

Enhancing ethical literacy of psychologically literate citizens

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What is ethical literacy?

- According to the APA (2007) guidelines for undergraduate psychology, it is the ability to:
 - Have a general understanding of the ethical principles and codes of ethics/conduct relevant to Psychology
 - Act ethically both generally and in research
 - Identify ethical issues in psychological applications
 - Use information and technology in an ethical manner
 - Be sensitive to ethnic and cultural issues
 - To manage professional conflicts in an ethical manner

What is ethical literacy continued

- According to the APAC Standards (2009) three-year graduates are expect to:
 - Acquire knowledge of the APS Code of Ethics (2007) and Ethical Guidelines
 - Evaluate research and other ethical conduct in accordance with the Code and Guidelines (GA 4)
 - Use information ethically (GA 4)
- Graduates from the 4th year should have received:
 - Instruction in professional and research ethics

Why might ethical literacy be important in the undergraduate curricula?

- An undergraduate psychology student works casually as a respite carer for a NGO. Her role brings her into contact with other welfare professional and guardians who, in her opinion, do not always act in the welfare interests of the client.
- Consider the undergraduate students who works casually in a fast food outlet, where the boss is overly familiar with other casual workers (especially young females from ethnic minority groups)
- Consider the cash poor undergraduate student who finds a wallet containing identification documents and a sizeable amount of cash.

Why might ethical literacy be important in the undergraduate curricula?

- Psychology students will encounter situations that challenge their personal sense of right and wrong, good and bad – whether or not they continue onto professional psychology training.
- As a psychological literate citizen, should graduates from psychology programs also be ethically literate?
- Would being ethically literate enhance their psychological literacy?
- If yes to these questions, then when and how should ethical literacy be taught?

Ethics curricula in Australian programs

- APS have argued for this since 1995
- 'Osmosis' vs formal training (Handelsman, 1986)
 - Decision making
 - Ethical principles and reasoning
 - Examination of one's own personal and professional values
- Less than 25% of undergraduate programs (Davidson, Garton & Joyce, 2003)
- 90% of 4th year programs and now all postgraduate programs teach ethics
- NB – graduates from 4 year degrees can register in Australia.

Type of coverage of ethics in undergraduate psychology

- Integrative approach – stand alone ethics courses not typical
- Philosophy courses not prescribed
- Covered well in research courses
- Optional/elective in courses such as interpersonal skills, counselling
- Emphasis – equal in philosophical and code based instructions

Type of coverage of ethics in 4th year and postgraduate psychology

- APS Code of Ethics
- APS Ethical guidelines
- Comprehensive listing of professional topics
 - Ethics theory, principles, consent, competence, boundaries, multiple roles, diversity, confidentiality, supervision, advertising, self care, burnout, decision making etc.
 - Case based – legislation, registration as a psychologist.

What does the research say about ethics training in Australian universities

- 16-20% of practising psychologists held negative opinions
- Half of the 4th years surveyed reported receiving inadequate ethics instruction (Morrissey & Symons, 2006, Sullivan 2005).
- Psychology educators place little importance on pre professional ethics training (Lipp et al 2006).
- No confidence that we currently provide sufficient grounding in ethical literacy for everyday life.

Is ethics done better in the USA?

- Less well documented – except for teaching of ethics
- Dunn (2010) recommends that psychology syllabi incorporate ethics and diversity across all coursework components (not limited to a subset of courses).

So how might we enhance ethical literacy?

- What is meant by ethical literacy?
- What an ethically literate citizen 'should know' and
- How might ethical literacy be imparted?

Defining ethics and ethical literacy

- Ethics is “the philosophical study of good conduct” (Ross, 1930, p.102)
- Ethical decision making – making moral choices based on philosophical theories of good conduct.
- Ethical conduct encompasses thoughts and actions commensurate with philosophical theories of good conduct

Ethical theories

- Any theory that offers an account of ethical thought and action, and allows for testing of the underlying assumptions on which the theory is based.
- Good conduct involves acts (or omissions) that are morally good or right
- Rightness and wrongness are terms that refer to what is done (acts), while goodness and badness involve judgements

Psychology educators and moral training?

- On what theoretical assumptions should we proceed when faced with everyday moral decisions?
- Our codes (APA, 2002; APS, 2007; NHMRC, 2007) largely adopt a deontological (or principle based) approach.
- These codes do not apply to psychologists' personal conduct (unless illegal or disreputable conduct occurs)

Teaching ethics

- Fine and Ulrich (1988) – utilitarian and deontological theories followed by ethical decision making
 - Everyday life issues – health, illness, suicide, mental health are examined. Students encouraged to examine their personal ethical reasoning
- Miner (2006) - considers the pro and cons of ideal utilitarianism, deontological theories, normative relativism, virtue theory
- We suggest hedonistic utilitarianism, intuitionism, radical relativism, and moral scepticism might also be included.

Teaching ethics continued

- Miner also suggests decision steps – consider theory and evaluates quality and truthfulness of argument, reasonableness of conclusions and proposed course of action.
- Davdison (2006) also examines *prima facie* duty theory - compares and contrasts theories, decision steps.
- Morrissey & Symons (2006): ethical theories, an understanding of ethical principles, review of personal values, practical ethical reasoning and decision making training

Ethically literate psychology graduates should:

- Have a disciplined knowledge of, and theoretical approach to moral decision making
- Have a vocabulary for talking about morality
- Understand the rules imposed by different theories
- Ethical decision making framework
- Understand and apply appropriate evaluative criteria to determine whether their proposed or actual conduct is ethical
- Meta ethical and reflective – and they do what is right for the right reasons, rather than for the wrong reasons, and not what is wrong.

Everyday ethical challenges

- Generalise from classroom to workplace, to relationships, to society.
- Moral agency – personal responsibility
- Understand health ethics, consumer rights, social justice, cultural tolerance, and social responsibility
- Intellectual and commercial honesty, self care
- Legal and organisational systems intersect
- Resolve ethical disagreements

Methods for enhancing ethical literacy

- Integrate formal instruction with experiential approaches
- Some classroom based instruction – analysis of cases, moral dilemmas, role plays, mock complaints committee etc.
- Problem based learning that take students outside of the classroom – placement activity – where intentional consideration of ethical issues in the placement setting
- Discursive approaches (e.g. Molewijk et al., 2008)

Suggested curriculum activities

- Study novels (eg. *Sophie's World*)
- Observe a peaceful social demonstration
- Unsupervised volunteer work or short placement – WIL– keep a reflective journal
- Collect press cuttings on social and environmental issues in the media
- Watch movies (eg., *Road to Guantanamo*)
- Explore examples of ethically problematic research for the benefit of society at large
- Study local high profile case involving breaches of professional ethics.
- Search the web or Yellow Pages for advertisements, public statements that might be morally questionable.

Implications for undergraduate learning and teaching

- Ethically literate students know moral theory, understand and apply ethical decision making, comprehend complexities and demonstrate their ability to apply these in everyday situations.
- Space need to be found in curricula
- Educators may need some educating
- Storied exchanges and practicing 'being ethical' are needed
- Integration of classroom and work integrated learning is necessary.

Conclusion

Psychology is capable of producing ethically literate graduates from undergraduate programs, but syllabi, educators' professional development, instructional approaches, and workplace opportunities need to change for this to become the norm, rather than the exception (Davidson and Morrissey, 2010 *in press*).

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