Ethics, Values and the Professional Self – week 1

Background and introduction to ethics, philosophy and dilemmas

Learning outcomes -

1

Demonstrate critical understanding of the philosophy of positive approaches to practical ethics.

2

Analyse the potential causes of and potential solutions to different professional and moral debates in psychology.

3

Critically reflect on their own continuing professional development needs, coping styles and decision-making abilities using appropriate psychological models.

4

Take responsibility for their own learning and skill development, including effective personal planning, self-reflection, and project management skills.

Assessment information-

RISK ASSESSMENT PROTOCOL

- Your task is to complete a 1,500-word written risk assessment protocol, which identifies the legal, ethical, and professional issues that need to be considered in working within the case scenario provided.

PORTFOLIO (3 ELEMENTS)

- Online Blog (500 words),
- Professional Profile, and
- Reflective Piece (1,500 words).

Lecture outcomes –

- Explore the philosophical underpinnings of professional ethics (deontology, utilitarianism, virtue ethics).
- Analyse and evaluate moral dilemmas using both philosophical and practical frame-works.
- Apply ethical decision-making models to real-world scenarios in psychology.
- Distinguish between the **legal/mandatory floor** of ethics and the higher, aspirational or "positive ethics" approach.
- Appreciate how personal ethics and professional standards interact, and how psychologists can integrate them.
- Recognise why ethics is more than avoiding wrongdoing—it involves striving for excellence in moral character and practice.

Introduction to Ethics in Psychology – some thoughts

Define ethics, morality, and professionalism.

The importance of ethics in psychology (impact on clients, society, and the profession).

Reference: BPS Code of Ethics.

Difference between law, ethics, and personal values.

Introduction to positive ethics – moving beyond avoiding misconduct to actively promoting well-being.

Where does morality come from?

Graham and Haidt (2012) devised Moral Foundations theory, identifying five value systems that influence human behaviour:

Care – we are motivated to care for others

Fairness – we value reciprocity and equity in relationships

Loyalty – we sacrifice our needs for the benefit of other

Authority – we respect and abide by higher authority figures

Sanctity – we value cleanliness, purity and chastity

Where does morality come from?

According to Haidt (2001) our moral reasoning is usually intuitive and use their reasoning to them justify their decisions. A classic dilemma used by Haidt in his research is as follows:

`Julie and Mark are siblings travelling in France for the summer holidays. One night in a cabin near the beach they decide it would be fun to make love to each other. They enjoy it but decide never to do it again and keep it a secret, making them feel even closer to each other`.

What do you think and why?

Intuitive versus rational thinking

- According to Haidt, when faced with this dilemma, participants could not rationally justify their response.
- He referred to this as **moral dumbfounding.**
- He further proposed that ther3e are two systems that govern our moral decision making – system 1, the intuitive one and system 2, the rational one.
- Findings from fMRI research indicates that the areas of the brain that deal with emotional processing are highly active when dealing with moral issues that are personal to us. This implies that moral thinking involves deep and meaningful processing of highly emotional material.

The Legal Floor and Positive Ethics

What is the Legal Floor ("the floor approach")?

The idea that professional ethics often set a baseline: law, enforceable standards like BPS Ethical Principles & Code of Conduct, regulations, licensing requirements.

These are what psychologists ***must*** do. Violation can lead to discipline, loss of licensure, legal consequences.

What is Positive (or Active / Aspirational) Ethics?

- Beyond minimal compliance: striving for moral excellence. Rooted in deeply held values or philosophical systems.
- It calls psychologists to do more, to behave not just “legally adequate” but “ethically excellent.”
- It involves integrity, virtues, beneficence, collaboration, respecting spirit not just letter.

Why the distinction matters

- If one only focuses on the floor, they may miss opportunities to do good beyond "just not doing harm."
- Compliance mentality may lead to minimalism—just enough to avoid penalty.
- Ethical dilemmas often fall outside strict rules: situations where laws or formal standards either don't cover something, or two rules conflict, or the rule is ambiguous.
- Positive ethics helps navigate that.
- Helps psychologists see their role not just as avoiding wrongdoing but enhancing well-being.

Why people tend towards the floor

- Human tendency toward loss aversion, avoidance: people focus more on avoiding punishment than achieving virtue or reward.
- Acculturation: how one is trained and socialised in the profession influences what one sees as ethical behaviour; early in training people may be less aware of higher-order ethical ideals.

The benefits of positive ethics-

- Greater self-satisfaction and professional fulfilment.
- Enhanced trust from clients/patients.
- Proactive approach to risk: fewer complaints, better relationships, less harm.
- Encourages continuous reflection, growth.

Challenges or Considerations

Potential for conflict between personal moral convictions and professional codes or clients' values.

What if "going above" isn't feasible (time, resources, institutional constraints)?

Danger of moral idealism—burnout if the ideals are too far removed from practice.

Philosophical Foundations of Ethics

Ethical Theory	Key Idea	Application in Psychology
Deontology (Kant)	Duty, rules, rights	Confidentiality, informed consent
Utilitarianism (Mill)	Greatest good for greatest number	Risk-benefit analysis in treatment
Virtue Ethics (Aristotle)	Moral character, practical wisdom	Integrity, empathy, honesty in practice

In addition, we have communitarian ethics and prima-facie ethics.

Deontology – Immanuel Kant

- **Deontological Ethics (Duty-Based Ethics)**
- **Definition:**
  Deontology is an ethical theory that judges the morality of an action based on whether it follows a set of rules, duties, or obligations – **not** on its consequences.
- Actions are right or wrong in themselves, independently of consequences.
- Moral duties are universal (e.g., *do not lie, do not kill, keep promises*).
- Emphasis on obligations, duties, rights. For example, respect for autonomy, truthfulness, promise-keeping.

Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths:	Provides clear rules and consistency.	Respects human dignity and rights.	Avoids justifying harm for the "greater good."
Weaknesses:	Can be rigid: sometimes rules conflict.	Ignores consequences—even if strict rule-following leads to worse outcomes.	May be difficult to apply in complex, real-world dilemmas.
	Example:	Lying to protect a friend: • **Deontology:** Lying is always wrong, even if it saves your friend.	

Utilitarianism - Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

- **Utilitarianism / Consequentialism**
- **Definition:**

  Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that judges actions by their **consequences**. The morally right choice is the one that produces the **greatest good for the greatest number** of people.
- Focuses on outcome rather than duties or character.
- Maximising happiness and minimising pain.
- Based on the principle of **utility** – an action is right if it increases overall happiness and wrong if it decreases it.
- Everyone's happiness counts equally.
- Moral calculation involved weighing up costs and benefits.

Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths:

Practical and outcome-focused.

Promotes fairness by considering everyone's interests.

Useful in public policy, law, and medicine (e.g., maximizing health benefits with limited resources).

Weaknesses:

Can justify harmful acts if they lead to a better overall outcome (e.g., sacrificing one to save many).

Difficult to predict or measure all consequences.

May neglect individual rights or justice in favor of majority benefit.

Example:

A runaway train will kill five people unless you divert it onto another track, where it will kill one.

- **Utilitarianism:** Divert the train—saving five is better than saving one.

Virtue Ethics - Aristotle

- **Virtue Ethics**
- Focus on character and moral virtues: what kind of person one should be (e.g., compassionate, honest, courageous).
- Less about what rules say or what results are, more about becoming a good professional.
- Morality involves developing good habits of character which lead to human flourishing – Eudaimonia (thriving).
- Emphasises balance – virtues are a `mean` between extremes. E.g. courage versus recklessness.
- The core virtues are honesty, courage, compassion, fairness, wisdom and integrity.

Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths:	Encourages moral growth and self-development.	Flexible, focusing on context and relationships.	Promotes integrity, not just rule-following or cost-benefit calculations.
Weaknesses:	Doesn't always provide clear guidance for specific dilemmas.	What counts as a "virtue" can vary across cultures.	Hard to apply when virtues conflict (e.g., honesty vs. compassion).
	Example:	A friend asks if you like their new haircut, but you think it looks bad. • **Virtue Ethics:** A virtuous person might show compassion and tact, balancing honesty with kindness.	

Principle-Based / Prima Facie Ethics

- **Definition:**
  Principle-based (or prima facie) ethics is an approach that relies on a set of **core ethical principles** as guides for moral decision-making. These principles are considered binding **unless** they conflict with one another – in which case we weigh and balance them.
- A middle ground: use moral principles (e.g. beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice, respect for autonomy) that are binding unless overridden by stronger principles in particular cases.
- The BPS and APA Ethics Codes have aspirational/general principles and enforceable standards: this model helps interpret them. For example, Autonomy, Beneficence, Nonmaleficence and Justice.

Strengths and weaknesses

- **Strengths:**
- Flexible: allows balancing when principles conflict.
- Widely applied in healthcare, psychology, and bioethics.
- More practical than rigid rule-based systems.
- **Weaknesses:**
- Doesn't always give clear answers about *which* principle should prevail.
- Requires judgment and interpretation, which can vary by person/culture.
- **Example:**
- A patient refuses a life-saving treatment.

  Autonomy: *Respect their choice.*

  Beneficence & Nonmaleficence: *Save them from harm.*

  Decision requires balancing these competing principles.

Communitarian Ethics

Communitarian ethics focus on the role of social relationships and the common good.

They react against extreme individualisation.

In other words, it is about the well-being of the community rather than the individual.

Communitarian approaches to ethics are influential in psychology – for example psychologists working within common objectives, sharing and supporting each other .

Supererogatory Obligations

Actions that go beyond duty: morally admirable but not required (e.g. sacrificing more than one is obliged to).

Helps mark the boundary between what is ethically required vs what is “above and beyond”.

Integrating Personal & Professional Ethics

Personal values (religion, cultural background, moral intuitions) influence how one sees ethical issues.

Professional codes offer structure and shared norms, but they may sometimes conflict with personal ethics or with institutional expectations.

Ethics acculturation model (Handelsman, Gottlieb & Knapp, 2005): describes how psychologists develop understanding of their professional role, responsibilities, and how they internalise professional ethics.

The interplay: self-reflection, supervision, ethical decision-making tools help negotiate clashes.

Issues with personal and professional ethical practice: Acculturation Model (Handelsman et al., 2005). Which type are you?

Professional Ethics	Personal ethics	
	High	Low
High	**Integrated:** Professionally informed, guided by personal compassion- highly effective psychologist	**Assimilated:** Adopted professional standards but lacks compassion, may become rigid and legalistic
Low	**Separated:** Personal compassion not restrained by professional ethics, may become overinvolved (runaway compassion)	**Marginalised:** Low professional and personal standards, risks becoming exploitative

Core ethical principles (based on both BPS and APA principles)

ADAPTED FROM *PRACTICAL ETHICS FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS*:

BENEFICENCE & NON-MALEFICENCE

FIDELITY & RESPONSIBILITY

INTEGRITY

JUSTICE

RESPECT FOR PEOPLE'S RIGHTS AND DIGNITY

EXAMPLE:
CONFIDENTIALITY VS. DUTY TO WARN

Discussion Questions:

Is it ever acceptable to follow only the legal floor in your professional role? Why or why not?

Which ethical theory do you find most compelling in psychological practice, and why?

How can psychologists ensure they are not “just complying” but striving for ethical excellence?

Integrating Ethical Decision-Making Models

- **Koocher & Keith-Spiegel's 8-step model (2008).**
- 1. Determine if the matter truly involves ethics.
- 2. Consult guidelines already available.
- 3. Consider all sources that might influence the decision.
- 4. Consult with a trusted colleague.
- 5. Evaluate the rights, responsibilities, and vulnerabilities of all affected parties.
- 6. Generate alternative decisions.
- 7. Consider the possible consequences of each decision.
- 8. Choose what appears to be the best course of action.

- **Nagy`s Decision Framework (2010).**
- 1. Recognise the ethical dilemma.
- 2. Consider relevant ethical guidelines.
- 3. Analyse from multiple philosophical perspectives.
- 4. Consider personal biases and emotional responses.
- 5. Consult with colleagues and supervisors.
- 6. Enumerate the possible consequences of decisions.
- 7. Make and document a justified decision.

Which, if either, is the best option?

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each approach?

Take home messages:

- Ethics isn't just about avoiding harm; it's about promoting good both for clients/patients and for the profession.
- Familiarise yourself with both the enforceable codes and aspirational principles.
- Know what is required, but also what is ideal.
- Use ethical theories and models to help in ambiguous or conflicting situations.
- Reflect on your own values; seek supervision, peer consultation, feedback. Ethical growth is ongoing.
- Be aware of environmental/institutional pressures that might weaken your ethical standards and develop strategies to preserve integrity.