

# TEACHING PROFESSIONAL ETHICS FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS: RECOMMENDATIONS

European Federation of Psychologists Associations, Board of Ethics

## 1. Introduction

### *Context for the recommendations*

These recommendations point to specific areas and perspectives that should be addressed in teaching professional ethics to psychologists, both as a separate subject and as an integral part of teaching of psychology. The recommendations formulate important areas to focus on, and suggest how they can be worked with in teaching. Advice is also given to the member Associations on how to promote the educational and training process in ethics.

Teaching professional ethics should be related to broader human encounters and the communications that arise from the relationships between psychologist and their clients. Teachers of the different disciplines within psychology should be aware of both explicit and implicit ethical issues which may arise in their specialist area of psychology.

Teaching and training about ethical issues is therefore a relevant issue for all teachers and trainers in psychology.

### *National Associations' Requirements of Qualifications*

The main focus of these guidelines is the professional psychologist, including teachers and researchers of psychology, although there are implications also for undergraduate students of the discipline and the training they should receive in ethics at that stage.

Good knowledge of ethics and sensitivity to ethical questions in professional situations are necessary basic elements in the competence of the psychologist. In the promotion and evaluation of the qualifications of its members, the National Association should emphasise that ethical sensitivity, ethical reasoning and decision-making are basic and important competencies, and an integral part of professional psychology. As such, it is important that the Association keep close contact on this issue with the universities and other institutions that give their members their basic education. A basic knowledge of professional ethics should be expected of new members.

As a member of the National Association, the psychologist is obliged to respect, and practise according to its ethical code. Each Association should have a permanent committee that considers and advises upon ethical matters and helps members to uphold high ethical standards in their work. The National Association should ensure that members engage in further training and should periodically offer their members seminars, workshops or should in other ways give information that focuses upon ethical questions.

## **II Process**

### ***Where ethics should be taught***

All educational providers of psychology programmes, including those organised, sponsored or accredited by the National Association should be expected to address relevant ethical issues. This should be clearly stated to the teachers. The programs and seminars should always be evaluated in terms of how ethical issues are addressed in addition to other aspects of content and delivery.

Educational and training programs that qualify psychologists to practise in specific areas (e.g. educational psychology, clinical psychology, organizational psychology), should include seminars which address ethical questions relevant to the particular specialist area.

### ***References for teaching ethics***

Psychologists must have a working knowledge of ethics. Teaching programmes should include consideration of the following:

1. The national association's Code of Ethics;
2. The EFPA Meta-code, EFPA Model Code;
3. Relevant national and European legislation;
4. Relevant guidelines that are developed for the specific area within which they work.

Teaching programmes should strive to develop student awareness and sensitivity of the ethical challenges of working in cross cultural and international environments/contexts.

Psychologists should be trained to find guidance for their practice, and in solving dilemmas that can arise therefrom, in the appropriate codes of ethics. Psychologists

should be sensitised to the relationship between the professional ethical codes and general ethical principles and theories, psychological research, and legislation.

Psychologists should be trained to appreciate and resolve dilemmas which arise in particular situations from competing ethical principles; from obligations arising from different elements within the Ethical Code, and from conflicts between ethical considerations and legal obligations.

Important reference points for ethical evaluations are social issues that are highlighted as ethical questions within society, and the public discussions that arise therefrom, both in general, and in relation to the areas where the psychologist works. These discussions will reflect the context within which the psychologist's clients will understand their positions and rights.

In teaching ethics it is important to include the current and changing public understanding of different professional practices as an important frame of reference for the practice of the psychologists. The professional ethics of psychologists must incorporate the development of ethical issues within the society in which they work, and the psychologist should be prepared to defend a possible difference of opinion with the public understanding of values which should be given priority.

### ***How ethics should be taught***

Since ethical questions in the end always pertain to practical and concrete situations, training in the practical management of such situations must be given, as well as training in identifying and evaluating the ethical dimensions of professional situations. Thus psychologists with relevant expertise should be involved in teaching ethics.

The psychologist should especially be trained in bringing ethical dilemmas into open communication with clients, colleagues and relevant third parties. The communication should lead to a focusing and clarification of the relevant responsibilities and actions of the psychologist.

Training in professional ethics might be facilitated by bringing forth ethical dilemmas in the psychologist's own practice, or by identifying dilemmas that others have encountered within the professional area. Besides a thorough discussion of such situations in relation to ethical dimensions, role-playing the relevant situations might be the optimal method of training in some circumstances.

### **III. Important issues in teaching ethics**

#### ***The locus and range of responsibility***

In professional practice the psychologist has primary responsibility in regard to his/her clients, but also has responsibility to society at large that gives the profession its legitimisation, and to his/her professional society that supports the role and identity of the psychologist. From an ethical perspective the responsibility for the actions of the psychologist cannot be divided or shared and will always remain with the psychologist him/herself. The psychologist should recognise that each professional situation is unique and should be subjected to an ethical evaluation.

The range of responsibilities of the psychologist and the situations in which these responsibilities will come into focus should be analysed during training. Even when a practice has been made routine and historically is considered to be ethical practice, it must be subjected to an ethical evaluation in every new and unique instance.

Psychologists should be trained specifically to analyse their professional relationships with regard to the degree of dependency. Thus the psychologist's relationship with his/her client also can be understood and analysed with respect to how it might interfere with and affect other relationships.

Psychologists should be prepared for the responsibilities that follow from having students in training and non-psychologists that work under their supervision.

Psychologists should know in what way they can expect to get support and guidance from their professional society, and thus be helped to uphold their responsibilities.

### ***The ambivalence in the ethical position***

When ethical questions are brought forward, there will often be a basic ambivalence or difference of interests in the situation. This compels the psychologist to be aware of, be able to reflect on and communicate about these differences. The basic ethical process is often one of working on human dilemmas that will have no ideal solution. It is on a balance of judgement that a best choice must be made. In training and teaching, psychologists must develop an understanding of the basic ethical position in professional work as one that requires them to give priority to, and pay special respect to the needs and rights of their clients.

Psychologists should be trained to understand the importance of being conscious of their own interests, subjective perspectives, limitations, and possible personal problems when it comes to making sound ethical evaluations. On the other hand psychologists should also be aware of their own legitimate rights and know how to protect the professional situation and themselves from being inappropriately exploited.

Psychologists should be trained specifically how to inform clients about their ethical responsibilities and where the client can turn if not satisfied with the service provided by the psychologist.

### ***Identifying and giving priorities to values***

Psychologists should be encouraged and trained to discuss their professional practice and research within a framework of values, and to consider which values should be given priority over others on a case by case basis. This implies having a meta-perspective of the values and possible consequences that can arise in different professional situations. Psychologists should understand the importance of applying a proactive evaluation of practice, and of monitoring their practice in relation to the relevant values. In particular it is of importance to assess and understand the values that the client upholds.

As well as identifying values each unique professional situation should be analysed with regard to the main dilemmas that may arise and make decisions difficult.

### ***The foundation of ethical theory and practice***

Psychologists should be familiar with basic ethical theories and dimensions and how these relate to professional practice.

Psychologists should be trained in applying general ethical theories and values to the theories and methods that provide a foundation for their practice. Psychologists should be trained to understand that no ethical theory or dimension alone will cover all aspects of the situation in which ethical dilemmas arise. Balancing and applying different dimensions are often necessary for sound ethical evaluation and choice of action.

### ***Making ethical evaluation in a discussion format***

Many ethical dilemmas can only be resolved within a format of discussion. It is only when the values, interests and dilemmas are brought into open communication that relevant information for ethical evaluation can be identified. It must be noted that discussing ethical dilemmas does not imply diluting psychologists' responsibility, but should always aim to clarify their professional responsibilities. During the training, intervision and supervision it is important to master such dialogues in a constructive manner.

### ***Differentiating between professional and private***

In teaching and training psychologists should be helped to be aware of the boundaries and the relationships between professional and private life. Training should focus especially on how to communicate about these boundaries and limitations with clients and relevant other parties, so as to avoid inappropriate dual relationships and exploitation. Psychologists should understand that communicating clearly about the borders between professional and private life is important also for protecting themselves against being exploited and becoming burned out.

### ***Relationships with colleagues***

Psychologists operate within the context of a professional psychological society: their practice therefore reflects upon this community, and hence has implications for other psychologists. Psychologists' practice is evaluated within the expectations of this professional society as well as those of society at large.

Psychologists should be made aware of the need to give information and support on ethical matters to their colleagues. In addition, psychologists should be trained to give criticism to, and to receive criticism from colleagues on ethical questions. Psychologists should be trained to provide support and care to colleagues without violating the legitimate rights and interests of clients or others.

### ***Recognising the situations that challenge ethical awareness***

Although all professional actions require ethical awareness and reflection, psychologists should be trained to identify and understand that some areas of practice are especially demanding on their ethical acuity. This should not diminish the need for psychologists to demonstrate ethical awareness in their daily practice.

Certain areas for practice always demand extra ethical awareness. Areas of professional practice, or research that could challenge the need for ethical awareness might be identified by their potential for conflicts, for example where one might expect manipulating strategies by the client and others.

### ***How to behave when criticism is raised and complaints are filed***

Ethical conduct is still expected of psychologists when confronted with criticism or a complaint about their work.

Psychologists should be helped to understand that one of the most difficult situations for ethical evaluation can arise when serious criticisms are raised or complaints are filed against the work of the psychologist. This is a situation that has the potential for eliciting

or perpetuating unethical behaviour. Psychologists should be trained to appreciate and reflect upon their personal reactions in such situations.

Psychologists must be acquainted with the procedures for assessing and evaluating complaints within the Association and within official bodies. They must be given guidance on how to communicate with the complainant, the ethical board or other bodies that have the right to evaluate the actions of the psychologist.

*efppa/ eth teac 2 document 18, EFPPA GA Rome 99,  
Adopted, revised by BoE 2016*

***Additional resources:***

<http://www.bps.org.uk/what-we-do/ethics-standards/ethics-standards>

[http://www.bps.org.uk/system/files/Public%20files/inf236\\_ethics\\_in\\_education\\_web.pdf](http://www.bps.org.uk/system/files/Public%20files/inf236_ethics_in_education_web.pdf)

<http://www.apa.org/monitor/2013/12/elc-teaching-ethics.aspx>

<http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/ptn/2013/09/teaching-diverse.aspx>