Chapter 16
Emerging Ethical Issues in Police and Public Safety Psychology:
Reflections on Mandatory vs. Aspirational Ethics

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents commonly experienced ethical dilemmas among police and public safety psychologists. Real-world, relevant examples are offered with an emphasis on emerging ethical issues. Related American Psychological Association (APA) ethical principles and standards for psychologists and codes of conduct are highlighted. The possibility that ethical dilemmas go unrecognized due to a focus on mandatory rather than aspirational ethics is considered. Solutions for resolving ethical dilemmas are presented.

INTRODUCTION

Ethical issues abound in the specialty of police and public safety psychology. Psychologists working in this specialty encounter ethical dilemmas that are thought-provoking and challenging. These dilemmas are likely among the toughest aspects of police and public safety psychology practice. A paucity of research exists about commonly experienced ethical dilemmas among police and public safety psychologists. Zelig (1988) surveyed police psychologists and found that the three most encountered ethical dilemmas involved multiple relationships, confidentiality concerns, and resolution of conflicts between professional standards and an organization's needs. Multiple studies of psychologists nationally and internationally have resulted in similar findings, with concerns related to confidentiality and multiple relationships cited as the most frequently experienced ethical challenges in psychology practice (Colnerud, 1997; Pettifor & Sawchuk, 2006; Pope & Vetter, 1992; Slack & Wassenaar, 1999). Zelig (1988) also found that many

police psychologists reported they did not experience any ethical dilemmas. This too was consistent with the results of Pope and Vetter (1992), who reported that 134 of their 679 psychologist respondents did not encounter a single ethically troubling incident in the last year or two prior to the survey.

Several reasons likely exist for a lack of identified ethical dilemmas. Psychologists may fail to recognize ethical challenges. They have busy practices or copious work to complete within an agency and may overlook such issues. Conversely they may think too concretely and miss the complexity of situations. Over time, they may have encountered similar dilemmas and have become immune to them. Alternately, perhaps with experience, they become better at managing dilemmas, such that situations are no longer viewed as anything out of the ordinary. Perhaps some police and public safety psychologists fail to consider potential differences between mandatory and aspirational ethics. Ethical dilemmas may go unrecognized due to a focus on mandatory ethics.

Practicing mandatory ethics involves only acting in compliance with enforceable standards. This approach involves following the letter of the law or the specifics of a code. The focus is on conforming to requirements. Close considerations include risk management, avoidance of harm, adherence to requirements and recognition of "right" action. Mandatory ethics are the "floor" of expectations in resolving any given ethical challenge.

Aspirational ethics involve striving for the best possible ethical outcome. In contrast to the floor example of mandatory ethics, aspirational ethics are the "ceiling" in any given ethical dilemma. Goals include pursuing the best outcome for the involved parties and seeking to "do good." This involves embracing principles, a philosophical stance, or an overarching thinking style to resolve ethical dilemmas. The APA's ethical principles for psychologists—in contrast to the enforceable (mandatory) principles—are aspirational in nature. They call upon psychologists to adopt core beliefs rather than simply following a set of rules, laws, or codes.

In considering aspirational ethics, there are multiple relevant areas of the APA Ethics Code. The General Principles relate to and address the need for psychologists to do good, avoid doing harm, be aware of their influence, have integrity, be conscientious and attuned to their responsibilities, be fair, exercise good decision-making, and recognize their biases and the limits of their competence (APA, 2002).

ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF POLICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY PSYCHOLOGISTS

Police and public safety psychologists experience a multitude of ethical dilemmas in different areas. Concerns about confidentiality, multiple relationships, managing conflicts between ethics and organizational demands, and professional competence are particularly relevant for police psychologists. Each of these key areas is addressed in the next section of this chapter and may be associated with a variety of ethical challenges. Psychologists encounter dilemmas when working in any of the four core functional domains of police and public safety psychology: assessment, intervention, consultation, and operations (Aumiller et al., 2007).

Confidentiality

Codes regarding confidentiality address the need for police and public safety psychologists to maintain confidences, identify the client or patient and other involved parties, clarify and make explicit these

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