Affirming Our Ethical Responsibilities

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I am honored to take the reins as the new editor the Ethics Column and excited to explore topics central to the responsible conduct of clinical psychology. I would like to first begin with a question, which I believe will help frame this introductory column and ones to follow: How does one become (or remain) an ethical psychologist? Unfortunately, there is no easy answer, but I would like to begin to address this question by describing three moral responsibilities that guide my approach to professional ethics: commitment, awareness and knowledge.

Commitment. Ethics requires a commitment to do what is right. It may sound silly to begin deliberating an ethical dilemma with what many perceive to be an obvious starting point (and often the initial step for many ethical decision-making models), but I find this pledge helps to remind us that the best ethical solution to any dilemma should not be determined by the option that requires the least personal effort, inconvenience, or hardship. That said, relying solely on our own moral compass and simply doing what we believe is right can sometimes lead us to the wrong ethical conclusion, as the desire to do good is a necessary but insufficient requirement to ethical decision-making. Rather, asking oneself, “What makes this the right decision?” and “How well does this solution conform to the profession’s ethical principles and standards, laws, guidelines, and our professional responsibilities to those whom we serve?” may help us discern the most appropriate course of action.

The ethical principles of our profession also stress a commitment to serve those with whom we work in our various professional capacities (clinician, assessor, evaluator, teacher, researcher, consultant, etc.), which requires adherence to the ethical principles and standards that guide our profession (American Psychological Association, 2010). These standards are not only useful in times of ethical indecision but may inform a wide range of professional decisions. For example, although not commonly considered an “ethical dilemma”, determining a course of treatment for a particular client/patient carries important ethical implications. The APA Ethics Code General Principles (Beneficence and Nonmaleficence, Fidelity), Ethical Standards (2.04 Bases for Scientific and Professional Judgments) and guidelines stress that treatments should demonstrate effectiveness in terms of the problem and population (American Psychological Association, 2006). This protects patients/clients from potentially harmful interventions that have not been tested or are otherwise ineffective. In order to fulfill our ethical responsibilities, psychologists should keep abreast of research findings on empirically-supported treatments and consider how this information may be used to inform treatment and other professional decisions (see Falzon, Davidson and Bruns (2010) for an informative article on accessing such research. In addition, Division 12 maintains a website on research-supported treatments: http://www.div12.org/psychological-treatments). In addition to evidence-based treatments, empirical research findings provide psychologists with critical information that can inform ethical decision-making. For example, research findings describing informed consent capacity among individuals diagnosed with severe mental illness or developmental disability may help guide clinician decisions about the best methods of gaining consent/assent and ensuring that consent remains informed, voluntary and rational throughout the professional experience. In future columns, I hope to highlight current research findings that may be used to inform evidence-based ethical practices.

Awareness. Personal awareness means more than an understanding of one’s own preferences and personality quirks, but, rather, encompasses a critical self-awareness of our training, experience and knowledge to help us determine when we may lack the necessary competence to perform a certain task and when it may best serve a client/patient to make a referral to a professional with the appropriate training and skills. Personal awareness also requires us to acknowledge and address personal biases and blind spots, or, in specific cases, when personal problems may interfere with our ability to discharge our professional duties. Finally, psychologists should assess their own multicultural ethical awareness (Fisher, 2013), or understanding of one’s own beliefs, biases and prejudices as well as an appreciation of the ways in which cultural factors may affect our professional work.

As we assume professional roles and gain more experience, we begin to become more aware of the multiple perspectives, authorities and sources of information that inform ethical dilemmas. Quite simply, reliance on the APA Ethics Code alone may be insufficient to adequately address many ethical dilemmas. Depending on the nature of the professional activity, federal, state and local laws, as well as institutional rules, regulations and guidelines also inform our ethical responsibilities. The setting
or activity may also influence our professional ethical obligations. For example, school-based interventions may be governed by specific ethics principles and laws, such as the National Association of School Psychologists’ Principles for Professional Ethics (2010), or the Family Education and Privacy Act (1974).

Knowledge. As my predecessors have astutely acknowledged in previous posts (Allen, 2013), ethical decision-making is not an easy task. The myriad of books, chapters, articles (and ongoing columns) on ethics are a testament to the challenging nature of ethical decision-making. While the APA Ethics Code is critical to informing the responsible conduct of psychology, it rarely offers cookie-cutter answers to what are most often complex and situationally dependent ethical dilemmas.

Although awareness and commitment are integral to resolving ethical questions, implicit within each of these imperatives is the assumption that our learning continues throughout our careers. The nature of and circumstances surrounding ethical quandaries are often dynamic and require that psychologists keep up-to-date about emerging trends in the science and practice of clinical psychology in order to fully appreciate the ethical implications of dilemmas. Examples may include promising but underresearched treatments, innovative technologies or new or evolving laws, rules and regulation governing the work of psychologists.

As column editor, I hope to discuss some of the most pressing ethical issues facing clinical psychologists and highlight particularly relevant and interesting research findings that inform practice, research and policy. Like my predecessors, I will attempt to give voice to those questions that may be most vexing. Some may relate to the changing landscape of the field of psychology, such as the appropriate use of new technologies (telehealth, social media, electronic communication). For example, what are the ethical implications of having a professional online presence and to what are the ethical questions associated with social media relationships with patients/clients. What are our ethical responsibilities to ensure data security in an increasingly digital, cloud-based world?

Many intriguing dilemmas focus on ongoing challenges related to the application of core ethical standards, such as confidentiality and consent, among increasingly diverse populations and settings. Even the challenging nature of the work of clinical psychologists itself is increasingly considered within an ethical context. For example, the growing recognition of the emotional toll, including stress, burnout and impaired job performance, associated with clinical work among psychologists working with vulnerable and at-risk populations raises important ethical questions for all clinical psychologists with respect to the moral mandate to engage in self-care strategies to ensure that professional duties are discharged in a competent and responsible manner.

Although we may not always be able to anticipate every possible ethical dilemma that may come our way, affirming and applying these ethical responsibilities to our professional work may serve as good preparation. I look forward to exploring key ethical questions relevant to clinical psychology in the coming issues and invite you to contact me (afried@fordham.edu) with any topics you think should be discussed in future columns.

References: