

ETHICAL CODE FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

Changing issues and ethics: Some general comments

The American Psychological Association revised its ethical code three times in ten years. This is indicative of the difficulty and complexity of formulating an ethical code. It also suggests the desirability of constant revision of a code of ethics in a rapidly changing world. Issues unheard of today may be highly relevant in a few years time.

At this point, it may be useful to consider the nature of some of the difficulties related to devising a code of ethics. First, developments in medical technology, such as psychosurgery and test-tube pregnancy give rise to new ethical issues, also in the field of psychology.

Second, it is often easier to formulate ethical principles than to apply them, especially when two principles conflict, for example, when the respect for a person's autonomy conflicts with the principle of concern for the well-being of a person who is judged to be of limited competence, for whatever reason.

Third, it is difficult to define principles which are general enough to be relevant to all areas of applied psychology, but which nonetheless allow for more specific interpretation and application in regard to various specialised categories of psychology. (A criterion for the inclusion or exclusion of a category for registration could be the extent to which it is able to satisfy the general ethical principles for psychologists.)

Fourth, in view of the foregoing a shift in emphasis in the ethical code could be considered so that, as Kitchener (1984) proposes, the focus should shift from ethical issues to ethical decision-making.

Basic assumptions

A basic philosophy of man underlies any formulation of ethical principles. The psychologist's view of man is reflected in respect for the dignity and worth of a person, irrespective of race, language, economic status, sex or creed.

The fundamental ideals and values to which psychologists subscribe can be briefly summarised as follows:

- (i) Psychologists are committed to the pursuit of knowledge and scientific endeavour which will enhance the understanding of themselves, of others and of man's environment and its effect upon him.
- (ii) Psychologists are committed to the promotion of human welfare and to the use of their knowledge and skills to this end.
- (iii) Psychologists are committed to the freedom to pursue the search for knowledge, and to communicate their findings and views objectively. They accept the responsibilities such freedom brings.
- (iv) Psychologists accept three basic premises: (a) that in some respects all people are alike, thus recognising their common humanity; (b) that in some respects certain people are alike, thus recognising differences between groups, such as age, sex, ethnic groups; (c) that in some respects each individual is unique.

Principle 1 : Professional responsibility

General

The worth of a profession is measured by its contribution to the welfare of man. Psychology seeks to further our knowledge of man and to better his condition by applying this knowledge to the solution of human problems. But a profession serves mankind only in an abstract sense; upon each individual psychologist rests the real responsibility for service.

In pursuing their profession, psychologists should maintain the highest standards of the profession, use their knowledge and skills appropriately and accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

All psychologists are required to know and accept the general ethical principles laid down by the Professional Board for Psychology of the South African Medical and Dental Council, as well as the ethical issues and guidelines specific to their registration category.

Specific

- (i) Psychologists bear a heavy social responsibility because their recommendations and professional actions may alter the lives and welfare of others. They should, therefore, be alert to personal, social, organizational, financial, and political situations and pressures which might lead to the misuse of their knowledge, influence or skills.
- (ii) As psychologists their first responsibility is to their profession and its ethical code. They need to clarify this in advance with all persons, agencies and institutions they serve to avoid conflict of interests - be this in regard to the sharing and utilization of research findings, the dissemination of knowledge or the use of their skills.
- (iii) As scientists, psychologists are responsible for the specific planning, conducting and reporting of their research. They must consider the ethical acceptability of a research project with due regard for the dignity, well-being and rights of the subjects concerned. They have the responsibility to avoid, prevent and counter the distortion and misuse of their findings.
- (iv) As practitioners, psychologists have the responsibility to serve the welfare and best interests of the people and groups with whom they work. They have a dual responsibility: to their clients and to the broader society in which they work.
- (v) As teachers, psychologists have the primary responsibility to help others acquire knowledge and skills, to maintain the highest standards of scholarship by presenting psychological information objectively, fully and accurately and to convey knowledge of, and encourage awareness of ethical issues relating to different areas of psychology.

- (vi) Psychologists take credit only for work they have actually done and acknowledge contributions by others in regard to publications and research.

Principle 2 : Competence

General

Psychologists are committed to the maintenance of high standards of competence in the interest of the people they serve and of the profession as a whole. Psychologists recognize the limitations of their competence and make every effort to stay abreast of new developments in their field.

Specific

- (i) Psychologists accurately present their qualifications, training and experience. They claim as evidence of educational qualifications only those degrees obtained from recognized academic departments of psychology. As evidence of professional training they claim as evidence only such training as is recognized by the Professional Board of Psychology of the South African Medical and Dental Council.
- (ii) It is unethical to claim or imply professional qualifications that exceed those one has actually attained. Professional skill in one field should not be used to claim or imply competence in an unrelated field. Membership of the Psychological Association should not be claimed as evidence of competence since the Association cannot confer registration.
- (iii) A psychologist performs his/her duties on the basis of careful preparation, be it as researcher, teacher, or therapist and recognizes the continuing need for reappraisal and education of knowledge and skills.
- (iv) Psychologists are aware of personal factors and problems which may interfere with their objectivity and professional competence, and refrain from activities in which personal factors may result in a lack of impartiality and in incompetence. If necessary, they seek professional help to determine if their activities should be suspended, terminated or limited because of the intrusion of personal factors and problem.

Principle 3 : Moral and legal standards

General

Regarding their own behaviour, psychologists are sensitive to prevailing community standards and to the possible impact that conformity to or deviation from these standards may have upon the quality of their performance as psychologists. Psychologists are also aware of the possible impact of their public behaviour upon the status and reputation of their profession.

Specific

- (i) When dealing with topics or methods that may give offence, they recognize and respect different attitudes and beliefs held by others.
- (ii) Psychologists avoid any action that will violate or diminish the legal and civil rights of clients or others who may be affected by their actions.

Principle 4 : Confidentiality

General

Psychologists have a primary obligation to respect the confidentiality of information obtained from persons in the course of their work as psychologists. They reveal such information to others only with the consent of the person or the person's legal representative, except in those unusual circumstances in which not to do so would result in clear danger to the person or others. Where appropriate, psychologists inform their clients of the legal limits of confidentiality.

Specific

- (i) Psychologists treat the information gained in the course of research as confidential and ensure that the anonymity of subjects is preserved.
- (ii) Psychologists who present personal information obtained during the course of professional work in writings, lectures, or other public forums either obtain adequate prior consent to do so or adequately disguise all identifying information.
- (iii) Information obtained in clinical or consulting relationships, or evaluative data concerning children, students, employees, and others, is discussed only for professional purposes and only with persons clearly concerned with the case. Written and oral reports present only data relevant to the purposes of the evaluation, and every effort is made to avoid undue invasion of privacy.
- (iv) When working with minors or other persons who are unable to give voluntary, informed consent, psychologists take special care to protect the best interests of such persons.

Principle 5 : Informed consent

General

Psychologists respect the autonomy of all people who may be affected by them in the exercise of their professional roles. They avoid the use of coercion in treatment and assessment or when involving others in research projects and, as far as possible, encourage joint decision-making regarding procedures to be adopted.

Specific

- (i) Psychologists clearly inform clients of the purpose and nature of an evaluative, treatment, educational, or training procedure, and the purpose of research. They acknowledge that clients, students or participants in research, have freedom of choice with regard to participation.
- (ii) If the methodological requirements of a study necessitate concealment or deception, the reasons for this should be explained to the participant.

Principle 6 : Welfare of client

General

Psychologists respect the integrity and protect the welfare of the people and groups with whom they work.

Specific

- (i) Psychologists make every effort to avoid dual relationships that could impair their professional judgement, increase the risk of exploitation or disadvantage the client. Examples of such relationships include, but are not limited to, research with and treatment of employees, students, supervisors, close friends, or relatives. Sexual intimacies with clients are unethical.
- (ii) When a psychologist agrees to provide services to a client at the request of a third party, he assumes the responsibility of explaining the nature of the professional relationships to all parties.
- (iii) If the demands of an organization employing psychologists require them to violate any of the Ethical Principles, a psychologist must explain the nature of the conflict between the demands and these principles to all concerned and take decisions in accordance with ethical principles.
- (iv) Fees charged by psychologists should be established with due consideration of the welfare of all concerned, and should be stated in advance. Psychologists neither give nor receive any remuneration for referring clients for professional services.
- (v) Psychologists terminate a clinical or consulting relationship when it is reasonably clear that the client is not benefitting from it. They offer to help the client find alternative or additional sources of assistance when necessary.
- (vi) Psychologists make every effort to maintain the security of tests and other assessment techniques. They strive to ensure the appropriate use of assessment techniques by authorized others.
- (vii) Psychologists shall not apply drugs or medicines in the treatment of a person.