Problems of Ethics in Community Mental Health: A Survey of Community Psychologists

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ABSTRACT: Psychologists in community mental health were surveyed to ascertain new ethical problems arising from their community activity. They were also asked what could be done about making psychologists more aware of these issues. Consultation, competence, confidentiality, and professional versus citizen's role were the important areas. Suggestions were made for early ethics education with examples in ethics handbooks of community activities.

INTRODUCTION

Ethical issues often emerge from situations where value judgments are made difficult by multiple loyalties and conflicting objectives. Community mental health programs may present examples of potentially difficult situations because the mental health agent may hold values which are not fully shared by the target population. Moreover, objectives of the change agent may come into conflict with human rights, such as the right to be left alone. This second problem may become critical when the issue of permission or consent is clouded. Ethical problems presented by conflicts of values or objectives may be magnified by the nature of the influence or change process employed. This is not to say that planned change through political action presents ethical problems different from those which emerge in the course of programs of consultation or education but that the ethical complications may be greater as more coercive and persuasive techniques are used.

To the change agent confronted with the need for action and the social and personal consequences of inaction, early consideration of ethical problems may appear to be a manifestation of inertia. Yet there are reasons to per-
sist in their early consideration. One reason is that such questions are becoming increasingly important and of interest to more people, including both public policy-makers and target groups of social action programs. Brayfield (1968) noted "that ethical issues in the development and application of psychological knowledge are becoming more complex, more extensive, more open to public scrutiny and more demanding of our professional interest and attention than at almost any other time in the history of our discipline." The same may be said of all mental health professions.

Another reason for persisting in the consideration of such issues is that social change, planning notwithstanding, is not always predictable or controllable and change achieved in the service of one goal may evolve in unexpected ways. Thus, something more basic than well-intended program objectives is necessary as a framework for thinking about planned change. In a recent issue of *Transaction*, Kenneth Keniston provided an example of this type of phenomenon in a paper entitled "How Community Mental Health Stamped Out the Riots." The paper was a "serious satire" in which community mental health workers became the front line of attack on urban unrest and the community mental health movement became just another way of controlling deviant behavior.

**SURVEY**

Because of the importance of ethical issues in community mental health, a survey of the membership of the Division of Community Psychology of the American Psychological Association was initiated by the authors. The survey aimed at answering two questions: (1) What are the ethical issues that are arising involving psychologists involved in community work, as perceived by the psychologists themselves? Can certain areas of concern be clearly identified? (2) How relevant is the current *Ethical Standards of Psychologists* with regard to these emerging issues?

The questionnaire was sent out to 636 members of the Division of Community Psychology of the American Psychological Association in the early part of 1968 and consisted of three questions.

1. Please describe a situation you know of first-hand in which a psychologist involved in community-related professional activities made a decision having ethical implications. Describe the conceptualization of the ethical issues involved in the situation.

2. In addition to any specific situation described in Question 1, what ethical issues do you see as especially relevant to psychologists in professional involvement in community activities? In other words, will we need new ethical principles to apply to psychology in a community context, and if so, which ones?

3. What mechanisms or media would you suggest for ethics education? How would you make psychologists involved in professional activities in the community more aware of ethical issues?

**RESULTS**

Fifty-one replies (8.2%) were received. These varied from detailed presentations of cases to a few quips and comments about the ques-