

Policy Statement Concerning the Parapsychological Association's Ethics System
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Past actions of the Parapsychological Association, Inc. (PA) and the wording of its document, "Ethical and Professional Standards for Parapsychologists," reflect an ethics system of the adjudicatory type. That is, the organization has heretofore elected to consider, hear, and adjudicate charges of unethical conduct on the part of its members (Members and Associate Members) and to take appropriate action relative to any member regarded as having violated ethical-professional standards.

Recently, however, the PA Board of Directors (formerly, PA Council) has reconsidered the wisdom of this approach to ethics for an organization of our small size and very limited resources and has decided in favor of a more positively oriented approach to ethics, namely, one that is aspirational, exhortational, and educational and that strives toward the highest standards.

The purpose of this policy statement is to explain to the membership the nature of these changes and the reasons for them, as well as to show their historical development.

History of the Change in Policy

Having recently examined a number of ethics-related allegations and recognizing that other such cases might arise, Council in 1985 decided that special administrative machinery and explicit functioning rules for adjudicating such allegations would be very useful. Council therefore appointed Dr. Rex G. Stanford as Ethics Officer and requested him to develop a proposal for such machinery and rules that Council would consider. In order to aid in the development of such a proposal Council at its August, 1985, meeting authorized Dr. Stanford to consult with the Administrative Officer for Ethics of the American Psychological Association (APA), Dr. David H. Mills. Council felt that not only did the APA have long and extensive experience in adjudicatory ethics, but that this experience was of likely relevance, since many psychologists, like parapsychologists*, are researchers who work with human subjects.

Prior to meeting with Dr. Mills, Dr. Stanford sent him a copy of the PA's "Ethical and Professional Standards for Parapsychologists" and invited him to make, at the time of the meeting, any and all comments that he might wish to make with regard to it and its workability as a document upon which ethics actions might be based. He invited Dr. Mills, also, to suggest any changes he might deem useful for that document and to suggest any changes in the APA procedures that might be desirable for an organization having the characteristics of the PA. Dr. Stanford mentioned other questions that he hoped could be addressed at the meeting, including the role of legal Counsel in APA ethics functioning. More generally, he asked Dr. Mills to be as frank and detailed as possible in making any and all suggestions that might benefit the PA. In order to insure Dr. Mills that suggestions at any level of discussion would be welcome, he also asked him to comment, if he wished, upon whether or not it makes sense for an organization of the size and character of the PA to be involved in a formal, in-depth way with ethics adjudication.

* Editor's Note: This word had been mistyped in the original published document, published in the Parapsychological Association's 1986 Annual Report, but it has been corrected here.

Dr. Stanford met with Dr. Mills on November 11, 1985. Dr. Mills has an extremely busy schedule, and the PA Directors are very grateful to him for coming in on this day, a holiday when most APA offices are closed, to meet with Dr. Stanford.

Much of Dr. Stanford's discussion with Dr. Mills focused on the administrative machinery and procedures for investigating and adjudicating ethics charges. However, Dr. Mills made some important comments and recommendations regarding the practicality of an adjudicatory approach for our organization. He explained the difference between ethical codes that are aspirational, which set "expectations of almost the highest standards of the endeavor," and those that are based on quandary ethics (also called "basement ethics") and are adjudicatory in nature. Then he suggested that an organization with the size and limited resources of the PA would probably be well advised to adopt the former rather than the latter. His reasons were, in summary, that the time, effort, costs, and liabilities involved in effectively and fairly enforcing a rule-based ethical system would likely be prohibitive, in the long term, for an organization of our size and resources. He felt that the PA would probably be better off with a code of ethics that describes the highest standards to which all members should aspire and not get involved in adjudication of complaints until the PA is large enough to have the personnel and resources to make such a system work effectively.

Dr. Mills elaborated on the costs involved in an adjudicatory system. As only one example, legal counsel is necessary in many unexpected ways. Competent legal counsel is, of course, very expensive. Liability insurance is also extremely expensive and, in some cases, difficult or impossible to obtain. It became apparent to Dr. Stanford that the administrative, legal, and insurance costs associated with an adjudicatory system of the type projected and needed would force an increase in membership dues to many times the present level.

The recommendations from Dr. Mills were reinforced by comments from other leaders in professional ethics. On May 24-25, 1986, Dr. Stanford, as PA representative, attended the Workshop on Professional Societies and Professional Ethics in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, jointly sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT). There he learned that a number of scientific organizations much larger than the PA which also have ethical statements or codes are not involved in ethics adjudication because of the types of considerations Dr. Mills had outlined. He also learned that a growing number of organizations are for such reasons moving away from ethics adjudication and are turning their ethics committees to educational functions. Further, when Dr. Stanford spoke to these leaders, they expressed surprise that the PA should ever have become involved in adjudicatory ethics, given its size and resources. In fact, Dr. Stanford was often asked if there were special ethical problems within parapsychology that led to its development of lengthy and highly elaborate ethical guidelines and to its involvement in adjudication! In sum, the general consensus among those with whom Dr. Stanford talked was that it was unusual and unrealistic for the PA to be involved in ethics adjudication. These remarks came from individuals who, like Dr. Mills, believe that adjudicatory ethics has an important place in professional societies when the costs are not prohibitive.

Rationale

Given the above, the PA Board feels that while an organization should do all that it can in the area of ethics, it would be foolhardy to undertake a course of action that would significantly strain the organization's resources (or those of the membership) or would, because of limited resources, be less than adequate in the difficult area of ethics adjudication. Such a course of action would be professionally irresponsible and,

possibly, unethical in itself. Further, the PA Board feels that there are more positive approaches than adjudication that are available for enhancing the ethical nature of its members' activities. The Board has therefore opted for an aspirational, nonadjudicatory ethics system.

Nothing in the above policy and decision should, however, be considered as abrogating the right of the PA to engage in adjudication of ethics charges should its Board of Directors ever deem that to be justified.

Prospectus

The first step in evolving an aspirational ethics system is a reexamination of the present set of guidelines in light of this policy shift. This will likely result in a modification of the present document. Dr. Stanford has collected a number of ethics documents from other organizations that should aid in the refinement of the PA document.

The decision to move away from adjudicatory ethics for the immediately foreseeable future is not a decision to move away from ethical concerns. This decision will free up time, energies, and funds to the PA to undertake ethics-related initiatives that would otherwise have been impossible or would simply have been ignored as possibilities. Along with the development of a meaningful statement of aspirational ethics, the PA will be able to plan and actualize ethics initiatives involving more widespread discussion of and education concerning ethical issues in a number of potential problem areas.

Professional ethics is not, after all, insured by the administering of sanctions to transgressors of "Thou shalt nots." It is perhaps most strongly insured by efforts to enhance the awareness of individuals concerning the concrete and real importance and advantage of self-scrutiny with regard to ethical issues and their application in their own work. The PA as an organization and its individual members must take a more active role in the discussion of ethical issues, and forums should be provided for such discussion. Effective professional ethics is truly a consensual activity, and that consensus begins with individuals who are willing and ready to consider the broader meanings of their actions. It is in aiding individuals in such undertakings and in helping them to prepare for this role that the PA can now become more active and more effective.

Board of Directors
Parapsychological Association, Inc.
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