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## **Main Principles of Ethics in Everyday Life**

Ethics is the moral philosophy that discusses what is morally correct and what is morally incorrect. Moral principles or ethics talk about the practicality of decision making in humans. (Singer, 2019)

For the purposes of this assignment, a case study will be taken up that underlines a particular ethical dilemma. The study is about the dilemma of a researcher facing issues with confidentiality of their participant. In brief, it is about a researcher conducting research on sex addicts. Her participant, however, confides that they she is having sex with a minor. The researcher is now faced with the dilemma of reporting a crime and keeping the participant's confidentiality intact.

### **Case Study**

The Powers Institute in Missouri is conducting a study on group therapy for women who are sex addicts. This type of addiction is less common in women so identifying specific treatment options for this group would be highly beneficial. There is a great risk to participants should their identities be exposed. Due to the sensitive nature of this study, the consent form promised strict confidentiality. Dr Jane Smith, the principal investigator on the project, has also obtained a certificate of confidentiality from the sponsoring agency to protect study data from subpoena.

During one therapy session, Amanda, a high school math teacher with 2 daughters, discloses that she is having sex with an unnamed 16-year old student. Sexual relations with an individual under 17 by an individual over 21 years old constitutes statutory rape 2 in Missouri and is reportable. Dr Smith chooses to break patient confidentiality and report the incident to the respective authorities. (DuBois, Dunn, n.d.)

### **Analysis**

The above case study is now to be analysed within the 5 principles of ethics as given by the American Psychological Association.

#### **Beneficence and Nonmaleficence**

This is the first and foremost ethical principle. It essentially states that a professional should strive to always do good and do no harm. They must safeguard the rights of all those with whom they interact. They need to have a clear view, not biased and clouded by preconceived notions. ("APA's Five General Principles of Ethics: How do They Matter to an Aspiring Scientist", n.d.)

According to this principle, it can be said that the psychologist from the case study failed. The first priority of the psychologist is to safeguard their participant. Dr Smith broke her confidentiality contract by reporting Amanda's sex with the minor. The sex with the minor was with one of the age of 16. In Missouri, the consenting age is 17. Hence, the minor in question is not that much younger and could have willingly consented to the sexual relations with Amanda.

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Dr Smith violated confidentiality for a good reason, however, in the process, Amanda will lose her job and her relationship with her daughters will go under immense strain. She could also be charged with statutory rape and land up in prison. Hence, Dr Smith has brought about a lot of harm for not as much good in return.

## **Fidelity and Responsibility**

This principle deals with the universal concept of responsibility. Psychologists have a duty towards their patient that they act in a manner that is conscientious and upholds the standard of the profession. Professionals create a certain level of trust with their patients. It is important to actually live up to the trust formed. They must remain accountable towards their actions as far as they can and must manage discord in the appropriate manner. ("APA's Five General Principles of Ethics: How do They Matter to an Aspiring Scientist", n.d.)

In this particular case study, Dr Smith has once again, not adhered to this principle. She broke the trust that she had established between herself and her participant. By breaking the contract, she not only jeopardized her own standing with the participant but the entire study as now, she will be understood as not sticking to her word. This brings down the standard of all psychologists as a whole as she did not stick to what she said she would do. Moreover, she has put her participant in a sticky situation.

## **Integrity**

This particular principle talks about the psychologist remaining truthful, not engaging in any type of deception, withholding of information, cheating, lying, and any other type of fraud. As previously discussed, psychologists must uphold a certain standard. The standard must be that psychologists have integrity, that they are truthful and honest and trustworthy. ("APA's Five General Principles of Ethics: How do They Matter to an Aspiring Scientist", n.d.) I feel that Dr Smith did uphold this principle by complaining to the authorities. She is sworn to be truthful and not lie. Here, Amanda is not behaving appropriately. Dr Smith, although broke her confidentiality agreement, she did so because she did not want to be part of the breaking of laws. She is within her own right or choice to decide to uphold her integrity.

## **Justice**

Psychologists strongly believe that making sure that everyone has access to psychological research and findings is a major nudge towards justice and being fair. They understand that their biases have the ability to creep in and distort their behaviour towards certain people. The important thing to do is to keep said biases as far away as possible from any analysis of people. In order to do this, they must constantly be aware of their thoughts and behaviour. ("APA's Five General Principles of Ethics: How do They Matter to an Aspiring Scientist", n.d.)

This principle views Dr Smith's behaviour in a twofold manner. While in one scenario Dr Smith is doing the right thing by bringing justice to the minor, in the other they are destroying Amanda, a sex addict's, life. Not to mention, sex addiction is an illness and thus, in that case, Amanda needs psychological help and not being locked away in jail. In this scenario, it can be concluded that Dr Smith should have carefully considered the situation before rushing to the authorities.

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## Respect for People's Rights and Dignity

According to the final principle, psychologists have high esteem for matters like dignity, confidentiality, privacy and self-determination. They are aware of differences in communities and how that may affect the psyche of certain communities. They understand biases regarding all aspects like caste, gender, sex, socio-economic status, class, disability, religion, occupation, geographical location, history etc. They then maintain in their work an atmosphere as free from any bias they may have. ("APA's Five General Principles of Ethics: How do They Matter to an Aspiring Scientist", n.d.)

When there is talk of confidentiality, Dr Smith has absolutely downright failed with no room for speculation. Despite signing a certificate that explicitly stated that she would not disclose the contents of her session with Amanda, Dr Smith did so. She categorically made the decision to break her contract and thus violate this fifth and final principle that talks about respecting other people's rights and dignity.

Hence, to conclude, it may be said that the case study used here to depict an ethical dilemma is one of violation of ethical principles. Dr Smith failed in upholding the ethical principles by violating her contract of confidentiality with Amanda, the participant of the research. However, ethical principles are a tricky line. Simply because Dr Smith violated 4 of 5 principles does not guarantee that her decision was one of misjudgement or the incorrect one. Stepping away from the ethical principles, one would say that Dr Smith must be applauded for her sense of responsibility for emerging with this news as at the end of the day, Amanda was in a sexual relation with a minor which counts as statutory rape and is illegal. Hence, it can't be said that Dr Smith's actions are clearly good or bad. She did as she saw fit and those actions broke certain ethical principles. Perhaps to truly come to a decision about this moral dilemma, there is a need to study the outcome of Dr Smith's actions.