Professional Practice Guidelines for Operational Psychology

Developed By:
Operational Psychology Practice Guidelines Task Force (OPPG TF)
Introduction

Operational psychologists provide a variety of psychological services in support of national security, national defense, and public safety. Their work often includes the assessment of personnel for high-risk positions, consultation to investigations and crisis negotiations, and support to military or intelligence operations. The practice of operational psychology differs in important ways from more other practice areas and has developed significantly over the past 20 years. Due to these developments and psychologists’ ongoing need for guidance, these Professional Practice Guidelines for Operational Psychology are provided to benefit operational psychologists and the recipients of their services.

Purpose and Scope

These guidelines are intended to maintain and improve the quality of operational psychology services, standardize and enhance the professional delivery of such services, encourage the practice and continued development of operational psychology, and respect the applicable rights of persons affected by such services. They are intended for use by psychologists engaged in operational support activities within the areas of national security, national defense, and public safety.

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1 The American Psychological Association (APA) has a division devoted to matters of military psychology (APA Division 19, the Society for Military Psychology) that includes many psychologists who provide support to national security and national defense sectors through operational support activities, and a section of Division 18 (Psychologists in Public Service) devoted to Police and Public Safety Psychology. Furthermore, there are scientific journals and various professional outlets devoted to the interface between psychology, national security, national defense, and public safety (e.g., Military Psychology, Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, Journal of Police & Criminal Psychology), as well as key texts and journal series devoted to the ethical and professional practice of operational psychology (e.g., Civiello, 2009; Ewing & Gelles, 2003; Kennedy, Borum, & Fein, 2011; Kennedy & Williams, 2011; Kitaeff, 2011; McCutcheon, 2017; Staal & DeVries, 2018; Staal & Stephenson, 2006, 2013; Stephenson & Staal, 2007; Williams & Johnson, 2006; Williams, Picano, Roland, & Banks, 2006). Training in operational psychology is available in pre-doctoral and postdoctoral settings and the American Board of Police & Public Safety Psychology - an affiliated American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP) specialty board - now certifies psychologists practicing in related domains.
Operational psychologists provide services to different clientele across practice settings. They are often referred to as national security psychologists or operational psychologists by those in the intelligence community and military (Civiello, 2009; Freedman, 2009; Gravitz, 2009; Staal & Stephenson, 2013), but expansion of those functions into private industry has led to other labels as well (e.g., intelligence psychologists, security psychologists). Operational psychologists may be employed full-time or part-time as internal or external consultants to individuals or organizations. In each case, these psychologists have developed expertise that addresses the specific needs of their respective organizations and communities (Brandon, 2011). Although different communities of practice may differ somewhat in their definition of operational psychology, for the purposes of these guidelines operational psychology refers to the application of psychological science to the operational activities conducted in support of national security, national defense, and public safety (Staal & DeVries, 2018). These services typically occur through a consultative relationship that enables clients to more effectively understand, develop, and/or influence individuals, groups, or organizations to accomplish a wide and diverse spectrum of objectives from field-level operations to strategic interests of nations (Staal & Stephenson, 2013). In many instances, the work of operational psychologists may resemble that of industrial-organizational psychologists (e.g., engaged in personnel suitability assessments), or sports psychologists (e.g., providing human performance enhancement training), or police psychologists (e.g., conducting consultation to investigative teams). Thus, psychologists performing similar duties in these or other areas of applied practice may also benefit from these guidelines.

For the purposes of these guidelines, practitioners of operational psychology refer to psychologists engaged in the practice of operational psychology as described above. They apply their expertise, in general, to such non-healthcare-related tasks as personnel assessment and selection, performance enhancement, organizational consultation, intelligence and counterintelligence activities, operational
consultation and interviewing, strategic communication, and threat assessment and management within the realms of national security, national defense, and public safety (Staal & Harvey, 2019). These functions share some of the same applications as other areas of applied psychology (e.g., police and public safety psychology and psychologists working within law enforcement, Kitaeff, 2011). Practitioners whose professional duties align with the description of operational psychology are encouraged to consider the present guidelines.

The APA’s Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (EPPCC; APA, 2017), as written, acts as a practice framework for these guidelines. (Note: As of 2020, APA Ethical Principles are being revised and a newer version will be available in the future.) In the remainder of the document, the term “guidelines” is used to reference statements that suggest or recommend professional behavior. It is important to note that whenever such guidelines are subject to change/revision, the newer version(s) of the guidelines are expected to inform practice frameworks. Consistent with the EPPCC, these guidelines are intended to be aspirational and to provide additional guidance for operational psychologists. They differ from standards in that standards are mandatory requirements for professional conduct that are enforceable and may carry legal penalties or other sanctions. In contrast, guidelines are intended to foster the development of the profession through an elevation in the quality of practice. These guidelines are neither mandatory nor exhaustive in nature. They are not applicable to every circumstance or practitioner. They are not definitive and should not take the place of sound professional judgment by a given psychologist in a given situation; as such, this framework is advisory, and operational psychologists are encouraged to exercise individual judgment in areas that are not prohibited or otherwise directed by the law, regulation, or the EPPCC. Due to the complexity of operational support activities and the evolving and dynamic nature of operational psychology, these guidelines do not exhaust professional, ethical, legal, moral or other considerations for operational
psychologists. They are not intended be used as the basis for disciplinary action or practice liability complaints. When applicable, federal and state laws and regulations supersede this guidance, however efforts should be made to reconcile such discrepancies whenever possible.

Documentation of Need

The justification of need for these guidelines is based on public benefit and the need for professional guidance, as indicated by APA policy (APA, 2015).

Public Benefit. Psychologists supporting national security, national defense, and public safety hold special positions of public trust and confidence. Operational psychologists have a direct impact on the security and safety of the nation, states, and local communities. Furthermore, their roles and activities are not currently addressed by any other guidelines. Given the sensitivity of their duties, the often-classified nature of their work, and the past controversies associated with their practice community, such guidelines are of significant value. Therefore, to the degree to which operational psychologists conduct their activities consistent with these guidelines, significant public benefit is expected.

Professional Guidance. Psychologists operating in national security, national defense, and public safety serve multiple spheres of intelligence, defense, and law enforcement sectors. These environments present challenging settings for psychological consultation. Operational psychologists are routinely confronted with various ethical dilemmas, including but not limited to dual-agency considerations, multiple relationships, consent issues, and competency challenges. Alerting psychologists to these complex issues will assist them in navigating potential dilemmas.

Definitions
Client refers to any individual, organization, agency or other entity employing or contracting operational psychology services. In many instances these entities may be organizations, and the operational psychologist’s services may affect individuals who are not identified as clients. Operational psychology client-consultant arrangements are similar to those found in many other professional practice contexts, including but not limited to industrial/organizational, school, and forensic settings.

Decision Maker refers to the person or entity with the authority to make operationally relevant decisions within the domain of national security, national defense, or public safety.

Human rights refer to the rights inherent to all human beings. Such rights exist without regard to race, sex, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or other status. Human rights generally include the right to life and liberty, freedoms of expression, freedom from slavery and torture, and other freedoms (see Universal Declaration of Human Rights/UN, 2021).

Operational Psychology refers to the application of psychological science to the operational activities of national security, national defense, and public safety. These services typically occur through a consultative relationship that enables clients to more effectively understand, develop, and/or influence individuals, groups, or organizations.

Operational Psychology Practitioner or Operational Psychologist refers to a psychologist engaged in operational psychology practice.
Party refers to any individual, group, or organization that may be affected by the services provided by the operational psychology practitioner. Parties also may be clients requesting services but often are not the retaining clients. For example, when an operational psychologist is employed to provide counter insider threat consultation to an organization or agency, the requesting client, as well as the individuals with whom the psychologist interacts, are considered “parties.”

Subject refers to any individual, group, or organization that may be the direct or indirect focus of the services provided by the operational psychology practitioner. Subjects also may be clients requesting services but often are not the client retaining the services of operational practitioners. Subjects also may be considered a party involved as the focus or in receipt of operational psychology services. For example, when an operational psychologist is employed to provide consultation to intelligence professionals, the subject of the consultation often is another party and not the intelligence professionals themselves. In some instances, operational psychologists are employed to provide feedback to their clients about their own performance or communications. In such cases, the client is also the subject of the operational psychologist’s services.

Third-Party refers to any entity that requests operational psychology services (e.g., an organization-as-client), when those services are applied to, or received by, another individual or entity. For example, an organization may contract the services for an operational psychologist on behalf of their employees (the recipients of services). In this instance, the organization is acting as the third-party client while the employee receiving or participating in services is the subject (but not client). This distinction does not absolve psychologists from their responsibility to non-client entities.

Compatibility
These guidelines are compatible with the EPPCC (APA, 2017), as written, and should be considered in conjunction with them. In addition, these guidelines are intended to be consistent with existing guidelines aiding related practitioners [e.g., *Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Psychology* (APA, 2013); *Consulting Police Psychologist Guidelines* (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2016); *Psychological Fitness-for-Duty Evaluation Guidelines* (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009); *Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Procedures* (Society for Industrial Organizational Psychology, 2018)].

**Disclosures**

There are no known conflicts of interest, nor sources of direct financial support, for the development of these guidelines. Furthermore, the authors are unaware of any potential financial benefit resulting from the development or implementation of the guidelines. Supporting literature was selected based on its relevance to the subject matter, currency, community consensus, and empirical support. The research literature in this area is has reached a sufficient critical mass within the practice community to warrant these Guidelines. Seminal works in the field have been identified and referenced accordingly. Additional consideration of opposing perspectives was also weighed and included when appropriate, and inclusion of material was determined by consensus of the practice community as agreed upon by Task Force membership.

**Development of the Guidelines**

These guidelines were developed by the Operational Psychology Practice Guidelines Task Force (OPPG TF). The OPPG TF was composed of psychologists appointed by their respective APA divisions, national board associations, and national security and national defense agencies. APA divisions believed to contain a significant constituency of operational psychologists (or related practitioners) were identified.
Each APA division’s president was asked for an independent nomination from within their membership to the Task Force. A similar request was extended to relevant national board presidents and senior psychology representatives among related government agencies. The process for which each entity chose to identify and ultimately nominate a representative from their organization, division, or board was left to their appointed leadership and not directed by the organizer of the Task Force. Diversity of thought was encouraged while subject matter expertise was requested. The outcome of this nomination process was a Task Force both diverse in its experience, perspective, and background, while common in its depth of knowledge and community representation. Furthermore, the group was afforded full autonomy to voice opinions and opposition, to solicit advice, inputs, and guidance from their communities (and any source they deemed relevant) in aiding the development of these guidelines. As one might imagine, with diverse backgrounds, experiences and perspectives, the TF membership engaged in rigorous and spirited debate at times. Business rules were established at the outset that would accommodate such differences and challenges to consensus. When such moments arose, the membership engaged in a period of discovery and discussion culminating in a vote. Consensus was always the goal and generally achieved. The TF did not move forward with guideline development until such consensus was found in accordance with the business rules adopted. The OPPG TF was chaired by Mark A. Staal, PhD, ABPP (Division 19, Society for Military Psychology). Members included Larry K. Lewis, PhD (Division 13, Society for Consulting Psychology), David M. Corey, PhD, ABPP (Division 18, Psychologists in Public Service), Daniel A. Krauss, JD, PhD, ABPP (Division 41, American Psychology-Law Society), Jeffrey N. Younggren, PhD, ABPP (Division 42, Psychologists in Independent Practice), David DeMatteo, JD, PhD, ABPP (American Board of Forensic Psychology), Philip S. Trompetter, PhD, ABPP (American Board of Police & Public Safety Psychology), and Members-at-Large: Natasha M. Annis, PsyD, Paul J. Dean, PhD, Christopher A. Myers, PhD, ABPP, Daniel J. Neller, PsyD, ABPP, and James A. Stephenson, PsyD, ABPP. The OPPG TF and its proposed guidelines were supported through the
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Affairs (BPA) and Committee on Professional Practice and Standards (COPPS).

**Guidelines for Practice in Operational Psychology**

**Guideline 1.** Operational psychologists strive to anticipate the direct and indirect impacts of their services on national security, national defense, public safety, and the parties with whom they work.

**Rationale.** While upholding the standards of their profession, operational psychologists strive to benefit clients and improve society predominantly through contributions to national security, national defense, and public safety. In most circumstances, their primary obligation is owed to the nation or community they strive to serve and protect. Ordinarily they meet this obligation by advancing the best interests of the retaining client, often a governmental organization. Their obligations to the greater good do not absolve them of responsibilities that may be owed to other affected parties.

**Application.** Operational psychologists strive to benefit their clients and enhance national security, national defense, and public safety in many and diverse ways. Among other activities, they assess personnel for high-risk positions; support intelligence and military operations; consult to investigations and crisis negotiations; and advise leaders on strategic messaging (Corey & Zelig, in press; Staal & Harvey, 2019). In most of these activities, their work simultaneously impacts multiple individuals and organizations, including clients and other parties (Kennedy & Williams, 2011).

For example, when they assess candidates for positions in national security or defense settings, operational psychologists contribute to decisions that impact non-client candidates and organizational clients. Because candidates for national security positions differ in their suitability and motivation (Picano, Williams, & Roland, 2012), the resultant hiring decisions also impact the nation and community.
that the candidate intends to serve. Operational psychologists strive to anticipate and consider potentially competing interests that may exist among candidates, their organizational clients, and society (Corey & Borum, 2013).

In situations in which competing interests are present, operational psychologists strive to (a) clearly identify their clients, the nature of the professional relationships, and the objectives of the services with all relevant parties at the outset of the professional relationships; (b) consider the rights, roles, responsibilities and status (including but not limited to diverse needs such as, culture, ethnicity, language, religion, sexual and gender orientation, socioeconomic factors, age, ability, etc.), of all parties involved; (c) identify confidentiality limits, probable uses, and accessibility of resultant work products or information; (d) weigh the likely effects their findings, recommendations, and other actions may have on clients and non-clients; and (e) take reasonable steps to promote welfare and avoid or minimize harm when it is foreseeable (EPPCC Standards 3.04, 3.07, and 3.11b; also see Moret & Greene, 2019).

Special care and consideration are required when the work of operational psychologists is classified or sensitive. Even when the work is unclassified or not otherwise sensitive, national security, national defense, and public safety settings often restrict access to individuals within those settings. Accordingly, operational psychologists may be precluded from fully disclosing all information surrounding the provision of their services (e.g., for personal safety, operational security, or practical reasons). For example, when operational psychologists support undercover public safety officers, they may be precluded from fully disclosing details to protect the undercover officer, maintain the integrity of the operation, and minimize foreseeable harm to others. Operational psychologists strive to follow the laws, regulations, and policies that govern information-sharing and handling.
Operational psychologists often work in high-threat settings, internationally and domestically.

Accordingly, security requirements may dictate the operational psychologist refrain from providing full disclosure of information such as his/her name, organizational affiliation and/or professional background. In anticipation of working in such settings, operational psychologists seek to identify descriptions of their role and activities that accurately characterize the purpose of their professional engagement without violating security restrictions, endangering themselves or others, or jeopardizing organizational objectives or interests. In this regard operational psychologists strive to: (a) obtain adequate oversight from a legally authorized party; (b) document, as appropriate, their actions in a way that enables critical review from relevant authorities; (c) take care to avoid or minimize foreseeable harm to affected parties; and (d) seek peer consultation as appropriate. (See EPPCC Standards 3.04, 3.11b, 4.01, 4.02, 4.05, 9.04, and 9.10; cf. Standard 8.07.)

Operational psychologists’ work activities may at times involve risk to their personal welfare, as might occur when they support combat or law enforcement operations, provide services in areas of civil unrest, or work in neighborhoods characterized by high rates of violent crime (Johnson Johnson, et al., 2011). Operational psychologists strive to recognize these risks to their physical and emotional well-being. They also understand that their failure to properly recognize such risks may increase risk to others. Operational psychologists seek to consider the impact of these conditions on the performance of their duties and the duties of others. To address these concerns, operational psychologists routinely strive to obtain data from multiple perspectives and take other reasonable steps to reduce risk of harm at all stages of a mission or operation, from planning and preparation, to execution, to completion and after-action review (AAR).
Guideline 2. Operational psychologists seek to appreciate the broader contexts in which they practice—national security, national defense, and public safety—and to understand relevant social, political, legal, and scientific developments that may impact their work.

Rationale. Operational psychology is a relatively new and emerging area of practice. Achieving and maintaining competence in areas pertinent to the work of operational psychology can often be difficult due to (a) the professional isolation often associated with supporting sensitive or classified work, (b) the absence or scarcity of specialized training opportunities, and (c) the nature of rapidly evolving, dynamic environments that can preclude careful research, preparation, and consultation (as such research becomes available, operational psychologists strive to remain vigilant in the collection and incorporation of such research into their practice). Furthermore, operational psychology is conducted in settings that consist of diverse systems, organizations, clients, and subjects. Operational psychologists strive to demonstrate and enhance their competence by actively seeking to understand these components and their unique subcultures. By doing so, they enhance their ability to anticipate, approach, and solve problems, and they build trust with those with whom they work.

Application. The environments in which operational psychologists practice demand a nuanced understanding of multiple contextual factors and layers of increasing complexity. For example, when operational psychologists in national security and defense settings support psychological operations against an adversary, they work from a reasonable understanding of international relations in general and strive to appreciate the history and current state of diplomatic relations with the identified adversary in particular; account for the culture, lifestyle, and attitudes of the adversary’s populace; and consider the body of research relevant to their activities (e.g., persuasion and influence approaches, techniques and tactics).
They take care to restrict their services to only those areas in which they are reasonably competent (EPPCC Standard 2.01). When considering the required level of competence to perform an operational support activity, operational psychologists consider multiple factors including training and experience, availability of subject matter expertise for consultation, and complexity of tasks to be performed. They strive to consult with peers or seek supervision as warranted. And they seek to fulfill continuing education requirements in domains relevant to their work, including human and civil rights, social justice, ethics, and related areas.

Operational psychologists strive to remain aware of empirical advances in relevant areas to provide scientifically informed services. Examples include, but are not limited to, advances in: inquiry and investigative techniques (Brandon, 2014; Meissner, Oleszkiewicz, Surmon-Böhr, & Alison, 2017), principles of influence and persuasion (Goodman-Delahunty & Howes, 2016), cultural competence (Christopher, Wendt, Marecek, & Goodman, 2014; Hardin, Robitschek, Flores, Navarro, & Ashton, 2014), training curriculum development (Abt, Oliver, & Nagal, 2016), cognitive bias in decision science (Beauregard & Michaud, 2016;), and others (Carretta, Rose, & Barron, 2015; Dawson & Thomson, 2018).

Advances in technology create challenging opportunities for operational psychologists. For example, high-fidelity telecommunication systems facilitate distributed decision-making on the battlefield, enabling military commanders to direct combat operations while removed from the fight. This ability provides operational decision makers with a unique perspective and reduces the “fog of war” traditionally experienced by ground force commanders. But the inability to anticipate and adapt to rapidly changing situations on the ground introduces new challenges to the employment of combat forces. In such circumstances, operational psychologists may develop training to aid combat leaders in maintaining situational awareness and managing cognitive bias.
Guideline 3. Operational psychologists make reasonable efforts to consider the legal, regulatory, and scientific bases of their work while taking care to respect the rights of all parties.

Rationale. Organizational demands and societal needs have the potential to infringe on individual rights in settings involving national security, national defense, and public safety. Accordingly, operational psychologists strive to safeguard the rights of all affected parties as they fulfill their responsibilities to their clients, recognizing that ethical practice sometimes results in adverse outcomes for those affected by those services (Grisso, 2001). Operational psychologists strive to avoid participating in practices that are illegal or unjust, or that unnecessarily infringe upon or violate others’ rights.

Application. Whether working in national security, national defense or public safety, operational psychologists encounter circumstances in which client and societal needs conflict with individual interests. Operational psychologists seek to balance these potentially competing interests by adhering to legal and regulatory requirements; using reliable data collection procedures that are the least invasive necessary for meeting the demands of their clients; restricting reports to data that are relevant and reliable; and describing as necessary the bases and limitations of their procedures, findings, and opinions (EPPCC Standards 2.04, 4.04a, 9.01, and 9.06).

For example, in national security and defense settings, senior leaders may direct subordinates to participate in psychological assessments of fitness for duty (Monahan & Keener, 2012). In conducting these occupationally mandated assessments, operational psychologists first consider laws, policies, and regulations that dictate assessment parameters; these include but are not limited to subjects’ rights to refuse participation, relevant areas of psychological inquiry, and criteria that establish fitness for duty. Due consideration is paid to the applicability of job analyses, validation, and competency modeling to
establish the job relevance of psychological attributes being assessed. Operational psychologists use multiple sources and methods to gather relevant data, while keeping in mind potential requirements for informed consent and release of information procedures. In their efforts to remain vigilant to individual privacy interests, operational psychologists strive to report only information of probative value and omit information reasonably expected to have non-probative prejudicial impact, particularly when the latter is exceptionally invasive in nature.

Although operational psychologists ordinarily do not function as ultimate decision-makers within the organizations they serve, their opinions are usually accorded substantial weight by decision-makers. To the fullest extent possible, therefore, operational psychologists recognize that their work typically informs rather than dictates courses of action. Accordingly, they strive to present and support their professional opinions in a neutral, impartial manner, and they show measured restraint in advocating for professional opinions. When organizations place them in decision-making roles, operational psychologists strive to adequately explain the underlying bases for their decisions, and they acknowledge limitations as appropriate.

In the unusual circumstances when ethical responsibilities of operational psychologists clearly conflict with organizational demands, societal needs, human rights, or legal or regulatory authorities, operational psychologists clarify the nature of the conflict, make known their commitment to the EPPCC, seek consultation from peers when available, and take reasonable steps to resolve the conflict in a responsible manner that is consistent with the EPPCC and avoids or minimizes harm (EPPCC Standards 1.02 and 1.03). Operational psychologists remain alert to any attempts to justify or defend violations of human rights that may result from seeking to resolve such conflicts. Additionally, when organizational
activities that violate human rights are identified, operational psychologists seek to document and/or report such findings through appropriate channels.

Operational psychologists seek to respond swiftly if they observe behavior that violates legal, moral, human rights, or ethical boundaries. For example, they may learn of a supervisory staff member engaging in sexual behavior with a subordinate, witness an investigator or guard mistreat a suspect or other detainee, observe a training cadre member exert unnecessary pressure on a trainee, or learn of a peer’s conduct that casts doubt on his or her ability to maintain access to classified or otherwise sensitive information (e.g., Doran, Hoyt, Hiller Lauby, & Morgan, 2012). To the extent possible, they strive first to resolve ethical matters informally when appropriate (EPPCC Standard 1.04). When violations have substantially harmed or are likely to substantially harm a person or organization, they take care to resolve ethical matters formally through appropriate channels (e.g., referral to state or national ethics bodies, licensing boards) (EPPCC Standard 1.05). As required, they also seek to refer legal matters to appropriate legal authorities.

Guideline 4. Operational psychologists strive to balance the demands of their organizational clients and the best interest of society with due regard for the autonomy, dignity, and well-being of all parties.

Rationale. Operational psychologists seek to benefit their organizational clients and society while taking care to avoid or minimize harm to affected parties (EPPCC Standard 3.04). They respect the dignity, worth, autonomy, and human rights of all people while remaining committed to the welfare of the greater good; this includes attention to such values as beneficence, nonmaleficence, fairness, and justice.
Application. In national security, national defense, and public safety settings, operational psychologists face potentially conflicting demands. While supporting organizational clients, operational psychologists may contribute to adverse outcomes for individual subjects, who may or may not be aware of the involvement of operational psychologists. These situations sometimes raise concerns about informed consent and potential harm. Usually without the benefit of an interview, operational psychologists review case files and evidence of possible criminal activity, indirectly assess possible suspects, and help investigators plan operations to identify individuals who may pose a grave threat to national security, national defense, or public safety (Neller, 2019; see also Myers & Trent, 2019). Securing a subject’s informed consent in such circumstances may be impossible or unreasonable (Staal & Harvey, 2019); see also (e.g., Bush, Connell, & Denney, 2006; Foote, 2017; Koocher, 2009; Myers, Neller, de Leeuw, & McDonald, 2017).

In such circumstances, operational psychologists strive to: (a) identify their clients, roles, and ethical obligations to each party at the onset of the professional relationship, and thereafter as warranted; (b) consider whether or not their consultation is mandated by law or regulation, or implied as a routine governmental activity; (c) weigh the impact that their involvement or lack of involvement likely would have on various outcomes; and (d) balance the demands of the organization and society against the impact on the well-being and rights of individual subjects (EPPCC Standards 3.04, 3.07, 3.10, 9.03).

When they choose to proceed with such consultations, operational psychologists take care to: (a) appropriately document the information upon which they relied; (b) determine if available information is sufficient for offering opinions based on scientific and professional knowledge; and if so, (c) report only information that is germane to the purpose of the consultation while (d) appropriately describing the limitations of their findings (EPPCC Standards 2.04, 4.04, 9.01, 9.02, and 9.04).
Guideline 5. Operational psychologists strive to avoid conflicts that may arise from dual agency, multiple roles and relationships, and conflicts of interest that can occur in settings involving national security, national defense, and public safety.

Rationale. Operational psychologists commonly pursue the best interest of society and their clients’ goals while simultaneously seeking to consider the impact on affected parties. When doing so, operational psychologists clarify their roles and responsibilities as appropriate, partly in an effort to build trust with – and safeguard the welfare, rights, and privacy of – those with whom they interact professionally. They also guard against political, organizational and social factors that might lead to misuse of their work or influence, or that could impair their objectivity. When conflicts arise, they seek to manage them responsibly and in a way that promotes welfare and minimizes harm (EPPCC Standard 3.04).

Application. Some operational psychologists are embedded in the units to which they offer services, and therefore may encounter ethical challenges similar to psychologists who practice in rural community settings. For example, they may act as special staff advisors to senior leaders; ad hoc project consultants to middle management; and trainers, performance enhancement coaches, and sometimes even counselors to other personnel. Other operational psychologists work closely as consultants with units to accomplish objectives ranging from supporting dynamic field operations to assisting leaders and managers with decisions that have strategic implications. These operational psychologists are often linked to the actions of their clients, and as such, they seek to partition their involvement from any action or activity if that action or activity compromises their ethical duties. Accordingly, they strive to diligently manage the ethical obligations they owe to a wide range of parties in ways deemed
acceptable by the broader profession (Johnson, 2008; Moret & Greene, 2019; Staal & King, 2000; Zur & Gonzalez, 2002).

When one or more competent peers is available to share in service delivery, operational psychologists strive to delineate their roles and functions in a manner that enhances effectiveness and reduces problems that may arise from dual agency, multiple roles and relationships, and conflicts of interest (EPPCC Standard 3.09; see also Standard 10.04). If it becomes apparent that operational psychologists may be called upon to perform potentially conflicting roles that are reasonably expected to impair their effectiveness, they take reasonable steps to clarify and modify, or withdraw from, roles as appropriate (cf. EPPCC Standard 10.2).

For example, in public safety settings, operational psychologists embedded within crisis negotiation units may assume a variety of responsibilities (Fagan, 2009; Hatcher, Mohandie, Turner, & Gelles, 1998). At the onset of crisis incidents, organizational leaders might direct operational psychologists to review press releases before their publication. Crisis negotiation teams (CNTs) might request assessments of the likely mental state of hostages or barricaded victims, of the mental state and potential violence risk posed by hostage-takers or barricaded subjects, and of the stress levels of CNT members. Following incidents, management might direct operational psychologists to support debriefings of CNT members, hostages or victims; provide brief therapeutic care to involved parties, including coworkers; and participate in AARs. In such instances, operational psychologists remain acutely aware of their limitations and boundaries of competence in providing any clinical services, and they further strive to clarify these limits to all parties involved. Based in part on results from AARs, management or line staff might ask operational psychologists to support the development of training programs intended to improve performance of CNTs in future operations.
Similarly, when embedded in compartmented programs in national defense settings, operational psychologists often are the sole providers of a wide variety of services delivered to multiple individuals (Dean & McNeil, 2012). Operational psychologists may influence the assessment and selection of personnel for entry into these programs; offer training to new personnel on a number of topics relevant to the organizations’ missions; routinely reassess personnel periodically to support determinations of continued fitness, counterintelligence risk, or other organizational needs; consult to peers and command staff on organizational development; and provide brief therapeutic interventions to all program personnel as needed.

Operational psychologists in national security positions also might routinely make rounds during temporary tours of duty at geographically separated units. During or after the tours, operational psychologists may broadly discuss with management their perceptions of morale within the units. If management requests specific information about potentially identifiable personnel, operational psychologists strive to deny providing the requested information unless: (a) the subject consents to such disclosure or presents a substantial risk to self, others, mission or operation; or (b) disclosure is otherwise permitted by law or regulation (EPPCC Standards 3.10, 4.01, 4.02, and 4.05). Whenever reasonable and permitted, operational psychologists seek to notify affected individuals of such disclosures.

Given their varied roles and responsibilities, operational psychologists strive to anticipate conflicts that can arise as a result of dual agency, multiple roles and relationships, and conflicts of interest. In each of their roles, they strive to identify their primary clients as they enter into professional relationships; and they refrain from entering into relationships that could reasonably be expected to impair their
objectivity, competence, or effectiveness in performing their duties, or that otherwise risk exploiting or
harming their clients (EPPCC Standards 3.05a, 3.06, and 3.07). If they find potentially harmful multiple
relationships have arisen, they seek to take reasonable steps to resolve the matter, with due regard to
the best interests of the impacted party and maximal compliance with the EPPCC (EPPCC Standard
3.05b). As conditions change, operational psychologists seek to ensure relevant parties are aware of any
changing roles and functions, as necessary, while striving to cooperate with coworkers to the fullest
extent feasible (EPPCC Standard 3.09).

Guideline 6. Operational psychologists strive to consider factors of diversity, equity, and inclusion
(DEI) when conducting assessments and providing other services.

Rationale. Operational psychologists take care to consider the unique backgrounds of individuals with
whom they work, as they strive to benefit their clients, respect and safeguard the rights of others, and
promote accuracy in practice. Such individual background factors include but are not limited to culture,
language, race, ethnicity, sex, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious preference,
socioeconomic status, and disability. Operational psychologists strive to eliminate the effect of biases
based on those factors while conducting their professional activities. They take precautions to ensure
their potential biases do not condone unjust practices.

Application. Psychologists working in national security, national defense, or public safety may conduct
their assessments and activities outside of the United States, which increases the salience of paying
consideration to diversity. But diversity poses a challenge to the work of operational psychologists inside
the United States as well. Operational psychologists conducting services with culturally diverse groups
strive to be mindful of their boundaries of expertise and seek training and consultation whenever working in areas that may challenge their competence (APA, 2017b).

Although practitioners are expected to be competent in cross-cultural psychology (APA, 2017), diversity presents significant challenges to the systematic study of individuals: most psychological research has been conducted on Western populations (e.g., Rad, Martingano, & Ginges, 2018); theories of motivation, needs, relational styles, and cognitive processes differ among cultural groups (Hui, 1985); and measures thought to be culture-free or culture-fair may, in practice, be neither culture-free nor culture-fair (Staal, 2012). Moreover, a host of cultural biases and related risks are well-known (Christopher et al., 2014; Hardin et al., 2014). Operational psychologists working with diverse groups strive to be aware of these issues and seek to minimize their negative impacts. When appropriate empirical data, measures, or methods are unavailable, operational psychologists make clear the limitations of their services and probable impact on their work products.

It is not uncommon for operational psychologists conducting assessments to speak a primary language that is different from that of the subject of their work. Such situations ordinarily require the services of an interpreter. When using interpreters, operational psychologists: (a) take reasonable steps to assess the professional qualifications and delineate expectations of the interpreter prior to commencing activities, making clear the rules of confidentiality; (b) seek assent or consent from the subject as early as is feasible and as appropriate; (c) strive to foster collaboration among all parties; and (d) when feasible, debrief the interpreter following service delivery (e.g., Australian Psychological Society, 2013; British Psychological Society, 2017; Frandsen, 2016; Staal & Bluestein, 2019).
Operational psychologists strive to remain aware and knowledgeable of applicable laws, regulations, cultural considerations, diverse needs, and other guidelines that inform their ethical practice when working with diverse populations; they use this knowledge when designing, selecting, employing, reviewing and/or revising the theories, tools, techniques and research methodologies employed in their practice. For example, several of the most important legislative acts relevant to personnel assessment considerations include the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), the Civil Rights Act (1964), the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection (1978), and the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (2008). These provide vital protections against discriminatory practices based on diversity factors and represent minimum requirements that must be incorporated into any personnel suitability assessment program (Corey, 2012).

Guideline 7. Operational Psychologists seek to select and rely on evidence-based assessment materials and procedures in the conduct of their work.

Rationale. Operational psychologists rely on a variety of assessment procedures. Failure to identify and employ procedures yielding scores that are valid and reliable for the contexts in which they are used may degrade the accuracy and efficacy of their assessments, resulting in a reduction in the usefulness and value of the process and its outcome for clients. Accordingly, operational psychologists strive to use procedures in light of the evidence on their usefulness with members of the population tested (EPPCC Standard 9.02). In addition, as appropriate, operational psychologists strive to ensure that assessment tools and procedures align with the “Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures” (1978), “Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Procedures” (SIOP, 2018), “Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology” (APA, 2006), “Standards on Educational and Psychological Testing” (AERA, APA,
NCME, 2014), and other empirically-informed guidelines, principles or practices that are widely accepted by the operational psychology community.

Application. Operational psychologists seek to employ assessment procedures that produce valid and reliable information for the contexts in which they are used. They also seek to guard the integrity of the psychometric properties of tests and ensure that the conditions of administration indicated in the test manual are preserved when adapted for use with national security or defense personnel or purposes. Operational psychologists strive to use test norms derived from similar populations or comparative samples when available. Operational psychologists seek to recognize the limitations of all such instruments and procedures, and to be ready to address these limitations and their potential impact. In this spirit, operational psychologists recognize that test results often guide the decision-making process rather than provide conclusive results.

Guideline 8. Operational Psychologists are mindful of the importance of establishing and maintaining competence when providing services to their clients.

Rationale. Psychologists have a primary ethical obligation to provide professional services only within the boundaries of their competence based on their education, training, supervised experience, consultation, study or professional experience (EPPCC, Standard 2.01). As with all new and emerging areas in which generally recognized standards for preparatory training do not yet exist, operational psychologists practice competently by carefully reviewing the existing seminal literature cited here, adapting evidence-based practices from related fields, extrapolating ideas from relevant research, and taking measures to mitigate harm (EPCCC, Standard 2.01.e). Operational practitioners also assume the responsibility for seeking consultation from more experienced practitioners, and assessing and
continuously evaluating their competencies, training, consultation, experience and risk management practices required for competent practice (EPPCC, Standard 2.03).

Application. Operational psychologists strive to obtain relevant professional training to develop their requisite knowledge and skills. Acquiring competence may require pursuing additional educational experiences and training, including but not limited to a review of the relevant literature, attendance at existing training programs, and continuing education specific to the delivery of operational consultation services to national security, defense, or public safety sectors.

Research may not be available that specifically addresses some professional activities. Despite such absences, operational psychologists may still choose to provide the services requested by their clients. The lack of documented support may not indicate that the services are ineffective. However, in such cases, consultation, informed consent, and additional documentation regarding known limitations may be warranted.

Operational psychologists continually strive to grow their expertise beyond basic level requisite competence. Such professional development is sought through formal coursework, additional training, consultation, and mentorship from operational practitioners with greater experience. Operational psychologists seek to grow their abilities through the cross-pollination of ideas, the knowledge of effective strategies and techniques, and the pursuit of scientifically based innovations related to their work.

Expiration
This document will expire as APA policy in 10 years (2031). Correspondence regarding the 2021 Guidelines for Psychological Practice in Operational Psychology should be addressed to the American Psychological Association, Practice Directorate, 750 First Street, NE, Washington, 20002-4242.


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