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The Influence of Ethical Behaviour Factors Among Social Work Students at Public Universities in Malaysia

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Abstract

Ethical behaviour is an important aspect among social work students who will be involved in workforce as a professional of social workers. Therefore, this article aims to measure the level and influence of ethical behavioural factors among social work students in public universities in Malaysia. This study applies quantitative research design by cross-sectional survey. A total of 215 final year social work students from six public universities in Malaysia were selected as respondents of the study. The study data was analysed using descriptive and multiple regression analyses. Based on the results found that social work students in public universities have a moderate to high-level ethical behaviour. Multiple regression analyses found that interpersonal communication variables, task management and leadership capabilities were key predictor factors influencing ethical behaviour among final year social work students at public universities. The study results have positive implications for the top management of the university, especially at the management of social work programs to improve programs that can nurture self-development and ethical behaviour among social work students in public universities in Malaysia.

Keywords: Ethical Behaviour, University, Students, Social Work, Public Universities

Introduction

The social work profession is a career that is responsible for delivering services effectively to meet the welfare as well as enhance the social functioning of individuals and society (Nazihah, 2019). The Department of Social Welfare (2010) defines social work as a profession that promotes social change, problem-solving and restores the social functioning of an individual and society. In addition, Saparin (2014) defines the social work profession as a field that focuses on aspects of human service in improving society's well-being and quality of life. Based on the statistics released by the Department of Social Welfare (JKM) from 2009 to 2013 shows an increase in the

number of cases related to social issues and need to be handled by social workers. Based on these statistics, among the target groups that contribute to the increase in cases are children, elderly, welfare recipients and registered disabled persons. For example, child-related cases exhibited an increase from 8,425 cases in 2009 to 12,783 cases in 2013. Therefore, it is crucial for social work students at public universities (UA) to exhibit high levels of ethical behaviour because final year social work students will enter the workforce as a social worker and face people from various walks of life coming from different backgrounds. Diversity of client backgrounds requires final year social work students to have practical skills and exhibit good ethical behaviour to handle cases ethically and professionally.

In the view to produce an efficient and highly skilled social worker in the social work profession, social work students who are in their final year need to be nurtured to increase the level of ethical behaviour to deliver effective services to the community. Ethical behaviour is an important aspect that needs to be inculcated in social work students because they are individuals who will practice professionally with clients. Hassan, Silong and Muslim (2009) define ethics as a situation in which a person can distinguish between good and bad in performing tasks. Ethics is also defined as the character, behaviour and combination of moral principles that influence an individual's behaviour (Kamri, 2008). Kamri (2008) also defines ethics as a set of values, norms and moral foundations that determine a person's actions to distinguish something, whether it is right or wrong and good or bad.

Social work students' understanding of ethical behaviour while performing tasks is vital to differentiate the boundaries between social workers and clients when they become social workers (Knowles & Cooner, 2016). Besides, such behaviour is also important for them to deal with any issues or problems in the workplace ethically and professionally (Rodie, 2008). Issues involving ethical and professional dilemmas in work settings do exist (Delaney, 2007). Therefore, final year social work students need to be prepared and have comprehensive skills to solve complex social problems and fully understand the social work ethic code that has been set when they become social workers (Dickens, 2012). Duboi and Miley (1999) state that the code of ethics has specific functions in a profession, including being a reference in decision making, assessing individual abilities and as a yardstick in evaluating a profession. Adi Fahrudin (1999) stated that the code of ethics in social work is related to professional socialisation and education among social workers.

In Malaysia, there is still no standard code of ethics adopted by social work practitioners. Based on previous research, studies related to ethical behaviour that focus on final year social work students are rarely conducted by researchers locally or abroad. However, this aspect is vital to measure ethical behaviour among final year social work students to determine their ability to deliver services professionally in social work. Based on the gap, this study was conducted to measure the level and influence of ethical behavioural factors among final year social work students at public universities in Malaysia. The results of the study are expected to provide useful input to the top management of the university to develop programs that can increase marketability in producing graduates who are competent and highly skilful in the profession and helping services.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is using quantitative cross-sectional surveys. Research data were analysed using descriptive and inferential tests. Data analysis was done using the 'Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS)' and the instruments used in this study are as follows:

1. Ethical Behaviour scale: measured using a scale modified from the Value Audit Management System Instrument (ISPAN) by the Prime Minister's Department (2007). This scale has a total of 11 items and has a good reliability value of 0.756.
2. Interpersonal Communication scale: measured using a scale developed by Armstrong (1981), contains 52 items, and has a good reliability value of 0.89.
3. Creative Thinking scale: measured using scale developed by Eko et al. (2016). This test tool has a total of 20 items and has a good reliability value of 0.911.
4. Problem Solving scale: measured using a modified scale developed by Cooper et al. (1988). This scale has 19 items and has a good reliability value of 0.94.
5. Task Management scale: measured using scale built by the researcher with tested validity and reliability. This scale has 8 items and has a good reliability value of 0.895.
6. Leadership Ability scale: measured using the Self Leadership Questionnaire scale developed by Anderson and Prussia (1997). This scale has a total of 20 items and has a good reliability value of 0.7.

The scale was on a four-point Likert scale with options namely (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) agree, and (4) strongly agree. In this study, the minimum score is 1, and the maximum score is 4. The range between score 1 and score 4 is 3. This range is then divided by 3 and produces 1. Based on that range, the level of ethical behaviour among final year social work students in public universities have been categorized into three levels as in table 1 below:

Table 1: Interpretation of the level of ethical behaviour of final year social work students in public universities

Level Score	Level Interpretation
1.00 - 2.00	Low Level
2.01 – 3.00	Moderate Level
3.01 – 4.00	High level

The descriptive analysis uses values such as mode, median, mean, and percentage to show the results of the data acquired (Chua, 2014). Descriptive analysis such as frequency, mean, percentage and standard deviation were used in this study to identify the level of ethical behaviour among final year social work students. On the other hand, various regressions using a stepwise approach are used to identify the influencing factors that contribute to ethical behaviour among social work students in public universities in Malaysia.

Population and study sample: In this study, the study population refers to final year social work students who are pursuing studies at six public universities in Malaysia. Based on the statistics of the registration of social work students at public universities in 2018, the total population of social work students enrolled in six public Universities in Malaysia, namely Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Universiti

Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) and Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (Unisza) is a total of 404 students.

Study Sample: The determination of the study sample size is based on the sampling table that has been designed by Krejcie & Morgan (1970), taking into account the significance level at $p < .05$ (significance level = 95%). According to the sample size determination table provided by Krejcie & Morgan (1970), if the population for a study is 404 people and the level of significance required is .05, the number of respondents required is 196 people. To conduct this study, Tuckman (1988) said it is appropriate if the number of samples provided according to the sample size determination table by Krejcie & Morgan (1970), which is a total of 196 people with an additional of 10% in the event of incomplete responses in filling the survey questionnaires. Therefore, considering these views and increasing the sample size to 10%, the sample size used in this research is 215 students.

Results and Discussion

Level of ethical behaviour among social work students at Public Universities

Table 3 shows the study results related to the level of ethical behaviour among final year social work students in public universities. The results of descriptive test analysis found that the majority of final year social work students in public universities in Malaysia exhibited a moderate level of ethical behaviour, which is a total of 65.6%. At the same time, another 34.4% showed a high level of ethical behaviour. The results suggest that none of the final year social work students showed a low level of ethical behaviour. This study indicates that the education and ethical behavioural skills applied to social work students in public universities are good and satisfactory. They are seen to be able to be a professional social worker with a good understanding and social work ethics and can help towards helping services in the community.

Table 3: Levels of Ethical Behaviour of Social Work Students in Public Universities

Ethical Behaviour Level	Number	Percentage (%)
Moderate	141	65.6
High	74	34.4

Notes: Low (<2.00), Medium (2.01-3.00), High (3.01-4.00)

Table 4 shows the items percentage of ethical behaviour among social work students in public universities. In detail, the study results showed that a total of 96.3% of social work students admitted that they were able to complete the work within the stipulated period (item 1). The majority of social work students also admit that they are serious about completing something that has been assigned to them (94.4% - item 2), willing to accept the tasks and responsibilities entrusted to them well (89.7% - item 3) and are able to maintain confidentiality in providing helping services for the society. (96.3% -item 4). The results also found that 96.7% among social work students also admitted that they do not discriminate one's background (item 5) in providing services to society.

The results of this study also showed that 96.7% of social work students can accept comments (item 6), can share success with others (94.9% -item 7) and appreciate the help and assistance

given by others (99.6% - items 8). The study also found that a total of 94.9% of students are not among the individuals who complain when a task is given to them (item 9), willing to work overtime without expecting rewards (64.7% - item 10) and do not have an arrogant nature (88.4% - item 11). The good ethical values displayed by these social work students are appropriate for them to be a professional social worker to help improve the community's functionality.

Table 4: Percentage of Ethical Behaviour Items

No	Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
.		P (%)	P (%)	P (%)	P (%)
1.	Can complete work within the stipulated time.	0.0	3.7	67.0	29.3
2.	Do not take it easy in completing a task	0.0	5.6	66.5	27.9
3.	Accept the entrusted duties and responsibilities.	0.0	10.2	60.9	28.8
4.	A person who can maintain confidentiality.	0.0	3.7	61.4	34.9
5.	A person who does not discriminate one's background.	0.9	2.3	61.4	35.3
6.	Receive comments well.	0.5	2.8	66.5	30.2
7.	Share success with others.	0.5	4.7	60.0	34.9
8.	Appreciate the help and assistance of others.	0.0	0.5	49.8	49.8
9.	Often complain about tasks given to me.	12.1	63.7	18.6	5.6
10.	Willing to work overtime without expecting rewards.	2.8	32.6	54.0	10.7
11.	An arrogant person.	36.3	52.1	8.8	2.8

Factors Affecting Ethical Behaviour Among Final Year Social Work Students in Public Universities

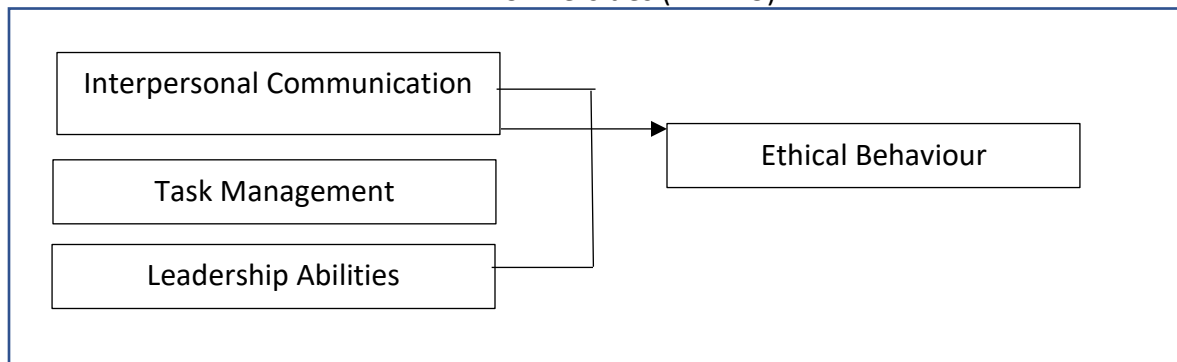
In this study, multiple regression analysis was used to analyse the factors influencing ethical behaviour among final year social work students at public universities (UA) in Malaysia. Based on Table 5, the results of multiple regression analysis found that three variables, namely interpersonal communication, task management and leadership ability, are the main predictor factors influencing the ethical behaviour of final year social work students in public universities in Malaysia.

Table 5: Factors Affecting the Ethical Behaviour of Final Year Social Work Students at Public Universities in Malaysia

Variables	Beta	R	R ²	Δ R ²
Interpersonal Communication	.634	.634	.402	-
Task Management	.375	.706	.499	0.97
Leadership Ability	.176	.714	.509	0.10

All three predictor factors have contributed a 50.9% variance to final year social work students' ethical behaviour at public universities in Malaysia. In this study, the interpersonal communication variable [F (1,213) = 143.460, p <.05] contributed 40.2% variance (R² = .402) to the ethical behaviour of final year social work students. The results show that interpersonal communication is a key predictor of influencing ethical behaviour among final year social work students at public universities in Malaysia. The results of this study also found that the combination of interpersonal communication variables (Beta = .634, p <.05) and task management (Beta = .375, P <.05) increased by (49.9% - 40.2%) or 9.7% to variance (R² = .499) on factors influencing the ethical behaviour of final year social work students in public universities [F (2,212) = 105,470, p <.05]. In addition, the results of the study also found that the leadership ability variable is also a factor that influences the ethical behaviour of final year social work students in public universities (Beta = .176, p <.05) with an increase in variance of (50.9% - 49.9%) or 1.0% variance (R² = .509) on factors influencing ethical behaviour among final year social work students in public universities [F (3,211) = 72,967, p <.05]. Based on these results, it can be concluded that three of the five predictor variables have been identified to influence ethical behaviour among final year social work students in public universities, namely interpersonal communication, task management, and leadership abilities, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Factors Influencing Ethical Behaviour Among Final Year Social Work Students in Public Universities (n = 215)



This study illustrates that to ensure that social work students have good ethical behaviour in providing helpful services to the society, aspects such as interpersonal communication, task management and leadership ability of social work students themselves need to be improved because those aspects can improve ethical behavioural skills among social work students in public universities. Hassan, Silong and Muslim (2009) assert that a person who has good ethical behaviour is able to distinguish between good and bad in performing a task. National Association

of Social Workers (1999) has defined the ethical principles that are the primary value in social work that is social workers need to provide services to the needy society oppose all social injustices, uphold one's dignity, recognize the importance of relationships between human beings, recognize one's integrity and must always improve their ability and professionalism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study shows that a majority of final year social work students involved in this study showed a level of ethical behaviour at a satisfactory level to become a professional social worker. The results also found that variables such as interpersonal communication, task management and leadership ability influence ethical behaviour among final year social work students in public universities. The findings of this study provide useful inputs to stakeholders, especially the management of Social Work Program in public universities to enhance the competencies and responsibilities of social workers in implementing social work practices towards society and also protect society from unprofessional practices. Good ethical behaviour is also able to guide social workers in dealing with practical dilemmas, including matters related to ethical issues and subsequently free from conflicts of interest. This study's results are also seen to have positive implications for university management, especially at the level of study programs to improve self-development programs and student communication to improve ethical behaviour among social work students in public universities in Malaysia.

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