

## Ethics in I/O Psychology

### I. Ethical Issues in Practice/Consulting

- A. Practically the first thing that the American Psychological Association's Code of Ethics says is :“Psychologists are committed to increasing scientific and professional knowledge of behavior and people's understanding of themselves and others and to the use of such knowledge to improve the condition of individuals, organizations, and society.”
- B. Do I/O Psychologists working in industry have as their goal the improvement of “individuals, organizations, and society”?
  - 1) Some I/O Psychologists have worked on problems that affect individual workers
    - a worker stress
    - b job burnout
    - c career development
    - d the relationship between work and non-work life
  - 1) However, I/O Psychologists “work on behalf of and [have an] identification with the organization and its managerial system.” (Lefkowitz, 2003, p. 309)
  - 1) As a consequence of this fact, I/O psychologists see things from the perspective of management.
    - a Topics focused on the well-being of the individual are still only a small part of I/O psychology.
      - i Instead, I/O psychologists tend to focus on taking action that will increase the profitability of the company, without much regard to the well-being of the individual worker.
      - ii Even when topics are focused on the individual worker, the perspective of the I/O psychologists is still often the bottom line:
        - (i) What effect does stress, burnout, etc have on worker effectiveness/productivity?

- b More often than not, I/O psychologists ignore the well-being of individual workers, or even are actively opposed to the well being of workers, when it conflicts with the success of the company.
  - i For example, in a survey of I/O psychologists who had worked on employment discrimination litigation, 2/3 had worked on behalf of the employers; only 9% had worked for the plaintiffs (the workers).
  - ii In an article by an I/O psychologist on the problem of invasion of privacy, the problem identified was the laws that were being passed to protect worker privacy.
  - iii In an article by I/O psychologists about lawsuits having to do with employee firing, the “negative outcomes” of lawsuits were listed. The damages (money) that employees got for being wrongfully fired and the “lowered morale on the part of [the remaining] workers” were listed as negative outcomes.
    - (i) If someone is *wrongfully* fired, isn’t getting damages in a lawsuit a *positive* outcome?
    - (ii) And, why isn’t the source of the lowered morale the fact that people were wrongfully fired, instead of the fact that they won a lawsuit?
- 1) There is also very little concern with questions that have a more society-wide effect, such as:
  - a What is the effect on people’s long-term well-being in an economy with lots of unemployment?
  - b What effects do unions have on personal development and adjustment of workers?
    - i Generally, I/O psychologists have thought very little about labor unions.

## II. Ethics in Research

- A. In general, the same issues apply in research ethics in I/O psychology that apply in any kind of research with humans. However, because often research in I/O psychology is done with people who are employees in a company, some special concerns come up.



C. The Risk/Benefit Tradeoff: The decision whether or not research is ethical should be based on whether the benefits of the research outweigh the risks.

1) Types of Benefits

- a To the individual
- b To society/science
- c To the organization: Should this be relevant? Should risk to workers be weighed against a benefit to the company?

1) Types of Risks

- a Physical
- b Emotional/Psychological
- c Employment Related.

D. Informed Consent

1) How does the fact that research is being done on *employees* affect their ability to really consent to participate?

1) Problems of deception in research.

E. Privacy Concerns

1) Does an employer have a right to observe whatever he/she wants in the workplace?

1) Does an employer have a right to use things observed for one purpose for another purpose?

- a For example, could we use recordings of calls to a call center that are supposedly made for training purposes for research?