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978-1-107-03973-5 - Ethical Challenges in the Behavioral and Brain Sciences: Case Studies and Commentaries

Edited by Robert J. Sternberg and Susan T. Fiske

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## Ethical Challenges in the Behavioral and Brain Sciences

In recent years, a growing number of scientific careers have been brought down by scientists' failure to satisfactorily confront ethical challenges. Scientists need to learn early on what constitutes acceptable ethical behavior in their professions. *Ethical Challenges in the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* encourages readers to engage in discussions of the diverse ethical challenges encountered by behavioral and brain scientists. The goal is to allow scientists to reflect on ethical issues before potentially confronting them. Each chapter is authored by a prominent scientist in the field, who describes a dilemma, how it was resolved, and what the scientist would do differently if confronted with the situation again.

Featuring commentary throughout and a culmination of opinions and experiences shared by leaders in the field, this book has as its goal not to provide "correct" answers to real-world ethical challenges; instead, authors pose the challenges, discuss their experiences and viewpoints on them, and speculate on alternative reactions to the issues. The firsthand insights shared throughout the book will provide an important basis for reflection among students and professionals on how to resolve the kinds of ethical challenges they may face in their own careers.

Robert J. Sternberg is past president of the Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences. He has been a professor at Yale University, Tufts University, Oklahoma State University, and the University of Wyoming and is currently a professor at Cornell University. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Academy of Education and a former president of the American Psychological Association.

Susan T. Fiske is president of the Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences. She has been a professor at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Massachusetts Amherst and is currently a professor at Princeton University. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Academy of Sciences and a former president of the Association for Psychological Science.

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# Ethical Challenges in the Behavioral and Brain Sciences

*Case Studies and Commentaries*

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*Edited by*

Robert J. Sternberg

*Cornell University*

Susan T. Fiske

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## Preface

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When we were in graduate school, no one paid a whole lot of attention to ethics – neither in teaching nor in research. There were no courses on ethics in our graduate curricula and no serious informal instruction either. Human-subjects committees were starting to be formed but were viewed as nothing more than unpleasant hurdles to pass through in order to get one's research done. Many behavioral and brain scientists today still view such committees as little more than annoyances. Yet today, ethics looms large for all behavioral and brain scientists. Here's why.

A professor of psychology at one of the top universities in the United States, someone with a previously impeccable reputation, resigned his position following a protracted and painful scandal in which serious questions arose concerning the correct interpretation of his data. Basically, he was accused of reading into the data what he wanted to see in them, regardless of what they said. What is especially puzzling is that almost any psychologist would have been thrilled to have his reputation, or even anything close to it. Why mess with the data?

A professor of social psychology in Europe had become widely famous for his ingenious experiments and his compelling results. He was not only a star in academia but a media darling as well. Today he too is out of a job because it turned out that he not only faked his data but also even faked experiments – claiming to have run experiments that were never executed.

Most ethical lapses are not of the magnitude of these, but less serious ethical lapses are much more common, and start early. Dora Clarke-Pine, an associate professor of psychology at La Sierra University in Riverside, California, conducted a study of psychology PhD dissertations obtained from a national sample of graduate students at both religious and non-religious universities. She found at least one example of plagiarism in four out of five dissertations.

Graduate students are trained in many and diverse aspects of professional conduct. But even today, one area in which training is sparse, and

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sometimes nonexistent, is professional ethics. This lack of ethical training becomes challenging in an era in which electronic communications make it extremely easy to plagiarize and to cheat in other ways, such as claiming originality for ideas picked up via the Internet from all over the world. Whereas a bad set of results in an empirical paper can spoil the chances of acceptance by a prestigious journal, an ethical lapse in the production of a paper can spoil a career.

The purpose of this book is to educate students and professionals about dealing with ethical challenges in the brain and behavioral sciences through case studies and commentaries. The importance of the case studies cannot be overemphasized. Many individuals receive ethical training of some sort from an early age: from their parents, through religious study, or through specific courses on ethics. The problem, well known in cognitive psychology, is the difficulty of getting transfer. What people learn in an abstract, encapsulated way often is not translated to their everyday behavior. In a world in which even religious leaders make the news for their severe lapses in ethical behavior, it is difficult to find role models and sources of instruction that help guide students and professionals down an ethical path.

Regrettably, there is more pressure than ever before on behavioral and brain scientists to produce exciting papers with compelling results. This pressure comes in several forms. First, the field is greatly expanded in terms of sheer numbers of professionals, meaning greater competition. Second, competition for obtaining grants – for which empirical publications are necessary – is stiffer than ever, with many agencies funding fewer than 10% of submissions. Third, competition for jobs is at record levels. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 23, 2012) reported that aging professors “create a faculty bottleneck” (p. 1). In particular, at some universities, according to the *Chronicle*, 1 in 3 academics are now 60 or older, and the number of professors aged 65 and older has more than doubled between 2000 and 2011 (p. 1). These figures, combined with decreased state support for public institutions, have drastically reduced the number of openings for new faculty members, especially in the junior ranks. Fourth, many of us who teach have found that students just do not have the same ethical standards as they once did. For example, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 12, 2012) has reported that cheating is rampant at British universities, and that more than 45,000 students have been found guilty of academic misconduct at 80 universities over the past 3 years (<http://chronicle.com/blogs/global/cheating-is-rife-at-british-universities/32438>). Experience in the United States is comparable. Fifth, it is just easier to cheat than ever before. Plagiarism does not even require writing out the text that one is copying without attribution.



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One can simply move a block of text from someone else's document to one's own with the click of a mouse. Increasing means of deterrence, such as Turnitin, does not seem to do much to discourage those determined to plagiarize from external sources.

Our sponsoring organization, the Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences, has created through this book a compendium of case studies and commentaries regarding ethical challenges facing scientists in the behavioral and brain sciences.

The editorial board for this book consisted of Max Bazerman, Harvard University; Jenny Crocker, Ohio State University; Susan T. Fiske, Princeton University; Joshua Greene, Harvard University; Todd Heatherton, Dartmouth University; Joseph Simmons, University of Pennsylvania; Uri Simonsohn, University of Pennsylvania; Sam Sommers, Tufts University; and Robert J. Sternberg, Cornell University.

The editors, Sternberg and Fiske, asked behavioral and brain scientists to contribute case studies representing ethical challenges they have faced in their own careers. Contributors were asked to address five issues:

1. A description of the ethical challenge.
2. What, if anything, made solving the ethical challenge difficult.
3. How the scientist resolved the challenge.
4. What the scientist might do differently if he/she were to face the situation today.
5. What general principle, if any, the scientist can infer from the case study.

The case studies they provided are in the pages that follow. We hope you find them useful in your professional work and perhaps even outside it.