Conference explores morality in the marketplace

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When it comes to business scandals, names like Madoff, Leman and Enron are top of mind. But why do people misbehave in the marketplace? That was the subject of a conference on Friday (Oct. 10) at the A. B. Freeman School of Business at Tulane University. With discussions from anthropologists, psychologists, philosophers and military scholars, the meeting of the Moral Research Lab was no ordinary business conference.



Janet Schwartz, left, and Peter McGraw were organizers of "Morality in the Marketplace," an interdisciplinary research conference on morality and moral decision making.

“Morality and the Marketplace” was the first in-person meeting of the lab, a virtual group of interdisciplinary scholars who study morality and moral decision-making. Nine researchers affiliated with the lab — including scholars from business, economics, psychology, philosophy and anthropology as well as representatives from the military, the National Institutes of Health and even a corporate fraud examiner — presented research aimed at better understanding why people behave badly in the market.

“I think the thing that’s interesting is that it’s interdisciplinary,” says Janet Schwartz, assistant professor of marketing at the Freeman School and organizer of the conference. “The researchers came together from all over to present their ideas about how to make this research more relevant to the practice of ethics.”

Conference co-organizer Peter McGraw, associate professor of marketing at the University of Colorado–Boulder, said that while the conference’s purpose wasn’t to tell people how to behave in a marketplace, the research presented can be used by policymakers and executives to help create more ethical work environments.

“When people think about a business school, they often have a very narrow perception of what they do,” McGraw says. “Business schools can inform public policy, support entrepreneurs or help consumer advocates, so any time you can help understand the marketplace at some micro or macro level, the ability to prescribe expands greatly. Business schools have a much broader mission than most people assume, and I think a conference like this can help highlight that.”

“Morality in the Marketplace” was co-sponsored by the A. B. Freeman School of Business, the Murphy Institute, Duke University’s Center for Advanced Hindsight, and the D. W. Mitchell Lecture Fund as part of the Provost’s Faculty Seminars in Interdisciplinary Research.