

The Brookline Principles on the Ethical Practice of Operational Psychology

Produced by the *Ethics of Operational Psychology Workshop*

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The emergent specialty of operational psychology — the use by psychologists of psychological skills and principles to support military and intelligence operations — has the potential to improve national security and general wellbeing. This specialty currently includes personnel selection; soldier resilience training; Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) training; behavioral consultation; outcome assessment; hostage negotiation; interrogation support; and personality profiling for high-risk, high-stakes missions. It is widely accepted that some of these applications constitute ethical practice while the ethicality of others is widely disputed.

Impassioned domestic and international controversies indicate that this field of practice is fraught with exigencies that challenge, and potentially violate, ethical principles for psychologists. The involvement of psychologists in abusive interrogation operations during recent conflicts demonstrates the need for careful examination of the ethical foundations of operational psychology practice.

Concerns about the ethics of operational psychology are further heightened because such operations are often necessarily conducted in secrecy. This can pose a significant challenge for state licensing boards, charged with providing ethics oversight, in those cases where the identities of the psychologists involved are unknown to the board or where the necessary evidentiary documents are unavailable.

For the profession of psychology to fulfill its potential, psychologists must uphold the public trust in the profession's ethical and scientific integrity across all domains. Some activities that fall within the field of operational psychology carry a high risk of undermining that trust and integrity, thereby diminishing the reputation and effectiveness of the entire profession and its service to national security.

Stephen Soldz, Jean Maria Arrigo, and Brad Olson of the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology organized a three-day workshop to engage in a deep and thoughtful dialogue about the specific ethical challenges faced by psychologists practicing in the field of operational psychology. Participants included psychologists, physicians, and social science professionals; military and intelligence professionals; and attorneys, ethicists, and human rights advocates. The discussion also drew upon years of dialogue between participants and members of the military and intelligence community. The workshop took place September 18-20, 2015, at the Boston Graduate School of Psychoanalysis in Brookline, Massachusetts, with support from the Meyer Foundation.

From this workshop a consensus emerged that the ethical issues confronting the field of operational psychology are particularly pressing. We therefore believe it is important to clarify relevant ethical principles and develop additional guidance for ethical practice for psychologists in this field. The current American Psychological Association Ethics Code,

while providing an excellent foundation and while applicable and binding on all APA members, does not in all cases provide adequate guidance to facilitate the moral discernment necessary for such activity; it would benefit from supplementary ethical guidance in this specialty area. The following Fundamental Principles and Guidelines are intended as a preliminary framework for that supplemental guidance. Consistent with their preliminary nature, these principles and guidelines highlight problem areas rather than provide definitive solutions.

Fundamental Principles and Guidelines

1. Psychology as a profession is based upon the core ethical principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence, or “do no harm.” These principles apply to all psychologists, including those working in military or national security contexts. The ethical obligations of professional psychologists are not diminished or altered in times of national emergency or perceived crisis. Operational psychologists serve best when they consistently uphold the moral and scientific integrity of their profession in the military or intelligence context.
2. Ethical concerns are at their highest when psychological expertise is employed to *cause harm* to the targets of an intervention. The awareness, expectation, or intention of inflicting harm, with whatever justification, is in direct tension with these core ethical principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence. The greater the harm, the greater the likelihood that participation in the activity is not ethically permissible for psychologists.
3. Ethical concerns are heightened when the target of the psychological intervention is *unaware* of the intervention or the purposes or risks of the intervention. Interventions conducted without the awareness and agreement of the target are in tension with the core ethical principle of voluntary informed consent.
4. The risk of compromised professional ethics is also heightened when, because of secrecy, compartmentalization, or strategic manipulation in the mission, psychologists lack *full awareness* of the scope of an operation in which they are participating. Ethical guidance and evaluation of operational psychology must address the implications of military and intelligence operations where full awareness is not available.
5. The ethical *acceptability* of any particular action to be undertaken by operational psychologists must be evaluated independently of the purported *effectiveness* of the proposed technique or operation. The fact that a particular action is considered necessary or has been determined to have been successful with respect to the mission does not thereby make it ethical for psychologists.
6. The ethical practice of psychology in every domain requires mechanisms for ethical *monitoring and accountability* by other professional psychologists and for ethics consultation and support. To be effective these mechanisms must be independent of chain-of-command pressures and must exhibit a degree of transparency and public accountability consistent with human rights standards. The development of comprehensive oversight, accountability, and consultation mechanisms for psychologists practicing in operational contexts is thus essential.
7. Members of professions have a duty to refuse to participate in activities that violate their professional ethics, and they must have a realistic opportunity to do so. However, some

operational psychologists, by virtue of their position within the military or intelligence chain of command or their critical roles in certain operations, will face enormous challenges in refusing participation in actions that are deemed lawful (under the law of armed conflict or other relevant bodies of law) but that violate their professional psychological ethics.

8. Operational psychologists who nevertheless choose to participate in activities that violate psychological ethics, in fulfillment of their military, intelligence, or other contractual commitments, should first be required to surrender their professional licenses and memberships in professional psychological organizations and must not present themselves, or be represented by others, as professional psychologists. Those who make this choice then are serving not as psychologists but as military or intelligence professionals with the corresponding ethical standards of those professions.

Endorsed by the following participants in the Ethics of Operational Psychology Workshop, Brookline, Massachusetts, September 18-20, 2015:

(Endorsement represents only the positions of individual signers and not those of employers or other organizations, which are listed for identification purposes only.)

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