


COMMENTARY

Advancing ethical decision making in industrial-organizational psychology

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Although ethics and values in industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology have arguably been neglected by the field (Lefkowitz, 2017), there has been increased focus on these areas in recent years. Still, the process by which I-O psychologists (IOPs) move from the proscriptions and prescriptions of professional codes of ethics to making real-life decisions about real-life situations has received relatively little attention. Indeed, the current version of the ethics code of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the many similar codes from other countries (see, e.g., Lowman, 2018) do not include decision-making models.¹ A useful initial effort, Banks et al.'s (2022) six-step (stage) ethical decision-making model (similar to other such models, e.g., Duffy & Passmore, 2010; Welfel, 2016) will benefit from elaboration. This is particularly true for the kinds of situations that, like many that arise in I-O practice and research, are complex and ambiguous but also to those where there is a specific “right answer.” In this article, I identify five points that have the potential to make this decision-making model more useful for IOPs and students. These are

1. professional ethics codes almost always address many right and wrong “answers” to ethical concerns; when judgement is appropriate, it occurs within defined parameters;
2. ethical principles and standards can be in conflict with one another, confounding ethical decision making;
3. ethical decision making in I-O often involves engaging with nonpsychologists in higher power positions who have no obligation to follow psychologists’ ethics;
4. ethical decision making requires consideration of a variety of other source material beyond an ethics code. These include guidelines and knowledge of the discipline; and
5. prevention is one of the most important paths to ethical decision making.

I will discuss each of these in turn.

1) Many ethical issues do have right or wrong answers; when judgements are appropriate, they must be anchored

The authors state that their model was not intended to lead IOPs to specific right-and-wrong answers of how to behave in particular situations. However, they situate their approach in a specific ethics code, that of APA, which is also the Society for Industrial and Organizational

¹An exception is the ethics code of the Canadian Psychological Association (2017) which includes specific guidelines on ethical decision making and what to do when the principles are in apparent conflict with each other.

Psychology's (SIOP) code. The APA/SIOP Ethics Code (hereafter "Ethics Code" or "Code"), like most professional codes of ethics, is in many respects a deontological one—that is, one with specific rules. The Code derived from professional consensus about right and wrong behavior, and includes specific "must dos" and "must not dos."

In the case of the APA code, both allowable and disallowed behavior is defined. For example, it is *per se* unethical for psychologists who conduct therapy to have sex with current clients (Standard 10.05 of the Ethics Code). Although most IOPs do not conduct therapy (coaching, however, has many elements of that activity), they are bound by a broader prohibition against exploitative relationships (Standard 3.08; APA, 2017). Similarly, it is also ethically forbidden to plagiarize others' work and present it as one's own (Standard 8.11; APA, 2017).

This is not to suggest that judgement is not required in deciding how the Code applies to particular situations. Rarely, however, would IOPs' "individual subjective stance" be an appropriate basis on which to make ethical decisions. The Code does allow for professional judgement to be used—but not without limitations. For example, the Code requires that psychologists' behavior be reasonable for the particular circumstances. It defines the term "reasonable" as "the prevailing professional judgment of psychologists engaged in similar activities in similar circumstances, given the knowledge the psychologist had or should have had at the time" (APA, 2017).

In short, when applying the Ethics Code in I-O contexts, some behaviors are, in effect, predecided. They are *per se* ethically wrong or without exception required to be done. Even in the many situations in which judgement is needed, however, the Code requires the use of a disciplined (not "subjective") process. When exercising professional judgement, the Code specifies that it must be consistent with "prevailing," not idiosyncratic, judgement. Another way to contextualize the matter is to imagine the retrospective evaluation of a psychologist's behavior by an ethics tribunal or in the context of litigation. Not knowing that the behavior at issue was prohibited or mandated would clearly be problematic as would not being familiar with the prevailing practices applying to such circumstances.

2) Ethical decision making when ethical standards and principles conflict

The APA Ethics Code includes both overarching principles and enforceable standards. The ethical principles provide the underlying values and assumptions on which the standards are based. The ethical standards are written so as to minimize ambiguity as to what is required of psychologists.

However, in some cases, the standards and/or principles are in apparent conflict with each other. The standards would prevail over the principles in cases of inconsistencies between the two in that the principles were written to be aspirational and the standards are specifically enforceable. The standards are also intended to identify the expectations of all psychologists, not a maximal standard of exemplary behavior.

But what happens when the standards themselves are in conflict? Which should prevail in ethical decision making? In the authors' Situation 5, for example, assuming that the case's protagonist, Allison, was required to comply with the Ethics Code (as many psychology graduate students are), she had an ethical obligation to either discuss the apparent ethical breach directly with the psychology professor, Dr. Fellows, (Standard 1.04) or, if that course of action were judged to be inappropriate, to formally report the behavior (Standard 1.05). However, standards relating to confidentiality (Standards 4.01 and 4.02) and avoiding harm (3.04) would potentially justify not reporting the behavior. The conflict could partly be resolved by considering the Code's principles even though the Code does not prioritize them as to their relative importance. Principle A of the Code states that "When conflicts occur among psychologists' obligations or concerns, they attempt to resolve these conflicts in a responsible fashion that avoids or minimizes harm" (APA, 2017). In this case, Allison might choose not to report the professor's problematic behavior because to do so might be judged to cause imminent harm to herself. Often, however, as in this

example, there may be no way to avoid potential harm altogether. Avoiding harm to oneself may come at the potential expense of harm to others in that reporting ethically problematic behavior may result in its being addressed. In considering whether the ultimate decision made was ethical, the information and ethical logic used to make the decision would need to be taken into account. The decision-making model would benefit from incorporating guidance about how to manage such conflicts.

3) Ethical decision making when stakeholders are the controlling partners

Banks et al.'s (2022) third step suggests that psychologists "identify proximal and distal stakeholders" who may be affected by the ethical situation. They define stakeholders broadly to be "anyone who may be affected by a given decision or action taken to resolve the ethical issue" (p. X). Their "anyone" also includes organizations, shareholders, and the public at large. The model also addresses obtaining the "most favorable outcomes for the majority of stakeholders involved" while "defending processes used to make decisions to protect the rights and well-being of individual stakeholders" (p. X).

This formulation is useful for some aspects of ethical decision making, but it is potentially problematic for others. It is managers and boards who often hold the bulk of the decision-making power in organizational settings. Unlike IOPs, they do not have a generally accepted professional code of ethics governing their behavior. Moreover, in for-profit organizations, they may be mandated to maximize shareholder or owner value, so there may be little interest among those in power in optimizing outcomes for stakeholder groups such as employees, much less to psychologists or their clients. Even so, psychologists need to be aware of, and strive to fulfill, their ethical obligations to the people, and in the context, with which they work.

The standards do address appropriate actions for psychologists who find themselves in situations in which organizational demands or laws and regulations conflict with the duties required by the Code (see Principle A and Standard 1.02, 1.03; APA 2017). For example, the Code prohibits discrimination based on a number of group or personal characteristics. Suppose that IOPs were asked (or required) by managers to devise strategies for attacking the credibility of a complainant in a discrimination or harassment case when the evidence was compelling that inappropriate discrimination or harassment had occurred. In such cases the "organizational demands" would be requiring the psychologist to do something in specific violation of the Code, which would require actions be taken by the psychologist in response.

Explicit guidance from an ethical decision-making model that would help psychologists identify options open to them when they are asked (or demanded) to do things that are in violation of their ethical standards would be particularly useful. It would be particularly helpful for situations where psychologists have little real power compared with other stakeholders. Although having a code of professional ethics itself can provide leverage in such situations, that alone may not be sufficient.

4) There is more to behaving ethically than codes of ethics

Beyond ethical awareness, Banks et al. (2022) noted the importance of knowledge of organizational policies and applicable laws. Organizational policies and laws, though important to consider, are seldom developed with the idea of being consistent with psychologists' ethical duties. In fact, laws and policies not infrequently directly conflict with APA's Code of Ethics. (Indeed, Standards 1.02 and 1.03 specifically address what is ethically required to be done in such situations.)

Tangentially mentioned in the model but also an important source for ethical decision making are professional guidelines and standards. These often reflect the best practices and professional

consensus, particularly in emerging areas of practice. Presumably all U.S. IOPs are familiar with the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (American Educational Association et al., 2014) and with SIOP's own guidelines, *Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Procedures* (2018). Possibly less widely known are a number of practice guidelines that help psychologists practice competently and ethically. These include among many others: *Guidelines for the Practice of Telepsychology* (<https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/telepsychology>), *Guidelines for Assessment of and Intervention with Persons with Disabilities* (<https://www.apa.org/pi/disability/resources/assessment-disabilities>), and *Professional Practice Guidelines for Integrating the Role of Work and Career into Psychological Practice* (<https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/role-work-career.pdf>).

Such guidelines provide detailed information and consensus guidance on appropriate professional behavior when working in a particular area. Because guidelines are generally promulgated without any power of enforcement, they may get overlooked.

5) Prevention: ethical decision making requires planning and foresight

Although not stated explicitly, Banks et al.'s (2022) model seems to apply especially to decision making in situations that have arisen in the course of professional practice or study. The model would do well to explicitly recognize that ethical problems can and should be anticipated in advance and be preventatively addressed.

Perhaps there are an unlimited number of ways that ethical issues can arise in I-O work, but if casebooks (e.g., Lowman, 2006) and reports of disciplinary actions taken against psychologists are any guide, the types of ethically problematic behaviors likely to be encountered are fairly predictable. Assuredly there are among the ranks of psychologists those who will behave blatantly unethically, stealing from or otherwise exploiting their clients, lying and misrepresenting their work or promised outcomes, making up data, and bullying their colleagues or seducing their students. However, I am aware of no evidence that suggests such behavior is widespread among IOPs or among psychologists in general. Arguably, the greater risk of ethically problematic behavior comes from not having considered possible ethical concerns early on in project planning and not having identified ways to keep them from occurring. Of course, even with careful planning and foresight, not all ethical challenges can be anticipated. Creating contingencies for what to do when unanticipated ethical concerns arise is itself a type of prevention.

Therefore, I suggest that, as part of a routine ethical decision-making process, IOPs and IOP trainees build in ethical checks from the beginning of their work to its conclusion. For example, the APA Ethics Code's Standard 3.11 states that "(a) Psychologists delivering services to or through organizations provide information beforehand to clients and when appropriate those directly affected by the services" concerning seven factors. These include "(1) the nature and objectives of the services, (2) the intended recipients . . . , [and] (4) the relationship the psychologist will have with each person and the organization." Complying with this standard requires IOPs to think through a number of potentially ethically problematic situations at the outset of services.

Other preventative approaches are also possible. Banks et al. (2022) suggest the value of practice in learning ethical decision making. I would add to this that working with colleagues (whether or not they are psychologists) who are committed to behaving ethically will likewise help prevent potential difficulties. Additionally, building in ethical reviews throughout projects can help keep ethical issues salient. For example, IOPs could also create and rotate the role of "ethical consultant" to assure that there is always at least one person in a work group who is charged with identifying potential ethical concerns and with asking the "what if" questions.

Such approaches, over time, can help to diffuse awareness and responsibility for prevention of ethical problems to all. When, despite the best efforts and intentions, unanticipated ethical issues

do arise, a review of how they came about, how they were handled, and what, in retrospect, might have been done differently earlier on will help prevent future repetitions of the same mistakes.

Summary and conclusion

The model of ethical decision making presented by Banks et al. (2022) is helpful as a foundational approach for enhancing ethical decision making. Because the model was anchored in a specific code of ethics, however, it needs to be clearer on the role of prescribed and proscribed behavior and the room (and limits) of discretionary decision making. Future iterations could address how IOPs should handle inconsistencies in what is ethically mandated and identify strategies for dealing with people in power who demand behaviors that are inconsistent with the Code. It would also provide greater specificity on how legal/policy issues and guidelines can be integrated into ethical deliberations. Finally, it is generally far easier to anticipate and avoid ethical problems than it is to deal with them after ethical breaches or complaints have occurred. Prevention matters.

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