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Ethics Case-Study Simulation: A Generic Tool for Psychology Teachers

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3. Teaching Ethics

Mark McMinn from George Fox College designed a case-study simulation to aid instructors teaching ethics in psychology. Two cases involving ethical decisions in psychology are included with the computer program. The first case deals with confidentiality in clinical psychology; the second case concerns ethics in planning, conducting, and reporting research. The program is generic and allows instructors to write their own text files.

Bernard Beins generated the Barnum effect to teach students at Ithaca College about the ethics of deception in research and the feelings of subjects who are deceived. Students in research methods classes received feedback about a bogus personality inventory and rated the perceived validity of the interpretations. Seniors were more skeptical than juniors and sophomores. This technique is an engaging and effective way to help students learn first-hand about the costs and benefits of research.

Deciding not to conduct a study because it involves deception or invasion of privacy is as much an act to be evaluated on ethical grounds as is conducting such a study. Robert Rosnow from Temple University designed a classroom exercise to demonstrate that the ethical evaluation of a study can be considered from several standpoints. He used role-play and discussion to sharpen critical thinking and develop an appreciation of the nuances of research ethics.

David Strohmetz and Anne Skleder evaluated the effectiveness of Rosnow's role-play exercise (see the preceding article) in their undergraduate research methods classes at Temple University. Results indicated that the technique can be a valuable tool for sensitizing students to the complex factors involved in judging the ethics of research.

Carl Kallgren and Robert Tauber from Penn State Erie surveyed 53 undergraduate researchers whose projects had received formal approval by an institutional review board (IRB). Students indicated that they had learned more by going through the IRB process, produced a better product, viewed instructor feedback more positively, saw the instructor as more of an ally, treated their research more seriously, and were sensitized to ethical issues. The authors recommend the IRB process for all undergraduate research.

Recognizing the growing controversy over the ethics of using animals in research, Harold Herzog from Western Carolina University reviewed two prominent philosophical justifications for animal liberation and described an exercise that facilitates class discussion of animal research issues. Students simulated participation on an institutional animal care committee and decided whether a series of hypothetical experiments would be allowed. Students reported that the technique increased their awareness about the complexity of making ethical decisions.

Ethics Case-Study Simulation: A Generic Tool for Psychology Teachers

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Psychologists frequently face difficult ethical issues; hence, the teaching of ethics is an important component of graduate and undergraduate psychology education. Keith-Spiegel and Koocher (1985) noted that the American Psychological Association spends more money on ethics-related matters than any other professional organization.

Case studies are frequently used in teaching ethics. Similarly, many ethics books in psychology are liberally sprinkled with case-study illustrations. Using case studies to teach ethics has several advantages. First, case studies are

interesting, increasing the salience of the principles being taught. Second, case studies are practical, illustrating to students how the principles are applied in real-life situations. Third, case studies are realistic. Many of the situations we teach students are similar to situations they will encounter in years to come. Specific attention to those issues during students' education will presumably allow them to make wiser decisions as professionals. Finally, case studies powerfully illustrate the difficulty of certain ethical decisions: They help students confront the absence of clear right and wrong answers in some situations.

But if case studies are presented quickly, without adequate exploration and discussion, they can be counterproductive. For example, the ethical issues might easily appear prescriptive to students. Students might begin to think that every case is addressed with a specific principle and not recognize the need for creative problem solving in ethical decision making. Memorizing the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists" (1981) is not the same as learning to be ethical. The process of ethical decision making might easily be overlooked with excessive use of poorly developed case studies.

An excellent alternative is to teach ethics by trial-and-error rather than by prescription. By having students take tentative positions on issues before revealing more information, a simulation of ethical decision making can occur in the classroom. But trial-and-error teaching cannot be done on an individual basis in most settings because graduate students in clinical programs learn by dealing with troubled clients. Appropriate ethical decisions are expected by supervisors without employing trial-and-error methods.

The advantages of in-depth case studies and trial-and-error learning can be combined with computer simulation. Students can see the effects of their choices, understand the importance of process in making decisions, and recognize the kinds of practical dilemmas they may experience.

The case-study simulation program described here was developed to address the need for interactive case studies that allow for trial-and-error learning. The program is written for IBM or compatible personal computers. It requires one disk drive and 128K of random access memory. All students are first presented with the same information; additional information varies depending on choices made by the student. The text is organized as a decision tree with a series of dichotomous choices. Based on their choice, students are presented one of two second-level screens. Based on their choice on the second-level screen, they select one of four third-level screens, and so on. There are five levels altogether, with the fifth level showing one of the 16 possible case outcomes and not requiring a decision by the student. Students can go backward in the decision tree and change their minds on previous decisions, giving the program the capacity to answer "what if" questions the student may have.

Ethics instructors recognize that what a student decides is often less important than why the student comes to that conclusion. After each decision in the simulation, students are asked why that response was chosen. Their reasons are input to a data file that can later be accessed by the instructor. Each reason in the data file is preceded by numbers identifying which screen and decision the reason is justifying. This allows the instructor to evaluate moral reasoning from a developmental, a consequential, or a deontological perspective. Moreover, it provides an excellent starting point for classroom discussions on moral development and ethical decision making. Classroom discussions can also

focus on how difficult it is to make ethical decisions before knowing what will happen after decisions are made.

Following the fifth-level screen (i.e., case outcome), students are evaluated based on the 10 "Ethical Principles of Psychologists" (1981). This is a subjective evaluation based on the opinions of the instructor preparing the case study, but the evaluation and the principles used can be tailored by the user.

Two cases related to ethical decision making in psychology are included with this program. The first case, THE SECRET, deals with confidentiality in clinical psychology. The second case, A SHOCKING STORY, concerns ethics in the planning, execution, and reporting of research.

The program is written as a generic tool, allowing others to write text files to be used with this software. An accompanying manual instructs others how to write their own cases. With my supervision, students prepare case studies in a psychology ethics class for upper-division undergraduates. It allows them to anticipate ethical dilemmas and probable effects of certain decisions. Because of the developmental level of undergraduates, I do not use the case studies they develop with other students. Nonetheless, having them prepare the case-study texts provides many hours of profitable, small-group discussion on ethical issues and allows students to anticipate the consequences of certain actions in psychology.

I have found the software to be very useful in teaching ethics. Students are intrigued by case studies, and they enjoy the simulation assignment. Because I have a record of the reasons students give for making certain decisions, I can stimulate fascinating discussions on the moral bases for different ethical decisions. Most students do not perform well on their first trials with the simulation. This gives them a healthy respect for the difficulty of many ethical decisions.

References

- Ethical principles of psychologists. (1981). *American Psychologist*, 36, 633-638.
- Keith-Spiegel, P., & Koocher, G. P. (1985). *Ethics in psychology: Professional standards and cases*. New York: Random House.

Notes

1. This work was supported by a Pew Foundation Grant for "Ethics Across the Curriculum" administered by the Christian College Consortium.
2. Readers who request the case-study simulation program and manual should send \$5.00 to cover cost of duplication and postage.
3. I would appreciate receiving any case study texts that others develop for the software.