Does an ethics course affect orientation to ethical behavior?

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Students in a required senior-level ethics class completed the Adolescent Ethical Behavior in Leisure Scale (ABLES) during the first week and the last week of the semester. Results indicate an increase in scores for three of the four subscales of the ABLES (i.e., the Creativity, Positive Relationships, and Moral domains).

Introduction
Apart from the recent resurgence in ethics education spurred by corporate scandals, moral reasoning and ethical behavior have been active research areas within psychology. Tooke and Ickes (1988) indicated that much of the earlier research on moral development concentrated on "(1) ethical judgements and beliefs, and (2) the developmental history of the individuals whose ethical judgements or beliefs are the object of study." More recent research has greatly expanded the psychological study of moral reasoning and ethical behavior.

This study examined the effect of an ethics course on students' reported ethical behavior.

Research Question
Does an ethics course affect orientation to ethical behavior?

Two of the learning goals of Capital University are to have students "develop their leadership and service potentials" and to "develop a sense of values that guides personal decision making." These goals are specifically targeted during the senior level course on ethics.

Method
College students attending one of two sections of a senior level required course on ethics completed the Adolescent Ethical Behavior in Leisure Scale (ABLES; Widmer, Ellis, & Trunnell, 1996) at the beginning of the semester and again at the end of the semester. Based on an Aristotelian perspective, the ABLES has four subscales: Intellectual Activity Domain, Creativity Domain, Positive Relationships, and Moral Activity. The Moral Activity subscale, in particular, contains items related to the two university learning goals mentioned above. Complete pre-course and post-course data were available for 28 students.

Results
Dependent sample t-tests were calculated for each of the subscales. Due to the small sample size, the t-tests were followed by Cohen’s d, a measure of effect size. Analysis revealed the following for each of the subscales: Intellectual Activity Domain: \( t(27) = .04, p = .969, \) Cohen's d = 0; Creativity Domain: \( t(27) = 1.719, p = .097, \) Cohen's d = .32; Positive Relationships Domain: \( t(27) = 2.47, p = .02, \) Cohen's d = .469; and Moral Activity Domain: \( t(27) = 1.933, p = .064, \) Cohen's d = .367.

Discussion
Change in reported behavior was evidenced for three of the subscales: Creativity Domain, Positive Relationships Domain, and Moral Domain. This can indicate support for the hypothesis that a course on ethics can affect orientation to ethical behavior. Alternative hypotheses must also be explored. That is, it is possible that the students were simply more aware of "ethical" behaviors at the end of the course and wanted to portray themselves as "ethical" individuals. Maturity, experiences in other courses, other campus activities, and life experiences can also account for the observed changes. Future research should be conducted to rule out these alternative explanations.

References

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