

COMMENTARY

Exploring the New Zealand's competence-based ethical training: Guidelines for I-O psychologists

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Lefkowitz (2021) developed a taxonomy to address the nuances of the ethical dilemmas that industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists face due to factors such as changes over time in technology, economy, and other transitions giving rise to novel ethical issues. This structural approach enables comparisons of the ethical dilemmas across various professions, organizations, demographic groups, and so on. To complement this “content-free” structural aspect of ethical dilemmas, we propose that a systematic approach should be developed to help I-O psychologists make ethical decisions. The goal of this commentary is to initiate the dialog of developing a structural approach to ethical decision making in I-O psychology.

Therefore, in this commentary, we first review the New Zealand Psychologists Board's (NZPB) competence-based ethical training, which seeks to unify different practices of psychology by first providing psychologists with an understanding of the fundamental purpose of the ethical codes and subsequently implementing them in unique situations successfully (NZBP, 2002). Then, we outline a six-step, ethical decision-making model prescribed to use the competencies efficiently. Next, we use the ethical dilemma presented in Lefkowitz's (2021) paper (see Appendix A) to provide a template with examples of how the decision-making model can be implemented. Finally, we suggest practical implications and future research to test this approach empirically in the I-O psychology field.

Competence-based ethical training

The New Zealand Psychologists' Code of Ethics presents *ethical codes* as an umbrella, acknowledging that no code can be exhaustive in its coverage. These codes serve as a document for the subsequent development of behavioral expectations for different areas of psychology (Sinclair, 1998). Competence-based ethical training is consistent with these objectives and focuses on the psychologists' ability to apply the general knowledge and skills of ethical issues in the real world, with competencies as criteria for evaluating learners (Falender & Shafranske, 2004; Seymour et al., 2004). This approach helps operationalize ethical competencies and assess individuals' ability to know and apply rules in a consistent fashion.

The NZPB has developed nine core competencies, and the competence-based model explicitly draws upon the principles that are based on these competencies (NZPB, 2018). Moreover, the knowledge and skills that are required for these competencies are outlined in detail to help students understand how psychologists can develop them. For example, competence in communication encompasses the knowledge of techniques for dissemination of findings and the skills to gather relevant information, build rapport, and effective communication of outcomes. Overall, psychologists receive training on and assessment of these competencies and are expected to use them to systematically solve ethical dilemmas. The next section outlines the ethical

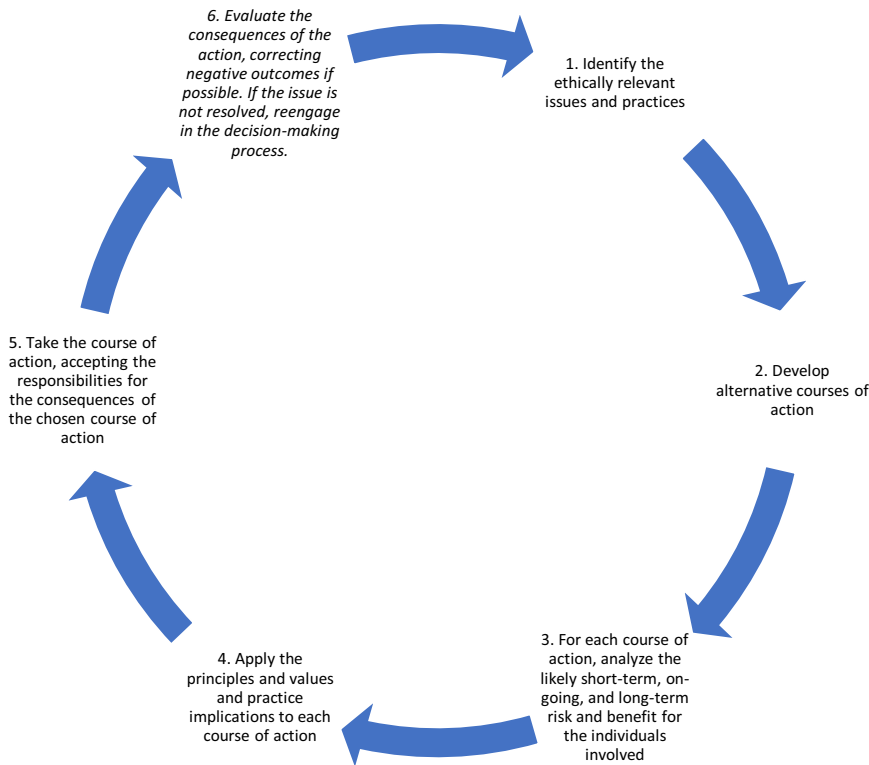


Figure 1. The six-step ethical decision-making model (New Zealand Psychologists Board, 2002)

decision-making model (NZPB, 2002) that enables psychologists to use these competencies systematically.

The six-step ethical decision-making model

The ethical decision-making model is an educational framework that promotes the understanding of ethical dilemmas as well as a working tool that facilitates ethical decision making (Lincoln & Holmes, 2010; Lindsay, 2012). We acknowledge that there are various ethical decision-making models that are based on the APA ethical code of conduct (e.g., Gottlieb, 1993); however, the NZPB's six-step ethical decision-making model (Figure 1) is consistent with the competence-based training in that it emphasizes the understanding of the fundamental meaning of the codes and identification of issues that may include conflicting principles or interests rather than simply deciding what constitutes obedience to the existing rules.

It is important to note that a linear approach to solving an ethical issue can sometimes fail to account for unique differences within culture, groups, and organizations (du Preez & Goedeke, 2016). Therefore, as demonstrated in Figure 1, we emphasize a nonlinear approach when using this model. When adapting this model to I-O psychology, we reiterate the importance of gathering all the necessary information at step 1 and revisiting this step to ensure that an informed decision is being made. Also, it is critical to account for personal and organizational constraints and code of practice at different workplaces. Although the model provides useful practice-based guidance on how psychologists may manage ethical dilemmas, being aware of factors that may limit the proper use of it (such as limited time or incomplete information) is important.

Ethical decision-making template

Table 1 demonstrates how the six steps in the decision-making model can be applied to a real-life scenario (Appendix A) and help individuals practice competency-based ethical decision making in I-O psychology. In this template, we first outline the issue and list the individuals who could potentially be affected by the decision. Next, we outline the competencies that could be used to analyze the issue. The goal is not to provide an exhaustive list of competencies but to provide an initial list of potential competencies that practitioners could use when brainstorming ideas. Then, we provide a few examples of how the issue can be analyzed and list the subsequent course of actions and the associated benefits, risks, and practice implications. A comprehensive list of all the potential outcomes can help practitioners make prudent and holistic decisions.

It is important to note that ethical codes cannot cover every possible situation that may arise, and sometimes ethical standards may conflict with each other, with law, or with organizational guidelines (Nagy, 2010). For these reasons, ethical decision-making processes are essential for guiding practitioners on how they may prioritize principles and come to ethically sound decisions. When faced with an ethical dilemma, a psychologist should consider the principles on which the code of ethics is based and the competencies they have developed. Understanding the value and practice implication of each principle thoroughly will allow the psychologist to think through the conflicts that have led to the ethical dilemma and help arrive at an ethically sound decision.

Practical implications

We recommend that practitioners identify the specific competencies that can help them understand ethical dilemmas and efficiently apply solutions using the knowledge and skills that they have developed. Practitioners can use the template provided in this paper to outline a comprehensive overview of the ethical dilemma and use their fundamental understanding of the ethical codes and competencies to brainstorm all the benefits and potential risks of different courses of action. When considering a course of action, it is important to be aware of personal biases, assumptions, and limitations. This awareness can help practitioners listen to clients without judgement and have more clarity in ethical dilemmas. Additionally, the awareness of the limitations of one's own understanding and competence can prompt practitioners to consult with colleagues and supervisors early on and help resolve any issue that may occur due to conflicts of interest (Thompson & Thompson, 2008).

Future research

Future studies should identify the competencies that are required for ethical decision-making processes in I-O psychology. These competencies can be adapted from the ones developed by the New Zealand Psychologists' Board and/or O*NET (NZPB, 2018; O*NET, 2018). The knowledge and skills that are required to develop these competencies should be validated to eventually be used as an assessment of a practitioner's ability to apply them and resolve ethical dilemmas. We suggest using Lefkowitz's (2021) approach of recruiting I-O psychologists and using content-validation processes to develop the competencies that are required to make ethically sound decisions.

As mentioned earlier, this model should be used with a nonlinear approach. Therefore, we suggest that competency-based training should be empirically tested against factors such as an organization's culture, the individual's tenure, the individual's decision-making style, and so on to confirm its efficacy in various settings and for different individuals.

Table 1. The Six-Step Ethical Decision-Making Process Template

<p>The issue: The consultant has been asked to breach confidentiality and share the data (of senior executives) with the CEO.</p> <p>People involved: Consultant, senior executives, CEO, SrVP of HR, potentially other employees of the organization.</p> <p>Examples of competencies that can be used to analyze the issue: <i>Communication</i> (clearly conveying ideas and possessing knowledge of techniques for gathering relevant information), <i>Ethics and Legal Practice</i> (apply informed judgment using code of ethics and all legislations), <i>Reflective Practice</i> (critical and constructive self-reflection; continuous process of accurate self-assessment), and <i>Supervision</i> (contractual process involving supervisor and supervisee meeting on a regular basis to enhance professional functioning; New Zealand Psychologists Board, 2002).</p> <p>Identifying the issue: The consultant should revise the confidential agreement and carefully review the terms and conditions that were agreed upon (<i>reflective practice</i>). After thorough review, consider the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has the consultant understood the goals of demand and explored alternatives with the parties involved explaining the risks and professional obligation? Has the consultant found a way to help the CEO and at the same time not breach confidentiality? Has the consultant gathered relevant information—for example, is everyone (employees/employer) aware of the demand? (<i>communication</i>) - Will there be harmful consequences for employees/organization? Which legal implications and company/HR policies should be considered? (<i>ethical and legal</i>) - Can a colleague or supervisor be consulted before making the decision? (<i>supervision</i>) <p>Once the relevant issues are considered, develop course of action and associates benefits, risks, and practice implications as shown below:</p>				
Course of Action	Benefits	Short term risks	Ongoing risks	Long term risks
Shares the confidential data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No conflict between the consultant and the CEO. - No professional threats to consultants from the CEO. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information may be misused, which might affect the senior executives' careers within the organization. - Possibilities of violating the ethical code of practice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negative effect on well-being of the consultant and senior executives. - Possibilities of violating the ethical code of practice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consultant's professional integrity and reputation at stake. - Negative effect on the workplace environment. - Company could experience Legal implications/lawsuits. - Possibilities of violating the ethical code of practice.
Practice implications		<p>Implications associated with the identified risks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Potential loss of executives' and consultants' jobs (loss of individuals' basic rights). - Consultant, senior executives, and/or other employees may feel unsafe (loss of individual's right to safety). 		
Does not share the confidential data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No breach of confidentiality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conflict with the CEO. - If consultant does not consider the ground rules of the confidentiality agreement—and if information is required to protect organization and employees—then there is a risk to organization and any involved employees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conflicts with the CEO. - Negative effect on consultant's well-being and morale. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Threats to consultant's career.
Practice implications		<p>Implications associated with the identified risks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Potential loss of consultants' job (loss of individuals' basic rights). - Consultant may feel unsafe (loss of individual's right to safety). - If disclosing information is important for others' safety, psychologists should consult colleagues/supervisor (public safety). 		

Conclusions

Competence-based ethical decision-making training can facilitate continual exposure to making decisions that are ethically sound. The goal of this paper was to initiate this dialog of developing a “content-free” structural framework to help I-O psychologists with the ethical decision-making process. We reviewed an existing model that was implemented by the New Zealand Psychologists’ Board and hope that this model will be adapted in the I-O psychology field and help practitioners commit to making decisions that improve the conditions of individuals, organizations, and society.

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Appendix A

Ethical dilemma

While consulting in a large organization, I was asked to initiate several coaching and development assignments with two senior executives. Several discussions and meetings occurred with the senior executives, the CEO, and the SrVP-HR to get agreement on the confidentiality ground rules for the engagements. After 3 months into both assignments, the CEO pressured me to divulge assessment and coaching information that was clearly covered in our agreement as confidential to the participant. He implied that my future work in the company might be in jeopardy if I did not cooperate with his request. After some thought, I chose not to share the information.

Source: Lefkowitz, J. (2021). Forms of ethical dilemmas in industrial-organizational psychology. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 14(3), 297–319.

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