

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 341

CG 025 670

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TITLE Academic Psychologists' Responses to Unethical Behavior in Colleagues: A Survey.  
PUB DATE Aug 93  
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (101st, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 20-24, 1993).  
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)  
  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Codes of Ethics; \*Ethics; Faculty; Higher Education; Malpractice; Plagiarism; \*Psychologists; Sexual Harassment; Sexuality; Teacher Student Relationship  
IDENTIFIERS Academicians; Faculty Attitudes; Fraud; Sex Exploitation

ABSTRACT

Concern about ethics in science is growing. This survey investigated academic psychologists' awareness of unethical behavior within their profession. Researchers mailed surveys to 500 randomly selected academic psychologists. Of the 158 completed questionnaires, 44 respondents were female, 101 were male, and 13 did not identify their gender. The survey asked whether or not these academics were aware of unethical behavior in their colleagues, and, if so, what they had done about it. Unethical behaviors were divided into faculty-student boundaries, unethical research, misrepresentation of credentials or misuse of academic position, and unethical teaching. Incidents of boundary violations between faculty and students, including violations of sexual boundaries, were reported most frequently. Fifty-four percent reported that they had overheard colleagues insult and ridicule students and 52 percent noted that they had evidence that a colleague had become sexually involved with a student. For most of the ethical infractions, over half of the respondents took no appropriate action. Respondents took more serious action against colleagues who either sexually harassed students or who taught while impaired by alcohol. Results indicate that boundary issues, whether or not they specifically involve sexual behavior, appear to be problematic for many psychologists. Two tables list the percentage responses to each survey question. (RJM)

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ED 375 341

Academic Psychologists' Responses to Unethical Behavior

in Colleagues: A Survey

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Psychological Association

Running head: Response to Unethical Behavior

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### Abstract

One hundred fifty eight academic psychologists responded to a survey asking them whether they knew of unethical behavior in their colleagues, and if so, what they had done about it. Reports of boundary violations between faculty and students, including violations of sexual boundaries, were frequent. For most of the ethical infractions, over half the respondents took no appropriate action. Respondents took more serious action against colleagues who sexually harassed students and those who taught while alcohol impaired.

Concern about ethics in science is growing (e.g., Adler, 1991). Both recent scandals (e.g., the David Baltimore case) and research (Miceli, Dozier, & Near, 1991) have led some to question whether the scientific and academic professions are able to enforce their own ethical standards. The following survey investigated to what extent academic psychologists are aware of unethical behavior within their profession, and what actions they take when they become aware of such behavior.

Examples of fraudulent scientific procedures were taken from Phinney (1991), and examples of other unethical behavior among academic psychologists were taken from Tabachnick, Keith-Spiegel, & Pope, 1991.

#### Method

**Subjects.** Surveys were mailed to 500 academic psychologists. Of the 500 questionnaires sent, 19 were returned as undeliverable. A return rate of 34% was obtained, with 164 returned. Of these, 6 were discarded for incomplete answers, and an additional 13 did not answer the demographic questions. Responses were used whether or not subjects filled out the demographics. Of the identified respondents of the 158 completed questionnaires, 44 were female, and 101 were male.

**Measure.** Two alternate survey forms were used, in an attempt to keep the form short and improve return rates. Returns were roughly comparable for each form (86 for one, 76 for the other.)

## Response to Unethical Behavior<sup>2</sup>

Each form presented 15 ethical issues. For instance, the first item of one survey was "Have you ever been in a situation in which you had evidence that a colleague has become sexually involved with a student?" After asking whether the respondent had knowledge of a colleague's involvement in an unethical incident, the survey asked what the respondent had done. Six options were included, ranging in seriousness of response from "nothing" through "spoke with another faculty member," "communicated with the colleague directly," "spoke with the Department Head," "spoke with the Dean or equivalent administrative position," and "reported to the State or APA Ethics Committee." These options were presented in a random order, and the same random order was used throughout the survey. At the end of the survey there were questions about demographics.

The judgments of respondents to the Tabachnick, et al., (1991) survey were utilized as the determinant of what behaviors were unethical. We chose for our survey those items from the Tabachnick, et al. survey on which over 50% of the respondents had stated that the behavior was "unquestionably not ethical." In addition, we added items from Phinney (1991) because of the importance of research fraud, not covered by Tabachnick, et al. These items included issues like knowing that a colleague manipulated statistics to make the results come out better, and all were clearly contrary to the APA ethical guidelines regarding research.

### Response to Unethical Behavior<sup>3</sup>

Procedure. A table of random numbers was used to select psychologists from the 1991 APA Directory. When the number identified a non-academic psychologist, the next academic psychologist on the page was chosen. "Academic" psychologists were defined as those listing a college or university department of psychology affiliation.

Surveys were mailed with a stamped self-addressed envelope and a cover letter. The letter explained the research, informed subjects that their responses were anonymous, and suggested that if they wanted the completed findings, to send their name and address in a separate envelope.

#### Results

Table 1 shows how many respondents in the sample reported that they were aware of a colleague's unethical behavior. The issues are divided into "faculty-student boundaries," "unethical research," "misrepresentation of credentials or misuse of academic position" and "unethical teaching." Violations of faculty-student boundaries were the most frequently reported, with 54% of respondents reporting that they had overheard colleagues insult and ridicule students in the student's absence, and 52% reporting that they had evidence that a colleague had become sexually involved with a student. In addition, 24% of respondents reported that they were aware of sexual harassment from faculty to students.

Comparatively fewer violations of research ethics or misrepresentation of credentials were noted. A large percentage of

#### Response to Unethical Behavior<sup>4</sup>

respondents, however, knew of unethical teaching in colleagues. Two of these examples are related to faculty-student boundaries: allowing student likability to influence grading (30%), and giving easy coursework or tests to ensure popularity with students (30%). For another important issue, a high percentage (28%) of respondents knew of an impaired teacher who had taught under the influence of alcohol.

Table 2 shows how subjects responded to their colleague's unethical behavior. Only those incidents are listed for which at least 15 subjects reported that they knew an errant colleague. With the exception of colleagues who taught while impaired with alcohol, none of our respondents had informed a state or APA Ethics Committee of the derelictions that they knew about. For most of the infractions, fully 50% of the academics took either "nothing" or "speaking to another faculty member" as their method of handling the problem. The option of speaking with another faculty member, in our judgment, is not usually an effective way of coping with a colleague's unethical behavior. Indeed, it can lead to gossip with further unfortunate effects.

Psychologists did, however, take more serious action against colleagues' sexual harassment or teaching while alcohol impaired. Against sexual harassment, 85% of respondents took some potentially effective action. The "other" responses that psychologists made to sexual harassment were primarily "encouraged student to take action," or "found out about harassment because of position on an ethics committee." With regard to alcohol impaired teachers, 74%

## Response to Unethical Behavior<sup>5</sup>

took potentially effective action.

Plagiarism was among the most frequently noted of the research violations, and psychologists responded to it in a bimodal way. Although 45% did nothing or merely discussed it with another faculty member, 9% went to the Dean, and of the 37% "other" responses we received, most involved reports to the journal or the plagiarized author.

The APA ethics code states that generally when a psychologist becomes aware of a violation against the code s/he should first communicate the concern with the colleague directly. We therefore asked respondents which action they took first if more than one action was taken. The percentage of those taking more than one action who spoke to the colleague first ranged from 23% to 62%.

### Discussion

Boundary issues, whether or not they specifically involve sexual behavior, appear to be problematic for many psychologists. It is interesting that Pope and Vetter (1992) also report survey data that "blurred, dual, or conflictual relationships" are among the most frequent of ethical dilemmas encountered by psychologists. In particular, the fact that 52% of our respondents knew a colleague who has become sexually involved with a student is troubling. Tabachnick, et al. (1991) report that only 11% of psychologists report that they have become involved sexually with a student, and 71% report that it is unquestionably not ethical. Only 1% of Tabachnick et al.'s respondents report that they have ever made "deliberate or repeated sexual comments, gestures, or



## Response to Unethical Behavior<sup>6</sup>

physical contact that is unwanted by the student," yet 24% of our sample knew of such behavior in their colleagues.

Both Tabachnick et al.'s and our own methodologies have value in ascertaining what unethical behavior is occurring in academia. Differences between our findings and Tabachnick, et al.'s may involve response biases in both samples; their sample may have been less likely to report if involved in ethically questionable behavior, and our sample may have been more likely to report if they knew of unethical behavior in others. In addition, Tabachnick et al.'s sample contained an equal proportion of male and female subjects, not representational of the field, and males are more likely to transgress sexually; thus, their figures for "average" percentage of sexual misconduct are an underestimate. Also, many individuals can come to know of sexual liaisons in an academic department, because such behavior can be more public than, for instance, grading practices. Sexual harassment, however, is usually more covert. The fact that 24% of our respondents knew of such behavior, and only 1% of Tabachnick, et al.'s sample reported it in themselves, suggests that faculty are often not aware that their behavior is harassing, and points out the value of asking psychologists about their colleagues.

Tabachnick, et al. provide valuable data on how seriously psychologists view various ethical infractions. Again, however, they assess how seriously psychologists see infractions in the context of their own behavior, not when others do it. Questioning what faculty actually have done about unethical behavior is a more

## Response to Unethical Behavior<sup>7</sup>

behavioral method of determining what they regard as serious. (A limitation of our method, of course, is that we cannot tell from the survey how effective respondents' actions actually were.) It is interesting, for instance, how much more seriously academics respond to sexual harassment in their colleagues than to actual sexual relationships. This finding suggests that the attempt within the APA Ethics code to label all faculty-student sexual relationships as unethical is not likely to be enforced by members.

Violations of research ethics are apparently not so frequent as other kinds of ethical violations. The findings of our survey, however, are congruent with other studies. For instance, in one survey of 700 academic scientists, 23% said colleagues had falsified research (Doulin, 1990). That 17% of academic psychologists in our sample reported plagiarism, and about the same percentage reported they knew of colleagues who took unfair authorship credit, suggests that current concern about ethics within science is justified.

It is important to note that more than half of the psychologists who knew of plagiarism took appropriate action. For most of the ethical violations in the survey, over 50% of respondents took no appropriate action, and only one respondent in the sample of 158 reported a behavior to a state or APA ethics committee. To the authors, this seems like a high percentage of inaction. It should be noted that some respondents explained why they did nothing; "Other members of the department had tried before to deal with this situation, without success" and "The offender in

Response to Unethical Behavior8

this case was the head of the department." Psychologists do judge some behaviors, for instance, teaching while alcohol impaired, as more serious, and take more serious action. In general, however, the findings suggest that psychologists need education, help and support in dealing with ethical violations.

Table 1

Percentage of Respondents Reporting Awareness of a Colleague's  
Unethical Behavior

Faculty-Student Boundaries

Insulted, ridiculed, etc., a student in the student's absence	54%
Became sexually involved with a student	52
Insulted, ridiculed, etc., a student in the student's presence	26
Made deliberate or repeated sexual comments, gestures or physical contact that was unwanted by the student	24
Told student, "I'm sexually attracted to you."	7
Revealed confidential disclosures told by a student	5

Unethical Research

Accepted undeserved authorship on a student's published paper	18
Took undue credit for work of others, e.g., taking a higher ranking authorship than deserved, or taking authorship when undeserved	17
Plagiarism: used the ideas, words, tables, graphs, and/or work of others without due credit and citation	17
Poor job of proofreading or included incomplete data for publication	17
Provided inaccurate information about the work of other scientists, e.g., providing unfair editorial reviews of the work (grants or papers) of others	15

Autoplagiarism: published the same ideas or words twice without proper citation to the original publication	12
Misrepresented results of research, e.g., cleaning up raw data, selective reporting of data to misrepresent or obscure findings, and/or intentionally analyzing data incorrectly to misrepresent results	11
Misrepresented how research was conducted, e.g., misreported methodology, the statistic and significance level, and/or failed to report known biases or flaws in the experiment/study.	7
Manipulated statistics to make the results "come out better"	7
Exploited the work of others, e.g., stealing data, taking control of a research project, grant proposal, and/or other original work of others without their permission	7
Reported "results" of experiments never performed	1
<u>Misrepresentation of Credentials or Misuse of Academic Position</u>	
Allowed possible financial gains to influence behavior, e.g., a conflict of interest	23
Accepted a publisher's monetary rebate for adopting their text	12
Used a fraudulent vita: misrepresented degrees and/or awards received	10
Used a fraudulent vita: included bogus papers and/or misrepresented the status of papers	4

Unethical Teaching

Gave easy coursework or tests to ensure popularity with students	30
Allowed a student's "likability" to influence grading	30
Taught while impaired under the influence of alcohol	28
Used films, etc., to fill in class time and reduce teaching load without regard for their educational value	28
Did nothing about strong evidence that a student was cheating on an exam	10
Taught that homosexuality per se is pathological	10
Taught while under the influence of cocaine or other illegal drugs	8
Taught that certain races are intellectually inferior	5
Included false or misleading information when writing a letter of recommendation for a student	4

Table 2

The Most Serious Action Taken by Subjects in Response to  
A Colleague's Unethical Behavior, in Percentages

Action by Subjects	Unethical Behavior*		
	Insult Absent Student	Sex with Student	
Number of respondents	40	39	
Nothing	42%	34%	
Spoke with Another Faculty	12%	15%	
Spoke to Colleague Directly	27%	22%	
Spoke with Department Head	10%	8%	
Spoke with Dean	6%	18%	
Reported to Ethics Committee	0%	0%	
	Easy Coursework	Biased Grading	Taught Alcohol Impaired
N	26	23	24
Nothing	27%	55%	13%
Faculty	23%	13%	13%
Colleague	8%	14%	9%
Dep't Head	31%	18%	44%
Dean	11%	0%	17%
Ethics Comm	0%	0%	4%

	Avoid Teaching	Insult Present Student	Sexual Harassment
N	21	22	18
Nothing	41%	9%	0%
Faculty	18%	29%	15%
Colleague	18%	38%	20%
Dep't Head	14%	14%	25%
Dean	9%	5%	20%
Ethics Comm	0%	0%	0%
Other		5%	20%

	Plagiarism
N	15
Nothing	27%
Faculty	18%
Colleague	9%
Dep't Head	0%
Dean	9%
Ethics Comm	0%
Other	37%

\* See Table 1 for more complete description of unethical behaviors.



## Response to Unethical Behavior

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