

Essay on Psychologist Ethics.  
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Introduction.

This paper consists of highlight opinions and suggestions that arise out of involvement with Psychologists for Social Responsibility during 2007 and 2008. For PsySR I interviewed retired military personnel and a professional interrogator. I wrote a white paper based on this and with the help of another PsySR member rewrote sections of the APA code of ethics to address areas that implicitly permitted psychologists to participate in illegal and immoral activities requested by their employer. I made preparations to present my opinions on panels with PsySR members at both the International Congress of Psychology convention in Berlin and the APA convention in Boston.

General Observations and Opinions.

I think it is inappropriate and impractical to try to prohibit psychologists from working at any facility that is committing illegal acts of any sort, or to restrict them to certain areas of professional service at such facilities, e.g. "psychotherapy, diagnosis and research". There are more effective and practical ways to deal with immoral, unethical and illegal behavior.

The military expects psychologists to ascribe to a professional code of ethics that has national stature, whether of the APA or other organization. I think this code of ethics should include provisions precluding activity that may be illegal. The psychologist should be responsible for reporting the suspected illegal job duty requests immediately to the professional association to whose ethics he/she is ascribing, whether that of APA or some other national professional body.

That professional association should have readily available legal counsel that would promptly investigate the matter (on a case by case basis) and provide a recommendation to the professional psychology organization as to the possible illegality of the requested job duties. The organization should then promptly inform the psychologist and clearly recommend either compliance or refusal to comply, both to be consonant with the ethical principles of the organization and to protect oneself from possible subsequent prosecution in a court of law.

My recommendations are based in part on the U.S. military expectation that professionals in their employ comply with national ethical codes governing their

professions, as a condition of military employment. This gives the APA a clear mandate from the military itself to create and enforce reasonable and workable ethical principles and mechanisms for enforcing them.

I think the APA should not try to specify what is or is not torture, as by listing specific behaviors that are torture and thereby implicitly permitting many other behaviors that can be torture and that a psychologist could participate in. APA should simply defer to the legal profession/arena and bar any illegal behavior and put the burden of responsibility for deciding what is or is not possibly illegal behavior in the hands of reputable attorneys serving them and the community at large, e.g. ones familiar with international law in the case of possible violations of the Geneva Convention. These matters would then be handled on a case by case basis, as raised by psychologists when asked to do something they, or others familiar with the case, suspect may be illegal. The burden would rest initially on the psychologist to report, just as it lay on Lt. Calley in Vietnam when he was ordered to massacre civilians in the line of military duty. The burden is to report the problem a.s.a.p.

The APA or other ethics code source could further guide psychologists with a casebook of likely job duty requests of the sort they might encounter in various employment settings, to help prepare the psychologist ahead of time for possible sticky situations.

I think psychologists also face "sticky" situations in specialties other than military prisons. For example, is it appropriate for a school psychologist to refrain from labeling a child with an I.Q. of 65 "mentally retarded" if the school system prefers to avoid that specific term, and asks the psychologist instead to label the child "developmentally delayed"? Or is it appropriate for a school psychologist to keep quiet when working for a school district which has a public policy of expecting every child in the district to have a goal of going to college, especially when feelings of academic failure are one factor that underlie violence-proneness?

Or is it appropriate for a psychologist working for the Social Security administration to minimize a Disability applicant's mental and emotional problems to help the government limit how many applicants are eligible for benefits to save government money?

Such behaviors may not be illegal, in the sense that torture is, but dramatize the sort of moral dilemmas psychologists face in the line of duty and with which a helpful and morally responsible professional association should be able to aid its members in handling.

Specific details:

1. Ethics, by definition, involve conflict or potential conflict between self-interest and the common good, the welfare of the greater community in which one lives.
2. Therefore, the need of a psychologist to keep his/her job must be secondary to the obligation to report to his/her national ethics committee cases of suspected employer illegality or immorality that raise ethical questions. Keeping one's job is self-interest. It is not unimportant but must be secondary to the common good if ethics are to have any meaning at all. Hitler's programs provided many jobs for many people. Those jobs did not justify the many inhumane, criminal, immoral and unethical practices of Nazi Germany.
3. Such reporting must also take precedence over any claim by the employer that such reporting is inappropriate, e.g. because of secrecy or "national interest" in the case of employment in the government.
4. Therefore, it may be appropriate and necessary that a psychologist require at the onset of employment that his employer sign a statement acknowledging respect for this principle, so both parties are clear from the outset that professional ethics in the service of the common good supercede employer needs or psychologist self-interest. This would help remind the employer not to invite or require psychologists to participate in "secret" or potentially controversial or illegal job duties.
5. The national association ethics committee and their legal services must be entirely independent of loyalty to any individual or organization other than the common good in hearing and judging ethics cases. For example, this committee should temporarily exclude any current or past members of military employment when hearing a case involving a psychologist working in the military.
6. The common good is best defined not by theologians, committees, organizations, governments, professional associations or moralists but by the citizens of a community. The larger the community sampled, the better. For, in the case of southern U. S. states, persecution of African Americans was considered moral and acceptable for many decades after it was declared illegal by Federal law after the Civil War. And in the case of Nazi Germany what German citizens accepted as moral behavior vis a vis Jews, foreigners and political dissidents was considered immoral by the Allied nations. The common good can be defined specifically by well-designed polls of the public. Psychologists are uniquely qualified to conduct such polls. Input from nations, committees, theologians, etc. would be appropriate in designing the initial content for such polls.
7. Psychologists are uniquely obligated to incorporate the findings of their science in formulating their ethical principles, e.g. awareness that most ordinary citizens can be persuaded by authorities to participate in inhumane behavior (a la Milgram and Zimbardo). End.

