

Ethics in Assessment

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Every profession has distinct ethical obligations to the public. These obligations include professional competency, integrity, honesty, confidentiality, objectivity, public safety, and fairness, all of which are intended to preserve and safeguard public confidence. Unfortunately, all too often we hear reports in the media of moral dilemmas and unethical behavior by professionals. These reports naturally receive considerable attention by the public, whose confidence in the profession is undermined with each report.

Those who are involved with assessment are unfortunately not immune to unethical practices. Abuses in preparing students to take tests as well as in the use and interpretation of test results have been widely publicized. Misuses of test data in high-stakes decisions, such as scholarship awards, retention/promotion decisions, and accountability decisions, have been reported all too frequently. Even claims made in advertisements about the success rates of test coaching courses have raised questions about truth in advertising. Given these and other occurrences of unethical behavior associated with assessment, the purpose of this digest is to examine the available standards of ethical practice in assessment and the issues associated with implementation of these standards.

Existing Ethical Standards

Concerns about ethical practices in assessment are not new. As early as 1972, the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME), the Association for Measurement and Evaluation in Guidance (AMEG), and the American Association for Counseling and Development (AACD) is now known as the American Counseling Association) developed a position paper on the responsible use of tests that was intended to ensure that tests are given, and examinees are treated, fairly and wisely (AMEG, 1972). Later in the 1970s, AACD developed a statement on the responsibilities of the users of standardized tests, a document that was revised as recently as 1989 (AACD, 1989). Both of these early documents recognized the need to positively influence the practices of those who use tests in ways that promote responsible use. These statements have been followed by the development of ethical standards by a number of other organizations having an interest, or directly involved, in assessment. These standards address assessment practices and related issues for various professionals: psychologists (American Psychological Association, 1992); counselors (American Association for Counseling and Development, 1988; 1989); educational researchers (American Educational Research Association, 1992); teachers (American Federation of Teachers, National Council on Measurement in Education, National Education Association, 1990); measurement specialists (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, National Council on Measurement in Education 1985; Joint Committee on Testing Practices, 1988); educational evaluators (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1988); evaluators of educational programs (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994); college admission counselors (National Association of College Admission Counselors, 1988); and others. The National Council on Measurement in Education is considering the adoption of a Code of Professional Responsibilities in Educational Measurement in the fall 1994. All of these codes vary widely in their scope:

some include technical standards that the professionals should meet in their practice, but all of them include some statements about ethical responsibilities that are intended to guide the behavior of professionals as they use assessments in their practice. The codes that focus exclusively on ethics that have been adopted by professions are intended to clarify the expectations of professional conduct in various situations encountered in practice and to affirm that the profession intends and expects its members to recognize the ethical dimensions of their practice. The fact that all of these standards exist is evidence that these organizations are seriously concerned and committed to promoting high *technical* standards for assessment instruments and high *ethical* standards for individual behavior as they work with assessments.

In recent years, there have been increasing discussions in the professions about how to make sure that proper ethical conduct is not only advocated as an ideal but also practiced. Yet, even once a code of ethics has been adopted, each organization has had to struggle with issues of both enforcement and education.

To Enforce or Not To Enforce?

Whether a code of ethics will be enforced and how it will be enforced has been a dilemma for most organizations. Even with the codes cited earlier, there is a great deal of variability in the approaches taken by the adopting organizations to enforce the codes. There appears to be at least four general approaches to enforcement.

First, some organizations have no formal enforcement of their codes; the standards are designed to increase the awareness of their members as to what constitutes ethical practice and to serve as an affirmation of exemplary conduct. Organizations like AERA and NCME have no formal enforcement mechanism, typically have no sanctions attached to membership in the organization, and membership is not tied to a credential in any way.

Second, some organizations enforce their codes of ethics at the local level. The national organizations delegate enforcement to affiliated state societies that have adopted the national code in whole or in part as their state society's code of ethics. This type of enforcement is used, for example, by the legal profession in that the American Bar Association's ethical codes serve as model legislation for state bars to use in creating and enforcing their own codes.

Third, some organizations enforce their codes at the national level. The ways in which enforcement is handled at the national level varies significantly. Organizations like the American Counseling Association and the American Psychological Association have established special divisions or committees as enforcement arms. Other organizations have established trial boards that adjudicate disciplinary charges and impose discipline; in other organizations, local chapters refer cases to the national ethics committee for adjudication and possible discipline.

The fourth model involves enforcement at both the national and local level. For instance, the American Medical Association might take disciplinary action against a member when the state medical association to which the physician belongs requests or consents to such action. At this

time, however, there does not appear to be an assessment-related organization that uses this type of enforcement.

The approach taken by a professional organization to enforce its code of ethics is usually directly related to the purpose of the code and the requirements for practice. If membership in the organization is voluntary, it is difficult to establish a formal means of discipline and enforcement. Certainly, membership in such an organization could be revoked, but it would not prevent the member from practicing. By contrast, when membership in the professional organization is tied to a credential or a designation of some type, then establishing a formal means of discipline and enforcement (such as formal/informal reprimands, revocation of designation, or expulsion from the profession) is easier to establish and implement.

To Educate

Nearly all organizations that have adopted a code of ethical assessment practices engage in educational activities that are intended to promote a greater understanding of what constitutes ethical assessment practice. Educational activities are particularly important since a code of ethics is not a set of givens, but rather a frame of reference for the evaluation of the appropriateness of behavior. Case studies can serve as particularly effective illustrations of how ethical issues may be analyzed and how judgment may be used to evaluate behavior. Other effective educational approaches include open forums for discussions of ethical issues, disseminating realistic problems that involve judgments about appropriateness of behavior, and group learning activities that pose ethical dilemmas that are analyzed and evaluated by groups of professionals. Regardless of the approach taken, dissemination of the codes supported by real-life examples of ethical dilemmas are effective ways of promoting an understanding of ethical assessment practice.

Summary

Promoting ethical practices in assessment is considered to be a very important goal of the organizations involved in assessment. Codes are intended to increase the awareness of ethical practice among their memberships and to promote ethical uses of assessment in various contexts: teaching, counseling, evaluation, research, among others.

The level of enforcement that each organization takes is directly tied to the character of membership in the organization, whether it is voluntary or tied to a credential or designation. Clearly, the more stringent the requirements are for membership in an organization, the easier it is for that organization to establish a more formal means of discipline and enforcement.

Educating others to understand and to engage in ethical practices is a critical goal. Illustrations of good and bad practice within realistic assessment contexts and discussions of ethical dilemmas are excellent ways of promoting ethically responsible practice in assessment.

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ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced and disseminated. This publication was funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Contract No. RR93002004. Opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions of the U.S. Department of Education, OERI, or ERIC/CASS.