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Morality and ethical acting in Higher Education Students

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Abstract

The teaching-learning process should promote an ethical culture of proximity that focuses on people who are capable to promote identity feelings of citizenship that will support the making of decisions towards the universal good and the creation of a sense of belonging which will bind them together and allow them to express their solidarity towards the community they are part of and in which they intervene. The Research Questions included identifying the moral principles that support the ethical performance of higher education students. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the morality of higher education students. The Research Methods included the use of a descriptive cross-sectional study, performed with the help of 345 nursing students, 80% of them being female, and whose average age was 20.82. Cunha's "Questionário de Modo de Agir Ético (2015)" (QMAE) was administered. The findings revealed that the morality of the student's actions focused mostly on individualism and is based on the following ethical principles: Ethical Subjectivism- 68,7% (69,1% ♂ and 68,6% ♀); Relativism- 56,5% (56,5% ♂ and 56,7% ♀); Deontological Ethics (Kant)- 53,9% (55,8% ♂ and 47,0% ♀); Subjectivism/ Ethical Egoism- 11,3% (7,4% ♂ and 12,3% ♀). It can be concluded that as part of the pedagogical practice, schools must educate their students for the decision making process, creating consensus based on universal values. Therefore, bioethical education becomes more important and should integrate the discussion of Trans-subjective morality criteria, like rationality (what any person would do for everyone's well-being) interconnected with impartiality, among others.

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1. Introduction

Ethics, defined as a moral philosophy or code, defines what the ideal human nature and conduct should be. It is also a field of study that deals with moral principles. These principles are generally known as morality and viewed as standards of conduct that will help know right from wrong (Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde – DeCS, 2015).

The word ethics derives from the ancient Greek word *ethos* which may appear under two different written forms (*êthos* e *éthos*) (Renaud, 1994; Heidegger, s.d.; Tughendhat, 1999 & Weil, 2012 as quoted in Pedro, 2013, p.485). If we take the *êthos* form of the term, primarily understood as “*the place in which animals were kept*”, we can consider ethics as “*the place in which acting blooms or, in other words, as men’s inner-self*” (Renaud, 1994 as quoted in Pedro, 2013, p.485) and also as “*the dwelling place of human beings*” (Heidegger quoted by Pedro, 2013, p.485). In philosophy, ethics is viewed as a science that studies the values, the moral principles of a society and its groups’ (Battestin, Bergamo & Gazzola, 2016, p.191). Following this thought, ethics is seen as a field of philosophical reflection. In the ethical world dimension, philosophizing is the permanent criticism of the *ethos*, or in other words, the orientation of one’s life guided by man’s responsibility and solidarity for himself and towards others (Dias, 2015, p. 2). Ethics implies the existence of action as well as the existence of others, since it will manifest through one’s responsible and conscious acts, creating guidelines for human actions to follow. This way, the kind of action that Kant sees as Ethical will be the one that will be fulfilled with enough freedom, the kind of action that derives from practical reason and that people may accept as a universal law (Battestin, Bergamo & Gazzola, 2016, p.192, 193).

In this study, we chose the *éthos* form of the word as a term that stands for “a person’s way of being, his character, behavior, habits, customs, moral values and, above all, human conduct” (Pedro, 2013, p.485).

Ethics is thus understood as a form that will regulate any individual’s behaviors and that is based on the self-establishment of values that will be shared with others in order to give sense to one’s decisions and to the development of actions that will be guided by righteousness (Carapeto & Fonseca, 2012, p.8).

Assuming an ethical conduct implies an introspective and theoretical reflection helped by a rational and critical revision of the validity of the human conduct and it can be witnessed in people’s daily life, in the way the individuals and the community assess what is right and what is wrong and in the way they act critically to undo the existing inequalities and promote the common good (Cunha, Albuquerque, Dias, Aparício, Bica, André, Martins & 25°CLE, 2015, p.7382).

Morality is closely related with ethics, since both occur in parallel. The word morality derives from the Latin word *mos* and refers to “*habits, standards and laws*” (Tughendhat, 1999 & Weil, 2012 quoted by Pedro, 2013, p.485).

Morality has an imperative dimension, since it forces people to comply with an obligation based on moral values imposed by some kind of authority and because it implies the acceptance of some given rules. Unlike ethics, morality is eminently practical, directed towards concrete and real action, towards a certain practical and moral know-how and towards the implementation of moral rules that come from

the most diverse spheres (politics, religion, philosophy, social customs, and so on...) and that are considered valid for all members of a particular social group.

Although they are distinct, ethics and morality are two constructs which are dynamically interrelated and that share an important ascending circularity and complementarity (Carapeto & Fonseca, 2012, p. 8,9; Pedro, 2013, p.487).

It is therefore essential to understand the college students' ethical-moral way of acting, both at a national and international level, since society expects higher education institutions to form young people who will become global citizens able to understand the rules and standards of the different ethnic societies and capable of behaving in an inclusive and proactive way within different multicultural contexts.

2. Problem Statement

The Kantian assumption stresses that actions must be carried out, not by inclination, but by duty. According to Kant, an action carried out by duty has a moral value, not in the objective we want to attain through its achievement, but in the principle which determines it. That way, when people carry out any kind of action, they must show an absolute respect for what Kant classifies as the categorical imperative law. The morality of the action is reinstated in a morality of intention and this process is the only way people have to verify whether an action was right or good and whether the way we acted was really ethical (Barata, 2008, p.7).

However, human beings *were not born ethical*; they need to develop this facet as they grow. Keeping this line of thinking in mind, it is the university's major responsibility to shape the "I" so that a truly global "*being*" might arise, a human being with an integral and global formation. Therefore the educator is par excellence the person who unveils the human side in the human being. And what distinguishes the human side is its ability to be. According to this interpretation, education becomes a powerful tool to build an ethical society, since it involves, in addition to the development of knowledge, the construction and consolidation of a set of essential values which are required to live in society. To be able to fulfill this objective, education has to incorporate aspects of ethics in its processes of formation of concepts, as well as in the theoretical models upon which the practice is based (Rossato, 2015 como citado em Battestin, Bergamo & Gazzola, 2016, p. 196).

3. Research question

Considering how the research on ethical-moral acting has been getting more and more relevance within the field of academic research, the main objective of the current study is to answer the following research question: "Which moral principles support the ethical performance of higher education students?"

4. Purpose of the Study

To evaluate higher education students' morality and ethical acting.

5. Research Methods

Descriptive and cross-sectional study, performed in association with 345 students who attended the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu. 277 of those students were female and 68 were male. Their age ranged between 17 and 46 years old, which gave us an average age of 20.82 years old (± 21 years old). We used a non-probability convenience sampling method and the data collection was supported by the following measuring instruments:

-Biographical and academic data questionnaire (that helped gather information about gender, age and academic data regarding the students' course, the school year they attend, the specific training they got in Citizenship, Morality, Ethics/bioethics, Law and Values, the number of specific training hours, the place where this specific training took place);

-Active Citizenship and Ethical Acting in Higher Education Students questionnaire (Cunha, 2015) which assesses the participants' ethical behavior. This questionnaire is divided into 4 sections in which we want to identify the ethical criterion used by the respondent when facing the selected situation. Four ethical texts were presented. All of them were intimately related to a given ethical dimension (Deontological Ethics, Ethical/moral Subjectivism, Subjectivism/ Relativism, Subjectivism, Relativism, Objectivism, Subjectivism/ Ethical Egoism, Utilitarianism). The respondent will have to select only one of the options he has been given.

-Lind's Moral Judgment Test (MJT) (1998), translated by Bataglia (1998), Ribeiro and Menezes (2000) as quoted by Nata (2011).

5.1 Procedures

The appropriate standards of conduct regarding scientific research were respected, the participants' rights were safeguarded through their informed consent. We asked the authors permission to submit the questionnaires and the Superior Health School of Viseu delivered a favorable opinion on this study. The data collection was previously authorized.

Statistic analysis was processed using the 21.0 version for Windows of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program.

6. Findings

6.1 Citizenship training

67.0% of the participants reported they had already received training in Citizenship (84.8%), Morality (59.3%), Bioethics/ Ethics (16.9%), Law (96.1%) and Values (96.1%).

The average training time was 31.44 hours (± 25.56) and ranged from 1 to 150 training hours. We created 3 different groups according to the participants' training time ≤ 19 hours, 20-38 hours and ≥ 40 hours. We realized that there was a prevalence of students who had already got 40 hours or more of

active citizenship training (39.7%). This active citizenship training was obtained within the family (26.0%), during basic education (42.0%), in high school (32.9%), in college (82.6%) and through lifelong learning opportunities (17.3%).

6.2 Moral skills

The real scores obtained for moral skills, namely for Moral Reasoning - C-INDEX- reported a 0.00 minimum and a 45.74 maximum score, with a 13.21 (± 8.778) average value. As far as Moral Judgment (MJT) was concerned, we got a -68.00 minimum score and a 45.00 maximum score, and a -6.76 (± 16.955) average.

6.3 Ethical acting

Statistics regarding the acting scores reported a minimum of 7.00 and a maximum score of 63.00, which gives us a 21.69 (± 8.863) average value.

6.4 Levels of Ethical acting

In order to determine the prevalence of ethical acting, we created, based on the global scoring obtained, different groups. This way, we could form three groups: the first included all the participants whose score was less than 16, thus showing an inappropriate ethical behavior; another group which included participants whose global score ranged between 17 and 24, thus revealing an appropriate ethical acting and, finally, a group which was formed by the participants whose global score was above 25 and whose ethical acting was thus considered as very appropriate (Table 1).

We found out that 74,8% of the students chose a positive ethical way of action, 45,8% of them showed an appropriate acting and 29.0 % a very appropriate behavior. However, 25,2% of the students still reveal an inappropriate ethical way of behaving.

Table 1. Acting sample groups (Cunha, 2015)

Ethical acting	Score Items		Category Global Score	
	Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.
Deontological Ethics (Kant)				
In his action the individual must always fulfil his duty	0	8		
When facing ethical-moral dilemma situations, people must choose to fulfill their duty	0	8		
An action is ethically good if it is carried out with good intentions	0	8	8	24
Moral/ethical Subjectivism				
In his action the individual must take his moral principles into account	0	7		
When dealing with ethical-moral dilemma situations, people must act according to their conscience.	0	7	7	14
Subjectivism/Relativism				
An action is ethically good if it complies with morality Subjectivism	0	6	6	6
Ethical-moral values are individual and subjective	0	5	5	5
Objectivism				
In his action, the individual must act according to impartial and universal criteria	0	4		
Ethical-moral values are universal and subjective	0	4	4	12
Ethical-moral values imply impartiality and consensus	0	4		
Relativism				
Ethical-moral values are relative and vary from society to society	0	3	3	3
Subjectivism/Ethical Egoism				
In his action, the individual must follow his inclinations and personal interests	0	2	2	2

Utilitarianism				
When dealing with ethical-moral dilemma situations, people must chose the actions that will have the best consequences	0	1		
When dealing with ethical-moral dilemma situations, people must chose the actions that will have the best consequences for the greater number of people	0	1	1	4
An action is ethically good if it brings pleasure/happiness	0	1		
An action is ethically good if it has good consequences	0	1		
Ethical way of acting Scores			36	70

6.5 People's behavior according to their gender

The morality of the students' actions focused essentially on individualism and was based on the following ethical principles: Ethical Subjectivism - 68.7% (69.1% ♂ and 68.6%♀); Relativism- 56.5% (56.5% ♂ and 56.7%♀); Deontological Ethics (Kant)-53,9% (55.8% ♂ and 47.0%♀); Subjectivism/ Ethical Egoism- 11.3% (7.4% ♂ and 12.3%♀). We realize that most of the students don't have/ don't use the impartial weighting of everyone's good as a criterion for the morality of their actions, since they mainly accept a subjectivist ethical perspective (68.7%), which means that the common good isn't seen as a value for everyone (Table 2).

Table 2. Statistics regarding Ethical behavior according to the gender

Texts/actions	Gender		Male		Female		Total		Residual		X ²	p
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	1	2		
Deontological Ethics (Kant)												
0,00	30	44,1	129	46,6	159	46,1	-4	,4			1,472	0,689
8,00	23	33,8	95	34,3	118	34,2	-,1	,1				
16,00	12	17,6	35	12,6	47	13,6	1,1	-1,1				
24,00	3	4,4	18	6,5	21	6,1	-,6	,6				
Deontological Ethics (Kant)	38	55,8	148	47,0	186	53,9					0,039	0,843
Ethical/moral Subjectivism												
0,00	21	30,9	87	31,4	108	31,3	-,1	,1			4,664	0,097
7,00	19	27,9	110	39,7	129	37,4	-1,8	1,8				
14,00	28	41,2	80	28,9	108	31,3	2,0	-2,0				
Ethical acting based on Ethical/moral Subjectivism	47	69,1	190	68,6	237	68,7					0,001	0,971
Subjectivism/relativism												
0,00	37	54,4	145	52,3	182	52,8	,3	-,3			0,093	0,760
6,00	31	45,6	132	47,7	163	47,2	-,3	,3				
Ethical acting based on Subjectivism/ relativism	31	45,6	132	47,7	163	47,2					0,034	0,854
Subjectivism												
0,00	57	83,8	229	82,7	286	82,9	,2	-,2			0,051	0,821
5,00	11	16,2	48	17,3	59	17,1	-,2	,2				
Ethical acting based on Subjectivism	11	16,2	48	17,3	59	17,1					0,036	0,849
Objectivism												
0,00	57	54,4	176	63,5	213	61,7	-1,4	1,4			n.a.	n.a.
8,00	24	35,3	81	29,2	105	30,4	1,0	-1,0				
4,00	6	8,8	16	6,9	25	7,2	,6	-,6				
12,00	1	1,5	1	0,4	2	0,6	1,1	-1,1				
Ethical acting based on Objectivism	31	45,6	98	36,5	132	38,2					1,061	0,303
Relativism												
0,00	30	44,1	120	43,3	150	43,5	,1	-,1			0,014	0,906
3,00	38	55,9	157	56,7	195	56,5	-,1	,1				
Ethical acting based on Relativism	38	55,9	157	56,7	195	56,5					0,004	0,950
Subjectivism/ Ethical Egoism												
0,00	63	92,6	243	87,7	306	88,7	1,1	-1,1			1,319	0,251
2,00	5	7,4	34	12,3	39	11,3	-1,1	1,1				

Ethical acting based on Subjectivism/Ethical Egoism	5	7,4	34	12,3	39	11,3			1,080	0,299
Utilitarianism										
0,00	25	36,8	115	41,5	140	40,6	-,7	,7	0,811	0,847
1,00	26	38,2	102	36,8	128	37,1	,2	-,2		
2,00	15	22,1	55	19,9	70	20,3	,4	-,4		
3,00	2	2,9	5	1,8	7	2,0	,6	-,6		
Ethical acting based on Utilitarianism	43	63,2	162	58,5	199	59,4			0,128	0,721

6.6 Students' acting according to their age

Younger students (≤ 19 years old) exhibit a higher ethical acting supported by Kant's Deontological Ethics (59.1%) than older students (55.8%). As far as the Ethical/moral Subjectivism is concerned, the highest percentage was obtained by younger students and by those who were between 20-21 years old (70.1%, respectively). Regarding Subjectivism/ relativism, the highest percentage was obtained by older students (≥ 22 years old) with a 52.9% score. Those were followed by the 20-21 year old students (49.1%). We found out that older students show a higher ethical acting based on Subjectivism (18.3%). Participants who were 20-21 years old obtained higher scores in Relativism (63.2%). As for Subjectivism/ Ethical Egoism, the highest percentage was obtained by the younger students (64.5%).

6.7 Students' acting according to the training they had received in Citizenship, Ethics, Law and Values

The students who got less training hours show an ethical behavior based on Kant's Deontological Ethics (59.1%). They are followed by those who received a longer training (55.8%). The highest percentage in Ethical/moral Subjectivism was obtained by students who got less training (70.1%). We also found out that students who received a longer training were those who obtained a higher score in Subjectivism/relativism (52.9%) and in Subjectivism (18.3%). In Ethical Subjectivism/ Ethical Egoism, the highest percentage was obtained by the students who received less hours of training (64.5%).

6.8 Multiple Univariate Regression Model for the Ethical Acting

A multiple Univariate Regression was carried out considering the ethical acting as the latent variable and age, active citizenship practices, gender and the training attendance as manifest variables. These two last variables were transformed into dummy variables. The trajectories, the critical ratio and the regression beta coefficients show that no manifest variable has a statistical significance in its relation with ethical behavior (Table 3)

Table 3. Trajectories, critical ratios and the regression beta coefficients of the Multiple Univariate Regression

Trajectories		Estimates	Standard Error	Critical Ratio	p	β
Ethical acting	<--- Gender	1,611	1,223	1,317	,188	,072
Ethical acting	<--- Training attendance	,236	1,051	,225	,822	,013
Ethical acting	<--- Citizenship practices	-,359	,369	-,973	,330	-,053
Ethical acting	<--- Moral Reasoning	,041	,050	,827	,408	,047
Ethical acting	<--- Age	-,194	,159	-1,222	,222	-,068
Ethical acting	<--- Moral Judgment	,033	,050	,659	,510	-,037

The result is equally assumed when we analyze the Beta coefficients through the graphic output. There is no predictive weight conferred to the ethical acting latent variable.

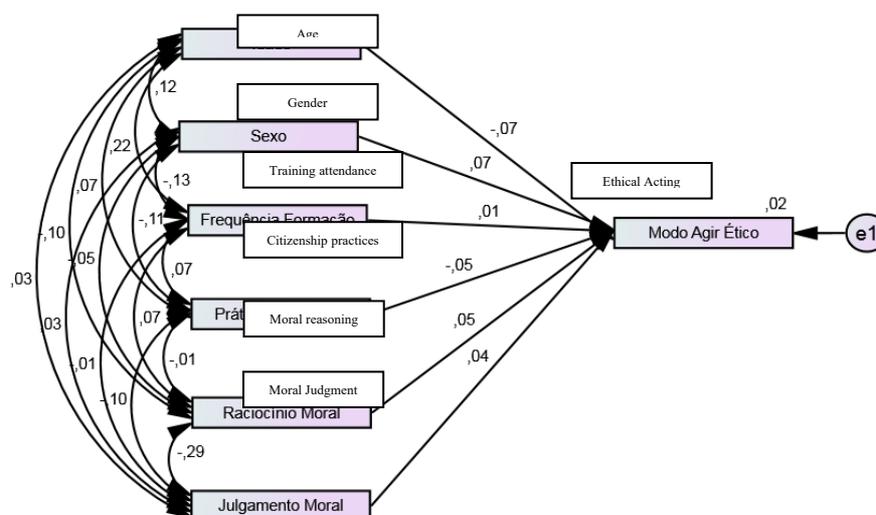


Fig. 1. Graphic Output of the relationship between the manifest variables and the Ethical acting latent variable

7. Conclusions

There was a 74.8% prevalence of students who exhibited a positive/appropriate ethical acting. However, in 25.2% of the cases the ethical behavior was inappropriate. We also found out that none of the manifest variables was predictor for the latent variable studied: ethical acting. The morality of the students' actions focused mainly on the following ethical principles: Ethical Subjectivism-68.7%; Relativism-56.5%; Deontological Ethics (Kant)-53.9%; Subjectivism/ Ethical Egoism-11.3%. We realized that most of the students don't have/don't use the impartial weighting of everyone's good as a criterion for the morality of their actions, since they mainly accept a subjectivist ethical perspective. This means that the common good isn't seen as a value for everyone. On the other hand, applying the ethical impartiality criterion would imply considering the existence of a supreme good and choosing/adopting an universal point of view in which any and every rational and enlightened subject would choose this supreme good for himself and for the others.

Keeping this in mind, we understand that promoting a higher ethical acting training is essential, a training that will reinforce ethical values and principles. This way, we suggest the implementation of dilemmatic discussions that would include the presentation of case types and that would allow the students to develop their cognitive and ethical-moral maturity. We can also ask students to solve hypothetical moral dilemmas. This kind of initiative will help them assess what should be done in the situation they were presented with and this way their answers will be legitimized. This activity could help students reflect upon their moral skills, a vital factor to achieve an appropriate ethical conduct. Being aware that conducting a research on ethical acting isn't the same as living an ethical life helps us accept the limitations of this study. These limitations come from the fact that the veracity of the results depends on the respondents' level of honesty and sincerity and that there will surely be answers

associated with desired conducts regarding the common good (and the risk of not expressing effective realities).

There is a knowledge gap when dealing with studies regarding ethical acting as well as with research conducted with higher education students. Therefore, there is a need for new studies in this field, especially studies that would help establish the existence of elements and/or factors that may contribute to the development of moral skills that will favor a behavior or a way of living based on ethical-moral principles and that would stimulate the common good for the surrounding community.

Since there will be teaching practice implications, universities should encourage students to take decisions that will create consensus because they are based on universal values. Hence the increased relevance given to bioethical education and the discussion of morality trans-objectives like the Rationality objective (what good would anyone do for himself and for others well-being?) interconnected with the Impartiality objective, among others (...)

There are also implications in nursing clinical practice: we want to stress that health education sessions are one of the essential factors that will contribute to the development of a better health literacy that will, in turn, favor the preservation and the promotion of the citizens' good global health. Therefore, the way we share knowledge with our students or with our clients must be based on a wise ethical education. We may also keep in mind the legacy of Kohlberg about moral skills and development: "*the ability to take decisions and make moral judgments (based on internal principles) and to live by those judgments*". These moral abilities and skills may and should be built throughout one's life-cycle: it must start in people's early childhood and continue through their youth and adult life (Lind, 2005 quoted by Melo, Souza & Barbosa, 2016, p.44). The knowledge about Kohlberg's dilemmas, for instance, gives us vital guidelines that will undoubtedly contribute to the development of a certain behavior. This action will be much more adjusted to the "*here*" and the "*now*" of our current society, by triggering a more conscious and balanced reflection that will contribute to raise awareness on health promotion and disease prevention issues. This way, if a health worker doesn't provide people with the "tools" which are required to stimulate proactivity and the individuals' assertive decision taking, he might be encouraging them to act, not based on ethical values, but based on automatism only. On the other hand, a nursing practice in which the nurses' professional conduct is based on the respect they have regarding their patients' values, beliefs and cultural characteristics will be devoid of moral judgment.

Therefore, educating people to act ethically relies on certain ethical-moral principles that will help attain the supreme good for oneself and for the others, in conjunction with the community's common good and to the detriment of personal interests.

Those are absolutely necessary conditions that will undoubtedly contribute to the development of individuals who will carry, transmit and create a sort of behavior imbued with the right ethical-moral support that will be the perfect example of the primacy of human dignity.

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