

## THE DEONTOLOGY OF PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS IN EUROPE

Pierre Nederlandt

Coordinator of the Standing Committee on Ethics of the European Federation of Psychological Associations (EFPA)

*What kind of training do psychology students receive in deontology? After a consideration of how training and information in the field of deontology and ethics should be conceived, this article specifically addresses the issue of the approach to deontology in Psychology training. Several arguments are proposed for reflection, and the European perspective is also discussed.*

**Key words:** Deontology in psychology, Ethics, Psychology students' training

*¿Qué formación tienen los estudiantes de Psicología en deontología? Tras una reflexión referente a la manera de concebir la formación y la información en el campo de la deontología y la ética, el artículo aborda, de forma muy concreta, la cuestión del enfoque de la deontología en la formación de los psicólogos. Se proponen argumentos para la reflexión y se discute también la perspectiva europea.*

**Palabras clave:** Deontología en Psicología, Ética, Formación de estudiantes de Psicología

**E**thics and deontology are not taught in the same way as other types of knowledge; however, it is essential for their professional future that students are well informed about this fundamental aspect. Clearly, the incorporation of ethics and deontology in the Psychology curriculum is not an easy task. It cannot be treated as just another subject, with content to be learned and an exam to pass. Thorough knowledge of the deontological Code is no guarantee of good working practices. On considering deontology with regard to Psychology students, two aspects should be highlighted from the outset. The first concerns information related to problems of ethics and the deontological Code of the country in which the student's educational institution is situated, while the second concerns the deontological problems students will encounter during their training.

### DEONTOLOGY IN PSYCHOLOGY TRAINING

#### *Deontology as a course subject*

As is the case with numerous professions that have a code, deontology must form part of the Study Plan in Psychology, even though the modalities vary considerably across training institutions.

In general, not all universities appear to give the same importance to this aspect of training; indeed, the different

psychological associations themselves have widely varying points of view and recommendations.

Thus, if we look at the deontological codes, some fail to mention the problem of training in ethics and deontology, others specify that students are obliged to respect the same norms as professionals (Belgium, Croatia and Italy, for example), and finally, there are those that are much more explicit about the way in which such training should take place (e.g., France).

This aspect of the problem is evident in the way in which some psychologists consider issues related to deontology. Thus, the EFPA (European Federation of Psychological Associations) Standing Committee on Ethics has reacted to the interpretation of the "Europsy" proposal. This proposal for the European Diploma in Psychology presents, among other aspects, a description of the Psychology in which it includes ethics among "academic skills", together with library research techniques and the writing of documents! The Standing Committee has requested that ethical matters have an independent place, be it at the beginning or the end of the presentation of the different aspects of the training curriculum. This proposal is based on the idea that what is common to all psychologists, whatever their nationality and area of activity, are the professional norms contained in the deontological Code.

As pointed out elsewhere (Nederlandt, 2006), it is essential for deontological codes to determine that students are obliged to respect the code, by which it is given to understand that they have received information about it during their training.

---

Correspondence: Pierre Nederlandt. *Profesor de la Haute Ecole Léonard de Vinci - Institut Libre Marie Haps, Rue d'Arlon 14 / B - 1050 Bruxelles. 32 (0) 793.40.00 fax 32 (0) 793.40.01. E-mail: p.nederlandt@ilmh.be*

**At what point?**

Some codes recommend informing students from the beginning of their studies in Psychology (deontological Code – France – art. 27: “Training institutions shall disseminate the psychologists’ deontological Code among students from the beginning of their studies”), while others are less precise, but it is true that the problem of deontology should be addressed before students begin their practical courses.

**With what content?**

It would seem evident that the basis of the subject should be the code of the country in question, or where applicable, the Meta-code proposed by EFPA. The content should refer to the four basic principles: respect for the rights of individuals, competence, responsibility and integrity.

Apart from this basic knowledge, it is important that teachers also address more specific deontology-related questions, such as professional secrecy with regard to matters discussed in interviews, the way patients are informed about the results of tests, obligations with respect to superiors who are not psychologists, the ethical norms to be observed in experiments, and so on.

In parallel to this, teachers should address issues related to plagiarism in relation to students’ research assignments.

Students should be made to understand that ethics and deontology constitute the permanent backdrop to their training and their professional future.

**SPECIFIC PROBLEMS FOR STUDENTS**

More specific issues for students can be found in certain course subjects or during practical courses.

**In certain subjects**

In practical training, it is common to find problems for discussion: What should one say during the presentation of a case within the framework of a practical case?; What should one say to the parents of a child who is to serve as a “guinea pig” for the learning of how to apply a test?; What to say to a colleague who has agreed to take a personality test?; How to respond to a person who offers to be interviewed for a practical and starts talking about his or her suicidal ideas?

The French code, which is one of the most explicit about the problems involved in student training, refers (art. 32) to the need: “To teach students that psychological

procedures concerning the assessment of individuals and groups require the utmost scientific and ethical rigour as regards the approach to them (prudence, verification) and their use (professional secrecy and duty of confidentiality), and that the presentation of cases must take place on the basis of respect for the freedom to consent or to reject, and for the dignity and well-being of the persons involved”.

Once again, teachers should be aware of the importance of keeping students informed and of the close monitoring of deontological issues throughout.

**The specific problem of practical courses****a. Texts**

In general, where there are guidelines in relation to practicals, they stipulate that:

- ✓ Those who supervise practicals can under no circumstances be paid for this work, since it is carried out within the framework of training.
- ✓ Students’ conduct on practical courses is the responsibility of the supervisor.
- ✓ Students should make clear in all the activities they undertake during their practical course that they are still in their training period.

**b. Problems encountered by students on practical courses**

Research has shown that the main problems related to ethics and deontology encountered by students on practical courses are:

- 1) Respect for professional secrecy: students often have difficulties in relation to the information they receive and the requests for information from other people working in the place where the practicals take place. They are an easy target for some patients who know that they will only be there for a short period, and take advantage to tell them their “secrets”. Also, students often wonder about what they can tell their friends and family when they ask about how the practicals are going (where are you doing your practicals?, what are you doing?, how is it going?, etc.)
- 2) Problems related to information files: who has access to them? In some places students do not have access to patient data, and this leads to problems for understanding certain situations, and makes their work more difficult.
- 3) Problems related to the reporting of results: to whom should or can students report the results of their observations and/or work?
- 4) Whether or not to do work that does not correspond

to psychologists: it is sometimes found that students on practical courses are exploited, given the fact that they are often in a position that makes it difficult for them to refuse to do certain jobs.

It would be appropriate to point out, as does the French code (art. 33), that *“Psychologists who supervise practicals, at the university or in the field, shall ensure that students apply the stipulations of the Code, particularly those regarding confidentiality, professional secrecy and informed consent. They shall not allow students to be employed as unpaid professionals. Their responsibility shall be to train students professionally, and not to intervene in their personality”*.

### c. The situation with regard to teachers on practical courses

Two different aspects should be distinguished in relation to the teaching of practical courses.

- 1) First of all, there is the person who, at the location of the practical, receives the students and starts them off in professional work by entrusting them with situations to be dealt with. There is no room, clearly, for professional secrecy between them. In practice, this necessarily defines their status as students from the outset. Professional secrecy cannot serve as a pretext for concealing certain information from the practicals supervisor.
- 2) Subsequently, there is the person who, within the training institution, assesses the student's work. This person is not among those exempt from the rule of professional secrecy. Thus, both in oral and written reports on the student's work, strict anonymity must be observed. Professional secrecy is also applicable to analysis of the functioning of the institution in which the student has carried out the practical work. It should be borne in mind that the teacher who supervises the practical must assess the student's competencies, and avoid delving into his or her private life.

### RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE EFPA STANDING COMMITTEE ON ETHICS

In 1999, the Standing Committee on Ethics published a text entitled *“Recommendations for the teaching of ethics for psychologists”*. This text, approved at the EFPA General Assembly in 2001, clearly sets out all the aspects of training in deontology and ethics that should be included in the training of psychologists.

- 1) It is necessary for the national associations to be in

contact with the universities and other higher education institutions, and all the educational authorities, in order to highlight the importance of training in deontology in Psychology curricula.

- 2) The content of this information should be based on the Ethical Charter, the Meta-code and the national Code, and should deal with emergent problems (e.g., the use of new technologies, problems of the psychology of refugees, or victims of war).
- 3) The methods used may vary widely: presentation of a text, seminars, discussions and case presentations.

### CONCLUSION

Training and informing Psychology students in matters of ethics and deontology constitute essential elements of their overall education. Whatever our approach, our nationality or our field of activity, we are united by deontology. We should be keenly aware of the professional requirements to be respected so as to strengthen the image of psychology.

Likewise, we should transmit a message of constant renewal and updating in a changing society in which psychologists are increasingly in demand.

Finally, we might imagine a general course subject called *“deontology”* addressing large groups of students and dealing with codes and ethics in general, but it will clearly be in smaller groups where deontological issues can be discussed in depth.

Thus, those responsible for the education and training of Psychology students need to reflect on how to integrate deontology into the higher education curriculum.

### REFERENCES

- Association des Enseignants de Psychologie des Universités (AEPU), Association Nationale des Organisations de Psychologues (ANOP) y Société Française de Psychologie (SFP)(1996). Code de déontologie des psychologues praticiens [Deontological code of practising psychologists] <http://www.sfpsy.org/Code-de-deontologie-des.html>
- European Federation of Psychologists Associations (EFPA) (2001). Recommendations for teaching ethics for psychologists. <http://www.efpa.be>
- Nederlandt, P. (2009). Déontologie des étudiants en psychologie [Deontology of psychology students]. III Colóquio europeu de Psicologia e Ética. Lisboa, 2006. Actas do Coloquio. Lisboa: ISPA (pp. 239-243).