NON – ETHICAL ACTIONS IN UNIVERSITY LIFE

Anita Cecilia Hirsch - Adler, National Autonomous University of Mexico

Abstract

Throughout the research work about professional ethics being carried out since 2003, in the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), with the main actors of the masters and doctor in philosophy levels: students, professors and program coordinators, we have detected serious critiques regarding non-ethical actions observed in university life. We applied a questionnaire to postgraduate students and professors, in order to understand the situation of professional ethics in the university. An interview guide was applied to the 40 coordinators of the graduate programs in UNAM. We have the description and analysis of all the information and results obtained. For the paper, the detection and classification of non-ethical ethical behavior described by students, professors and program coordinators will be emphasized. Also, the non ethical actions detected and classified at the Autonomous University of Yucatan (in Mexico), in their own research project on professional ethics among graduate students and professors, will also be presented.

Key Words: Non Ethical Actions, Graduate Professors, Coordinators of Graduate Programs, Graduate Students, Mexico

I. **The Research Project on Professional Ethics**

The *Research Project on Professional Ethics* of UNAM was centered, in the first phase, on the construction of the theoretical framework; the construction of a state of knowledge about this theme in Mexico; interviews with professors of some Spanish universities; the design of a questionnaire consisting of the open question: *Which are the five main features of "being a good professional?";* and an attitude scale about professional ethics and its application to graduate students in Spain and in the 40 graduate programs in UNAM.

In the second phase, we applied the same instrument to a sample of professors in UNAM. The questionnaire for the professors included other open and closed questions. In this second phase we also organized the *Inter-university Project about Professional Ethics*, with 14 other universities in Mexico. One of these universities is the Autonomous University of Yucatan. For this paper we selected some of the results obtained in this university because the research group included a very interesting question about non-ethical problems mentioned by the graduate students about themselves and in relation to their professors. In the third and last phase, we applied in UNAM an interview guide to the forty program coordinators. With all these elements we selected the answers given by professors, program coordinators and students about ethical problems and dilemmas in the two Mexican

universities.

II. Basic Conditions that Influence in Professional Ethical Decisions

A very significant theme - which is part of professional ethics theory - relates to the responsibility that professionals have, not only when they work for themselves, but specifically when they are part of public and private organizations. More and more professionals are working in institutions and organizations.

Dr. Augusto Hortal, from the Pontifical University of Comillas in Madrid - Spain (2002:55-86), considers that almost every profession is exposed to three mediations: technical, economical and organizational.

The technical mediation refers to the huge influence that the expansion of technology has at a world level. Some of the consequences for professionals are that they prefer to design goals and tasks that already have developed techniques; to set only those goals and tasks for which techniques have already been developed; and to inhibit the ethical responsibility of the subjects, allowing it to dilute in the instruments and the procedures. Technical progress has not produced a parallel ethical development in the professional fields.

Economic mediation refers to the fact that professionals have to work with limited resources and within margins that ensure the economic viability of the companies and organizations where they work. The scarcity of jobs and the lack of work security, however, can represent a big obstacle when making ethical decisions.

The institutional and organizational mediation refers, primarily, to the behavior of professionals within institutional frames, which can limit the exercise of their profession. If the institutions behave in an ethical manner, the professional will have the opportunity to work in a responsible way; if they don't behave ethically, the professional will face obstacles to make important decisions of an ethical nature. In the most extreme cases, the professional might opt to change his place in the labor market.

Elliot Freidson (2003:81) introduces a complementary idea: he considers that, in a near future, the action and competency world of each profession can change as a consequence of the reassignment of many tasks in the processes of globalization and industrial development. Some tasks that are today the responsibility of professionals could be performed tomorrow by less qualified individuals. The risk exists that many professionals will be transformed into technical workers with special privileges.

III. Non Ethical Behavior Mentioned by Graduate Professors, Program Coordinators and Graduate Students

Professors
1. As part of the answers given to the open question "Do you consider that the subject of professional ethics should be included in the curriculum for all students?", applied to a sample of 704 professors of graduate studies in UNAM, one of the categories (based on the answers) had to do with the "need to eradicate bad practices." This includes non-ethical behavior related to: corruption, bribes, abuse of trust, selfishness, professional envy, nepotism, abuse of power, conflict of interests, lack of ethics of other colleagues, problems of society due to lack of values, violence, individualistic model, social and professional decay, professional failure, fraud, and plagiarism.
2. Answers of graduate studies professors of UNAM to two other open questions: the

values that the university should promote in the students and the values that the university should promote in the professors. In both cases, the highest value was given to Honesty. Other values with high percentage were: Social Commitment, Responsibility, Discipline, and Respect.

Program Coordinators
One of the questions of the interview guide applied to the 40 program coordinators of UNAM referred directly to ethical dilemmas. The answers were grouped under two headings: *Problems* and *Ethical Dilemmas.*

Main Problems:
1. Competitiveness and individualism are encouraged in the training of students and in the academic work of professors and researchers -mainly because high standards are sought, which promotes competitiveness-, for the need of graduates to find good jobs, and because of the evaluation of researchers within the university and in other external institutions, such as the National System of Researchers, in Mexico. Team play is not often encouraged.
2. The training in professional ethics and social service are not promoted in all graduate studies programs as explicit goals.
3. Different social situations have influence on ethical problems, such as: loss of values in society, emotional issues, and the absence of an ethical education in family environments and in previous levels of education.
4. There are complaints of students regarding harassment by professors.

Ethical Dilemmas:
1. Not doing the job.
2. Lack of knowledge.
3. Making wrong decisions as a result of pressure; among them: ignoring problems that have been detected and that can have serious consequences in the future.
4. Put the interests of the employer ahead of anything else.
5. Give priority to issues of power and political relations.
6. Fail to inform the occurrence of falsifications.
7. Dilemmas of professional honesty in researchers, such as: publishing false results, not following a protocol, not acknowledging the mistakes made, not recognizing that some times the results are not positive, and not respecting what was actually discovered.
8. Plagiarism of bibliographical sources and authors.
9. Pressure to publish, which leads to publish many but not necessarily good papers and adding authors that did not participate in the papers.
10. Inadequate use of economic resources and dishonesty.
11. How to handle the information obtained during research work or that is obtained in the process of serving the direct or indirect beneficiaries of the profession (conflicts and delinquent acts, as well as acts that can harm them.)
12. Decision making problems regarding the subjects of research and the management of animals and the environment.
13. Not respecting the rule of confidentiality.
14. How does one behave in a corrupt society?
15. Pressures linked to teaching, such as: give a passing grade to incompetent students from private universities; present the material outlined in the curriculum or syllabus without

evaluating if the learning goals were achieved; and how to evaluate students, combining their efforts in class with the results obtained in exams.

Graduate Students
The answers come from a sample of 508 masters programs' students in the Autonomous University of Yucatán (UADY).

a. Unethical behavior of students
UADY classified the diverse and multiple answers under eleven categories:
1. Plagiarism
2. Lack of team work spirit.
3. Show negative values (be opportunistic, irresponsible, late, dishonest, selfish, show no solidarity, be disrespectful, untruthful, have no discipline, be inhuman, indiscrete, insecure, impatient, envious, disloyal, arrogant and intolerant.)
4. Copy the work of others or cheat.
5. Ethical problems in their relation with others.
6. Ethical problems in the classroom.
7. Ethical problems in their relationship with professors.
8. Individualism.
9. Ethical problems related to the profession.
10. Lack of ethical principles.
11. Ethical problems related to research work.

b. Unethical behavior of professors in the opinion of graduate students
UADY classified the answers into eight categories:
1. Plagiarism
2. Exhibiting negative values.
3. Ethical problems in the relationship of the professors with each other and with others.
4. Shaw ethical problems in their teaching work.
5. Ethical problems in their relationship with students.
6. Ethical problems linked to the profession.
7. Lack of ethical principles, and
8. Ethical problems related to research work.

IV. Conclusions
The subjects of this research: graduate professors, coordinators of graduate studies and graduate students, point out numerous problems and ethical dilemma. Corruption and dishonesty are the central topics. The problems of individualism and competing against others - that limit team work - are also mentioned frequently.
From the three main aspects that influence professional work, mentioned in the theory of professional ethics (technical, economical and organizational), two of them stand out in the answers of the graduate studies coordinators: the economic and the organizational. Regarding the economical influence, the principal reason is the competition among the students that have concluded their studies to find good jobs and the lack of work stability, which are considered to limit their capacity to make ethical decisions. With respect to organizational influences, it was stated that professionals put the interests of their

employers ahead their own, both in public and private organizations; which strongly undermines their ethical behavior.

The ethical problems linked with the processes and results of research and with teaching, pointed out by coordinators of the graduate programs in UNAM and the students of UADY, turned out to be quite interesting.

The problems presented don't steam only from the university environment; they also pertain to society in general, family, and previous levels of education. The answers are not centered only on cognitive aspects; emotional problems are also expressed.

Most of the themes mentioned are common to the three subjects of this research work.

V. Bibliographical References

Canto, P. and N. Benois (2009); "The Study about Professional Ethics in Graduate Students in a Public University", in: Canto, P. (coordinator) *Ethics in the University: Concepts and Approaches.* Merida, Mexico, Unas Letras Industria Editorial (pp. 187 – 239).

Freidson, E. (2003); "The Soul of Professionalism", in: Sánchez, M.; Sáez, J. and Svensson, L., *Sociology of Professions. Past, Present and Future*. Murcia – Spain: Diego Marín Librero-Editor (pp. 67 – 91).

Hortal, A. (2002); *General Professional Ethics.* Bilbao, España: Desclée De Brouwer, S. A. (pp. 55 – 86).

PAGE

PAGE 1