

Rediscovering the General Principles of APA Ethics

By Dr. Bob Woody

Most psychologists quickly think about the standards contained in the “Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct” (American Psychological Association [APA], 2002): “The Ethical Standards set forth enforceable rules for conduct as psychologists” (p. 1061). If asked about the General Principles, their lack of direct prescriptions for professional conduct would likely lead to uncertainty on the part of a significant number of psychologists: “Although the Preamble and General principles are not themselves enforceable rules, they should be considered by psychologists in arriving at an ethical course of action” (p. 1061).

There are five General Principles. Principle A: Beneficence and Nonmaleficence declares “do no harm.” Principle B: Fidelity and Responsibility promotes professional contributions to society and specific communities (including some *pro bono* services). Principle C: Integrity recognizes the importance of accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness. Principle D: Justice emphasizes fairness and justice for ALL people, and ensuring that psychologists guard against “potential biases, the boundaries of their competence, and the limitations of their expertise do not lead to or condone unjust practices” (p. 1063). Finally, Principle E: Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity acknowledges individual rights and the safeguards necessary for protecting “the rights and welfare of persons or communities whose vulnerabilities impair autonomous decision making” (p. 1063). In fact, concern for cultural diversity provides for an explicit directive: “Psychologists try to eliminate the effect on their work of biases based on those factors, and they do not knowingly participate in or condone activities of others based upon such prejudices” (p. 1063).

With all due respect, the pragmatics of day to day practice do not commonly allow the private practitioner time for leisurely thoughts about a course of action. Moreover, being removed from the training milieu, many practitioners (especially those in solo practice without colleagues available for ready consultation?) may not be prepared to apply a well-reasoned model (Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 1998). As Barnett, Behnke, Rosenthal, and Koocher (2007) state: “Even the most seasoned and knowledgeable clinicians may be unsure of how to proceed in some situations” (p. 7). *An essential for modern-day practice is for the psychologist to be able to apply a logical ethical decision-making model* (see: Cottone & Clause, 2000).

The APA ethics code “applies only to psychologists’ activities that are part of their scientific, educational, or professional roles as psychologists” and “across a variety of contexts, such as in person, postal, telephone, Internet, and other electronic transmissions” (p. 1061). Although the APA ethics code makes clear that “purely private conduct of psychologists . . . is not within the purview of the Ethics Code” (p. 1061), it seems reasonable to ponder: *Should a psychologist’s nonprofessional activity that brings public disdain to the profession be embraced by the statutory definition of “minimum standards” and enforced by the regulatory (licensing) system?*

The General Principles offer importance substance for the cognitive processes involved in any ethical decision-making. The General Principles are intended “to guide and inspire psychologists toward the *very highest* ethical ideals of the profession” (emphasis added; p. 1062). There is no obligation per se to rely on or demonstrate the General Principles in professional practices. Granted, the APA ethics codes indicates that the General Principles are not intended for imposing sanctions, at least not in the APA ethics complaint system. Nonetheless, in accord with the priority on “psychologists

[moving] toward the *very highest* ethical ideals of the professions” (emphasis added), it seems appropriate to consider the relevance of the General Principles to the statutory “minimum standards” issue; that is: *Should a psychologist who fails to embrace the General Principles in services to consumers be held accountable by the regulatory (licensing) system?*

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