COMMENTARY

Ethics and I-O psychology: Do we just talk the talk or do we walk the walk?

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The Society for Industrial-Organizational Psychology (SIOP) adopted the American Psychological Association's (APA's) *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (https://www.apa.org/ethics/code) and, as SIOP members and psychologists, we agree to follow and abide by and are expected to comply with the APA Ethics Code[1, 2]. Therefore, we applaud Lefkowitz's (2021) contribution to the theoretical frameworks for ethics. Clearly identifying ethical dilemmas should foster interest and subsequent research on ethical conflicts that are faced by industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists. In this response, we have three foci:

1. Our previous experiences affirm Lefkowitz's insight that, as a profession, we have not taken ethical concerns as seriously as we think we should.
2. Although the framework of ethical dilemmas is needed, corruption is deservedly equally important to be addressed by our field.
3. We present a call to action to address both of these issues.

As Lefkowitz noted, the study and discussion of ethics are rarely found in our texts, publications, or conferences. We applaud the work of SIOP's Committee for the Advancement of Professional Ethics (CAPE) thus far but propose that SIOP needs to go further. Of particular concern, SIOP does not have a means for "enforcing" ethical behavior; CAPE serves only an educational function. Lefkowitz is kind in referring to this as "benign neglect"; we highlight instances of an active lack of concern on the part of SIOP members and implore for greater concern in understanding the importance of ethics education, research, and accountability. Independently, Brossoit et al. (2021) also argued for a greater focus on ethics education in I-O programs.

As I-O psychologists, whether in academe or practice, we have a professional obligation to apply our discipline-related knowledge to create an ethical environment and to model ethical behavior across situations and settings. Because of our positions as academics, we focus on ethical misbehavior in academia, but our examples likely translate to situations encountered by practitioners.

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[1]Depending on the practice of an I-O psychologist, there are other associations that have ethical expectations and guidelines, such as SHRM, https://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/pages/code-of-ethics.aspx, and ATD, https://www.td.org/about/vision-mission-code-of-ethics.

Our primary purpose here is to note that there has been a lack of awareness and concern on the part of SIOP—and possibly by I-O psychologists—in monitoring the ethical practice in the formal field of I-O psychology.

[2]The APA has indicated it will not hear an ethical violation complaint unless it first has been adjudicated by another body (e.g., a state board of psychology, a university ethics committee).

There are relatively few sources that provide guidance to I-O psychologists facing ethically challenging situations in academic organizational settings that do not entail research. Typically, ethical cases presented for academics deal with conducting and reporting research, submitting and reviewing manuscripts, and credit on publications (e.g., Lowman, 2006). We acknowledge that these are relevant, serious academic activities and ethical behavior in these areas is important. At the same time, we acknowledge that because of the unique characteristics of university governance, there is an array of other situations that present potential ethical challenges to faculty in academic settings that are unique and different from those found in many organizational settings in business, industry, and government. For example, faculty grievances are frequently heard and arbitrated by a committee of colleagues rather than by supervisors or the HR department; graduate assistants are employees who by the nature of their position may be in a dual or triple relationship with their supervising faculty member as both an employee (e.g., teaching or research assistant) and a student in classes and/or as the recipient of thesis or dissertation direction, which results in an even greater power differential than the typical supervisor–employee relationship in most organizational settings. Though characteristic of academe, these, and other situations we note later, are important for I-O psychologists to attend to and to discuss with other I-O psychologists to set meaningful standards for our field. Based on our experiences, we have a lot of work to do.

Instances representing lack of concern or interest among SIOP members

Calls for more attention by professionals to ethical concerns are not new. In addition to the focal article, Lefkowitz (2003) called for discussions and exchanges at conferences as an important method for engaging in continuing education in ethics. Our I-O colleagues are likely to share common professional values and offer informed insights into appropriate ways to deal with ethical dilemmas in academic organizational situations (Lefkowitz 2005, 2008). Frequently, I-O psychologists are in the minority in academic departments whether they are housed in psychology departments or business schools. Therefore, it would be of value to discuss ethics issues with SIOP colleagues in the context of a SIOP session specifically designed to encourage the exploration and resolution of ethical quandaries experienced in academia that go beyond the teaching of ethical principles.

Sadly, some I-O psychologists seem to see little value in discussing ethics at the SIOP conference. Our own experiences with SIOP conference submissions highlight the "benign neglect" of the consideration of ethical issues. Over 3 consecutive years, we submitted SIOP panel proposals on ethics that included cases of unethical situations we had observed in academia; two of these proposals included the focal article author as one of the panelists. All three proposals were rejected. We acknowledge that SIOP conference acceptance is highly selective, but we have a strong acceptance record, especially for academic and pedagogical sessions. In each of our rejections, what was of primary concern was the implication in reviewer comments that sessions on ethics are neither relevant to SIOP members (e.g., "I don't see the value to I-O psychologists per se") nor appropriate for the SIOP conference (e.g., "I think this panel would be interesting to academic faculty in general, I'm just not certain the SIOP conference is the appropriate forum for this discussion"). In addition, there were reviewer comments that suggested that our lived situations were not realistic. A few reviewers recognized ethics as an important topic of discussion for a SIOP conference. Nonetheless, these reviewers were in the minority.

The need to focus on unethical behaviors such as corruption

As we reviewed the examples in the focal article, we agreed with the general taxonomy of preventing harm, self-serving temptations, role and value conflicts, and coercion. We argue, however,

that corruption (i.e., when someone voluntarily and intentionally violates ethical constraints; Lefkowitz, 2021) also needs to be a major research area and focus for preventative action. We posit that corruption may be more harmful in the long run than a number of the ethical dilemmas posed in the focal article. Corruption that goes unchecked is not only harmful to individuals and organizations, it is harmful—if unaddressed—to the integrity of the field of I-O psychology. Even if we are not concerned about the moral imperative, the sheer economic cost should impress us to action. The cost to the world economy from corruption is staggering, estimated to be 5% of global GDP (World Economic Forum, cited in Castro et al., 2020).

Experience with corruption was evident in the survey results reported by Lefkowitz. Even though he was focusing on ethical dilemmas, 25.6% of the reported behaviors were classified as corruption. Although the sample did not include the full membership of SIOP, these data are sufficiently concerning to suggest a need to focus on all types of unethical behavior.

Unfortunately, the list of ethical dilemmas and acts of corruption we have witnessed over our collective century as professors of psychology is quite long. Yet, some SIOP members might not realize such extreme situations actually occur. For example, one SIOP conference reviewer wrote, "Whilst ethics is a very important area of consideration for our profession the cases outlined seemed a little extreme. Maybe a focus on more day to day ethical dilemmas would enable the session to appeal to a wider range of delegates." Perhaps this incredulity is at least in part due to the *intentional nature of acts of corruption* that some may find hard to believe. With corruption, the actor is not placed in a coercive situation by an employer or client; the individual makes a volitional decision to act in an unethical manner. Here are some examples of corrupt behavior we have observed:

- A faculty member falsified educational background and work experience to gain membership in professional organizations for which the faculty member did not meet membership requirements.
- A senior faculty member agreed to teach a course for additional pay, which was taught by a junior colleague; these two colleagues split the extra pay.
- Faculty members purposely misrepresented to other faculty, denigrating a well-qualified job candidate who was not their preferred candidate.
- A faculty member knowingly made a false claim of research misconduct against another faculty member with whom the faculty member had a personal disagreement, setting off a lengthy, time-consuming investigation.
- A faculty member threatened students who might report the faculty member's unethical behavior that, if reported, the faculty member would track down the jobs to which the students were applying and write unsolicited negative letters of recommendation.
- When a junior faculty member disagreed with the department chair on a substantive matter, the chair scheduled the faculty member's classes during times such that the faculty member would miss certain service obligations expected for retention and promotion.

As the reader can see, these are substantial violations of ethics and, no doubt, several have obvious parallels in practitioner settings. When SIOP is unwilling or unable to act when there are clear incidents of ethical misconduct, it undermines the integrity of our profession. Although the rate of unethical or corrupt behaviors might be low, they occur in academia and other settings, often without recourse.

We are concerned that because SIOP to date does not appear to have a strong ethos around ethics, we may inadvertently be communicating to our students that ethics are optional or of lesser importance than other I-O psychology content. We know that employers value ethical behavior when our students enter the workplace as interns (Shoenfelt et al., 2012) as well as employees (Zelin et al., 2015). In the SIOP careers study, across all four employment sectors of academics, consulting, industry, and government, ethical behavior was listed as one of the top five

competencies regardless of the job level of the I-O psychologist (Zelin, et al., 2015). Brossoit et al. (2021) reported that program directors were confident in their graduates' ability to handle ethical issues in research but were less confident in graduates' ability to handle ethical issues in consulting work and internships, and they had low confidence in graduates' ability to deal with ethical issues in teaching (including advising and mentoring situations). These data further support the need for more education and continued discussion about ethics.

A call to (further) action

As I-O psychologists, we have great respect for our profession, our colleagues, and our field. We call upon SIOP, as well as our I-O colleagues, to propose and support changes to our organizational structure and standards that will enable a stronger sense of ethical concern and action, as well as a heightened awareness of the value of integrity.

We recommend the following:

- As Brossoit et al. (2021) recommended, ethics courses should be required and offered early in programs. SIOP should elevate the placement of ethics in its recommended graduate competencies (SIOP, 2016) and emphasize its development in graduate training.
- SIOP should encourage sessions on ethics at the annual conference and, perhaps, carve out dedicated space for ethics in the limited conference program space. As Lefkowitz (2021) noted, this does not currently exist. Further, this message needs to become part of the culture of SIOP: SIOP leaders need to visibly support the importance of attendance at conference sessions about ethics.
- As a corollary, an "ethics" corner in *TIP* would support this culture building. For years, there had been an "on the legal front" segment in *TIP*.
- SIOP could offer education sessions at the SIOP Annual Conference and the Leading Edge Consortium.
- SIOP should develop a mechanism to hear and resolve complaints of unethical behavior by SIOP members.
- In addition to Lefkowitz's taxonomy of ethical dilemmas, I-O psychologists should support an effort to build a taxonomy around corruption and how best to combat it. There are already efforts in other arenas for this (Castro et al., 2020). Further, we know that anticorruption training can be effective in inducing employees to reject opportunities to engage in unethical behavior (Hauser, 2019), but without fully understanding the foundations of corruption, such training may be less effective than it could be. I-O psychologists could use the taxonomy to structure research on ethics and the ethical practice of I-O psychology.
- The SIOP Foundation could fund research specifically targeting the ethical practice of I-O psychology.

Conclusion

Using the context of academia, we established that SIOP, as evidenced by conference representation, has not had a strong concern for ethical issues or research in ethics that pertains to I-O psychologists. We also have made a case that corruption should be of significant concern in I-O psychology. We recommend corruption be afforded more attention in I-O research agendas. Furthermore, we urge SIOP to take a more proactive approach to incorporating ethics and ethics training into the field by elevating ethics to a core competency in graduate training guidelines, intentionally including ethics in conference programming, funding ethics research, and developing a mechanism for pursuing ethical complaints from SIOP members.

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