An Ethics Code for I/O Psychology: For What Purpose
and At What Cost?

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I read with a mixture of bemusement, frustration, and (ultimately) cautious optimism Seberhagen’s (1993) call for consideration by SIOP of creating its own ethics code. Certainly I/O psychologists’ interest in ethics is a laudable turn of events, but before creating a new code just because statisticians now have one, consider the following.

First, is there a need? If I/O psychologists primarily identify as psychologists (and I, for one, still proudly maintain psychology as my primary professional allegiance and identity), then we need to ask whether there is something wrong with the ethics code of the American Psychological Association (APA) as a guideline for ethical behavior by I/O psychologists? (SIOP members who belong to APS, but not APA, are not covered by the APA ethics code—Ed.) In the recent major revision of the APA code, I tried, with limited success, to get SIOP members to address several features of the proposed new code I felt were inadequate for the practice of I/O psychology. While many of the changes in the previous version of the code concerning the practice of clinical psychology were long overdue, the need to create better principles related to the non-testing aspects of I/O psychology practice would have benefitted from much more attention. I found APA representatives more than willing to listen to the I/O concerns and to attempt to reach some sort of resolution on the concerns. The existence of the proposed revision of the APA document was widely publicized over many months, yet there was little response—organized or otherwise—on the part of I/O psychologists to shape this document. Will an internal document generate any greater interest?

Secondly, who will enforce a SIOP ethics code? Having served on the Ethics Committee of the American Psychological Association a few years ago, I saw first hand the enormously complex and expensive undertaking required to enforce a professional code of ethics, particularly so in today’s litigious environment in which it can reasonably be expected that nearly every decision of an ethics panel will likely be appealed (or litigated). Though a minuscule fraction of the membership of the American Psychological Association ever comes before the scrutiny of APA’s Ethics Committee, those who do often consume huge amounts of resources. And, almost by definition, someone (the complainant or the complainee, in ethical committee parlance) is always unhappy with the result. The investment of unpaid labor (amounting, for APA
Ethics Committee members, to a day or so a week on average) is also not insignificant, at least for a large professional association.

While few ethics cases during my tenure on the APA Ethics Committee involved I/O psychologists, nonetheless a new ethics code by SIOP is meaningless except as an aspirational document unless it is tied with the power to influence outcomes, i.e., enforcement. Moreover, courts may require a codified set of “rules and procedures” for upholding a professional society’s ethical enforcement mechanisms (see Ethics Committee of the American Psychological Association, 1992). A society of a few thousand persons may find the costs of developing and implementing such procedures prohibitive. (And how, incidentally, does one file an ethics complaint against a member of the American Psychological Society?)

Third, who will pay to create the new code? The costs of creating a new code should not be underestimated. The American Psychological Association (APA) just completed a major revision of its ethics code (APA, 1992). This multi-year project was a substantial undertaking; the approval process was even more painstaking. Do the funds exist to create such a document; is that the best use to which they can be put?

Fourth, why not use (and modify) what we’ve got? While there is certainly no reason in principle that SIOP could not have its own code of ethics or supplement to APA’s (or some other group’s) code, why reinvent what is already in place? APA’s ethics code and enforcement mechanisms are widely regarded as worthy of emulation by a variety of professional groups and associations and for good and well-deserved reasons. Why not try first to make APA’s code better and more accessible to I/O psychologists?

So, instead of a new ethics code for SIOP, here is an alternative proposal:

1) A Revised Ethics Casebook—The I/O Ethics Codebook (Lowman, 1983). A SIOP Professional Affairs Committee project of several years ago, definitely needs updating. Such a document should be alive and timely, as the document’s preface laid out in the 1985 version. Further, when we created the document, most of the cases on which we could reach consensus were rather straightforward ones. We now need a new casebook (or a part 2) updating references to current ethical principles and standards, with more complex cases. Such a casebook could also cite relevant standards of practice from non-psychology sources, even, one presumes, the ethics standards for statisticians.

2) More Active Participation in APA Ethics Committees Revisions by SIOP Members—The current APA ethics code and its predecessors, flawed though all such documents may necessarily be, contains much that is admirable. SIOP’s input in future revisions would greatly be welcomed by APA, but not when it is after-the-fact or merely (plainly false) bellyaching about APA’s code and interests being relevant only to clinicians. Clinical and counseling psychologists, who in numbers dominate APA, are not malevolently intended
when they overlook I/O concerns. But they do need to be reminded repetitively that all psychology does not involve mental health concerns.

3) A Greater Willingness to Identify and Confront Unethical Behavior—As a practitioner as well as an academic, I encounter more ethically questionable practices among persons practicing in competitive circumstances than among I/O psychologists who research and teach. (But why is it when certain academics enter the consulting arena, some suddenly forget what they presumably have been teaching their students about proper ways to behave as an I/O psychologist.) The operative word here, perhaps, is "competitive." Some recent examples from the real world of practice include: a) mischaracterization of one's competitors' work or orientation in an effort to sell one's own firm's services, b) entering a case as an expert witness and then attempting actively to market one's own services in related areas while using the expert's perch to criticize, often with limited information, other's work, c) advising an organization to administer tests without regard to time limits or standard administration procedures to assist in reaching a company's goal of increasing the pass rate of a protected class and d) releasing, expressly against a test publisher's copyright policy, copies of tests to non-test-user-qualified legal personnel. Too often we avoid confronting such behavior, writing it off, "letting the market take care of the problem." Make no mistake: persons confronted with possible violations of ethics principles generally do not take kindly to being advised by a colleague of concerns about ethics. The exceptions are the ethical ones: they welcome the feedback and strive to understand, clarify, and/or change the situation.

In short, SIOP, like any other professional association, is welcome to create its own "new" ethics code, though it is unlikely that, when all the monies and the talk are expended, the code will be that much different or better than ones already existent. But such an enterprise should be undertaken with eyes as well as wallets and pocketbooks open and with a great tolerance for long-term litigation, if enforcement through SIOP is a parallel goal. Simpler, and possibly more appropriate, mechanisms exist to remedy the ethical concerns of I/O psychology in the (hopefully accurate) case that I/O psychologists still wish to be part of the profession of psychology.

References