Ethics in Psychology

Ethics is traditionally a branch of philosophy that deals with moral problems and moral judgments. White (1988) defines ethics as the evaluation of human actions. In doing so, we evaluate behavior as “right” or “wrong,” “good” or “bad,” “acceptable” or “unacceptable” according to the perspective of a moral principle or ethical guideline. In this book we approach professional ethics and standards from a practical perspective, applying some core ethical principles to situations presented in the course of the work that psychologists do. Ethics codes are almost as old as recorded history, with the Hippocratic oath (written about 400 B.C.) the first profession-generated code of ethics (Sinclair, Simon, & Pettitör, 1996). We apply the formal ethical guidelines and professional standards, primarily the ethics code of the American Psychological Association (APA, 1992), although we sometimes take issue with some of its provisions. The complete APA code can be found in appendix A. We cite it whenever we discuss a specific ethical principle (designated EP, followed by the appropriate letter) or ethical standard (designated ES, followed by the appropriate number). The reader may refer to the wording directly.

Ethics and Risk Management

A “risk management” approach to ethics has become popular in recent years as a result of the increasing number of complaints and lawsuits against psychologists. This approach involves taking as many steps as possible to avoid being placed in precarious ethical or legal circumstances. The focus of risk management is to assist practitioners in protecting themselves against the hazards of modern-day professional practice (see Bennett, Bryant, VandenBos, & Greenwood, 1990; Gottlieb, 1994; Stromberg et al., 1988). The key to effective risk management involves scrupulously upholding the tenets of relevant laws, policies, professional standards, and ethics codes.

Whereas the practice of defensive ethics makes good sense in a litigious society, it may also insidiously create the mind-set that consumers of services are always out to “get” psychologists. We take the position that the rationale for being an ethically aware and sensitive psychologist is not solely for self-protection. Being ethical also ensures delivery of the best possible service to consumers and a personally gratifying career. Reaching for the highest standards emboldens us in the face of ethical uncertainty. Holding high ethical standards requires acting with benevolence and courage rather than donning protective armor and running for a safe place to hide.

Core Ethical Principles

Ethical perfection is beyond reach for most of us humans, even if we could completely agree on what is “ethically proper” in every situation. Furthermore, all psychologists will encounter ethical dilemmas, such as the ones presented at the beginning of this chapter, and not know exactly what to do. We recognize that situational factors, insufficient information, conflicting loyalties, and other conditions converge to challenge even the most principled among us, and these obstacles to ethical perfection also are more fully discussed.

The nine core ethical principles that we believe should guide the behavior of psychologists are adapted from several sources (Beauchamp & Childress, 1989; Frankena, 1973; Gilligan, 1982; Josephson, 1991; Kitchener, 1985; Ross, 1930).

1. **Doing no harm** (nonmaleficence). Through commission or omission, psychologists strive to benefit those with whom they work, at the same time taking care to ensure that the potential for damage is eliminated or minimized to the greatest extent possible.

2. **Respecting autonomy.** The rights of individuals to decide how to live their lives as long as their actions do not interfere with the welfare of others is accepted by psychologists as an ultimate goal for clients, students, research participants, and others with whom psychologists work. Members of our profession are often in the business of moving those with whom we work toward greater independence and self-reliance.

3. **Benefiting others.** All decisions that psychologists make should have the potential for a positive effect on others. Often, this principle must be balanced against doing no harm, respect for autonomy, available resources, and utility.
4. All should be fair and equitable, be treated as psychologists would want to be treated under similar circumstances.

5. Being faithful. Issues of fidelity, loyalty, truthfulness, trust, promise keeping, and respect for those with whom psychologists work converge to form the delicate standards necessary in fiduciary relationships. When psychologists are straightforward, sincere, candid, and without intent to mislead or deceive anyone, ethical action is more likely.

6. According to dignity. Psychologists view others as worthy of respect. This enhances the probability that decisions will be ethical.

7. Treating others with caring and compassion. Psychologists should be considerate and kind to those with whom they work, yet maintain professional boundaries.

8. Pursuit of excellence. Maintaining competence, doing one’s best, and taking pride in one’s work are important in ensuring high-quality professional services, as well as providing hedges against unprofessional and unethical actions.

9. Accepting accountability. Psychologists who act with a consideration of possible consequences, who accept responsibility for actions and inactions, and who avoid shifting blame or making excuses are acting with integrity. Putting principles over expediency is sometimes the longer and more arduous route, but in the long run it is the one that ensures self-respect.

What may strike you about the nine ethical principles is that some are unlikely to be practiced unless they are already embedded in the fabric of psychologists’ characters. For example, is it possible to “act” with caring and compassion unless that is the kind of person one already is? Ideally, people behave ethically because they have virtuous characters. But, “principle ethics,” defined for our purposes as acting according to the moral principles listed above, allows the possibility that ethical behavior can occur solely as the result of professional obligation and deliberate adherence to rules rather than moral commitment according to one’s conscience and personally held standards. The reader interested in learning more about principle versus virtue ethics as they apply to psychology is referred to Meara, Schmidt, and Day (1996).

HOW ETHICAL PROBLEMS ARISE

Who is Unethical?

The stereotype of the “unethical psychologist” is quite unsavory. “Greedy,” “stupid,” “psychopathic,” “devious,” and “immoral” are among the common descriptors according to our own informal polling of colleagues. Some psychologists do willfully, even maliciously, engage in acts they know to be in violation of the ethical and legal standards. How avarice, expediency, and other self-serving motives can blur judgments is illustrated throughout this book. The cases below illustrate the lurid, extreme range of unacceptable acts by mental health professionals. As with all of our cases, they are based on true incidents.

Case 1-1: A psychologist plotted against a former client who had accused him of professional misconduct. The psychologist hired a man to burglarize a business and place the stolen items in the ex-client’s home and then to call the police with a tip that a person fitting the client’s description was observed leaving the victim’s business in a car with the ex-client’s license number. Fortunately for the ex-client, the hired burglar repeated the story to others in a bar, leading to his quick arrest and disclosure of the psychologist’s scheme.

Case 1-2: A jury found in favor of a client, and awarded her a large sum, after the woman made a compelling case that her therapist had sex with her regularly over a 10-year period while she was a client. In addition, the therapist had rented a home for her and employed her as his family’s housekeeper. The defendant claimed that his conduct should be excused because the “sex was good” and the client was no more disabled currently than when she entered his care. His attempt to escape liability was not persuasive to the jury.

Psychologists count on consumers’ trust to accomplish their most effective work; however, these cases reveal how that trust can be badly abused. But, are such drastic behaviors typical of psychologists who violate professional ethical standards? In our experience, the prevailing portrait of those crossing over the line is considerably more muted and complex and can include...