Concern for ethics in social, industrial, and clinical psychology as reflected in textbooks and journal articles

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Concern for ethics in social, industrial, and clinical psychology was assessed through textbook citations and journal articles for the years 1975-1980. Social psychology showed a high concern in texts and a moderate concern in journal articles. Clinical psychology was low as reflected in texts and high as reflected in journal articles. Industrial psychology had a low number of both textbook citations and journal articles.

In line with the increased concern of federal and state agencies for the rights of human subjects in behavioral research (cf. McCarthy, 1981; Tedeschi & Rosenfeld, 1981), there has been a growing interest among psychologists themselves in matters relating to the ethics of laboratory and field investigations (see Kimmel, 1981, for reviews). In the laboratory, issues such as informed consent, coercion of participants, and deception have received much attention (Tedeschi & Rosenfeld, 1981), whereas in the field, ethical dilemmas often revolve around matters such as invasion of privacy (Levin, 1981) and potential harm to patients, employees, or consumers as a result of psychological intervention.

While concern for ethics apparently is increasing among psychologists, to our knowledge there has been no attempt to empirically assess the magnitude of this concern. One way to measure interest in this topic is to determine the extent to which it appears in textbooks and journal articles. For the present study, the fields of social, industrial, and clinical psychology were chosen, based on the assumption that due to the extensive use of laboratory and field methodologies in these fields, ethical concerns would be dealt with extensively both in texts and in journals.

METHOD

Texts

Six texts each from social, industrial, and clinical psychology were randomly selected from those published during the years 1975-1980. The texts were searched for a section on ethics, as listed in the index of each book.

The authors acknowledge the aid of the library computer search facilities at the State University of New York at Albany.

Journal Articles

A BRS computer search was done that probed *Psychological Abstracts*. In order to keep the citations consistent with the copyright dates on the texts, the computer search was restricted to articles subsequent to 1975. Other restrictions eliminated articles not written in English, those carried out with nonhuman subjects, and those that used pharmacological agents.

The computer searcher was requested to insert the following key words: ethics, experimental ethics, and professional ethics. These words resulted in an output of 573 citations. Three independent raters categorized the citations into one of four areas: "social," including topics such as bystander intervention and obedience; "clinical," including areas such as psychotherapy, confidentiality, and clinical testing; "industrial," with areas such as management, organizations, and training; and "miscellaneous," which included articles not classified within the first three. The miscellaneous citations (313) were dropped from the analysis. Additionally, for approximately 7% of the total citations, there was some disagreement among the raters; therefore, it was decided to drop these 42 citations from subsequent analysis.¹

RESULTS

Texts

While the clinical and industrial texts each had one ethics citation, all six social texts included ethics. A chi-square analysis among the three areas showed that these differences were statistically significant [$\chi^2(2) = 11.33, p < .01$].

Journal Articles

Of the 218 citations included in the analysis, 182 were from clinical psychology, 27 were classified as being in social psychology, and only 9 were from industrial psychology. Once again, a chi-square analysis showed reliable differences among the three [$\chi^2(2) = 248.977, p < .001$].

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study suggest a few conclusions pertaining to the concern for ethics in social, industrial, and clinical psychology.

First, in terms of the knowledge that is transmitted to students through texts, social psychology clearly evinces more concern for ethical issues than does either clinical or industrial psychology, in which ethics citations were present in only 17% of the texts we examined. Being that textbooks often are repositories of classic findings, the greater attention given by social psychologists may be due to the publicity received by the Milgram (1963) experiment, which became the focus of a heated ethical debate (Baumrind, 1964).

The journal citations rather surprisingly showed that although clinical textbooks rarely consider ethical issues, clinical researchers often do in their articles. One would expect that clinical textbooks in the future would reflect this apparently widespread recent concern. Social psychologists in their journal articles seem to have a moderate interest in ethics, one lower than might have been expected given the textbook data. Ethical interest among industrial psychologists appears to be consistently low as reflected in both text and journal citations. It appears that within the last 5 years, at least, ethics has not been a major research concern for industrial psychologists.

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NOTE

1. The 42 articles not included in the analysis were discrepant as to their categorization into the social, clinical, or other groups. None of these articles was categorized as being in the industrial group by any of the three raters.

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