

Ethics 101: Philosophical Foundations to Practical Applications

A review of



APA Handbook of Ethics in Psychology

by Samuel J. Knapp, Michael C. Gottlieb, Mitchell M. Handelsman, and Leon D. VandeCreek (Eds.)

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2012.

Volume 1: Moral Foundations and Common Themes

518 pp. ISBN 978-1-4338-1001-5

Volume 2: Practice, Teaching, and Research

490 pp. ISBN 978-1-4338-1002-2

ISBN 978-1-4338-1000-8. \$395.00, set

Reviewed by

[Janet R. Matthews](#)

Why do we need a two-volume handbook about ethics in psychology? Ethics is one of a small number of topics that play an ongoing role in the daily activities of psychologists regardless of their specialty area or place of employment. All members of the American Psychological Association (APA), as a condition of that membership, agree to abide by APA's Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2002). Thus, each time the code is revised, we see revisions of classic texts as

well as the addition of new ones to adapt to changes that have occurred (e.g., Barnett & Johnson, 2008; Fisher, 2012; Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 2008; Nagy, 2011).

The specific academic course work any individual psychologist receives about ethics varies depending on both the specialty area and the academic institution. As our profession has become increasingly specialized, some programs have attempted to incorporate training in ethics into existing courses to allow the addition of new courses or added practical experiences.

There is also a tendency to focus on those parts of the code that are specifically relevant to one's major activities without viewing the code in its entirety. A research-centered psychologist may focus on Standard 8, Research and Publication, whereas an assessment-focused practitioner might focus on Standard 9, Assessment. Thus, psychologists from different specialty areas may not have the opportunity to discuss ethical issues with each other as would occur if all graduate students took an ethics course together or all professionals took continuing education (CE) courses in it.

Many psychologists who are licensed in jurisdictions with mandatory CE are required to take regular ethics training. However, this training may be of a passive rather than of an interactive nature, as might be found in an ongoing academic course. In addition, their peers in these CE settings are often in similar occupational settings rather than representing the broad spectrum of the field.

The editors have provided a two-volume collection of articles that is more likely to be viewed as a coffee table book than as a text for a graduate course. The 8.5-by-11-inch page size is also more reminiscent of a reference book than of one easily carried from place to place.

Volume 1, *Moral Foundations and Common Themes*, is somewhat misnamed. At first glance, a reader might expect this volume to address only philosophical issues. Of the 19 chapters included in Volume 1, only the first five chapters address moral issues. Among those five chapters, only the opening chapter is truly a presentation of philosophical views of ethics. Although the chapter on social justice could be viewed as philosophical, its focus is on ways that APA as an organization and its affiliated state, provincial, and territorial associations have worked for social justice rather than on a theoretical consideration of the subject.

Perhaps due to recent issues raised on the floor of the APA Council of Representatives as well as in recent issues of the *American Psychologist* (e.g., Comment/Reply section of *American Psychologist*, 2011) about the role of professional ethics in the daily activities of military psychologists, one chapter in the section Moral Foundations in Volume 1 is devoted to ethical issues related to institutional pressures that can lead to potential ethical conflicts, with police and military settings used as illustrative cases.

The author, whose professional affiliation is listed as U.S. Navy, provides an interesting comparison of the original 2002 code on Standard 1.03, Conflicts Between Ethics and Organizational Demands, with the 2010 revision (American Psychological Association,

2002). The inclusion of relevant material from the Manual for Courts Martial (Joint Service Committee on Military Justice, 2008) gives the interested reader an understanding of the definition of a lawful order and the consequences of failing to obey such an order within this specialized system. Psychologists who are considering employment, either as consultants or on a full-time basis, with law enforcement agencies may find the table describing strategies to avoid conflicts between agency policies and APA's code especially useful.

Another interesting approach of the editors of this work is the decision to have two chapters addressing special situations usually included under the category of *dual relationships*. Professional relationships are addressed in one chapter, whereas the traditional topic of sexual relationships is covered in a separate chapter.

Perhaps because different authors wrote these chapters, the distinction between the chapters is not always clear. Perhaps a sign of 21st-century life, the boundaries chapter includes an interesting section with case examples of special issues that may arise in crisis situations. Although the author of the chapter on sexualized relationships does a good job of discussing the negative impact on the client, there is inadequate coverage of the possible impacts on the perpetrator such as loss of license or even the potential for a felony conviction.

The chapter on religion and spirituality highlights a change in the profession in recent years. Earlier generations of psychologists were trained to keep this topic quite separate from the profession, whereas today there is increased attention to it. This chapter does not provide information about how to integrate religion and spirituality into one's activities but rather ties the subject to the ethics code. The author ends the chapter with three specific questions that do a good job of summarizing the material.

An interesting topic included within the broad area of subpopulations, special settings, and emerging areas is public education. This chapter is subdivided into sections on traditional media and the Internet. The focus of the material is for those psychologists called "media professionals" rather than the psychologist who may respond on a particular topic or during a unique situation. Although much of the material is also relevant to the latter group, the chapter could have provided a broader scope. The author uses case examples to illustrate a range of ethical issues that may arise in this setting.

The academic section, in Volume 2, is the shortest, with individual chapters addressing the culture of training programs, supervision, and teaching ethics. The final section on scholarship and research includes chapters on traditional topics such as deception and laboratory animal work as well as newer concerns such as Internet research.

An interesting point raised by the authors of the Internet chapter is related to the rapid growth of technology. They posit that psychologists are often stronger in their knowledge of research ethics than they are in the use of technology. This chapter provides an introductory-level integration of these domains. The 10 questions at the end of the chapter provide a good overview of the subject matter. Although the focus in this chapter is on Internet research, the rapid development of technology also applies to the teaching process.

The chapter on issues related to the actual teaching process fails to address the impact of technology on ethical classroom behavior. When one is dealing with a generation of students who are potentially more technologically advanced than the professor, special ethical challenges arise.

Overall, this two-volume set is worthy of its rather expensive purchase price. It provides a somewhat different approach to the available ethics literature. As in any edited work, there is variability among chapters. Some chapters provide historical context; others make extensive use of vignettes as illustrations. This set is more likely to be placed on either a departmental resource shelf or in an institution's library than among an individual psychologist's holdings. It could also form the basis for a comprehensive CE offering about the broad topic of ethics.

References

American Psychological Association. (2002). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct* (Amended June 1, 2010). Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx>

Barnett, J. E., & Johnson, W. B. (2008). *Ethics desk reference for psychologists*.

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. PsycINFO

Comment/Reply section. (2011). *American Psychologist*, 66, 641–647.

Fisher, C. B. (2012). *Decoding the ethics code: A practical guide for psychologists* (2nd ed.).

Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. PsycINFO

Joint Service Committee on Military Justice. (2008). *Manual for courts-martial United States*. Washington, DC: Author.

Koocher, G. P., & Keith-Spiegel, P. (2008). *Ethics in psychology and the mental health professions* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press. PsycINFO

Nagy, T. F. (2011). *Essential ethics for psychologists: A primer for understanding and mastering core issues*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

doi:10.1037/12345-000 PsycINFO Article