

Code of Ethics



Jean L. Pettifor, Calgary, Alberta

Ethical Stances to External Stresses

Here are some more comments in considering how well our new Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists serves our needs and where and how it may require revisions.

The Problems of External Stresses

We profess to serve a human welfare ethic while we live in a complex society in which there is much emphasis on self-interest, survival, and competition in getting ahead - sometimes to the detriment of others. Many of us adjust to the status quo as we see it, and "get ahead" by conforming and by avoiding advocacy, risk, rocking the boat, and personal stress. We may give up ideals of doing great good as being unrealistic. We may accept doing no harm if we can help it, and accept the uninspiring reality that our impact on the world is rather small. We may think that ethical values are pious and useless. We may only want to know what behaviours will guarantee keeping us out of trouble. We may question whom we really serve, recognizing that we are nothing unless we survive ourselves.

In some specific work situations psychologists may find that the rewards strongly favor one type of activity over another without any explicit value statements on the relative merits of these activities. Should the psychologist place a higher value on the less rewarded activity, there is an ethical dilemma between self-interest and the interests of others. The University professor may feel compelled to pay more attention to research publications than to teaching or analysis of social problems. The researcher, in order to gain funding, must please granting agencies and therefore not research unpopular topics. The private practitioner may have to consider clients' financial ability to pay above their human needs for services. Public servants may not always serve the public if good practice is at variance with the direction of politicians or senior administrators on whom they depend for job security.

The types of situations which involve perceived conflict between professional standards and employer expectations are often the most demoralizing and stressful to psychologists. I have yet to attend a gathering of psychologists where I have not informally felt the frustration, anger and apathy of some individuals over problems in their particular work settings. Our codes of ethics are written as if psychologists were independent practitioners in control of their professional relationships, yet most psychologists are employees who, as they attempt to serve clients, are also serving their employers and meeting expectations and regulations of the organization. Employer pressures are often strong pressures, while the support and guidance of professional associations to their members has often been weak.

The points of view on major objectives of administrators in large organizations are different from those of professionals serving clients. Administrators often function on premises that hierarchical authority knows best; that employees should be loyal, conform to rules and procedures; that results should be measurable; that there should be uniform implementation of policy; and that there should be constraints on the utilization of human and financial resources. Professionals think that they know best about service delivery; that client needs should have priority over rigid interpretation of policy and economic restraint; that there should be professional responsibility for the well-being of the whole person rather than just a fragmented part; and that only professional peers can monitor the quality of services. Conflict seems inevitable, and yet neither the administrators or professionals can survive without the other, and both should be serving consumers.

What the Code Says

Does the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists help us? Yes, it makes a major contribution in addressing the question of values and principles being in conflict and the dilemma of deciding what to do in such situations. Not only may principles be in conflict, but there may be very strong pressures to violate ethical principles either unthinkingly or by rationalizing behaviors in self-interest or in the interest of more powerful parties. Such pressures may be personal, social, organizational, financial or political. When principles are in conflict, it is more than an intellectual dilemma; for, there may be serious interpersonal and interagency conflict as well.

The code provides several guidelines for resolving ethical dilemmas.

1. The four major principles are ordered in priority so that Respect for the Dignity of Persons is number one and Responsibility for Society is number four.
2. The ethical decision-making process requires a series of steps culminating in an action decision and taking responsibility for that action.

3. In difficult dilemmas, psychologists are expected to consult in order to add knowledge and objectivity to the decision making process.
4. The individual is responsible for the decision and there is room for personal conscience provided that the decision making process is explicit enough to bear public scrutiny.

Moreover, the code addresses special responsibilities for dependant and vulnerable clients, and the extended responsibilities of psychologists. Unlike the old code's use of passive phrases such as is "responsible" "cognizant" and "aware", almost every standard in the new code begins with an action word; that is, psychologists would do or act in a variety of ways to maintain these standards or principles. The standards are proactive as well as reactive and require psychologists to actively do good and prevent harm, not just to take a neutral position.

Government Laws, Institutional Regulations and Personal Conscience

We support law and order in society but we do not always agree on the value of many laws, or may see some as being unjust to clients. How much disagreement is there on laws related to immigration, refugees, abortions, sex offenders, illegal use of drugs, or posted speed limits on highways? How often are we concerned for the welfare of clients because they do not meet some detail of eligibility criteria for special education or other specialized services, or for financial assistance; or temporary wardship is allowed to be extended indefinitely with no permanent placement for the child; or suicidal adolescents are refused service because they are difficult to manage; or mental patients are discharged without adequate support services in the community?

Under Principle IV "Respect for Society" Standards II and 12 apply

Standard II

Abide by all governmental and institutional laws and regulations unless those laws and regulations seriously conflict with the ethical principles contained herein. When such 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.

Should one choose to disobey the law or institutional regulations in the interests of a higher morality and for the welfare of clients, it is wise to have collegial support and a decision making rationale that is explicit enough to bear public scrutiny. It is also wise to assess the risk and consequences, not only for clients, but also for the professionals and agencies involved. One may even wish to lobby for changing the law.

A Not Uncommon Situation

A disturbed fifteen year old girl voluntarily seeks help from a mental health agency whose regulations prohibit treatment of juveniles without parental consent. She does not want her parents to know about her seeking help, and she will not discuss her home situation unless assured that her parents will know nothing about it or she is securely placed away from the family. There are differences of opinion regarding legal age of consent. What are the probable consequences in this case of obeying or disobeying the agency's rules?

Conflict Between Professional/Ethical Standards and Employer Expectations

Within organizations there can be many situations or problems which result in poor service for clients - practices which are not respectful, caring, helpful or honest. For the employed psychologists or other professionals who are concerned for individual clients and who feel that their power to bring about change is limited, there are indeed ethical dilemmas. The Code of Ethics may assist in identifying the nature of the concerns for the psychologist, but it may be necessary to find other approaches beyond the ethical context to finding resolutions. Complaining that some senior person in the organization is unethical for making policy decisions which adversely affect clients is unlikely to carry much weight.

Look for a perspective on the problem which is amenable to change within an organization. Your specific client concern can be translated into an organizational or public image problem, such as the need to review practice standards, to reshape service program to be more effective, to enhance staff development, or to enhance a public image (avoid public criticism). One must look for strategies for positive change and avoid adversarial win-lose situations. There is a place for ethical complaints but this is not a good mechanism for bringing about change in organizations.

Interpersonal tensions can accumulate in organizations to the point that personal offense at another's behaviour may be seen as grounds for complaining of unethical conduct. I have seen ethical complaints which appeared to be used as another weapon in the escalation of ongoing interpersonal conflict. Ethical beings seek constructive ways to resolve conflict, and do not abuse ethical principles by using them for adversarial self-interest.

A Not Uncommon Type of Situation

The Imago School Board is reducing the cost of psychological services as an economy measure. As a result there are fewer psychologists employed, more rigid intake criteria, less time allowed per case, increased referrals to other agencies on the basis of superficial assessments. Psychologists are concerned that the quality of service is deteriorating; that unless client problems are very severe, they will receive no attention; and that the public is told that an excellent level of service is being maintained. Are there ethical dilemmas? For whom? How can they be resolved?

Another Perspective of Ethical Complaints

There is another type of situation within organizations in which the use of ethical complaints can be abused. Psychologists are pleased when large employer organizations recognize them as professionals and recognize their professional organizations. Sometimes alleged abuse of vulnerable clients receive media attention and embarrasses the organization. Suppose a psychologist and several others have some involvement. There are problems within the organization, such as difficult working conditions, unclear mandates and lines of responsibility, undefined standards, lack of supervision, negligence by acts of omission. After a lapse of time, formal complaints of unethical conduct by the psychologist are made to the professional association for adjudication. They appear to have been "arranged" by the employer in order to place total blame on the one employee and a clean bill of health for all others in the organization.

Conflict within organizations goes across professional disciplines and can involve a mixture of many issues of politics, competency, personal relationships as well as ethics. I strongly believe that our training programs and professional associations should be more proactive in preparing and assisting psychologists to function effectively in larger organizations and that, while attention to ethics helps, it is not sufficient. This is not a deficiency of the Code of Ethics which clarifies values, principles and appropriate behaviors for individual professionals, but rather that other strategies are appropriate to resolving problems within organizations.

Conclusion

We have values. We have conflict. We have injustice. We have a range of personal styles, beliefs and commitments. Some of us interpret codes with minimal responsibilities and appear to do well. Some of us are dedicated to reform, social justice and humane treatment of others, but use primarily an intellectual approach - using psychological knowledge to analyze and interpret. Some of us emotionally are touched by suffering and injustice, and both professionally and personally have a mission or calling to bring about change.

Does this statement from the code cover the full range of alternatives open to us?

"In order to be responsible to society and to contribute constructively to its ongoing evolution, psychology as a whole needs to be self-reflective about its place in society and about the ways in which it might be contributing to or detracting from beneficial societal changes. It also needs to engage in even-tempered observation and interpretation of social structures and policies, their effects, and their process of change, developing its ability to avoid misuse of psychological knowledge and increase its beneficial use. Once again, individual psychologists must decide for themselves the most appropriate and beneficial use of their time and talents in helping to meet this collective responsibility."

The code is a bit academic out there but to be really effective the personal meaning and essence must be inside. We must not only behave ethically but we must be ethical beings who breathe life into the printed words.



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!

See "Letter to the Editor" Page 4E.