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.

C.P.A.

Ethical Obligations Beyond Professional Guidelines

by Jean L. Pettifor after reading Mearig, 1979

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 proportional 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...

Principle V: 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 disruption. Suggestions for 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 the profession with regard to the dignity of persons, responsible caring, and integrity in relationships to such an extent that it would be irresponsible for psychologists involved in work within or consolidating these social structures not to be critical nor advocate for change to occur as quickly as possible.
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!