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COMMENTARY

Putting the APA code to practice and developing a moral awareness

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Truth be told, I started out writing this commentary determined to argue in favor of a supplementary code for I-O psychologists. As an I-O psychologist in academia, with nearly 30 years of educational and pedagogical experience in both undergraduate and graduate programs, I believe that during initial stages of knowledge acquisition, it is pertinent that students know and understand the APA ethical code of conduct, that they develop a deep understanding of the responsibilities entailed in becoming a member of our professional community, gain respect for our humanistic values and ethical code, and ensure that these are adopted as basic guidelines and boundaries, as the "dos" and the "don'ts" commanded to us and by us. The development of a supplementary code for I-O psychology could provide further guidelines that are particularly relevant to our community. Indeed, the deficiencies (i.e., deficient themes) in the APA code uncovered by Watts et al. (2023) provide initial and important empirical evidence that there are gaps and ambiguities that exist, and particularly that the code lacks reference to the unique complexities and activities encountered by I-O psychologists. These issues deserve adequate attention. It is likely to assume that further investigations may uncover more deficiencies or reinforce the gravity of those already discovered. Therefore, additional and continuous research is warranted and will enable our community to identify, monitor, and address these and other deficiencies that may occur over time, complexities, dynamics, and future developments (technological and otherwise) that characterize the world, society, and organizations within which we work and live. Indeed, and as suggested by the authors, some of the gaps and ambiguities identified may be attended to within the current code.

However, I do not believe that any code of ethics or conduct can, nor should, relate to all contexts or circumstances. Although adjustments and adaptations may be warranted from time to time, the intent of the code is clear: "The Preamble and General Principles are aspirational goals to guide psychologists toward the highest ideals of psychology . . . they should be considered by psychologists in arriving at an ethical course of action" (APA, 2017, p. 2).

Perhaps more to the point would be to focus on obtaining a better understanding of why we continue to encounter occurrences relating to unethical behavior of members of our community. Indeed, individuals make conscious choices that are based not only on their needs, values, or goals but also on the particulars and complexities of the context or situation at hand (e.g., political interests, social norms, financial pressures, etc.). Research in behavior ethics found ethical failure to occur given a "complex mix" of individual and contextual factors, and that under the right circumstances, most individuals may engage in unethical behavior (Bazerman & Banaji, 2004). Therefore, the first step that we must take is to familiarize ourselves with the behavior ethics research. It is our responsibility, as members of this community, as educators, researchers, and practitioners, to develop a deep understanding of the factors, the complex mixes, and the circumstances that can influence good people (De Cremer et al., 2010) and highly educated professionals to

sometimes do bad things. We need to examine if and the circumstances under which I-O psychologists refer to the code and the extent to which the principles and the code are taken into consideration when contemplating an ethical course of action. If they are not taken into consideration, we must identify and understand why the code is ignored. We need to uncover the motives underlying why psychologists who engage in scientific, educational, or professional activities choose to behave in a manner that is misaligned with the intent of the code. What are the factors that determine or impact a psychologist to consciously choose to engage in an unethical manner?

Then, it is our duty to expose our community to these findings, to discuss and debate how we can educate our students and our professional community members to develop and maintain a high level of moral awareness, that is, to identify what we can within a given situation, to understand the potential consequences for each choice of action to each of the individuals/parties involved, and to clarify "our own gut feelings on the matter" (Rest, 1986). Moral awareness is viewed as interpretive process (e.g., Reynolds, 2008), which begins once an individual recognizes that there is a moral problem in a given situation and should serve as a warning that any "potential decision or action could affect the interests, welfare, or expectations of the self or others in a fashion that may conflict with one or more ethical standards" (Butterfield et al., 2000, p. 82). It is at this point where the code should be translated into action. Hence, it is also our responsibility to jointly learn, develop, expand, and maintain an active professional moral awareness; to create professional moral schemas that will guide and enable us to detect a moral problem and work cautiously, consciously, and conscientiously; to provide ethical and moral solutions; and to avoid any potential harm to the interests, welfare, or expectations of anyone involved (e.g., self, client, colleague, etc.).

Turning back to my teaching, and prior to the beginning of each academic year, I find myself reevaluating my course syllabi to examine if and what changes can be made to ensure that the students experience a most significant, meaningful, engaging, and relevant professional learning process. Each year I contemplate what the ideal balance is between exposing students to the relevant I-O literature and research, and providing them with engaging learning activities that will enable them to better understand and evaluate the way in which the underlying principles and code of conduct can assist them in the questions they ask, in the dilemmas they confront, and in the decisions that they make. I also contemplate which teaching methods and tactics will best stimulate and help to formulate their critical thinking skills and abilities. As the scope of literature, research, case studies, and examples that can be presented within the classroom is limited, my underlying goal and objective is to help my students to develop a questioning mindset that will enable them to develop the necessary skills and abilities for thinking critically about the situations they encounter while putting the code to practice.

Following along these same guidelines, I believe that it is our responsibility to create similar ongoing and continuous opportunities within the SIOP community for our community members, whether they are in academia or serve as consultants or as practitioners for/within organizations. It is up to us to help our members to learn to put the code to practice and develop moral and ethical routines that will accompany them in all professional activities, encounters, and decisions. Knowing the code and practicing the code are two very different things. It is our responsibility as a community to invest ongoing effort necessary in the education and mentoring of our students and members not only to know the code but to develop, maintain, and practice a high level of moral awareness and critical thinking in all decision making and professional activities.

Putting the code to practice and maintaining a high level of moral awareness is particularly important considering the pressures that many of us encounter within our organizations by our clients and other organizational members. For example, financial and political pressures may at times be extremely challenging and aligning with the code may have serious repercussions for the I-O professional, even with respect to future work and employment opportunities. As such situations are likely to be encountered by all I-O professionals during their career, a high level of

moral awareness and a strong practice of the code can help the professional to deal with these challenges morally and ethically.

Finally, ensuring that our members are of high moral awareness and that we continuously put the code to practice in all our professional activities and encounters is pertinent, particularly considering SIOP's recent call to accept professionals who are not I-O psychologists into our community. This new practice may indeed help our community to expand/broaden our organizational and professional perspectives; however, it also warrants that we be extremely clear in our values and conduct. Again, it is our responsibility to educate and to help our new affiliates understand and respect our APA code and to develop a moral awareness accordingly. Ultimately, once they do choose to become members of our society, they too should adopt the code, as written and in practice. It is our duty to assist them in learning how to translate and implement the code into their daily activities and encounters; to exercise, discuss, and debate suitable solutions to gaps; and to best deal with ambiguities while keeping in mind the interests, welfare, and expectations of ourselves and all individuals or groups involved.

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