



“Honesty as a value in the interpersonal relationships in organizations”

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HONESTY AS A VALUE IN THE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Abstract

The crisis caused by COVID-19 has increased interest to the subject of integrity in organizations. The purpose of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of the opinions on the value of honesty, broken down by the group of supervisors and subordinates during the crisis caused by COVID-19. The analysis was carried out in Poland among undergraduate students pursuing a bachelor's degree in fields representing disciplines other than management. The paper used a survey method; 102 respondents took part in the survey. 9.52% of men and 5.00% of women in the group of subordinates did not have opinions on this subject. In the group of supervisors, the situation was completely opposite: 6.25% of women and 4.76% of men showed such a result. Significant discrepancies were noticed in the assessment of the importance of honesty depending on the education field of the respondents. The difference between the highest assessments of the importance of this value was 33.70 percentage points in the supervisors' group, and 38.64 percentage points in the subordinates group. Drawing attention to this problem, which affects all participants of an organization to a different extent, may help to shape the ethical attitudes of future managers and, in consequence, manage their organizations better.

Keywords

values, organizational culture, leadership, management, organizational behavior

JEL Classification

D21, D22, M10, M50

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, business ethics is understood as the application of ethical values to business behavior; it applies to all aspects of business activities, from boardroom strategies and how companies treat their employees and suppliers to sales techniques and accounting practices (Institute of Business Ethics, n.d.). The concept of "values", understood as "principles and beliefs underlying the ethical standards adopted in a given community" (SJP, n.d.) has been fascinating scientists and practitioners of social sciences for many years, including management sciences (Drucker, 2008; Kozielski, 2013; Blanchard & O'Connor, 2015). Knowledge about the values and beliefs of members of a given organization, as Kostera and Śliwa (2012) claim, is extremely important. Among the set of values that are universal to all business ethics, Pałgan (2008) includes the value of honesty.

Honesty is widely recognized as an important moral virtue (Wilson, 2018). People with a low level of honesty/humility tend to behave dishonest, manipulative, cheating, and pretentious. It is worth recalling the definition of ethical leadership: "ethical leaders are likely to be honest, considerate of their followers, fair in their decisions, use rewards and punishments to promote ethical conduct, and make decisions based on ethical values" (Brown et al., 2005). In times of crisis,

such as the COVID-19 pandemic, values seem to play one of the key roles also in managing an organization (Aljondi & Alghamdi, 2020). Bastian (2020) even claims that in times of crisis they are simply necessary because, if the employees live by them, they can be the basis for making decisions, and for a quick response “because we know who we are and the values we believe”. Education, including universities, also influences the shaping of an attitude of honesty. Academic education is not indifferent to forming the ethical attitudes of young people (Karmańska & Obrębska, 2021). Now, during the COVID-19 crisis, values seem to play a key role in managing an organization (Błachnio, 2021; Cekuls, 2015; Kirkland et al., 2021; Hannan et al., 2006). The value of honesty is one of the most important values in the context of organizational leadership (Ete et al., 2020; Huhtala et al., 2021; Cardona & Garci’a-Lombardi’a, 2008; Ogunfowora, 2014; Barends et al., 2019).

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

As early as 1959, Gordon and Howell (n.d. cited in Piper, 1997) argued that business schools must do whatever they can to develop a sense of social responsibility and high standards of business ethics in their graduates. In turn, Lewicka-Strzałecka (2018), looking for the sources of a positive relationship between morality and business, states that in the economy, traditions are dating back to the times of Franklin, who promoted bourgeois virtues in his numerous writings, especially in the popular calendar. He was the most staunch propagator of honesty as the best policy maxim. Franklin, in giving the recommendation “to be honest”, tried to justify it in such a way that honesty pays off. Lack of integrity can generate numerous costs for individuals (Lombardi & Yoshihara, 2018). Organizations and entire societies face promises to be broken, contracts to go unenforced, taxes to remain unpaid, and governments to be-

come corrupt (Cohn et al., 2019). Therefore, it is worth taking a look at the definitions of the concept of honesty existing in the literature. In a linguistic sense, “honesty” can be considered both as a certain attitude, behavior, and a feature of a specific subject (Kopaczyńska-Pieczniak, 2016). Selected definitions¹ of honesty are presented in Table 1.

The quoted definitions of honesty show the differences in the understanding of this concept by various authors. Some define this value as a certain way of proceeding, others by negating the notion of dishonesty. There is a discussion in the literature whether it is possible to separate these two concepts in a polarized manner, because there are behaviors, as Frankel (2006) argues, that can be classified as shades of gray between extremes: *There are gray areas between clear-cut situations on which most, if not all, people would agree. There are gray areas (...) between absolutely honest and*

Table 1. Overview of selected definitions

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Vadi and Vissak (2013), Lennick and Kiel (2007), Kolb (2008), Encyklopedia (n.d.), Stachewicz (2014), and Koźmińska and Olszewska (2018).

Definition	Reference
Honesty is the refusal to pretend that facts of reality are other than what they are.	Becker (1998)
Being truthful or having integrity.	Kolb (2008)
Maintaining the recognized moral standards, honesty in their fulfillment, righteousness.	Encyklopedia (n.d.)
Telling the truth and respecting the truth, honesty, non-appropriation of someone else’s property, application of the principle of impartiality, and equal rights.	Koźmińska and Olszewska (2018)
Honesty is acting in accordance with principles, values, and beliefs, it is telling the truth, it is sticking to what is right, is keeping your word.	Lennick and Kiel (2007)
Integrity capacity is the alignment of individual and collective moral awareness, deliberation, character, and conduct on a sustained basis.	Petrick (2011)
Dishonesty occurs when a responsible actor voluntarily and intentionally violates some convention of the transfer of information or of property, and, in so doing, potentially harms a valued being.	Scott (1999)
The word dishonesty implies an intent to commit a wrongful act.	Skillern (1978)
Fulfilling moral obligations, with a given word, adherence to accepted moral rules.	Stachewicz (2014)

¹ The definitions contained in Table 1 are intended to illustrate the diversity of approaches to the studied phenomenon and not to constitute a systematic discussion of the tested value from the point of view of one selected criterion.

truthful communication and clear deceit. Within these areas, one can move in small steps, one at a time, from honesty to dishonesty (p. 4).

The concept of honesty is therefore complex and ambiguous, and prone to overinterpretation. It should be noted, however, that there are honesty questionnaires in the literature that require an unequivocal assessment of behavior. Such tools include, for example, a questionnaire designed to study corrupt behavior (Iyer & Samociuk, 2007), which assumes the study of dishonest behavior of respondents by answering “yes/no”. However, there are situations in which the value of honesty as a moral value may come into conflict with other values. This is the case when breaking the principle of honesty has worse consequences than telling the truth. In a situation of a conflict of values, the more important value is selected using the general good criterion (Kozłmińska & Olszewska, 2018). However, this paper does not consider contentious issues and focuses on the value of honesty as an important value for an individual, entire communities, and organizations.

For this study, the value of honesty was broadly treated and defined as “telling the truth and respecting the truth, honesty, non-appropriation of someone else’s property, application of the principle of impartiality and equal rights” (Kozłmińska & Olszewska, 2018). Based on Kozłmińska and Olszewska (2018), the components of honesty include:

1. Telling the truth – honesty as truthfulness and respect for the truth means telling the truth even when it is inconvenient and may cause a person to be hurt.
2. Not seeking someone else’s property – honesty as non-appropriation of someone else’s property means not seeking someone else’s property without the knowledge and consent of the owner.
3. Thorough performance of one’s work and duties – honesty as fairness means the diligent and proper performance of one’s work and duties.

These components were selected for the analysis, as there is little likelihood of different inter-

pretations of these concepts by the respondents. It was assumed that honesty is an integral value, which means that it is impossible to separate private and professional life when examining the issue of honesty. According to Gryżenia (2010), *honesty excludes the possibility of disregarding the principles of social life (...) principles constitute the basis of educational influence, their behavior creates opportunities for human development, they stimulate him to effort and work on himself, encourage him to undertake the difficult art of self-education* (p. 78).

In a survey conducted in 2020, as many as 70% of students asked about values, including the value of honesty, said that these concepts did not need to be explained because their names are intuitive, and 7% said that no, there was no need to explain them (Karmańska & Obrębska, 2021). Therefore, it can be assumed that the value of honesty and its components will be similarly interpreted by the respondents.

Integrity occurs in the organizational reality in many areas and is sometimes a component of other key values, which include trust and loyalty. Coil (2021), writing about leadership, claims that nothing is more important than being honest. Frankel (2006) claims that morality alone is not strong enough to enforce honesty. Therefore, mechanisms are needed in organizations that support building a culture of honesty. The question is what factors influence the value of honesty. There are several factors influencing manifestations of honesty and dishonesty: organizational (i.e. management) factors, personal values, and socio-demographic characteristics. Besides societal reasons and factors, organizational, personal, and some socio-demographic characteristics also affect the manifestation of honesty and dishonesty (Vadi & Vissak, 2013).

From the point of view of this study, organizational factors deserve special attention, among them the particularly important role of the manager and his/her way of exercising power in the organization, as it is the only factor out of the aforementioned on which organizations have such a large influence. A list of features indicated as necessary for exercising power in an organization can be formed. Two of them were

considered the most important: trust and honesty. Honesty is understood in this context as acting according to recognized values (DuBrin, 2000). Thus, it is sometimes treated as an important value in power relations in organizations. According to Koźmińska and Olszewska (2018), there is the rule that says: “When teaching honesty, we must act honestly ourselves”. It can be said that the value of honesty is to such an extent more important in the group of supervisors, that it should be primary. In addition, an example comes that only a transparent leader who acts honestly can convey this value to subordinates. Because “both honest and dishonest behaviors seem to be contagious belonging to our social surrounding, we inevitably mirror others” (Kindsiko, 2013). However, all groups that make up the organization must be aware of this process. In the context of exercising power, honesty can be found as one of the principles of organizational leadership. According to Palmer (2010), there is no organizational context in which honesty plays a less important role than other leadership principles. People who are led by a leader must trust the leader and believe not only in his honesty but also that he is genuinely interested in them and their aspirations (pp. 204-205).

Based on the literature review, it can be said that 96% of the surveyed employees of companies in Poland believe that honesty and ethics are very important (Sroka, 2018). According to Karmańska and Obrębska (2021), who conducted a study at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents who were students of economic studies stated that the culture of running a business in a given company and patterns of behavior of employees are created by managers, but at the same time they perceive responsibility on the part of employees. In the report “World Business Integrity Survey 2020” (Zespół Zarządzania Ryzykiem Nadużyć EY, 2020), the results of the assessment conducted during and after the pandemic are presented. As many as 90% of respondents believe that the crisis caused by COVID-19 creates a risk for ethical business. For the above-mentioned reasons, it is necessary to continue research on the importance of honesty in the context of power relations in organizations.

2. AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the opinions on the value of honesty, broken down by the group of supervisors and subordinates during the crisis caused by COVID-19.

The following research questions were posed:

1. Is there a difference in assessing the importance of integrity in the COVID-19 crisis between supervisors and subordinates?
2. How does the gender of the respondents influence the value of honesty among supervisors and subordinates?
3. Which behaviors are the most and the least important in the context of building a culture of integrity in the organizations among supervisors and subordinates?
4. Does the education field chosen by the respondents for undergraduate studies affect the assessment of the value of honesty among supervisors and subordinates?

3. METHODS

The diagnostic survey method was used. This method is commonly used for similar studies. The survey tool allows studying large groups of respondents whose direct observation is not possible. The survey was completely anonymous and was carried out remotely. The link to the survey was sent to students. The results were processed in a spreadsheet. After collecting the respondents' opinions, the structure of their responses was analyzed in several sections, examining the variability of individual values broken down into the surveyed groups of respondents.

The analysis was conducted in Poland in May 2021 on a group of deliberately selected undergraduate students who previously studied in fields other than management. The survey was carried out on a group of 102 respondents. The link to the survey was sent to the respondents via the Internet. The questions were created based on the literature re-

view. In the study, when constructing responses, a five-point Likert scale was used. Positive opinions resulted in high scores, low scores represent negative opinions respectively.

In this study, the aim was to verify the opinions not about themselves in the context of assessing the honesty of respondents but based on their observations and experiences about two groups of employees: supervisors (A) and subordinates (B). The first part of the study was the survey of respondents' opinions on the prioritization of the importance of values, which is honesty. The second part concerned honest behaviors, which were classified based on Koźmińska and Olszewska (2018). Respondents were asked to rate the importance of behavior for both groups in the context of building a culture of integrity in the organization. The results obtained in the survey allow using the statistical analysis to process the data.

4. RESULTS

First, an attempt was made to answer the first research question, which was: "Is there a difference in assessing the importance of integrity during the COVID-19 crisis among supervisors and subordinates?" The comparison of the results for both groups is presented in Figure 1.

According to the respondents, the value of honesty for subordinates (B) is more important by 5.88 percentage points than for supervisors (A). The opposite situation is in the case of the answer "important" – there was a higher result in group A

than in group B. Generally, the respondents stated that the value of honesty for both groups is important or very important (84.32% for A and 83.33% for B). The importance of the value of honesty during the crisis caused by COVID-19 broken down by gender of respondents for the group of subordinates is presented in Figure 2.

In the group of women, responses ranged from "completely unimportant" to "very important". The polarization in the group of women was more visible than in the group of men, as they chose the middle statements more often (71.42%), while the women in these ranges chose such answers less often (42.5%). None of the men stated that in group B the value of honesty is completely unimportant, and in the group of women, 1.25% of the respondents did so.

The answers were slightly different in the case of supervisors' assessment (Figure 3). In this case, only 4.76% of men did not have an opinion on a given topic, while more women said so (6.25%). More men considered it to be of little importance in the case of group A than in the case of group B (the difference is 4.77 percentage points). Both groups of respondents stated that in the case of group A, this value always has some (though marginal) significance, as no one chose the answer "completely unimportant". Interestingly, in the case of group A, the difference in the responses of women and men in the case of the answer "very important" was 14.17 percentage points, while in the case of group B it was as high as 27.68. However, in the case of the answer "very important" it was the group of women who chose this answer in 56.25%,

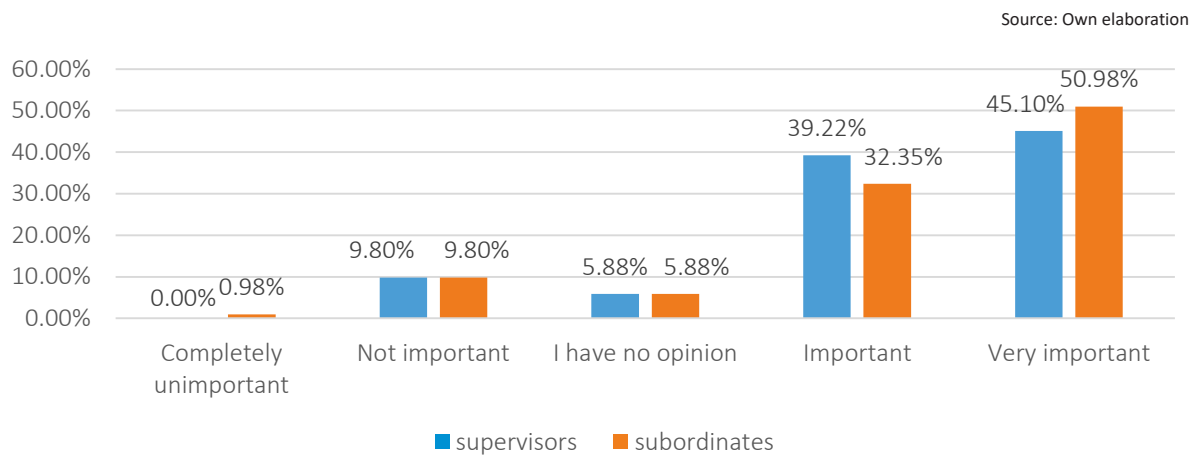


Figure 1. Importance of integrity values in the COVID-19 crisis

Source: Own elaboration.

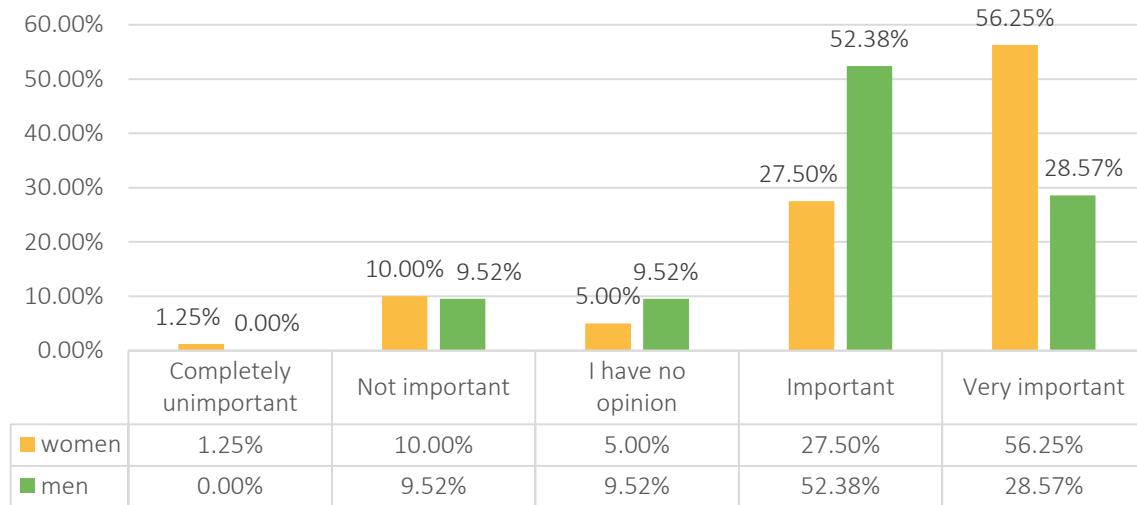


Figure 2. Importance of subordinates' integrity values during the COVID-19 crisis (by gender of respondents)

while in the group of men, this answer was chosen by 28.57% of respondents.

Answering the third research question, the above-mentioned components of honesty were analyzed in the context of the specified groups. All three behaviors (components of honesty) were rated high by the respondents, with the differences in responses between supervisors and subordinates ranging from 1 to 2 percentage points. The results of the analysis for both groups, broken down into the listed behaviors, are presented in Figures 4, 5, and 6.

All three behaviors were rated high and there were no significant differences in the assessment. According to Figure 4, there were only 4.9 percentage points in the case of group A and 6.86 percentage points in the case of group B. At the same time, interestingly, only in the case of "not reaching for someone else's property", one percent of the respondents answered "not important". In all other cases, and in the case of the answer "completely unimportant", no one chose these answers. The behavior described as "performing your duties diligently" – in the case of "very important" answers, the percentage of

Source: Own elaboration.

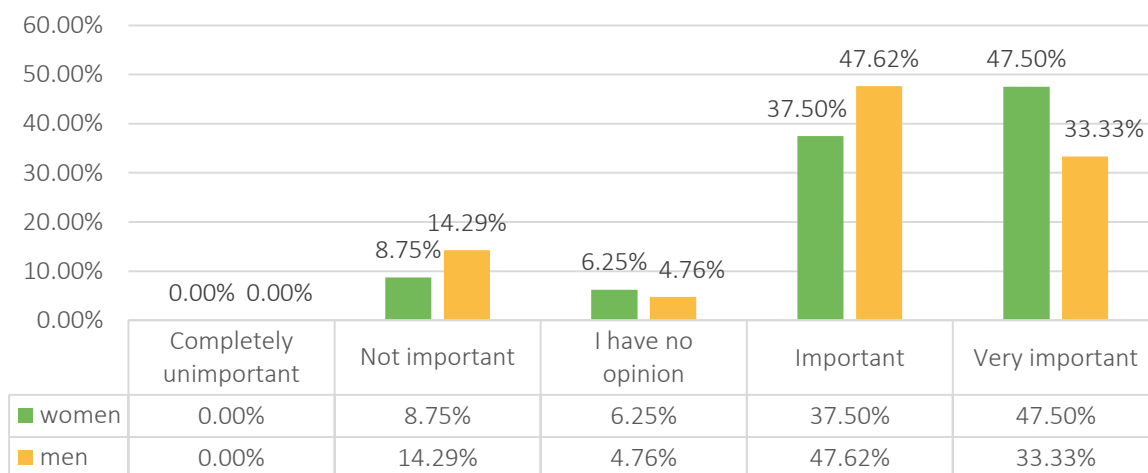


Figure 3. Importance of integrity for supervisors during the COVID-19 crisis (by gender of respondents)

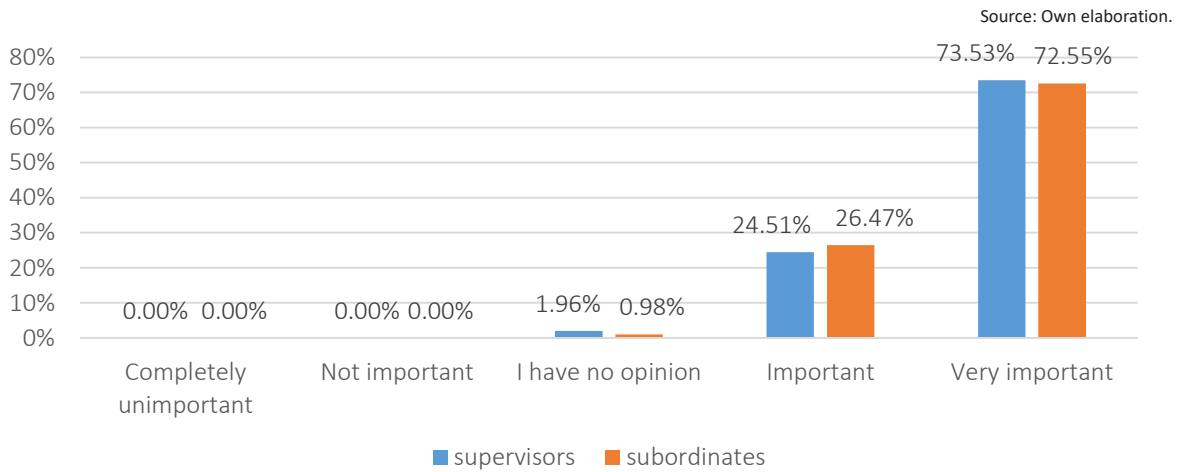


Figure 4. Telling the truth – a summary for the groups of supervisors and subordinates

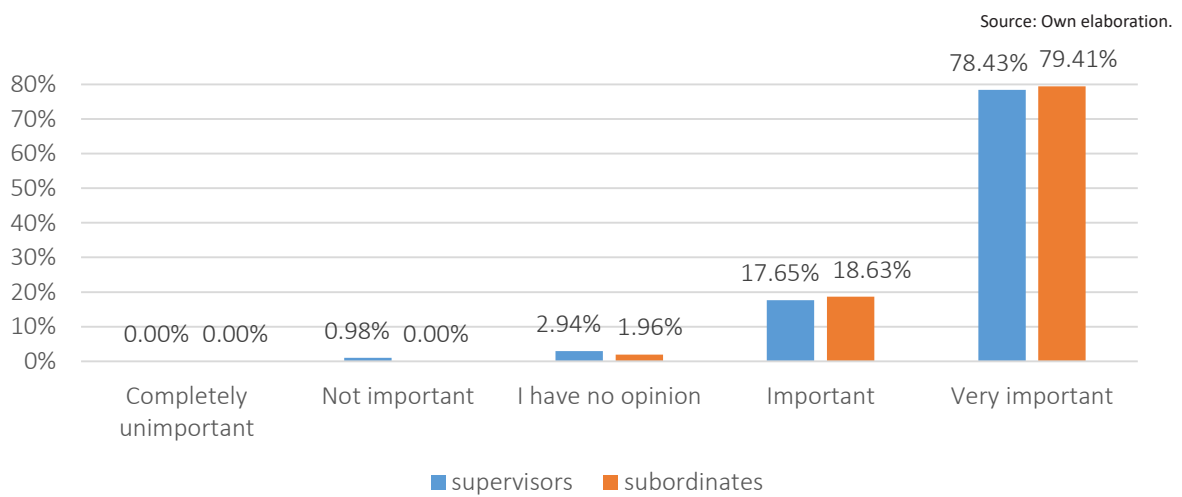


Figure 5. Not reaching for someone else's property – a summary for the groups of supervisors and subordinates

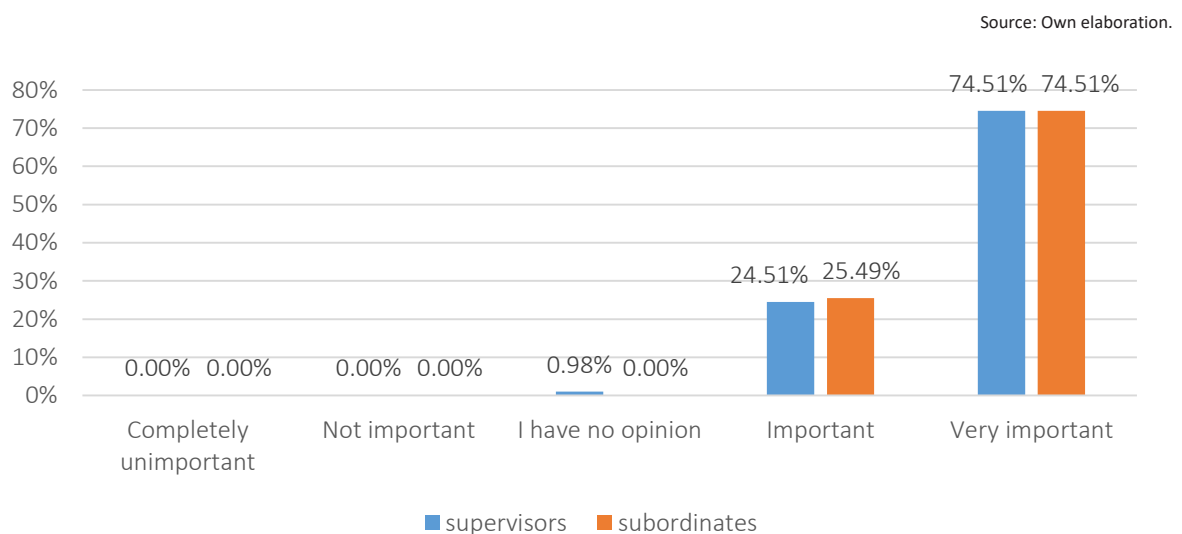


Figure 6. Performing their duties diligently – overview for the groups of supervisors and subordinates

Table 2. Distribution of respondents by education fields

Source: Own elaboration.

Scientific field	Percentage
Humanities	57.84%
Engineering and technical sciences	10.78%
Medical and health sciences	1.96%
Agricultural sciences	0.98%
Social sciences	22.55%
Natural sciences	4.90%
Theological sciences	0.00%
Art	0.98%

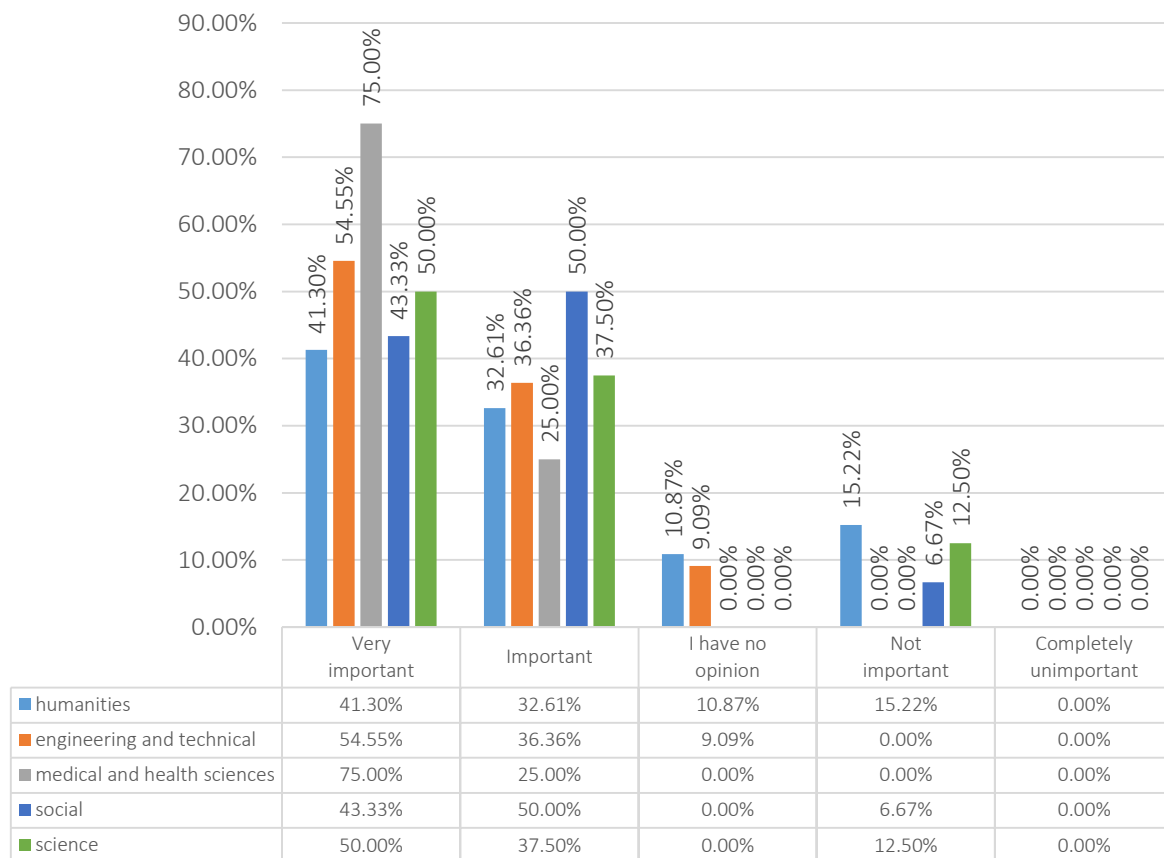
responses for both groups allowed to place it between the two groups.

Subsequently, an attempt was made to answer the fourth research question. The respondents represented various education fields. The percentage distribution of respondents by first-cycle education is presented in Table 2. The most numerous group were graduates of humanities – 57.84% and social sciences – 22.55%. No respondent was

representing the field of theological sciences, and the fields of agricultural sciences and art; due to their low representation (one person), they are omitted from further analysis.

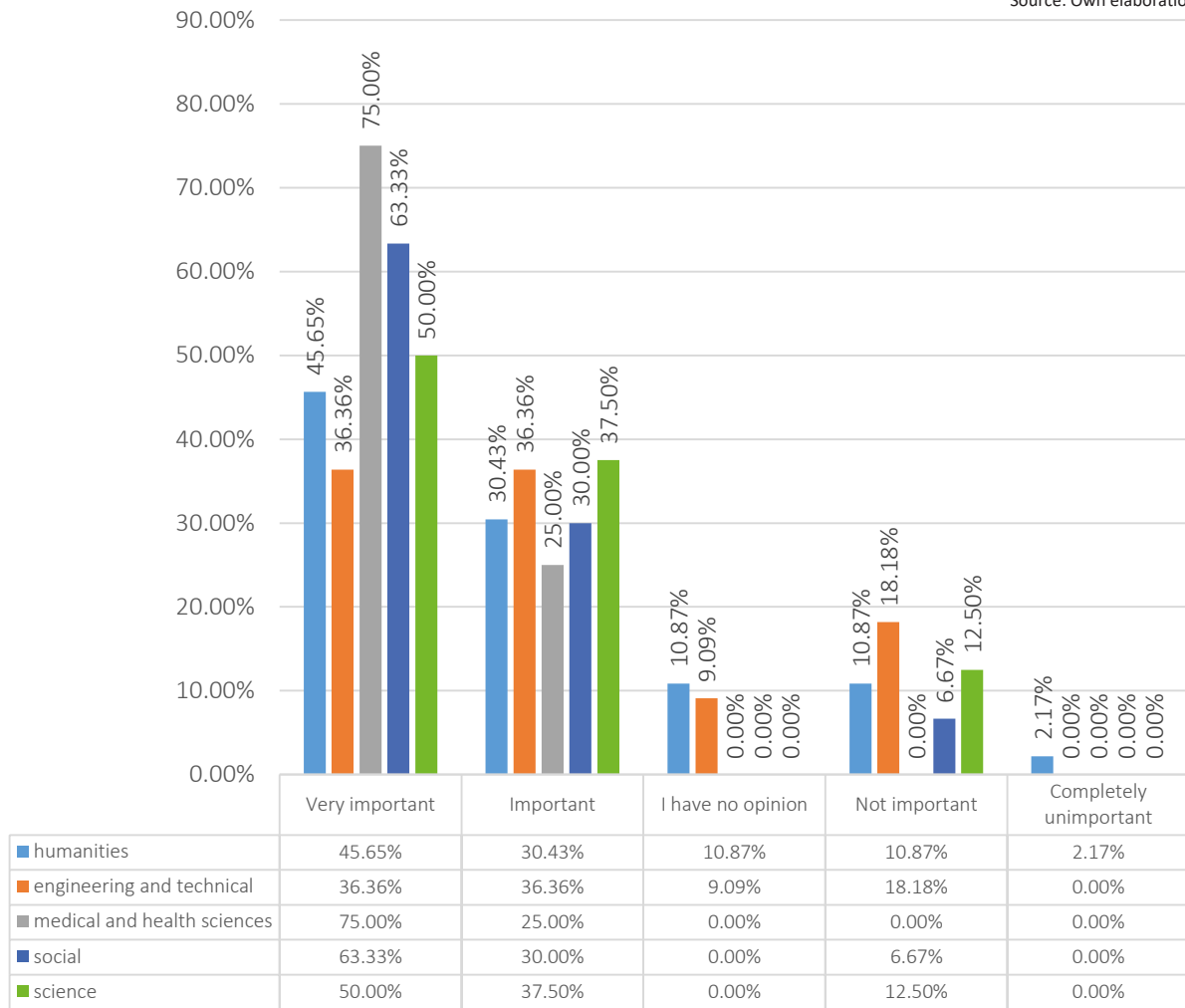
Figures 7 and 8 present the distribution of respondents' answers to the question regarding the assessment of the importance of honesty, broken down by the represented education fields at the first level.

Source: Own elaboration.



Note: Science = Natural sciences.

Figure 7. Assessing the value of integrity in the group of supervisors, broken down by education fields completed in the first cycle of studies



Note: Science = Natural sciences.

Figure 8. Assessing the value of honesty in the group of subordinates broken down by education fields completed at the first cycle of studies

Noteworthy is the case of representatives of medical and health sciences, which are identical for both groups A and B: 75% of the respondents chose the answer “very important” and 25% – “important”. Nobody chose the answers “I have no opinion”, and “little or no importance at all”. The situation is different in the case of humanities. As many as 10% of respondents do not have an opinion on this subject, while 15.22% declared that this value is of little importance in the case of group A. For group B, this value amounts to 10.87%. It is worth noting, however, that the answer “completely invalid” was chosen only by the representatives of this group and amounted to 2.17%. In both groups (A and B), an identical distribution of answers can also be observed for the field of natural sciences. In this group, the value of honesty was described by 87.5% of the respondents as “very important”

and “important”, while as many as 12.5% considered the tested value to be of little importance. The greatest disproportion between the responses for groups A and B can be observed among representatives of the field of engineering and technical sciences, and in second place – social sciences. In the case of engineering and technical sciences, the respondents more often chose the answer “very important” when it was about group A (54.55%) and less often when it was about group B (36.36%). It was also related to choosing the answer “not important” in group B (as much as 18.18%), while this answer in group A was not chosen by any of the respondents. In the case of group A, the most common answers were “important” (50.00%) and in the second place – “very important” (43.33%), while in group B, the results were as follows: “very important” – 63.33 %, and “valid” – 30%.

5. DISCUSSION

In times of the COVID-19 crisis, honesty seems to be a particularly important value, as employee control is largely based on self-control and remote work creates areas for abuse in this area. First, an attempt was made to answer the first research question, which was: "Is there a difference in assessing the importance of integrity during the COVID-19 crisis among supervisors and subordinates?" Interestingly, the statements "of little importance" and "I have no opinion" in both groups of respondents' answers obtained the same values. The statement that the value of honesty is completely unimportant was chosen only in 1% of respondents in the case of group B. Based on the obtained results, it can be stated that there is no significant difference in the assessment of the importance of honesty in groups A and B, because the obtained results differ slightly. However, it is worth looking at the results obtained in answering these questions depending on the gender of the respondents.

Given the importance of the value of integrity in the COVID-19 crisis broken down by gender of respondents (question two) for the subordinate group, it seems interesting that almost twice as many men as women did not have an opinion on the subject. Therefore, it can be concluded that the gender of the respondents has an impact on the assessment of the value of honesty in both surveyed groups. It is difficult to clearly show the direction of the impact, but it can be concluded that men more often assessed group A as for whom the value of honesty is "of little importance". In the group of men, the most frequently chosen answer was "important", while in the group of women it was "very important". The question is why there is such a difference. Are women naturally more likely to choose more categorical statements or are they gentler than men in both groups of respondents? Answering the second research question – it is difficult to formulate unambiguous conclusions in this matter based on the obtained research results.

Answering the third research question, it can be stated that the respondents considered all three behaviors to be almost equally important from the point of view of creating a culture of trust in the organization and, in their opinion, behavior.

These should characterize both groups. If one wants to prioritize them, then taking into account the responses of the respondents from the "important" and "very important" ranges, the obtained results are as follows:

- 1) to perform your work or duties diligently (A – 99.02%; B – 100%),
- 2) telling the truth (A – 98.04%; B – 99.02%),
- 3) not reaching for someone else's property (A – 96.08%; B – 98.04%).

The choices of the remaining answers were similar among the respondents, and no significant difference was noticed depending on whether the question concerned group A or B. The results of the analysis so far allow the conclusion that when respondents rely on their own experiences, their assessment of the value of honesty is lower, and when asked about a theory not related to specific cases encountered in life, their assessment of the model is the same for both groups (B and A).

Subsequently, an attempt was made to answer the fourth research question. The respondents' opinions clearly show differences depending on their education field. When analyzing the respondents' answers regarding the importance of the value of honesty, both in group A and group B, representatives of medical and health sciences deserve attention. The test results are identical for both groups. Based on the conducted analysis it can be concluded that graduates of faculties representing the field of medical and health sciences are more sensitive to the value of honesty and more often perceive the necessity of its existence in organizational culture. On the other hand, representatives of humanities are divided on this topic. Some of them see such a necessity and some consider this value to be of little importance. An interesting finding is that of comparing the responses in both groups. In the field of medical and health sciences as well as natural sciences, no difference was noticed between the responses. However, in the case of engineering and technical sciences, this difference is the most significant and suggests a more restrictive approach to the behavior of group A than to B, for which the requirements in this respect are much lower. Therefore, it can be concluded that

the field of natural sciences has an impact on the assessment of the importance of honesty in organizations. Social sciences respondents showed the opposite tendency. In group A, the number of “important” responses was greater than “very important”, while in group B the opposite was true.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to conduct a comparative analysis of the opinion on the value of honesty, broken down by the group of supervisors and subordinates during the crisis caused by COVID-19. As a result, it is possible to notice the phenomenon of a greater requirement of this value from supervisors than from subordinates. There is no significant difference in the assessment of the importance of honesty in the groups of supervisors and subordinates, respectively, as the obtained results differ relatively insignificantly (84.32% for group A and 83.33% for group B).

The gender of the respondents has an impact on the assessment of the value of honesty in both surveyed groups. It is difficult to clearly show the direction of the impact, but it can be concluded that more men considered it to be of little importance in the case of supervisors than in the case of subordinates (the difference is 4.77 percentage points).

The education field of the respondents influences the assessment of the importance of honesty in organizations. Graduates in the fields of medical sciences and health sciences are more sensitive to the value of honesty and more often perceive the necessity of its existence in the organizational culture. In the field of medical and health sciences as well as natural sciences, no difference was found (75.00% of the respondents chose the answer “very important” and 25.00% – “important”). However, in the case of engineering and technical sciences, this difference is the most significant and suggests a more restrictive approach to the behavior of supervisors than to subordinates, to whom the requirements in this respect are much lower (54.55% of the respondents chose the answer “very important” and 36.36% – “important” for the group of supervisors and 36.36% of the respondents chose the answer “very important” and 36.36% – “important” for the group of subordinates).

The conducted study may constitute an introduction to the study of honest/dishonest behavior in organizations. The results allow noticing how important the value of honesty is nowadays. Additionally, managers should try to shape an organizational culture based on the value of honesty. When considering further directions of research on the value of honesty and its role in the organization, it is worth paying attention to the role of education. How do different levels of education influence the shaping of the value of honesty and how is the value of honesty taught in particular fields of study? An interesting direction of research would also be to examine, on a larger group of respondents, the influence of gender on the importance of honesty among supervisors and subordinates. Honesty is not an easy path, but it seems necessary and it is worth striving for it.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Maria Czajkowska-Białkowska.
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Funding acquisition: Maria Czajkowska-Białkowska.
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Supervision: Maria Czajkowska-Białkowska.

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Visualization: Maria Czajkowska-Białkowska.

Writing – original draft: Maria Czajkowska-Białkowska.

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