
Brief Report

The Use of the Ethical Judgment Scale for Ethics Education

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Recent psychological literature has focused on the question of ethics as it relates to the practice of psychology. In addition, there has been an increase in the teaching of ethics at the various educational institutions involved with the training of psychologists. The American Psychological Association, for example, has recently required ethical content in their approved programs and internships for doctoral level students (1979). Often, institutions provide only informal rather than formal training in ethics. In addition, internships have not offered systematic comprehensive components, even though ethics education has been included in the content (Newmark & Hutchins, 1981).

Starting in the 1980s, more information began appearing in the literature with respect to models and goals for education in ethics. Abeles (1980) was one of the first authors to provide the details of a semester course in ethics. He used the value confrontation approach for doctoral students in clinical psychology. Critical incidents and readings relevant to the personal values involved in professional issues were used as case materials.

The Ethical Judgment Scale

Some educators have used the work of Kohlberg (1969) in the area of moral development to generate models for ethical development. One such model was that of Van Hoose & Paradise (1979) which offered a developmental model describing five levels of ethical thought (based upon Kohlberg): A punishment orientation, an institutional orientation, a societal orientation, an individual client orientation, and what the authors considered the highest moral or ethical orientation — one based upon principle or conscience. These are described as “qualitatively discrete stages” reflecting “an underlying continuum of ethical reasoning” (p. 37). To complement this model, Van Hoose and Paradise (1979, pp. 113-60) developed the ethical judgment scale (EJS) which purports to measure a person’s position on this continuum.

Welfel and Lipsitz (1983a) called for a comprehensive approach to ethics research in education. The work of Van Hoose and Paradise (1979) was cited as a useful tool:

This model is unique in the literature because it is (a) the first to explain variability in practitioners’ responses to ethical dilemmas with reference to

cognitive variables; (b) the first to relate professional ethical decision making to the person's capacity for moral reasoning; and (c) the first to follow up its theoretical assertions with empirical study (p. 324).

Welfel and Lipsitz (1983b) utilized the EJS in a study of 63 individuals at four educational levels from undergraduates to doctoral students at Boston College. The results of their study found that there was a direct correlation between experience and increases in the mean of the EJS. They concluded that the significant differences between groups and mean EJS scores for each group offered some support for the claim that the stages of ethical orientation represent a developmental continuum (p. 42). Anecdotal evidence supports the use of the EJS as a training tool but many of the participants found the test tedious and fatiguing.

University of Alberta Courses

A new course in ethics education for clinical and counselling students at the master's level was introduced at the University of Alberta in 1986. Details of that course are described in Eberlein (1987). A modified form of the EJS was used with the group of such master's students in the fall of 1986. Similar use of the material was made during the summer of 1986 with the undergraduates enrolled in an introductory guidance course.

The most recent version of the EJS presents 25 paragraph length descriptions of ethically sensitive situations with 5 choices of responses for each situation. Each choice is coded to represent one of the five stages referred to earlier. The present study used the 25 item test and developed two subtests. Form A included 15 of the 25 items, and Form B the other 10 items plus 5 items that had been used in Form A. Form A was used for a pre-test at the beginning of the course and Form B was a post-test at the end of the course of about 3 weeks duration.

The number of responses at each level was recorded in accordance with a scoring key provided by the authors (1979) (p. 129). In the interval between the two tests (about 2 weeks) course content included information about the five level response format of the EJS. In addition, many of the unrepeated test items were discussed in class. As a result, in taking the post-test, students were aware that each response represented a different level of moral judgment.

Results

This study was conducted primarily for its educational value; personal feedback was provided to students as soon as the tests were scored. Results were similar for both groups. All but one of the 33 undergraduates increased their mean level of moral judgment, the group mean increasing from 3.26 to 3.73 on the five point scale used by the authors.

A similar situation prevailed with the 20 graduate students completing both pre- and post-tests. The mean level of response increased from 3.20 to 3.80. Two students had slight decreases in their levels of response while 17 students increased from .33 to 1.13 points on the 5 point scale.

These increases should probably be attributed to an increase in the sensitivity of the students to the moral issues involved in the ethical situations presented as well as their desire to respond at a higher ethical level. Many students indicated that in the post-test they were able to identify level 4 or 5 moral responses but they would not personally choose such a response to the situation presented.

Conclusion

The responses of the EJS tend to reflect the orientations offered in the manual. However, there are differences of opinion relative to several items. It is thus not clear that the EJS is useful as a research instrument. The scale does have definite usefulness for educational purposes. One of the principal purposes in ethics education is to sensitize students to the existence of an ethical problem.

The value of the scale lies in its use of varying ethical dilemmas and five alternative responses. In some cases, students would try a sequence of responses. In other cases, they would combine responses or create different alternatives. It was clear that students were prepared to discuss the issues involved and reach a conclusion. Although certain responses were uniformly rejected, there was not complete agreement as to which response was the "best" (rather than the most ethical) in a given situation.

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