

Professional ethics of the university teacher of psychology concerning a multi-paradigmatic panorama

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Abstract

This study aims to remind that psychology is a multi-paradigmatic science, which is why teaching psychology in higher education is eclectic in nature in order to reflect on the alternatives available in this respect. However, when it comes to practical performance, the personal theoretical orientation of each professor may lead him or her to opt for and present in an unethical manner topics that are not consistent with the desired outcomes of introducing students with the array of conceptualization options and their specific applications. This bias can occur when professors favor an alternative at the expense of others or make a biased comparison between them, forbid or penalize answers that they consider invalid, or neglect and avoid clarifying topics covered in class. This study highlights that the transmission of updated knowledge on a specific topic or domain is key for adequate faculty performance, which should rise above personal or professional preferences.

Keywords: Psychology, professional ethics, paradigm, theory, teaching..

Ética profesional del docente universitario de psicología frente a un panorama multi-paradigmático

Resumen

En esta comunicación se recuerda que la psicología es una ciencia multi-paradigmática en la cual, por lo mismo, se ha optado por una enseñanza universitaria de tipo ecléctico para reflejar todas las alternativas. Sin embargo, a veces en el desempeño práctico, la postura teórica personal de cada docente puede inclinarle a que seleccione y exponga de forma poco ética temáticas incongruentes con el equilibrio deseado, a la hora de presentar a sus alumnos la baraja completa de opciones de conceptualización y aplicaciones características de cada una de ellas. Este sesgo puede cometerse de varias maneras: privilegiando la mención de una alternativa sobre otras o contrastarlas desventajosamente; prohibiendo o sancionando respuestas que no considera válidas desde su punto de vista; o desatendiendo u omitiendo aclaraciones sobre lo discutido en clase. Se remarca que el correcto desempeño de la labor docente requiere una adecuada transmisión de conocimientos actualizados acerca de cualquier temática o dominio que se enseñe, por encima de las preferencias personales y profesionales.

Palabras clave: Psicología, ética profesional, paradigma, teoría, enseñanza.

Ética profissional do professor de psicologia universitária versus uma paisagem multiparadigmática

Resumo

Em esta comunicação recorda-se que a psicologia é uma ciência multiparadigmática. Por este motivo, optou-se por um ensino universitário de tipo eclético que reflita todas as alternativas. Porém, às vezes, no desempenho prático, a postura teórica pessoal de cada docente pode incliná-lo a selecionar e expor de maneira pouco ética temáticas incongruentes com o equilíbrio desejado no momento de apresentar aos seus alunos um leque completo de opções de conceptualização e das aplicações características de cada uma de elas. Diante de este viés, é possível agir de várias maneiras: privilegiando a menção de uma alternativa sobre as outras ou contrastando-as de maneira desigual; proibindo ou punindo respostas que não considera válidas desde seu ponto de vista; desatendendo ou omitindo esclarecimentos sobre o que foi discutido na sala de aula. Salienta-se que o desempenho correto do trabalho do docente precisa de uma transmissão de conhecimentos atualizados sobre qualquer temática ou domínio que ensine, acima de quaisquer preferências pessoais e profissionais.

Palavras-chave: Psicologia, ética profissional, paradigma, teoria, ensino

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University professors organize and mediate the structuring of knowledge in their students and, to carry out this task, they must have some professional skills, which include the theoretical mastery of what they teach, the use of strategies for transmitting the learning content, and the exercise of values and attitudes that support their teaching approach. This last point includes the ethics of academic work, which grants its tasks a genuinely scientific sense when, as Ander-Egg (1995) points out, it constitutes itself "not as a way of being for when 'science is being made,' but as a vital attitude in all circumstances and moments of life [...], what we call the scientific attitude as a way of life" (p.121). It implies, among other things, being ethical and scrupulous regarding the contents that are being transmitted, without mixing them with personal opinions that are not given explicitly as such. In his famous lecture of 1919 on the relationship between politics and science in the classroom, Max Weber referred categorically to this subject, stating that

[...] the prophet or demagogue do not belong on the academic platform [...]. It seems to me like a total lack of responsibility that the teacher takes advantage of

these circumstances to imprint upon the students his or her personal political views, instead of simply fulfilling his or her specific mission, which is to be useful to them with his or her knowledge and scientific experience (Weber, 1979, p.213).

Weber's claim refers to politics, but, following the same logic, it also applies to the expression of any other personal opinion of the professor, who wants to pass him or herself off as an authority on the discussion of a topic or the contents of a course. In fact, there are high-level documents that try to prevent this type of practice, such as, in our country, the section on a teacher's duties (article 87) of University Law 30220, in force in Peru, which emphasizes the need to "Practice teaching with academic rigor, respect for intellectual property, professional ethics, independence and conceptual and ideological openness" (Congress of the Republic, July 9, 2014; p.527224).

Applicable to university teaching in general, it is also applicable to teaching in different study programs, such as, in this case, Psychology. However, it should be noted that the specific characteristics of this discipline make it more

difficult to follow the implicit mandate to avoid the intromission of personal views not supported by evidence, for the reasons explained in the following paragraphs.

It is no secret that there are multiple conceptual options in Psychology. Since its modern starting point, this diversity was apparent in the formulation and continuous reformulation of different study objects, theories, models, methods, and other relevant contents (Gondra, 2003), giving rise to a long and complex history of paradigmatic competition, as well as, consequently, to an image of fragmentation and chaos (if not confusion) in the eyes of whomever observes its evolution and current state (Arana, Meilán, & Pérez, 2006; López & Fernández, 2015). Faced with such reality, the issue of its academic teaching in comprehensive terms becomes a serious problem.

In this regard, in an attempt to synthesize, Psychology in general has been classified according to dichotomous schemes, as, for example, the one about the existence of two opposing cultures in the same discipline: scientific and comprehensive (Cornejo, 2005), each with different purposes and interests: experimental-correlational, on the one hand, and hermeneutic-phenomenological, on the other. This division seems to be on board with the one established by Coan's (1979) classic work on the basic underlying dimensions as trends in psychological theory: restrictive (similar to the experimental-correlational) and adversus fluidus (similar to hermeneutic-phenomenological) (see Montgomery, 2006, for a review). An attempt has also been made to reduce the total scope of options to a few, as in the case of Ardila (2003), for whom the scenario includes the neo-conductive, neo-psychoanalytic, humanist, and historical-cultural approaches.

In any case, the traditional solution adopted for the teaching of psychology has been eclecticism. That is, to articulate in a curriculum a set of subjects which, when addressed, will take account of all, or most, of the approaches considered current in the discipline. The references for this type of assumption have been the numerous introductions to general psychology (for example, the well-known manuals by Feldman, 2014, and by Morris & Maisto, 2019, as well as its many emulators in Spanish-speaking countries),

which present these topics in terms that could be labelled as compatible multiplicity of paradigms and contents, minimizing the differences reflected in the different ontological compromises of each current, and privileging the exposure of empirical operations and supposedly common practices formulated on the basis of social demand¹.

The contradiction of such a strategy has been, and still is, that, even though curricula can be eclectic, the vast majority of professors who make it possible to deliver them in the classroom are not, given that they have a personal theoretical position (inevitable in a multi-paradigmatic discipline), even if sometimes they do not convey it explicitly enough. This is what may give rise to the problem that is the subject of this paper: a problem of possible bias in the transmission of relevant knowledge by teachers.

Bias of the Psychology Teacher

The definition of bias that appears in the American Psychological Association's dictionary (2010) implies "partiality: the inclination or predisposition for or against something. See also bias" (p. 463). In the matter under discussion in this article, it is used to designate the conscious or subconscious tendency of the university professor to unbalance his or her teaching of certain subjects (or part of them) based on personal paradigmatic and theoretical inclinations.

To elaborate further on this, on the one hand, the teacher who is in charge of a subject designed to present a panoramic perspective of some general or introductory area of psychology can often arrive surrounded by a nimbus of impartiality that makes his or her students assume that the presentations about the topics included in the study plan are accurate and encompass the whole deck of approaches and theories in existence. But, on the other hand, in practice, he or she can show that both the selection that the teacher makes of his or her subjects, as well as the presentation itself and the critical evaluations linked to each content, are plagued with biases related to his or her

1 Just to mention some of those manuals in our country: Uculmana (1986), Meza (2002), Braun (2009), and Frisancho (2011).

personal and professional choices. In other words, professors do not present the real picture, not even approximately, but rather their version of it, in a way that could be described as not very responsible, to say the least. This could also be considered professionally unethical, even though it is often minimized or ignored, as if it were something natural or inevitable, or simply due to an insufficient capacity to teach. In this regard, by the way, the formal attribution given to professors to freely organize their courses is not in question. That is good and desirable. What is ethically questionable is that in doing so they are not careful, to say the least, to review or update the literature that deals with the subject in question, sometimes based on the assumption that any such paradigmatic source they come from is not correct or outdated, or, at least, to make it clear to their students from which paradigmatic perspective they make their selection and presentation of study subjects. It should be understood that a good professional is inherently scrupulous and impartial with respect to the teaching of the knowledge he or she intends to share, which does not mean that they cannot give their opinion in class after having provided students with as much information as possible, without excessive bias or pompous sufficiency on the subject matter conveyed.

As stated by Guzmán & Guzmán (2016), referring to the Mexican academia, but with a universal sense:

It seems that we psychologists have assumed that we do not need to prepare ourselves to teach psychology because what we receive in our training enables us to teach and evaluate adequately [...]. We say so because after a bibliographic search conducted in the main psychological and educational journals of our country, we did not find any papers or research on reported experiences of teacher training in psychology. (p. 8)

It is common for a professor of a certain subject to have a teaching strategy based on their own knowledge, selecting those contents that they deem pertinent, emphasizing certain topics and discarding (or avoiding) others. In that regard, if,

as it frequently happens, he or she is in charge of a theoretical or empirical domain of a panoramic type (let's say, General Psychology, History of Psychology, Educational Psychology, Clinical Psychology, Psychology of Language, Epistemology, Psychology of Personality, Psychotherapy, and others), at worst he or she may have the tendency to design it in such a biased way that it may be subjective and even prejudiced, ignoring or, worse, misinterpreting or misrepresenting the contribution of approaches that are not his or her own, and magnifying their own in turn, presenting students with a distorted picture of the domain in question.

The truth is that when many teachers are doing the same in favor of an eventually majority focus, they produce an amplified effect of what has been called "the Matthew effect" (as quoted in Bunge, 2019): "Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them" (verse 12, chapter 13 of the Gospel attributed to Matthew). In other words, they attribute all the merits to the momentarily dominant paradigm or theory, to the detriment of less popular or influential paradigms or theories. It is obvious that in science, democracy (or ochlocracy) cannot be a reference criterion for making judgments about the adequacy or inadequacy of reports about reality.

The objection that some proponents of bias might make to what has been expressed in the previous paragraph would be that if the majority of members of the professional community agree with a particular approach, it must be because it is better or solves more problems—in the style of the Kuhnian argument on the paradigmatic revolutions—and it is therefore almost natural that it is preferred. This kind of reasoning, which was very much ingrained in the discipline from the 1960s to the 1980s, has lost strength for many years (for example, see the rebuttals by the historians Leahey, 1992; Goodwin, 2015). Except for very specific cases, what usually predominates in psychology is not a paradigm, but, at least for now, a multiparadigmatic coexistence or competition.

The Influence of Biased Textbooks

In spite of the discredit of the legend about a paradigm that substitutes other less capable ones, there are many colleagues who continue to

hold this opinion, and certainly, one of the most effective foundations of this school of thought is the narrative offered by certain Psychology introductory manuals. The fact is that, frequently, the excessive demands made on university professors seem to compel some to consider their teaching content based solely on the reading of a few general books, instead of consciously reviewing all the available literature about the subjects on which they pretend to be experts before the students.

Certainly, the practice of presenting biased works favoring a particular orientation, as if they were a genuine review of the psychological field in any of its areas of study, has been very frequent, serving as an inadequate model for university professors. Among many others, the bibliographical introductions referred to in the first section of this article are a good example of negative biased practices that, in a certain way, canonize others that extend to teaching in a classroom setting. Namely, if one reviews Morris & Maisto's book (2019), one realizes that, already from its first pages, there is an established bias regarding, among other things, the enthusiastic support that the authors give to one of the approaches (in this case, the cognitive one), at the expense of the one that is considered the main competitor (in this case, the behavioral one), to the point of declaring expeditiously: "In contrast to behaviorism, cognitive psychologists believe that mental processes can and should be studied scientifically" (p. 15). That is not only a remarkable inaccuracy, based on a popular prejudice, not sustainable just by reviewing a little the behavioral literature—which questions the professional suitability of those who present it so slightly—, but also an unexpected lack of honesty on the part of those who, undertaking the task of making a general presentation of the discipline, do not preserve a minimum of impartiality. In any case, the right thing to do with any work that seeks to give a panoramic view of a discipline would be for its title to reflect, from the outset, the particular orientation (very legitimate, by the way) of the authors, instead pretending to be above all theories. But, no, the title of this book seems to be totally aseptic: *Understanding Psychology*.

One thing that needs to be understood is that, apart from helping to determine how to relate to practical problems, every individual explanatory conception responds, in turn, to a larger approach that frames it. The psychologist that acts as a psychology professor—like the author of a book or a research paper—does not come out of a bubble that has preserved him or her from any theoretical contamination. He or she determines in an idiosyncratic way what he or she does or says, promotes, or offers as feedback in class, according to the criteria that delimit his or her own perspective: the examples, that is, the ones that have led him or her to establish the abstractions about the recognition of the events that seem important in the various topics.

As has already been suggested, in itself that is not wrong since it implies freedom of thought and of teaching. What is wrong is that the teacher does it under the conscious or unconscious assumption that his or her perspective is the only correct one and that, for that reason, he or she must transmit this sense of value to his or her students, administering also the sources that he or she makes known to them on the matter so that they can certify or confirm what he or she proposes. The truth is that even though one can honestly think that what one believes in or knows is better than what others believe in or know, and can argue this well, ethically, teaching does not allow one to be biased in any case due to authority image of the teacher in front of his or her young students (let's recall once again Weber's disquisition, 1979; *ut supra*), exercising the power to deeply influence their beliefs and attitudes, risking the possibility of them becoming very superficial prejudices and stereotypes of acceptance or rejection toward schools of psychology that are not of their liking.

The way in which the emphatic theoretical stance of a teacher can impact students varies according to certain modalities related to the way in which he or she approaches the interactions with them, namely the mediating practices of modeling or instructing on some type of content, or about the requirements to be fulfilled prior to it; to point out an option over others or to contrast them; to sponsor or determine conditions so that a transfer of learning takes place or to instruct on the social demands that it must satisfy; to

prohibit or sanction responses with concrete consequences; and to disregard or omit some explanation of what was discussed in class. In this broad sense, the role of the teacher is that of a context builder in the classroom (García & Vargas, 2008), who, through his or her teaching strategies, models both attitudes and specific responses in the students regarding the options existing in the theoretical universe of psychology.

Multiple informal examples could be given of how in classes, lectures, conferences, publications, and other types of oral and written presentations, many things are said and repeated without support, under the cloak of a supposed impartiality or supra-knowledge, by not sharing a worldview with certain paradigms or theories that are the subject of critique, simplification, or misinterpretation by the speaker. Suffice it to mention two: in class, a student heard his teacher enthusiastically review the landscape of, according to him, current theories on language and thought. When the teacher prompted questions about what he had said, he was asked about the absence of theories *X* and *Y*² in his presentation. His answer, quick and sharp, was: "Those currents do not have theories about language or thought," confusing the fact that those currents avoid labelling their studies on such topics with the fact that they do not deal with them. Another example is about the numerous manuals about personality that circulate and are used in the course of Personality Theories (among others). If the teacher of that course used these manuals as textbooks and had to limit him or herself to what they show, he or she would have to limit explanations explaining about some psychodynamic theorists, some other humanists, an anti-personality behaviorist (Skinner), an old constructivist, several factorialists and others of social learning, period. But where are the other more recent behavioral theorists who do speak of personality? Where are the current cognitive-constructivists? Where are the Marxist theorists? They are simply ignored. The same is seen in other subjects with some variations. The fact is

that most teachers stick to that limitation as if it were natural.

In fact, it is enough to review in some depth the literature of any current to find that they do have theoretical conceptions about thought, language and personality, even if they don't appear in textbooks that pretend to make a panoramic review of those subjects. Just to illustrate what has been said, one can quote review texts on the subject of personality in behaviorist (Santacreu, Hernández, Adarraga, & Márquez, 2002), Marxist (González Rey, 2002), and constructivist (Balbi, 2004) authors that are not included or mentioned in traditional textbooks. Something similar occurs with other subjects, but it would be long and marginal to the present argumentation to quote more materials in that connection.

It is the ethical and deontological duty of professors not to rely only on summary reviews made by others, but to explore by themselves what they are going to teach, taking into account the paradigmatic multiplicity of the discipline. In order to do it, there is nothing better than to go to the sources of what is presented in class, avoiding general manuals in order to focus on basic works or articles by authors of the same school who develop concepts, methods, or research one subject or another.

Possible Solution?

Considering what was said in previous sections, years ago, on the occasion of a curricular reform at Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos (UNMSM), assuming the multiplicity of conceptions in psychology, the author of this article proposed two things:

- a) That the courses of the study plan that presented a global view of some area of psychology (like the ones mentioned above in the first section: Educational Psychology, Clinical Psychology, Language Psychology, Epistemology, Personality Psychology, Psychotherapy, among others), were taught as collegiate subjects by faculty members of different psychological orientations. The purpose of this approach would be to foster

2 *X* and *Y* are used to avoid mentions of theories with proper names, so as not to contaminate the argument with party references.

updated presentations on those subjects by those who—coming from a particular orientation and working on it—really know the field from the perspective of their preference and professional practice.

- b) That said study plan included courses of theoretical and practical introduction to the different paradigms of psychology (Behavioral Psychology and Behavioral Intervention Techniques; Cognitive Psychology and Cognitive Intervention Techniques; Dynamic Psychology and Dynamic Intervention Techniques; Humanist Psychology and Humanist Intervention Techniques; Dialectical Psychology and Dialectical Intervention Techniques), so as to provide students with comprehensive reviews geared towards different world views in philosophical, theoretical, methodological, research, technological, and application terms, presented by teachers in the field.

The aim was to present several options so that the same students would compare and choose one of them as a motivation for their learning activity. Unfortunately, the first proposal could not be applied due to problems related to the faculty's work schedules, but the second was partially applied, including four subjects dedicated to the global exposure of paradigms (Psychology and Behavioral Intervention Techniques; Psychology and Cognitive Intervention Techniques; Psychology and Dynamic Intervention Techniques; and Psychology and Humanistic Intervention Techniques), currently included in the study plans of the two departments of the School of Psychology of the aforementioned university. Currently, the course overviews of all of them demand the comprehensive presentation of the relevant productions of the psychological worldview in the terms that have been already mentioned.

It is not perfect but, as far as is known, in no other national higher education institution has there been any attempt as radical as the one mentioned to avoid theoretical biases or to compensate for them.

In addition to the above, it is obvious that more attention should be paid to the problems regarding training in the skills needed in teaching,

as well as in the ethical-professional aspects. It is necessary to talk about it rather than pretending it does not exist.

Conclusion

Assuming a scientific attitude as a lifestyle implies also being ethical and scrupulous with the contents transmitted while teaching. Having a particular paradigmatic and theoretical position within a universe that is known to be multi-paradigmatic does not exempt professors from trying to be faithful selectors and presenters of the pertinent contents of each psychological option, especially in courses that assume doctrinally a formal neutrality about the treated topics, so that their students contact authentic versions of all the alternatives.

In order to avoid possible unethical paradigmatic biases in such work, from the perspective presented here, it is necessary, on the one hand, to adjust expository practice to criteria that are as exhaustive as possible in the search for information on each current or approach in panoramic subjects of the discipline (which includes, if possible, as has been said, entrusting it to people identified with each approach); and, on the other hand, to substitute the use of introductions or general overviews—falsely neutral, according to the reasoning that guides this proposal—, with basic books or articles written by relevant authors of each option.

This would benefit the student body and future classes of better-informed psychologists committed to the development of their discipline; in other words, capable of understanding different perspectives, in addition to their own, and of taking on research tasks, whose theoretical and practical coherence is effective.

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