

## The APA Code of Ethics: Alive and Applied

A Review of

APA Ethics Code Commentary and Case Illustrations by Linda Campbell, Melba Vasquez, Stephen Behnke, and Robert Kinscherff Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010. 392 pp. ISBN 978-1-4338-0693-3. \$69.95

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Reviewed by

Jessica H. Daniel

Ethics are often seen in a bold, black-and-white context, with situations akin to the green, red, and amber traffic lights periodically appearing. The American Psychological Association (APA) Ethics Code has shades of gray that may seem ambiguous but in fact are meant to promote a decision-making process that is thoughtful and inclusive of all the parties involved. Even the traffic lights have different hues in this world, with deep amber being the predominant one, urging caution and consultation on many occasions. At other times, one sees red for stop and a soft green, tempered by an infusion of amber, to indicate that it is ethical to proceed with caution.

The Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (collectively referred to as the Ethics Code) were adopted by APA in August 2002 and became effective in June 2003. It took five years for the 2002 Ethics Code to be written; several hundred psychologists provided feedback when various drafts were distributed for review by the APA membership. The resulting Ethics Code consists of five principles—beneficence and nonmaleficence; fidelity and responsibility; integrity; justice; and respect for people's rights and dignity—and 89 standards based on them.

Familiarity with the APA Ethics Code is essential in the discipline of psychology, regardless of one's specialty. In their book *APA Ethics Code Commentary and Case Illustrations*, Linda Campbell, Melba Vasquez, Stephen Behnke, and Robert Kinscherff, all of whom have extensive experience with APA ethics, have written a text that makes the code come alive so that it can be applied across a range of contexts. The examples are rich and will provoke discussion that may occasionally bring to light different views about how one might respond in particular situations.

As two of the authors (Campbell and Vasquez) were members of the Ethics Code Task Force charged with writing the Ethics Code, they are able to provide additional information that embellishes the sometimes sparse statements of the Ethics Code. The application of the Ethics Code is presented as a thoughtful process and not a black/white decision tree. While the use of modifiers such as "reasonably" and "appropriate" may seem too vague, this is done with the purpose of encouraging psychologists to think through ethical issues as well as understand and anticipate the consequences and meaning of their decisions for all the parties involved.

The format of the book makes it accessible, especially for those who choose to use it for instruction and training. Instead of the principles being set apart as distinct and lofty ideals, they are incorporated into all of the sections of the code. Each chapter begins with the principles that apply to particular ethical standards.

The introduction is a carefully worded discussion about psychology as a public profession. Psychology is presented as a dynamic discipline with intellectual content. The reader is encouraged to strive for a professional level of maturity marked by the incorporation of ethics into his or her professional thought and behavior patterns.

APA Ethics Code Commentary and Case Illustrations makes it clear that, in addition to having a working knowledge of the Ethics Code, psychologists need to be aware of state and federal laws that regulate psychological services. For those involved with instruction and training, reading this book might lead to a direct discussion of local regulations that govern the practice of psychology.

This text embeds two critical messages about the practice of psychology. The first regards the importance of peers and senior psychologists who can provide assistance and advice when a colleague is in doubt about a decision and who can help problem solve once one is in a challenging situation. In short, colleagues matter. The second message is the importance of knowing current local laws and regulations that govern practice. It is the responsibility of the psychologist to know the law and to practice accordingly.

It was not possible to provide case illustrations for all 89 of the ethical standards. Each case presentation includes four parts: Case Illustration, Ethical Dilemma, Decision-Making Factors, and Decision Options. The emphasis is on being proactive instead of reactive. If ethics are inextricably woven into the fabric of one's professional planning, then this is a feasible approach.

Perhaps because the authors have provided numerous consultations on ethical dilemmas, the case illustrations are very convincing. Some are more complicated than others. Most striking are the cases in which the psychologist had not anticipated that ethics might even become an issue. In some instances, the psychologist acknowledged his or her error and sought to repair the situation through apologies and explanatory meetings. Sometimes the psychologist withdrew services and referred the client appropriately to another professional.

Some illustrations do not provide real answers but instead generate more questions and options. Responses to such situations can rarely be judged in absolutes or simply classified as right or wrong. The authors make clear that the Ethics Code is not a simple set of rules. Ethical ambiguity is more the common reality than the exception.

This text would be valuable in an ethics course for graduate students, a seminar for an internship class, or for faculty inservice training sessions. If questions regarding ethics are included during instruction and training, future and current professionals may increase students' awareness of the how pervasive the issues are and how to avoid situations that can be very problematic for themselves and their patients. *APA Ethics Code Commentary and Case Illustrations* is engaging, informative, and appropriate for use at any stage of one's professional development. It is a valuable contribution to the profession.