

In The Realm of Ethics



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A new code of ethics has been adopted by the Canadian Psychological Association. In several ways it is notably different from our traditional codes - in the methodology used in its development, in subsuming all standards statements under four major principles or values, in prioritizing the relative importance of these principles, in emphasizing the responsibility for vulnerable and dependent populations in making explicit extended responsibilities, and most important in providing a decision making model for resolving dilemmas. There has been a great deal of consultation used in arriving at the final version. Now it is time to see how well it serves psychologists, and where and how it may require further modification. It will be tested in many situations.

One question which bears scrutiny is how far the ethical responsibility of psychologists extends for obtaining or providing services for clients when the barriers to clients receiving needed services are not attributable to the individual psychologist. Several years ago the multidisciplinary staff of a children's mental health service collected case studies of situations in which clients did not receive appropriate services, and yet the professionals involved could not individually be considered incompetent, unethical or non-compliant to agency expectations. They all believed that they were actively working for the welfare of the clients, but that often there were frustrations in being unable to see good results. Then an exciting book appeared, namely Working for Children: Ethical Issues Beyond Professional Guidelines by Judith Mearig and Associates (1978). With this background and some quotes from Mearig, I put together Ethical Obligations Beyond Professional Guidelines (1979) which are produced below.

They are proactive with a focus on getting results - to obtain needed services for clients, to change those aspects of organizational structures and societal attitudes which are harmful, to take personal risks when necessary, and to support students and staff in learning strategies to obtain similar results. When I used those statements in published articles and in workshop presentations I expected to get strong reactions from psychologists either for and against. I was mistaken in that there was no loud response of any kind.

Now in 1986 I want to know if our new code addresses these issues. The obligation statements seem to demand results. The ethical standards focus more on values and activities/ practice with the implication that they should produce good results. However, the decision making process requires consideration of the consequences of alternative actions. Here are the Obligations with the relevant statements from Code in the second column.

C.P.A. Canadian

ETHICAL OBLIGATIONS BEYOND PROFESSIONAL GUIDELINES

by Jean L. Pettifor after reading Mearig 1979

Code of Ethics

- I have an obligation to ensure that clients with whom I have professional contact actually receive the services they need.

I will not be circumscribed in my efforts to obtain needed client services by professional incompetence, inadequate communication, restrictive job expectations, arbitrary or uniform implementation of agency policy, questionable procedures, or other obstructive variables.

"Injustice exists and flourishes, and the professional who is a part of it must either see it, or blindly perpetuate it."

Principle II: RESPONSIBLE CARING From Values Statement

...ethical conduct by psychologists is characterized by an active concern for the welfare of any individual, family or group with whom they come into relationship in their role as psychologists...

...psychologists' greatest responsibility normally is to protect the welfare of those directly involved in their activities and, therefore, in a more vulnerable position...

...as vulnerabilities increase and/or as power to control one's own life decreases, they have an increasing responsibility to protect the well-being of...

...psychologists consider it their responsibility to increase safeguards proportionate to the degree of dependency and the lack of voluntary initiation on the part of the persons involved.

Standard 14 Provide services that are coordinated with other service providers to avoid duplication or working at cross purposes thereby reducing the benefit to the service recipient...

Standard 17 Strive to obtain the best possible service for those needing and seeking psychological service. This includes recommending professionals other than psychologists where appropriate.

Standard 33 Act to stop or offset the consequences of clearly harmful activities being carried out by another psychologist or professional when these activities have come to their attention outside of a confidential client relationship with the psychologist or professional involved...

- I have an obligation to use my prerogatives and public power as a professional to prevent system, institution and agency barriers from hindering the delivery of services for clients.

I will not rationalize my inaction by blaming others; and I will become knowledgeable of bureaucratic structures and policies for the purpose of maximizing services available for clients.

"Professionals must learn how to shape organizational structure so they do not interfere with the attainment of professional goals, and they must discover how to monitor and use bureaucratic policies and procedures for the benefit of their clients."

Principle IV: RESPONSIBILITY TO SOCIETY From Values Statement

...social structures and policies which have beneficial purposes are defined as those which more readily support and reflect respect for the dignity of persons, responsible caring, and integrity in relationships.

...psychologists acknowledge that many social structures have evolved slowly over time in response to human need and that they are valued by society and as primarily beneficial. In such circumstances, psychologists convey respect for these social structures and avoid unwarranted or unnecessary disruptions. Suggestions for and action toward changes or enhancement of such social structures are carried out only through an educational process that seeks to achieve a consensus within society through democratic means.

On the other hand, some social structures ignore or oppose the principles of respect for the dignity of the person, responsible caring, and integrity in relationships to such an extent that it would be irresponsible for psychologists involved in work within or concerning these social structures not to be critical nor advocate for change to occur as quickly as possible.

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3. I have an obligation to initiate change in larger systems for the benefit of clients; and I have an obligation to use a position of strength in my choice of strategies which have some hope of success.

I will not be impulsive, abrasive, deceitful or unethical in my relationships with agencies and professional colleagues but will be considerate, knowledgeable and ethical in all my actions, and hopefully effective.

"Values permeate almost every professional act."

4. I have an obligation at times to take professional risk to obtain services for the client who is seriously at risk if deprived of such services.

I will avoid "doing nothing" in the face of client need, even though it involves a threat to my personal acceptance, approval and job security.

"A picture flashed through my mind of a delicately balanced scale weighted with safety at one end and risk on the other, and I realized that maintaining that vital balance was what professionalism was all about."

5. I have an obligation to contribute toward changing society's negative feelings and attitudes toward the physically, emotionally, behaviorally and culturally dysfunctional in order that services needed by clients will be supported.

I will not devalue disabled clients, or deny them legal and civil rights, or pretend that they do not exist, or accept procedures and policies which would otherwise be unacceptable.

"The abnormal ones are the nonexistent ones - the palpable or material symbol for not being. We hold this imperfection at bay by separating "them" out of the shared being and activities of community."

6. I have an obligation to assist students and junior staff in dealing with ethics and the decision making process, dilemmas and conflict, in a manner which will integrate idealism with effective pragmatic realities.

I will not neglect ethical professional dilemmas in teaching, or quell the desire for change, or present a picture of professional impotence.

"The role of the seasoned professional is to know the odds and yet keep at the task, working with the young professional who supplies both the drive for change and the time myopia."

"The true professional must accept private responsibility for the constant reconstruction of what is right."

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Standard 10 Convey respect for prevailing community laws, mores, social customs, and cultural expectations in all professional activities provided that this does not contravene respect for the dignity of persons, responsible caring, and integrity in relationships.

Standard 11 Abide by all governmental and institutional laws and regulations unless those laws and regulations seriously conflict with the ethical principles contained herein. When such a conflict exists, decision for action is considered a matter of personal conscience.

Standard 12 In any apparent conflict between keeping a law and following a professional ethical principle, unless in an emergency situation, consult with colleagues and seek consensus as to the most ethical course of action and the most responsible, knowledgeable, effective and respectful way to carry it out.

Standard 21 When involved in work within or concerning specific social structures, speak out when the policies or practices of the social structure seriously ignore or oppose the principles or respect for the dignity of persons, responsible caring, and integrity in relationships.

From THE PREAMBLE

Psychologists engaged in a time-consuming process of deliberation are encouraged and expected to consult with colleagues and/or advisory bodies when such individuals can add knowledge and/or objectivity to the decision-making process. Although the decision for action remains with the individual psychologist concerned, the seeking and consideration of such assistance reflects an ethical approach to ethical decision-making.

Principle I. RESPECT FOR THE DIGNITY OF PERSONS
From Values Statement

...psychologists acknowledge that all persons have a right to have their innate worth as human beings appreciated and that this worth is not enhance or reduced by such differences as culture, ethnicity, color, race, religion, gender, sexual preference, physical or mental abilities, age, socio-economic status, and/or any other preferences or personal characteristic, condition or status.

..their greatest responsibility normally be to those persons directly receiving or involved in the psychologist's activities and, therefore, in a more vulnerable position (e.g. clients, students, research participants). This responsibility is almost always greater than their responsibility to those indirectly involved (e.g. employers, third party payers, the general public).

...psychologists consider it their responsibility to increase safeguards to protect and promote the rights of persons involved in their activities proportionate to the degree of dependency and the lack of voluntary initiation. For example, this would mean that there would be more safeguards to protect and promote the rights of involuntary persons than partially dependent persons, and more safeguards for partially-dependent than independent persons.

Standard 5 Avoid or refuse to participate in practices inconsistent with respect for the legal, civil or moral rights of others.

Standard 9 Not practice, condone, facilitate or collaborate with any form of unjust discrimination.

Standard 10 Act to prevent or correct practices that are unjustly discriminatory.

Let's Hear from YOU

Can you buy the more strongly stated obligations or do you think that they push psychologists into troubled waters far beyond their professional responsibility and expertise? Are the standards in the Code insufficient, excessive, or just right? Is it "true", "false" or "maybe and sometimes" that "The true professional must accept private responsibility for the constant reconstruction of what is right."?

Yes, Highlights welcomes your lively response!

