

Can Psychology Ethics Effectively Be Integrated into Introductory Psychology?

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Abstract This study evaluated the integration of psychology ethics into an introductory psychology course. Students in two general psychology sections were exposed to an infusion of psychology ethics in teaching, research, and clinical practice, whereas students in two sections were exposed to traditional course content. Students completed a pre and post-test assessment including a psychology ethics questionnaire and open-ended responses to three ethics case studies. Students in the ethics group displayed a statistically significant increase in scores on both measures from pre to post-test. However, students in the traditional group showed no improvement in scores.

Keywords Ethics · Psychology · Psychology ethics · Introductory psychology · Teaching outcomes

Introductory psychology is a popular course (Griggs 2002), with approximately 1 to 1.5 million students enrolled annually at American universities (Cush and Buskist 1997). Moreover, introductory psychology is the second most frequently selected course by bachelor's degree recipients (Halpern 2008) and is vital to the undergraduate psychology curriculum (Griggs). It serves as an emissary of psychology for students who select other courses of study and as a foundation for those who choose a psychology major. Psychology is currently the fourth most popular undergraduate major (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006). Hence, the teaching of introductory psychology is an important consideration for departments of psychology.

In 1994, the American Psychological Association (APA) identified ethics as one component of a quality undergraduate program. Subsequently, APA (2007) identified knowledge of ethics as a learning outcome for the undergraduate psychology major. Specifically, students should be familiar with the APA Code of Ethics and related ethical issues, follow the Code of Ethics when conducting research, understand that complicated

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ethical circumstances arise during the application of psychology, and be aware of the responsibility for ethical behavior in the science and practice of psychology (APA 2007).

Many theoretical and anecdotal reports have addressed the inclusion of ethics into undergraduate psychology programs (Balogh 2002; Haemmerlie and Mathews 1988; Handelsman 2006; Lamb 1991; Plante, 1998). Previous authors (Balogh 2002; Fisher and Kuther 1997; Leonard et al. 2002; McMinn 1988) have recommended a case study approach to teach psychology ethics. Moreover, there are several advantages of using case studies to teach ethics in psychology: they are intriguing, increase the salience of the ethics principles of interest, and are practical, illustrating the application of ethical principles to real-life situations (McMinn). Case studies may be particularly well-suited for introductory psychology courses, as they correlate with positive learning outcomes and result in increased student engagement and problem-solving abilities (Leonard et al.).

However, there is limited empirical research that investigates the inclusion of ethics content in introductory psychology. Korn (1984) reviewed introductory psychology textbooks for ethics content and determined that if ethics were included, the coverage was approximately one page. Fisher and Kuther (1997) studied the inclusion of research ethics into introductory psychology, using a case study approach. Their results indicated students who were exposed to research ethics were more aware of ethical guidelines and decision-making skills for psychology research than were students who did not receive such instruction. Fisher and Kuther recommended students be exposed to a more comprehensive view of the ethical problems faced by psychologists. Hence, the current study assessed the effectiveness of the integration of psychology ethics related to three common roles of psychologists: teacher, researcher, and practitioner, into introductory psychology. The following research question was posed: Are general psychology students who receive instruction enhanced with psychology ethics more knowledgeable and able to apply that knowledge to case studies at post-test than those who are not?

Method

Participants

Students enrolled in four sections of general psychology (PSYC 101) at a small, mid-western, Jesuit University during the spring 2008 semester ($N=86$) participated in this study. The mean age was 19.23 years ($SD=1.23$). Freshmen and sophomores represented 57% and 17% of the sample, respectively. Women comprised 62% of the sample. The ethnic origin of participants was primarily Caucasian (79%), with relatively fewer African Americans (14%). 71% enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences and 21% enrolled in the College of Social Sciences, Health, and Education. Common majors included biology (23%), undecided (15%), communications (9%), psychology (6%), criminal justice (5%), and social work (5%). Forty-six percent had previously enrolled in a psychology course (either high school or college) and 43% had taken an ethics course prior to the study.

Procedure

This study utilized a quasi-experimental design. Students enrolled in two general psychology course sections taught by one instructor comprised a control group ($n=43$), which received the traditional curriculum. Students enrolled in two additional general psychology course sections (sections taught by the author and another instructor) comprised

the ethics group ($n=43$). These students were exposed to a psychology ethics curriculum developed by the author. Knapp and VandeCreek (2006) served as the primary source for psychology ethics content. The APA Code of Ethics (2002) was also discussed with students throughout the semester. Information about psychology ethics was integrated into the following course topics: careers in psychology, research, learning, social psychology, and clinical practice. Table 1 provides detailed information about specific subjects addressed and teaching methodologies used.

Students reviewed and discussed case studies to encourage application of their knowledge of ethics. Case studies were drawn from multiple sources (APA 1987; Francis 1999; Herlihy and Golden 1990; Kitchener 2000; Knapp and VandeCreek 2006; Koocher and Keith-Spiegel 1998; Nagy 2005). After presentation of the ethics material, students were presented with case studies and posed with the following questions: 1) Which of the ethical principles have been violated; 2) What are the specific ethical issues of concern; and 3) How might the situation be most ethically resolved? In some cases, discussion of case studies occurred within the whole class. In most cases, small groups were assigned a case study, discussed it, answered the questions, and reported back to the entire class.

A psychology ethics questionnaire (PEQ) and case study questions assessed student knowledge. A pre-test assessment occurred on the first day of class and post-test on the last teaching day of the semester. Administration procedures included standardized directions

Table 1 Psychology ethics content for introductory psychology

Course topic	Subject	Method(s) used
Careers in Psychology/ Teaching of Psychology	Teaching Competence, Evaluation of Students, General Beneficence, Allocation of Authorship Credit, Dual Relationships	PowerPoint Presentation, Including introduction of APA Code of Ethics (e.g., General Principles), Classroom Discussion, Case Studies
Research	The Ethical Researcher, Use of Deception, Informed & Voluntary Consent, Institutional Review Board (IRB)	PowerPoint Presentation, Classroom Discussion, including APA Code of Ethics (e.g., General Principles and Specific Standards), Case Studies
Learning	Unethical Research Practices (deception, authorship credit); Watson's Little Albert Case Study	PowerPoint Presentation, Case Studies, Supplemental Reading (Hock 2005a), Video Clip, Classroom Discussion including APA Code of Ethics (e.g., General Principles)
Ethics Refresher	Ethics of research and teaching	Case studies, APA Code of Ethics (e.g., General Principles), Small Group Discussion, Class Discussion
Social Psychology	Ethics in social psychology research (Classic studies conducted by Zimbardo, Asch, Milgram), use of deception in social psychology, informed and voluntary consent, second-order [informed] consent, IRB	PowerPoint Presentation, Classroom Discussion including APA Code of Ethics (e.g., General Principles, Specific Standards), Video Clips, Supplemental Reading (Hock 2005b)
Clinical Practice	Confidentiality, Limits of Confidentiality, Tarasoff Case, Duty to Warn, Informed Consent, Boundaries, Multiple Relationships, Competence, Exceptions to Competence	PowerPoint Presentation, Classroom Discussion including APA Code of Ethics (e.g., General Principles and Specific Standards), Case Studies, Small Group Discussion

and a maximum of 30 min to complete the measures (See Appendix A). PEQ questions and case studies reflected ethics content presented to students in class. The specific case studies used for the assessment were unfamiliar to students; however, the students were exposed to the ethical issues arising in these case studies during class discussions. Questions about the assessment case studies were the same or similar to questions posed of students during class discussions of case studies.

Measures

Psychology Ethics Questionnaire (PEQ). The PEQ is a 15-item multiple-choice achievement test developed to assess student knowledge of ethics (see Appendix B). Five items assessed each area in which the course ethics content was focused: teaching, research, and clinical practice. PEQ scores ranged from 0 to 15, representing the number of correct items.

The internal consistency of the scale was assessed by calculating the Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha=.59$). While DeVillis (1991) indicated Cronbach's alpha should be above .70, the moderate internal consistency of the PEQ may be attributed to a small number of items and to three dimensions being assessed, rather than one dimension (Cortina 1993). The test-retest reliability of the questionnaire was assessed at a 1-week interval using students from another general psychology course section ($n=18$), $r=.58$. The low correlation coefficient is likely due to the small sample size.

Case Studies Three case studies were presented to students about which they described possible associated ethical issues (Question 1) and how the situation could be more ethically resolved (Question 2) in an open-ended response format (see Appendix C). Thus, there were six questions across three case studies. The case studies assessed students' ability to apply their knowledge to ethical situations. A priori, the researcher and a colleague identified the best, most comprehensive answer for each question. For Case Studies 1 and 3, raters used a 0 to 2 scale to evaluate responses for both items. A score of 2 indicated that a response included all necessary information. A score of 1 signified that the response contained some, but not all, necessary information. A score of 0 indicated that the response did not include any necessary information. For Case Study 2, raters used a 0 or 1 scale to evaluate responses for both questions, since there was only one right answer for each question. A score of 1 indicated that the response included necessary information, whereas a score of 0 indicated that necessary information was not present. Hence, total case study scores ranged from 0 to 10. Specific evaluation criteria for the case study scores can be found in Appendix D.

The author trained two graduate research assistants to score responses to the case study questions. Both research assistants scored a subset of 10 participants' responses from the pre- and post-test case studies to evaluate ratings of the inter-rater agreement. The kappa value for these ratings was .69, indicating good agreement (Altman 1991). Thereafter, one research assistant scored each participant's responses.

Results

To assess the effectiveness of the inclusion of ethics into introductory psychology, a series of *t*-tests were conducted. The traditional and ethics groups were compared at pre- and post-test on both dependent measures to assess whether there was a statistically significant difference between groups. The traditional group's pre- and post-test scores were compared

on both dependent measures to assess whether there was a change in knowledge in standard instruction condition. Finally, the ethics group's pre- and post-test scores were compared on both dependent measures to assess whether there was a change in knowledge in the experimental condition.

A *t*-test for independent samples was conducted to compare the pre-test PEQ scores for the traditional and ethics groups. There was no significant difference in the scores, $t(84) = .06, p = .95$. Likewise, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the pre-test case study scores for the traditional and ethics groups. There was no significant difference in the scores, $t(84) = .45, p = .65$. The means and standard deviations for the PEQ and case study scores are presented in Table 2.

A *t*-test for independent samples was conducted to compare the post-test PEQ scores for the traditional and ethics groups. There was a significant difference in the scores, $t(84) = 4.38, p < .005, \eta^2 = .19$. An independent samples *t*-test was also conducted to compare the post-test case study scores for the traditional and ethics groups. There was a significant difference in the scores, $t(84) = 5.08, p < .005, \eta^2 = .24$.

A paired-samples *t*-test was used to evaluate the possibility of change in the traditional group's PEQ scores from pre- to post-test. There was no statistically significant difference, $t(42) = .68, p = .50$. A *t*-test for paired-samples was used to evaluate the possibility of change in the traditional group's case study scores from pre- to post-test. There was no statistically significant difference in case study scores from pre- to post-test, $t(42) = 1.37, p = .177$.

A paired-samples *t*-test was used to evaluate the impact of the integration of psychology ethics content on the ethics group's PEQ scores. There was a statistically significant increase in scores from pre- to post-test, $t(42) = 5.32, p < .0005, \eta^2 = .40$. Similarly, a *t*-test for paired-samples was used to evaluate the impact of the integration of psychology ethics content on the ethics group case study scores. There was a statistically significant increase in case study scores from pre- to post-test, $t(42) = 5.11, p < .0005, \eta^2 = .38$.

Discussion

These findings suggest an increased presence of psychology ethics in introductory psychology may result in better student knowledge of psychology ethics and an improved ability to recognize unethical behavior and appropriate resolutions to ethically challenging situations. Students exposed to the integration of psychology ethics showed a statistically significant improvement on the PEQ and case studies at post-test as compared to pre-test, whereas those in the traditional group did not. The present study extended the work of Fisher and Kuther (1997), as it utilized a more comprehensive presentation of psychology ethics. The case study methodology appeared to engage students effectively in discussion and understanding ethics in introductory psychology.

Table 2 Means (*SD*) for the pre and post-test assessment

	Pre-test		Post-test	
	PEQ	Case studies	PEQ	Case studies
Traditional	6.49 (1.81)	3.02 (1.21)	6.72 (1.91)	2.74 (1.16)
Ethics	6.51 (1.67)	2.91 (1.19)	8.86 (2.58)	4.28 (1.61)

As previously discussed, introductory psychology is a popular course and psychology is a popular major. Hence, the integration of psychology ethics into introductory psychology exposes a large number of undergraduates, both majors and non-majors, to a critical topic within the field. APA (2007) identified knowledge of ethics within several domains as a key learning outcome for the undergraduate psychology major. Yet, ethics are typically addressed in a research methods, senior seminar, separate ethics, or practicum course (Haemmerlie and Mathews 1988; LaCour and Lewis 1998; Lamb 1991; Plante 1998). Due to the emphasis currently placed on knowledge of on research methods as a learning outcome (APA), it is appropriate to expect that most psychology majors will be exposed to research ethics. Nonetheless, it is unfortunate that few undergraduates may be exposed to ethics in the other key areas identified by the APA (i.e., clinical practice). Including ethics related to clinical practice in introductory psychology would provide such information to psychology students, as well as a broader population of potential consumers of clinical services.

Due to the study's quasi-experimental design, one cannot definitively state that the results are a direct result of the integration of psychology ethics into the course. In addition, the sample was one of convenience and may not accurately reflect the population that enrolls in introductory psychology. For example, psychology majors, business majors, and Hispanic students were under-represented. Due to the Jesuit nature of the university, students are required to take a core curriculum ethics course and therefore may have a greater awareness of ethics at baseline than students from other types of institutions. Future research should assess the integration of psychology ethics into introductory psychology using a more representative sample. Also, it would be helpful to assess the integration of ethics across the undergraduate psychology curriculum, including an assessment of ethical decision-making.

In conclusion, the current study extended the work of Fisher and Kuther (1997). It showed that a broader base of psychology ethics may be effectively integrated into an introductory psychology course, as indicated by an increase in student knowledge and awareness of ethical situations at post-test. On the whole, students in the ethics condition were more knowledgeable about a psychologist's ethical behavior in roles related to teaching, research, and clinical practice at the end of the semester. This expanded presentation of psychology ethics is congruent with a recent APA (2007) recommendation that undergraduate psychology students should be familiar with the APA code of ethics, as applied to both the science and practice of psychology. Ethics information was infused into many course topics, through a variety of teaching methodologies. Consistent with previous authors' observations, case studies increased the salience of the ethical principles being taught (McMinn 1988), improved student engagement (Leonard et al. 2002), and were associated with positive learning outcomes (Leonard et al.). It is imperative that students are knowledgeable about the ethical behavior of psychologists who function in a variety of domains, recognize ethical dilemmas when they occur, and are aware of ethical resolutions to such situations. The current study showed how the infusion of such information into introductory psychology may result in students who achieve these important learning outcomes.

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Appendix A

Standardized administration instructions (read to students by the instructor)

This test will be given to several general psychology classes to measure your progress over the course of the semester. While you may find this test difficult, I encourage you to put forth your best effort. Your score will NOT impact your course grade. Remember, this test is a tool to monitor your level of knowledge over the course of the semester. The attached cover sheet will provide general background information about you.

Please read the questions carefully and circle the BEST, most ethical answer. Answer ALL test items. You will have 30 min to complete the test.

Appendix B

PEQ

1. Being competent to teach psychology includes:
 - A. Mastery of the subject matter.
 - B. Mastery of technology.
 - C. Sticking to the designated lesson plan and ignoring classroom dynamics.
 - D. All of the above.
2. In obtaining informed consent for participation in a psychology experiment, a psychologist,
 - A. Allows potential subjects the freedom to decline participation.
 - B. Is required to have written consent for every experiment.
 - C. Discusses every implication of withdrawing and continuing in the experiment.
 - D. Does not give the prospective participants the opportunity to ask questions.
3. In underserved areas, or areas where there are few psychologists, a psychologist
 - A. May routinely provide services to a client, even if he/she is not fully competent to provide the services.
 - B. Provides services to a client population only if he/she is fully competent to do so.
 - C. Provides services to anyone in case of an emergency.
 - D. Can choose to work with any population and refer those persons with whom he/she does not want to work.
4. Psychology instructors
 - A. Are responsible to their students and their universities, but not to society, in general.
 - B. Are obligated to give grades that accurately reflect students' work.
 - C. Write letters of reference that only positively highlight students' qualities.
 - D. Due to academic freedom, can present only their viewpoint, rather than the factually based information.
5. In the clinical practice of psychology, informed consent includes:
 - A. Information about the limits of confidentiality.
 - B. Dialogue about financial arrangements and fees.
 - C. Respect for the client's autonomy.
 - D. All of the above.

6. Some faculty-student relationships are inevitable. It is difficult to draw a clear line between those relationships that are ethical and those that are unethical. We may do so by assessing:
 - A. The extent of coercion.
 - B. The extent of exploitation.
 - C. Neither A nor B
 - D. Both A and B.

7. The decision to use deception in research
 - A. Cannot be justified.
 - B. Involves sharing the costs & benefits of deception with participants before the experiment begins.
 - C. Involves consideration of other designs, such as naturalistic observation.
 - D. Is always justified because of the research's scientific value.

8. A competent psychologist:
 - A. Ignores differences between him/herself and his/her clients.
 - B. Seeks consultation and supervision when developing new areas of practice.
 - C. Does not serve populations with which he/she has little or no experience.
 - D. Is able to serve all client populations.

9. Sexual relationships between psychology faculty and students are:
 - A. Always ethical.
 - B. Always unethical.
 - C. Sometimes unethical.
 - D. Are prohibited in circumstances in which the professor has evaluative authority over the student.

10. Authorship credit:
 - A. Is determined by the relative scientific contribution of persons involved.
 - B. Is one of the last issues addressed in the research and publication process.
 - C. May be given for minor contributions such as, running participants or assisting with statistical analysis.
 - D. May be given for possession of an important institutional position, such as department chair.

11. A psychologist can break confidentiality:
 - A. Under no circumstances.
 - B. In order to be reimbursed by an insurance company for services rendered.
 - C. When a client says, "I could just kill somebody", but does not identify a specific person.
 - D. Only with written consent of client.

12. It is unethical to:
 - A. Offer excessive compensation for research participation.
 - B. Offer no compensation for research participation.
 - C. Have a restricted research sample.
 - D. None of the above.

13. For psychologists in clinical practice, dual relationships:
 - A. Are not prohibited unless they are harmful or exploitative.
 - B. Are always prohibited.
 - C. Are restricted to small or rural community settings.
 - D. Are always harmful.

14. Relationships between psychology teachers and students:
 - A. May involve group activities (such as, going to lunch together) as acceptable behaviors.
 - B. Are no different than that of psychotherapists and clients.
 - C. Should involve a large amount of positive out of classroom experiences.
 - D. Should be governed by the rule of avoiding exploitation of students.

15. The primary purpose of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) is to:
 - A. Review projects for scientific merit.
 - B. Protect the public from harm.
 - C. Establish standards governing the conduct of psychologists in research.
 - D. All of the above.

Appendix C

Case Studies

Directions: Please read the following case vignettes. Carefully consider the questions listed after each and write your answers in the space provided. Please write or print legibly.

A psychologist wants to study the effects of peer pressure on children. To study the issue, she identifies elementary school samples and asks parents' permission to include their child in a study of peer pressure. The students answer questions about their preferences for several toys and then join a discussion group. Without telling the participants, she trains a group of confederates to endorse preferences that are different from the ones chosen by the research participants. When participants are asked about their preferences in the group, they are faced with indicating an unpopular choice. In the debriefing, participants are told that the confederates were instructed not to say what they really liked but to choose what the participant did not. Although many students think the study was fun, a few look perplexed. One asks the researcher why she told the group members to "lie". Several parents object to the study and argue that it unintentionally endorsed lying, a behavior they try to discourage in their children. [Source: Kitchener (2000)]

What is/are the ethical problem(s) related to this case?

What is the most ethical way for the psychologist to conduct this study?

Dr. Yaro was a developmental psychologist with a large multiyear grant working on predictors of suicide among low-income youth. He recently accepted some additional responsibilities in the department as section head, which involved him in fundraising and other administrative obligations. Consequently, he allowed a post-doctoral research

associate, Dr. Zapata, to take the primary responsibility for organizing data collection and analysis on the grant. In addition, with his consent, she began to investigate some variables that had not been a part of Dr. Yaro's original conceptualization of the relevant issues. In fact, Dr. Zapata's hypotheses paid off and the study produced some very interesting findings. Because Dr. Yaro was so busy with his new responsibilities, Dr. Zapata wrote the article for publication, putting her name first on the draft of the manuscript. She then gave it to Dr. Yaro for comments and suggestions. When he returned the manuscript, the first thing she noticed was that he had switched the order of their names. When she complained that she had done most of the work, and, in fact, contributed the ideas that led to the interesting results, he pointed out that it was his grant and he initially conceptualized the study. [Source: Kitchener (2000)]

What is/are the ethical problems related to this case?

What is the most ethical course of action for Dr. Zapata?

A psychologist works in a rural community where he is a member and deacon of a local church. This is an underserved community; there are very few mental health resources in the community, as well as in a 100 mile radius. People from the church he attends often seek out his services because they know him already and he understands their spiritual perspective. Sometimes they come to him after they have tried other mental health resources in the community and are dissatisfied with the quality of the help they have received elsewhere. [Source: Kitchener (2000)]

What is/are the ethical problem(s) related to this case?

What is the most ethical course of action for this psychologist?

Appendix D

Ethics Case Study Evaluation Criteria

Case Study 1

Question A) What is/are the ethical problems related to this case?

1. Use of **deception**.
2. Parents have not **given fully informed consent** for their children's participation.

Scored as 2, 1, 0

2=includes both 1 and 2

1=includes either 1 or 2

0=does not include 1 or 2

Question B) What is the most ethical way for the psychologist to conduct this study?

1. **Modify current design/Choose another research design.**
 - a. Such as, telling parents the children will be assigned to different conditions, which may involve a condition of deception, but will not inform them or the children if this is the case.

- b. May also use a different type of debriefing that would be more effective in addressing the deception with the children.
2. **Parents are given information about the deception** so they can give a **genuine informed consent**.

Scored as 2, 1, 0

2=includes both 1 and 2

1=includes either 1 or 2

0=does not include 1 or 2

Case Study 2

Question A) What is/are the ethical problems related to this case?

1. **Authorship credit**- needs to be based upon each person's contribution.

Scored as 1 or 0

1=includes 1

0=does not include 1

Question B) What is the most ethical course of action for Dr. Zapata?

1. **Address the issue of authorship credit directly with Dr. Yaro.** - discussing who provided conceptual leadership and who made the greatest scientific contribution. Ideally, this discussion would have occurred before the research had begun.

Scored as 1 or 0

1=includes 1

0=does not include 1

Case Study 3

Question A) What is/are the ethical problems related to this case?

1. **Potential for dual relationships.**
2. **Providing services in an underserved area.** A psychologist may be forced to provide services in a less than ideal situation because there are not sufficient resources available in the community that he/she serves.

Scored as 2, 1, 0

2=includes both 1 and 2

1=includes either 1 or 2

0=does not include 1 or 2

Question B) What is the most ethical way for this psychologist?

1. **Considering the dual relationships.** Is there a possibility of harm or exploitation?
2. **Weigh the advantage of providing the services to those he knows versus not providing the services.** The primary concern is the consumer's welfare.

Scored as 2, 1, 0

2=includes both 1 and 2

1=includes either 1 or 2

0=does not include 1 or 2

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