



Is Making a Difference Part of the Ethics of our Profession?

By Bram Fridhandler, PhD

In asking this question, I'm using the phrase to mean going beyond the routine roles of a psychologist to do things purely for the purpose of helping others, in the service of social justice or simply to provide services to people in need. One would think, surely, this is part of the ethics of our profession. But why then does our Ethics Code (APA, 2010) have little to say about it?

The General Principles, it's true, include such statements as "[Psychologists] are aware of their professional and scientific responsibilities to society" and "psychologists recognize that fairness and justice entitle all persons to access to and benefit from the contributions of psychology." But not only are these statements general indeed, they are aspirations, not obligations. In the binding sections of the Code, there are many that prevent us from exploiting or otherwise harming people through carelessness or unrestrained self-interest, but none that require us to go beyond our routine roles. Pro bono work, for example, is not mentioned.

Why this reticence? I think mainly for two reasons: (1) reluctance to go too far in dictating the behavior of psychologists, and (2) a wish, or perhaps a need, to be value-neutral. The former reason is straightforward, if not always evident from the ever-increasing length of the Code's successive revisions. The drafters of the Code and other official documents laying out our standard of care are mindful that their colleagues will be held to these provisions in disciplinary actions and therefore weigh each obligation imposed. A requirement, for example, that all psychologists contribute a minimum amount time without compensation would surely face an uphill battle.

The attempt to be value-neutral is more complicated. It has several roots. One is the fact that psychologists' values are diverse and the profession therefore can't establish an official set of values – politically liberal ones, for example – which would create an unwelcoming environment for members holding different views. Beyond this, the concept of value-neutrality, many have argued, is built into the nature of the professions, which are meant to be applications of specialized knowledge toward ends chosen by society, not by the professionals themselves. Economists, for instance, are not supposed to decide how income is distributed.

The need for impartiality and objectivity, accordingly, emerges across the range of our activities as psychologists. In the work of the psychotherapist, diagnosis and assessment of current symptoms must not be influenced by a desire for the patient to be able to get more sessions from insurance. A psychologist's other opinions, if expressed in

external proceedings such as a parent's therapist supporting his or her patient in a custody dispute, must be objective if they are to be taken as professional opinions rather than value-laden intrusions that discredit the professional and the profession. Forensic experts must give impartial opinions regardless of who is paying them; the same challenge to impartiality exists when the motivation is social good rather than personal gain. When individual psychologists and our professional associations cite research in support of their recommendations on legislation or pending court cases, they must provide an objective, balanced reading of the literature or the effort will be advocacy disguised as science.

Should we be suspicious of these well-worn imperatives to objectivity when they lead to acquiescence in the face of injustice? This is surely a vast topic involving the question of whether societal structures including the professions are, ultimately, instruments for the preservation of existing power structures and more narrowly whether the very concept of value-neutrality is a myth which serves the same end. One could cite the counter-example of social work, where the NASW Ethics Code instructs its members to advocate for the "realization of social justice."

But in this issue of *The California Psychologist*, we celebrate the psychologists who are already making a difference, reaching out to the suffering and expanding the scope of our profession while increasing the sophistication, including the multicultural sophistication, of its practitioners. Thanks to these inspiring authors and the many individuals who work with them. □

Reference

American Psychological Association. (2010). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct (2002, Amended June 1, 2010)*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx>.

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