
Navigating the Ethical Decision Making Maze

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Psychologists are regularly confronted with ethical dilemmas and challenges with no clear cut or readily identifiable answer. Even well trained and well-intentioned professionals may be unsure of how to best proceed. Having a model for ethical decision-making can be a great help in these situations.

The first place psychologists typically look is the American Psychological Association's Ethics Code (APA, 2002). While the standards of the Ethics Code's provide very useful guidance in many situations, they generally are more helpful in more straightforward situations. Additionally, it would not be possible for the Ethics Code or any other single document to directly address the diverse range of situations psychologists may face.

Nevertheless, the General Principles of the Ethics Code, which is aspirational in nature, can be of great use when facing ethical dilemmas. Based on the profession's underlying virtues of Beneficence, Nonmaleficence, Fidelity, Autonomy, Justice, and Self-Care (Thompson, 1990), these principles can lead us to ask a range of questions that may guide us when faced with an ethical dilemma. These questions may include: (1) Will doing this be in my client's best interest or lead to exploitation or harm to my client or others; (2) To whom do I owe my primary allegiance and is this consistent with my obligations to this individual; (3) Am I being deceptive or dishonest in any way; (4) Am I treating this individual fairly and am I providing the same quality of service I provide to others; (5) Will doing this promote this individual's independence of me; and (6) Have I allowed my objectivity or judgement to become impaired or will this action increase the chances of that happening?

In addition to seeking guidance from the APA Ethics Code psychologists will always want to consult the relevant laws in their jurisdiction, any policies or regulations for their particular setting, and relevant professional standards and guidelines. Examples of the former include Titles 10 and 18, and specific laws addressing the treatment of minors, the duty to report child abuse or neglect, and disclosure of

medical records. Examples of the latter include APA's Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Divorce Proceedings (1994) and APA's Record Keeping Guidelines (1993).] An outstanding resource with links to a wide range of such guidelines, standards, and various ethics codes is the website of psychologist Ken Pope, available at www.kspope.com.

A broad range of ethical decision-making models are found in the literature. An excellent review is provided by Cottone and Claus (2000). Some are theoretically or philosophically based while others are practice based. The theoretical/philosophical based models are describe as Virtue Ethics by Jordan and Meara (1990). The question asked is "Who shall I be?" Practice based models can be described as Principle Ethics, which asks "What shall I do?" Both models have strengths and weaknesses. Many argue for an integrated approach that is based on certain fundamental values or ideals common to our profession. An integrated approach is practical and can guides us in actions to take or to avoid.

A representative philosophical model is proposed by Rest (1984). This model, based on moral reasoning, is intended to delineate the "processes involved in the production of moral behavior" (p. 19). Utilizing this model helps psychologists: (1) interpret the situation in terms of how one's actions affect the welfare of others; (2) formulate a moral course of action by identifying the moral ideal in a specific situation; (3) select, among competing value outcomes of ideals, the one to act upon; deciding whether or not to try to fulfill one's moral ideal; and (4) execute and implement what one intends to do (p.20).

A representative practice based decision-making model is proposed by Tarvydas (1998). This model recommends that psychologists: (1) interpret the situation; (2) review the problem or dilemma; (3) determine the standards that apply to the dilemma; (4) generate possible and probable courses of action; (5) consider the likely consequences of each course of action; (6) consult with a supervisor and/or peers; (7) select an action by weighing competing values given the context;

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