

THE TEACHING OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS ON PSYCHOLOGY DEGREE COURSES IN SPAIN

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There is unanimous agreement within the profession as regards the essential importance of training in Ethics and Deontology, and that no professional should begin working without adequate ethical and legal knowledge. Furthermore, it is considered that the competent exercise of the profession requires not only the possession of this knowledge but also of how to integrate it into professional practice; therefore, the most effective approach to teaching would appear to be that based on case discussion and analysis and the resolution of ethical dilemmas. In the wake of demands from various professional associations for the inclusion of this type of training on Psychology degree courses, it seems that academia has finally given the matter serious consideration. Indeed, the White Paper on the Psychology Degree published by the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA, 2005) and produced with the collaboration of all faculties awarding the Psychology degree in Spain, considers "Ethical commitment" – that is, knowing and meeting the deontological obligations of Psychology – to be one of the essential specific competences in training, proposing it as mandatory content (a core subject) in the Psychology Degree. Whether this knowledge be taught in a transversal fashion or as an independent subject (with a structured programme), we understand it to be a crucial component that will determine the future status of Ethics and Deontology within the training of psychologists. We consider the introduction of an independent course unit or module within the Degree to be the best way of guaranteeing the adequate acquisition of this basic knowledge and these competencies. Obviously postgraduate courses must explore in greater depth the types of ethical conflict most frequently observed in this specific sphere of professional activity.

Key words: Professional ethics, Deontology, Psychology studies, Transversal teaching, Modular teaching.

En la profesión hay un acuerdo unánime respecto a que la formación en Ética y Deontología es fundamental y se considera que ningún profesional debería comenzar a ejercer sin los conocimientos éticos y legales suficientes para una práctica con garantías. Además, se asume que una actuación competente requiere no sólo la posesión de esos conocimientos sino que es imprescindible saber integrarlos en la práctica profesional y para ello, según se ha podido comprobar, el abordaje más eficaz es la enseñanza a partir del análisis y discusión de casos y de la resolución de dilemas éticos. Distintas instancias colegiales han reclamado la necesidad de incluir esa formación en los estudios de Psicología y parece que, por fin, en el mundo académico también se ha considerado. De hecho, en el Libro Blanco del Grado en Psicología de la Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación (ANECA, 2005) elaborado con la colaboración de todas las facultades que imparten la titulación de Psicología en España, el "Compromiso ético", es decir, conocer y ajustarse a las obligaciones deontológicas de la Psicología, se considera una de las competencias específicas para la formación, proponiéndose como contenido común obligatorio (troncal) en el Grado en Psicología. Que estos conocimientos se impartan de forma transversal o como asignatura independiente (con un programa estructurado) entendemos que es un elemento crucial que va a determinar el status futuro de la Ética y la Deontología en el periodo formativo de los futuros psicólogos. Consideramos que la puesta en marcha de una asignatura independiente en el Grado es la mejor forma de garantizar que se adquieran de forma suficiente esos conocimientos básicos y competencias. Lógicamente, en los estudios de post-grado, deberían abordarse con más profundidad los conflictos éticos que con más frecuencia se observan en ese ámbito profesional específico.

Palabras clave: Ética profesional, Deontología, Estudios de Psicología, Docencia transversal, Docencia modular.

We begin by citing Quayle (2009), who quite rightly pointed out that: "Ethics is always a fundamental issue in Psychology as a profession: it guides decisions and actions in all fields, being the core of the profession itself" (p. 97). The

basic question to address from the outset is: do we, as Spanish psychologists, have sufficient knowledge in relation to these issues? And more specifically, do Psychology students receive the training necessary to deal with the ethical conflicts and dilemmas they will have to face in their professional practice? Are they familiar with the different ethical principles, the deontological code, the practical norms and guidelines developed by different

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professional bodies, civil and criminal law, or the relevant legal framework and jurisprudence in the professional area in which they will be working?

The answers to such questions are not as positive as we might like, and testimony to this is the fact that Spain's various Psychological Associations (*Colegios Oficiales de Psicólogos*, COP) are receiving increasing numbers of complaints or reports from users of psychological services in relation to alleged unethical professional conduct by some of their members. Such complaints and reports are investigated by the Deontological Committees, leading to disciplinary measures in those cases in which, after the appropriate procedures, there is adequate proof of the violation of some of the precepts of the Deontological Code. The gradual rise in numbers of such reports is undoubtedly due to the increasing amount of information available, as well as greater awareness of their rights among users, and consequently higher demand for quality and ethics-based interventions. This circumstance clearly highlights the need for the training of psychologists in professional ethics to be a relevant element both in university courses and throughout their professional career, through regular updating courses run by the professional associations. Among other reasons for this need, a claim to ignorance of such aspects will not reduce the future responsibility of professionals as regards their practice within an ethical framework in the case of complaints or lawsuits filed against them with the associations or in courts of law.

In this regard, many professionals echo the assertion by ethics specialist Melba Vásquez (1992), *“Professionals concerned with the problems of unethical behaviour believe that the strongest weapon against professional misconduct may be the education of trainers”* (p. 196).

The need for training in professional ethics has been highlighted from various sources within the COP; indeed, the full text of article 61 of the Deontological Code of the Psychologist, from 1987, stated the following:

“The Deontological Committee set up by the Spanish Psychological Association shall be responsible for ensuring the correct interpretation and application of this Code. The Spanish Psychological Association shall ensure the dissemination of this Code among all relevant professionals and social institutions. Likewise, they shall try to make sure that the principles set out are studied by all students of Psychology on university courses.”

And, as might be expected, the Preamble to the proposal

for the new Code also stressed the importance of such training:

“Likewise, this new Code assimilates the accumulated experience of the Deontological Committees of the various Psychological Associations of Spain and the National Deontological Committee, which reflects the fact that sound knowledge and sensitivity as regards ethical issues is a basic element in the competence of psychologists in the exercise of the profession. Professional ethics and deontology must be studied and learned in relation to the problems and difficulties arising in the exercise of the psychology profession, and form part of any theoretical or practical discipline.

“Training in professional ethics and deontology is, therefore, one of the principal objectives that should be pursued in courses leading to qualifications for the professional exercise of Psychology. The Deontological Code for the Psychology Profession, the EFPA Meta-code, the Carta Ethica (Charter of Professional Ethics for Psychologists) and the guidelines drawn up for specific fields are the basic core of such training. In the teaching of professional ethics it is of particular interest to give priority to the study of dilemmas or situations involving ethical conflicts through the study of cases and the application of appropriate problem-solving methods in accordance with this Code and with the relevant legislation.”

Thus, in line with this, the Psychological Associations throughout Spain have a duty to ensure that our universities are fully aware of the deontological principles governing the profession and how to integrate them in their courses. However, in our country this objective has so far not been covered adequately, and this is evidenced by the fact that, to date, none of the study programmes leading to the award of the qualification *Licenciado en Psicología* (the soon-to-be-obsolete Psychology degree course) have included *Professional Ethics and Deontology* in their core courses, scarce few having run any units at all on these aspects, be they mandatory (e.g., at the University of Barcelona) or even optional.

Given this situation, at the National Convention of Psychological Associations held in Madrid in 1998 (at the same time as the II Ibero-American Congress of Psychology), the round table on *“Professional Ethics and Deontology: New perspectives”* highlighted the need for more extensive training in ethical aspects in



undergraduate Psychology studies, urging psychology faculties in Spain to introduce courses in "*Professional Ethics and Deontology*". This issue was also comprehensively debated at the *Deontology Workshop* organized by the Psychological Association of the Valencia Region, held in Valencia in March 2001, which saw the participation of representatives from the different Deontological Committees throughout Spain. Some of the conclusions adopted at this workshop were subsequently approved by the National Deontology Committee, and one of the most important of them concerned the need for the teaching of deontology in Psychology to play a much more central role in the university education of future psychologists.

In October 2002, at the Plenary Session of the National Deontological Committee of the COP, it was decided to send an open letter to the Conference of Deans of Psychology Faculties of Spanish Universities setting out in comprehensive manner the principal conclusions of the *Deontology Workshop* referred to in the previous paragraph and the situation of the teaching of Professional Ethics and Deontology in our universities, both public and private, and requesting them to take the appropriate measures to ensure that all Psychology Faculties in Spanish universities teach Ethics and Deontology for the professional exercise of Psychology.

These same conclusions were reached in October 2003, at the II *Congress on the Teaching of Psychology: European Higher Education Area*, in the context of a symposium sponsored and coordinated by the COP on "*The Teaching of Ethics in Psychology*", which saw the participation of different members of the National Deontological Committee and other specialists in the university system.

Moreover, in other forums, people linked to university teaching and/or to the Deontological Committees of the COP have also highlighted the need for more extensive training in Professional Ethics and Deontology on Psychology degree courses (e.g., Bermejo, 2000; Batres, 2001; del Río & Miró, 2002; del Río, Borda & Torres, 2003; Borda, del Río, Pérez, Martín & Torres, 2004; del Río, 2005; etc.).

RECOMMENDATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

In the previous section we mentioned the recommendations of the COP, but recommendations have also been made by professional associations of

international scope. These would include the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA), whose Standing Committee on Ethics published a report in 1999, approved at the General Assembly of 2001, entitled: "*Recommendations for teaching ethics for psychologists*". As the current President of EFPA, Pierre Nederlandt, points out in the present issue of *Papeles del Psicólogo*, this text sets out in detail all the aspects of training in Ethics and Deontology that should be taken into account in the education of psychologists in the European Union.

The above-mentioned EFPA report stresses that sound knowledge of and sensitivity towards ethical questions in professional situations are essential competencies for psychologists. It also suggests that on promoting and assessing its members' qualifications, professional associations should highlight ethical reflection and decision-making as fundamental skills and as essential elements of the psychology profession.

Although these guidelines are designed to address mainly professional psychologists, including teachers and researchers, there are also recommendations for students of Psychology, and about the training in Professional Ethics that they should receive during their course, with indications of the specific areas and perspectives to be covered in the teaching of this material as an independent subject and as an integral part of education in Psychology. Furthermore, they underline the importance of collaboration in these matters between professional associations and both the universities and other institutions that provide training in Psychology.

In the North American context, the American Psychological Association (APA) has long shown considerable interest in the ethical education of its members; consequently, since the late 1970s, all university Psychology courses recognized by the Association are required to offer training in Professional Ethics and to familiarize students with the version of the APA Code of Ethics in force at the time. By 1990, 69% of programmes were teaching ethics as an independent course or subject, normally with a duration of 20 to 30 hours (Welfel & Kitchener, 1992). Moreover, a training in Professional Ethics is a requirement for APA membership.

In 2002, at the *Competencies Conference: Future Directions in Education and Credentialing in Professional Psychology* held in Scottsdale, Arizona under the auspices of, among other organizations, the APA, a working group was formed with the aim of identifying the basic competencies and strategies of qualification and



assessment related to the teaching of Ethics and the training of psychologists. One of the tasks of this group being the identification of the principal components of such qualification, it reached the consensus that psychologists and Psychology students should possess knowledge and skills for ethical decision-making and intervention, including the following competencies: 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. In its conclusions, the working group underlined its belief that the training of Psychology students in Ethics was the best guarantee against inappropriate professional conduct; moreover, it suggested a variety of methods for improving the teaching of Ethics, thus strengthening the prestige of the profession and providing more protection for the users of psychological services (de las Fuentes, Willmuth & Yarrow, 2005).

Finally, we might consider the situation in the field of medicine, given that it is a profession close to our own. In 1999, the General Assembly of the World Medical Association (WMA) passed a resolution recommending that all Faculties of Medicine include *Medical Ethics* and human rights as obligatory material in their study programmes. This resolution was based on the fact that scientific progress – particularly in relation to healthcare and medical knowledge and techniques –, as well as social change, had led to a situation in which Ethics had become an essential element in everyday professional decision-making. In order to ascertain whether the Medical Faculties of the European Union had considered this WMA recommendation, Claudot, Alla, Ducrocq and Coudane (2007) carried out a study with the aim of obtaining an overview of the state of teaching of such material. They looked at 25 Faculties of Medicine (chosen at random) in 18 European countries (including Spain), finding that in 21 out of 25 at least one module of Ethics was taught as an independent subject. In 11 out of 25 cases, Ethics was also taught in transversal fashion, and only one faculty acknowledged no teaching of this material. Mean time devoted to the teaching of Ethics was

44 hours in the general study programme. After analysis of these results it was concluded that Ethics had become established in the study programmes of Medicine throughout the European Union, though large discrepancies were observed in the characteristics of programmes between different faculties.

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF THE TEACHING OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS IN SPAIN

As discussed elsewhere (see del Río, 2005, pp. 180-182), until relatively recently, the teaching of Professional Ethics and Deontology as an independent subject had practically not been considered in the Psychology Faculties of public universities in Spain. Thus, such teaching had been the exception, rather than what it should have been: the rule. However, it should be pointed out that in the majority of Psychology faculties at private universities such material was already being taught, as either mandatory or optional subjects.

If we analyze what has been up to now the only independent and mandatory course of this nature taught in a Psychology department at a public university (the University of Barcelona), called "Ethics" (phased out from 2010-11 onwards due to the introduction of the new Psychology degree qualification, the *Grado en Psicología*), we observe that it forms part of the "second-stage" courses (*segundo ciclo* – the last two years of the 5-year degree course) and was introduced in the academic year 2000-2001. It is interdepartmental in nature, teaching being shared between lecturers from the departments concerned.

At first it was considered that since this material affected all areas of psychological knowledge and intervention – research on both animals and humans, psychological treatments, the management of organizations, educational activity, community psychology, and so on –, each department or area would be assigned a space for dealing with the ethical considerations most relevant to it, giving rise to at least five such spaces in the teaching of the subject. However, this model was subsequently dropped due to excessive fragmentation, and the material is now taught in an alternative way by the departments involved, the teaching being organized with a General Introduction of a somewhat philosophical nature and three large blocks: research and teaching, clinical assessment and intervention, and psychosocial assessment and intervention.

At the Psychology Faculty of the University of Seville, the



2001 study programme incorporated an optional subject entitled "Ethical and Deontological Aspects in Clinical Psychology" (with 4.5 credits), and although it never actually came to constitute one of the optional course subjects, from that academic year it was offered as a separate optional course (*actividad de Libre Configuración*).

The degree course at Miguel Hernández University in Elche (Spain) includes a mandatory subject worth 6 credits, taught in the fourth year and entitled "Models of professional practice", which includes the following aspects: Interviewing skills; Professional-client negotiation skills; and Professional Deontology.

This notable absence of regulated training in Professional Ethics at Spanish public universities in the now-defunct *Licenciatura en Psicología* course has been a source of concern for many lecturers teaching it. In fact, we are aware that some lecturers include in their teaching programmes some ethical aspects, and this is to be applauded, but in our view it is insufficient, since it is clearly impossible in the time available to deal with such content (and work with students on it) in the necessary depth.

The situation in Spain is not comparable to those of other countries, above all those in the Anglophone world (including Canada and Australia) and Hispano-America, in which training in *Ethics* at Psychology faculties is customary.

To situate ourselves in the present, and bearing in mind what is set down in the White Paper on the Psychology Degree from the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (*Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación*; ANECA, 2005), drawn up in cooperation with 31 faculties currently teaching the old Psychology Degree (*Licenciatura*) course and coordinated by the University of Barcelona, it appeared that the situation was going to change. In that White Paper it was considered that "Ethical Commitment", that is, *knowing and meeting the deontological obligations of Psychology*, is one of the specific competencies for training in the new Psychology Degree (*Grado en Psicología*), being the only one that is related to all the mandatory common blocks of training content; moreover, it was deemed necessary to develop this competency in depth in all of these blocks (pp. 128-129). Once the scale of competencies had been drawn up, a survey was carried out to gather information about the importance given to them by a group of Psychology lecturers, by practicing professionals, by

recent Psychology graduates and by employers (psychologists and non-psychologists who usually employ Psychology graduates). A small qualitative study was also carried out on the manner in which the different competencies were identified for each of the established professional profiles. In all cases "ethical commitment" was highly rated, and especially among clinical psychologists, who considered it the most important of all the transversal and generic competencies (pp. 65-71). In sum, the White Paper concludes that the general objective of the new Psychology Degree course is to produce professionals with the necessary scientific knowledge to understand, interpret, analyze and explain human behaviour, and with the basic skills and abilities to assess and intervene in individual and social contexts throughout the life cycle, with the aim of promoting and improving health and quality of life. In order to achieve these objectives, the holder of the Psychology Degree (*Grado en Psicología*) must demonstrate specific knowledge and be able to apply the principles of Psychology in the individual, group and organizational spheres. Among the specific skills to be demonstrated is that of adjusting to the deontological obligations of Psychology (pp. 121-122).

Given what we have seen so far, it is clear that in the new Psychology Degree qualification, knowledge in the field of *Ethics and Deontology* is considered a necessary part of the training of future psychologists; however, our research in this regard suggests that the majority of study programmes for the Degree approved by the Council of Universities for commencement in the academic year 2009-10 do not include independent and specific courses for the development of these competencies.

A positive example is that of the Psychology Faculty at the University of Seville, where a mandatory course is included in the fourth year of the Degree course (commencing in 2009-10), worth 6 credits and taught by the Department of Personality, Assessment and Psychological Treatment. As stated in the Student's Guide for 2009-10¹: "Within the context of professionalization that characterizes this fourth-year course, especially noteworthy is the unit in Semester 7, mandatory for all students, entitled "Professional Ethics and Deontology", which includes content related to both applied psychology and psychological research. Moreover, this course unit provides an ideal opportunity for discussion and reflection on specific relevant issues, for the consolidation of competencies developed in a transversal fashion in other units (especially third-year ones), and for

the incorporation of values of, for example, respect for diversity, equality, and democratic and peaceful culture, which are demanded both in general society and by the professional associations in particular” (p. 51).

More specifically, the competencies required for obtaining the Psychology Degree at the University of Seville include: 1) *Knowledge of the ethical norms of professional activity set down in the Deontological Code of the profession:* a) in relation to respect for and adaptation to the characteristics and conditions of users; b) with adequate scientific bases; c) with regard to situations to be avoided; d) in relation to attention to the user at the beginning of, during and at the end of the intervention or service; e) with regard to relations with other professionals; f) as regards fees; g) in relation to information obtained during professional practice and its use; and h) with regard to other aspects that may be relevant in particular circumstances; and 2) *Knowledge of the fundamental rights of persons in general and the specific ones of different minorities; of the values of democracy and a culture of peace; and of the situations and contexts in which such rights and values are both respected and disregarded.* Consequently, Psychology graduates are expected: 1) to know how to apply this knowledge to professional work in the field of psychology; 2) to be capable of undertaking their professional and training activity based on respect for the Deontological Code of the psychology profession, which includes, among other more specific principles, those of respect for and promotion of basic human rights, of equality, of universal accessibility to different goods and services, and of the promotion of values of democracy and peace.

STRATEGIES FOR THE TEACHING OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

Courses in Professional Ethics based on the decision-making model employing problem-solving techniques have been the most widely accepted (Eberlein, 1987; Bersoff, 2003), to the extent that the majority of the programmes currently being taught are inspired in this model, or at least include a section covering the training of students in the identification and resolution of ethical dilemmas. Studies examining the efficacy of such courses are scarce, but those that have been carried out demonstrate their usefulness (Gawthrop & Uhlemann,

1992; LaCourt & Lewi, 1998; Borda et al., 2004). Also, Pettifor, Estay and Paquet (2002) assessed the impact of seven strategies for the teaching of ethics, finding the interactive ones to be more useful than more traditional approaches.

Publications on the teaching of ethics in Psychology focus on two main aspects. The first concerns the need for psychologists to be familiar with the norms of good practice, norms which are contained in the Codes and/or in other guidelines approved by the professional associations and also set down in the relevant legislation. The second refers to the importance of their knowing how to integrate this knowledge in practice, and therefore for them to be capable of identifying the dilemmas and of following the appropriate steps in the process of ethical decision-making (see del Río, 2007). The Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) was the first to include the ethical decision-making process in its code of ethics. The steps of the process, as described in the third edition of the Code (2000), include: 1) Identifying the problem and the people potentially affected by the situation. 2) Identifying the relevant ethical aspects. 3) Considering how personal issues or prejudices might be influencing the choice of a given action. 4) Developing alternative strategies. 5) Analyzing the short- and long-term, risks, as well as the benefits, of each of the alternatives proposed. 6) Choosing the optimum strategies, taking into account current legislation. 7) Accepting the commitment to abide by the consequences of the decision or decisions taken. 8) Assessing the results of applying the strategies chosen. 9) Preventing these dilemmas from arising in the future, through appropriate action.

The content of the programmes we have reviewed, especially in the Anglophone and Hispanic contexts, is highly diverse, even though the majority of them, in addition to including material on the philosophical bases, on the main ethical theories and on the principles and codes, provide training in the ethical decision-making model and cover issues such as confidentiality, dual relationships and how to handle professional limits, problems arising from psychological assessment and from therapy, professional competency, problems of forensic assessment, those deriving from managed care, and so on.

Regardless of the inclusion or omission of particular components, or the setting of given objectives, one thing that is clear is that “informal” teaching is totally inadequate, “informal” teaching being understood, for

² http://centro.us.es/facpsi/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/GUÍA-DEL-GRADO-09_10.pdf

example, as that based on the idea of a kind of “osmosis”, whereby a sensitivity toward these aspects will filter down to students during the discussion of cases (Handelsman, 1986), or on simply providing students with a copy of the Deontological Code or even, as we shall see presently, with descriptions of how ethical aspects are dealt with in different subject areas, without a structure (teaching programme) and the control that this implies. Consequently, the teaching of Professional Ethics in contemporary society is a challenge to be met, involving students from the very beginning of their studies. The use of active methodologies and the discussion of real cases will help the integration of theories, ethical codes and everyday professional situations, providing students with the capacity to deal with ethical problems and helping to promote an awareness of human rights.

THE FUTURE OF ETHICS AND DEONTOLOGY TEACHING

The first question to consider is whether Professional Ethics should be taught as an independent subject or its content distributed in a transversal way across the different subject areas. Treating it as an independent subject would oblige universities to include it in their Study Programmes, and therefore to consider it in the organization of their teaching, with all the advantages associated with the obligation to design and develop a structured programme. Professional Ethics would thus acquire its own status in the training curriculum of psychologists, and a concern with such material would spread not only among students but also among teachers and researchers. If, on the other hand, we were to opt for the teaching of such content in a transversal way as part of other course units, there is a risk of the learning being insufficient, leading to potential difficulties in the acquisition of one of the competencies considered as a fundamental requirement for Psychology graduates. In this case, the way it is taught would be left up to lecturers, and would thus depend on their greater or lesser interest in the ethical aspects involved in their specialist area, or more likely, on the time available for covering their teaching programme (almost always scarce). It is quite possible, moreover, that there would be excessive fragmentation of content, unnecessary repetition of aspects common to all subject areas of psychology, and above all, a shortage of time for discussing the ethical implications of certain behaviours by professionals, or how to handle conflictive professional situations. Consequently, there would be a danger of future

psychologists beginning their professional practice without a comprehensive training that allows them to manage with difficulty any of the ethical or legal problems they will surely come up against. In sum, the lack of a specific and structured teaching programme results in the risk of a training that is both inadequate and inconsistent, not only between different faculties but also between different lecturers within the same faculty. As pointed out above, professional associations both in our own country and throughout Europe recommend that Professional Ethics be taught as an independent subject, and that it form part of the study programmes of Psychology degree courses.

Another question concerns who would be responsible for teaching this content. Obviously, the lecturers from a given field of specialization would be in the best position to teach students about the ethical aspects related to that area, but an independent course or module with teaching shared among different staff would undoubtedly give rise to the repetition of content common to all professional contexts, and this would be to the detriment of the depth in which the content were treated. A possible solution to this problem is that one area of specialization takes responsibility for delivering the programme, organizing and teaching aspects common to all professional areas and those specific to its field, and with contributions from specialist teachers where required. This solution would ensure that it was always experts who taught the material. Collaboration between the Ethics and Deontology Committees of the professional associations and Psychology faculties in the teaching of the ethical aspects of the profession is fundamental, since these committees and associations would be able to contribute valuable information about quality practice in line with the ethical values in the code and about society’s demands based on the complaints most commonly received from the users of psychological services; moreover, students would become familiar with the Committees and their functions, and this would facilitate future interaction in the face of situations involving difficult ethical dilemmas.

In such a case, which area could take responsibility for this teaching? In our view, it should be that which is most frequently the most intensely involved in ethical conflicts. Clearly, it is in the field of Clinical Psychology that the most complex ethical dilemmas arise, and also in which there are most claims or reports of professional malpractice by the users of services. In Spain there are no accurate statistical data on the cases



dealt with by the different Deontological Committees, but the majority are related to clinical intervention and forensic assessments (del Río, 2005). Other ethics committees do make data in their cases public; for example, since 1985, the ethics committee of the APA has published, in *American Psychologist*, an annual report detailing the cases dealt with, and these documents reflect that the largest numbers of sanctions, including actual expulsions from the profession, result from conduct within the context of clinical practice. In 2008, problems deriving from inappropriate sexual behaviour accounted for 31% of the reports presented. These were followed in order of frequency by problems related to child custody, to non-sexual dual relationships or to issues concerning timetables or insurance companies (13% of reports in each of these cases), while in third place, accounting for at least 6% of reports in each case, were problems associated with the course or termination of therapy, or to inappropriate public statements. All of the situations are related to clinical intervention (see APA, 2009). Moreover, if we take into account the point of view of professionals, that is, if we consider the issues that for them are the most relevant potential sources of ethical conflict – regardless of the claims users may file – we find that these are also related primarily to clinical practice (see Pope & Vetter, 1992, and Urrea, 2006).

THE SUBJECT OF ETHICS AND DEONTOLOGY: A PROPOSAL FOR THE BASIC CONTENT OF PSYCHOLOGY DEGREE COURSES

Our experience over 9 years of teaching Ethics as a subject within the Psychology degree course, together with the analysis of published studies of international scope on the teaching of this material, have permitted us to draw up a possible programme of basic content that should be covered in a course module on Professional Ethics and Deontology. The methodology that has proved most effective is the interactive type, though the more traditional lecture style is appropriate in certain cases. The resolution of ethical dilemmas and the ethical analysis of real cases should be carried out in small groups, followed by debates involving the whole group. The way the programme might be organized is as follows:

A) Theoretical content:

1. Basic concepts: Ethics and Deontology. Psychoethics and Bioethics. General ethical principles.

2. The ethics codes and principal legal norms applicable to professional practice: The new *Deontological Code for the Psychology Profession*.
3. Ethical decision-making.
4. Legal responsibility for malpractice by psychologists.
5. Ethics and Deontology Committees and the disciplinary regime of the professional associations.
6. Fundamental ethical and/or deontological norms or rules that should apply for guaranteeing appropriate professional practice:
 - a. Professional competency: the integration in professional practice of scientific and technical expertise with ethical and legal knowledge.
 - b. Respect for intimacy and confidentiality.
 - c. Respect for autonomy and self-determination: informed consent.
7. Transgressions of professional limits: Dual or multiple relationships (sexual or otherwise).
8. Incapacity for professional practice: Mental health or other problems which due to their intensity prevent the adequate fulfilment of one's professional functions.
9. Ethical aspects in the principal areas of intervention:
 - a. In assessment.
 - b. In therapy.
 - c. In the community sphere.
 - d. In the context of Organizations and Human Resources.
 - e. In forensic assessments.
 - f. In intervention with minors and in educational settings.
 - g. In intervention via Internet.
 - h. In research and in contexts related to the authorship and publication of scientific work.

B) Practical content

1. Resolution of ethical dilemmas: Training in the ethical decision-making model through the consideration of different professional situations involving ethical dilemmas. Students, in small groups, will have to put themselves in the position of the professional involved and follow the basic steps of the model proposed. This will be followed by a debate on the conclusions reached by each group.
2. Study of cases dealt with by deontological committees or published in different media: Discussion, in



small groups of students, of illustrative cases (obtained from real cases after the removal of any elements that might permit the identification of the persons involved) representing different situations involving ethical infractions. The methodology employed will be as follows: a) The groups of students will adopt the role of "Ethics committees" and carry out an ethical analysis of the situations presented, identifying where possible the articles of the Deontological Code that they consider to have been violated. b) Each group will present to their colleagues the conclusions reached in their discussion. c) Final debate on the conclusions.

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