

NSBEP NOTES ~ ETHICAL ISSUES VERSUS ETHICAL DILEMMAS ~

In the NSBEP's oral exam, we ask candidates to describe an ethical dilemma. It has been our experience that most candidates are well prepared for this aspect of the oral exam. Of course, we see some candidates who struggle with their ethical dilemma, and when there is a struggle, it is most often with regard to perceiving a dilemma when none exists.

Although it may seem like a matter of semantics, the distinction between an ethical issue and an ethical dilemma is an important one, and has significant implications for practice. As psychologists, we face an enormous diversity of situations in which we must call upon our knowledge of the Code of Ethics. Ethical situations can be expected to arise as a matter of routine in our practice, and the great majority of them are fairly straightforward; we can usually make correct decisions easily and quickly, because the "right" answer is clear.

An ethical situation presents what I will call an ethical "issue" when it is possible to ascertain the answer by simply adhering to a clear-cut guideline in the Code of Ethics. As an example, a psychologist who is asked by her hairstylist if she can take him on as a client can easily and readily come to the conclusion that the answer must be "no," in adherence with the standard of avoiding dual relationships (Principle III: Integrity in Relationships). The ethical decision-making process for an ethical issue such as this should occur quickly, leading to an easy resolution, since there is no conflict between principles.

Typically, an ethical dilemma, on the other hand, exists when two or more ethical principles or standards are conflicting with each other. The situation above would become an ethical dilemma if, for example, the psychologist lives in a remote area, and is the only psychologist available. In such a case, another principle becomes relevant, namely Principle II: Responsible Caring. This principle is now competing with the psychologist's need to avoid the dual relationship. Because Principle II "trumps" Principle III, in accordance with the hierarchy of the principles, the psychologist must find a way to *manage* the dual relationship, rather than avoid it. Perhaps, for example, the psychologist will need to take on her hairstylist as a client and find a new hairstylist, to ensure that the best interests of the hairstylist-client are protected.

To perceive an ethical "dilemma" when the issue is clear-cut and there is no conflict between principles is neither correct nor efficient in practice. In the case of such a misperception, an easily-resolved ethical situation can instead become needlessly complicated, and moreover, it can lead to the possibility of the psychologist acting unethically. In the above example, if the psychologist perceives the simple ethical issue as a dilemma, she may, for example, perceive that she has an obligation to provide treatment to her hairstylist when she does not. Perhaps, to complicate matters, her hairstylist has indicated that he feels comfortable with her, and has heard her talk about the type of therapy she conducts, and he sees her as the only psychologist he would ever trust. Even so, no ethical dilemma exists, as the psychologist must still avoid the dual relationship, despite the hairstylist's wishes. Even though the psychologist may *feel* conflicted, or experience a *personal* dilemma about a situation, a true ethical dilemma does not exist, as there is conflict between principles.

Of course, I've presented but one of an infinite number of possible ethical issues and dilemmas

psychologists may face, but I hope that it exemplifies the importance of being proficient at distinguishing between an ethical issue and an ethical dilemma.

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