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## Are Professional Codes of Ethics Relevant for Multicultural Counselling?

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Jean L. Pettifor  
*University of Calgary*

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### ABSTRACT

Pederson's three main criticisms of professional codes of ethics — that they lack a moral philosophical foundation, that their cultural grounding promotes unintentional racism, and that multicultural issues are trivialized — are reviewed. Progressive developments in the codes of ethics of the Canadian Psychological Association and the Canadian Counselling Association in defining moral and ethical principles and in providing an ethical decision-making process are described. New developments within the professions promote increased understanding and sensitivity to cultural diversity while other aspects of society may support unintentional racism. Codes of ethics are relevant in supporting competent multicultural counselling.

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article a pour objet d'étudier les trois critiques principales formulées par Pederson concernant les codes déontologiques professionnels, à savoir qu'ils ne sont pas basés sur des principes philosophiques moraux, que leurs fondements culturels encouragent un racisme involontaire et que les questions multiculturelles sont banalisées. On y décrit les transformations constructives des codes déontologiques de la Société canadienne de psychologie et de la Société canadienne d'orientation et de consultation pour définir les principes éthiques et moraux ainsi que pour élaborer un processus de prise de décision éthique. De nouveaux progrès dans ces professions encouragent une compréhension et une sensibilité croissantes envers la diversité culturelle même si d'autres aspects de la société encouragent un racisme involontaire. Les codes déontologiques contribuent à un counseling multiculturel efficace.

The helping professions, including psychology, have been slow to develop ethical guidelines that specifically address culturally sensitive counselling and psychological services. However, there is considerable counselling literature on defining multicultural competencies for competent cross-cultural practice (Arredondo et al., 1996; Arthur & Januszowski, [in this issue]; Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 1998; Pedersen, 1997a; Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 1995; Sue, 1996; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992; Sue & Sue, 1999). There have been significant calls for professional associations, especially counselling, to include more specific guidelines to address multicultural counselling in their codes of ethics (Casas, Ponterotto, & Gutierrez, 1986; Cayleff, 1986; Ibrahim & Arredondo, 1986; Pedersen, 1989, 1995, 1997a, 1997b; Ponterotto et al., 1995; Sue et al., 1992). When particular populations do not receive, or perceive themselves as not receiving competent and ethical services, the question arises, "Are professional codes of ethics relevant for multicultural counselling?"

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FOR PROFESSIONAL CODES OF ETHICS

Today's codes of ethics have historical antecedents. While the Hippocratic Oath from circa 400 B.C. (Perkin, 1980) is one of the first known professional codes of ethics, the development of codes of ethics for the helping professions in modern times followed World War II, and may have been a response to other major developments. The disclosure of atrocities in the name of science in Nazi Germany led to the articulation of ethical guidelines for research with human subjects. The rapid professionalization of psychology post World War II contributed to formal regulation of practice including the development of codes of ethics (Sinclair, Simon, & Pettifor, 1996). The first North American regulatory legislation in psychology was in Connecticut in 1945.

The need to define standards for the regulation of practice was a strong motivation to make explicit rules and regulations rather than to develop a theoretical foundation for the articulation of ethical and moral principles. For example, the rules regarding obtaining informed consent from clients and research participants was seen as a means to protect these individuals from harm as well as to protect professionals from complaints. Disciplinary and legal bodies welcomed the establishment of rules of conduct because it became easier within a legal context to adjudicate complaints. In focussing on a prescriptive minimalist approach rather than on aspiring to serve the best interests of consumers, it was easy to neglect reflection on the meaning of respect for the dignity, autonomy and value of all human beings. Today codes of ethics often contain both aspirational principles and rules of conduct. Regulatory bodies sometimes adopt separate documents to address codes of conduct on the model of the *Code of Conduct* produced by the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (1991).

The American Psychological Association (APA), established in 1892, is often perceived in the Western World as the leader in scientific and professional psychology. APA adopted its first code of ethics, *Ethical Standards for Psychologists* in 1952 (APA, 1953). APA's *Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human Participants* was adopted in 1973. APA's *Guidelines for Providers of Ethnic, Linguistic, and Culturally Diverse Populations* was adopted in 1991, clearly a delayed response to the call in the counselling literature to recognize the increasing diversity of North American society.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CODES OF ETHICS

Paul Pedersen critiqued *Ethical Principles of Psychologists* (American Psychological Association, 1981), and in 1997 the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (American Psychological Association, 1992), along with the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (American Counseling Association, 1995). Pedersen's major concern is that the philosophical assumptions underlying codes of ethics need to be examined and clarified in order to guide professionals toward intentional ethical decision making in multicultural settings. This is in contrast to the exclusionary stance of imposing one's own familiar

worldview on others. He identifies principles of altruism, responsibility, justice, and caring with a committed focus on practical psychosocial, community, and group issues.

Bersoff (1995) comments on the moral foundation of APA's code of ethics as follows:

Ideally, a code of ethics should serve as a guide to resolving moral problems that confront members of the profession . . . with its primary emphasis on protecting the public . . . Realistically, what a code does is consensually validate the most recent views of a majority of professionals empowered by their colleagues to make decisions about ethical issues. Thus a code of ethics is inevitably anachronistic, conservative, ethnocentric, and the product of political compromise (p.1).

The APA differentiates between General Principles, or value statements, and the ethical standards of behaviour, but does not specifically link them. The American Counseling Association (ACA) does not articulate its underlying philosophical principles and it organizes its ethical standards around various topic areas. The ACA code includes a second section on Standards of Practice that "represent minimal behavioral statements of the Code of Ethics." In contrast, the Canadian Counselling Association (CCA) (1999) lists six fundamental ethical principles: (a) respect for the dignity of persons, (b) not wilfully harming others, (c) integrity in relationships, (d) responsible caring, (e) responsibility to society, and (f) respect for self-determination. However CCA does not explicitly link these fundamental ethical principles to the ethical standards, but organizes the standards around topics of relationships and activities. For example, under all three headings of Professional Responsibility, Counselling Relationships, and Evaluation and Assessment, counsellors will strive to understand and be sensitive to diversity. Although these codes of ethics vary in their ability to articulate their philosophical assumptions, they all contain statements on non-discrimination and recognition of cultural diversity.

The Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) since 1986 has been on the leading edge among professions in defining a philosophical foundation for its code of ethics and in explicitly linking all standards to those ethical principles. The four principles are the following: (a) Respect for the Dignity of Persons, (b) Responsible Caring, (c) Integrity in Relationships, and (d) Responsibility to Society. A value statement describes each of these ethical principles. The standards indicate how each principle may be demonstrated behaviourally. The "social contract," described in the introduction to the code, requires members of the discipline to place the welfare of society and of the members of that society above the welfare of the discipline and its own members. This requirement is expected of all psychologists, including those who are involved in research, direct service, teaching, administration, supervision, consultation, peer review, editorial work, presenting as expert witness, social policy development, or any other role related to the discipline of psychology.

Until recently this code was unique in providing an ethical decision-making or problem-solving process to resolve dilemmas, especially when principles may

be in conflict or the interests and wishes of different parties are at variance. The reference points for decision making are primarily the ethical principles, and how respect and caring can best be demonstrated, rather than only requiring obedience to rules of conduct. The guidelines for an ethical decision-making process that are included in both the CPA and the CCA codes require reflection and a weighing of options on how to serve the best interests of others.

The CPA code is more proactive than many other codes in that extra care must be taken not just to behave right, but to behave in ways that actually benefit the consumers of services. It is more important that the clients receive an optimal level of service than that professionals observe only a minimal standard of practice. This proactive caring approach is demonstrated in a number of ways. There is a strong emphasis on self-knowledge, self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-improvement, and on taking an extra responsibility to protect the rights of persons who are vulnerable or dependent. The code includes the concept of extended responsibility for the ethical behaviour of assistants, students, supervisees and employees. Psychologists are expected to take action to correct or prevent harm that may result from the consequences of their own actions; the misrepresentation, misuse, or abuse of their own work; and those aspects of the profession and of society that violate ethical principles. The Code legitimizes self-nurture to enhance one's capacity to serve others. All of the features of the *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists for Psychologists* provide a strong proactive value-base or philosophical foundation for respecting all people. Each revision of the Code has seen a strengthening of the commitment to respect the cultural values of diverse populations (Sinclair & Pettifor, 1999). The strong emphasis on serving others and on self-awareness may guide ethical reflection and decision making but the Code cannot by itself guarantee competent and ethical behaviour. To the extent that those who are different from the dominant group(s) are vulnerable to neglect or discrimination, these values require psychologists to take extra care to protect their rights and serve their best interests.

In summary, American codes tend to be more legalistic and rule oriented. Canadian codes tend to articulate the ethical principles or moral foundation on which rules and standards are based.

#### CULTURAL BELIEFS AND UNINTENTIONAL RACISM

Pedersen (1995, 1997a) believes that the dominant culture perspective discriminates against persons and groups from different cultural beliefs and that it is racist to demand that others adjust and accommodate to the majority culture. The professional who lacks awareness of self and awareness of diversity may be unintentionally racist (Sue, 1996). The North American emphasis on individual responsibility, achievement and decision making may conflict with cultural values of family, community, interdependence, and collective identity. The emphasis on science and objectivity may deny subjective learning experience. Absolutist concepts of the use of power, definitions of professional identity, training, scope

of practice, concepts of the nature of mental health and illness, and prohibition of dual relationships and barter may all be culturally insensitive and discriminatory. For example, assessing the hearing of voices or communicating with the dead as psychotic manifestations, recommending that an ethnic group is intellectually inferior and therefore incapable of learning computer technology, or counselling youth to establish full independence from their families may be racist.

North American codes of ethics have obviously been developed within the North American culture. The responses of mainstream Canadian psychologists on their values in resolving ethical dilemmas provided the empirical base for developing the code's ethical principles (Sinclair, Poizner, Gilmour-Barrett, & Randall, 1987). Priorizing respect for the dignity of individual persons as higher than responsibility to society is clearly a Euro-American cultural belief, and may not be accepted in cultures that place the individual secondary to family, community, or society. Canadian psychologists are expected to demonstrate respect, caring and integrity in relation to all persons who are affected by their professional decision, and this includes individual, families, groups, and communities. Although North American practice will generally emphasize the autonomy of the individual, professionals are cautioned to respect and not to violate the different values of other cultures. Respect for individuals includes respect for their cultural beliefs, not a demand that clients become independent, autonomous, or alienated from their own cultural identity.

The *Feminist Therapy Ethical Code* (Feminist Therapy Institute, 1987, 2000) is more proactive than other codes of ethics in specifically addressing diversity. In this code the term "multicultural counsellor" could easily substitute for "feminist therapist." The guidelines forcefully address cultural diversities and oppressions, power differentials, overlapping relationships, therapist accountability, and social change. While the guidelines are consistent with the multicultural counselling competencies of Arredondo et al. (1996), they address issues of power more explicitly. The *Feminist Therapy Ethical Code* is meant to complement rather than replace other professional codes of ethics.

There are forces within both the professions and society generally that can be seen as supporting unintentional racism. In the professionalization process, psychology has defined its identity, its training, and its scope of practice on a scientist-practitioner model, and has established licensing requirements that are uncultural, and not always conducive to recognizing diversity or to developing cross-cultural competencies. The belief in scientific empiricism and empirically supported interventions has the potential to exclude the use of culturally appropriate humanistic and spiritual healing experiences. Mental health that is perceived as adjustment to the status quo may deny the need for social activism and social change. The institutionalization of the profession has brought credibility, recognition, and rewards, but has the potential to limit creativity and flexibility in respecting diversity.

There are also forces in society that may work against respect, understanding, and caring for people who are perceived as different. Today the focus on cost-

control may restrict the ability to fund programs that assist immigrants from other countries. The deontological ethical principles of respect for the inherent value of human beings may be eroded by the utilitarian principles of the greatest good for the greatest number and the adequate return for the money spent. Budgetary cutbacks, capped funding, managed care restrictions, rationing of services, and other developments have the potential to unintentionally discriminate against diverse groups. What is unintentional is difficult to address because motives are not always obvious. Codes of ethics support the development of self-awareness and require professionals to practice within their areas of competency. However, self-awareness and competency may be better defined and developed with professional training, continuing education, and supervision.

#### TRIVIALIZATION OF CULTURE

Pedersen (1995, 1997a) believes that codes of ethics generally minimize or trivialize the role of culture in ethical decision making. Ambiguously stated standards tend to protect the status quo. The guidelines do not deal with the fundamental ethical issues of bias in the profession but are designed to protect the professional against the culturally different client. The lack of attention to multicultural issues in counselling and the tolerance for violations of the generalized guidelines that do exist demonstrate how principles are violated without consequences.

The Canadian Psychological Association and the Canadian Counselling Association, as Pedersen recommends, provide an aspirational and moral foundation for professional ethics and ethical decision making. The codes provide ethical principles and standards that are relevant to all areas of professional activity. It would be impossible within a manageable code of ethics to provide specific practice standards for every area of practice. However, if special areas are neglected in practice, misinterpreted, or trivialized, more specific standards could be developed.

I would like to see special practice standards articulated to elaborate on how the ethical principles should be applied to multicultural education and practice. For example, the Canadian Psychological Association adopted *Guidelines for Non-Discriminatory Practice* (Crozier, Harris, Larsen, Pettifor, & Sloane, 1996), in which each of the four ethical principles is described specifically as it applies to non-discriminatory practice. Statements representing ethical practice with diverse populations follow the principles. The next level of specificity would be a document that directly addresses multicultural counselling, education, and research. Ibrahim and Arredondo (1986) proposed ethical standards that would fit this model. Other groups interested in diverse populations, e.g., persons with disabilities, women, elderly, gays and lesbians, and children, may wish to develop practice guidelines that are specific to protecting their concerns.

As for Pedersen's concern that violations of the ethical guidelines that do exist for multicultural counselling are tolerated without consequences, I would suggest that complaints of professional misconduct must be serious, documented,

and legally argued in order to be upheld by disciplinary bodies. Disciplinary actions may stop some serious misdemeanors from continuing, but cannot enforce an optimal level of practice. Guidelines are aspirational while misconduct is a violation of the bottom line of acceptable conduct.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND CALLS FOR ACTION

Professional codes of ethics are relevant for multicultural counselling inasmuch as respect for the dignity of persons must include respect for diversity. Codes have shifted from recommending equal treatment for everyone to placing an extra responsibility on its members to protect the rights of those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged. A code of ethics with a sound philosophical moral base can help professionals to evaluate what is morally right, and better, and what is wrong. The Canadian Psychological Association and the Canadian Counselling Association are each providing a moral framework to guide their professional activities. Both associations have developed a process for making ethical decisions, and both have produced manuals to assist members in interpreting the guidelines and in making decisions (Sinclair & Pettifor, 1992; Schultz, 1994). The ethical decision-making process shifts the focus from a rules orientation to a consideration of values in relationships and the inherent worth of all human beings. It becomes necessary to think through each context in order to find what is right, best, and moral for those involved.

Professional codes of ethics are relevant but they are not enough. The determinants of change and the strategies for change are multi-faceted and never linear. Change occurs without one being conscious of all of the contributing factors. Whether the glass is half full or half empty depends on one's perspective. Within my own memory tremendous changes have occurred toward greater acceptance of diversity and these changes go beyond the lipservice of political correctness. Progress is always uneven.

Education, training, and continuing education in ethics are important in the preparation of professionals. Training in ethics needs to address the interpretation and application of ethical principles to a wide range of practical situations. In order to avoid protecting the status quo and trivializing multicultural issues, educational programs should always address the application of principles and standards to real life situations. This includes understanding how personal beliefs and culture influence one's interactions with others. Even with awareness of differences in values the question remains of how to bridge conflicting worldviews for effective counselling (Arthur & Januszkowski, in this issue). Fortunately the literature on multicultural counselling has increased tremendously in the last 15 years. Several recent authors have addressed training in the ethics of multicultural counselling (Corey et al., 1998; LaFromboise, Foster, & James, 1996; Lee & Kurilla, 1997; Pedersen, 1997b; Sue, Bingham, Porche-Burke, & Vasquez, 1999). Today most universities offer separate course on diversity, but fall short of an integration model that infuses multicultural content and issues into all course and training experiences (Sue et al., 1999).

There are other signs of change within the professions. Community psychologists, feminist counsellors, and multicultural counsellors are recognizing the needs of diverse populations and are shifting the practice emphasis from individual pathology to social and community issues. Increasingly an ethic of responsibility to society is being articulated. The conceptual frameworks and the ethical guidelines for conducting research are also changing in the direction of greater acceptance and inclusion of diversity (Medical Research Council of Canada, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 1998; Sue, 1999).

Governments under the requirements of the European Union, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the Canadian Agreement on Internal Trade are forcing the professions to develop competency-based criteria whereby each jurisdiction is able to accept the credentials of professionals from other jurisdictions. The opportunity is here to question traditional training programs and to review and revise current licensing requirements. The need to justify regulatory requirements on the basis of competency to practice is consistent with both ethical principles and concerns for multicultural practice. Professional standards help to maintain the credibility of the professions and ethically these standards must serve the purposes for which they were intended in serving the public interest.

The American Psychological Association, the largest psychology organization in the world, may be on the verge of promoting revolutionary changes in science, education, and training, and practice based on an ethic of social justice according to a report on the National Multicultural Conference and Summit. "APA has a moral and ethical obligation to take the lead in seeing that multicultural competence becomes a defining feature of the profession and that we produce psychologists with awareness, knowledge, and skills to function in a pluralistic society" (Sue et al., 1999, p. 1068).

Ethically, professionals are required to respect diversity and increase their understanding of individuals, groups, and communities. Sensitivity and understanding can be developed but rarely enforced. A sense of social justice and responsibility to society requires professionals to work in various ways to change political structures and power relationships that present barriers to a better quality of life for people of all cultures and colours.

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### *About the Author*

Jean L. Pettifor, Ph.D., a past-president of both the Canadian Psychological Association and the College of Alberta Psychologists, is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Calgary where she teaches professional ethics. She has served as a practitioner, teacher, and researcher and today is best known for her promotion of value-based ethical decision making.

Address correspondence to Jean L. Pettifor, Ph.D., 2731 Crawford Road N.W., Calgary, Alberta T2L 1C9. e-mail: [pettifo@home.com](mailto:pettifo@home.com)