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# Examining the Personal–Professional Distinction

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## *Ethics Codes and the Difficulty of Drawing a Boundary*

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*The Ethics Code of the American Psychological Association (APA) applies to the professional role behaviors of members and not to their personal behavior. This article discusses some of the difficulties inherent in drawing distinctions between the personal and the professional. Consideration is given to the importance of clarifying public statements. Four ethics codes other than the APA Ethics Code are examined for how they treat the personal–professional distinction. A number of questions are posed to assist in determining the tilt a behavior takes. A concluding recommendation suggests that APA Ethical Standards be applied only to professional role behaviors, whereas aspirational principles might be applied to personal behavior.*

**Keywords:** ethics, ethical standards, ethical principles, personal behavior and ethics, psychology and ethics

**T**he idea that professional associations have the right to regulate and discipline their members and constrain their behavior has a long history, extending back at least into the Middle Ages. For example, in 14th-century England, craft and parish guilds were asked to ensure that their members did not commit fraud, foment unrest, and so forth. If a member misbehaved, it was the obligation of the guild to bring the member's behavior back into line with acceptable norms and statutes (C. Bertolet, personal communication, November 4, 2003).

Professional associations such as the American Psychological Association (APA) have a vested interest in the behavior of their members for a number of reasons, including the reputation of the association, the overall image of the profession, the desire to enhance the education and competency of members, and the aspiration to protect the students, clients, supervisees, organizations, and research participants with whom members work. When individuals enter a profession, a question arises as to what behaviors, if any, they agree to modify or give up as a result of becoming a member of the profession. For example, in psychology, the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (hereafter referred to as the *Ethics Code* or the *Code*) of the APA (2002) prohibits members (hereafter referred to as *psychologists*) from engaging in certain types of relationships with clients, former clients, students, research participants, employees, and others with whom they work.<sup>1</sup> Examples include exploitative relationships with clients, employees, research participants, and students; sexual relationships with supervisees and clients or (in some

cases, depending on time and relevant variables in the case) former clients; and multiple relationships with clients, when the multiple relationship is likely to lead to impairment of the psychologist or harm to the client. Additionally, in their work-related behavior, psychologists are obligated to behave in ways that are consistent with other standards of the APA Ethics Code. Examples include the obligation to protect research participants, to keep certain kinds of information confidential, to evaluate students in ways consistent with program requirements, to use appropriate assessment instruments, and to present psychological information accurately when teaching. Thus, individuals who join the APA voluntarily agree to constrain their behavior in a variety of ways within their professional role.<sup>2</sup>

Consistent with the above comments, one of the issues that arises when discussing whether any particular behavior on the part of the psychologist is or is not prohibited by the APA Ethics Code is whether the behavior under consideration does or does not fall within the boundaries of the professional role of the psychologist. The Introduction and Applicability section of the 2002 APA Ethics Code states the following:

The Ethics Code applies only to psychologists' activities that are part of their scientific, educational, or professional roles as psychologists. . . . These activities shall be distinguished from the

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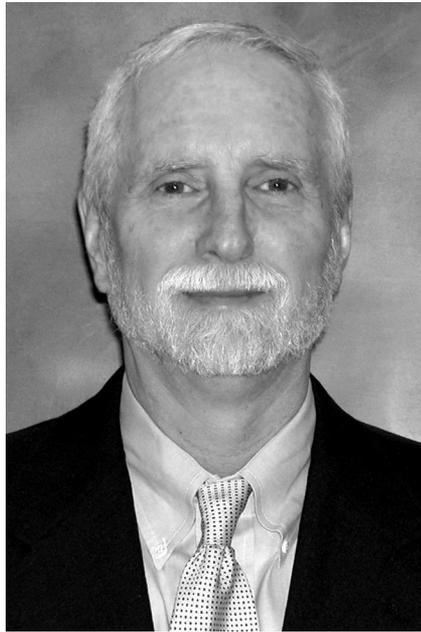
An earlier version of this article was presented at the 112th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Honolulu, Hawaii, August 2004. We thank Philip Lewis, Anne Penney, and Caroline Burke for their helpful comments on previous drafts as well as Gary Schoener for his helpful comments at the APA convention program. The order of the last two authors was determined randomly.

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<sup>1</sup> The Ethics Code consists of four parts: Introduction and Applicability, Preamble, General Principles, and Ethical Standards. The Ethical Standards (but not the other portions of the Code) are enforceable, and members are disciplined when found to have violated them.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, the terms *professional role* and *professional* encompass the full range of activities performed by psychologists—scientific, educational, and so forth.



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purely private conduct of psychologists, which is not within the purview of the Ethics Code. (p. 1061)

Thus, in contrast to the constraints (accepted voluntarily as a result of membership) imposed by the APA Ethics Code on psychologists when they are acting within their role as psychologists, no such constraints are imposed or mandated by the Ethics Code when psychologists function outside their roles as psychologists. Within the constraints of their own moral standards, social custom, the law, and any relevant organizational rules (e.g., those dictated by an employer or other professional association), psychologists may, when their professional role is not operative, engage in exploitative relationships and sexual and multiple relationships of their choosing. They may, with impunity from the Code, demean individuals of a particular gender or a particular religion with whom they interact only on a personal basis. It appears that in those municipalities that do not make it illegal to do so, a psychologist may own an apartment building and refuse to rent to individuals who are, for example, gay. Outside their roles as psychologists, they may (subject to the constraints just listed) break confidences, be verbally abusive to their romantic partners, lie to their friends, evaluate others unfairly, and generally act like a louse.<sup>3</sup> To summarize, other than the exception footnoted, odious behavior outside the psychologist's professional role is not subject to the current Ethics Code. It is important to note that the APA Ethics Code does little to define personal behavior or to explain the distinction between personal behavior and professional behavior.

## **Genesis of the Boundary**

How has there come to be, expressed in so many ways, including the APA Ethics Code, a boundary between the

personal and the professional? Does it make sense to talk about such a boundary? The relationship between the individual and the group (often society) was of interest to the Greek Hellenic philosophers and extends through the Age of Enlightenment with political philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Discussion of related issues continues through the present era, framed in a variety of ways including (but certainly not limited to) individualism versus collectivism (e.g., Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Sampson, 2000), the self (definitions and threats to identity in the postmodern era; e.g., Gergen, 1991; Smith, 1994), and broad sociological discourses on individualism and civic life in the United States (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Putnam, 2000).

This distinction between the personal and the professional (and the related distinction between the private and the public) is rooted deeply in cultural values. Particularly in United States culture (to the extent one can talk about one U.S. culture), there is enduring emphasis on one's right to a personal life little constrained by other individuals, organizations, or government. Justice William O. Douglas expressed a part of this philosophy when he said, "The right to be let alone is indeed the beginning of all freedom." Similarly, one of the popular mantras of the 1960s was "do your own thing," a paean to individuality and to one's right to live a life unfettered by the expectations or control of others. In the legal arena, even such fundamental rights as freedom of the press may be substantially limited when a newspaper criticizes a person deemed to be a private individual as opposed to a public figure (for related case law, see *Franklin Prescriptions, Inc. v. New York Times Co.*, 2003). In general, numerous amendments to the United States Constitution, including but not limited to the Bill of Rights, stand as a bulwark against capricious government activity and in general help protect minority viewpoints, however unpopular or out of fashion. Even psychologists advocating what many other psychologists might call "snake oil" treatments may find protection under the First Amendment (Kennedy, Mercer, Mohr, & Huffine, 2002). Within the profession of psychology, the frequency with which psychologists invoke the broad, culturally constructed ethical principle of autonomy and the related concept of informed consent is further evidence of the influence, value, and expression of free choice for the individual whenever possible. In turn, in their purely private lives, psychologists could be expected to steadfastly guard their own free choices and freedom of expression.

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<sup>3</sup> Members of APA may be expelled from the association after being convicted of a felony, even if the felony is unrelated to their role as a psychologist. That is to say, personal behaviors can fall within reach of the association's discipline, even though they are not directly actionable under the Ethical Standards. Felony convictions allow but do not require the association to discipline members. One reason the APA Ethics Code does not include legal violations as a specific standard is that there has been a consensus that an illegal act such as civil disobedience should not automatically subject the APA member to sanctions (C. Fisher, personal communication, November 5, 2003).



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In addition to the political and constitutional roots that helped develop the construct of the personal–professional boundary, the philosophical and psychological notion of the autonomous self, existing apart from the group, also helps underpin the distinction. In this view, individuals are capable of functionally separating themselves and their behavior from the groups (including professions) in which they are embedded. Both what the individual is capable of doing in terms of separation as well as the individual's responsibility to the group becomes of interest. Furthermore, role theory, which has a long history in the social sciences (e.g., Getzels & Guba, 1954), assumes that individuals can carry out multiple, although sometimes conflicting, roles. Thus, the construct of roles allows one set of obligations or activities to be defined and then contrasted with a different set of obligations or activities. Taken together, the idea of the autonomous self and the idea of roles, when combined with the political, philosophical, and constitutional issues, allow us to talk about the boundary between the personal and the professional.

### **What Do We Know About the Boundary?**

Before raising additional questions about the boundary between the personal and the professional, we briefly articulate some of what we know about this distinction. First, we know that there is often a reciprocal and causal relationship between elements within each of the two arenas. In that sense, there really is no debate about whether there is commingling of the areas. For example, consider the issue of impairment. In many cases, though not all, impairment is almost by definition a debilitating intrusion of personal variables into the professional realm. An example would be a psychologist with clinical depression who was unable to

teach a class effectively or who had insufficient energy to supervise research assistants properly. The difficulty in defining and understanding impairment (e.g., trying to decide when individuals need education or therapy vs. when they might need or deserve more punitive sanctions) is symptomatic of the entanglement between the personal and the professional. The professional may also impact the personal. Deep feelings of pride in one's professional accomplishments may help ameliorate old feelings of insecurity, or a poor performance rating at work may accelerate conflict with a significant other. (Literature analyzing how work and family interact includes discussion of work–family conflict and family–work conflict. For a discussion of spillover and other constructs related to the work–family interface, see, e.g., Edwards & Rothbard, 2000.)

In the academic arena, an example of the personal impacting the professional can be found from time to time when a university department meets to discuss job candidates who have interviewed for a position. In such cases, votes for particular candidates are often influenced by logic, departmental needs, and candidate qualifications. Votes may also be influenced by personal chemistry between the candidate and faculty members. Having one's vote influenced by a strong feeling of affinity is professional in the sense that a decent working relationship between colleagues is highly desirable, but it is also personal in that such feelings can be based on many intangibles that may or may not be work related. The votes of faculty members may also be influenced by how strongly their close friends in the department feel about a particular candidate. It is rational and professional to consider the opinions of those faculty members one respects, but we would venture to guess that most faculty members have at some time had their votes in departmental meetings influenced by feelings that go beyond professional considerations. Similarly, to what extent should members of Institutional Review Boards be influenced by personal feelings when making judgments about the safeguards needed in a research project?

Second, we know that many behaviors are quite easy to categorize. Space does not permit a long list of examples here, but presumably most psychologists agree that voting for political candidates, for example, is a personal act (not to say that it has no professional ramifications!). Similarly, there is likely near unanimity in the belief that psychologists' behavior with their students and clients should be regulated to a certain extent by professional norms and codes.

Third, there are some behaviors that seem to be both personal and professional. An example might be the writing of an overly enthusiastic letter of reference for a colleague. For some such behaviors, psychologists will never have complete agreement about whether the behavior is personal or professional (or whether it really is both), although the APA Ethics Committee and the Director of the APA Ethics Office must in fact make a judgment about this issue when deciding whether the APA Code does or does not apply to a behavior when there has been an allegation of unethical conduct.



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Fourth, whether specific ethical codes do or do not apply, it is important to behave ethically in the gray area—the area that contains behaviors that seem at once to be both personal and professional.

Fifth, we know that when professional roles collide with personal behavior, controversy often ensues. Recent examples highlighting the complex interplay between personal behavior and professional or job-related behavior include a report on the American Anthropological Association's moving a meeting in response to picket lines (Glenn, 2004), a controversy about the contents of a professor's Web log (Smallwood, 2003), a university football coach being fired for gambling (Jacobson, 2004), a private company requiring that employees be tested for smoking (Peters, 2005), and the United States Military Academy's evaluating the spirituality of cadets (Zupan, 2004). These examples demonstrate how easily the personal and the professional become intertwined and, as just noted, the controversy that can follow. Furthermore, these diverse examples show that as psychologists struggle to clarify what is and what is not appropriately defined as behavior in the professional realm, they echo disputes in the broader culture about the personal–professional boundary. To understand how contentious an issue can become when it involves the merging of the personal and the professional, one need look no further than the controversy (especially prior to the adoption of the 1992 APA Ethics Code) about whether (or when or under what circumstances) psychologists should be free to have sexual relationships with former clients.

### **What Is Personal? What Is Professional?**

The 1992 APA Ethics Code was apparently the first APA Code to draw a distinction between the personal and the

professional behavior of psychologists in terms of the applicability of the Code. The Introduction section of this Code states, “These work-related activities can be distinguished from the purely private conduct of a psychologist, which *ordinarily* [italics added] is not within the purview of the Ethics Code” (APA, 1992, p. 1598).

Fisher and Younggren (1997) noted that the issue of whether particularly egregious behavior outside one's role as a psychologist should fall under the purview of the Code was a subject for discussion in future revisions of the Code (for a discussion of changes reflected in the 2002 APA Code, see Fisher, 2003; Knapp & VandeCreek, 2003a, 2003b). In fact, the limitation of the Code's applicability to professional (as opposed to personal) behavior actually appears to have been strengthened in the new (2002) Ethics Code. As noted above, the 2002 APA Code says, “These activities shall be distinguished from the purely private conduct of psychologists, which *is not* [italics added] within the purview of the Ethics Code” (p. 1061). Despite the clear statement about the purview of the Code, Section 2.06 (Personal Problems and Conflicts) suggests that psychologists' personal behaviors might be at least partially at issue when considering whether the Code has been violated. Standard 3.06 (Conflict of Interest) also brings into focus the potential intermingling of personal activity and professional obligations. The distinction between the personal and the professional is made difficult when the Code both places personal behavior off the table for consideration yet recognizes that personal problems, which may at times be evidenced primarily in nonwork-related activities, are likely correlates of poor performance in the work setting. The distinction between the personal and the professional has been implicitly criticized by Payton (1994), who noted the following:

The distinction [between personal and professional behavior] provokes rethinking of my role. Until now, I have always considered myself a psychologist regardless of my job title. Social acquaintances view me as such. Are there any psychologists who have not been greeted with a “Oh, you can read my mind,” when introduced as a psychologist? The new code [i.e., the 1992 Code] frees me to leave my professional identity at the office at the close of business. (p. 319)

Of particular note in Payton's position is the emphasis on the perception of others. From this standpoint, such perception is an important criterion in determining whether psychologists can in fact, in Payton's words, “leave . . . [their] professional identity at the office at the close of business” (p. 319).

In their book on the 1992 Code, Canter, Bennett, Jones, and Nagy (1994) gave the example (still relevant for the 2002 Code) of the psychologist who sits on a library board and makes statements about the effects of certain kinds of books on children. Is such behavior subject to the Ethics Code? On the one hand, the psychologist may argue that she volunteered to be on the board as a private citizen and that as a member of the board she is entitled to express opinions about children's books. On the other hand, an observer might argue that the individuals who made the

board appointment were likely aware that the individual was, in fact, a psychologist. Such an observer might also argue that it is a matter of common sense to link the appointment, the role the psychologist plays as a university professor with, for example, a specialty in child psychology, and the opinions being expressed by the psychologist.

Psychologists who substantially quote psychological literature and freely comment on it in public are arguably engaging in activity that is a part of their “scientific, educational, or professional roles as psychologists,” even if they do not specifically identify themselves as psychologists (APA, 2002, p. 1061). It is interesting to note that the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (Canadian Psychological Association, 2000), the Principles of Medical Ethics with Annotations Especially Applicable to Psychiatry (American Psychiatric Association, 2001), and the ethics code of the American Counseling Association (1995) each contain a section that is quite applicable here. Each of these codes notes that professionals have an affirmative duty to indicate when they are speaking as a matter of personal opinion as opposed to speaking as experts.

This distinction between speaking as a matter of personal expression versus speaking as a representative of a profession or an institution is addressed by the American Association of University Professors (1940) Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure:

College and university teachers are citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution. When they speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their special position in the community imposes special obligations. As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution. (Section: Academic Freedom [c])

Even though the APA Ethics Code does not contain a standard requiring that psychologists clarify statements that might be ambiguous along the dimension of speaking privately versus speaking as a professional, such a standard could indeed help prevent misunderstanding. Obviously, claims by psychologists that they are acting as private citizens, in the face of clear and convincing evidence that they were functioning within a professional role, are fraudulent.

Although the purpose of this article is not to suggest new APA ethical standards, we do believe that in making future revisions of the APA Ethics Code, psychologists should consider slightly altering current standards in the area of public statements, so as to provide additional guidance to psychologists seeking to make clear that they are speaking for themselves in a given arena. In turn, such a standard, when applied to a particular situation, would directly address the question of the distinction between the personal and the professional. Not all difficulties in distinguishing between personal and professional behavior can

be solved by a statement; nonetheless, in our view, a standard outlining one’s obligation to clarify roles would make a reasonable addition to the Ethics Code. Perhaps it would be helpful to point out here that one of the purposes of the APA Code is to set forth enforceable standards, but another purpose is to educate psychologists. By outlining a standard in the area of public statements, the Code would be alerting psychologists to the importance of being clear about one’s role (speaking as a professional vs. speaking personally).

Consider two more examples that draw further attention to the issue of the personal and the professional:

*One night, while drinking with friends at a bar, Dr. Rodriguez, a clinical psychologist, sees two of his long-term clients sitting just a few feet away. Even though he knows his clients are there, he becomes very intoxicated, to the point of slurred speech. Is his behavior subject to the Ethics Code? Would it make any difference if one of his clients had a problem with alcohol abuse or if Dr. Rodriguez ran the local alcohol treatment facility? What if the same incident was repeated a number of times?*

*Dr. Green, a psychologist who is a statistician, is a player-manager for a softball team and she has invited her doctoral student, Lois, to play on the team with her. On the ball field, and in front of the other players, Dr. Green repeatedly belittles her student’s athletic skills. She also frequently makes substitutions in a way that limits Lois’s playing time. In the role of doctoral advisor, Dr. Green is supportive and fair. Is Dr. Green’s behavior on the softball field subject to the Code?*

Explicit guidance concerning such behavior is not in the Code, although Standard 3.04 (APA, 2002) does admonish psychologists to avoid harming students and others with whom they work. It is unlikely that any ethics code will be able to answer clearly questions about all of the many complicated situations that could conceivably arise in distinguishing between the personal and the professional. Nonetheless, later in this article, we turn to the problem of determining the tilt (toward the personal or toward the professional) a behavior takes as a function of several variables, including some raised by the examples just cited.

Perhaps as much as any area of psychology, feminist theory and practice (e.g., Worell & Johnson, 1997) raises the question of the personal versus the professional life of the psychologist. One of the mantras of feminist psychology has been the belief that “the personal is political.” Indeed, the preamble to the Feminist Therapy Code of Ethics (Feminist Therapy Institute, 2000) includes this very statement. In turn, political issues (e.g., social justice) are seen as part and parcel of the psychological enterprise. One need only pick up any of several books on feminist ethics (e.g., Brabeck, 2000; Rave & Larsen, 1995) to see that personal values and personal identity are inextricably interwoven with the idea of professional values and ethics.

Another example highlighting the ambiguous relationship between the personal and the professional, especially

from a feminist perspective,<sup>4</sup> is that of hate speech. Vasquez and de las Fuentes (2000) have discussed the issue of hate speech and the issues involved in balancing the need for autonomy and feminist ethics. They concluded that faculty and student speech codes were needed (and also discussed a number of relevant court cases). As they pointed out, freedom of speech is by no means absolute. At the same time, however, courts have been rather reluctant to endorse speech codes, often finding them too broadly drawn. Although the issue of hate speech on campus is not the same as, for example, hate speech in one's personal life, nonetheless, the issue is raised as to the interaction between one's personal life and one's professional life. If a therapist sees a large caseload of clients who identify their ethnicity as African American, should the profession merely say in essence, "we have nothing to say" if the therapist writes letters to the editor that are racist? Is such (perhaps) personal behavior outside the scope of the APA Ethics Code?

The confusion between the personal and the professional is also indirectly addressed by those writers (e.g., Kitchener, 1996, 1999, 2000; Meara, Schmidt, & Day, 1996) who advocate virtue ethics as an alternative or addendum to principle ethics. Virtue ethics, with its emphasis on, among other things, character, suggests that the kind of person someone is (in some total sense) drives what the person does and how the person thinks in the professional as well as in the personal realm. Hence, individuals who advocate for virtue ethics as an effective tool in thinking about ethical dilemmas, although not necessarily ruling out the distinction between the personal and the professional, certainly add complexity to psychologists' thinking.

The question of character and fitness for duty has been raised directly in the literature by Johnson and Campbell (2002, 2004) who suggested that training programs and licensure boards should give more attention to these two issues. In their view, there should be more screening along character dimensions (e.g., integrity, prudence, and caring) and fitness (e.g., personality adjustment, psychological health, and use of substances). Although their articles focused on screening, as opposed to discipline, the implication is clear that variables outside one's immediate performance of duties can and should be considered if there is a rational link between a deficiency and one's fitness or capacity to practice psychology. Likewise, training programs often seek out students who possess the ability to be self-reflective. For example, in their predoctoral internship materials, the Ball State University Counseling Center (2004) states the following:

An important component of our training program is the intersection between the personal and professional. . . . We believe that effectiveness in all aspects of professional functioning is related to one's ability to reflect on oneself, one's interpersonal and personal dynamics and the history from which these dynamics emerge. Thus, professional functioning can be either enhanced or hindered by one's development, or lack thereof, in these essential areas. (¶ 16)

From this perspective, a personal skill, self-reflection, is implicitly a professional skill.

Discussions about virtue ethics, character and fitness requirements for duty, the importance of self-reflection, and the challenges of impairment suggest that psychologists really do in fact want it both ways. We are committed to honoring a separate personal life, yet in our hearts, we really believe that the personal and the professional are often inseparable.

## Other Ethics Codes

The question of the personal versus the professional is addressed either directly or indirectly in ethics codes other than that of the APA. Earlier we discussed the issue of how various codes address the problem of when are professionals speaking for themselves and when are they speaking as a member of the profession.

The psychiatric ethics code (American Psychiatric Association, 2001) does make clear that there is a distinction between the private and the professional and, simultaneously, implicitly acknowledges that these two roles can become intertwined. One section of this code (2 [1.0]) states, "The requirement that the physician conduct himself/herself with propriety in his or her profession *and in all the actions of his or her life* [italics added] is especially important in the case of the psychiatrist." On the one hand, this section of the psychiatric code appears to imply that psychiatrists must (by constraint of the code?) conduct their personal life with propriety. On the other hand, the psychiatric ethics code is not clear on what personal behavior might be specifically constrained by the American Psychiatric Association.

It appears that the codes for psychiatrists and counselors are silent on whether professionals can in their personal lives discriminate against others on the basis of culture, religion, sexual orientation, and so forth. (Naturally, certain forms of discrimination are illegal regardless of whether one is acting within a professional role.) It is interesting that the Canadian Psychological Association (2000) code says (Principle I.2) that psychologists would "Not engage publicly (e.g., in public statements, presentations, research reports, or with clients) in degrading comments about others, including demeaning jokes based on such characteristics as culture, nationality, ethnicity, color, race, religion, sex, gender, or sexual orientation." Note that the Canadian Psychological Association code seems to imply that one should not make degrading public statements, and this prohibition does not seem limited to clients or others with whom psychologists work.

Section V(A) of the Feminist Therapy Code of Ethics (Feminist Therapy Institute, 2000) states: "A feminist therapist seeks multiple avenues for impacting change, including public education and advocacy within professional organizations, lobbying for legislative actions, and other

<sup>4</sup> It is inaccurate to speak of a single feminist position on, for example, ethics or hate speech. As Enns (1993) has pointed out, there are several schools of feminist thought, not to mention individual variation among feminists.

appropriate activities.”<sup>5</sup> When feminist psychologists send e-mails to a legislator (without identifying themselves as psychologists), imploring the elected official to vote for a proposal to make the tax structure more equitable, this is both a personal act and a professional one through the feminist lens. Thus, as noted above, from certain feminist perspectives, it can be difficult to separate the personal from the professional because one’s identity as a psychologist is irrevocably bound up with one’s personal commitments.

The Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (Canadian Psychological Association, 2000), like our own APA Ethics Code, explicitly states that it applies only to activities that one engages in as a psychologist. However, the Canadian Psychological Association ethics code goes on to say the following:

Personal behavior becomes a concern of the discipline only if it is of such a nature that it undermines public trust in the discipline as a whole or if it raises questions about the psychologist’s ability to carry out appropriately his or her responsibilities as a psychologist. (Section: Relationship of *Code* to Personal Behavior)

Thus, it appears that under certain conditions, the Canadian Code of Ethics might be applicable to personal behavior. Relatedly, it makes the following statement: “In some cases, resolution [of an ethical dilemma] might be a matter of personal conscience” (Canadian Psychological Association, 2000, Section: When Principles Conflict). The code goes on to say that decision-making processes involving personal conscience must bear public scrutiny. Despite this fact, and although common sense would tell us that all ethical decisions are at least partially informed by our own conscience or moral standards, the fact that the ethics code of the Canadian Psychological Association explicitly brings into its formal structure a role for personal conscience within the professional arena at least indirectly suggests that one’s personal life and one’s professional life must at times be intertwined. Philosophically, this position is consistent with the discussion above describing feminist ethics.

## Interrogating the Boundary

We now pose three questions, and make related comments, which we believe help interrogate this boundary between the personal and the professional. Space does not permit a detailed discussion of these items. What follows is not meant to provide definitive answers but rather is to be thought of as a set of beginning heuristics as we think about this boundary.

### **Why Is It Important to Think About This Boundary?**

Perhaps one answer that comes to mind when this question is asked can be found in the APA Ethics Code (and discussed above), namely, that one will not be charged with an Ethics Code violation (or at least will not be found guilty of one) if the behavior in question is deemed personal. So, psychologists have a vested interest in this boundary and obviously so does the APA Ethics Committee. More

broadly, and more important, thinking about this boundary challenges psychologists to be reflective about the bridge between the personal and the professional. In this sense, the emphasis is not on “What am I free to do in my personal life that is unregulated by the Code?” but rather “What are those enduring values that cut across my professional life and my personal life?” Let us be clear that we take seriously the right of psychologists to lead personal lives free of oversight from APA. There is something very wrong, however, if psychologists drink to intoxication in front of clients who abuse alcohol and their first thought is “Can I be disciplined under the APA Ethics Code?” Using a less extreme example, we know a psychologist who typically avoids going to a particular coffee shop because a psychotherapy client frequents the shop and, in the view of the psychologist, there are transference issues that might make such visits problematic. No one doubts that the psychologist has a right to go to the coffee shop. It is scarcely plausible that the Code would constrain behavior in such a circumstance. The psychologist’s perspective is that this intersection between the personal (“I would like to visit this coffee shop”) and the professional (“My client frequents the shop and my professional judgment leads me to think that my going might interfere with therapy at this juncture”) calls for sacrificing personal choice.<sup>6</sup> The personal value of freedom to go to a particular coffee shop is ordered and graded, in part, as an outgrowth of a professional value. We believe that psychologists frequently make such choices. In such circumstances, values as psychologists are fused with more personal values. Such fusion strengthens psychologists’ identities, contributes to a feeling of wholeness, and brings satisfaction as they pursue in their after-work lives the same values they uphold during the workday.

### **What Might Impact the Tilt a Behavior Takes Toward Either the Personal or the Professional?**

Despite our comments above about the importance of focusing on the appropriate integration of the personal and the professional, we understand that psychologists at times may want more clarity about whether a behavior tilts toward the professional or toward the personal. We emphasize that when a behavior is ambiguous enough to be near the personal–professional boundary, we seek to know the tilt the behavior is taking rather than aiming for a categorization. Our overall bias is to help sensitize psychologists to situations in which the welfare of clients, students, research participants, or even the public at large might be at risk. Whether such welfare is at risk is by no means the sole determinant of whether a behavior is to be considered professional. At the same time, we believe that psychologists should proceed with great caution when the behavior

<sup>5</sup> Copyright 2000 by the Feminist Therapy Institute, Inc., 912 Five Islands Road, Georgetown, ME 04548.

<sup>6</sup> We leave aside the questions of whether the psychologist’s judgment is correct or not and whether the psychologist is actually avoiding the coffee shop because of countertransference issues or out of self-care.

under consideration is somewhat personal but poses significant risk of harming or seriously confusing those with whom they work. Such behavior that is repeated or done in a highly public manner bears special scrutiny.

Drawing on the contents of the ethics codes discussed above, the examples cited, and on heuristic guides published on multiple relationships (e.g., Anderson & Kitchener, 1998; Gottlieb, 1993), we suggest a series of questions that might be asked to help determine whether an action is tilting toward the professional: (a) Does the behavior, on its face, seem at least partially professional? (b) Is there a high probability that students, research participants, or clients will be directly, significantly, and negatively affected? (c) Is the action under discussion linked to a role played by psychologists? (d) Has a client, student, or research participant expressed confusion about whether the behavior is personal or professional? (e) Is there a high probability that the action will be viewed or discovered by research participants, students, or clients currently receiving services? (f) Does the action threaten the credibility of the psychologist or the field of psychology? (g) Given the opportunity, did the psychologist fail to clarify that the action was a personal one? (h) Was the behavior repeated, especially if the answer to one of the first four questions was yes?

Although not listed as one of the guiding questions, we would also note that if the behavior seems likely to violate the spirit or letter of either the Ethical Standards, the Ethical Principles, or any APA guidelines, obviously this should be a signal to engage in further thoughtful analysis, even if all other indicators suggest that the behavior is personal. It is important to emphasize that answers to these questions, as noted above, do not provide an automatic categorization. Rather, they provide a framework to help think about the degree to which a behavior might be slipping into the professional realm.

### **What Are the Implications of a Fuzzy Boundary?**

We briefly highlight three implications. First, issues of character (see discussion above) must surely count in selecting and training future psychologists. If psychologists cannot always distinguish between the personal and the professional, and assuming that there is a reciprocal relationship between elements of the two domains, then how psychologists select students for graduate school becomes critical. They must select individuals whose character includes qualities such as truthfulness, personal responsibility, and integrity. Such character helps ensure ethical behavior whether one is operating in the personal or in the professional realm or somewhere in between.

Second, training in ethics in graduate school should emphasize not just obeying the standards in the Ethics Code but should encourage behavior that is consistent with broader aspirational principles. Furthermore, because the personal and the professional do so often become intertwined, a stance of self-reflection and self-knowledge should be modeled and fostered in graduate programs. Among others, Kant (e.g., see Potter, 2002) emphasized the

role of self-deception in moral failures. If self-deception is such a danger, then surely a portion of the antidote is self-reflection and self-knowledge.

Third, lifelong personal development of the psychologist is crucial. Personal problems and conflicts (see APA, 2002, Standard 2.06) are recognized as ongoing threats to effective professionalism. Impairment continues to challenge psychologists both at the practical and at the conceptual level. Personal development of psychologists seems like a reasonable tool in the profession's struggles with impairment.

## **Summary and Recommendations**

We have outlined a number of issues that both help create, and that emanate from, the tensions between a professional code of ethics and the personal behavior of an association's members. A code of ethics is a consensus document and it is unlikely, given the great diversity of culture in the United States, that there can be standards for personal behavior about which psychologists will all agree. Even attempting to ban something as odious as personal hate speech often raises constitutional issues and serious disagreement among stakeholders. Furthermore, there will always be some disagreement about the boundary between professional and personal behavior. For these boundary areas, context and detail are extremely important. For example, what might constitute personal behavior in a large urban setting might constitute professional behavior in a small community. In part reflecting the tradition in the United States of an emphasis on personal freedom, and the concomitant difficulty of achieving even rough consensus about applying ethical standards to private behavior, we are generally supportive of the idea that APA Ethical Standards should apply only to professional role behavior.

We have suggested a number of ways in which individuals and the field should approach this dilemma. We have suggested one specific possibility for an addition to our Ethics Code—namely that of considering a standard that more directly addresses one's affirmative duty to clarify when one is speaking for one's personal self and when one is speaking as a professional. Such a standard can be found in the ethics codes of the Canadian Psychological Association, the American Counseling Association, and the American Psychiatric Association. Furthermore, we have proposed that psychologists examine the tilt of their behavior when they find themselves in the gray area. We have emphasized the need for self-reflection and personal development. Additionally, we have recommended that training programs use selection procedures that take into consideration character traits, and we have suggested that programs should emphasize the importance of aspirational principles.

Finally, we would like to propose an idea that would make no change in the standards to which psychologists are held but that would make clear the investment psychologists have in ethical behavior beyond the borders of their professional lives. We propose that the APA consider amending the Introduction and Applicability portion of the Ethics Code so that the General Principles, which are aspirational (not enforceable), can be explicitly discussed

as applying to all areas of a member's life, not just to their professional role behaviors. Our proposal is founded on two fundamental assumptions: (a) It is often difficult to distinguish between what is personal and what is professional. Especially in these gray areas, it would be reassuring to know that at least some portion of the Code addressed the behavior even if that portion were not enforceable. (b) There are some broad aspirational values about which psychologists can attain rough consensus as applying to their personal behavior.

Under APA's current Ethics Code, once a behavior has been defined as personal rather than professional, the entire Ethics Code falls silent. However, APA already has in place a mechanism for potentially disciplining members whose personal behavior leads to a felony conviction. Therefore, the issue is not really whether APA is in the business of making judgments about personal behavior, because under certain circumstances, it certainly does make such judgments. We are deeply sympathetic with the argument, rooted in this country's historical emphasis on the right to be let alone, that professional codes of ethics should not dictate one's personal behavior. At the same time, one of the strengths and attractive features of the APA Code is that it does draw a distinction between what is enforceable and what is aspirational. This does not mean that everyone in APA completely agrees with these aspirational principles; but for the most part, these principles are written in a way that makes them palatable to most psychologists. They are undergirded by values of such obvious appeal (e.g., justice, integrity, respect for people's rights and dignity) that it seems plausible psychologists could achieve a consensus on them as aspirational beyond their professional role. In our view, to say that abiding by these values is something to which psychologists aspire in their personal lives seems reasonable, if not obvious.

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### Correction to Ossorio and Duster (2005)

In the article “Race and Genetics: Controversies in Biomedical, Behavioral, and Forensic Sciences,” by Pilar Ossorio and Troy Duster (*American Psychologist*, 2005, Vol. 60, No. 1, pp. 115–128), Table 1 contains several errors due to an editorial mistake. In the Population and Incarceration columns, the data for Blacks and Whites were transposed. In addition, decimal points were omitted from the data in the Rate (%) of Incarceration per Population columns. The correct version of Table 1 appears below:

**Table 1**  
*Incarceration Rates by Race*

Year	Population <sup>a</sup>			Incarceration <sup>b</sup>			Rate (%) of incarceration per population			Approximate ratio (Black to White)
	Total	White	Black	Total	White	Black	Total	White	Black	
1933	125,579	112,815	12,764	137,997	102,118	31,739	0.11	0.09	0.25	2.5:1
1950	151,684	135,814	15,870	178,065	115,742	60,542	0.12	0.09	0.38	4:1
1960	180,671	160,023	19,006	226,065	138,070	83,747	0.13	0.09	0.44	5:1
1970	204,879	179,491	22,787	198,831	115,322	81,520	0.10	0.06	0.36	6:1
1989	248,240	208,961	30,660	712,563	343,550	334,952	0.29	0.16	1.09	7:1
1995	263,168	218,149	33,095	1,126,287	454,961	546,005	0.43	0.21	1.65	8:1

<sup>a</sup> Total population of the United States by ethnicity (in thousands). Data are from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (1975, 1976, 1997).

<sup>b</sup> Total number of prison population by ethnicity. Data are from U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (1986, Table 3–31; 1997).