Training and Education in Professional Psychology
2014, Vol. 8, No. 4, 248–252

1931-3918/14/$12.00 http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tep0000036

Graduate Ethics Education: A Content Analysis of Syllabi

Shannon M. Griffith, Melanie M. Domenech Rodríguez, and Austin J. Anderson
Utah State University

Ethical practice of psychology is emphasized by American Psychological Association (APA) accreditation requirements. The current study is a content analysis of 53 ethics course syllabi from all APA accredited programs listed in the *American Psychologist* 2011 annual report. This article is a companion to Domenech Rodríguez et al. (2014, pp. 241–247) and contributes knowledge on the current state of graduate ethics education. Of the parent project respondents (n = 364), 14% returned syllabi for the present study. General information (e.g., objectives, honor code, academic honesty, common policy, and classroom expectations), assignments, APA format, and teaching sources were coded. Coding of objectives were developed from McKeachie and Svinicki's (2011) definition and de las Fuentes, Willmuth, and Yarrow's (2005) conceptualization of specific objectives (awareness, skill, and knowledge). A little more than half (56.6%) of syllabi stated clear objectives, only 52.8% covered academic honesty, and 16 (30.2%) did not include a section to address accommodations for students with disabilities. Most syllabi used APA format to cite sources, however most sources used were 5 years or older. Overall, syllabi were quite varied in the information they included. Greater consistency in syllabus content would make future evaluations on the state of graduate ethics education more accurate. Recommendations for observational and self-report alternatives are also presented.

Keywords: ethics education, objectives, syllabus

American Psychological Association (APA; APA Commission on Accreditation, 2009) guidelines for accreditation require that doctoral programs in psychology train students in "professional conduct, ethics and law, and other standards for providers of psychological services" (p. 22). Less guidance is provided on how this training should occur or what specific content must be covered. A recent self-report survey of 167 ethics educators (Domenech Rodríguez et al., 2014, pp. 241–247) found significant differences in educational strategies across programs. For example, ethics educators in practitioner scholar programs used large group discussions (82.1%) significantly more than those in scientist practitioner (59.0%) and clinical science (28.6%) programs. Domenech Rodríguez et al. (2014, pp. 241–247) found similarities and also significant differences across programs. For example, all programs covered mandated reporting but varied in their coverage specific guidelines and topics such as decision-making models. The present study focused on ethics course content through direct observations of syllabi.

Ethics Education in Graduate Training

Ethics applies to many areas of psychology and students are typically only exposed to a single, graduate level course late in their academic career (Domenech Rodríguez et al., 2014, pp. 241–247). There is very little research on the structure of ethics education for psychology graduate students. There are two reasons that warrant attention to ethics education: our field values ethical behavior on the part of professional psychologists and continued documentation of ethical violations by professionals in our field suggest possible gaps in training.

The value placed in ethics education in the field of psychology is perhaps best evidenced by the focus on ethics at an institutional level. For example, the APA Ethics Office is one of five offices under the Executive Officer, with six staff members (APA, 2013). Another example is found in the Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP) exam wherein 15% of items are focused on ethics (Sharpless & Barber, 2009). The value on ethics is also evidenced in the many publications and books on ethics. A search by the authors on the Psychology and Behavioral Sciences collection using the search terms (education and professional psychology) returned 647 articles and book chapters.

When examining violations, there is ample evidence of problematic ethics practices. Ethical misconduct in the field of psychological research ranged from a prevalence rate of 1.7% (falsification of data) to 66.5% (failure to report all dependent measures) depending on the specified act. An impressive 94% of participants admitted to at least one questionable research practice (John,

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Shannon M. Griffith is earning her BS in psychology from Utah State University. Her research interests include ethics, gender differences, the criminal justice system, and decision making factors in courts.

Melanie M. Domenech Rodríguez earned her PhD in psychology from Colorado State University. She is currently professor of psychology at Utah State University. Her research interests include cultural adaptations of evidence-based intervention, Latino/a mental health, and multicultural and ethics education.

Austin J. Anderson earned his BS in psychology from Utah State University. He is currently a research assistant in the Department of Psychology, Utah State University. His research interests include well-being, work productivity, and LBGQT.

We thank Linda Forrest and Jennifer Cornish for their thoughtful review of this article.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Melanie M. Domenech Rodríguez, Department of Psychology, Utah State University, Logan, UT 84321. E-mail: melanie.domenech@usu.edu

Loewenstein, & Prelec, 2012). These number may be partly the result of shortcomings in ethics education. In one study, psychology graduate students reported difficulties with the comprehension of certain aspects of ethical issues pertaining to research (Löfström, 2012).

There is evidence of ethical violations in the clinical domain. A review of the 20 years of APA Ethics Office annual reports revealed 1,155 open cases, of which the majority were brought to the APA Ethics Office from licensing boards (53.9%; Domenech Rodríguez, Farnsworth, & Enno, 2011) presumably on clinical violations. The remaining cases involved inappropriate professional practice (25.6%), dual relationship (12.9%), inappropriate research, teaching, or administrative practices (3.6%), inappropriate public statements (3.1%) and failure to uphold standards of the profession (0.8%; Domenech Rodríguez et al., 2011).

It is essential for students to not only be able to have knowledge of the APA guidelines but to also be able to adapt to possible ethical dilemmas through awareness and development of ethical judgment (Welfel & Lipsitz, 1984). For students to be competent in professional ethics it is imperative to provide future professionals the opportunity to obtain knowledge, skills, and development of personal or self-awareness as well as exposure to ethical dilemmas (de las Fuentes, Willmuth, & Yarrow, 2005). Furthermore, modeling of professors is one of the best ways to learn appropriate ethical behavior, and learning is compromised when professors violate ethical codes (de las Fuentes et al., 2005). In the classroom, the syllabus is the equivalent of an informed consent form. Students are expected to adhere to the standards stated in the syllabus. Syllabi also allow students to question pedagogical rationale or misunderstandings of course content. Professors should take advantage of this opportunity and use it as the first form of modeling that students receive from a course.

The ability to study the content and process of ethics education can present some challenges. No known observations of classroom practices exist. Syllabi represent a feasible way to begin to delve into direct observation of ethics education. The information contained in a syllabus varies from class to class depending on the course taught. Standard syllabus content includes the following: basic information such as meeting time and course number, course description, objectives, texts or materials needed, a weekly schedule with details of assignments, policies including attendance, class participation, late assignments or exams, academic dishonesty, grading criteria, expectations, and accommodations, other additional information pertinent to the course, final thoughts, and lastly the references (Sinor & Kaplan, 1998). This information is needed for students to navigate the course successfully (Sinor & Kaplan, 1998).

McKeachie and Svinicki (2011) also gave a detailed set of guidelines for syllabi and stressed that objectives are the key factor for constructing the course. Specifically, the authors state that course objectives describe what learners will be able to do at the end of the course rather than provide a narrative for what will be covered in the course. The latter they catalog as a course description. They recommend using a variety of written sources but also suggest using one textbook to give students more structure. No known data support this one-book recommendation. Furthermore, this recommendation may be more applicable to general undergraduate courses than to highly specialized graduate classes that may require multiple specific resources to provide the proper depth of knowledge targeted in the course.

Pedagogical strategies may be evident in syllabi as well. Discussions about the effectiveness of various teaching strategies have been a hot topic among researchers in the last decade (Hooper, 2012). Recent research shows that training in pedagogical strategies has an effect on student learning outcomes even after controlling teaching experience (Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2007). These findings suggest that pedagogical strategies can be shifted to meet the needs of students, programs, and the profession for competence in various areas. Specific pedagogical strategies found in the literature are linked to good learning outcomes such as (a) the five Rs: reporting, responding, relating, reasoning, and reconstructing (Bain, Ballantyne, Mills, & Lester, 2002); (b) reflection (Ryan, 2013); (c) building community, creating a context for safe dialog, eliciting in-depth discussion (Miller & Harris, 2005); and (d) compromises in terms of power (Puchner & Roseboro, 2011).

Overall, it appears that students may not be extracting optimal learning from their ethics courses, yet teaching strategies are trainable to meet course goals and objectives. Unfortunately little research exists to help inform what is happening in ethics courses across graduate psychology programs. The present manuscript seeks to shed some light on this by examining the content of ethics syllabi.

Method

The present data were collected as part of a national survey of ethics educators (see Domenech Rodríguez et al., 2014, pp. 241–247). In the parent study, 364 surveys were mailed. Of the total sample of surveys obtained ($n = 167$), 53 syllabi (39%) were returned with completed surveys. Syllabi were from 42 PhD, 9 PsyD, and 2 “other” programs. Of these, there were 39 clinical programs, 4 counseling programs, 8 school programs, and 2 combined programs.

The sample was gathered by identifying all APA-accredited graduate programs in psychology listed in the *American Psychologist* in the 2011 annual report. The research was reviewed by the Institutional Review Boards at University of Colorado, Denver (DU), Utah State University, and University of Oregon, where all lead researchers were located. Only DU provided approval for the protocol. The other two sites determined the research did not involve human participants.

A coding system was developed to evaluate the syllabi. Specifically, we coded the number of journal articles assigned and their publication year, types of assignments used (e.g., papers, presentations, dilemmas), and presence or absence of explicitly stated classroom expectations. Instructors who sent in a syllabus that did not identify which type of program it was sent from and were registered as having both PhD and PsyD programs were classified as “other” for coding. The category of objectives was coded using McKeachie and Svinicki’s (2011) definition; specifically, we coded whether objectives were *present* (1) or *absent* (0).

Certain variables were separated into subcategories. Specifically, objectives sections were coded for self-awareness, knowledge, and skills following de las Fuentes et al.’s (2005) conceptualization. Each subcategory was coded as *present* (1) or *absent* (0) in a syllabus if they were explicitly stated as such or an obvious synonym (e.g., awareness of one's affect, facts, or abilities). Self-awareness objectives were defined in the codebook as those that addressed students' development of personal values and morals. Knowledge objectives explicitly stated information gathering that promoted ethical reasoning. Finally, skill objectives targeted behaviors that could be applied in a practical psychology setting. Classroom expectations were also divided into subcategories and coded as *absent* (0) or *present* (1) with "other" classified as very specific restrictions (e.g., seating arrangements) that did not fit into the one of the nine main subcategories (see Figure 1). Written assignments were divided into length and were coded as "unspecified" if number of pages was not given. Two researchers coded the syllabi. Interrater agreement was adequate across categories for three syllabi (Cohen's Kappas = .61, .82, and 1.0).

Results

General Information

A little more than half (*n* = 30; 56.6%) of syllabi stated clear objectives for the class. Only 18 (34%) presented self-awareness objectives, 30 (56.6%) syllabi stated knowledge objectives, and 28 (52%) listed skill objectives. It was most common for syllabi to present no objectives (*n* = 23, 43.4%), followed by stating all three types of objectives (*n* = 17, 32.1%), then only two (*n* = 12, 22.6%) and then one (*n* = 1, 1.9%). Over half of syllabi did not include a section discussing academic honesty (52.8%) or an honor code (50.9%), and 16 (30.2%) did not address accommodations for students with disabilities. Most syllabi (*n* = 40, 75.5%) included restrictions on specific classroom behavior with attendance (*n* = 30, 56.6%) as the most common policy (see Figure 1 for a full list).

Assignments

Almost all of the classes (92.5%) had assigned reading (*M* = 35.4, *SD* = 22.1, *Mdn* = 31, range = 0 −108). Most syllabi specified written assignments (*n* = 47, 88.7%), which varied in length (see Table 1). Of these, 17 (32.1%) assigned short papers, 19 (35.8%) medium papers, 3 (5.7%) long papers, and 30 (56.6%) unspecified. Alternative forms of assignments are shown in Table 1.

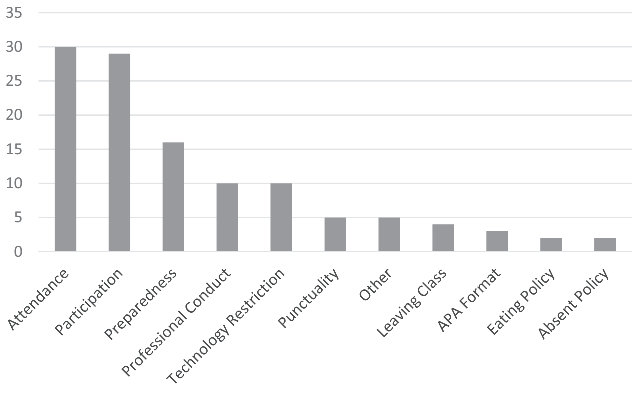

Figure 1. Coding categories for policies regarding classroom expectations.

Table 1
Assignments Reported in Syllabi

Variable	*n*	*M*	*SD*	Range
Long paper	3	0.06	.02	0–1
Short paper	17	0.85	2.28	0–14
Medium paper	19	0.45	0.67	0–2
Dilemmas	26	0.49	0.51	0–1
Unspecified paper	30	2.19	3.91	0–16
Presentations	31	0.72	0.74	0–3
Discussions	34	5.66	6.55	0–18
Reading	49	38.22	22.10	8–108

Journal articles. Of the journal articles and books specified in the syllabi, 40 (75.5%) were listed in APA format. The oldest journal article assigned was from 1982, and the newest was in press. Of the 37 syllabi that included assigned articles, there were 18.7 (*SD* = 13.36) journal articles assigned on average. The mean number of articles assigned per syllabus that were five years or older was 11.4 (*SD* = 10.11), whereas the average number of articles assigned less than five years was 4.3 (*SD* = 5.82).

There were 691 total assigned articles across 131 different journals. The most often used journals were *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, which had 174 articles assigned in 26 of the syllabi, *American Psychologist*, with 113 articles in 25 syllabi, *Monitor on Psychology*, with 34 articles used in 3 syllabi, and *Ethics & Behavior*, with 12 articles in 10 syllabi.

Books. Nearly all (*n* = 49, 92.5%) syllabi specified a required textbook. The most common was the requirement of only one textbook (*n* = 22, 41.5%), followed by two textbooks (*n* = 17, 32.1%), three textbooks (*n* = 7, 13.2%), and four textbooks (*n* = 3, 5.7%). The three most common textbooks were 9 (17%) Koocher and Keith-Spiegel (2008), 8 (15.1%) Bersoff (2008), and 6 (11.3%) Knapp and VandeCreek (2006).

Discussion

Professionals, students, and teachers frequently encounter moral or ethical dilemmas in psychology (Pope & Vetter, 1992). Yet our observations of syllabi suggests that ethics educators do not follow a consistent pedagogical structure or include consistent content across programs, making it difficult to assess whether students are uniformly prepared to face ethical challenges inherent in the field.

McKeachie and Svinicki (2011) reflected on the importance of clarity and identification of goals and objectives. Our findings suggest that ethics courses do not meet McKeachie's standard at face value. It is possible that unstated objectives are in fact met. It is also possible that stated objectives are not fulfilled as presented. Future research can shed light on these possibilities through either direct observation of ethics educators and/or self-report surveys from students engaged in these courses. In addition to answering the question—are instructors adequately addressing course objectives?—long-term follow-up of these students can also help ethics educators better understand what the professional impact of stating and meeting awareness, knowledge, and skills objectives has on those students' professional practice. At present there is ample room for ethics educators to focus on developing and refining course objectives in their syllabi.

Previous research has demonstrated the importance of self-awareness, knowledge, and skills objectives in curricula (de las Fuentes et al., 2005). To achieve greater uniformity of experience across graduate ethics training, and perhaps consistent in spirit with the uniformity of training implied in having APA accreditation, ethics educators may consider reviewing their syllabi to ensure they have listed an objective in each area. Although the majority of the syllabi did not conform to the guidelines set forth by McKeachie and Svinicki, we cannot be certain that this is true across all programs. We would recommend that ethics educators and/or doctoral programs conduct a review of their syllabus against the McKeachie and Svincki criteria to determine whether they need to make changes to improve their syllabi. Any educators who want to pursue external evaluation of their syllabi may also consider peer evaluation, such as that provided by APA Division 2 (Society for the Teaching of Psychology) through their syllabus project initiative or peer review for possible publication in a journal (e.g., *Syllabus*).

An interesting observation from syllabi was that 75% of professors followed APA format in their reading lists. Although the majority seized the opportunity to model proper formatting, fully 25% did not. Modeling is one of the oldest teaching strategies and is well understood by psychologists. We recommend that ethics educators consider adhering to proper APA formatting of required books, journal articles, and other published materials in their syllabi.

Not surprisingly, graduate students were assigned a substantial amount of readings. Almost all programs (92%) had assigned readings and/or reported use of a textbook from a known ethics expert. Unfortunately we were not able to collect more specific data on the number of pages assigned per week because of the variability in the presentation of this information across syllabi. Future research may seek to elucidate this information to better understand the standard for readings at the doctoral level. It is unclear what, if any, impact readings have on graduate students' learning. Future research could help elucidate how much reading is optimal. For example, students assigned an inordinate amount of reading, may disengage and not complete any or very little of the reading assignments, whereas students in a course with an optimal reading load may be more likely to read and derive benefit from written materials.

Relatedly, 60% of the assigned peer-reviewed articles were older than five years. The APA Ethics Code directs teachers to "present psychological information accurately" (APA, 2010, p. 9). Although information may be accurate regardless of its publication year, its relevance may wane over time, especially in an area like ethics in which changing contexts challenge prevailing notions of what is and is not ethical. The inclusion of "classic" articles that are older yet continue to be relevant to ethics education seems quite appropriate. However, ethics educators are invited to consider the relevance and timeliness of their assigned readings to ensure the best possible training in ethics education. With the proliferation of psychology journal and the accompanying number of publications, this could be burdensome. Educators may consider signing up for "table of content alerts" to the top ethics education journals (e.g., *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*) to support more targeted efforts to keep their ethics readings updated.

During this project, an unanticipated concern emerged while attempting to obtain syllabi from instructors over whether their syllabi constituted intellectual property. More specifically, faculty inquired about whether syllabi would be used for purposes other than the research project and whether they would be disseminated without participant's knowledge. Many syllabi are readily distributed and easily accessible. At our own institution, faculty are asked to provide syllabi at the outset of each semester for posting on the departmental website. However, we learned that the issue of syllabi accessibility has become a "hot topic" in higher education. Although a search on traditional databases did not return scholarly articles on syllabi as intellectual property, we found plenty of discussion in blogs and professional forums (e.g., Chronicle of Higher Education, syllabi and intellectual property forum). The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) published a statement asserting their belief that course materials, including syllabi, should be the intellectual property of professors rather than universities (Springer, 2005). At its most extreme, this would mean that a professor would be free to pursue copyright for a syllabus. More likely, these intellectual property debates generate questions about the appropriate use and dissemination of course syllabi. For example, would the use of an existing syllabus posted on a Web site for one institution and used by a professor at another university constitute plagiarism?

It is possible that our response rate was ultimately tied to different understandings and levels of comfort on the part of participants with sharing their intellectual property. Indeed, the issues of intellectual property may be differentially relevant to institutions that provide mostly on-site versus distance education training. In our sample we had relatively few syllabi returned from PsyD programs. Further examination should be pursued to determine whether the pedagogical content of ethics courses differ from that in PhD programs. Researchers may benefit from being aware of possible road blocks in conducting this research.

Overall, we were pleased with the number of instructors who shared their syllabi ($n = 53$). We believe it reflects positively on the desire of ethics educators to receive feedback and offer transparency about their pedagogical activities. Many educators offer explicit objectives, consistent with best practices in teaching. There are clear attempts to maintain updated reading lists and give assignments (i.e., papers) that are consistent with graduate students' developmental level. It is important that students gain the knowledge, skills, and self-awareness needed to operate ethically in the field of psychology. Having specific content guidelines as well as incorporating ethics into undergraduate courses may increase efficacy while easing the burden for graduate school instructors.

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Received August 12, 2013
Revision received December 3, 2013
Accepted December 8, 2013 ■

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