

## Effect of Secular Attitude and Openness to Experience on Ethical Behaviour among College Students

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### Abstract

This study aims to examine the effect of Secular Attitude and Openness to Experience on Ethical behaviour among college students. With the help of a random sampling technique data from 200 undergraduate students between the age of 18 to 22 years, from different colleges of Agra were collected on the variables 'Secular Attitude', 'Ethical Value Scale' and 'Openness to experience'. For Data Analysis Two-way ANOVA was used. The results indicated a significant effect of Secular Attitude on the Ethical Behaviour of the students ( $F=7.12$ ,  $p<0.01$  level). Students with high Secular Attitude ( $M=70.14$ ) display more Ethical behaviour in comparison to the students with low Secular Attitude ( $M=59.45$ ). A significant effect of Openness to Experience on the Ethical behaviour of the students ( $F=74.40$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) is also observed. Students with high Openness to Experience ( $M=74.38$ ) display Ethical behaviour more than the students with low Openness to Experience ( $M=55.21$ ). No significant effect of Secular Attitude and Openness to Experience on Ethical behaviour ( $F=1.04$ ,  $p>0.05$ ) was observed.

**Keywords:** Secular Attitude, Openness to Experience and Ethical Behaviour

In a diverse country like India, where multiple religions coexist, a secular attitude is essential for maintaining harmony. A **secular attitude** promotes impartiality towards all religions, fostering inclusivity, tolerance, and respect for diverse beliefs. Daimary (2019) found that higher education students generally exhibit a positive secular attitude, but this is not always reflected in the broader society. Kamble (2016) stressed the importance of early secular education. It enhances critical thinking, helping young individuals evaluate religious and ethical perspectives objectively.

A study by Modi, Padu, and Padu (2024) examined secular attitudes among higher secondary school students in Arunachal Pradesh. Given the state's religious diversity, fostering a secular mindset is crucial for social harmony. The study revealed that students exhibited an average secular attitude, with significant differences based on gender and settlement. The findings indicate the importance of integrating secular education at the school level to nurture inclusivity and prevent communal disharmony.

**Openness to experience** is a personality trait reflecting curiosity, imagination, and a willingness to explore new ideas, experiences, and creative pursuits. Openness to experience is a key trait in the Big Five model (Workman & Reader, 2015), reflecting intellectual curiosity, imagination, and receptivity to novel experiences. Costa and McCrae's Five-Factor Theory (1992) suggests that openness is a biologically influenced trait shaped by environmental factors, impacting cognition, perception, and behaviour. Individuals high in openness actively seek out intellectual stimulation, enjoy abstract thinking, and are more willing to challenge conventional beliefs. Their heightened sensitivity to aesthetics and emotions often leads to a deeper appreciation of art, literature, and diverse cultural experiences.

**Ethical behaviour** refers to acting with integrity, fairness, and respect for others while adhering to

moral principles and societal norms. It involves honesty, accountability, empathy, and making decisions that promote trust and justice. Ethical behaviour prioritizes doing what is right, even when faced with challenges or personal gain. Kohlberg (1958) proposed three levels of moral development—pre-conventional (focused on self-interest and consequences), conventional (based on societal norms and law), and post-conventional (guided by universal ethical principles). Ethical decision-making is influenced by various factors, including peer behaviour (Joseph et al., 2009), emotional intelligence (Chowdhury, 2017), GPA (Burrus et al., 2007), and gender (Nguyen et al., 2008). Spiritual leadership and ethical climates influence workplace ethics as well (Pio & Langkong, 2020; Hassanian & Shayan, 2019).

### Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 explains how college students' secular attitude and openness to experience influence their ethical behaviour. Secular attitude reflects a non-religious perspective, while openness to experience signifies receptivity. Investigating these factors conceptually aims to understand their impact on students' ethical decision-making and behaviour within an educational context.

### Research Question

Is there any effect of Secular Attitude and Openness to Experience on Ethical behaviour among college students?

### Hypotheses

1. There would be a significant effect of secular attitude on ethical behaviour among college students.
2. There would be a significant effect of openness to experience on ethical behaviour among college students.
3. There would be an interaction effect of secular attitude and openness to experience on ethical behaviour among college students.

### Sample Description

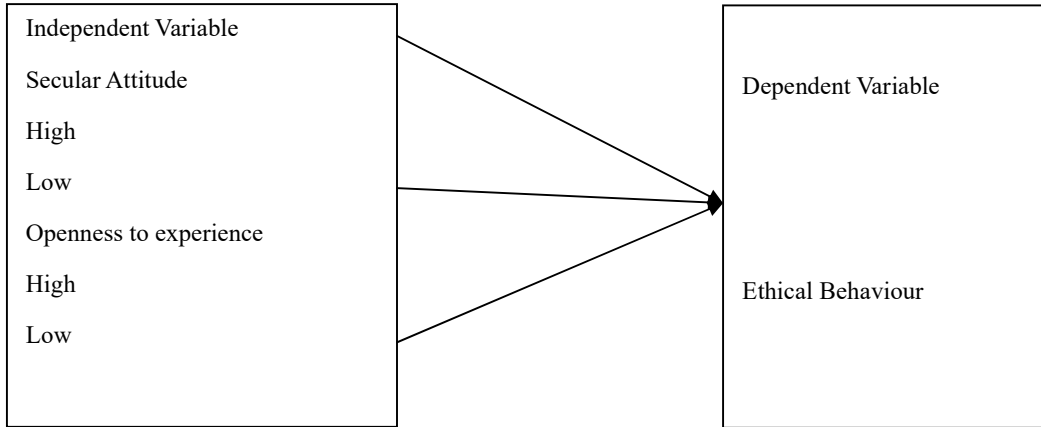
The sampling was done by the simple random sampling method and a sample of 200 students (both

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male and female) from the Universities and Colleges of Agra were selected.

5,10,15,20,25,30,35R,40,41R,44 allocated to Openness to Experience. Participants rate each item



**Inclusion Criteria-**

- The age range of the respondents was between 18 to 22 years.

**Exclusion criteria-**

- The present research did not include students with any reported mental disorders and retardation, etc.

**Research design:**

In the present research 2x2 factorial design was used to study the effect of secular education and openness on ethical behaviour among college students.

**Tools Used**

**1. Ethical Value Assessment (EVA)-** The EVA was developed by Jensen and Padilla- Walker in 2019. It contains 18-items designed to assess an individual's moral values and how they impact their life. The internal consistency of the EVA has been found to be high, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.80 to 0.90. The EVA has also been found to have good construct validity, as it correlates with other measures of moral values and prosocial behaviour. The EVA can be used to gain insight into an individual's ethical values and to help guide decision-making in various settings.

**2. Secular Attitude Scale (SAS)-** The SAS was developed by Mehra and Sinha in 1992. It contains 35-items which measures the secular attitude of the individual above 18 years of age through six factors— I. socio-religious dimensions, II. self-definition and religion, III. non-religious secular code, IV. religious morality, V. rational ethics, VI. unquestioning religiosity. Split-half reliability coefficient of the scale is 0.929 (N=236). Correcting the above by the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula the reliability coefficient is 0.963 (N=236). Cronbach's alpha for the scale is 0.952. Concurrent validity of the scale was estimated by correlating it with an external criterion.

**3. Big Five Inventory (BFI) –** The Big Five Inventory (BFI) is a 44-item personality assessment tool developed by John and Srivastava in 1999. It measures the big five personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, with items

on a five-point scale from 1 (Disagree a Lot) to 5 (Agree a Lot). The BFI exhibits good reliability, with alpha coefficients typically between .75 and .90 and a three-month estimated stability coefficient averaging .85. It also demonstrates construct validity through its relationships with other Big Five instruments and peer ratings, both convergent and divergent.

**Procedure**

The participants completed a self-administered questionnaire, which included three scales: the Secular Attitude Scale, the Big Five Inventory, and Ethical Value Assessment. All scales utilized a five-point Likert scale, with a score of 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 5 indicating "strongly agree." A 2x2 ANOVA was employed to organize the raw data into a valid and reliable format.

**Results**

The following results were derived after conducting the statistical analysis.

1. Effect of secular attitude on ethical behaviour among college students.
2. Effect of openness to experience on ethical behaviour among college students.
3. Interaction effect of secular attitude and openness to experience on ethical behaviour among college students.

**ANOVA Summary:**

**Table 1 - ANOVA Summary of Ethical Behaviour Scores**

Source of variance	SS	df	MS	F
A (secular attitude)	1340.314	1	1340.31	7.12**
B (openness to experience)	1400.954	1	1400.95	74.4**
AB (interaction)	195.647	1	195.65	1.04
Within group	36886.189	196	188.20	

\*\* p < 0.01

F, 99 = 6.76

F, 95 = 3.89

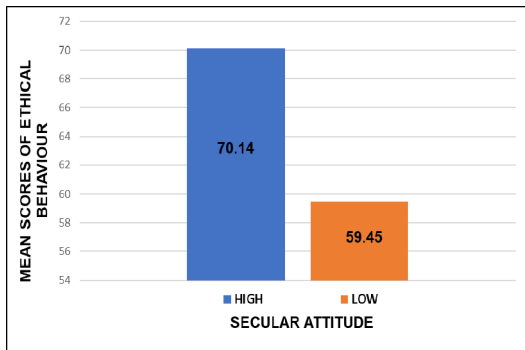
Table 1 shows that the F value for the variable Secular Attitude was found to be significant: (F= 7.12, p < 0.01). This shows a significant effect of Secular Attitude on Ethical Behaviour. Also, the table indicates that the variable Openness to Experience exhibited a significant effect on Ethical behaviour (F = 74.396, p < 0.01).

**Table 1 Mean score of Ethical Behaviour for different groups**

Secular Attitude	Openness to Experience		Grand Mean
	High	Low	
High	75.55	60.09	70.14
Low	72.2	52.58	59.45
Grand Mean	74.38	55.21	64.8

Table 1 shows how secular attitude and openness to experience relate to ethical behaviour (the dependent variable). People high in both had the highest ethical behaviour scores (M = 75.55), while those low in both had the lowest (M = 52.58).

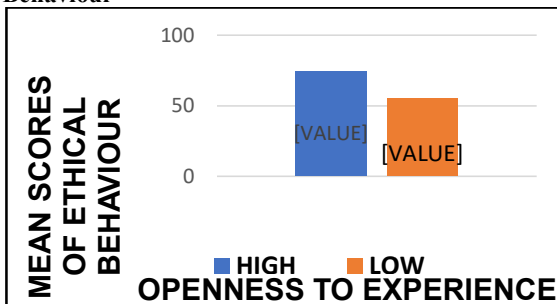
**Effect of Secular Attitude on Ethical Behaviour:**



**Graph 1- Mean Scores of Ethical Behaviour for Secular Attitude**

Graph 1 displays the mean scores for students with high secular attitude is 70.14, whereas the mean score for students with a low secular attitude is 59.45. The observed mean scores indicate that students with a robust or high secular attitude exhibit more ethical behaviour compared to students with a less pronounced or low secular attitude.

**Effect of Openness to Experience on Ethical Behaviour**

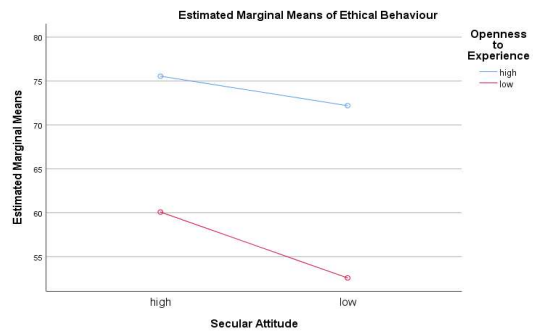


**Graph 1 – Mean score of Ethical Behaviour for Openness to Experience**

Graph 1.2 displays the mean scores for students with high Openness to Experience is 74.38, whereas the mean score for students with a low Openness to experience is 55.21. The observed mean scores indicate that students with a robust or high openness to experience exhibit more ethical behaviour compared to students with a less pronounced or low openness to experience.

**Interaction effect of Secular Attitude and Openness to Experience on Ethical Behaviour among college students:**

In Table 1.1, the F value indicating the interaction effect was determined to be non-significant (F = 1.04, p > 0.01). The combined impact of secular attitude and openness to experience did not demonstrate statistical significance concerning its influence on ethical behaviour.



**Graph 1- Graph showing no significant interaction effect of Secular Attitude and Openness to Experience on Ethical Behaviour.**

**Findings**

The findings of the present study are based on the hypotheses to be under taken are as follows:

1. Secular attitude has shown a significant effect on ethical behaviour among college students, i.e., the students with high secular attitude are more ethical in their behaviour as compared to students with low secular attitude.
2. Openness to Experience has shown a significant effect on ethical behaviour among college students which implies that students with high openness to experience are more ethical in their behaviour as compared to students with low openness to experience.
3. Two-way interaction effect of Secular attitude and Openness to Experience does not have a significant effect on ethical behaviour among college students.

**Discussion**

**Significant effect of Secular Attitude on Ethical Behaviour**

Ethical Behaviour influences how people make good choices in simple but impactful ways. It encourages everyone to think for themselves and take responsibility for their actions. A secular outlook not only helps individuals deal with life using logic and reasoning but also helps avoid following rules blindly

coming from fabricated rituals of the society. Zagonari (2021) suggested that Religious and secular ethics offer complementary strategies to achieve environmental sustainability as well. In the words of Huzur Mehtaji Maharaj of Radhasoami Faith, Dayalbagh, “Any community which wishes to go ahead with its work must remain united in purpose, thought and actions.” Dames (2008), suggested that exponential growth is possible when it comes to the role of the Family, Religious and Secular Traditions and that they have the ability to impact youth. Mubako, Bagchi, Udo and Marinovic (2020) Gender, ethics training, and religiosity also influence behaviour, with Self-Transcendence having distinct effects based on gender and religiosity. Pio and Langkong (2020) suggested that spiritual leadership has a direct effect on the quality of work life. The spiritual leadership has a direct effect on ethical behaviour.

#### **Significant effect of Openness to Experience on Ethical Behaviour**

Openness to experience, can affect how people make innovative and progressive choice. Open individuals are accepting of different views, making them more inclusive in ethical decisions. They're also flexible and adapt well, changing their ethical views based on new information. Open people learn to appreciate and explore different moral ideas, helping them understand ethical principles better. They're often empathetic, caring about how others feel in ethical situations. Being creative thinkers, they find unique solutions to ethical problems. In simple terms, being open-minded helps people make ethical choices by being accepting, adaptable, understanding, creative, and appreciative of diversity.

Anwar and Shah (2022) suggested that neuroticism and extraversion have expected negative associations with ethical behaviour. In contrast, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness shows positive and significant impacts on ethical behaviour.

#### **Interaction effect of Secular Attitude and Openness to Experience**

In the current research, the interaction effect of Secular attitude and Openness to Experience does not have a significant effect on ethical behaviour among college students. According to the researcher, the current result may be due to external influences such as family type, or environment in which the individual strives. Though spirituality may be innate but secularity may not be the area in which they have received the environment to develop. Therefore, the researcher feels that it may be best to educate them to make them more ready for the future, so that they are able to respect individual differences. This opens the door for further research as well. A comparative study between those students who have had the opportunity to be educated in a secular environment and those who have not had the same could be conducted to explore the variables further.

#### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, having a secular attitude appears to strongly influence ethical behaviour. Additionally, being open to new experiences also has a notable impact on ethical conduct. However, when it comes to the interplay between a secular attitude and openness to experience, there is no significant combined effect on ethical behaviour. Essentially, these findings suggest that both secularism and openness independently contribute to ethical behaviour among students, but their combination does not result in a distinctive influence. These insights underscore the importance of considering these factors individually when exploring and promoting ethical behaviour in the college setting.

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