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Business ethics: Are accounting students aware? A Cross-cultural study of four countries

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Abstract

The basic question addressed in this study is whether accounting students, from four countries located in three different continents, are aware of ethical conduct and if there are any differences in awareness among these groups of students. The subjects are from Mississippi State University (United States), the University of the Philippines (Philippines), the University of Indonesia at Jakarta (Indonesia), and University of Tampere (Finland). Specifically, the study examined the student's perception of ethical relative to sixteen cases, each of which describes an ethical dilemma. The results showed that, overall, the students from the four universities differ significantly in their perceptions of ethics. The students from the University of the Philippines indicated the highest degree of ethical awareness. The students from Mississippi State University and the University of Tampere showed almost identical scores. In seven of the sixteen cases, all four groups of students clearly showed ethical awareness. All four groups of students were indifferent of situations that include training sales force on high-pressured selling techniques and hiring employees away from competitors. All four groups of students found nothing wrong with giving awards to customers based on dollar purchases to maintain customers loyalty. All four groups expressed their strongest disapproval of deceitful actions involving unsubstantiated advertising claim, using high pollutant material to avoid raising price, and selling a banned carcinogen sleepwar in far flung areas with no means of

knowing about the danger if the product.

The recent emphasis on the inclusion of ethics in business curricula has given rise to the questions of how aware the business student is already of the subject. If the student has already learned of the difference between right and wrong, then the curricula would be different to that which would be required by student who does not know of this difference. The purpose of such a course would be to give the student some understanding of what would be considered ethical conduct before the student moves into the "real" world, where each segment of society is trying to define and apply ethical principles as perceived and required within that segment. Thus, in the business segment, a specific set of rules and acceptable patterns of behavior have been developed; bankers, lawyers, accountants, doctors and other professionals have specific codes of ethics to which adherence is expected. The purpose of this study is to examine whether accounting students, from four countries located in three continents, viz., Mississippi State University (MSU), University of the Philippines (UP) in Manila, University of Indonesia (UI) at Jakarta, and University of Tampere (UT) in Finland are aware of ethical conduct and if there are any differences in awareness among these four groups of accounting students.

Backgrounds

The United States in the last two decades, the 70's and the 80's, have been racked by scandals at various government units. The Watergate, Iran Contra, and the HUD scandals indicated the lack of ethics at the Executive levels. At the Congressional level, the House Post Office and House Bank scandals illustrated the lack of ethical principles among those elected by the people. In business, on Wall Street, the insider trading scandals, highlighted by Ivan Boesky and Michael Milken, showed the lack of ethics at the highest financial levels. The legal settlements, which allowed these two principals to retain much of their ill-gotten gains, did not create fear of punishment in the general populace. The Savings and Loan (S & L) industry failures, notably that of Silverado Bank, and Lincoln Savings, have been other examples of ethical failures. Recipients of the blame for these debacles are, in general, governmental deregulation and, in particular, the auditors of the defunct S & Ls. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) and the former Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corp. (FSLIC) have sued who were then the eight accounting firms, alleging that faulty audits hid the truth about insolvent S & Ls. Three of the

defendants are members of the 'Big Six' (The Washington Post, October 24, 1990, p.12). The resulting public outcry has forced the government to file lawsuits against all but one of the 'Big Six'. Accountants are now facing claims of more than \$2 billion in damages, and regulators are preparing lawsuits demanding millions more. Critics for the profession allege that due to a shrinking pool of clients in the 1980s the Big Six firms sometimes turned a blind eye to questionable activity to hold on to business (Business Week, April 6, 1992, pp. 78-79). It is not only in the United States that such scandals have occurred. In Japan, the Recruit scandal connected highly placed politicians with big time gangsters. German corporations made profits by setting up poison gas factories in Libya and Iraq. Dow Corning, a corporation that has an ethics program since 1976, had to withdraw its breast implants under pressure from the public and the Food and Drug Administration, on the grounds that insufficient testing could not answer the question of the effect of the silicone if the implant ruptured (Business Week, March 9, 1992, pp. 67-69). The largest financial scandal of the eighties decade was the failure of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) and to this day investigators are unable to explain the disappearance of \$15 billion (The Economist, Nov. 30, 1991, p. 76). The recent indictment of one of Washington's most respected persons, Clifford Clark, allegedly for taking bribes (Time, August 10, 1992, p. 40) indicates that ethical values have sunk extremely low.

One of the developing problems that ethicists face is due to the increasing internationalization of business. For example, a team of American managers may be stationed in a Third World country. Ethical values may not be emphasized in that country to the extent they are in the United States. Thus, having to accept lower ethical standards in business dealings, such as bribery, and commissions to power brokers, and then having to account for these "black" or "under the table" amounts, in some manner, in the books, could create a "laissez faire" attitude in these managers. When the tour of duty is over, would the returning managers be able to adjust back to the higher standards of ethics that would be expected in the United States? (Fortune, April 20, 1992, p. 168). In the United Kingdom, the accounting profession has also been haunted, in the recent past, by two financial scandals, the Dunsdale saga and the Guinness case. In the first case, the auditors were being blamed, while in the latter, the auditors picked up the trail but were never given the chance to pursue it to its logical conclusion (The Boston Line, October, 1990, p. 6). Thus, it is seen that such scandals are

not part of any specific geographic locale, but indicate a lack of global ethical principles. The general reaction in the United States seems to be try to educate the younger generation and efforts have been made by business schools to integrate ethics instruction into the curriculum as required by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

Literature Review

There were several studies conducted on ethical values of business students. A number of studies compared the perceptions of ethical values between liberal arts students with those of business students. The results did not indicate that one group was more ethical than the other.

Goodman and Crawford (1974) found that there were no significant differences in ethical values between liberal arts majors and business students. Hawkins and Cocanougher (1972) and Shuptrine (1979) found that business students tend to accept questionable business practices more readily than no-business majors. Hawkins and Cocanougher also found that senior business students are more tolerant of questionable business practices than junior business students.

Harris in a 1989 study found (1) a significant difference in ethical values of graduating business and non-business majors; (2) that pre-business freshmen and non-business freshmen differ in ethical measures; (3) no significant difference among non-business freshman and seniors; and (4) that senior business students are more tolerant of questionable business practices than incoming freshmen.

Arlow and Ulrich (1985) carried out a longitudinal study, involving three time periods, to evaluate the effectiveness of ethics instruction on students. They found that, in the long run, ethical instruction has no significant impact on ethical values. This is agreement with a study done by Andrews in 1979 which indicated that ethics instruction did not change the ethical values of graduate business students.

There are a few studies which compared accounting majors with other business majors. Arlow and Ulrich (1980) tested business students at the beginning and end of the semester in a business and society course to see if the course material had any impact on the students ethical values. The results of the study showed a decrease in ethical values among accounting students while

those management and marketing students increased. Cherrington and Cherrington (1979) found that in cases involving moral dilemmas, accounting students fared better in honesty than the overall average and that accounting students were only slightly more honest than management students but considerably more honest than advertising students.

The results of a study by Fulmer and Cargile (1983) indicated that there are differences between accounting students and some other business students in the way ethical issues are perceived, with accounting students tending toward a more ethical viewpoint. The differences, however, appear to be found in perceptions only, not in actions.

A number of studies have examined the professional and work characteristics of accountants across cultures. In a study of Australian and U.S. auditors, Ferris, Dillard and Nethercott (1980) found few differences with respect to personal value structures, perceptions of the work environment, and work motivation levels. The authors suggest that cross national differences should be insignificant between countries of approximately the same level of economic development and with language similarities. In contrast, Amernic, Kanungo, and Aranya (1983), in a study of Anglophile and Francophile characterized accountants in Quebec, Canada, found that culture has a significant effect on certain professional and work values.

In an international comparison study, Ishmael P. Akaah (1990) examined differences in attitudes towards research ethics among marketing professionals in Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and the United States. The results of the study indicated a lack of significant differences in such attitudes among the marketing professionals in the four countries involved. The author explained the results by citing the fact that the four countries have a lot in common. The four are highly developed economically, all four believed in the free enterprise system, and all four have a common ancestry.

Swinyard, Rinne and Kau (1990) did a cross-cultural study that examined differences in morality and behavior toward software piracy in Singapore versus the United States. The study involved a total of 371 students - 221 attending a major western U.S. university and 150 attending the National University of Singapore. The study found that, although the Singaporean subjects were more knowledgeable about software copyright law, their attitudes were less supportive of those laws. The result

of the study also indicated that in making a moral decision, the Singaporean group was more influenced by the benefits of their actions on self, family, or community than by the legality of copying the software. On the other hand, the Americans based their moral decisions on the legality of the decision.

Although the study by Swinyard, Rinne and Kau was a cross-cultural study, the issue involved specifically that of copyright laws. Protection legislation covering copyright, patent and trade secrets originated in the Western world. The Asian culture, however, does not generally support the notion of protecting proprietary creative work. Thus, the results of the study are expected and are not a reflection of the general perception of ethical values by the student samples representing Asian and American cultures.

Russell Abratt, Deon Nel and Nicola Susan Higgs carried out an empirical study of the ethical beliefs of a group of South African and Australian managers. A questionnaire using 28 scenarios or vignettes was circulated to the two groups of managers and then analyzed for differences using T-tests and MANOVA. Results indicated that only three of the scenarios rejected the hypothesis of no difference between the two groups of managers; the results of the remaining 25 scenarios supported no difference in the ethical perceptions of South African and Australian managers. The conclusion suggested that culture has no effect on ethical perceptions, based on the assumption that South African culture was different to Australian culture.

Methodology

The objective of the study is to empirically examine whether differences in ethical attitudes exist among the four groups of accounting students attending universities that are continents apart, viz., Mississippi State University (MSU), the University of the Philippines (UP), University of Indonesia (UT), and the University of Tampere (UY) in Finland.

Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that there are no significant differences among the accounting students at Mississippi State University, the University of the Philippines, University of Indonesia at Jakarta, and the University of Tampere (Finland) in each of the sixteen vignettes presented. Each vignette describes a business situation that calls for an individual's approval or disapproval of the

action taken.

Subjects

The sample was drawn from the accounting students population of Mississippi State University, the University of the Philippines, University of Indonesia, and the University of Tampere. The total usable sample numbered 451 accounting students of which 98 were from Mississippi State University, 115 were from the University of Philippines, 171 were from the University of Indonesia, and 67 were from the University of Tampere. The questionnaire presented sixteen vignettes describing various ethical situations facing business management in today's environment. A five-point Likert scale was used with 5 indicating "strong disapproval" and 1 indicating "strong approval". Thus a higher score indicated a great student awareness of ethical business conduct

Data Analysis

The research hypothesis was tested employing a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) using the general linear model (GLM). The next step in the analysis was to test whether the differences among the means were statistically significant from one another for each of the sixteen vignettes using the Scheffe test at a significance level of .05.

Results of Data Analysis

A GLM procedure using the average rating of all sixteen vignettes was run to obtain some indication of overall differences among the groups specified in the hypothesis. The results showed that, overall, the students from the four universities differ significantly in their perceptions of ethics (see Table 1). The Scheffe test confirmed the GLM results showing that the students from the University of the Philippines, with average mean score of 4.0071, differ significantly in their perceptions of ethics from their counterparts from the University of Indonesia, Mississippi State University, and University of Tampere (average mean scores of 3.738, 3.6190 and 3.6083, respectively).

Table 1

The results of the analysis of variance for individual vignettes indicate rejection of Hypothesis 1 for fourteen of the sixteen

vignettes. As Table 2 indicates, students from the four schools differ significantly in their perceptions of ethical behavior expect for Vignettes K and M. The Scheffé test confirmed the results of the ANOVA, that is, the means, of the Vignettes that showed significant results, were found to be statistically different at .05 level, expect for J and P.

Table 2

The results of the data analysis for the vignettes that showed statistically significant results are discussed below.

Vignette A

Daily, Inc. is a leading manufacturer of breakfast cereals. Conscious of the market shift toward more healthful foods, it recently added a line of all fiber cereals to capitalize this trend and directed its advertising agency to prepare ad copy which stresses that this cereal helped prevent intestinal cancer among regular users even though there is no scientific evidence to prove or disprove this fact.

The ANOVA procedure showed a mean difference among the three groups of students at the .0211 level of significance. An examination of the means among the four groups (see Table 2) showed a significantly higher disapproval rating for the UP students (mean rating 4.63) than the UT students (mean of 4.23). There was no significant difference between the MSU, UP, and UI students.

Vignette B

State Electric, a publicly held electrical generating company, is faced with rapidly escalating costs of its low sulfur coal. Reliable estimates show this price trend to continue over the next five years necessitating an across-the-board price increase to customers. Lower cost, high sulfur coal is readily available; however its use will increase State's overall pollution emissions by 25%. Management opts for the high sulfur coal rather than raising the cost per KWH customers. As shown in Table 2, Hypothesis 1 was rejected at .002 level. An examination of the means, indicated disapproval by three of the four groups. The students from UP, UI and UT students expressed disapproval (mean of 4.32, 4.15, and 4.11, respectively) than their MSU counterparts (mean of 3.75).

Vignette C

Doug Watson is a salesman for Delta Drug Company and is responsible for calling on both physicians and pharmacists in a very wide area. With commission and bonuses, his annual salary averages about \$32,000. Doug has made it a practice of supplementing his salary by at least \$1,200 by padding his expense account. He rationalizes this behavior by saying that everyone else in the business is doing it.

The ANOVA procedure for Hypothesis 1 showed a significant difference among the four groups of students at .0001 level (see Table 2). All of the four groups strongly disapproved of the sales manager's action. This vignette, however, drew the strongest degree of disapproval from the UP students (mean of 4.62) than their counterparts from MSU, UI, and UT (mean of 4.27, 4.00, and 3.90, respectively).

Vignette D

Frank Pollard, Executive Vice President of United Industries calls the personnel director of one of their major suppliers and asks in a non-threatening way that his nephew be interviewed for a job in their organization. The personnel director complies with Pollard's request and arranges for the interview. Pollard's nephew fails miserably on the aptitude test which is required of all applicants; but is hired anyway because United is one of their biggest accounts.

Hypothesis 1 was rejected at .0184 and results of the Scheffe test indicated that the mean scores of student from UP (4.60) differ significantly with the students from MSU (4.21). All four groups indicated very strong ethical awareness in this vignette.

Vignette E

One of America's largest automobile manufacturers is the corporate sponsor of the popular series ANYTOWN VICE. The sponsor has been approached by a national coalition of concerned citizens as to the impact of this program on the morals of today's youth. The coalition demands that the sponsor exert its influence on the show's producer to tone down the sex and violence on the program. The sponsor's reply to the coalition, in essence, is that "our job is to sell cars not censor what the public wants to watch on TV."

The ANOVA procedure rejected Hypothesis 1, indicating significant difference in the perceptions of the four groups of students at the .0001 level. The Scheffe test indicated no significant differences between students from UP (mean of 4.19) and students from UI (mean of 3.99). Both groups of students expressed disapproval on this vignette. The students from MSU and UT, however, expressed indifference with mean of 3.28 and 3.05, respectively.

Vignette F

Kiddie Textiles, Inc., a manufacturer of children's sleepwear, responded to the appeal by the National Safety Council (NSC) and treated its entire fall line with the flame retardant agent TRIS. Research found this to be carcinogenic agent and TRIS treated textiles were subsequently banned from sale. Left with more than one million units in inventory of the banned products, Kiddie sold the entire lot at a cost to a dealer whom it was sure would sell the TRIS treated sleepwear to markets in the far flung areas which have not heard of TRIS and can't be supervised by NSC.

As shown in Table 2, the ANOVA procedures showed significant difference among the groups being studied at .0002. All the groups disapproved strongly with the action taken in this vignette. With means of 4.88, 4.70, and 4.62, the students from UP, UI, and UT showed a very high degree of ethical awareness regarding the situation described above. The MSU students with a mean of 4.42 also expressed disapproval.

Vignette G

The U.S. Patent Office recently issued an exclusive patent to Tiger Automotive for a fuel efficient device which has been proven to increase the average car's mileage by 45%. Given that Tiger is protected from direct competition by its patent, it has decided to price its new product at \$45 to auto parts dealers even though it costs less than \$1 to produce and distribute.

The ANOVA results (see Table 2) showed the difference among the groups to be significant at .0001. The Scheffe test indicated a significant difference among the four groups of students. This vignette drew different reactions from each group of students. The students from UP, with a mean of 3.91, elicited a certain degree of disapproval. The students from MSU and UI were

indifferent of the situation (mean of 3.18 and 3.16, respectively) while the students from UT expressed a certain degree of approval (mean of 2.43).

Vignette H

A major company, Giang Corporation, has been approached by a group of workers requesting that the company provide them a daily means of transportation, which they are willing to pay for. The workers live in a community located 80 miles from the corporation's main plant and going to work has been a daily struggle for these workers who have to contend with congestion and high transportation costs. Citing high investment outlay to buy the transportation facilities, costs of setting up maintenance facilities and costs of running the transportation service, Giant decides not to comply with the group's request.

The results of the ANOVA yielded significant difference among the groups of students for Hypothesis 1 at .0001. The Scheffe test divided the students into two groups. The students from UI (3.88) and UP (3.86) differ significantly from the UT and MSU students (means of 3.31 and 3.19, respectively).

Vignette I

For years to tobacco industry has been subjected to criticism questioning the legitimacy of its products in the marketplace. More recently, various local action groups have been moderately successful in imposing bans against smoking in public places as well as the workplace. At the national level, smoking is prohibited on all regulated airline flights of two hours or less. Feeling that this is a critical issue which may bring about widespread ban against smoking, the tobacco trade association has more than doubled its budget for lobbying efforts to reverse this rule.

The results of the ANOVA showed significant differences among the groups of students at the .0151 (see Table 2). All groups showed varying degrees of disapproval and the Scheffe test indicated no significant difference among the UI, UT, and MSU students (means of 3.64, 3.59, and 3.51, respectively). These three groups of students differed significantly with UP students who expressed the strongest disapproval with a mean of 4.11.

Vignette J

Johnny Jones is the sales manager for a local automobile dealership. One of his responsibilities is to train new persons as they come into the organization. Experience has shown that one of the most difficult tasks in selling automobiles, as in selling other goods, is closing the sale. Jones feels that some customers need to be helped into this decision to buy a particular car, so he teaches his new salespersons several high pressure techniques proven to be successful in closing the sale.

As shown in Table 2, the three groups are significantly different at .0320 level as indicated by the ANOVA test. The Scheffe test, however, showed no significant difference among the four groups of students all of which expressed indifference in this vignette.

Vignette L

Management of Durable Copy Machines, Inc. has word from reliable sources that its chief competitor is about to unveil a new model which, in all likelihood, will sweep the market, make substantial inroads into Durable's market share and profitability. Robert Mann, head of engineering for Durable, plays golf regularly with a member of the competitor's design department and is aware of his dissatisfaction with the amount of his recent raise. Being made aware of this fact, top management at Durable has instructed personnel to "hire that employee at any cost."

The ANOVA test results showed statistically significant difference among the groups at .0071 level. The results of the Scheffe test indicated that the means of the students from UP (3.38), MSU (3.22), and UI (3.18) differ significantly with the UT students (mean of 2.52). The means indicated that while the students from UP, MSU, and UI were indifferent towards this act of "employee piracy", the UT students did not see anything wrong with such an action.

Vignette N

Joe Smith is a major stockholder of a major food company that grants franchises. A franchise is pending to build a franchise shop in a city of 30,000 people. The company received three bids, one of which is from Joe's uncle. Joe called on Luke Adams, the officer in charge of granting the franchise, was threatened of his job if the franchise is not given to Joe's uncle.

Luke found out that the bid by Joes's uncle is well below that of the other two bidders. After much thought, Luke selected the highest bidder. What do you think of Luke's action.

The vignette describes an action which calls for a rating the opposite of the rest of the vignettes. In this case, 1 represents a more ethical position and 5 a less ethical position. To be consistent with the rating used in the other vignettes, the scores were reversed, i.e., 1=5, etc. The results of ANOVA test indicated a significant difference among the four groups of students at .0001 level. An examination of the results of the Scheffe test showed no significant difference between the UT and UP students. Both groups indicated a very strong approval of the ethical action of the officer in charge in the vignette with the students from UT expressing a stronger position than the students from UP with means of 4.61 and 4.21, respectively. The students from UI (means of 3.66) and MSU (mean of 3.53) expressed indifference for the action taken in this vignette.

Vignette O

Todd Jackson is the purchasing agent for Wyler Industries and has final say on which of numerous suppliers his firm will buy from. Conscious of the magnitude of purchasing dollars he controls, Todd has let it be known that in those situations where price and other things are equal, his decision to purchase from a particular vendor can be swayed by the receipt of an "appropriate" gift.

The results of both the ANOVA and Scheffe tests indicated significant differences among the groups of students at .0248 level. The students from UP (4.27) differed significantly from the Indonesian students (3.72).

Vignette P

John Smith has been recently employed by General Supply, Inc. as a sales rep and has taken over the territory which includes among its potential customers Wyler Industries (mentioned above). General has been unsuccessful in selling to Wyler in the past because it has a strict policy against using company funds to provide gifts to any customer or prospective customer. As a novice in the selling profession, Smith is determined to make a sale to Wyler Industries even if he has to pay a gift for Todd Jackson out of his commission on the sale.

The results of the ANOVA showed significant differences among the four groups of students at the .0155 level. However, the Scheffe tests indicated that the differences were not significant enough among the groups. All the groups expressed varying degree of indifference ranging from 3.16 by the UI students to 3.67 by the MSU students. The results of the ANOVA showed no significant differences among the four groups of students for Vignettes K and M. An examination of the means for Vignette K (see Table 2) showed that the students from the four universities expressed a mild form of disapproval bordering on indifference with means ranging from 3.88 - 3.51. For Vignette M, all four groups of students expressed indifference with means ranging from 2.89 - 2.64.

Summary and Conclusions

A number of observations can be made by examining the means of ratings of the four groups of students across the sixteen vignettes. The students from all four schools clearly showed ethical awareness for Vignettes a, B, C, D, F, N and O. The students from UP expressed the highest degrees of ethical awareness for the above mentioned vignettes. For Vignettes A, B, and F, the students from UI showed higher degrees of ethical awareness than their UT and MSU counterparts. All four groups of students indicated a very high degree of disapproval of deceitful actions involving unsubstantiated advertising claim (A), using lower cost, polluting coal rather than raising price (B), and selling a banned carcinogen product in far flung area (F). The students also disapproved strongly of fraudulent acts involving padding of expenses (C) and receiving "gift" as a prerequisite to selecting suppliers (O). The students expressed disapproval of the use of coercive power to get employment for a relative (D) and obtain a franchise for a relative (N). All groups of students found nothing wrong with a company's practice of instituting an award system based on amount of purchases (M). The students were clearly indifferent to the practices of training sales force on high-pressured selling techniques (J) and hiring employees away from competitors (L). Vignette G drew the most varied reactions among the groups of students in which the students from UP expressed disapproval, UT students expressed approval, and the students from UI and MSU expressed indifference. In four of the sixteen vignettes there were no statistical differences among the four groups (J, K, M, and P). For Vignette E, which describes a situation where a sponsor of a show refused to influence the show's producer to

tone down sex and violence, the students from UT and MSU were indifferent while the students from UP and UI disapproved of such an action. An examination of the means of the four groups for each vignette and identifying for each group those vignettes the groups do not differ revealed the following: (1) MSU students agreed with UT students on 13 vignettes, agreed with UI students on 12 vignettes, and agreed with UP on 18 vignettes; (2) UP students do not differ with the UI students on 11 vignettes and do not differ with UT students on 9 vignettes; and (3) UI students agreed with the UT students on 11 of the vignettes. Using the above information, the MSU and the UT students have the most number of agreements closely followed by MSU and UI students. The least number of agreement occurred between the MSU and UP students. These findings reject making hypothesis that since the Philippines and US have had a long history of close relationship, one would expect a strong American influence on the Philippine culture. The findings also would reject the notion that since the Philippines and Indonesia are closely located geographically and are bound by similar cultural heritage, the two countries should have more in common than any other groups in the study. The results indicated that the Indonesian students have more in common with the American and Finnish students than their Filipino counterparts. As expected, the American and Finnish students displayed the highest degree of agreement than any other two groups. There are several limitations of the study which must be pointed out. First, the data are self-reported by the respondents. Second, the study consisted of unequal sample sizes between the groups under study. This was not believed to be a major limitation, however, due to the nature of the GLM procedure.

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