


COMMENTARY

Uses and limitations of ethical dilemmas in understanding and applying ethics and values in industrial-organizational psychology

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Joel Lefkowitz's focal article (2021) on industrial-organizational psychology (IOP) ethics "dilemmas" ("behaviors" or "incidents," I argue) that derived from a 2009 survey of members and fellows from the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) provides useful information in what indeed is a sometimes-neglected area in IOP. Here I intend to extend the discussion by raising four points:

1. aggregations of empirically derived ethics situations are useful for certain ethical purposes but not for others;
2. ethical *dilemmas* present both measurement and interpretation dilemmas;
3. to understand ethical behavior, it is as important to examine examples of exemplary as well as of problematic behavior; and
4. IOP would benefit, as Lefkowitz argues, from engaging more directly in expanding its engagement with issues of ethics and values and the ends to which its knowledge and expertise are directed.

Uses and limits of self-reported aggregated ethics data

As the editor of the various editions of SIOP's ethics casebook (e.g., Lowman, 2006) and as one who has written and presented widely on ethical issues in IOP and consulting psychology, I would certainly not be the one to dispute the value of systematically gathering and categorizing samples of ethical incidents. In a variety of teaching and research contexts, I have collected something over a thousand of such I-O ethics cases myself, and I have also supervised dissertations based on ethics case material. Well-detailed case examples covering an assortment of research and practice situations are especially helpful for those in training and practice. They help students and professionals alike to be aware of and consider how they would handle such situations.

Although Lefkowitz (2021) is correct that empirical studies of IOP ethical concerns have been a relatively neglected area in the broader field, aggregations of self-reported case material are useful for some purposes but not for others. Knowing the types of ethical situations that are especially likely to raise concerns can be helpful for flagging particular situations or conflicts as ones needing special attention and care. From such data, ethics code writers can also identify areas potentially needing more detailed coverage. Such data are useful in comparing the incidence of ethical problems across time, at least when samples and the questions posed to elicit cases are comparable.

Self-reports of ethical behaviors are not without their limitations, however. For one thing, it is rarely clear of what such responses are representative. This goes beyond the question of demographic similarities of the sample to the larger populations. Given the relatively low response rates in the groups that are asked to send ethics situations, it is useful to consider who takes the trouble to send examples of problematic ethical behavior to such a survey. Presumably, for example, those who have themselves behaved unethically will not be among those who are quick to do so. Presumably, also, those who care about ethics are also more likely to respond. That SIOP fellows in the current study were underrepresented in the results is puzzling; who more than senior members of the profession would be better able to identify ethical concerns?

Such aggregated data are not as useful as are full case descriptions in helping people learn how to think ethically or to contemplate how they would themselves handle specific ethical challenges that they may encounter in their careers. These purposes, I argue, are better served by the kind of content-rich material that a detailed case can provide such as those presented as examples of material that was coded (Lefkowitz, 2021, Table 3). Anyone reading the details of cases like those can immediately grasp the specific situation as it may occur in real-life applications. The reader is likely to ask of well-articulated cases, “Did the psychologist do the right thing?”; “What would (or should) I do in this situation?” From such detailed descriptions, whether actual, aggregated, or theoretical, they can learn quite pragmatically about ethical issues and, indirectly, about themselves. Cases, not summary data, best provide such opportunities.

Some dilemmas about “ethical dilemmas”

Lefkowitz (2021) focused his case analyses on what were termed “ethical dilemmas.” He noted that these include “a choice situation that invokes ethical/moral principles and which has substantial consequences for some people” (p. 297). These were differentiated from “corruption,” ethical “misbehavior,” and “ethical situations.”

Lefkowitz (2021) appropriately summarized the focus of his research in these questions: “What is the incidence and substance of unethical behavior *among* I-O psychologists or of ethical problems *faced by* I-O psychologists?” But those questions cannot be answered by limiting the focus to only situations that involve (a) a choice situation or (b) that entail “substantial consequences” for “some people.”

Did all of the analyzed situations meet these criteria? Unfortunately, too little information was provided about solicited “ethical situations” to know whether respondents were actually prompted or required to submit an ethical dilemma as here defined. The author did not include the preliminary information that was provided to the research participants who chose to include an “ethical situation.” What is stated is that after whatever introductory material was provided, they were to provide “an open-ended description of the situation” and an “open-ended explanation of why they consider the situation “ethical” in nature.” The study’s described methodology thus does not appear to have asked participants to present “ethical dilemmas” and the terminology “ethical situations” would appear to be open to whatever personal interpretation may have been applied by them. Nor is there any suggestion that situations not meeting the criteria of being “ethical dilemmas” were tossed out.

Thus, though the concept of “ethical dilemmas” may be an interesting one, it is not clear that in this research all of the situations that were judged to fall into one of five taxonomic categories (or into the “incivility” or “corruption” classifications) were indeed ethical dilemmas. Much can be learned by keeping the focus of research like this broad (e.g., “ethical situations”) and then letting the data determine whether or not the provided information were dilemmas as here defined or whether that construct even mattered. Little is lost by not insisting on “dilemmas.”

Of similar concern was the decision to put instances of incivility and corruption into their own (“nondilemma” categories). Such differentiations can be limiting, splitting philosophical hairs at

the potential expense of knowing what kinds of behaviors are likely to be encountered by I-O psychologists. Clearly, it was not just “ethical dilemmas” that mattered to those who submitted ethical examples when over a quarter of them (26.5%) were classified as incidences of corruption.

What *not* to do? Or what *to do*?

Although the exact prompt that was used to gather the ethical situations in this paper was not provided, it appears that mostly problematic ethical behavior examples were obtained. Indeed, most such ethics-related solicitations tend to result in problematic rather than exemplary behavior.

Lefkowitz (2021) noted that one possible reason that IOPs do not appear to be very concerned with ethics is that they may be largely a highly ethical lot. Given that IOPs must meet rigorous academic criteria and their behavior is closely scrutinized during their training programs, it would be surprising if evidence of widespread professional malfeasance would have been found. Assuredly, there are members of the I-O profession who have been identified, charged, and convicted of having behaved badly. Few may recall, for example, but one of the first consumer psychologists, John B. Watson, came to that role after having been forced out of his university employment for having had an affair with a graduate student (Stimpert, 2001). Still, in lists of people expelled from their professional associations or who have lost their professional licenses, IOPs are seldom prominent on such lists.

I argue that there is little evidence that I-O psychologists as a group behave abusively with their clients, exploit them, or intentionally engage in research fraud or misrepresentation of their results. Nevertheless, many work in highly complicated situations with conflicting roles and obligations and where they do not have legal protections when it comes to issues such as confidentiality or real control over what happens to their work products. I-O psychologists who are in training and those in practice need help in sorting out conflicts, including cases of ethically problematic and ethically exemplary behavior. However, when it comes to considering ethical values and standards within the context of larger societal issues, Lefkowitz’s (2021) concerns that IOP does not embrace ethics and values need thoughtful consideration. This is particularly true when ethical concerns move from narrow technical issues or egregious, if obviously so, misbehavior to the broader ethical concerns of society, especially in ethically fraught times.

A major goal: Elevating ethical concerns within IOP

Lefkowitz (2021) again in this paper (see also, Lefkowitz, 2017) builds a strong case that IOP has generally neglected issues of ethics and values. He confesses not to know why this is so. He suggests that building more of an empirical base for the study of ethical issues in IOP may help with this.

Whatever reasons there are for the IOP field’s apparent disinterest in ethics, it seems unlikely that ethics case data alone will cause it to receive more attention. Most professions’ direct statements regarding their ethics are found in their professional ethics codes, in the case of SIOP, that of the American Psychological Association (APA), called the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct*, hereinafter referred to as the APA Ethics Code (APA, 2017). Note that although this document is typically referred to as an ethics code, it also identifies a number of underlying principles. Such codes tend to be slow to be created or changed, and the process for revision is usually rather political. Influencing such documents requires the sustained focus on ethics and values that Lefkowitz (2021) characterizes, accurately I believe, as having not been focal in IOP.

It is first useful to briefly consider how ethics codes are created or changed. Usually, it is the professional associations that are the source of the ethics codes that find their way into law. The original version of the APA Ethics Code (APA, 2017) was not developed until some 50 years after

the organization's founding. The initial code began with a solicitation of ethical situations from members of the APA (see Hobb, 1948). However, those "cases" were only one source of information used by a special committee created to develop a code. Judgement had to be used to decide what standards were needed and would address the ethical issues that can arise in a field as vast as psychology. When substantive changes have periodically been made to the APA code, a task force has been created that scans the environment; makes judgements as to what changes are needed; and repeatedly circulates drafts for input across the groups, committees, and members of the Association. Finally, in some form, the revised APA Ethics Code is approved by APA's Board and then by its Council of Representatives, the final decision-making body. This elaborate process of feedback often occurs in the midst of substantial advocacy and substantial resistance. IOP is usually represented on such bodies but usually as a distinct minority.

Creators or revisers of professional codes of ethics can and do consider empirical evidence in creating or changing a code of ethics, but ultimately they use judgement to decide what constitutes ethical and unethical behavior and in translating those concepts into informative and enforceable language. Substantive change often occurs only after resolution of strongly differing points of view, usually involving some compromise. When, for example, the decision was made in an earlier version of the APA Ethics Code (2017) to define it as per se unethical for psychologists to have sex with a current psychotherapy client, there were those who felt that psychologists should never ever have sex with current or former clients and others who argued strongly that an ethics code should not be in the business of telling psychologists with whom they could have romantic or sexual relationships. In the end, the APA Ethics Code incorporated an enforceable standard stipulating that sex with current psychotherapy clients was unethical and further establishing that sexual or romantic relationships with prior clients were not ethically permitted for at least 2 years after the end of the professional relationship, and even then only under very specific, nonexploitative circumstances. Why did the APA choose the period of 2 years and not zero years or in perpetuity? The decision was a compromise to address a controversial practice in a way that protected clients but that also recognized alternative views.

More recently, the APA Ethics Code explicitly banned psychologists from participating in situations involving the use of torture. Standard 3.04 Avoiding Harm added the following:

(b) Psychologists do not participate in, facilitate, assist, or otherwise engage in torture, defined as any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person, or in any other cruel, inhuman, or degrading behavior that violates 3.04(a). (APA 2017, p. 6)

Some military and I-O psychologists objected strenuously to adding such standards noting, among other concerns, that by not permitting psychologists to be present when aggressive interrogation techniques were being used, they would lose any ability to moderate, or to stop, such practices.

How did issues of torture emerge to be an ethics code concern is useful to consider. The greatest impetus was the not-uncontroversial Hoffman Report (Hoffman et al., 2015) that identified a number of psychologists, both those on APA staff and those active in its governance, who were described in the report as having been involved in facilitating the use of advanced interrogation techniques, which constituted torture in the opinion of many professional bodies, during the George W. Bush administration. The point here is that it was a political process that was immersed in aggressive advocacy by people with differing points of view, by which the APA Ethics Code was amended.

Most ethical standards (which, unlike the principles, are enforceable) are not controversial, and on those most psychologists can agree. But bringing awareness of and action on some ethical issues to a large and diverse professional group can take protracted advocacy and awareness building. The pressures to consider new or expanded ethical issues typically stem more from use of

persuasion techniques than from empirical research findings. Lefkowitz himself (e.g., 2017) has been one of the major advocates for a number of values and ethics issues in IOP (see also, Lowman 2014) that he argues have been underaddressed. In that process, he has marshalled some empirical evidence, but he has also relied on a full range of moral persuasion techniques. Without widespread support among academics and those in leadership roles in SIOP, the advancement of IOP's ethical concerns is not likely to be very effective.

If case material helps bring IOP's attention to the underlying ethical issues in the field, it serves a useful purpose. But if the field wants to use its considerable knowledge and expertise to the address the societally important ethical issues of the day or if it just wants to be more of a voice on issues of ethics and values in its own areas, it will have to elevate values and ethics to become a more focal part of its enterprise. The ends to which IOP's formidable knowledge base are put inevitably are ones reflecting ethics and values. Debates about them are often messy and inconclusive and they are easily avoided. Like Lefkowitz (2021), I would argue that they should not be.

Summary

Of course, there is value in identifying and categorizing samples of behavior in ethically problematic situations. There are also limitations, both in obtaining such data and in their uses. Whether ethical dilemmas—with all that term's complexity and baggage—are what should be sampled in empirical ethics studies and whether a predetermined taxonomy should be the primary way to code open-ended responses can be debated. Similarly, whether incivility and fraud belong in their own behavioral categories needs further consideration. However, the great contribution of this study is to provide one more source of evidence about why ethics and values in IOP should not be ignored or minimized, as the article maintains is currently the case. When it is further considered that changes in a profession's ethical standards and values come not just from empirical data but also from advocacy and political engagement, Lefkowitz's (2021) call for engagement is particularly timely.

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Cite this article: Lowman, RL. (2021). Uses and limitations of ethical dilemmas in understanding and applying ethics and values in industrial-organizational psychology. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* *14*, 320–324. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2021.72>