



Students' Beliefs about the Ethics of Teaching

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Introduction

There is a literature on professors' beliefs about the ethics of teaching, but little about students' beliefs.

Seminal research by Keith-Spiegel et al. (1993) and two later studies by Kuther (2003) and Morgan and Korschgen (2001) form the core of a sparse and asystematic literature by psychologists. The lack of coherence in the studies available, growing focus on moral and ethical theory (Haidt, 2007), and 20 years between student cohorts led us to replicate aspects of Keith-Spiegel et al.'s study.

To make a direct comparison, we selected 37 of an original 107 descriptions of professors' behaviors that student's had rated as either ethically egregious (17 items) or not unethical, but possibly tacky or ill-mannered (20 items).

Our goal was to determine whether these extremes of ethical judgment would replicate or how these beliefs would change for a new student sample.

Method

We used Qualtrics to survey college students about their demographics, beliefs about 37 actions of professors, and reactions to our study.

Demographics

N = 315 students with 25% Male & 75% Female
36% 1st or 2nd year & 64% 3rd year or above
89% Caucasian, 4% Hispanic, 7% Other
48% requested course credit for participation

Rating for 37 Actions by Professors

It would not be an unethical act/nothing wrong...
Poor manners or tacky but not unethical
Unethical under rare circumstances
Unethical under many circumstances
Unethical under virtually all circumstances

Participants also could answer: *I don't know*

Reactions

308 students rated reactions from 1 (SD) to 5 (SA)
M = 3.7 for ... *interested in topic of ethical teaching*
M = 3.9 for ... *like to do another online study...*
M = 4.2 for ... *believe my answers are anonymous*
M = 4.8 for ... *I answered the questions honestly*

Tables Show % for 2013 and Difference from 1993

The two tables focus on the actions that fell out of the extreme categories for the current sample. We used the criteria for inclusion of Keith-Spiegel et al. (1993).

Table 1 shows the percentage of students who judged the actions as unethical (either under many or all circumstances). Criterion was 80% or more of participants.

Table 2 shows the percentage of students who judged the actions as not unethical (not unethical, or poor manners). Criterion was 60% or more of participants.

Numbers in red portray differences in percentage of students from 1993 to 2013.

Table 1: Ethically Egregious Actions

Changing the expected format of a test on the day of the test	67.3	-18.4
Giving a very difficult exam during the third week of school in attempt to encourage some students to drop the course	66.3	-17.1
Running a film that might offend or emotionally upset some students without prior warning	64.1	-16.2
Including material on the test that was not covered in the lectures or assigned reading	77.1	-14.4
Intentionally leaving out something very important that would help the student when writing a letter or recommendation	75.6	-10.1
Using a grading procedure that doesn't adequately measure what students have learned	75.6	-04.5

Table 2: Ethically Untroubling Actions

Engaging in sexual relationships with other faculty members in the same department	44.4	-36.3
Being sexually attracted to a student	28.6	-35.5
Becoming sexually involved with a student after the class is over and the grades have been turned in	30.8	-32.5
Asking small favors (such as a ride home) from students	49.5	-18.1
Giving academic credit instead of salary for student assistants to perform work with professor because funds not available	50.5	-13.8
Selling goods (such as a car or books) to a student	55.6	-13.4
Encouraging students to volunteer to participate in their research projects as "subjects"	52.4	-11.1

Results & Discussion

Our main finding is that students judge the 37 actions in a way similar to students of the early 1990s. For example, the correlation of item ranks is $r(35) = .95, p < .001$.

However, there were shifts in the percentages of students identifying items as egregiously unethical (Table 1) or not unethical (Table 2).

Table 1 shows 6 previously egregious actions did not reach the 80% criterion for the belief.

Table 2 shows students now believe 7 of 20 not unethical behaviors were more problematic because they did not reach the 60% criterion.

The apparent change is that (a) there is less agreement about professors' actions that could harm students are egregiously unethical, and (b) a greater concern about actions that could exploit or abuse relationships with students.

Conclusions

Our results show that replication of an earlier study is interesting, important, and useful.

Our findings suggest that future research using a larger sampling of professors' behaviors may yield other interesting and important findings.

Item and factor analyses may delineate the structure of students' judgments and contribute to our understanding of students' developing beliefs about ethics.

Future research should analyze relationships between the professors' actions and the APA (2010) ethical principles and standards.

The concern that changes entail regressions to the mean is contradicted by a group of 5 items more strongly rated as ethically less troubling.

The concern that our sample was voluntary and limited to a few universities is contradicted by the self-reports of sincere and ethical participation by respondents.

Kudos

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