All Aboard! Navigating the Waters of Professional Ethics

Jenn Lindberg McGinnis, Jane Vignovic, Amy DuVernet, Tara Behrend, Reanna Poncheri, and Clara Hess

It is hard to believe that SIOP 2008 was over 5 months ago! Some of you joined us at the conference for our roundtable discussion on ethical dilemmas encountered by graduate students. During the roundtable, several interesting points were raised, and based on your feedback, we decided to pursue this topic further.

In March 2008, we conducted a survey of SIOP Student Affiliates (N = 50) regarding their concerns and questions about professional ethics. The results of that survey provided the foundation for the topics we address in this column. There were numerous issues raised on the survey, but a few were frequently mentioned: competence, managing relationships, and research issues. Although this list is not exhaustive, we hope this column provides you with a good starting point to deal with ethical dilemmas in these three areas.

To help us navigate the sometimes turbulent waters of ethics, we enlisted the expertise of Dr. Rodney L. Lowman. Dr. Lowman served in the roles of dean and professor of Alliant’s California School of Organizational Studies and later became the provost and vice president of Academic Affairs for the university. He is now the president of Lake Superior State University and a professor of psychology there. Dr. Lowman holds a doctoral degree in psychology with specializations in I-O and clinical from Michigan State University. In addition to being a SIOP Fellow, he has published over 100 articles and book chapters, edited two professional journals (including current editorship of Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research), made hundreds of professional presentations, and is well known for his work on ethics. Some of you may have read his edited casebook, The Ethical Practice of Psychology in Organizations. If not, we suggest you get a copy. This book specifically addresses the work of I-Os and gives us an opportunity to reflect on ethical dilemmas that we may encounter in our work.

Our interview began with a discussion of the biggest ethical dilemmas facing graduate students in I-O. According to Dr. Lowman, the field of knowledge within I-O is greatly expanding, making it increasingly difficult to ensure that one is competent in all aspects of the field; it is difficult to master even a relatively small portion of the field, let alone be an expert in every-
thing. As the field changes and grows, we need to be aware of how those changes affect us as students and professionals. In addition, Dr. Lowman mentioned that many programs do not provide extensive opportunities for students to have supervised experience. According to Dr. Lowman, these experiences are important because they help students “translate issues from broad conceptual understanding to competence in specific areas of practice.” Finally, Dr. Lowman mentioned that ethical applications are a challenge because many I-O programs do not emphasize ethics as much as other applied areas of psychology. Indeed, our informal investigation of 118 doctoral and master’s level I-O programs revealed that at least 53 of these schools (44.9%) did not offer or require courses related to ethics in I-O. Although many I-O programs have limited course offerings on ethics, Dr. Lowman stated, “If your professors aren’t raising these issues, then you as students need to be because you are the ones who are going to have to deal with some of these issues in professional practice.”

We also asked Dr. Lowman for his thoughts on ethical dilemmas that graduate students in I-O may be encountering without realizing. According to Dr. Lowman, there are at least two commonly encountered dilemmas. The first concerns the transition in our field from doing work at the group or organization level to the individual level, such as executive coaching. Many I-O programs have not changed their curricula to match these newer areas of practice. As a result, students may receive limited or no training in an area in which they will subsequently practice. The second issue Dr. Lowman mentioned is that we are not typically trained to think about the social justice implications of our work. For example, do we have an ethical obligation to provide feedback to candidates who go through our selection system but don’t get the job? How, in applied practice, do we best balance the needs of traditionally oppressed groups versus those of the client? Often, there is so much effort focused on the science of our discipline that there aren’t opportunities to think about the implications of our work for other people.

During the remainder of our interview, Dr. Lowman provided us with his advice and expert opinions on questions about competence, managing relationships, and research issues. And now on to our feature presentation....

**Competence**

How do you know if you are competent? Although it is easy to require psychologists to be competent, it is more difficult to determine what competence means (Kitchener, 2000). Fortunately, there are resources available to help students determine if they are competent in the field of I-O. The American Psychological Association’s (APA’s) *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (hereinafter referred to as the *Ethics Code*; 2002) states that our competence should be based on our education, training, and appropriate experience (Standard 2.01), and we should undertake ongoing efforts
to develop and maintain our competence (Standard 2.03). In addition, SIOP (1994, 1999) has guidelines for education and training in I-O that emphasize the content areas in which we should be competent and the methods that can be used to evaluate competence. Despite these resources, many questions remain. In this column, Dr. Lowman answers questions about competence in both consulting and teaching.

**Competence in Consulting**

At what point in graduate school is it ethical for graduate students in I-O to begin advertising our professional services? How can graduate students determine the areas in which they are competent enough to consult and the areas in which they are not?

Although “there’s no point at which you are magically qualified,” Dr. Lowman offered the following suggestions:

1. **Take more than one course or practicum in a particular content area.** As Dr. Lowman noted, “I don’t think you can master the content or the practice of most areas with a single course.” It is important to have both content and “how to” knowledge (Aguinis & Kraiger, 1997).

2. **Gain supervised experience as a graduate student.** “When you are doing things without the proper credentials, you really need to do that under supervision,” said Dr. Lowman. “Someone should oversee your work to make sure you are doing it appropriately and also be available to guide you when ethical or practice issues arise.”

3. **Ask others (e.g., advisors, professors) to help you determine your level of competence.** According to Dr. Lowman, “I don’t think a determination as to competence and readiness for practice as a student should be made by students on their own before somebody qualified can attest to their competence level.” Similarly, most, if not all, graduate programs in I-O require students to pass a comprehensive examination to demonstrate their competence in certain content areas (Aguinis & Kraiger, 1997; SIOP, 1995).

4. **Align what you are able to do professionally and competently with how you present yourself to potential clients.** For example, “If you’ve seen one coaching client and you’re presenting yourself as an experienced executive coach, then first of all, probably no one is going to hire you, and secondly, you are not. You are not experienced and you are probably not competent in that field yet,” said Dr. Lowman. Don’t misrepresent yourself in your eagerness to get work.

**Competence in Teaching**

As graduate teaching assistants (TAs), we encounter many difficult and novel situations in which we must use our judgment to determine the best course of action. How can we be fair and reasonable while ensuring that our students are not pulling the wool over our eyes?
“Learning instruction is just like any other professional skill set. It is something that has to be learned over a period of many years,” said Dr. Lowman. He offered the following suggestions:

1. **Develop a set of guiding principles.** Reflect on what you are trying to accomplish as an instructor and what you believe are fair teaching practices. Use these principles to guide you through difficult or ambiguous situations in the teaching environment.

2. **Seek out resources.** “Read some of the books that are out there about mastering the art of teaching, particularly those written by psychologists,” said Dr. Lowman. Read Section 7 of the *Ethics Code*, and talk to your peers who are experiencing similar situations.

3. **Model the behaviors of others.** As Dr. Lowman suggested, “Think about the courses you have had and what you liked and didn’t like about these courses. Try to model the behaviors of the professors you thought were effective.”

4. **Learn from past experiences.** “You are not going to be perfect at teaching the first time or probably the tenth,” stated Dr. Lowman. Learn from your past teaching experiences and consider what you would do differently in the future.

**Managing Relationships**

Graduate students in I-O may encounter ethical dilemmas in their relationships with other individuals, including other graduate students, undergraduates, professors, and supervisors (Oberlander & Barnett, 2005). Indeed, multiple-role relationships have been a major source of complaints brought to the APA (Kitchener, 2000) and are discussed throughout the *Ethics Code* (see Standard 3.05). In the section that follows, Dr. Lowman answers questions about ethical dilemmas in two types of relationships: with peers and with employers.

**Relationships With Peers**

In graduate school, there is often a fine line between providing help to a fellow graduate student and cheating. In what situations is it okay to provide help to a peer and in what situations is it not?

1. **Seek clarification.** If you are unsure if it would be ethical to provide help to a peer, then seek clarification from your professor. Asking these questions upfront is the key to gaining information about the intended outcomes of that learning experience.

2. **Be collaborative.** Dr. Lowman suggests that “we ought to be training people not to think that collaboration is necessarily cheating but that it’s part of what is helping you prepare for life.” Ethical collaboration with peers can be excellent preparation for team-based work in organizational contexts. Of course, it is important to consider the kinds of help that peers are asking for, as well as the motivation behind their requests.
3. **Go with your gut.** “When you feel uncomfortable as a graduate student with requests that you are getting from your peers, that’s probably a red flag that you need to stop and ask yourself why you are feeling uncomfortable,” said Dr. Lowman. “It may be your subconscious telling you that these requests are more exploitative than benevolent help-seeking.”

**Relationships With Employers**

What advice do you have to help students draw ethical boundaries when they encounter employment situations in which the employer’s or client’s ethical standards are subpar or follow a different standard than their own?

1. **Seek to understand and be understood.** “If you think about it, the only ones with the ethical obligations to obey the *Ethics Code* are psychologists or psychologists-in-training, not managers,” said Dr. Lowman. “It is therefore incumbent upon psychologists to make clear what their ethical obligations are and to ensure compliance with the *Ethics Code.*” Standard 1.03 (Conflicts Between Ethics and Organizational Demands) addresses this issue.

2. **Seek a second opinion.** “In the early stages of your career, it is hard to remember all aspects of the psychologist’s *Ethics Code,*” said Dr. Lowman. If you feel uneasy about a client’s request, then seek additional opinions from your colleagues, supervisors, or professors before fulfilling the request.

3. **Be polite, yet persistent.** Dr. Lowman noted, “For many students, most of the people you are going to be dealing with in organizational contexts will be older than you, have more experience than you, and oftentimes hold positions that may be intimidating, so you’ve got to understand your own authority issues and whether you can stand up to people in a polite but persistent way. Being able to speak truth to power is one of the issues that you have to learn if you are going to be an effective organizational consultant.”

**Research Issues**

Undoubtedly, graduate students may encounter a variety of ethical dilemmas when conducting research. In our survey of 50 SIOP Student Affiliates, at least 39 respondents indicated they were at least moderately concerned about ethical issues encountered when conducting research. Similarly, in a survey completed by 136 SIOP Student Affiliates, several unethical research behaviors were observed with some frequency (e.g., formulating or changing hypothesis after data analysis; Bandelli, Lopez Rivas, & Ottinot, 2006). These findings suggest that graduate students in I-O frequently encounter ethical dilemmas when conducting research. For this column, Dr. Lowman answers questions about two topics: conducting applied research and “fishing.” In addition to the suggestions that follow, consult Section 8 of the *Ethics Code* on research and publication.
Conducting Applied Research

As graduate students in I-O, many of us may conduct research through our internships or other employment opportunities. When conducting research in our educational institutions, we must go through the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB); however, the procedures are less clear when we are conducting research for our employers. What guidelines should we continue to follow when conducting applied research for our employers?

1. Consider the data you are collecting and how it will be used. Do not ask questions about sensitive information in employee attitude surveys if the data are not really necessary. Ensure that the data will not be used for unintended purposes. According to Dr. Lowman, “The misuse of data collected for one purpose and applied later for another is an area where there’s ample opportunity for ethical challenges.” You should also consider who will own and have access to the data.

2. Be proactive; anticipate the consequences. “It is incumbent upon you to think about ethical issues in research in advance of conducting your studies. Talking about them with a colleague can be one source of assistance,” said Dr. Lowman.

3. Create your own advisory committee. If the organization does not have an HSRB of its own, consider forming an advisory committee to help review your research proposals to ensure they are not putting individuals or the company at risk.

“Fishing”

We are told to use statistics to test hypotheses that are formulated beforehand, but it seems that many people go “fishing” for significant results and only write their manuscripts after analyzing their data. As graduate students, what are some ways we can guard against this practice?

1. Ask yourself, “Why am I doing this research?” Identify the purpose of your research upfront. According to Dr. Lowman, “We need good theory, good hypotheses, and the integration of practice and research, but we need these done in a way that is disciplined rather than thrown together.” Good research begins with identifying its purpose.

2. Do your homework. “It is not a bad thing to come up with hypotheses that are not supported, provided you have done your homework first,” said Dr. Lowman. “If you are forced by the discipline of your profession or professors to make sure you’ve done a proper job on your proposal, including assuring that your research addresses an important topic that extends what is already known, then hopefully you wouldn’t have the latitude to go fishing because you would be anchored to some strong hypotheses that came out of what was already known.”

3. Know the literature on your topic. Conduct a proper literature review before designing the research project. As Dr. Lowman indicated, “Oftentimes
people don’t do a very good job of reviewing or knowing the literature.” This can result in studies that do little to advance the knowledge base.

**Conclusion**

Many of the issues we addressed in this column aren’t unique to graduate students; they’re ethical dilemmas we will face throughout our careers. As Dr. Lowman said, “It is incumbent upon graduate students and professionals within this field to understand that they are the carriers of the ethical responsibilities of the profession. If students and professionals don’t raise the issues that they are concerned about in the context of organizational applications, it is unlikely that anyone else will.” So start now; ask questions and help create a culture that is trained to think about the ethical implications of our work. Learn the *Ethics Code* and the other ethical codes that are relevant to our work (e.g., Academy of Management, Society for Human Resource Management, specific organizations, etc.). In reference to the *Ethics Code*, Dr. Lowman advised, “Read it, understand it, think about it, and think about what you are doing. If you don’t like the Code, try to change it.”

We are very appreciative of the time Dr. Lowman gave to helping us navigate such a challenging topic, and we hope you will take his advice and run with it.

**References**


