

Ethics and Social Justice Issues in a Psychology Research Methods Course

Dalia L. Diab, PhD (Psychology)

Mentor: David J. Burns, DBA (Marketing)

Course Information

Research Methods and Design II is the second methods course in the research methods sequence offered by the Department of Psychology. The course objectives are to help students:

1. Solidify their understanding of the scientific process and the importance of sound methodology.
2. Further understand and apply the basic concepts, principles, and issues relevant to psychological research.
3. Further develop the skills necessary to think critically and to critically evaluate research.
4. Further develop the skills necessary to design and conduct research studies.
5. Further develop the skills necessary to write research papers in APA style.
6. Develop the skills necessary to present findings of research studies orally and in poster format.

Changes Implemented in the Course

Changes that were implemented in the Methods II class as part of the Ignatian Mentoring Program related to two topics: *ethics* and *social justice*. The topic of ethics is extremely relevant to a Jesuit education, and it is also extremely important in a psychology research methods class; therefore, the first two changes that were made related to ethics. Social justice is another topic that is relevant to a Jesuit education. Therefore, the third change that was implemented related to this topic.

Change #1: Requiring Students to Write a Reaction Paper on an Ethics Chapter

Students in this class are expected to write four reaction papers on four different chapters from a critical thinking in psychology textbook (Sternberg, Roediger, & Halpern, 2007). When this class was previously taught, students could have written a reaction paper on the chapter on ethics (*Critical Thinking and Ethics in Psychology*), but they were not required to do so. Therefore, the first change was requiring students to write a reaction paper on the ethics chapter.

The students wrote thoughtful reaction papers, making it clear that they understood the importance of being ethical psychologists.

Below are quotes from the students' reaction papers:

- Perhaps the biggest thing that I took away from this chapter is that while there are many wrong answers in ethical situations, it takes much discernment and critical thinking to access correct answers in ethically complicated situations.
- Ethical decision-making requires creativity, analysis, and problem solving skills. A psychologist must consider what his or her actions mean for all of the stakeholders. It is vital that psychologists know their limits and their areas of expertise and do not practice in areas that they are unqualified to work in.
- Psychologists should be committed to doing what is moral, foresee unethical situations, collect relevant information to the task, and consult with colleagues about decision making.
- ...the very first point is to decide to be a moral person, no matter what. I find that it is very telling that this is the first guideline before any decisions or possible alternatives are made for it speaks clearly that the most important thing is to be ethical and moral.
- A psychologist must consider what his or her actions mean for all of the stakeholders. It is vital that psychologists know their limits and their areas of expertise and do not practice in areas that they are unqualified to work in. Doing so would hinder their trustworthiness and their effectiveness at treating the client would be poor, if not harmful.
- The ethical dilemmas that come up in various situations have no true set of rules to follow, but the judgment is based on the psychologist's ability to make his or her own decisions in respect to others.
- Critical thinking skills and analyzing alternatives for difficult scenarios is an important process in ethical decision making for psychologists.
- In order for critical thinking about ethical issues to be effective, psychologists must have the motivation to be ethical.
- It is necessary for psychologists to put aside their judgments when thinking critically.
- There are many situations in which psychologists face ethical dilemmas, and it is important for them to know the APA rules and regulations to help face and solve these dilemmas. They must know and commit to moral values in order to practice ethically. Psychologists must take the appropriate steps to solve ethical dilemmas.

Change #2: Adding an Ethics Assignment

The second change was adding an ethics assignment that asked students to view videos about a study replicating Milgram's classic obedience experiment (which had several ethical issues). Students had to write a reaction paper on that study.

Below is the ethics assignment handout that was given to students:

Please go to the following websites to view 3 videos relating to a study that was conducted, replicating Milgram's original experiment:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcvSNg0HZwk>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzTuz0mNlwU&feature=endscreen&NR=1>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&v=CmFCoo-cU3Y&NR=1>

After viewing the videos, please write a reaction paper on the study, focusing on the "ethical" issues surrounding the study. Your reaction paper should be thoughtful, intelligent, and well-written (coherent, grammatically correct, etc.). Your paper should be approximately **one single-spaced (or two double-spaced) typed pages**.

Be sure to address the following points in your reaction paper:

1. Briefly summarize the study you viewed
2. Comment on the "ethical" issues relevant to this study, emphasizing the APA Code of Ethics that you learned about in this class and in Research Methods and Design I – **be specific** when you mention the APA ethical principles and standards, focusing on the ones that you feel are most relevant in this specific situation
3. Comment on how learning about "ethics" is relevant to a Jesuit education

The students wrote thoughtful reaction papers, showing that they understood the importance of ethics in psychology, and that they understood why being ethical is relevant to a Jesuit education.

Below are quotes from the students' reaction papers:

- Ethics are an essential part of a Jesuit education. Xavier's mission statement says that Jesuit institutions should provide their students with, "a world view that is oriented to responsible action and recognizes the intrinsic value of the natural and human values."
- A Jesuit education focuses on educating the whole person so that graduates achieve career goals, but also make the world a better, more ethical place.
- ... Jesuits believe that honesty and integrity play a key role in being successful in, not only the life of a college student but in life after school as well. An extremely important factor in ethics is the role that honesty and integrity play in allowing psychologists to be successful in their careers.
- Exploring the ethical component of any given situation is an extremely important part of the Jesuit tradition of "men and women for others." Living for others requires one to have the best interest of someone else in mind...

- Learning ethics is important for any field but especially psychology because it is so intimately linked with people and the core of personhood. Therefore, in the Jesuit tradition, if we are to be men and women for others, then we need to make sure that the dignity and well being of every single person is clear and is protected.
- Ethics and justice are main goals of a Jesuit education. While academics and a liberal arts background build the foundation for a Jesuit education, there is also a strong focus on service and ethics. Jesuits believe in being “men and women with and for others,” which means that science is only beneficial if it is to the benefit of the larger community.
- Jesuit education tries to educate students by instilling in them values so that they may do their work to help all people and society while being sensitive to diversity. Jesuit tradition believes in service to others, all people being treated equal, and doing work to benefit others in a moral way.
- As a student in the psychology department, it is important to see how the values of Jesuit tradition pertain to the field of psychology, which is best seen in the APA’s ethical principles and by discussing ethical and unethical situations.
- The Jesuits’ desire to create a learning experience that has the interest of maximizing the good in society is directly relevant to the Human Rights, and Beneficence and Nonmaleficence principles in the APA Code of Conduct. Both instill a desire for and dedication toward the need for human equality...
- ...learning about ethics and how they relate to psychology is important to a Jesuit tradition as well as to one’s studies in psychology because Jesuits strive for equal treatment of all people.

Change #3: Adding a Social Justice Assignment

The third and last change was adding a social justice assignment. Students were asked to read an article that dealt with a social justice issue (specifically, gender inequality in the workplace; Stephens & Levine, 2011), and they had to write a reaction paper on the article.

Below is the social justice assignment handout that was given to students:

Please read the following article, which is posted on Blackboard:

Stephens, N. M., & Levine, C. S. (2011). Opting out or denying discrimination? How the framework of free choice in American society influences perceptions of gender inequality. *Psychological Science*, 22, 1231-1236.

After reading the article, please write a reaction paper, making sure to address the following points:

- Briefly summarize the article (there are two studies, so make sure to address both in your summary)
- After defining what social justice is (you may have to find other resources to address this part), comment on the main *social justice* issue relevant to this article
- Comment on other important issues relevant to *social justice* (you may also have to find other resources to address this part)
- Comment on how learning about *social justice* is relevant to a Jesuit education

Please keep in mind that your reaction paper should be thoughtful, intelligent, and well-written (coherent, grammatically correct, etc.). Your paper should be approximately one single-spaced (or two double-spaced) typed pages.”

Once again, the students wrote thoughtful reaction papers, showing that they understood the importance of social justice and how it relates to a Jesuit education.

Below are quotes from the students’ reaction papers:

- I think it is important at a Jesuit university to learn about social justice because it upholds the ideals of the university to be aware and active about societal issues in our world.
- To be true men and women for others, there is a need to be aware of the problems around us, to not be ignorant of the issues, and to work for the equality and dignity of all.
- The foundation of a Jesuit education is teaching students to be “men and women for others.” A large part of this is working to create systems that provide everyone with the ability to achieve their potential. If we rely on service, the same social issues will prevail. Thus, as true men and women for others, we have to work for systemic change.
- The Jesuit education is meant to produce men and women for others. Social justice is an imperative part of the process of becoming one who lives for others. To live for others one must be aware of others’ needs.
- Learning about social justice is relevant to a Jesuit education because Jesuit education instills values in their students so that they may help all people and society.
- Jesuit education believes in being sensitive to diversity and treating all people equally. This is exactly what social justice is about. Jesuit values are to service others and to benefit society so that it is just and fair.
- A Jesuit education calls the student to be aware of and recognize social justice issues in their community and across the world. As a community that promotes service to others, it is especially important to remember equality when serving.
- In relation to a Jesuit education, it should emphasize speaking up for those who do not have voices and teaching students effective strategies for facing issues like these.

- Jesuit universities strive for their students to be active in the community and can generate compassion for issues by educating students which will motivate them to be activists for what they believe.
- The concept of social justice is directly relevant to the components of a Jesuit education. Jesuit education seeks to educate the whole person, body, mind, and spirit, and create men and women for and with others. To do this Xavier and other Jesuit schools have a core curriculum that incorporate concepts like social justice and the inequalities that still exist in our country and world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these changes seem to have had the intended impact of making the Jesuit principles of ethics and social justice more salient to psychology students. It was clear that the students were able to integrate aspects of their Jesuit education into a psychology research methods course. After completing this class, students should now be able to better appreciate the interplay between Jesuit values and psychological research.

References

- Stephens, N. M., & Levine, C. S. (2011). Opting out or denying discrimination? How the framework of free choice in American society influences perceptions of gender inequality. *Psychological Science*, 22, 1231-1236.
- Sternberg, R. J., Roediger, H. L., & Halpern, D. F. (Eds.). (2007). *Critical thinking in psychology*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.