

“Changing our own behavior – how are the ethics of professionals constructed and perceived?”

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Research Interviews: Emerging themes



- 1: We regard ourselves as ethical, we regard 'hired guns' as unethical, and we want to be trusted
2. The source of our ethical standards are partly universal 'right/wrong' intuitions, and partly our group values (our generation, our nation, our profession), as interpreted and adapted through our personal 'world view'
3. Distinguishing personal environmental values from professional ethics
4. Who is 'unethical' ? Personal interests & client's wishes—v- 'truth'

1. Self-perception as 'ethical'

- Most of us consider ourselves ethical, but have developed standards by different paths, and different interpretations of 'ethical' ... but 'hired guns' are unethical. Disparity between how we perceive ourselves, how others see us, and where we would like to be. We want to be trusted, we acknowledge that both technical competence and ethical practice are the cornerstones of this trust, but EIANZ Code of Ethics is not central to their day-to-day practice.
- Why do we aspire to be (and seen to be) ethical? Humans where possible avoid being hypocritical. We try to link our judgments and actions to our principles – *“An aim in behaving morally is to avoid hypocrisy; that is, to have one’s behaviour appropriately exemplifying or operationalising one’s moral beliefs”* (Cohen S. (2004))

2. Sources of morality and ethics

- Singer (2016) considers moral beliefs to be intuitive, because surveys of responses to some of his famous ethical scenarios (what would you do if ...?) indicate an extraordinary degree of universal agreement. Either “ *a divine creator handed us these universal elements at the moment of creation*” .. or... “*an alternative explanation ... is that over millions of years we have evolved a moral faculty that generated intuitions about right and wrong*”
- Perhaps the evolutionary advantages reportedly conferred by altruism can be extended to the ‘social contract’ – when humans started to live together in groups larger than a family, we needed to trust each other. Agreement that stealing, incest and murder were wrong; and that helping one’s neighbor was the ‘right thing to do’, became universal codes.

3. Personal values & professional ethics

- Each of us has a ‘world view’ which influences how we interpret and apply both the intuitive right/wrong morality shared by most of humanity, and the more specific ethical standards shared by our groups – our generation, our nation and our profession. This personal ‘world view’ (eg. whether I perceive society as competitive or cooperative, pessimist/optimist; whether my role is to contribute or to accumulate) have a strong bearing on personal ethics.
- Distinguishing between professional ethics and personal values – we can hold environmental beliefs while still providing dispassionate objective advice based on analysis and facts. But young and early career professionals struggle with these distinctions.

4. Identifying 'unethical' practitioners

- When asked how or why you might judge another practitioner as unethical, a common thread is because they are known to misrepresent the truth, or alter their own opinions, in the interests of their clients.
- We place a very high value on truth, objectivity and being able to trust the technical competence and advice given by skilled and experienced practitioners;

Not on the notion that the customer is always right, the 'best for project' principle (the show must go on), or putting the best possible 'spin' on our client's case. These may be drivers for corporate decisions, but they don't affect what we consider to be ethical practice.

- The environment profession's progress towards trust and respect may be hampered by the adversarial nature of analysis and approval processes. Many environmental specialists are engaged by one 'side' or the other - not conducive to community trust
- Regulatory agencies have a role to act in the best interests of the community so may enjoy greater trust. However regulators rarely consider themselves part of the same profession as those they seek to regulate, and this regrettable division further undermines community trust in the environmental professions.

Example scenarios facing environmental professionals can be framed (as per Singer 2016) as whether a particular action is (a) obligatory (b) permissible or (c) forbidden (notwithstanding that it may be perfectly legal); eg:

1. A 'good' client has been advised by lawyers that a loophole in the law will allow him to clear native vegetation from a wildlife corridor, provided an ecological survey reveals no endangered species. Do you accept the commission?

2. A planning authority which intends refusing a high density transit-oriented development, in response to local community objections. As a senior officer, you are asked to write a report justifying the refusal, but you consider that it has urban sustainability benefits. Do you express your opinion in the report ?

When we behave differently from what our principles tell us, we all rationalise and self-justify. Some of these are necessary, some have become 'enshrined' by:

- Barristers: the legal system depends on representing 'first come' clients to the best of my abilities, irrespective of my personal opinion
- Coalminers: if I don't do this, someone else will ... and do worse
- Scientists: I'm simply providing objective technical analysis, and would advise all parties the same
- Professional advisers: I provide my clients with a preferred option, but it's up to them to make the decision
- Good team players: The team (or the project) shouldn't be undermined by my individual opinion, I'll override my scruples for the broader group
- Group-Think: if everyone thinks it's right, I guess it's OK

- Our complex society relies upon skilled specialists, who everyone trusts are well-trained, ethical and dedicated to their vocation.
- Professions generally share a commitment to these common attributes, as well as a code of ethics and goals of service ie. their specialised knowledge should benefit the community generally, in return for the degree of trust and privileged position.
- In the case of EIANZ, the goals of service include improving environmental quality and raising practice standards generally.
- Ethical dimensions of workplace decisions require discussion, so they come out of the closet and into everyday conversation