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Ethics in Psychology

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS
AND CASES

ETHICS IN PSYCHOLOGY

Professional Standards and Cases

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We owe gratitude to our colleagues and mentors who have inspired, encouraged, and guided us throughout the years. With much affection and appreciation, we dedicate this book to Brenda Allen, Stuart Cook, Fred McKinney, Freda Rebelsky, and M. Brewster Smith.

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ETHICS IN PSYCHOLOGY

Foreword

Psychologists are increasing in number and in the variety of roles and functions that they fill in our society. Almost 60,000 members now belong to the American Psychological Association—a doubling in the last 14 years.

The scope of psychology is expanding at what sometimes seems to be an exponential fashion. Psychologists continue to fill their rather traditional roles as teachers, researchers, diagnosticians, therapists, measurement experts, curriculum designers, and so forth. The number of psychologists in these traditional roles is increasing. In addition, new and more uncharted roles for psychologists also exist in health maintenance organizations (HMOs), in changing health-related behaviors in general medical settings, in mental health prevention and consultation, as expert witnesses in the courtroom, as consultants to management, and so on. The sheer size of the psychological enterprise has thrust many psychologists into management roles where they experience new and different pressures and expectations. Perhaps the most extraordinary growth has been in the independent practice of psychology on both a full- and part-time basis.

Notwithstanding the changes in their field in both size and scope, psychologists have insisted on maintaining and enforcing a code of ethics for all psychologists, especially those psychologists who are either members of the American Psychological Association or who are licensed by a state or provincial licensing board that insists that its licensees adhere to such a code. Although this code, officially adopted by the American Psychological Association, is brief and easy to read, its application in specific situations is often difficult; thus many of the implicit and necessary ethical dilemmas are

left for the individual psychologist to resolve. Until the publication of this volume, no comprehensive guide to the understanding and application of the code existed, either for teaching purposes or for use by the individual psychologist in particular situations. Consequently, the need that this book serves is a large and important one. There could be no more appropriate people to write such a volume than Patricia Keith-Spiegel and Gerald Koocher. Both of them are distinguished psychologists with substantial academic and writing credentials; both are former members of the American Psychological Association's Ethics Committee; and both have a commitment and depth of understanding in this area that has made this book the contribution to the field that it is.

Leonard D. Goodstein

Preface

*To be good is noble, but to teach others to
be good is nobler—and less trouble.*

Mark Twain

WHY ETHICS NOW?

The general use definition of ethics refers to a set of guidelines that provide directions for conduct. Students and professionals alike may react to this topic with groans and yawns since heated diatribes or prissy, rigid moralizing are often associated with the term “ethics.”

Ethics study, however, has burgeoned in recent years, perhaps reflecting the complexities of today’s world. As a pluralistic and mobile “nation of strangers,” the availability of trusted advisors has diminished. It is increasingly difficult to find guideposts in a fast-changing world, yet moral guidance seems to be needed most during confusing times. We may react by turning inward and searching for inner fulfillment or self-pleasure, but we may also remain unaware that others may be harmed by a personal philosophy of “do whatever feels good or right.” Cultural relativism occasionally results in unstable or feeble ethical values, which are no more comforting than absolutist doctrines that may be anachronistic or inappropriate in a particular situation.

Despite today’s uncertainties, ethical guidelines are essential to maintaining the integrity and cohesiveness of a profession. The growing distrust of professionals and their potential misuse of power by the general public has also forced a more careful self-examination of our conduct. Students and professionals alike are increasingly eager for the clear signposts that indicate appropriate and inappropriate conduct under various conditions.

PURPOSE AND GOALS OF THE BOOK

Our primary purpose is to present the full range of contemporary ethical issues in psychology as not only relevant and intriguing, but also as integral and unavoidable aspects of the professional role of a psychologist. Regardless of one's training specialty or the work setting, ethical dilemmas will arise—probably with some regularity—and action decisions must be made. By providing an awareness of the ethical standards of the profession, and by revealing how they apply to specific situations, we hope to achieve a useful and practical guide.

After serving for many years on ethics committees, we began to realize that many people who are already functioning as fully trained psychologists are not as well attuned to the expectations for ethical conduct and how the profession monitors itself as they could be. We also observed that inquiries to ethics committees or calls for consultation on ethical matters often arrive after-the-fact and that the resolution primarily involves reactive or remedial, rather than preventative, steps. Consequently, this book sensitizes readers to the monitoring and redress mechanisms available when ethical violations occur, and it also provides information and decision-making strategies that will assist in avoiding or preventing ethical misconduct.

Nonetheless, we cannot provide solutions to every conceivable ethical problem that might arise in psychology practice, research, or teaching. Many specific situations are, in fact, so complicated that no ethics code, policy guideline, or law can deftly point the way to a satisfactory and "correct" resolution. In some situations, for example, one ethical principle may seem to be pitted *against* another, or upholding an ethical principle may be at variance with a legal requirement, leaving the psychologist dangling somewhere in the middle. Moreover, the discipline of psychology in particular, as well as our society in general, is constantly emerging and changing, which causes profound ethical dilemmas that neither the ethics code nor the profession is fully equipped to handle. Rapid computerization, new and untested therapeutic techniques, changing consent procedures, and the increasing involvement of psychology with the mass media are only a few of the phenomena that have yet to be fully explored in terms of ethical implications. We do assume, however, that the more information and sensitization to issues made available to psychologists or psychologists in training, the better they will be able to sort out even the most complex ethical problems and make the best possible professional judgment.

AN EXPLANATION OF SOME SPECIFIC FEATURES OF THIS BOOK

This book is developed around the most recent version of the ethics code of the American Psychological Association, *Ethical Principles of Psychologists* (1981). This code is cited extensively throughout the text and is reproduced, in its entirety, as Appendix A.* We refer to it simply as the *Ethical Principles* in the text. Or, when we wish to refer parenthetically to a *specific* principle or

*The *Ethical Principles*, copyright © 1981 by the American Psychological Association, are reprinted in Appendix A by permission of APA.

subprinciple, we designate that as *EP* followed by the corresponding number and letter of the principle and subprinciple: for example, *EP: 6a* refers to Principle 6 (Client Welfare) of the ethics code and subsection *a* of that principle dealing with dual-role relationships and exploitation. This notation makes it easy for the reader to look up the exact wording of the code relevant to the text discussion.

Because ethical problems often overlap or cluster around several principles, it is difficult to create neat piles of material from which to develop discrete chapters. Whereas each chapter has a specific focus, some cross-referencing was necessary to inform readers whether additional information about a particular topic could be found in another chapter. Furthermore, it was not possible to cover every conceivable ethical situation that psychologists might face in a single volume. The omission of specific topics, however, does not mean they are unimportant, and the neglect of some forms of conduct does not mean that such behaviors are implicitly condoned.

We use case vignettes as a way to illustrate violations of APA's *Ethical Principles* and other ethical dilemmas. Our case examples are adapted either from ethics committees' case files or from actual incidents known to us. We have disguised the material in a variety of ways, such as through combining the features of one case with another, switching the sex of one or more principals, or altering contexts in which the activity occurred. It should also be noted that we often "trimmed" cases by focusing on only one aspect of the charge or violation. In fact, most cases brought to the attention of ethics committees involve charges of violating two or more *Ethical Principles*. A single incident of misconduct that violates five or six principles and subprinciples of the *Ethical Principles* is not an uncommon occurrence.

We decided to avoid routine methods of designating the principal characters in our case material (e.g., "Dr. A." or "the client"), but we also wanted to reduce the risk of using bogus names that might correspond to those of real people. Hence, most of our pseudonyms are highly contrived. Nevertheless, it was *not* our intent to trivialize the seriousness of the matters under discussion, but rather to enhance interest and recall of specific cases. Any resulting resemblance between the names of our characters and those of actual people is purely coincidental. The names used in particular cases, however, do *not* even remotely resemble the names of the actual principals.

In a few instances, we have cited cases that are in the public domain because of associated litigation. These cases use the real names of the principals and are accompanied in the text by citation of the relevant law or public source.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A book aspiring to provide appropriate decisions and actions when ethical dilemmas arise in professional activity carries a heavy responsibility. We felt obligated to submit our chapters to extensive external review by experts in specific topic areas. We are deeply indebted to our reviewers for their invaluable assistance in ensuring the accuracy and integrity of our book. Our appreciation is extended to the following people:

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We must note that reviewers may not necessarily endorse the entire content of the book or even the particular chapter reviewed. Our colleagues did not always agree with us or among themselves, leaving the authors with the final content decisions for which we assume full responsibility.

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About The Authors

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Current Status of APA Ethics Code [February, 1991]

This book is based on the 1981 version of the *Ethical Principles for Psychologists*, the ethics code of the American Psychological Association. In response to pressure from the Federal Trade Commission, the Board of Directors of the American Psychological Association declared an emergency on June 2, 1989 and acted in place of the Council of Representatives to rescind several provisions of the code. A copy of the amended *Ethical Principles* was published in the August, 1989 issue of the *American Psychologist*, 45, 557-563. Unfortunately, no commentary or explanation for the changes accompanied the publication leaving some readers confused about exactly what had been changed and why.

The changes involve no added text, but rather *deletions* from Principles 4, 6, and 7. The following items from Principle 4 have been rescinded: 4. b. v; 4 b vi; 4 b vii; 4. b. viii. The phrase, "they neither give nor receive any remuneration for referring clients from professional services" has been rescinded from Principle 7. b. and the phrase "If a person is receiving similar services from another professional, psychologists do not offer their own services directly to such a person." Although the deliberations were complicated, the primary reasoning behind rescinding these portions of the code was not because the points have no ethical relevance, but rather because they may constitute restraint of trade. Keith-Spiegel and Koocher, however, continue to stand behind their analysis of the ethical dilemmas related to the rescinded sections and phrases.

The rest of the code currently in force is the same as the version used in this textbook. Whereas, the American Psychological Association is in the process of substantially revising its ethics code, the 1989 version does not constitute that major revision. Hence, the analyses and references to the APA code in this book are valid until the major revision is completed and approved by the APA Council of Representatives. This is not likely to occur before mid-1992 at the earliest.

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