



COMMENTARY

## Increasing the saliency of ethical decision making for SIOP members

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In the Banks et al. (2022) focal article, the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) Committee for the Advancement of Professional Ethics (CAPE) provided a useful framework to guide the identification, evaluation, and resolution of situations containing ethical ambiguities. This framework used in combination with the Lefkowitz (2021) taxonomy of paradigmatic forms of ethical dilemmas and the data from Lefkowitz and Watts (2021) should provide much utility for making appropriate ethical decisions and engaging in ethical behavior.

Banks et al. (2022) noted that ethical decision making requires active attention to issues and outcomes as they occur and the intent to behave in an ethical manner. Indeed, Banks et al. stated their assumption that “the vast majority of [industrial organizational (I-O)] psychologists want to be ethical and ‘do the right thing’” (p. X). This statement needs to be qualified. Although Lefkowitz and Watts (2021) found proportionately fewer acts of covert ethical violations in 2019 than in 2009, they still found corruption (i.e., intentional volitional unethical acts) to be the second most common form of ethical dilemma or misconduct, with a reported rate of 18.5%. Similarly, Lefkowitz (2021) reported that 25.6% of incidents submitted by SIOP members were classified as corruption. The Lefkowitz and Watts distinction between covert and overt ethical violations, respectively, aligns with Sashkin and Prien’s (1996) *blunderers* whose unethicity is committed unintentionally because of ignorance, lack of foresight, or overzealousness and *bounders* who intentionally behave in an unethical manner. It may be that this 20% (actually 18.5%–25.6%) who are bounders cause 80% of our ethical problems. Regardless, this is a sufficiently large proportion that it should be of concern to SIOP and should be addressed through intentional efforts by SIOP to recognize, address, and prevent such behavior.

Lefkowitz (2021) indicated SIOP’s attitude toward ethics could be characterized as *benign neglect*; he identified historical markers of SIOP’s lack of attention to ethics. The CAPE framework for ethical decision making will facilitate appropriate decisions by those who are aware and motivated to use it. However, we believe that the role of ethics needs to become more salient in the discipline of I-O psychology. Accordingly, here we expand our earlier call and recommendations (Stone et al., 2021) that, to ensure the integrity of our discipline, SIOP needs to be more intentional and proactive in promoting the role of ethics in both graduate training and in professional practice. Below we explain further how our recommendations might be operationalized. An important thread that runs through all of our recommendations is the need to make the importance of ethics more salient and to increase the positive valence of acting in an ethical manner; that is, we must be motivated to behave ethically.

## The foundation: Making ethics more salient in graduate education and at the SIOP conference

We previously recommended that ethics assume a more prominent place in graduate education and at the SIOP conference (Stone *et al.*, 2021). In our opinion, one of the challenging aspects of the CAPE framework not thoroughly addressed is the intentionality required to use the framework. The actor needs to be aware of the ethical implications of the situation, to intentionally evaluate the situation in an ethical context, and to value an ethical resolution to the situation (Jones, 1991). More directly, not evident in the model is the role of moral intensity,<sup>1</sup> which affects decision making at each stage. High levels of moral intensity inherent in an issue are likely to make an issue more salient. Here, our goal is to identify means by which SIOP can make SIOP members more aware of and more likely to act to resolve ethical matters.

### **Graduate education**

A more prominent place for ethics in graduate education will help ensure that new I-O professionals are not only aware of the ethical dimension of many organizational decisions and how to effectively navigate the challenges these decisions so frequently pose but also that the I-O profession values ethical behavior. We can draw an analogy from diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) that just a few years ago was mentioned in only a few chapters in most I-O textbooks and now is featured in dedicated texts as well as prominently in other textbooks. This prominence clearly conveys that DEI is important. We know that across industry sectors, ethics is valued as a top competency by employers in both I-O interns (Shoenfelt *et al.*, 2012) and I-O employees (Zelin *et al.*, 2015). We also know that ethics training can be effective (Watts *et al.*, 2017). Yet, the SIOP *Guidelines for Education and Training in Industrial-Organizational Psychology* identify ethics as a general knowledge and skill along with history and systems, fields of psychology, and professional skills. This designation does not mean ethics necessarily is of lesser importance—statistics and research methods, critical to our field, also are so designated. However, ethics does fall outside of what is identified as “core content.” Thus, there can be no argument that this placement and labeling communicates that ethics are not considered to be core content for I-O psychologists. In graduate training, ethics frequently is covered tangentially to other topics across a variety of courses rather than in a dedicated graduate course. In combination, these factors may inadvertently convey that ethics are less important than other I-O content and perhaps even optional for I-O psychologists. We recommend required ethics course(s) that are offered early in the graduate training sequence (Brossoit *et al.*, 2021; Stone *et al.*, 2021) and taught using a variety of methods including case studies, panel presentations, discussions of the CAPE Dilemma Deck, and CAPE Bingo. Both of the latter CAPE resources identify ethical situations commonly faced by I-O psychologists in practice and academe (SIOP CAPE, 2022). We advocate that the next version of the SIOP *Guidelines* take note of these recommendations and incorporate additional emphasis on ethics in graduate education.

### **SIOP Annual Conference**

A review of searchable SIOP conference programs from 2018 to 2021 using both the content area of “Consulting/Legal/Ethical Issues” and the word “Ethic” indicated two, five, two, and three sessions, respectively, on ethical practice. Posters were more prevalent but still small in number, ranging from 2 to 12 per conference, and most dealt with leadership ethics rather than ethical

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<sup>1</sup>Jones (1991) proposed that moral intensity was composed of the following attributes of an issue: magnitude of consequences, social consensus, probability of effect, temporal immediacy, proximity, and concentration of effect. An issue that ranks high on these attributes is more likely to become salient to a moral agent. Further, meta-analyses (Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2010) reveal that all aspects of the moral intensity of an issue predict (un)ethical behavior.

practice as an I-O psychologist. That actual conference sessions on ethics are few also suggests that discussions on ethics are not highly valued by the SIOP community. Dedicated space in the conference program would accomplish two important objectives: both a message to the membership that such discussions are valued and that such discussions would be ensured at the conference. Faculty seeking to build their «resume» through conference presentations likely would be more motivated to submit sessions on ethics if there was a higher probability of those proposals being accepted. As Stone et al. (2021) suggested, a dedicated *TIP* column on ethics would provide a forum for ongoing discussions on ethical situations encountered by I-O psychologists. A prominent conference presence and a dedicated *TIP* column would be highly visible commitments to creating a culture within I-O psychology that values ethical behavior.

## **The carrot: SIOP Foundation funding and recognition of research and practice specifically targeting the ethical practice of I-O psychology**

### ***SIOP grants to support ethics research***

We all are familiar with the motivating powers of positive reinforcement. SIOP-provided grant funding that specifically targets research on ethics would likely result in an increase in meaningful research that could inform practice. Two potential research areas readily come to mind. The first is refining the Lefkowitz (2021) taxonomy of ethical dilemmas to include corruption, a further understanding of which would assist in dealing with it when it occurs and hopefully prevent future acts. This taxonomy provides a framework for organizing research efforts and applications for practice. A second area is to better inform ethics training in terms of what instills a better understanding of ethical dilemmas and how to make ethical decisions and what contributes to the transfer of this knowledge to ethical behavior in the workplace. For example, anticorruption training can induce employees to refrain from unethical acts (Hauser, 2019), but we do not fully understand the foundations of corruption. The better we understand the underlying dynamics of ethical and unethical behavior, the more effective training can be.

### ***SIOP award for outstanding ethical organizational practice***

A SIOP award recognizing ethical practice in organizations is another mechanism to reward ethical behavior and to highlight its importance to the I-O community. Just as ethical scandals damage organizations and are so notorious one need only mention the company name to recall the scandal (e.g., Enron, Volkswagen, Lehman Brothers, BP, Equifax, Boeing), organizational decisions that optimize doing the right thing even to the detriment of other priorities can be compelling and are unusual enough that they make national headlines, although many will not recall the ethical decisions made by these organizations (e.g., Costco, Best Buy, Woolworths, CVS<sup>2</sup>). An annual SIOP award recognizing ethical organizational practice would be a clear indication that SIOP values ethical practice.

Perhaps those of us who feel strongly about the important role of ethics in I-O psychology could work together to create an endowment to fund grants and an award. The award might mirror the SIOP/SHRM Human Resources Management Impact Award to ensure best practices for establishing criteria for recognizing organizations and/or I-O psychologists who work in them for dedication to integrity and ethical practices, exemplary ethical behavior/practices, or advocacy of ethical behavior/practices.

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<sup>2</sup>Follow these links to learn the ethical or unethical practices in which these organizations engaged. <https://www.ig.com/en/news-and-trade-ideas/top-10-biggest-corporate-scandals-and-how-they-affected-share-pr-181101>  
<https://www.greatworklife.com/ethical-decision-making-in-business-examples/>

## The stick: SIOP mechanism to hear and resolve complaints of unethical behavior by SIOP members

We believe an important component in addressing unethicality is a mechanism for addressing, even enforcing,<sup>3</sup> violations of our ethical standards through accountability mechanisms fairly administered through an overarching relevant governing body, that is, SIOP. Without such a mechanism, SIOP, and perhaps I-O psychologists, demonstrate a lack of awareness and concern for the ethical practice of I-O psychology (Stone *et al.*, 2021). We need an arbitration mechanism to hold I-O psychologists accountable when ethical decision making fails whether intentionally (bounder) or unintentionally (blunderer). There is increased potential harm to the profession and our stakeholders if we have no mechanism to deal with bounders. As noted above, Lefkowitz's 2021 compilation and classification of ethical situations faced by I-O psychologists indicate there are sufficient incidents of intentional unethical behavior to warrant a way to hear and resolve these incidents with appropriate negative consequences for those found to have engaged in unethical acts and, to the extent possible, to make whole those who have been harmed by a SIOP member's unethical acts.

Although SIOP has adopted the American Psychological Association Ethics Code (APA; 2016) as our own, the APA has indicated their focus in ethical complaints is to steer the resolution of the complainant to other avenues such as a state licensing boards for licensed psychologists, university grievance procedures for faculty and students, or civil or criminal courts (APA, 2021). Many organizations lack a mechanism for hearing ethics complaints that involve issues that fail to meet the threshold of illegal activity. The APA review of ethics complaints concerning APA members is restricted to serious complaints that have no other avenue for adjudication. The APA's ability to sanction is limited to members and to the consequence of expulsion from membership. Complaints involving any of the significant number of SIOP members who are not APA members would not be heard by APA. Accordingly, the APA adjudication process does not adequately serve the needs of SIOP members. Furthermore, it is likely that a SIOP process would more readily understand the nuances of situations involving I-O psychologists and would have available sanctions that are more meaningful to I-O psychologists such as restrictions on membership and committee, conference, or award participation. SIOP recently implemented the *SIOP Anti-Harassment Policy* (2020) containing specific procedures to address acts of harassment, retaliation, and incivility by SIOP members and including sanctions ranging from written reprimand to permanent suspension from publishing in SIOP journals to permanent expulsion from SIOP. An analogous SIOP policy and procedure for ethical violations or the expansion of the anti-harassment policy to include ethical violations would clearly convey that ethical behavior by SIOP members is not only expected but valued.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, with respect for our profession and our I-O colleagues, we echo Lefkowitz (2005, 2008) and present a call to action that provides concrete practices that will increase the saliency of ethics in the I-O community and demonstrate a firm commitment to ethical practice. It is our hope that our recommended practices along with other calls to action will help grow a culture of ethicality where ethical decision making is highly valued and plays a prominent role in our discipline.

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<sup>3</sup>Meta-analyses (Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2010) have shown that the existence of a code of conduct is ineffective, but enforcement of those codes of conduct are predictive (moderate effect size) of ethical behavior.

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