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A Survey of Ethics Training in Undergraduate Psychology Programs at Jesuit Universities

Thomas G. Plante,¹ Selena Pistoresi

Abstract Training in ethics is fundamental in higher education among both faith-based and secular colleges and universities, regardless of one's academic major or field of study. Catholic colleges and universities have included moral philosophy, theology, and applied ethics in their undergraduate curricula for generations. The purpose of this investigation was to determine what, if anything, Jesuit college psychology departments are doing to educate psychology majors regarding ethical issues. A survey method was used to assess the psychology departments of all 28 Jesuits colleges and universities in the United States. A total of 21 of the 28 schools responded and completed the survey. Five schools (23%) reported that they offered a course specifically on ethics in psychology, and three (14%) additional schools offered related courses. Of the eight (38%) that offered ethics-related courses, only one required its majors to take it, and only if they were enrolled in the mental health or forensic psychology tracks. For two (10%) of the schools, the ethics in psychology course counted as a university core ethics requirement; for two others (10%), the class met an elective university ethics requirement for psychology majors.

Keywords ethics, psychology, undergraduates, Jesuit education

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Training in ethics is fundamental in higher education among both faith-based and secular colleges and universities, regardless of one's academic major or field of study. Catholic colleges and universities have included moral philosophy, theology, and applied ethics in their undergraduate curricula for generations. In the field of psychology, the focus of this paper, applied ethics has been considered a very important component of the undergraduate psychology major and curriculum for at least the past two decades (Zuccherro 2011). An important 1991 national conference on the undergraduate psychology curriculum, the St. Mary's Conference, outlined agreed-upon principles for a quality undergraduate psychology education that included a solid understanding of and training in ethical issues (Zuccherro 2011). Currently, the American Psychological Association's guidelines for undergraduate psychology education highlight ethics, which is included in four of the five primary learning objectives consistent with the standard guidelines for psychology pedagogy (American Psychological Association 2007). A more recent 2008 national conference focusing on psychology education at the undergraduate level, the Puget Sound Conference, advocated a more detailed standardized curriculum for the undergraduate psychology major (Zuccherro 2011). Additionally, Dunn et al. (2010) proposed a core psychology curriculum and recommended that ethics should be incorporated into all psychology courses.

Despite the call for an increase in ethics education within the psychology undergraduate major curriculum in recent years, a standardized, commonly adopted psychology ethics curriculum has yet to be developed or implemented. Research studies focusing on the integration of ethics into introductory psychology textbooks have revealed that ethics coverage is minimal at best (Zuccherro 2011). Those texts that do discuss ethics tend to focus on ethics in research only,

with little attention paid to other areas of concern such as clinical practice and other important issues in psychology (Mathews 1991; Plante and Plante 2017).

Santa Clara University, a Roman Catholic and Jesuit institution, shares a core curriculum approach and strategy for higher education with 27 sister Jesuits colleges and universities throughout the United States. Since the Jesuit educational philosophy emphasizes ethics as part of the core curriculum, it was intuitive for us to begin our search for trends in ethics education with these sister colleges and universities. The purpose of this investigation was to determine what, if anything, Jesuit college psychology departments are doing to educate psychology majors regarding ethical issues. To our knowledge, no published research has examined this particular issue regarding undergraduate ethics education within secular or religious affiliated colleges.

Method

A survey developed by the authors and administrated by the second author was used to assess the 28 undergraduate Jesuit colleges and universities within the United States. Contact, directed to department chairs, was made by email when available (see appendixes A and B) and by telephone if no email address was readily available.

Results

Of the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities, 21 (75%) responded to our email or phone call request. Of those who responded, five (23%) reported that they offered a course specifically on ethics in psychology and three (14%) additional schools that they offered related courses (i.e., Ethical Controversies in Psychology and Neuroscience, Ethics and Professionalism, and Ethics in Research). Of the eight schools (38%) that offered ethics-related courses, only one required its

majors to take the course if they were in the mental health or forensic psychology track. For two (10%) of the schools, the ethics in psychology course also counted as a university-wide core ethics requirement; for two others (10%), the class met an elective requirement for psychology majors.

Of the 21 schools that responded to the survey, eight (38%) offered a syllabus for their ethics or ethics-related course. Following a careful review of the eight available syllabi, the following common ethical topics emerged in two or more of the received documents: informed consent, ethics in research design, confidentiality and record-keeping, boundaries and multiple-role relationships, competence, responsibility in assessment, and ethics in a legal setting. Other topics included: ethics in psychotherapy techniques, dilemmas in an academic setting, multicultural considerations, and ethical decision-making. Additionally, three of the five departments offering a course in ethics in psychology listed as required reading the text *Ethics in Psychology and the Mental Health Professions: Standards and Cases* by Koocher and Keith-Spiegel (2007).

Many department representatives responding to our survey reported that ethics is incorporated into other courses such as research methods and introductory psychology. However, this incorporation was described as little more than a unit within a broader curriculum as opposed to being the focal point of the courses.

Discussion

Although further research is needed, it is clear that ethics education is not a high priority among the greater portion of Jesuit colleges and university undergraduate psychology departments. Only

23% of the responding schools offered an ethics in psychology class, and only 10% offered their class as one that would meet general university core curriculum requirements for ethics.

It is important to make clear that our survey examined undergraduate ethics training in psychology and not graduate or professional training. Thus, it is unclear how ethics training at the college level may impact students as they grow older and pursue various career options. Additionally, it is also unclear how ethics training in secular and other non-Jesuit educational institutions is conducted, if at all, given our current survey results. Finally, the American Psychological Association (2002) offers an ethics code for members of the association, but they offer little on the particulars of undergraduate ethics training and the code certainly does not apply to the behavior of college students who are not members of the association. These issues may be best addressed in future research using different research samples.

Given our findings, it is reasonable to suggest that Santa Clara University may be a reasonable model for ethics education in undergraduate psychology among Jesuit institutions. Santa Clara University is one of only five Jesuit universities that offer an undergraduate course specifically on ethics in psychology and one of only two that integrates the course as a fulfillment of a core university-wide ethics requirement and major elective requirement. Using the Santa Clara University ethics class as a template, the next step in this research would be to design an ethics model for other Jesuit schools to consider and perhaps for non-Jesuit and secular institutions as well. A dynamic, adaptable curriculum for ethics in psychology at the college level may be helpful not only for future psychologists but also for college psychology majors interested in a variety of careers, and it is a natural step in the progression towards a curriculum inspired by Jesuit values (Plante and Plante 2017). More research is needed, and this current

survey is just an initial step in what will hopefully be a useful and productive direction. After all, more ethics training, rather than less, is likely to be helpful to all students.

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Zuccherro, R. A. (2011). Psychology ethics in introductory psychology textbooks. *Teaching of Psychology, 38*, 110–113.

Appendix A

Survey Template

If an ethics in psychology course was found through an initial online catalog search:

Hello,

My name is _____ and I am writing from the psychology department at Santa Clara University.

We are conducting a survey of the 28 Jesuit universities in the United States, and we would love to have your input. We are interested in finding out what, if anything, Jesuit institutions do to incorporate ethics into their psychology curriculum. I see on your website that you offer a course called:

PSYC _____

I have a few questions about this course and your ethics curriculum in general:

- 1) Is it a required course for psychology majors?
- 2) Does it cross over with a university core ethics requirement?
- 3) Would it be possible to obtain a syllabus for PSYC _____?
- 4) Does your university offer any other courses or experiences designed to teach ethics to psychology majors (research opportunities, internship experiences, etc.)?

Our ultimate goal is to develop a model ethics curriculum in line with Jesuit ideals that could be shared nationally among psychology departments. Your input is truly valuable to us, and I would deeply appreciate it if you could pass this email along to the appropriate recipient. Please do not hesitate to contact me at _____.

Appendix B

Survey Template

If an ethics in psychology course could not be found through an initial online catalog search:

Hello,

My name is _____ and I am writing from the psychology department at Santa Clara University. We are conducting a survey of the 28 Jesuit universities in the United States, and we would love to have your input. We are interested in finding out what, if anything, Jesuit institutions do to incorporate ethics into their psychology curriculum. I was not able to find a course that specifically addresses ethics in psychology among your course listings, and I am wondering if you can provide me with further information by answering these questions:

- 1) Do you offer a course on ethics in psychology?
- 2) Is it a required course for psychology majors?
- 3) Does it cross over with a university core ethics requirement?
- 4) Would it be possible to obtain a syllabus for it?
- 5) Are ethics incorporated into any of the psychology courses that you offer? If so, how?
- 6) Does your university offer any other courses or experiences designed to teach ethics to psychology majors (research opportunities, internship experiences, etc.)?

Our ultimate goal is to develop a model ethics curriculum in line with Jesuit ideals that could be shared nationally among psychology departments. Your input is truly valuable to us, and I would deeply appreciate it if you could pass this email along to the appropriate recipient. Please do not hesitate to contact me at _____.

Appendix C

Sample Syllabus

ETHICS IN PSYCHOLOGY

Required Reading:

Texts: Rachels, J., & Rachels, S. (2012). *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (7th Ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill. ISBN: 9780078038242

Koocher, G. P., & Keith-Spiegel, P. (2008). *Ethics in Psychology and the Mental Health Professions: Standards and Cases* (3rd Ed.). New York, NY: Oxford. ISBN: 978-0-19-514911-1

Plante, T. G. (2004). *Do the Right Thing: Living Ethically in an Unethical World*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger. ISBN: 1572243643

APA Ethics Code also located at <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx#>.

Course Evaluation:

Class Quizzes	100 points
Class Behavior	+/-
Midterm Learning Adventure 1	100 points
Midterm Learning Adventure 2	100 points
Final Learning Adventure	200 points
Term Paper	100 points
Class Participation and Scholarly Enthusiasm:	+

+/- can improve or decrease course grade

Course Description: Ethics in psychology involves the role of ethical behavior and decision-making in the field of psychology and related behavioral, medical, and social sciences (e.g., medicine, public policy, nursing, occupational therapy, physical therapy). In accordance with the University's statement of purpose, the course seeks to "prepare students to assume leadership roles in society through an education that stresses moral . . . values . . . , seeks to answer . . . 'what should be' . . . and (promotes) justice . . . and the common good." Class topics include issues related to competence, integrity, professional, scientific, and social responsibility, respect for others' rights and dignity, concern for others' welfare, and other topics.

Learning Objectives: (from University Core Curriculum Requirements)

1.1 Be able to reason ethically by drawing on major ethical theories and traditions, (e.g, virtue ethics, feminist ethics, deontological or consequentialist theories); by normatively assessing individual, professional, and institutional decisions; and by articulating their personal engagement with the meaning of the right and the good. (Arts & Humanities, Ethical Reasoning, Critical Thinking)

1.2 Be able to analyze, critically evaluate, and apply major ethical theories and traditions to significant personal, professional, and institutional decisions. As part of such efforts, students will be able to articulate how they understand some central ethical concepts such as justice, happiness, the good, virtue, dignity, rights, and equality. (Arts & Humanities, Critical Thinking, Ethical Reasoning)

1.3 Be able to demonstrate appreciation of nuance and ambiguity, as well as clarity and precision, in their thinking and writing about moral problems, concepts, and ideals. (Critical Thinking, Complexity)

1.4 Reflect on their own ethical decisions and actions, on their roles as morally responsible members of the human community, and on what it means to be a good person. (Critical Thinking, Complexity)

Course Goals: (1) To understand ethical issues and ethical decision-making in the field of psychology and related fields.
(2) To provide a framework for understanding and thinking about ethical issues in psychology and other behavioral, social, and medical sciences.
(3) To provide the foundation for students taking additional courses and advanced training in psychology and other behavioral and social science fields.

Sequence of Topics and Readings:

Week 1	Introduction to Course & Introduction to Ethics	R# 1-6, P 1
Week 2	Methods and Perspectives in Ethical Decision-Making	R 7-13, P 2
Week 3	Application of Ethical Decision-Making to Psychology and Related Fields	K 1-3 & Appendix A
Week 4	Competence & Integrity	K 4, 5, 6; P 3-4
Week 5	Professional & Scientific Responsibility <i>Midterm Learning Adventure 1</i>	K 16, 19; P 5
Week 6	Respect for People's Rights and Dignity	K 8, 9, 13; P 6
Week 7	Concern for Other's Welfare	K 10, 11, 12, P 7
Week 8	Social Responsibility	K 7, 14, 15
Week 9	Special Issues: e.g., Legal & Work Issues <i>Midterm Learning Adventure 2</i>	K 17, 18
Week 10	Future Trends, Hot Topics, & Conclusions <i>Term Paper Due</i>	P 8-9

R = Rachels book, **K** = Koocher book, **P** = Plante book