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MAINTAINING BUSINESS ETHICS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN GLOBALIZED WORLD: A COMPARISON OF ETHICAL THEORIES AND FUTURE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Business ethics, from the start of the 21st century, has got attention among business communities. Globalization and workforce diversity have further extended this phenomenon and presently it is considered a part of the organization's vision and mission statement. However, business ethics are not even practiced properly worldwide, especially in developing countries. Moreover, the present situation of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has deteriorated the situation. Despite ethical theories, nothing else can justify business ethics, especially employee treatment in this pandemic situation. This paper aims to synthesize, compare and discuss the ethical theories in detail and tries to know whether these theories are enough to properly explain the business ethical issues that emerge due to globalization and the pandemic or not. The paper used the theory synthesis technique. Our discussion revealed that not a single theory can properly explain all the ethical issues and dimensions that emerged due to globalization and the COVID-19 pandemic disruption. Further, this paper suggests different aspects to formulate the new ethical dimensions that could explain all ethical dimensions and issues in all situations. This paper provides practical implications to corporate social responsibility and business ethic specialists to formulate new more precise dimensions in explaining ethical issues.

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INTRODUCTION

The business is as old as the civilizations and has passed through many periods of development and growth. The colonial period primarily started with agricultural growth and transformed into mass production through semiskilled labor and machines till 1850. Advancements in technology and demand for manufactured goods created new industries till the end of the 1800s. More and faster production of goods, bringing value addition and innovation has shaken organizational management. To address the needs and preferences of customers and maintain relationships through technology, strategic alliances and corporate social responsibility within business ethics becomes a key challenge for the managers of the contemporary world. During the process of growth and development, businesses have gone through different challenges. One of the most important and challenging issues for business managers is maintaining business ethics among the diversified workforce in a globalized world. The globalization of business increases the challenges for contemporary management, especially concerning business ethics. The diversified workforce in business is considered the key element in innovation among business processes, manufacturing, production, and services (Bello-Pintado and Bianchi, 2020). Similarly, businesses act as growth engines nationally and internationally for the economy. The changing face of the national and international environment compelled businesses

to change and adopt corporate social responsibility and business ethics among the workforce (Attaran et al., 2020).

Besides traditional challenges that impact the contemporary management workforce like an aging population, deficiency of skilled labor, diversity of the workforce, outsourcing and offshoring of business, creativity, and innovation, the outbreak of pandemics like Ebola, Swine flu, MERS, and SARS CoV2 has brought emerging challenges for the contemporary businesses locally and internationally. Moreover, international political, social, technological, and legal cultures along with international business further deteriorated the situation. These disruptions compelled the world to think and do things in different ways. Previous literature has focused the corporate social responsibility and business ethics only from traditional and specific perspectives (Brinkmann, 2002; Ferrell et al., 2019; Goel and Ramanathan, 2014). Research studies that purely focused the CSR and business ethics from the perspective of these disruptions are rare. Moreover, the theories of business ethics are unable to justify business ethics during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially concerning employees. There exists a gap in the literature regarding the explanation of these ethical theories from the perspective of pandemics like Ebola, Swine flu, MERS, and most recently COVID-19.

Keeping business ethics in mind, it is getting more and more difficult for the managers of today's world to manage business ethics internationally and domestically, especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, this study aims to analyze different ethical theories and their applications for being competitive in this globalized business world, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the gap in previous literature and the present situation, this study majorly focused to synthesize, analyze and discuss the ethical theories in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and globalization. This study has several important elements not only for academicians but also for practitioners working in a more competitive, diverse, and globalized world. Firstly, this is essential because globalization has made it difficult for organizations to manage a diverse workforce with different ethical, social, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Managers realized the difficulty and were kept under trial due to managing such workers globally. Secondly, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has made the situation further deteriorated (Shahzad et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic not only affects business operations and employee treatment issues but also creates unemployment (Shahzad et al., 2021), which creates a negative image of organizations. Thirdly, the synthesis and analysis of ethical theories provide current dimensions that managers could use to address ethical issues. Lastly, this study has provided sound future research directions for researchers, academicians, and practitioners in formulating the ethical principles that could serve better in a crisis like any disruption.

Research Questions

Keeping the research objectives in mind, the following research questions were formulated;

RQ 1: What are the important ethical theories which are used to explain the ethical issues in literature?

RQ 2: Are these theories successful in explaining the ethical issues that arise due to globalization and the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ 3: What might be the future perspectives of ethical theories, especially in the rapidly globalized and fragile environment?

Literature Review

With rapid globalization, business ethics has become more imperative for business managers globally. To address and maintain business ethics and its sub-dimensions, managers sacrificed a lot of interest and goodwill. Previously, business ethics are violated globally but the outbreak of disruption has deeply affected business ethics. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the entire community across the world. Similarly, the business community also faced a huge blow due to the pandemic. Unemployment across the world has impacted the employee's basic rights, and violation of business ethics concerning employees has been made by companies all over the world. Only 117000 persons in Germany have been fired due to shutdowns.

Unemployment across the world is expected to rise by 12 % and in OECD nations, it will be 10% at the end of 2020 (Corak, 2020). According to EY Global (2020), 90 % of board members from different countries believe that the disruption has posed a threat to business ethical concerns. According to ethical theories, employee integrity, basic employment rights, and firing should be addressed in proper ethical manners. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, immediate shutdowns and immediate firing of employees from companies all over the world have shaken the claim of these ethical theories. Through this paper, we try to compare the ethical theories and try to provide some new insights to cater to these disruptions in the future.

Business ethics is the new competitive environment for the business managers of the 21st century (Banister, 2007; Hansson, 2017). Competitiveness had dramatically increased due to the advancement of technology and the technology adoption has enhanced automation hence effects employment (Banister, 2007). According to Andrew Crane, "Business ethics is the study of business situations, activities, and decisions where issues of right and wrong are addressed". According to Raymond C Baumhart, "The ethics of business is the ethics of responsibility. The businessman must promise that he will not harm knowingly". European companies have realized the fact of social responsibility and business ethics. From a normative perspective, social responsibility addresses the values, norms, and principles concerning fulfilling the economic, social, legal, ethical, and philanthropic needs of the general public (Carroll, 1991). Hence, social responsibility deals with the terminologies like social problems, sustainable performance, customer rights protection, corporate governance, and regulatory affairs (Ferrell et al., 2017). A business is accountable to the general public, customers, employees, investors, and the financial community. Besides all these businesses has to be accountable for the betterment of the natural environment as well. Customers have more and more expectations towards business as compared to a few years ago. The most difficult job for the managers of the 21st century is to address ethical conduct. One of the major challenges of international management is to manage and understand business ethics across borders. Some practices and acts are more tolerated in some cultures and some are tolerated less in different cultures. There are no standard ethical rules so far finalized for different cultures (Husted, 2001). Software piracy is commonly practiced in Asia as compared to the United States and European countries. Ethics changed according to culture, environment, and religion. There is a discussion on the ethical adoption by the companies. What are the parameters that motivate an organization to be ethical?

A *negative approach* suggests that most organizations adopt ethics as a bandwagon due to social pressures while a *Positive approach* suggests that most firms adopt ethics through self-motivation regardless of social pressures. An *instrumental approach* believes that good ethics simply represent a suitable instrument to expedite profits. Dominant theories in business ethics and summary of selected studies are mentioned in Table 1 and 2.

Table 1. Dominant theories in business ethics.

Theory	Author	Year
Theory of Justice	John Rawls	1971
Theory of Need	David McClelland	1940
Utilitarian Theory	Jeremy Bentham	1780-1789

Table 2. Summary of selected studies.

Dimension	Author	Year	Findings	No
Ethical Theories	Derry and Green	(1989)	There is no clarity in ethical theories to explain the diverse workforce.	6
	Beauchamp et al.	(2004)	Ethical treatment of employees according to their ethnic group.	
	Granitz and Loewy	(2007)	Unethical behavior at school leads to unethical behavior at business.	
	Beschorner	(2006)	It is suggested that discourse-ethical strategies should be focused to address ethical principles.	
	Singh and Mishra	(2018)	Ethical theories were found rigid and difficult in explaining business ethics.	
Ethical Issues	Arnold et al.	(2010)	Debate on pluralist and particularisms way of moral judgement in business.	17
	Banister	(2007)	Ethical practices can be integrated with technology in work.	
	Birchley et al.	(2017)	Ethics are essential partners to smart home engineering.	
	Barnett et al.	(1994)	Ethical issues vary according to ethical ideology.	
	Egels	(2005)	There exists no concise and comprehensive concept of ethics.	
	Baker and Comer	(2012)	Identification and perception of ethical issues in business by students according to their understanding.	
	Nuseir and Ghandour	(2019)	Globalization and digitalization have changed the ethical dimensions.	
	Gill	(2010)	Female business students are more ethically predisposed than their male counterparts.	
	Gautschi and Jones	(1998)	Students who complete ethical courses are more capable to handle ethical issues.	
	White	(2001)	Business ethics websites provide adequate information and services to the global community.	
	Stead and Gilbert	(2001)	The power of the internet to highlight issues is noted as a major strength that provides regulations.	
	Tamunomiebi and Ehior	(2019)	Organizations should modify their styles to handle a diverse workforce.	
	Nabi et al.	(2020)	Online advertising with unjustified claims affects the consumers' and firms' dignity.	
	Rahanu et al.	(2021)	Deployment of Industry 4.0 can bring social, technological, and business changes that should be justifiable.	
	Ferrell et al.	(2019)	Consumers give similar value to CSR and the ethical behavior of firms.	
	Belk	(2021)	Artificial intelligence and robotics service providers create severe ethical issues for consumers.	
Ermasova	(2021)	Empirical studies dominate business ethics literature and need conceptual papers to promote a theoretical perspective.		
Royakkers et al.	(2018)	Digitalization has put enormous pressure on business ethics.		
Ethical Challenge	Carroll	(2000)	Millennials will face double ethical issues in the subsequent couple of years.	2
	Sudhir and Murty	(2001)	Business-related ethical challenges should be resolved through ethical standards at organizational or personal level.	
Ethical Failure	Pritchard	(2014)	Ethical failures create disturbance for the sports business.	1

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the theory synthesis approach of conceptual writing has been incorporated (Jaakkola, 2020). Three ethical theories have been selected from previous literature, which are widely used in explaining ethical issues across the world. These theories include; the theory of need, the theory of justice, and the utilitarian theory. Further sub-concepts under these theories have also been discussed in brief in this study. The theory synthesis technique

helps researchers to integrate and summarize existing information about an idea or phenomenon. MacInnis (2011) states that summarizing leads researchers towards condensing, assimilating, and minimizing a known phenomenon while integrating leads researchers to evaluate an idea or concept in a different new approach by transmuting existing results or theory into an innovative perspective. Selection and exclusion criteria shown in Figure 1 and 2.

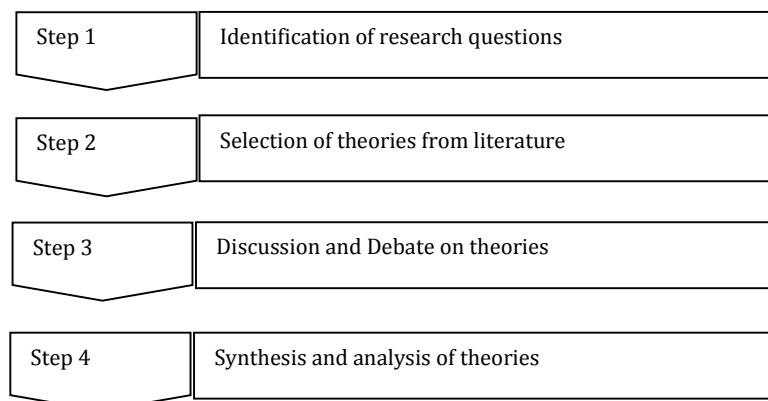


Figure 1. Selection criteria.

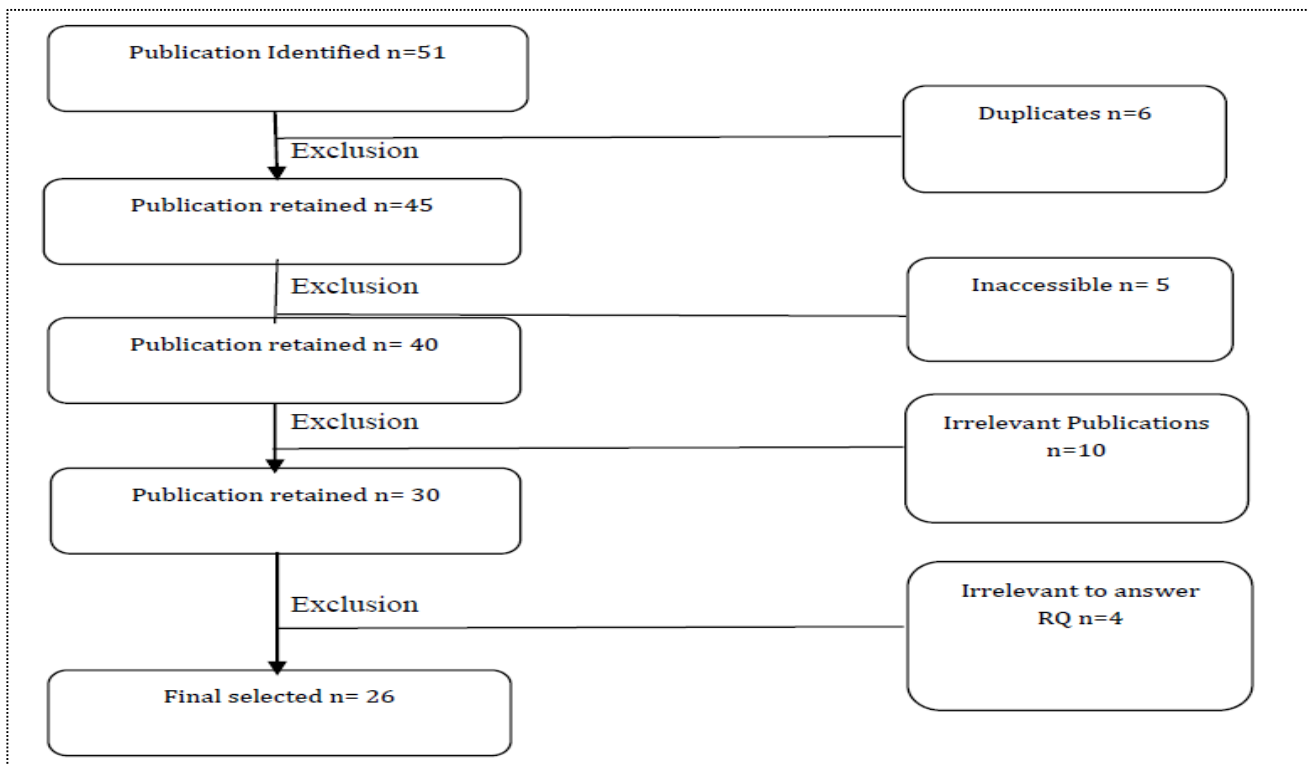


Figure 2. Summary of exclusion criteria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ 1. What are the important ethical theories which are used to explain the ethical issues in literature?

To address the ethical consideration certain theories have evolved. Theories that are involved to address business ethics is the *Theory of justice* which was presented by John Rawls in 1971. It is specially related to political philosophy and ethics. In this theory, he discusses the problem regarding the distribution of goods among society members. The theory was refined multiple times and finally, come up with two principles of justice (1) Everyone in a society/organization has equal rights and liberty (greatest equality principle) (2) Economic and social inequalities should be arranged to (a) Greatest benefit to least advantaged (the difference principle) and (b) Fair equalities of opportunities for all (equal opportunity principle). Under the equal liberty principle, Rawls identifies the following basic liberties (1) Political liberty (2) Freedom of thought (3) the Principle of human integrity (4) Rule of law, and (5) the Right to have personal property and freedom from arbitrary arrest and sensation. Indifference principle, Rawls talks about the social and economic inequalities and supports his view that these inequalities are only acceptable when they can be used for the betterment of the least advantaged or less developed people. While in the equal opportunity principle, he explains the equal opportunity for all in the offices and all aspects of life. *The utilitarian theory of ethics* is used in management while making decisions regarding right and wrong based on the outcome. The utilitarian theory explains that good individuals deserve greater things in reward. Despite several limitations, it is the theory that can explain ethical decision-making most appropriately. The third one is David McClelland's *Theory of need* which suggests that the needs of individuals are acquired over time and shaped by experience. The needs may be affiliations, achievements, or power. The job or task functions of an individual are defined by these three aspects. People with

achievement needs always look for moderate-level tasks and avoid low and high-risk projects. They wish to work with high achievers or alone. Individuals with higher needs of affiliations always want strong relationships with others and always wish to be accepted in relations. This type of individual always desires the task of personal interaction. The individuals in need of power can be of two types: personal powers and institutional powers. Individuals with the desire for personal powers always wish to direct others and want dominance. People with higher needs of institutional powers always organize the efforts of other people to achieve the goals of organizations. The first desire of need is undesirable and the second one is desirable in management contexts. The implications of this theory for multinationals are very important. Managers should assign challenging jobs and tasks to individuals with high achievement needs, marketing of interaction-based tasks to people with needs of affiliations, and allow managing others for individuals with higher power needs.

RQ2. Are these theories successful in explaining the ethical issues that arise due to globalization and the COVID-19 pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the entire community across the world. Similarly, the business community also faced a huge blow due to the pandemic. Unemployment across the world has impacted employees' basic rights, and violation of business ethics concerning employees has been made by companies all over the world. Only 117000 persons in Germany have been fired due to shutdowns. Unemployment across the world is expected to rise by 12 % and in OECD nations, it would be 10% at the end of 2020 (Corak, 2020). According to EY Global (2020), 90 % of board members from different countries believe that the disruption has posed a threat to business ethical concerns. According to ethical theories, employee integrity, basic employment rights, and firing should be addressed in proper ethical manners. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, immediate

shutdowns and immediate firing of employees from companies all over the world have shaken the claim of these ethical theories. Through this paper, we try to compare the ethical theories and try to provide some new insights to cater to these disruptions in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created various serious ethical issues for the management of the 21st century and especially those running multinational organizations. There are certain questions raised regarding the workforce from different cultures employed across the world by companies. Either the firing of employees immediately without any prior notice ethically rational? Switching the working environments from office to home and the anxiety provided to them by the employer is justified. What are the ethical codes that come under consideration while transferring a working environment from offices to homes or remote areas? What are the standards national or international firms have to keep in consideration while launching such measures from the employee perspective?

These and many other questions like this need immediate answers and, they require some international standards or principles or values that are justified for different cultures. It is very difficult to decide which types of standards are appropriate for less developed and developed countries. It is also difficult to handle the workforce of different countries with different cultural, religious, and social norms. Besides this, it is also a key challenge for managers to address labor and environmental principles while operating businesses in those countries. Managers have to consciously and unconsciously implement some ethical considerations in those countries. To address all these issues, the manager should have some ethical standards to handle the diverse cultural norms, ethics, values, and customs during the situations caused by this pandemic.

On the other hand, globalization has forced managers to create diverse organizations and firms that consist of people from different cultures that mostly differ in their moral and immoral, just and unjust, and virtuous or vicious ethics. In the contemporary world of business, there should be some ethical standards that at least theoretically enable arbitrating the differences of cultures, religious and social norms that are arising from the global world. These issues made the situation worse for companies globally.

Certain theories have tried to address these issues. In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars defended the theory of ethical relativism to support moral diversity (Wong, 1984). This theory states that "what is right or wrong is what the culture says is right or wrong." This theory claims that there are no internationally accepted moral principles except domestic or localized moral norms that can be used to appropriately predict or explain the behavior of all cultures. The behaviors of the people are only be predicted or explained through local moral norms and there are no universally accepted ethical standards that can predict or explain the behavior of that particular region. Initially, a small number of scholars have embraced and appreciated this theory, but now a day a large number of theorists hold a strong theoretical position in favor of this theory (Velasquez, 2000). A particularistic approach regarding ethics claims that disputes among social groups should be solved through local original practices and traditions. Similarly, communitarians defend their arguments regarding ethical obligations that individuals have a special right to live and enjoy their own local culture and their ethics should be considered before the international ethical standards. Others have argued that moral justice should be practiced with characters and

individual traits a community has historically produced in them. Similarly, the defenders of partiality argued that the priority of community members over the internationally recommended standards of ethics overrides the universal standards. All these approaches are very important during the 21st century and proof that looking for universal ethical principles is a mistake to solve the disputes of local cultures.

This theory has several drawbacks but two of them are very prominent. First, the relativist approach is unable to answer some of the very immediate and prominent questions of cross-cultural confrontation. For example, managers from different cultures have to manage the norms and culture of the different workforce having different cultures and norms but working together. As the two employees from different cultures and religions work together and their values, norms, and customs are different according to their cultures. If managers face a confrontation of ethical issues among such people, they have to follow the local norms according to the theory of relativism. Here the theory of relativism failed to explain the ethical standards for ethical confrontation. Secondly, there is no justification for culture's dominancy over the other one. The managers cannot be able to decide based on only one local ethical norm, value, or culture (Velasquez, 1996).

Based on these failure characteristics of the theory of relativism, managers of multinational organizations have to look for some internationally recognized ethical standards. Another approach that might be workable is the absolutism approach. In this approach, there must be some internationally recognized and universally accepted standards that can be implied to resolve such cross-cultural ethical confrontations. By universally accepted means the standards that are accepted by most of the population of a diverse workforce. The three most common absolutist approaches are now dominant in the literature (1) the Human rights approach (2) the Utilitarian approach and the (3) Principles of justice.

The absolutism approach is free from the drawbacks of the relativism approach. In the absolutism approach, certain universally accepted ethical principles can be used to arbitrate among the diverse workforce ethical issues. The most evident approaches under absolutism are human rights, utilitarianism, and justice, and all these are based on some assumptions that are prevalent in European culture. However, these assumptions are not found in all cultures but are based on some principles derived from the evaluation of other cultures as well.

Human Right Approach

This approach is considered to be the most appropriate one and is based on some moral standards which are used justifiably to explain and evaluate the social actions and deeds of people in all cultures. This approach is universally accepted because the workforce is human and they all respect this approach. This approach is backed by the UN declaration of human rights and many ethicists declared their commitment to this approach. The human rights approach is based on the assumptions of individualism and collectivism. These assumptions are derived from the Hofstede cultural dimensions. Human rights theories empower individuals to chase their personal goals and personal welfare and individuals are the right to pursue any of them. In both cases, individuals are the prime priority. Hence the human rights approach suggests that individuals have a unique existence and they have some personal goals and welfare which is dominant to the community. Hence when the individual goals and welfare are

dominated by the welfare and goals of the community, one should hesitate to claim that individuals have rights in that particular society (Udvaros, 1991).

On the other hand, the collectivist approach argues that the identity, goals, and welfare of the individuals are due to the community and the welfare, goals, and identity of the community are more powerful than the individuals. In such types of cultures, the identity of the individuals is sacrificed over the community. Asian cultures are collectivist cultures while the cultures of the US, Europe, and Australia are individualistic. Hence the human rights theories are narrow-minded and unable to explain the trans-cultural ethical issues which are essentially required for multinational managers.

Utilitarian Theory assumes that the core subject of interest is the individuals and it explains that morality requires either behavior or rules must be utilized at maximum levels. Utilitarian theories prefer individuals more profoundly as compared to human rights theorists. They said that the individuals are the core vessels of the utilitarian aspect and moral ethics are evaluated by the extent to which the individuals have achieved their goals or objectives. According to utilitarian theories, individuals have some personal desires and wishes that are independent of that of the community and easily identifiable through deep concerns. From the aspect of utilitarian theory, individuals are known by their desires, wishes, and satisfaction. These theories are also based on the assumptions of the individuals' preferences and failed to explain the ethical issues of collectivist cultures (Samuel, 2015).

Theory of Justice

Lastly, the theory of justice describes the distribution of benefits or burdens among individuals or communities according to their cultural context. In collectivist cultures, the distribution of shares, and benefits are judged fair when the whole group receives the same portion. In an individualistic culture, the share or benefit is distributed according to the efforts and participation toward the goal or task achievement. So the distinction between individuals is more prominent in the individualistic culture as compared to the collectivistic culture (Leung and Bond, 1982). Besides this, certain significant cultural differences predict the narrowness of the theory of justice. In egalitarian cultures, it is supposed that nature has created human beings based on equality and all the organizational hierarchies are artificial to distinguish the positions. On the other hand, if we consider the Hindu culture, they have hierarchies among their population and they have divided them into castes and the individuals at the top are not equal to the individuals at the bottom. In egalitarian cultures, there is an assumption to diminish these inequalities, especially race, gender, religion, and cultural discrimination. These inequalities are called unjust discrimination. The hierarchical cultures suggest that these inequalities should be suppressed as they are basic and built by nature. Hence the status inequalities are rationally justified but the violation of the natural right of the individuals is illegitimate. The theory of justice is purely based on the assumptions of the egalitarian culture. This theory is based on the basic assumption of equality and against the discrimination of race, gender, sex, religion, and ethnicity (Rawls, 2009). Besides this, the communitarian theories of justice proposed by Michael Sandel are also based on the principle of equality. Hence, the theory of justice is also narrowing-minded as utilitarian and human rights theories.

RQ 3. What might be the future perspectives of ethical theories, especially in the rapidly globalized and fragile environment?

Despite the long and comprehensive discussion about ethical theories, the managers of multinationals are still in a confusing situation. The question still needs answering either there some international code of ethical conduct that can be used to solve the cross or trans-cultural ethical issues and situations that arise due to pandemic outbreaks? The answer is somewhat yes, there is only one strategy that can be beneficial for multinational managers. Managers should adjust themselves according to the situation and can use the relativist or absolutist approaches. This approach may also proceed with the help of some of the "hyper norms" that may be acceptable among the majority of societies. This approach is recently proposed by Donaldson and Dunfee. But the question of successfully explaining the internationally arising ethical issues is still there. According to Donaldson and Dunfee's (1994) theory of social contract, the hyper norms are derived from the universal social norms, while the local ethical norms are from local and regional social contracts. There are certain difficulties and deficiencies in their theory as well. Both authors have included the individuals whose interests have been affected by the social contract. It means everyone has to be included in this social contract which is somehow difficult. Moreover, it is very difficult to evaluate the aggregate goals, objectives, tastes, and preferences of people under the social contract (Donaldson and Dunfee, 1994). The measurement of aggregate goals and objectives under social contracts showed the narrowness of this theory. The absolutist part of social contract theory also has some limitations which include the dominancy of local norms without respecting the hyper norms or internationally recognized ethical standards.

Discussion

The synthesis and analytical discussion on the subject of the COVID-19 pandemic, globalization, and ethical issues related to the workforce for managers of international firms have provided insight into the complicated relationship. Globalization has deeply affected the decision-making in business not only in financial and management issues but also on the ethical fronts regarding employee decisions. As the discussion has revealed ethics as a competitive factor in international business so the role of different ethical theories has also been discussed in making decisions regarding cross and trans-cultural conflicts in business, especially concerning COVID-19 disruption. The whole discussion on different ethical theories brings nothing in hand except failure. Not a single theory is completely successful to explain the disruption situations, cross, and trans-cultural ethical issues. On the other hand, managers of multinational organizations are still struggling hard to address this ethical aspect of business and trying to find out some of the most appropriate and justified methods of dealing with such types of conflicts. So far discussed three theories, i.e., theory of need, theory of justice, and utilitarian theory provide insight to managers on different fronts to deal efficiently with pandemic situations and cross and trans-cultural issues, but they are unable to provide a universally acknowledged approach to managers on international firms. The world of business is in a much more sophisticated environment in this period and things are getting more and more complicated and interlinked. The managers of multinational and local firms need some authenticated and well acknowledge ethical theories that can be able to best define and explain the ethical issues especially cross and trans-cultural issues including disruptions caused by COVID-19. Scholars and theorists must look up some of the new normative ways to develop new approaches on ethical fronts to help managers to address these issues. In this regard, "design

thinking” and “caring design” proposed by Hamington (2019) should be considered to solve ethical issues.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

From the discussion, it was derived that firms globally faced critical pressure because of globalization and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in managing business ethics and employee treatment. Business entities have tried hard to address these conflicting issues through various mechanisms provided by existing theories and principles. However, these firms faced difficulty in addressing all the ethical issues that originated due to globalization and especially the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this paper has examined and synthesized the major ethical theories that include the theory of need, the theory of justice, and the utilitarian theory. This paper has also examined the sub-dimensions of these theories and other ethical principles and dimensions and found that these theories, their sub-dimensions, and other ethical principles are not adequately and completely addressed all the ethical issues generated during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this synthesis revealed that ethical theories were only valid to address the ethical issues of the globalized world but failed to handle the disruption or problematized scenarios which are threatening the global world after the blow of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, this paper has provided future research avenues for corporate social activists and business ethics gurus to think and work on the improvement of these ethical issues with newly more abstract theories and principles.

The theoretical synthesis of this study provides sound theoretical implications. Synthesis of three ethical theories was done from the perspective of the COVID-19 pandemic yields limitations of these theories in explaining business ethics during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous literature has never reported such a type of synthesis of theories except for Velasquez (2000), who discussed the failure of business ethics in the era of globalization. According to him, multinational and global firms failed to fulfill the ethical requirements of a diverse workforce and employees. Similarly, Boda and Zsolnai (2016) also investigated the corporation’s behavior towards ethics and found that corporation-ruled businesses failed to fulfill the ethical demands and requirements of today’s modern business world. The synthesis of this study also reported similar findings to previous but limited literature. This study opens up the doors for business ethics researcher to extend their arms to capture the deep understanding of business ethics in today’s business world and also to enhance viable business ethical plans and theories for disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic and other expected disruptions.

This study also provides practical implications to academicians and practitioners. Firstly, the synthesis of ethical theories provides sound information to academicians and practitioners regarding business ethics, ethical theories in practice, and their implications in the present modernized world. Secondly, these theories also provide implications for practitioners to practice one or more ethical theories to address the ethical issues of employees, especially for those working in multinationals having a diverse workforce. Thirdly, practitioners are the imperative actors in theory building, their role to highlight and address the gaps among practical orientation of theories is crucial. There always exists a gap between theory and practice; practitioners need to further probe the gaps among ethical theories and help academicians in the building of new ethical theories, which is majorly highlighted in this study.

The present study is bound to the theory synthesis technique; future studies can be conducted through other conceptual approaches by using qualitative analysis of these theories and some other ethical issues. In the future, to capture the common elements of ethical theories, integration of ethical theories is recommended through a qualitative or empirical approach. Through this technique, a new universal approach or theory is expected, which can solve ethical issues nationally and internationally.

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