Knowledge of undergraduate psychology-major students of the APA code of ethics

Aziz Atweh
Rowan University

Follow this and additional works at: http://rdw.rowan.edu/etd

Part of the Educational Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation
http://rdw.rowan.edu/etd/683

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Rowan Digital Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Rowan Digital Works. For more information, please contact LibraryTheses@rowan.edu.
KNOWLEDGE OF UNDERGRADUATE PSYCHOLOGY-MAJOR STUDENTS OF THE APA CODE OF ETHICS

by
Aziz Atweh

A Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Arts Degree of The Graduate School at Rowan University May 7, 2008

Approved by 
Advisor
Date Approved May 7, 2008

© 2008 Aziz G. Atweh
The initial driving force of this study was to examine the knowledge and familiarity of undergraduate psychology-major students at Rowan University with the American Psychological Association’s code of ethics or ethics code. An adapted version of a 1982 questionnaire containing vignettes of clinical and research situations that required ‘ethical’ decision-making processes was used. The original questionnaire and design of the study were conceived by Tymchuck et al. For purposes of the current study, however, the original vignettes were slightly adapted in order to fit neatly into the APA’s 2002 code of ethics. Although the only statistically significant results showed that participants that had been enrolled in psychology courses that dealt with ethics and more specifically the APA Code of Ethics, scored higher on the test meaning that they made less ethical choices in general, the sample size needed to be larger for any generalization of the results to be even considered.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for the Study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypotheses</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: Literature Review</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Beginnings</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 1992 Code of Ethics</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 2002 Code of Ethics</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dual Relationships</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Ethical Issues</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Trends in Ethics</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Ethical’ Controversy</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics Research</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Method</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Measures 15
Design 16
Hypotheses 16
Chapter Four: Results 18
Hypothesis I 18
Results 19
Hypothesis II 20
Results 20
Hypothesis III 20
Results 21
Summary 21
Chapter Five: Discussion 22
Conclusions 23
Limitations 23
Discussion 24
Implications for Future Research 25
References 27
Appendix: Questionnaire 31
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1: Mean Score Vs. Previous Ethics Knowledge 19
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The American Psychological Association has strict principles, standards and guidelines governing the practice of licensed psychologists. Most of these deal with ethical issues and describe a specific “code of conduct” which is expected of all psychologists who belong to the association. The six general principles outlined by the APA are: competence, integrity, professional and scientific responsibility, respect for people’s rights and dignity, concern for others’ welfare and social responsibility.

Need for the study

The initial driving force of this study was to examine the knowledge and familiarity of undergraduate psychology-major students at Rowan University with the American Psychological Association’s code of ethics or ethics code. Rowan University offers a Master’s degree in School Psychology followed by the Educational Specialist Certification Program. Many of the students who apply to the MA or Ed.S programs have an undergraduate degree in psychology, whether be it from Rowan or any other higher-education institution. Are these undergraduates well-versed in APA ethical guidelines? How much do they, as potential psychologists of the future know about the APA and its ethical code? How well do the students think they know APA ethical guidelines versus how much they actually do know? Is there a discrepancy there? Are there gender differences in how students would imagine a psychologist would respond to a particular situation “ethically”? What should be done in order to improve students’ knowledge and enhance their familiarity and understanding of APA and the role it plays in upholding ethical standards in the many branches of the realm of psychology?
Purpose

This study was prepared in order to study how familiar undergraduate college students who are majoring in psychology at Rowan University are with the standards and principles which the APA upholds. These are all included the official APA code of ethics which was most recently reviewed in August of 2002.

Hypotheses

There has not been sufficient research into the familiarity of undergraduate college students with the APA ethical principles. However, because we could be fairly certain that specific patterns will emerge from students who share similar or different social backgrounds, high school education, or school guidance programs, the following hypotheses will be put forth:

I. Previous knowledge and exposure to the APA’s code of ethics in an educational setting is positively correlated with a lower score on the questionnaire (meaning ‘more ethical’ choices)

II. Higher self-report scores on identifying oneself as making ethical choices in general is positively correlated with actually making ‘more ethical’ choices

III. Higher SES scores indicate higher knowledge of ethical principles, or at least more accurate “gut-feeling” toward the more ethical choice

Definitions

APA:

An acronym for the American Psychological Association.

APA code of ethics:
An ethics code set by the American Psychological Association and is intended to provide specific standards to cover most situations encountered by psychologists and to promote a high level of ethical standards.

Ed.S:

Educational Specialist Certification; a certification for the practice of Psychology in a public school.

MA:

Masters of Arts (educational degree)

Psychology:

The scientific study of mind, brain and behavior in humans.

Rowan University:

A state university located in Southern New Jersey, formerly a state college and normal school established 78 years ago.

Assumptions

It was assumed by the researcher, for the purposes of this study, that the undergraduate psychology-major students’ distribution is similar to other student populations in general and psychology-major population in particular of other American universities.

It was assumed by the researcher, for the purposes of this study, that the students surveyed know what APA and its function are. It is also assumed that the students either have no knowledge at all of the ethical standards of the APA, or have a basic knowledge of the APA code of ethics.

It was assumed by the researcher, for the purposes of this study, that the students surveyed can make intelligent decisions, or guesses if needed, as to what
would be an ‘ethical’ course of action in a specific situation; usually between a psychologist and client.

Limitations

One major limitation to this study would be the small sample size. This factor would undoubtedly affect the generalizability and reliability of the findings. Another issue here would be the fact that more girls are usually enrolled as psychology majors and hence the results could turn out to be erroneously skewed to better represent undergraduate females majoring in psychology rather than both genders.

Another limitation would be the homogeneity of the sample. Already, the sample used is a pool of undergraduate psychology major students. Moreover, as Rowan University exists in a more or less rural setting, the student population, in general, is predominantly Caucasian and not as ethnically diverse as other more urban universities. This lack of diversity will certainly impact the results and hence the conclusions in that they will be less generalizable to other university populations, especially universities that are situated in major metropolitan areas.

Summary

Chapter two will include a detailed literature review of the history of the American Psychological Association with focus on its ethical principles and guidelines throughout the years culminating into the most recent edition of the APA’s 2002 review of the code of ethics. Also, we will turn to some literature about gender differences in ethics and techniques by which we promote ethical standards in psychology.

Chapter three will describe and outline how the study was designed. Vignettes will be used to set-up a situation where a psychologist is faced with an ‘ethical
dilemma’ and students will be asked to answer as to how they think the psychologist should react ethically.

Chapter four will present the results of the research, outlining which ‘ethical responses’ were most common. It will also show comparison tables and chart results detailing the distribution of responses among genders and between them.

In Chapter five, conclusions, discussion and implications for further research will be presented. Also, suggestions will be made as to how to improve the knowledge of undergraduate psychology students with APA ethical guidelines and principles.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

"The American Psychological Association (APA) adopted its first Ethics Code in 1953. The Code has been revised periodically, and in August 2002, the 10th version was approved by APA’s Council of Representatives." (Flanagan et al, 2005, p. 433). This chapter will attempt to capture some of what has been researched and written about APA ethics in general and the Ethics Code of the APA in particular.

Ethical Beginnings

Bond (2004) argues that all the major ethical dilemmas and challenges in research and psychotherapy largely arise from inequality, difference, uncertainty and risk. In order to address these issues, the APA has provided us with numerous versions and reports since the early fifties. It would also be worth mentioning that throughout, the APA has always left a margin of personal judgment for the professional to decide upon the more ‘ethical’ decision or choice to make in a particular situation (APA, 1951; 1992; 2002; 2006). In other words, the ethics themselves “cannot be prescribed” and are not etched in stone and could attain different forms or variations in different settings, situations or cultures. This however has always been and remains a topic of considerable controversy as no one is exactly sure where to ‘draw the line’. Some have even argued that inconsistent treatment can result from individual interpretations and hence call for a more binding, specific and unambiguous code of ethics (Tymchuk et al, 1982).

Membership in the APA commits members and student affiliates to comply with the standards of the APA Ethics Code and to the rules and procedures used to
enforce them" (APA, 2002, p. 1) Five general principles existed in the APA’s 2002 revision of the Code of Ethics, down from six in the 1992 version. This most recent edition became effective on June 1, 2003. Concern for Other’s Welfare, Professional and Scientific Responsibility, Integrity and Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity were all general principles in the 1992 version of the code of ethics. Some of these were incorporated into or just renamed in the 2002 edition.

The 1992 Code of Ethics

In the 1992 ethics code, many modifications and adjustments were made to previous ethics publications by the APA. For example, the details and timing of the therapeutic contract were more precisely and explicitly explained (Koocher, 1994). Advertising issues were also altered and practices which previous to 1992 would have been deemed ‘unethical’ by the APA were judged acceptable. Moreover, more stringent rules were enforced on dual-relationships. Prohibition against sexual involvement in particular is evident.

Other financial issues were also presented and addressed in detail. These include “barter, shared fees and payment for referrals” (Koocher, 1994, p. 361). The 1992 APA Ethics Code was also apparently the first APA Code to draw a clear-cut distinction between the personal and the professional behavior of psychologists (Pipes, Holstein & Aguirre, 2005). In terms of the applicability of the Code itself, the Introduction section of this Code states, “These work-related activities can be distinguished from the purely private conduct of a psychologist, which ordinarily is not within the purview of the Ethics Code” (APA, 1992, p. 1598).
The 2002 Code of Ethics

In the 2002 edition, Principle A is Beneficence and Non-malfeasance. This refers to the very broad perspective and goal of psychology as a helping profession in that the professional will perpetually strive to 'do good' and take care to do no harm. When conflicts in the profession arise, whether amongst psychologists themselves or between a client and a professional, psychologists should attempt to resolve that issue in a particular manner that would cause no, or at least minimizes harm to others. Also, in adhering to this principle, psychologists attempt not to use their influence in order to gain personal benefit. “They are alert to and guard against personal, financial, social, organizational, or political factors” that might lead them to use that influence (APA, 2002, p. 3). Psychologists are also encouraged to strive to recognize the effect which their own mental and physical health could have on their clients.

Principle B is Fidelity and Responsibility. Psychologists are expected to cooperate, consult with or refer to other professionals in the helping professions, especially with other psychologists. They also establish relationships of trust with whom they work and are aware of their influence on the society in which they work. They are concerned with the ethical performance and compliance of other psychologists and if necessary they would share these concerns with the professionals themselves first, and could report them to the American Psychological Association if the issues are not resolved. One last sub-principle in the general principle of Fidelity and Responsibility is that psychologists use a portion of their time for the general good, and expect nothing in return.
In Principle C, which is Integrity, Psychologists are expected to seek honesty, accuracy and truthfulness in teaching or practice of psychology. Cheating, stealing, engaging in fraud and misinterpretation are all prohibited. In cases where a certain amount of deception could be used in psychotherapy, psychologists are encouraged to firstly, assess the benefits and disadvantages of such techniques, and deal with the potential mistrust resulting from them after implementation accordingly. Psychologists are also expected to avoid unclear commitments and keep their promises, unless in extreme cases, where the client, for example, has the intention to harm themselves or others.

Principle D, Justice, refers to psychologists recognizing that all people must have equal access to and the same quality of psychological help when they seek it. They take precautions against condoning unjust, unfair or discriminatory points of view and/or actions.

Principle E, Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity deals with psychologists respecting the worth of all individuals and their right to confidentiality, privacy and self-determination. In the case of individuals where independent decision-making is not possible, psychologists attempt to safeguard and protect their rights and welfare. Psychologists do not discriminate on the bases of “age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language, and socioeconomic status” and take these factors into consideration when dealing with clients of such groups (APA, 2002, p. 4).

In addition to these five general principles, all the APA versions of the ethics code feature other more specific ethical principles. These include but are not limited
to: the outlining of a therapeutic contract, the attainment of informed consent, and more specific details about the training of employees and harassment issues. The access, safe-keeping and confidentiality of records, rules and regulations of advertising and fees and financial arrangements are also addressed.

In addition to these, the 2002 APA Code clearly addresses the issue of personal-professional distinction and explains that “These activities shall be distinguished from the purely private conduct of psychologists, which is not within the purview of the Ethics Code” (p. 1061). In the 2002 Code, the specific standards of research which apply to the critical issue of informed consent were expanded so that they would induce more specific and detailed information. This applied to both informed consent forms and waiver forms for informed consent. New requirements were also introduced into psychological activities requiring or involving the use of interpreters.

**Dual Relationships**

Dual relationships are also prohibited in strong language and looked down upon because they impede and eventually annihilate the psychotherapeutic relationship. Behnke (2006b) elaborates on three reasons why sexual relationships between a psychologist and a client make the work of analysis or psychotherapy impossible. Firstly, he explains, beneficence is no longer possible toward a patient with whom you have had, or are having, sexual relations. Secondly, the psychologist would be automatically placing the client in harm’s way as they are the ones who are deriving gratification from the relationship now, and not the subject only. Thirdly, there always has to be a ‘fiduciary’ relationship between the mental health
professional and the client, and by engaging in sexual contact the psychologist is violating that and hence is behaving unethically (Behnke, 2006c).

Other Ethical Issues

Behnke (2006c) also suggests that, as a general rule, it is not exactly true that "psychologists should (always) avoid meeting their own needs and desires or should always put the needs of their patients first, before their own." (p. 2). Furthermore, he explains that it is acceptable and even desirable for psychologists to meet their own desires and needs through working with their clients. However, these would be the likes of: "engaging in creative and interesting professional endeavors, enhancing the well-being of others and contributing to the profession through scholarly publications." (p. 3). More importantly however, he emphasizes some unethical practices in which psychologists sometimes tend to slide into. For example, offering appointments at times that only fit their schedules even if the case is urgent would be one. Another would be cancelling appointments for no foreseen or legitimate reason.

General Trends in Ethics

In general, it is recognized that public and social trends tend to affect each revision of the APA Code of Ethics. "These trends include (a) the advent of Internet-mediated research and the use of other electronic media for conducting, storing, and disseminating research; (b) increased sensitivity to the research needs of culturally and language-diverse populations; (c) the need for greater harmonization between APA standards for research and federal policies for the protection of human participants and (d) the shift from paternalistic to autonomy-based public attitudes and federal regulations regarding informed consent, patient
privacy, and patient access to health records for the public in general and minors in particular” (Fisher, 2004, p. 832).

‘Ethical’ Controversy

APA’s ethics code has repeatedly come under attack from many distinct and diverse sources. Some actually believe that it is too broad and general and that it leaves too much room for speculation as a lot of its terminology is too vague and open for different interpretations. Others believe that the APA should come up with even broader guidelines because they claim that the code of ethics is too specific and smothers psychologists with its technicalities and complicated procedures. Some have even argued that the code is “reflective of the style of lawyers rather than psychologists and seems more intended to narrow one’s liability than to stir one to the highest plane of ethical functioning.” (Koocher, 1994, p. 361).

Ethics Research

To a large degree, ethics research has focused greatly on graduate students, especially in the fields of counseling and clinical psychology (Bernard & Jara, 1986; Fly, van Bark, Weinman, Kitchener, & Lang, 1997; Morrison & Teta, 1979; Wilson & Ranft, 1993). In this literature, it has been evident that since these graduate students are usually shadowing or training under the supervision of a psychologist, they are more likely to encounter ethical dilemmas and to observe how the psychologists deal with these. In contrast to this picture, there is very little research done into the exposure of undergraduate students ‘ethical dilemma’ aspect of psychology. As a matter of fact, the APA does not require that higher-education institutions incorporate any ethical training into their undergraduate psychology students’ education.
In a study done by Halliday & Franitz (2006) on the teaching of ethics based on the moral development theory, it was shown that students who engage in an ethics course gain more moral reasoning that those in a control group. However this research study was done in the context of the philosophy department and hence cannot really be generalized into the more structured format the American Psychological Association has emerged as in recent years.
CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

The purpose of this study was to study how familiar undergraduate college students who are majoring in psychology at Rowan University are with the standards and principles which the American Psychological Association upholds. More specifically, for the purpose of this study, these standards and principles will be obtained solely from the 2002 version of the APA’s code of ethics. Information will be obtained from of a questionnaire to answer specific questions about how the knowledge of undergraduate students in psychology at Rowan University could or could not affect their later decision-making in the psychology field. Also, it would be beneficial to contrast and compare the many variables which play a role in determining why one student seems to be ‘more ethically oriented than the other. Here, we will look at demographics, gender, annual household income, self-reported familiarity with the APA, its ethical guidelines and code of ethics, previous exposure to ‘ethical training’ or exposure to a course in which, to some extent, ethical issues in psychology were covered and other variables.

Sample

The sample will consist of undergraduate psychology students from the department of psychology’s pool of students at Rowan University. All participants will volunteer for the study and it will not involve any costs to the subject. No payment will be made to participants, but they will receive course credit for participation, as required by the psychology department. All participants will be
over eighteen year of age and an informed consent form will be used along with the questionnaire.

Measures

An adapted version of a 1982 questionnaire containing vignettes of clinical and research situations that required 'ethical' decision-making processes was used. The original questionnaire and design of the study were conceived by Tymchuck et al. and it was expected to tackle three distinct objectives. “The first objective was to determine the extent to which a nationwide sample of clinical psychologists concurred in their responses to a set of hypothetical clinical situations. Consistency of decision making is desirable to ensure that regardless of circumstances, psychological standards will be fairly and equitably applied, and individual rights will be guaranteed to all people seen by psychologists. The second objective was to assess the extent that these decisions were reached, based on similar considerations. The third objective was to assess the psychologists’ background in and attitudes toward professional education in ethics.” (Tymchuck, 1982, p. 413)

For purposes of the current study, however, the original vignettes were slightly adapted in order to fit neatly into the APA’s 2002 code of ethics. For example, some of the things that were considered ‘unethical’ in the 80s like advertisement for psychological professionals are now commonplace, but under certain limits are regulations. In that sense, the vignettes were modified and followed by a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Agree; 5=Strongly Disagree). This was done in order to be able to measure; later on, how ‘close’ the responses actually were in contrast to the response the APA would give. For instance, it could be beneficial to add up the ‘points’ each subject accumulated and then the ones with
the least points would be the ones who actually chose the more ethically-sound response.

The adapted questionnaire itself consisted of a total of 18 questions. The first three questions are purely demographic in nature and refer to the age, gender and approximate annual household income of the participant. Questions four through eight deal with self-report of familiarity with the APA’s ethics (and ethical code), perceived personal ethical stand and previous exposure to ethics in psychology in general. The last ten questions are the actual vignettes from the Tymchuk et. al study. Some were slightly modified for the sake of clarity and time constraints.

Design

The study will be descriptive and correlational in its entirety. There is no independent variable per se as but the ‘knowledge students have of APA code of ethics’ could be loosely considered as one. However, this variable will not be manipulated in order to study its effect on other variables. These other variables include, socioeconomic status (which, although not an exact and specific measure, is going to be inferred from the annual household income item on the questionnaire), gender and previous familiarity with ethics.

Hypotheses

I. Previous knowledge and exposure to the APA’s code of ethics in an educational setting is positively correlated with a lower score on the questionnaire (meaning ‘more ethical’ choices)

II. Higher self-report scores on identifying oneself as making ethical choices in general is positively correlated with actually making ‘more ethical’ choices
III. Higher SES scores indicate higher knowledge of ethical principles, or at least more accurate "gut-feeling" toward the more ethical choice
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

The initial impetus for this study grew out of a need to understand and study how familiar undergraduate college students who are majoring in psychology at Rowan University are with the standards and principles which the APA upholds.

After the results were obtained from the questionnaires, the researcher proceeded to calculate a “score” for each of the participants. On each of the 10 vignette questions, the optimal response was considered a “0” and the further away the response was from that answer, the more points a participant accumulated. In theory, the minimum score was a zero and the maximum was a forty. In other words, the more points a subject ended up with, the less ethical his/her responses were considered to be. In actuality, however, the minimum score was a thirteen and the maximum was a twenty-one.

Hypothesis I

This hypothesis predicted that previous knowledge and exposure to the APA’s code of ethics in an educational setting is positively correlated with a lower score on the questionnaire (meaning ‘more ethical’ choices). In the questionnaire that the subjects were required to answer, two of the questions asked the participants to identify how familiar they were with “the APA’s ethical guidelines (or Code of Ethics)” and whether they “are … currently attending a course which to some extent covers ethical issues in psychology or requires students to be familiar with the APA Code of Ethics”, refer to Appendix A. In the former, the participants’ choices were limited to four possible ones including “Very Familiar”, “Somewhat Familiar”, “Not
very familiar” and “Not familiar at all”. These were condensed into all or none responses for the sake of simplicity. The first two responses were considered a “yes” and the last two a “no”. In the latter, the participants only answered yes or no.

Results

A t-test was conducted between previous ethics knowledge and the score of the participants yielded the following results $t(17)=2.062, p=0.055$. Mathematically, the correlation here is not significant, but due to the small sample size, $n=19$, it can be considered to be close to significance. The mean score for the 12 participants who had previous knowledge in APA ethics was 18. The mean score for those who had not been familiar with the APA Code of Ethics was 16.083. Hence, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected; in fact, it is close to being shown true. It appears as though the more familiar the participants were with the APA’s Code of Ethics, the higher they scored on the vignette part of the questionnaire, implying that their responses are considered less ethical than their ‘not so ethically educated’ counterparts, see figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: Mean Score Vs. Previous Ethics Knowledge
Hypothesis II

Higher self-report scores on identifying oneself as making ethical choices in general is positively correlated with actually making ‘more ethical’ choices. In other words, if the participants reported that they think they do make ethical choices in general, they should score lower than their counterparts who had not identified themselves as making ethical choices. Again, a lower score was correlated with a better ethical outcome.

Results

Another t-test was conducted between the self-report responses and the scores of the participants to assess whether the means of two groups are statistically different from each other. The mean score of the 15 participants you reported being ethical was found to be 16.933 and the mean score for the other group who identified themselves as individuals who do not make ethical choices in general was 16.25 from 4 participants. Again, the results did not prove to be statistically significant and the null hypothesis could not be rejected.

Hypothesis III

Higher socio-economic status (SES) scores indicate higher knowledge of ethical principles, or at least more accurate “gut-feeling” toward the more ethical choice. It was put forward that the lower the income level for the families of the participants, the higher they would score on the questionnaire, thus their responses being considered less ethical. In theory, the higher the income level of the students’ families, the better education they should have had and hence the better ethical choices they should thus make.
Results

The Pearson Product Moment Correlation conducted between the 5 SES self-placement categories and the students’ scores was not significant and the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. However, the mean scores of students in the 5 categories were astonishingly similar with the highest being 17.34 and the lowest being 16.01. If the results were statistically significant, it could have been concluded that the results show that SES does not play a role in students’ making ethical choices according to the APA’s Code of Ethics.

Summary

Very few if any significant results were obtained by this study and none of the null hypothesis could be rejected.

Hypothesis I was the closest to being shown false as the results obtained were almost statistically significant. This was an interesting finding nonetheless as it seemed to imply that if the participants had been enrolled in psychology courses that dealt with ethics and more specifically the APA Code of Ethics, they would score higher on the test meaning that they were making less ethical choices. However, due to the small sample size, it would not be uncommon that statistical test would yield insignificant results unless the correlation were extremely strong which is not the case. Also, although the gender distribution of the sample was optimal, (9 males and 10 females) the sample size needed to be larger for any generalization of the results to be even considered.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Chapter one explained the need and purpose for this particular study, which began in an effort to understand and study how familiar undergraduate college students who are majoring in psychology at Rowan University are with the standards and principles which the APA upholds. Three hypotheses were put forth relating a vignette-type questionnaire’s results to previous exposure to the APA’s Code of Ethics, self-report outcomes and socio-economic status.

Chapter two included a detailed literature review of the history of the American Psychological Association with focus on its ethical principles and guidelines throughout the years culminating into the most recent edition of the APA’s 2002 review of the code of ethics and the main principles it upholds. General trends in ethics and current research findings were also discussed.

Chapter three described and outlined how the study was designed. Vignettes were be used to set up a situation where a psychologist is faced with an ‘ethical dilemma’ and students will be asked to answer as to how they think the psychologist should react ethically. Students responded to the questionnaire online so the exact amount of time they took to fill out the entire questionnaire varied widely from 2 minutes to 129 minutes.

Chapter four presented the results of the research, outlining which ‘ethical responses’ were most common. It also showed how each hypothesis of the 3 was studied and compared to the scores calculated from the student responses on the questionnaire. The t-test was used twice in hypotheses I and II. The Pearson Product
Moment Correlation was used in hypothesis III. Some chart results and corresponding analyses detailing the distribution of responses were also discussed.

Chapter five will offer conclusions, discussion and implications for further research. Also, suggestions will be made as to how to improve the knowledge of undergraduate psychology students with APA ethical guidelines and principles.

Conclusions

1. The correlation between previous knowledge and exposure to the APA’s code of ethics in an educational setting and the final scores of each participant was almost significant hinting toward the possibility that the more familiar the participants were with the APA’s Code of Ethics, and if they had taken a psychology course dealing with ethics before, the higher they scored on the vignette part of the questionnaire, implying that their responses are not considered to be as ethical as the other group of subjects.

2. The correlation between self-report scores on identifying oneself as making ethical choices in general is and actually picking the ‘more ethical’ choices on the questionnaire was not significant.

3. The correlation between socio-economic status of the participants’ families and the students’ scores was not significant.

Limitations

The major limitation to this study would be the small sample size (n=19). This factor undoubtedly affected the generalizability and reliability of the findings. Also, it was almost impossible to come up with statistically significant findings because of the sample size. The gender distribution was more or less accurate however, with about half of the participants being male (n_m=10) and the other half being female (n_f=9).
Another limitation was the homogeneity of the sample. The sample used was a pool of undergraduate psychology major students at the psychology department at Rowan University. Moreover, as Rowan University exists in a more or less rural setting, the student population, in general, is predominantly Caucasian and not as ethnically diverse as other more urban universities. This lack of diversity could have impacted the results and hence the conclusions in that they will be less generalizable to other university populations, especially universities that are situated in major metropolitan areas. However, it should be noted that ethnicity items were not a part of the questionnaire thus making it not possible to correlate that factor into the results.

Yet another limitation that came up as the results were being analyzed was that none of the participants identified their family annual income as being less that $10,000. This could have skewed the results as all of the participants were students from middle to upper middle class families.

Discussion

As discussed in Chapter 2, most of the past and current ethics research has focused greatly on graduate students, especially in the fields of counseling and clinical psychology (Bernard & Jara, 1986; Fly, van Bark, Weinman, Kitchener, & Lang, 1997; Morrison & Teta, 1979; Wilson & Ranft, 1993). This research has shown that if participants were trained in ethics before their practice, they tended to make more ethical choices in general. The current study, in reference to hypothesis I, comes close to disproving that trend when talking about undergraduate students in psychology.

The two other hypotheses did not yield significant results and hence will not be compared against corresponding findings in the literature.
In the 2002 edition of the APA’s Code of Ethics, Principles A, B, C, D and E: Beneficence and Non-malfeasance, Fidelity and Responsibility, Integrity, Justice, Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity respectively, were all included in the questionnaire. The vignettes were specifically chosen to cover all of these areas. In addition, some other vignettes dealt with controversial ethical issues such as advertising and dual relationships. The results do not reveal any pattern of more ethical choices in some principles than others. The distribution of responses, on average, seems to be relatively even among all the vignettes.

Implications for Future Research

It would be beneficial that the study be repeated with a larger sample. Even if the results had been statistically significant, this researcher would have thought twice before generalizing the findings. Hence, a larger sample size and more diverse sample, possibly from more than one institutions of higher education across the country would be optimal.

The APA still does not require that higher-education institutions incorporate any ethical training into their undergraduate psychology students’ education. It is the belief of this researcher that that would be beneficial for these students as they are the future of the field of psychology and should be trained to uphold high moral and ethical standards according to APA principles and guidelines early on rather than expecting them to resolve or come by them along the way as they undergo graduate training, for example.

It would also be interesting to perform a similar study on students with other majors or the general population and try to correlate specific majors to specific answers on each of the 5 general principles in the 2002 APA Code of Ethics. If
statistically significant differences exist, it would also be favorable to try to investigate why such differences in opinion exist and where they originate from.
References


Appendix: Questionnaire
Please tell us a little bit about yourself by answering the following questions.

1. Gender:  □ Male    □ Female
2. Age:       

3. What is your approximate household annual income?
   □ <10,000 □ 10,001-25,000 □ 25,001-50,000 □ 50,001-100,000
   □ >100,000

4. How familiar would you say you are with the American Psychological
   Association or APA?
   □ Very Familiar  □ Somewhat Familiar  □ Not very familiar  □ Not familiar at all

5. How familiar would you say you are with the APA’s ethical guidelines (or
   Code of Ethics)?
   □ Very Familiar  □ Somewhat Familiar  □ Not very familiar  □ Not familiar at all

6. Have you previously, or are you currently attending a course which to some extent covers ethical issues in psychology or requires students to be familiar with the APA Code of Ethics?
   □ YES  □ NO

7. Would you identify yourself as a person who makes ‘ethical’ choices in
   general?
   □ Strongly Agree
   □ Agree
   □ Don’t know/Undecided
   □ Disagree
   □ Strongly Disagree
8. If you were more familiar with the APA and its Code of ethics, do you think you would make more ‘ethically sound’ decisions if you eventually work in the psychology field?

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Don’t know/Undecided
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly Disagree

Instructions:
Kindly read the vignettes below and indicate whether you don’t know, strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree with the statement in bold. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

9. A psychologist at a cocktail party is having a conversation with a woman whom he has just met. He begins to tell her about a client of his, without mentioning names. He reveals to her a set of situations in which the client has recently found himself involved and which the psychologist finds particularly amusing. The woman appears interested in the psychologist’s story, until she has heard enough to cause her to believe he is talking about someone she knows. She says, "Are you talking about...?" to which the psychologist replies, "Yes, you know him too?" And they both laugh.

The psychologist showed a lack of regard for protecting the identity of his client.

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Don’t know/Undecided
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly Disagree

10. A psychologist with considerable skill in behavioral engineering is asked by a state institution for the retarded to plan and assist in executing a behavioral program on its adolescent ward. The purpose of this program will be to increase self-help and ward maintenance skills such as bathing, grooming, dressing, feeding, etc. The program will work only on positive incentives, with special treats such as candy, outings, dances, etc. being provided as rewards for those who improve their skills in these areas. The psychologist meets with each adolescent on the ward to explain the program and finds that about 25% of the youngsters do not understand what he is talking about. Even with a film
designed to explain his procedures, the psychologist is unable to get his message across to these youngsters.

These youngsters should be included in the behavior modification program because the director of the institution wants all the adolescents on the ward to participate.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Don’t know/Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

11. A male clinical psychologist regularly saw a female patient in his apartment to which he had given her a key. Sometimes the therapeutic sessions lasted past midnight. Eventually the patient and her husband accused the therapist of improper relations. The therapist explained that the highly unusual arrangements for psychotherapy resulted from the fact that he had lost control of the relationship and that his patient dominated it.

It would be ethical for a psychologist to see a client on this basis as long as the client had consented to such sessions and was benefiting from the therapy.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Don’t know/Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

12. A psychologist gives information on a figure drawing test to a writer for an article in a popular magazine. The test is not copyrighted and does not require professional training for appropriate interpretation. The psychologist is under the impression that the article would be a dignified statement about how such tests are an aid to the psychologist in giving services to the public. The article appears under the headline "Figure out Your Own Personality," with a blank space for drawing and instructions for scoring, showing examples.

The psychologist violated ethical standards in giving such materials for a popular article.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Don’t know/Undecided
13. A researcher in autism provides intensive behavioral treatment for one half of the children under age 3 who come to her treatment/research facility. The other children are placed in a control group. Children in the first group receive up to 2 years intensive behavioral treatment. It is known that beyond the age of 5 or 6, the benefits of the treatment program decrease significantly.

**This researcher should be obliged to offer 2 years of intensive treatment to the control group children once they have remained in that group for 2 years.**

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Don’t know/Undecided
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly Disagree

14. A client signs a contract for six weeks of a popularized therapy for which she pays the ($3,000) amount in full prior to treatment. She agrees that after two weeks of the therapy she can receive portions of her money back over the next four-week period. After one week, the client decides she does not like the therapy, has lost trust in the therapist, and wants all of her money back.

**The psychologist should return all of the client's money, even though the contract specified none to be returned within the first two weeks.**

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Don’t know/Undecided
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly Disagree

15. Current legal developments suggest that rights to treatment for the involuntarily committed include "nutritionally adequate meals,"-which suggests that contingent availability of meals as reinforcers is unacceptable even if it is deemed therapeutic. A psychologist complies with this requirement by offering his patients nutritious food by taking all the courses and mixing them together in a blender. This blended together meal is freely available to all patients, but patients desiring separate course servings must pay for them with earned tokens.
What the psychologist has done is cruel and unethical.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Don’t know/Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

16. The parents of a public school child demand that a psychologist in private practice give them a written report since they paid for psychological testing. The psychologist gives them copies of his report in which actual test scores are included. The parents take the report to the school psychologist who refers it to the APA.

In giving such a report to the parents, the psychologist is unethical and lacking in good judgment.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Don’t know/Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

17. A specialist in child development acts as a consultant to a toy manufacturer. Her major function is to test the toys in free-play situations. The manufacturer wants to use the results of this testing in his advertising, and he requests permission to use the name of the psychologist in this connection. This is not to be an endorsement of any particular toy but a statement of the fact that the psychologist has tested the toys.

It is ethical for a psychologist to lend her name to advertisements. After all, she needs to make a living.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Don’t know/Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

18. A psychologist advertises by mail a service which offers to introduce marriageable clients to each other on a personality analysis basis, thereby
increasing the prospects of a compatible relationship. The psychologist does not influence the clients to make any decision to marry but merely obtains from them by mail, information he deems relevant. The data are sorted by computer and used as a basis for arranging introductions of interested clients.

**The psychologist's behavior is ethical.**

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Don't know/Undecided
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly Disagree