

# APA Amends Ethics Code to Address Potential Conflicts Among Professional Ethics, Legal Authority and Organizational Demands

*Adds Language Reiterating that ‘Under No Circumstances’ May Standards Be Used to Justify Violating Human Rights*

WASHINGTON – The American Psychological Association has amended its Code of Ethics to make clear that its standards can never be interpreted to justify or defend violating human rights.

The action, which came during the winter meeting of APA’s governing Council of Representatives, amended the Codes Introduction and Applicability section, as well as Ethical Standards 1.02 and 1.03, to resolve any potential ambiguity in the original language. These changes become effective June 1, 2010.

“APA’s longstanding policy is that psychologists may never violate human rights,” said APA President Carol D. Goodheart, EdD, Saturday in announcing the changes. “These standards now unquestionably conform to that policy.”

The standards, from APA’s “Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct” (2002), address situations where psychologists’ ethical responsibilities conflict with law, regulations, other governing legal authority, or organizational demands. Previously, it appeared that if psychologists could not resolve such conflicts, they could adhere to the law or demands of an organization without further consideration. That language has been deleted and this new sentence added: “*Under no circumstances may this standard be used to justify or defend violating human rights.*”

The meaning of these two standards (1.02 and 1.03) was called into question during the last Bush administration when the Justice Department issued legal rulings authorizing so-called enhanced interrogation techniques.

“These amendments to the Ethics Code provide clear guidance to psychologists regarding their ethical obligations when conflicts arise between psychology ethics and the law or ethics and organizational demands,” said APA Ethics Director Stephen H. Behnke, PhD. “This action by the Council of Representatives makes all psychologists’ ethical responsibilities abundantly clear.”

Following are the two ethical standards and the changes adopted. Language that is underscored was newly adopted.

## **1.02, Conflicts Between Ethics and Law, Regulations, or Other Governing Legal Authority**

If psychologists’ ethical responsibilities conflict with law, regulations, or other governing legal authority, psychologists clarify the nature of the conflict, make known their commitment to the Ethics Code and take reasonable steps to resolve the conflict consistent with the General Principles and Ethical Standards of the Ethics Code. Under no circumstances may this standard be used to justify or defend violating human rights.

## **1.03, Conflicts Between Ethics and Organizational Demands**

If the demands of an organization with which psychologists are affiliated or for whom they are working are in conflict with this Ethics Code, psychologists clarify the nature of the conflict, make known their commitment to the Ethics Code, and take reasonable steps to resolve the conflict consistent with the General Principles and Ethical Standards of the Ethics Code. Under no circumstances may this standard be used to justify or defend violating human rights.

*The American Psychological Association, in Washington, D.C., is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States and is the world's largest association of psychologists. APA's membership includes more than 152,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants and students. Through its divisions in 54 subfields of psychology and affiliations with 60 state, territorial and Canadian provincial associations, APA works to advance psychology as a science, as a profession and as a means of promoting health, education and human welfare.*