 25-30	15	9
Between 31-69	17	3
MARITAL STATUS (%)		
Single	78	89
Not Single*	22	11

Table 2A. Ethical Judgment: Frequencies by Scenario and Type of Questionnaire (in %) – Chilean Business Students – Public University

Deontology Consequences	Immoral		Moral	
	+	-	+	-
<u>Ethical Judgment: Scenario 1</u>				
Unethical ¹	93.9	80.2	10.0	18.8
Neutral	5.1	11.1	15.0	15.0
Ethical ²	1.0	8.6	75.0	66.4
(Total)	100	100	100	100
n = 359	98	81	100	80
<u>Ethical Judgment: Scenario 2</u>				
Unethical ¹	89.7	85.2	2.0	11.3
Neutral	8.2	7.4	12.0	12.5
Ethical ²	1.0	3.7	86.0	75.1
(Total)	100	100	100	100
n = 359	98	81	100	80

¹ Includes the following values in decreasing intensity: very unethical, unethical, and slightly unethical

² Includes the following values in decreasing intensity: very ethical, ethical, and slightly ethical

Table 2B. Ethical Judgment: Frequencies by Scenario and Type of Questionnaire (in %) – Chilean Business Students – Private University

Deontology Consequences	Immoral		Moral	
	+	-	+	-
<u>Ethical Judgment: Scenario 1</u>				
Unethical ¹	88.1	84.7	7.6	29.6
Neutral	7.3	10.4	16.6	19.9
Ethical ²	4.6	4.9	75.8	50.5
(Total)	100	100	100	100
n = 323	86	81	80	76
<u>Ethical Judgment: Scenario 2</u>				
Unethical ¹	82.2	87.1	6.3	10.8
Neutral	9.6	6.7	13.0	15.4
Ethical ²	8.2	6.2	80.7	73.8
(Total)	100	100	100	100
n = 323	86	81	80	76

¹ Includes the following values in decreasing intensity: very unethical, unethical, and slightly unethical

² Includes the following values in decreasing intensity: very ethical, ethical, and slightly ethical

Table 3A. Intention to Act: Frequencies by Scenario and Type of Questionnaire (in %) –
Chilean Business Students – Public University

Deontology	Immoral		Moral	
	+	-	+	-
<u>Intention to Act: Scenario 1</u>				
Punish ¹	79.6	93.8	21.0	41.3
No Action	9.2	1.2	20.0	37.5
Reward ²	11.1	3.7	59.0	21.4
(Total)	100	100	100	100
n = 359	98	81	100	80
<u>Intention to Act: Scenario 2</u>				
Punish ¹	78.6	90.2	6.0	32.6
No Action	5.1	2.5	7.0	21.3
Reward ²	16.2	4.9	86.0	46.3
(Total)	100	100	100	100
n = 359	98	81	100	80

¹ Includes the following values representing punishment from strongest to slightest: Report [name] to the VP of Student Affairs; Give [name] an F on the exam; Give [name] an in class verbal reprimand; Give [name] a written reprimand.

² Includes the following values representing reward from highest to smallest: Give [name] a good grade and positive in class verbal recognition; Give [name] a good grade and encouraging written comments on the exam; Give [name] positive in class verbal recognition; Give [name] a passing grade.

Table 3B. Intention to Act: Frequencies by Scenario and Type of Questionnaire (in %) –
Chilean Business Students – Private University

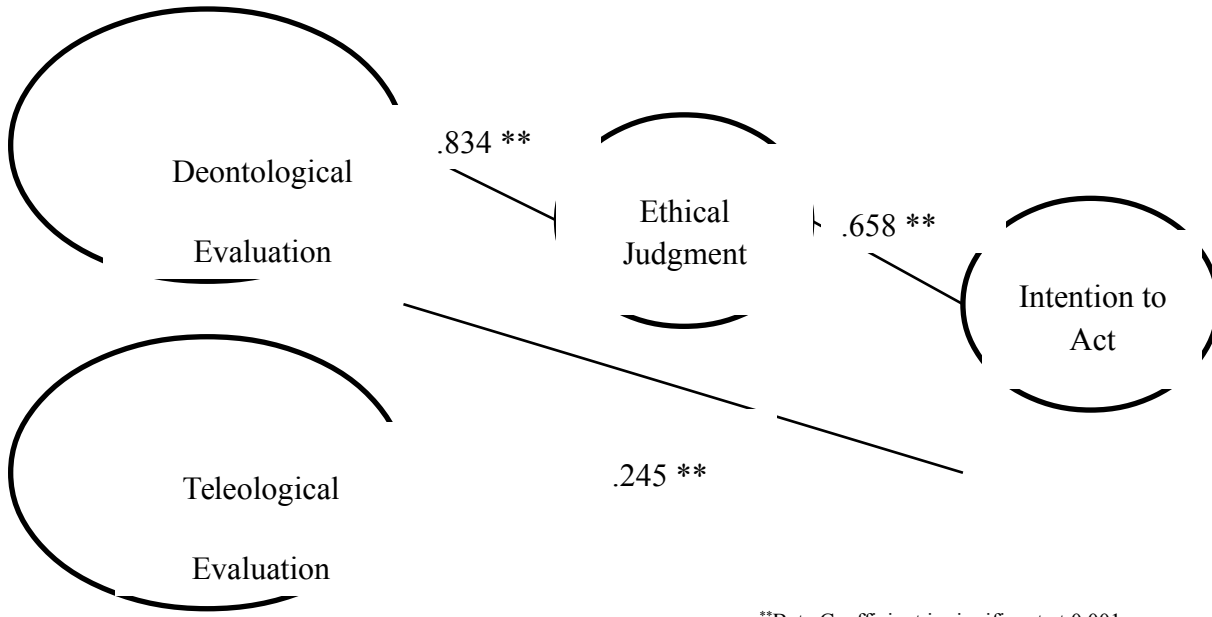
Deontology Consequences	Immoral		Moral	
	+	-	+	-
<u>Intention to Act: Scenario 1</u>				
Punish ¹	68.6	88.9	20.0	43.5
No Action	5.8	4.9	25.0	35.5
Reward ²	25.6	6.2	55.0	21.0
(Total)	100	100	100	100
n = 323	86	81	80	76
<u>Intention to Act: Scenario 2</u>				
Punish ¹	60.3	80.3	12.6	23.3
No Action	7.2	7.4	17.6	32.0
Reward ²	32.5	12.3	69.8	44.7
(Total)	100	100	100	100
n = 323	86	81	80	76

¹ Includes the following values representing punishment from strongest to slightest: Report [name] to the VP of Student Affairs; Give [name] an F on the exam; Give [name] an in class verbal reprimand; Give [name] a written reprimand.

² Includes the following values representing reward from highest to smallest: Give [name] a good grade and positive in class verbal recognition; Give [name] a good grade and encouraging written comments on the exam; Give [name] positive in class verbal recognition; Give [name] a passing grade.

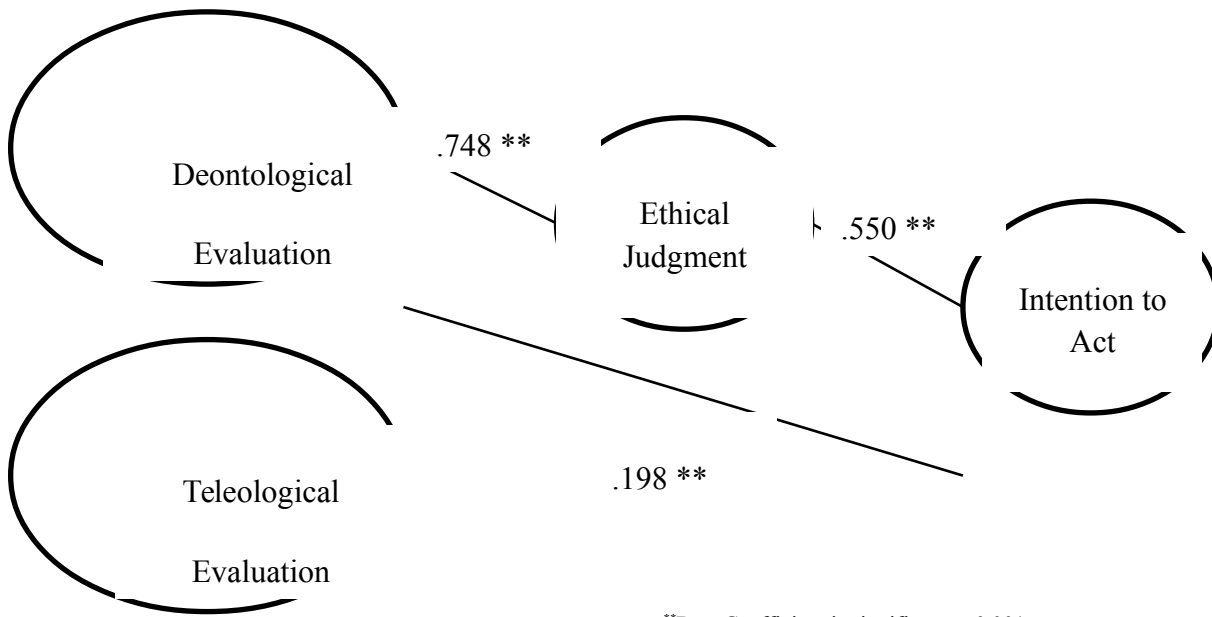
Figure 1. Determination of Ethical Judgment and Intention to Act among Chilean Business Students

PUBLIC UNIVERSITY



**Beta Coefficient is significant at 0.001.

PRIVATE UNIVERSITY



**Beta Coefficient is significant at 0.001.