

### Changing the Ethics Code Outside the Standard Revision Process

At its Spring 2008 meeting, the Ethics Committee asked the Ethics Office to identify resources that address when it would be appropriate to change the Ethics Code outside the standard code revision process. The Ethics Office was able to identify two relevant texts, both published in the *American Psychologist*.

The “Report of the Ethics Committee, 1994” (American Psychological Association [APA], Ethics Committee, 1995) addressed various concerns about the 1992 Ethics Code and concluded that immediate revision was not needed. The report stated that

concerns . . . could be adequately addressed through statements by the Ethics Committee . . . and that remaining concerns were covered by existing standards in the current Ethics Code or did not pose sufficient risk to the public or burden to psychologists to warrant immediate action. (p. 706)

The “Report of the Ethics Committee, 1996” (APA, Ethics Committee, 1997) examined the process used to consider whether evolving conditions might subsequently result in a need for immediate revision of the 1992 Ethics Code.

An interim revision will be undertaken if the Ethics Committee, Board of Directors, or Council of Representatives determines 1) that there is an urgent concern about the Ethics Code that should not be delayed until the major revision and 2) that there should be an interim revision. (p. 898)

These texts indicate several different aspects to determining whether a change to the Ethics Code outside the standard revision process is appropriate. The initial step is to determine whether the concern is already addressed in existing ethical standards. To the extent there is ambiguity regarding whether a concern is adequately addressed in an existing standard, a statement by the Ethics Committee may be sufficient to resolve the ambiguity.

To determine whether an actual change to the Ethics Code outside the standard code revision process is appropriate, the texts offer three criteria:

- an “urgent” concern,
- sufficient risk to the public to warrant immediate action,
- sufficient burden to psychologists to warrant immediate action.

Thus, these 1995 and 1997 texts from the *American Psychologist* offer both a process and substantive criteria in determining whether it is appropriate to change the Ethics Code outside the standard revision process.

### References

- American Psychological Association, Ethics Committee. (1995). Report of the Ethics Committee, 1994. *American Psychologist*, 50, 706-713.
- American Psychological Association, Ethics Committee. (1997). Report of the Ethics Committee, 1996. *American Psychologist*, 52, 897-905.