# Psychology and the Moral Imperative

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## Abstract

In this paper, the authors examine the moral obligations of psychology. An inquiry into the main priorities of academic and professional psychology reveals that contributions to human welfare, its preeminent moral obligation, comes a distant third after (a) guild issues and professional self-interest, and (b) the pursuit of knowledge. In an effort to reassign moral philosophy the place of prominence it deserves, and broaden the ethical discourse of psychology, the authors introduce the term "moral imperative." The promotion of the moral imperative entails the exploration of three fundamental questions, and the advancement of four human agency values. The questions are as follows: (a) To what extent does the present social order promote human welfare for the population at large?, (b) To what extent does psychology support or challenge the present social order?, and (c) What contributions can psychology make to the advent of the "good" society. The human agency values advanced in the proposed framework are: (a) self-determination, (b) distributive justice, (c) collaborative and democratic participation, and (d) relationality.

## PSYCHOLOGY AND THE MORAL IMPERATIVE

As privileged citizens, we, the authors, face a moral dilemma. We live with the tension of trying to promote a better society and being accomplices, however critical, of a system that is oppressive of many of its members. We cannot escape our social location but must try to utilize the space afforded us to advance marginalized issues of social importance. We address here the profound neglect of social ethics in psychology. Unlike immoral acts committed against clients or students, this kind of ethical oversight does not result in psychologists appearing in court or in front of an ethical board. Were psychology summoned to explain its indifference to the plight of society's oppressed members, we think the trial would not make us proud. Due to space considerations, we choose to focus on the vision of a social ethics for psychology. Many authors have already

detailed psychology's *social amnesia* (Jacoby, 1975; Sampson, 1993; Sarason, 1981; Prilleltensky, in press; Unger & Crawford, 1992; Ussher & Nicolson, 1992). We prefer to outline and illustrate a framework that may lead to constructive action, a task which has not received as much attention in the literature.

The term moral imperative refers to the urgent need to advance human and social welfare according to ethical guidelines derived from moral philosophy. Hitherto, psychologists have adopted a rather narrow interpretation of ethics which gives primacy to the welfare of the individual at the expense of actions aimed at improving the well-being of the community as a whole. The moral imperative calls for an expanded definition of ethics which restores the importance of contributing, proactively, to the advancement of the "good" society.

This approach differs from the predominant view of ethics in psychological circles in four respects. First, it emphasizes the social as opposed to the individual; second, it promotes proactive as opposed to reactive interventions; third, it calls for a self-reflective stance with respect to the social consequences of psychological theories and practices; and fourth, it is primarily based on principles of social ethics, in contrast to the present one which is largely based on the culture of professionalism.

With regards to the first dimension, individual vs. social, North American psychology has traditionally endorsed a rather narrow interpretation of ethics which gives primacy to the welfare of the individual client, student, or research-participant, at the expense of actions intended to foster the well-being of the entire community. Although in differing degrees, this is a pervasive bias in the code of ethics of the major bodies governing psychologists in North America (Prilleltensky, 1990, 1991). The *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists* (Canadian Psychological Association, 1991) does propose the principle of "Responsibility to Society" but, unfortunately, the code itself indicates that this principle is to be regarded as the least important in value.

Concerning the second dimension, reactive vs. proactive, the codes of ethics and ethics committees have traditionally functioned as watchdogs to ensure that psychologists are accountable to their peers, clients, students, or research-participants. Most discussions of ethics in the psychological literature deal with the in/appropriate response of practitioners to conflicting situations (e.g., Pope & Vetter, 1992). After an extensive literature search, we have concluded that little energy is devoted to the *prevention* of ethical misconduct in psychology and the helping professions in general.

The third distinguishing feature has to do with a conscious effort to evaluate the societal repercussions of psychological praxis. Although critical analyses of the sociopolitical implications of theories and practices abound, these are not viewed as falling within the realm of ethics. To our knowledge, the code of ethics of the Feminist Therapy Institute (1990) is

the only professional code that explicitly addresses oppression, cultural diversity, power differentials, and social change as prominent and legitimate ethical issues.

Concerning the last distinguishing dimension, we believe that the prevalent ethical discourse in the discipline is largely dictated by professional practice priorities and not necessarily by principles of moral philosophy (Kultgen, 1988; Lerman & Porter, 1990; Serrano-García; 1993). This tendency is reflected in numerous publications dealing with ethics in psychology (Ethics Committee of the American Psychological Association, 1988; Pope & Vetter, 1992; see also American Psychological Association, 1992). As a result, a truncated conception of ethics that favors narrow professional interests is preserved in psychology.

A unidimensional view of ethics, guided exclusively by the predominant approach is susceptible to the following risks: (a) insensitivity to social issues, (b) lack of understanding of psychology's collective impact on society, (c) inability to anticipate ethical concerns at the individual and social levels, and (d) preoccupation with the welfare of the profession ahead of the welfare of the public. The essence of the moral imperative is to promote an ethical discourse which transcends the current approach and is informed also by the heretofore neglected elements offered in the alternative framework.

## Priorities in Psychology

An examination of the main priorities of academic and professional psychology reveals that the moral imperative comes a distant third after guild issues and professional self-interest, and the pursuit of knowledge. Founding psychologists doggedly pursued scientific and professional legitimacy from the established sciences and from the bearers of power in society (Camfield, 1973; Danziger, 1979; Napoli, 1981). Early psychologists endeavoured to convince business and government of the practical benefits to accrue from psychological applications (Danziger, 1979). Thus, the professional identity of psychology became legitimate because subsequent generations of psychologists conformed with the administrative interests of business and government (Leahey, 1992). Currently, psychology enjoys considerable prestige as a science and profession, virtually supplanting traditional religion in the popular mind. Moreover, guild issues and public advocacy for its self-interest continue to occupy a great deal of organized psychology's energies.

The second priority has been psychologists' pursuit of knowledge itself, separated from social contexts, human interests, and endemic moral concerns (Bevan, 1991). Psychologists' ideology of positivism segregates both the content and the process of research from moral considerations. In spite of pressing social issues, like the Depression (Napoli, 1981; Reiff, 1970), and profound problems associated with the experimental method (Campbell, 1984; Danziger, 1990; Gergen, 1982; Manicas & Secord, 1983;

Sarason, 1978), psychologists have ploddingly accumulated a plethora of statistically significant but trivial findings focused on narrow interests (Bevan, 1991; Dunnette, 1966). Furthermore, investigators' entrepreneurial ambition for recognition and financial reward has led to a quasi-industrial model of science, that is, mass production of contradictory micro studies (Wachtel, 1980). A key casualty of psychologists' pursuit of problematic knowledge ahead of the promotion of human welfare is the research relationship between investigators and research participants. Researchers traditionally have relegated citizens to only one role—data source—and arrogated to themselves all other research functions and benefits associated with an investigation (Danziger, 1990; Walsh-Bowers, 1992). Relatedly, the APA report-writing style, by in effect proscribing relationships and contexts from journal reports, serves to legitimize depersonalizing and exploitive relating (Walsh, 1987, 1989; Walsh-Bowers, 1992).

When psychologists have promoted human welfare, for the most part their attempts have been misguided. Four founding fathers, Hall, McDougall, Muensterberg, and Watson, independently declared that scientific psychology was the foundation for shaping individuals' adjustment to social, economic, and political conditions of an industrial society (Morawski, 1982). Central to these visions was cultural relativism for which adaptation of the individual is the key notion. This is a moral philosophy of self-contained "rugged individualism" which affirms personal not social responsibility and celebrates hedonistic, competitive striving for personal gain (Fromm, 1955; Sampson, 1993; Sarason, 1981). Another moral inconsistency is found in the historical relationship of psychologists to the military: in peacetime psychologists claim their work is objective science, but during wars they beaver away for victory (Morawski & Goldstein, 1985; Napoli, 1981; Reiff, 1970).

In our view, what is sorely required in psychology is an alternative set of moral principles rooted in social responsibility. Socially responsible psychologists are those who denounce by means of systematic critical inquiry the social structures and dynamics that oppress people and announce those conditions that are emancipatory (Freire, 1970; Habermas, 1971). Both denunciation and annunciation are pivotal in our approach to a moral imperative for psychology. We are advocating a shift from a Baconian position of knowledge is power to a democratized position of knowledge is virtuous citizenship (Taylor , 1991). Thus, the psychologist's role changes to active participation in her or his *polis* (Bevan, 1991), and shifts from the role of expert "giving psychology away" to the role of co-constructing knowledge and its applications with other citizens (Sampson, 1991).

## A Framework for Social Ethics in Psychology

In order to advance our alternative approach to ethics, we suggest the

following conceptual framework, tentatively called *social ethics*. We argue that two complementary kinds of considerations should inform our analysis. The first set of issues entails *structural* concerns with the way society is organized, the role psychology plays in society, and the ability of both, society and psychology, to promote human welfare for the population at large. The second set of considerations is related to *human* values, that is, primary values that inform the behavior of psychologists as moral agents.

## Structural considerations

An integral element of social ethics is questioning the ability of current social arrangements to promote welfare for the population at large (Addams, 1902; Chambers, 1992; Smith, 1991). In our particular case, we need to explore the social role of psychology in advancing human welfare. Three sequential tasks deserve serious deliberation:

1.   The first one is to evaluate the ability of the present social order to foster human welfare. Scrutiny of the society of which we are a constituent part is the first step psychology must take in reflecting on its moral duties toward the community at large. This analytical task begins with a portrayal, however tentative, of the ideal "good society" in which desirable social properties would be available for all members of the community. In essence, this project entails the definition of human welfare and the good society. Although space does not allow us a full discussion of the issues, we are aware of the complexity of the task and the variety of propositions advanced to define human welfare (Aristotle, 1978; Blanshard, 1961; Maslow, 1970; Norman, 1983) and the good society (Facione, Scherer, & Attig, 1978; D. Miller, 1978; Olson, 1978; Sidgwick, 1922; Singer, 1993). The intrinsic merit and proportional value of the various qualities proposed have been elaborated elsewhere (Prilleltensky, in press, chapter 13). It is only after we know what we mean by the good life and the good society that a rational critique of the present social order can be pursued.

2.   The second task is to analyze psychology's position vis-á-vis the social order. Does psychology support or challenge the societal status quo? Is the status quo congruent with our vision of the good society or is it anathema to it? How does psychology promote existing power relations? (Kitzinger, 1991; Prilleltensky, in press). This structural consideration needs to be applied to all branches of psychology. Psychology does not, and can not stand outside the political realm (Howitt, 1991; Parker, 1991). There is no field of psychology immune to the potential utilization of its research results or applications for the strengthening or weakening of the social order.

3.   The third task entails the identification of steps to be taken by psychology to facilitate bridging the gap between the current and the "good" society. If indeed a gap is recognized between the present and the good

society, then a profession devoted to understanding behavior and alleviating human problems must have something to contribute to the transformation of society.

## Human values

The philosophy of social ethics requires the formulation of values to be upheld in our professional endeavors (Kultgen, 1988; Lebacqz, 1985; Reeck, 1982). In our opinion, four fundamental values are the pillars of social ethical behavior. These are self-determination, distributive justice, collaborative and democratic participation, and relationality. We offer below a brief definition and explanation of why we endorse these values.

Following Olson's (1978) analysis of freedom, self-determination may be thought of as "the individual's ability to pursue chosen goals without excessive frustration" (p. 45). This concept should not be interpreted as a new fashion of individualism, such as the current obsession with the self inherent in modern "health" ethics (Kovel, 1991). Our interpretation of self-determination calls for the assertion of one's fundamental rights, not for the enhancement of self-preoccupation. The needs and rights of individuals promoted and protected by self-determination should be complemented with values designed to preserve the needs and rights of fellow community members. This ensures a balance between personal fulfilment and communal well-being.

Distributive justice is the value invoked to guide the fair and equitable allocation of burdens and resources in society (Facione, Scherer, & Attig, 1978; Miller, 1978; Olson, 1978). In Sidgwick's words, this value puts forth "principles from which we may work out an ideally just distribution of rights and privileges, burdens and pains" (1922, p. 274). This principle is rarely, if ever, addressed in professional codes of conduct. The very idea of sharing resources and power with clients, students, and research participants threatens the position of privilege enjoyed by professionals.

The intrinsic beneficial qualities of self-determination and distributive justice are brought forth by the collaborative and democratic process. A commitment to treating persons fairly, equitably, and with respect demands that a collaborative approach be used. The test of democracy and collaboration is when all the stakeholders of a group or community are afforded a meaningful opportunity to voice their concerns, and have consequential input into decisions affecting their lives. The notion of "ideal speech situation," advanced by Habermas (1990), is helpful in delineating some parameters for significant participation of citizens in issues concerning them. A *sine qua non* prerequisite of the ideal speech situation is that people be given a chance to express their opinions without physical or psychological coercion. As psychologists, we are in a unique position to deconstruct the many interpersonal and social "mind games" intended to invalidate people's voices.

Self-determination, distributive justice, and the collaborative-demo-

cratic process presuppose the principle of relationality—persons in community. That is, these human values are expressed within an inherently relational process of critical reflection and mutual understanding, which mobilizes action and capacities for change (Surrey, 1991). Paolo Freire (1970) has called this socio-political process "conscientization." Consequently, the four values of social ethics are inter-related. For example, activities of self-determination and distributive justice require an ethic of care flowing from human interdependence, for genuine justice derives its energy from compassion (Kovel, 1991), and compassionate, democratic relationships are the basis of ethical citizenship (Taylor, 1991).

### The Practice of Social Ethics in Psychology

Probably the most formidable challenge of our proposal is how to generate an ethos of practice congruent with the philosophy of social ethics. Specifically, how do we incorporate ethical, structural considerations and human values into workaday professional activities? Efforts are underway to promote the social ethics of psychology in *theory, research, teaching and practice.* Paradigms supporting the social ethics philosophy are slowly emerging (Prilleltensky, 1990, 1991, in press; Sampson, 1991; Seiber & Stanley, 1988; Tyler, Pargament, & Gatz, 1983; Watts, 1992). With regards to the development of *theory*, we envision a new kind of conceptualizing that differs from the prevalent one in three respects: purpose, process, and content. The main *purpose* of theory would be to develop concepts that meet the short or long term needs of those in positions of disadvantage. This is not to eliminate basic research, the benefits of which are sometimes very slow in coming. Rather, to reorient theory to meet public needs and not the curiosity and interests of researchers and theorists detached from social concerns. The *process* of generating theory would incorporate democratic input from the citizens theory is supposed to serve. The objective of this step is not to have theories that represent the ideas of everyone, for in this case rationality could not be assured; but rather to ensure that the social needs of those whose the theory wishes to serve are taken into account.

The *content* of theory would change along the following lines. First, the study of social values and structural considerations would be given priority. Psychological theory can help discern what are the necessary conditions for the values of social ethics to emerge. The limitations of their particular approach notwithstanding, several psychoanalysts have tried to identify the human capacities for enacting some of these values (Hartman, 1960; Wallwork, 1991). Similarly, some feminist authors have speculated on the psychosocial ecology most conducive to the principle of relationality (Zanardi, 1990). Second, the content of theory would change from the study and conceptualizing of *what is* or *what appears to be*, to *what can be*. Considerable efforts have been invested in interpreting why people behave the way they do under current social arrangements. A radical departure

from this tradition would be to devise theories that would inform education and socialization according to the precepts of self-determination, distributive justice, cooperation, and relationality. The third change in theorizing would involve greater efforts at integrating human values with social issues. Social ethics theories would have to balance personal well being with that of others', bearing in mind that they sometimes conflict. Instead of an unabashed search for the enhancement of individual satisfaction, theories would have to struggle to accommodate personal fulfilment with harmonious interdependence and distributive justice.

*Research* practice in mainstream North American psychology has remained virtually unchanged since Watson's era (Danziger, 1990). That is, the standard mode consists of researchers exercising unidirectional power over all phases of an investigation (Walsh-Bowers, 1992). In contrast, practicing self-determination, distributive-justice, democratic participation, and relationality redirects research to emancipatory aims in both content and process. Such a reorientation is congruent with a revised (and feminist) philosophy of science for psychology (Manicas & Secord, 1983), as many have noted (Campbell, 1984; Gergen, 1982; McHugh, Koeske, & Frieze, 1986; Sullivan, 1984). Accordingly, the content of investigations would shift to uncovering and elucidating power relations (Kitzinger, 1991) and would lead to the identification of possible remedial course of action. Equally as important, the process of research would entail citizen participation throughout, so that the social knowledge which investigators and citizens co-create can be genuinely applicable (McHugh et al., 1986; Sampson, 1991; Walsh, 1987, 1989; Walsh-Bowers, 1992). Correspondingly, report-writing for scholarly journals, which is fundamentally a rhetorical activity (Bevan, 1991), would become humanized, personalized, and contextualized to exemplify the integration of word and deed (Walsh, 1987, 1989; Walsh-Bowers, 1992).

The moral imperative as we envision it is particularly well-suited for informing the theory and practice of *teaching* and learning. Emanating from the principle of conscientization, and concretized in the problem-posing dialogue, the goal of teaching and learning becomes critical thinking in the social ethical sense of denunciation and annunciation (Freire, 1970). That is, teachers and students, who provide a mutual learning environment (Tyler et al., 1983), attempt to raise awareness of the social historical context enveloping the issues in citizens' lives and to promote practicable and effective action. In large measure, the critical learning environment is concerned with counteracting the powerful undertow in contemporary society represented by mass thinking, conformity, and internalization of myths about person-blame and natural-causes explanations for oppression (Prilleltensky, 1990). The heart of social ethical learning is the democratic relationship between teachers and learners whereby each party is a learning resource for the other (Tyler et al., 1983). It is in this adult-to-adult climate, then, that such specific prac-

tices as student choice, meaningful teacher evaluation, and emancipation from textbook worldviews can flourish.

As far as the *practice* of social ethics is concerned, we can learn a great deal from *liberation psychology*, developed by Latin-American psychologists (Martín Baró, 1986; Montero, 1992). *Liberation psychology* claims that the discipline needs to explicitly promote the interests of those who suffer, and not of those who benefit from the status quo. Hence, the principle of distributive justice and the second and third structural considerations serve to guide practice in the social arena. In action, this may mean community organizing for better housing or better working conditions, political education to eradicate the toxic and fatalistic messages of self-blame imposed on the lower classes by the media, and the like. The opportunities for action are countless. Studying from our colleagues of the South is an honorable beginning (e.g. Montero, 1991a, 1991b; Santiago, Serrano García, & Perfecto, 1983).

But these explorations, thus far, remain peripheral to the central and ethical concerns of the discipline. The key question we have to ask ourselves is why? There are many sources of resistance in psychology—conscious and unconscious—to the practice of social ethics. First, there is the reality of nearly ten decades of psychological theory, research, and intervention that support the status quo (Prilleltensky, in press). Kurt Lewin's action research, for example, has virtually disappeared (Sanford, 1970); social action components rarely appear in feminist and community psychology research reports, two sub-disciplines committed, in theory, to social change (Walsh, 1987, 1989); and mainstream applied psychology areas, including social, educational, clinical, and industrial-organizational, typically are preoccupied with person-centered issues (Walsh-Bowers, 1992).

A second source of resistance rests in the epistemological, ethical, and professional foundations of the discipline. An objectivist stance can not serve as a basis for social critique nor for social change. Such a posture is not only historically false in North American psychology (Morawski & Goldstein, 1985), it also alienates the public (Zuniga, 1975). On the other hand, attempts to create a "psychology of participation," in Gordon Allport's (1945) phrase, or to "give psychology away," in George Miller's (1969) phrase, integrate values with science for the purpose of managing social change in a top-down fashion (Vallance, 1972), thereby creating a mere veneer or patina of democracy. If we insist on playing the role of parentalistic expert, we will obstruct democratization, sow the seeds of iatrogenic effects, and render the moral imperative sterile.

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