

Ethics of Psychotherapy and Counseling

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Ethics is not (yet) one of the core content areas in the undergraduate curriculum of most schools. Ethics training historically has been mostly (a) graduate, (b) cognitive, and (c) rule-based—none of which is conducive to engaging undergraduates. We believe that there are several good reasons and engaging ways to teach ethics in the undergraduate psychology curriculum.

First, studying the ethics of psychotherapy and counseling by exploring differences between personal and professional ethics provides a useful way for students think about their personal morality, which is arguably a major purpose of higher education (Lewis, 2006). Second, many students will be consumers of counseling or psychotherapeutic services, and all students will continue to be consumers of professional services. Thus, studying ethics will be useful in understanding all types of professional ethics and should make students wiser consumers as they interact with physicians, attorneys, financial planners—and professors! Third, many students will not be waiting until graduate school to begin their work in professional capacities. In undergraduate internships, service learning opportunities, bachelor's level positions, and beginning practica, students will be working with clients and professionals who will expect and deserve professional behavior.

Guidelines and Principles for Developing Learning Activities

Engagement is multi-faceted (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990). For example, students can engage emotionally, cognitively, and/or interpersonally. They can engage with the material, the instructor, other class members, and/or the teaching process (including technology). Activities are most effective when both instructors and students are fully engaged on several levels.

Several overlapping approaches exist to help instructors choose what and how to teach. The *wise consumer* approach (e.g., Anderson, 2010) may be the most accessible and useful for undergraduates. All students have already dealt with a variety of professionals—physicians, high school counselors,

college instructors, restaurant personnel, and perhaps advisors, therapists, personal trainers, police officers, and attorneys. Instructors can ask students to reflect on what made for positive and negative interactions with these professionals. The *ethical acculturation* approach (Anderson & Handelsman, 2010; Handelsman, Gottlieb, & Knapp, 2005) helps students with the transition into professional roles, which include professional values, principles, and rules that do not completely overlap with those of other relationships. A third approach is *ethical decision making* (Cottone & Claus, 2000) or *ethical choice making* (Anderson, Wagoner, & Moore, 2006). The word *choice* highlights the action of implementing ethical decisions after careful deliberation. The choice-making approach can incorporate both external (e.g., ethics codes, principles) and internal (e.g., virtues, motivation, moral values) factors.

Regardless of the approach, it helps to have criteria by which to judge the activities we design. Gottlieb, Handelsman, and Knapp (2008) outlined five principles to make graduate ethics education effective; you can easily adapt their principles for undergraduates. These principles interact with each other; as we discuss activities that exemplify each principle, remember that good activities will exemplify most or all of these principles.

Focus on Students' Backgrounds and Needs

Getting students to know themselves—their ethical values and virtues (Anderson & Handelsman, 2010)—can be very engaging, whether they are reflecting on being a wise consumer, their ethical acculturation strategies, or their ethical choice processes. You can facilitate self-reflection via self-assessment questionnaires, case discussions, and writing assignments like journaling or an ethics autobiography.

One self-reflective exercise, which is especially applicable in the wise consumer and ethical acculturation approaches, is to ask students to look at professional relationships via metaphors. Students can complete the following: “The psychotherapeutic relationship is most like the relationship between _____ and _____. The psychotherapeutic

relationship and this other relationship are similar in that they both _____, but they are different because _____.” In our experience, the ensuing exploration and discussion naturally brings up issues that can be developed, such as boundaries, trust, exploitation, and confidentiality. You might also explore the use of appropriate self-disclosure—about your own experiences as professional or consumer—as a way to (a) model self-reflection, (b) introduce content, and (c) stay engaged.

Positive vs. Remedial Ethics

Helping people follow rules and avoid complaints is called remedial ethics, while helping people achieve excellence and actualize a coherent professional identity is called positive ethics (Handelsman, Knapp, & Gottlieb, 2009; Knapp & VandeCreek, 2006). Positive approaches may be more engaging than remedial ones.

Social and Supportive Strategies

The sensitive nature of many ethics discussions creates the potential for students to feel vulnerable (Pope, Sonne, & Greene, 2006). You should work to create a safe classroom environment in which students feel free to reflect and express minority views or opinions that they are not absolutely sure are beyond reproach. The ethical acculturation approach is one way to facilitate such risk-taking. For example, when students share tentative thoughts, it is more supportive (and positive) to discuss their acculturation strategy than to label them or their ideas as unethical. Balogh (2004) suggested that instructors make clear the distinction between personal moral beliefs and professional standards of conduct.

Class discussions of cases are inherently social. You can make these discussions more supportive by having students include their pre-existing moral ideas. Other examples include having students work in small groups to *create* case examples that make use of course concepts, or to create documents, such as informed consent forms, along with rationales for the forms that incorporate course concepts (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2007). Reading each others’ ethics autobiographies can also help students appreciate, respect, and work with their own and their colleagues’ ideas about ethics. You can also ask students to do some *perspective-taking* (Anderson & Handelsman, 2010), to place themselves in the shoes of another person and feel what the issue would be like from that position (e.g., “What would you do if this were your friend, not your client?”).

Experiential Exercises

Case discussions can be very social and

supportive, but they are not very experiential. We like to turn case discussions into role-plays. Sometimes we have students pair up and have each pair role-play for a few minutes before a large group discussion.

One way we make ethics more experiential, for students and ourselves, is to make the classroom a microcosm for the exploration of ethical choices. Recently one of us asked an ethics class: “If one of you tells a story that is very funny but slightly embarrassing, is it ethical for me to go home and tell my spouse? Can I tell another class to illustrate a point?” We discuss classroom policies—grading, extra credit, use of cell phones, attendance—using ethical principles from the course. We then explore the parallels between these situations and therapeutic situations.

Students can conduct interviews with psychotherapists about ethical issues they’ve encountered, or with clients who can discuss their reactions to various therapist behaviors. Ethical issues are also particularly well-suited to classroom debates. You can make debates more positive and supportive by adopting Johnson and Johnson’s (1993) strategy of academic or structured controversy, which includes steps where debaters argue the other side and where middle ground is sought between extreme positions.

Life-Long Learning

Acculturation, self-reflection, and ethical choice making are life-long endeavors. To have students become aware of time, case discussions can include questions such as: “What would you have thought about this case in high school?” Or, “What would you have judged or done before you read the chapter?” Students can conduct interviews with professionals at various points in their careers, or at least ask experienced therapists what has changed—in them, in the field, in their ethical thinking.

Good learning activities inspire students to develop good habits. For example, Reese (1990) had small groups of students discuss the ethics of popular press accounts of research studies; she reported that “most students find the exercise worthwhile” (p. 261). You can do the same type of exercise with newspaper and internet accounts of psychotherapy (Balogh, 2004).

Sample Activities

Continuum of Perspective: “Is it ethical or unethical?”

Start by asking students a question, such as, “Is it ethical or unethical for a psychotherapist to hug a client?” Students then physically move to a spot

along a line with the poles of “Ethical” and “Unethical.” Ask for volunteers to share why they’ve chosen their positions. You can institute a rule that no two students can occupy the same position on the line, forcing them to get social and talk with those next to them to make sure they’re in the right spot. You can make it more experiential, and focus on students’ backgrounds, by having them take the role of therapist and discuss their needs and values that might be met by the choice they made.

You can change different variables in the situation and see if students want to move up or down the continuum. For example: “Is it ethical or unethical for a psychotherapist to hug a client who is the same gender?” Another possibility: “Is it ethical or unethical for a real estate agent to hug a client?”

Uninformed Lack of Consent

Sometimes opportunities present themselves naturally. Mitch’s story: Years ago I was nominated for a teaching award that required being observed by two senior faculty members. My ethics class was scheduled to read the chapter about informed consent. I asked my two observers to sit up front with me as I started class. Soon one student asked, “Who are these two people?”

“You really don’t need to know that,” I responded.

“But why are they here?”

“You don’t need to know that either. Trust me.”

I continued to assert my privilege—and my beneficent intentions. Students pressed me for the identity and agenda of the visitors, and I asked students to justify their demands using their readings about informed consent. Do *students* need to be informed? How much information do they need to know? Do they need to consent specifically to any non-lecture class activity or non-professor presence? Are there exceptions to the obligation to provide information?

Students were certainly emotionally involved in this experience—as was I! The exercise was social and supportive, as students reinforced each others’ use of course material. The experience reflected positive ethics because students were asking me to go beyond minimum legal or ethical rules.

By the end of the period students had made eloquent, emotional, and intellectually sound arguments for my obligation to identify my visitors and disclose the purpose of their visit—which I did. In subsequent semesters I have invited colleagues to sit in and have set up a video camera—pointed at students—at the beginning of class.

Annotated Bibliography

Books

You can use these books as primary texts in ethics courses, supplemental texts in psychotherapy/counseling courses, or references to develop activities for any course.

- Anderson, S. K., & Handelsman, M. M. (2010). *Ethics for psychotherapists and counselors: A proactive approach*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Using ethical acculturation as the foundation and self-exploration as the major tool, the authors encourage students to be active learners. Students work through numerous journal suggestions and “Food for Thought” activities that can be done in writing, in small groups, and/or in large-group discussions.

For example, one journal entry asks students to create a list of their values (“I think it’s important ...”) and then prioritize them. Students then write about those that are most important in their role as a psychotherapist or counselor, and which are most important to their ethical identity. Another journal entry asks students to respond to this scenario:

You and your friend both get a job in which you are counseling high school students in an after-school program. The program has a strict policy against drinking or drug use among both students and staff members, and your friend—who is now also your colleague—is showing up for work high or hung over. (p. 48)

Students then answer a series of questions about their feelings, their desire/obligation to report their friend, the specific actions they would take, and their values. Variations are presented, such as that harm was definitely being done, that the colleague wasn’t a friend, and that reporting a colleague’s misbehavior was mandatory.

- Corey, G., Corey, M. S., & Callanan, P. (2007). *Issues and ethics in the helping professions* (7th ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

The first chapter includes an excellent self-assessment exercise that both you and students can complete. All chapters include cultural issues, cases for discussion, and suggested activities which include small group exercises, role-plays, and class debate topics.

- Kitchener, K. S. & Anderson, S. K. (2011). *Foundations of ethical practice, research, and teaching in psychology and counseling* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

This is a comprehensive review of the literature for psychologists and counselors, and draws upon Kitchener's seminal work on principles, virtues, and decision making. Each chapter contains multiple case studies.

- Knapp, S. J., & VandeCreek, L. D. (2006). *Practical ethics for psychologists: A positive approach*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

A great ethics text for undergraduates. It covers the APA Ethics Code (APA 2002) in a very straightforward way. It also takes a positive approach and includes many concise case scenarios.

Articles

- Anderson, S. K. (2009). A proactive approach to teaching ethics from the inside out. *Career Planning and Adult Development Journal*, 25, 134-146.

This article contains a brief overview of the importance of self-exploration in developing a professional identity, an overview of the ethical acculturation approach, and activities addressing acculturation strategies. One activity that explores the *separation* strategy is, "Isn't that kind of picky or silly?" Students honestly share their criticisms about the ethical guidelines, conflicts they perceive between their personal values and the expectations of the profession, and cases they found surprising or disturbing.

- Bashe, A., Anderson, S. K., Handelsman, M. M., & Klevansky, R. (2007). An acculturation model for ethics training: The ethics autobiography and beyond. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 48, 60-67.

The authors present exercises designed to help students acculturate to the mental health professions. The major technique is the *ethics autobiography*: Students reflect on their personal ethics and backgrounds. They consider how their values may interact with psychology ethics. The authors suggest assigning the ethics autobiography early in the course to establish an atmosphere where students' histories are valued.

The authors also discuss *ethics rounds*—a way to introduce ethics discussions at the beginning of a course (or section, or class period). Students introduce themselves by talking about their professional or personal experiences with ethical dilemmas. Even if they have no professional experiences in psychology, many undergraduates have experienced ethical dilemmas such as having a fellow student ask to use a paper that they have written to submit for an assignment in a different course. You can learn quite a bit about where students are coming from, and students also begin to

learn about each other.

- Costanzo, M., & Handelsman, M. M. (1998). Teaching aspiring professors to be ethical teachers: Doing justice to the case study method. *Teaching of Psychology*, 25, 97-102.

This article concerns the ethics of teaching, but the four cases described illustrate three ways to make cases more effective: Include variations of the case, make the variations revolve around the major issue or principles (e.g., justice) being studied, and include specific questions for students to answer that lead them towards the issues they need to address.

- Eberlein, L. (1987). Introducing ethics to beginning psychologists: A problem-solving approach. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 18, 353-359.

This article focuses on the process of solving ethical dilemmas by (a) considering the individuals involved and (b) weighing alternatives. The article also highlights the importance of personal values, moral reasoning, and taking responsibility in the decision-making process.

- Hutchison, L. L. (2002). Teaching ethics across the public relations curriculum. *Public Relations Review*, 28, 301-309.

This article presents active learning techniques used to teach ethics in a public relations curriculum, including a detailed list of pedagogical tools to address specific ethics topics. The activities include small and large group discussions, group and individual presentations, class debates, role-plays, student development of ethical codes, journal keeping (particularly regarding internship experiences), and video conferences with practitioners. The author also suggests that instructors focus on early career dilemmas to promote student engagement.

- Mintz, S. M. (2006). Accounting ethics education: Integrating reflective learning and virtue ethics. *Journal of Accounting Education*, 24, 97-117.

The author presents a detailed description of an undergraduate accounting ethics course that incorporates several techniques (e.g., directed discussion, minute papers) to help students develop virtues and reflective learning that can easily be adapted for psychology. One technique is *reflection logs*, in which students share observations about current discussions, but also go back to previous log entries and reflect upon them in light of what they've learned since. He provides specific guidelines for role-plays, including having students reflect on these questions: "(1) What it was like to be inside the experience; (2) What went well for them and why; (3) What would they do differently next time; and (4) What have they learned about their own ability to reflect on and identify ethical issues" (p. 105). A

qualitative survey indicated that the majority of students commented favorably about the effectiveness and innovation of the techniques.

- Roberts-Kirchhoff, E. S., & Caspers, M. L. (2001). Dialogues as teaching tools in the biochemical sciences. *Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education*, 29, 225-228.

This detailed article describes a class assignment to promote student engagement and higher level reasoning regarding ethical issues. Students work in groups to create a written dialogue where at least two different viewpoints of an issue must be explored. You could create a list of possible topics or allow student teams to choose their own topics. The arguments in the written dialogues must be based on information from the literature in the field (e.g., journal articles). Individual engagement is also encouraged as students must present a short personal perspective on the dialogue as well. The project culminates in a classroom presentation and discussion. Examples show that students were very creative in their presentations and at times involved the audience as active members as well (e.g., as jury members deciding a case). These dialogues are a great active learning technique and a great way to help assess students' learning. The article presents data demonstrating that students' knowledge of course topics increased from before to after their presentations.

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