

The ethical principles of the Portuguese psychologists: An evaluation after eleven years

Miguel Ricou*  / Sílvia Marina*  / Eduardo Sá** 

* Universidade do Porto, Faculdade de Medicina, CINTESIS@RISE – Centro de Investigação em Tecnologias e Serviços de Saúde, Porto, Portugal; ** Universidade de Coimbra, Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação, Coimbra, Portugal / ISPA – Instituto Universitário, Lisboa, Portugal

Abstract: Several changes were implemented in the psychology profession after the Order of Portuguese Psychologists was created. A set of ethical principles to guide psychological practice was established. Eleven years after the several changes have been initiated in the professional practice in Portugal, this study analyzes whether there are changes in the valuation of the fundamental ethical principles of Portuguese psychologists. To this end, data from 2009 and 2020 was compared. On a grading scale from 1 to 5, Portuguese psychologists allotted the importance to each general principle. We found Competence and Responsibility decreased after 11 years, and Integrity and Beneficence and Non-Maleficence increased from 2009 to 2020. We also found that Psychologists with more experience valued more the Respect for people's rights and dignity, Integrity, and Beneficence and non-maleficence than those with lesser years of experience. Order of Portuguese Psychologists and the existence of an ethics code seems to have improved the professional identity.

Keywords: Psychology, Code of ethics, Ethical principles, Professional practice.

Since 1930, psychology in Portugal has emerged as one of the main subjects in the teacher training curriculum and later in the medical course, entitled medical psychology. However, in 1967/68, a private higher educational institution created the first university degree in psychology (Bairrão, 1968). In 1980, the first batch of students in psychology graduated from public universities in Portugal (Coelho et al., 2012). In 2008, the Order of Portuguese Psychologists was founded (Lei n.º 57/2008) and started to regulate the professional psychologists' service. Its attributions include representing and defending the general interests of the profession, regulating access to the profession, overseeing the professional exercise and exclusively attributing professional titles and specialization (Lei n.º 57/2008). The attribution of the professional title, its use and the exercise of the professional psychologist individually or in a corporate community depend on the registration in the Order of Portuguese Psychologists (Lei n.º 57/2008).

Several changes are implemented in the profession after the Order of Portuguese Psychologists was created. Ricou (2011) proposed a set of common ethical principles to guide psychological practice, which was adopted by the Order of Portuguese Psychologists as its General Principles (Regulamento n.º 258/2011).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Miguel Ricou, Universidade do Porto, Faculdade de Medicina, CINTESIS – Centro de Investigação em Tecnologias e Serviços de Saúde, Avenida Rodrigues de Freitas, 265, 4049-021 Porto, Portugal. Email: mricou@med.up.pt

Five main ethical principles were assumed (Regulamento n.º 898/2024; Ricou et al., 2017, 2019):

Respect for people's rights and dignity: Psychologists must respect people's rights and decisions based on rational exercise. Psychologists shall not discriminate against clients and shall promote their autonomy (Ricou, 2011; Ricou et al., 2019).

Competence: Psychologists must work in accordance with the technical and scientific professional standards, undertake appropriate professional training and update their professional skills (Ricou, 2011; Ricou et al., 2019).

Responsibility: Psychologists should be aware of the consequences their work can have on their clients, the profession and society. They should provide high-quality services to clients to promote the image of the profession and be ready to take credits and responsibilities for their conduct (Ricou, 2011; Ricou et al., 2019).

Integrity: Psychologists must follow the ethics and principles guiding the profession. They should avoid conflicts of interest and participate in conflict resolutions and arbitration (Ricou, 2011; Ricou et al., 2019).

Beneficence and non-maleficence: The psychologist must always act in the best interests of the clients and should uphold ethical professional practice that will free clients from harm (Ricou, 2011; Ricou et al., 2019).

In 2019, Ricou et al. conducted a study to determine the level of valorisation offered by psychologists based on the aforementioned principles. Eleven years after the first evaluation, several changes have been initiated in the professional practice in Portugal, which is the justification of this research. The present study analyzes whether there are changes in the valorisation of ethical principles.

Method

Data from 2009 and 2020 was collected and analysed to understand changes in the valuation of the fundamental ethical principles of Portuguese psychologists.

Participants

The sample was composed of 3566 psychologists, of which 1385 answered the questionnaire in 2009 and 2181 in 2020. In both 2009 and 2020, the majority of participants were women (1173 [84.7%] and 1914 [87.8%], respectively). Concerning the professional experience in 2009, 17.0% of recently graduated psychologists have less than a year of experience. However, 20.1% have 1-3 years of working experience, 22.5% 4-6 years of experience, 20.0% over 7 but less than 10 years of experience, 9.9% 11-15 years and 10.5% have been working for over 15 years ($n=1.386$). In 2020, 8.6% of participants have less than a year of professional experience, 14.4% have between 1 and 3 years of professional experience. Most of the psychologists (35.4%) reported having more than 15 years of professional experience.

Instrument

We used the questionnaire developed and validated by Ricou et al. (2011, 2019) to ascertain the level of valorisation of the five general principles of the Portuguese ethical code of psychologists. The questionnaire was composed of five premises that focused on an ethical principle (Respect for people's rights and dignity, Competence, Responsibility, Integrity, Beneficence and non-maleficence). The aim was to evaluate the importance of Portuguese psychologists allotted to each general principle. The answers were on a grading scale from 1 (indifferent) to 5 (fundamental).

Procedures

The 2009 data was collected by Ricou et al. (2011, 2019) which was provided by the authors for the present study. However, we seek the collaboration of the Order of Portuguese Psychologists to collect data from 2020. The psychologists were invited to participate in this study. The questionnaire was made available to participants via a link shared through direct e-mail. The questionnaires were answered online through the Google Forms platform. Data were collected from September 2019 to February 2020.

Ethical procedures were following the ethics code of the Order of Portuguese Psychologists, and the General Data Protection Regulation (Nigel, 2018) were followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, in which participants were asked to tick a box to indicate they understood the terms of the study and consented. All psychologists participated in the study anonymously. No electronic authentication was required.

Data analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS, version 26.0). The outcome of reliability analysis was Cronbach's alpha of 0.80, reflecting a good internal consistency of the questionnaire (Kline, 2011). Skewness and kurtosis values were below |3| and |10|, respectively, suggesting no severe deviations were observed from the normal distribution, which therefore followed the appropriateness of using parametric procedures. The *t*-test for independent samples was performed to determine differences between 2009 and 2020 valorisation of principles, and professional experience groups. Results were reported at a $p \leq 0.05$ significance level.

Results

Psychologists of both 2009 and 2020 group highly valued the five general principles. Statistically significant differences were found when comparing the levels of valorisation of these principles between the groups. Table 1 displays significant differences in Competence, Responsibility, Integrity and Beneficence and non-maleficence principles [$(t_{(3379)}=5.02, p=0.00)$, $(t_{(3359)}=3.12, p=0.00)$, $(t_{(3564)}=-3.55, p=0.00)$, $(t_{(2936)}=-3.28, p=0.00)$]. As shown in Table 1, Competence and Responsibility decreased after 11 years, and Integrity and Beneficence and non-maleficence increased from 2009 to 2020.

Table 1

Comparison by year: Means, standard deviation, and t-test (n=3566)

Ethical principles	2009 (n=1385)		2020 (n=2181)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Respect for people's rights and dignity	4.62	0.60	4.60	0.69	0.96	0.33
Competence	4.77	0.49	4.68	0.62	5.02	0.00
Responsibility	4.75	0.48	4.70	0.59	3.12	0.00
Integrity	4.44	0.67	4.52	0.67	-3.55	0.00
Beneficence and non-maleficence	4.55	0.67	4.62	0.67	-3.28	0.00

We also found statistically significant differences between the groups regarding the analysis of the valorisation of ethical principles according to the professional experience. Table 2 compared the results of psychologists with less than six years of experience and those with over 10 years of professional experience. We found statistically significant differences in the principles: Respect for people's rights and dignity, Integrity, and Beneficence and non-maleficence [($t_{(3008)}=-2.84$, $p=0.00$), ($t_{(3022)}=-2.03$, $p=0.04$), ($t_{(3027)}=-4.70$, $p=0.00$)]. Psychologists with more experience valued these principles more than those with lesser years of experience (Table 2).

Table 2

Comparison by experience: Means, standard deviation, and t-test (n=3030)

Ethical principles	Less than 6 years (n=1592)		More than 10 years (n=1438)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Respect for people's rights and dignity	4.57	0.67	4.64	0.66	-2.84	0.00
Competence	4.70	0.58	4.71	0.59	-0.11	0.90
Responsibility	4.70	0.57	4.74	0.55	-1.74	0.08
Integrity	4.47	0.69	4.52	0.65	-2.03	0.04
Beneficence and non-maleficence	4.54	0.71	4.65	0.64	-4.70	0.00

Discussion

Approximately 11 years have passed between the analysis of the first and the second questionnaires, which has focused on the ethical principles of the ethics code of the Order of Portuguese Psychologists. Within the last decade, a great evolution has been recorded on Psychology in Portugal. In 2009, approximately 12200 psychologists were registered in the Order of Portuguese Psychologists. However, in 2020, the number of registered psychologists increased to 23650 (Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses, 2020). In Portugal, registration is mandatory to practice the profession, and the psychology should have five years of academic training and one year of professional training to access the Order. An increase in the number of registered psychologists by almost 100% was because not all psychologists registered in the Order at the time of its creation. Moreover, with a rise in the number of professional psychologists, members of the Order also increase. This increase in the number of registered psychologists may explain the difference in sample sizes. In both samples, most participants were women. Moreover, the results show an increase in the professional experience of psychologists over the years.

In 2009, more experienced psychologists expressed a higher valuation of ethical principles, highlighting that experience contributed to a higher quality of professional practice (Ricou et al., 2019). The authors found that the lowest valuation of integrity principle was noted when compared to the other ethical principles (Ricou et al., 2019). Integrity is a principle that aims to promote the

valorisation of all principles and enhance a clearer professional identity. According to Ricou et al. (2019), lack of organisation of the profession accounts for lower integrity during the early years of its formation. At the time of its formation, no formalised common principles is in practice, and psychologists seemed not to identify closely with the professional class. It is assumed that they linked to the schools they graduated from and theoretical models used to practice their professions. The results obtained after 11 years showed an increase in the valuation of the integrity principle. This result also shows a change in professional integrity, with which the Order of Portuguese Psychologists has probably contributed. Ricou et al. (2019) suggest that re-staging the study is crucial, and future studies should analyse whether there is any change in the valuation of the integrity principle and the creation of the Order of Portuguese Psychologists. This hypothesis seems to have been verified in this research.

The creation of the Order of Portuguese Psychologists seems to have improved the Psychology profession in Portugal. The profession has been well organised. For example, the specialities in psychology and the ethics code based on guiding principles for the practice of psychology have been created. Seitz and O'Neill (1996) referred to the creation of a code of ethics as the transition from a technical activity to a profession. The existence of an ethics code aims to promote the professional brand to the public, through the recognition of professional values, its good practices and limitations (Ricou et al., 2017).

In the 2020 survey, changes in the valorisation of ethical principles are noted based on the experience. In 2009, competence was one of the principles valued by most psychologists, the same was not shown 11 years later. As argued by Ricou et al. (2019), overvaluing competence is a way to seek security in the professional practice without a professional organisation representing them, psychologists might feel not represented in their practice. Therefore, they could seek security in their technical training to improve their competence. With the growth in the professional identity, through the creation of the Psychologists' Order and peer training, psychologists may gain confidence in psychological practice.

The results of the 2020 study seem to indicate a greater balance in the valuation of the ethical principles of psychology in Portugal. There was an increase in the valuation of the principles of integrity and beneficence and non-maleficence (the less valued in 2009) and a decrease in the valuation of responsibility and competence (the most valued in 2009). According to the principles model of Beauchamp and Childress, principles do not have a hierarchy among themselves but should be valued according to each case (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). These results indicate that Portuguese psychologists, after 11 years, have more confidence in their practice and identity, thereby valuing their principles in a more balanced way. This seems to be a good indicator for a practice guided by ethical principles.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Order of Portuguese Psychologists for support us with the data collection.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors contribution

Conceptualization: MR, SM, ES; Methodology: MR, SM; Data curation: MR; Investigation: MR, SM, ES; Resources: MR, SM; Formal analysis: MR, SM; Statistical analysis: SM; Writing – Original draft: MR, SM; Writing – Review and edit: MR, SM, ES.

All the authors read and approved the final manuscript.

References

- Bairrão, J. (1968). O ensino da psicologia em Portugal: Situação e perspectiva. *Análise Social*, 6(22/24), 730-762. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41008322>
- Beauchamp, T. L., & Childress, J. F. (2001). *Principles of biomedical ethics* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Coelho, V., Brás, P., Pereira, L., & Amaro, A. (2012). Um país de psicólogos?: Análise da formação universitária em psicologia em Portugal. *PSIS21 – Revista Oficial da Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses*, 2, 14-15.
- Kline, R. (2011). *Principles and practice of structural equation modeling* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Lei n.º 57/2008, de 4 de setembro [Cria a Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses e aprova o seu Estatuto]. *Diário da República*, 1.ª série (171), 6211-6220. <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/57-2008-453992>
- Nigel, K. (2018). The general data protection regulation. *Faculty Dental Journal*, 9(2), 54-57. <https://doi.org/10.1308/rcsfjd.2018.54>
- Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses. (2020). *Relatório e contas*. https://www.bportugal.pt/sites/default/files/anexos/documentos-relacionados/ft0007_d180730_h112603-0007-cam-201712-cai.pdf
- Regulamento n.º 258/2011, de 20 de abril [Código Deontológico da Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses]. *Diário da República*, 2.ª série (78), 17931-17936. <https://dre.pt/application/conteudo/870174>
- Regulamento n.º 898/2024, de 14 de agosto [Aprova o Código Deontológico da Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses]. *Diário da República* 2.ª série (157), 1-22. <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/regulamento/898-2024-877061574>
- Ricou, M. (2011). *A ética e a deontologia no exercício da psicologia* [Tese de doutoramento em Psicologia, Faculdade de Psicologia e Ciências da Educação da Universidade de Coimbra]. Repositório Científico da Universidade de Coimbra. <http://hdl.handle.net/10316/20349>
- Ricou, M., Sá, E., & Nunes, R. (2017). The ethical principles of the Portuguese psychologists: A universal dimension. *The Journal of Medicine & Philosophy*, 42(2), 199-213. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jmp/jhw066>
- Ricou, M., Sá, E., & Nunes, R. (2019). The ethical principles of the Portuguese psychologists: An empirical approach. *The Journal of Medicine & Philosophy*, 44(1), 109-131. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jmp/jhy036>
- Seitz, J., & O'Neill, P. (1996). Ethical decision-making and the code of ethics of the Canadian Psychological Association. *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie Canadienne*, 37(1), 23-30. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0708-5591.37.1.23>

Os princípios éticos dos psicólogos portugueses: Uma avaliação passados onze anos

Resumo: Várias mudanças foram sendo implementadas na profissão de psicólogo com a criação da Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses. Uma das mais importantes foi o estabelecimento de um conjunto de princípios éticos que visam orientar a prática psicológica. Onze anos após o seu estabelecimento e

considerando as várias alterações na prática profissional da Psicologia em Portugal, este estudo pretende analisar se houve alterações na valorização dos princípios éticos por parte dos psicólogos portugueses. Deste modo, foram comparados dados de 2009 e 2020. Numa escala de 1 a 5, os psicólogos portugueses atribuíram importância a cada princípio geral. Constatou-se que os princípios da Competência e da Responsabilidade diminuíram na importância relativa atribuída, após 11 anos, quando comparados com a Integridade e a Beneficência e Não Maleficência. Também se verificou que psicólogos com mais experiência atribuem maior importância relativa aos princípios do Respeito pela dignidade e direitos das pessoas, Integridade e Beneficência e Não Maleficência quando comparados com profissionais com menos anos de experiência. A criação da Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses e a existência de um código deontológico parecem ter contribuído para o fortalecimento da identidade profissional.

Palavras-chave: Psicologia, Código deontológico, Princípios éticos, Prática profissional.

Submitted: 18/11/2021

Accepted: 23/10/2024