

# Competency Training in Ethics Education and Practice

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This article provides an overview of issues, including identification of core competencies and strategies for training and assessment, related to ethics education and training for psychologists. It summarizes the products emerging from the ethics working group at the November 2002 Competencies Conference: Future Directions in Education and Credentialing in Professional Psychology, held in Scottsdale, Arizona.

*Keywords:* ethics, competency, training

The 2002 Competencies Conference was held November 7–9, 2002, in Scottsdale, Arizona. The conference was hosted by the Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers in collaboration with cosponsors from Canada, Mexico, and the United States, including boards, committees, and divisions of the American Psychological Association (APA); education and training groups; credentialing and regulatory bodies; and ethnic minority psychology organizations. Much of the work during the conference was accomplished in small working groups in which dialogue and debate among participants were encouraged. The working group in which we participated was charged with address-

ing the identification, training, and assessment of the development of competence in ethics, legal, public policy, advocacy, and professional issues. Group members spent most of their time discussing training and assessment of competence in ethics. This article presents an overview of the working group's product, enhanced by relevant literature and organized to address (a) the identification of core components of competence in ethics; (b) the critical educational and training experiences needed to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to become a competent ethical psychologist; and (c) the assessment of ethics competency.

## Identification of Core Components of Competence in Ethics

Although the working group was not expected to achieve consensus on every issue but rather to create a record of their discussions, noting both areas of agreement and disagreement, there was unanimous agreement on the following core components of competence in ethics. Through lively and collegial discussions and debate and the sharing of instructional models and practices, the working group came to a consensus that psychologists and psychologists in training need knowledge and skills for ethical decision making and intervention, including the following abilities:

1. to appraise and adopt or adapt one's own ethical decision-making model and apply it with personal integrity and cultural competence in all aspects of their professional activities;
2. to recognize ethical and legal dilemmas in the course of their professional activities (including the ability to determine whether a dilemma exists through research and consultation);
3. to recognize and reconcile conflicts among relevant codes and laws and to deal with convergence, divergence, and ambiguity; and
4. to raise and resolve ethical and legal issues appropriately.

The working group agreed that to accomplish the above identified skills, psychologists and psychologists in training need to obtain knowledge and awareness of the following:

1. the self in community as a moral individual and an ethical professional and

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2. the various professional ethical principles and codes; practice standards and guidelines; civil and criminal statutes; and regulations and case law relevant to the practice of psychology.

The above summarized core components of ethics competency were considered by the working group to be the foundation of ethics education and were discussed as neither sequential in development nor discrete, but as overlapping and essential throughout the professional life of the psychologist.

The only area in which the working group did not reach consensus regarded whether *courage* is a core component of ethics education and a competency necessary for ethical action. Although some of the members of the working group maintained that courage is necessary for ethical competence and therefore a significant component of ethics training, others maintained it is a more general attribute.

Following the identification of core components for competence in ethics, the working group focused on its next task: identifying the critical educational and training experiences needed to develop the above identified core components of ethics competency. However, once we began our discussion, it became obvious to us that training for ethics competency necessitated the appropriate selection of applicants for training and an ethical training environment. These two components of ethics training will thus be discussed first.

#### Gatekeeping: Program Responsibilities in the Selection and Adjudication of Trainees

Of course, ethics training programs are designed to affect the ethical decision making and behaviors of psychologists and psychologists in training; however, it is naive to assume that training programs can develop a specific moral character in its students, given all of the variables involved in creating moral behavior. Therefore, a comprehensive ethics education program obligates itself to (a) appropriately select candidates whose psychological fitness and moral character are not likely to interfere in their abilities to deliver competent and ethical psychological services and, once students are admitted into a training program, (b) monitor their capacity to process ethical and moral issues and dilemmas cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally. It was the consensus of the working group that training programs and the faculty in them have a responsibility to evaluate a student's personal and professional competence to practice in the service of protecting the public, the student body, and the profession. Indeed, the APA (2002) code of ethics clearly states that applicants and students may be compelled to disclose elements of their history (those bearing on character and fitness; Johnson & Campbell, 2004) if

the information is necessary to evaluate or obtain assistance for students whose personal problems could reasonably be judged to be preventing them from performing their training- or professionally related activities in a competent manner or posing a threat to the students or others. (APA, 2002, Section 7.04, pp. 1068–1069)

Additionally, the working group members agreed that programs should develop an ethical training program that includes clear communications about expected conduct, remediation for professionally inappropriate or unethical behavior, termination from the course of study if a remediation plan is not followed or not a viable option (as in the case of impairment or egregious unethical or

incompetent behavior), and due process and rights to appeal decisions regarding a change of their status in the training program (see also APA, 2002, Section 7.02: Descriptions of Education and Training Programs). We felt strongly that training programs become emboldened regarding the evaluation and dismissal (if necessary) of students whose conduct, character, or capacity demonstrates an inability to competently and ethically serve the public.

#### Milieu and Modeling

Working group members recalled and discussed many instances from their own training or programs in which ethical standards were required of trainees but not of administrators or educators. Because the most adjudicated offense in psychology is unethical sexual relationships between male therapists and female clients, what attitudes and behaviors are being modeled by psychology faculty who engage in unethical multiple relationships with their students? If people act morally because others have modeled moral behaviors (Rest, 1983), could not the reverse be true? Can what is taught in the classroom be contradicted by faculty–student relationships outside of the classroom? Are we, as trainers and educators, modeling attitudes and behaviors that imply acceptance of multiple relationships with clients, supervisees, students, research participants, subordinates, and others in positions of lesser power? Kitchener (1992) lamented that “silence best characterizes the discussion of the ethical responsibilities of faculty members toward students in higher education in general and psychology education in particular” (p. 190) and argued that the ethical principles should be the foundation of ethics education in psychology.

Training programs are responsible for providing an environment that is safe and nurturing of psychology trainees' exploration of themselves and the ethical issues inherent in psychology (Vasquez, 1988). The working group members believed that teaching ethical concepts and prohibitions, although essential and generally occurring during most training programs, is not sufficient and does not necessarily translate into ethical behavior. A comprehensive ethics training program includes (a) a living self-reflective application of ethical principles in the training environment demonstrated and modeled for trainees in order for it to become an enduring part of their professional identity and (b) a training that focuses not only on the therapeutic environment but also on the social and cultural contexts within which training occurs (Housman & Stake, 1999).

#### Training for Ethics Competence

Once the working group members discussed the fact that training for ethics competency necessitates the appropriate selection of applicants for training and an ethical training environment, we proceeded to focus on identifying the critical educational and training experiences needed to develop the identified core components of ethics competency.

The working group discussed our belief that multicultural issues often did not receive the consideration necessary in teaching of ethical behavior and practice. We noted that our ethical codes and ethical practice have evolved in a cultural context and with multicultural influences. We felt that it is essential that all training programs in ethics address the APA's published guidelines on multicultural practice; therapy with gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals; and therapy with women, in addition to others.

The working group members agreed that training in ethical issues should be infused throughout the training curricula. Although the members agreed that training should be progressive in consideration of trainees' professional development, there was no consensus on a specific sequence for training. The following developmental sequence provides an outline of a set of skills and content areas that programs may consider as they train for ethical competence. The skill sets described below address content and process areas reflecting progressive levels of training.

Beginning students must be able to demonstrate awareness, knowledge, and skills of the following content areas: the development of moral reasoning and moral behavior; values and beliefs as emerging from cultural contexts; ethical codes and practice guidelines; ethical principles, virtues, and orientations; and relevant case law. Beginning students must also be able to demonstrate the following processes skills: the ability to explore one's own moral and ethical values and attitudes, interpersonal skills of flexibility, openness to new ideas and change, nondefensiveness to feedback, and awareness and appreciation of differences in moral and ethical values across cultures.

### *Teaching Moral Reasoning and Moral Behavior*

Ethical behaviors have been seen as arising from several origins, one of which is morals. Although empirical studies have been published that offer a curriculum or model for teaching new professionals how to avoid or address ethically problematic behavior, many authors (e.g., Fly, van Bark, Weinman, Kitchener, & Lang, 1997; Welfel & Kitchener, 1992) have suggested that Rest's (1983, 1986) work provides some guidance. Rest's four stage model of ethical decision making consists of (a) recognition of a moral dilemma and related emotional response, (b) a cognitive understanding of the moral issues involved, (c) a moral course of action that is decided on, and (d) an appropriate ethical behavioral response that is carried out. Fly et al. (1997) suggested that ethics curricula that address all of these stages may be more efficacious in facilitating the ethical development of graduate students as they learn how to avoid ethical transgressions and produce ethical behaviors.

One member of the group, Richard Weinberg, described an innovative instructional tool, a morality genogram, which he uses to encourage trainees to examine the development of their own values and morality. In constructing this genogram, students look for critical incidents and other important influences (e.g., culture and religion) on their own moral development. Although morality is a dimension that is not often articulated in training, it is likely essential for ethical behavior. The genogram introduces this dimension as it helps trainees articulate how morality enters into ethical decision making in the course of one's professional life.

### *Ethical Principles and Virtues*

An example of principle ethics in psychology was described in Kitchener's (1984) two-level theory of ethical decision making. Kitchener proposed that Beauchamp and Childress's (1983) five principles (autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity) make up the basis for the critical evaluation of ethical justification in the context of counseling and psychology. Instructors might consider discussing how the above principles have

influenced the evolution of APA's (2002) general principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence, fidelity and responsibility, integrity, justice, and respect for people's rights and dignity.

Virtue ethics focus on the character of the individual rather than on the solution to a particular ethical dilemma. According to Meara, Schmidt, and Day (1996), the unique characteristics of virtue ethics is the identification of the motivation, emotion, character, ideals, and moral habits of a person who functions in the traditions and practices of a culture, group, or community. As ethics educators, we should demonstrate to our students that psychologists are informed by both virtues and principles in our professional practice.

In addition to the above, advanced students must be able to demonstrate culturally appropriate and reasoned ethical decision-making skills and ethical behaviors in (a) content areas including case studies, vignettes, and role plays in didactic situations and (b) process areas such as in their interactions with faculty, peers, clients, supervisors, and the organizations and institutions in which they work and study. These competencies necessitate the skills of knowing when and how to use consultants and supervisors appropriately and, with the information acquired from these sources, pursuing appropriate courses of action to resolve an ethical dilemma.

Many advanced students in psychology training programs teach courses at the undergraduate level. With this in mind, these students need also be able to demonstrate ethical decision-making skills commensurate with this practice. For example, advanced student instructors must address plagiarism or falsification of data by their students because these transgressions violate psychology's ethical principles of honesty and integrity.

Internship and postdoctoral trainees should be able to consistently demonstrate an integration of the above skills in a culturally appropriate, smooth, and compelling manner in all aspects of their professional lives (i.e., not only in the presence of an ethical dilemma) and, with appropriate consultation, recognize and reconcile conflicts among relevant codes and laws to deal with convergence, divergence, and ambiguity. Because most training programs at this level include training in supervision, the trainee should become familiar with the ethical and legal issues involved in this new role.

Working group members discussed that competence acquisition would be enhanced if, during the course of their training, trainees could provide feedback to faculty, training directors, supervisors, and administrators on their ethical conduct. This might facilitate the likelihood that trainees will become ethical and competent trainers for the next generation.

Professional psychologists demonstrate all of the above advanced skills and provide competent ethical consultation to others. The working group members discussed that psychologists are lifelong learners and as a result they join or form peer networks and consultation-study groups in which they receive and provide consultation and feedback on the competent and ethical delivery of services they provide. To encourage and facilitate this process, those jurisdictions not already doing so should be encouraged to consider providing continuing education credit for participation in peer consultation-study groups. These continuing education practices encourage discussion of the scientific bases of decision making in practice and may make it more likely that a psychologist will access appropriate consultation when confronting an ethical

dilemma. In addition, psychologists take advantage of the numerous formal continuing education opportunities available that address the continued development and maintenance of their skills and ethical practice.

In summary, ethics and legal competencies are not discrete competencies that begin in the first year of graduate school and are completed by the end of training. These competencies develop along a lifelong continuum, from early moral training in childhood to the end of one's professional career.

### Assessment of Competence in Ethics

Following the identification of the critical educational and training experiences needed to develop the identified core components of ethics competency, the working group members turned their attention to assessment of competence in ethics. We reached rapid agreement that with regard to the components of competency in ethics, acquisition of knowledge and skills can be readily measured but that values and attitudes may be more difficult to assess as they are not created in graduate school and are not limited to professional spheres of activity. Nonetheless, we strongly believed that values and attitudes need to be identified and assessed for "goodness of fit" to the profession before competence in ethics can be determined.

In its discussions regarding training, the working group considered both formative and summative assessments to be very important. Much assessment throughout training is formative, such as determining whether training objectives in ethics competencies are being met (e.g., in courses and practicum). But at various points during a student's tenure in a graduate program, trainers must make summative decisions, most often occurring at transitions from one stage of training to another or when there is serious concern about the behavior and capacity for change of a trainee. Regrettably, most summative evaluations of ethics competencies occur by ethics committees and state boards that must determine whether a psychologist has violated ethical or legal edicts. Unfortunately, training programs are rarely made aware of these summative judgments made against their former trainees, resulting in a failure of a feedback process for their training curriculum and processes.

The working group members thought that multimodal methods of assessment were necessary to ensure that trainees develop ethical practice skills. Suggestions for modes of assessment included the following methods:

1. Assess for ethical integrity in every course throughout training including monitoring plagiarism, falsification of data, and misrepresentation of one's work or contribution (e.g., in the case of group projects) as these are all reflective of dishonest attitudes and behavior.
2. Assess for ethical competence in clinical training, including violations of confidentiality, sexual and nonsexual boundary violations, compromising the welfare of a client, distortion of information provided to supervisors, and procedural breaches with ethical or legal implications as these transgressions can have harmful effects on clients and reflect a failure to understand or abide by the core ethical values of the profession.
3. Assessments can also be made by the use of a 360°-type of evaluation whereby everyone in the training environment (i.e., peers, support staff, administration, faculty, supervisors, and cli-

ents) can evaluate and provide feedback to students and the program regarding students' interpersonal and ethical competence. One member of the working group related a situation of graduate students who did not report incidents of sexual harassment by one of their peers until after he graduated. We agreed that although we might not be able to catch all cases of interpersonal abuse among peers, a 360° evaluation might provide a venue by which ethical offenses by psychologists in training and psychologists in the training environment may be addressed.

4. Assess how trainees respond to actual ethical dilemmas through the use of critical incident methodology. Such a methodology makes note of the processes by which a trainee has (or has not) recognized an ethical or legal dilemma, used (or did not use) consultation and supervision, used appropriate (or inappropriate) cultural and contextual sensitivity, and addressed (or did not address) the matter in an ethical manner. The working group members thought that this approach could be conducted in a transparent, public, and sensitive manner so that all relevant parties can contribute to the discussion and learn from the training moment.

Working group members identified a further issue with regard to assessment in ethical competence that trainers may want to be alert to. Interns are sometimes cast in the role of evaluating how more junior graduate trainees handle ethical dilemmas. This may place the interns in conflicting roles between the students and the intern's own supervisor or could result in the supervisor having less opportunity to directly evaluate the more junior trainee and address incipient problems. It is important to remember that it remains the responsibility of trainers to directly assess and address any ethical problems that occur during training, as these incidents may well be predictive of future ethical and legal transgressions.

### Assessment of the Ethics Training Program

Peppered throughout our discussions, the working group members addressed assessment of ethics training programs. We agreed that training programs should request data on their students' scores on the ethics domain of the Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology and use the data to inform their training program development. In addition, working group members thought it would be helpful for licensing boards to provide information to training programs about the adjudication of their graduates. Such information could provide feedback to training programs about their (a) selection of appropriate students to train into the field and (b) the efficacy of their ethics training model.

### Conclusion

Working group members found the opportunity for trainers and regulators to meet and brainstorm on the topic of ethics competencies extremely helpful. A member of the group recommended that a joint conference of regulators and the training community at the national level be held in the future to discuss innovative models and assessment of training for ethics competency. Such a conference would build on the work of the 2002 Competencies Conference, which has been reported in part here, and the proceedings could be developed into a case book of best practices.

We conclude with a quote from educator and ethicist Melba Vasquez (1992) who wrote "Professionals concerned with the problems of unethical behavior believe that the strongest weapon

against professional misconduct may be the education of trainees" (p. 196). The working group underscored this belief and has offered a variety of ways by which ethics education may be improved and the standing of our profession and protection of consumers of psychological services enhanced.

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