

Gender, family background, cynicism and ethical sensitivity of future procurement professionals in a developing country context: evidence from Ugandan universities

Cynicism and
ethical
sensitivity

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Received 23 October 2020
Revised 21 January 2021
3 May 2021
27 January 2022
8 March 2022
Accepted 8 March 2022

Abstract

Purpose – Some scholars argue that ethical awareness increases alongside work experience, whereas others agree that ethics education shapes ethical awareness and that cheating in college predicts unethical behaviour in subsequent professional environment. The purpose of this paper is therefore to investigate the level and antecedents of ethical sensitivity of future procurement professionals.

Design/methodology/approach – An exploratory descriptive survey of a sample of 303 final year procurement students from the two largest public Universities in Uganda was conducted. Using Statistical Package for (SPSS) and Amos Version 27, data were analysed by using means, standard deviations, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses and correlation analysis.

Findings – The study revealed that future procurement professionals exhibit low levels of ethical sensitivity. However, contrary to the general observations from the extant literature, gender and family background of students do not determine both ethical sensitivity and cynicism. Moreover, this study establishes that cynicism is positively associated with instances that depict low ethical sensitivity.

Research limitations/implications – This paper contributes to providing an empirical understanding of the derivation of unethical behaviour in procurement practice. Grounded in Aristotle's organic theory of state and moral habituation, this argues that future procurement professionals possess natural proclivities that trigger their social instincts and membership to multiple associations in actualising their innate potential for ethical behaviour. This supports the notion that humans are potentially virtuous, whereby morality is learned, imitated, emerges and perfects through repetitive actions and is therefore incremental.

Practical implications – The findings mirror what prevails in practice in Uganda, where procurement practitioners have been implicated in unethical practices regardless of their gender and family background. This signals that managers should not recruit or deploy procurement personnel based on gender or family background.

Originality/value – While research on ethical sensitivity of students has been focussed on other disciplines such as accounting, nursing and other business studies, this paper focusses on ethical sensitivity of procurement students aspiring to join a professional environment that is severely marred with unethical practices. Further, Aristotle's moral habituation and organic theory of state invoked in this study underline the synergies of both nature and nurturing in inculcating ethicality in procurement professionals.

Keywords Ethical sensitivity, Procurement, Gender, Family background, Cynicism, Developing country, Universities

Paper type Research paper



1. Introduction

In the recent past, escalating business scandals have aggravated interest in the antecedents of ethical behaviour of individuals (Eweje and Brunton, 2010; Cremer *et al.*, 2011; Chatterjee *et al.*, 2021). But, most extant studies that assess ethical sensitivity have largely ignored procurement, besides the general acknowledgement that ethical sensitivity is a key determinant of moral judgement (Chen *et al.*, 2021). Ethical sensitivity enables an individual to recognise that a situation has a moral or ethical dimension. Hence, people with high ethical sensitivity tend to display ethical conduct in their operations than those whose ethical sensitivity is low (Rest, 1986 Muramatsu *et al.* 2019). Ethical sensitivity and subsequent unethical behaviour are also linked to cynicism – the belief that others are engaging in unethical acts or that unethical behaviour is common or normal (Sierles *et al.*, 1980; James, 2005; Nair and Kamalanabhan, 2010; Stavrova *et al.*, 2020; İnandı and Gülç, 2021; Chatterjee *et al.*, 2021). There is also a growing concern regarding the influence of gender and family background on ethical sensitivity. On the one hand, the positive role of gender and family background is acknowledged (Steinberg *et al.*, 1994; Baumrind, 1985; Galambos *et al.*, 2003; German *et al.*, 2009; Schutte *et al.*, 2014; Cheah and Shimul, 2020; Valente *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, it is disputed (Zopiatis and Krambia-Kapardis, 2007; Kirilmaz, *et al.*, 2015; Boateng and Agyapong, 2017; Krienert *et al.*, 2021). Further, some researchers argue that ethical awareness increases alongside work experience (Eweje and Brunton, 2010), whereas others emphasise that ethics education shapes ethical awareness, and that cheating in college is a precursor to unethical behaviour in the subsequent professional environment (Sierles *et al.*, 1980; Shaub *et al.*, 1993; Zopiatis and Krambia-Kapardis, 2007; Cheah and Shimul, 2020; Valente *et al.*, 2021; Okougbo *et al.*, 2021; Krienert *et al.*, 2021; Chen *et al.*, 2021). It is also noticeable that the extant studies on procurement ethics have concentrated on the ethical behaviour of procurement professionals already in the working environment, leaving a gap in our knowledge of the origin of unethical behaviour in practice – whether procurement officers enter the working environment with ethical or unethical behaviour.

In the context of this study, there is considerable literature on procurement ethics in Uganda, but this has similarly concentrated on the procurement working class. Studies have for example, focussed on their ethical attitudes (Mutebi *et al.*, 2015), moral schemas (Ntayi, *et al.*, 2013), moral identities (Ntayi, 2013), social cohesion and group think (Ntayi *et al.*, 2010). Given the fact that ethical sensitivity is an antecedent to ethical decision-making and the necessary first step towards moral behaviour (Rest, 1979; Cannon, 2010; Muramatsu *et al.*, 2019), it becomes plausible to investigate the ethical sensitivity of potential workers. And borrowing from Ntayi *et al.*'s (2010) conclusion that social cohesion and group think influence ethical behaviour of Uganda's procurement officers, it can be argued here that social cohesion and group think at the university may as well culminate in or aggravate unethical behaviour among future procurement officials. This argument is further reinforced by previous scholars who concluded that group work and social connectedness may influence cynical behaviour (Alanoglu and Karabatak, 2021) and ethical decision-making (Conor and Pangemanan, 2007; Cheah and Shimul, 2020), and such nurtured behaviour can subsequently be migrated to the workplace like any other skills that students learn and transfer.

Generally, the moral behaviour of public procurement employees in Uganda has been found deficient. Further, besides the fact that the global corruption perception index has underlined Uganda as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, it is acknowledged that many of the ethical-related scandals have been committed through public procurement. For example, the 3rd Procurement Integrity Survey conducted by The Public Procurement and

Disposal of Public Assets Authority (PPDA) (2015) revealed that 71.8% of procurements were fouled with unethical acts. The PPDA Performance Report (2018) underlined several instances of use of wrong procurement methods and unfairness during the evaluation process for various procurements. The Uganda Corruption Report (2017) exposes several unethical practices of procurement managers, including favouritism, in the form of companies winning contracts after making “under-the-table” payments. Moreover, Transparency International has recurrently ranked Uganda as one of the leading countries with unethical acts in the public sector. Given the contemporary importance of procurement to socio-economic development, revealed, in part, in the colossal sums of money spent thorough public procurement, coupled with the various attendant unethical practices, it becomes pertinent to investigate the origin of unethical behaviour of procurement professionals. Furthermore, given that procurement professionals are mainly trained from universities and ethics courses form part of the curriculum, it is logical to suggest that universities could cultivate ethicality in potential procurement practitioners.

Against this backdrop, this paper makes the following contributions to the extant literature. First, it responds to the observation by prior researchers of the need to conduct more research on ethical behaviour of students and millennials (Eweje and Brunton, 2010; Chatzopoulou and de Kiewiet, 2021), as it is believed that students’ unethicality has negative ramifications for their future behaviour at workplaces (Krienert *et al.*, 2021; Valente *et al.*, 2021). Second, this paper is the foremost to invoke the organic theory of state and moral habituation theory arguing that the moral behaviour of potential procurement professionals is sequential and cumulative, as it emanates from human natural social inclinations, innate potential for morality and habituation in various organic interrelationships.

Third, while a substantial amount of work on ethical sensitivity and behaviour of students has been done in other fields, especially accounting (Ameen *et al.*, 1996; Mayhew and Murphy, 2008; Ho and Lin, 2011; Yahaya *et al.*, 2016; Boateng and Agyapong, 2017; Okougbo *et al.*, 2021) and nursing (Shayestehfard *et al.*, 2020; Jalili *et al.*, 2020; Chen *et al.*, 2021; Spekkink and Jacobs, 2021; Bilgiç, 2022), our comprehensive literature review could not trace any prior research investigating ethical sensitivity of procurement students. And more generally, the authors could hardly trace any research on ethical sensitivity of students in Uganda. Cheah and Shimul (2020) stressed that it is important to understand students’ reactions towards ethical misconducts in different countries because they significantly differ. Furthermore, it is understood that students choose certain study programmes based on what they anticipate in the job market during their future professional careers. And given that the procurement profession has generally received negative publicity as a fertile breeding ground for multiple sorts of unethicality, it is important to investigate whether procurement degree programmes attract potentially unethical students.

Therefore, following the aforementioned discourse, an exploratory study is conducted to answer the following four research questions:

- RQ1. What is the level of ethical sensitivity of procurement students in Uganda?
- RQ2. Does gender influence the level of ethical sensitivity of procurement students in Uganda?
- RQ3. Does family background influence the level of ethical sensitivity of procurement students in Uganda?
- RQ4. What is the relationship between cynicism and ethical sensitivity of procurement students in Uganda?

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, the moral habituation theory and organic theory of state are reviewed and the relevant literature relating to ethical sensitivity and its theorised antecedents of gender, family background and cynicism are discussed. Section 3 outlines the research method used. Section 4 presents the analysis of data and interpretation. In Section 5, we present the discussion of results, implications and conclusions before limitations and areas for further research are provided.

2. Theoretical foundation and literature review

This study is underpinned by Aristotle's moral habituation and organic theory of state. The moral habituation theory underscores the importance of social interrelationships in nurturing human ethical virtues. According to Aristotle, we become just by acting as the just person does, and reach our moral maturity when we act as the virtuous person does. Following the notion of moral habituation, [Bowditch \(2008\)](#) posits that a person develops the moral muscle to act as the virtuous person through the imitation of the actions of a just person, and this explains why it is fundamental to have appropriate upbringing right from childhood. The moral habituation perspective maintains that a virtue is not a natural capacity that can be automatically activated but something that is acquired. This suggests that we are not naturally virtuous but we become so through habituation. Therefore, without proper upbringing, we do not reach our full potential and fulfil the proper function of a human being. From the foregoing, we can infer that the family background of procurement students is pivotal for their ethical sensitivity and subsequent behaviour, as the family takes the foundational responsibility for their appropriate upbringing.

According to Aristotle, virtues are acquired, just like crafts, by having first activated them. Virtues are learned and perfected through repetitive practice of similar activities and incremental learning. [Odozor and Agulanna \(2012\)](#) reaffirm this by observing that moral virtues are not a natural property but a product of habit. Aristotle argues that what people do in terrifying situations, and the habits of fear or confidence that they acquire, make some brave and others cowards. This could explain the differences in ethical behaviour of procurement staff, even if they work in the same environment. This further suggests that students in the same university could differ in their ethical sensitivity for some are threatened by examinations and fear of failure, while others tend to be confident: it is such that might determine their subsequent ethical behaviour in the working environment. As an example, a procurement student who survives examination failure by cheating is most likely to consider similar acts as the only way to success and perhaps transfer such behaviour to the workplace.

Aristotle argues that the process by which one is habituated to virtue is, from a practical perspective. For example, a young person is habituated to virtue by the parent, the teacher and other close people and this happens through imitation and repetition. [Bowditch \(2008\)](#) affirms that humans have the capacity to lapse into immoral tendencies if efforts are not made to regulate their desires – morality in humans can either degenerate or improve. [Bowditch \(2008\)](#) further emphasises the aspect of repetition and imitation in shaping ones moral behaviour. [Odozor and Agulanna \(2012\)](#) add that morality is not something that simply lies in humans in the form of supposed innate morality but it is basically communicated. The moral habituation suggests that the acquisition or development of morality in humans is a gradual process: consideration of a person as good or bad is based on a character trait such a person has developed over time. This suggests that the university is one conduit in a procurement student's ethical development, which has a bearing on the behaviour such a student later exhibits in the working environment.

Therefore, the moral habituation theory teaches us that family background, which determines the foundational upbringing of future procurement professionals, is essential in shaping their successive ethical sensitivity. Further, it shows that ethical behaviour is incremental – it is learned, nurtured and perfected through repetitive performance. We also learn that ethicality can be imitated and varies over time circumstantially. This therefore makes a clear case to consider a university an appropriate research setting from which to understand the ethical sensitivity of procurement professionals. Universities do the training and it is expected that they are fundamental in the students' upbringing and their incremental moral development as credible professionals.

The foregoing discourse on Aristotle's moral habituation helps us appreciate how ethical virtue evolves from habituations of potential procurement professionals in different organic interrelationships in families, schools and other associations. This fits within the presupposition that art completes nature whereby human efforts determine the form and pattern through which the natural potentiality of man is converted by habit into good or bad (Jiyuan, 2012). However, this leaves a gap in our understanding of the organic and multi-systemic nature of human associations as well as moral propensities, which would supplement in furthering our knowledge about the nature of ethical construct. The organic theory of state was initiated by Plato and later adapted by Aristotle to provide an explanation of how the existence of human associations and potential for virtue is a natural phenomenon. The highest level of association – the state – which individuals are part of and cannot be separated from, and which is necessary to enable citizens live a good and morally perfect life arises not out of people's choice but of their diverse needs, which cannot be satisfied without mutual co-existence involving exchange and division of labour (Jiyuan, 2012; Amadi and Wonah, 2016). The state is responsible for instituting appropriate laws that regulate what a virtuous act is, provide the norms for being virtuous and set standards of practice for achieving moral virtue (Jiyuan, 2012).

The state is formed from the instinct for group life reflected in Aristotle's regard of man as a social animal, which is initially mirrored in the first association – the family – which forms organically from man's instinct to procreate and therefore preserve own specie as well as to provide man's other recurrent needs (Arnhart, 1998). Due to the growing diversity in needs whose satisfaction goes beyond a single family, an association of families produces a village and later villages associate to form a state, which by agency of the law influences societal behaviour. Thus, the state law has a habituating influence on the individual through obedience. Meanwhile, there are other embedded sub-systems which form out of the need for different fulfilments such as economic systems, culture and religion, whereby each form through individuals with related goals and guided by similar moral standards. Therefore, man exists in different interrelationships that form organically to satisfy different needs but guided by the universal state agency of the law, which aims to enable an individual achieve the ideal, morality and goodness in life (Aristotle, 1982). Thus, we can consider an act as good or bad depending on whether it enhances or inhibits the flourishing of our nature (Arnhart, 1998). Aristotle's Teleological ethics maintains that the state is the finished completion of man's potentials, fulfilment of man's instinct for a sociable and good life and is therefore a creation of nature (Aristotle, 1982). The organic theory of state maintains that the morality of an activity performed by an individual can be claimed if the nature of such activity is common to other individuals. This is in line with Mure's (1949) assertion that human affairs operate in different progressive, interrelated and complementary levels of associations, which culminate in an inclusive association of the state.

Furthermore, Aristotle's teleological biology considers humans as rational by nature whereby from birth, people have natural inclinations that identify them as rational animals.

Such innate impulses include the desire to have sufficient necessities of life, the gift of speech and natural moral sense (Jiyuan, 2012). To actualise such inclinations, humans need material resources, proper habituation, and intellectual stimulation. For example, humans are naturally endowed with potentialities for morality, which can be developed and turned into moral conduct through proper habituation and intellectual judgement (Arnhart, 1998). The natural gift of speech contains the potential that enables human beings to discriminate between moral and immoral acts, while the impulse of moral sense signifies that man has a natural sense of good and evil and of just and unjust: the association of living beings who possess these senses forms a family and a state (Jiyuan, 2012).

On the whole, Aristotle's organic theory of state suggests that procurement students possess natural inclinations, including for ethical conduct. The natural impulse of moral sense for example is capable of enabling procurement students to differentiate between ethical and unethical practices. The natural desires for procreation, sociable life and efficient fulfilment of various necessities for good life find their own actualisation through belongingness in multi-level interrelationships such as families, communities and the state. Aristotle's moral habituation perspective shows that multiple systems in which procurement students find belonging are responsible for activating, refining and perfecting their natural ethical potential e.g. through parents' guidance, ethical learning, obedience to law and justice. Thus, the combination of organic theory of state and moral habituation theory shows the complementariness of both nature and nurturing in shaping students' ethical sensitivity. Procurement students are adapted by nature to receive ethical virtue, which can be actualised through being nurtured in organically interrelated multiple systems such as family, village, schools and working communities – all of which are microcosms of the state.

2.1 Ethical sensitivity

According to Dellaportas *et al.* (2011) "ethical sensitivity concerns the way people initially encodes an ethical situation and the consequences that a person's actions might have on others." Simga-Mugan *et al.* (2005) considers ethical sensitivity as an individual's propensity to judge a certain conduct as unethical. With ethical sensitivity, an individual has the ability to recognise that a situation has a moral or ethical dimension through interpretation or comprehension (Rest, 1986), and this is a key determinant of ethical behaviour. According to Rest (1986), ethical sensitivity is the first and paramount component of moral judgement which is the identification of the salient ethical aspects of a situation. In the same line, Jagger (2011) avers that ethics teaching can raise the levels of ethical sensitivity of people which is the foundation for the development of moral judgement. This suggests that it is imperative to understand and streamline the ethical sensitivity of students at the university before they join the work environment.

Ethical sensitivity is an important enabler of individuals to exhibit moral response in what they do (Weaver *et al.*, 2008). The study in the health care by Van Der Zande *et al.* (2014) found that ethical sensitivity is an integral part of moral clinical decision-making and the subsequent provision of high-quality care. Muramatsu *et al.* (2019) stressed that ethical sensitivity is a key aspect of the ethical decision-making process, which is critical in realizing and solving ethical problems (Dellaportas *et al.*, 2011). Jagger (2011) demonstrated that low levels of ethical sensitivity can have a significant negative impact on the ability of a person to develop moral judgement. Conversely, Chan and Leung (2006) did not find any significant relationship between accounting students' ethical sensitivity and their ethical reasoning. This controversy therefore triggers debate on the relationship between a person's ethical sensitivity and subsequent ethical behaviour.

2.2 Gender and ethical sensitivity

Schutte *et al.* (2014) established that male and female students differ in their ethical sensitivity. Similarly, Simga-Mugan *et al.* (2005) reported that gender is one of the factors that affect individuals' ethical sensitivity. There are various studies which found out that females are more ethically sensitive than males. For example, Stanga and Turpen (1991) found that the female accounting students are more sensitive to unethical practices, less cynical and less likely to engage in unethical behaviour than their male counterparts. This also re-echoes Ameen *et al.* (1996), who found that ethical sensitivity of female accounting students is higher than that of male students. It was also established that male students are more cynical and unethical than female students. Similarly, Billiot *et al.* (2012) discovered that females were more ethically sensitive than males regardless of age or ethics courses. Several other scholars in different geographical contexts contend that females have higher ethical sensitivity than males (Cohen, *et al.*, 2001; Sidani *et al.*, 2009; Ogungbamila and Udegbe, 2014). This is further reinforced by the assertion that women exhibit relatively high ethical standards and engage in less unethical behaviour in what they do and strongly internalize moral traits than men (Kennedy *et al.*, 2017). In the same vein, Cheah and Shimul (2020) found that males are more likely to behave unethically as compared to females at their workplaces. Valente *et al.* (2021) reiterated that female students express stricter views on corporate ethics than their male counterparts. On the contrary, Kirilmaz *et al.* (2015) found out that gender does not cause any change in ethical sensitivity. Boateng and Agyapong (2017) also found that male accounting students are more ethical than their female counterparts. This gender-ethical sensitivity controversy concurs with the earlier research by Hebert *et al.* (1992), where no significant difference was found between males and females in ethical decision-making. Similarly, Krienert *et al.* (2021) also established that both female and male college students are likely to engage in unethical practices.

2.3 Family background and ethical sensitivity

According to Bogod and Leach (1999), the family is an intimate room where the core values, culture as well as morals of individuals are shaped: the education and upbringing of people have an influence on trustiness and fairness of the individual. Duh and Belak (2009) reveal that the family forms fundamental principles and core values, which can be seen as the guidelines in setting the vision, mission and goals, which influence the ethical behaviour of individuals. Walker and Taylor (1991) further stipulated that parental and familial contexts are important in promoting the stage of moral judgement development through processes such as parental warmth and affection, attitudes, interactions, discussion styles and disciplinary styles. White (2000) contends that family processes such as family adaptability, cohesion and communication predict differences in the content of ethical actions of the individuals. It was also argued that individuals from families with effective maternal and paternal parenting have high ethical sensitivity levels (Lamb, 2003). White and Matawie (2004) found out that the parents' morals significantly predict the child's behaviour. Several studies have shown that people who are raised in homes characterised by authoritative parenting have high ethical sensitivity (Baumrind, 1985; Steinberg, *et al.*, 1994). Galambos *et al.* (2003) add that lack of effective parenting in a family makes the family members aggressive, hostile, oppositional, and involving in delinquent behaviour. Furthermore, German *et al.* (2009) argue that effective parenting creates strong bonds among the family members, which positively influences their ethical behaviour. In addition, Woodbury (2012) agrees that individuals can depend on cohesive families and authoritative parents to develop abilities for sophisticated moral reasoning and behaviour. Similarly, Valente *et al.* (2021) established that students from higher education family backgrounds exhibit stricter views

on corporate ethics than those of their peers. However authors such as [Zopiatis and Krambia-Kapardis \(2007\)](#) reported no association between the individuals' ethical judgement and their family background.

2.4 Cynicism and ethical sensitivity

Cynicism can be described as a mindset characterised by hopelessness, disappointment and disillusionment, which is also associated with scorn, disgust, suspicion, contempt and distrust ([Andersson, 1996](#); [Andersson and Bateman, 1997](#); [Choy et al., 2021](#)). [Stavrova et al. \(2020\)](#) refers to cynicism as the tendency to believe that people are morally bankrupt and behave deceitfully to fulfil their self-interests. In the education sector, studies have established that organisational cynicism positively relates to factors that may either produce or accentuate unethical conduct such as job tension, teacher burnout, counterproductive work behaviour and non-compliance ([James, 2005](#)). Furthermore, cynicism has a significant and negative impact on workers' emotional pride ([Durrach et al., 2019](#)). It is also related to job stress and work alienation ([Koçoğlu, 2014](#)). Cynicism is underpinned by the belief that the principles of honesty, fairness, and sincerity are sacrificed to further the individual's self-interest, which makes cynics see little use in adhering to ethics and morality ([James, 2005](#)). Although some scholars argue that individuals who develop cynical attitudes towards their organisations do not necessarily possess the stable personality trait of cynicism ([Dean et al., 1998](#)), [Andersson and Bateman \(1997\)](#) noted that cynicism towards the organisation might reduce employee compliance to ethical behavioural practices requested by managers.

Similarly, [Nair and Kamalanabhan \(2010\)](#) observed that cynicism relates to the belief that others are engaging in unethical acts or that unethical behaviour is common or normal. This culminates in unethical intentions ([Nair and Kamalanabhan, 2010](#)). A study conducted in three universities in Cyprus found that faculty administrators' ethical leadership behaviour negatively effects academics' organisational cynicism behaviour. [Brands et al. \(2011\)](#) established that dental students appear to have a widespread and persistent cynicism about the ethics of their future profession. [Helm et al. \(2015\)](#) also found that consumer cynicism impacts marketplace behaviour. Similarly, [Chowdhury and Fernando \(2014\)](#) argued that cynicism is related to consumer ethics and moral disengagement. [Stavrova et al. \(2020\)](#) acknowledge that cynicism reinforces disrespectful behaviour in organisations. In the same vein, [Chatterjee et al. \(2021\)](#) identified cynicism as one of the barriers to ethical consumption. And whereas some scholars ([Alanoglu, and Karabatak, 2021](#)) argue that organisational cynicism differs according to gender, others find no significant gender differences in certain facets of cynicism ([Inandi and Gilç, 2021](#)).

3. Methodology

This is an exploratory study, which employs a cross-sectional and descriptive quantitative survey design. We epistemologically take a positivistic and reductionist stance of following pre-specified research questions drawn from the extant literature. We study final year undergraduate procurement students in Makerere University Business School and Kyambogo University in Uganda. The two institutions are chosen because they are the oldest, largest and most prestigious public universities in Uganda, admitting and rolling out to the job market the largest number of procurement workers. In addition, the two are the pioneers of university procurement education in Uganda under the auspices of The Netherlands government through the Nuffic project. Specifically, final year procurement students were chosen for the reason that they had covered ethics courses and had also completed their industrial training (field attachment) which presumably could influence

their ethical sensitivity and ethical decision-making. This is in line with scholars (Shaub *et al.*, 1993; Cheah and Shimul, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2021; Black *et al.*, 2021; Chen *et al.*, 2021; Okougbo *et al.*, 2021) who underlined the critical role of ethics education in enhancing ethical awareness.

Data were collected from a sample of 303 finalist students registered in 2018/2019 academic year, between the months of March 2019 through to June 2019. We took a census of all the third-year students in both universities since we are lecturers of procurement and could easily access students in class. Moreover, both universities are located in close proximity in Kampala capital city. We recognise that our results may not be generalisable to the entire procurement student population in all Ugandan universities, but believe that the sample suffices enough for this pioneer exploratory study. The data collection exercise lasted for three months due to students' low class attendance in Uganda. We would continue the exercise to capture those who would not have participated previously. Two of the co-authors met with students face to face during their lectures in their different study shifts, and would leave some time after the lectures for students to fill and return the questionnaires. The students were assured that the exercise was meant for only academic purposes and their anonymity would be ensured, since they were not required to disclose their names and other identification particulars. This was to enable them freely respond to the questions to minimise bias.

Ethical sensitivity was considered as one-dimensional construct using a scale adapted from the study by Ameen *et al.* (1996) and later adapted by Karakoc (2016). We followed the approach by Ameen *et al.* (1996) of asking students to make value judgements concerning activities with which they were familiar either through observation or by engagement, rather than their anticipated unethical behaviour during their future professional careers. We adapted the questions previously developed and used by Ameen, *et al.* (1996) on the ethical sensitivity of accounting students and used questionnaire items as they reflect what is ongoing in the Ugandan universities. According to Zopiatis and Krambia-Kapardis (2007), cheating and academic dishonesty is considered by researchers as a very serious unethical behaviour. Researchers (Sierles *et al.*, 1980; Krienert *et al.*, 2021; Valente *et al.*, 2021) add that cheating in college is a predictor of unethical behaviour in subsequent professional environments. The items were related to the school activities students engage in including; exams, project works, coursework and exercises. All items were anchored on a five point Likert-type scale ranging from, 1 = not cheating, 2 = least cheating, 3 = adequate cheating, 4 = quite cheating, 5 = most cheating. Average scores of each item were calculated during data analysis. The F statistic was used in determining mean differences between groups. The 1 point meant higher ethical sensitivity and 5 points meant low ethical sensitivity.

Borrowing from Ameen *et al.* (1996), we also investigated levels and differences in cynicism. According to Sierles *et al.* (1980), students who engage in controversial behaviour are more cynical. Three statements were adapted to measure cynicism related to cheating. Each of the statements was evaluated on a five-point scale; (5) "no truth", (4) "mildly truthful", (3) "somewhat truthful", (2) "fairly truthful", (1) "extremely truthful".

Before administration, the questionnaires were tested with a panel of four procurement professionals who are also academics. The collected data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Amos Version 27. Borrowing from authors (Goretzko *et al.*, 2021; Schreiber, 2021), who underline the importance of exploratory factor analysis, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis with the use of SPSS's Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation (Kaiser Normalization) (Table 8). Our aim was

to establish the loading of the items capturing ethical sensitivity and then to relate the factor structure to actual unethical procurement practices. To establish the adequacy and suitability of our data for exploratory factor analysis (EFA), Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett’s test were assessed. The rule of thumb is that the KMO value should be above 0.7 and Bartlett’s test should be significant ($p < 0.05$). The results indicate that there was sampling adequacy and suitability for us to carry out EFA (KMO = 0.707) and Bartlett’s test ($p = 0.000$) (Table 7). Principal components with Varimax rotation factor analysis revealed four factors each with an Eigen value of greater than 1.0. The four variables accounted for 65.9% of the variance in ethical sensitivity.

The four variables from EFA were further confirmed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS version 27, which yielded the following acceptable fit indices: CMIN = 22.733; DF = 19; P = 0.249; CMIN/DF = 1.196; GFI = 0.984; AGFI = 0.961; NFI = 0.940; RFI = 0.886; IFI = 0.990; TLI = 0.979; CFI = 0.989; RMSEA = 0.026; PCLOSE = 0.869 (Figure 1 for the CFA measurement model). Finally, like any other similar studies, the authors would like to acknowledge the possibility of the issue of “social desirability” whereby students may respond to what they think is socially desirable.

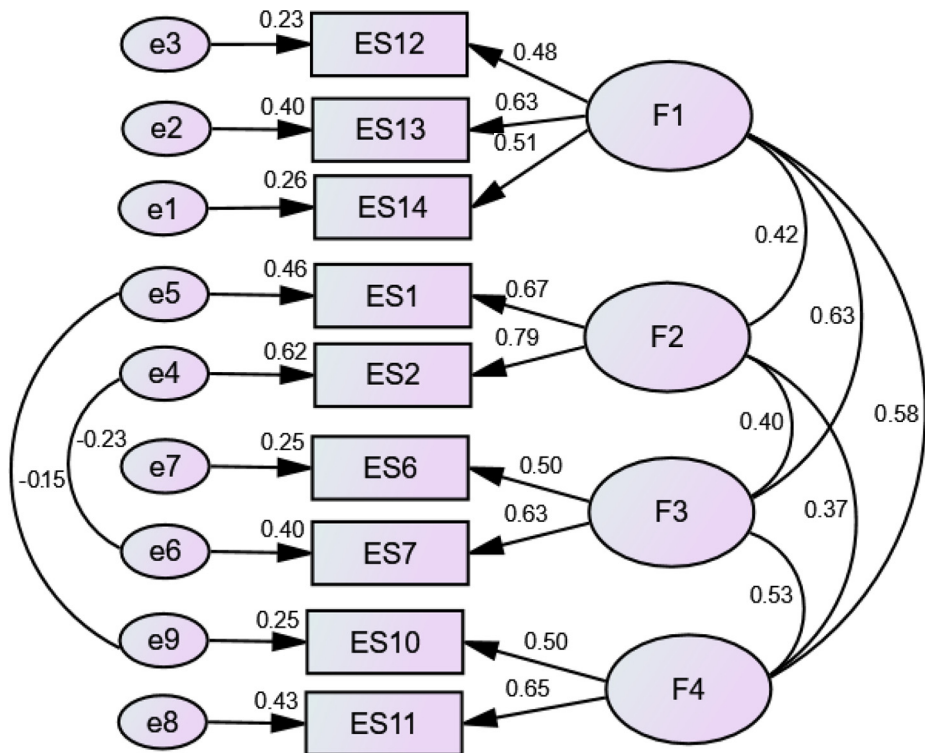


Figure 1.
CFA Measurement
model for ethical
sensitivity

Notes: CMIN = 22.733; DF= 19; P = 0.249; CMIN/DF = 1.196; GFI = .984; AGFI = 0.961; NFI = 0.940; RFI = 0.886; IFI = 0.990; TLI = 0.979; CFI = 0.989; RMSEA = 0.026; PCLOSE = 0.869

4. Analysis and results

Out of the 303 students who participated in the study, 177 (58.4%) were females and 126 (41.6%) were males. A total of 87.8% of the students were in the age range of 20–25 years and only 12.2% were above 25 years. This means that the study was dominated by millennials, i.e. respondents were in generation Y. This is a generation which is socially active, and has been shaped by parental excesses and computers. Regarding family background, 63% indicated that their parents were still living together and 37% revealed that their parents separated. This suggests most of the respondents are still being advised, supported and assisted by their parents. On academic performance, the majority of students (35.3%) had CGPA of 3.5–4. A total of 31% were in a range of 3–3.4, 22.8% were in a range of 4–5 and only 10.9% had CGPAs below 3, which is an indicator of fair academic performance, because the highest CGPA score in Ugandan universities is 5.

The results in both [Tables 1](#) and [2](#) indicate that the ethical sensitivity level of future procurement professionals in Uganda is low. The overall results in [Table 1](#) indicate that procurement students are willing to engage in adequate cheating for their survival and success at the University ($M = 3.020$, $SD = 0.663$). According to students' responses as a group, there is no significant difference between the male students and female students regarding the level of engagement in cheating in the different academic activities. However, as observed in [Table 2](#), there was a significant difference only on one activity (ES10 – there are several unethical ways of passing university exams in addition to the much reading of the books), where females believe in engaging in such unethical actions than females in order to pass the university exams ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.188$) compared to males ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.331$). This is probably because females in Uganda have several avenues to cheat examinations and get free marks as opposed to males. Furthermore, the results in [Table 2](#) show that 13 items out the 18 items, students agreed that they engage and are likely to get involved in adequate cheating. The students indicated that they rather ask someone for the answers during a final exam than fail it (ES3: $M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.428$). They also agreed that they had ever given answers to colleagues during an exam (ES4: $M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.444$). This means that the supervision of students during examinations is still not very strict and adequate enough to prevent the students from all kinds of cheating. The students added that it is difficult not to look at other students' exam papers during exams (ES6: $M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.469$). This means that sitting arrangements during examinations seem to be deficient, and this could perhaps be due to large student numbers compared to the size of lecture rooms. The students further indicated that sitting next to a bright friend in an exam gives them comfort (SE7: $M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.607$), which is a sign of willingness and readiness to cheat during exams. In terms of cynicism, the above findings suggest that students believe that unethical practices are normal.

Sex	N	Mean	SD	F	Sig.
<i>All activities</i>					
Male	126	2.940	0.636	0.036	0.849
Female	177	2.900	0.689		
Total	303	3.020	0.663		

Notes: Means based on following response range: 1 = not cheating; 2 = least cheating; 3 = adequate cheating; 4 = quite cheating; 5 = most cheating

Table 1.
Overall mean
severity of students'
ethical actions based
on gender

Activity	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	F	Sig.
<i>ES1</i>						
Male	126	2.65	1.551	0.138	2.962	0.086
Female	177	2.44	1.441	0.108		
Total	303	2.55	1.510			
<i>ES2</i>						
Male	126	2.76	1.472	0.131	0.143	0.706
Female	177	2.61	1.466	0.110		
Total	303	2.70	1.510			
<i>ES3</i>						
Male	126	3.40	1.443	0.129	0.128	0.721
Female	177	3.38	1.413	0.106		
Total	303	3.40	1.428			
<i>ES4</i>						
Male	126	3.37	1.485	0.132	1.377	0.241
Female	177	3.29	1.403	0.105		
Total	303	3.33	1.444			
<i>ES5</i>						
Male	126	2.20	1.357	0.121	0.889	0.346
Female	177	2.05	1.318	0.099		
Total	303	2.13	1.338			
<i>ES6</i>						
Male	126	3.16	1.456	0.130	0.000	0.998
Female	177	3.05	1.482	0.111		
Total	303	3.11	1.469			
<i>ES7</i>						
Male	126	3.18	1.567	0.140	1.214	0.271
Female	177	3.05	1.647	0.124		
Total	303	3.12	1.607			
<i>ES8</i>						
Male	126	2.67	1.502	0.134	0.011	0.916
Female	177	2.64	1.502	0.113		
Total	303	2.66	1.502			
<i>ES9</i>						
Male	126	2.81	1.390	0.124	0.099	0.753
Female	177	3.11	1.442	0.108		
Total	303	3.00	1.416			
<i>ES10</i>						
Male	126	3.75	1.331	0.119	8.753	0.003
Female	177	3.95	1.188	0.089		
Total	303	3.90	1.260			
<i>ES11</i>						
Male	126	3.13	1.388	0.124	0.538	0.464
Female	177	3.25	1.343	0.101		
Total	303	3.19	1.366			
<i>ES12</i>						
Male	126	2.29	1.186	0.106	1.387	0.240
Female	177	2.20	1.314	0.099		
Total	303	2.25	1.250			

Table 2.
Mean severity for
each individual
ethical statement
based on gender

(continued)

Activity	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	F	Sig.
<i>ES13</i>						
Male	126	2.96	1.323	0.118	0.381	0.537
Female	177	3.12	1.379	0.104		
Total	303	3.04	1.351			
<i>ES14</i>						
Male	126	2.47	1.446	0.129	0.082	0.775
Female	177	2.42	1.460	0.110		
Total	303	2.45	1.453			
<i>ES15</i>						
Male	126	3.00	1.391	0.124	0.182	0.670
Female	177	2.80	1.387	0.104		
Total	303	2.90	1.389			
<i>ES16</i>						
Male	126	3.24	1.242	0.111	0.003	0.954
Female	177	3.16	1.247	0.094		
Total	303	3.20	1.245			
<i>ES17</i>						
Male	126	3.47	1.343	0.120	0.833	0.362
Female	177	3.36	1.254	0.094		
Total	303	3.42	1.310			
<i>ES18</i>						
Male	126	3.41	1.376	0.123	0.172	0.679
Female	177	3.59	1.388	0.104		
Total	303	3.50	1.382			

Notes: Means based on following response range: 1 = not cheating; 2 = least cheating; 3 = adequate cheating; 4 = quite cheating; 5 = most cheating

Table 2.

The students also agreed that sometimes, they are forced to buy work from fellow students or commercial researchers (ES9: M = 3.00, SD = 1.416). This implies that facilitators have to be vigilant when assessing students' works, as students tend to copy other students' ideas. In addition, universities should have various approaches of examining students, for example, by including the take-home assignments alongside the class tests or exams. Plagiarism detection software would also suffice because most commercial researchers in Uganda are fond of duplicating work for different students. The respondents believed that there are several unethical ways of passing university exams in addition to the much reading of books (ES10: M = 3.90, SD = 1.260). This implies that students believe in fulfilling their aspirations even if it means non-compliance with formal procedures. The students further revealed that sometimes, it is difficult not to copy homework from other students (ES11: M = 3.19, SD = 1.366). This implies that facilitators have to ensure that students defend their works and ideas through class presentations.

Furthermore, the students revealed that when they miss a test, they are more willing to ask people who have already taken it such that they can pass it very well (ES13: M = 3.04, SD = 1.351). They further said that sometimes rephrasing words of someone's work is unavoidable in order to come up with an excellent work (ES16: M = 3.20, SD = 1.245). These students resemble procurement employees who modify other people's procurement bids to favour particular suppliers and get kickbacks. The students further agreed that in case of

group assignment, if they are busy they would talk to friends to assist them and include their names (ES17: $M = 3.42, SD = 1.310$). This implies that, to ensure effectiveness, the facilitators should use mixed methods of evaluating students' group works by, for example, using physical presentations in addition to hard or soft copy submissions. Students whose names are just included on group works can easily be identified using a presentation requirement. The respondents further believed that befriending the facilitators can be of help during studies at the university (ES18: $M = 3.50, SD = 1.382$). This means that students befriend facilitators expecting to be unfairly assisted academically and this mirrors procurement employees who tend to form networks expecting to gain unfair advantage in the procurement process. According to students' responses as a group, there is no significant difference between students who come from families whose parents are still together and those who separated regarding ethical sensitivity, implying that family background is not a determinant as demonstrated in Table 3.

From the descriptive analysis displayed in Tables 1–3, the first three research questions were answered. The first question concerned the level of ethical sensitivity of procurement students; the second concerned the gender influence on the level of ethical sensitivity of procurement students, while the third asked whether family background influences the level of ethical sensitivity of procurement students. As hitherto explained, and as can be observed from the tables, it was found that the level of ethical sensitivity of procurement students is generally low regardless of the gender and family background of students.

We also analysed data relating to cynicism to ascertain whether procurement students whose ethical sensitivity has been found to be low are also cynical as the literature suggests (Sierles *et al.*, 1980). It was revealed that all procurement students are cynical ($M = 3.499, SD = 0.89$). As can be seen from Tables 4 and 6, there are generally no significant differences in cynicism based on gender and family background. However, as observed in Table 5, the only particular significant difference was on statement EC8 (People who say they have never cheated are hypocrites) where males were more cynical than females. This indicates that male students highly believe that cheating is normal and everybody can get involved, given an opportunity (Tables 4–6).

Table 3.
Overall mean severity of students' ethical actions basing on family background

Family background	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	F	Sig.
<i>ESMEAN</i>						
Yes	191	3.06	0.67	0.049		
No	112	3.04	0.65	0.061	0.083	0.773

Notes: Means based on following response range: 1 = not cheating; 2 = least cheating; 3 = adequate cheating; 4 = quite cheating; 5 = most cheating

Table 4.
Student overall mean rating of cynicism basing on gender

Sex	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	F	Sig.
<i>CYNICISM</i>						
Male	126	3.58	0.81	0.072	2.792	0.096
Female	177	3.44	0.94	0.071		
Total	303	3.499	0.89	0.051		

Notes: Means based on following response range: 1 = not cheating; 2 = least cheating; 3 = adequate cheating; 4 = quite cheating; 5 = most cheating

Sex	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	F	Sig.	Cynicism and ethical sensitivity
<i>EC8</i>							95
Male	126	3.53	1.282	0.114	4.883	0.028	
Female	177	3.26	1.422	0.107			
Total	303	3.37	1.370	0.079			
<i>EC9</i>							
Male	126	4.12	0.977	0.087	0.044	0.834	
Female	177	3.98	1.031	0.077			
Total	303	4.04	1.009	0.058			
<i>EC10</i>							
Male	126	3.10	1.347	0.120	1.916	0.167	
Female	177	3.08	1.420	0.107			
Total	303	3.09	1.388	0.080			

Notes: Means based on following response range: 1 = not cheating; 2 = least cheating; 3 = adequate cheating; 4 = quite cheating; 5 = most cheating

Table 5.
Student mean rating of cynicism on individual statements

Family background	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	F	Sig.	
<i>EC8</i>							Table 6. Student mean rating of cynicism basing on family background
Yes	191	3.36	1.350	0.098	0.589	0.443	
No	112	3.39	1.410	0.133			
<i>EC9</i>							
Yes	191	3.93	1.096	0.079	1.916	0.167	
No	112	4.22	0.813	0.077			
<i>EC10</i>							
Yes	191	3.08	1.393	0.101	0.070	0.791	
No	112	3.09	1.386	0.131			

Notes: Means based on following response range: 1 = not cheating; 2 = least cheating; 3 = adequate cheating; 4 = quite cheating; 5 = most cheating

To answer the fourth research question, we first conducted both EFA and confirmatory factor analyses (CFA). The aim was to understand the factor structure that would emerge from the items relating to ethical sensitivity to enable us figure out their connotation to actual unethical behavioural practices in procurement in Uganda. From [Table 7](#), we see that the items loaded on four factors (i.e. ES1, ES2, ES3, ES4), which were also confirmed through confirmatory factor analysis ([Figure 1](#)). We named the first factor as opportunism/selfishness because the three items mimicked self-seeking, which results in unethical enrichment. The second factor was named as collusion because the items involve working

KMO and Bartlett's Test							
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy							0.707
<i>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity</i>							
Approx. Chi-Square							372.520
Df							36
Sig.							0.000

Table 7.
KMO and Bartlett's test

together to benefit dubiously at the expense of others. We named the third factor as bid rigging because the items mirror having knowledge of other potential suppliers' bids before bid submission and adjusting accordingly. Finally, we named the fourth as deliberate non-compliance because the items reflect deliberate failure to follow the right procedures. Some prior works on students' ethical sensitivity using similar items have not only ended on exploratory factor analysis but also left the emerging factors unnamed. But, we believe it adds some value to a study of this nature by taking a step further to interpret what such loading could mean for unethical behaviour in practice (Tables 7–9).

After identifying the four factors, Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis was conducted. In Table 9, we find that there is a positive significant relationship between cynicism and all the four components of ethical sensitivity ($r = 0.329^{**}$, $p < 0.01$). This answers the fourth research question implying that students who are cynical are likely to have low ethical sensitivity.

5. Discussion

The results reported in this paper suggest that the level of ethical sensitivity of final year procurement students is low and that cynicism is evident in both male and female students. Although this finding contradicts those of scholars (Alanoglu, and Karabatak, 2021) who emphasise that the level of cynicism differs according to gender, it concurs with Inandi and

Table 8.
Exploratory factor
analysis for ethical
sensitivity

	Rotated Component Matrix ^a				Communalities
	Component 1	2	3	4	
I see no problem studying from someone else's notes without their approval (ES12)	0.780				0.648
I see no problem hiring someone to write for me the assignment after doing my basic research for better results (ES14)	0.666				0.571
When I miss a test, I have to ask someone who has already taken it such that I can pass it very well (ES13)	0.618				0.520
Exchanging papers during an examination can rescue those who did not read (ES1)		0.860			0.766
Taking a test for a friend can rescue him or her (ES2)		0.855			0.767
It is difficult not to look at another student's exam paper during exams (ES6)			0.769		0.646
Sitting next to a bright friend in an exam gives me comfort (ES7)			0.765		0.669
There are several ways of passing university exams in addition to the much reading of the books (ES10)				0.823	0.715
Sometimes it is difficult not to copy homework from another student (ES11)				0.724	0.633
Eigen Value	2.572	1.283	1.064	1.016	
% of Variance	28.583	14.256	11.817	11.286	
Cumulative %	28.583	42.839	54.656	65.942	

Notes: Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with kaiser normalization. ^ARotation converged in 5 iterations

Gılıç (2021) who did not find significant gender differences in particular cynicism dimensions. The correlation results also revealed a positive and significant association between students' level of cynicism and ethical sensitivity. This confirms earlier studies (Sierles *et al.*, 1980; Stavrova *et al.*, 2020; Chatterjee *et al.*, 2021), which acknowledge that cynicism is associated with unethical behaviour.

The low level of ethical sensitivity among students in this study contradicts some of the prior studies such as Yahaya *et al.* (2016) who found that only about 11% of the 275 accounting students were willing to engage in unethical conduct. But this finding agrees with those of other scholars such as Saat *et al.* (2009), who found that Malaysian accounting students had low ethical sensitivity. The low level of ethical sensitivity of procurement students in this study context reflects the reported rampant unethical behaviour and unbridled squandering of public funds through public procurement in Uganda. Moreover, this is re-enforced by the EFA and CFA results, whereby items related to cheating examinations emerged with four factors which when interpreted in terms of unethical behaviour in practice are labelled as bid rigging, collusion, opportunism and non-compliance behaviour. Researchers (Shaub *et al.*, 1993; Cheah and Shimul, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2021; Black *et al.*, 2021; Chen *et al.*, 2021; Okougbo *et al.*, 2021) underline that ethics education is pivotal in cultivating and enhancing ethical awareness. Further, previous researchers agree that cheating in college is a predictor of unethical behaviour in subsequent professional environments (Krienert *et al.*, 2021; Valente *et al.*, 2021). This therefore implies that if procurement students' ethical conduct cannot be shaped during training at the university, procurement graduates are likely to enter the working environment with unethical behaviour. This is also in line with Aristotle's theory of moral habituation and organic theory of state, which suggest that people are naturally endowed with virtuous potentials such that by habituation, moral virtues can be learned and perfected through repetitive practice of similar activities and incremental learning.

Regarding gender, this study found no significant gender differences regarding ethical sensitivity among procurement students. This is in line with prior research (Hebert *et al.*, 1992; Kirilmaz *et al.*, 2015), which established that gender does not influence ethical sensitivity. Krienert *et al.* (2021) also established that both female and male college students are likely to engage in unethical practices. More specifically, the findings concur with scholars (Eweje and Brunton, 2010; Boateng and Agyapong, 2017) who found no significant difference in the ethical sensitivity of male and female business and accounting students. However, the findings contradict some previous studies (Simga-Mugan *et al.*, 2005; Billiot *et al.*, 2012; Ogungbamila and Udegbe, 2014; Kennedy *et al.*, 2017; Cheah and Shimul, 2020; Valente *et al.*, 2021) which contend that females are more ethically sensitive than males. But, this also contradicts Zopiatis and Krambia-Kapardis (2007) who found that male students in Cyprus tend to exhibit more ethical sensitivity to computer related ethics and selfishness

Study variables	Mean	SD	CYN	ESN11	ESN12	ESN13	ESN14	ESENTIVITY
Cynicism	3.499	0.890	1					
ESN11	2.575	0.985	0.317**	1				
ESN12	2.599	1.296	0.160**	0.255**	1			
ESN13	3.099	1.252	0.191**	0.318**	0.205**	1		
ESN14	3.536	1.064	0.201**	0.311**	0.185**	0.256**	1	
Ethical sensitivity	2.952	0.762	0.329**	0.670**	0.657**	0.690**	0.633**	1

Note: **, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

Table 9.
Correlation analysis

compared to females. A cross-national investigation of ethical attitudes of university students in Australia, Singapore and Hong Kong found that males were more ethically sensitive than females (Phau and Kea, 2007). This further disagrees with an earlier study by Ameen *et al.* (1996) which concluded that female accounting students exhibit higher ethical sensitivity than their male counterparts.

The above divergences and convergences, notwithstanding, the lack of distinction between male and female procurement students on ethicality reflects the situation in Uganda. In the recent past, the Ugandan public service has witnessed increasing numbers of women who take up decision-making positions, due in part, to the women emancipation movement that has been ongoing for quite a long time. For example, the female students are given extra free points to join public universities. This example may in itself tempt females to think they deserve special favours, which ultimately inculcates unethicity. This study finds that on ethical sensitivity, male and female students significantly differ only on one activity which related to several unethical ways of passing university exams in addition to hard work and extensive revision. In here, females scored a higher mean implying that they believe in engaging in unethical practices such as circumventing formal procedures. This is not surprising, given that some female students at Makerere University have been implicated in offering sexual favours to lecturers and administrators in exchange for marks (Daily monitor, 2013; The New vision, 2019). The advocacy for gender equality could also add to the problem. In the African traditional society, men used to be providers for their families, but nowadays, females look forward to being independent, which makes them as egoistic and individualistic as men, which motivates them to involve in unethical enrichment.

Secondly, the lack of gender differences reflects the Ugandan working environment, in which both males and females have been implicated in unethical conduct. Many of the ethical scandals involving misappropriation of public funds and other unethical practices such as collusion, conflict of interest, bribery and corruption in general have involved a mixture of both males and females attempting to defend their alleged unethical conduct. Thus in Uganda, one finds it difficult to differentiate employees on the basis of gender when it comes to ethics in procurement. Many of the females have been accused of grand scale corruption, including, most recently, in Uganda's central bank, where the Ugandan parliament discovered that, for a long period of time, spanning over 15 years, the central bank officials have been liquidating and selling off several commercial banks dubiously. Indeed the government of Uganda through the office of the Inspector General of Government, has demanded that all public servants regardless of gender declare their wealth annually to minimise unethical enrichment.

Finally, the study establishes that family background does not matter: all students regardless of whether their parents were still together or separated displayed low ethical sensitivity and corresponding high levels of cynicism. This is surprising given that we expected students groomed by both parents to be less cynical and hence highly ethical sensitive. The surprise is further exacerbated by prior researchers like Lamb (2003), who emphasised that individuals from families with both maternal and paternal effective parenting have high ethical sensitivity levels. Similarly, Valente *et al.* (2021) underlined that there is an association between the family background of students and their ethical sensitivity. The findings contradict scholars (Sampson *et al.*, 1997; Reiss and Leve, 2007), who affirmed that conditions such as family poverty, neighbourhood violence, single parent family and other family disruptions negatively influence individuals' ethical attitudes such as by developing the "do not care attitude". But this finding seems to agree with scholars such as Zopiatis and Krambia-Kapardis (2007) who maintain that there is no relationship

between individuals' ethical judgements and their family background. In this study context, this finding mirrors a situation where Ugandan parents apparently do not provide the necessary parenting to their children. The gravity of this problem can be reflected in the emerging volunteer projects such as "Ekisakatte" that was initiated by the largest kingdom in Uganda – the Buganda Kingdom – where during school holidays, young children are separated from their parents and gathered in one place to be taught various virtues, including socio-cultural, religious as well as performance of family cores like food preparation, which would have ideally been a responsibility of the parents.

5.1 Theoretical implications

First, this paper contributes to our understanding of unethical behaviour in procurement practice that has been highly pronounced, especially in developing countries. Through the moral habituation and organic theory of state, this study contributes to our understanding of morality as a natural potential whereby ethical virtue can be learned, imitated, nurtured and perfected through repetitive practice and is therefore incremental. This study suggests that on average, a newly hired procurement professional will most likely enter the working environment exhibiting low levels of ethical behaviour and such unethicity might escalate over time due to incremental learning. Hence, our study helps to emphasise that the moral habituation and organic theory of state are important theoretical perspectives in understanding the organic nature, trajectory, transitional and non-stationary nature of individuals' ethical behaviour.

Second, this study addresses a gap of the limited literature on ethical sensitivity and cynicism of university students. It contributes to the controversial debate pertaining to the role of gender and family background on ethical behaviour and cynicism. Further, although studies on students' ethical sensitivity could be traced in other university programmes such as nursing, accounting and other business studies, procurement has been underrepresented, yet it is fundamental to socio-economic development, besides being greatly marred with scandals. Moreover, hinging on the acknowledgement that individuals' ethical sensitivity and behaviour differ across countries (Cheah and Shimul, 2020), this study contributes to the literature on ethical sensitivity from the context of a developing country – Uganda.

5.2 Practical implications

This study provides multiple insights for managers, practitioners, government, policy makers, training institutions (especially universities) and families. To begin with, managers should be aware that fresh procurement graduates are likely to enter the job market with unethical behavioural mindset such as opportunism/selfishness, collusion, bid rigging and deliberate non-compliance to formal procedures as revealed by the factorability of items in this study. Managers should therefore impose stringent screening methods during recruitment to minimise procurement of unethical personnel: interviewees should be subjected to rigorous behavioural testing techniques using ethical scenarios aimed to unveil their ethical sensitivity.

Secondly, since the government of Uganda is in charge of education curriculum development and modification (through the National Curriculum Development Centre), it should also make ethics education compulsory at all levels in the national education curriculum to nurture students regarding ethical conduct. This is pertinent since the moral habituation and organic theory of state suggest that morality can be developed through incremental learning. In addition, the government should impose strict conviction and punitive measures for unethical procurement workers such as imprisonment coupled with

confiscation of unethical proceeds so as to inculcate ethical awareness and fear of consequences among students and the general public.

Furthermore, managers in organisations should develop continuous on job training programmes focussing on ethics and these should be made compulsory regardless of gender or family background. The moral habituation theory suggests that moral character can be changed over time, meaning it can change positively. In this study, it is generally observed that all potential procurement employees are inherently unethical regardless of their gender or family background. Thus, related to this, during recruitment, managers should not attempt to reserve particular sensitive positions, especially those more vulnerable to unethical practices for females or people from specific family backgrounds rather than merit on the pretext that females or job candidates from particular family backgrounds are potentially ethical. This recommendation deviates from [Cheah and Shimul \(2020\)](#) who recently claimed that female employees are more suitable job candidates than males regarding ethical values at workplace. Furthermore, it deviates from [Valente et al. \(2021\)](#) who opine that female students and those from higher education family backgrounds exhibit higher levels of ethical sensitivity at work than their peers.

Furthermore, training institutions, especially universities should emphasise ethics education in all study programmes so as to nurture students' moral virtues. Currently, it is evident that there are many study programmes in Ugandan universities that do not offer ethics courses. The role of ethics training in inculcating ethical sensitivity and behaviour has been emphasised in the recent studies ([Cheah and Shimul, 2020](#); [Lee et al., 2021](#); [Black et al., 2021](#); [Chen et al., 2021](#); [Okougbo et al., 2021](#)). Hence, contrary to the current practice in Uganda, where undergraduate business students are offered only one course of business ethics throughout their studies, this study recommends that the number of ethics related courses should be increased and given more weight in terms of credit units, as it is understood that ethical sensitivity can either develop or decline over time. Training institutions should also toughen punitive measures for students who involve in academic fraud such as cheating examinations. These measures could include marks reduction, suspension, retaking the cheated examination and at worst dismissal.

Training institutions should also emphasise field attachment/internship, whereby students should be attached to certain organisations relevant to their study programmes. Hence, field attachment should be one of the courses in all study programmes, which should be assessed and given considerable weight. This is important for making students aware of the ethical and cynical situations in their potential working environment. To implement this, universities should, for example, collaborate with organisations so as to secure placements for their students. Moreover, students should be required to report on the ethical and cynical situations experienced during the field attachment exercise.

This study also establishes that cynicism is associated with ethical sensitivity. Hence, universities should ensure that avenues that potentially breed cynic behaviour are blocked. For example, students should be offered equal treatment regardless of their gender or family background. There should also be transparency in terms of students' assessments and unethical staff should be punished accordingly and in a transparent manner. In addition, the importance of trust should be emphasised in universities and all university employees should be encouraged to be exemplary regarding ethical conduct.

Finally, parents also need to provide effective parenting to their children such as parental nurturance, emotional warmth and support, demonstrated acceptance and active interest in their children's moral development. Parents should set clear and reasonable expectations as well as standards for proper morals with coherent rules and consequences for misbehaviour as well as effective monitoring and supervision of

children's actions. Thus, borrowing from the organic theory of state and moral habituation theory by Plato and Aristotle, whereby morality is organic, incremental and systemic, it is apparent that parents can provide a springboard for the subsequent ethical direction of prospective procurement professionals.

5.3 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to find out the level of ethical sensitivity and cynicism of future procurement professionals in Uganda and how it could be influenced by the students' gender and family background together with the relationship between cynicism and ethical sensitivity. The study findings revealed that the level of ethical sensitivity of final year procurement students in Uganda is generally low. The study also established that gender and family background differences do not determine the students' ethical sensitivity. Further, all procurement students were found to be cynical regardless of their gender. Both EFA and CFA revealed factors relating to ethical situations such as opportunism/selfishness, collusion, bid rigging and deliberate non-compliance, which are prevalent in the Ugandan public procurement practice. And correlation analysis revealed a positive and significant association between cynicism and instances that depict low ethical sensitivity. Thus, based on our results and borrowing from [Shaub *et al.* \(1993\)](#)'s assertion that ethics education shapes ethical awareness and that cheating in college mirrors unethical behaviour in subsequent professional environment, we can make the overall conclusion that unethical behaviour in procurement does not develop at the workplace: graduates leave training institutions when already or potentially unethical and unethical practices can be perfected with work experience in accordance with the moral habituation and organic theory of state.

5.4 Limitations and future research directions

Like any other survey research, this study suffers some limitations that are likely to affect the generalisability of the findings. First, the moral habituation and organic theory of state perspectives of procurement ethics offered a signal that morality changes over time. Hence, a more nuanced and in-depth approach through interviews using longitudinal studies is needed. Such studies can follow trajectories of students from lower education levels through to universities and workplaces to establish the incremental nature or deviations in ethical behaviour.

Further, this study was conducted in only two public universities. Though the two are the largest and most prominent universities in Uganda, the results may not represent the entire university population. More research is needed to enhance generalisability to the university population in Uganda, including private universities and other developing countries for external validity purposes.

Finally, this study considered cynicism and the demographic variables – family background and gender – as antecedents of ethical sensitivity. Hence, further research can investigate other potential antecedents of ethical sensitivity of students such as school ethical leadership, ethical climate, cultural dimensions, ethical reasoning, regulatory factors, social cohesion, ethical education and training and other personality factors such as the level of compassion in universities. Quantitative survey research can also focus on the outcomes of ethical sensitivity such as corporate governance, ethical judgement and ethical decision-making in universities.

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