

SIOP Response to APA's Ethics Code Task Force Call for Comments on
Proposed New Principles
Submitted October 30, 2020

GENERAL COMMENT BOX

We thank the ECTF for their work and appreciate the opportunity to comment on draft principles for a new Ethics Code. Our feedback addresses two themes: (1) the principles are too lengthy and skewed to ill-suited content and (2) there is insufficient information to contextualize how the principles are to be used.

1. Under the assumption that the principles should be instilled in psychologists without requiring repeated reference to the Ethics Code, eight principles each extensively defined is too much. Some content is redundant, confusing, and/or verbose. This is exacerbated by the use of bullet points. Although the bullet points are meant to be explanatory, they have the opposite effect of making it difficult to internalize the principles. The use of bullet points may also contribute to misinterpretation: they often connote an exhaustive list and might be mistaken as applicable to all psychologist roles. Moreover, their behavioral focus makes them akin to enforceable standards.

With regard to content, some of the material included in the consideration of *social justice*, and *human and civil rights*, while representing laudable democratic moral values, arguably do not represent aspirational ethical principles so much as social advocacy concerns about which psychologists may differ in perspective and/or applicability to their roles as psychologists. At the same time, important aspects of the current *justice* principle have been lost. Finally, *scientific mindedness* and *multi-level interrelatedness*, although critical concepts to psychological research and practice, do not fit the mode of ethical principles per se.

In our detailed comments, we recommend dropping three principles, combining two, removing the bullets, and editing the remaining text to be more concise, less redundant, and to keep faith with the target construct. Assuming they are not retained as separate principles, notions of scientific mindedness and multi-level interrelatedness should be integrated into the remaining principles and of course into the forthcoming standards, as applicable.

2. With regard to contextualizing the principles, clarification is needed of the following:

The code states that it pertains to only “activities that are part of [our] scientific, educational, or professional roles as psychologists [not to our] purely private conduct.” However, this is contradicted by the statement that APA may take action against a member who is convicted of a felony, suspended from a state association or had his/her license suspended. Those are rare events; nevertheless, they contradict the stated scope of applicability. It invites consideration of whether there might be less egregious private actions also warranting sanction—e.g., social media behavior.

Relatedly, to which activities does the Code apply when psychologists perform multiple roles in their work, including activities that ostensibly are outside the professional role of psychologists? Psychologists may become administrators or manage employees who are not psychologists. When functioning in professional capacities outside the explicit role as psychologists it is not apparent whether the code applies.

The current code states that the principles “should be considered by psychologists in arriving at an ethical course of action.” But it implies that the principles are not all that important – they are not enforceable; they should [merely] be considered; they are [simply] aspirational in nature; intended [only] to guide us toward ethical ideals; and in contrast to the standards, do not represent obligations.

While we agree that the principles “should not form the basis for imposing sanctions”, this is a far cry from implying that they are of peripheral use. The General Principles should be promoted as the venerable moral principles on which the standards are based. They are the ultimate justification/defense of the values operationalized in the specific standards.

Consideration should be given to providing more guidance on how the principles “should be considered.” The Code could be directed to helping us think ethically in a variety of anticipated and unanticipated situations. No ethics code can anticipate all potential problems. It is when one cannot find a direct answer in the standards to one’s dilemma that the principles provide their greatest service. They provide the intellectual flexibility to deal with new situations. They provide moral guidelines that guide ethical decision making. This affirmative viewpoint regarding their usefulness should be expressed in the Code.

Some consideration might be given to ways in which the principles can be prioritized in the event they cannot all be satisfied. Perhaps this will be considered in the development of a decision model. That said, we are skeptical of the appropriateness of singling out any one model.

Box 2

Interrelatedness of People, Systems, and Environment (IPSE); Scientific Mindedness (SM)

Substantive Issues

IPSE and SM were proposed as two new ethical principles. SIOP appreciates this effort to broaden the focus of the principles beyond the traditional focus on individuals to include the work of psychologists in organizations, as captured in the proposed IPSE principle. Additionally, the proposed SM principle is unique in describing the important role of scientific values in defining what it means to be a psychologist. However, we have two main concerns about establishing these concepts as new ethical principles.

1. It is unclear whether these two concepts constitute *ethical* principles. We think this criticism is most apparent when asking the question, “If a psychologist were to violate this principle, would they be considered unethical?” For the original five principles, the answer is “probably.” Psychologists who violate the principles of beneficence, justice, integrity, etc. are violating ethical values, norms, and in some cases legal regulations. Such issues involve moral stakes. In contrast, the moral stakes of the proposed IPSE principle and SM principle are not obvious from their definition or most of their subsequent examples.

2. The specific content appearing in these two new principles is not distinct enough from pre-established ethical principles to warrant their addition. As a result, we recommend dropping these two concepts as separate ethical principles and instead integrating their relevant contents into a few pre-established principles. In particular, we think that the SM content—when clearly relevant to ethics (e.g., bullets 2 and 4)—could be integrated into the principle of Integrity. Meanwhile, the IPSE content relevant to ethics (e.g., bullet 2) could be included in the principle of Professionalism and Responsibility.

In sum, we want to reiterate that we think IPSE and SM are two excellent general principles that are relevant to the work of many, if not most, psychologists. If the decision is made to retain these two new principles or their content in some form, we recommend specifying clearly the ethics-related content in their definitions.

Stylistic Issues about SM

We recommend removing the bulleted content entirely. If bullets are retained, here are some recommended edits:

Bullet 4: “...a commitment to transparency...” There are aspects of scientific research that place this statement in conflict with other ethical obligations, such as maintaining participant confidentiality.

Bullet 5: “Because the survival of all living things...” This bullet is too narrow to fit the roles of many psychologists.

Bullet 5: “...psychologists understand that relationship...” This kind of phraseology appears throughout the revised principles, referring to internal states as opposed to action-oriented,

observable behaviors. It is not necessary to specify what the psychologist “understands”, “recognizes”, or “is aware of.” Leaving such phrases out would make these statements (e.g., “psychologists seek”) stronger and more behavioral.

Box 3

Benevolence and Nonmalevolence (BN)

Substantive Issues

Overall, the revised BN principle does a good job of emphasizing the ethical behaviors that psychologists use when attempting to maximize benefits and minimize harm to others. We see two general issues with the definition provided for BN.

1. The current definition problematically implies that benevolence and malevolence are two sides of the same coin. This is not the case, as malevolence is a greater transgression than lack of benevolence, and a lack of benevolence does not automatically indicate malevolence. In addition, exceptions to benevolence based on relevant duties and relationships are often accepted as realistic, whereas adherence to nonmalevolence is viewed as more unconditional and universal. Along related lines, the parenthetical addition “(benevolence)” is unnecessary and not a complete or accurate rendition of “to benefit.” The term benevolence has a deeper and more complex philosophical meaning and implication than simply to benefit others. These important nuances are missing from the current definition.

2. The phrase “Persons and Peoples”, first introduced in the BN section, are repeated multiple times throughout the principles. We can guess at what is meant by these terms, but it would be clearer if they were explicitly defined. On a minor stylistic note, it is also unclear why these terms were capitalized (and this is distracting).

Stylistic Issues

We recommend removing the bulleted content entirely. If bullets are retained, here are some recommended edits:

Bullet 1: Change “Psychologists maximize benefit...” to “Psychologists SEEK TO maximize benefits...”.

Bullet 2: Remove reference to “human animals”, which is ironically dehumanizing. Instead, we suggest: “PEOPLE AND animals”.

Bullet 4: In last clause, change to “...psychologists STRIVE TO avoid harming other Persons...”.

Bullet 5: In second line, change to “...knowledge IN WAYS THAT MIGHT harm Persons...”.

Bullet 6: In second line, replace “and” with “to”.

Bullet 7: Change to: “Psychologists ensure that they WORK WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES OF THEIR COMPETENCE in caring for AND/OR WORKING WITH other People...”.

Bullet 8: Change to: “Psychologists TAKE RESPONSIBILITY for their professional and personal decision making and STRIVE TO REDUCE THE POTENTIAL NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF THEIR ACTIONS on others.”

Box 4

Integrity

We see no substantive issues with the framing of the integrity principle. Below we note a few recommendations for minor edits.

Stylistic Issues

Definition: The last sentence about cultural competence and humility (later referred to as “cultural humility”) is not clearly relevant to the definition of Integrity. This statement would fit better in the principle of Respect for the Welfare of Persons and Peoples or Human and Civil Rights.

We recommend removing the bulleted content entirely. If bullets are retained, here are some recommended edits:

Bullet 2: Remove reference to “social justice” since this is not integral to the definition of integrity and covered in other principles.

Bullet 3: This example seems redundant with the definition. This is an example that could simply be cut without losing the spirit of the principle of Integrity.

Bullet 5: Remove “...act with integrity...”. This is redundant with the definition of Integrity. Also, the development of cultural competence and cultural humility is not integral to the definition of Integrity. This example would perhaps fit better in the principle of Respect of the Welfare of Persons and Peoples or Human and Civil Rights.

Box 5

Professionalism and Responsibility (PR)

The definition of the PR principle is excellent. We identified no substantive issues. Some of the examples appear redundant or could be clearer, as noted below.

Stylistic Issues

We recommend removing the bulleted content entirely. If bullets are retained, here are some recommended edits:

Bullet 2: Change “minimize biases” to “MANAGE PERSONAL biases THAT INTERFERE WITH ETHICAL DECISION MAKING”.

Bullet 3: Change to: “WHEN psychologists...collaborate with those from other disciplines, they do so in ways that serve the best interests of those with whom they work, and maintain and promote THE values, standards, and knowledge of the field.”

Bullet 4: Change to: “Psychologists are attentive to their colleagues’ scientific and professional ethical conduct and TAKE STEPS TO SUPPORT THEIR ETHICAL DECISION MAKING.”

Bullet 5: This example would fit better in the sections on Human and Civil Rights, Respect for Welfare of Persons and Peoples, or Social Justice.

Bullet 6: Remove. Voluntary contributions of professional time are certainly encouraged, but it goes too far to state this as an ethical principle.

Recommendation for new bullet: “PSYCHOLOGISTS MAINTAIN CURRENT KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ANY CHANGES IN PROFESSIONAL AND/OR LEGAL GUIDELINES, STANDARDS, OR REGULATIONS APPLYING TO THEIR WORK.”

Box 6

Human and Civil Rights (HCR); Social Justice (SJ); Respect for the Welfare of Persons and Peoples (RWPP)

HCR was proposed as a new ethical principle, while SJ and RWPP appear to be modifications of the existing principles *Justice* and *Respect for People's Rights and Dignity*. While SIOP can appreciate the aspirational ideals of these three proposed principles, we have several concerns related to all three.

As discussed in the general comments, they are too lengthy and redundant. The purpose of the principles is to “guide and inspire psychologists toward the very highest ethical ideals of the profession” and the redundancy of the content across the new principles overly complicates the aspirational nature and purpose of the principles, rendering them less usable for guidance. The new format that includes bullet points appears to serve as a list of behavioral markers that can be checked off, but which may result in failure to consider the many other ways that the principles might be considered.

Additionally, these three principles come across as an overcorrection to the recent and current political environment, both within and outside APA. They shift from aspirations that inspire moral or ethical goals for professional behavior to a call for political activism. As a profession that takes pride in using scientific principles to understand human behavior, HCR, SJ, and RWPP are worthy of attention, and while aims listed in the bullets are admirable and desirable, they do not necessarily apply to the professional roles of the majority of psychologists.

Regarding the individual principles, we are concerned that in the new SJ principle the overarching message of fairness, equality, and justice for all persons that was central to the original *Justice* principle is missing from the new RWPP. Similarly, the message of dignity that was originally communicated within the principle *Respect for People's Rights and Dignity* has been lost. We feel this represents a major loss of critical content that should be important to all psychologists in their professional roles. Although the message of dignity is communicated, it is in the context of social justice, which is not necessarily the same as respect and decency for all persons whether members of marginalized groups or not.

As currently written, HCR does not offer a clear definition about what constitutes human rights, and failing to provide an explicit definition opens the door for potential confusion about what they are. The note at the end may serve as the definition, but it is not as specific as others (e.g., the UN declaration of human rights). Additionally, the principle of HCR is complex and potentially unusable, as the majority of psychologists may not necessarily bear an obligation to incorporate this principle into their practice. Due to the intense focus on civil rights and the lack of accessibility to most psychologists, we recommend dropping HCR as a principle and reworking the one relevant aim into RWPP.

Relevant content is seen in the HCR bullet “Psychologists respect and promote equity, diversity, and inclusion for all humans through the application of psychological science.” The content is consistent with RWPP and could be incorporated within this principle.

Given these concerns, we recommend dropping HCR and either significantly revising or combining SJ and RWPP. Retained principles need to be edited to be more concise, less redundant, and to keep faith with target constructs as they apply to psychologists' professional roles.

If SJ is to remain as a separate principle, edit the language to broadly clarify ways that considering social justice issues relates to the processes, procedures, and services that are conducted by psychologists (e.g., the first sentence of Principle D: Justice "fairness and justice entitle all persons... equal quality in processes, procedures, and services..."). This would increase their usability and lessen the concern that including this as a separate principle, apart from the original principle of Justice, oversteps the bounds of an ethics code governing professional and not private behavior.

For example, Bullet 1: "...use their...influence to identify and counteract the underlying causes and conditions of social injustices..." This bullet appears to impose a requirement on psychologists that may not be relevant to the work they do or research they conduct. Note also that Bullet 6 is unclear and without more specific wording, its broad nature leaves psychologists with potentially unresolvable conflicts.

Relatedly, if RWPP is to remain a separate principle, aims related to the ideals of dignity and worth of all people and safeguards for vulnerable populations should be incorporated.